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Kalidasa's Shakuntala: Some Sidelights

P.P. SHARMA

THE OBSCURANTISTS' almost dogmatic insistence that they can find everything — including the latest researches in Nuclear Physics—in the writings of antiquity has been, and continues to be the chief bane of our national intellectual life. To rehearse the battle of books, a one-time favourite game of scholars, would be an entirely unproductive exercise at this time of day. Far better, rather, for us would be to follow Kalidasa's own advice: not everything old is good, nor everything new (by that very token) blameworthy. The wise examine and discriminate, whereas the fools go by hearsay. In my attempt to uncover Kalidasa's ecological vision as it has been embodied in his famous drama *Shakuntala* I will try to take the path approved by him without letting passion rule over me. Hopefully, of course.

No sooner are the foregoing words committed to writing than am I swept by a strange emotion, ambivalent in character. How come, formidable orientalisks and Sanskrit pundits no-

*Although many good editions of *Shakuntala* are available for the convenience of quotations in my text and for benefit of readers not familiar with Sanskrit, I shall use *Kalidasa: Translations of Shakuntala* and other works by Arthur W. Ryder (Everyman's library).

torious for their hair-splitting carried to the nth degree should have left an area unexplored for a mere amateur like me? The very idea fills me with trepidation. Kalidasa, setting himself the task of recounting the deeds of the glorious dynasty of Raghu, would probably have not felt so shaken up as I do at the moment—a frail vessel rushing in where mighty galleons have feared to tread. There is at the same time that in me which had burst forth from Archimedes' lips in the exulting exclamation 'Eureka'.

To come back from this rather whimsical digression Kalidasa in *Shakuntala* projects a certain way of life which enables man to achieve maximally a harmonious relationship with his habitat or surroundings. Maybe such was the Hindu way of life in the fifth century (the period to which the poet, after interminable wrangles, has been tentatively assigned) and Kalidasa simply anchors his vision in his *milieu* or transplants a commonly shared world view. Be that as it may, it has been transmitted to us by him and that is enough for us. Let us, then, attend to that vision without any further ado.

The play opens with the following benediction upon the audience:

Eight forms has Shiva, Lord of all and king;
 And these are water, first created thing;
 And fire, which speeds the sacrifice begun;
 The priest; and time's dividers, moon and sun;
 The all-embracing ether, path of sound;
 The earth, wherein all seeds of life are found;
 And air, the breath of life: may be draw near,
 Revealed in these, and bless those gathered here.

In this invocation, as will at once be seen, are mentioned water, fire, ether, moon, sun, earth and air which represent altogether the planet that we inhabit and the cosmic and universal forces the earth is hemmed in with. The priest, possibly as the most enlightened specimen of our species, also belongs with them. Moreover, the earth includes the various forms and manifestations of life. And all these enumerated items are eight

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forms of one deity, Shiva, meaning good. What can be a more comprehensive definition of ecology than the one offered here? If the sun and the moon are interpreted with some latitude to stand for the various stars and planets and interstellar spaces, this definition is as good as any that the present-day specialists can hope to formulate. The basic principle of ecology is very neatly summed up in these eight lines. Since they are forms of the same being, they are not mechanically put together; they are organically integrated and related. The question of hostilities or discrepancies among them does not arise. There are no frictions and they work in complete unison. It is through their existing and working in perfect amity that universal welfare can be secured.

Since Kalidasa is writing a drama and not an abstruse metaphysical treatise (for which lesser talents would do) he must give a local habitation and a name to these "airy nothings". It is on this earth, then, that he must lay the scene of action and show how a balanced life can be lived among the various forms of life, not in conflict but in co-operation with them. If man can learn to live on this earth without provoking antagonisms or doing violence in his relationship with others who share the earth in common with him—the trees, the hills, the rivers and the animals—if he can find subsistence for himself without making deprivations on the earth itself, he will apparently have little trouble adjusting himself to the larger universe of which the earth is but an infinitesimal part. First things should come first. One cannot perform an intricate footwork without first learning to walk straight. The initial necessary step towards working for a cosmic harmony would obviously be man's proper adaptation with his terrestrial surroundings.

Such a proper, almost ideal, adaptation of man with his terrestrial surroundings is presented before us in Kanva's hermitage on the bank of the river Malini. Although the human drama with its romantic love-affair between Dushyanta and Shakuntala is exciting enough, it would surely be a misreading

of the play to concentrate all our attention on it. Nature is not introduced here as a setting or background or to impart what is called 'local colour'. Those who look upon nature as peripheral have apparently been disoriented by their acquaintance with another kind of literature. Kalidasa has provided all the possible clues to help us place the flora and fauna right at the centre, on par with the significant characters. Even before king and charioteer appear, the dramatist has director and actress recite verses to get audience into a relaxed mood in which alone nature can cast its spell over them. The former celebrates elemental life: plunging into the river at midday in summer; then inhaling the breeze laden with the fragrance of flowers; slumbering in the shade and, finally, enjoying the charms of the twilight hours. The flower motif is brought in by the latter (actress). The fair *siris*-blossoms, rich with pollen, we are told, are gently plucked by maidens to deck their hair. Fairly early in the play we are being prepared for the delicate attachment which the denizens of the forest feel for plants, trees, creepers and flowers.

The first sight that the king has of the sylvan maidens, described as the 'flower-children of the wood', is their going around with waterpots to water the young trees. Evidently, Kalidasa arranges this in order to reveal what he considers their most attractive characteristic—their spontaneous oneness with life at its most delicate. They are engaged in this work not because of any external compulsion, nor for any utilitarian motive as is brought out in the following dialogue:

FIRST FRIEND: It seems to me, dear, that Father Kanva cares more for the hermitage trees than he does for you. You are delicate as a jasmine blossom, yet he tells you to fill the trenches about the trees.

SHAKUNTALA: Oh, it is not Father's bidding so much. I feel like a real sister to them. (She waters the trees.)

PRIYAMVADA: Shakuntala, we have watered the trees that blossom in the summer time. Now let's sprinkle those whose flowering time is past. That will be a better deed, because we

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shall not be working for a reward.

SHAKUNTALA: What a pretty idea (*She does so*).

On the stage, the directions given in the parentheses will lead to a definite action; the reader should, therefore, give them adequate weightage and not simply skip them. The main point that will, then, be enforced is that Shakuntala and her friend are not merely theorizing; that is the way they actually live. In western literature personification is a literary device which can be mechanically applied in the treatment of external nature. A much finer sensitivity is required to see that a tree is an individual with a fully developed consciousness. Ryder has a point when he says that his "almost instinctive belief in reincarnation" makes it easier for a Hindu "to feel that all life, from plant to God, is truly one". Shakuntala hastens towards the mango tree because with his branches that move in the wind like fingers, he is trying to tell her something. How pallid looks Wordsworth's flower that "enjoys the air it breathes" as compared with the full-blooded life in which the mango tree and the Jasmine vine, like the groom and his bride, are intertwined. Their relationship is further enriched by their intercourse with the human world. They are by no means two distinct categories. When Shakuntala stands by the mango tree, "it looks as if a vine were clinging to the mango tree". Later on, Shakuntala looks joyfully at the pretty pair: "The Jasmine shows her youth in her fresh flowers and the mango-tree shows his strength in his ripening fruit." The spring creeper is as much a part of the human world as of the vegetable. Father Kanva, as Anusuya recalls, tended her with his own hands just as he did Shakuntala and so she is, as Shakuntala says, her sister. There is no wanton plucking of flowers. Flowers just enough for the sacrifice are gathered.

Critics and commentators of Kalidasa have waxed lyrical over act IV, and, as it appears to me, rightly so. But by far the best part of this act is that point of Shakuntala's departure from the hermitage where everybody—men, women, trees, creepers, birds and animals—participates in, nay, is moved by,

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the overwhelming grief of farewell. Kanva, the foster-father, his long labour done, bids the trees (by which her course to Hastinapur will be probably lined) to speed her on her road.

She would not drink till she had wet
Your roots, a sister's duty,
Nor pluck your flowers; she loves you yet
Far more than selfish beauty.
It was festival in her pure life
When budding blossoms showed;
And now she leaves you as a wife—
Oh, speed her on her road.

Koil-birds, as being the most articulate, co-operate with the trees and one of the pupils draws Kanva's attention to this:

The trees are answering your prayer
In cooing cuckoo-song
Bidding Shakuntala farewell,
Their sister for so long.

Shakuntala was their sister, but earlier in her life she was tended by birds (Shakuntas) and this fact was responsible for her name. For such a one all the elements in nature will work in union and an assurance to this effect is given by invisible beings:

May lily-dotted lakes delight your eye;
May shade-trees bid the heat of noonday cease;
May soft winds blow the lotus-pollen nigh;
May all your path be pleasantness and peace.

Not enough notice, it seems to me, has been taken of the references to the non-human world that are crowded into the most moving scene of parting. There are so many dear ones assembled and time is running out. Each one of those present would like to receive her attention. How much attached this maiden should be to the creeper, to the doe, to the fawn, to feel so concerned about them as to give offence to her two most intimate friends who, amid tears, cry out, "But who will care

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for poor us? Her taking leave of the vine and trusting it to the care of friends is really touching.

SHAKUNTALA: (*approaches the vine and embraces it.*) Vine sister, embrace me too with your arms, these branches. I shall be far away from you after today. Father, you must care for her as you did for me.

KANVA: My child, you found the lover who
Had long been sought by me;
No longer need I watch for you;
I will give the vine a lover true,
This handsome mango tree.

Animals, it has been wisely remarked, are "our closest relatives in the ecological network". Our attitude towards them, ironically enough, is inimical, destructive and exploitative. Some fine specimens of them are becoming extinct as a result of man's ravages and acts of vandalism. To the humane among us who are increasingly worried about their proper care and the preservation of the wild life *Shakuntala* is bound to have a tremendous appeal, emphasizing as it does, the correspondence between animals and levels of man's psyche and the need for a compassionate, friendly understanding of animals. Although Kalidasa substantially draws upon the first book of the epic *Mahabharata* he omits the discordant detail of the slaying of thousands of wild creatures at the hands of Dushyant and his mighty host of men in chariots before his entry into Kanva's ashram. Even the pursuit of the deer he has to abandon at the behest of the hermit. Moreover, the king's readiness to let the deer alone seems quite in accord with his basic nature. Anyone who watches each movement of the deer as he does cannot but have love and sympathy for it:

The path he takes is strewed
With blades of grass half-chewed
From jaws wide with the stress
Of fevered weariness.
He leaps so often and so high,
He does not seem to run, but fly.

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Similarly, by his keen observation of the galloping horses he shows his interest in them. Not only that, afterwards he wants the horses to be rested. Since the king is an outsider, Kalidasa uses him as a convenient mouthpiece for commenting upon some common features of the hermitage which might have been obscured for the regular inmate through overfamiliarity—common features which are, nevertheless, redolent of the aroma of the forest.

Do you not see? Why, here
Are rice-grains, dropped from bills of parrot chicks
Beneath the trees; and pounding-stones where sticks
A little almond-oil; and trustful deer
That do not run away as we draw near;
And river-paths that are sprinkled yet
From trickling hermit-garments, clean and wet.

Obviously, the waters of the Malini flow limpid and clear. No pollution of water, for the hermits go there for their ablutions. Besides, water resources are so abundant that there is no fear of their exhaustion or depletion. Maybe, the smoke rising from the offering to Indra, the God of rain, helps the formation of clouds and ensures timely showers. The king observes.

The roots of trees are washed by many a stream
That breezes ruffle; and the flowers' red gleam
Is dimmed by pious smoke; and fearless fawns
Move softly on the close-cropped lawns.

The king also knows what soil erosion is but he does not find it here.

Indeed the real lovers of animals are those who live in close proximity with them. What spokesman of Society for prevention of cruelty to Animals can say it better than the hermit?

Why should his tender form expire
As blossoms perish in the fire?
How could that gentle life endure
The deadly arrow, sharp and sure?
Restore your arrow to the quiver

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To you were weapons lent
The broken-hearted to deliver,
Not strike the innocent.

But none can surpass Shakuntala because she has made them all her own. At the time of bidding good bye, she takes a promise from Kanva that the good news of the pregnant doe's safe delivery will at once be communicated to her. Even while she is going away, a fawn keeps pulling at her dress as if to hinder her. The poor creature finds her going away very painful as Shakuntala had so much taken care of it. Because of her overwrought emotional state she cannot identify as to who is hindering her. Kanva has to do that for her:

It is the fawn whose lips, when torn
By Kusha-grass, you soothed with oil
The Fawn who gladly nibbled corn
Held in your hand; with loving toil
You have adopted him, and he
would never leave you willingly.

It was she who had brought him up when his mother had died. "Now I am leaving you, and Father Kanva will take care of you. Go back, deer! go back." And she walks away weeping. The affection Shakuntala had bestowed on all living things was such that there is not one in the whole hermitage that is not grieving at saying good-bye to her. The grass drops from the feeding doe and the pea-hen stops her dance. The plants want to cling on to her body and, when separated, shed pale, trembling leaves like tears. Truly it is a pathetic sight:

The she-drake does not heed his mate
Who calls behind the lotus-leaf:
He drops the lily from his bill
And turns on you a glance of grief.

Elsewhere, too, we are told how nature, responding to human grief, suspends her normal function. The mango branches are in bloom, yet pollen does not form. Similarly, although the warm days have come, the cuckoo's song sticks in his

throat, the amaranth-bud is formed, there is, however, no further growth.

All this should not be dismissed as mere sob-stuff. What is understood in *Shakuntala* is the kinship and the reciprocal compassion between man and his natural habitat. Not only birds and beasts, trees and flowers, mountains and rivers but also the distant sun and moon—distant worlds in space, that is—enter into Kalidasa's ecological vision. We are not, therefore, free to act the way we want to on this earth because it is part of a larger system; it is interlinked with other planets and stars. That we are responsible to the total cosmos is, by implication, brought home to us. King Dushayanta is summoned by Indra to quell the disturbance in heaven. And while he is returning from there in his aerial chariot, Kalidasa gets his supreme opportunity to look at the earth—its varied landscapes, the plains, the mountains, the flora and fauna, the clear net work of rivers and streams—precisely after the fashion of the twentieth-century aeronauts. This sense of perspective enabling a man to look at the earth from on high and be struck by its noble loveliness is scarcely found in Sanskrit poetry outside Kalidasa.

The ecological vision expressed in *Shakuntala* is opposed to such a one as inspires Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and which, in a more general sense, supports the progress-domination theory by stressing the dichotomy between man and the rest of the universe. Just as Prospero is shown to be in control of the island, using Caliban and Ariel as tools for his schemes, so also man is supposed to conquer nature, pillage and ransack its resources for his own gratification. During the last several centuries science and technology have been pressed into service for this purpose. Today we are reaching a crucial point in our civilization's history with the growing fear that we may not be able to survive the dreadful poisoning of our environment, the pollution of water, the mass slaughter of animals, rapid deforestation and pitiless destruction of wilderness, depletion of reserves and serious ecological imbalances that are painfully in

evidence at our present stage of civilization. To the sensitive the phrase "the conquest of nature" is already beginning to sound suspect, if not anachronistic. The concept of rivalry is being discarded in favour of a more relaxed and open way with the world; conflict is being sought to be replaced with mutuality and co-operative, sacral and communal life. A poet like Gary Snyder longs for a return to the paliolithic age. In America itself with its apotheosis of science and technology writers like John Muir, Robinson Jeffers, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac and a host of Beats and Hippies believe that through the revival of some kind of primitivism only can we evolve an "ecologically responsible civilization".

The anxieties and apprehensions which afflict us at present and some idea of which can be gathered from the foregoing paragraph should establish, beyond doubt, how relevant is Kalidasa's ecological view to our predicament today. Far from being naive and sentimental, it holds the key to our continuance as a species. That is why the finest spirits are trying to reach back to that vision. Thus, apart from being a universally acclaimed poet enchanting us with his superb poetry, with his unrivalled command of metaphor and farthest reach in the creation of two sovereign rasas, Shringara and Karuna alike, Kalidasa is also a towering cultural hero who from across fifteen centuries is showing the way that mankind should follow if it wants to avoid the catastrophe that threatens us today even more than the much-dreaded third world war which, considering the prevailing international temper, may not take place at all.