

Shakuntala^{or} the Ring of Remembrance



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BASED ON KALIDASA'S PLAY

TALES AND LEGENDS OF INDIA
Volume 2

This series was started with the aim of providing the modern reader with a glimpse of the fascinating, but infinitely complex world of Indian sensibility. Today's mind is at times taken aback by the superimposition of different worlds in the old Indian stories. This characteristic is not the fruit of a laboured aestheticism, but is the sign of a mentality that always tries to describe terrestrial life not in outer terms, but in terms of what it hides. It is a mentality that sees the field of human action as always surrounded and influenced by other forces that one could qualify as cosmic in nature. For the Greek spirit the light of the sun is its natural atmosphere, but for the ancient Indian spirit the sun is a golden veil that hides wonders that it desires ardently to possess. Ours is not a scholarly venture but an attempt to suggest through certain stories, told in as living and simple a language as possible, a key to understanding the culture and genius of India.

PUBLISHERS' NOTE

Kalidasa, the great Sanskrit dramatist, was hailed by none other than Sri Aurobindo as "the great, the supreme poet of the senses". His creative genius expressed itself in a style that still captures our imagination: "The delight of the eye, the delight of the ear, smell, palate, touch, the satisfaction of the imagination and taste are the texture of his poetical creation, and into this he has worked the most beautiful flowers of emotion and intellectual or aesthetic ideal. The scenery of this work is a universal paradise of beautiful things. All therein obeys one law of earthly grace; morality is aestheticised, intellect suffused and governed with the sense of beauty. And yet this poetry does not swim in languor, does not dissolve itself in sensuous weakness; it is not heavy with its own dissoluteness, heavy of curl and heavy of eye-lid, cloyed by its own sweets, as the poetry of the senses usually is. Kalidasa is saved from this by the chastity of his style, his aim at burdened precision and energy of phrase, his unsleeping artistic vigilance."

तद्वात्मानमपि विस्मरिष्यामि ।

How could I forget my very self?

FOREWORD

It is common practice when reciting a sacred poem in India to add at the end a number of verses in which the boons derived from reading or listening to the poem are listed. Sometimes an apology for any errors of pronunciation that might have occurred during the recitation is added as well. We do not know what boons might flow from reading this ancient Indian story, but we would like, before even having begun its narration, to pray the great playwright Kalidasa to forgive us. Unable to render the original beauty of his work, we have plundered it. We have shamelessly appropriated those jewels that seemed to us the most splendid and rearranged them in our manner. Our only excuse is that others have done it before us.

The legends and stories of India are generous and offer themselves to whoever shows interest. They have been retold and repeated so many times and interpreted in so many ways, they have been the consenting victims of so many interpolations, and have given birth to so many different adaptations, from ancient times up through the age of cinema and television, that one more version of the story of Shakuntala, no matter how imperfect, should not shock the reader

“In search of the forgotten soul” could be the title of this story. The extremely powerful charm of this work of Kalidasa — beyond the poet’s art and the “divine elegance” of the language — is to be found, we feel, in the underlying thread, all the more moving because never made explicit, that runs through this love story: it captures and expresses a deep and poignant need at the heart of our human condition. For man, like King Dushyant, has been condemned to forget. And like him he lives generally satisfied with his condition, ignorant of the curse he is under, not even suspecting he has been bewitched and is haunted by a lost love. He doesn’t have the King’s luck, and no one will find

the ring for him that will restore his memory. From time to time however an indefinable something provokes an astonishing and inexplicable anguish in him, just as the King is astonished at how the simple words of a song can overwhelm him. Who is the being never known and yet so dear to us whose absence at times seems so cruel? For what loved one never met, for what life submerged in the darkness of our memory are we so nostalgic?

The story of Shakuntala, as recounted by Kalidasa, the great Indian poet of the first century BC, is also the story of a transformation. Through painful trials two characters grow. Love, born in the paradise of childhood and innocence, is regained, transmuted and magnificently widened, in another paradise that one could call divine. In this regard one should note the parallels of the two journeys of the King. As there are two chariots, a terrestrial and a heavenly one, so there are two journeys: one through the forest that leads the King to a world of marvellous purity, and the other through the regions of the sky that brings him to a universe of light. From the union of the two is born Bharat, “the support of the worlds”, the king who gave his

name to India, that is to say Bhârat.

All who love India, we would like to imagine, will be charmed by the idea that the origin of this country's name lies in this story of Shakuntala, that is so suffused with magical light.

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The doe fled, drenched in sweat.

Startled, she had reared while savouring the clearing's tender grass, and now in her stumbling flight, green half-chewed clumps fell from her mouth as she ran. She could feel the rumbling of the chariot wheels as they neared. She could even hear the harsh voice of the chariot driver edging his horses on. And yet, from time to time, she couldn't resist glancing back, and as she obliquely turned her graceful neck, one could have thought that she was casting a dumb, astonished question back at her pursuers. King Dushyant stood in the back of the chariot, inebriated with its speed, and without losing sight of the doe marvelled at the intense

sensations the unbridled chase was producing in him. He had the sensation of having penetrated a different world. Curves no longer existed and all objects within his arc of vision — trees, rocks, the chariot, even his bow, which he held high above his chest — were as if elongated, sucked up by the thunderous gallop of the horses. All notion of distance had disappeared: a mighty sense of speed that swallowed all, whether far or near, alone existed.

The distance between the chariot and the animal was narrowing and as Dushyant readied to let an arrow fly he suddenly heard repeated cries; “Take care, it is a doe of the hermitage! Do not harm it! It is forbidden to kill it!” The King immediately ordered his charioteer to slow the horses down. The chariot had now stopped and the horses shaking their manes and pulling on their bits seemed to be expressing all their displeasure at this unexpected halt. One of two young men had now come abreast of the chariot’s team and continued with perhaps more familiarity and warmth than was called for in the presence of a king of such imposing allure.

“No, it is not allowed that an arrow wound such

a sweet-natured animal. Does one destroy flowers by fire? May your majesty replace that arrow in its quiver. You shall use it to protect the weak and the oppressed, not to strike down the innocent.”

The King smiled and obeyed immediately. Why should he protest? Truth had been spoken through the young man’s words, and what was a king if not a servant of truth? Relieved, the two hermits let their joy and gratitude flow forth: “This gesture is worthy of you and the Puru dynasty! May you have a virtuous son, a sovereign of earth!”

This formulation was somewhat banal, part of a ritual benediction. How was it then that these words resonated so strangely in the King? It was as if all the sounds of the forest had suddenly stopped and the King, his heart pounding and without knowing exactly what he was doing, bowed down before the two young ascetics murmuring “May it be so.”

Upon rising, he saw that other hermits had joined them. The eldest of them welcomed him, and explained that he had reached the gates of the hermitage of the great sage Kanva, that was located on the banks of the Malini river. The master

had left on a pilgrimage for a few days, and had confided the responsibility for receiving guests to his daughter Shakuntala. He urged Dushyant to accept their offer of hospitality, reminding him that the hermitage was part of the Puru kingdom. Then, beckoning for his companions to follow, he turned and took his leave.

Dushyant remained silent for a moment. He had noticed that of late he had been experiencing a certain lassitude of body and soul. The flattery of his courtesans provoked a heavier sense of boredom than usual, the pleasures of his capital seemed emptier than ever, and his kingly duty, a burden difficult to bear. He dreamed at times of a solitary place where he could forget that he was the king of the Puru dynasty. Was this not the sought-for chance? He proceeded to order his charioteer to head towards the hermitage.

Everything indicated that they were approaching one of those revered places found in the forests of ancient India that were called ashrams. At once university and monastery, community and sanctuary, an ashram was dedicated at the same time to study, discipline and research. It was a

privileged place where both the youth most avid for knowledge and the most remarkable men of the time came to receive teachings at the feet of the great visionary sages of ancient India who were called Rishis. The Rishis had discovered and developed a certain science called the true science, whose goal was to explore and master the infinite powers concealed within the human being.

Signs of the activities of the ashram's inhabitants could be seen everywhere and Dushyant, sensing that they must now be nearing the sanctuary, looked around. In some places the leaves of the trees that lined the path were covered with the soot of sacrificial fires. A gentle wind rippled the surface of a waterway whose banks had been erected with care. Dushyant noticed fawns quietly grazing. They observed the chariot's arrival, then without showing any trace of fear, returned to their activities. Birds swooped low, as if to show their joy at the sight of the king, brushing, tickling the ears of the horses with their wings. Listening to their calls, Dushyant recalled it having been said that certain Rishis understood the language of birds.

The King wanted his arrival to perturb as little

as possible the activities of the ashram and its inhabitants. He therefore asked his charioteer to stop the horses at some distance from the buildings and proceeded to get down from the chariot. The instant his foot touched the earth he felt a vast calm fill his being. His fatigue had disappeared, leaving nothing but an intense desire to shed himself of all encumbering ornaments, all that was useless, and to prostrate himself on the ground. He handed his bow and quiver to the charioteer, then slowly took off his crown, the gold bracelets from his arms, and the heavy pendants that covered his chest. Handing all these to his charioteer, he ordered him to await his return. Then, divested of his arms and jewels, he walked towards the hermitage alone, on foot, like a humble pilgrim.

As he entered the sacred precincts he shuddered and stopped. What sudden emotion, at once anguish and delight had gripped his heart? How strange, he told himself. Everything here was suffused with peace and calm. So why was he trembling as if he were about to receive some overwhelming news? The words of a song that he had heard one day came back to him: *The doors are open everywhere,*

the doors of what shall be. Yes, the doors of what shall be. On what threshold of a mysterious destiny had he arrived?

Starting to walk forward again, he admired the splendid vegetation and the grace of the flowering shrub trees that had been planted by the members of the community. One could feel that each had been protected, taken care of and tended by loving, expert hands. Dushyant was bending down over a sweet-smelling jasmine bush, when he suddenly heard laughter and feminine voices coming, he thought, his way. Without thinking twice, he hid himself behind a mango tree. Three young girls, dressed in robes of bark, each balancing a rounded earthen pot on their hips, approached. The roundness of the pots contrasted with their slim figures. The vigour and suppleness of their gait, their simplicity of dress and the freshness of their laughter struck the King, accustomed as he was to the languid poses and studied manners of the women of the court. The young girl walking in front, who was the most refined of the three, pointed out the plants that had to be watered to the others. They obeyed, but not without teasing

her. "Hey, slow down a bit, let's stop a minute... One can see that your father is more attached to his plants and flowers than to his own daughter. Imagine giving her such a hard job, she who is as delicate as a flower." "But, I..." the first one replied, smiling as she tilted the pot carefully to water the base of a tree, "I am not only obeying my father, I love these plants, like a sister." And saying this, she tenderly caressed the trunk of the young tree.

"Behold Shakuntala", remarked Dushyant to himself, and he was surprised that a girl so young and with such a gracious body was to be found in an ashram, whose life, like that of all ashrams, must be quite austere. But if he believed that an ashram was a place where games and gaiety were forbidden, he was soon to be convinced otherwise. "Anusuya", Shakuntala called to one of her friends, "could you help me loosen my dress? Priyamvada made its straps so tight that I can hardly breathe." While the young girl named Anusuya helped loosen the straps that held her tunic to her shoulders, the third girl, leaning against a tree, watched the scene with amusement and remarked, a glint of malice in her eye: "How easy it is to blame me! Instead

of reproaching her friend shouldn't my dear Shakuntala be lamenting the fact she is no longer a child? Her breasts are starting to have a woman's roundness. Am I to blame for this?"

The King listened to the pleasantries being bandied about by the three young girls and wondered at the contrast of Shakuntala's delicacy and the roughness of the robe she wore. It was as if this outfit, so rustic and humble, emphasized the delicacy of her body's lines — just as a lotus-flower half-covered by reeds seems all the more beautiful and the moon is all the more brilliant when half-hidden behind the clouds. Dushyant watched the young girl whose long naked arm gracefully covered the stalk of an eglantine and he surprised himself by suddenly wondering whether she was not of royal blood. Who was her mother? But as he was thinking these thoughts, something within him violently reproached him: how can you doubt? Your heart knows it and has always known it: she is of noble birth like you. Remember that the heart alone is infallible, and it is that which draws you to her.

Shakuntala started walking towards the mango

tree. "Its branches, blown by the wind seem to be beckoning me", she remarked to Priyamvada, "It wants to drink as well." "And what about the jasmine," retorted Anusuya, "the jasmine that you one day baptized 'Light of the forest', have you forgotten it?" — "Ah," replied Shakuntala, turning around and observing it with gentle amusement, "how could I forget what is dearer to me than my very self?" "Careful," shouted Priyamvada. A bee was buzzing around Shakuntala. The young girl shook her head and frenziedly agitated her arms, but to no avail. The bee mocked her efforts and stubbornly continued to attack, as if it had been tracking her. The King followed the tussle between the bee and the young girl. Observing the audacious insect as it sometimes whisked the edge of her lashes, sometimes hovered as if whispering a secret into her ear, or sometimes perched itself on her lower lip as if to quench its thirst, he was invaded by a welter of delicious emotions. Shakuntala, half-irritated and half-amused, called out to her companions. "This ill-behaved fly listens to nothing, she is stalking me. Help me instead of standing there laughing!" But this plea for help had



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