

The Ethics of Nature in *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*: A Study

Dr. Chirashree Mukherjee

Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit, Ramananda College, Bishnupur
Bankura University, Bankura, West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Chirashree Mukherjee

Abstract

Environment plays a pivotal role in human civilization. In order to secure sustainable development of human life, supportive environment is essential. Environment did arrest the attention of the literary artists of the world from the time literature came into existence. Environment has become an integral part of literature.

The universal relationship between nature and human being has been portrayed in the literary works of Kālidāsa in a most appreciating manner. The works of Kālidāsa, is, no doubt, a treasure house of moral lessons which can work as the basis for setting up new environmental ethics in the world which has much relevance in the present era. This study will try to explore the different aspects of environmental awareness as reflected in the *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, a unique creation of Kālidāsa and its relevance in the present challenging environmental crisis.

Key words: Abhijñānaśakuntalam, Kalidasa, Sakuntala, nature, environment, mankind, society, forest, hermitage

Introduction

Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* is a celebrated Sanskrit play that showcases the beauty of nature in its pristine form. The play is a classic representation of the harmony between human emotions and nature's everlasting essence. Kālidāsa, the renowned Sanskrit poet and playwright, has beautifully portrayed nature as a constant source of inspiration and solace. The plot is sourced from a tale from the *Mahābhārata*, the great Indian epic, and Kālidāsa put forth his own creative genius to compose a classic, that has withstood the ages of time.

Concepts and Hypothesis

In this play, the playwright devotes the First Act to the *maṅgalācaraṇam* (prologue) wherein we learn that he is a devotee of Lord Shiva. He defines *prakṛti* (nature) in its different forms (*rūpa*), which are eight in all, while he reveres Lord Śiva here. Thus, to quote Kālidāsa,

या सृष्टिः स्रष्टुराद्या वहति विधिहुतं या हविर्या च होत्री
ये द्वे कालं विधत्तः श्रुतिविषयगुणा या स्थिता व्याप्य विश्वम् ।
यामाहुः सर्वबीजप्रकृतिरिति यया प्राणिनः प्राणवन्तः
प्रत्यक्षाभिः प्रपन्नस्तनुभिरवतु वस्ताभिरष्टाभिरीशः ॥१॥

(1.1 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

M.R. Kale translates: “May īśa (The Lord), endowed with the eight visible forms, protect you!-(the eight forms, viz.) (1) which is the first creation of the creator (i.e. Water), (2) that which conveys (to the gods) the oblation offered according to customary rites (i.e. Fire), (3) that which is Sacrificer, (4 and 5) those two that regulate time (i.e. the Sun and the Moon), (6) that which has sound for its quality and which pervades the universe (i.e. Ether) (7) that which they call the source of all seeds (i.e. the Earth), and (8) that by which creatures possess breath (i.e. Air)”.

It is clear from the above quoted verses that Kālidāsa evoked Lord Śiva as the protector of all the elements of Nature. we also get some idea about the poet’s passion for all that is manifested in its various forms in Nature; he included every element that can be imagined by mankind in his creations. He clearly believed that *prakṛti*, which has a broader connotation than the Western concept of ‘nature’ and mankind completed each other. In his works, *prakṛti* always took on human qualities; it was as if they were extensions of the humans present in the plays or poems. Kālidāsa further connects nature’s beauty and beautiful young women thus:

“सुभगसलिलावगाहाः पाटलसंसर्गसुरभिवनवाताः
प्रच्छायसुलभनिद्रा दिवसाः परिणामरमणीयाः ॥३॥

(1.3 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

The translation goes: “The days in which a plunge in water is delightful, in which the breeze from the woods is fragrant owing to the contact of *pāṭala* flowers, in which sleep is induced in thick shaded spots and which are charming towards their close”.

Kālidāsa continues to speak on:

ईषदीषच्छुम्बितानि भ्रमरैः सुकुमारकेसरशिखानि ।
अवतंसयन्ति दयमानाः प्रमदाः शिरीषकुसुमानि ॥४॥

(1.4 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

“Youthful fair ones with a compassionate heart use, as their ear-ornament, the *Śiriṣha* flowers which are gently kissed by the black bees, and the tips of whose filaments are very delicate”. Thus, Kālidāsa aesthetically described the summer season (*grīṣma ṛtu*), which, according to him was the time of the year when people would love to take baths in cool water and take naps during the afternoon in shades.

Kālidāsa demonstrates his reverence of Śiva in the First Act when he compares the hero with the supreme deity. In the Sixth verse of the First Act, Kālidāsa makes the comparison between Lord Śiva and King Duṣyanta-

कृष्णसारे ददश्चक्षुस्त्वयि चाधिज्यकार्मुके ।
मृगानुसारिणं साक्षात्पश्यामीव पिनाकिनम् ॥६॥

(1.6 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

“Casting (my) eye on the black-antelope and on thee with-thy-strung-bow I behold, as it were, Śiva visibly present chasing the deer”.

When the playwright bequeaths the hero of the play the same attributes of his revered deity, is simply demonstrates the sheer amount of importance and deference he bestows upon him. He simply imagines King Duṣyanta as Lord Śiva and establishes in the very First Act of the play the place the king is going to occupy in both the hearts of the heroin and the audience of the play. Right after he describes the king chasing after the deer, comparing his image to that of

the deity, he further portrays the monarch's qualities in *śokas* that are testaments to his artistic abilities. We shall take one verse right after the previous one, where he describes the movements of the deer—"Arching his neck with infinite grace, now and then he glances back at the speeding chariot, his form curving fearful of the arrow's fall, the haunches almost touching his chest. Panting and fatigued, his jaws gaping wide spill the half-chewed tender grass to mark his path. With long leaps bounding high upwards, see how he soars flying in the sky, scarce skimming the surface of the earth".

“ग्रीवाभङ्गाभिरामं मुहुरनुपतति स्यन्दने बद्धदृष्टिः
पश्चार्धेन प्रविष्टः शरपतनभयाद्भूयसा पूर्वकायम् ।
दर्भैरर्धावलीढैः श्रमविवृतमुखभ्रंशिभिः कीर्णवर्त्मा
पश्योदग्रप्लुतत्वाद्वियति बहुतरं स्तोकमुर्व्या प्रयाति ॥७॥”

(1.7 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

There is a distinct sexual imagery in the way Kālidāsa describes the deer in flight, which is a testament to his brilliant skill in allegorical images. The way the deer pants in exhaustion is compared by critiques to the sexual exhaustion of a maiden; thus, the chasing of the deer is comparable to the encounter and subsequent sexual encounter that King Duṣyanta will have with the heroine, Śakuntalā. When the deer is said to be “flying in the sky” it brings to mind the *apsarā*, the demi goddess from the sky who gave birth to Śakuntalā. Again, in the very next verse, we notice Kālidāsa's knowledge about speed and enormity, which he compares with the forces of nature. “That which in my sight (appeared) minute suddenly attains magnitude; that which was divided in half becomes as if united; that also which is by nature [really] crooked (appears) even-lined [straight] to my eyes nothing (seems) at a distance from me nor at my side even for a moment, by reason of the velocity of the chariot”.

“यदालोके सूक्ष्मं व्रजति सहसा तद्विपुलतां
यदर्धे विच्छिन्नं भवति कृतसन्धानमिव तत् ।
प्रकृत्या यद्वक्रं तदपि समरेखां नयनयो दृ
र्न मे दूरे किञ्चित्क्षणमपि न पार्श्वे रथजवात् ॥८॥”

(1.9 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

Kālidāsa here describes how the sheer pace of the chariot is such that it blurs the images surrounding it, thus making the charioteer oblivious of the beauty surrounding him. He says that nothing is near-neither is it afar for a moment. The concept of time and space of the poet simply stuns the modern reader.

The play ‘*Abhijñānaśakuntalam*’ revolves around Śakuntalā, the protagonist of the play. The *apsarā*, Menoka, gave birth to her and then abandoned her to the forest, near the hermitage of sage Kaṇva. Menoka's residence was in the *apsarāloka*-a place higher than the Earth, but not the Heaven. The child was protected by the birds (Śakuntalā) till sage Kaṇva found her and took her up as his daughter. Thus, she came to be known as ‘Śakuntalā.’As Kālidāsa describes

सुरयुवतिसम्भवं किल मुनेरपत्यं तदुज्जिताधिगतम् ।
अर्कस्योपरि शिथिलं च्युतमिव नवमालिकाकुसुमम् ॥८॥

(2.8 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

At her entry to the play, Śakuntalā is being introduced as the child of nature; it is as if Kālidāsa compared Śakuntalā with *prakṛti*. She grew up in the hermitage amongst the plants, animals and birds, unfettered by the conventions of urban society, in complete innocence; the hermitage was a place where nature stood undisturbed by external influences of mankind. The whole play centres on this young woman from the forest, who is almost like the embodiment

of nature. Kālidāsa describes her physical beauty and lovely face thus-“Lower lip has the redness of young sprouts; her arms imitate tender twigs and youth, attractive like a blossom, pervades all her limbs”.

“अधरः किसलयरागः कोमलवितपानुकारिणौ बाहू ।
कुसुममिव लोभनीयं यौवनमङ्गेषु सन्धदम् ॥१६॥”

(1.19 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

Again, we see the poet using similes to compare the physical beauty to youth to nature’s bounty. Further, King Duṣyanta, while debating with his inner consciousness and pondering how he can approach her, compares the personality and beauty of Śakuntalā to that of a jewel, which can be touched, and not that of fire, that burns if touched. With this comparison, his doubt is transformed into confidence.

“भव हृदय साभिलाषं संप्रति सन्देहनिर्णयो जातः ।
आशङ्कसे यदग्निं तदिदं स्पर्शक्षमं रत्नम् ॥२५॥”

(1.25 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

Thus we see Kālidāsa, while describing Śakuntalā as an extension of nature, also asserts his pragmatic side where he compares her to a jewel, and not a natural element as fire; this is how he, by applying his innate sense of similes, lays down the justification of King Duṣyanta approaching Śakuntalā.

The Fourth Act of the play sees Śakuntalā leave her father’s home for her husband’s. Nature plays a crucial role here, literally, and figuratively. Kālidāsa describes, “By a certain tree was put forth (i.e. offered) a fine silk garment, white like the moon, and suited to this auspicious occasion; by another was exuded the lac-dye for application to this feet (&); the ornaments were presented from other trees by the hands of sylvan deities put forth as far as the wrist (*lit.* The joint) and vying with the bursting of tender sprouts from there”.

“क्षौमं केनचिदिन्दुपादु तरुणा माङ्गल्यमाविष्कृतं
निष्ठयूतश्चरणोपभोगसुलभो लाक्षारसः केनचित् ।
अन्येभ्यो वनदेवताकरतलैरापर्वभागोत्थितै-
र्दत्तान्याभरणानि तत्किसलयोद्भेदप्रतिद्वन्दिभिः ॥५॥”

(4.5 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

So, when it was time for Śakuntalā to be decked up in bridal finery, it was nature that came forward in aiding her. Sarees were provided by the trees, whose sheen of silk was comparable only to the brightness of the moon; some of the plants supplied the lac to dye her feet red. Kālidāsa was portraying the trees as embodied with human qualities-in their feelings and emotions they were equal to their human friends. The whole forest, along with the animals that inhabited it, was mourning her loss, as she got ready to leave them behind; it was as if the whole forest was her family, for she had been taking care of the plants and animals her whole life until now. Kālidāsa states.

“May these sacrificial fires, having their places assigned to them round the alter, having the sacrificial sticks (offered to them) and the *darbha* grass strewn round (them) and chasing away evil with the odours of sacrificial offerings, purify you”.

“अमी वेदिं परितः क्लृप्तधिष्याः समिद्धन्तः प्रान्तसंस्तीर्णदर्भाः
अपघ्नन्तो दुरितं हव्यगन्धैर्वैतानास्त्वां वह्नयः पावयन्तु ॥८॥”

(4.8 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

In the above verse Kālidāsa demonstrates the great importance he laid on the element of fire

(Agni). Since the time of the *Rgveda*, Agni had been the most important elements; in fact, he was the deity that got the first offerings of the sacrifice in any *yagña* during the Vedic times. It was also considered to be one of the purest elements, which is why Kālidāsa mentioned that all the fires that surround the *yagñavedī* and the energy from the fires will help Śakuntalā during her journey. Even in the present-day context, Agni is considered to be one of the purest forms of element.

Śakuntalā is so connected to the natural world around her that as she prepares to leave for her husband's place, she does not forget to delegate the responsibilities of looking after her favourite trees and plants and animals to other people. She worries about how the peacocks, deer, plants etc. shall fare in her absence. Kālidāsa lets us know that she has never taken water herself before she had provided the same for the plants. Sage Kanva comments that she who loves to dress up in flower ornaments have never plucked a single flower or a leaf out of her affection for the trees. He then seeks permission from the plants and the trees so that they may let her go and she may leave. To quote Kālidāsa here,

पातुं न प्रथमं व्यवस्यति जलं युष्मास्वपीतेषु या
नादत्ते प्रियमण्डनापि भवतां स्नेहेन या पल्लवम् ।
अद्ये वः कुसुम प्रसूतिसमये यस्या भवत्युत्सवः
सेयं याति शकुन्तला पतिगृहं सर्वैरनुज्ञायताम् ॥६॥

(4.9 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

It seems that all the greenery vanishes in the absence of Śakuntalā. Thus, it is established by the playwright how intimately connected humankind was to their surrounding's natural elements.

The 'Abhijñānaśakuntalam' indeed back nature as its backdrop, where the urban life is shown up in contrast to it. Nature in Kālidāsa's play is an extension of the human characters in the play; the foster daughter of Sage Kanva is so much a child of nature that when she leaves her father's home, there is a break in the fabric of the natural elements of her dwelling forest. Whenever the playwright talks about Śakuntalā's beauty, he goes back to the nature and finds the proper analogy there. He compares Śakuntalā's physique with various elements of nature. Kālidāsa attributes a number of verses in describing Śakuntalā –

सरसिजमनुविध्दं शैवलेनापि रम्यं
मलिनमपि हिमांशोर्लक्ष्म लक्ष्मीं तनोति ।
इयमधिकमनोज्ञा वल्कलेनापि तन्वी
किमिव हि मधुराणां मण्डनं नाकृतीनाम् ॥१८॥

(1.18 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

मानुषीषु कथं वा स्यादस्य रूपस्य संभवः
न प्रभातरलं ज्योतिरुदेति वसुधातलात् ॥२३॥

(1.23 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

अनाघ्रातं पुष्पं किसलयमलूनं कररुहैः
अनाविध्दं रत्नं मधुनवमनास्वादितरसम्
अखण्डं पुण्यानां फलमिव च तद्रूपमनघं
न जाने भोक्तारं किमिह समुपस्थास्यति विधिः ॥१०॥

(2.10 *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*)

Thus, nature is part of the weave of the lives of the main characters in the play of Kālidāsa, which surrounds the actions and emotions of the play with its everlasting essence.

Conclusion

The play takes place in the forest of Daṇḍaka, which is described as a pristine wilderness with dense forests, flowing rivers, and mountains. The characters in the play, Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta, are enamored by the beauty of nature around them and frequently take inspiration from the natural world. Śakuntalā, in particular, has a deep connection with nature and often talks to the birds, animals, and plants around her.

Kālidāsa uses vivid imagery and metaphors to describe nature's essence throughout the play. He describes the river flowing through the forest as a "jeweled necklace" and the mountains as "fearless warriors." The play also portrays the cycle of birth and death in nature, with references to the blooming of flowers in the spring and the falling of leaves in autumn.

In *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, nature is not merely a backdrop for the human drama; rather, it is an active participant in the play. The forest, rivers, and mountains are shown as sentient beings that respond to the emotions and actions of the human characters. For example, when Śakuntalā is sad and weeping, the birds and animals in the forest stop singing and become silent, as if in sympathy with her.

Overall, Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* celebrates the beauty and harmony of nature. The play emphasizes the importance of preserving the natural world and living in harmony with it, rather than exploiting it for personal gain. Through the character of Śakuntalā and her deep connection with nature, Kālidāsa highlights the enduring power of nature to inspire and heal the human spirit.

Abbreviations: *Lit.* -Literally.

References

1. *Śakuntalā* by Kālidāsa, Eng. trans. Monier Williams, 2nd ed. Oxford Clarendon Press.
2. Devadhar CR. (Edit.) *Abhijñānaśakuntalam of Kālidāsa*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.; c1934.
3. Kale MR. (Edit.) *Abhijñānaśakuntalam of Kālidāsa* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.; c1969.
4. Kalidasa Ramesh Chandra. (Ed.), Edgren AH (Tr.) *Abhijñānaśakuntalam (Shakuntala)*, Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House; c2004.
5. Malviya Sudhakar. (Edit. & Trans.) *Abhijñānaśakuntalam of Kālidāsa*, Varanasi: Krishnadas Academy.