

## **24. Some Thoughts on Dramatic Art and Kalidasa's Shakuntalam**

Ever since man began to use his power of thought he has attempted to understand something of Nature around him and its mystery. The mighty torrent rolling down from the snow-clad peaks, the awe-inspiring sound of the thunder, the silent serenity of majestic mountain ranges, the invariable sequence of all processes of nature, have ever filled men's hearts with a deep yearning to understand their meaning. Whether it was an element of fear that first filled the soul of man, or a sense of utter helplessness before the stern and rigid laws which ruled all happenings, or again a peculiar feeling of suppressed elation at the beauty and grandeur of Nature's workshop, there is ever deep at heart, in the innermost recesses of the soul-nature in man, a longing for understanding, feeling, and realising the source of all the apparent mystery which ever surrounds him, manifesting itself in newer and newer forms in the process of time. Many have approached the solution, partial or total, as the case may be, through philosophy; others have approached it, through devotion; while many others have sought and are still seeking it through the service of fellow beings. In

one or other of these and many other forms, man has tried to solve the problem of existence, the relation of man to God, the relation of the phenomenal world to its creator. Whatever the path, the final goal is the same, the sensing of the Reality behind all the fleeting forms and ephemeral phenomena. And one of the most useful, but probably not so very popular, of these paths is the path of Art. This path has not got so many avowed votaries as the other paths, or at any rate, many do not recognise in Art one of the most potent factors in the progress of the human soul towards the Divine. But none the less, it is true that just as we can approach God behind nature through his Wisdom, Love, or Activity, so also we can approach and sense Him through His aspect of Beauty. God is as beautiful as he is wise or loving; and the philosophy of the Beautiful is as good and consistent a system of philosophy as any other. Orpheus and Plato, and in modern times Ruskin and others, have attempted to realise God through Art; all great artists, whether they be poets or sculptors, dramatists or painters, architects or musicians, are all the time trying to realise, through their art, God in His aspect of Beauty.

What is Art then? Art is a means by which the artist brings down something of the nature of God to our world of physical happenings, it enables us to rise through the outer phenomena to the Reality behind them; to understand Nature from the standpoint of the Creator, to pierce through the limitations around us and realise the unlimited; in short, to understand the mind of God in relation to His creation and that through that creation itself. That which helps us to accomplish this object, in a greater or smaller degree, is alone real Art.

Philosophy tells us that there are two great limitations which have been imposed on us and to which we must be subject as long as manifestation lasts; they are the limitations of Time and Space, the two great fundamental pillars

in the complicated structure of the world's mystery. In painting, the artist attempts to lift the human consciousness out of the limitation of space. Take a piece of scenery painting; the scenery represented there might have extended over many miles in nature, but all that you have on a few square feet of canvas. It is only when you relate it to things around you, you begin to recognise the actual size of the canvas and the picture on it; but if you concentrate your attention on the painting, the impression you get is the same as if you were standing in front of a vast scenery and admiring it, provided of course the painter is a true artist. So, while nature requires many hundreds of square miles to produce a particular impression on you, the artist accomplishes the same purpose on a canvas of a few square inches. So there you have clearly an attempt to transcend the limitation of Space. What scenery painting is to space, that drama is to time. Incidents of many years are there represented in the space of a few hours; and for the time being you feel as if you are moving in time with the characters. Not only this; if it be really a good play, experiences of many centuries would be gathered up and presented through the action of the play; out of the different impressions produced there will emerge a thought which is independent of the time of the action of the play or of particular characters in it, but will represent a truth which will obtain at all time and under all conditions. In fact, the great dramas are the great generalisations of the process of nature. The characters in it are more than particular individuals belonging to particular periods of human history; they represent types. In any form of art, the true artist tries to represent the type and the nearer this type is to the idea in the Mind of the Creator—or as it is called the Archetype the more true is the artist. As William Hazlitt would put it, "the stage is an epitome, a bettered like-ness of the world, with the dull part left out". The immortal lines of Shakespeare.

" All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:"

are as much true as that the stage is a world, and all the characters in it represent men and women of different types. The dramas of the true artist "do not depict actions of mere individuals, but of individuals who are representative of types." "'SAKUNTALAM' moves men's hearts in the West as well as in the East, and now as of old. All Shakespeare's great characters are still with us; translate his plays into any language, and though as poems they lose much, the characters in them lose nothing at all. By studying each character, we know the psychology of hundreds of souls of that type.....Through the types in the great dramas, we look into the archetypes of thoughts and emotions, and of souls themselves."

And what is this archetype? It is the type in the mind of God. God plans in His mind ere He creates and produces forms down here; these exist in His mind as ideas; it is these ideas that we call archetypes. An archetype when it descends into the world of forms and concrete things manifests itself in various shapes. The idea behind is one, but the concrete manifestation of that idea may be manifold. For example, let us take the human type called the Teutonic. The Germans and the British, and several other nations of Europe belong to this type, but they are all different one from the other. A type is the generalisation of a number of particular things belonging to that type. All the multifarious things we see around us, exist in the mind of God as archetypes, and the function of the true artist is to enable us to sense them through his works. Shakespeare's Iago is not a mere individual, but a type; there were, are and probably there will be many Iagos in the world; so also a Dushyanta or a Sakuntala. They all represent types akin to those in the mind of God. The artist sums up in

himself many varieties of individual experiences and out of them spins the types and presents them to the world, so that through them many may get a glimpse, however passing, of the ideal world, the world of God's ideas. Multiplicity and diversity here, but unity and generality above. In the words of Browning, "On the earth broken arcs, in the heaven a perfect round." Just as one shining disc in the sky, the moon, is reflected in the different waves of a vast expanse of water and appears as multiformed discs, so also what is only one in the mind of God, shows itself down in numerous forms. Let all waves merge into one vast motionless sheet of water, and you see the one brilliant moon shining in all its splendour, so also let all ideas of difference, let the passing whims and fancies tranquillise into one silent mental repose, then unity arises. To realise unity through diversity is the goal of humanity; to sense the type through the different members of the type, to rise from particularities to generalities, is the path of the philosopher, the devotee, the philanthropist, the artist, and all who seek the Divine. That then is the function of the drama, to enable us to rise above differences and sense the type behind individuals and thereby get nearer God's idea.

As regards 'Shakuntalam', let me at the outset make a few observations about the construction of the drama. To me, this play seems to be perfect from the stand-point of construction and sceneic development. You know there are seven acts in "Shakuntalam." I wonder why Kalidasa chose the number seven for the number of acts of his best play. According to the rules of Sanskrit histrionic art, a drama may have from five to ten acts. Kalidasa has taken the number seven. We know that seven is considered to be a mystic number, full of occult significance; everywhere in Nature this number plays an important part; there are the seven notes of the musical scale and the seven prismatic colours; certain diseases show peculiar turns on the 7th, 14th and

21st days and so on; the waxing and the waning of the moon depend on that number. It is also interesting to note that Shakespeare when he speaks of the world as a stage divides the life of man into seven stages.

"And one man in his time plays many parts  
His acts being seven ages, .....

Might it not be that Kalidasa wanted to show that this drama was to represent the world with the seven great stages and so divided it into seven acts? I would even go further and try to show that there is some analogy between the seven stages mentioned by Shakespeare and the seven acts of "Shakuntalam". In the first act we are introduced to the heroine, Shakuntala, in all her innocence and simplicity of Ashrama life, tended and fondly looked after by her foster-father and other hermits, and this corresponds to the first stage of Shakespeare, 'the infant in the nurse's arms'. Shakuntala is here verily a child in the drama of life that was to be played later on by her. Then comes,

"The whining school boy with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail,  
Unwilling to School."

In the second act we find, Dushyanta who had come to the forest to hunt and thereby discharge his duty as Kshatriya king, is unwilling to hunt; he brings forward all sorts of excuses and declines to hunt like an unwilling school boy. Then comes the stage of,

"the Lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress's eye-brow".

It appears as though Shakespeare summed up in two lines the whole action of the third Act of "Shakuntalam". It is in this act that the love between Dushyanta and Shakun-

tala is fully worked out and we find both 'sighing like furnace', each with a ballad made to the other.

The next act appears to have no obvious connection with the fourth stage of Shakespeare, the soldier, but still we can find some of the characteristics of the soldier in the sage Kanva, the main character in the action of the fourth act. Kanva is a soldier fighting in the spiritual realm, and just as our ordinary soldier does not mind his personal considerations and looks on his body as only the property of the State which has a right to claim it when needed, so also Kanva, in spite of all his affection for the sweet Shakuntala, looks upon her as only a trust to be handed over to him who had a right to claim her. The last verse in the fourth act brings out this idea pointedly.

When we come to the fifth act, we find the king discharging his duties as an impartial judge irrespective of his own inclinations. Charming as she is, Shakuntala cannot warp his judgement. Though his inclinations tend to make him lenient towards Shakuntala, the king declines to swerve from the path of justice, and this is analogous to the fifth stage of Shakespeare. When the lost ring is put into Dushyanta's hands and the whole succession of events flashes across his memory, he loses zest in everything and begins to moralise on his condition as well as that of other childless people. He is much emaciated and just as in Shakespeare the man in the sixth stage finds,

"His youthful hose well saved a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank,"

Dushyanta in the sixth act finds his golden bangle too loose for his shrunk arm. The "last scene of all that ends this strange eventful history is second childishness, mere oblivion." We meet again Shakuntala in an Ashrama as we saw her in the first act, surrounded by hermits and in the bliss of reunion all the past misery is sunk in oblivion. W.

find none of those things that marked the intervening period of pain, 'sans everything' of sorrow, and there is an end of all trouble. So there is a remarkable analogy between the seven acts of "Shakuntalam" and the seven stages of Shakespeare's world drama.

Again, see how balanced the construction is, there is perfect symmetry; the acts from the beginning and the end bear a close resemblance to one another in their actions and scenes. The first act opens with Dushyanta riding his car driven by his charioteer; while in the seventh act, we find him in the car of Indra run by the hands of Mathali, Indra's charioteer. The main action in these two acts is the meeting of Dushyanta and Shakuntala; in the first act, he meets her for the first time, and in the seventh, he meets her first after the restoration of his memory regarding the events connected with Shakuntala. In the second act we find the love-sick king extolling the charms of his beloved to his friend, Mathavya, the Vidooshaka, and this is also the main action of the sixth act, where the king, with all his past memories vitified once again, is panting for his beloved, and Vidooshaka is the person on whom he vents all his eulogies about her. In the third act, the hero and the heroine meet and marry, while in the fifth they meet as husband and wife. The fourth act stands quite apart and has nothing in common with any of the other acts; the very atmosphere in this act is unique and is entirely foreign to the sentiments which characterise the action of the other acts.

As regards delicate touches and skilful avoidance of repetitions one can quote dozens of instances. In the first act where Shakuntala's friend narrates the story of Vishwamitra and Menaka the king interrupts her and saves her the embarrassment of having to narrate apparently indelicate incidents. In the third act where the king and Shakuntala meet alone in the bower Gautami is introduced just



at the right moment. The hint her friends give Shakuntala of the approach of Gautami is a masterly touch.

In the fifth act the king has lost all memory about Shakuntala and asks her to remind him of incidents which would enable him to remember his relations with her. *The incidents she narrates are not incidents which the audience have seen already enacted on the stage.* The same touch is used in the sixth act where the discovery of the Royal signet ring is narrated; the dramatist manages so to direct the narration as to avoid repeating what the audience already know.

There is an exquisite dramatic touch used in the sixth act which I cannot help referring to. Naturally the same person acts the king in all the six acts. In the beginning of the sixth act the chamberlain describes how the king, his memory restored, was living a life of intense agony and consequently has become thin and emaciated. Unless the make-up artist was a genius it would be physically impossible to make a good-looking, well built person look suddenly thin and emaciated. The dramatist anticipates this difficulty and provides for it by making the chamberlain say that though the king had become lean it could not be easily noticed on account of his innate lustre and royal effulgence. One can go on quoting such instances, but these should be enough to show the mastery of the dramatist.

It is not my purpose to deal with the usual criticism about characterisation. Much has been written about the shy forest maiden Shakuntala, the Dhrodattanayaka Dushyanta, the idiotic court fool Madhavya and the sage Kanva. These are types of humanity and a deep study of their psychologies will, as I have already mentioned, give a sort of vicarious experience which will benefit us as if we had gone through that experience ourselves. I wish however to say a few words about the sage Kanva. He is a rare specimen of the highest type of Rishi. He is not an ascetic wh

shuns the world and goes into retreat in a jungle or a cave; he could love with human love but in a sublimated way; he could look into the future and foresee the fate hanging over Shakuntala, but he would not interfere with the natural Law of karma. He knew on his arrival at his Ashrama that Shakuntala had accepted the hand of the king of her own accord, but he accepts the inevitable and proceeds to arrange for sending his foster-daughter to her husband's home. He loves her with all the warmth of a real father, but all the time there is a certain background of high impersonality behind it all. He makes all arrangements, fixes the escorts and attends to every detail like an ordinary house-holder. The time comes for parting; sage as he is, there is a deep pang, tears well up in his eyes, his voice is choked; but in the presence of Shakuntala he keeps calm; and when she has departed he falls back on his wonted serenity and is the unruffled sage once again. A real sage has transcended the experiences of a house-holder; he does not become a sage by merely running away from family ties; a sage is a house-holder sublimated; his range of experience covers all the experiences of a house-holder and comprises much more perhaps beyond the reach of the latter. His advice to Shakuntala and his message to the king are the quintessence of wisdom, courtesy, forethought and deep insight into human nature. We love and admire Kanva for these things much more than for his asceticism or abstruse Yoga practices. In him we find the consummation of what all real spiritual aspirants strive for.

In conclusion I would like to say a word about the general atmosphere of the play. Practically all the acts except perhaps the fifth and the sixth are played in forest hermitages where man and beast and trees live as one family, each loving the others like brothers. The simple yet elevated life of the hermits is the keynote of the play. Man is nearest to his Maker in such surroundings and not in the

din of strife and competition. There he communes with Nature and gets into touch with God. Simplicity of life untrammelled by man-made conventions and institutions helps the growth of the human soul which, like a tender rose bud, seeks congenial atmosphere for its unfolding. The play is full of references to the great love which the hermits and Shakuntala have for the beasts and trees. Shakuntala bidding farewell to her pet lamb, Kanva seeking for the blessings of the forest deities on her and his description of the tender love she has borne for the trees and shrubs and creepers are some of the most touching situations in the play. Man is born in varied environments; he has different duties and avocations; but his soul ever hungers for an anchorage; it is ever restless and seeks that anchorage in various ways. The final glory comes to him when he has realised that all life is one and that in simplicity of life and unselfish love lies the way leading to the Kingdom of Heaven.