

Advanced Course in Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu- 2

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Lecture 10

THE STORY OF SHAKUNTALA AND DUSHYANTA [37 MINUTES]

“This we offer with an expression of homage to the poets of old. Let us also pay reverence to language, a deathless thing, a part of the soul”
Bhavabhuti

The Tamil rendering of the story of Shakuntala and Dushyanta owes its inspiration to Kalidasa’s rendering of this narrative and in that it deviates from the narrative as found in the Epic. Kalidasa’s narrative begins with Dushyanta chasing an antelope

“We have been drawn far by this black antelope. Even now he, repeatedly darts a glance at the pursuing chariot, gracefully twisting his neck, with his haunches drawn acutely forward into his forebody out of fear of the arrow’s strike, scattering the path with grass half-chewed, dropping from his mouth gaping with exhaustion. Look! With his lofty steps he moves more through the sky and hardly touches the ground. How? Even though I am hard on his heels he has become hard to make out!”
Kalidasa

Kalidasa’s play *Abhijnanashakuntalam* was the first Indian play which attracted the attention of European writers like Goethe when it was first translated into the European languages. This narrative has been rendered as a film also in most Indian languages. Kalidasa’s play translated as “The lost ring of Shakuntala” has *Viraha*, or ‘love in separation’ as its central *Rasa*.

The story, in itself is banal. It’s the story of a man who falls in love with his ultimate other but due to circumstances beyond his control both forgets himself and their love. Finally the sight of a ring which he had given to Shakuntala, invokes his forgotten memory and again harmony is restored.

In Indian traditions, Art is primarily a mnemonic which helps one recover either what one has willfully or unconsciously forgotten. Invoking memory both collective and individual,

becomes the primary task of the artist and hence this formulation of aesthetics. So in general practice, all aesthetic performances begin with an invocation of Ganesha, the elephant headed deity for as they say, the elephant never 'forgets'. The aesthetic experience for the audience is nested between this notion of collective and individual memory that this figure of Ganesha represents.

The story of Shakuntala and Dushyanta is a very popular narrative found in the Mahabharata and many other Puranas. Dushyanta, after Nahusha and Yayati is eulogised as another great King of the Lunar Dynasty. Villibharatam opens the description of Dushyanta by saying that he was a King who had achieved equanimity in his life. That is, he had conquered all the three Gunas inherent in everyone and everything

Once that Neelan or Ilan married a lady called Iradandai or Rathanthai, had Dushyanta as the first born.

That exceptional first born was the inheritor of the throne. Listen to the tales of that exceptional first born as the inheritor of the throne. King Nila and Rathanthara gave birth to a son called Dushyanta. King Dushyanta was a devout King. He had also transcended all binaries and was in control of all his three gunas "Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas". Like all Kings of these ages he was skilled in all the sixty four arts.

One day King Dushyanta left with his army out on a hunt to the forest. Throwing sharp spear, hunting, terrifying the deer, chasing the wild buffaloes and elephants raging mad in the forest filled with giant birds like "Saraba" which were destroying the forest, the King rode his horse with his companions. A dainty deer looked at the King, and he went chasing it. King Dushyanta hunted all the dangerous and ferocious animals in the forest. That was the forest where Saraba birds ruled supreme.

There was a bird called Saraba, its might can be described in this fashion-In a fight between a lion and an elephant the Saraba bird could easily lift both the fighting animals. This bird was so strong it could lift and fly away with both the lion and the elephant. In a forest inhabited by such ferocious creatures Dushyanta was hunting fearlessly.

On the way he sees a deer which keeps staring at him intently. The King wanted to capture the deer that was staring at him so intently. He chases the deer which sometimes looks as though it is next to him, sometimes far away.

The King chasing the deer is a leitmotif, which begins most narratives in this tradition. The deer, while by it, is a neutral figure can either lead one to disaster or fulfilment. While narrating this episode, most storytellers would invoke other narratives of kings chasing deer's in the forest. In the Ramayana, Dasaratha's shooting what he thought was a deer begins a trail of events Rama, on the behest of Sita going after the golden deer had its own consequences. In the Mahabharata, King Pandu's killing a male deer which was actually a Rishi making love to his wife led to his getting cursed which again had a trail of consequences. The image of the deer invokes multiple narratives, resonates with multiple narratives. The storytellers underline this image of the King chasing the deer where usually unlike the case of Dushyanta chasing the deer leads the king to disaster.

Tired, fatigued, the King rose with his attendants to go a long distance in the forest, overcome by great thirst at first crossing the harsh hot desert where because of the heat even rats wouldn't budge and not be scared at the fearsome sight of a cobra. Tired, exhausted and thirsty, he sighted the gift of river Bhagirathi.

After quenching his thirst from the waters of the Ganga, Dushyanta saw a desert and next to the desert he saw a lush forest. The plants and trees in the forest seemed to be waving in the wind welcoming him inside. The sprigs of flowers on the trees were as red as Vermillion. Seeing this Dushyanta felt he was seeing the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi herself.

Kalidasa begins his description of Dushyanta's act of chasing a deer with another image of Shiva chasing an antelope, which superimposes another layer, another memory on this image. Dushyanta's charioteer makes this observation when he sees Dushyanta with his bow arched.

In this narrative analogy cited by the charioteer, a grief stricken Shiva had wanted to destroy the Yagna of his father in law, Daksha in which his wife Sati took her own life. The Yagna took on the form of a deer to escape Shiva's wrath. The deer shattered by Shiva's arrows became the stars, the Nakshatra's one which sees in the sky.

This simile placed here invokes the idea of the entire cosmos and of time itself. While Shiva's act of shooting the deer was an expression of his grief, Dushyanta, at this point of the narrative is just about to meet his other Shakuntala. This analogy placed here also gives a foreboding of the separation of Shakuntala and Dushytanta which is also soon to follow. Narratives in this epic tradition when juxtaposed with one other colour the other narrative giving it a totally different texture. The Tamil rendering of the narrative of Dushyanta and

Shakuntala also frames the main narrative with other narratives which add another dimension to what is being heard.

With circling birds as the canopy, hanging sheaths of the areca nut as welcoming arches, humming of the bees as the raga, voice of the young cuckoos as sweet music, and a swirl of peacocks as the dance of the dancing girls. With green coconuts for fresh water, the King who had quenched his thirst, encountered the forest. The rocks in the forest were arched like auspicious festival festoons as the King was walking watching all these sights a few Brahmins crossed his path. The King bowed to them and asked them as to whom this wonderful grove belonged to? They said this belonged to Rishi Kanva, whose ashram was nearby. They said that he has come a long way and it would be good if he can meet Rishi Kanva in his ashram. The King agreed and was walking towards Rishi Kanva's ashram. As he neared the Ashram, the crescendo of the Vedas being chanted increased in volume. He could see sacrificial fires all around the grove. The King strolled through the grove smelling the fragrances of the sacrificial fires. Straight away he entered Kanva Rishi's ashram. When he entered the ashram he was surprised to see a beautiful girl

The King who had gone to see the Rishi is perplexed to see a beautiful woman instead. The woman also stared back at the King. She quickly ran inside and brought out a chair for the King to sit on. The King sat on that chair. He asked whether he was in ascetic Kanva's ashram. She said "yes" and the King asked "whether the Rishi was not at home?" She replies by saying something which could mean two things simultaneously. One asking him to wait till the Rishi comes. The other meaning that the Rishi will be back in few minutes.

The King was curious and asked her as to whose daughter she was? She said she was the adopted daughter of Kanva Rishi. Shakuntala says she was adopted daughter of the Rishi Kanva and her real parents were King Kaushika and the celestial Apsara Menaka. Her father King Kaushika was practicing severe austerities in the forest which threatened the King of the Devas, Indra. So Indra sent the Apsaras to distract King Kaushika's concentration. There were four celestial dancers or apsaras in Indra's court. Indra called one of them, Menaka and said that King Kaushika was performing severe Tapas and asked her to disturb his Tapas. Menaka went to Kaushika who was deep in dhyana and danced and sang seductively. Smelling the fragrance emanating from her body and seeing her enchanting dancing and singing, King Kaushika's Tapas was disturbed. Kaushika was attracted to her and ran and embraced Menaka. As a result Menaka had a child. She carried her new born baby to King Kaushika and handed her over to him. King Kaushika complained that he wanted to perform tapas and become a great Rishi but she had disturbed his austerities. He asked Menaka to raise the child herself. Menaka just laughed and said that raising a child did not interest her. Menaka said that his child was his responsibility to raise now. Saying this she disappeared. Kaushika realised that if the child was there he would not be able to perform his tapas. So he

abandoned the child there and moved to another place to complete his tapas. The child started crying. Seeing the abandoned child cry, a bird of the species Shakuntala spread its wings providing shade for the crying child. As the sun was rising the child was disturbed by the heat and this bird provided shade from the hot sun to the crying child. Rishi Kanva who was passing that way heard the cries of the child and when he came upon the child he saw a beautiful baby girl. Rishi Kanva was shocked that the parents of the child did not show the same concern to the child that was shown by the Shakuntala bird. He decided to adopt the child himself and named her Shakuntala for the bird that had shielded her from the sun. Rishi Kanva found the abandoned child and raised her as his own daughter. Shakuntala says that her father had told her history to another Rishi which she had overheard.

So she started narrating her story to Dushyanta.

Praiseworthy of the Devas and others Sages, Kaushika as was his name practiced severe austerities earning the merits for his sincerity. The King performed Tapas in the Himalayas, touching the skies. The King among hills earned praise from all directions.

There was once a King called Kaushika who had a hundred sons and one day with his sons and army he went out on a hunt in the forest. In the forest all of them were hungry and tired and see Rishi Vasishta doing tapas. the King and his army went in great hunger to Vasishta's ashram which was nearby. Seeing that they were hungry Vasishta invoked the celestial cow Kamadhenu and requested Kamadhenu to provide food for all his hungry guests. Kamadhenu produced delicious food from her own body and Kaushika was amazed. He said that Kamadhenu was wasted in the ashram whereas she would be a huge asset to him and his huge army providing them food on all their long campaigns. Vasishta said that the cow did not belong to him but was really a celestial creature who would come when ever sages like him invoked her Kaushika, in anger at Vasishta's refusal sent his army to capture Kamadhenu. Kamadhenu appealed to Vasishta and he said that Kamadhenu could do whatever she could to defend herself. Now Kamadhenu created an entire army from her own body and her army defeated Kaushika's army Kamadhenu disappeared after the army was routed. Kaushika in anger sent his hundred sons to wage war against Vasishta but they were no match for Vasishta's spiritual powers and all his hundred sons lost their lives.

Now Kaushika himself entered the fray and was amazed that Vasishta was able to stave off all his invincible weapons. Kaushika realised that his physical prowess was ineffective against Vasishta's spiritual power. He decided to practice severe austerities to acquire the same kind of powers that Vasishta had so that he could become his equal and defeat him. Kaushika being born as a Shatriya could only become a Rajarishi and not a Brahmarishi which is what Vasishta was. Kaushika was determined on becoming Vasishta's equal and practised even more severe austerities to achieve his goal. For this he had to overcome numerous obstacles

on his quest and finally King Kaushika becomes the sage Vishwamitra. The narrative of the fight between Vashista and Vishwamitra again hinges on the question as to whether an individual has agency or is just merely an instrument. Kaushika through his sheer persistence changes his own destiny

Shakuntala says that this story she narrated to him was told by her father to another Rishi. Until this moment there was one hesitation curbing Dushyanta's instant love for Shakuntala. He was hesitant because he thought Shakuntala was the daughter of a Brahmin. Being a Shatriya he was hesitant to propose marriage to her. Now he feels comfortable as he knows that Shakuntala was actually a daughter of a Shatriya.

Both Shakuntala and Dushyanta are mutually attracted by the other. They decide to get married in the Gandharva fashion where mutual consent between both partners sanctifies the marriage. Dushyanta is called away urgently by his royal responsibilities and he takes reluctant leave of Shakuntala. He leaves promising that he would return the next day to claim her hand in marriage from her father Rishi Kanva and take her to Hastinapura.

In Tamil traditions, before Dushyanta leaves he makes a pledge before the elements, nature itself to bear witness. He tells Aagayavani, that Shakuntala was his wife and the son born to them would be crowned King after Dushyanta. Making the heavens bear witness to their union, Dushyanta gets married in the Gandarva style after promising that the son born to them will be the future King.

Shakuntala was only thinking about Dushyanta and did not notice Sage Durvasa who entered the Ashram. Thinking about the absent Dushyanta with longing Shakuntala does not notice Rishi Durvasa who had come to visit Kanva's ashram. Neither does she realise that Durvasa has cursed her in anger for ignoring him. An angry Durvasa mentally cursed Shakuntala that the person she was thinking of would forget about her till he actually sees her in person.

Few moments later, Rishi Kanva returned to his ashram. Shakuntala was afraid to tell her father about her secret wedding to King Dushyanta but Kanva already knew what had happened, and he assures her that Dushyanta would come, to claim her hand in marriage. Kanva reassures her by saying that he was actually worried as to how he would find a suitable husband to match Shakuntala's beauty and intelligence and says that only the Gods have sent Dushyanta to their ashram. He tells her that Dushyanta was a good man but Shakuntala says that he had promised he would come the next day to take her to Hastinapura. Kanva asks his daughter not to worry and says that he will definitely come tomorrow and

take her to his kingdom. A son is born to her and twelve years pass with no news from Dushyanta.

Rishi Kanva persuades her to go to Hastinapura with her son and says that Dushyanta would definitely recognise their son who resembled him more strongly. Kanva says that he does not know the reason for Dushyanta not returning and says that maybe he has forgotten her and asks her to go directly to the King and meet him. Kanva says if the King sees her he will definitely remember her. So he sent a few Brahmins to accompany her, requesting them to take her to King Dushyanta. Shakuntala picked up her son and is now on her way to meet Dushyanta. She had dreamed thousands of scenarios of how the meeting between her and her lover would take place. She thinks the moment she sees her, the King would rush to embrace her. With all these desires and hopes she enters the Royal Palace. With great expectations and love Shakuntala reaches Hastinapura and is shocked when Dushyanta says in open court that he does not know who Shakuntala was.

The moment she entered his court Dushyanta saw her and immediately recognised her as Shakuntala. Till now he had forgotten her, but the moment he saw her, his memory of her came back. But what did he do when he left her? He had made the heavens a witness to their love for each other. He had said only the child born to her will be the future King of the land. His doubt was whether the people would accept a child who came suddenly from nowhere as their future King. So he waited for the heavens to bear witness to their love, and even though he recognised Shakuntala he pretends that he has not seen her before. The king looked at that lotus like lady wearing bangles saying that her son was the son born to them. He thought about it, but stayed as if he was not aware of it. Dushyanta asked her, who are you and from where are you coming? What is your name? Finally who is the father of this child? The girl did not reply but she told her son that the King before them was his father and asked him to take his blessings. The people in Dushyanta's court were puzzled at what was happening

The eminent man has forgotten me, thought the lady: You spent time at Kanva's place after having embraced me; united in Gandharva marriage gave me a blessed son. Shakuntala thought that Dushyanta had forgotten her and pleaded with him asking him whether he really did not remember her. She says that one day when on a hunt he had visited her at her father Kanva's ashram. We got married in the Gandarva style and you had promised to return the next day to take me to your kingdom as your wife.

As she was pleading with him the King addressed his court and denies knowing Shakuntala or even of having met her. I have not seen her nor have been with her.

Can one trust the words of this woman or wait for the celestials to confirm rather than believe her as she looks innocent. The people of the court were puzzled. They did not know who to believe? Their beloved King or this beautiful woman! They knew that their King was a good man they could also see that the woman did not seem to be lying and her son looked like the spitting image of their beloved King. Now they were in a dilemma as to whom to believe, their King or this beautiful woman?

If the people in the country erred the King would be expected to punish them. But who had the authority to punish an errant King? Shakuntala says I have not seen anyone disinterested in a progeny. They long for, always praying, performing austerities charity for the boon of getting a son. Shakuntala cries and says that what King is saying is untrue. My son Bharathan is his son. The King denies the boy as his son but does he also deny the promise that he made?

Digging a hundred wells would equal digging a tank, digging a hundred tanks would earn the merit of performing a yagna, performing a hundred yagnas is equal to having a son. Being true to one's word is even better than having a hundred good sons. One would get the merit of digging a hundred water wells by creating a huge pond. One will get the merit of digging a hundred ponds by performing a yaga. One will get the merit of performing a hundred yagas if one is the father of a great son, and one will get the merit of fathering a hundred great sons if one stands for the truth.

In Kalidasa's rendition of this narrative a humiliated Shakuntala is taken away by her mother Menaka to Sage Kasyapa's Ashram where finally Shakuntala is reunited with Dushyanta. A fisherman bringing to the king a ring which Shakuntala had lost jolts Dushyanta's memory and suddenly he remembers all that he had forgotten.

In the Tamil rendition, Shakuntala is portrayed as a strong independent woman who berates Dushyanta for breaking his word. To a King a promise he made, she says should be sacrosanct and she narrates the story of king Harischandra here.

Harischandra was unwavering to his word whatever it cost him personally. Any promise he made was absolutely sacrosanct to him and would he rather die than break his word. Rishi Vishwamitra wanted to test the sanctity of Harischandra's word. So one day, he approached the king asking alms. The king in all his generosity declared that all that he owned was now the property of the sage and he could ask whatever he wanted. Vishwamitra wanted all the wealth that the king owned and promptly Harishchandra gave him his kingdom and all his

wealth. Harishchandra then left his kingdom with his wife and son. All three of them dressed in the garb of ascetics or of people who owned 'nothing'. Vishwamitra was not satisfied by this gesture of the king as he felt that still the king 'owned' some undisclosed wealth.

The narrative which follows is a divestment of all the wealth which the King, consciously or unconsciously owned. As the narrative unfolds Harishchandra becomes a slave and works as a caretaker of the cremation grounds. For every body that Harishchandra cremated, some money would be given to him the major portion of which would go to his master. Harishchandra would subsist on whatever remained. Vishwamitra was still not satisfied as he felt that Harishchandra still had wealth in terms of his attachment to his wife Taramati and their son Rohitadas. Harishchandra, to him, would only be bereft of all his wealth once his final attachment to his wife and son were also removed. So in this tragic narrative, his queen Taramati, lands up at Harichandra's crematorium to cremate their newly dead son Rohitadas. As Taramati had no money to pay for the cremation of Rohitadas Harishchandra was honour bound to refuse to cremate his own son.

At this point of the narrative, all the gods from heaven land up in the crematorium. They are pleased with Harishchandra upholding Dharma even at the direst of times now Vishwamitra also enters and he promises, even pleads with Harishchandra that he would get back all that he had lost if he just withdrew the promise he had made to him. But Harishchandra remains steadfast and does not renege on his promise.

After narrating the story of Raja Harichandra, an angry Shakuntala is about to walk away from the court with her son Bharata. In this universe the bad, the good, women men and for all there is no one but God who will be the protector. So said Shakuntala and walked out, holding the hands of the love child. Shakuntala tells her son that if there was a being called God, and then this God should come to suggest a solution. Otherwise let's end our lives and leave this place. Saying this she pulls her son by his hand and drags him out of the court.

At that point a voice from the heavens spoke out in favour of Shakuntala. The voice said "Listen oh Dushyanta! What Shakuntala is saying is the absolute truth" The voice said that it is true that you went to the forest and met her. It is also true that you married her in the Gandharva system. It is true that you had promised that the child born to her would be the future King of the land but for some unknown reason, you seem to have forgotten all this.

Dushyanta was waiting patiently for such a long time for the voice from heavens to bear witness to Shakuntala's story, because he had made the entire heavens the witness to their

love and marriage; but if he suddenly accepted this woman who appeared suddenly and made her son the King he was doubtful whether the people would accept this. The King was waiting patiently for such a long time waiting for the oracle from the heavens to bear witness. When the voice from the sky spoke, he immediately ran to Shakuntala and embraced both her and their son. He stood with them in the court and declared that I realised that she was my wife the moment I saw her.

It is true that one day I went to the forest where I met her It is true that we got married. It is true that I had made a promise, that the son born to us would be the future king of this land. But for some unknown reason I seemed to have forgotten all this. The moment I saw her, I remembered all that I had forgotten. But if I had accepted her immediately I was doubtful whether you would all believe me. So I waited for the oracle from the heavens to bear witness to our story and I restrained myself. Now that the heavens have spoken, I request the entire court to accept this. Hearing this everybody in the court were happy. The storyteller ended this session by describing the rule of Bharata who while being a great king was also a great patron of the arts.

Young Bharathan, the king, the Parthivan (ruler of earth), to be happy was born in the clan of Puru. One with shoulders high as hills in the embrace of women with rich bosom. He was equally adept in bharatham (dance) and music as he was steadfast in vows, learned in Vedas, great in performing yagnas.

The Mahabharata narrates three stories to say who the Pandavas were and why they were born. One narrative says that they were five of the eight guardian deities of the cardinal directions. All the deities of the cardinal directions were saddened, seeing the plight of the Raja Harischandra. Five of the eight guardian deities protested against the cruelty of Vishwamitra against the venerable King Harischandra. Vishwamitra cursed them for questioning his intentions and these five guardian deities were born as the Pandavas. This is one reason for the Pandavas birth given in the Epic. Another narrative says they were five Indra's of the previous Yugas who because of the power that they possessed currently thought that they were immortal. A line of ants is shown to them and when they ask as to who these ants were the answer was that all these ants were the Indra's of their respective Yugas. These five arrogant Indras were cursed to be born on earth as the Pandavas.

This is one distinctive feature of epic traditions where every narrative has an excess which cannot be contained by one single narrative. As one storyteller said to tell one story, you have to tell another, to complete which you have to begin another. In effect, he said to tell one story, one has to tell all stories. Only Death, he said, was a single story.