

ECOCENTRIC PRINCIPLES OF THE ĀŚRAMA SYSTEM IN KĀLIDĀSA'S ABHIJÑĀNAŚĀKUNTALAM

SWASTI SHARMA¹, §

Abstract. *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, or *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, is widely renowned as Kālidāsa's magnum opus. Its lyrical aesthetics and dramatic magnificence have been drawn from the long lineage of literary antecedents that exhibit social, spiritual, and political ideals in ancient India. The concept of the āśrama as the penance grove retreat (Kanva's āśrama) and its connection with the four important stages of life (āśrama system) in Sanātan dharma can be clearly discerned in Kalidasa's prominent plays. This research paper attempts to examine how *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* perceives, eulogises and delineates sustainable coexistence in the āśrama system. Besides, the paper also places a premium on several aspects of the fourfold life stages- Brahmacharya (scholastic life), Gṛhastha (matrimonial life), Vānaprastha (detachment from materialism), and Saṁnyāsa (complete renunciation), which have been described in the play. The ascetic abode of Sage Kanva is located in a remote greenwood, and its inhabitants dwell in absolute harmony with the laws of nature. The paper also underscores urban-rural spatial differentiation to analyse the contemporary social framework.

The transition of King Duṣanta from royal gṛhastha to lovestricken nāyaka to protector of rājadharmā bound by virtue and duty strongly resonates with āśrama principles. Through close reading and textual analysis of crucial acts, dialogues, themes, imagery, and characters, this paper argues that the āśrama concept involves phases of union, separation, and reunion (abhijñāna), unambiguously indicating that life is not always linear or absolute. The eco-conscious setting of Kanva's āśrama, the infallible figure of *rajarshi*, and lacunae in translation are some of the ancillary concerns that will contour the discourse. Translated into English by William Jones in 1789, *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* was pivotal for the British Orientalist enterprise. The play upholds the āśrama system as an integral component of the ethical-spiritual framework while simultaneously revealing human frailty and the dilemma of political duty.

Keywords: Aesthetics, āśrama, sustainable coexistence, rājadharmā, orientalist.

¹ Department of English, Satyawati College (University of Delhi), Ashok Vihar, Delhi-110052, India. e-mail: swastisharma@satyawati.du.ac.in, swasti95@gmail.com

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1. From Spaces to Stages: Āśrama as an Evolving Entity

Āśrama in the ancient Sanatan worldview is a polysemous word which refers to different stages of life — Brahmacharya, Gr̥hastha, Vānaprastha, Saṃnyāsa, as well as a secluded hermitage (centre of knowledge) where sages and ascetics dwell, experiment, meditate, and pursue spiritual ascendance. Kālidāsa's Abhijñānaśākuntalam successfully negotiates both interpretations. The very first scene is set against the backdrop of Rishi Kanva's āśrama, a rustic hermitage situated deep in the colossal jungle along the banks of the Malinī river, where Śakuntalā, who is the biological daughter of Vishwamitra and Menaka, is raised by her foster father, Sage Kanva. Raised in the lap of nature, Śakuntalā considers "Mādhavī bush" as her own sister. In Act 1, the union between Jasmine and Mango has been described by Śakuntalā as below:

"O Anasūyā, what a charming sight, this marriage of vine and tree. See, the jasmine has this very moment entered into her budding youth. And the mango tree is laden with young fruit indicating he is ready for enjoyment. (she stands gazing at them)" (Kālidāsa 177).

It is important to note that King Duṣṇanta's hunt was brought to a halt by an ascetic and his disciple belonging to the āśrama who not only protected the life of the blackbuck that belonged to the hermitage, but also reminded the King of his *rājadharmā*:

"How fragile the life of this deer!
How cruel your sharp-pointed arrows, swift-winged!
Never should they fall on his tender frame
like tongues of flame on a heap of owers.
Quickly withdraw your well-aimed arrow, bound
to protect the distressed, not strike the pure" (Kālidāsa 173).

In the pastoral setting of the āśrama space, all living beings are treated equally. Human life and animal life are treated alike. There's no hierarchy. From the above utterance, readers can infer that hermitages were hubs of coexistence between man and nature. Environmental preservation and maintenance of equilibrium were primary ecocentric principles. By protecting the deer that belonged to the āśrama from the arrows of the king, the ascetic performed both his mānava dharma and ṛṣi dharma. All lifeforms are sacred, and they are nurtured in the hermitage. This peaceful coexistence conveys a profound message to society regarding the deep connection between humans and nature. In 'Prithvi Sukta' of the *Atharva Veda*, the filial duty towards Mother Earth is described in the sloka "Mata Bhumiḥ Putroham Prithivīyah" (Earth is my mother, I am her son). The importance of the seasonal cycle and the judicious use of environmental resources are enshrined in the

Vedas. These fundamental principles were propounded by Vedic seers who transmitted them through the verbal medium. Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni and Prithvi are deities mentioned in the Rig Veda who are responsible for maintaining the balance of natural entities. Worshipping them through the therapeutic fire of ‘Yajna’ or holy oblations was deemed essential for progress and abundance. In the Oshadhi Sukta of the Rig Veda, the medicinal properties of varieties of herbs have been discussed in great detail. Therefore, it can be clearly established that āśramas were centres of knowledge and civilisation from where information was disseminated to society.

The ascetic in *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* reminds the King of his rājadharmā while narrating the code of conduct for performing holy rites in the āśrama:

“When you behold the sages rich in holiness
immersed in the tranquil performance of holy rites
free of impediments, you will know how well
your arm scarred by the oft-drawn bowstring protects” (Kālidāsa 174).

This intrinsic relationship between the king and his rājadharmā constitutes a key theme in the play. A King gains respect and fame by carrying out the duties by which he is bound. King Duṣanta fights several celestial and earthly battles to uphold righteousness, not just in the mortal realm but also in the heavenly realm. Thus, the ascetic reminds Duṣanta of the great power that rests with him as the king and how he should use it to safeguard the rights of his subjects. It is quite intriguing to note that although the āśrama of Sage Kanva was within the sovereign rule of Duṣanta, yet the code of conduct within the periphery of the āśrama was determined by Patriarch Kanva. Such a socio-cultural milieu was characterised by mutual respect, high regard for *jñāna paramparā*, and humility in leadership. When King Duṣanta enters the tranquil hermitage “modestly attired”, he sets an example for others to follow. Unlike Western civilisation, a ruler in Sanatan Dharma is also a *bhūmipah* (a protector of the territory) and a *nṛpah* (a protector of his subjects). King Duṣanta performs this duty by ensuring that the tranquillity of the āśrama is not disturbed in Sage Kanva’s absence. By doing so, he follows in the footsteps of his Puru ancestors, who had protected the sacrificial rites of hermits before him.

It is imperative to note that Śakuntalā’s foster nurturing in the āśrama space is far removed from courtly politics, conspiracies and worldly obligations. The āśrama is located in a secluded and densely forested area, symbolising spiritual ascendance. The constant presence of ascetics, sages, and seers facilitates the liturgical, meditative, and contemplative flow of life. In contrast, King Duṣanta’s Hastinapur is the centre of geopolitical and cosmic

upheaval. This rampant urbanisation is characterised by hierarchies, stringent laws, code of conduct and palace intrigue. Śakuntalā's harmonious coexistence with nature is an outcome of imbibing the solemn virtuosity of the āśrama, whereas Duḥśanta represents the urban tempestuousness of the court. The readers wonder how the two worlds will coincide. However, Duḥśanta dexterously transforms the "penance-grove" into a "pleasure garden" through optimal utilisation of freedom granted by the pastoral setting and absentee patriarch. He pursues Śakuntalā in a calculated manner without haste. The courtship evolves in a romantic and aesthetically pleasing bower of flowers. As the King says,

“ I may overlook the offence,
O girl with tapering thighs! If
out of kindness, you offer me a place
on this bed of flowers
sweet from the touch of your limbs,
to allay my weariness” (Kālidāsa 207).

While Śakuntalā is overcome by shyness and is skeptical of the union, the King dispels her fears by proposing a marriage/ consummation through acceptable Gandharva rites.

“Many are the daughters of sages,
married by the Gāndharva rite, we hear;
and once married, felicitated
with joyful acceptance by their fathers”(Kālidāsa 209).

2. Orientalist Influences and Re-reading of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*

This paper explores how *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* depicts the āśrama system: the spatio-temporal space of the penance grove; embodiment of myriad āśrama ideals; existence of clear distinction between ascetic/spiritual values and worldly duty; and Kālidāsa's attempt to negotiate utopian vs practical life. Rishi Kanva's hermitage offers a nuanced understanding of the āśrama system. At the very outset, Rishi Kanva is completely devoted to severe penance, which symbolically renders hermitage as extremely venerated, spiritually significant, and morally elevated. The āśrama system is not just confined to an idyllic pastoral space, but as a place for conducting tapas (austerity) with complete renunciation. Secluding oneself from material world, engaging in deep spiritual exercises, and gaining command over senses are some of the objectives of penance groves. They were centres of transcendental learning.

Many readers have observed that Kanva's penance establishes a clear dichotomy: penance (tapas) versus the romanticised aesthetic beauty. As love blooms between Śakuntalā and Duḥṣanta, many digressions and deviations are introduced to the hermitic ideal. Tender romance in a monotonous space exhibits Kalidasa's novel approach. The play introduces readers to different kinds of hermitages—Kanva's, Mārīca's, and Hastinapur's antithetical urban life—to examine dharma(s) and other intricacies of human-nature relationship. For example, some modern essayists have opined that Kanva's penance grove weaves an organic fascination towards spiritual renunciation. The purpose of penance is not only to perform external ritual austerity but fostering internal psychological control.

Orientalists and colonial translators saw penance groves as sites of detachment. For instance, William Jones's translation indicated scope of enlightenment in this moral retreat. However, he missed the disruptions that challenge the rigidity of austerity. These hermitages were meant for those who had entered the stage of *vānaprastha* and *saṃnyāsa*. Withdrawal from worldly attachment and seeking spiritual ascendance were the goals of such inhabitants. These hermitages stood in stark contrast with Brahmacharya (Śakuntalā's upbringing) and then Gṛhastha (Duḥṣanta's social obligations). Śakuntalā's departure from Kanva's hermitage to Hastinapur evokes a strong sense of harmony with nature. The singing by invisible spirits and koel demonstrates an unbreakable bond between Śakuntalā and the venerable trees within the consecrated grove, that house dieties and divine presences. The participation of benevolent *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs* in the farewell ceremony creates a sublime moment. Rishi Kanva heaps praises on Śakuntalā who has never caused any harm to nature, rather she celebrated the booming of tender buds that signify regeneration shows the inseparable ties. As Priyamvadā describes,

“The doe tosses out mouthfuls of grass,
the peacocks dance no more:
pale leaves utter down
as if the vines are shedding their limbs” (Kālidāsa 224).

The spectators of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* are active participants rather than passive viewers. The evocation of *rasas* allows spectators to delve deeper and connect intimately with the plot. The rasa-anubhava link creates an aesthetic appeal. For instance, audience experience Karuṇa rasa in Act III when Sage Durvasa curses innocent Śakuntalā. In the vast stretch of Kanva's āśrama, Śakuntalā had been nurtured according to the core principles of moral restraint and spiritual devotion. It is intriguing to note that Sage Kanva himself sporadically withdraws to abate any worldly ambition. Yet, it is quite interesting that

Kanva's āśrama is not an exclusive domain. It endorses and hosts people from all walks of life. The hermitage itself is porous, an idyllic and tranquil area that informs and enlightens the world outside. Therefore, it is not entirely insulated from the world. The liberating 'green world' of āśrama as opposed to the ostentatiously ornate world of the court promotes self-determination and autonomy. Śakuntalā is a child of nature. Throughout the play, her uncommon origin and qualities of *apsarā* make her exceptional and distinguished from the rest. She embodies purity and natural fertility. Śakuntalā and Duhṣanta's union begets Kāmaśakti (Sarva-damana King Bharata). As Kumar Pankaj asserts, "Shakuntala's integration with nature is portrayed as seamless and intrinsic, reflecting a deep harmony between her character and the natural world that surrounds her. She moves through the hermitage not as a visitor, but as an organic extension of it nurturing plants, communing with animals, and embodying a serene, almost elemental purity" (Pankaj 1113).

3. Evolution of Characters in Fourfold System

It is imperative to analyse *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* from the lens of āśrama system (four stages of life), prescribed in Dharmashastras and Upanishads:

Brahmacarya or ideal Student life: Śakuntalā is an archetype. She spends her formative years in the hermitage. Abandoned at birth and looked after by Śakunta birds until Rishi Kanva finds her, she becomes a brahmachārīni in the initial phase, owing to the rigid disciplinary environment of āśrama. Imbibing spiritual and ethical values, her relation-with nature becomes more profound. Prior to the arrival of Duhṣanta, she is unexposed to mundane and temporal affairs of the world. She has never transcended beyond the wilderness and spiritual lore. As Śakuntalā falls in love; Duhṣanta also experiences a strong pull of personal infatuation and moral duties. The disruption of hermetic ideals can be clearly witnessed as the courtship progresses with time. The tranquil āśrama hermitage is interrupted by erotic love. The foundation of the tapo-van or penance grove, Śakuntalā's juvenescence, and her meeting with Duhṣanta exalt her Brahmacarya-like innocence and chastity.

Grihastha or householder's life: Duhṣanta's love affair and *gāndharva* marriage with correspond to purusharth chatushtaya or the fourfold goals of life. The king fulfils his duties of pleasure (kāma), wealth and status (artha). Simultaneously, he is aware of the social obligations and vulnerabilities of the householder. Motivated by the strong urge to reproduce male heir, the King perceives consummation with Śakuntalā as his chance at fatherhood. Śakuntalā has often been compared to a fertile land that receives the "seed" of Dushyanta,

indicating conception. The curse motif of *abhijñāna* (recognition) hinges on memory, acceptance, and legal/social aspects. The crisis arises due to forgetting and return, reflecting the inner conflicts of duty and ethical responsibility in householder life. Śakuntalā, is forced by the dire circumstances to assume a more public role in the King's court when humiliation is inflicted upon her. The cycle of desire, regret, aspiration shows the world of Gṛhastha in true light.

Vānaprastha and Saṃnyāsa stages of life: Although the characters do not literally retire to forest, there are scenes indicating Kanva's penance and withdrawal, Duḥśanta's agony during and post-amnesia, his remorse and attempt to restore justice. Śakuntalā reverts to the āśrama, seeking refuge and Mārīca's hema-kuta hermitage. The sacred hermitage space facilitates reflection and atonement. The play does not show literal transition to Vānaprastha or Saṃnyāsa, but offers their symbolic contours. The highest state of renunciation or forest retreat is continually in contrast with political duty or *rajadharma*. Duḥśanta's repentance and Śakuntalā's dignified patience results in final reconciliation.

The four stages are ideal for a balanced life as per Dharmasūtras and various Smritis. Brahmacharya is the ideal stage for learning, Gṛhastha is meant for elevating society and for executing dharma/artha/kāma, Vānaprastha is for steady withdrawal to rehearse for Saṃnyāsa. It is a widespread misconception that āśrama dwellings were meant only for male sages, operating as secluded retreats for sublime asceticism and moral purification owing to their proximity to nature. Śakuntalā, Gautami and wives of sages shatter the stereotype by demonstrating that women were active participants and exercised agency in āśrama functioning (Khanal 235). Through close textual analysis, it becomes quite evident that women enjoyed equality and respect in hermitages. Venerable Gautami is the guardian or matron who guides Śakuntalā and imparts precepts of blissful marriage to her. However, gender equality of āśrama is subverted in the court of Duḥśanta. When accused of guile, Śakuntalā asserts her independence and rebukes the King. In the Indian literary tradition, pristine spaces such as vaṭas, vāna, and hermitages often contrast with opulent palaces and urban centres to show opposite ways of life: detachment and attachment respectively.

Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* employs the layered metaphor of āśrama in both literal and metaphysical senses. The penance grove is not just a mere backdrop: it defines the identities of protagonists, exposes moral ambiguities and dilemmas, shapes virtues of simplicity, detachment, and learning. The characters evolve in this picturesque and bucolic setting: Śakuntalā in her formative years attains Brahmacharyahood; Duḥśanta represents the Grihastha's life with its advantages and limitations; Kanva performs the dual role of

rishi and guide. Both Vānaprastha and Saṃnyāsa are depicted as mostly symbolic, but constantly informing the moral structure of the drama: withdrawal and solitude. As the Royal Sage or Rājarsi, the King has to strike a balance between personal desires and political obligations. His struggles become apparent in Act VI and VII where he tries to cope with personal grief by keeping himself occupied in the celestial battle. *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* does not reduce the performance of the play to a steadfast affirming of the āśrama; it duly scrutinizes the difficult terrain of negotiation between the expectations of love, memory, society, and spiritual virtues.

4. Conclusion

One finds that some of the later commentaries have projected the āśrama scenes of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* including Kanva's retreat, Shakuntalā's humiliation and Duḥśanta's remorse as the fundamental base for ecological, spiritual, gendered, psychoanalytical, and cultural meaning (Khanal 236; Pankaj 1115). The play has extensively explored the significance of ideal hermitage and moral discipline in spiritual awakening, reconciliation, reunion and recognition (Duḥśanta's remorse). The readings of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* across various cultures offer myriad thematic standpoints and lenses to re-examine dharma, gender, psychological realism, and self-positioning of characters. These interpretations redefine the status-quo understanding of the āśrama system. It is not characterised by a set of duties, but as a hub of universal humanism harnessing collective lived experience.

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