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Editor-In-Chief
Prof. K.N. Shelke

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A detailed still-life composition featuring a quill pen as the central element. The quill is positioned diagonally, with its tip resting on a scroll of aged parchment. The scroll is secured with a red wax seal and a red ribbon. In the background, a lit candle in a brass holder casts a warm glow. In the foreground, a glass inkwell with a quill inside and a red wax seal are visible. The entire scene is set on a dark wooden surface.

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Prof. K.N. Shelke

Head, Department of English,
Barns College of Arts, Science & Commerce, New Panvel (M.S.) India

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-:Contact:-

Prof. K.N. Shelke

Flat No. 01,
Nirman Sagar Coop. Housing Society,
Thana Naka, Panvel, Navi Mumbai. (MS), India. 410206. knshelke@yahoo.in

Cell: +91-7588058508

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Shakuntala - Myth or Reality: Man Enjoys and Woman Suffers**Dr. Archana Durgesh***BBD NITM, Lucknow, (U.P.) India***Abstract**

Kalidasa has been universally acknowledged as the highest star in the firmament of Indian Poetry. Tenderness in the expression of feeling and richness of creative fancy has assigned to him a lofty place among the poets of all nations. Sir Monier Willaims says ‘Of all Indian dramatists and indeed of all Indian poets the most celebrated is Kaladasa, the poetical merit of whose ‘*Sakoontala*’ is so universally admitted that any remarks on this head would be superfluous’.

Key Words: Shakuntala, myth, reality

That Kalidasa is the foremost of all poets is vividly brought out in the following oft-quoted sloka:

*Puraa kaveenaam gananaa prasamge
kanishthhikaadhishthtita Kaalidaasah
Adyaapi tattulya kaverabhaavaat
anaamikaa saarthhavatee babhoova*

In the Oriental method of counting, kanishthhikaa or the little finger comes first, then anaamikaa the ring finger and so on. In an assembly of learned men every one counted Kalidasa on the little finger. No name was forthcoming for the next finger. Therefore its name anaamikaa became literally true because there was no name to assign to the ring finger. (This, of course, is a poet’s liberty to fancy a situation which will bring out, in a telling way, the greatness of Kalidasa.)

Shakuntala is a play in seven acts. It begins with a remarkable Prologue, in which the director of the play briefly discusses the planned night’s entertainment with the lead

actress. He’s worried about impressing his learned audience, and tells her:

“Until the wise are satisfied,
I cannot feel that the skill is shown
The best trained mind requires
support,
And does not trust itself alone. (p.3)

The scene opens with King Dushyanta on a hunting trip near Sage Kanva’s *ashram* where to his utter amazement Shakuntala is coming into her own self and one of the first things the king sees is Shakuntala asking one of her friends to loosen the no longer quite form-fitting bark dress she is wearing. As Priyamvada says, “you had better blame your own charms for that.” (p. 9)

Much of the power of the play is as a character study of Shakuntala, as Kalidasa shows her in these different circumstances. Her love, her despair, her anger are all impressively displayed. Much of this and indeed, the success of much of the rest of the play depended on the poetry of the play, and while there are some very successful bits,

Miller's translation does fall short. Sanskrit is a difficult language to translate in any case, the nominal compounds and the Sanskrit verses with their own complex rules are also very difficult to convey. But up to an extent Ryder succeeded in bringing out the true essence and beauty of Kalidasa's version. But as it is explicit, 'translation is like a beloved if she is beautiful, she is not faithful and if she is faithful she is not beautiful.' There is nothing equal to Kalidasa's *Abhijhaana Shakuntalam*.

Shakuntala stands for all that is beautiful in Indian womanhood. She would risk her honor as a woman for the love of a man, and yet she would not take one harsh word that goes against her dignity from that man. She has the softness of the softest flower and yet she is as fierce as fire itself. She is strength that knows how to bend. She is the courage to trust. She is silence that knows how to be eloquent when the need arises.

The source of the plot is the *Sakuntalopaakhyana* in *MahaBharata*, *Adi Parva*, *Sambhava parva*. *Adhyaayaas* 68 to 74. In the *Mahabharata* her story is told by Vaishampayana in response to a question by King Janamejaya about his remote ancestors. When we first meet Shakuntala in the epic, she is the gracious ashram hostess who receives the honored visitor Dushyanta who has just entered Sage Kanva's ashram. The king was on a hunting trip and had reached the banks of the Malini where numerous ashrams were situated. The most famous among them was that of Sage Kanva and it was to pay his respects to Kanva that Dushyanta had gone to the ashram.

Dushyanta is surprised to see the beautiful young maiden in the ashram. Her beauty takes his breath away. Desire for her is instantly born in him. And he tells the young woman in front of him it is not the habit of his heart to desire for the undesirable and had she been a daughter of Kanva and hence a brahmana maiden, he would not have desired her. He introduces himself and asks her to tell him who she is.

Shakuntala informs him that she is the sage's adopted daughter and he is the only father she has known all her life. She was born to the sage Vishwamitra and the apsara Menaka. Dushyanta thought aptly, she was the daughter of a nymph with divine beauty:

To beauty such as this.
No woman could give birth;
The quivering lightning flash
Is not a child of earth. (Ryder, 13)

The sage was doing tapas when Indra asked the celestial dancer to go and tempt him and she was the result. She was abandoned at birth by both her parents and found by Sage Kanva. She was given the name Shakuntala because the sage had found her lovingly cared for by peacocks. Shakunta in Sanskrit means a peacock. Shakuntala is short for shakunta-laalita, lovingly-cared-for-by-peacocks. By the time she finishes her story, his desire for her breaks all bounds. He wants her, and he wants her now. "So it is the royal blood of Vishwamitra that flows through you and for that reason you are a princess and a kshatriya woman. Marry me, be my queen and live in royal comforts in my palace. You will have all the ornaments you desire, all the diamonds and jewels,

finest clothes and anything else you wish for. I give you my kingdom itself.”

The king presses hard. Passion for her has destroyed all his sense. Shakuntala asks the king to wait until her father comes back. He has gone out to the jungle to collect fruits and should be back in a short while. But Dushyanta wouldn't wait. Desire for her is tormenting him. He asks her to marry him by the gandharva rites, in which a man and a woman in love give themselves to each other, without waiting for the approval of parents and elders, without mantras, without priests, without rituals.

Again Shakuntala says they should wait. It is only a short while, until the sage is back, which would be any time now. But the king persists and succeeds in overcoming her objections. He grants her the one thing she desires – that her son should inherit his kingdom. He is burning with desire so he easily commits and said:

Her sweetly trembling up
With virgin invitation
Provokes my soul to sip
Delighted fascination. (Ryder, 37)

The wedding is consummated immediately. Rather than wait for Kanva to come back, to see whom was why he had originally come to the ashram, Dushyanta decides to depart immediately, telling Shakuntala his men would soon come to escort her to his palace.

The king does not keep his promise. Shakuntala waits for Dushyanta's people to come and take her to his palace. They do not come. She gives birth to her child in the ashram and names him Sarvadamana, All-Subduer. Still no one comes from Dushyanta. Eventually, when her son is

twelve years old, Kanva, her father, reminds her it is time for her to hand over her son to his father and to let him grow up in the palace where he belongs, learning the ways of kings. Shakuntala takes her son with her and reaches Dushyanta's court. Dushyanta refuses to acknowledge that he had ever met Shakuntala or had any relations with her. He refuses to acknowledge the adolescent she has brought along as his son. He calls Shakuntala a whore and the mother of a bastard child born of shameless lust.

He shows no respect even for the ashram clothes she is wearing. At his words, Shakuntala becomes an enraged snake. This is the man she had chosen for herself thirteen years ago. This is the man to whom she had surrendered her heart and her body. This is the man who had begotten a child in her and left, promising to send his people to fetch her and then forgotten all about it. And now he is insulting her in the middle of an assembly, in the presence of his ministers and noblemen – insulting her in such crude, merciless words.

The young woman who grew up in an ashram does not know what fear is. She does not know what treachery is, what weakness is. She has received the best possible upbringing: in an atmosphere of love, kindness, truth and fearlessness. She does not care she is standing in the court of an all-powerful monarch. She does not care his ministers and nobles are listening to her. A moment ago she was embarrassed about coming to him like this and shy. But now she lashes out at him, in the only language she knows: the language of truth. “You know me well, great king,” she tells him,

“and yet you shamelessly say you do not, showing total lack of culture.”

She reminds him that culture demands that a wife who comes to her husband’s place for the first time needs to be honoured, she needs to be offered worship. “You err by not worshipping me as I stand here,” asserts Shakuntala, demanding from her man the obeisance that is every woman’s right by Indian culture. “I deserve to be worshipped. And you do not offer me worship that is my due.” Shakuntala’s power comes from her knowledge of her position, her rights. Our ancient culture held women at the highest level. Our women did not grow up internalizing a self image that told her that she was the creation of a lesser God. She was the creation of the same God, maybe even a greater God. She was not a source of sin for man, but of *dharma*, virtue.

It is thrilling to see this powerful self-image in woman after epic Indian woman. Practically all our epic women, be it Gandhari, Kunti, Draupadi, or Sita share the same self-image: that of an equal to her man. There is no feeling in her that she is the ‘second sex’. If anything, she is the first sex. Gandhari never once in her life cringes before her husband Dhritarashtra. Kunti never once feels she is inferior to Pandu. Draupadi knows she is in every way equal to her husband. And Sita says she will walk not in Rama’s footsteps, but ahead of him, so that she can crush the thorns on his path with her feet and make his journey easier for him – *agratah te gamishyaami, mRdnantii kuzakaNTakaan*. This amazing self-perception of power is not born of arrogance or haughtiness, but of her culturally given status. We see this same status of women in

their husband’s home spoken of by the Vedas too. The standard Vedic blessing for a new bride was:

*samraajni zvazure bhava
samraajni zvazvraam bhava
nanandari samraajni bhava
samraajni adhi devRSu.*

[RV 10.85.46] [AV 14.144]

Be thou an empress to your father-in-law.
An empress be thou to your mother-in-law.
Be thou an empress to your husband’s sister.
An empress be thou to his younger brother.

Shakuntala tells Dushyanta that he needs to worship her for she is his wife come home for the first time. Perhaps the position of Indian women was at its best in the Vedic times. Since those ancient days, it has been a more or less steady decline for women. Today the respect given to a new bride is mostly ritualistic. She is still worshipped as she enters her husband’s home, though not by her husband but by his family, but her actual position in a traditional Indian home is far from what it was in the Vedic days. Shakuntala tells Dushyanta that a wife is not a man’s plaything – she is an equal half of his being, his best friend in the journey of life, the root of his *dharma*, *artha* and *kama* [virtue, wealth and pleasures]. And for a man who wants to cross the ocean of *samsara* and reach *moksha*, she is his most powerful ship. She reminds him that woman is the eternal sacred ground where man is reborn as his own son.

*aatmano janmanah kSetram
punyam raamaah sanaatanam.*

Shakuntala tells Dushyanta that she has not come to him for his charity – she does not need any of it. What she demands is justice – what is hers by right. In fact, she herself does not need even that. She is perfectly willing to go back to the *ashram* from where she has come – she will always be welcome there. She does not care for the comforts of the palace – such things do not tempt her. She needs just one thing: that his child be acknowledged as his. And she warns him of dire consequences if he ignored her. Still Dushyanta does not acknowledge her or her son. Instead, he insults her father, the sage Vishwamitra, calling him wanton; and insults her mother, the *apsara* Menaka, calling her a whore. And she herself is speaking like a common whore, he tells her: *pumscaliiva prabhaaSase*. He does not stop there. He calls all women liars. Before answering him this time she apologizes, for she says what she is going to say is going to hurt him. And then she tells him the difference between a fool and a wise man is that the fool chooses evil where the wise man chooses the good.

“Truth,” she tells him, “is superior to a thousand *ashwamedha* sacrifices; the study of all the Vedas, bathing in every sacred *teertha* in the world – nay, even these are not equal to the sixteenth part of the truth.” It is that truth that Dushyanta was rejecting in rejecting her and her son. Shakuntala shows her culture by apologizing for calling him a fool in spite of Dushyanta’s use of such unpardonable words as a whore for her and her mother, and a wanton for her father. As she turns around to leave, she tells Dushyanta her son does not need his kingdom. She did not bring him to

Dushyanta in the hope of her son inheriting his kingdom. No, he does not require it. For, her son will rule over all the earth bounded by the oceans even without his help.

*Rte’pi tvayi duSyanta zailaraaja-
avatamsikaam
caturantaam imaam urviim putro me
paalayiSyati.*

In contrast to the original myth Kalidasa sent Shakuntala while she was carrying accompanied by Gautami and Sharngarava who got so vexed at Dushyanta’s behavior that he commented sharply:

Leave her or take her, as you will;
She is your wife;
Husbands have power for good or ill
O’er woman’s life. (Ryder, 60)

In contrast to the original incident Kalidasa makes Dushyanta rebuke and insult his wife immensely and they are separated for years, only after that a fisher man is brought to his court with his signet ring he gave to Shakuntala as a token of their love and marriage that Sage Durvasa’s curse ends and the mist on his mind lifts and he remembers each moment vividly. Unable to find his true love full of remorse he says:

When I denied her, then she tried
To join her people.
“stay,” one cried,
Her father’s representatives
She stopped, she turned, she could not
give
A tear-dimmed glance to heartless me-
That arrow burns me poisonously.
(Ryder, 69)

Gods and celestial sages interfere here on Shakuntala’s behalf. They appear and testify

that she is indeed Dushyanta's wife and Sarvadamana is his son and suggest that he should now be renamed Bharata.

When the gods and celestial sages declare that Sarvadamana is indeed Dushyanta's son, the king accepts him and says that he has never for a moment doubted it, nor had he ever forgotten Shakuntala. Had he accepted Shakuntala and her son straight away, the royal officers and common people would have had doubts about the legitimacy of his relationship with them – there would always have remained an amount of suspicion in their minds. For his marriage to Shakuntala was known only to the two of them. Now that the gods and celestial sages have declared her his wife and Sarvadamana his son, he is the happiest man.

Is Dushyanta speaking the truth? Or is it that he has no choice but to accept them since the gods and sages have made their declaration? The answer lies not in Dushyanta's words but in his acts since meeting Shakuntala for the first time in the ashram. The moment Dushyanta sees her; he is smitten by her and desires her. After asking her who she is and finding that she is of royal blood, he straight away expresses his desire for her and asks her to marry him. He offers her everything that comes to his mind that might interest a woman according to his understanding of women – precious ornaments, beautiful clothes, jewels, and even his own kingdom.

Shakuntala tells him to wait a short while since her father would be back any moment – it is only to gather fruits that he has gone, he should wait until he comes back and ask for her from him. Shakuntala was a woman

any man could fall in love with instantly. She was desirable in every imaginable way as far as a man is concerned. But there is a distinction between love and lust. If it was love for her that Dushyanta felt, he could have, and would have, waited until Kanva came back in a few minutes or at the latest in an hour or so. But no, he wouldn't wait, in spite of being repeatedly requested by Shakuntala. Eventually she agrees to his proposal, after making him promise that the son born to them would inherit his kingdom. They enter into a gandharva marriage and the marriage is immediately consummated.

Dushyanta leaves the ashram straight away. He does not wait until Kanva comes back. Had he been an honorable man, had his intentions been honorable, he should have waited for him to come back at least now, told the sage what had happened and then left. Instead, he chooses to leave the ashram in a desperate hurry, promising to Shakuntala that his people would soon come to the ashram to fetch her to her new home, his palace.

There is no pressing business waiting for him, no emergency. He is on a vacation – on a leisurely hunting trip, accompanied by his ministers and a huge army. He has received no message informing him he is needed at the capital. His ministers are just outside the ashram. He does not tell any of them what happened in the ashram. He does not tell them he has married a beautiful maiden he met in the ashram. They do not know a thing about what happened until the gods and celestial sages reveal it to them in Dushyanta's court thirteen years later.

Let's assume Dushyanta did not have other wives. But there must have been lots of other relatives living with him in the palace. The rest of his family. His mother Rathantari is certainly there, to whom he later introduces her, after the gods have spoken. His four younger brothers are in all probability living there with him – Shooru, Bheema, Prapoorva and Vasu. He does not speak a word about Shakuntala to any of them.

And he does not send anyone to fetch Shakuntala as he promises. There would have been no ill fame in sending for her. The beautiful daughter of Sage Vishwamitra – a former king – and the *apsara* Menaka, brought up in the ashram of Sage Kanva, would have been more than acceptable to people as their queen.

Shakuntala will have to come to the court on her own when her son is twelve years old. There is no curse involved here that makes the king forget her. That is a later addition by Kalidasa to make the king's behavior acceptable.

The king accepted her because he had no other choice after the gods and the celestial sages made their declaration. And but for that, he would not have accepted them. He says that he made her wait for twelve years, made her suffer all those years, humiliated her so brutally in the court in the presence of the nobles and ministers present there, in front of her own twelve-year-old son, all because she could honorably be accepted as his queen.

I find it hard to believe. And even if it were so, did he have the right to make her suffer so much? Krishna says in the *Gita*: *yad yad*

aacarati zreSThah, tat tad eva itaro janah; sa yat pramaaNam kurute, lokah tad anuvartate – Whatever a great man does, other people also do; whatever he considers the ideal, the rest of the world follows. Wasn't Dushyanta setting up a very dark precedence when he left it to the gods and celestial sages to come and speak on behalf of Shakuntala? What would have happened if they had not? What happens when a mere mortal woman, an ordinary woman, is thus accused by her man?

In Valmiki *Ramayana*, Rama too makes Sita suffer agonies before he accepts her back at the end of the war with Ravana. He insults her, humiliates her publicly and rejects her. And there too the god of fire appears and vouches for her purity and then Rama says he did what he did so that she could be accepted back as his wife without dishonor.

Indian women are still asked to enter burning fire and dip their hands in boiling oil to prove their purity. The women who people our epics are *shaktis*: each one of them is endowed with power, sure of herself, sure of the choices she makes, sure in her speech, protective, passionate, loving, giving, hungry for life, filled with adventurousness, a fearless wanderer in life's vast fields.

She inherits her soul from our Vedic women: Independent, assertive, strong winners, who took responsibility for themselves. Authentic women who participated in all fields of life as men's equals. They debated on the meaning of life with the best of philosophers. They explored the mysteries of existence just as the men of their times did. They composed poems,

sacred and mundane, poems of the soul and of the flesh, singing of spiritual ecstasy and sexual longing, that survive to this day. The changes Kalidasa makes in *Shakuntala* tells us much about the changes that took place in women's status, her role in a man's life and societal and familial expectations from her by the time we leave behind epic times and reach what modern historians call the golden period of Indian history. Vyasa's *Shakuntala* is strong. She is shakti, bold and fearless. In the case of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, her strength lies in her weakness, in her helplessness. She is an *abala*: an infantilized woman whose strength is her capacity to invoke protectiveness in us.

Shakuntala gave herself to Dushyanta without waiting for her father to do that honour as her culture expected her to is just an outcome of – a foundling's insecurity. She was abandoned at birth and, though a royal child, had to grow up in an *ashram*. True, she was loved by her foster father, adored by all in the ashram, but when she would give birth to a son, she wanted him grow up in the palace, as the son of a princess should. Dushyanta was the answer to this deeply felt need. The man she fell in love with at first sight. And she responded to that need.

And when she comes to Dushyanta thirteen years later, it is for the sake of her son. The *Mahabharata* makes it very clear that she wanted nothing for herself. Our insecurities make us do strange things. This skeleton of a Puranic unromantic story has been transformed into one of the most beautiful plays in classical Sanskrit by the poetic genius of Kalidasa. The poet has invented dramatic situations and characters that

captivate the hearts and appeal to finer emotions of the readers. Durvasa's curse followed by the loss of the ring is the pivotal point around which the theme has been made to turn by the genius of Kalidasa. Though the story is recorded in the Epic, the plot is the poet's own. The two female friends of *Shakuntala*, the two pupil-sages who escort *Shakuntala* to the king's palace, the fisherman's scene, the king's sojourn in heaven at the request of Indra, Sage Maaricha and the King's reunion with *Shakuntala* under his blessings are all some of the characters and situations which are the exclusive creations of the poet's imagination. The narration about the birth of *Shakuntala* by her female friends to the king instead of by herself is certainly an improvement calculated to enhance the dramatic effect and is more in accordance with decorum. The absence of Kanva on a long pilgrimage when the king first comes to the hermitage, instead of the short absence set out in the *Mahabharata* story, conduces to the gradual growth of love between the lovers leading to a consummation in due course. Durvasa's curse conceived by the poet is a dramatic necessity for ennobling the character of the hero. Also, when *Shakuntala* is sent to the palace of Dushyanta she is still pregnant and not having a son of six years as in the original narration in *Mahabharata*.

The appreciation of *Shakuntala* by the great German poet Goethe is embodied in the oft-quoted translation of his words which runs as follows, "Would'st thou the young year's blossoms and the fruits of its decline, And all by which the soul is charmed, enraptured, feasted, fed. Would'st thou the

Earth and Heaven itself in one sole name combine? I name thee, O Sankuntala! And all at once is.”

Our great modern poet-critic sees in the above lines not a mere eulogy of poetic rapture but the deliberate judgment of a true critic. Goethe’s words have a special meaning for Tagore. They suggest that **Shakuntala** contains the history of a development - the development of flower into fruit, of earth into heaven, of matter into spirit. Tagore says, “There are two unions in *Shakuntala* and the motif of the play is the progress from the earlier union of the First Act with its earthly unstable beauty and romance to the higher union in the heavenly hermitage of eternal bliss described in the last Act. Love is elevated from the sphere of physical beauty to the eternal heaven of moral beauty. He then refers to the ease with which Kalidasa has affected this junction of earth with heaven. The simplicity of Shakuntala which leads her to a fall into the earthly love and Dushyanta’s conquest of her equally of the earth are naturally drawn. No restraints are sought to be imposed on Nature’s impulses by either of the lovers, and yet Shakuntala develops in her a devoted wife leading a life of rigid religious discipline. Freedom and restraint are marvelously blended in her, and the consequential joys and sorrows find a meeting point in her. Trustfulness was firmly enthroned in her heart, and though for a moment it caused her fall, it also redeemed her forever.

“In this drama Kalidasa has extinguished the volcanic fire of Dushyanta’s tumultuous passion by means of the tears of the penitent heart.’ The introduction of the curse of

Durvasas takes away the extremely cruel and pathetic nature of his desertion of Shakuntala. From the Fourth Act to the Fifth Act there is a sudden change of atmosphere. The ideal world of the hermitage makes way for the royal court with its hard hearts. Then the repudiation comes. Shakuntala is once for all torn away from the simple and beautiful environments of hermitage life and is cast upon the world helpless. ‘With rare poetic insight Kalidasa has declined to restore Shakuntala to Kanva’s hermitage’. The deep silence worthy of the mighty grief of the mourner is not disturbed by the poet by an exposition of the austere life of sorrows led by Shakuntala under new environments in the hermitage of Maricha in the celestial regions to which she has been transported. Now comes the turn of Dushyanta to be stricken with remorse. This remorse itself is *tapasya*, which purges him of all his sins of the past. ‘So long as Shakuntala was not won by means of this repentance, there was no glory in winning her. One sudden gust of youthful impulse had in a moment given her up to Dushyanta, but that was not the true, the full winning of her. The best means of winning is by devotion, by *tapasya*. What is easily gained is as easily lost. Therefore, the poet has made the two lovers undergo a long and austere *tapasya* that they may gain each other truly eternally’. Fate now plunged Dushyanta into deep grief and thus made him worthy of true love. ‘Thus has Kalidasa burnt away vice in the eternal fire of the sinner’s heart?’ “He has made the physical union of Dushyanta and Shakuntala tread the path of sorrow and thereby chastened and sublimated it into a moral union.” ‘Truly in

Shakuntala there is one *Paradise Lost* and another *Paradise Regained*'

Herde wrote after reading *Shakuntala*, "A masterpiece that appears once every two thousand years." The story for the play '*AbhijnanaShakuntalam*' appears in the *Adi Parva* of The *Mahabharata*; Kalidas adapted the story for this play though he takes significant liberties in his version.

Kalidasa is recognizably the greatest poet and dramatist in ancient India when Sanskrit flourished. *AbhijnanaShakuntalam* and Kalidasa's other plays were written for a refined court audience. The dialogue of the upper-class characters was delivered in Sanskrit, the classical language, and that of women and commoners in Prakrit, the common speech. Despite these lofty origins, Kalidasa's plays have remained popular.

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