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Social Values of Women in Abhijnanasakuntalam: An Analysis

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Abstract

The Abhijnanasakuntalam is a marvelous work of the great poet and playwright Kalidasa, the brightest star in the firmament of Indian poetry. Kalidasa's imagination holds in perfect fusion the two elements of natural beauty and human feelings. Out of three plays of Kalidasa, Abhijnanasakuntalam is generally regarded as a masterpiece. The word 'Abhijnana' in the title signifies 'a token of recognition' (here a ring), which is instrumental in bringing about the final recognition of Sakuntala by the king. It is a Nataka in Seven Acts, based on the love-story of king Dushyanta and the maiden Sakuntala. Social values form an important part of the culture of the society. Values account for the stability of social order. They provide the general guidelines for social conduct. Values such as fundamental rights, patriotism, respect for human dignity, rationality, sacrifice, individuality, equality, democracy etc. guide our behaviour in many ways. Values are the criteria people use in assessing their daily lives; arrange their priorities and choosing between alternative courses of action. There are Seven Acts in Abhijnanasakuntalam. Each Act of Abhijnanasakuntalam reflects various social values of women which are more beneficial to human society and the present day world.

The present paper will try to shed some light on the various social values i.e., emotions, behaviour, attitude, feelings and experiences, mental states, the degree of patience, the quality of forgiveness, reaction to social situations, modesty and decency etc. of Women in Abhijnanasakuntalam.

Key Words: Society, Value, Social Value, Social Problem, Behaviour, Attitude, Love, Women.

Introduction: Abhijnanasakuntalam is a beautiful tale of love and romance, the name literally meaning 'of Sakuntala who is recognized by a token'. Written by one of the greatest poets of India, Sakuntalam is synonymous with its author, Kalidasa. Abhijnanasakuntalam has an iconic status in the history of Indian literature and within the ideologies of nationalism and domesticity of nineteenth century elite Indian societies that drew from brahmanical social values and still continue to dominate lives and politics in contemporary India. Abhijnanasakuntalam is one of the best not only in Sanskrit literature, but in the literature of the world. The story was already in Mahabharata in the form of a dull narrative; but, Kalidasa turned the same into an elegant work of art with a lot of innovations. Love in union and love in separation are both depicted in this drama with a greater degree of perfection. The dramatic power and poetic beauty of this unique work have elicited the highest praise and admiration from the scholars all over the world. The play, Abhijnanasakuntalam, has been widely acclaimed as Kalidasa's masterpiece. He is the brightest luminary in the firmament of Sanskrit literature. His play consists of Seven Acts, based on the love story of king Dushyanta and the maiden Sakuntala, as given in the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata. The various social values i.e., emotions, behaviour, attitude, feelings and experiences, mental states, the degree of patience, the quality of forgiveness, reaction to social situations, modesty and decency etc. of Women are reflected in the play Abhijnanasakuntalam.

Act Wise Analysis of Social Values of Women in Abhijnanasakuntalam:

In the First Act, we see Dushyanta, the hero of the play once went out on a haunting expedition, accompanied by a large army. He became exhausted and came to the penance grove of Kanva in pursuit of some wild deer. He is then invited to receive such hospitalities as the Ashrama could offer.

At that time sage Kanva is away, but his daughter Sakuntala is there, who would most surely look after the guest's comfort. Here hospitality is in this state a duty. That is why Kanva takes special care to appoint Sakuntala in his absence to receive the guests. The king accepts the invitation and enters into the hermitage. There he finds three girls watering the flowering plants and shrubs. In this connection, he falls in love with Sakuntala who is one of them, the other two Anasuya and Priyamvada being her companions.

In the meanwhile Sakuntala is also struck at the king's appearance and readily falls in love with him. The king thinks of the possibility of his being a suitable husband for Sakuntala because a man of a higher class was allowed to marry, besides a girl of his own class (who alone could join him in the performance of religious duties), a girl of lower class or classes (of course at the risk of being degraded in the estimation of society). If she be of Brahmana origin, on both the sides, he could not marry her, marriage with a woman of the higher class being strictly forbidden.

In the Second Act, at the time of her departure with her friends Sakuntala manifest her feelings towards the king, though with modesty. Having gone only a few steps, the slender one suddenly stopped, alleging that her foot was pricked by a blade of darbha, and she stood with her face turned towards me, pretending to disentangle her bark-garments, though it was not caught in the branches of trees. Here we can see that Sakuntala is so shameful, cultured, decent, sober and moderate that she can't express his inner feelings to her beloved directly. In this context, we find that by answering the questions of king Dushyanta "is she always remain celibacy or until marriage?" Priyamvada answers "*arya dharma caranepi paravasoyam janah*". It means even in the discharge of religious duties she is dependent upon another; what then in a matter of such great moment as leading a married life. Manu also declares that women can't have independence of action under any circumstances. A woman has no liberty of action at any time. They are not freely or independently allowed to do anything as she wishes. There are certain social, religious taboos which operated as social sanctions.

In the Third Act, we see Sakuntala looking at Priyamvada speaks "*hala kimantahpuravirahaparyutsukakasya rajarseruparodhena*" means friend, why do you detain the royal sage, who is pining on account of his separation from the ladies of his harem? This proves that Sankutala in spite of her coyness is capable of looking after her own interests. Is it not natural that an unsophisticated mind may have misgivings about situations reports whereof are not encouraging? One born and brought up in the cradle of nature is yet to be convinced of a warm response from someone who is a stranger to unostentatious habit of life. She is now affected by the malady of love, but still she told to king that "though smitten with love, I am not the mistress of my person. I can give you my heart but it is my father who has the power to dispose of my person, not I". Her modesty was so great that ever since the time when she felt herself invaded by a feeling which was strange to her in her hermit-life. (Act -I. *kim nu khalvimam janam prekhya tapovanavirodhino vikarasya gamaniyasmi samvrta*), She kept it concealed even from her dearest friends, till her love-affected condition and the entreaties of her friends forced her to reveal it to them (Act III. *yatah pravrti mama darsanapathamagatah sa tapovanaraksita rajarsih & c.*). So far she presents an illusion of the Aryan female modesty. Though trouble by the arrows of cupid she showed a full sense of female honour. Her words "*pauraba raksa vinayam madanasamtaptapi na khalvatmanah prabhavami*" prove her lively sense of feminine dignity and respect for her elders. This raises her character immensely in our eyes. Here we see the Kalidasa's wonderful insight into human nature.

Then we see Dushyanta has married Sakuntala by the Gandharva form of marriage and has then left for the capital, having promised to send a suitable guard to take his bride to his place. Although it is heard that many daughters of royal sages are heard to have been married by the Gandharva form of marriage and they have received the approval of their fathers and i.e., also accepted by Manu, still the girls become anxious as to how the father will view the incidents that transpired in his absence? But Kanva congratulates Sakuntala with all his heart after knowing of her marriage. At this juncture, while Sakuntala is alone in the hermitage, her thoughts being away with her absent husband, she fails to offer proper hospitality to the choleric sage, Durvasa, come to the Ashrama as a guest. The hot tempered sage curses her, "he of whom you are thinking, he won't remember you even when reminded by you". One of Sakuntala's companions, however, pleads Sakuntala's absentmindedness and obtains from the sage forgiveness and concession in so far that, the curse would cease to have effect on the production of some token of recognition. The two companions say nothing about the curse to any one; they do not communicate it even to Sakuntala, as they thought it was not advisable

to worry her with it, and especially as some token of recognition could easily be produced when the occasion needed it. One of her friends Anasuya thinks how the king, having said those sweet things, has not sent even a letter during so long a time? or once in the company of ladies of the harem the king was likely to forget his new love (*smarati va na va*). These feelings are natural for the part of a true friend. She has a sensitive kind of devotion to her welfare and an almost feverish desire to avoid causing her friend any unnecessary worry, either mental or physical.

Now all are preparing to send Sakuntala to her lawful husband. Normally what happens? A friend presents a presentation to his friend at his marriage. Here we also see the two friends of Sakuntala, although they are not endowed with so many wealth still their friendship forced them to give some presentations at her friend's marriage ceremony. Her two friends deposited a wreath of bakula flowers capable of lasting for a period of time retaining its odour in the casket of palm-leaves, hanging from the branch of the mango tree, cosmetics, such as *mrigarochana* (yellow orpiment), holy dust and tender *durva* grass. As we see the friendship or even sisterly affection between them is finely delineated.

In the Fourth Act, at the time of her departure Kanva's emotion is very pathetic. Though living in a forest, far removed from family ties, a perpetual celibate himself, he finds it impossible to control his emotion in spite of the magnificent wealth of his asceticism. Sakuntala's affection for her father was also unbounded. Her heart is heavy with sorrow. She says to her friend that though I am eager to see my husband, my feet move onwards with great difficulty, as I am leaving the hermitage. As she is brought up amidst hermitage environments and her kinsmen are the foresters, so it is very difficult for her part to depart these relations.

Another most remarkable point is the Kanva's practical wisdom in the counsel he gives to Sakuntala on the duties of a house-wife and a daughter-in-law. We find this in Act IV. It means "Serve your elders, and act the part of a loving friend towards your co-wives; though wronged do not act in a refractory way towards your husband, in a fit of anger; be extremely polite towards your dependants, and not elated with pride in prosperity. Thus do young ladies attain the dignity of a house wife; those of an opposite character are a curse to the banes of their family". It embodies the noblest advice that could be ever given to a young woman on such an occasion when she is joining her husband's household. This was considered as the principal duty of a girl after marriage in ancient times. With such mentality a girl has to enter her in-law's household. It is often referred by Bhasa in his plays. To abide entirely by the wishes of her husband and to be devoted to his well being alone, is considered to be the highest duty of a Hindu woman. There is an abiding faith in the institution of marriage as not just a private affair but as a sacrament, a mystic unifying force that builds society.

From her parent's perspective, the daughter is only a deposit guarded by the father to be made over to her husband at the proper time. Having sent Sakuntala to her husband's house Kanva says my inward soul is now intensely serene as it is when a deposit is returned to its owner (*pratyarpitanyasa ivantaratma*). When wedded to the king by the legal form of marriage, Sakuntala presents another interesting side of Hindu womanhood.

In the Fifth Act, she is openly discarded by the king as he does not remember having married her. So he regards her as another's wife. To accept her as a wife, would be openly having connection with another's wife and he would be guilty of being a *kshetriya*. One deserving punishment in the matter of another's wife (i.e., one having a willful connection with her) an adulterer at that time. After hearing these, though for a time just angry with him, she does not in the least lose her affection for her Lord, and does not forget her duties as a married woman towards him. She leads an ascetic's life during her separation, ever keeping the image of her beloved husband in her heart. Her patience is skillfully delineated here. She does not lose her courage at the King's repudiation. Controlling her feelings, she politely and patiently tries her best to remind Dushyanta of the earlier incidents. She blames her misfortune for her failure and never utters a word against her husband. Only once and that too when Dushyanta passes a remark about her morals, and the morals of her family—she loses her tempers and calls her husband 'Anarya'. Here, we see, she is endowed with a high sense of self-respect, courage to suffer, heart to forgive etc. The use of the word '*avarodhastirodhAne rajadareshu tadgruhe*' in this act shows that the custom of restricting the women to their inner apartments at that time. The mention of the veil is instructive from a historical point of view. It shows that women, at least high-caste ladies and women of the royal house-hold (cf. *asUryampashyA rAjadArAh*), were in those days in the habit

of wearing a veil (perhaps the upper garment serving as a veil being drawn over the head so as to conceal the face) when going to public places.

In the Sixth Act, the discovery of the ring paves the way for the re-union. From this act we get some idea of the law of inheritance prevailing in the days of Kalidasa. The Prime Minister, the noble Pisuna, sends the following report of a case which he refers to the king for decision:—"A sea-faring merchant named Dhanamitra has been lost in ship-wreck. He dies childless, and his immense property becomes by law forfeited to the king". Now the king's reply is "As he had great riches, he must have several wives. Let inquiry be made. There may be a wife who is with child". And when he is told that one of his wives – the daughter of a merchant from Saketa is soon to become a mother, the king decides that the child shall receive the inheritance. The unborn child has a title to his father's property. From this it seems that the widow could not inherit her husband's property in those days; she was simply entitled to maintenance.

In the Seventh Act, the king backs again in Indra's car, his unexpected meeting with a refractory boy in the hermitage of Maricha, the search for the amulet by which the boy is proved to be his son, the meeting with Sakuntala who had neither combed her hair nor braided them after separation (*ekavenidharA*) and the happy re-union of the lovers in the end.

We see the union of the lovers in the first Act is romantic and the re-union in the Seventh Act is spiritual.

Concluding Remarks: From the above discussion, we see that a man of a higher class was allowed to marry, besides a girl of his own class (who alone could join him in the performance of religious duties), a girl of lower class or classes (of course at the risk of being degraded in the estimation of society). If she be of Brahmin origin, on both the sides, he could not marry her, marriage with a woman of the higher class being strictly forbidden. It means caste system was their. Women can't have independence of action under any circumstances. They are not freely or independently allowed to do anything as she wishes. There are certain social, religious taboos which operated as social sanctions. To abide entirely by the wishes of her husband and to be devoted to his well being alone, is considered to be the highest duty of a Hindu women. There is an abiding faith in the institution of marriage as not just a private affair but as a sacrament, a mystic unifying force that builds the society. One deserving punishment in the matter of another's wife (i.e., one having a willful connection with her) an adulterer and the custom of restricting the women to their inner apartments are also found. The widow could not inherit her husband's property in those days; she was simply entitled to maintenance. It shows that there is no more importance of women at the time of Kalidasa. Women are strictly restricted in every sphere to breathe an independent life. They are recognized as the oppressed class of the society and merely a puppet in the hands of male dominating society.

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