‘KAŅVA AS A STHITAPRAJÑA’

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By S. RAMACHANDRA RAO

Asst. Professor of Sanskrit (Indology), Maharaja’s College, Mysore

The Bhagavad Gita and the Abhijnana Sakuntala are complementary classics. Between them they present in full Indian life and ideals. The concept of a Sthita-Prajñā was a distinct contribution of the Bhagavad Gita to posterity. While the Gita utilised and synthesised all the fundamental principles which went to make up an Aparokshajñānīn as enunciated in the upanishads and Vedanta Sutras, it added on to them its own idea, that an Aparokshajñānīn should be one in society and not one out of it. Indeed, it insisted that it was the bounden duty of an Aparokshajñānīn to keep the ‘Jagatchakra’ moving. This insistence of an Aparokshajñānīn taking interest in worldly activity, while at the same time having his mind fixed on God was a distinct contribution of the Bhagavad Gita. The Upanishads did not emphasise this social aspect of an Aparokshajñānīn. They spoke only of his spiritual qualities and described him as a successful spiritual aspirant. Having spoken thus of a Sthita-Prajñā, the Gita felt that it ought to illustrate its concept. It mentioned as an illustration Janaka, and spoke of other similar God-minded souls interested in participating in worldly activity. But the Gita did not describe in detail how these men actually bore the burden of worldly responsibility. Perhaps, the Gita thought that it was not its domain; and that the puranas and other texts might as well complete the other side of the picture.

This was exactly where the Abhijnana Sakuntala stepped in. This remarkable Indian drama presented the great character Kanva in order to illustrate in detail the worldly activity of an ideal yogin. Indeed, the many changes effected by Kalidasa in the character of Kanva as it is found in the Sakuntalopakhyana of the Mahabharata, show that Kalidasa was deliberately trying to portray Kanva as an ideal ascetic—a great Sthita-Prajñā. Thus we are told in the original Mahabharata story that when Kanva returned from the forest with fruits, he learnt from Sakuntala all about her love affair with Dushyanta. In the drama we are told that an ‘incorpooreal voice’ disclosed the fact to the sage when he entered the fire-sanctuary. The change effected here imparts divine power and sanctity to the personality of Kanva. Again, while in the original, it is said that king Dushyanta did not send for either Sakuntala or her son because he was afraid of the anger of Kanva; in the drama we learn that the king did not do so because he was under the curse of

1 Adhyāya III, pāda IV.  
2 Bh. Gita III 16.  
3 Bh. Gita III 20.  
4 Sak. Act IV.  
5 Mah. Bh. 20; 95.
Durvasas and therefore did not remember his wedlock with Sakuntala. The anger of Kanva is not touched in the drama at all; and thus, one of the chief attributes of a Sthitaprajna, namely the complete absence of anger is hinted at. Next, in the original we are told that Kasyapa felt exceedingly sad while sending Sakuntala to the capital of Dushyanta. Kasyapa, we are told, was in great sorrow and allowed tears to flow down his cheeks. Now such a conduct would be inconsistent with an Aparokshajnanin and Kalidasa has rightly avoided references to it while sketching Kanva in the drama. Nor is this all; Kanva is portrayed just as an ordinary ascetic in the Mahabharata. He does not send his daughter to her husband’s house immediately he learns of her marriage. Rather, it was only when he learnt that Sarvadamana was becoming more and more mischievous each day that he decides to send both mother and son to Dushyanta. Contrast this with the conduct of Kanva in the play where the sage decides to send immediately Sakuntala to Dushyanta’s capital. This would show that the sage was deeply attached to Sakuntala. But we learn from Kalidasa that he ordered only two sages Sarngarava and Saradvata and the matron Gautami to accompany her. This would be the correct conduct of an ideal sanyasin. And therefore, we learn by these changes, that it was Kalidasa’s intention to convert the worldly Kanva of the Mahabharata to a Sthitaprajna.

Kalidasa gives enough evidence in the play to show that Kasyapa was not merely a great sage but that he was also a Jivanmukta. As a Jivanmukta, he had acquired divine vision and supernatural powers. No less a sage than the great Maricha tells us, that sage Kanva had known all about the re-union of Sakuntala and Dushyanta by his spiritual powers and that there was no necessity for sending words to him separately about it. A reference again to his powers of ‘Siddhi’ is made by Sarngarava. To an enquiry made by Dushyanta in regard to the health and cheer of Sage Kasyapa, Sarngarava replies—“Sir, persons of supernatural powers have their well-being in their power.” An earlier statement made by Sarngarava while addressing Kasyapa: ‘Indeed, Sir, there is nothing out of province to the intelligent’, confirms the view that the sages knew Kasyapa as having great powers which could only be wielded by an Aparokshajnanin. When Priyamvada tells us that Kanva learnt the fact of Sakuntala’s wedding with Dushyanta by a divine voice, we know that it is the euphemistic way of telling that Kanva was a sage with divine powers acquired by his Aparokshajnan. For, we learn from Darsana texts that such powers could be acquired only by an Aparokshajnanin. Because of such powers, it was possible

for him to secure ornaments from various trees of the hermitage. The statement—'kim mānasī siddhiḥ' of Gautami in this connection is noteworthy. Armed with such spiritual powers, there is no wonder if his blessings come true. He blessed his daughter Sakuntala to become a respected wife and the mother of a great son and ultimately she did become both. Nor was it possible for evil forces to have their sway so long as the sage stayed in his hermitage. And, we are told that the minute he was absent from the asrama, the goblins made it a point to put obstacles in the way of the ascetics, thus forcing some of them to seek Dushyanta's aid in clearing the obstacles.

All this is to show that Kanva was a yogin par excellence. A taste of the rigorous ascetic life he led which perhaps was responsible for bringing him the status of the Sthitaprajña is also referred to in the play. When he is introduced to us for the first time in the fourth Act, we see him looking holy after his daily bath. He would not think of sending Sakuntala to her husband’s home without making her first circumambulate respectfully the sacred fires. He was averse to transgressing rules prescribed for ascetics, and readily stops accompanying Sakuntala when he is reminded by Sarngarava that 'a beloved person should be followed as far as the waters’ brink'. It is no wonder therefore that his adherence to such strict principles of asceticism should have secured for him the place of an ideal ascetic.

Further, Kalidasa shows by contrast, the distance which existed between Kanva and the other ascetics. The others were all imperfect; perhaps were Sthitaprajnas in the making; while Kanva had realised the status. The Bhagavad Gita tells us that a Sthitaprajña is one 'whose mind was free from anxiety amid pains, indifferent amid pleasures, loosed from passion, fear and anger'. And yet, it is the opposite of these qualities that we find in the conduct of sage Durvasas in the drama. When no one recognised him the minute he announced himself as a guest, he becomes so angry that he curses even the tender-hearted and unoffending maiden in love. Anasuya knew him as a 'great sage' who was 'easily irritable' and who was 'pervasive by nature'. And how far indeed is his conduct from that of the ideal sage Kanva who speaks not a word of admonition when he learns that his daughter had wed during his absence and without his permission. Thus the drama presents these two ascetics in sharp contrast. Equally sharp is the contrast which is suggested between Kanva who is spoken of as a celebrate all his life and sage Kausika who fell a victim to Menaka's beauty. By such a study in contrast, Kalidasa shows that while Kanva had thoroughly mastered his senses—a requisite quality of a Sthitaprajña, Kausika

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1 Sak. IV 5. 2 Ibid., Act IV. 3 Ibid., Act IV st. 6. 4 Sak. Act II p. 66. 5 Ibid., Act IV p. 115. 6 Ibid., Act IV p. 116. 7 Ibid., Act IV p. 123. 8 Gita II 56. 9 Sak. Act IV st. 1. 10 Ibid., Act IV p. 107. 11 Ibid., Act IV p. 102. 12 Ibid., Act IV p. 109. 13 Ibid., p. 34. 14 Ibid., p. 35. 15 Gita II 58.
was far from it. Nor are the two other ascetics Sarngarava and Sarad-yata anywhere near their master in the possession of ascetic virtues. Unlike their master, they are impatient and angry. And, of the two, Sarngarava is positively cynical and ironical in addition to being highly emotional. How far away are these ugly qualities from Kanva, their master, who was a veritable Sthitaprajna!

All this has gone to establish that sage Kanva had the requisite qualities to be termed a ‘Sthitaprajna’. But it was maintained above that the term would suit only an ascetic who partook also of the activities of the world and did not run away from them. As if to declare, that Kanva had even this in an ample measure, Kalidasa portrays him as playing the role of an ideal house-holder. Though a celebate from birth and though his ambition was self-realisation, fate compelled him into worldly activities by presenting him with the orphaned child Sakuntala. Nor was she the only child to be reared and brought up in the asrama. Though we are not told how Anasuya and Priyamvada got into the hermitage, we learn that the sage had reared them affectionately and was thinking of making them over to suitable bridegrooms when the proper moment arrived. From the moment the sage accepted the responsibility of playing the foster-father to Sakuntala, he goes at his task seriously. He knew for example, that evil was in store for Sakuntala and goes to Somatheertha to counteract it. He also decides to offer Sakuntala to a suitable bridegroom and has even thought of Dushyanta as the most worthy husband for her. He can play the great organiser with credit and successfully discharges the duties of a great ‘Kulapathi’ of an asrama situated on the banks of the holy river Malini. His stay in the asrama struck terror into the hearts of the demons who dared to prowl about the precincts of the asrama, only when the great Kulapathi was absent from it. He knew how he had to make arrangements to receive guests during his absence and appointed his dear daughter Sakuntala to this sacred task. Nor is he unaware of the necessity of looking after the tender plants of the hermitage and thinks of Sakuntala again to look after their welfare. He feels satisfied to learn that the ‘Navamalika creeper had resorted to the mango tree’. He assures Sakuntala that he will not forget to send a letter to her when her dear deer gave birth to a young one. He even undertakes to protect the deer when requested to do so by his daughter. When the time comes for sending his dear daughter to her husband’s house, he observes all the typical formalities enjoined to a Grihastha and derives immense satisfaction after having entrusted his daughter’s hand to its proper owner.

All these detailed activities of Kanva are narrated by the dramatist only to show that Kanvas’ was the instance of a great sage engaged in worldly activities. What makes him a Sthitaprajna is that he plays the

1 Sak. Act V st. 20.  2 Sak. Act IV p. 126.  3 Ibid., p. 15.  4 Sak. Act IV st. 12.  5 Sak. p. 122.  6 Sak. IV 21.
house-holder without cultivating any attachment. Truly a brilliant example for the statement—‘Mukta Šamgah Samāchara!’ Gifted with supernatural powers, he would have come to the help of his suffering daughter; but no, he was a Sthitaprajna and allowed her fate to work itself out. Again, however dear Sakuntala was to him, he would not ask king Dushyanta to treat her with partiality. Indeed, all that he asked of him was to accord the same treatment as the king would do to the other women of his harem. Great as Kanva is, he feels that others were also his daughters and as good as his dear Sakuntala. He finds it entirely inappropriate to demand any special treatment to Sakuntala, though she was his object of affection. His high asceticism again makes him set standards for a good daughter-in-law and an ideal house-wife.

Thus far it is established that Kanva is an instance of a great Bramhajnanin who associated himself with worldly activities, without developing attachment to them. This was exactly what the Bhagavad Gita was preaching while talking about a Sthitaprajna. However, there is one other character in the play who can lay claim to such a title. He is the great sage Maricha who appears in the final act of the drama. The rigours of his penance as also of those of the other ascetics in his asrama are vividly described. Rejected Sakuntala finds finally shelter in his asrama and it is there that Sarvadamana is born and named. And yet, Maricha, though he is undoubtedly a Jivanmukta, appears to be too austere and away from the world of erring beings. He is too awe-inspiring and grand to evoke feelings of affection towards him and is in contrast with Kanva who is gentle and humane. Maricha seems to be nearer the upanishadic ideal of Aparokshajnanin rather than that of the ‘Sthitaprajna’ of the Gita. He seems to be at a stage when he is keener on his own mukti than on attending to the affairs of other beings. Nor is his character and personality worked out in such great detail in the drama by the poet as that of sage Kanva. The dramatist never allows the vivid picture of Kanva to be blurred by the presentation of yet another character in the same play possessing similar virtues. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the Abhijnana Sakuntala portrays sage Kanva as a great Sthitaprajna.

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1 Ibid., IV 16.  
2 Sak. Act IV st. 17.  
3 Ibid., Act IV st. 18.  
4 Gita sts. 52-75; ch. II.  
5 Sak. Act VII sts. 11-12.

N.B.—The references here are to the “Abhijnāna Šākuntala of Kālidāsa” Edited by A. B. Gajendragadkar, Bombay, 1920.