India’s Ancient Plays (Two Plays of Ancient India):
Shakuntala and The Little Clay Cart

Instructor: Mohan R. Limaye, Ph.D.
Fall 2009
Honors 392-001
Tu Th: 9:15 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.

Course Description:

Two masterpieces of ancient Indian dramatic literature will be studied intensely, one a romance and the other a (tragi)comedy, with analyses of the culture or milieu in which they had their origin. Though we will consult other sources of Indian culture, the main emphasis in the course will be on “extracting” cultural information from the plays themselves. Thematically speaking, the students will see how both plays explore love in all its aspects, from the purely carnal to almost spiritual, from conjugal love to love among friends, and bonds between parents and children. The two plays also complement each other very well in terms of the psychological ambiance, the social classes represented by the characters, the intensity of the purely poetical quality, the kind of humor employed, and the nature of the plot.

Required Texts:

(1) The Recognition of Sakuntala, a play by Kalidasa, translated by Arthur W. Ryder, Dover Publications
(2) The Little Clay Cart, A Hindu Drama Attributed to King Shudraka, translated by Arthur W. Ryder & Charles R. Lanman, Kessinger Publishing (Rare Reprints)

Introduction:

A unique aesthetic experience, namely, of reading two masterpieces of ancient India could most certainly enrich American students of literature because, for one thing, Indian dramatic theory differs substantially from the Aristotelian norm that informs western drama (thus providing an Indian counterpart to their knowledge of the dramatic genre). For another, I think that these two plays, Shakuntala and The Cart, are perhaps the most famous and enduring works in the entire Indian dramatic repertoire.

Not only will the texts be studied intensively as artifacts, but various aspects of ancient Indian culture will also be explored as they are revealed through the words and the deeds of the characters in the plays. Such exploration will demonstrate that Hindu culture has (remarkably enough) remained in tact in its essence to this day. In the classroom, we will talk about the significant references and allusions to Indian culture occurring in the plays. Such discussions will facilitate our understanding of Hindu mythology, Hindu theology or “religion” and ritual, India’s social structure based on caste and class, and India’s music and art.
Reputation of the Plays

These plays were written around two thousand years ago but have ever since been immensely influential in India: a couplet incorporating Indian traditional literary estimate of Shakuntala, for instance, puts this play at the very top (and drama as the most pleasing of all the genres of poetry). A researcher, Dorothy M. Figueira, found at least forty-six translations of Shakuntala rendered in twelve European languages during the 19th century, an indication of the Western interest in Indian drama. Without suggesting any borrowing from either side, one may note the similarities between The Cart and the ancient Roman comedy in the apparatus employed by them, leading one to the possible conclusion that the genre of comedy has many universal elements. The atmosphere of Shakuntala, on the other hand, is at once essentially human and ethereal, and I can see no parallel to it at least in British drama (except, maybe, in Shakespeare’s romances).

Just as no literate English speaker can be found who has not heard the Shakespearean line “To be, or not to be: that’s the question,” similarly, no educated Hindu of my generation can be found who hasn’t heard at least a few expressions from these plays. Some expressions that have passed into India’s psyche, for instance, come from Shakuntala: “shivaaste panthanaha santu” (bon voyage), “na khalu madhuraanaam” (Everything adorns the beautiful) or “ati snehaha paapshunki” (Too much affection makes one unduly anxious). I may cite a few from The Cart-- a term “abhisaarikaa,” denoting a woman who is passionately in love, getting ready to meet her lover against all odds. Or “gunaha khalvanu, etc.” (True love would be won by virtue, not violence) and “nirdhanataa sarvaa, etc.” (Lack of money is the root of all misfortune). Examples abound.

I give below brief descriptions of the two plays:

**Shakuntala ( The full Title: Abhidnyaan-Shakuntalam ) by Kalidasa**

The Indian poet-dramatist Kalidasa, “the Grace of Poetry”, wrote The Recognition of Shakuntala, a play in seven acts, over 2000 years ago. Shakuntala is a story of love at first sight between a king and a “maiden of nature” that goes through union, separation, and re-union, moving from a purely physical attraction to a steady flame of conjugal love. The play ends in a trinity of father, mother and son, a full royal family. The son of Dushyanta the hero and Shakuntala the heroine is, thematically speaking, the mediator and crux of the play inasmuch as he resolves its oppositions: palace versus hermitage, court versus country, and run-away passion versus self-control. This is a play of incomparable poetic beauty and thematic richness.

Shakuntala has been held in very high esteem by Indians throughout the ages as one of the best plays of India. Among other merits of Kalidasa, traditional Indian literary critics listed his use of the simile and the metaphor as his greatest trait. Since Sir William Jones first introduced Shakuntala to the Western reader through his English translation toward the end of the eighteenth century, it has become a favorite of the oriental scholar and some of the first-rate literary figures of Europe, such as the German poet Goethe. It is to
plays like Shakuntala that the Indian dramatists turned for inspiration and for models when a literary renaissance broke out in all the principal regional languages of India beginning in the early nineteenth century. Incidentally, the other official name of India, Bhaararat, comes from the name of the son of Dushyanta and Shakuntala.

**The Little Clay Cart (Mrut-Shakatikam) by King Shudraka: A Brief Introduction**

This play mixes love between a generous, cultured, and once-rich young man and a beautiful, talented, high-class courtesan with slapstick comedy, a subplot in the form of a political intrigue, and a fascinating world of low class persons with their feet firmly planted on the ground. It is a world very different from the world of Shakuntala. It was uncommon to have for a heroine a courtesan, although a very sophisticated and educated one. Similarly, a Brahmin, by profession a merchant, was not that common either. There is a lot of action in this play with not a dull moment. The principal plot and the subsidiary plot are skillfully blended. They are original (not derived from the epics), and the rich diversity of characters gives this play an atmosphere uncharacteristic of most “heroic” Sanskrit drama. Burglars, police officers, judges and juries, maids in love, lovers confused about their assignations, the king’s brother-in-law chasing a woman who doesn’t want him—all these jostle together, a “God’s plenty,” creating a comedy that is unparalleled in the whole gamut of the Indian theatre. Magnanimity, acts of kindness done without expectation of reward or reciprocity, is one major theme of the play. Another theme is the great power of love that transforms—literally as well as figuratively.

**Some Characteristics of this Course**

1. This course will be run like a seminar. That means the students will be responsible for finding a lot of information on their own—on the Internet, in relevant articles and books, and through collaboration with fellow students.
2. From time to time, I shall ask the students to research specific topics and report on them to the class.
3. They will be encouraged to ask questions and generate discussions on issues as they arise out of the plays we are studying—cultural, social as well as literary.
4. My handouts will often serve as springboards for further in-depth study of the topics covered in the plays. I would encourage student initiatives for such explorations. In other words, they can choose relevant topics.

**Policies**

(1) Tardiness and absences are discouraged: Each unexcused absence will cost 10 points.

(2) The presenter should make every effort to finish the report within the time allotted.
(3) Oral presentation grades are non-negotiable.

(4) Use of standard, “educated” English is expected for all assignments.

(5) Once presentation dates are set, students will be expected to stick to the schedule.

Evaluation of student performance

Students will do the following assignments for grades (Some not-for-grade assignments will be given from time to time):

(1) A six to eight-page, double spaced typed summary of a scholarly book on India (assigned to or chosen by the student), which also includes a critical evaluation of the book, will be distributed by each student to the instructor and the other students in the class. He/she should do so sufficiently in advance so that all the students will have enough time to read and digest the summary. The student will present the book report before the class, which will be followed by a Q-and-A period (300 points).

(2) Every student will give an oral presentation on some aspect of Indian culture to be followed by a question and answer period. He/she will also submit to the instructor an outline of the presentation and a bibliography. (200 points)

(3) Students will take a mid-term essay exam based on Shakuntala. They will answer one out of three or four questions asked (200 points).

(4) Toward the end of the semester, they will take another essay exam based on The Little Clay Cart. They will answer one out of three or four questions asked (200 points).

We will decide later whether these will be take home exams. Both the exams will test the students’ appreciation and critical understanding of the plays.

Estimated Time Allocations for Various Tasks

We have roughly 30 class sessions.

Shakuntala and The Cart (Lectures and Discussions)--------------------------12 sessions

Book Report I (written and oral)---------------------------------------------4 sessions

Topic Report (oral)---------------------------------------------------------- 4 sessions

Discussions of relevant topics-----------------------------------------------8 sessions

Two Exams-------------------------------------------------------------------2 sessions