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# Review

Romila Thapar, Śakuntalā: Texts, Reading, Histories. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. xii + 271 pp. $29. ISBN: 978-0-231-15655-4 (paperback).

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A mighty king on a hunt meets a beautiful girl from the forests, the alliance produces a son who is initially rejected and then accepted by the king. This story of Śakuntalā has been told and retold in different forms, straddling canonical as well as popular traditions in India. Thus when a leading historian of ancient India delves into this mutating literary narrative not for the purpose of 'combing literature for historical facts' but 'to treat this repetition as a prism through which to view points of historical change' (1), we expect a rich interface between literature and history—and we get that and more.

Professor Thapar's substantial analysis of the journey of the Śakuntalā narrative begins with the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata* after tracing its pre-epic locations such as the Vedic corpus and the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* where Śakuntalā is briefly linked to the preeminent clan of the Bharatas. In the *Mahābhārata* (which took shape between the fourth century BCE and fourth century CE) a lengthened version of this narrative reappears among the ancestral legends of the Puru lineage in the 'Book of the Beginning'. The Puru lineage was part of the Candravaṃśa or the Lunar line, one of the two Kṣatriya lineages to which most of the clans claiming the prestige of Kṣatriya status were assigned. The epic version of the Śakuntalā story sets out the origin of the Bharata clan which continued to be a legitimising agency as many dynasties in later Indian history also claimed descent from one of these two royal lineages. The constant repetition of the story of Bharata's birth in the Purāṇas, from about the seventh century CE for example, is not only because he became an important node in the succession list of Candravaṃśa but also because of the ideological importance of lineage.

Professor Thapar's work on ancient India has shown that genealogies that claim to be records of succession in the past derive from the social institutions of the present for which they provide legitimizing mechanisms. In Śakuntalā: Texts, Reading, Histories, Professor Thapar uncovers the politics of genealogical inventions through an analysis of structural oppositions, characterization, dialogue and literary tropes employed in the epic. The most exciting element of this analysis is the figure of Śakuntalā, the mother of Bharata of

the celebrated lineage, who appears to be mired in controversies. Śakuntalā is located in a liminal space between the cultured court and the natural forest, she is the forsaken child of a union not legitimized by marriage and she is forthright, free and assertive. In short, Śakuntalā is not quite the ideal wife extolled in the didactic sections of epic which suggests that she is a woman from a different society who sees herself as equal in status to the man, characteristic of the society of forest dwellers.

Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* is a retelling of the Śakuntalā narrative in another historical context through another literary form—that of a nāṭaka/play. Kālidāsa's dates have not been conclusively proved but it is accepted that he was possibly active in the fourth and fifth century CE during the Gupta period. This is a time when attempts are made to restructure the agrarian economy by drawing in peripheral areas under Brahmanical supervision, convert communal property into feudal property, harness local cults to Vedic Brahmanism under state patronage and strengthen caste patriarchy in many ways. The differences between the epic and the play, almost a contestation, as exposed in Professor Thapar's analysis, reveal how indeed the retelling of a literary narrative may serve as a prism through which historical changes may be viewed.

The genre of the romantic play foregrounds the hero-king, the tension of the struggle between desire and duty and the rhetoric of political power of the monarchical state. In an essay entitled *Dāna and Dakṣinā as Forms of Exchange* (1976) Professor Thapar had argued that land grants constituted the germ of what was later to develop into a new agrarian structure as well as a changed metaphor for both the recipient and the donor. In Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, Professor Thapar reveals the play of such political gestures in tracing the lineaments of Kaṇva's āśrama as an incipient agrahāra, a settlement of Brāhmaṇas on land donated by the king. It is also not surprising, given the visibility of a brahmanical high culture in the play, that the figure of Śakuntalā is now re-presented as extremely shy and retiring, though with erotic undertones, taking on the romanticized persona of the upper-caste woman of feudal patriarchy.

The reading of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* by Orientalist scholarship and by European literary opinion from the end of the eighteenth century is yet another significant signpost in the journey of the Śakuntalā narrative. The endorsement of the West in the colonized world helps set in motion a certain legitimate, and dominant, way of looking at the narrative and central to this process is the translation of the play by William Jones in 1789. Jones' attempt may have been to recuperate and canonize what he considered to be a glorious example of India's Hindu classical tradition. But the prominence given to the Sanskrit play by Orientalist scholarship in effect also marginalized all the other variants of the Śakuntalā narrative in Sanskrit, Braj-bhāṣa and Urdu. The foregrounding of Sanskrit studies slowly fed the construction of an essentialized Hindu that tended to be monolithic as well as reductive

since it privileged the upper-caste norms from a rich tapestry of plural cultures. Also, Jones' unease with erotica seemed to draw from contemporary British patriarchy whose fictions dominantly represented romantic love in ways that domesticated female sexual agency. It is not surprising therefore that while the pastoral beauty and lyrical charm of the play were appreciated, the unabridged play, as Professor Thapar points out, was not approved of as a text for teaching Sanskrit in schools and colleges. The next major translation of the play into English, that of Monier-Williams is published in 1855. Monier-Williams was later associated with the Boden Chair at Oxford and was Professor of Sanskrit at Haileybury College where those who were to 'command the destinies of the Eastern world' (p. 223) were being trained. Controlling the culture of the colonised was a new way of administering that culture for imperial purpose.

The Śakuntalā narrative is also an important instance of how Indian nationalism sieved its past. Professor Thapar argues that nationalist ideology in its earlier phase iconized the Indian woman as the domesticated wife and mother. Kālidāsa's heroine exhibits chastity, submission and sacrifice of an order that is not present in her epic counterpart. Thus for Indian nationalism, Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā, and not the spunky heroine of the epic, was the role model. Śakuntalā in Mārica's hermitage, parted from her girlhood and disciplined by penance, is, in the words of Rabindranath Tagore, 'invested with the dignity of a matron, she is the image of motherhood...' (p. 248).

The plural stories of Śakuntalā, their interpretations, translations and marginalization, as recuperated and mapped by Romila Thapar reveal that pre-modern Indian culture was not a monolith. But the past is selectively constructed according to the present needs of the dominant in society and thus traditions legitimate the present. Professor Thapar's book is not only significant in uncovering the historical impulses, often multiply driven, that empower certain readings or receptions of the story but also gives us in the process many of those forgotten stories, which like Śakuntalā demand and wait for recognition.