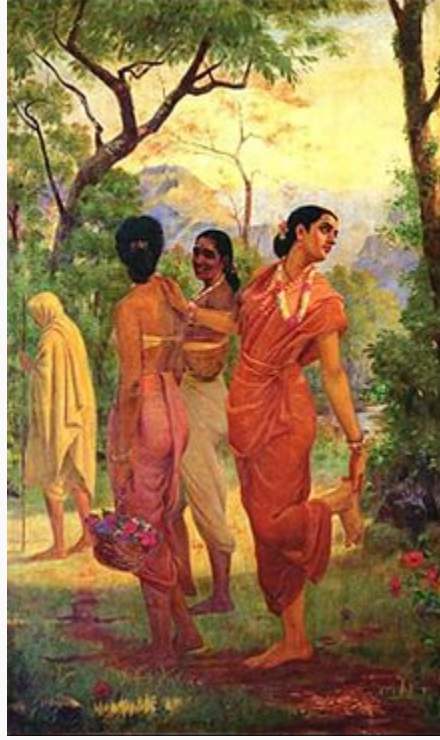


Shakuntala



"Śakuntalā Looking Back to Glimpse [Dushyanta](#)". Scene from [Kālidāsa's](#) [The Recognition of Śakuntalā](#) as painted by [Raja Ravi Varma](#).

In [Hinduism](#) **Shakuntala** ([Sanskrit](#): , **Śakuntalā**) is the wife of [Dushyanta](#) and the mother of [Emperor Bharata](#). Her story is told in the [Mahabharata](#) and dramatized by [Kalidasa](#) in his play [Abhijñānaśākuntala](#) (*The Sign of Shakuntala*).



Etymology

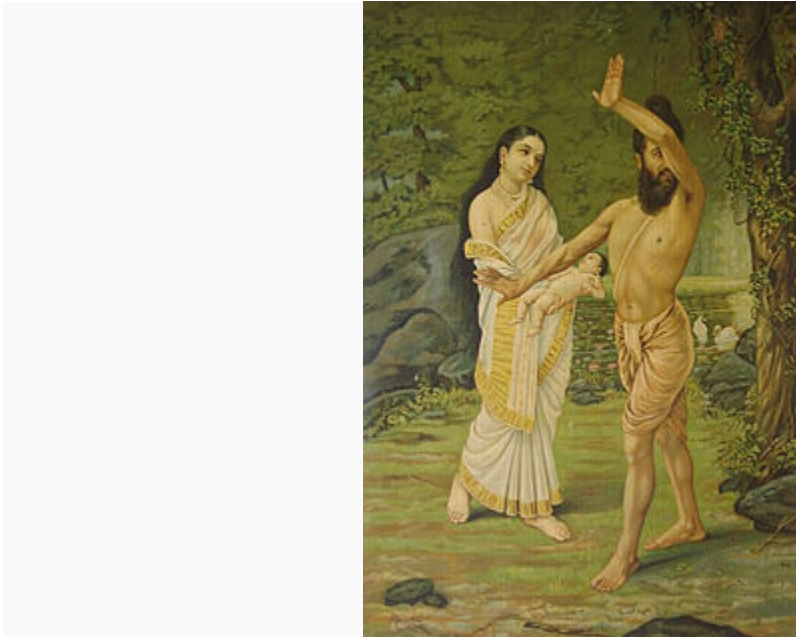
Rishi [Kanva](#) found her in forest as a baby surrounded by Shakunta birds ([Sanskrit](#): , *śakunta*). Therefore he named her *Shakuntala* ([Sanskrit](#):), meaning *Shakunta-protected*.^{[1][2]}

In the [Adi Parva](#) of [Mahabharata](#), [Kanva](#) says:

*nirjane ca vane yasmācchakuntaiḥ parirakṣitā
śakuntaleti nāmāsyāḥ kṛtaṃ cāpi tato mayā*

She was surrounded in the solitude of the wilderness, by *śakuntas*, therefore, hath she been named by me Shakuntala (Shakunta-protected).

Birth and childhood



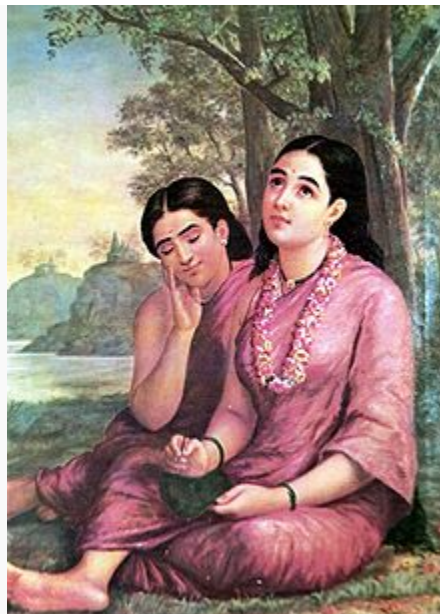
Birth of Shakuntalā - [Vishwāmitra](#) rejects the child, Painting by [Raja Ravi Varma](#).

Shakuntalā () was born of the sage [Vishwāmitra](#) () and the [Apsarā](#) () [Menakā](#) (). Menakā had come at the behest of the King of the Heaven, [Indra](#) (), to distract the great sage Vishwāmitra () from his deep meditations. She succeeded, and bore a child by him. Vishwāmitra (), angered by the loss of the virtue gained through his many hard years of strict [ascetism](#), distanced himself from the child and mother to return to his work. Realizing that she could not leave the child with him, and having to return to the heavenly realms, Menakā left the newborn Shakuntalā in the forest. It was here that the new born child was found by Kanva Rishi () surrounded by Shakunta birds (, *śakunta*). He thus named her Shakuntalā. Kanva Rishi took the child to his ashram, on the banks of the Mālīni River which rises in the Shivālik hills of Himālayas and lies about 10 km from the town of Kotdwāra in the state of Uttarākhand, India. This is corroborated by Kālidāsa in his famous play *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* () in which he has described the ashram of the Kanva Rishi on the banks of river Mālīni. [\[citation needed\]](#)



Dushyant & Shakuntala

King [Dushyanta](#) first encountered Shakuntala while travelling through the forest with his army. He was pursuing a male [deer](#) wounded by his weapon. Shakuntala and Dushyanta fell in love with each other and got married. Dushyanta left for his kingdom, promising to come back soon and take Shakuntala with him.



Shakuntala writes to Dushyanta by [Raja Ravi Varma](#)

Shakuntala spent much time dreaming of her new husband and was often distracted by her daydreams. One day, a powerful rishi, [Durvasa](#), came to the ashrama but, lost in her thoughts about Dushyanta, Shakuntala failed to greet him properly. Incensed by this slight, the rishi cursed Shakuntala, saying that the person she was dreaming of would forget about her altogether. As he departed in a rage, one of Shakuntala's friends quickly explained to him the reason for her friend's distraction. The rishi, realizing that his extreme wrath was not warranted, modified his curse saying that the person who had forgotten Shakuntala would remember everything again if she showed him a personal token that had been given to her.

Time passed, and Shakuntala, wondering why Dushyanta did not return for her, finally set out for the capital city with her father and some of her companions. On the way, they had to cross a river by a canoe ferry and, seduced by the deep blue waters of the river, Shakuntala ran her fingers through the water. Her ring slipped off her finger without her realizing it.

Arriving at Dushyanta's court, Shakuntala was hurt and surprised when her husband did not recognize her, nor recollected anything about her. She tried to remind him that she was his wife but without the ring Dushyanta did not recognize her. Humiliated, she returned to the forests and, collecting her son, settled in a wild part of the forest by herself. Here she spent her days while Bharata, her son, grew older. Surrounded only by wild animals, Bharata grew to be a strong youth and made a sport of opening the mouths of tigers and lions and counting their teeth.

Meanwhile, a fisherman was surprised to find a royal ring in the belly of a fish he had caught. Recognizing the royal seal, he took the ring to the palace and, upon seeing his ring, [Dushyanta's](#) memories of his lovely bride came rushing back to him. He immediately set out to find her and, arriving at her father's ashram, discovered that she was no longer there. He continued deeper into the forest to find his wife and came upon a surprising scene in the forest: a young boy had pried open the mouth of a lion and was busy counting its teeth. The king greeted the boy, amazed by his boldness and strength, and asked his name. He was surprised when the boy answered that he was [Bharata](#), the son of King Dushyanta. The boy took him to Shakuntala, and thus the family was reunited.

An alternate narrative is that after Dushyanta failed to recognize Shakuntala, her mother Menaka took Shakuntala to Heaven where she gave birth to Bharata. Dushyanta was required to fight with the devas, from which he emerged victorious; his reward was to be reunited with his wife and son. He had a vision in which he saw a young boy counting the teeth of a lion. His *kavach* (arm band/armour) had fallen off his arm. Dushyanta was informed by the devas that only Bharata's mother or father could tie it back on his arm. Dushyanta successfully tied it on his arm. The confused Bharata took the king to his

mother Shakuntala and told her that this man claimed to be his father. Upon which Shakuntala told Bharata that the king was indeed his father. Thus the family was reunited in Heaven, and they returned to earth to rule for many years before the birth of the [Pandava](#).