



## Story of Shakuntala & Dushyanta

In Hindu mythology Shakuntala is considered to be the mother of Emperor Bharata and the wife of Dushyanta who was the founder of the Paurav vansha (Paurav Dynasty). Shakuntala was born of Vishvamitra and Menaka. Rishi Kanva found her in the forest surrounded and protected by birds (Shakuntan in Sanskrit), so she was named Shakuntala.

Once, while out on a hunt with his army, Dushyanta passed through a forest full of bilv, ark, khadir, kapith, dahv etc. trees. The forest undulated with interspersed rocky hillocks and extended over several yojanas and there was no trace of any man. It was full of wildlife.

Dushyanta, along with his powerful army, happened to pass through extensive desert after which he reached a good forest. This forest was full of ashramas (hermitages) and there were fruit-bearing trees but no xerophytic trees. Here Dushyanta came across the ashrama of Rishi Kanva, the son of Kashyapa Rishi. It was surrounded by the Malini River.

Menaka had come at the behest of the King of the Gods Indra to distract the great sage Vishvamitra from his deep meditations. She succeeded in distracting him, and sired a child by him. Vishwamitra, 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, Menaka left Shakuntala, just after

birth, on the banks of the Malini River on the peaks of the Himalayas. As stated above, Rishi Kanva found the newly born girl in the forest surrounded and protected by birds and thus named her Shakuntala. According to a source Titwala, a small town near Kalyan in Maharashtra, is considered to be the site of the hermitage where Shakuntala was born.

Dushyanta, pursuing a male deer wounded by his arrow into the ashrama, saw Shakuntala nursing the deer, her pet, and fell in love with her. He profusely begged her forgiveness for harming the deer and spent some time at the ashrama. They fell in love and Dushyanta married Shakuntala there in the ashrama. Having to leave after some time due to unrest in the capital city, Dushyanta gave Shakuntala a royal ring as a sign of their love, promising her that he would return for her.

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 ashram 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. Humiliated, Shakuntala returned to the forests and, collecting her son, settled in a wild part of the forest by herself. Here she spent her days as Bharat, her son, grew older. Surrounded only by wild animals, Bharat 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