

## Śūdraka's *Mrichchhakatika*: A Representation of Society and Human Relationships

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### Abstract

Śūdraka's famous play *Mrichchhakatika* is a creation of the playwright's own imagination and observations of the society of his time. In this particular play Śūdraka has portrayed the multifarious aspects of the society of his time and has thrown light on different facets of human relationships using his sense of realism and imaginative faculty. Śūdraka's talent as an efficient Sanskrit dramatist of India has been displayed in every page of the text of *Mrichchhakatika*. Though he has borrowed from an existing play of Bhāsa, this play of Śūdraka has a universal appeal to the readers and the spectators. In this paper an attempt has been made to show the unique and efficient skills of Śūdraka in representing the society of his time and varied human relationships.

**Keywords:** Sanskrit drama, *Nāṭya Śāstra*, social issues, poverty, *prakarana*

### INTRODUCTION

Śūdraka has tremendously been inspired by Bhāsa's *Daśarūpa Charudatta* (*Poor Charudatta*) for writing his play *Mrichchhakatika*. In this play, Śūdraka uses the unconventional stories of passion and love; and at the same time incorporates a political upheaval. This play, therefore, becomes a great work of art and at the same time an enriched social document. There are ten acts altogether in the play, while Bhāsa's play has four acts. There is no any structural looseness in Śūdraka's play. The play revolves around the love and mutual affection of Charudatta, who is a poor Brahmana and Vasantasena, who is a rich courtesan. There is a villain named Sakara in Śūdraka's play, who aggressively pursues Vasantasena. The play deals with another item – the overthrow of a corrupt king by some rebels.

## ANALYSIS

In his scholarly article “Sanskrit Drama: Theory and Performance”, V. Raghavan has identified some similarities and dissimilarities between Greek drama and Sanskrit drama. He mentions that the earliest available work dealing with the Indian theatre arts is *Nāṭya Śāstra* of the sage Bharata. *Natya* was, according to Bharata, extracted from the Vedas:

The analysis of the varieties of Sanskrit drama – the heroic and the social – suggests similarities to the Greek theatre with its two types, the tragic and the comic, and the orientalist of the West have indeed tried to show that Sanskrit drama developed under Greek influence. But the height of Greek influence was in the first century B.C., and as we have seen above, Sanskrit drama had developed much earlier. The Indian theatre already had a rich variety of dramatic forms not met with in the Greek. The tragedy was the highest form of Greek drama and the Sanskrit theatre never developed anything like the Greek tragedy.....the Greek theory of terror, pity and catharsis is scrappy beside the full *rasa* theory of Bharata, whose treatise is more complete than Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* put together. (39)

Sanskrit drama opens with a prologue in which the manager (Sutradhar) introduces the dramatist and the play. The theme of the play is organized in acts called *ankas*, ranging from four to ten. The text of the play is a mixture of prose and verse; the characters within the play are either educated who use Sanskrit and the lower uneducated people who speak Prakrits. The action may be long or short. The theme may be taken from epics or mythologies; or it may be invented or may be a combination of the two. The dramatist also very often makes innovations to suit his dramatic purpose. The drama should have a happy ending.

The prologue of the play is very important as it gives a detailed account of the playwright, the main characters in the play and also the theme of the play. Devendra Raj Ankur aptly writes: “*Mrichchhakatika*’s prologue is the only prologue in Sanskrit dramatic literature that presents a detailed account of its composer’s life and his death. Apart from this, the subject-matter

of the play is presented with similar elaboration” (268). In the prologue Śūdraka has presented the theme of the play in a very efficient way:

It is related that, there lived, as was said, in the city of Ujjayini, Charudutta, a leader of the Brahmanas, who was young and poor, and a courtesan called Vasantasena, lovely like the beauty of *Vasanta*, who loved him for his virtues.

Through Vasantasena and Charudutta, king Sudraka has excellently delineated the course of virtuous life based on the pleasures of true love, corrupt legal procedure, the nature of villains, and workings of Destiny. (61)

In Sanskrit drama, it is generally Sutradhara who enters the stage first and begins the prologue (*prastavana*) after the Nandi path. Śūdraka’s play begins with a benediction. The entry of the Sutradhara is not mentioned as a stage direction. However, Sutradhar provides all necessary preliminary information for reading/watching and understanding the entire play.

Kālidāsa stands supreme in Sanskrit drama. His play *Sakuntala* is his famous creation. Love at first sight, separation and reunion are the main issues of the play. The bond between human heart and Nature is found in the play. Bhāsa’s *Swapna-vasavadatta* is a famous play. His *Malavikagnimitra* is a shorter court play. King Harshavardhana’s *Ratnavali* and *Nagananda* are highly praiseworthy plays. Śūdraka’s credit is that he has dealt with the more common social issues. This kind of play is called a *prakarana*. While the plays of Kālidāsa, Bhavabhuti and King Harshavardhana deal with epic kinds or renowned royalty, Śūdraka has used his fund of imagination to deal with the contemporary social issues.

In his play *Mrichchhakatika*, Śūdraka has introduced the dualities of good and evil, trade and art, poverty and richness. If Charudatta stands for good, Sakara symbolizes evil. Charudutta’s love for Vasantasena is pure and sublime. He even becomes poor because of his helpful attitudes towards the helpless and poor people. He helps and saves Aryaka, the rebel in the play to escape from the clutches of the corrupted king Palaka. He loves music and

art. On the other hand, Sakara wants to possess Vasantasena as his property; he wants to satisfy his sexual desire using Vasantasena. Sakara has not the heart of a true lover. This is the reason why he has been rejected and refused by Vasantasena. Sakara even goes to the extent of strangling Vasantasena and kill her. Not only this; he even makes a conspiracy against Charudutta entangling him in the act of murdering Vasantasena. The duality of good and evil pervades the entire drama. Whereas the king Palaka himself stands for corruption and immorality, Charudatta and Aryaka always try to do good for the common people. The world of Sakara stands for trade, while that of Charudutta stands for art. Charudutta is a lover of art and music. The duality of poverty and luxury or richness is found in the play. There are several significant references to poverty and its impact upon people throughout the entire play. In the opening act named ‘The Depositing the Ornament’, Charudutta talks to Vidushaka and tells him:

Friend, poverty in the case of a man – the abode of anxiety; it is the source of the highest insult; it is a different phase of enmity; it breeds disgust in his friends; and it is the exciter of the hatred of his kinsmen and of the general public. He feels an inclination to retire to the forest; he suffers insults even from his own wife. It is the fire of grief that dwells in his heart; it does not actually burn him, but it pains him continually. (67)

This utterance of Charudutta touches every poor man’s heart. This commentary upon poverty has a universal relevance. When Charudutta says, “owing to poverty a man’s relatives do not abide by his order, his bosom friends turn away from him; his difficulties multiply; his spirit languishes” (73), nobody can deny the truth of this utterance. Śūdraka has very skillfully put some meaningful words in the lips of Charudutta that draw everyone’s attention. The true idea of poverty is conveyed by the hero Charudutta in the opening act of the play. As Charudutta himself is now a poor Brahmana he knows why “nobody keeps company with him, or talks respectfully to him; if he goes to the mansions of the rich on festive occasions, he is looked at, with contempt” (73). He sees poverty as the sixth great sin. On the other hand,

Vasantasena and Sakara are rich. Sakara is the brother-in-law of the king. So he is not only very rich but also very powerful and influential. Vasantasena is a rich courtesan; she always wears gold ornaments and lives in a big and gorgeous palace-like building. Charudutta lives in a decrepit mansion and leads a poor man's life. These dualities of good and evil, trade and art, poverty and richness show how Śūdraka has employed diversified aspects of the people of the society of his time. He has depicted all types of positive and negative aspects of his society, and different classes and economic strata of his time with high objectivity. To appreciate Śūdraka's *Mrichchhakatika*, D. D. Kosambi rightly comments: "No other Sanskrit drama makes so great a concession to everyday life, just as none other deals with a historical in preference to a mythical episode" (6). Another scholar named G. S. Pondse opines, "The author of the drama (*Mrichchhakatika*) has depicted a variety of characters and incidents, which have a bearing on social life of that time" (238).

Śūdraka introduces different types of characters belonging to different strata of the society of his time. Charudatta, the hero of the play is a poor Brahmana merchant; Vasantasena, the heroine is a courtesan; Samvahaka is a masseur; thieves and gamblers are also present in the play. A king and his brother-in-law are in this play and a rebel is also in it to bring about a change in the society where corruption prevails. Sarvilaka is not an ordinary thief. He is a skilful house-breaker as he knows different arts to make a breach on a wall. Thieving is not only his means of livelihood but he likes it and practises this art. Thieves, gamblers, masseurs – all such earthly characters add various tastes to the play and they use their own language and demonstrate their own peculiar manners and behaviours in the play. In this way Śūdraka's play becomes a storehouse of all sorts of human experiences and activities. The narrative and imaginative innovation is seen in the entire play of Śūdraka. Devendra Raj Ankur in his essay "*Mrichchhakatika: A Reading*" comments:

For the first time, we witness a play where all the characters except Sakara belong to the middle class or the lower

class. Charudutta may have been a powerful businessman of Ujjayini once but his present circumstances are no different from the other characters. On the other hand, Vasantasena, however much wealth and riches she may have under her possession, is no more than a whore or *nagarvadhu* in the social hierarchy, even as she is respected as an artist, being an adept dancer. (275)

Śūdraka's play *Mrichchhakatika* throws clear light on human relationships. Charudatta, the hero of Śūdraka's play is a poor Brahmana of Ujjayini. He is an epitome of generosity of spirit and moral excellence. Vasantasena is one of the most charming heroines in Sanskrit drama. She is like the spring season itself. Although she is a *ganika*, she does not lack good taste, artistic accomplishments and sophistication. She is a rich woman but does not forget the misery of the poor. She is a courtesan but she possesses a good heart. She has everything yet she longs for true love. She has a kind and sympathetic mind. Śūdraka's play shows how a courtesan can make a great appeal to the readers and the spectators. She wants to be Charudatta's beloved because she thinks this love can only make her free from emotional deprivation and moral inferiority. She loves Charudatta only to satisfy her void heart and to enjoy pure human relationship. Madhusudan Pati rightly comments: "For her (Vasantasena), love is an instrument of emancipation from a state of emotional deprivation and moral inferiority. She aspires to be not just a beloved, but a wedded wife of Charudatta's, and looks upon the emotion of love as the means to a profoundly satisfying human relationship, and not mere sexual gratification" (251). The love-affair between Charudatta and Vasantasena is presented in the play in a very attractive way. The playwright has used his innovative imagination to present this intense relation of a poor Brahmana merchant and a rich courtesan of his time. Devendra Raj Ankur comments that "love between a Brahmana merchant and a *ganika* is rare in Sanskrit drama" (267). Śūdraka's mental stamina to depict this type of human relationship in his play is appreciated by all. After the reformed political order that has occurred with the dethronement of the king Palaka, Vasantasena lives happily in the family of Charudatta and Dhuta as

Charudutta's second wife. However, in the play Sarvilaka is depicted as an alter-ego of Charudatta. He is, like Charudatta, a Brahmana. Sarvilaka is a Brahmana adventurer who commits a robbery for obtaining money to ransom-off Madanika whom he loves. In order to emancipate Madanika from Vasantasena's servitude Sarvilaka steals the casket of gold ornaments. It shows man's efforts to save good human relation. Moreover, Sarvilaka joins the movement against the despotic king Palaka and Charudatta helps another rebel Aryaka who works to remove the corrupt king. However, the missions of these three persons – Aryaka, Charudatta and Sarvilaka meet at the same point. They want to do a good deed – they want justice and fairness in their society.

The plot of a *prakarana* play depends on the innovative imagination of the playwright. Śūdraka's *Mrichchhakatika* belongs to this category. The main focus of the play is on the love story of a Brahmana hero and a courtesan or a *ganika*. Śūdraka's play emerges as a social play as it demonstrates the social reality of his time through the activities of thieves, gamblers, immoral officers and through an attempt by some rebels to end the ruling of an unscrupulous king. In the play, therefore, some political and social issues can be clearly visible. At the same time the dramatist portrays various features of human relationship in his play. The characters in Śūdraka's play interact and build up relations among them. Charudatta, Vasantasena, Dhuta and Rohasena have been united in one single family; Sarvilaka and Madanika become husband and wife after some ups and downs. Aryaka and Sarvilaka are strongly bonded to fulfill their one mission of removing the corrupt king. Śūdraka's *Mrichchhakatika* holds a unique position in the entire corpus of Indian dramatic literature.

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