

Social and Political Dimensions in Śūdraka's *Mṛcchakaṭikam*

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Abstract: Śūdraka's *Mṛcchakaṭikam* is a remarkable classical Sanskrit drama that vividly depicts the social and political life of ancient Indian civilization. Unlike mythical or heroic tragedies, this play depicts urban life in a realistic manner, concentrating on regular residents, disadvantaged groups, and intricate interpersonal connections. *Mṛcchakaṭikam* highlights societal stratification, gender relations, economic situations and ethical principles. Courtesans, merchants, servants, gamblers, and criminals play important roles in the story, emphasizing society's diversity and dynamic dynamism. The drama emphasizes the dignity of women, particularly Vasantasenā, who demonstrates moral integrity, independence and emotional depth despite her social station. On the other hand, *Mṛcchakaṭikam* criticizes tyranny, corruption and misuse of authority. King Pālaka's oppressive rule and state official's mistreatment demonstrate political instability and moral deterioration in government. In contrast, the restoration of justice under Āryaka emphasizes the ideal of virtuous kingship anchored in dharma. The play's representation of political injustice and social misery implies a strong relationship between ethical government and societal peace. This research examines how Śūdraka uses theatrical realism to express social critique and political consciousness. The study examines major characters, settings, and themes to show that *Mṛcchakaṭikam* is a significant socio-political text reflecting contemporary circumstances and humanistic principles in ancient India, rather than just a love drama.

Keywords: Political, Caste, Buddhism, Gambling, Punishment, Atmosphere.

Introduction:

Mṛcchakaṭikam is one of the earliest Sanskrit dramas of the *prakarana* category made by ten acts in which the storyline is a work of fiction rather than a historical or Puranic source. The author is a king by name Śūdraka. Though his identity and chronology are obscure but he ought to be placed to the second century B.C. Because some scholars believe he was the founder of the Āndhra dynasty in South India. Śūdraka was not the creator of the love story between Cārudatta and Basantasenā, which is the main storyline of *Mṛcchakaṭikam*. The storyline of Bhāsa's drama Cārudatta is based on this story, and it ends unexpectedly at the end of Act IV. Śūdraka continued to work on this unfinished story. It develops into a complete ten-act play's storyline, tying together a number of thrilling events to present an interested, adventurous love story that keeps the readers interested from start to end. In poetry or drama, the title is determined by the character, significant event, or topic of the work. However, the author chose this drama's title based on a minor incident that takes place in the sixth act and has relevance to the child's play of hero. Śūdraka made up his story with the use of Prakrit and Sanskrit language. Hence it is clear that he had the proper knowledge of

these languages. Beside this it is clear from the entire story of the drama that the author had the idea of different aspects of knowledge.

However, *Mṛcchakaṭikam* is a social and political drama which elaborates about the social and political aspects of that period. The author showed in his story a good picture of the social, religious and political condition of his day. We can assume the picture of the society of that time after reading his story. This drama describes the caste system of the society of that time, the system of slavery, playing dice, stealing, worship of various gods and goddesses, the condition of women, etc. The influence of Buddhism is also reflected in this drama. Along with this, a clear picture of the monarchy system is revealed. Although the monarchy system is found in the Dharmasastras and the Arthashastra but influence of the king, the police system, the system of punishment of criminals, etc. are captured in this story in a systematic way. In this research paper, we will try to highlight the social and political picture of that time as developed by the touch of the author's writing.

Social aspects as depicted in the Play

The story of *Mṛcchakaṭikam* focuses on the daily activities of the city's common people, rather than the lives of kings, nobles, gods, and sages. The hero is from the upper middle class, and the heroine is a rich harlot who does not practice her ancestral occupation. All of the other characters presented are from the middle and lower classes.

At that time, the caste system was commonly accepted. The Brahmanas were highly respected by the people and got special benefits. Brahmanas took up trade, gained wealth, and lived a lavish lifestyle—

“आर्य सम्पत्रं भोजनं निःसम्पत्रं च ।

अपि च दक्षिनापि ते भविष्यति ।”¹

Some Brahmins were rich and refused to eat with others or accept gifts. Even the ancient scriptures exempted Brahmins from the death penalty. (*Manusamhitā*, 8.124). They also engaged in gambling, and after losing the money, they became stupid people such as Sarvilaka, who is not afraid to steal. Therefore, Viraka Candanaka's hateful symbol to each other's low caste proves how strong the caste system had on the people—

“अरे का मम चन्दनकर्य चन्द्रविमुद्रय जातिः ।

पूज्यमानो मान्यमानस्त्वमात्मनो जातिं न स्मरसि ॥”²

The Brahmins could marry any women of any caste even a Courtesan or a Slave.

The businessmen traded with various countries and travelled frequently. They earned enormous wealth by selling different products and used the money for their own happiness, or sometime helping the public. Trade via foreign lands was occasionally carried out in large vessels.

The women have generally well respected in the society. There are two classes of women found in the society. One is *prakāśanārī* (or *ganika*) and

another is *aprakāśanārī* (*kulavadhū*). The women become *kulavadhū* after getting a legal marriage. They were considered to be superior in status even to her former mistress. In some cases, a *prakāśa* woman was given the title of *kulavadhū* by the king in recognition of her good qualities, allowing her to marry the man of her choosing. They were very faithful to their husband. On the other hand, *prakāśanārī* (or *gāṇika*) who were known as courtesan were well-established. Though it is considered a low-level profession, it has a certain level of recognition as well. Courtesans are not considered as social outcasts, and wealthy people used to have close connections to them, although they were too bashful about displaying it in public. They were also well educated and belonged a wealthy status. But institution of courtesans is also looked upon as a social evil. However, almost all of courtesans are selfish and don't have a particular love interest for anybody. But Basantasēnā was a little different from them because his love for the poor Brahmin Cārudatta was always unwavering.

Gambling was another addiction that has become firmly established in cities. Though it was a social evil but people from every level of society attended to play this game. There was gambler's association which was belonging to powerful and influential gamblers. The gambling officer was called by *sabhika* who led this organization by using his power. According to this drama, this organization that had the authority to prosecute and punish gamblers who failed to pay their bets—

“माथुरः संवाहमाकृष्य घोनायां मुष्टिप्रहारं ददाति ।
संवाहकः सकोणितं मुच्छर्ता नाटयभूमौ पतति ॥”³

Even the participants of this game lost everything for sometimes. Since this game is a social crime, the Vedas also instruct people to abandon this game and take up honourable work like agricultural—

“अक्षैर्मादीव्यः कृषिमिल्कृष्ववित्तरमस्वबहुमन्यमानः ।
तत्रगावः कितवतत्रजायातन्मेविचष्टेसवितायमर्यः ॥”⁴

Poverty is the root of all anti-social activities in the society which was depicted in this drama. That's why anti-social acts like stealing are seen in this drama. In the case of Śarvilaṅka, he steals ornaments that Basantasēnā has deposited at the house of Cārudatta in order to marry a courtesan who is servant of Basantasēnā—

“दरिद्र्येणाभि भूतेन लत्खेहानुगतेन च ।
अद्यौ रात्रौ मया भीरु लदर्थे साहसं कृतम् ॥”⁵

Slavery is reflected in *Mṛcchakaṭikam*. It was another social crime in that time. Slaves, both male and female had the ability to buy and sell. They are entirely under the control of their masters. Although they wouldn't do anything unethical even for their masters, their word has less value—

“येनास्मि गर्भदासो विनिर्मितो भागधेयदोषः ।

अधिकं च न केष्यामि तेनाकायं परिहरामि ॥”⁶

The influence of Hinduism is particularly noticeable in that society. They worshipped various gods and goddesses and made sacrifices to them. Even religious images like offering sacrifices to various gods or spirits at the doorsteps of houses or at the crossroads are captured in this story—

“वयस्य कृतो मया गृहदेवताभ्यो वलिः ।

गच्छ त्वमसि चतुष्पथे मातृभ्यो वलिमुपहर ॥”⁷

Rich people frequently had public gardens and tanks built as holy works to acquire religious merit. The Brahmans practiced their *sandhyā* adoration, daily worship, and meditation as regular necessary duties. They thought that the deities would be propitiated for this. Buddhism became more popular and people generally regarded Buddhist mendicants. Women also could attempt to a medicant's life and becomes nuns. Though some people believed their appearance was unfavourable.

Astrology was also extremely popular, with a belief that the positions and conjunctions of the stars in the sky had a positive or negative influence on human life on Earth—

“भण कर्य जन्मषष्टी जीवो नवमस्तथैव सुरसुतः ।

जीवति चन्दनके कः स गोपालदारकः हरति ॥”⁸

The general moral standard was extremely high. For it is not only great people like Cārudatta or Basantasēnā, but also low-class people like Sthavaraka, who shows moral rectitude, in spite of the fact that people like Sakara, a complete ethical wreck.

Political aspects as depicted in the Play

The politicians of *Mrchakatikam* were not fabulous characters; rather, they represented the reality in that time. The political persons were not dramatic, but they were engaging. Carudatta, the drama's hero, is an idealistic citizen who gave up everything for the cause of his country. We see in the drama that; monarchy was the basic form of government in that time. Kings inherited the throne and ruled through their lineage. They ruled together with the consent of their subjects. Otherwise, the subjects would revolt against the king. The situation that caused Palaka's death and the subjects' enthronement of Aryaka as king exemplifies this—

“हत्वा तं कुनृपमहं हि पालकं भोस्तद्राज्ये द्रुतमभिषिच्य चार्यकं तम् ।

तस्याज्ञां शिरसि निधाय शेषभुतां मोक्षेऽहं व्यसनगतं च चारुदत्तम् ॥”⁹

The king seems to have been the absolute head of state, with total control over all of his subjects, allowing him to issue instructions and have them followed up. Kautilya believed that a ruler should be lively and inspire his subjects to be active as well. If the king is irresponsible, his subjects will be irresponsible as well, and they will eat into his works. Furthermore, an irresponsible ruler will readily fall into the hands of foes. As a result, the

king needs to stay alert at all times. Therefore, a king must protect his subjects to practice his religion. The king gets Salvation (*Moksha*) if he protects the subjects carefully.

But we see a different picture in this drama. Although we did not see the king Pālaka on stage in this drama, the anarchy that prevailed throughout the country during his reign is clearly captured. The subjects were fed up with the tyranny of the king's brother-in-law, Śakāra. He used to interfere in the administration of the kingdom unjustly. Because of his relationship with the king, he did not suffer any punishment even if he committed an injustice. Therefore, *Rājdharma* was not properly observed in this drama. Because despite knowing that Carudatta was a Brahmin, he violated the rules of *Dharmaśāstra* and upheld the order of his death sentence. This shows how the subjects were oppressed in the society because of the king's injustice. Carudatta felt sadness and expressed extreme disdain and condemnation of such an authoritarian regime—

“इटशैः श्वेतकाकोयैः राज्ञः शासनदुष्कैः ।

अपापानां सहस्राणि हन्यन्ते च हतानि च ॥”¹⁰

The law and order were enforced by a special officer. He investigated cases and suits and, after an exhaustive inquiry, gave all of the information to the king, along with his personal recommendation in some situations; on the basis of these, the king passed his final judgment. According to Śakāra's appeal, the officer tried the case of Basantasēnā's murder. In his trial, he ruled Cārudatta guilty due to the evidence that led him to that decision. He reported the situation to the king and made proposals for Cārudatta's punishment as a Brahmin—

“अयं हि पातकी विप्रो न वध्यो मनुरब्रवीत् ।

राष्ट्रदस्मात् निर्वास्यो विभवैरक्षतैः सह ॥”¹¹

Two officers helped the judge named as *śreṣṭhin* and *kāyastha-*

“भोः शेषिकायस्यौ न मयेति व्यवहारपदं प्रथमभिलिस्यताम् ।”¹²

Everybody could go to the court and register a complaint or file a suit in person, and there was a servant who worked as a modern bailiff, summoning persons to the court as needed. In this drama, a servant named Śodanaka was in charge of summoning the people. The judge was expected to be quite skilled and neutral. His situation, however, was far from enviable, as he would soon be criticized rather than admired by the public. The trial appears to have been quite quick, with attempts made to go through all types of evidence from every possible source. When direct evidence was insufficient, decisions were made using indirect or circumstantial evidence.

The police department appears to have worked with considerable enthusiasm and efficiency, while some policemen were more soft-hearted than their colleagues. Candanaka was the kind-hearted police officer here. Even though he was a Pālaka soldier, he did not tolerate the king's and others' im-

morality and improper behaviour, and indirectly assisted the Āryaka and Cārudatta parties. He assists Āryaka in escaping by arguing with his comrade Vīraka, despite the fact that he saw Āryaka in the wagon Cārudatta. There were night watches on the streets—

“राजमार्गे हि शुन्योऽयं रक्षणः संचरन्ति च ।
पञ्चना परिहर्तव्या वहुदोषा हि शर्वरी ॥”¹³

Conclusion:

The poet's depiction of the Constitution is timeless. Individuality, society, and politics were all intertwined in the drama's composition. In this way, *Mrchakatikam* is more than just a drama; it also encompasses the moral concept of eternal life set against a historical backdrop of political turbulence, with the subjects being impoverished by evil leaders. It may not be an exaggeration to suggest that this drama proclaims morals to all nations on the verge of ruin. This is because the drama has a theme of societal unity, and the persons described in the drama are members of a larger society; it also includes the philosophy that was valued by humans throughout the cosmos. King Śūdraka did not write the drama for his own mental satisfaction as a king. This drama may have been written for prosperity of the nation, cultural revival, and rehabilitation in society.

Endnotes

1. *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, Act-1
2. *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, Act-6
3. *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, Act-2
4. *Rgveda*, 10.34.13
5. *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, Act-4.5
6. *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, Act-8.25
7. *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, Act-1
8. *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, Act-6.10
9. *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, Act-10.47
10. *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, Act-9.41
11. *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, Act-9.39
12. *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, Act-9
13. *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, Act-1.58

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