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## Mṛcchakaṭika and the contemporary society

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### Abstract

Mṛcchakaṭika (The Little Clay Cart), the love story of the Brāhmaṇa Cārudatta and the courtesan Vasantasenā, a ten-act drama attributed to Śūdraka (possibly 5th century CE), appears to be a unique creation as far as the canons of Sanskrit dramaturgy are concerned. An attempt has been made in this article to present a closer insight and analysis of the contemporary society of the Mṛcchakaṭika.

**Keywords:** Prakaraṇa, Mṛcchakaṭika, Cārudatta, Vasantasenā, Śūdraka, contemporary society, drama, Sanskrit, Buddhism, Brahmanism, merchant, brāhmaṇa, vedic

### Introduction

Śūdraka's *Mṛcchakaṭika*, a great universal drama in nature, is an extraordinary addition to the domain of Indian drama in Sanskrit. It is exceptional in each and every aspect. This drama, while remaining very close to the real life and times of the contemporary society, has departed from the stereotypical frame of traditional Sanskrit drama. Instead of focussing on the lives of the nobility only, it incorporates many characters from the masses who speak in different Prakrit dialects. To all intents and purposes, this magnificent endeavour of Śūdraka is of different and uncommon type enthralling general readers across the globe with its superb and marvellous effect. This widely celebrated and often-performed drama of Śūdraka played a remarkable role in generating interest in Indian theatre among the audience all over the world for years and still continues to do so to the modern-day spectators through its several successful stage productions.

In *Mṛcchakaṭika*, we get a humanitarian appeal related to modern-day taste as well as we find political and contemporary societal awareness. The play showcases a range of intricately woven subplots that provide a vivid depiction of the societal conditions of the time. These subplots include the portrayal of an autocratic and tyrannical king, an arrogant and overbearing brother-in-law of the king, the rise of political unrest, and an imminent rebellion waiting to unfold.

There were casteism and elitism in the society. Different classes of people were there in the city of Ujjain. Caste divisions existed in society. In the stratified societal structure, apart from *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, *śūdra*, there were some new subdivisions in caste, like *kāyastha* and *caṇḍāla*. As a caste, the *kāyasthas* did not have much respect. They have been compared to snakes. But it is also worth noting that the term *kāyastha* was used in a technical sense to denote an employee who takes note of the legal proceedings in the court of the King. *Caṇḍālas* are usually seen in crematoriums. They are skilled in cremation. Here, *caṇḍāla* is also seen as a beheader of a criminal sentenced to death by capital punishment.

Apparently, there seemed to be little difference between various castes. But the supremacy of the *brāhmaṇas* could not be denied. The contemporary society was under great influence of Brahmanism, so special honours were showered on *brāhmaṇas* for Vedic recital, Vedic sacrifices. Animal sacrifice was considered as great deed. *Brāhmaṇas* had special rights. Common people tried to appease them in various ways. There was a custom of inviting *brāhmaṇas* for taking food and giving *dakṣiṇā* thereafter. Poor *brāhmaṇas* used to accept invitations from others. They also used to eat with lower class people. The elite *brāhmaṇas* had earned the highest position of respect in the society. They earned fame as the intellectual class in the society and were the leaders in learning and teaching various scriptures, social policy making and originating political ideas. Again, it cannot be said that all were universally

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respectful of the *brāhmaṇas* who were well-read in the Vedas. Otherwise, how can *vidūṣaka* express this way ---- श्रोत्रिय इव सुखोप वष्टो निद्राति दौवारिकः (Mṛcch. IV) or दधभक्तपूरितोदरो ब्राह्मण इव सूक्तं पठति पञ्जरशुकः (Mṛcch. IV). *Brāhmaṇas* could not be severely punished. However, an exception was noted in the case of Cārudatta. At the end of the 9th act of the drama *Mṛcchakaṭika* Cārudatta lamented:

वष-स लल-तुलाग्नि-प्रा र्थते मे वचारे  
क्रकच मह शरीरे वीक्ष्य दातव्यमद्य ।  
अथ रिपुवचनास्त्वं ब्राह्मणं मा निहं स  
पत स नरकमध्ये पुत्रपौत्रैः समेतः ॥ (Mṛcch. IX/43)  
**Yājñavalkyaśaṁhitā goes on saying:**  
तुलाग्न्यापो वषं कोषो दिव्यानीह वशुद्धये ।  
महा भयोगेष्वेतानि शीर्षकस्थैः भयोक्तरी ॥ (Vyā. 95)

So, in case of *mahābhīyoga*, *divyapramāṇa* was to be taken in case of upper castes like *brāhmaṇas*. But in grave allegations like the killing of one's wife, the *brāhmaṇa* Cārudatta was sentenced to death without taking *divyapramāṇa* into consideration. Hence, as the bearer of the *brāhmaṇa* caste, Cārudatta tried to draw the attention towards the special outlook of the judiciary system. Judges according to *Smṛtiśāstra* indicated that the *brāhmaṇas* were *avadhya* –

अयं हि पातकी वप्रो न वध्यो मनुब्रवीत् ॥  
राष्ट्रादस्मात्तु निर्वास्यो वभवैरक्षतैः सह ॥ (Mṛcch. IX/39)

Adhikaraṇika kept on saying that they were only entitled to judge the matter properly, but only the king can grant release or punishment. The king had the authority of rejecting the Judge's verdict which we observed in this particular case of Cārudatta. It indicates the incontestable supremacy of the king.

The *vaiśyas* were primarily engaged in trade. *Śreṣṭhī* is being mentioned among the assistants of the Judge in the drama. *Śreṣṭhī*, or the Chief Merchant was present there to examine the price of the commodities, counting coins and discussing the laws related to trade and commerce. Even in the 16th and 17th century Coromandel Trade, when the East India Company started trading in India, the chief merchant was addressed as the *śreṣṭhī* (pronounced "Chetty" by them). A wide range of trade was carried on playing a definite role in increasing the wealth of the country. Indian ships used to go to the farthest corners of the world. Notably, this money was also spent on public interests.

References to the Vedic gods Indra and Rudra are found. *Indradhvaja* festival is also mentioned.

अभयं तव ददातु हरो वष्णुर्ब्रह्मा र वश्च चन्द्रश्च ।  
हत्वा शत्रुपक्षं शुम्भनिशुम्भौ यथा देवी ॥ (Mṛcch. VI/27)

Idolatry was prevalent. Maitreya told about the city deity. The presence of the temples is known from the words of gamblers. Just as there was a practice of worshipping the domestic deity among Hindus, there was also a practice of worshipping female deities in temples established at major crossroads of cities. This helps to infer that worship of female deities achieved

widespread popularity in the then society. It probably indicates the inclusion of the Pauranic or Tantric culture in the society. At the very beginning of the drama *Mṛcchakaṭika* (Mṛcch.1.1, 1.2) we find the glory of Śiva. Thieves used to worship Skanda or Kārtika before going for the act of theft. Kāmadeva's temple in the city is also mentioned. The religious customs that were inseparable from the life of the people of this country at that time can be found in this *prakaraṇa*. Prostitutes generally used to worship lord Madana as the god of sexual desire on their own in the temples situated in their own houses but probably there were *brāhmaṇas* as regular priests as the first meeting between Cārudatta and Vasantasena evidences this. This can be considered as symbolic inclusion of consumerism in Indian society at that time.

In those days common people had various superstitions. Dancing eyes, crowing, seeing snakes etc. were considered as bad omens. The *caṇḍālas* say it is improper to see the fall of *Indradhvaja*, the birth of a cow, the fall of a star, the death of a gentleman (*sajjana*) etc. According to *Jyotiṣa* everyone believed in the influence of planets on human life. *Adhikaraṇika* says that a solar eclipse in the morning heralds the misfortune of a great man. Different types of vows (*vrata*) were in vogue at that time.

Probably the system of employment according to the *varṇa* was getting relaxed during the time of *Mṛcchakaṭika*. People of different castes took up different occupations. Cārudatta was a *Brāhmaṇa* by birth and a merchant by profession. Born of a *brāhmaṇa* family Śarvilaka was expert in *courya vidyā*. Vīraka and Candanaka were appointed as commanders in the department of defence of King Pālaka though they were barber and cobbler respectively in origin. Everyone has high pride and respect for their jobs. A *brāhmaṇa* even being a thief never denigrated his profession, and Saṁvāhaka, being a Buddhist monk, never felt ashamed of being a masseur of Cārudatta.

Apart from the spread of Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism also enjoyed the limelight in those times. Although it was considered inauspicious to see a Buddhist monk at the time of starting a journey, but their beneficial advices and discipline was respected in the society. A much better situation of Buddhism is also seen. For various reasons, people of the orthodox society used to adopt Buddhism after being criticised or feeling disgusted. Ordinary people could become Buddhist monks (*bhikṣu*). A woman could become a Buddhist nun (*bhikṣuṇī*). After becoming a monk, they easily renounced the pleasures of ordinary life. There were monasteries or *viḥāras* at various places. After Āryaka's accession to the throne, Saṁvāhaka was recognized as the *kulapati* of all the *viḥāras* in the country. Buddhist monks were surely engaged in welfare of the masses. As we see that Basantasena recovered to a new lease of life with the nursing by a follower of Buddhism. Such caregiving of Buddhist monks is widely known and documented.

Slave system is observed in the society of the *Mṛcchakaṭika*. They were not allowed any free will, and their human rights were largely dependent on the will of their master.

A clear differentiation between haves and have-nots was distinctly prevalent in the society of the *Mṛcchakaṭika*. An imminent result of such a stratified society was - the loud and self-centric consumerism of the wealthy class on one hand, and the wanton waste and erosion of energy of the jobless poor anti-social class on the other.

Now the status of women comes in question. perhaps the situation was slightly better in the society of the

*Mṛcchakaṭika*. While there have been instances of outraging the modesty of women, marriages between *brāhmaṇa* Cārudatta and prostitute Vasantasena, *brāhmaṇa* Śarvilaka and maid servant Madanikā did not face any social hindrances. We find evidences that compulsory enforcement of *sahamaraṇa* was absent. After receiving the news of the death sentence of Cārudatta, his wife Dhūtā wanted to immolate herself in fire. She did not approve of the edict of the scriptures that presence of a minor child should be reason enough for her to forego the rite. Finally, however Dhūtā did not need to sacrifice her life.

A fair degree of political awareness is also evidenced. As an end-result of the corrupted administration of King Pālaka, we see a mass uprising ending in the rise of Āryaka to the king's throne. The political process of making and breaking of kings, the mass rebellion in the *Mṛcchakaṭika* adds a new dimension to the societal canvas which is unique in its nature in the history of Sanskrit drama. It was not a mere imagination of the dramatist, but was an obvious political consciousness.

In the *Mṛcchakaṭika*, the religious system and judiciary was solely controlled by the political administration involving the king and his relatives and the wealthy section of the society. On one hand the Buddhist monk was humiliated and insulted by a Royal relative and on the other hand a Buddhist monk is made the *adhyakṣa* of all *maṭhas* across the country at the end of the drama. This proves autocracy in the part of the King.

The mere presence of the word *śūdra* in the name of the King Śūdraka declaring himself as a *brāhmaṇa*, the presence of the word *ārya* in the name of the King Āryaka who originated from *gopa* (milkman) tribe raises more questions - which, when answered, might bring out the analysis into a new light.

### Abbreviations

Mṛcch. - *Mṛcchakaṭika*

Vyā. - *Vyāvahārādhyāya*

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