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Society in Mudrārākṣasa: An analytical study

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Abstract:

Viśākhadatta's *Mudrārākṣasa*, is indeed a historical political drama that is considered a masterpiece of Sanskrit literature. It is set in the 4th century BCE during the Mauryan Empire and revolves around the political intrigues and power struggles of the time. The play is known for its complex characters, intricate plot, and use of various literary devices. An attempt has been made to explore the multifaceted portrayal of ancient Indian society and culture depicted in *Mudrārākṣasa*.

Keyword: Viśākhadatta, Mudrārākṣasa, political, Mauryan Empire, Indian society, kāyastha, culture, Sanskrit drama

Introduction

Mudrārākṣasa is indeed a remarkable play that showcases the richness and versatility of Sanskrit drama. Being primarily a political drama focused on the power struggle between various characters, it also provides a glimpse into the society and culture of ancient India during the Mauryan Empire. Based on a historical context, *Mudrārākṣasa* depicts the political and social hierarchies of the time, as well as the cultural and religious beliefs that shaped people's lives.

The play's title, *Mudrārākṣasa*, refers to the chief minister of the Nanda king, who is a key character in the play. The play portrays the rise of Candragupta Maurya, who overthrows the Nanda dynasty and establishes the Mauryan Empire.

The play does not offer a complete reflection of the life of the masses, but it does offer insights into the customs and practices of certain sections of society. For example, the play portrays the opulence and extravagance of the royal court, with characters discussing topics such as feasts, clothing, and jewellery.

The play also includes references to various social customs and practices, such as the use of honorific titles, gift-giving, and the importance of lineage and ancestry. It also touches on themes such as loyalty, friendship, and betrayal, which are relevant to society as a whole.

In the society depicted in *Mudrārākṣasa*, there was casteism and elitism. In the stratified societal structure, apart from *brāhmaṇa*, *ṣṭriya*, *vaiśya*, *śūdra*, there were some new subdivisions in caste, like *kāyastha* and *caṇḍāla*. In most of these cases, brahmin Cāṇakya addressed Candragupta as *vṛṣala*, since he was born of a *vṛṣalī* or *śūdra* lady. *Kaṅcukī* said -

तत् स्थाने खल्वस्य वृषलो देवश्चन्द्रगुप्तः। (Mudrā. III)

In the speech of Rākṣasa, we also get evidence of Candragupta's lowborn lineage -

पृथ्व्यां कं दग्धाः प्रथतकूलजा भुमपतयः

पतिं पापे मौर्ये यदस कुलहीनं वृत्तवती । (Mudrā. II/7)

The *kāyasthas* were a caste of people who were primarily involved in clerical and administrative work. They were considered to be slightly higher in social status than the *vaiśyas*, who were a caste of merchants and traders. The *kāyasthas* were responsible for keeping records, preparing legal documents, and maintaining administrative and financial records for the rulers and the wealthy merchants

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They were also involved in the collection of taxes and revenue, and they played an important role in the governance and administration of the kingdom. Cāṅakya appreciated *kāyastha* Śakaṭadāsa's handwriting.

अहो दर्शनीयान्यक्षरा ण । (Mudrā. I)

He was appointed as the personal assistant to the Rākṣasa. Cāṅakya himself had recruited a file manager named Acaladāsa who was *kāyastha* in caste. In the third act, Cāṅakya asked for an important file from *kāyastha* Acala. He ordered *pratihārī* -

शोणोत्तरे मद्रवचनात् कायस्थमचलं ब्रूहि
यत्तद्भद्रभटप्रभृतीनां [मतोऽपरागादपक्रम्य
मलयकेतुमा श्रतानां] लेख्यपत्रं दीयता मति । (Mudrā. III)

Using the honoured adjective *ārya* before *kāyastha* Śakaṭadāsa's name reflects the honourable status of the *kāyasthas* in the then society. Despite their relatively high social status, the *kāyasthas* were still considered to be below the Brahmins and the *Kṣatriyas* in the caste hierarchy. However, their role in the governance and administration of the kingdom gave them considerable influence and power, and they were often able to use their position to advance their own interests.

The *vaiśyas* were primarily merchants and traders. They were an important part of the economic life of the kingdom, and they played a crucial role in the collection of taxes and revenue. However, in terms of social status, the *vaiśyas* were considered to be below the *Kṣatriyas* and the Brahmins in the caste hierarchy. They were not allowed to participate in many religious rituals and ceremonies and were often excluded from political and administrative positions. Despite their lower social status, some *vaiśyas* in *Mudrārākṣasa* were able to attain wealth and power through their business activities. For example, Śreṣṭhī Candanadāsa, who was a *vaiśya* by caste, was a wealthy merchant who had amassed considerable wealth and influence. He was able to use his wealth to support political factions and influence the course of events in the kingdom. The play portrays the Brahmin caste as a powerful and influential group, with characters such as Cāṅakya and Rākṣasa belonging to this caste. They wield significant political power and influence.

Cāṅakya, in particular, is portrayed as a master strategist and political genius who is able to manipulate events to his advantage. He is depicted as the architect of Candragupta Maurya's rise to power and is responsible for overthrowing the Nanda dynasty. His intelligence and cunning are often highlighted throughout the play.

Similarly, Rākṣasa, who is portrayed as the Prime Minister of the Nanda dynasty, is also a Brahmin and is shown to have considerable political power and influence. He is able to maintain his position as Prime Minister despite the changing political landscape and is depicted as a shrewd and capable administrator.

Cāṅakya's co-learner friend brahmin Induśarmā was expert in Śukrācārya's *daṇḍanīti* and 64-fold science of Astrology. Cāṅakya said it himself -

अस्ति चास्माकं सहाध्यायि मत्र मन्दुशर्मा नाम ब्राह्मणः ।
स चौशनस्यां दण्डनीत्यां चतुःषष्ट्यङ्गे ज्योतिःशास्त्रे च
परं प्रावीण्यमुपगतः ॥ (Mudrā. I)

Overall, the portrayal of the Brahmin caste in the play reinforces the traditional hierarchy of ancient Indian society, where the Brahmins held a position of power and influence in both political and religious spheres.

Though there was prominence of brahmin religion and culture but they didn't enjoy uninterrupted supremacy. Criminal brahmins were sent to exile. So Malayaketu sent a brahmin like Rākṣasa to exile after insulting him severely. *Bhikṣus* and monks were also not exempted from the royal fury and penalty, if they were involved in anti-state activities. Brahmins held respectable positions in the eyes of general mass. Brahmins who were invited in religious ceremonies were offered generous *dakṣiṇās* after taking food. The Brahmins who were invited in the funeral rites were gifted expensive ornaments used by the dead person. Hence, during the performance of funeral rites of Parvataka, Candragupta wanted to give his used ornaments to the brahmins.

There were evidences of fixation of jobs according to the quality in the *Mudrārākṣasa*. Cāṅakya is shown to have risen to a position of great power and influence despite not belonging to a royal or warrior caste. Many brahmins were appointed as the spy of Cāṅakya. Rākṣasa being *brāhmaṇa* by caste, was a great warrior like a *kṣatriya*. While the caste system and fixation of jobs based on perceived qualities are evident in *Mudrārākṣasa*, the play also demonstrates that individuals were not always limited by these societal expectations and were able to rise above them through their abilities and actions

Sahamarāṇa is mentioned in the *Mudrārākṣasa* as a practice where the wives of deceased kings would commit sati (self-immolation) on the funeral pyre of their husbands. The play depicts *Sahamarāṇa* as a custom practiced by the ruling class and as a sign of loyalty and devotion to the deceased king. The character of Durdharā, who is the wife of Candragupta Maurya, also participates in *Sahamarāṇa* in the play. Even after knowing for sure that Candandāsa will have to die in the execution ground, his wife has expressed her willingness to cremate herself on her husband's pyre. But there was no compulsion for this rite. A widow sometimes desisted from *sahamarāṇa* to take care of minor children. We find evidences that compulsory enforcement of this custom was absent - so that the mother of Malayaketu led a normal life in the society after her husband's death. However, the play portrays *Sahamarāṇa* as a contested practice, with some characters criticizing it as barbaric and inhumane. The portrayal of *Sahamarāṇa* in the play reflects the historical context of ancient India, where *sati* was practiced by some communities as a form of widow sacrifice.

Furthermore, the play offers insights into the religious and philosophical beliefs of ancient India, with characters discussing topics such as *karma*, *dharma*, and the nature of reality. The play also includes references to various gods and goddesses, including Indra, Viṣṇu, and Śiva.

Polytheism was practised in the society of the *Mudrārākṣasa*. The dramatist has eulogised Śiva's cleverlyness in the *nāndīśloka*. In another *śloka*, the glory of *Tripurajayī* Lord Śiva has been described. The *barāha avatara* of Lord Viṣṇu was glorified in the *bharatavākya* of the drama *Mudrārākṣasa*. People had a sense of fearful respect even towards the God of death, Yama -

एष खल्वन्यभक्तानां हरति जीवं परिस्फुरन्तम् । (Mudrā. I/17)

The *Mudrārākṣasa* does depict the presence and popularity of the worship of female deities in the society of its time. This is

reflected in the establishment of temples of female deities at major crossroads in cities, which suggests that this form of worship had achieved a level of mainstream acceptance and popularity.

The period depicted in the play is characterized by the emergence and spread of several major religious and philosophical movements, including Brahminism, Buddhism, and Jainism. During this period, Brahminism continued to be a dominant force in Indian society and played a significant role in shaping political and cultural life. At the same time, Buddhism and Jainism emerged as powerful religious and philosophical movements that challenged traditional Brahminical ideas and practices.

The play depicts the interactions and conflicts between these different religious and philosophical traditions. For example, the character of Cāṇakya, who is a Brahmin, is shown as having conflicts with the Buddhists and Jains in the play. Even if Jainism had some influence on the society of the *Mudrārākṣasa*, it never achieved the respect and reverence commanded by its rival, Buddhism. The sighting of Jain *ḥṣapaṇaka* was considered inauspicious. Possibly the horrendous appearance of *ḥṣapaṇaka* gave birth to such a superstition. Even so, a fair degree of religious tolerance can be observed in the society, as *ḥṣapaṇaka* Jīvasiddhi was recruited as the spy of a brahmin minister - Cāṇakya.

Overall, the play offers a fascinating glimpse into the complex religious and philosophical landscape of ancient India, highlighting the diverse ideas, beliefs, and practices that shaped the society of the time.

In the society of *Mudrārākṣasa*, a sense of ostracism and untouchability prevailed towards lower castes. The society was hierarchical and characterized by a sense of discrimination and exclusion towards lower castes.

This discrimination is reflected in the play through various references to the status and treatment of lower castes. Rākṣasa said Cāṇakya –

(स्वगतम्) अमात्य इति लज्जाकर मदानीं वशेषणम् ।

(प्रकाशम्) वष्णुगुप्त, न चाण्डालस्पर्शदूषतं स्पृष्टुमर्हसि ॥ (Mudrā. VII)

In one scene, a Shudra woman is not allowed to enter the royal court because of her low status. Similarly, the character of Cāṇakya is depicted as being deeply committed to upholding the authority and privileges of the Brahmin caste, often at the expense of other castes. Brimming with the pride of his elitism, Brahmin Cāṇakya even addresses King Candragupta as *vṛṣala*. It could also be that the use of the term *vṛṣala* or *śūdra* may have been a deliberate tactic by Cāṇakya to remind Candragupta of his origins and prevent him from becoming arrogant or complacent.

In the society of the *Mudrārākṣasa* extravagant spending of money in grand and luxurious celebrations was a common practise among the wealthy class, which was a direct effect of the thriving economy during Candragupta's reign. Candragupta's angry deliberations to Cāṇakya's decision to ban the *Kaumudī* festival in Kusumapura reflects the picture of luxurious and extravagant festivals that involved prostitutes and clowns.

Now the status of women comes in question. *Mudrārākṣasa* is a play without any major female characters, and as such, there is no direct portrayal of the lives and experiences of women in ancient India. However, there are several indirect references to women throughout the play, and these references generally

present a belittling or dismissive view of women's role in society. In the speech of Rākṣasa -

प्रकृत्या वा काशप्रभवकुसुमप्रान्तचपला

पुरन्धीणां प्रज्ञा पुरुषगुण वजान वमूखी ॥ (Mudrā. II/7)

In the speech of Cāṇakya –

ते भृत्या नृपतेः कलत्रमितरे सम्पत्सु चापत्सु च ॥ (Mudrā. II/15)

So it is evident that no responsible posts were awarded to women. But women were not bound indoors; they accompanied their husbands to festivals. They even participated in resolving domestic problems and in necessity they advised their husbands in various works. We evidence it in the speech of *sūtradhāra*.

गुणवत्युपायनिलये स्थितिहेतोः सा धके त्रिवर्गस्य ।

मद्भवनीति वदये कार्याचार्ये द्रुतमुपेहि ॥ (Mudrā. I/5)

As a political drama, the *Mudrārākṣasa* surely has overtones of political awareness. We see examples of powerful political figures being expelled or dismissed by their superiors. For example, Malayaketu, the prince of Avanti, orders the expulsion of Rākṣasa, who was the minister of his father. Similarly, we see Candragupta Maurya, the king of Magadha, dismissing Cāṇakya from his position as chief advisor due to a perceived betrayal.

अतः प्रभृत्यनादृत्य चाणक्यं चन्द्रगुप्तः स्वयमेव राज्यं करिष्यतीति गृहीतार्थाः क्रयन्तां प्रकृतयः । (Mudrā. III)

These incidents illustrate the volatile and unpredictable nature of politics during the Mauryan Empire, where even highly ranked officials and advisors could be quickly dismissed if they were deemed to be a liability or a threat. The play also highlights the importance of loyalty and trust in political relationships, as well as the potential consequences of betrayal and deception.

While the picture of society presented in the play may be somewhat partial or limited, it nonetheless offers valuable insights into the cultural and social milieu of ancient India during the Mauryan Empire.

Abbreviations

Mudrā. - *Mudrārākṣasa*

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