

*Illustrate the Historical Context in Sudraka's
'Mrichchhakatika'*

Mricchakatika is a Sanskrit play composed by Sudraka, dated between second century BCE and fifth century CE. Nothing more is known about Sudraka except that he was a well learned Kshatriya king and a Shiva devotee. Sanskrit scholars would put Mricchakatika into the technical category of 'Prakarana' (incidents) as it is an imaginative plot based on worldly life; with a serene and dignified hero (Charudatta- a Brahmana merchant); and has ten acts based chiefly on the concept of Shringara or love. Also, it is a "Sankirna" Prakarana as it has a courtesan as its heroine. The drama is set in Ujjayini during the rule of King Palaka of the Pradyota dynasty (fifth century BCE). However, it is supposed to have been composed during the Post-Maurya/Pre-Gupta period. The plot of Mricchakatika is strikingly partly similar to Bhasa's play Charudatta. Some scholars describe the former as an extension or elaboration of the latter.

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The story's protagonist is a noble impoverished young Brahmin, Charudatta who falls in love with a wealthy courtesan Vasantasena. However, their love and lives are put at stake when the boisterous lecherous Samsthanaka, brother-in-law of King Palaka, attempts to pursue Vasantasena aggressively.

Mricchakatika is a unique play in the sense that it deviates from the ideals of drama as delineated in the Natya Shastra (a treatise on performing arts) by sage Bharata. According to G.K. Bhat, Sudraka has defied the conventions of the Sanskrit stage in a number of ways. For example, he doesn't present his hero in every act. Bharata has expressively forbidden the use of unusual scenes like sleep on stage. And violence is to be clearly avoided. Sudraka might have been inspired by Bhasa, but he seems to not have hesitated to put on the stage these unconventional elements. The presentation of love is natural. Sudraka shows his hero and heroine clinging to each other in a close embrace under the rain. This surely subtle from other works of Sanskrit dramatists, who observe Bharata's restriction

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regarding the representation of love scenes but carry in the speeches of their characters suggestions of actions that reach the limit of eroticism.

Also, the title of the play itself departs from the normal practice. Instead of using the names of the hero or heroine or of a principal character or event, he has chosen an apparently insignificant incident, that of the clay toy-cart, (Mricchakatika means 'The little clay cart') which, however, holds the key to a major issue in virtue of its poetic symbolism.

Finally, the "Sutradhara" i.e Narrator of the play- "Vidushaka", the Fool, aka Maitreya- addresses the audience in Prakrit. In the beginning of the play, Sutradhara says that he has switched on to Prakrit for the purpose of speaking to his wife. Prakrit was the language of the masses and the women thus this represents a sort of condescending attitude of the so-called elite Sanskrit-literate Brahmanas towards women. Sudraka was one of the pioneers in this respect as Sanskrit dramas generally remained the privilege of the exclusive class of aristocracy

or of the intelligentsia.

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The play represents a state of religion in which the older forms of Brahmanical religion still continued to exist while the newer forms of the popular Hinduism were becoming increasingly preponderant. It is rather a mixed state. The appeal of Buddhism to the masses is clearly discernible. There are references to Hara, Vishnu, Brahma, Ravi, Chandra, Shiva, Kartikeya and some other deities. Shakara/Samsthanaka boasts himself to be a Vasudeva. Image worship and idol worship seem to have been very prominent as suggested by the temples due their wide presence in so many scenes of the play. The temple of the Cupid, where Charudatta first caught sight of Vasantasena, is of central importance. Charudatta doesn't fail in his duty of making the Bali offerings to the house deities, in spite of his poverty and notwithstanding the protest of Maitreya, because he believes firmly that the gods are gratified by such and other acts of religious merit. The play in many instances point out the philosophy- Brahmana is sacrosanct and his superior social position cannot be challenged. (In the nocturnal encounter of

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Shakara, the Vita falls at the feet of Maitreya to appease him. In another instance, Maitreya angrily refuses to wash Charudatta's feet as it was a task unsuitable to his stature.) The judge who tries Charudatta quotes the authority of Manu. There are references to the 'yagnopavita' ceremony as well.

A major belief in the play is the inevitability of fate. This is mainly with respect to the character of Aryaka, who is prophesized to be the next king by overthrowing Palaka. Also when he escapes from prison, Charudatta exclaims him to be 'sent by fate'. Superstition forms part of the general life of the people and is not confined to the ignorant masses only. This includes predictions of soothsayers (Aryaka is imprisoned by the king who fears the soothsayer's prophecy to come true.)

The influence of Buddhism is also explicit. The particular terms Shramanaka and Bhikshu are mentioned. It is significant that Charudatta had generously contributed towards the building of Buddhist monasteries. There was a monastery near the Pushparandaka garden- where

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Charudatta invites Vasantasena for a meeting. In fact, Samvahaka (gambler-turned-shramanaka who saves Vasantasena in the end) is made the chief of all monasteries in Ujjayini.

The political condition presented in the play is that of small self-sufficient states. Ujjayini probably could have been a city-state. There is an instance of a political revolution in the kingdom where the ruling king Palaka is overthrown by the leader of the revolutionary party. Palaka is described as a bad king, lacking the support of the army and ministers. The discontent of the officials and the subjects and the sympathy for the exiled and imprisoned Aryaka contributed to the speedy success of the political coup. The form of government is no doubt Monarchical. The king was not only the executive head of the government; his power to make laws is also clearly hinted: King Aryaka, in the end of the play, by a writ of the law admits Vasantasena in the class of respectable brides. Shakara's threat of removing the judge by an appeal to the king points out the latter's power of appointing and removing officials.

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Different types of officers are mentioned in the play: Pradhana-danda-dharaka- Chief of the police force (Viraka's post); Balapati- some kind of colonel of the guards (Chandanaka's post); Rashtriya- superintendant of police (mentioned by Sakara in the play). The police officers did their duties vigilantly, Viraka, for instance, declares that he would refuse to recognise his own father while executing the king's orders.

The existence of municipal administration is felt in mentions of royal highways and public squares and gardens. Collection of tax from the public is certainly indicated- Charudatta, in a fanciful description of the trees, compares the bees to the tax officers. And most explicitly is the realistic and detailed picture of the administration of justice. The trial was conducted in a special court-hall headed by a judge (Adhikaranika) - and with attached usher and court officers (adhikarana-bhojaka). The legal procedure seems to be known as Vyavahara. The two parties are Vyavaharthi (the plaintiff) and the Pratyarthi (the defendant).

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The economic aspect is commendably explored in the play. The general impression that the play produces about the life is one of richness, luxury and certain elegance. This ought to be the result of a definite measure of economic prosperity. The dazzling wealth of Vasantasena is one instance of luxury and opulence. This is in contrast with economic condition of Charudatta who despite the poverty donates hugely- reflecting his generosity. The main areas of economy include trade (Charudatta is a merchant) and agriculture (references to the importance of rain and crop-fields); landlords (referred as 'grahapatis') have been mentioned. Other professions referred to in the play include: domestic servants, judges, clerks, police, public executioners, masons, goldsmiths, ironsmiths, carpenters, courtesans, charioteers, soldiers, potters, jewellers etc. In the social set-up that has been accepted in the play, class distinctions amounting to caste system are an undeniable fact. The Brahmins are clearly the privileged caste commanding respect from all castes. Bias in the different

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punishments given to convicts of different classes makes it very clear. The Brahmin priests were distinguished from other Brahmins as Charudatta being a Brahmin lived in the merchants' guild's locality. The caste divide is also shown by the scene in which Charudatta asks the "chandala" for a favour and immediately corrects himself as it wasn't fit for a Brahmin to ask a favour from a lower caste person.