



Research Paper

## Socio-Cultural and Linguistic Analysis of *Sūdraka's* Dramaturgy: A Study of *Mṛcchakaṭikam*

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### Abstract:

The relevancy of Indian Classical Dramatist *Sūdraka* and his ten-act Play *Mṛcchakaṭikam* is still prevalent in the digital era of 21<sup>st</sup> century. The highly critiqued drama is also translated in different languages of the world and remains one of the most exceptional and significant portrayal of social hierarchy, economic deprivation, linguistic differentiation and other social practices. Both the author and his play occupy a laudable position in Sanskrit literature though the researches give contradictory results on the authorship of *Sūdraka* which is an unresolved problem till the date. But from the universal acceptance, the drama got laurels in the field of literature, history, sociology, film and theatre. Through the naming of this play a reader can explore its resonance through several scholastic levels. *Sūdraka* flouted the dictates of patriarchal structure of society as well as the literary writings through his representation of different characters in terms of their social classes and acknowledged the necessity of the roles of women in public space opposed to the private space where women are portrayed as the amalgamation of their beauty, fertility, courage and brains. The drama shows how penury leads towards all calamity irrespective of caste or class through the state of *Cārudatta's* (the hero) melancholy. Above all, the linguistic subalterns and their different *Prākṛt* dialects in a Sanskrit play is absolutely remarkable where he created an all-inclusive world and gave the power of verbal expression to the voiceless and muted sections of most literary works. It's a play of deliberate displacement of socio-cultural formulations to question the basic structure of Indian society in terms of hierarchies and social segregation.

**Key words:** language, hierarchy, subaltern characters, social upheaval, cultural practices, literary dynamics

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### I. Introduction:

*Mṛcchakaṭikam* or Little Clay Cart is a famous Sanskrit drama by the poet *Sūdraka* written during 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century CE which is the span of Gupta era. The play begins with the invocation of lord Shiva as it is a Sanskrit literary rule (*Maṅgalacarāṇa*) to complete a work without any obstacle. The drama strikingly ascribes to *Cārudatta*, a four act Sanskrit play of *Bhāsa* but there are dissimilarities among them. Therefore, it is difficult for a reader and researcher to connect and place them correctly in history. But it should be taken into account that first portion of the drama is quite similar to *Cārudatta*. Indeed, it is a *Prakarāṇa* owing to fulfil its criteria such as plots based on worldly life, personal experiences of the common men and to derive themes from the societal issues and frictions. The playwright derives the characters from everyday life ranging from the Brahmana hero to the courtesan heroine. Thus, he deviates from the *Nāṭyāśāstra*, the encyclopaedic treatise of literary traditions in India and represents different layers of the then society as an amalgam of goods and bads. The playwright himself plays a role of artist drawing the intrepid *Vasantasenā* and her unabashed confidence, the generous *Cārudatta* and his non-frivolous disposition that challenges the notion of masculine bravado and feminine subjugation under a single gamp. The process of gender de-stereotyping, using different types of subalterns and lay man languages and debunking the principles of literary rules in a Sanskrit drama is quite significant and remarkable.

### **Exploring the Author and the Title:**

Researchers, critiques and literary experts considered *Sūdraka* as the crediting author of this drama but the historical evidences of his life are sparse. One must rely upon his creations to know him properly. But from the prologue where the *Sutradhara* was announcing the of the play and the playwright just after the end of *Mangalācaraṇa* of lord Shiva, a reader can get a detailed about the king cum dramatist. His position, physical attributes, holy practices and even his intellectual qualities were drawn without any indication of his ruling place or even the time. But after a long study it can be believed that he lived during Gupta dynasty which spanned from 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century CE and also, the drama is set in Ujjayini during the rule of king Palaka. Still, it is a debatable one to recognise *Sūdraka* as the real author of this play. Researches have produced many contradictory results and shrouded readers with scepticism. It is indeed, an endless act to set up the actual time of either the play or the playwright.

Therefore, a vast period ranging from 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. to 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. has been assigned for both the play and the playwright. Generally, the name of a poetry or dialogue or drama or story in Sanskrit literature starts with its character's name or it signifies the theme of it. But *Mṛcchakaṭikam* is an exception in this matter. The word denotes 'clay cart' but the text is not about a clay cart and it leaves no hints about its protagonist. According to the rules of *Nātakas* provided by several Sanskrit poets, a drama must focus on any historic or puranic or folk tales. On the other hand, *Prakarāṇa* should be deeply rooted in social reality and the lives of common people. Here *Mṛcchakaṭikam* or little clay cart refers to a trivial domestic object.

### **A Philosophical Analysis of the Characters Against the Tradition:**

*Mṛcchakaṭikam* is more social than traditional one. It marks a radical departure from the classical conventions of Sanskrit dramaturgy as confined in the *Nāṭyasastra* of *Bharata* which uses to give privilege to the extraordinary social characters namely kings, gods or cosmic ideals. At first the title of the drama symbolises foregrounding impermanence and material fragility which highlights being is not hierarchical and it anticipates a contingent and unstable social status and wealth. Also, it belongs to an innocent child rather than power of heroism. Thus, the choice of title is philosophically charged where the author encapsulates the critique of power and hierarchy.

The choice of poor Brahmin *Cārudatta* neither king nor warrior offers a philosophical reading to understand shift from ontological heroism to ethical heroism. Here *Cārudatta's* poverty is not ascetic rather socially produced and his morality is very human- centred rather than metaphysical where the associated Brahmin-hood fails to protect him. He is heroic because he remains ethically intact within structural injustice.

Secondly, the author introduced a courtesan as the heroine which doesn't fit into the rules of *Bharata*. It challenges traditionality of Sanskrit dramaturgy, Brahmanical morality and patriarchal gender norms. Her position is quite paradoxical: economically central still socially marginal. Where in classical literature, the women used to be portrayed through their marriage, chastity and domestic enclosure, *Vasantasenā* dismantles all such ontologies where she chooses love without commodification, gives her wealth without any obligation and acts independently without any male guardianship. Though she faces social stigma and physical violence, does not appeal to any kind of protection which shows her existential femininity. Moreover, her love is socially dangerous and politically punishable; it is not like romantic destiny (*Śṛṅgāra*) as idealized by classical Sanskrit texts rather, her love is as resistance to exclusion. *Vasantasenā* is compassionate and courageous within a hostile social order.

*Sūdraka's* major departure from the traditional narratives was his portrayal of *Gaṇikās* which is very unique, different and challenging in the genre of Sanskrit drama. Placing the richest and wealthy women in his plots and giving them entry to the public spaces with their beauties as well intellect is something against the notion of patriarchal demands.

### **A Linguistic- Philosophical Analysis:**

In Sanskrit drama the language Sanskrit itself is used by the elite characters in a play and the *Prākṛt* language is used by the lower caste and by the women as well. Thus, a language reflects a social being. *Cārudatta's* caste language (Sanskrit) though refined still powerless which asserts a language of power is not necessarily a language with power. At the same time, women, servants, gamblers, thieves speak in Prakrit in which their emotion, moral insights, social reality can be emerged and articulated fully and it suggests a democratization of knowledge itself. Unlike other Sanskrit drama, *Mṛcchakaṭikam* is polyphonic where several dialects (almost 27 *Prākṛt*) coexist. Here *Charudatta's* elite language could not protect him but *Sākāra's* abusive speech carries power which assert that power does not belong to language rather power decides the value of language. Therefore, *Vasantasenā* and other subaltern characters do speak, but their words lack institutional weight. Thus, the power of language is structural; social institutions only hear status and recognize power instead hearing truth and recognizing ethics. They only decide whose language is heard and whose is true. From this play, a reader can easily understand how language functions not merely a tool of communication but also a

symbol of graded inequality. In view of this, *Sūdraka* is a pioneer of Sanskrit dramas to represent the aristocracy and exclusive intelligentsia using language stereotyping.

#### **Socio-Religious Aspects in *Mṛcchakaṭikam*:**

The drama is a reflection of Buddhist proximity which deeply emphasizes on impermanence, compassion, human suffering, social conflicts and injustice. The drama shows explicitly as to how the suffering produced socially and structurally from a conditioned life, Vasantasena's detachment from worldly pleasure, *Cārudatta* and *Vasantasenā*'s love for each other without any expectation, the solidarity and empathy shown by the marginalised characters, the absence of salvific ritual reshape Buddhist values. The play shows the social conflicts without any divine intervention to solve it rather establishes religion as socially embedded and is evaluated through its social consequences. Thus, the drama unlike other Sanskrit dramas places human sufferings and social inequality rather codifying divine idealism only. It exposes how the society usually marginalises and suppresses the voice of the poor and segregated person. It also exposes how power distorts justice, how justice turns into political theatre and functions as a mechanism of control and how society faces a systematic breakdown. Thus, the play becomes a critique of collective social failure not just an institutional corruption.

#### **II. Conclusion:**

*Mṛcchakaṭikam* is a nutshell of alternative life style, social awareness, political changes and religious system. It is a unique play in the domain of classical Sanskrit literature. There are more than thirty distinctive characters in this ten-act play employed by the playwright in terms of their different social classes and the words of love, despair, idealism, challenge, revolution, expressed by them transcends Indian boundaries and blend into the hearts of other nationals. It represents a keen sense of humour from grim to farcical, from satirical to quaint. It is perhaps for this reason that the drama has been translated in several languages. *Sūdraka*'s skill and brilliance has been explored through the various event of plots. It replaces hierarchical idealized society to a lived reality, ritualistic society to social-ethical humanism, normative romanticism to ethical and transgressed love, sacred language to social speech, traditional aesthetic to social engagement. Most of the Sanskrit dramas adhere to the rules of dramaturgy but *Mṛcchakaṭikam* is *Sūdraka*'s own creation that follows its own rules and requirements for the execution of its plot and thus makes it a world known, highly critiqued and frequently performed one.

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