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Śūdraka *Mṛcchakatikam*: Poverty as a social stigma

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of Śūdraka's views on poverty as expressed in his *Prakarāṇa*, the *Mṛcchakatikam* through the character of Cārudatta. A study of *Mṛcchakatikam* gives psychological insights into the mind of a person of high virtues who has fallen into bad days due to his exceptional generosity and yet doesn't compromise with his principles even in the face of death. The paper makes a close reading of Cārudatta situation who has lost his wealth and has fallen into days of penury but cannot shed off his generosity. He gives away all of his material wealth and yet lives with the wealth of his virtues. It is because of his noble and generous character that the heroine Vasantasenā falls in love with him.

Keywords: Śūdraka, *Mṛcchakatikam*, Cārudatta, *prakaraṇa*

Introduction

Mṛcchakatikam, the *prakaraṇa*

Mṛcchakatikam of Śūdraka is a *prakaraṇa* form of drama. Sanskrit dramatic theory talks about ten types of plays, generally named as rupakas. *Prakarāṇa* is one of the ten forms of *rupaka*-s. Bharatmuni's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 18, Vishwanātha, the author of *Sāhityadarpaṇa*, states the features of *Prakarāṇa* ^[1] - in the *prakaraṇa*, the main character or the hero comes either from poet's imagination or he is a well known man of the world (*laukika*). Unlike the *Rupaka*, he is not based on historical (*aitihāsika*) or mythological (*paurāṇika*) heroes. He can be a Brahmin, a minister or a merchant. He engages in the prescribed *puruṣārtha*-s of *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* and is *dhīrapraśāntakaḥ* i.e. calm and composed in nature. The chief *rasa* is Śringara, and the heroine can be from a noble family (*kulīna*), or a *veśyā/gaṇikā* (courtesan). Sometimes, both of these can be there as heroines ^[2]. Śūdraka's *Mṛcchakatikam* displays many of the features of a *prakaraṇa* which is an evidence of its antiquity. Scholars have argued that he couldn't have been a predecessor of Bhāsa because his *Mṛcchakatikam* is based on Bhāsa's play *Daṛidaracārudatta*. It is true that *Mṛcchakatikam* closely follows the four-act play of Bhāsa but the rest of the six acts are Śūdraka's own original creative rendering in the format. Moreover, Śūdraka's could have been aware of the dramatic theory given by Bharatamuni in *Nāṭyaśāstra* because even though he doesn't go by the rule-book completely, he does integrate larger framework of the *prakaraṇa* ^[3]. It is conjectured about Kālidāsa that his play *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* is so perfect that Bharatmuni could have made his rules of *Rupaka* the basis of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*. Similarly one can say that Sudraka's *Mṛcchakatikam* may have served as a representative text of *prakaraṇa* form of *nāṭaka* for the theoreticians of drama later. For instance, Śūdraka builds his plot on a well-known story of a noble *brāhmin* Cārudatta. Hence his hero is *laukika* and not a king from the epics or *puranas*. Cārudatta is a Brahmin-merchant, which makes him very fitting for this kind of *rupaka*.

¹ A *prakaraṇa* is defined along the same lines in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 18, and *Daśa-Rupaka*, Chapter 3 authored by Acarya Bharatmuni (2nd BC) and Acarya Dhananjaya (10th AD) respectively.

² Ref. Ācārya Śeṣarājasharma Regmi, 2011, p-546. *Bhavetprakaraṇe vṛttam laukikam kavikalpitaṃ// 224 b. sṛṅgāroṅgī, nāyakastu vipro mātyo thvā vanikah/ sāpāyadharmakāmārthaparo dhīrapraśāntakah// 225. nāyikā kulajā kvāpi, veśyā kvāpi, dvayam kvāpi/ 226 a. [Sāhityadarpaṇam.6.224 b,224,226a].*

³ On the contrary, Prof. M.R.Kale believes that "dramas like those of Bhāsa, Śūdraka and Kālidāsa, being the earlier productions, composed at a time when heard and fast rules of Sanskrit dramaturgy were yet to be evolved, will not be found to conform precisely to all the numerous minutiae as elaborated in rhetorical treatises." Ref. Kale, 1924, 1st edition, rpt.1962, p- li

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He is virtuous man whose fortune has gone down. His generosity and knowledge of dharma make him the right kind of hero for the prakaraṇa. He deep love along with his knowledge of music, his appreciation of art, poetry and his refined aesthetic sensibilities are displayed in various stages in the play. His appreciation of Rembhil's music, that of the art of thief Śarvilaka's work in piercing a hole in the wall of his house are revealed in Act -3. The poetic bent of his mind is displayed throughout the play but it is at its best in Act I when he speaks about poverty as a curse in Act-I, and in his conversation with Vasantasenā in Act 5 and in Act-10.

However, the focus of present deliberation is on how the poverty is conceived and depicted in this play. Through the character of Cārudatta, playwright Śūdraka makes very penetrating remarks on how poverty affects the perceptions of not only the one who suffers it but also the others who are around that individual as friends and family.

Cārudatta's Lamentations on Poverty

In act one of *Mṛcchakatikā*, Cārudatta comes as a wealthy Brahmin trader from an established who has lost his fortunes due to his excessive generosity. He lament on poverty is very poignant. In whole of act one, Cārudatta's mind is preoccupied with how poverty affects the character of a person. Cārudatta delivers eight poetic verses on the subject of poverty right in the beginning of the play. Moreover, throughout the play he appears to be under the shadow of sadness that poverty has cast over him. In order to understand the cause of this long lament, we must look at Cārudatta's character in entirety. To use, Prof. Kale's words: "Charudatta [is] a Brahmana youth of Ujjayini, whose ancestors had amassed a large fortune in trade, which subsequently disappeared and left him penniless. This poverty, however, is brought on him by the extreme generosity of his own nature – even his name is significant, meaning 'he use gives nobly'..."^[4]

Now, the question that comes to mind is that as a *dhīraprasāntakaḥ* (calm and composed noble Brahmin) hero, Cārudatta must act with equanimity in the face of misfortune. Why does he lament about his poverty so much that in Act 3, when he comes to know about the theft of Vasantasena's jewels, he almost falls unconscious and Maitreya has to console him. Prof. Kale also raises this and argues that, "He is to be seen in the very first Act as lamenting at great length over his poverty, which is considered by some critics as unworthy of a great man whom mere want of money should not have rendered so despondent; it may be argued in his justification, however, that Charudatta mourns his condition, not because he wants money for enjoyment, but because he is thereby deprived of the opportunities of doing good to others"^[5].

Prof. Kale's argument is certainly justified but this is not the only reason for Cārudatta's lament. His lament consists of a very deep-seated psychological fact that a noble man (like him) deems his character as primary and material wealth as secondary. Besides, the notion of *yaśa* (fame and honour) is considered to be highly desirable in the Indian culture. The seeds of this come from the idea that one should live an ideal life duly engaging in the three *puruṣārtha*-s of *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* during his earthy existence, so that one automatically passes over to the fourth *puruṣārtha* of *mokṣa* which is conceived to be a higher existence after life like

heaven or *Jīvanmukti* (liberation while alive). These ideas were ingrained in the psyche of any educated person in ancient times, so Cārudatta's as a noble educated person considers it his highest duty to live a life sticking to the highest ideals in which honour is supreme. Honour, in turn, is earned through abiding by the virtues of honesty, truth, compassion and so on and Cārudatta is shown to possess all of them and more. Therefore, we see that Cārudatta's despondency in the play is not concerned with his personal situation after getting reduced to poverty. His despondency arises from his awareness that loss of fortune makes one vulnerable to loss of honour because even a guileless man who is poor is seen to be the easiest target of suspicion in case of an error or a crime. In Act 3, when he realizes that a thief has stolen the casket of jewels that was kept by Vasantasena as deposit with him, then his first reaction is that, "If destiny loved my wealth [i.e. has already taken away my wealth], then why does the cruel one now maligns my honour"^[6]. Similarly, when Maitreya suggests that they should tell Vasantasena the truth, then Cārudatta poignantly says that "who will believe the real fact? Everyone will think lightly of me. For in the world, inglorious poverty is always prone to be suspected"^[7].

Now we shall look into the textual evidence on Cārudatta's actual response to the loss of his fortune. At the beginning of the play, Cārudatta is introduced as the leader of merchants (*Sārthavāha*) who lives in a splendid home befitting his wealthy past. However, currently he has become very poor and the reason for his poverty is his own compulsive generosity. Due to this virtue he has earned many friends including the friendship of the new king Aryaka whom he has helped long before he became the king. In the first Act, Vita, an associate of jealous Śākāra, says fitting words of high praise for Cārudatta and describes Cārudatta's.

Superlative generosity, as "He has become impoverished by (granting) the prayers of persons like us; never did he insult anyone in his (pride of) wealth. He has dried up (i.e. become poor) by having satisfied the thirst (i.e. needs) of men, like a reservoir, full of water, in the hot season"^[8]. Thus, Śūdraka firmly establishes Cārudatta's poverty as an outcome of his virtues through the statement of a person from opposite camp and shows that even his enemies hold Cārudatta in high esteem.

Śūdraka's Social Psychology of Poverty

Śūdraka *Mṛcchakatikā* offers very authentic insights into the social reception of poverty. Cārudatta gives two kinds of arguments in his lamentations on poverty- a) a general idea about the social position of a poor man and, b) a personal dictum on how he is personally affected by his poverty.

In his general comments on poverty, Cārudatta says that, "Poverty brings shame on the poor, an ashamed person loses spiritedness, a person without energy or spiritedness is insulted in the society, an insulted person becomes aloof; aloofness leads to sadness; sadness destroys intelligence, and one devoid of intelligence is destroyed. Therefore, poverty is the root cause of all calamities"^[9].

⁶ Ref. *Mṛcchakatikā*. 3.25 [Trans mine].

⁷ Trans. M.R. Kale. *Kaḥ Śrđhāsyati bhūtārtham sarvo mām tulyisyati/śankanyā hi loke'sminniṣpratāpā daridratā//* 3.24

⁸ Ref. *Mṛcchakatika*, Act-I. *So 'smādvidhānām praṇayatiḥ kṛṣīkṛto na tena kaścidvibhavairvimānitaḥ/ nidāghakleṣviva sodako hṛdo nṛṇām sa tṛṣṇāmapānyā śuṣkavāna//* 1.46

⁹ *Mṛcchakatika*, Act I, 14. Translation mine. *Dāridryādhnnyameti Hriparigataḥ prabhṛṣyate tejaso nistejaḥ paribhūyate*

⁴ Ref. Kale, 1924, rpt. 1962, p-lxvi.

⁵ Ibid.

He says that poverty doesn't burn you completely but scalds you slowly because it creates hostility amongst friends and family; even one's own wife disregards a poor husband who then feels as if he should leave everything and go to a forest. So poverty is the abode of worries. (I.15).

Besides, Cārudatta's situation is more agonizing because he has enjoyed wealth and has gone into poverty afterwards. He rightly expresses this sentiment when he says that if one experiences happiness [through wealth] after the experience of poverty, then it is like a lamp lighting up the darkness, but if a person's fortunes fall from wealth (*sukhas*) to poverty (*dukhas*), then he life is reduced to just holding the body[ie. he lives like a dead man] ^[10]. Pain of death is short-lived but poverty is endless suffering, therefore, he prefers death over poverty.

This kind of extreme willingness to die than to be poor on Cārudatta's part echoes the events in Act 10, when Cārudatta actually chooses to be silent and die. He feels that the judges will think of him as a liar because he is poor and so is not in a position to prove his innocence.

Perhaps the most beautiful and moving lines in the whole play that reveal Cārudatta's inner purity and nobleness and appear to be coming from an authentic experience of a good man are where he says that suffering and happiness come and go according to one's destiny and this doesn't trouble him; what bothers him deeply is that his loved ones (his friends and acquaintances) reduce their love towards him ^[11].

This is his reply when his friend and confidante Arya Maitreya, (playing the role of vidūṣaka) asks him why is getting worried like a child about fortune which is nothing but like a small breakfast (i.e insignificant) - "I am really not feeling any anxiety on account of the loss of my fortune; for riches come and go, following the course of one's luck. But this burns me (as it were), that people become remiss even in their affection towards a person who has lost his support of wealth" ^[12].

Thus, Cārudatta's personal sentiments on poverty are coming from a man of high character. He is shown to have become very sensitive to others' opinion of himself because for a nobleman like him, even the smallest spite towards him is equal to darkest blemish on his character that he has earned by living up to the principles of dharma throughout his life.

In this way, Śūdraka builds Cārudatta's character right from the beginning in a consistent manner successfully delineating him as a man whose very occupation appears to be upholding of dharma and virtues. The plot and story of the play stands on how significant Cārudatta is for the whole social framework of his time because his ideals make him the upholders of dharma in the eyes of all others. Vita's words in Act- I.48 are a true tribute to Cārudatta:

"To the distressed, he is wish yielding tree, bent down with (the load of) the fruit of this virtues. To the virtuous he is a family head. To the learned his is a mirror. He is the touchstone of moral conduct, and the ocean having righteousness

for its coast-line (i.e. never transgressing it). He is (ever) hospitable, and never shows disrespect. He is a treasure of all manly virtues, and is courteous and magnanimous by nature. By reason of his manifold virtues, he alone, deserving of praise, really lives; while others are (merely) breathing as it were" ^[13].

Even the central love story of Vasantasena falling for his virtues is dependent of him being an ideal among men.

Thus Śūdraka *Mṛcchakatikam* provides an indepth psychological insight into the state of poverty through the character of Cārudatta.

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paribhavānnirvedyamāpadyate/Nirviṇṇaḥ śucameti śokapīhito buddhaya parityajjyate nirbuddhiḥ kṣayametyaho nirdhanatā sarvāpadamaspadam// I.14.

¹⁰ Ref. *Mṛcchakatika*, Act-I-10 and 11. *Suḥkham hi duḥkhānyanubhūya śobhate ghanāndhakāreṣviva dīpadarśanam/Suḥkhāttu yo yāti nara daridratām dhṛtaḥ śarīreṇa mṛtaḥ sa jīvati//Dāridryādvā maraṇamvā maraṇam mama rocate na dāridryam/alpakleśam maraṇam dāridryamanantakam duḥkham// I.11*

¹¹ Ref. *Mṛcchakatika Act -I. Satyaṁ na me vibhavanāśkr̥tāsti cintā bhagyakrameṇa hi dhanāni bhavanti yānti/atattu maṁ dahti naṣṭadhanāśrayasya yatsauhr̥dādapi janah śithilībhavanti// I.13*

¹² *Mṛcchakatika Act -I-13.* (Trans. M.R. Kale)

¹³ Ref. *Mṛcchakatika Act -I. 48. Dīnānāma kalpavṛkṣa svaguṇaphalanataḥ sajjanānām kutumbī ādarśaḥ śikṣitānām sucaritānikaṣaḥ śīlavela samudraḥ satkarta nāvamantā puruṣaguṇanidhirdākṣiṇodārasattvo hyekah ślāghyah sa jīvatyadhikaguṇatayā cocchavasantīva cānye// I.48*