



Mrichchhakatika: A Classic Specimen of Prakarana

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted on: 26-03-2025

Published on: 15-04-2025

Keywords:

Mrichchhaktika,
Natyasastra, Sudraka,
prakarana, sanskrit drama

ABSTRACT

Mṛichchhakaṭika (The Little Clay Cart), authored by Sanskrit playwright Sudraka, is one of the finest examples of classical Sanskrit drama. This paper seeks to explore the fundamentals that make *Mṛichchhakaṭika (The Little Clay Cart) aprakarana*, a sub-genre of Sanskrit plays. To examine the play a study has been done on the *Natyasastra*, the oldest and most complete extant work on dramatic art in India. As found in the *Natyasastra*, *aprakarana* has a story which is invented by the author, a hero who is either a Brahman, a minister, or a merchant, a heroine who is a courtesan, the predominance of love, *Sringara* (erotic) and *Prahasana* (comedy) *rasas*, the number of acts ranging from five to ten, stock characters like gamblers, thieves and servants etc. Besides, it is unlike the Sanskrit plays based on epics. It deals with realistic stories and characters which are the brain-children of the author. The paper also brings to light the research gaps that need to be addressed in future research. While extensive research work has been undertaken to analyse the Sanskrit drama as a whole, exclusive discussion on *prakarana* and *Mrichchhakatika* should be done. Such discussion will offer more comprehensive insight into Indian Sanskrit drama.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15223623>

Introduction



This paper has been designed to relook into the fundamentals that qualify *Mrichchhakatika* as a *prakarana*. While *nataka* like *Sakuntala* has been studied with due care, *prakarana* like *Mrichchhakatika* deserves attention to. It has something that brings it closer to any modern text. The present paper can not be imagined without a due reference to the *Natyasastra*, a vital document on Indian classical drama. If we initiate even a surface investigation into it, it will be clear that it is more than a science of drama; it is an encyclopedia of knowledge featuring Sanskrit drama and theatre. It is the most comprehensive work of its kind that ancient India produced. Without this, the principles of Sanskrit drama would remain unexplored. **Just as Aristotle's *Poetics* offers us picture of English classical drama, the *Natyasastra* stands out as a foundational text in Indian classical drama. The work comprises many chapters dealing with different aspects of dramaturgy.** It talks about the origins of theatre, theatre structure, acting, costuming, makeup, properties, dance, music, grammar, audiences and many more. The *Natyasastra* recognises ten major types of plays: *nataka*, *prakarana*, *anka*, *vyayoga*, *bhana*, *samvakara*, *vithi*, *prahasana*, *dima*, and *ihamrga*. Amongst these only two have been discussed exclusively-*nataka* and *prakarana*. The *nataka* deals with the exploits of a hero who is either a royal sage or a king. The central theme in *nataka* should be either love or heroism. *Nataka* usually has no less than five and not more than seven acts.

On the other hand, the story of a *prakarana* is invented by the author; its hero is either abrahman, a minister, or a merchant; its heroine is a courtesan and love constitutes the central theme. Sudraka's *Mrichchhakatika* is an extant *prakarana*. The present paper is an attempt to justify *Mrichchhakatika* as a *prakarana*.

Literature Review

Extensive research work has been done on Indian Sanskrit drama and the *Natyasastra*. Following works like *Theatre and Its Other: Abhinavagupta on Dance and Dramatic Acting* by Ganser E, *On The Use Of "Rasa" In Studies Of Sanskrit Drama* by Herman Tieken, *Shudraka. Makers of Indian Literature* by Biswanath Banerjee, *A Concise History of Classical Sanskrit Literature* by Gaurinath Sastri, *Two Classical Indian Plays: Kalidasa's Sakuntala and Sudraka's Little Clay Cart* by Barbara Stoler Miller and many more have been authored to explore various dimensions of Sanskrit drama in general. But more study should be done on the contemporary nature of *Mrichchhakatika*. Comparative studies need to be done to find out the differences between this play and other *prakarans*. Vasantasena's character need to be studied further from gender perspective. Contemporary interpretation is also required to explore the unexplored dimensions of the



character of Sakara who has been labelled traditionally as villain. Psychological investigation can be undertaken into his character. If all these gaps are studied with emphasis, may lead to more comprehensive understanding of its literary, cultural, and historical merit.

Methodology

To explore fundamental features of a prakarana in Mrichchhakatika, a study has been done on the Sanskrit dramaturgy, especially the Natyasastra. All the quotations and the textual references have been drawn from the book *The Mrichchhakatika of Sudraka WITH INTRODUCTION, CRITICAL ESSAYS AND A PHOTO ESSAY TRANSLATED BY M R KALE, Edited by KuljeetSingh, published in 2019*. To meet the target of the paper, at first, all the elements of prakarana have been examined in different paragraphs using textual references from the mentioned edition. Finally, there is the conclusion where the difference between a *prakarana* and *natak* has been underlined. Apart from this, the conclusion stresses on the presentness of this ancient text.

Findings

The key findings of the study are the following:

1. Prakarana is really a distinct form of drama. It is rich in variety.
2. Charudatta and Vasantasena have challenged the stereotypical notion of gender.
3. Though deeply rooted in Indian classical tradition, the play is very much modern in its message.
4. More study is required to explore the psychological motive of Sakara.
5. Vasantasena's character should be studied from contemporary perspective.
6. Comparative study of Mrichchhakatika can be very important to discover more about the Indian Sanskrit drama.

Discussion

Most Sanskrit plays derive the required material from the traditional epics. They are generally not the product of the author's imagination, rather they are mythical representations. Unlike most Sanskrit plays, prakarana is invented by the author. Like a typical *prakarana*, *Mrcchakatika* presents a story which is purely a product of Śūdraka's imagination. The story features Charudatta, a leader of the



Brahmanas, who was young and poor, and a courtesan called Vasantasena, lovely like the beauty of Vasanta, who loved him for his virtues.

In a *prakarana*, the hero is generally a Brahmana or a minister or a merchant. The hero is portrayed in a very favourable light. He is presented as possessing true generosity of spirit. He is an emblem of humanity. Despite experiencing vicissitude of misfortunes, the hero in a *prakarana* is able to maintain the quality he is known for. In *Mrichchhakatika*, the hero Charudatta is an honest and kind-hearted Brahmana. As a generous and honest young brahmin, Charudatta, through his charitable contributions to unlucky friends and the general public welfare, has severely impoverished himself and his family. Though deserted by most of his friends and embarrassed by deteriorating living conditions, he has maintained his reputation in Ujjayini as an honest and upright Brahmana with a rare gift of wisdom. That Charudatta is a 'worthy' individual is evident in the untainted and sincere appreciation of Vita, a friend of Sakara. In Act I, Vita addresses Charudatta as 'worthy Charudatta'. According to him, to the helpless, Charudatta is the wish-yielding tree, bent down with the load of the fruit of his virtues. To the virtuous he is a guardian. Vita further adds that Charudatta is the 'touchstone of moral conduct, and the ocean having righteousness'. In short, Charudatta is a treasure of all manly virtues. In a *prakarana* drama, the hero is capable of intellectual and philosophical exercise. The more he faces crisis, the more he becomes philosophical and spiritual in his thoughts and expression. This is what we discover in 'noble' Charudatta. This side of the character of Charudatta is evident in the very conversation he has had with other characters in the play. In Act I of the play, Charudatta explains to Vidushaka that poverty is the root of all miseries. It is the source of highest insult. It makes a person isolated from his friends and kinsmen. As a result, the person feels inclined towards forests. Further in Act X, when Charudatta has been put to trial, his utterances assume the form of poetic exuberance. He says to himself that just as the bees come in swarm to a flower to suck its honey at its first blooming, so also, in times of crisis, a man's troubles multiply when there are weak points. Thus, being the hero Charudatta has fulfilled all the requirements of a *prakarana*. He embodies moral excellence, generosity of spirit and artistic temperament, qualities that have forced him into a penury. But such reversal of fortune has in no way affected his righteousness and grace.

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra* Bharata talks about the four types of heroines in a play. They are the celestial one (like Goddess), the queen, the lady of nobility and the courtesan. They all possessed different qualities and dispositions. The celestial represented courage, simplicity, exaltedness and modesty. These qualities were shared by the queen also. The noble heroine stood for exaltedness and modesty; and the courtesan



was renowned for her light-heartedness, exaltedness and expertise in dance, music and other arts. As one explores the figure of the courtesans and wives in the above mentioned sources, one finds that the characteristics of the heroine bears points of similarity with the characteristics mentioned in the *Nāṭyasāstra*. Like the hero, the heroine holds a very important place in a *prakarana*. The heroine here is generally a courtesan renowned for her qualities of head and heart. She remains alive and animated throughout the course of the play. In *Mrichchhakatika* Vasantasena is the heroine who is actually a courtesan. In ancient Indian society, a courtesan was not just a prostitute or mistress, but a source of companionship for the aristocratic men. As a courtesan Vasantasena was well-versed in the sixty four *kalas* or fine arts including music and dance. She had access to wealth and even reverence. She is the epitome of all the captivating charms spring produces. She is highly esteemed for her culture, vivacity, good taste, elegance, and artistic accomplishments. In a *prakarana*, the heroine is depicted as searching for emotional fulfilment. This is well exemplified by Vasantasena. She has got everything to entertain herself, she has no end of riches and wealth, but there is an emotional void in her heart. She is no longer satisfied with her material advancement, rather she yearns to feed her passion for love. And this emotional void is finally fulfilled by Charudatta. Like the hero, the heroine in a *prakarana*, is known for kindness. In *Mrichchhakatika* Vasantasena is shown having generosity and goodness. This is proved in her action in Act IV to free Madanika so that she may marry Sarvilaka. Another remarkable quality that the heroine in a *prakarana*, is found to have, is courage. Vasantasena has shown her courage in her fooling the villain Samsthanaka. This bravery is reflected in Sakara's words to Vita in Act I:

“Friend, Friend! In this pitchy darkness Vasantasena has disappeared while being just in sight, like a pellet of lampblack fallen in a heap of black beans.” (Singh 72)

In the sixth chapter of the *Natyasastra* we find mention of eight *rasas*. Each of the eight *rasas* is produced from its own permanent emotion. The first *rasa* is the *srīngāra*, or the erotic *rasa*, which arises from the permanent emotion of love (*rati*). In every *prakarana*, this *rasa* plays predominant role. As a successful *prakarana*, *Mrichchhakatika* deals with the predominance of love, *srīngāra* (erotic) *rasa*. From the very beginning of the play we discover Vasantasena as having no dearth of material comfort. However, she lacks something which she keenly wished to fulfil. And that is love. She believes that love will transform her life, and it is through love that she will be able to satisfy all her feminine longings and enrich her sensibility. From the very beginning of the play Vasantasena cherishes a deep love for Charudatta, but has not found any opportunity of communicating her feelings. One evening, seeking to escape from the clutches of Sakara who is in hot pursuit, she runs into the old mansion of Charudatta.



Thus, though accidentally, She has had her first opportunity of observing him at close quarters and engaging him to a talk. She capitalizes on this opportunity to fathom the depth of his feelings for her. In Act I, when Charudatta hands Vasantasena (mistaking her as Rdanika) his own scented cloak to give it to his son Rohasena, she smells it. Then longingly she says to herself:

“Ah! This cloak bears the scent of jasmine flowers! His youth seems to be not indifferent to the pleasures of life, after all.” (Singh 80)

Very charmingly, Charudatta, who has already had some prior intimation of her love for him, is also equally eager to reciprocate to the passion of Vasantasena. When in the same act Charudattacomes to learn that he has mistaken her for Radanika, he says to himself: “Ah, this is Vasantasena! Now that my ample fortune has declined, the passion inspired in me subsides in my limbs like the anger of a cowardly person.” (Singh 80)

To further her connection with noble Charudatta, Vasantasena, very purposefully, entreats him to keep her ornaments:

“Sir if your honour would like thus to favour me, then I wish to keep this ornament in your house as a deposit.” (Singh 82)

Finally, after much hesitation, Charudatta agrees to have the deposit, and himself accompanies her to her house. Slowly but silently Charudatta starts feeling for her. To him, Vasantasena is like the moon whose light will serve as a torch to light the king’s road. Being submerged in the feelings for Vasantasena, Charudatta says to Vidushaka: “There is no need of the torches now.” (Singh 83)

Like a true *prakarana*, *Mrichchhakatika* is replete with elements of *Prahasana* (comedy) *rasa*. Sakara’s typical habit of making wrong references to several names and myths, adds much humor to the play. For example, in Act I Sakara threatens Vasantasena saying: “ why do you fly away like Draupadi afraid of Rama?” (Singh69) This is a wrong reference because it is known that Draupadi and Rama have no connection with each other. Wrong references like this actually add further to the tinge of humor. Again in the same act Sakara makes a wrong reference that he will carry Vasantasena off suddenly as Hanumat did with Subhadra, the sister of Visvvasu. As mentioned in the epic Mahabharata, Visvvasu was a Gandharva king and has no bearing with Subhadra. These wrong references which may be due to Sakara’s ignorance and carelessness, create much laughter among the audience.



The characters like Vita, Cheta, Vidushaka, Aryaka add to the comic spirit of the play. In Act I, Vidushaka makes a humorous remark when Charudatta and Vasantasena are engaged in exchanging apologies. Here he compares them with paddy-fields and himself with a camel-colt. He wants to suggest that he is disturbing them just as a camel-colt upsets the paddy fields. One can not but laugh after reading those important lines spoken by Vidushaka in Act VII where after mistaking Aryaka as Vasantasena, Vidushaka says:

“Have her feet been tied by chains, that she cannot get down herself?...Oh! This is not Mistress Vasantasena! Here’s Mister Vasantasena!”(Singh 161) This is really very humorous.

In classical Sanskrit drama, stock characters perform multifaceted roles. They are crucial in structuring the narrative and epitomising the existing social norms. Besides, they play significant part to maintain emotional balance by providing comic relief. As a typical *prakarana*, *Mrichchhakatika* has stock characters like gamblers(Darudraka and Dhutkara); servants(Vardhamanaka, servant of Charudatta, Karnapuraka, servant of Vasantasena, Stavaraka, servant of Sakara); *nayaka*Charudatta and courtesan Vasantasena.

As mentioned in the *Natyasastra aprakarana* should have no less than five and no more than ten acts. *Mrichchhakatika* has ten acts in all.

Conclusion

From the above examination it is evident that *Mrichchhakatika* or *The Little Clay Cart* has successfully met the requirements of *aprakarana*. It also becomes evident that this genre is in many ways different from *nataka*, another sub-genre of Sanskrit drama. Another important finding of the study is that **the play *Mrichchhakatika*, though deeply rooted in ancient India, it does have contemporary relevance. All the characters, their thoughts, actions, motives are very much identifiable in the contemporary reality.**Charudatta, though a creation of Sudraka, is like any modern human being torn between the ideal and the real. His struggle is the struggle that every benevolent and generous-hearted individual has to experience. Vasantasena also represents all those women who seek emotional security, either by being a lover, wife or being a mother. Sakara, on the other hand, is the agent of all the power-loving modern men who are eager to satisfy their materialistic hunger by any means. He can be identifiable with any corrupted authoritarian modern individual who exploits laws for personal



advancement. Other stock characters too find match in the world we live in. This presentness of the *Mrichchhakatika*, makes it distinct from other extant Sanskrit dramas.

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