

## **Mṛcchakaṭīka of Śūdraka and the cosmopolitan world**

**Sharmila Bagchi**

In general, Sanskrit language is known to be a language of Hindus as ancient India was a country of people called Hindus (till the invaders belonging to other religions, languages and countries intruded this land). So all the literature belonging to ancient India or even the medieval period is found in Sanskrit language. Now, as the world has become an oyster due to the communication skills provided by science and technology, the transition of people of one culture to another, one country to another, one religion to another has become easy. We compare the culture, language and literature of one country with that of ours and try to find out similarities or differences in them., Especially in this age of 'Globalisation', when people are adopting the life styles of global citizens, we are interested in the things which are cosmopolitan, which don't have strings attached to any specific religion, country or culture. The effort of this new global man is to prove himself as well as his country, culture and literature to be more cosmopolitan so that he can be accepted as traditionally global or cosmopolitan. Hence, the need is there to analyse the ancient culture cosmo-politically.

In literature, the phrase, 'cosmopolitan' means-when an author touches the traits, which belong to nowhere in particular but are the basic traits of humanity. The characters rise from their native soil, but, some of their traits or actions give the impressions that they could have been anywhere on earth, which means that in spite of their particular stamp which is inseparable, they have an

affinity with people from other soils, this affinity is obviously due to the fact that these certain characteristics belonging to common humanity. The characters, in spite of their environment, religion or philosophy are basically of human beings. Whatever the differences and however great they may be, there is something common in the core of humanity.

Here, we will talk about Sanskrit literature. When he talks about the culture, literature and society of ancient India and when you have to show the modern elements or up-to-date attitude of your culture, you have to analyse your ancient culture according to global-cosmopolitan standard. The universal Sanskrit literature or philosophy, even if not all of it, can stand for this test also. Sanskrit literature, be it Nāṭaka (Drama), Mahākāvya (Epics), Laghukāvya (Short poems)-has a set of rules. It has very limited scope for novelty, experiments and variety. Keeping this thought in mind, the Śāstrakāras (Paṇḍits) had always proposed two versions of literary style, one for class (scholars) and one for Mass (common people). The style for mass had strict rules to be followed and the other one had liberal rules and even different styles.

The Nāṭya or Rūpaka has ten styles of which Nāṭaka, Vyāyoga, Samavakāra, Dīma, Utsrṣṭikāṅka-have fixed a set up of story-line (even nāyaka-hero also) as Prakhyāta (famous) in Purāṇa, Itihāsa (history-epics), whereas Prakaraṇa, Bhāṇa, Īhāmṛga (sometimes prakhyāta also), Vīthi, Prahāsana have imaginary-Utpādyā story. Since Nāṭaka has a fixed frame of Prakhyāta story, whereas the hero should be from famous lineage,<sup>1</sup> It has to be limited to Hindu framework and to an ancient Indian period. The hero here, represents a specific culture and tradition of a specific country and time. But, other dramatic forms especially prakaraṇa has a plot,

which is invented by the poet. In this dramatic form, the hero can be a Brahmin (Vipra), Minister (Amātya), or Merchant (Vanika). The heroine can be a woman from a Noble family (kulastrī) or a courtesan (Veśyā) or both and the dominating sentiment (Rasa) can be Sṛṅgāra (love). So says Bharata in Nāṭyaśāstra-

आत्मशक्त्या कविर्यत्र कथां नायकमेव च ।

औत्पत्तिकं प्रकुरुते तद्धि प्रकरणं विदुः ॥

द्विधा प्रकरणं तत्तु शुद्धं सङ्कीर्णमेव च ।

कुलस्त्रीरचितं शुद्धं सङ्कीर्णं वेश्याया कृतम् ॥ १८ । ९६-९७ ।

and Viśvanātha in Sāhityadarpaṇa-

भवेत्प्रकरणे वृत्तं लौकिकं कविकल्पितम् ।

शृङ्गारोऽङ्गी नायकस्तु विप्रोऽमात्योऽथवा वणिकः ॥

सापायधर्मकामार्थपरो धीरप्रशान्तकः ।

नायिका कुलजा क्वापि वेश्या क्वापि द्वयं क्वचित् ॥ ५ । २२४-२२६ ।<sup>१</sup>

Having a set up of common man's life and his society, which is devoid of any divine element, Prakaraṇa can relate to any place, people. The incidents or the story may depict a culture of any specific period/time. Though it has an essential characteristic for the story and that is-it should be - a love story and Viśvanātha says that it should be named after its hero or heroine or the title of the play should suggest the theme (VI, sl. 163-164).

To find the cosmopolitan characteristics in Sanskrit literature, the Mṛcchakaṭika, a Prakaraṇa by Śūdraka is being considered here. Mṛcchakaṭika is always a favourite of scholars for being path-breaking trend setter with the most liberal approach to tradition. The Mṛcchakaṭika is one of the few Sanskrit dramas, which are not dramatic poems, but, possess distinctly dramatic qualities that may appeal to the modern taste. Truly relevant to all times, the most human of all the Sanskrit plays it is in many respects.

According to Wilson Ryder, There is something strikingly Shakespearean in the skillful drawing of characters, the energy and the life of the large number of personages in the play, and in the directness and clearness of the plot itself....<sup>3</sup> The chief value of *Mṛcchakaṭika*, aside from its interest as a drama, lies in the graphic picture it presents of a very interesting phase of every day life in ancient India. It gives a realistic view of life right from the gamblers and their quarrels, the burglars active at night, the theft of ornaments, to the court and the execution scenes. In it, we come across an untold story where the earthen carriage asserts itself against the royal chariot, a new social order, with the untouchables as the protagonists, voices its presence. This thematic compulsion made a number of reversions in the direction and folk voices emerged.

*Mṛcchakaṭika* enjoys a celebrity status in abroad, which it did not enjoy at home though it is an all time favorite of modern scholars of Indian languages. It was mostly translated in Hindi with special mention of Mohan Rakesh's 'Mittī ki Gādi' which was directed by noted theatre person E. Alkazi on Nov. 28, 1978 for National School of Drama. B.V.Karant presented it in Malvi (a dialect of Madhya Pradesh) as *Gara ki Gadi*. Many experiments are done with this play. Like Karant, Habib Tanvir-another noted theatre person, whose 'Mittī ki Gādi' in Hindi (in Nautanki style), is a milestone since 1958 and which was rejuvenated in 1978. He later on presented it in Chattisgarhi (a dialect of the U.P., now Chattisgarh) in Lokadharmi style. In 1965, Balwant Gargi-a renowned theatre person, presented *Mṛcchakaṭika* at Washington and New York. Apart from these noted persons, *Mṛcchakaṭika* is been played in Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali, Telugu languages. Bengali is a language in which it was presented most on different times.

In abroad, it was France where it was presented first in French version in the years 1850 & 1896 as 'Chariot d' enfant' by different groups! Then in Germany, about the year 1892-93 (Winternitz documented it in his book 'Some problems of Indian Literature' that he witnessed the play at the latter place in 1921) in German language, in Poland as 'Clay Cart', Wasantsena (1998) in Polish.<sup>4</sup> In New York, England, its English version-'The Toy Cart' is often staged.

But comparing Kālidasa and Śūdraka with Shakespeare and Goethe and their works to prove them cosmopolitan, is again a wrong notion. The work of Śūdraka is so remarkable, so full of dramatic life, vigor and freshness, so full of transcendent wit and humor that we cannot, but agree about his indebtedness to any predecessor or to any particular school of drama. Ryder remarks while appreciating the creation of Śūdraka-Kālidasa and Bhavabhūti are Hindus of the Hindus; the Śakuntala and the 'Latter acts of Rāma' (Uttarāmacarita) could have been written nowhere save India 'but, Śūdraka alone in the long line of Indian dramatists, has a cosmopolitan character. Śakuntala is a Hindu maid, Mādhava is a Hindu hero, but, Sansthānaka, Maitreya and Madanika are the citizens of the world.<sup>5</sup> Certainly they are Indian in mind and body, working under Indian belief and thought, as no author can rise about the influence of his own soil and traditions to create characters, which will exhibit traits or habits of the world at large. They are undoubtedly Indians, but, at the same time they have an universalism in their nature, career and action, which perhaps prompted Ryder to make the above observation. Peculiar habits, interesting contradictions, impressive ideas and human aspirations invest Śūdraka's men and women with such universal traits, for which they can rightly be termed as cosmopolitan characters.

The variety of Prākṛts used in the drama, has made it a unique composition. Most of the characters of the play are of low social status and the dramatist has done justice to his every man and woman by allowing them to use their own unsophisticated tongue. As a result, a large number of Prākṛts and dialects find place in the drama, making it a drama of people in the true sense. Perhaps, this aspect inspired the scholars from all over the world to translate it in their own language or to experiment with it by using the other dialects like Malvi, Chattisgarhi. The remarkable point in this play is that Sūtradhāra switches on to the Prakṛti for the purpose of speaking to his wife and for the sake of stage representation.<sup>6</sup> Though the language of the masses and of the women is Prākṛt for a considerable time, no Sūtradhāra ever condescended to speak to the Naṭī in her language and change over to prākṛt while introducing the play to the audiences, but, the Sūtradhāra in this play does it; and in this casual remark, is hidden probably the purpose which inspired Śūdraka's experiment. Biswanath Banerjee quotes<sup>7</sup> the commentator Pṛthvīdhara who says that 11 characters of the play-Sūtradhāra, Naṭī, Radanika, Madanika, Vasantasena, her mother and Ceṭī, Karnapuraka, Dhuta, Sodhanaka and the Śreṣṭhī-speak Śaurasenī; Viraka, Candanaka and Maitreya speak Prācyā; Samvāhaka, the three Ceṭās, Bhikkhu (Bhikṣu) and Rohasena-these six characters speak Magadhi; and among Apabhramśa-the Raṣṭrīya speaks the Sakari, the executioners speak Caṇḍāli and Mathura and his associates use Dhaki. Unfortunately, the tradition of the Prākṛt has been lost and the language of the drama has posed a problem for the correct understanding and assessment of the work. To read the drama with the help of the Sanskrit chāya, is to deny oneself the real charm of it. This loss of

Prākṛt tradition and lack of the correct knowledge of Prākṛts, have led to a large number of mistakes in the interpretation of its Prākṛt verses and passages.

Now, as well as it is known, the story of Mṛcchakaṭika is not the original one. It is not a drama of invention in the sense that everything that presented here is not the creation of dramatist's own imagination. Both the Ādhikārika (main) and Prāsangikavastu (sub-plot stories) have their roots in Bṛhatkathāmañjarī<sup>8</sup>, Kathāsaritsāgara and Daśakumāracarita give the stories of courtesans' love with men and their effort to become 'Vadhu'. Buddhist Jātakas and Jain Āgamas also have the story element. The royal names in the political-sub-plot appear to possess historical reality. Bṛhatkathā mentions Gopāla and Palaka as the sons of Pradyota and Angāravatī. Aryaka appears to be the son of this Gopāla. The struggle between the nephew and the uncles is thus the basis of the political revolution.<sup>9</sup> The incomplete four act play named Cārudatta, which is ascribed to Bhāsa, contains the story of Vasantasena and Cārudatta. Mṛcchakaṭika continues the story after fourth act till the completion of the play. The astonishing similarity between the two plays has raised controversies-

1. Whether Bhāsa has written both the plays.
2. Whether Cārudatta is an abridged version of Mṛcchakaṭika.

The scholars of Sanskrit literature have spent a lot of their valuable time to support and differ to these controversies. The ultimate result is that both are accepted as original works of two different persons. Śūdraka owes a great deal to Bhāsa and his Cārudatta, Bṛhatkathā and other literature for the source of this play, but, that doesn't mean that he is an amplifier. Apart from the changes he brought about language, versification, dramatic devices

and incidents, Śūdraka has made certain definite addition to the play, which has completely altered its outlook.

The story of Mṛcchakaṭika is more interesting in sub-plot. In main-plot, the story goes like this—a poor virtuous Brahmin Cārudatta, having a wife and child, falls in love with rich courtesan Vasantasena, who equally loves him. The brother-in-law of the king Saara, who lusts her, dejected by her refusal, tries to kill her and nearly succeeds. Assuming her dead, he puts the blame on Cārudatta and using his influence on judiciary, gets him sentenced for execution. At the time of execution, Vasantasena saved by Samvāhaka—now a Bhikṣu, appears in person and saves him from being killed. Along with this story, another story of revolution runs parallel where a mutiny is taking place and all the characters of the main plot help to let it progress. At the time of Cārudatta's execution, the revolutionaries become successful in removing the king and installing Āryaka as a new king.

The Mṛcchakaṭika is always the all-time favourite of scholars for its critical analysis, though it cannot get popularity among its contemporary plays. It is always being criticised for its length (10 acts) and some critics think some of its parts as unnecessary. Ryder thinks—Indeed we have in the Little Clay Cart, the material for two plays.<sup>10</sup> But for its lengthiness, Sanskrit tradition is to be blamed, which not only permitted lengthy plays, but, which throwing the art of fiction into a comparative disregard, left the artist the only alternative of choosing between epic and drama. And then the Sanskrit drama is constructed on the lines of literary traditions that make the Sanskrit plays more as 'dramatic poems-dr̥śyakāvya' than as drama-nāṭya. So much emphasis on literary aspect is given that drama becomes less dramatic. Sanskrit drama-tradition has



allowed a display of lyrical beauty and charms of style. Śūdraka has tried to follow the spirit of Indian tradition in some episodic scenes. The canvas that Śūdraka has chosen, is very broad and the Prakaraṇa type treatment has naturally made the length inevitable.

The stage-craft (scenic construction) of the drama is noted most, as it is not usual type. It needs a compartmental stage that can be seen as Bhasa's influence, which is likely to have been adopted by the author of Mṛcchakaṭika. It may happen that an act in a Sanskrit play did consist of different scenes though it was not usual to indicate them by appropriate stage direction.

The inconsistencies in the characterisation, appears to be only apparent in case of Sakara, Vita, judge and sometimes in Cārudatta, though it has received accolades from all over the world for its variation-being human in nature-sometimes soft sometimes hard. The author of the play did not choose to follow the conventional practice of creating settled types. He has created individuals. It is in this individualism of characters that we discover the shape of common humanity. Sudraka, unlike most of the Sanskrit dramatists, has chosen a cosmopolitan city like Ujjayini as the background for his play and has created an unconventional world where a rogue and monk, a pious Brahmin, a virtuous maid and a wicked villain jostle with one other.

The society depicted in Mṛcchakaṭika, is said to be of the contemporary life though Levi finds it to be an imaginative one. The society of Śūdraka has Varṇāśrama system with Brahmin supremacy accepted caste system, poor and rich division, lower caste people vocal in their presence, bribery-a common practice, corrupt administration, gambling and drinking-a common practice, night-clubs-pubs, polygamy, sati-a prevalent practice, breakdown of law

and order because of an immoral and cruel ruler, slavery, patriarchal society, respect for married woman, food-loving people, beautiful city surroundings, people following Vedic religion, Buddhism flourishing, people fond of fine-arts, capital punishments for serious offences—all these can not be imagined with their minute details. This kind of society can belong to any community, at any time in any country.

I would like to conclude with the observation of Dr. G. K. Bhatt<sup>11</sup>- 'The author has so worked on the material that his wealth of incidents, the variety of the characters and their admirable portrayal, the mastery of pathos and abundance of humour and wit and their charm of his simple but effective style, lift *Mṛcchakaṭika* from the common run of Sanskrit plays and bestow on it a unique quality. The unconventional realism of the drama, its perfectly individualised characters and above all, the cosmopolitan world that the author brings into it with its malice, intrigue, romance and humour, justify the cosmopolitan character attributed to the drama or its author. Especially in view of the fact that these elements are conspicuous by their absence in the rigid frame work of Sanskrit drama. The author's freshness and breadth of outlook amply justifies the bold unconventional experiment that he attempted to put on the Sanskrit stage. Śūdraka has paid for his boldness by the general neglect at the hands of the tradition loving and rule-obeying Sanskrit drama-writers; but, it is time that we realised the value of *Mṛcchakaṭika* for the Sanskrit drama'.

## References

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