

The 2000-year-old play 'Mrcchakatika' actually both modern and radical in every way.
Discuss=

Mrcchakatika is a love story and a political satire. A play more ancient than the equally famous Shakuntala, it remains one of India's most enduring works, one still widely performed in various formats and versions. The main storyline of Mrcchakatika, with its ten acts and thirty characters, runs thus:

Charudatta is a noble, impoverished Brahmin. One night, the courtesan Vasantasena on the run from the evil Sansthanaka, seeks refuge in Charudatta's house. She leaves her jewels (and, evidently, her heart) there. The jewels are later stolen by the thief Sharvilaka who is in love with Vasantasena's attendant and needs them to secure the latter's freedom.

As the theft is discovered, Charudatta's wife offers her own pearl necklace. Vasantasena returns to his house, ostensibly to return the ratnamala but with the hope of seeing him again. Predictably, it is a dark and stormy night. The next morning, she meets Charudatta's young son, Rohasena. Moved by his fervent childish desire to own a gold cart (the cart that gives the play its name), quite like his playmate's, Vasantasena fills it with her own jewellery.

It is this jewellery that will implicate Charudatta in Vasantasena's murder (actually committed by Sansthanaka). But along with all this, there is political upheaval, a trial and then the sensational last act – when Vasantasena is miraculously resuscitated by a masseur turned monk whom Charudatta had once helped.

The mysterious playwright=

For all the familiarity with the play, there remains much that is mysterious about its author. All existing versions of the play Mrcchakatika begin with a prologue which states that its author Shudraka was a mighty and wise king. A "dvija-mukhyatama", he knew the Vedas and scriptures, and was a great warrior to boot. Having ruled for 110 years, he performed the horse sacrifice, in the manner of all great kings, and then abdicated in favour of his son and consigned his own self to the fire.

But the evident exaggerations implied that the prologue was added on, much after the play assumed its final version – even though scholars of an earlier generation also postulated that it was customary for playwrights to introduce themselves this way in the prologue.

Philologists, linguists, historians and scholars of theatre have played detective trying to ascertain the authorship and also the date of the text. This becomes important so as to place the work in context, and to determine the times and period it talks about.

The doubts about Shudraka's authorship begin early on. The playwright Dandin, who lived in the seventh century CE, and his contemporary, Rajashekara mention Shudraka but more as a romantic hero rather than a poet.

In a text attributed to Dandin but now lost, and whose versions were quoted by later writers, it is believed that Shudraka was either a prince or a noble figure who lived in Asmaka (in present day Maharashtra). He was a friend of then Satavahana king Svati; the Satavahanas ruled from about 230 BCE for another 400 years, around present day Andhra Pradesh, south-east Maharashtra and parts of Karnataka. As the story goes, Shudraka first dethroned Svati but out of regard for their old friendship restored Svati's kingdom to him. In the end though, he defeated Svati at Ujjaiyani and became king instead.

There were some scholars who have also suggested that *Mrcchakatika* was derived from an earlier play, *Charu-datam* by Bhasa (who lived in the early centuries BCE), since the first four acts of the plays share close similarities. Bhasa's *Charu-datam* continued for long to be performed by practitioners of the Kutiyattam dance form in Kerala, and was rediscovered in the early twentieth century – Raja Ravi Varma's famous painting of *Vasantasena* is based on this version.

Shudraka or the author, it is surmised, added on to the original story – the rest that includes the episodes of the rebellion and *Vasantasena*'s murder. Based on this surmise, Shudraka is supposed to have lived between the times of Bhasa and Kalidasa, who came later during the Gupta era, in the fifth century CE.

A rebellion as a clue=

Scholars in the 1940s and 1950s tried to date the text looking at historical incidents mentioned in the play, hoping to match the author with actual historical characters.

They refer to the important subplot within the play: king Palaka of Ujjaiyani is overthrown by Aryaka, a cowherd (described as "gopaladaraka", of the Abhira caste). Aryaka had been imprisoned by the former, yet he sneaks back into the city and is helped by many people in his quest for revenge against Palaka: the policemen who do catch him at one point, and even by Charudatta himself.

Based on this, it has been speculated that Shudraka was king of the Abhiras. They appear as a mythical nomadic group who are first mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. The German Indologist Walter Ruben described the Abhiras as a "pre-Indo European" tribe, who had evidently taken to a settled life somewhere in Sindh or Malwa. Perhaps they were feudatories of the Sakas at one time.

Ptolemy, the Greek geographer of the second century CE, places the Abhira homeland somewhere between the southern Indus valley and around Kathiawar. A few centuries later, they became rulers of a kingdom in south west Maharashtra and/or northern Karnataka.

Identifying Shudraka with the Abhiras is apparent from the former's clear "anti-Brahmanical" leanings and his empathy for the oppressed, as the play shows. While Sansthanaka is clearly an unlikeable royal bully, the plebeians show a noble character and higher morality. For instance, this is how one of the headmen charged with the task of executing Charudatta describes his own hesitation:

Goha: Well, when my father was going to heaven, he said to me, "Son Goha, if it's your turn to kill him, don't kill the sinner too quick."

Ahinta: But why?

Goha: "Perhaps," said he, "some good man might give the money to set him free. Perhaps a son might be born to the king, and to celebrate the event, all the prisoners might be set free. Perhaps an elephant might break loose, and the prisoner might escape in the excitement. Perhaps there might be a change of kings, and all the prisoners might be set free."

- Arthur William Ryder's translation of The Little Clay Cart

One of the Abhira rulers is believed to be Isvarasena, whose coins have been found in northern Maharashtra. It was either Isvarasena or his father, another historical character Shivadutta, who overthrew the Satavahanas in this region around 248-49 CE (this apparently tallies with the incident in the play). Isvarasena's coins have led scholars to believe that the Abhiras ruled for a time between the Satavahanas and the Vakatakas in western India and perhaps had even subdued the Sakas, as indicated by their presence in Ujjain.

Going by the book=

Later scholars have tried to adduce evidence from the text. As the play mentions the words "Dravida", "Karnata", and "Chola" in the text, there is a view that Shudraka was a dramatist based in the southern part of India..

Diwakar Acharya (who translated The Little Clay Cart for the Clay Sanskrit Library in 2009) believes the core version of the play (featuring the Charudatta-Vasantasena story) existed originally, and it was actually added on to by later writers. Acharya contends that the work in the version now available to us has definitive two layers – an early one as seen in the many passages using the Prakrit dialects, and then a later version when it was renamed and many additions were also made.

Acharya also suggests that the play could be dated to around the early centuries CE because of how the god Skandadeva is referred to. In Act III of the play, the impoverished Brahmin-turned-thief Sharvilaka calls himself "son of Skanda" (Skandaputra). He also reposes his faith in the god Kartikeya and addresses him by his various names.

Kartikeya or Skanda or even Brahmanyadeva as he appears in this text is the god of war, but as Acharya points out, in Mrcchakatika he is invoked as the god of thieves. In Bhasa's Charu-datta (early centuries BCE), the god of thieves has a different name and is invoked in the name of Khara-pata. Evidently, this god was later forgotten and appears instead with a different name a couple of centuries later in Mrcchakatika.

Many versions of Mrcchakatika=

For all its unknown origins, the play evidently moved through different versions (this piece, for instance, relies on Arthur Ryder's version for its spellings). The play assumed the version now known to us in the time of Prithvidhara, a scholar of the thirteenth century CE, who wrote a commentary on it. At this time there were, besides Sanskrit, eight known dialects used in Mrcchakatika: Sauraseni, Maharashtri, Avantika, Pracya, Magadhi, Sakari, Candali,

Dakkhi (Prithvidhara, as quoted by Anthony Kennedy Warder). It was also adapted into later versions such as, for instance, by the poet Manika in Nepal, the second half of whose play, Bhairavananda, written in the late fourteenth century, is clearly based on Mrcchakatika.

Prithvidhara was a courtier who lived in the time of Ramasimha Deva of Mithila (north Bihar and southeast Nepal). Mithila, like its contemporary Sena kingdom in Bengal, was where literature in Sanskrit flourished for long, though Sanskrit works continued to be composed elsewhere, and were even translated in Akbar's court.

Prithvidhara's commentary and other ones by Lalla Dikshita and Jivananda Vidyasagar (both in the early nineteenth century) were used by later scholars as they worked on subsequent translations of Mrcchakatika. It's always a challenging task translating from the original Sanskrit and Prakrit, but translators have tried to preserve the essence of the play in various ways. As its various stage versions suggest, it is a play that lends itself freely to modern day adaptations. Horace Hayman Wilson, who was surgeon general in the East India Company and also a polymath, translated it into English in 1826 before it was translated into French, German and other Indian languages too.

The translation by Arthur William Ryder was based on a 1904 Sanskrit text by Kashinath Pandurang Parab, which also included the older commentaries on it. Ryder, whose translation was a mix of prose and verse (like the Sanskrit original) tried to retain the drama, humour and sensibility of the original while adapting it for an essentially English audience. It was adapted for a performance in New York in 1924; the cast was all-American but two Indian musicians played the background score with a sitar and esraj.

Present day interpretations=

The play's first Marathi production was in 1887, performed by the Lalit Kalotsav Mandali in Pune. This play was based on the Sangita Mrcchakatika by the playwright Govind Ballal Deval. Apparently he relied on an earlier version by the noted scholar and lexicographer Parashuram Godbole published in 1862, though there is the version of Mrcchakatika in 1896 by Narayan Ballal Godbole which uses all existing versions of the play. Godbole procured different versions of the play from places as far apart as Tanjore, Nagpur and Jeypore in Bengal to write his own magisterial version.

It was staged in Bengali by the Bohurupee theatre group, directed by Kumar Roy. Even in its later presentations, Mrcchakatika had many firsts to its credit. Vasantasena was the first Kannada silent film to be made in 1931, starring Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in the eponymous role. Suchet Singh, a young filmmaker who had worked with Charles Chaplin, shot four silent films including one on Vasantasena. He died in 1930 and not one of his films survives.

One of its most famous adaptations was by the Hindustani Theatre Group in 1958, under the name Mitti ki Gadi, in a Hindi-Urdu version. Translated by Begum Qudsiya Zaidi and Noor Nabi Abbasi, it also involved folk artistes from Chattisgarh, introduced by the play's director Habib Tanvir. Tanvir's adaptation, which also highlighted the play's political message, melded the classical Sanskrit tradition with the idiom of folk theatre, complete with music and dialogue.

It was Tanvir who pointed out that all translations of the play had extolled its literary virtues but were reticent about aspects of dramaturgy, as Anjum Katyal writes. Indian concepts of drama based on the Natyashastra were different from Aristotle's Poetics, which defined dramatic traditions in Europe. The time flows and space shifts that occur within one act in the play might have been difficult to replicate on a western stage setting, but Tanvir got around this by introducing innovative stage sets and his use of music and perambulation, so that the change was obvious to all.

Its silver screen adaptation in 1985, the Girish Karnad directed Utsav, was a latter day interpretation, seeking to revoke the past in a radically different way. The script, however, had to be redone in conventional ways for the silver screen. For instance, some scenes not in the original play had to be written. Aryaka's escape appears as dialogue in the play but in the film there is an entire sequence which shows Sharvilaka breaking into jail and assisting Aryaka's escape.

How the film ends (still on a happy note as in the true tradition of kavya), is of course different from earlier versions of the play. Utsav is a women-centered movie, and attempts to ascribe agency to both women – especially in the instance of Charudatta's wife who appears as Aditi in this version. Its interpretation won the movie critical acclaim (though apparently not much commercial success) and its success as a classic endures.

For all its period detail, Mrcchakatika continues to offer re-interpretation in many ways. And in its timelessly radical message, it also remains important to our times and even after.