

## Different Aspects of Shudraka's Mrichchakatika (The Little Clay Cart)=

### Introduction to Shudraka's Mrichchakatika=

Sudraka's Mrichchakatika is among the earliest known plays of Sanskrit Literature. It is widely celebrated as one of the first plays to skip the narration from the perspective of the royals or nobles and depict the life of a common village populace. The underlying story of this iconic play is set in the glory days of monarchic Ujjain, which has seen the rule of several Kshatriya Kingdoms, dating as early as the 5th Century BC. However, the specific period of the story isn't mentioned, and the story is more universal in nature, rather being confined to Indian society, which is quite contrasting to other renowned plays like Kalidasa's Shakuntala.

The play Mrichchakatika was written by Sudraka, who was also a Kshatriya king of Ujjain around 4th Century BC. Very little is known about the author, except for what is available in the prologue of the play, which is written by Sudraka himself.

### Central Characters of the Play=

Charudatta – He is the protagonist of the play, and is portrayed as the perfect human being in terms of generosity, and steadfastness. Charudatta is a Brahmin, who has lost all his wealth due to the charities and sacrifices he made for others. These virtues and his earnest love and admiration for Vasantasena lured her to fall in love with him.

Vasantasena – She comes as a beautiful and desirable courtesan, who yearns for a man to love her the way she was. All the virtues that she wanted in the love of her life, Vasantsena finds those in Charudatta, after seeing him preaching in one of the many temples in the kingdom. She is deeply in love with the "generous brahmin", and wants to be his, even after learning that Charudatta has a wife and a son. (The character of "Madhu" (Meenakshi Seshadri) in the 1993 film titled "Kshatriya" is quite reminiscent of this.)

Sansthanaka – Brother-in-law of the tyrant king Plaka, he is the antagonist, who is desperately attracted to Vasantasena, and hence, despises Charudatta. Responsible for the atrocities and injustices committed on Charudatta.

Maitreya – Another poor Brahmin, close friend of Charudatta. Maitreya hates the condition he, and his friend are forced to live in by destiny, and blames the gods for his misfortunes.

Rohasena – Charudatta's toddler kid, who unknowingly plays one of the most moving parts in the play. He, interestingly is the possessor of The Little Clay Cart.

Madanika – Vasantasena's maid, almost a friend and trustworthy. The character is one of the primary reasons which move the plot of the play, as the estranged jewelry for the theft which Charudatta is wrongly convicted, comes on the scene due to her lover.

Sharvilaka – Madanika's lover, who committed a theft, which eventually sets the plot towards the climax. Sharvilaka is an honest man, however, commits the crime primarily to set his love, Madanika, free from bondage and eventually marry her.

Aryaka – A revolutionary herdsman, who is captured for treason and is sent into confined imprisonment. Aryaka eventually escapes, kills the tyrant ruler, and fulfills the prophecy by a soothsayer by becoming the king. Rules justly, and reinstates Charudatta's fortune.

Plaka – The tyrant king, on whose backing Sansthanaka committed all the crimes. Plaka is ultimately killed by his destined slayer, Aryaka.

Plot of the Mrichchakatika=

Mrichchakatika is established on 10 acts, each one having the significance of its own. Charudatta is a Brahmin, who has lost all his wealth because of his excessively generous nature, and in helping individuals who came to him for monetary assistance. Despite being broke and living an insignificant life, he is still revered and respected across the kingdom of Ujjain, for his striking honesty and unparalleled wisdom. However, Charudatta is overtly embarrassed by his insufficient wealth, due to which most of his friends, except Maitreya, have abandoned him, though being respected and revered brings him some relief.

Charudatta is happily married to a devout wife, from whom he has a son named Rohasena. However, he falls in deep love with a wealthy and reputed courtesan, Vasantasena, who herself is enamored of Charudatta. Vasantasena saw Charudatta during a visit to a temple where he was preaching, not knowing that he was being watched by her.

The play begins with Charudatta and Maitreya discussing their misfortune, where Charudatta was debating his friend why it was important to be devoted to the gods, even if they were living a humbled life, quite below what the brahmins deserve. Vasantasena emerges on the scene, being persuaded by Sansthanaka, his slave, and a courtier. Sansthanaka is the brother-in-law of the tyrant king Plaka, and he himself is not less cruel. He wants Vasantasena to accept his proposal, however, she manages to escape as the evening turned into night, and entered Charudatta's cottage.

Sansthanaka is informed by his men that Vasantasena has fallen in love with the broke brahmin, and therefore, sends a chilling message to Charudatta through his friend Maitreya, to either turn Vasantasena or accept him as his enemy. However, Charudatta and Vasantasena meet in the cottage and express their love for each other, and from here begins the overt display of love. While parting away, for the time being, Vasantasena gives Charudatta a gold casket, with the intention that it could be an excuse to meet her beloved subsequently.

Sharvilaka, lover of Vasantasena's maid, Madanika wants to buy her from her mistress, and for this, he decides to commit the sin of stealing, though he too enjoys the reputation of being honest. Nonetheless, as he has no money, he sets to enter Charudatta's house and steals the gold casket given in the care of Charudatta, without knowing that it, in fact, belongs to the person he intends to give to in return for his lover's freedom. As planned, he

visits the mistress of Madanika and presents her with the gold casket. The courtesan accepts the jewels and frees Madanika to marry Sharvilaka. Vasantasena makes arrangements to inform Charudatta that the jewels stolen from him have been recovered in her presence, for she didn't want the love of her life to be worried.

In the meantime, Charudatta realizes about the robbery and sends through Maitreya a rare pearl necklace belonging to his wife to Vasantasena as a compensation to the courtesan for the loss of her valuable jewels. However, Maitreya fears that acquaintance with the courtesan is an ill-omen, and will cause grave and disastrous outcomes, and therefore, pleads Charudatta to end his "misadventure". He feels that Vasantasena, like other courtesans, simply wants to take away the few possessions that Charudatta has, and hence, is creating deceit.

After leaving Vasantasena's palace with his newly freed bride, Sharvilaka learns that his friend, the revolutionary herdsman Aryaka has been arrested by King Plaka, and is imprisoned in an oubliette. The king, an unjust and tyrant ruler, fears that the people might instigate a rebellion against him, as a soothsayer has predicted that Aryaka would become the king of the land. Upon hearing the news of the arrest, Sharvilaka decides to help Aryaka, and hence, asks the permission of his newly wedded wife Madanika, and send her to his parents' house to stay until he returns successfully. Subsequently, Sharvilaka successfully helps Aryaka escape from prison, but they still need assistance to dodge the guards on the pursuit. Aryaka seeks help from Charudatta and narrates him his plight, and the generous brahmin aids him in escaping the pursuing guards.

Vasantasena meets Charudatta's young kid, Rohasena, soon after they begin their love affair. Rohasena is crying for a toy that his father cannot afford to buy, and instead, Charudatta gives him a little toy clay cart, which Rohasena doesn't want. While crying, Rohasena asks who Vasantasena

Vasantasena, having become Charudatta's mistress, meets his small son and gives him some jewels with which to purchase a golden toy cart to replace the unsatisfactory clay cart Charudatta had been able to afford. She makes arrangements to meet Charudatta in Pushpakarandaka Park, outside the city, for a day's outing, but by mistake, she enters the wrong vehicle and finds herself in the gharry belonging to Sansthanaka, who still pursues her and is madly jealous of the love and favors she bestows freely upon Charudatta. When Vasantasena arrives at the park, Sansthanaka finds her in the gharry, who at first overflows with joy at seeing her because he thinks she has come to him voluntarily. When she spurns him and declares her love for Charudatta, Sansthanaka tries to make his henchmen kill her, but they refuse. Sansthanaka sends his followers away and chokes her himself.

Believing her dead, he hides the body under a pile of leaves. Then, hoping to escape the penalty for his crime, Sansthanaka decides to go to a court and accuse Charudatta of murdering Vasantasena. When Sansthanaka first appears at the court, the judges, who know him to be somewhat mad, refuse to see him or take him seriously, but when he threatens to go to King Plaka, the judges become frightened and send for Charudatta. Falsely accused, Charudatta proclaims his innocence, but circumstances are against him. He admits having been in the park, and the jewels of Vasantasena are found at his home, offering a motive for the poverty-stricken man to have killed her.

The judges, in spite of Charudatta's previous reputation, find him guilty. Although Charudatta's status as a Brahman exempts him from the death penalty for any crime, King Plaka orders Charudatta put to death. No one knows that the body identified as Vasantasena's was actually that of another woman or that Vasantasena is not dead; befriended by a Buddhist monk, she is recovering near the park from Sansthanaka's attack.

Charudatta is taken through the city by two executioners, who stop several times to announce the name of the condemned man and the nature of his crime. Although the people of the city love Charudatta, they dare not intervene on his behalf, even though he steadfastly maintains his innocence. Sansthanaka's slave tries to tell that his master is really the one who committed the crime, but no one believes him, and so Charudatta and his executioners, accompanied by a crowd, continue on their way to the place of execution, a cemetery south of the city.

The executioners, thinking to be merciful, offer to decapitate Charudatta, but a miracle prevents their sword from touching him, and so they prepare the victim for the slow, agonizing death by impalement on a pike. Fortunately, Vasantasena, seeing the excited crowd as she makes her way back to the city, intervenes in time to save Charudatta. When she narrates the true happenings, the king arrests Sansthanaka. The excitement does not end with that, however, for the word comes that Charudatta's wife, believing herself a widow, is about to cast herself upon a funeral pyre. Charudatta reaches her in time to prevent her death, and she and Vasantasena meet and accept each other.

Word comes, too, that Prince Aryaka has deposed King Plaka and is now king. One of his first deeds is to restore Charudatta's fortune and make him an important official of the court. Charudatta, still a man of conscience and charity forgives Sansthanaka for his villainy and causes him to be set free.

#### Thematic Elements in the Play=

Mrichchakatika is a rich document in terms of depicting various factions of the society, and several forms of emotion, which makes this a play director's delight. Following are the underlying themes in the play, which were apparent to me:

#### Love-

Love is the central theme of the play, which is apparent in three different manifestations. Firstly, the love between Charudatta and Vasantasena is what sets the tone of the story, and the ways they try to please each other is pure, unadulterated love. Despite Vasantasena being a courtesan, who generally have immensely bad repute, Charudatta falls in love with her, who is a brahmin himself. In fact, there's a point in the play when Maitreya, his friend tries to make him understand the dangers of being with a courtesan who is wanted by the king's close aide, but Charudatta's yearning for his love only increased. Realizing this, Maitreya says, "you can never reason with a lover."

Secondly, the story of Sharvilaka and Madanika portrays love in a controversial manner. Justifying the act of stealing sounds creepy, and Sharvilaka also had the thought of killing

those who were sleeping and hadn't it been for Maitreya's conversation with him, he would certainly have killed them. However, that aside, Sharvilaka makes an honest effort to end the bondage of the woman he dearly loves and marries her as soon as she got free. Contrastingly, despite a happy ending, Vasantasena could never be the wife of Charudatta.

The third manifestation of love can be seen in a third love story, which is unapologetically understated, and that's the love and devotion of Charudatta's wife towards her husband. She is ready to give away her prized possessions, and even accept Vasantasena as her husband's mistress, only to make Charudatta happy. While this seems to be quite an injustice in modern times, the age in which the play is set, having a mistress was quite common, and the wife always had a higher status.

#### Infidelity-

Infidelity is a prominent theme throughout the play, however, it is glorified. Charudatta is a man married to a devout wife, who's ready to do anything and everything for her husband, and also has a small adorable son. He is also a brahmin, who preaches at temples, and is known for his generosity. However, he falls for a courtesan, and openly proclaims his love for Vasantasena, without even considering what his wife would think of his newfound love.

Vasantasena, on the other hand, is equally insensitive to the feelings of a wife, whose husband has become her lover. She begins a romance, which would undoubtedly have been a heart-breaking time for the wife. Similarly, she loves Charudatta's son, Rohasena, and tries to please him by giving him gems. And in the end, both the lovers convince the wife, who doesn't resist at all, to accept their relationship.

#### Poverty=

Being excessively generous makes Charudatta experience poverty and all the piercing truths that came along with it. His friends abandon him, and once who helped others, was seeing the role reversal. The story shows how poverty brings out the true colors of people, who claimed to be well-wishers during the spring and desert us during autumn.

Without money, people become more susceptible to injustice, as they don't have enough influence over others to prove themselves. In this case, Charudatta was convicted for a crime which he did not commit, simply because being poor was a possible motive for him killing Vasantasena and stealing her jewelry.

#### Jealousy=

Jealousy is one of the purest forms of emotion, and closely analyzing Mrichchakatika makes us realize that it is present within two characters, Sansthanaka and Maitreya. Sansthanaka desperately craves for Vasantasena, whether in love or lust, can't be said. When he realizes that it is Charudatta, and not him, who she loves, he becomes furious and conspires a tragedy, which eventually fails. He almost kills Vasantasena, for he couldn't bear the woman he wanted for himself to be in the arms of another man. Out of jealousy, he falsely accuses Charudatta of the murder of the courtesan and has him almost killed too.

Maitreya, on the other hand, is a poor brahmin, who overtly hates his fate, but inwardly is insecure and jealous of those living a higher worldly life than him and his friend Charudatta. Nonetheless, his jealousy is quite different than that of Sansthanaka, and he will never commit something as heinous crimes as the latter. However, even if wanted to, who couldn't commit such a huge crime, because he was poor, and he himself would've ended in serious trouble, unlike Sansthanaka.

#### Friendship-

Friendship is displayed on various occasions in the play, the most prominent being that between Sharvilaka and Aryaka, and Charudatta and Maitreya. Sharvilaka is newly married, with a girl for whom he committed the crime of stealing from a brahmin, but no sooner than he heard about his friend Aryaka's arrest, he vowed to help him, and he successfully did. This shows the strong bond between the two, who were both rebels in their own regard.

Likewise, the friendship between Charudatta and Maitreya is also quite strong, though, unlike Sharvilaka and Aryaka, theirs is bonded by mutual disdain and poverty, rather than the adventure of rebellion. Nevertheless, Maitreya comes across a very helpful friend, as he goes against his will to help his friend have a love affair with a courtesan. In fact, despite disliking Vasantasena, he frequently meets her on Charudatta's requests.

#### Loyalty-

One thing that has been among the most important elements of the monarchic times is loyalty, which is clearly evident in Mrichchakatika as well. There are incidents throughout the play that depict loyalty, though it hasn't been stressed upon as strongly as love and jealousy. The act of Sharvilaka separating from his newly wedded wife to save the future king, and the act of Aryaka restoring Charudatta's fortune display loyalty.

However, one incident which stands out in this regard is the scene in which Aryaka is hiding in Charudatta's bullock-cart carrying Vasantasena, and it gets confronted by Viraka, the head constable of the police, and one of the king's favored men. The valiant act by Chandanaka in order to save Aryaka, the destined king of the lands, was an impactful one. Risking one's life against one of the tyrant king's own men required a lot of courage, but his loyalty towards the rebel made Chandanaka do the unthinkable.

#### Injustice-

Injustice has been plaguing societies for centuries, and a perfect example is seen in this play. Charudatta is sentenced for a crime that he did not commit, while the real culprit almost went free. Being a close associate of the tyrant king, Sansthanaka could use all his resources to prove that Charudatta was the murderer, and if it hadn't been for the return of Vasantasena, Charudatta would have surely died. Even after Sansthanaka's slave informs that it was his master who killed the courtesan, no one believed him, for justice apparently is only for the privileged class.

The theme of injustice depicted in the play can be found even in today's world, where rapists and murderers of influential backgrounds go free, while those from the vulnerable groups

spend years, and in some cases, decades in prison, without committing any crime. This makes the theme even more relatable.

Hope-

All is well that ends well, and this is what we get in the end, hope. The tyrant Plaka commits atrocities and plunders the weak, but he is replaced by the destined and just king Aryaka. Sansthanaka does whatever he could, still, he became an example of "crime never pays". Charudatta and Vasantasena reuniting gives joy, and it increases when Charudatta forgives Sansthanaka in the end.

We also get hope that if we help someone in their difficult times, the person could be of help during our crucial times. Vasantasena repaid the 10-gold coin loan of the Shampooer who became the monk, and in the end, the monk saved her life in the park after Sansthanaka strangled her. Similarly, Aryaka reinstated the fortunes of Charudatta and made him an important official in his court, because the broken brahmin had helped him escape the guards.

Conclusion=

Sudraka's Mrichchakatika is a masterpiece in its own regard, and unlike Kalidasa's Shakuntala, has universal appeal to it. It is one of the only Indian literary works in Sanskrit which has been adapted and researched upon more in the west than in India. And that's not difficult to understand why it is so.

First of all, the problems the play addresses are prevalent in almost around the world, and that too, almost at all times. Extramarital affairs are not just part of the modern culture but are an ancient phenomenon, and therefore, stories related to this can be found in almost all kinds of literature, right from the Middle East, and Africa to the Europe and Americas.

However, I was utterly disappointed with the portrayal of Charudatta's wife, which I felt was quite insufficient. But I cannot understand it completely, as it was set in an era where women were in total submission to their husbands and accepted all their demands.

That aside, the play is rightly counted among the classics and takes a much broader approach at playwriting in terms of culture and story narration, which is quite a rarity in ancient Indian plays.