

Revisiting Gender Historiography in the Specific Context of Shudraka's *Mrcchakatika*

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Abstract: The historical texts hold that Gupta period is the 'Golden Age' of Hindu society. Most criticisms of the period are based on the social-economic and material conditions of the society of that era. However, to analyse every aspect of social life, it is important to undertake a deep analysis of the society of that particular age. There are very few writings available which analyses the condition of women of that era. But the available evidence reveals that the status of women during Gupta period is a big source of critique for the 'Golden Age' hypothesis. This paper will bring the subjectivity of women as a historical character by tracing her position in society from the well-known play of the period, '*Mrcchakatika*'.

Keywords: *Mrcchakatika*, Gender, Historiography.

Introduction

To understand the nature of women in the Gupta period, it is necessary to grapple with the texts (historical and literary) of that period. It should be noted that in different time periods, status of women varies. This variance can be attributed to the social and cultural practices. Historical writings, of course, have created space for women but only within clearly defined parameters. This paper is an attempt to study the role of gender in one of the most significant plays of the Gupta period, namely *Mrcchakatika*. Even though the text is a work of fiction, it can add to our understanding of the status of women in that era, albeit, in a limited manner.

Before delving into the text, it is necessary to talk about the text's author and the text itself. Here, it is also necessary to have a look on the contemporary writers and similarities and dissimilarities in their writings. Theatre had a unique place in the cultural history of classical India. In one manner, it straddled several language barriers in northern India with an ease which seems to deny that there were barriers, and yet became the loftiest expression of a typical Sanskrit literature. Theatre attracted educated population and it was the image of civilization itself. India had a unique and sophisticated tradition of theatre much before the West had conceived a coherent idea of literary aesthetics. The *Natyashastra* was the oldest and the most elaborate treatise on theatre, attributed to Sage Bharata composed somewhere

around 2500 years ago. This treatise touched on every aspect of theatre production. Its antiquity dates to the Indian time of Treta Yug when Indra himself, accompanied by the deties, went to Brahma with a request to provide men and women of that era with a *Kridanaka* (plaything) which would bring back the straying masses to the path of righteousness. Natyashastra, also known as Natyaveda, was the Pancham veda (fifth veda) that was composed of the union of all the four extant vedas. The treatise had a huge influence on the theatre of that period and the subsequent eras. Playwrights chiefly depended upon the stories of the Indian epics for their subject matter and the techniques in the Natyashastra. By 4th century, the genre of the plays had developed completely into a distinctive form and it flourishes for the next millennium (Buitenen, 1968).

***Mrcchakatika*: An Insight**

Shudraka inaugurates a new period in the political and social history of India. When *Shudraka* was writing, *Kushana* empire was on the verge of decline. Satavahana empire had collapsed completely. Lots of new empires came into being in place of these. These activities were a clear indication of the break from the past in terms of feudal revolution. In the next couple of years, new changes produced a society whose outlook was very different from the earlier one. Changes in the social ideas of the society were reflected in the literature, traditions of India were reinterpreted and then reaffirmed, although, there was an extensive rewriting of *Puranas* and new production of theistic scriptures (Warder, 1990). Now the Indian literature was expressing many different views, various in outlook and not subjected to any oppressive orthodoxy (p. 2). In the new political situation where central power became weak, writers always had a choice of patrons and could never be subjected to any single all engulfing censorship and direction.

Debate arose about *Shudraka*'s identity; who was he and where he came from, his caste, class, and dynasty came to be inquired about (p. 4). In *Skandapurana*, he is identified as *Andhrabhrtya* i.e. vassal of the *Andhras*. *Skandapurana* dates his period in the kali period of 3290. On the other hand, *Bana* and *Kadambri* regarded him king of *Vidisa*. According to the *Jaina* traditions, *Satavahana* gave him half of his empire. According to *Dandi*, his name was *Indranigupta* and he belonged to *Asmaka* class. Same story relates with *Jinaprabha* story (p. 5). Some scholars regarded him as one of a great royal authors of *kavya*. *Rajasekhara* in *Kavyamimamsa* notes that *Shudraka* was a famous patron who presided over a literary circle.

In the contemporary period, examples are found of similar works as that of *Mrcchakatika* which gives an impression that the name *Shudraka* has to serve as a convenient designation for the author of a set of plays, marked by an individual and brilliant style, for example, *Vina Vasavadatta*. It was popular with dramatic critique and eight acts were intact.

Shudraka and *Bhasa* were contemporary writers and *Shudraka* took up *Bhasa*'s character *Charudatta* and extended it in his play. He produced the fiction in ten plays (p. 21). *Shudraka*'s acts are longer and contains more incidents than that of *Bhasa*'s plays and presents more characters than *Bhasa* in corresponding plays. In this new phase of drama, aesthetic theory of the *Natyashastra* is more consciously and literally applied (p. 21). *Clay cart* is unique in actions, and the aesthetic experiences are sensitive, comic, compassionate, furious and the heroic.

Play has the great variety of the *prakriti* dialects in Mahrastri, Avantika, Pracya, Magadhi, Sakari, Candali, and Dhakki.

First four acts of the play correspond exactly to Bhasa's play. Charudatta and Vasantasena are dominant and Vasantasena plans to visit Charudatta's place but in the meanwhile, gambler Samvahaka, who lost in gambling is followed by another gambler, who won the gamble. Samvahaka reaches Vasantasena's house and is rescued by her because he lied that he is the servant of Charudatta and she thinks of fetching some information from him concerning Charudatta.

In the Fourth Act, Palaka imprisons the cowherd Aryaka, who is supposed to become the next king. Sajjalaka was Aryaka's friend and determined to start an insurrection to liberate him. Maitreya went to return Vasantasena's necklace and is bedazzled after seeing the golden and jewelled stairs and found her abode attractive. He crosses eight courtyards and described each of them in an impressive way. In the act five, Shudraka defines the necklace received by Vasantasena and in the same manner, Bhoja also defines the act and named it prapanca 'ironically flattery' as a limb of the street play. Before receiving the necklace, Vasantasena acquired a respectable place in Maitreya's perception but as she accepted the necklace, her impression turns as that of a prostitute, who does not have any place in the society and she is not considered respectable. Maitreya here says that, I am a learned Brahman and how someone can talk to me in a manner inappropriate to him. According to him, they did not treat him with respect. In the fourth and fifth act, the power and knowledge hegemony has been broken by Vasantasena.

The Fourth Act begins with the scene which gives Shudraka's play its name. Charudatta's son, Rahul, was playing with clay cart but as his friends had golden carts, he was unwilling to play with the clay cart. Vasantasena came and gave him her ornaments and decorated the cart. Then, she proceeds in a bullock carrier to meet Charudatta in the old Puspakarandaka park; she thought the carrier was Charudatta's but actually, by mistake, has been shuffled with Sakara's bullock carrier. Meanwhile, by Sarvilaka's help, Aryaka escapes from the prison and hurries past. In the Seventh Act, Charudatta meets his carriage at the park and found Aryaka in it and is shocked. He helped him in his escape.

In the Eight Act, Sakara is shocked to find Vasantasena in his cart and mistook her with a ghost, but his parasite came to know that she is real Vasantasena who thought that she came here to meet Sakara, which made him enquire about the situation. Whether or not she came here to meet Sakara, if it is so, then why is he not understanding her feeling? Later, he came to know that she came here by mistake. After knowing this fact, Sakara got angry and tried to kill Vasantasena (pp. 26-27). He induced his servant and slave Sthavaraka to commit the murder. Sagarandin notes it as the limb 'enticement' pralobha of the silpaka. After some time, when everyone left, Sakara beats and strangles Vasantasena and leaves her dead. Sakara now mediates his plan to accuse Charudatta of the murder. However, Vasantasena was not dead, and monk Samvahaka upon finding her unconscious body, revives her and takes her to be looked after by a nun.

In Act IX, Charudatta got accused by Sakara for Vasantasena's murder to acquire her jewellery and was later brought to trial. Everyone came to know that Vasantasena spent last night with Charudatta and in the morning also she went to meet with him in the park. On the

same day, police found a corpse of a woman and confused her with Vasantasena. The judge knows Charudatta's character and hesitates, but Sakara accuses him of being partial. Maitreya comes to the court room and accuses Sakara but Vasantasena's ornaments, which she gave to Charudatta's son, Rahul, falls down, that were given to Maitreya to return to her. Thus, Sakara now got an excuse to strongly blame him. Possession of the ornaments finally is regarded as conclusive evidence against Charudatta and he is sentenced to death.

In the Final Act, Charudatta is led through the streets of Ujjayini by two executioners. He felt embarrassed as the executioners publicly announced his name maligning his ancestral pride and prestige. Maitreya comes to him with his son, Rahul; Charudatta says that he is going to die and that he does not have anything to give to his own son. Nonetheless, he gives him his *Janau* (sacred thread). In the meanwhile, Sthavaraka hears proclamation in the imprisonment and heroically throws himself out from a window and cries that Charudatta is innocent and that he is not being heard. Simultaneously on the other hand, the Buddhist monk who rescued Vasantasena, was escorting her to Charudatta's house, on reaching there, they came to know the whole story. They rushed through the crowd to save Charudatta. They reached there just in time and after seeing Vasantasena alive, Charudatta's executioners released him.

In a parallel scene in the story, Palaka is dead and Aryaka has been consecrated as the king. Aryaka rewarded all those who helped him reach this place with posts and grants. At the end, Charudatta accepts Vasantasena as his wife.

A Critical Analysis of *Mrcchakatika*

We can find new insights into the play by studying how dialogue delivery is making identity and how it is creating the gender image. In Charudatta's role, how his character is divided and how gender relation made him work in relation to the circumstances. If there was resistance, then, what type of resistance and against whom? What type of monogamous patriarchy is there? From where is the subjectivity of character coming? Is it coming from power relations in those he is situated or is it coming from social value? I will try to analyse these points.

In the first act when Sutradharah came home after the music practice he was very hungry so he asked the Nati whether there anything to eat or not? *Nati* then replies that there is sugared rice, ghee, curd, boiled rice and his favourite remedy – everything's here. Sutradharah on it replies that you must be joking. *Nati* in a resistant voice replies, "alright then, I'll joke (aloud), No, it's in the shop, my dear". After this incident Sutradharah replies to her in an angry and patriarchal manner, *Nati* is frightened and comes under his patronage taking back her resistant voice.

When *Nati* told the actual story of fasting then Sutradharah said: *pekkhantu pekkhantu, ajja missa mamakerakena bhatta parivvaena paraloio bhattaannesadi* (look, gentlemen), look! A good husband in the next world is being sought at the cost of my food. In the above-mentioned lines, dialogue delivery is making the gender image. Here, Sutradharah is exercising power and power is coming from the society because society taught him that being born as a man you are superior and that a man has domination over sources. Man has the legal authority to

exercise the power because of patriarchy. Nati throws herself to *Sutradharah's* feet and says that I am fasting because I want you as my husband in the next birth as well.

In the play *Charudatta* is not only the lover of *Vasantasena* but he is divided into characters, such as in the first act when Maitreya came back and asked him that why are you worried then he said:

*Sukham hi duhkhamy anubhuya sobhate
ghan'andhakareshv iva dipa darsanam
sukhat tu yo yati naro daridratam
dhrtah sarirena mrtah sa jivati*

In this above-mentioned passage *Charudatta* said that poverty is like hardship after a comfortable life and it gives trouble. So here his character is also of a poor person. All earlier meta-narratives describe him as the lover of *Vasantasena* but he is also a trader, who became poor which is prolonged. Another very remarkable incident happened when conversation was taking place between *Charudatta* and *Maitreya* about offerings to the Goddesses. *Maitreya* said:

*bho na gamissam anno ko vi paujjiadu.
mama una bhamhanassa savvam jjeva vipardidam paarinamadi
adamsa gad via chaa vamado dakkhina dakkhinado vama.
Annam aedae padosa velae idhi raa magge gania vida ceda raa vallaha a purisa samcaranti.
ta mandua luddhassa kala sapassa musio via ahimuh avadido vajjho denim bhavissam
tumam idhi uvavittho kim karissasi?*

Here, dialogues show the time of the scenario in which *Maitreya* pointed out that he cannot go out in the mid-night because prostitutes, libertines, slaves and favorites of the king are roaming on the highway. In subsequent part of the story, he goes with *Radanika* and it breaks the hierarchy of man's power imagination, which in the later period was glorified. Man was not brave as represented in the later manipulations. Story is closed and gives impression of city life in which not more than five characters arose. The main importance in the story has been given either to *Vasantasena's* house or *Charudatta's* house.

Subjectivities of the characters are constituted by several identities. *Charudatta's* character is the most complex one as he is a husband, father, respectable citizen; but here overall image of *Charudatta*- the identity of lover seems to over-weigh all the other strands while on the other hand *Sravalik's* (*Madanika's* lover) occupation as a thief is dominant over his being a lover. *Maitreya's* Brahmanical values and his friendship with *Charudatta* comes in conflict with each other when he returns back the necklace to *Vasantasena*, and she accepts it; he comes back and complains that she did not even offer him water. After sometime he manipulates the story in different way because he doesn't want to see any relation between *Vasantasena* and *Charudatta*. There is a scene in which *Vasantasena* meets *Charudatta* and he is accompanied by *Maitreya*. At this moment he refuses to go away after knowing that *Vasantasena* came here to meet *Charudatta*, but after a while, *Vasantasena's* maid takes him away with her.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to discuss how gender historiography got manipulated in its course. I have also tried to provide an alternative philosophy that how we should look at the status of women. If we compare the contexts, it is clear that the forms of urban structure were quite similar but amidst similarities, acceptance of prostitution seems to be surprising from today's position; It is hard to conceive how a prostitute was capable of influencing the state. The text presents a cross-section of society with its value system, emanating from and reinvigorating the power social relations in the society which are simultaneously power relations. How resistance is being posed (as seen in the case of *Nati*, *Madanika* and *Dhuta*) and how it is reconstituted in the societal power. It is a text full of analytical possibilities which are to be explored with suitable tools.

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