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SUDRAKA: *Mrichchhakatika*

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EXPERT COMMITTEE

Prof. Satyakam, Director
School of Humanities
IGNOU, New Delhi

Prof. Balaji Ranganathan
Gujarat Central University
Gandhinagar, Gujarat

Dr. Anand Prakash (Retd)
Formerly at Hans Raj College
University of Delhi, Delhi

Dr. Rajnish Kumar Mishra
Special Centre for Sanskrit Studies
JNU, New Delhi

Dr. Payal Nagpal
Janki Devi College
University of Delhi

Prof. Romika Batra
Indira Gandhi University
Meerpur, Rewari

Dr. Hema Raghavan (Retd)
Formerly at Gargi College
University of Delhi

Dr. Richa Bajaj
Hindu College
University of Delhi

IGNOU FACULTY

Prof. Anju S. Gupta

Prof. Neera Singh

Prof. Malati Mathur

Dr. Pema Eden Samdup

Ms. Mridula Rashmi Kindo

COURSE PREPARATION

Dr Anand Prakash
Formerly at Hans Raj College
University of Delhi, Delhi

CONTENT & LANGUAGE EDITING

Dr Pema Eden Samdup
School of Humanities, IGNOU, New Delhi

COURSE COORDINATION

Dr Pema Eden Samdup
School of Humanities, IGNOU, New Delhi

PRINT PRODUCTION

Sh. C. N. Pandey
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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Mrichchhakatika is a unique *Sanskrit* play as it deals with a totally fictional creation unlike the earlier play – *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* by **Kalidasa**. If we recall the previous block, we'd remember that this was one of the earliest plays to be translated and that it is based on the epic, the *Mahabharata*. *Mrichchhakatika* also seems to flout the norms of the *Natyashastra* in not dealing with the lives of exalted beings. Moreover, it is interspersed with the vernacular also known as *Prakrit*. The *Mrichchhakatika* has been translated, adapted and performed globally and is a significant aspect of our ancient literary tradition. You are required to read *The Mrichchhakatika of Sudraka, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 2017 edition, translated by M R Kale*, for this block. Good Luck with your work!



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Sudraka:
Mrichhakatika



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UNIT 1 SUDRAKA AND HIS PLAY *MRICHCHHAKATIKA*: AN INTRODUCTION

Structure

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- 1.4 Impact of Material Situation on Literary Writing
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- 1.6 Focus on *Mrichchakatika* as a Literary Text
- 1.7 Thematic Richness of *Mrichchhakatika*
- 1.8 Let Us Sum Up
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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall be considering questions and issues related to **Sudraka**'s famous play *Mrichchhkatika*, a drama text that belongs to the beginning years of the first millennium. Keeping this in view, we shall focus upon the conditions that prevailed in that distant past and the way they were recreated in the imaginative-cultural mode by its writer. Even as this play presumably entertained the audiences of its time, it has a good dose of humour and suspense. It holds an interest for us today as well. Also, a discussion about the characters in it and the conditions that surround them is sure to help us in understanding our own social atmosphere. As a work of art, this play will reflect on other plays of its period, and the others that followed it. The problems depicted in it and the creative-aesthetic experiments its writer made while developing his scope will, offer valuable insights into the complexities we confront in our own time.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Let us first think of the important dates in relation to the writer **Sudraka** and the play. Let us admit, we face specific difficulties in this regard. It will be useful to keep in mind that the period to which the writer belongs is ancient India that, being far back in time is not easy to decipher. Particularly, in the case of literary texts of that period, determining the dates is a big issue. Either records were not kept, or they were lost in the long span of time between then and now. Yet, in the last two hundred years, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, efforts have been made to retrieve the precious treasures of ancient writing. Owing to this, a big chunk of valuable information is available today to tell us where we stood then with respect to economy, polity and social environment.

Further, we may get to know, how we might relate to this knowledge today in the middle of contemporary conflicts and issues. Literature has this dimension of the human experience, in it, there are elements that do not remain confined to interests and issues of the time when a literary text was composed. There is no doubt that predominant features of a text are taken from its period, yet,

human beings in their practices show aspects that are rooted in the recent and distant past as well as those others which are present in seed form and for this reason may come up in future, again in the coming few decades or much later.

Add to this the fact that social institutions, too, have a long life. They do not have a fixed date on which they were born, so to say. Moreover, their life-span may be relatively larger than the period in which they perform a tangible and broadly determining function. Such institutions play the role of reminding succeeding eras of a history that shows itself at the level of presenting a process like the one that is set in motion in relatively different backgrounds. Be that as it may, ancient texts do arouse interest in us and take us to scenes of life capable of shedding light on what we do and the way we respond to our world. Let us take the case of **Sudraka's** *Mrichchhakatika*. It is heard that the play was not known till its text emerged in remote Kerala in the early years of the twentieth century. At the same time though, there are bits of information about the play having been translated into a number of European languages in the latter half of the nineteenth century itself. It is possible that the Orientalists dug out the play from the vast repertoire of ancient writing in India and saw in it an outstanding dramatic composition. The emergence of the play's text from different sources in a diversity of places only added to its appeal. It also helped scholars compare one version of the text with another.

As soon as the play *Mrichchhakatika* came to light, it took the literary world by storm. Here is a play that is so relevant to our own time! It had an extremely evolved style of depiction, a dramatic form marked by consistency, wit, and objectivity. It offered a vast panorama of the ways of the time. As one went through the text, one was transported to the ancient era. In some respect, it resembled our own period. At the same time, in other respects it bore testimony to the world that produced it. The specificity of that world captured graphically in the play dazzled all. Having said that, let us now look at **Sudraka** the playwright.

1.2 SUDRAKA, THE PLAYWRIGHT

Sudraka, the playwright of *Mrichchhakatika*, lived at some point of time between the first and third century A.D. The name of the writer raises the question of whether he belonged to the marginalised sections of our society. Mark the word '**Sudraka**' and consider. There may be some connection between the name of the playwright and his background that tells us the story of his antecedents and source. Contrarily or otherwise, the range and depth of the play suggest that he had a powerful literary imagination and was well acquainted with Sanskrit writings of his period, apart from being well-versed in the rich learning that ancient writing is known for.

A look at the text of the play makes clear that **Sudraka** expressed himself with equal felicity in *Sanskrit* prose and verse as well as in *Prakrit*. The latter was a dialect used by the common masses of the time. In **Sudraka's** hands, *Prakrit* became an efficient medium of communication and did justice to the complex thought processes of the semiliterate and illiterate. Since the dialect was closer to life's rhythms, it left a peculiar impact on the reader and viewer then. Today as well, it might strike us for its flow and flexibility. Its raw nature moved the reader/viewer immensely. In its time, the play's dialect helped the

audience connect with those characters that belonged to the street and learnt their linguistic skills from there. Is it not fascinating that what you see in life is presented on the stage as part of a tale, an episode, and an interesting sequence? *Prakrit* with its rich vocabulary of the dialect, the play packed with actions, gestures and stances of the characters did in a manner, what the fully evolved *Sanskrit* was not perhaps capable of doing. *Sanskrit* is driven by brevity, suggestion and focus. On the other hand, *Prakrit* draws strength from the actual usage, and, the putting together of the two in the play works wonders for the depth of communication.

There exist numerous references to **Sudraka** in writings of the ancient period. The man is remembered as a great ruler, a fine statesman, a scholar and thinker of repute, and one who knew many languages. These references turn him into a mythical figure. In view of the information we have, we may be tempted to guess whether he indeed was the writer of the play *Mrichchhakatika* that has a wide range of imagination and a close view of life at the grassroots. It is hard to surmise, for instance, that a king, howsoever knowledgeable, would be steeped in the nuances of feelings the play offers in its descriptions. It is possible that another person bearing the name **Sudraka** wrote this play and those many other plays that find mention in stray records of the period when he lived. This other **Sudraka** would have culled details of the plot and the happenings woven in it from his own sources of information and knowledge. Also, it is not necessary that an unknown figure in that period bore the name **Sudraka** that suggested origins of the man in the lower orders of society. It is possible that the writer of the play *Mrichchhakatika* thought of hiding behind an assumed name **Sudraka**.



wikipedia.org

1.3 THE PLAY *MRICHCHHKATIKA*: REFLECTING PERIOD OF COMPOSITION

Let us ask this question and see where it might lead us. Is it not an interesting fact that **Sudraka**'s *Mrichchhakatika* gives a truly realistic picture of ancient India? This is an India full of energy, passion, street-smart people crowding

the roads, quarrels and fights among the mighty and influential? In this we come across, too, the economic, political, crass as well as violent and scandalous facets of life—all thriving on what transpired really at the time. Historical accounts of the period may give us an inkling of this. Related to developments in the early centuries of the first millennium, read the following account by **D N Jha**:

Increased commercial activity and the consequent growth of a money economy led to the proliferation of arts and crafts. ... The increase in trade demanded an efficient organization of production and distribution. Individual artisans congregated together and formed guilds; merchants also organized themselves into corporations. No less than two dozen guilds of artisans existed in this period. The guild system seems to have become the general pattern of production, facilitating high output. ... The guilds sometimes acted as trustees and bankers. ... The guilds evidently utilized the capital deposited with them to augment production and paid interest on it of the proceeds from the sale of their commodities. The possibility of the increasing output may have prompted the guilds to hire additional labour, both free labour and slaves. This naturally gave a measure of freedom to artisans and craftsmen. (134-135)

Jha talks of an India active and vibrant. The increased economic activity created a platform for people to relate to one another on a plane of useful give and take. Commerce helped them increase the scope of their living beyond the narrow confines of a country market to one that, offered opportunities of expansion. As a consequence of this, preoccupations multiplied giving a chance to actors in the scene for tricks and innovative methods; these would enhance the quality of life stretching it beyond limits of sanctioned freedom. “Augmented production” and interest being paid on “proceeds for sale” indicate higher levels of participation in the entrepreneurial world of ancient India.

Jha has stated in the quotation that “Increased commercial activity and the consequent growth of a money economy led to the proliferation of arts and crafts.” He has provided a link between activity in society and art. You know that Literature is also placed in the category of art. Do you agree with **Jha** regarding this link? If you do, you would have the idea that ancient Literature drew useful influences from the life of the times. Also, if the prevailing life had a strong economic activity working in it, the Literature of the period will also carry an impact of that activity in it. You may, then, see **Sudraka’s** *Mrichchhakatika* in a new light. Let us examine the impact of the prevailing economic condition on the literary writings of the period next.

1.4 IMPACT OF MATERIAL SITUATIONS ON LITERARY WRITING

Let us further extend the point raised in the previous section in our discussion. In view of the quotation given above on the economic scene, we may think of the issue of fantasy working on a writer’s mind. Such a fantasy indeed exists in *Mrichchhakatika* where the writer **Sudraka** uses, under an aesthetic plan, many variations of human response to the world around it. One may go over, in one’s imagination, the happenings in the play. For instance, a woman is being stalked by a group of evil souls driven by lust. The reader/viewer might study the vocabulary they employ to give vent to their hidden desires. At this point

it is important to note that the scoundrels in pursuit of *Vasantasena* have thrown caution to the winds and decided to capture and molest the woman if they get their hands on her. They do not seem to be afraid of the legal machinery active in the town. The crime they intend to commit may land them in jail, but they seem not bothered by such an apprehension. Can we visualise such a situation in view of the account we have read in the quotation given above? The question entails a peculiar linkage between society and art. **Sudraka** has in mind, a town with an active administration, a powerful section of the rich and privileged, as well as a whole group of officers who on the sly will violate the existing norms and rules. The point is that a situation such as this might give an occasion to clever manipulators for seeking pleasures of the senses.

Yet, the scene we talk about captures more than a legally permissible scenario. It presents in tangible ways the clash between civilised norms and baser motives of men away from the light of law and constitution. The fight is between morality supported by ideals and pleasure-seeking by a pack of law-breakers. What should art do in such a case? Such a consideration works behind the structure of the play.

Mrichchhakatika may give the impression of being a comic play meant to offer titillation alone. Nothing is farther from the truth. In fact, there is no titillation in the scene referred to. Instead, a serious anomaly of social behaviour connected to a ruling clique in the town is being shown graphically. We may understand this point in precise terms when we compare the concerned scene with the dramatic happenings that unfold before us as the action proceeds. The range of action in the play is wide and it draws attention to those ethical questions as well as the connected issues of goodness and idealism that make a society meaningful in its dynamic working. There is no anarchy in the play. Even as recklessness may be spotted in a part of the social fabric, most of the people in the town and outside seek guidance from principles of virtue and social harmony. The binding thread for such a visualisation is provided by that productivity that operates at the centre of the socio - economic activity. We may get a glimpse of it when we take cognisance of a greater arrangement inherent in the historical framework of the play. Let us explore this idea further in the next section.

1.5 PRODUCTIVITY AND SOCIAL EXPANSION IN *MRICHCHHAKATIKA*

Another statement, this time from the historian **Irfan Habib**, provides further details about life in the period of history we are dealing with. It may take us into the domain and help us grasp the nature of the play *Mrichchhakatika* we are discussing. The statement goes as follows:

Every town that contained non-agricultural populations had to obtain food-stuffs for consumption and raw material for manufacture from the countryside. Insofar as the state or landed aristocracy living in towns collected taxes or rents from villages, whether in money or in kind, and spent the resources so gathered in the towns, the local trade was in one direction, i.e., from villages to towns. Villages sold grains in order to pay tax or rent in money, or gave over part of the produce to the tax or rent collector. In either case, a large part of the products was sold and consumed in the towns. Such trade

is often called induced trade. Villages themselves depended on the towns for very little, their 'imports' comprising some iron tools or salt (then an expensive commodity in some parts of the country). But in some rural areas there were specialized crops or products, notably varieties of cotton, sugarcane or indigo, pepper, wild silks, etc., which had markets beyond the neighbouring towns.

(120)

The information given by **Habib** is linked largely to the differences in activities between the villages and the cities. This is denoted by “non-agricultural populations.” These are the ones that we come across in urban centres. People in the towns and cities live away from agriculture and are engaged in trade, administration, running of families, and interacting with one another at the level of thought that may revolve around education centres. Were there education centres in ancient India? Think of this and locate people in *Mrichchhakatika* taking seriously to reading, discussing and studying. When you do this, you might find certain people leaving the city and moving elsewhere or at least from one part of the city to another. In a broader sense, this may be characterised as social mobility. Do you recognise such a social mobility in the play? In the quotation above, there is a reference to trade, commodity and crops yielding cotton, sugarcane, indigo, pepper, wild silks, etc. Parallel to this, see if the play gives us a glimpses of the traders, merchants, buyers, those levying taxes, etc. The place captured in *Mrichchhakatika* resembles the towns that still exist in modern India. Compare as well as contrast the two pictures and draw your own conclusions in this regard.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Do you think that an ancient text such as *Mrichchhakatika* is relevant to us? Give reasons to support your answer.

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- 2) Can there be a link between the conditions of life in the society around us and the art of the same period? Attempt an answer to this question keeping in view Sudraka’s *Mrichchhakatika*.

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1.6 FOCUS ON *MRICHCHHAKATIKA* AS A LITERARY TEXT

Let us now look at *Mrichchhakatika* as a drama text which has characters bound in situations and which move from the beginning to the end in a sequence. In Indian poetics of the ancient period, there used to be rules governing literary forms. One interesting rule was that of emotion, such as love, disgust, anger, laughter, etc. In many plays, we mainly come across the emotion of laughter or comedy. It is observed that laughter renders the description enjoyable and earthly. At the same time, it trivialises life’s content, making it available to the crude and vulgar. From there, profane is not far.

We generally note that the mighty gods to whom ordinary mortals look up do not seek amusement but a meaningful message alone. The guiding principle in *Mrichchhakatika* is the comic approach. It holds the main function of art to be entertaining, and letting people know that society, howsoever difficult and complex, is manageable.

It dawns on us that the issue in *Mrichchhakatika* is a crisis that shows itself in the situation of the protagonist. He is rendered poor by circumstances. Yet, the value of high drama in which kings, gods, and mythical figures are predominant is not assigned to *Mrichchhakatika*. It is not a *nataka* or *natakiyakriti* in that sense. *Nataka* denotes representation of the sacred and godly in a form that indicates the lofty and profound, not the ordinary. Instead, the name given to *Mrichchhakatika* is *Prakarana*. If politics and courtly issues involving change of order, lofty questions of war and preserving large territories were at the centre of the work, the play may have enjoyed a higher reputation than it has. What we find instead is that an ordinary scholar rendered poor by fate, or worldly shuffles of events is emotionally supported by a courtesan. The two indeed are lovers, each holding the other in high regard and earning on that account adulation from the middle rung citizens in the society of the town. We may, therefore, accept the word *Prakarana* for it that may stand as explained in terms of a supposedly lesser play. **Biswanath Banerjee** defines the word as follows:

This work of Shudraka is a prakarana type of dramatic composition which presents the love-episode of Charudatta, a poor but noble Brahmin tradesman of Ujjayini, and Vasantasena, a rich and attractive courtesan of the same place, which ends in their happy union. The main theme of the play has been furnished with various impressive and attractive incidents and actions to make the work of Shudraka the most enjoyable one in the whole range of Sanskrit dramatic literature. (15)

The *prakarana* form is defined further by **Banerjee** thus:

The primary condition of a parkarana to which class this drama belongs, is that it should be a drama of invention, i.e., the plot should be an invention of the poet, kavi-kalpita, based on worldly life focusing on the actions of men and women. In this respect Shudraka's drama fulfils the condition of dramaturgy quite well, and even goes beyond it to be considered as the only drama of invention. As are the requirements of the type of composition the main theme has been presented in ten acts, the predominant sentiment (rasa) is love or shringara, a deep and calm (dhir-prashanta) Brahmin is the hero, of the two heroines, one, i.e., Dhuta, is born of a noble family, kulaja, and the other, Vasantasena, is a public woman or ganika, and this makes the composition a mixed or samkirna type of prakarana. (16)

At the same time, the play has characters who are weak yet ambitious individuals. They are driven by the urge to succeed and wield power in their world. It does not matter whether they adopt fair or unfair means in the pursuit of their goals, since morality or adherence to norms is not their strongpoint. Barring a few such as *Charudatta*, the people in the play bear resemblance to ordinary

mortals given to pleasures of the flesh. If rich, they indulge in vices such as gambling, if poor they break the rules of the road and rob, waylay, resort to lies and half-truths, cheat and swindle. The writer sees to it that they reflect the time in which they live and appear normal in a world of inequality and class divisions.

We notice in this India, a full-fledged state with a king, the court, judiciary, traders, servants, slaves, among a whole variety of life's pursuits including concubines doing business and courtesans entertaining clients in full view of the society at large. The playwright **Sudraka** has ensured that the action of the play is confined in the main to such a city as the one described but which at the same time takes its broader inspirations from the nearby villages and forests "the lifeline of the world of prosperity and comfort. In the next section, we shall look at the thematic richness in *Mrichchhakatika*.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) What is 'Prakarana'? Can we call *Mrichchhakatika* a prakarana? Give reasons in support of your answer.

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1.7 THEMATIC RICHNESS OF *MRICHCHHAKATIKA*

Significantly, *Mrichchhakatika* has no gods and goddesses as characters. This we note in **Kalidasa** a great deal, who would bring in sublime virtues and qualities in an otherwise secular world of intrigues, crime and worse. In this regard, *Mrichchhakatika* stands out in the old classical texts giving account of exchanges between the holy and unholy, the resplendent and mundane. Here, one is face-to-face with the fight between good and evil, noble and ignoble, god-like and devilish.

As we begin reading the play, we confront *Sutradhar* and *Nati*, husband and wife engaged in a slightly teasing banter—they are in a playful mood. See the introduction of sensuousness that communicates not just through words but also through the visual, olfactory and taste-related, senses, (one can see, smell and taste), and enjoy being a part of the fare the play presents. *Sutradhar* notices that there are preparations in the house for welcoming guests with well-cooked food. When he reaches home one day, this is what he confronts. In his own words—

Here is my home, I shall go in. (entering and observing) Heigh-ho! How is it that there is quite a development in our house! The passage is full of a long stream of rice-water, and the floor, which is dark-grey because of the iron saucepans moved over it, now looking more charming, like a decked-up woman. And my hunger is agonising me the more, if it were greatly excited by this inviting aroma. ... One woman is pounding unguents, while another is wreathing flowers.
(Act 1)

At the same time, it is difficult to miss the simile, the comparison between the home and "decked-up woman". The man-woman relationship that the viewer

will see as the play proceeds has so many shades of pain, longing and pleasure. Seeing this, *Sutradhar* wonders what the occasion might be, and if he is the sole beneficiary of the bounty. When he enquires about it to his wife, she gives him a half-baked answer that can be turned both towards the positive as well as the negative. Indeed, *Nati* disappoints with one answer and makes him yet hopeful with the following one. In the comic mode, this kind of ambiguity can as well produce more than a tickle between husband and wife. Consider the husband getting angry and happy by turns, this is a twist that well suits the theme of the play at the centre of which is, as is suggested, the fulfilment of desire between the two young protagonists, *Vasantasena* and *Charudatta*.

In the beginning of *Mrichchhakatika*, we are struck by two things. The first is the manner in which poverty is depicted, and the second is the deft use of the *simile*. The play is well crafted at the level of language, too, explaining a complex phenomenon through meaningful pauses, gaps and suggestions. The *simile* is a device to lay bare the character of a twisted situation—it comes with one or the other idea wrapped in layers of association. We notice that the *simile* takes the view of the audience away from the given issue, and puts it in an entirely different mode of thought for a while. When the audience has seen the logic away from an existing detail, the same is brought back to the play's context coupled with insight. Meanwhile, the audience has been equipped with a concrete reasoning with the help of which the original knot is untied. A dramatic act of this kind sharpens the imagination of the audience and gives them a chance to use it creatively. The result is pleasure emanating from the excited imagination of the audience. We shall come back to it later in the discussion.

In the context, also see that the playwright makes a conscious decision to use prose and verse alternately. After the character has spoken her/his dialogue in simple prose, there comes a moment when comment becomes necessary as it opens up the scope of appreciation. Here, recourse is taken to verse—a *shloka* (usually a couplet) that raises the level of thought and makes it meaningfully appealing. This is used by the playwright as a word of wisdom. In the world of average exchange of views, there emerges a saying, a general statement, a quotation that lights up the ordinary conduct of a person caught in a life-situation.

This is the first feature we note in the play. The second facet of representation that catches our eye is of selecting an issue that touches social life vitally. In *Mrichchhakatika*, we can look at poverty that is at the core of the protagonist *Charudatta*'s misery. It brings to the fore hidden agendas of the economically powerful, out to use means fair and foul to augment their wealth and resources. *Charudatta* says of his plight:

Out of poverty and death, I prefer death, for death causes short-lived pain, while poverty is unending misery.

Is he right in his dark observation about the lack of means in a world driven by money and success? In another text of the ancient period, the issue may have received a treatment along religious and moral lines. The speaker might have suggested the illusory nature of material comforts that denies one the freedom that comes from interests in the divine. Here, the terms are broadly secular since money helps one gain happiness and social esteem, something that has influenced human behaviour all along in history. Consider the following:

Charudatta: Loss of money is not of my misery. Observe—what pains me is that guests avoid coming to my house because it has lost its riches, as the news fly off to desert, when the thick line of rut on the elephant’s cheek totally dries up.

That money assists in earning happiness in the social-human sense takes the concern away from other worldly pursuits. In consequence, the person is closer to the real business of mutual give - and - take, as well as, day - to - day experience. *Charudatta* is a man of the world and has seen early prosperity. Suddenly, however, he incurs losses because of which he appears bewildered. He has not lost faith in the material world where he was active all along. At the moment when the play opens, he is seriously engaged in the struggle to get back to his previous financial status. This is clearly seen in his intense suffering manifest in the following quote where he shares his worries with *Vidushak*.

Charudatta: Friend, I am not really feeling any anxiety on account of the loss of my fortune, for riches come and go, following the course of one’s luck. But this burns me that the people go thoughtless even in their affection towards a person who has lost his support of wealth.

The truth of his statement is that money might easily slip away from one’s grip if one is not sufficiently careful and that its loss may result in the loss of friends. Conversely, money ensures “support” from friends that will keep the rich person in a state of stability and peace. This is not a small thing in social life. At the same time, the acquisition or loss of money affords wisdom about the nature of life on the earth. *Charudatta* is a learned man. He knows how to philosophise and see hidden ideas in social endeavour. This is how the wisdom is hinted at in general terms:

Charudatta: From penury a person passes to shame; being overcome by shame, he loses his spirit; devoid of spirit he is slighted; being slighted, he feels dejected; full of dejection, he comes to be sorry; being smitten with sorrow, he is forsaken by reason; and destitute of reason, he perishes. Ah! Pennilessness is the abode of all sorts misfortune!

The mode here is of a gradual movement towards equanimity on one side and a disturbed condition of life on the other. Mark the clustering of shame, loss of spirit, slight, dejection, being sorry, irrationality and destruction. The logic suggests that they are connected and thus, ought to be viewed as bound to norms of inevitable doom. Is that true in life? If we ponder over it, we may realise that pragmatic behaviour goes by logic such as this and, if an individual observes the course of life alertly, s/he will surely gain from such an idea.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

- 1) Comment on the use of verse and prose in *Mrichchhakatika*.

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1.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the relationship between a literary work and its socio-economic background. This is followed by an account of specific details about the writer and the time in history to which he belonged. The issue of

aesthetic form is also dealt with in brief. An important aspect of thematic richness finally catches our attention. We noted that the ancient period had many aspects that are of interest to us even today. The plot of the play and the characters that live life to the full on the stage and involve the viewer in problems that they face will be taken up at length in the next few units.

1.9 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Read Sections 1.1, 1.2, 1.3
2. Read Section 1.4

Check Your Progress 2

1. Read Section 1.6

Check Your Progress 3

1. Read Section 1.7



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UNIT 2 *MRICHCHHAKATIKA*: PLOT STRUCTURE AND ANALYSIS

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In the present unit, we get to know the plot-line primarily. At the same time, we may keep in mind that a dramatic plot is not merely its story, but a plan under which the playwright executes a design of presentation. Generally, too, the dramatic text shows to the viewer that which is required for narrating an account. In this unit, apart from considering the plot-line, we may offer for the young scholar a view of the happenings in a sequence. This will help us in placing the behaviour of the characters in context. This will win for us an entry point into the play - *Mrichchhakatika*. If we recall we discussed in Block I that **Bhasa** too wrote a play on the same theme – the courtship between *Charudatta* and *Vasantasena*. Let's look at the two plays briefly before we proceed further.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Before we begin to discuss the plot of this play, let us refer to the subject of comparison between **Sudraka**'s play *Mrichchhakatika* and **Bhasa**'s play *Charudatta*. The main similarity between the two plays is that they adopt the two central characters, *Charudatta* and *Vasantasena*, with respect to their identities. The two characters appear in both the plays mentioned as suggested by **Bannerjee**. But the dissimilarities are more prominent. **Bhasa**'s play is short and has only four acts, whereas *Mrichchhakatika* has ten acts. In substance and texture, too, the dissimilarity looms large with **Sudraka**'s play scoring over **Bhasa**'s. The same holds true about the neat division of acts in **Sudraka**'s play that has a large and balanced structure. Since our purpose here is not to go into the two texts to clarify text-related details, it will suffice that, as **Ankur** puts it, we tell ourselves about the existence of **Bhasa**'s play that preceded **Sudraka**'s.

The play *Mrichchhatikata* has a neatly laid out plot in the manner of the *Morality Plays* of the English tradition. As we know, in the *Morality Play*, a well-known form of literary expression in the medieval period, the viewer was familiarised with established social norms that would always keep people on track. Accordingly, the adversary in life would always be considered wrong and immoral and, therefore, etched in sharpest terms for the benefit of the good and virtuous. Such a clarity between two sets of behavioural norms added to the appeal of the play because of which the playwright could exercise his creativity within the given parameters. See that at the centre of *Mrichchhakatika*, there are two characters: *Charudatta* and *Vasantasena* around whom the action revolves.

To serve the necessity of convention, we find here that the division of characters adheres to the cluster of men and women based on their belonging to these two personages. *Charudatta*'s team of characters, so to say, constitutes *Maitreya*, *Vardhamanaka*, *Samvahaka*, *Radanika*, *Dhuta* and *Rohsena*. All of them are aligned to him in various capacities in a very precise and neat manner. Among these, a few are *Charudatta*'s companions in all that he does, whereas, there are others in the group who exist as a part of his household. The scheme is predictable and each member of the group performs the assigned roles he possesses. If, for instance, the pillar of the group undergoes a lean phase in life, the associates share the troubles visiting the main figure in the group.

Since the fate of *Charudatta* runs parallel to that of *Vasantasena*, she being tied to him in love, the duo form a yet larger group of positive characters. In the latter's cluster of associates are *Karunapuraka*, *Madanika*, *Kumbhilaka*, *Maid*, *Vita*, *Old Lady*, *Bastards*, and *Umbrella Bearer*—some are her maidservants keeping her company and being part of her secret or open schemes, whereas, the others provide to her, company, services and protection. Together, this big group revolves around the two protagonists who find themselves threatened by a common enemy in the form of *Sakara* or *Samsthanaka*, "the villain of the play." Significantly, he is the brother-in-law of the King of *Ujjayini*, the place where the protagonists live. The neatness we referred to is borne out by this well-defined line-up between the good and the bad in the world of the play.

As the play progresses, we take note of the larger change happening in the background. Yes, *Charudatta* and *Vasantasena* are partners in love, but behind them is enacted the drama of a political upheaval. The actual fight is between King *Palaka* and *Aryaka*. The latter is described as "A cowherd and insurgent, later the king of *Ujjayini*." The question arises as to why the playwright draws the picture of a king with evil designs who is finally ousted by an insurgent. The answer is not provided by the playwright, since that would give the play an entirely different colouring of serious intent.

Yet, the ouster of King *Palaka* from the state he heads serves a useful purpose in the play. It lends a realistic image to the restoration of *Charudatta* as a prosperous merchant later in life. Let us not forget that only a rich *Charudatta* will ensure stability to the relationship between him and *Vasantasena*.

It is assumed in the play that prosperity ensures happiness. It gives people importance and a sense of the world as a place to which one may belong. The old saying is that money and privilege enable a person to pursue *dharma*. *Charudatta* is always pained that he cannot entertain guests, cannot be with

good people in his world. The first scene has many assertions made by *Charudatta* linked to the condition of a new state of poverty. Even as he does not set much store by riches *per se*, being a man of simple habits, he requires facilities that will make him a man of consequence. Starting with the Prologue, we shall begin our journey into the world of the *Mrichhakatika*.

2.2 THE PROLOGUE

To begin with, let us be clear about the purely aesthetic nature of the theatre in a specific social setting, a city or town where people assemble to watch a play. A *prologue* in the beginning of the presentation is a convention that facilitates a connection between the players on the stage and the audience sitting in front. It sets up an equation of relaxed communication between the play and the spectators. The audience that watches the movement of the action later in the presentation of the drama/play begin to take an interest in the story since the *prologue* places them in a situation of friendly ease. This also provides to the spectators a sense of the atmosphere the plot will work in. It is obvious that the play is going to cut off the audience from the outside world. The more the audience forgets their homes and families as well as their work, the better it would be for them to grasp the reality of the story unfolding on the stage. In this sense, the prologue is a necessary dramatic device.

We have called the prologue a dramatic device because it does not play any significant role in the dramatic action. Here, too, once the prologue comes to an end, the characters in it will not reappear later. Yet, *Sutradhar* and *Nati* tell the audience in no uncertain terms that what they are going to watch is a performance, not an actual part of life. Yet, the two characters appear so real that one starts believing in their veracity. However, we are given to feel that the play is an imaginatively created fantasy in which the audience will see something along the plane of an illusion. The audience who belong to different strata of society have come to snatch a few moments of pleasure from the performance and they should not feel that they are confronted with any specific question located in real life. The *prologue* draws a dividing line between the atmosphere of the play and the social life of which the audience is a constituent. The prologue enables the audience to remain free from the bindings of the presented spectacle and to assess the proceedings on the stage independently.

How important is the plot in *Mrichhakatika*? The question is important and a general view of it is suggested in the preceding sections. But let us address it specifically.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What purpose does the prologue serve in *Mrichhakatika*?

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2.3 IS THE PLOT IN MRICHCHAKATIKA INTEGRATED WELL?

We have termed the play a fantasy. It is thus, meant to provide entertainment to the audience. What we call dramatic action has a limit—it begins at one

point and ends at another. Between these two points, many incidents are presented in terms as close to the real situation as possible. Also, there are actual people playing the part of characters. Imagine that real persons are on the stage playing the role of imaginary characters. The real persons playing roles temporarily transform themselves into some others so that, an illusion is created and then the same is shared with the audience. On their part, the audience forgets for a limited period of time that they have their independent lives to lead and to which they will go back after the play is over.

In the explanation above, we have made a mention of incidents. They are many. Even as they are separate, all of them are at the same time knit together in a single whole. This is what we might consider as the plot. The *rationale* of the plot is that incidents in it are interdependent and make a statement that the audience will interpret. The plot indeed is the crux, it might be called the play itself—the order of incidents, the efforts and standpoints of the characters, the clashes, agreements and disagreements residing in the action. In the next section, we shall look at the various Acts in the play.

2.4 A VIEW OF ACTS I - IV IN THE PLAY

Let us look at the mention of episodes in the ten acts constituting *Mrichchhakatika*. The First Act is described as dealing with “*The Depositing of the Ornament*.” It refers to the running away of *Vasantasena* from her home and seeking shelter elsewhere. But she successfully leaves her ornaments with *Charudatta*’s friend *Maitreya*. The Second Act is termed “*Samvahaka, the Gambler*” and the third act gets the name “*The Making of a Breach*.” We see in the second act possibilities of growth in *Samvahaka*’s character who, initially was a professional shampooer but later took to gambling. When caught by a debtor on the road and pressed to pay up for the losses he incurred, he helplessly looks around for protection. Finally, he is rescued. Thereon, he decides to leave the path of worldly living and become a Buddhist monk. The act acquaints the audience with shades of grey in his character as well as the sympathetic traits of other people caught in the logic of social conduct.

In the Third Act, *Sarvilaka*, a Brahmin by birth, breaks into *Charudatta*’s house to commit burglary. Interestingly, he observes conventions of good behaviour and checks himself many times while taking the cask of gold from the home he broke into. He has a purpose behind committing this act. With the money from the ornaments, he will pay for the release of his beloved from slavery. The woman he loves is *Vasantasena*’s maidservant. The third act gives enough space to *Sarvilaka* for showing his house-breaking skills. The profession of committing thefts has taught him many things useful for successfully robbing people of their belongings. At one place in the act, *Sarvilaka* says the following about his clever and skilful ways:

I, who—am a veritable cat in leaping, a deer in bounding off, a hawk in seizing prey and tearing it to pieces, a dog in judging of the strength of a man according as he is asleep or awake, a snake in crawling, magic personified in assuming different characters, postures and dresses, the goddess of speech in the various dialects of different countries, a lamp during nights, a dudubha in slipping away from intricate places, a horse on land, and a boat on water!

Moreover—

*In movement I am quick like a snake, in steadiness, like a mountain;
in flying, I resemble the lord of birds. In surveying the whole country,
I am like a hare; in effecting a capture, like a wolf, and in strength,
a lion.* (Kale 107)

Mark the versatility of *Sarvilaka*. Also, see that many of his arts have been copied from the movements of birds. The observation is sharp and fully assessed from the point of view of usage. Hidden behind the character of animals, birds and inanimate objects such as the mountains are qualities one may learn from and imbibe. The focus, however, is on the “breach” in the wall that enabled the thief *Sarvilaka* to enter *Charudatta*’s house. In the spectacle, both *Charudatta* and his friend *Maitreya*, referred to as *Vidushaka*, too, stand out as important parts of the plot.

Act IV, which will be summed up at the end as “*Madanika and Sarvilaka*,” carries a statement by *Sarvilaka*. It is as follows:

*In some place I had to let go a man who was busy talking to his
servants; in another I passed by a house seeing that it was inhabited
by women only; and sometimes I had to stand like a wooden pillar
of a house when a posse of the king’s watchmen came near me. By
hundreds of acts, mostly like these, I turned the night into day.*
(113)

But this statement does more than give the information. It tells the viewer/reader *Sarvilaka*’s state of mind, which is that of a man working hard to earn for his beloved the freedom from slavery.

Another concern highlighted in the beginning of the act is *Vasantasena*’s dignity as a woman and lover. She is a courtesan and is bound to fulfil the professional role of entertaining anyone who can pay for her services. Here, *Vasantasena* faces the crucial dilemma of being a lover and a courtesan. Whereas she likes the first from the core of her heart, she despises the second strongly. *Vasantasena* is irked that the king’s brother-in-law *Samsthanaka* has sent an ornament as a gift accompanied by the request that she reach him by his carriage. The arrangement for this proposed act is under instructions from *Vasantasena*’s mother. We notice that the preparation of liberating *Madanika* from bondage and letting her go to her lover *Sarvilaka* is positioned parallel to *Vasantasena*’s decision that she would flout the norm of being a courtesan and to courageous enough to pursue undaunted, the cause of love. The next section examines Acts V – VIII.

2.5 EXPANSION OF THE THEME IN ACTS V-VIII

In the Fifth Act, *Charudatta* confronts in poetic terms the scene of gathering clouds. The same may also be happening in his mind where nothing but the love for *Vasantasena* has been growing. The courtesan *Vasantasena* is put on a pedestal by her lover. Quite dramatically, however, the counterpoint is made about her, the “harlot” as she is in the eyes of the society. *Vidushak/ Maitreya* calls her this after noting that she does not pay attention to him as he gives her the ornament sent by *Charudatta*. Note the following:

Never then shall I so much as even look at the face of that slave-born harlot! (sorrowfully) Truly, do they say: "A lotus-plant that grows without a root; a tradesman that does not cheat; a goldsmith that doesn't steal; a village-meeting that is without a quarrel; and a courtesan that is not avaricious—these are hard to be found.

(132)

Such statements as this provide breadth to the meaning of the text. What *Maitreya* has talked of is not philosophical, but a set of mundane acts witnessed in the surrounding world. We may relate the connection between the details of social behaviour contained in the popular saying. The point at the same time is made well. He has successfully emphasised the fact of a courtesan being greedy and petty, putting her profession before love or devotion. This shrouds the comment with a double irony. It throws light as much on *Vasantasena* as on the accumulated wisdom of the time; it says, for instance, that social acts are bound to one another as also with those tendencies that are observed in nature. The smallness of the comparison between the social happenings and the natural phenomenon puts the scholar *Maitreya* in poor light, as one who cannot see the qualitative difference between the processes of nature and conditions that are thrown at people because of circumstances. The latter are human-made and liable to change that will result from other decisions the humans might take under other inspirations. Human behaviour does not follow the kind of pattern we see in nature that has precise laws to govern its movement or intensity.

The visit of *Vasantasena* to *Charudatta*'s house is to return the ornament she received from him as also the other one that *Charudatta* thought was stolen from his house. How the other one, belonging to *Vasantasena*, lands up at *Vasantasena*'s home, though she had entrusted *Charudatta* with safe keeping is unknown to *Charudatta*. The question is presented in a manner that reflects the intense emotion of *Vasantasena* for *Charudatta* and on the other hand the latter's complete faith in her honesty. We referred to storm clouds gathering in the beginning of the section, in the next section we shall examine the significance of the storm clouds.

2.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STORM

Still more important in the Fifth Act is the storm following the gathering of dark clouds. As indicated earlier, it is presented as a mirror in which the passion of the lovers for each other is reflected. The grandeur of the storm is caught in words, and on stage in particular, it may be combined with music, human movements, and the scene of trees falling, and leaves flying around. Act V, called "*A Stormy Day*" ends on the following note:

Shrilly on the tala leaves, rumbling on the branches, harshly on stones and fiercely on the water; thus do the showers fall, resembling lutes played upon inmusical concerts to the keeping of time. (147)

The attention paid by the playwright to the storm symbolises the commonness between nature and humanity. We do not miss the fact that the appearance of natural phenomenon presented through the storm is fundamentally a human act—that is how nature is shaped by the help of the human imagination. On the other hand, the impact of nature is only registered in the human mind (the

picture of the storm is constructed because such a thing as the storm exists outside the human subject). Irrespective of how the storm is shaped by the human mind, it was already there as an objective fact. The point being made is that both humanity and the outside world of wind, vegetation, sounds and the facts of hardness or softness coexist and affect one another. For the playwright *Sudraka*, the storm is a happening of great proportions and makes him and the audience aware of the power and appeal hidden in nature. This is to be noted and equally well celebrated. The storm also arouses an aesthetic feeling, something that calls for definition and sways humans into participating in the domain of movements outside themselves.

Act VI begins with a long exchange of views between *Vasantasena* and her maidservants. The conversation is marked by wit and playfulness. However, there is a tinge of sadness in the voice of *Vasantasena*; that is caused by the distance that exists between her and her lover *Charudatta*. In this act, she prepares to meet him away from home in a garden. This is the crucial moment in the play—it is an occasion of mix-up of the two carriages, the one of *Charudatta* that waits at the door of the house for *Vasantasena* and the second that belongs to *Sakar/ Samsthanaka*, the villain of the play and the brother-in-law of the king. The mix-up helps the important prisoner of the state escape from jail and move out of the city. The prisoner is none other than the would-be king *Aryaka*, a coward and an insurgent. This act involves a lot of action and suspense. Would *Aryaka* be able to escape from the clutches of the king's officers, or will he be captured and brought back to the jail from where he has run away? The playwright has presented the sequence of events in such a way that one mistake on the part of the officers will lead to another and chance happenings too, will contribute to *Aryaka*'s great escape that will happen in Act VI.

Coming back to the sequence of acts, we are struck by the beginning of the VI Act; in it we get a glimpse of *Charudatta*'s son *Rohasena*, a young child who wishes to play with a toy-cart made of gold. *Rohasena*'s father having fallen on bad days cannot afford a golden cart. The maidservants of the house offer him a cart made of clay which *Rohasena* abhors. We mark that the play takes its title from this clay cart, a small detail that in no way reflects anything vital in the play. Yet, the play is called “the clay cart” or “*Mrichchhakatika*.” As the said “mix-up” that gives the impression of being evoked by the cart of the child, is central to the VI Act, rightly then the act is summed up as “*The Exchange of the Carriages*.”

Act VII is short and shows only the climax of *Aryaka* successfully escaping from the arms of the state. In it, we witness *Charudatta* coming face – to – face with *Aryaka*. The two exchange greetings. *Aryaka* is beholden to *Charudatta* since the latter has assisted him in slipping away from the city. The act also carries the seed of the final resolution of the play that hinges upon *Charudatta* – gaining his strong economic position; in this he will get the support of the new king. Also, the two men, *Charudatta* and *Aryaka*, impress the audience with their upright moral stance and indicate that the city will earn stability and peace under the able handling of issues by a new king and his associates. The Seventh Act also lets the audience see that the value of goodness and a balanced temperament is essential for the smooth running of life in the kingdom. We see how the message of happiness and tranquillity is conveyed in an artistic sense in the play. The summing up of the action of this part of the play is descriptive—“*The Escape of Aryaka*.”

What has been initiated as an episode of serious crime in the Seventh Act is taken further in Act VIII. Here, the plot is well laid out indicating the intentions of various characters at a deeper level. Till this moment, the servants or slaves in the play belonged to a category that gave them a simple and mechanical identity. In this act, specific lines of distinction are drawn. Have a look at *Cheta* (*Sthavaraka*) and *Vita*. The former is the driver of *Sakara's* carriage and the latter is described as a friend and associate of *Sakara*. The trio is engaged in immoral and unlawful activities in the city and the state protects them since its head *Sakara* is the brother-in-law of the king. Yet in this act, *Cheta* and *Vita* have a temperament of their own that comes out in clear terms. We can ascribe this to the crisis-situation in which they are placed, they emerge here in their individuality.

The main aspect of this act, however, is that it presents a crime involving murder and gives an altogether different turn to the play that is unexpected and horrifying. The state is to go through a turmoil leading to the change of guard—the present king will be ousted and new one, more humane and forward-looking one will replace him. This will then result in a total revamping of administration and the way will be paved for the merchant *Charudatta's* return to prosperity. This and the next two acts will work out this aesthetic strategy of the play and prove *Mrichchhakatika* to be an example of serious comedy and entertainment.

At this point, keeping in view the context of the humanity that resides in the heart of ordinary people, we may note the response of *Vita*, the friend of *Sakara* as follows:

Vita: Speak out, then, what it is.

Sakara: Kill Vasantasena!

Vita: If I kill her who is young, a woman, and an ornament of our city, and who, although a courtesan, bestows her love in a manner unlike that of the courtesans' quarter, and who is withal innocent, then with what boat shall I cross the river of the next world?

Sakara: I will give you a boat. And moreover, in this deserted garden, who would see you killing her?

Vita: The ten quarters are seeing me, and the sylvan deities, and the moon, and this sun with his brilliant rays, and Dharma, and Wind, and Sky, and the internal soul, and also the Earth, the witness to all holy and unholy acts. (174-5)

The dialogues here are stylised and the views, too, are closer to the positive notions of *Dharma*. Yet, the situation provides to them the aura of humanist ethics. Killing is a serious act and forbidden by law. When *Sakara*, the one enjoying the protection of the king, asks a servant to kill a woman, the various points of morality and ethics get raised and the scope is further widened by references to the five elements, the Earth, the Sun, etc. The situation is repeated a while later. See the following:

Cheta: Let my master speak out what it is.

Sakara: Kill this Vasantasena?

Cheta: Please, master, don't ask me that! This noble lady was brought here by my unworthy self owing to an interchange of carts.

Sakara: You, slave, have I no mastery over you?

Cheta: Your Honour is the master of my body, but not of my morals.

So please, master, excuse me; I am verily afraid.
Sakara: Being my servant, of whom are you afraid?
Cheta: Of the next world, master.
Sakara: What is that 'next world'?
Cheta: Master, it is the consequence of one's good and bad acts.
Sakara: Of what kind is the consequence of good acts?
Cheta: To be like my master, adorned with many golden ornaments.
Sakara: And of what sort is the consequence of bad acts?
Cheta: To be like me, who have become an eater of others' food.
So I will not do an unholy deed. (175-6)

In this quote, the terms are clear and well-defined. These are joined, too, with ones that are imposed from above by the powers that be. The intention of the individual servant *Cheta* impresses us because of its stress upon principles. He is able to see the bad and unholy deeds from the good acts quite crucially. This lends an edge to his standpoint. In the broader picture of the play, the perspective of *Vita* and *Cheta* merges with that of the high-placed in the city. The ideological picture getting drawn this way might eventually become an acceptable rationale. The play seems to strengthen such a value system. The scheme working behind Act VIII and Act IX becomes a foundation on which the new regime headed by the cowherd King *Arayaka* will stand strongly and bring stability to the city.

These details of the play add up to the scope of the plot that covers social, moral and administrative dimensions to the presented action. Even though Act VIII is given the title "*The Killing of Vasantasena*," we see the episode from the point of view of the moral-aesthetic standards laid down by minor characters. This contributes to the play's effect. The next section shall deal with Act IX & X.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Examine the significance of the "Gathering of Storm Clouds".

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2.7 INTEGRATION OF THE VIEW OF THE STATE WITH THE THEME IN ACTS IX-X

Act IX of the play goes into the nitty-gritty of law, social structures and the way the mighty as well as weaker humans conduct themselves in the given sequence of happenings. We note that functionaries of the state such as the Judge, *Sreshthin* and *Kayastha* understand the issue of injustice well enough. As the act begins, the Judge announces in no uncertain terms the evil nature of *Sakara*. When *Sodhanaka* begins the court's proceedings and calls out, "Gentlemen, here is this king's brother-in-law come to the court, who wishes to present a case," the Judge remarks, "How! At the very commencement, there is the king's brother-in-law wanting to present a case! It is just like an eclipse at sunrise, foretelling the death of some great man!" Yet, the state seems paralysed before King *Palaka* and his family that is given to autocratic ways and at keeping the interests of citizens at bay. In the city, the whims and fancies of *Sakara*

hold sway. The court proceeds in one direction and the King's policies work as a deterrent to the smooth functioning of the judicial system. A dismal picture of the prevailing system emerges in the process. Later, praise is showered on *Charudatta's* antecedents—the names of his grandfather and father are mentioned to establish his worth and moral standing. Soon, however, the facts of the case of *Vasantasena's* supposed killing begin pointing towards *Charudatta's* hand, who is accused of committing the act.

Act IX offers a long narrative of *Sakara's* tricks that present a topsy-turvy world. Can sense be brought back to the case of *Charudatta* being fought in the court? It goes to the credit of the playwright *Sudraka* that negative features of life, in and outside the court are piled up and no hope seems to exist for *Charudatta's* deliverance as far as proceedings of the court are concerned.

But the playwright has an eye for detail. In the length of the text, he works out a pattern in which chinks finally emerge and tables are turned against *Sakara* potentially. But the might of privilege works to the detriment of *Charudatta* and the act ends on a note of despair. Neither the personal distaste of *Sodhanaka* and the Judge for *Sakara* nor the disapproval of the latter's ways by the general public hinders the anti-*Charudatta* campaign. The word of *Sakara* prevails. The court announces a death sentence to *Charudatta* who in turn bursts out with:

After my case had been investigated, by means of the ordeals of poison, water, balance, and fire, then with justice you might have today ordered a saw to be used on this body of mine. But as you are killing me, a Brahmana, relying simply on the words of my enemy, you will surely fall into hell, along with your sons and grandsons!

The final question remains whether *Charudatta* will be hanged for the crime he is accused of committing, and this gives a strong note of suspense to the play. From the point of the audience, it is a great moment of curiosity as punishment to the one they admire might bring intense pain to them. Act IX is rightly given the name "*The Trial*."

Act X opens with the two *Chandalas*. They are the lowest of the low. Proverbially, they are the messengers of death and represent only the snuffing out of life. It does credit to the playwright who provides ample space to them and in what they say is revealed their humanity and positive concerns for the virtuous and honest. In the play, they end up as executioners literally. Yet, they show control of temper and give the impression of carrying out the job professionally. A sort of dignity is discernible in their behaviour. The two *Chandalas* and *Charudatta* face each other moments before the execution is likely to happen. The exchange is meaningful. Read the following, for instance:

Charudatta: (listening; mournfully) O you, the chief of your caste. I wish to ask a favour at your hands.

Chandalas: What! You would take a favour from our hands?

Charudatta: Heavens forbid! Still, a Chandala is not like the ill-behaved King Palaka, who acts without due investigation. So, I request you for getting a last sight of my son's face, so that I might easily obtain heaven.

Chandalas: You may do so. (209)

This works to intensify anguish and present the situation as a severe indictment of the existing regime. But since the play is fast approaching the end, latent

expectations begin hinting at a resolution contrary to the one that is anticipated in the previous act. Soon, *Sakara's* servant *Sthavaraka* will have a change of heart and he will spill the beans. The most to be hurt by *Sthavaraka's* conduct will understandably be *Sakara* himself. It is finally stated that *Sakara* has killed *Vasantasena* and put instead the blame on *Charudatta*.

Expectedly though, there is yet an issue with the ending. A play of this kind cannot end in death and attendant misery. The poetics do not allow it. Literature is supposed to offer entertainment and episodes of distress are to only heighten the effect of representation. In the last pages, *Vasantasena* comes to life, as if emerging from the ashes like a Phoenix, to announce that she is alive. Accompanying *Vasantasena's* disclosure is the news of the fall of King *Palaka* and King *Aryaka* rising to occupy the throne. In this manner, "*The Conclusion*" is an appropriate summing up of the complex pattern of situations on offer in the play. How does the play holdup? Given the many happenings and a sense of tragedy does the play have a tight or a loosely woven structure? We'll look at that briefly next.

2.8 PLOT, STRUCTURE AND ITS MANY DIMENSIONS

What we come across in **Sudraka's** *Mrichchhakatika* is a dramatic rendering of a sequence of happenings that involve the love-alliance between *Charudatta* and the courtesan *Vasantasena*. This is presented in the background of different political happenings that are kept largely offstage. But the tussle between good and evil is squarely presented in a plot that is complex and virtue-driven. The sympathy earned by the lovers and the punishment visiting the villain is the staple of popular entertainment and the same has been achieved with effect. This is structurally built in at the level of the dramatic plot—it avoids all unnecessary details such as providing space to King *Aryaka* who will ascend the throne and King *Palaka* who will be ousted from power. At the same time, the long account of ups and downs as well as the re-creation of various scenes in the middle of the play's movement follows meticulous planning. This in brief constitutes the structure of the plot in which the happenings have been woven deftly.

It is evident that the play impresses on the strength of its density and richness. Each act is a cluster of varied situations that have characters moving in and going out even as the unity of action remains intact. **Biswanath Banerjee** has rightly observed that

Sudraka has given evidence of his skill in arranging his scenes in a way hitherto unknown but which has added to the attractiveness of his drama. Almost in every act he has several scenes, one connected with the other and staged simultaneously (28)

We may assume that such a view has noted the thematic integration that the play enjoys. Also, the points the characters raise and the decisions they take from one moment to the other in consonance with their behaviour traits lend cogency to the plot structure emerging out of the presentation.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Examine some of the aspects/dimensions of social life as highlighted in the play.

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2.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have gone into the sequence of situations and episodes in *Mrichchhakatika* under the overall framework of the plot. We have noted in detail the treatment the playwright metes out to the characters such as *Charudatta* and *Vasantasena*. The plot of the play follows assiduously the pattern of comedy that exalts the theme of love between *Charudatta* and *Vasantasena* as lovers. Also knitted in the fabric of the play are accounts of ordinary people such as thieves, stalkers, cheats and gamblers and, last but not least, the machinery of the law prevailing at the time.

2.10 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Read Section 2.2

Check Your Progress 2

1. Read Section 2.6

Check Your Progress 3

2. Read Section 2.6
3. Read Sections 2.4, 2.5, 2.6 & 2.7

2.11 QUESTIONS

1. Would it be correct to say that the love theme is central to Sudraka's *Mrichchhatika*? Give reasons in support of your answer.
2. Comment on the nature of the plot in *Mrichchhakatika*.

UNIT 3 THEMATIC CONCERNS IN SUDRAKA'S *MRICHCHHAKATIKA*

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Role and Function of the Prayer
- 3.3 The Significance of *Sutradhar* and *Nati* in the Play
- 3.4 Crisis and its Impact on the Hero
- 3.5 Administering the State: Repercussions
- 3.6 Mix of Comedy and Social Anarchy
- 3.7 *Shringara*, Love and Class Differences
- 3.8 Wisdom through Entertainment
- 3.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.10 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 3.11 Glossary

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall take up a few important issues and through them highlight the concerns of the playwright at the time of writing this play. An attempt will be made in this unit to establish a link between the said issues and the characters that raise them in the text. Light will also be shed on the value and importance of the issues with respect to the emphasis and focus given to them.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Sudraka's *Mrichchhkatika* is a drama text and it falls under the category of literary writing. The writing involved the active imagination of the author who aimed to entertain the audience and to engage them with situations they could relate to. The society in which the writer lived was uneven and difficult to comprehend. It was hierarchical in nature and at its top sat the king. The text of the play indicates in clear terms that the king in company with merchants, high state officials and judiciary ruled the country. The environs of the play are those of a vibrant city where trade and commerce thrive. It can be safely assumed that through trade, the city (of *Ujjayini*) has a vital linkage with the villages surrounding it. When we come to know that in the city's jail is imprisoned a cowherd insurgent called *Aryaka*, we become aware that rearing of cows would be an important occupation forming a vital part of the city's economic life. We can imagine that the rich and privileged in the city would be leading a life of luxury which is possible only when a huge population of the poor are available to render services to them. All this is indeed there in the play. It is a different matter though, that servants, maidservants, cart drivers, porters, door-keepers, and attendants draw attention only when they are seen at work in different places. The first question that can be posed in this context is whether such a social set up could remain at peace for a long time?

Additionally, we may ask whether the playwright will care to look at such an aspect and show some feeling towards it. This in brief could be the implication

of the word “concerns.” Here, “feeling” is a mild word to use. **Sudraka** has built the image of the protagonist *Charudatta* around the question of poverty—he is a Brahman merchant who has fallen on bad days and his decline from a prosperous man to one who has no money to live by is referred to again and again throughout the play. This is poverty of the gravest kind since it entails a fall from above and one that causes great anguish. In the same manner, the management of a vast society along a legal framework and administrative function would bring in problems of disagreement, friction and violence. Humans caught in clashes to outdo one another would create a complex picture of feuds, and petty quarrels. **Sudraka** takes a keen note of all this and puts to use his imaginative might for presenting a picture of variety and fascination. We will get a view of this as we read the play from beginning to end. Let us follow this simple method of traversing the scene of the play and gain insight into the factors constituting the play, by examining the role and function of the prayer next.

3.2 THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF THE PRAYER

Let us begin with a remark on the prayer at the onset of the play. Gods, indeed, are important in the ancient period to which the play belongs. The two gods, *Brahma* and *Shiva* represent creation and protection respectively, these see to it, (if offered respect) that whatever well-intentioned act is planned for execution will turn out successfully. Such a beginning of the play that opens with an invocation is termed *Nandi* in the traditional sense. Also, mark that the verses set to music contain wisdom and goodness couched in philosophy. *Shiva* is talked of as sitting in a yoga-posture and his sense is described as

so suspended as to cause the cessation of all perception, by reason of the vital airs being confined within; and who, with the eye of truth, is visualising himself and the Universal Soul as one

Kale, p. 59

In it, “*the eye of truth*” is stressed and may emphatically suggest that the play will adhere to the dictum of genuinely knowing what actually goes on in the surrounding world. The utterance would surely cause vibrancy across the play assuring that the dramatic piece so begun will reach the intended end uninterrupted. The same can be said of the figure of *Sutradhar* who, seeing the hall empty, says:

*This music hall is empty! Where could the actors have gone?
(reflecting) Ah! I got it!—*

*The home of a sonless person is empty; he who doesn't have a real
friend finds all the time empty; the quarters are empty to a fool;
and everything is empty to a poor man. (62)*

Such quotations were given conventionally. The famous Indian classic *Panchatantra* is replete with them. They served the purpose of authenticating a perceived happening in the manner of that which all believes in as established. Additionally, the verse connects directly with the state of *Charudatta*, the protagonist of the play when he appears on stage for the first time. Did the narrator *Sutradhar* and his wife *Nati* have a purpose in the play? Lets' look at that next.

3.3 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *SUTRADHAR* AND *NATI* IN THE PLAY

The beginning of the play arouses curiosity about the manner in which society that is captured in the play, functions. We note that the first act presents *Sutradhar* surrounded by worries of a peculiar nature. After he has made a general statement, he is joined by *Nati*, his wife and co-actor. The two are in and out of the first act and enjoy a kind of familiarity with the audience that makes them feel at ease with the environs. They indulge in fun and merry-making and create an atmosphere of pleasurable give and take. We visualise a relaxed audience facing the stage. The exchanges that *Sutradhar* and *Nati* have with each other present the image of an audience equipped to appreciate nuances of wit and humour.

The lively exchange between *Sutradhar* and *Nati* tells us about the class differences existing in the ancient period. By convention, *Sutradhar* was a person accomplished in the arts and higher learning. He would hold dialogue with the scholars of the times and also train artists as a guide and teacher. He is held in esteem by the society's upper sections. This bestows on him even linguistic superiority that in turn places him on a high pedestal. In this play, *Sutradhar* ordinarily speaks *Sanskrit*. But see that he shifts to *Prakrit*, the language of the common people, when he talks to *Nati*. The latter is an inferior in the social hierarchy for being a nonentity in the world of arts and letters, and also since she is a woman. The play makes a deft use of the shift in language to draw a line of demarcation between the weaker and powerful sections of the society of the times.

The distance between *Sutradhar* and *Nati* is further augmented by the tone the two adopt in conversation with each other. *Sutradhar* is jovial but is generally authoritative. *Nati* knows that she is to remain conscious about her station in life which demands of her to show nothing but agreement with whatever the husband says. Yet, she has an agile mind, something that puts her in contrast with *Sutradhar*, who has a simple mind, not possessing subtlety and nuances of speech. When *Sutradhar* assumes a mightier stance, she punctures him suddenly with a turn of speech. This makes the former angry. Seeing this, *Nati* changes tack, retreats from the position she held previously. The question is, who comes out stronger at the end of it all? The answer is a clear affirmation of *Nati* as the more powerful communicator of the two.

Entry into the play is provided by the food-based argument between *Sutradhar* and *Nati*. During the discussion *Nati* has observed a fast which can be ended only when a *Brahman* is fed. The ritual of feeding a *Brahman* necessitates *Sutradhar's* inviting *Maitreya* (who from offstage) declines the offer—as it become clear that he is already enroute to another home for food and the tribute of money thereafter. The movement from *Sutradhar-Nati* dialogue to the inside of the dramatised action is smooth. *Maitreya* is *Charudatta's* close friend and a reference point to the latter's lean economic phase. We see that the quarrel between husband and wife is resolved successfully - as **Sudraka's** dramatic skills are underlined by such an arrangement of the *Prologue*. We face, however, the question as to why the *Prologue* is so long and elaborate. Is it that the first scene, which is a mixture of informal imparting of information and introduction of hidden tensions, will pave the way for calling in the protagonist to the stage

so that the drama's serious business can begin? We need to think about it as we analyse the play. Meanwhile, what is troubling our hero *Charudatta*? The next section examines the trouble of the hero.

Check Your Progress 1

1. What function do Sutradhar and Nati serve in the play?

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3.4 CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE HERO

On stage, *Maitreya*, indeed, is heard talking to himself but also announcing for one and all the point that *Charudatta* is facing misfortune and worry. See what *Maitreya* says in the manner of a general announcement:

Or I, too, Maitreya, have to look for invitations from others! Ah, Fortune, you have made a pauper out of me! I, who indeed, when my friend Charudatta was prosperous, used to devour, day and night, upon the sweetmeats, emitting savoury smells at the effusion of breath, and prepared with great care, and I, sitting at the entrance of his antahpura, surrounded by hundreds of dishes, used repeatedly to touch them with my fingers and put them aside when satisfied, just like a painter surrounded by hundreds of colour pots touching each with his fingers and removing it after use, and who used to remain ruminating like a bull in a public square of the city. (65)

What strikes us as significant in this quotation is the long sentence containing clauses in which each has a narrative of its own. *Charudatta* is prosperous and his friend *Maitreya* enjoys dishes as a *Brahman* should in the situation. The simile of the painter with many colours on his palette at his disposal is interesting. Just as the painter is shown to be creating an object of beauty, similarly the *Brahman* has many tasty dishes at his disposal to taste/eat. The bull symbolises relaxation as well as authority. The word ruminating is employed for the bull that is unconcerned with what goes on around it. All these images weave a picture of harmony and plenty. We may note that pictures in this description tell of a situation as much with information as with suggestion of sounds and hand movements.

The First Act is well laid out in terms of situations that are concrete entities. They can be visualised by the audience. Additionally, they bring in dimensions of the larger society. This may be seen in company with those imagined few who share life's values with *Maitreya*. **Sudraka's** aim appears to be making him a symbol of goodness and virtue. We have, for instance, *Charudatta* and *Maitreya* discussing poverty with respect to its negative effect on life, even as it may not amount to much in the play. *Charudatta* explains it effectively. *Maitreya* tries to console his friend by sympathising with him. He refuses to worship deities that do not reverse the misfortune of such a good man as *Charudatta*. As the play progresses we know that the stalking, chase, kidnapping, and proposed murder of *Vasantasena* is eminent, that aspect will be examined next.

3.5 ADMINISTERING THE STATE: REPERCUSSIONS

Think of another situation in the play. It is violent and greatly disturbing since it involves showing of the chase of a young woman by uncouth stalkers. Mark that it is presented in a poetic mode rendering the description comic and serious simultaneously! If one looks at the woman, one feels a sense of helplessness, observing that there is no possibility of escape for her from her molesters. She is terrified and panic-ridden. However, the dialogues of the rogues have a discourse that is couched in repetitive words bound with a refrain. The humour emanating from their efforts and words is sinister. It may appeal to those among the audience who came to the performance for titillation. The play does not present titillation but shows the villainous group in a negative light. This is how the comic is to be interpreted in the context. To see the point in greater clarity, let us refer to the repetition of words in the description as follows:

Vita: Stay, Vasantasena, stay!—

Why are you, setting aside your tenderness of limbs owing to fear, and plying your feet which are trained by the practice of dancing, running away like a female deer, frightened when being pursued by a hunter, with eyes casting affrighted and tremulous side-glances?

Sakar: Stay, Vasantasena, stay!—

Why do you go, run and scamper and stumble? Be pleased, O girl! You won't die. Stay awhile. Indeed, my poor heart is being burnt by passion, just like a piece of flesh fallen on a heap of burning charcoal.

Cheta: Stay, lad, stay!—

You are running away from me in terror, like a pea-hen in the hot season with her tail fully grown and outstretched. Here is my lord and master bounding (after you) like a young cook in the forest.

Vita: Stay, Vasantasena, stay!—

Why do you run away, quaking like a young plantain tree, your red silken garment trailing with its ends fluttering in the breeze, and dropping off the numerous buds of red lotuses, like a cave of red arsenic, being excavated with a chisel? (68)

The chase and dialogues continue for quite some time till *Vasantasena* does the disappearing act and walks into safe territory. Consider the stylised dialogues that have the tone of a musical pattern. The remarks by the group of scoundrels led by *Sakar*, the king's brother-in-law, combine to turn the chase into a net from which the supposed bird, a helpless young woman, cannot fly away.

The details of life woven, in this set of the rascals going after a lone woman are so much a part of social discourse in a male-dominated environment that we in the modern era, too, see in it a close familiarity. It is horrifying. 20th century films and those of the 21st century are full of atrocities against women. Their purpose is to titillate the audience in such a manner that males in the audience accept them as a norm. In *Mrichchhakatika*, the account is focused upon the satirical manner. Mark the hidden suggestions of violence to be done to the woman as soon as she is caught. In the context, the first image is of a female deer pursued by a hunter. We note that passion in the male for the female body is expressed here in terms of burning charcoal.

The third is of a pea-hen falling in the hands of a cook who would fry it and make a dish out of it— vocabulary such as this - of cutting into pieces, burning and eating is repulsive. The last description leaves nothing to the imagination as the writer lays bare the entire game of dark pleasure graphically— *Vasantasena* is being compared to a plantain tree—with its “*red silken garment trailing with its ends fluttering in the breeze, and dropping off the numerous buds of red lotuses, like a cave of red arsenic, being excavated with a chisel.*” The artistic control is manifest in the pictures that has been created to show the horror of the city scene. In it, the young woman doomed to bear untold agony, symbolises the helpless populace of *Ujjayini* ruled by an insensitive ruler. We may keep in mind, too, the mix of comedy and social criticism the playwright intended to exhibit. Let us examine this a little thoroughly next.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Critically analyse the theme of instability in *Mrichchhkatika*.

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3.6 MIX OF COMEDY AND SOCIAL ANARCHY

In the scene that we are interpreting, there is another example of comedy used by **Sudraka**. It brings to the fore social divisions that create disharmony and a distorted value system. The playwright maintains a subtle distinction between the profound and ludicrous, alternating each with great mastery. In one case the king's brother-in-law *Sakara* plays the fool and misunderstands ‘calm’ for ‘fatigued’ (the Sanskrit words *shanta* and *shranta* respectively). In the process, he waxes eloquent about the male not fatigued but as more aroused by the chase of a beautiful woman. The playwright uses it to combine absurdity and social criticism beautifully. Consider the following:

Vasantasena: Sir, I am only a feeble woman!

Vita: Hence you are alive!

Sakara: Hence you are not killed!

Vasantasena (to herself): Even his courtesy strikes terror! Well, I will proceed thus, (aloud) Sir, do you expect to take my ornament?

Vita: Heaven forbid! O *Vasantasena*, a garden-creeper deserves not to be robbed of its blossoms. So we have nothing to do with ornaments.

Vasantasena: Then what, indeed, can it be now?

Sakara: That I, a heavenly personage, a man, and *Vasudeva*, should be loved.

Vasantasena (angrily): Enough, no more of this! Get away! You talk wickedly.

Sakara (clapping his hands and laughing): Friend, friend! Just see. This courtesan girl is indeed very much attached to me and hence she says to me, ‘come, you are fatigued, you are exhausted’, while I have not gone to another village, nor to another city. Lady, I swear by my friend's head touched by my feet. I am fatigued and wearied while chasing you here and there.

Vita (to himself): Oh! The fool understands *shranta* (fatigued) when she said *shanta* (enough or calm down).

(aloud) O *Vasantasena*, you have spoken in a manner contrary to your profession—

Remember that the courtesans' quarter is dependent on young men for help and also consider yourself like a creeper growing by the wayside. You possess a body that can be bought for money and hence it is like an article for sale. Therefore, O good maiden, serve equally one much coveted by you and one disliked by you.

Moreover—

An erudite eminent Brahmana, and also an idiot of the lowest caste, both bathe in the same well. Even a crow bends on the same creeper in bloom that had been bent by a peacock sitting upon it. And by the same boat Chandalas (Shudras) cross a river, by which Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas cross it. You are a harlot, and therefore like a well, or a creeper, or a boat. Wait upon all equally.

In the passage, the use of language as well as the act of giving *Vita* an opportunity to make a point about money and the market widens the scope of meaning. **Sudraka** uses a very interesting ideological move by branching out into neutral concepts such as the articles for sale, or the boat not distinguishing an upper caste *Brahmana* from a *Chandala*; even if philosophically posed, lights up the scene enormously.

Given a play of this nature it is but inevitable that there will be class differences, and given that *Vasantasena* is a courtesan, the world of *Shringara* and love will also feature predominantly. So, the question really is what purpose does *Shringara* and love serve in the play? Let's look at that next.

3.7 **SHRINGARA, LOVE AND CLASS DIFFERENCES**

The play gains in the unfolding action. The two situations depicted for presentation offers a contrast to romance, shedding deep colour on sensitive individuals and mundane happenings in which ordinary people participate. The first is characterised by the talk between *Vasantasena* and *Madanika* involving love. The subject belongs to the category of *shringara*—

Maid: Sir, what next?

Samvahaka: Lady, owing to the large gifts he borrowed in compassion, he now—

Vasantasena: has lost all his fortune?

Samvahaka: How did Your Ladyship know it, even before it was told to you?

Vasantasena: What is there to be known? Virtues and riches are seldom found to exist together. Water is most plentiful in those pools which are unfit to be drunk from.

Maid: Sir, what may his name be?

Samvahaka: Lady, who is there that does not know the name of that Moon on this Earth? He resides in the merchants' quarter; he, of auspicious name, is called the noble Charudatta.

Vasantasena: (joyfully getting down from her seat. And take up a fan, His Honour is wary with fatigue.

(Maid does as ordered)

Samvahaka (to himself): How! By the mere mention of the noble Charudatta's name they are showing me so much respect! Excellent, noble Charudatta, excellent! You alone really live in this world, while all other persons merely breathe!

(94)

We notice in the middle of the ordinary exchange a sudden shift to thoughtful words such as *live* and *breathe*. These need to be examined in their deeper connotations. This is preceded in the quotation by the statement that “*Virtues and riches are seldom found to exist together.*” This is then elucidated by “*Water is most plentiful in those pools which are unfit to be drunk from.*” Significantly, the supposed elucidation leads us to an indicator of a broader truth that plenty is not necessarily good but rather the opposite, something extremely hateful. To reiterate, money and riches are not valuable in themselves, but only as items that make living easy. Also, if stored, they breed evil. The observation that “*Pools which are unfit to be drunk from*” makes a direct reference to the privileged sections who command not genuine respect but artificial adoration. This bigger dictum is hidden well behind the simple details of life as is shown. Further, “*living*” contains quality such as happiness and high thoughts because of which it is looked up to. On the other hand, “*breathing*” puts humans on par with animals that breathe alone and do not know the aims and purposes of life that might lift one to the heights of noble principles of sympathy and compassion. *Mrichchhakatika* is a great play since out of a simple comedy bordering upon buffoonery, it suddenly lights up the stage with insights of the kind brought forth in the quotation above.

In a significant sense, class differences exist in the play and are accepted as such by all. The subtlety of perception is, however, shown at work, and its source is the heart of *Charudatta*, the *Brahman* caught in distress. He is generally of an aesthetic bent, and in the circumstances, his capacity to observe still deeper levels of understanding, is truly notable. This happens in the context of *Vidushaka*, a friend of *Charudatta*'s and a *Brahmana* by birth who has come to spend valuable time with *Charudatta*. The latter arrives home and is received by a servant with a pot of water in hand in readiness to wash *Charudatta*'s feet. This is how the act is represented:

Vidushaka: Varadhamanaka, call Radanika to wash our feet.

Charudatta (with compassion): You do not awaken a person who is sleeping.

Cheta: Sir Maitreya, I'll hold the water, and you may wash Charudatta's feet.

Vidushaka (angrily): Friend, here is this fellow, the son-of-a-slave going to hold the water, while he wants to make me, who am a Brahmana, wash your feet.

Charudatta: Friend Maitreya, you may hold the water and Vardhamanaka will wash my feet!

Cheta: Sir Maitreya, pour the water.

(Vidushaka does accordingly, Cheta washes Charudatta's feet and moves away)

Charudatta: You should also pour water over the Brahmana's feet.

Vidushaka: What good will water for my feet do? I shall again soon have to roll on the ground, like a beaten ass?

Cheta: Sir Maitreya, you are indeed a Brahmana!

Vidushaka: Yes, I am a Brahmana among all the Brahmanas, like the harmless and despised dundubha among all the serpents!

Mark that *Vidushaka Maitreya* has the hidden arrogance of a *Brahamana* and none in the company minds it. But the playwrights stressed it unmistakably, suggesting its peculiar nature—the conversation is out of place in the circumstance of economic inequality. Thus, once the ritual of washing the feet is finished, the state of poverty comes to the surface and the poor *Brahamana* is the one who compares himself to creature that has no sting. Also, the economically mighty, bear comparison to poisonous snakes. The playwright's hand in showing the truth of the matter is unmistakable. Let us analyse another important aspect of art and its use in our lives next.

Check Your Progress 3

1. How are Shrinagara and love depicted in Mrichchhatika? Discuss with examples.

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3.8 WISDOM THROUGH ENTERTAINMENT

Even as the talk so far has been smooth and somewhat inconsequential, it has offered a background to what follows—an episode of rare subtlety and brilliance. It relates to *Sarvilaka*, the *Brahamana* adventurer who is forced by necessity to commit a robbery. Let us bear in mind that *Sarvilaka* is well-read in scriptures and conversant with knowledge of the highest quality. However, the playwright has assigned to him the role of a lover out to get his woman of choice freed from bondage. The act he is to commit is unlawful but the mission is of love. This fits in well with the tone and tenor of the play—a work providing entertainment and a realistic picture of the complex world of ancient India. What strikes us is the dramatic conception of the sequence of happenings—on display being the sense of timing, changes and shuffles of detail that bring out skills of the writer impressively. Under the scheme, *Sarvilaka* breaks into the house of *Charudatta* in the dead of the night and steals the ornaments that *Vasantasena* had left with *Charudatta* while trying to escape from the clutches of rascals who were in hot pursuit of her. The scene of committing the theft is presented in terms of suspense. Thus, a single wrong move can be disastrous. At the same time, the effective execution of the crime can provide satisfaction to the audience.

The question can, however, be raised whether the notion of moral conduct can be persuasively established with use of characters driven by desire alone. On the one side, we have *Charudatta* and *Vasantasena* who are upright and honest. They generate an atmosphere of sweet emotion. Whereas, *Charudatta* is living a life of misery and want, *Vasantasena* suffers the pain of ignominy and helplessness. In this, too, the former maintains an exterior of self-control and discipline, and the latter appeals to the audience by her sense of straightforward love. As companions, the duo appears to be pillars of strength to the society at large. In the city, they are discussed as carrying the weight of righteousness. This makes them a bridge between the established tradition of projecting the high principles of life on the one hand and a thin line between the newly emerged world of success and manipulation on the other. The writer **Sudraka** walks

on the fine thread of the immediate surroundings that seek balancing on standards of acceptability. It was a serious challenge that dramatic art faced at the time marked by transition. In the historical context, the old rule of the king to serve the cause of order was being fast replaced by a pattern in which trade was the pragmatic requirement. As writer of vision, **Sudraka** would not compromise on realism and kept instead his eyes and ears open to a changing scenario.

The requirement of capturing an existing world through recognition of its amoral parameters was a task worth fulfilling. With this end in view, **Sudraka** displaced the figure of the king and his court from the centre and peopled the play with the men of the streets. The task entailed the risk of faltering on the side of the immoral and becoming a means of presenting the vulgar stratum. Accomplishing a balance between the change in economy and society was a challenge for **Sudraka**. In response to such a question, we may think of the play that has so many characters. It appears to be the case of the many portraits that hang on the wall and draw the attention of the viewers to the wealth of pattern they carry. Indeed, the audience might lose track of what goes on in the play as a well-knit sequence. The crowding of personages on the stage and the lines of their movement may have criss-crossed interminably.

That is why perhaps, the last scene is heavy with issues. We are made to ask as to where it will all end, and whether some sort of answer will emerge finally. We wonder, for instance, whether the play will end as a tragedy with the death of *Charudatta*? One answer is in the play of chance or fate. This is what **Sudraka** has used for ending the play on a happy note. But he has achieved more than this. He has changed the entire texture of the play by using the shadow of change happening in the background. Mark that the said changes are of great proportions! It points towards the replacement of the unjust and autocratic king by another who is a people's hero. As we view the happenings on the stage, we are constantly reminded of the presence of the new king who escaped the scene in the beginning of the play but came back finally to assume authority. This theme of grandeur in the background enables the writer to offset the imbalance caused by gamblers, thieves and tricksters. The latter eventually become colourful agents of the dynamic life that the circumstance of the time produced.

Check Your Progress 4

1. To what extent can *Mrichchhkatika* be called a play of hope? Discuss.

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3.9 LET US SUM UP

Sudraka's *Mrichchhkatika* provides a vivid picture of the socio-political scene in ancient India that is ridden with issues of instability, poverty, and suffering. At the back of these, however, are ideals that may shine forth when conditions became improved and the city gained is in the hands of a rightful authority. Also to be recognised in the play is the various thematic concerns of love, emotional suffering, longing and pain. These are not presented as universally

Sudraka:
Mrichchhatika

present issues of life. Instead, they are given specific colouring of the circumstance of the day. Even as the concerns are of a serious nature, they are given the perspective of a realistic art resting on comic entertainment. This broadens the reach of the play. For this reason, *Mrichchhatika* wins appreciation in our time of crisis and contentious questions. The finally emerging hopefulness is a sign of the play's strength and significance.

3.10 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Read Section 3.3

Check Your Progress 2

1. Read Section 3.5

Check Your Progress 3

1. Read Section 3.7

Check Your Progress 4

1. Read Section 3.8

3.11 GLOSSARY

Antahpur: The inner part of the palace where the queen and her maids reside.

Bull in a public square: A picture signifying peacefulness.

UNIT 4 *MRICHCHHAKATIKA*: FACETS OF CHARACTERISATION

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 *Charudatta* and *Vasantasena* as Central Characters
- 4.3 The Private Space of Women
- 4.4 Characterisation
- 4.5 Use of Metaphor
- 4.6 Exploring *Sarvilaka*
- 4.7 *Sarvilaka* as a Person of Art and Imagination
- 4.8 Character as a Carrier of Dynamic Change
- 4.9 Backdrop of Art as Problematic Conflict-ridden Structure
- 4.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.11 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 4.12 Glossary
- 4.13 Suggested Readings and References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall discuss a few characters in **Sudraka**'s play *Mrichchhkatika* from the point of view of their role and function in the text and their complexities. The unit will also examine the mental, emotional, and physical space that women share and analyse **Sudraka**' against the backdrop of the play.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

We shall be helped in achieving our aim by a close look at the way the characters conduct themselves in the play. There is also an angle from where the authorial understanding behind them can be revealed. In the latter sense, characters are not what they are supposed to be in real life. This is never the case. Instead, the characters are invariably forged by the author in his imagination and on the pages of the text. Thus, they may not be considered as characters, but as characterisations. Through this route, we reach not only the values and norms that characters observe, but also the mind of the author that picks up specific temperaments for dramatic depiction. We shall look at the protagonists of the play next – *Charudatta* and *Vasantasena*.

4.2 *CHARUDATTA AND VASANTASENA AS CENTRAL CHARACTERS*

Let us begin with a comment on these characters that have found a place in *Mrichchhkatika* for projecting the authorial intent. *Charudatta* is described as “a Brahmana merchant who is a citizen of Ujjayini.” Two things are important in his case—one, that he is placed in the highest caste, and two,

that he is a merchant by profession. The combination of these two raises his social level very high. This is a combination of qualities of heart (such as sympathy), and capability to conduct worldly activities. The pragmatic view shows him as a man of the world that is driven by the notion of success. He is placed in the category of a hero who is of evolved sensibility, tolerance, level-headedness and magnanimity. He is a leader of men. As such, he would be surrounded by people and would win credit for what he might do for others. The playwright **Sudraka** has chosen *Charudatta* in preference to the kingly figure meant to rule the city. Is it not idealisation of a person? The crucial characteristic in him that draws our attention is of his being a lover. He remains a lover till the end of the play, and nothing can deter him from his chosen path. The trait of love sustains him as a human being, and increases his appeal to the audience.

Love joins *Charudatta* with *Vasantasena*, a courtesan. Her job in life is of providing entertainment to the privileged in the city. To perform such a role, she is highly accomplished in the arts, such as dancing and singing. Her youth and good looks enhance her value in society. Such a person would not be ordinarily associated with love that might align her with an individual. Love might take her out of the ambit of entertainment she is supposed to provide. Love is a matter of choice, and from the point of view of the profession chosen by her, she is denied such a choice. A woman of entertainment available to the collective will is supposed to consider the citizens as her clients who will buy her company and attention. As a courtesan, her concern cannot be the pursuit of virtue and morality. But she loves *Charudatta* and, therefore, tries to gain virtue by leaving her profession aside and foregoing money and a life of luxury. From the character of *Vasantasena* stems the need for an analysis of the private space of women as society was still segregated between men and women and their respective gender roles.

4.3 THE PRIVATE SPACE OF WOMEN

As mentioned above, the action of the play reveals love as a purifying, and chastening venture. It involves self denial of good things and redefines pleasure on its own terms. This lays a emphasis on those qualities that cannot be measured by money or social standing. We shall later consider this as the yardstick with which to measure the significance of characters in the play. First, however, let us look at a small group of women characters engaged in talking about ordinary matters of living within the private space of the home. This will give us a peep into the creative nature of women in ancient India, even as the world of that time was governed by the hierarchical power of men. The following from Act II may be the starting point of characterisation:

Vasanatsena: Friend, what next?

Madanika: Lady, you have not spoken about anything. How, then, do you ask 'what next'?

Vasanatsena: What did I say?

Madanika: You asked, 'what next'?

Vasanatsena: (Knitting her eyebrows): Ah! Yes!

Maid (approaching): Lady, the mother asks that you should take your bath and go through the worship of the deities.

Vasanatsena: Friend, tell mother that I am not going to bathe today, let therefore the Brahmana himself perform the worship.

Maid: As Your Ladyship commands. (exit)

Madanika: Madam, it is my love that prompts me to inquire, and not the disposition to find faults; so tell me, please, what all this means.

Vasanatsena: Madanika, what do you see me to be like?

Madanika: I can see from Your Ladyship's absent-mindedness that you have fallen in love with somebody whom you have treasured in your heart.

Vasanatsena: Rightly you have guessed! Clever in fathoming the hearts of others, you are indeed Madanika. (Singh 84)

Let us pause here to see the behavioural norms of specific persons. We note that three women participate in the goings on, even as the mother in the wings (mother of *Vasantasena* presumably), is sending instructions for *Vasantasena* to follow (This adds up to four women whose job is to follow the household norms and do the chores. The rest is the conversation that gives these ladies their distinct identities).

In the beginning of the quote, we are struck by the mental alertness of the maidservant *Madanika*. She loves the use of words. Obviously, “*what next*” can be said only when the speaker is in the middle of the conversation. Here, however, the chat is started with the question “*what next?*” At the query of the maidservant *Vasantasena* wakes up from her reverie, and is forced to ask “*what did I say?*” That is an interesting way of starting a conversation. Indeed, *Vasantasena* is lucky that she has such a lively companion as *Madanika*. This would keep the mistress amused and happy all the time, particularly at a moment in time when she is lost in the thought of her lover. The next point in the exchange between *Vasantasena* and *Madanika* is the bathing ritual and being a part of the worship of the deity aspect. The instruction for this comes from *Vasantasena*'s mother. The carrier of the instruction is another woman not mentioned by name and is merely called “Maid.” The response of *Vasantasena* to the word from the mother is that she is not in a mood of getting up from her seat. Note that the mood makes *Vasantasena* say something that goes against the convention of performing the worship. Also, she suggests that the *Brahmana* alone do the worship and leave the house. Yet, the chat continues, this time in the direction of the mistress's absent-mindedness, and whether she is in love. It is clear from the exchanges between the two that love is closer to the heart of both. The interesting part is that the topic draws the two near each other and establishes a sense of equality and sisterhood between them. In this way, the wall of separation between the mistress and the maidservant breaks down and they now have a space of freedom to share. An author/the playwright creates the characters and gives them life. But how does s/he manage to convey a social reality through characterisation, if at all s/he does? The next section will address this question.

4.4 CHARACTERISATION

Before we move further in the discussion, let us explore the issue of characterisation in the hands of the playwright. The playwright has presented *Vasantasena* and *Madanika* as playmates that enjoy gossip around love. The subject also proves beyond doubt that women in ancient India would converse freely and intelligently if they were in private territory with no males to pry into their privacy. Also, that class means little when it comes to agility of the mind. The give and take between *Vasantasena* and *Madanika* shows that it is beyond doubt the fertility of imagination that is shared between women belonging to

the lower and middle rungs of society. It also points towards the fact that the playwright **Sudraka** was a promoter of decorum but he also gave scope to people of different sections to assert selfhood. This is clear from the way the mistress and the maidservant spend time together and secrets between the two are freely shared. Such characterisation helps build an atmosphere of close bonding, a hallmark of humanist representation. Aesthetically, too, it enables the viewer to enter the consciousness of characters on the stage where ideas, notions, sensations and feelings surge and win their own specific expression. Read the following to see how social, ideological and emotional areas are investigated—

Madanika: Well, I am glad indeed! Herein you are indeed obliging the mighty Cupid, who is a glorious festive joy to all young persons. So Your Ladyship will please tell whether he is a king, or a king's favourite, who is thus desired to be served!

Vasantasena: Girl, I want to enjoy, not to serve.

Madanika: Do you love some Brahmana youth, distinguished for his deep erudition?

Vasantasena: I have veneration for all Brahmanas.

Madanika: Do you then love some young merchant, who has amassed a great fortune by visiting many cities?

Vasantasena: Friend, a merchant causes great pain of separation, by going to other countries, leaving behind his beloved even though her love for him be very deep.

Madanika: Madam, he is not a king, nor a king's favourite, nor a Brahmana, nor a merchant. Who may he be then, that my mistress desires?

Vasantasena: Girl, you visited with me the garden of Cupid?

Madanika: I did, Madam.

Vasantasena: And still you ask me, as if you are stranger?

Madanika: I got it! Is he that same gentleman who favourably received my mistress when she sought his help?

Vasantasena: Well, what is his name?

Madanika: My lady, he—of auspicious name—is called the noble Charudatta.

Vasantasena (joyfully): Excellent, Madanika, excellent! You got rightly.

Madanika (to herself): Let me speak to her now. (aloud) My lady, it is heard that he is a poor man.

Vasantasena: Hence it is, that I love him. For a courtesan who fixes her affections on a poor lover would not incur censure from the world.

Madanika: But Madam, do the honey-bees frequent a mango tree which has lost its blossoms?

Vasantasena: And hence they are known as 'honey-suckers' (It means that honey-bee are bit examples of true lovers, since they suck honey – are interested only in honey)

Madanika: Lady, if you desire him, then why is it that you do not now approach him clandestinely, at once?

Vasantasena: Girl, if I were to go to him myself clandestinely, then, being unable to make an adequate return, he may probably make it impossible for me to visit him again, and that I wish to prevent.

Madanika: Is it for this very reason that you deposited the ornament in his hands?

Vasantasena: Girl, you have guessed it correctly!

The mention of Cupid as a “*glorious festive joy*” provides wings to the mind of the maidservant as well as to *Vasantasena*. It also facilitates the entry of the king, the nobleman, the merchant, the man with wealth, the “*Brahmana youth distinguished for his deep erudition*” and outside these, another person who could be a true possessor of dignity and honesty. The last characteristic belongs to *Charudatta*. Apart from characterisation, figures of speech and language too play a major role in a work of art. Let us look at the use of metaphor in the play.

Check Your Progress 1

1. What function does characterisation perform in a drama text? Give instances from *Mrichchhakatika* to explain your point.

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4.5 USE OF METAPHOR

In the previous quote, mark the metaphor of the honey-bees that *Madanika* has used to comment on the love of her mistress. It is teasingly evocative of the beauty and taste of love. In a larger sense, it covers different layers of relationship between *Vasantasena* and *Charudatta*. From the reference to honey-bees, *Vasantasena* takes the cue and frames her own version of false love and lovers. She achieves the interesting interpretation of bees being “honey-suckers” that contains the word-twist and shows the questionable side of love that usually means gaining worldly benefits. For *Vasantasena*, however, love is to be sustained as an enriching factor of life.

Again, in the quoted lines, the entire talk happens within the parameters of the two characters. It leaves an impact on the reader. Among the mentioned categories, *Charudatta* is described as a poor person. This is specifically underlined to hint at the sensitivity and richness of feelings in him. When his name is finally mentioned by *Madanika*, *Vasantasena* has a sense of thrill running down her spine. It also becomes clear finally that of the two women, *Vasantasena* is the more intelligent—note the way she has planned things with respect to continuing her visits to her lover. The revelation of the scheme to *Madanika* is appropriately strategised for meeting the ends of her desire. *Vasantasena* comes forth to the viewer as a deft combination of beauty and intelligence.

So far, we have analysed in brief a minor episode of the play from the point of view of the characters—the way they were conceived by the playwright and then taken further on towards the final execution in the text. In this is reflected the overall attitude of the author *via-a-vis* the world of his time carried by the characters in the play. See how characterisation is commented on by **Jagdish Chandra Mishra** in the following lines:

The significance of Shudraka as a poet-writer consists in the manner of characterisation of Charudatta, Vasantasena, Sarvilaka as well as Sakara. These are figures made of clay, as it were, that came from the contemporary society. The maker of the play in the pattern of Prakarana (a comic representation in the realistic mode) was a master scholar of religious thought, scriptures, old narratives, astrology,

political discourse, Hindu philosophy as well as Sanskrit and Prakrit languages. This is authenticated by the fact that social descriptions along with a highly-evolved language and an extremely appealing style witnessed in the play are rooted in day-to-day facts of life. ... The characterisation in the hands of the poet-author built up through the nature of society and its realistic, subtle and psychological knowledge prove this facet with telling effect.

(Prakash, A. (translation 25-26))

Mishra links characterisation gainfully with details of life that existed in **Sudraka**'s time. In fact, the author and the cultural patterns surrounding him are expressed through the characters in the play. Having looked at the central characters and other women characters we will now turn our attention to the other 'male' characters in the play.

4.6 EXPLORING SARVILAKA

We may now shift from specifically the women characters to a few others. We will also consider other dimensions of human experience and social structures in *Mrichchhakatika* and this may help us recognise and comprehend patterns shedding a new light on the play's happenings. A most outstanding and extraordinary episode in *Mrichchhakatika* is of *Sarvilaka* who is described as a "*Brahmana-adventurer who commits a robbery for obtaining money to ransom-off the servant-girl Madanika whom he loves*" (38). This takes us back to the previous discussion between *Madanika* and *Vasantasena* that tells us about the former's vivacity and wit. A young woman imbued with clever thinking that is at once steeped in friendliness and fair play lets the viewer feel sympathetic towards her. If the said *Brahmana*-adventurer succeeds in his mission to set her free through his intervention, it would add to the positive impact that *Mrichchhakatika* as a *prakrana* might leave on us. We are told that the man is taken to robbing and stealing and over time has become a skilled practitioner of the art of thievery. It is indeed exciting to watch the man in action. This is how he announces his arrival in the play:

Sarvilaka: Having made a passage for my business, by the power of my training and physical strength—a passage large enough to easily admit a man of my build—I move about, my sides being scratched by my creeping along the ground, like a snake with his old worn-out body casting off his slough. (102)

This shows that *Sarvilaka* has worked hard to train as a thief. The effort has given him the "*physical strength*" that will come handy for "*creeping along the ground.*" A self-made man, *Sarvilaka* takes pride in having become like a snake that can move into any crevice of a house-wall, enter the house and move around stealthily in search of precious objects, ornaments etc and commit robbery. The metaphor of the snake is complete when casting off "*the worn-out body*" is mentioned. Is he not a well-read man in the know of discussions about literary expression? The answer would be in the affirmative, aptly corroborated by what follows. When *Sarvilaka* looks up and spots the moon "*about to set,*" he bursts forth:

Sarvilaka: This night, in which all the objects are hidden from sight by the pitchy darkness, is concealing me as fondly as a mother conceals her son, a mother in whom all other sentiments are overpowered by the intense blindness of love; I who walk about in

fear of the king's watchmen, and who, supremely brave, am bent upon burgling the houses of others.

**Mrichhakatika: Facets of
Characterisation**

Here, “*the pitchy darkness*” is a soothing phenomenon like that of the protection given by a mother to her son. The comment is extended to take in its fold the mother’s “*intense blindness of love.*” This gives an unconventional connotation to blindness that shines forth since it lights the heart of the child. It appears that *Sarvilaka* is in the heart of a poet using evocative images. Yet more indeed, *Sarvilaka* bears in his heart sharp contradictions of thought. When with the tools he is carrying, he makes a hole in the wall of the house and enters the *antahpur*, he exclaims about his dubious profession:

Let people call, as they will, this a vile trade, which thrives well when people are asleep, and that getting the better of people by cheating them when they are unsuspecting, is mere thieving, and by no means a brave deed. Still, even a condemnable position of independence is preferable to serving others with folded hands.

The case is presented in moral-philosophical terms. He calls thieving an act of cheating since it is done when people are asleep and unsuspecting and, therefore, cannot prevent the act. Note the expression “*a brave deed.*” It tells about the man who would rather think of carrying out great missions than deprive people of their earnings on the sly. But, then, he realises, as he goes into the complexities of the question, that an act of an independent man is better than that of a slave who renders service to his master with folded hands. There is dignity in the former deed, while the latter turns the man into an abject creature. Can we associate a person, with the ability to venture into high intellectual issues, with breaking into houses in the dead of night? In fact, *Sarvilaka* is a poet-artist and philosopher rolled into one. From this point, the playwright **Sudraka** takes him into the persona of an expert in the field of his choice that is taken as subject of deep study. “Effecting a breach” is the next step in his scheme:

Sarvilaka: What is that spot, which is loose soft by being sprinkled over with water, so that it would produce no sound when being bored through? Where could be made a hole in the wall, wide but not in sight of the passers-by? What portion of this building is dilapidated, having its masonry worn out by the corroding action of saline exudations? And where shall I not come upon women-folk, and still accomplish my purpose?

(touching the wall) Here's a spot, worn out by saline action, and weakened by being sprinkled every day with water at the sight of the sun and here's a pile of rubbish excavated by rats! My purpose in hand here is as good as accomplished! For this is the best omen of success for us thieves, the sons of Karttikeya, our patron-saint. Now I have to begin my job; what sort of hole shall I make here? In connection with this the divine Kanakasakti has laid down four modes of making a breach they are as follows: to pull out the bricks when they are baked, to chip them off if unbaked, to wet them with water if they are of common clay, and to cut them through if they are of wood. Now this is a wall of baked bricks, so I shall have to pull them out. Here seven kinds of holes are possible. (102-103)

The observance of the details is impressive that in effect builds up a scene of elaborate academic inquiry and the hard work necessary to take the mission

forward. Still more, ancient India had committed scholars in all fields of craft and the arts, including that of robbery. In the quoted lines, there is a reference to *Kartikkeya*. He was a known thinker and a rare genius. Thieves of the day started calling him their patron-saint and father. In this position, they would study his work assiduously and follow it to the last fragment. Imagine the seven holes out of which the appropriate one would be dug into the wall. In the present case, suddenly we see a comic turn, when *Sarvilaka* remarks:

Sarvilaka: When at night other walls were breached by me, as also hard structures, weakened by the action of saltpetre, the neighbours, seeing them in the morning, have condemned my crime, and praised my skill of handiwork as well. (103-104)

The artist in *Sarvilaka* defines the dialectics in his action—together they bring out his practice as subtle since it evokes a mixed response from those who would watch the breach in the wall later. The crime he has committed will obviously be criticised but the skill, as he calls it, will win their appreciation. What is the playwright aiming at if not that every human individual has an innate seed of energy that can only weakly be described as split? Really speaking, however, it is an integrated effort not induced merely by the evil intention but has a highly problematic aspect to it? In the present case, *Sarvilaka* dazzles the audience by the dialectic he carries within him. As such, the narrative is shaping up as an independent episode. It is a different matter, however, that it has a bearing on the central episode of love between *Vasantasena* and *Charudaata*. Both pairs have a close similarity—they are poor, helpless and yet seeking union in a world that works against the interests of each. Where the two pairs go in different directions is when *Sarvilaka* as a lover has taken to pragmatism for winning his beloved, *Charudatta* and *Vasantasena* have taken a moral and principled stand. The latter will not budge from the path of honesty that they have adopted. This explains their breadth of vision that might influence in the long run the larger audience tracking their movement. Let us delve into the character of *Sarvilaka* a little more in the next section.

4.7 SARVILAKA AS A PERSON OF ART AND IMAGINATION

Coming back to *Sarvilaka*, his evolution as a success-oriented individual has proceeded along the normal path till he reached the stage of poetic expression. At the specific point of nearing his goal, he turns blissful and fulfilled, even though partially. In a corner of the house, he sees a lamp burning. The question is if he should put it out. But, no! He is struck with its beauty and observes:

This flame of the lamp, yellowish like gold, emerging through the hole and lying across the ground, being surrounded by darkness on all sides, looks like a streak of gold scratched on a touchstone. (104)

The simile is constructed well even though he is pressed by the moment of making away with the booty. The aesthetics of his endeavour emanate from the surroundings. Is this the doing of the suspense, uncertainty and the villainy residing in his heart? Has it happened because he required a break from the consistent hard work he has gone through? We can only wonder. Still, a more plausible guess may be that *Sarvilaka* has a noble mission to pursue—it is

of love and the way in which the beloved *Madanika* can be set free from bondage. The combination of love and freedom from slavery render him capable of creating that beauty which he recognises in the flame of the lamp.

Later, at the completion of the thieving-scheme, *Sarvilaka* is in two minds again. He is visited by the guilt that he has committed an immoral act by going against the existing norms of not depriving a *Brahmana* of his assets. His comment on it is significant as before:

Sarvilaka: Worthy Brahmana, you may sleep for hundred years! Alas! For the sake of the courtesan Madanika, I have thus brought degradation upon my Brahmana family; or why, I have degraded my soul?

Fie upon poverty, on account of which one's manly nature ceases to feel disgust for unworthy acts! For instance, here I am censuring this ignoble deed, but am doing it all the same! (106)

As we see, the sense of guilt is short-lived. Indeed, it has been suggested by the self-pity in words “*but am doing it all the same!*” A man of the world that runs principally by rules of manipulation, *Sarvilaka* changes tack and expresses the following:

Sarvilaka: Well now let me return to Vasantasena's mansion to buy Madanika's freedom. (walking about and observing) Ah! It sounds like somebody's footsteps! I hope they are not policemen! Never mind—I'll become rigid like a pillar and stand here. Or rather—are the police of any account to me Sarvilaka? I, who—am a veritable cat in leaping, a deer in bounding off, a hawk in seizing prey and tearing it to pieces, a dog in judging of the strength of a man according as he is asleep or awake, a snake in crawling, magic personified in assuming different characters, postures and dresses, the goddess of speech in the various dialects of different countries, a lamp during nights, a dudubha in slipping away from intricate places, a horse on land, and a boat on water!

This is the moment of triumph for *Sarvilaka*, and he is pleased with himself. This mood has given him a swagger—he talks to himself and pays him glowing tributes. Through this self-praise, he also lets the audience know about the hard work one was supposed to put in if one had to pursue the career of a thief. Sometimes authors and playwrights also use characters to signify/change. **Sudraka** seems to be doing this with the character of *Sarvilaka*. Lets' look at this aspect next.

4.8 CHARACTER AS A CARRIER OF DYNAMIC CHANGE

Does the quoted passage also inform us about the state of crime in the ancient period that was an evolved area of strategic preparation and meticulous execution? This appears to be the case. There was concentration of money in the city and the state saw to it that the trade sector was safe and secure. However, money was in the hands of a few whereas the vast multitude was left to fend for itself. Many young men took to crime for this reason. It was a tussle between an elaborate system of administration and a mentally agile

populace. The emotional aspect of life added to the agony of the young people. *Sarvilaka* is in love with *Madanika* who is a bonded slave. In view of the existing law, she could buy freedom with money. The mission of *Sarvilaka* is twofold, to obtain his beloved and survive in the surrounding world as a person. In fact, he turns a new leaf after securing the release of his beloved from bondage. His espousing the cause of change and facilitating a new king to take over the reins of the city is significant. His love for *Madanika* brings about complete transformation in his life. This gives focus to his endeavour and fills him with creative energy. **Biswanath Banerjee** puts this aspect of his role succinctly. To quote:

A poor and ordinary citizen has been able to organise a revolution and leads it to success is a fact sufficient enough to project Sarvilaka as having a personality with indomitable spirit, exemplary courage, much resourcefulness, sense of duty and sacrificing nature. In the beginning we find him rash and impetuous but slowly and surely the dramatist has turned him into a lovable personality with all care and sympathy. He has become a real friend of the hero who gains everything through his efforts, and this character with youthful enthusiasm and chivalrous spirit may well be recognised as the sub-hero or upa-nayaka of the play. (Banerjee 64)

Sarvilaka's characterisation is such that it can envelop a whole series of actions moving in a specific direction. We see changes happening in his growth as a person through a clash of perspectives—he wants to remain true to his profession, and is also mindful of the established hierarchies that place the *Brahmana* at the top. The respect he accords to women in the scene is also noticeable. He holds a monologue with himself that reflects his intellect and morality. This makes him a typical as well as an individualised character, much in the manner of modern-day realism. The combination of goodness and evil in him sets him apart from *Sakar*, the king's brother-in-law who symbolises senseless violence, trickery and falsehood. The character of *Sakar* is interestingly drawn and requires some thought so let's look at how the purpose his character serves in the play in the next section.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Critically comment on the theme of love in *Mrichchhatika*.

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4.9 BACKDROP OF ART AS PROBLEMATIC CONFLICT-RIDDEN STRUCTURE

Sakara carries out his ill-conceived schemes with crudity and brute power. He stands for steamrolling opposition on the strength of closeness to the group that constitutes the state. The set of people keeping him company are equally cynical, not bothering about established norms of behaviour. They are safe because of the protection they receive from *Sakar*. Yet we see some difference between *Sakara* and his associates. The former runs a counter-narrative of his own, his concern being to prevent people living lives of dignity. Why is that shown as a lever to push the dramatic action?

In answer to this query, we might say that binaries of good and bad, intelligent and foolish, moral and immoral were sharply etched in the older sensibility. People

judged one another on the measuring rod of what helped them earn fulfilment and joy, as also in reverse what obstructed their chosen path. Dramatic writing, particularly that given to dealing with issues of social living, selected actual living patterns and categorised them as promoting virtue or vice. This neat line is discernible in *Mrichchhatika*. The division was moralistic and predictable in the context of representing reality. At the same time though, it left scope for the author to creatively engage with the questions of the day. In *Mrichchhakatika*, this tendency has indeed helped the playwright give free rein to his imagination and manufacture a world filled with vivacity, power and hopefulness against all odds. That goes to show that art had assumed great relevance in that period.

We could put him in the category of characters drawn in black and white. Set against the shining examples of *Charudatta* and *Vasantasena*, *Sakara* is a black character whose evil nature unfolds at each turn in the play. If he had his way, Both *Vasantasena* and *Charudatta* would have been dead as per the plan hatched by him. *Sakara* and his group/ associates are devoid of values of fellow-feeling, self discipline and sympathy for others. The attitude they have towards is one that perceives a change/ threat/ a challenge and something that needs to be met/ faced with all of one's power and might. Yet, like *Sarvilaka* who represents the intelligentsia suffering under the yoke of economic and political crisis, *Sakara* represents the unsustainable cruelty and oppression of the state. Thus, we see the picture of an uneven and crisis-ridden society worked out through a whole lot of characters who together let a positive vision and comic outcome emerge at the end of the play.

Check Your Progress 3

1. How do you visualise Sakara as an example of characterisation? Elaborate.

.....
.....
.....

4.10 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed characterisation in detail by picking up a few characters to illustrate the different points. It is an important area since this form of drama necessitates individuals who interact with one another on stage and weave a well-defined narrative around their actions. As they carry forward the plan of the playwright, they reveal significant traits hidden in their behaviour and sensibility. In this unit, we analysed extensively a complex character that could go in two entirely distinct directions. The reference is to *Sarvilaka*, the thief and a *Brahman* scholar as well as artist in pursuit of his beloved whom he plans to snatch away from bondage by means fair or foul. This has become an occasion to reflect on other characters, too. Yet, this unit dwells on the points of individuals picked up from society for projection of the theme and the point of view of the playwright.

4.11 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Read section 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4

Check Your Progress 2

1. Read section 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 & 4.6

Check Your Progress 3

1. Read section 4.7, 4.8 & 4.9

4.12 GLOSSARY

Madanika: Literally, the word derives its meaning from Kamadev (Cupid). Since it is a name given to a woman and is accordingly modified, it denotes a woman who understands the ways of love as an expert.

Prakrit: In ancient India, the language of common use as distinct from its standardized and refined version called Sanskrit. The two coexisted. *Prakrit* remained ever close to the surface of life and drew its energy and creativity from there. Such a language would take influence from the spoken word of the day and went on evolving with the changing life-patterns.

Dudubha: The Sanskrit word for the eagle

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