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A Study of Mrichchhakatika as a Prakarana

Abstract

One of the earliest known Sanskrit plays is Mrichchhakatika, thought to have been composed by Sudraka, a king who is believed to have lived between the third century and the fifth century BC. Drama is a distinct genre of ancient Sanskrit literature. Bhasa, Sudraka, Kalidasa, and Asvaghosa are the famous Sanskrit dramatists. Though numerous plays written by these playwrights are still available, little is known about the authors themselves. Regarding the life, the date, and the very identity of the author king Sudraka, we are eagerly ignorant. Mrichchhakatika is a play in ten acts based on the love-story of the male protagonist Charudatta, an honest but poor inhabitant of Ujjayini and Vasantasena, a beautiful and pure-minded courtesan of the same city. The play is completely based on the imagination of Sudraka and does not take its material from epics. Mrichchhakatika is unique in many ways within the entire corpus of classical Sanskrit literature. The play is one of the best examples of Prakarana, one of the ten types of 'rupakas'. In this present paper, my attempt is to establish the point of view that Mrichchhakatika is a pure Prakarana.

Keywords: Imagination, Nataka, Prakarana, Rupaka, Social realism

Introduction

Mrichchhakatika by Sudraka is a creation of outstanding brilliance and it occupies a very high and distinguished position among the earliest known Sanskrit dramas in the history of ancient Indian literature. Mrichchhakatika, the famous Prakarana bears a plot which is partly derived from history and partly is a creation of the author's fancy of the ancient India that is not based on the epic material. It is natural that Sudraka gives importance of his imaginative creative power which offers the greatest scope of the type of drama called drama of invention. Mrichchhakatika is the only drama which fulfils the spirits of the drama of invention, as defined by the Sanskrit canons of dramaturgy. The play begins with a prologue consisting of a benedictory stanza which basically is a prayer for the people of the world. The author asks Lord Siva to protect the people from all kinds of pain and prejudice, free from all kinds of bounds of mind and body. We also know from the prologue that Sudraka was a Kshatriya king of some country, brave and handsome in appearance knowing Rigveda, Samaveda and mathematics. He knew the art of regarding courtesans and the science of training of elephants. He was a devotee of Lord Siva and has performed the Asvamedha

sacrifice. The great king died at the ripe age of hundred years and ten days. As we advance the reading of the play from the prologue to the final act, we get all the significant aspects related to the main issue.

Related Concepts

A Rupaka has two meanings. It is both a symbol and an allegory, where one incident or figure of speech is meant to stand for another. The meaning is often extended to refer to an entire act of dramatic composition. An entire play was often referred to as a Rupaka in classical Sanskrit usage – the meaning being quite clear, the audio-visual experience of the play was meant to deliver something of a deeper and higher meaning, some philosophical insight. The meaning of Rupaka was often interchangeably used with ‘drishyakavya’. The different kinds of Rupaka according to Bharata are Nataka, Prakarana, Bhana, Vyayoga, Samavakara, Dima, Ihamriga, Anka, Vithi, and Prahasana. Nataka is the first of the different types of Rupaka that Sanskrit aesthetic theory talks about. It is the most grand and comprehensive, employing almost all forms of skills and possibilities that audio visual imitation has at its disposal. Regarding the characteristics that delineate a Nataka, Viswanath states that its theme must be well known and taken from the epics, the puranas well known through written historical or popular oral traditions. Thus, the playwright is completely deprived of any imaginative connection of theme. It will have five forms of sandhis or thematic nodes, namely mukh, pratimukh, garbha, vimarsa and upsanghriti – roughly corresponding to the less strictly worked out Aristotelian beginning, middle and end. There will be vilasa and riddhi and it will be a source of both joy and despair and employ not one but multiple rasas. It will have no less than five and no more than ten acts. The hero of a Nataka will have the qualities of being calm, tranquil and of an open mind; he must belong to a well known and preferably royal family, and will be a rajarshi, or a king with the qualities of a sage. He will be either a god (devta), a god incarnated as a human being or a human being. The dominant rasa of Nataka will be veera or shringara. Abhijnanasakuntala is a consummate example of a Nataka as it brings together all the strands and applies them to perfection.

On the other hand, Prakarana is one of the major forms in Sanskrit drama according to Natyashastra of the sage Bharata, a large dramaturgical treatise with about six thousand verses and has been divided into thirty-six chapters dealing with all aspects of theory and performance. A Prakarana is different from a Nataka. The most important difference between a Prakarana and a Nataka is that a Prakarana does not draw its material from the epic tradition, but comprises characters that are mostly inventions of the playwright. The length is typically between five to ten acts of varying lengths. These characters are drawn from the middle and lower strata of society. A king is rarely, if ever seen in a Prakarana. The diction is the street patios of the time, and never reaches the lyrical height of a Nataka. The themes include mostly petty revenges, political intrigues, familial enmities and the like. In this way, there are clear similarities between a Prakarana and a classical European comedy as defined by Aristotle. The scene is outside the palace, and most of the action takes place on the streets. The setting is almost invariably urban. In many ways, a Prakarana is a better representative of

the time, and includes as more incisive social critique than Nataka. Mrichchhakatika of Sudraka is the best known extant example of a Prakarana.

Justification

The play Mrichchhakatika is completely based on the imagination of Sudraka and does not take its material from the epics as a Nataka does. It comprises ten acts, and an urban setting. The play largely takes place on the streets of Ujjain and successfully captures the life and vibrancy of the city life. There different dialects, often comic and ridiculous are foregrounded. The political coup and personal intrigue play a major role in the play. The desire of Sansthanaka for Vasantasena, his failed attempts at acquiring her, all form an important part of the play. He comes across as a buffoon and a villain. However, his villainy is characterized by pettiness. The scene of Sarvilaka the thief also adds to the comic rubric of the play. The play ends with the sudden turn of fate for Charudatta, the exposing of the miscreants, and finally a political coup. As a Prakarana, the hero of Mrichchhakatika is a Brahman named Charudatta, a generous young man who through his charitable contribution to unlucky friends and the general public welfare, has severely impoverished him. In spite of his deteriorating living conditions, he has maintained reputation in Ujjayini as an honest and upright man with rare gift of wisdom and many men continue to seek his counsel. The heroine of this play is a 'ganika' or a courtesan named Vasantasena who is exquisitely beautiful and pure minded. Mrichchhakatika as a Prakarana also features characters like Vita, a stock character; the parasitic companion of a dissolute young man. The play includes gamblers, thieves and servants as minor characters. Wider use of Prakrit dialects is another characteristic of Mrichchhakatika to be a Prakarana.

In a Prakarana, the contemporary society must be reflected. So, Mrichchhakatika is not an exception in this regard and the play may be treated as a study in social realism. In choosing a theme of love between a bankrupt merchant Charudatta and a rich courtesan Vasantasena set boldly against a background of contemporary urban society, rather than deriving it on the copious literary wealth of Puranas and the epics. Mrichchhakatika stands unique within the tradition of the classical Sanskrit literature. It is a play as much about a realistic portrayal of the socio-political condition of urban India of the time. Ujjain was a city known for its beauty. Its buildings, temples, pyres, and beautifully designed pathways were an epitome of urban planning in the classical times. All these aspects are well expressed in the play. Regarding the social life in Ujjain, trades were held in high respect, as is obvious in a city that based its fame on wealth and prosperity, and was a seat of bustling commercial activity. The rich and famous ones formed the very bulwark of its admiration.

This play, however, provides a more real picture. We see that Vasantasena is as cultured a courtesan as any in Ujjain, yet she is cursed as a common prostitute at a moment of heated argument; and her right to choose her patrons is ridiculed by two kinsmen cum agents – Chita and Vita. Their position was precarious. We find her attacked and manhandled by a drunk. No law comes to her protection, and it is only through her wit that she saves herself from being summarily violated. A kind of uncertainty is evident in the play's treatment of the caste system as well. At the outset, it seems obvious that caste system is rigid. Every character

seems to be overtly conscious of his or her caste status and acting according to its demands. In the play we see the Brahmin was revered by many, but unquestioned obeisance to him was not taken for granted. While many lay themselves prostrate before the Brahmin, it is hinted that they carry out rites in exchange of money. Sansthanaka, for one, despised anyone who laid themselves prostrate before a Brahmin. Therefore, Mrichchhakatika is a play of social realism that leads it to be treated as a Prakarana.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, it is admitted that all events and characters in Mrichchhakatika are taken from the contemporary society. The political story and the love story which play a significant role are painted partly from history and partly from the imagination of the playwright. The union of Charudatta and Vasantasena through a chain of events is a picture of the happy ending that offers much importance to the play. Finally, the victory of the character Aryaka, the representative of common people is the victory of the ordinary mass of society. So, from the overall study it can be called that Mrichchhakatika is a successful Prakarana.

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