

## **Gendering Work in Early Sanskrit Drama: A Case Study of *Mudrārākshasa* and *Mṛichchhakaṭika***

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### ***Abstract***

It is during the past three decades, if not since the last century, that there has been an increasing interest amongst scholars of different hues to focus on the material structure underlying gender stratification that ultimately led to identify important elements within such structures and to work out their gendered nature. The participation of men and women in various productive works has always been necessary for social and economic development. Men and Women's presence has been recognized through ages, but it is only recent that their contribution towards the overall socio-economic development of societies is being recognized. The importance of their toil and their reproductivity, their role in maintaining traditions and forming societal linkages is gradually being underlined. Though most societies look upon women as carrying out the function of 'social reproduction', we do find them in many early Sanskrit Dramas to be engaged in various productive works and employed as workers apart from the very important function of reproduction and child care.

The sources used in the paper are mainly the two early Sanskrit dramas i.e. Viśākhadatta's *Mudrārākshasa* and Śūdraka's *Mṛichchhakaṭika*. These two texts have been analyzed so as to locate the position and status of occupational categories of women in comparison to their male counterparts. The research paper therefore seeks to understand on the factors behind the differentiation in women and men's work and the works that were gendered in nature apart from seeing the common profession or work.

Keywords: Sanskrit Drama, *Mudrārākshasa*, *Mṛichchhakaṭika*, Men and Women, Gendering Professions

## **Introduction**

Studies on gender based in the early period of the subcontinent are still a novelty and Suvira Jaiswal, Uma Chakravarti, Kumkum Roy, Vijaya Ramaswamy and Jaya Tyagi are among the few who have brought issues related to gender to the fore. Other prominent social historians of early India have discussed the entire period of early India, while barely referring to how patriarchal constructs are an inherent part of norms that govern class, caste, kinship and gender hierarchies. Moreover, since earlier studies showed that women & men of early India were involved in a range of activities including those associated with agriculture, in pastoral activities, in processing milk, weaving, spying, and especially carrying out spinning work in early India, it becomes relevant to explore their roles in the socio-economic spheres in comparison with their male counterparts.

The paper has used mainly two Sanskrit dramas which will be discussed subsequently. It has been observed that Dramas and plays do in fact heavily derive their subject matter from the normative and epic texts but the difference comes in with the author's perception where he is trying to tell a story which willingly or unwillingly reflects in ways the true picture of the society. The basic goal of a Sanskrit drama according to the many earliest manuals is to derive emotional response from the audience. This has been achieved by depicting sentiments of love, honour, duty and misery. We have ample of references to men & women workers in these plays for instance, it is stated that women were employed by the state as poison maidens (as dancing girls) who were sent to the enemy camp with nocturnal assassins in their midst. Similarly, men were employed in a range of occupations such as involved in high administrative posts apart from being employed as carpenters, singers, in various administrative services and involved in many agricultural operations. Instances like these and other will surely help us uncover the various issues related to gender and work in early India.

## **Gendering Work through an exploration of *Mudrārākshasa***

*Mudrārākshasa/Mudrārākṣasa* is basically a historical drama in seven parts written by Viśākhadatta/*Viśakhadutta* during the time of the Imperial Guptas. Like many other Sanskrit drama, the exact date of its compilation and author can't be ascertained with certainty. It throws light on the prevailing economic condition during the time of the Gupta period. The play is mainly concerned with Chandragupta Maurya of the Mauryan Dynasty's elevation to the throne of the Magadha (presently south Bihar), on the fall of the Nanda dynasty, and the adoption of the different measures undertaken by his able minister, Chāṇakya (a renowned politician of his time) to strengthen his rule. It is clearly visible from above that the underlying theme of this play has political leanings to the extent of exclusion of humour and love which have been the basic backbone of the Sanskrit dramas through ages that makes the *Mudrārākshasa* somewhat different from the other conventional dramas. In terms of uncovering various facets of gendering work, the play becomes relevant as it is the author's portrayal of the various occupations, castes and stratas. Also here the author has all his attention towards describing the political arena as mentioned above and therefore does not point to any specific attention to caste hierarchies, due to this he shows how he himself sees the society and not as it is described in the normative texts.

Men and Women were in this text were involved in lot of works. For instance we find that two officers of justice *Kalāpāsika* and *Daṇḍapāsika* have been mentioned; here Cāṇakya asks his messenger to inform these two that the king has ordered to drive Jīvasiddhī out of the city. What is important here is that the officers of justice don't seem to have the power to dispense justice but are only supposed to carry out orders of the king or Cāṇakya. So the real judicial authority may have been with the crown only. It is evident therefore that men were employed in the justice department of the state and we don't find any women being involved in these services. Women workers have been mentioned in this play. The first reference we look into is that of a Poison maiden<sup>1</sup> we see that it is in a context that Rākṣasa caused the death of Paravataka who was Cāṇakya's benefactor and ally by the use of a poison maiden. It has been stated in the didactic literature that there are various ways in which poison could be used against the enemy. The wells in the enemy territory could be poisoned<sup>2</sup>, the path which the enemy army is marching on there the trees, water, grass, creepers everything could be treated with poison<sup>3</sup> (as was done by the minister Yogakarandaka of King Brahmadutta of Benāras).

Further poison damsels as dancing girls could be sent to the enemy camp with nocturnal assassins in their midst. In the context of the use of poison, Kauṭilya in his *Arthaśāstra* states that the King's person was safeguarded from poison through a number of tests in which certain animals which were supposed to be extraordinarily sensitive to poison. For instance, such as birds were employed.<sup>4</sup> Further some even poison mixers are mentioned as amongst the officials employed in the royal service. There are also references to women attendants and a particular reference to courtesans or *vaiśya*<sup>5</sup> who are to be a part of the moon light festival<sup>6</sup> which is organized for "prominent citizens who are free from misgivings to enjoy with their wives".<sup>7</sup> Here we see that courtesans are seen as a major component of state entertainment, in conformity with this Kauṭilya in *Arthaśāstra* looks upon prostitution as an occupation and mentions several categories prostitutes such as *Gaṇikā*, *Pratigaṇikā*, *Rupājīva*, *Punścalī* and *Baudhakī*.<sup>8</sup> Suvira Jaiswal in this context states that in this kind of male dominated patriarchal society prostitution was a socially sanctioned profession as it was a state regulated institution.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the question of various attendants who would look after the daily chores of the household, they seemed to have served both the royalty and the common people (who could afford them). Kauṭilya has outlined many categories of female attendants these are *Dhātri* or nurses, *dāsi* or female slaves, *Ahitikambā* or a mortgaged woman, *Rupājīva* or one who lives on her beauty.<sup>10</sup> What we can infer from this is that: one, prostitution was a state sanctioned occupation and two, otherwise also as attendants women had quiet a few occupations.

We also have references to women pounding aromatic herbs, stringing garlands and beating pestles<sup>11</sup> and female doorkeeper's *pratihāri*.<sup>12</sup> The next important reference that we can scattered throughout the story is that of the spies. They were employed as emissaries in various disguises and were conversant with various languages, places, dresses, manners and modes of dealing with strangers.<sup>13</sup> Their work was mainly to find out how popular or unpopular the king was and if any conspiracy was being hatched against him. The first one mentioned here is the one carrying a *Yamapata*<sup>14</sup> who with the motive of showing it to people could have access to many places. The second one is the Jaina monk Jīvasidhī who is actually Brāhmaṇ Induśarmā.<sup>15</sup> The snake catcher or *ahituḍanḍika*<sup>16</sup> is another interesting spy who speaks both in prakrit and Sanskrit. There is also a spy who is disguised as a bard who by the way of his songs tries to instigate the king against Cāṇakya.<sup>17</sup> Thus we see that both women and men were employed as spies. Therefore, spies were an important tool available for guarding and furthering the interests

of the state. Some of them might have had to live in households of internal or external enemies for years on end, keeping their own identities under cover. They could be deployed for keeping a watch over both internal and external enemies, as well as for the purposes of checking the integrity of the ministers etc. This profession was not gendered.

Looking at the crafts and artisanal works, we see that the guild system seems to be prevalent as Candandāsa who is Rākṣasa's friend is mentioned as the *śreṣṭhin* of jewelers or *Maṇikāraśreṣṭhin*<sup>18</sup>, interesting fact here is that generally the guilds are known to have their own laws and judicial system but here when the head of a guild of jewelers is arrested no one from the guild raises a voice that its upto the guild to decide whether the person is guilty or not. This point to the fact that either the monarch held sway over the guild also and could control them or the guilds were not as powerful as they seem to be and the final power rests with the king only. Other artisan mentioned is a carpenter or *Sūtradhār* Dārūvarma<sup>19</sup> who is also referred to as a *śilpī*. He for planning and taking part in Candragupta's assassination attempt was stoned to death.<sup>20</sup> Another occupation mentioned is that of Abhayadutta who is a physician or *Bhīṣaja* or *vaidya*<sup>21</sup> who was sent to poison Candragupta and kill him. The idea of a theoretical four-fold *varṇa* division where occupations are decided on the basis of birth can be totally given up here. The variety of occupations present shows a true cosmopolitan society where flexibility comes in with increasing numbers.

### ***Gendering Work through an exploration of Mṛchchhakaṭika Play***

The *Mṛchchhakaṭika* (also known as The Little Clay cart) is a comic love story set in *Ujjainī* where the main actor of the drama is a poor Brāhmaṇ Cārūdutta who has been involved in number of occupations. He is addressed as a "leader of Brāhmaṇs" (*Dvijasārthavāho*) by M R Kale<sup>22</sup> where as at places in the play he is referred to as both a merchant and Brāhmaṇ. The actress in the play is a well established and cultured courtesan (*gaṇikā*) Vasantasenā. Here the actor is supposed to be a Brāhmaṇ or a minister or a merchant, the actress must be a courtesan or a lady of noble birth. The author Śūdraka finds reference in the beginning of the play, his background is detailed upon by the play itself where Śūdraka is referred to as a king who is an expert in the *Ṛgveda*, the *Sāmaveda*, Mathematics, the arts regarding the courtesans and the science of elephants, all these facts which depict this knowledge are shown in the play<sup>23</sup>.

Like many other Sanskrit dramas different prakrits have been used in the play which seems to be almost illustrate percepts of *Nāṭyaśāstra* in this regard.<sup>24</sup> The *śaurasenūis* spoken by the director after he has talked in Sanskrit, the comedienne by Vasantsenā, Madanikā, her servant Karnapuraka, her slave, her mother, the wife of Cārūdutta, the Śreṣṭhin or the guildman, the officers at the court and Rādhanika Cārūdutta'sservant. Avantikā is attributed to the two police men Viraka and Candnaka. The Vidūṣaka speaks Prācyā. The shampooer who turns monk, Sthavaraka, servant of Śākāra, Samsthanaka, Kumbhilaka, servant of Vasantsenā, Vardhamānaka, servant of Cārūdutta and little Rohasenā speak Magadhī. The Śākāra speaks Śākārī, the Cāṇḍālas Cāṇḍālī and the chief gambler *Dhakkī*<sup>25</sup>. Sanskrit being elite language, has been spoken by Cārūdutta, the Viṭa, The royal claimant Āryaka, the Brāhmaṇ thief Śarvilāka and heroine Vasantsenā. On whole, the play marks itself as very different and cannot be type castes in any genre as such but what is visible is that it has all the flavours of cosmopolitan drama and out of all these the comic element seems to dominate.

In majority, the profession of Prostitution seems to be gendered and of exclusive female reserve, though there were men and women who were assisting the courtesans in managing their affairs. We find vivid representations of the Gaṇikā (Vasantsenā), the *Kulastrī* (Cārūdutta's wife) and the Nagaraka Cārūdutta who sways between the both. If we analyze the social status of the *gaṇikā*, we observed that the *Mitākṣara* commentary on *Yajñavalkyasmṛti* quotes the *skanda purāna* as saying that the prostitutes constitute a separate caste emerging from the *apsarā Pancacudā*<sup>26</sup> and in terms of paramour we see that it was of no consequence<sup>27</sup> and the *varṇa* or caste were not a consideration for sexual intercourse. Looking at the drama, we see the prominence of the following *varṇa/jāti/occupations*: *Brāhmaṇ* where we see three very different depictions of the *Brāhmaṇ*. One is Cārūdutta who is mentioned both as a *Brāhmaṇ* and as a merchant, two is *Vidūṣaka* who is seen as a comic character and *Brāhmaṇ* just in the name and three is Śarvilāka who is a *Brāhmaṇ* but steals due to circumstances. The Courtesan who is referred to as a *gaṇikā*, a *vaiśyā* and *punśaclī*. Others mentioned are the king and his men, merchant, Buddhist monk, Judge, *Śreṣṭhin*, *Kāyastha*, *Bandhulas*, *kulavadhu*, *cāṇḍālas*, slaves, barber and shoemaker. What is interesting here is that the last three i.e the slaves, the barber and shoemaker are used mainly in terms of abusing. Most of the derogatory references that we notice in the drama are basically birth related.

Looking at the other interesting aspects of the play, we see the Vidūṣaka at one point is afraid to go on the royal road and he says that he does not want to fall prey to royal favourites, courtesans and their parasites, compares them to black snake who may be greedy for a poor frog like him<sup>28</sup>, in another reference already mentioned, he talks of a courtesan, an elephant, a *Kāyastha*, a mendicant, a spy and a donkey as things around which even villains cannot flourish.<sup>29</sup> These two very clearly point towards the people, professions and things which were seen as dangerous or suspicious and were looked down upon. Also interesting and very helpful in the drama is the usage of abusive language to understand which people or categories of people were looked down upon. Here most frequently mentioned is *dāsyaputra* or son of a slave. Others are *Garbhadāsi* or slave from birth, *vaiśyāputra* and *punśācliputra* or son of a prostitute,<sup>30</sup> the reference by the police men to each other as a barber and a shoe maker while abusing each other<sup>31</sup> and the sight of a Buddhist as an evil omen. All these show that these were the categories of people who were really looked down upon like the slave, son of a slave, son of a prostitute, barber, shoe maker and a Buddhist monk.

Other professions that are mentioned include the reference of the gamekeeper in the drama who runs the gambling house and it seems to exercise a lot of authority in his domain. He here, seems to have the right to exercise muscle power on the people who default in payments.<sup>32</sup> Also worth mentioning here is the reference of a “player’s association”<sup>33</sup> which has the authority to arrest defaulters. This shows that gambling must be a men’s profession and being very popular needed a whole mechanism to regulate it. Also mentioned is the presence of Judges, here an elaborate description is provided by the judge himself stating how a judge should be in terms of character,<sup>34</sup> accompanying him in the courtroom are a *śreṣṭhin* and a *Kāyastha*. The *Kāyastha* is there because of his work as a scribe and the *śreṣṭhin* may have been there as it is a merchant’s trial or maybe as a representative of a dominant community. Another possibility is that he may have been there as the representative of a guild. Thus, men were employed as judge, as business men and in gambling works. Lastly and quite importantly we see the mention of two Cāṇḍālas, these are the people who are taking Cārūdutta for his execution, what is interesting here is that firstly as mentioned earlier unlike convention Cārūdutta a Brāhmaṇ is to be executed here. Secondly, the judges were not in the favour of a death sentence and apparently the king insisted on it so that people draw an example from this and never again try to commit such a crime.

## Conclusion

On the whole we find lot of professions in Viśākhadattta's *Mudrārākshasa* and in Śūdraka's *Mṛichchhakaṭika*. Both men and women were drawn into various kinds of works. The profession of prostitution was gendered and of exclusive female preserve. Women alone had space in this work. Men were employed into the services of judicial department of the state, as snake catchers, as mechants, in the more skillfull professions such as carpentry, in masonry works and in medicine. Spying was one such profession where both men and women worked. These two Sanskrit dramas have many different layers to present. The economic life depicted here has to be interpreted in many ways.

In *Mudrārākshasa*, there are references of women into the services of a poison maidens, attendants, courtesans, women pounding aromatic herbs, stringing garlands, *Pratihari* or the door keeper, women of town, low birth women, spies, agents, women involved in spinning and weaving. The lower birth women are seen as more open and work inclined where as the high birth women are expected to remain inside the confines of the house. The text in a way depicts all kinds of professions practiced by the women but within the story they are not ascribed much importance. Men were employed as judicial officials, as spies, Jeweller, carpenter and Physician. An interesting point here is that it's the king who seems to be dispensing the justice and not the judicial officials. In terms of reliance on the shastric literature, there seems to be no normative description except for the nomenclature which has been extensively borrowed from the *Arthśāstra*. The *Mṛichchhakaṭika* in terms of its story and character portrayal totally follows a contradictory trend. In terms of castes and occupations we see three kinds of Brāhmaṇs, the *Gaṇikā*, her attendants, spy, Kāyastha, Buddhist monk, Judge, Śreṣṭhin, Cāṇḍālas and a player's association. Here again we see the King giving out the sentence and not the Judge. A very cosmopolitan society is depicted which cannot be pushed into a hierarchical framework on the basis of the didactic literature.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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<sup>2</sup> Jiwanji Jamshedji Modi, “The Viś-Kanyā or Poison-Damsels of Ancient India”, Illustrated by the story of Susan Ramashgar in the Persion Burzo- Nameh, *Folklore*, Vol. 38, No, 4 (1927), p. 326.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert H Gowen, “The Indian Machiavelli or Political theory in India two thousand years ago,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (June 1929) p. 181. The Academy of Political Science.

<sup>5</sup> M. R. Kale (ed & tr.), Viśākhadatta *Mudrārākshasa* with a commentary of *Dhundirāja*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> R. S. Pandit, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Suvira Jaiswal, “Female Images in the Arthasāstra”, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 29, No. ¾ 2001, p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Rekha Rani Sharma, “Slavery in the Mauryan period”, *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1978), p. 190.

<sup>11</sup> M. R. Kale, op. cit., p. 190.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>16</sup> M. R. Kale, op. cit., p. 203.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> M.R. Kale (tr.), *Mṛichchhakaṭika of Śūdraka*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> A. B. Keith, *The Sanskrit Drama in its origin, development, theory and practice*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 128.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 140.

<sup>26</sup> Shalini Shah, “In the Business of Kāma: Prostitution in Classical Sanskrit Literature from seventh to the thirteenth centuries,” *The Medieval History Journal*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002, p. 152.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>28</sup> M.R. Kale (tr.), *Mṛichchhakaṭika of Śūdraka*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982, p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>32</sup> M.R. Kale, op.cit., p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 311.