

Social aspects in the *Mudrārākṣasa* of Viśākhadatta

Dr. Subhajyoti Borgohain

Abstract

The *Mudrārākṣasa* of Viśākhadatta is one of the great Sanskrit plays which have been able to occupy by virtue of its various qualities, a unique position in the world of dramatic literature. It is of seven Acts. It is a drama based on political intrigues of Cāṇakya, the minister of the Maurya king Candragupta of *Pāṭaliputra*. This Cāṇakya had destroyed the Nanda dynasty and placed Candragupta on the throne as the first Maurya emperor. To make Candragupta secure, Cāṇakya presses Rākṣasa, the former minister of the Nandas into the service of their Maurya successor as a minister. The reconciliation of Rākṣasa was not an easy task as he still professed loyalty to his former patron. But the task was accomplished through a certain 'signet ring'. Rākṣasa being won by a signet ring is the principal theme of the play. In this drama, the dramatist shows the social and political conditions of that age and his aim is to depict the picture of the skilful application of the political ways in proper time and proper place. He has discussed different aspects of politics- administration, tackling the enemies and applies suitable tricks in proper place etc. In this play, there is no bloodshed, no fighting, no clash of battlefield, yet the enemy is perturbed and defeated and proper application of very sharp intelligence and policy which accomplish the enemy to surrender to the victor. The historical method has been adopted along with the textual to address the objective cited above.

Keywords: Marriage, Caste system, Food and drink, Religious sacraments, Teacher and the taught, Family relation etc.

Viśākhadatta's *Mudrārākṣasa* is one of the great dramas of Sanskrit literature. It plays a great position among the dramatic composition by the distinguished Sanskrit writers. This drama is of seven acts. The main theme of this play is the reconciliation of Rākṣasa, the faithful minister of the fallen dynasty of Nandas. Cāṇakya, traditional master of statecraft wants to win him over. As his service of Candragupta Mayura, he was able to know his ability and honesty and has been established on the throne by Cāṇakya's cleverness and his own bravery *Mudrārākṣasa* is based on the political intrigue. The dramatist shows the social and political condition of that age and his aim is to depict the picture of the skilful applications of the political ways in proper time and proper place. He has discussed different aspects of politics- administration, tackling the enemies and applies suitable contrivances in proper place etc. In this drama, there is no bloodshed, no fighting, no conflict in the battlefield-yet the enemy is perturbed and defeated and proper applications of very sharp intelligence and policy which accomplish the enemy to surrender to the fiction. Of all the Sanskrit dramas, *Mudrārākṣasa* remains one of the most widely celebrated and oft performed in the west. The *Mudrārākṣasa* provides us sufficient materials for social studies. A full and graphic picture of the then society of India is delineated in this drama.

Viśākhadatta is a keen observer and therefore he draws a vivid picture of social life of the people. A humble attempt has been made here to bring out the social aspects of the Indian society as depicted in the *Mṛcchakatika*.

1) Marriage:

Marriage is one of the universal social institutions. It is established by human society to control and regulate the sex life of man. It is closely connected with the institution of family. As Westermarck has remarked- "Marriage is rooted in the family rather than the family in the marriage." Marriage is an institution of society which can have very different implications in different cultures.¹ Marriage unites man and woman in the social and religious bonds. A man is a half man without a wife.² Yājñavalkya in his *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* says that a man a man who is *Brāhmaṇa* or *Kṣetriya* or *Vaiśya* or *Śudra*, he is unfit for religious duties without a wife.³ Kālidāsa opines that the marriage is the best relation between man and woman which ties them in life-long union.⁴ It is said in the Hindu mythology that the husband and wife have a perpetual union from birth to birth. Kauṭilya in his *Arthasāstra* narrates the eight types of marriage.⁵ According to him, *Brāhma* is the most superior marriage and *Gāndharva* is the marriage with the mutual consent of lovers.⁶ The *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* states that a person who is unmarried is unholy.⁷ Manu says that a perfect man is he who has his wife and child.⁸ In the Smṛtis, the eight forms of marriage are- *Brāhma*, *Dvaiva*, *Ārṣa*, *Prājāpatya*, *Asura*, *Gāndharva*, *Rākṣasa* and *Paiśāsa*.⁹

From the play *Mudrārākṣasa*, we have not any delineation about the forms of marriage prevailing in the society. But in the Act I, we see that a married woman was imagined to be difference on her husband.¹⁰ Again in the Act VI, remarriage seems to be permitted among the family of the dead husband for all classes of people. The remarriage was only low classes woman or character.¹¹

2) Caste system:

The term 'caste' is derived from the Spanish word 'caste' meaning 'breed' or 'lineage'. The Portuguese used the term 'caste' first to denote the divisions in the Indian caste system. The word 'caste' also signifies 'race' or 'kind'. The Sanskrit word for caste is '*Varṇa*' which means 'colour'. The popular equivalent of caste is '*Jāti*'.¹² A *Jāti* is an endogamous hereditary social group that has a name and a combination of attitudes. All members of a *Jāti* are expected to according to their *Jāti* attributes, and each members shares has *Jāti* status in the social hierarchy of village, locality in India.¹³ In the *Puruṣasūkta* of the *Ṛgveda*, the four kinds of castes was first referred. Here, it is narrated that the four castes *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣetriya*, *Vaiśya* and *Śudra* originated from the mouth, arms, thighs and legs of the creator.¹⁴ In the *Manusmṛhitā* also, the divisions of the four castes are found.¹⁵

Brāhmaṇa (the priests):

In the *Gītā*, it is said that a *brāhmaṇa* born of his nature are self control, calmness, severity of manners of life, purity, patience, integrity, knowledge of *Veda* etc.¹⁶ The Śāstras prohibit a *brāhmaṇa* to drink wine. According to Manu, drinking wine is a great sin.¹⁷

Kṣetriya (warriors and nobility):

The kṣetriyas are so famous for their valour, courage and patriotism. They are great warriors. In the *Gītā*, the nature of *kṣetriya* is heroism, abundance, and resolution, full of contrivances etc.¹⁸

Vaiśya (farmers, trader and artisans):

According to Manu, the duties of *Vaiśya* are protection of the cattle, charity and performance of sacrifice, study of the Vedas, commerce and agriculture.¹⁹ The *Gītā* also mentions the nature of the *Vaiśya*.²⁰

Śūdra (tenant farmers and servants):

The *Śūdra* is the fourth class of the people. Manu says that for a *Śūdra* service to the three classes without any secret envy is the only work.²¹ In the *Gītā* also, it is stated that the people who appoint themselves in the service of upper class people.²²

Manu in his *Manusāhita* regards Candalas as the lowest of the *Śūdra* class people.²³

Brāhmaṇas enjoyed a high and respectful position in the then society. People honoured them for their high standard of purity. On the religious occasions people invited them to take dinner and given good payment of fees (*dakṣiṇā*) to them. As religious gifts the Brāhmaṇas have received the ornaments and other things. Some Brāhmaṇas were expert in politics and other Śāstras also. Some Brāhmaṇas had done their works as minister or spies. Others were learned in the Vedic lore.²⁴ The *Kāyastha* was so popular for beautiful handwriting. On the other hand, they were interested in politics also.²⁵ *Vanik* was popular for incardinate desire for wealth and they collected a large quantity of wealth. When their wealth are demanded in the occasion then the *Vanik* class of people were prepared to fasten each and everything belonging to them even their wives and children also. On account of a friend the *Vanik* could endure punishment. Even he could entrust himself to the fire or hang to death. In the drama *Mudrārākṣasa*, Candanadāsa is a man of *Vanik* class and he undergoes for the sake of his friend Rākṣasa. In those days, Candālas were considered as none caste people who is not to be touched.

3) Food and drink:

No living being can live without food. It is prime requirement of life. It is aptly mentioned in the *Cāndogyopaniṣad* that it is food which enables a man to use all his faculties²⁶ and the purity of thought depends upon the purity of food.²⁷

The Upaniṣadic word denoting food appears to be *anna* which is derived from the root *ad* (to eat) and means that which is eaten. In the Brāhmaṇas, many items of food have been mentioned. In the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, various products of food were mentioned i. e. *Dhānā*, *Karambha*, *Parivāpa*, *Purodāśa*, *Payasyā* etc.²⁸ The fleshes of sterile cow, ox, goat and sheep were favourite items of food in

the Vedic age. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* states that an ox or a sterile cow had to be slaughtered when a king or any venerable person became a guest.²⁹ In the time of Viśākhadatta, flesh was regarded as the best kind of food. People sold the flesh or meat in their shops regularly.cf.

kanya tivra visaprayogavisamam krtva krtaghna tvaya
visrambhapravanah pura mama pita nitah kathasesatam/
sampratyahitagauravena bhavata mantradhikare ripao
*prarabdham pralayaya mansavadaho vikretumete vayam/*³⁰

In *Mudrārākṣasa*, people considered drinking as a vice. But in festive occasions, people gratified themselves in wine to some extent. Woman and hunting were vices and the people mostly avoided them. The royal servants who were addicted to any of these they were responsible to be punished. We see that Bhadrabhaṭa and Puruṣadatta have been removed from their office as they were *strīmadyamṛgayāśīla*.³¹

4) Religious sacraments:

Religious norms and practices give rise to different social rules, someone has to carry on. Religion as social institution has two aspects- structural and functional. The structure of religion includes theologies, creeds, practices, rituals, sects and symbols. Religion is a matter of belief. It is nothing but man's belief in supernatural or superhuman forces. Religious belief is the cognitive aspect of religion. It tries to explain the nature and origin of sacred things.

The discussion on Religion or Dharma is found in the old scriptures like in the Purāṇas, Manusmṛtis, *Gītā* etc. In the *Smṛtiśāstra*, dharma is described as the main topic of discussion.³² It is mentioned in the *Manusmṛti* that the Vedas, the smṛtis, *sadācāra* and self-content are the main qualities of dharma.³³ In the *Mahābhārata* also, the definition of dharma is found.³⁴

The drama *Mudrārākṣasa* provides us some information about religious sacraments. In those days, on religious occasions or festival days like moon-eclipse, people invite Brāhmaṇas to take up dinner and give them *dakṣiṇā*. Religious usages and ceremonies were performed with reference to the relatives and friends.³⁵ At the funeral ceremonies it was the rule to offer all the belongings of the dead to the learned Brāhmaṇas. Religious gifts were commonly recognized and a man gave all his wealth to the poor people before immolation.³⁶ In this play, the custom of *anumāraṇa* is commonly seen. A friend did not hesitate to burn himself in the fire or hanged himself on behalf of other friend. We find to see that Bāṇa and Kālidāsa said against this custom of *anumāraṇa*. This custom of *anumāraṇa* is

not compulsory at that time for the people. This is seen in our play that after his father's death Malayaketu's mothers were not immolating and they were living after their husband's death.

5) Teacher and the taught:

According to the Dharmaśāstras, there are three types of teacher. They are- *Guru*, *Āchārya* and *Upādhyāya*. A teacher was held in high esteem because of his both scholarship and excellence of character. In the *Manusmṛiti*, Manu says that if a *Brāhmaṇa* has no knowledge of Vedas or Śāstras, he is a *Brāhmaṇa* only for his name just as wooden elephant or leather made deer do not possess the qualities associated with their names.³⁷

In the time of Viśākhadatta, there was a good relation between the teacher and the taught. In that time, the taught or the students respected fully to their teachers and they paid attention for their learning also. In our play, a student says to the spy about their preceptor Cāṇakya thus: "(Angrily), Fie upon you, fool! Do you pretend to be better conversant with Dharma than our preceptor?" and "Do you wish to rob our preceptor of (i. e. assume) his omniscience."³⁸

The pupils were very obedience to their preceptors and gained knowledge from them. Sometimes it is seen that pupils paid small politeness to their preceptors and abused them also. Such example is found in the 3rd Act of the *Mudrārākṣasa* where the king Candragupta says thus: "My mind has as it were begun to enter the very cavity of the earth though I overstepped the limits of respectfulness by the command of His Honour himself. How, indeed, does not shame rend the hearts of those who really slight their preceptors?"³⁹ On some other places we see that the preceptors can control the disciples. The preceptors sometimes angry with their disciples otherwise tried to understand them also. This is found from the mouth of Cāṇakya in the 1st Act of the drama.⁴⁰

6) Family relation:

The family is the most important primary group in society. It is the most basic of all social groupings. It is the first and the most immediate social environment to which a child is exposed. The family, as an institution is universal. It is the most permanent and the most pervasive of all social institutions. All societies large and small, primitive and civilized, ancient and modern have some form of family or the other. The word 'family' has been taken over from Latin word 'Famulus' which means a servant. In Roman law, the word denoted a group of producers and slaves and other servants as well as members connected by common descent or marriage. Originally, family consisted of a man and woman with a child or children and servants. In the *Manusamhitā*, Manu states that the activities of a housewife are child bearing, showing hospitability towards guests and taking care of the family members.⁴¹

In ancient times, we see the glimpse of family relation. In the period of Viśākhadatta, the husband loved his wife very much and the wife always does her duty towards her husband. When the husband sets out on a journey then the wife send off him with affection. The wife always looks after her child and her family well when her husband was not present at home. She was loved towards her child and

served as a guide to him. In the *Abhijñānaśakuntalā* of Kālidāsa, Śakuntalā's father Kaṇva also said about the duty of a wife to her husband.

cf. *śuśruṣasva gurunkuru priyasakhīvṛttim sapatnījane*
bhartuviprakṛtāpi roṣaṇatayā māṣma pratīpam gamah/
bhūyiṣṭham bhava dakṣinā parijane bhāgyesanutsekinī
yāntyevam ḡrhiṇīpadaṁ yuvatayo vāmāḥ kulasyādhayaḥ//⁴²

Sometimes it is seen that the husband was not so loved and dutiful. He was not thinking seriously for the safety of his wife and children before going away from home. He was not heistant to keep them with a friend for safety. We see in our play that Rākṣasa kept his family with his friend Candanadāsa in his serious case.

In the *Mudrārākṣasa*, we see a deep relation between two true friends. In Rākṣasa's serious task, Candanadāsa keeps the wife and the child of Rākṣasa in his own house with great risk. In the end when Candanadāsa was in crime he was being led to the place of execution by the executioners. Then he was meeting with his family. His wife refused to return from him. Candanadāsa tries to cheer her up by saying that he is dying for a friend. Then his wife would follow him in his death. He reminds her of her son whom at least she must live. The son doing so asks what he should do, bereaved of his father. The son loved his father very much and he was respected for his father. He feels helpless.

As a true friend Rākṣasa's role is not less important. After a long period of separation of his friend when Rākṣasa knew that Candanadāsa was in execution then Rākṣasa ran over to Candanadāsa and requested candālas not to execute Candanadāsa. He asks them to place the garland of culprit on his own neck. He says that he was only partially imitated his good deed. After all, in that time a friend remains faithful and he was not fear to keep his friend's family in his own risk. Faithless friends were not wanting. People did not give importance to the faithful friends. Sons were much obedient to their fathers and always respect them.

7) Theistic ideas:

Theistic ideas mean who believes in God. In the *nāndī* verse of the play *Mudrārākṣasa*, it is delineated that the God Shiva is supporting both the *Śaśīkalā* and the Gaṅgas on his head and his wife Pārvatī asks the question the name of them.⁴³ Again, in the 2nd verse of the Act I, the dramatist described Siva's body which is daubed with *bhaṣma*.⁴⁴ In the *bharatavākya* of this play, God Viṣṇu is also delineated whose task and who had assumed the form of the Boar fitted to grant protection, the earth, the yore, clung, amidst universal destruction.

cf. *vārāhīmātmayonestanumavanavidhāvāsthitasyānurupām*

yasya prāgdantakoṭim pralayaparigatā śīśriye bhūtadhātrī/

mlecchairudvijyamānā bhujayugamadhunā saṁsritā rājamūrteḥ

*sa śrīmadvandhubhrtyaściramavatu mahīm pāṛthivaścandraguptaḥ*⁴⁵

In those days, people worshipped to the new moon. We find such example in the Act VI. 10. In some places of the drama, sun was also as worshipped by the people.⁴⁶

8) Credulous beliefs:

Credulous belief means unsuspecting beliefs. It is commonly applied to beliefs and practices surrounding luck, prophecy and certain spiritual beings, particularly the belief that future events can be foretold by specific unrelated prior events. There are various kinds of such beliefs in different countries of the world. The number '13' is an unlucky number. It is a bad omen if someone calls us from behind when we are to go somewhere. To see a black cat crossing the way is a very bad sign. The crying owl or a raven or even the mewling of a cat is an unlucky thing. To see a man carrying an empty bucket means bad luck. There are scores of such credulous beliefs.

In the age of Viśākhadatta, credulous beliefs are also accepted by the people. The people believed the moon- eclipse which was caused by the wicked graham *ketu* swallowing the moon.⁴⁷ On the occasions, people were feeding the Brāhmaṇas as it was considered as their religious duty. The idea of foreboding evil was also seen in the then society. The spectacle of a snake was considered as ill-omens. In the same way, the palpitation of the left eye was also regarded as inauspicious. Such example found in the 1st Act of the *Mudrārākṣasa- (vāmākṣispandanam sūsayitvā ātmagatam) katham prathamameva sarpadarśanam*/

Sometimes, people considered the credulous beliefs as the God of death and his *paṭa*. Man live by means of that *Yama* or the God of death who kills all people. He takes away the struggling life of those who are devoted to other deities.⁴⁸ *Yama* helps the man by Citragupta. Such example is found in the Act I.⁴⁹

9) Heterodox:

In the time of Viśākhadatta, two heterodox systems i. e. Buddhism and Jainism flourished.

Jainism: At that time, the sight of a necked Jain was considered to be very ill- omen. In the *Mudrārākṣasa* it is found that a *kṣapaṇaka* is hated by the people.⁵⁰ Because the *kṣapaṇaka* presented a detestable sight, so his appearance was too much detestable.

Buddhism: Buddhism also flourished in the then society. In the Act VII of the drama we find an example of Buddhism.

cf. *duṣkālepi kalāvasajjanarusao prānaih param rakṣatā*

nītam yena yaśasvinātilaghutāmouśīnarīyam yaśah/

buddhānāmapi ceṣṭitam susaritaih kliṣṭam viśuddhātmanā

pujārhopi sa yatkrte tava gato vadhyatvameṣomi saḥ//⁵¹

10) Masters and servants:

In those days, masters were very kind to their servants. Yet some masters were very apprehension of danger. Cāṅkya was such a master. Master in that time always tried to solve the problems of their servants at their bad conditions. Again, servants were very faithful to their masters. Servants were quietly submissive to their masters and so they could not did any task without masters.

cf. *kule lajjāyām ca svayaśāsi ca māne ca vimukhaḥ*

śarīram vikrīya kṣaṇikadhanalobhāddhanavati/

tadājñā kuvāṇo hitamahitamityetadadhunā

vicārātikrāntaḥ kimiti paratanthro vimṛṣati//⁵²

Servant's feelings are like a dog's life.

cf. *bhetavyam nṛpateṣṭataḥ sacivato rājñastato vallabhā*

danyebhyaśca vasanti yasya bhavane labdhaprasādā viṭāḥ/

dainyādunmukhadarśanāpalapanaiḥ piṇḍārthamāyasyataḥ

sevām lāghavakāriṇinkṛtadhiyaḥ sthāne svavṛttim viduḥ//⁵³

Notes and references:

1. Sociology-Principles of Sociology with an introduction to social thought by C. N. Shankar Rao, p. 327
2. *Hindu Saṃskāra*, p. 261
3. *YVSMT*, I. 51
4. *Kālidāsa: A critical study*, p. 324
5. *AŚ*, III. 2
6. *MS*. III. 21
7. *TB*. 2. 2. 2. 6

8. *MS. IX. 45*
9. *ibid. III. 21*
YVSMT. I. 58-61
10. *MR. p. 32*
11. *ibid. VI. 5*
12. *Sociology-Principles of Sociology with an introduction to social thought by C. N. Shankar Rao, p. 390*
13. *Jaypalan. N., Indian society and social institution, p. 32*
14. *RV. X. 90. 12*
15. *MS. I. 87*
16. *Gītā. XVIII. 42*
17. *MS. XI. 54*
18. *Gītā. XVIII. 19. MS. I. 90*
20. *Gītā. XVIII. 44*
21. *MS. I. 91*
22. *Gītā. XVIII. 44*
23. *MS. V. 85*
24. *MR. I.*
25. *ibid. I. p. 30*
26. *CHU. 7. 9. 1*
27. *ibid. 7. 26. 2*
28. *AB. 2-8. 5*
29. *ibid. 1-3, 4*
30. *MR. V. 21*
31. *ibid. III. 248*
32. *MS. II. 10*



33. *ibid.* II. 12

34. *MBH. Karṇa L. XIX. 57- 58, Śānti C. IX. 10-11*

35. *MR.* p. 171

36. *ibid.*

37. *MS.* II. 157

38. *MR.* I. p. 34

39. *ibid.* III. 33

40. *ibid.* I. p. 22

41. *MS.* IX. 27

42. *AŚ.* IV. 4

43. *MR.* I. 1

44. *ibid.* I. 2

45. *ibid.* VII. 18

46. *ibid.* p. 120

47. *ibid.* I. 6

48. i) *ibid.* I. 17

ii) *ibid.* I. 18

49. *ibid.* I. 20

50. *ibid.*

*katham kṣapaṇaka āgacchati/ yāvadsyāśukulabhūtaṁ darśanaṁ mama saṁmatameva/ tasmāna
pariharāmi/*

51. *ibid.* VII. 5

52. *ibid.* V. 4

53. *ibid.* III. 14

