

## **Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia**

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**Lecture 09**

**Sanskrit Dramaturgy and Rasa Theory V**

*Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religion in South Asia. We are discussing Sanskrit dramaturgy and Rasa theory. Today our discussion will be in the light of Sudraka's Mrichhakatika. Mrichhakatika means The Little Clay Cart. Sudraka's Mrichhakatika is one of the earliest known Sanskrit plays, and it is assumed to have been written by Sudraka, who was a king that ruled between the third and fifth centuries BC. Mrichhakatika comprises ten acts.*

*It is a ten-act drama about the story of Cārudatta. Cārudatta who is an honest but impoverished Brahmin native of Ujjvayini, and his love interest Vasantasenā, a beautiful and pure-hearted courtesan from the same city. The play is entirely built on Sudraka's imagination and it does not draw inspiration from any previously written epic, either primary or secondary epics. Mrichhakatika is unique in several ways within the entire corpus of the classical Sanskrit tradition and artworks.*

*The play is one of the best examples of Prakarana. Prakarana, which is one of the ten types of "rupakas." Now let us understand what Prakarana is. Prakarana is a prominent type of Sanskrit theatre, which etymologically means to do something perfectly. And Mrichhakatika is the only Sanskrit drama that embodies this spirit of Prakarana.*

*Now we see that Prakrit and Sanskrit, these two traditions have very different sets of audience. Prakrit became an efficient vehicle of communication in Sudraka's hands when he is writing Mrichhakatika, and it did justice to express the complex mental processes of the common people, people that are not necessarily linked to the royal lineages, the royal personages. And so it, in a way it is the mouthpiece, it finds itself as expressing the sentiments, the voices of the common, the grassroots and the uneducated. Since Prakrit as a dialect was closer to the life's realities, it is, it left a peculiar, a typical impact on the reader and the viewer. This is to say that it is definitely a language closer to the common man, directly identifiable with the common man's sentiments.*

*Prakrit with its rich vocabulary of the dialect and the drama in Prakrit being packed with, you know, movements, gestures, attitudes of the characters, was able to accomplish what a fully developed and highly sophisticated Sanskrit tradition might have possibly, you know, not achieved, something that might have not been achieved by the fully developed Sanskrit tradition in terms of plebeian representation, a more inclusive, a more comprehensive representation of the then society. So, Sanskrit is characterized by its brevity, its suggestion and emphasis. Prakrit, on the other hand, gains its agency or its meaning through colloquial usage, local, you know, forms and usage. And the combination of Sanskrit with Prakrit in this play is doing wonders for the depth of communication. We see in Mrichhakatika communication happening at different levels, where we employ both Prakrit and Sanskrit here.*

*The guiding principle in Mrichhakatika is the comic approach. It holds the message, it holds out the message that the main function of art as Bharat Muni himself would agree is to entertain and let people know that a society might be very difficult and complex to handle, but in the end all the problems are manageable. So, some kind of optimistic note. The issue in Mrichhakatika is this crisis that manifests itself in the protagonist's circumstance. The protagonist is a victim of circumstances and he is rendered poor by these different, you know, negative things happening in his life.*

*So, coming back to Prakarana, Prakarana must represent contemporary society and culture. Mrichhakatika is not an exception in this sense, and the play may be viewed as a study of social realism. It is written through the prism of social realism. The play chooses a theme of love, but then a very unconventional type of love that is taking place between a bankrupt Brahmin merchant Cārudatta and rich courtesan Vasantasenā, and this love story is set boldly against a backdrop of contemporary urban society, which does not so much derive its essence from the literary wealth of the Puranas and the epics. Mrichhakatika is a remarkable work in the tradition of ancient Sanskrit literature.*

*It is a play about a realistic picture of metropolitan India's socio-political situation at that time. So, Mrichhakatika ideally cannot be called as a Nataka or a natakiyakriti. In that sense, Nataka denotes the representation of the sacred and the godly in a form that indicates the lofty and profound. And in the typical idea of Nataka, the Sanskrit Nataka, the ordinary, the life of the ordinary people, the lives of the ordinary people are not covered, not so much shown. Mrichhakatika is not accorded the value of high drama in which kings, gods and mythological beings predominate, and this is like I said the usual trait of Sanskrit artwork.*

*Instead, the category of Mrichhakatika is a Prakarana. So, a lot of critics would say they are of the opinion that, had the play been about courtly affairs including some kind of change in polity or political order, had it been about the lofty questions of wars among kings and sustaining or confiscating of enormous territories, had it been about the grand affairs, it could have had a better footing, a better visibility. This work by Sudraka is a Prakarana type and it is representing the episode of Cārudatta's affair with Vasantasenā, and it in the end closes with a happy union. So, the fundamental requirement of a Prakarana, the class to which Vasantasenā belongs is that a drama be inventive or original in nature, that the narrative should be a creation of the poet, it should be Kavi Kalpita, it should be in the Kalpana, in the creative you know imagination of the poet, it should be based on worldly life and centered on the acts of men and women. So, as are the requirements of the type of this composition Prakarana, the main theme in Mrichhakatika has been presented in ten acts and the predominant sentiment or rasa is love or shringar and the Nayak's trait is Dhiraprashaanta (deep and calm).*

*Cārudatta is represented through deep and calm traits. As a Prakarana, the hero of Mrichhakatika, a Brahmin named Cārudatta is a very generous young man. We see that because of his charitable nature, his contributions to unworthy unlucky friends and also due to his general public welfare he is doomed, he has become bankrupted and impoverished. And yet, despite his poor living conditions, he has maintained a reputation in Ujjvayini as an honest and upright man endowed with the rare gift of knowledge and many men continue to seek his advice. So, he completely defies the stereotype of the greedy Brahmin that was also forming.*

*We have this figure being represented through one of the stock types of Vidushaka. I have already discussed that. Cārudatta is just the opposite of that. He has lost all his material wealth, but he is spiritually so pure and he is such a respectable man that even despite his poverty, the denizens of Ujjvayini respect and honor him for his knowledge and his character. So, Cārudatta has two heroines.*

*One is Dhuta who is born of a noble family and she is therefore a kulaja. On the other hand, we have the main heroine Vasantasenā who is a public woman or a ganika. This kind of intermixing of you know, or bringing two types of women in juxtaposition is unusual in Sanskrit drama. On the one hand, we have the kulaja woman, a highborn woman. On the other hand, we have the main heroine who is a ganika or courtesan.*

*This makes the composition of Mrichhakatika a mixed or samkirna type of prakarana. The protagonist of the play Cārudatta as such does not belong to a noble or royal lineage. He is not related to kings. And we see that Vasantasenā is a courtesan and yet she bears exemplary attitude and very dignified behavior that impresses the audience. So, the nobility of these*

*characters are not derived from the social status or from their birth, but for the individual virtues and behavior that they possess.*

*Mrichhakatika has a tale which is understood as partly real and partly the author's imagination, and it is not so much derived from any epic material. It is not drawing so much on epic material. Sudraka emphasizes his imagination and his creative force, which provides the greatest form of theatre known as the drama of creation. So, Prakarana is different from a Nataka. This is something I have been telling earlier also.*

*The most significant distinction between Prakarana and Nataka is that a Prakarana does not derive its content from the epic tradition, but rather from the playwright's innovations or creativity. The length is typically between 5 to 10 acts of various lengths. These each act could be of various lengths. The characters are derived from the society's middle- and lower-classes. So, a king if at all present is very rarely seen in a prakarana.*

*Either the king is not there altogether or the king is rarely present. The themes are primarily about mundane acts of vengeance, political intrigues and familial feuds. In a way, we see that there are clear similarities between what the prakarana is trying to depict and the classical European comedy which is defined by Aristotle. The action in the case of prakarana takes place primarily on the streets outside of the palace. So, it is not confined to the precincts of the palace and the setting is nearly always urban and metropolitan and it is secular in nature, it is not otherworldly.*

*In many ways, a prakarana is a more inclusive representation of its contemporary time and it contains a more sharp, more incisive social commentary as compared to a Nataka. Mrichhakatika is deeply influenced by the political upheaval and personal intrigues. The figure of this villain that we have, his name is Samsthānaka, also known as Shakara. So, Samsthānaka or Shakara is a vulgar courtier who is aggressively pursuing Vasantasenā. His longing for Vasantasenā, his desire to overpower Vasantasenā and his fruitless attempts play a key role in this drama.*

*He is constantly in very vulgar fashion trying to overtake or trying to overpower this courtesan Vasantasenā, and his futile attempts form a major theme in the play. So, Samsthānaka appears to be a fool and a villain and his villainy is derived, is defined by his pettiness. And we also have the figure of Sarvilaka, the thief that adds to the play's humorous tone. So, that is basically where prakarana is coming from. It deals with the anomalous characters in the society that do not find any mention typically in a Sanskrit artwork.*

*We have the thief who evokes laughter, we have a villain who is more funny than, you know, pejorative or harmful. His overtures, his wrong overtures, wrong approaches to Vasantasenā makes him a very petty villain. And in the end, the protagonists themselves are also very, you know, they are a departure from the typical or the traditional idea of noble. They are not noble in the sense of being born in lofty families. One is a ganika, the other is a bankrupt, you know, Brahmin.*

*And the concept of a Brahmin trader wanting to marry a courtesan itself is also very unusual, very unconventional, usually sneered at. People would scoff and sneer at such an idea, but he successfully unites with Vasantasenā in the end. So, a lot of social bars, a lot of social, you know, gaps or kind of social bar, like I was saying, differences are overcome through a prakarana, an unusual writing such as Mrichhakatika. It defies, it plays around and finally resists a lot of stereotype. It is also in a way mixed nature, it is hybrid nature, goes on to say a lot of things.*

*For example, the fact that Sanskrit plays deal only with noble lives and noble matters, noble affairs, royal affairs. Here we see that we have the hero who is not a king or a minister, right. At the same time, it is revisiting the stereotype of the greedy Brahmin, a Brahmin that can be very poor and yet so, you know, such a respectable character. A courtesan, the stock character or the stereotypical character of courtesan is that of a lewd woman, a lascivious woman. Here we see Vasantasenā as so upright and so dignified that it revisits the idea, entire idea of Ganika.*

*So, it is in a way playing around with all these stereotypes and, you know, the fact like I said that Sanskrit, you know, belongs only to or deals only with upper-class affairs or lofty affairs. Here it is a very secular, a very mundane theme being dealt with, where and it is very all-inclusive where even a villain, even a thief finds his place or is mentioned somewhere in the narrative, and even the idea of a king is revisited, given that Sudraka himself is a king. He is a king who is making this kind of an experimentation. He is mixing the Sanskrit with the Prakrit. So, a king's interest in the common affairs, the urban common affairs in social realism is fantastic.*

*It is remarkably and very notably represented in Mrichhakatika. So, the drama concludes with Cārudatta's unexpected turn of fate, the exposure of the miscreants or the villains and eventually a political victory and a happy romantic union. With this, I am going to stop my*

*lecture here today and let us meet with another round of discussions in another lecture. Thank you.*