Glimpsing a Revolution through the Chinks of the Text: Deconstructing Mrichchhakatika

by Ankur Betageri (February 2016)

A still from the movie *Utsav* (1984)

Poverty and the effect it has on the psyche of man is a central theme in Shudraka's play *Mrichchhakatika*. Poverty forces the characters to explore three main life-paths: of being oriented towards this world, where everything is mediated through power and money; towards the other world, where the spirit reigns supreme; and towards another world that can emerge out of this world, through love and politics.

Charudatta's meditation on poverty, his stoic acceptance of it, and the way he is rewarded for it eventually (though not in the other world) may appear, at least to us schooled in Occidental classics, very "Christian" but this pre-Christian Prakrit play – yes, how can you call it a Sanskrit play when it has more Prakrit, or "Prakrits," than Sanskrit? – written sometime between 3rd and 1st century BCE, explores the tension between the material and the spirit world through the lives of its different characters –the dialectic that lies at the origin, not just of Christianity, but of all religions.

The Prologue of the play captures the strange and complex way this theme unfolds in everyday life. It takes place in a house unsettled by preparations for a festival. A feast is being prepared but the master of the house, the Sutradhara, is dying of hunger while his wife, the Nati, is observing a fast so that she may have the Sutradhara as her husband even in her next life. The same experience of lack, of starvation, is being experienced differently by the husband and the wife: the starvation of the husband, induced from outside, is hunger and wants to be satisfied, while the wife's starvation is voluntary which seeks a reward

in the next life. The experience of lack gets transfigured by just how it is approached: passively or wilfully; and for what it is deployed: for this world or the next. And the prologue is a playful conversation between a hungry and distressed Sutradhara and a fasting but fully-in-control Nati. This conversation, in certain ways, continues between Charudatta who bemoans his poverty and Vasantasena who sees in his poverty an opportunity for a new life; between Samsthanaka who sees Charudatta merely as an impoverished person and his friend Vita who sees him as a pond which has dried up after quenching the thirst of people, and between the unwitting Sharvilaka who steals Vasantasena's own jewels from Charudatta's house to present them to her for the release of Madanika, and the clever Madanika who turns Sharvilaka the thief into an emissary from Charudatta—the conversation is between two people who see the same situation in diametrically opposite ways and only one person is right because that person makes the situation capable of being acted upon, capable of being transformed through the exertion of one's will. The right approach is defined by that which makes a tool of the situation, or, to use Heidegger's language, that which perceives a present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) or thing-being, as a ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*) or tool-being.

Act 1 of *Mrichchhakatika* begins with a heavy-hearted Charudatta observing how his ample offering for swans and flocks of doves has dwindled to a handful of corn for the mouths of insects: it is the portrait of a man come to ruin because of his generosity and a man whose poverty is all the more painful because it restrains his generous impulse. His experience of poverty after living a life of luxury makes him feel like a dead man; on being asked by Vidushaka whether he prefers death or poverty he says death because the pain of death, he reasons, has the limit of death while the misery of poverty is limitless. Charudatta sees poverty as the first-cause that leads to progressive decadence ending in death, a psychological death whose pain is insufferable and constant ("the fire of grief that dwells in the heart"). This death is also a social death, the death of being completely isolated, being an object of contempt and of walking at a distance wearing the cloak of shame—it is a death which has come from outside and has turned his body into its home. This is an interesting detail because the state of being a social outcaste is extremely uncommon for a Brahmana though it is widely accepted as the natural condition of a Chandala, who by the conventions of Sanskrit drama can never be the hero of a play. It is as if Shudraka, censored from speaking about the plight of the socially ostracized

Chandalas, has to use the character of a Brahmana to embody the living-dead state of a Chandala. But the social ostracization that the Brahmin Charudatta experiences is not one determined by birth but one that is caused by poverty; an escape from the state of poverty is then what Shudraka proposes – given his constraints as a Sanskrit dramatist, one can interpret – as a straightforward and limited solution to what would today be called the Dalit problem. But though the Brahmana understands his social degradation as a result of poverty having taken residence in the metaphorical house of his body the events that eventually transform his life can be read as Shudraka's radical solutions to the problem of social degradation. We can call them the solution of radical love and the solution of political revolution.

The narrative of radical love begins with Vasantasena, a courtesan who has fallen in love with Charudatta after seeing him in the Garden of Lord Kama, slipping into his decrepit old house by extinguishing the lamp "with the hem of her garment." On meeting Charudatta, whose poverty does not allow her to stay with him as a courtesan, she asks for the favour of leaving her ornaments "as a deposit" in his house. When he protests that his house is not fit for keeping deposits she reminds him that deposits are entrusted not to houses but to persons, an interesting point since it is the metaphor of dilapidated house, and not his person, which is seen as the source of his degradation. Vasantasena later tells her maidservant Madanika that she deposited the ornaments so as to have a reason to visit Charudatta again, and so, in a sense, what she deposits with Charudatta are not her ornaments but her love. And it is Charudatta's poverty which makes her relate to him in a way that would have been impossible had he been rich: with the rich Charudatta she would have had the conventional unproblematic relationship of a courtesan, but the poor Charudatta opens before her an impossible chasm, a chasm that can only be leapt over by the radical and excessive emotion of love.

So, at the very beginning of the play we see a psychic transaction taking place, a psychic transaction that is typical of religiosity; Charudatta's impoverishment which has made an outcaste of him, instead of being seen as a disadvantage, turns him into an absolute ideal that Vasantasena can only pursue by leaving behind all that is courtesan-like in her. It is as if the courtesan, the traditional gold-digger, has found an opportunity to discover a heart of gold within her; and it is only by letting go of her greedy ways that she can

make the liberating leap from the conventional transaction of give-and-take to the amorous risk of give-and-give, from calculating courtesan-ship to the courage of unconditional love, and by making this leap she escapes the bad faith of being just a coveted social role and finds existential authenticity as a person who has made a momentous choice.

2.

Samvahaka, the masseur turned gambler, is another person suffering the pangs of poverty unable to return the ten gold pieces that he has staked, and lost, in a game of dice. He is on the run and is being pursued by Maathura, the gambler who has won, and Dhutakara, another player. Samvahaka's addiction to gambling has its origin in poverty; he finds it an irresistible temptation because it offers a quick way out of poverty. "The rattling sound of dice stirs the heart of a penniless person," he says, "just as the sound of drums does that of a king who has lost his kingdom." Harassed and humiliated by fellow gamblers who have now become his creditors he is finally bailed out by Vasantasena. But on being rescued he decides to renounce the world and become a Buddhist monk. Poverty and gambling have helped him scale the very limits of a certain kind of social existence and he no longer wants to live that life. He feels he can realise his full potential as a spiritual person because while lack of money makes the worldly person vulnerable and powerless, it makes the spiritual person more powerful than the most powerful earthly power, the king. "Gambling has done to me that which places me beyond the power of all people," he says. "Now I will roam about on the king's highway freely holding up my head." So Samvahaka even as he gives up gambling to live the life of a Buddhist ascetic continues to be the quintessential gambler. His choice of monkhood has no otherworldly temptations. He stakes his life in the game of chance to claim the highest power on earth, and he does claim it when Charudatta makes him the chief of all Buddhist monasteries.

3.

If poverty kindles the flame of love in the courtesan Vasantasena and turns the masseur/gambler Samvahaka into a greater gambler as an ascetic, it transforms Sharvilaka, the lover/thief, into a revolutionary. It is Sharvilaka indeed who from being an ordinary thief becomes the "greatest of all criminals" by acting in the untimely manner of an Übermensch – and his untimely act is harnessing the

power of discontent to change the life-condition of all through revolutionary politics.

Sharvilaka is presented to us as an ambiguous character who is in two minds about his profession of thieving. On the one hand, he sees himself as a supremely skilful master-thief, the follower of Kumara Karttikeya, the patron-saint of thieves, and as someone who has read and mastered the treatises on the black arts written by Bhaskaranandin and Yogacharya. On the other hand, he is shown as someone who thinks of stealing as "cheating people when they are asleep… by no means a brave deed" and considers himself a victim who has been forced by poverty into this "degrading" profession. The act of stealing from Charudatta's house fills him with self-loathing: "Fie upon poverty on account of which one's manly nature ceases to feel disgust!" he says holding the stolen casket of ornaments, "here I am censuring this ignoble deed, but am doing it all the same!" The self-loathing also makes him revile, on a rather flimsy provocation to jealousy, his lover Madanika who is a slave at Vasantasena's mansion and to free whom he has actually stolen.

The casket of ornaments that Sharvilka steals from Charudatta's house, he learns later from Madanika, is actually Vasantasena's and Madanika convinces him to pretend as Charudatta's messenger who has come to return it. But when Sharvilaka returns the casket, Vasantasena, who has overheard the conversation between him and Madanika, decides to free Madanika by offering her as a gift to "Charudatta's messenger." But Sharvilaka, who has chosen the profession of thieving because "even a condemnable position of independence is preferable to serving others with folded hands," is not really happy with the unheroic way in which he has secured the release of Madanika. So stepping out of Vasantasena's mansion when he learns that his friend Aryaka, the cowherd's son who has been prophesized to overthrow the king, has been imprisoned by king Palaka, he doesn't think twice about coming to his rescue by sending his newly secured bride to his friend Rebhila's house. "Now I will incite to rebellion my kinsmen, the city rakes and men that have won fame through the valour of their own arms," he says as he leaves, and joins the revolutionary underground that finally manages to overthrow the oppressive regime of Palaka.

When he next appears on stage, towards the end of the last act, he has already undergone transformation as a triumphant revolutionary who has helped Aryaka, the proletarian leader, ascend to the throne. The new regime bestows on

Charudatta, the socially ostracised friend of the revolution, the kingdom of Kusavati. And Charudatta, with his new powers, we are told, “smothers” the villain Samsthanaka “with kindness” by pardoning him, makes Samvahaka the head of all the Buddhist monasteries in the country, frees Samsthanaka’s bonded-servant Sthavaraka who attempted to rescue him, makes the two executioners who delayed his execution the chiefs of all the Chandalas, and appoints Chandanaka, the police officer who had prevented Aryaka’s arrest when his carriage was intercepted on the road, the chief magistrate of the country. But, clearly, it is not Charudatta’s place, as the ruler of a small kingdom, to make these significant administrative appointments but since Aryaka, the cowherd’s son, cannot be allowed to displace Charudatta, the conventional Brahmin hero of the Sanskrit drama, he is forced to hold court in regal attire and send out royal decrees in the place of the real king Aryaka. While this makes the play’s ending funny and contrived, as if the telos of all the events and the strivings of all the characters is just to make the Brahmin Charudatta happier and more fortunate, it also draws our attention to the serious limitation of Sanskrit drama: it never allows real heroes and “real” historical events to take centre stage. Everything has to happen through Brahmin heroes and with the approval of reactionary Brahminism. So even something as momentous as a political revolution is turned into the rag-to-riches story of a poor Brahmana and his banal conquest of a courtesan whom he does not even respect enough to acknowledge as his lover.

4.

So while Vasantasena’s love, due to her radical stance towards poverty, is intense and religious, Charudatta’s love for her is at best lukewarm. Charudatta, almost till the very end, treats her only as an attractive courtesan; it is Arayaka, the new king, who formally changes her social status from a *ganika* (courtesan) to a *vadhu* (bride) thereby giving her the license to marry Charudatta. Charudatta is ashamed to acknowledge his relationship with Vasantasena because she is a courtesan. When the jury ask him whether Vasantasena is his friend he replies: “O officials how should I utter such a thing? Herein it is my youth that is at fault, not my character.”

Charudatta who, on losing Vasantasena’s ornaments deposited with him, can give away his wife’s expensive pearl necklace does not know how to give his heart. He seems as shackled in his desire for Vasantasena as Vasantasena is liberated in her desire for him.

And it is only when he is convinced of the death of Vasantasena (after Viraka, the police officer, reports seeing a woman's corpse being eaten away by jackals in Puspakarandaka garden) and after being repeatedly asked to confess to her murder by Samsthanaka that he is dispirited enough to make this strange comment: "I know neither of the two worlds," he says, "a woman, and especially a jewel among women."

But Vasantasena, not being dead, and rescued by the masseur-turned-Buddhist-monk Samvahaka, prevents the execution of Charudatta by presenting herself before the executioners who have been ordered to execute "the murderer of Vasantasena." And it is Vasantasena's arrival which saves Charudatta's life and reverses his fortunes: the red garment of the death row convict now "becomes a bridegroom's attire," the sacrificial garland decks him "as though he were a bridegroom" and "the sounds of the drums of execution… resemble those of nuptial drums."

5.

The rather stupid character of the play is Samsthanaka, the king's brother-in-law, the one who is completely consumed by power and wealth. Since he is a composite of two stock characters, the Fool and the Villain, the critic M.R. Kale calls him a unique character in Sanskrit drama but this also means he is more of a caricature than a real person. And everything he does in the play borders on the farcical: he loves Vasantasena, is not loved by her, he pursues her unrelentingly and unsuccessfully and when he realises that she wouldn't yield to him he tries to murder her. And assuming he has murdered her, he frames Charudatta, Vasantasena's lover, as her murderer and tries to manipulate the law court to have him executed. And when he is about to succeed Vasantasena appears on the execution ground and tells the executioners who the real culprit is.

Kale also says Samsthanaka cannot be seen as a common fool; that he is a complex character whose bumbling exterior conceals a ruthless and diabolical mind. But Samsthanaka seems to be more of a Fool who is villainous than a Villain who is foolish. But even as a caricature the ruthless and cunning Samsthanaka is a more powerful person than the "worthy" and "virtuous" Charudatta—the embodiment of impassivity. And yet Samsthanaka loses in his fight with Charudatta, not because his Machiavellian ways are ineffective but because he is not allowed by the playwright to be Machiavellian enough, both in his ruthlessness and cunning. He leaves the unconscious Vasantasena for dead when a genuinely "ruthless" villain

would have checked the pulse or heartbeat and ensured that he has killed properly; a real villain would have also gotten rid of Sthavaraka, the sole witness to the crime, instead of imprisoning him in the elephant-corniced terrace of the palace from where he can observe all the happenings in the city. He does not seem to be all that cunning either. He is too preoccupied with his personal desires to see what is happening in the kingdom; he neither senses the alienation in the former aides of king nor the brewing of the rebellion which ultimately results in dethronement and death of the king.

Also Samsthanaka's portrayal as the adversary of Charudatta is false and unconvincing as it is created solely to ensure the victory of the so-called *dhiraprashanta* ("calmly courageous") hero. Other than being stubbornly impassive and waiting for a miracle to occur, Charudatta does little to challenge Samsthanaka's false accusations of murder. In fact, he plays the role of the dead man (that he says he has become at the beginning of first act) throughout the play; he is hardly responsible for the good fortunes that befall him. He is a meek, impassive character who wins over a wilful and purposeful adversary because the gods smile upon his patient imperturbability and virtuous resignation—what could be more "Christian" than this? But anybody who is aware of the Brahminical ("Hindu") virtue of inaction – whose highest spiritual act consists in sitting in the lotus posture and concentrating attention on the tip of one's nose, whose intolerable effeminacy and spinelessness goes by the respectable name of *stithapragnata* (equanimity) – would not fail to identify it as a quintessential Brahminical ("Hindu") play. But *Mrichchhakatika* works because it becomes much more than a vehicle for Brahminical propaganda: *Mrichchhakarika*, because of its very formulaic structure, becomes a commentary on the oppressive nature of Brahminism ("Hinduism") in which real heroes like Aryaka and Sharvilaka are confined to the background, while wimps and plaster saints like Maitreya and Charudatta are made to strut about being virtuous and respectable personages of the society.

This is why Girish Karnad's transformation of the character of Samsthanaka in his cinematic rendering *Utsav,* as a tragic lover who is unable to communicate properly, and whose love Vasantasena finally reciprocates, has a touch of genius about it. Samsthanaka, as one of the three prominent characters of the play apart from Charudatta and Vasantasena, is absurd and unfortunate in many ways—he is surprisingly insistent in invoking his muddled up mythology to describe what

he sees before him; he is more feared than respected as is evident from the fact that his own friend, Vita, calls him a bastard, and the judge reviles him as a low-caste person; and he has the rather endearing handicap of pronouncing the Sanskrit/Prakrit letter 'sa' as 'sha' earning him the sobriquet of "Sha-kaara." Karnad, by making Vasantasena finally yield to Samsthanaka's love, turns this Villain-cum-Fool into a Quixotic hero and makes us look at his amorous strivings with compassion and understanding. Vasantasena too, because of her compassion, comes across as a grounded, mature and an altogether loveable person. In stark contrast to Shudraka's Vasantasena, who after being turned into the subhuman stereotype of the *vadhu* finds salvation in the patriarchal system by becoming the second wife of Charudatta, Karnad's Vasantasena emerges as a strong independent-minded woman who does not mind taking the defeated and socially derided underdog Samsthanaka as her lover. This little change gives the play a structural perfection; the only prominent character who was deprived of being transformed by "poverty", Samsthanaka, is now made the recipient of a very human and earthly salvation: Vasantasena's love. And this is all the more moving because Vasantasena loves him not as a *vadhu,* the socially tamed bride, but as a ganika, the free-spirited courtesan.

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