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# UNIT 1 SUDRAKA AND HIS PLAY *MRICHCHHAKATIKA*: AN INTRODUCTION

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, we shall be considering questions and issues related to **Sudraka**'s famous play *Mrichchhkatika*, a drama text that belongs to the beginning years of the first millennium. Keeping this in view, we shall focus upon the conditions that prevailed in that distant past and the way they were recreated in the imaginative-cultural mode by its writer. Even as this play presumably entertained the audiences of its time, it has a good dose of humour and suspense. It holds an interest for us today as well. Also, a discussion about the characters in it and the conditions that surround them is sure to help us in understanding our own social atmosphere. As a work of art, this play will reflect on other plays of its period, and the others that followed it. The problems depicted in it and the creative-aesthetic experiments its writer made while developing his scope will, offer valuable insights into the complexities we confront in our own time.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Let us first think of the important dates in relation to the writer **Sudraka** and the play. Let us admit, we face specific difficulties in this regard. It will be useful to keep in mind that the period to which the writer belongs is ancient India that, being far back in time is not easy to decipher. Particularly, in the case of literary texts of that period, determining the dates is a big issue. Either records were not kept, or they were lost in the long span of time between then and now. Yet, in the last two hundred years, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, efforts have been made to retrieve the precious treasures of ancient writing. Owing to this, a big chunk of valuable information is available today to tell us where we stood then with respect to economy, polity and social environment.

Further, we may get to know, how we might relate to this knowledge today in the middle of contemporary conflicts and issues. Literature has this dimension of the human experience, in it, there are elements that do not remain confined to interests and issues of the time when a literary text was composed. There is no doubt that predominant features of a text are taken from its period, yet,

human beings in their practices show aspects that are rooted in the recent and distant past as well as those others which are present in seed form and for this reason may come up in future, again in the coming few decades or much later.

Add to this the fact that social institutions, too, have a long life. They do not have a fixed date on which they were born, so to say. Moreover, their life-span may be relatively larger than the period in which they perform a tangible and broadly determining function. Such institutions play the role of reminding succeeding eras of a history that shows itself at the level of presenting a process like the one that is set in motion in relatively different backgrounds. Be that as it may, ancient texts do arouse interest in us and take us to scenes of life capable of shedding light on what we do and the way we respond to our world. Let us take the case of **Sudraka's** *Mrichchhakatika*. It is heard that the play was not known till its text emerged in remote Kerala in the early years of the twentieth century. At the same time though, there are bits of information about the play having been translated into a number of European languages in the latter half of the nineteenth century itself. It is possible that the Orientalists dug out the play from the vast repertoire of ancient writing in India and saw in it an outstanding dramatic composition. The emergence of the play's text from different sources in a diversity of places only added to its appeal. It also helped scholars compare one version of the text with another.

As soon as the play *Mrichchhakatika* came to light, it took the literary world by storm. Here is a play that is so relevant to our own time! It had an extremely evolved style of depiction, a dramatic form marked by consistency, wit, and objectivity. It offered a vast panorama of the ways of the time. As one went through the text, one was transported to the ancient era. In some respect, it resembled our own period. At the same time, in other respects it bore testimony to the world that produced it. The specificity of that world captured graphically in the play dazzled all. Having said that, let us now look at **Sudraka** the playwright.

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## **1.2 SUDRAKA, THE PLAYWRIGHT**

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**Sudraka**, the playwright of *Mrichchhakatika*, lived at some point of time between the first and third century A.D. The name of the writer raises the question of whether he belonged to the marginalised sections of our society. Mark the word '**Sudraka**' and consider. There may be some connection between the name of the playwright and his background that tells us the story of his antecedents and source. Contrarily or otherwise, the range and depth of the play suggest that he had a powerful literary imagination and was well acquainted with Sanskrit writings of his period, apart from being well-versed in the rich learning that ancient writing is known for.

A look at the text of the play makes clear that **Sudraka** expressed himself with equal felicity in *Sanskrit* prose and verse as well as in *Prakrit*. The latter was a dialect used by the common masses of the time. In **Sudraka's** hands, *Prakrit* became an efficient medium of communication and did justice to the complex thought processes of the semiliterate and illiterate. Since the dialect was closer to life's rhythms, it left a peculiar impact on the reader and viewer then. Today as well, it might strike us for its flow and flexibility. Its raw nature moved the reader/viewer immensely. In its time, the play's dialect helped the

audience connect with those characters that belonged to the street and learnt their linguistic skills from there. Is it not fascinating that what you see in life is presented on the stage as part of a tale, an episode, and an interesting sequence? *Prakrit* with its rich vocabulary of the dialect, the play packed with actions, gestures and stances of the characters did in a manner, what the fully evolved *Sanskrit* was not perhaps capable of doing. *Sanskrit* is driven by brevity, suggestion and focus. On the other hand, *Prakrit* draws strength from the actual usage, and, the putting together of the two in the play works wonders for the depth of communication.

There exist numerous references to **Sudraka** in writings of the ancient period. The man is remembered as a great ruler, a fine statesman, a scholar and thinker of repute, and one who knew many languages. These references turn him into a mythical figure. In view of the information we have, we may be tempted to guess whether he indeed was the writer of the play *Mrichchhakatika* that has a wide range of imagination and a close view of life at the grassroots. It is hard to surmise, for instance, that a king, howsoever knowledgeable, would be steeped in the nuances of feelings the play offers in its descriptions. It is possible that another person bearing the name **Sudraka** wrote this play and those many other plays that find mention in stray records of the period when he lived. This other **Sudraka** would have culled details of the plot and the happenings woven in it from his own sources of information and knowledge. Also, it is not necessary that an unknown figure in that period bore the name **Sudraka** that suggested origins of the man in the lower orders of society. It is possible that the writer of the play *Mrichchhakatika* thought of hiding behind an assumed name **Sudraka**.



*wikipedia.org*

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### **1.3 THE PLAY *MRICHCHHAKATIKA*: REFLECTING PERIOD OF COMPOSITION**

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Let us ask this question and see where it might lead us. Is it not an interesting fact that **Sudraka**'s *Mrichchhakatika* gives a truly realistic picture of ancient India? This is an India full of energy, passion, street-smart people crowding

the roads, quarrels and fights among the mighty and influential? In this we come across, too, the economic, political, crass as well as violent and scandalous facets of life—all thriving on what transpired really at the time. Historical accounts of the period may give us an inkling of this. Related to developments in the early centuries of the first millennium, read the following account by **D N Jha**:

*Increased commercial activity and the consequent growth of a money economy led to the proliferation of arts and crafts. ... The increase in trade demanded an efficient organization of production and distribution. Individual artisans congregated together and formed guilds; merchants also organized themselves into corporations. No less than two dozen guilds of artisans existed in this period. The guild system seems to have become the general pattern of production, facilitating high output. ... The guilds sometimes acted as trustees and bankers. ... The guilds evidently utilized the capital deposited with them to augment production and paid interest on it of the proceeds from the sale of their commodities. The possibility of the increasing output may have prompted the guilds to hire additional labour, both free labour and slaves. This naturally gave a measure of freedom to artisans and craftsmen. (134-135)*

**Jha** talks of an India active and vibrant. The increased economic activity created a platform for people to relate to one another on a plane of useful give and take. Commerce helped them increase the scope of their living beyond the narrow confines of a country market to one that, offered opportunities of expansion. As a consequence of this, preoccupations multiplied giving a chance to actors in the scene for tricks and innovative methods; these would enhance the quality of life stretching it beyond limits of sanctioned freedom. “Augmented production” and interest being paid on “proceeds for sale” indicate higher levels of participation in the entrepreneurial world of ancient India.

**Jha** has stated in the quotation that “Increased commercial activity and the consequent growth of a money economy led to the proliferation of arts and crafts.” He has provided a link between activity in society and art. You know that Literature is also placed in the category of art. Do you agree with **Jha** regarding this link? If you do, you would have the idea that ancient Literature drew useful influences from the life of the times. Also, if the prevailing life had a strong economic activity working in it, the Literature of the period will also carry an impact of that activity in it. You may, then, see **Sudraka’s** *Mrichchhakatika* in a new light. Let us examine the impact of the prevailing economic condition on the literary writings of the period next.

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## 1.4 IMPACT OF MATERIAL SITUATIONS ON LITERARY WRITING

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Let us further extend the point raised in the previous section in our discussion. In view of the quotation given above on the economic scene, we may think of the issue of fantasy working on a writer’s mind. Such a fantasy indeed exists in *Mrichchhakatika* where the writer **Sudraka** uses, under an aesthetic plan, many variations of human response to the world around it. One may go over, in one’s imagination, the happenings in the play. For instance, a woman is being stalked by a group of evil souls driven by lust. The reader/viewer might study the vocabulary they employ to give vent to their hidden desires. At this point

it is important to note that the scoundrels in pursuit of *Vasantasena* have thrown caution to the winds and decided to capture and molest the woman if they get their hands on her. They do not seem to be afraid of the legal machinery active in the town. The crime they intend to commit may land them in jail, but they seem not bothered by such an apprehension. Can we visualise such a situation in view of the account we have read in the quotation given above? The question entails a peculiar linkage between society and art. **Sudraka** has in mind, a town with an active administration, a powerful section of the rich and privileged, as well as a whole group of officers who on the sly will violate the existing norms and rules. The point is that a situation such as this might give an occasion to clever manipulators for seeking pleasures of the senses.

Yet, the scene we talk about captures more than a legally permissible scenario. It presents in tangible ways the clash between civilised norms and baser motives of men away from the light of law and constitution. The fight is between morality supported by ideals and pleasure-seeking by a pack of law-breakers. What should art do in such a case? Such a consideration works behind the structure of the play.

*Mrichchhakatika* may give the impression of being a comic play meant to offer titillation alone. Nothing is farther from the truth. In fact, there is no titillation in the scene referred to. Instead, a serious anomaly of social behaviour connected to a ruling clique in the town is being shown graphically. We may understand this point in precise terms when we compare the concerned scene with the dramatic happenings that unfold before us as the action proceeds. The range of action in the play is wide and it draws attention to those ethical questions as well as the connected issues of goodness and idealism that make a society meaningful in its dynamic working. There is no anarchy in the play. Even as recklessness may be spotted in a part of the social fabric, most of the people in the town and outside seek guidance from principles of virtue and social harmony. The binding thread for such a visualisation is provided by that productivity that operates at the centre of the socio - economic activity. We may get a glimpse of it when we take cognisance of a greater arrangement inherent in the historical framework of the play. Let us explore this idea further in the next section.

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## **1.5 PRODUCTIVITY AND SOCIAL EXPANSION IN MRICHCHHAKATIKA**

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Another statement, this time from the historian **Irfan Habib**, provides further details about life in the period of history we are dealing with. It may take us into the domain and help us grasp the nature of the play *Mrichchhakatika* we are discussing. The statement goes as follows:

*Every town that contained non-agricultural populations had to obtain food-stuffs for consumption and raw material for manufacture from the countryside. Insofar as the state or landed aristocracy living in towns collected taxes or rents from villages, whether in money or in kind, and spent the resources so gathered in the towns, the local trade was in one direction, i.e., from villages to towns. Villages sold grains in order to pay tax or rent in money, or gave over part of the produce to the tax or rent collector. In either case, a large part of the products was sold and consumed in the towns. Such trade*

*is often called induced trade. Villages themselves depended on the towns for very little, their 'imports' comprising some iron tools or salt (then an expensive commodity in some parts of the country). But in some rural areas there were specialized crops or products, notably varieties of cotton, sugarcane or indigo, pepper, wild silks, etc., which had markets beyond the neighbouring towns.*

(120)

The information given by **Habib** is linked largely to the differences in activities between the villages and the cities. This is denoted by “non-agricultural populations.” These are the ones that we come across in urban centres. People in the towns and cities live away from agriculture and are engaged in trade, administration, running of families, and interacting with one another at the level of thought that may revolve around education centres. Were there education centres in ancient India? Think of this and locate people in *Mrichchhakatika* taking seriously to reading, discussing and studying. When you do this, you might find certain people leaving the city and moving elsewhere or at least from one part of the city to another. In a broader sense, this may be characterised as social mobility. Do you recognise such a social mobility in the play? In the quotation above, there is a reference to trade, commodity and crops yielding cotton, sugarcane, indigo, pepper, wild silks, etc. Parallel to this, see if the play gives us a glimpses of the traders, merchants, buyers, those levying taxes, etc. The place captured in *Mrichchhakatika* resembles the towns that still exist in modern India. Compare as well as contrast the two pictures and draw your own conclusions in this regard.

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Do you think that an ancient text such as *Mrichchhakatika* is relevant to us? Give reasons to support your answer.

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- 2) Can there be a link between the conditions of life in the society around us and the art of the same period? Attempt an answer to this question keeping in view Sudraka’s *Mrichchhakatika*.

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## 1.6 FOCUS ON *MRICHCHHAKATIKA* AS A LITERARY TEXT

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Let us now look at *Mrichchhakatika* as a drama text which has characters bound in situations and which move from the beginning to the end in a sequence. In Indian poetics of the ancient period, there used to be rules governing literary forms. One interesting rule was that of emotion, such as love, disgust, anger, laughter, etc. In many plays, we mainly come across the emotion of laughter or comedy. It is observed that laughter renders the description enjoyable and earthly. At the same time, it trivialises life’s content, making it available to the crude and vulgar. From there, profane is not far.

We generally note that the mighty gods to whom ordinary mortals look up do not seek amusement but a meaningful message alone. The guiding principle in *Mrichchhakatika* is the comic approach. It holds the main function of art to be entertaining, and letting people know that society, howsoever difficult and complex, is manageable.

It dawns on us that the issue in *Mrichchhakatika* is a crisis that shows itself in the situation of the protagonist. He is rendered poor by circumstances. Yet, the value of high drama in which kings, gods, and mythical figures are predominant is not assigned to *Mrichchhakatika*. It is not a *nataka* or *natakriyakriti* in that sense. *Nataka* denotes representation of the sacred and godly in a form that indicates the lofty and profound, not the ordinary. Instead, the name given to *Mrichchhakatika* is *Prakarana*. If politics and courtly issues involving change of order, lofty questions of war and preserving large territories were at the centre of the work, the play may have enjoyed a higher reputation than it has. What we find instead is that an ordinary scholar rendered poor by fate, or worldly shuffles of events is emotionally supported by a courtesan. The two indeed are lovers, each holding the other in high regard and earning on that account adulation from the middle rung citizens in the society of the town. We may, therefore, accept the word *Prakarana* for it that may stand as explained in terms of a supposedly lesser play. **Biswanath Banerjee** defines the word as follows:

*This work of Shudraka is a prakarana type of dramatic composition which presents the love-episode of Charudatta, a poor but noble Brahmin tradesman of Ujjayini, and Vasantasena, a rich and attractive courtesan of the same place, which ends in their happy union. The main theme of the play has been furnished with various impressive and attractive incidents and actions to make the work of Shudraka the most enjoyable one in the whole range of Sanskrit dramatic literature.* (15)

The *prakarana* form is defined further by **Banerjee** thus:

*The primary condition of a parkarana to which class this drama belongs, is that it should be a drama of invention, i.e., the plot should be an invention of the poet, kavi-kalpita, based on worldly life focusing on the actions of men and women. In this respect Shudraka's drama fulfils the condition of dramaturgy quite well, and even goes beyond it to be considered as the only drama of invention. As are the requirements of the type of composition the main theme has been presented in ten acts, the predominant sentiment (rasa) is love or shringara, a deep and calm (dhir-prashanta) Brahmin is the hero, of the two heroines, one, i.e., Dhuta, is born of a noble family, kulaja, and the other, Vasantasena, is a public woman or ganika, and this makes the composition a mixed or samkirna type of prakarana.* (16)

At the same time, the play has characters who are weak yet ambitious individuals. They are driven by the urge to succeed and wield power in their world. It does not matter whether they adopt fair or unfair means in the pursuit of their goals, since morality or adherence to norms is not their strongpoint. Barring a few such as *Charudatta*, the people in the play bear resemblance to ordinary

mortals given to pleasures of the flesh. If rich, they indulge in vices such as gambling, if poor they break the rules of the road and rob, waylay, resort to lies and half-truths, cheat and swindle. The writer sees to it that they reflect the time in which they live and appear normal in a world of inequality and class divisions.

We notice in this India, a full-fledged state with a king, the court, judiciary, traders, servants, slaves, among a whole variety of life's pursuits including concubines doing business and courtesans entertaining clients in full view of the society at large. The playwright **Sudraka** has ensured that the action of the play is confined in the main to such a city as the one described but which at the same time takes its broader inspirations from the nearby villages and forests "the lifeline of the world of prosperity and comfort. In the next section, we shall look at the thematic richness in *Mrichchhakatika*.

### **Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

- 1) What is 'Prakarana'? Can we call *Mrichchhakatika* a prakarana? Give reasons in support of your answer.

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## **1.7 THEMATIC RICHNESS OF *MRICHCHHAKATIKA***

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Significantly, *Mrichchhakatika* has no gods and goddesses as characters. This we note in **Kalidasa** a great deal, who would bring in sublime virtues and qualities in an otherwise secular world of intrigues, crime and worse. In this regard, *Mrichchhakatika* stands out in the old classical texts giving account of exchanges between the holy and unholy, the resplendent and mundane. Here, one is face-to-face with the fight between good and evil, noble and ignoble, god-like and devilish.

As we begin reading the play, we confront *Sutradhar* and *Nati*, husband and wife engaged in a slightly teasing banter—they are in a playful mood. See the introduction of sensuousness that communicates not just through words but also through the visual, olfactory and taste-related, senses, (one can see, smell and taste), and enjoy being a part of the fare the play presents. *Sutradhar* notices that there are preparations in the house for welcoming guests with well-cooked food. When he reaches home one day, this is what he confronts. In his own words—

*Here is my home, I shall go in. (entering and observing) Heigh-ho! How is it that there is quite a development in our house! The passage is full of a long stream of rice-water, and the floor, which is dark-grey because of the iron saucepans moved over it, now looking more charming, like a decked-up woman. And my hunger is agonising me the more, if it were greatly excited by this inviting aroma. ... One woman is pounding unguents, while another is wreathing flowers.*  
(Act 1)

At the same time, it is difficult to miss the simile, the comparison between the home and "decked-up woman". The man-woman relationship that the viewer



will see as the play proceeds has so many shades of pain, longing and pleasure. Seeing this, *Sutradhar* wonders what the occasion might be, and if he is the sole beneficiary of the bounty. When he enquires about it to his wife, she gives him a half-baked answer that can be turned both towards the positive as well as the negative. Indeed, *Nati* disappoints with one answer and makes him yet hopeful with the following one. In the comic mode, this kind of ambiguity can as well produce more than a tickle between husband and wife. Consider the husband getting angry and happy by turns, this is a twist that well suits the theme of the play at the centre of which is, as is suggested, the fulfilment of desire between the two young protagonists, *Vasantasena* and *Charudatta*.

In the beginning of *Mrichchhakatika*, we are struck by two things. The first is the manner in which poverty is depicted, and the second is the deft use of the *simile*. The play is well crafted at the level of language, too, explaining a complex phenomenon through meaningful pauses, gaps and suggestions. The *simile* is a device to lay bare the character of a twisted situation—it comes with one or the other idea wrapped in layers of association. We notice that the *simile* takes the view of the audience away from the given issue, and puts it in an entirely different mode of thought for a while. When the audience has seen the logic away from an existing detail, the same is brought back to the play's context coupled with insight. Meanwhile, the audience has been equipped with a concrete reasoning with the help of which the original knot is untied. A dramatic act of this kind sharpens the imagination of the audience and gives them a chance to use it creatively. The result is pleasure emanating from the excited imagination of the audience. We shall come back to it later in the discussion.

In the context, also see that the playwright makes a conscious decision to use prose and verse alternately. After the character has spoken her/his dialogue in simple prose, there comes a moment when comment becomes necessary as it opens up the scope of appreciation. Here, recourse is taken to verse—a *shloka* (usually a couplet) that raises the level of thought and makes it meaningfully appealing. This is used by the playwright as a word of wisdom. In the world of average exchange of views, there emerges a saying, a general statement, a quotation that lights up the ordinary conduct of a person caught in a life-situation.

This is the first feature we note in the play. The second facet of representation that catches our eye is of selecting an issue that touches social life vitally. In *Mrichchhakatika*, we can look at poverty that is at the core of the protagonist *Charudatta*'s misery. It brings to the fore hidden agendas of the economically powerful, out to use means fair and foul to augment their wealth and resources. *Charudatta* says of his plight:

*Out of poverty and death, I prefer death, for death causes short-lived pain, while poverty is unending misery.*

Is he right in his dark observation about the lack of means in a world driven by money and success? In another text of the ancient period, the issue may have received a treatment along religious and moral lines. The speaker might have suggested the illusory nature of material comforts that denies one the freedom that comes from interests in the divine. Here, the terms are broadly secular since money helps one gain happiness and social esteem, something that has influenced human behaviour all along in history. Consider the following:

*Charudatta: Loss of money is not of my misery. Observe—what pains me is that guests avoid coming to my house because it has lost its riches, as the news fly off to desert, when the thick line of rut on the elephant’s cheek totally dries up.*

That money assists in earning happiness in the social-human sense takes the concern away from other worldly pursuits. In consequence, the person is closer to the real business of mutual give - and - take, as well as, day - to - day experience. *Charudatta* is a man of the world and has seen early prosperity. Suddenly, however, he incurs losses because of which he appears bewildered. He has not lost faith in the material world where he was active all along. At the moment when the play opens, he is seriously engaged in the struggle to get back to his previous financial status. This is clearly seen in his intense suffering manifest in the following quote where he shares his worries with *Vidushak*.

*Charudatta: Friend, I am not really feeling any anxiety on account of the loss of my fortune, for riches come and go, following the course of one’s luck. But this burns me that the people go thoughtless even in their affection towards a person who has lost his support of wealth.*

The truth of his statement is that money might easily slip away from one’s grip if one is not sufficiently careful and that its loss may result in the loss of friends. Conversely, money ensures “support” from friends that will keep the rich person in a state of stability and peace. This is not a small thing in social life. At the same time, the acquisition or loss of money affords wisdom about the nature of life on the earth. *Charudatta* is a learned man. He knows how to philosophise and see hidden ideas in social endeavour. This is how the wisdom is hinted at in general terms:

*Charudatta: From penury a person passes to shame; being overcome by shame, he loses his spirit; devoid of spirit he is slighted; being slighted, he feels dejected; full of dejection, he comes to be sorry; being smitten with sorrow, he is forsaken by reason; and destitute of reason, he perishes. Ah! Pennilessness is the abode of all sorts misfortune!*

The mode here is of a gradual movement towards equanimity on one side and a disturbed condition of life on the other. Mark the clustering of shame, loss of spirit, slight, dejection, being sorry, irrationality and destruction. The logic suggests that they are connected and thus, ought to be viewed as bound to norms of inevitable doom. Is that true in life? If we ponder over it, we may realise that pragmatic behaviour goes by logic such as this and, if an individual observes the course of life alertly, s/he will surely gain from such an idea.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 3**

- 1) Comment on the use of verse and prose in *Mrichchhakatika*.

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**1.8 LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit, we have discussed the relationship between a literary work and its socio-economic background. This is followed by an account of specific details about the writer and the time in history to which he belonged. The issue of

aesthetic form is also dealt with in brief. An important aspect of thematic richness finally catches our attention. We noted that the ancient period had many aspects that are of interest to us even today. The plot of the play and the characters that live life to the full on the stage and involve the viewer in problems that they face will be taken up at length in the next few units.

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## **1.9 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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### **Check Your Progress 1**

1. Read Sections 1.1, 1.2, 1.3
2. Read Section 1.4

### **Check Your Progress 2**

1. Read Section 1.6

### **Check Your Progress 3**

1. Read Section 1.7

