

# Poverty as a Curse: Reflection in some well-known Sanskrit Texts

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Poverty is a socio-economic phenomenon that persists through the ages. In ancient Sanskrit literature, the subject of poverty is a rare thing. For the poets who made a living by praising kings, it was almost impossible to provide an accurate description of the economic landscape while going against the king. Amidst the grandeur of monarchy, the harsh reality sometimes emerges as a protest from the unwary pen of the poet.

In the R̥gveda, there is a depiction of a poor family shivering in the biting cold with bare bodies, for whom the fear of winter was as great as the fear of a tiger. People often prayed to the Gods for good health, children and wealth. Such intense and desperate desires for worldly comfort and happiness vividly highlighted the widespread picture of suffering and hardship in Vedic era<sup>i</sup>. Here we find a mantra: *gobhiṣṭare māmatim̐ duyevāṃ yavena kṣudham̐ puruhūta viśvām/ vayam̐ rājabhīḥ prathamā dhanāny asmākena vrjanenā jayema//* R̥gveda 10.42.10

In the *Aitareya-brāhmaṇa*, a poor father sold his middle son Śūnaḥsepa to the king for sacrifice to the God. Such a cruel and tragic event mentioned in Vedic literature is so shocking. It can be observed in society that the tradition of exploiting poverty in the form of buying and selling people still continues in various forms.

In the *Śāntiparva* of the great epic Mahābhārata, the praise of wealth is observed like that without wealth, proper adherence of dharma is not possible. Just as the rivers originate from mountains, dharma originates from wealth- *nādhano dharmakṛtyāni yathāvad anu tiṣṭhati//*

In the famous drama Kalidāsa's *Abhijnāna-śakuntalam*, a unique character of a poor fisherman with distinctive qualities is found. He made living by catching fish. While Śakuntalā was bathing, the ring which she received as a gift and symbol of marriage, slipped from her finger and fell into water. Later it was

swallowed by a rohu fish. Later a fisherman caught the fish and tried to sell the ring in the market. Then he got accused of theft. Despite the intimidation and threats from the police, he did not accept the accusation of theft. After receiving a reward from the king he had no qualms about giving half of the money to the police. Rather he was worried that day's futile harassment had ruined his earnings. Despite his poverty, the fisherman possessed courage. He had pride and satisfaction in his work. He also had generosity to share his joy with others.

The consequences of poverty are thoroughly explained and analysed in Śūdraka's play *Mṛchakatika*. The main character of this prakaraṇa is merchant Cārudatta who was now destitute due to his extensive charity. In the prologue of the play, the dialogues between the play director Sūtradhāra and his wife Naṭi reveal a poignant picture of their poverty. Their music hall was lonesome as the pervasive emptiness of poverty was main cause. Sūtradhāra did not get breakfast. Hunger makes his eyes dry like lotus seeds. It seemed to Sūtradhāra that the whole world was devoid of food- *śuṣkapuṣkaravījam iva pracalitātārake kṣudhā mamākṣiṇī khaṭakhaṭāyate. ... bubhukṣāt onnamayaṃ jīvalokaṃ paśyāmi*. His wife jokingly mentioned named of dishes like curd, ghee, rice, jaggery pudding, but the reality was the pantry was empty. Due to poverty, these items were easily available in the market but not in their home.

Writer Śūdraka masterly depicted Cārudatta's poverty and also scarcity of his friends and relatives. His friend Maitreya, who once used to enjoy great hospitality at Cārudatta's home now lived a beggar's life, begged from house to house for sustenance. For Cārudatta himself, the suffering of death is temporary but the pain of poverty is limitless.<sup>ii</sup> He had to endure the pain of being neglected everywhere. During tough times, guests avoided his house. He no longer received affection or love from anyone.<sup>iii</sup> Due to poverty, a

person felt ashamed everywhere and this shame caused him to lose his influence. The constant criticism led to self-reproach, which in turn brought sorrow. Overwhelmed by sorrow, he became devoid of wisdom and this lack of wisdom ultimately led to his downfall. Therefore, poverty was the root cause of all misfortunes. Due to the fault of poverty, worries arose, harassment by enemies' occurred, hatred from friends was received and hostility from relatives was faced. One feels the urge to flee the forest, away from home. Even the humiliation from one's own wife must be endured. The fire of grief dwells in his heart. It does not burn him actually but heats him continuously.<sup>iv</sup> No one listened to the poor, friends turned away.<sup>v</sup> No one wanted to associate with the poor, greeted them warmly. On festive days, people looked the poor with disdain. In Cārudatta's view, poverty was the sixth great sin.<sup>vi</sup> While trying to capture the courtesan Vasantasenā, the lecherous royal relative Śākāra and his companion entered the house of Cārudatta and seized his maid instead of Vasantasenā. Vidūṣaka scolded Śākāra and said that even though Cārudatta was poor, he was a virtuous man. Śākāra's contemptuous question- *ke tasya guṇāḥ? yasya geham praviśya aśitavyam api nāsti*. To spare the poverty-stricken householder from double heartache, the Vidūṣaka and the humiliated maid together decided to keep the incident of the insult into a secret. Cārudatta became even more distressed when the jewellery that Vasantasenā entrusted to him was stolen. A burglar had stolen his jewellery. To prevent Cārudatta from being blamed, his wife offered to give her own necklace. However, Cārudatta's pride prevented him from living on his wife's wealth after losing his own possessions. According to author, without money a man becomes a woman and with money, a woman becomes a man.<sup>vii</sup> Because there was nothing to do, the anger and favour of the poor were all in vain.<sup>viii</sup> Through Cārudatta the dramatist said- a bird with broken wings, a dry tree, a waterless well or pond, a snake with broken fang, an empty house and a poor person are looked down upon in the same way.<sup>ix</sup> Many people were forced into antisocial activities due to the torment of poverty. One of Cārudatta's employees, during the employer's difficult times lost his job and took up gambling. After losing in gambling there was huge humiliation to him. Whether selling his parents or himself, there was no escape from hands of the creditor until he repaid the money. He had to resort to

clever words, hiding in a dark temple dressed as an idol, and deceiving the creditor's partner and escaping. Finally, he was freed from debt with the generous help of Vasantasenā. Due to poverty, another character of this prakaraṇa Śarvilaka became a burglar which is noteworthy in this context. He wanted to marry Ceṭi Madanikā, the maid of Vasantasenā. But Madanikā would not be free without ransom. Śarvilaka decided to steal Vasantasenā's jewellery, which was kept in Cārudatta's house. Despite being a Brahmin's son, Śarvilaka considered that he was dragging his Brahmin lineage and himself to hell for the sake of courtesan Madanikā, he wanted to steal. He did not touch a girl adorned with jewellery, the gold of sacrificial offering, a Brahmin's property, or the child in a nurse's arms.<sup>x</sup> Seeing the dilapidated condition of Cārudatta's house, he didn't consider to steal his house but poverty was such a thing that it made a resort to base actions. Even knowing it was wrong, people were forced to do wrongful deeds.<sup>xi</sup> Discovering the true mystery behind the stolen jewellery, Śarvilaka felt ashamed and condemned himself. He knew the right appreciation of a virtuous man. To him, a poor but virtuous person was far superior to a wealthy but unworthy one. Later Śarvilaka left his newlywed wife with the elders and unhesitatingly engaged in the task of cleverly freeing his friend Āryaka from imprisonment and overthrowing the tyrannical regime. Again, when the king's brother-in-law Śākara tried to strangle Vasantasnā in the garden, he couldn't persuade Viṭa and Ceṭa to commit the crime despite offering them gold, jewels and money. The Ceṭa said that Śākara might be master of his body but not of his character. The playwright firmly believed that even poor people have possessed great humanity. In the texts like Pañcatantra and Hitopadeśa, the aspects of the horrors of poverty is often depicted. These quotes are much relevant in this context: Wealth is the source of a ruler's power.<sup>xii</sup> If one has wealth, they are considered learned.<sup>xiii</sup> They make friends and their reputation for valour spreads.<sup>xiv</sup> Even someone who has committed the gravest of sins gains respect if they are wealthy.<sup>xv</sup> The wealthy person transferred supplicants' dance to their tunes like monkeys<sup>xvi</sup>. A person is not only slave of another person but also he was a servant of wealth<sup>xvii</sup>. Like Mṛcchakaṭika, there is a similar type of analysis of the misfortune of poverty is found in *Hitopadeśa*. It is said that the stream of all the work of a poor person

dries up like a small summer river<sup>xviii</sup>. Driven by hunger, a woman abandons her own child, just as a starving serpent swallows its own eggs, forgetting everything. Hunger makes people extremely cruel<sup>xix</sup>. One has to accept the shame of a dependent life due to the pangs of hunger, though living as a dependent is equivalent to dying<sup>xx</sup>. The one whose hunger is satisfied by others has no end to their torment<sup>xxi</sup>. Serving the rich, one has to endure false accusations of being foolish, talkative, cowardly, irritable, and unruly. Selling oneself to the rich for money is

comparable to prostitution- *abudhair arthalābhāya panyastrībhīr iva svayam / ātmā saṃskṛtya saṃskṛtya paropakaraṇīkṛtaḥ //*

In this way, the timeless narrative of poverty has been sporadically described in numerous texts like Bhartṛhari's *Nītiśataka*, Śrīdharadāsa's *Saduktikarṇāmṛtaḥ*, etc. throughout the ages. Due to the brevity of this discussion, examples from a few well-known texts of the Vedic and post-Vedic periods have been discussed. Later, many instances can be found in Modern Sanskrit literature.

<sup>i</sup> *Rgveda*, 10.42- 43

<sup>ii</sup> *Mṛcchakaṭika*, 1.10-11 *śloka*

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid*, 1.12-13

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*, 1.15

<sup>v</sup> *ibid*, 1.36

<sup>vi</sup> *ibid*, 1.37

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid*, 3.27

<sup>viii</sup> *ibid*, 5.40

<sup>ix</sup> *ibid*, 5.41-42

<sup>x</sup> *ibid*, 4.6

<sup>xi</sup> *ibid*, 2.19

<sup>xii</sup> *Hitopadeśa*, 1.123

<sup>xiii</sup> *ibid*, 1.24

<sup>xiv</sup> *ibid*, 1.126

<sup>xv</sup> *ibid*, 2.3

<sup>xvi</sup> *ibid*, 2.23

<sup>xvii</sup> *ibid*, 3.78

<sup>xviii</sup> *ibid*, 1.125

<sup>xix</sup> *ibid*, 4.55

<sup>xx</sup> *ibid*, 2.22

<sup>xxi</sup> *ibid*, 2.26

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