**Shudraka**



**Shudraka** was an [Indian](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/India) playwright, to whom three [Sanskrit plays](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Sanskrit_drama) are attributed: *[Mrichchhakatika](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Mrichchhakatika" \o "Mrichchhakatika)* (*The Little Clay Cart*), *Vinavasavadatta*, and a *[bhana](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Bhana" \o "Bhana)* (short one-act monologue), *Padmaprabhritaka*. According to the prologue of *Mrichchhakatika*, he was a king; according to one theory, he may have been a third century [Abhira](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Abhira_dynasty) king. According to another theory, Shudraka is a mythical figure, and the authorship of plays attributed to him is uncertain.

**Sources**

In the prologue of the play *Mrichchhakatika*, the stage manager states that its poet was a wise king renowned as "Shudraka". He had performed [Ashvamedha](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Ashvamedha) (horse sacrifice) ritual to prove his superiority, and immolated himself at the age of 110 years, after crowning his son as the new king. The prologue describes him as a distinguished wise man, who had gained knowledge of the [Rigveda](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Rigveda), the [Samaveda](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Samaveda), mathematics, the [Kamashastra](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Kamashastra" \o "Kamashastra) and the art of training elephants.[[4]](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Shudraka#citenoteFOOTNOTEFarleyPRichmond199355564)

Two [lost works](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Lost_work) titled *Shudraka-katha* ([IAST](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/IAST): Śūdraka-kathā, "the story of Shudraka") are known from other sources. A verse attributed to the 10th century poet [Rajashekhara](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Rajashekhara_(Sanskrit_poet)" \o "Rajashekhara (Sanskrit poet)) in *[Suktimuktavali](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Suktimuktavali" \o "Suktimuktavali)* praises two writers - Ramila and Somila - for jointly composing a novel titled *Shudraka-katha*. Because it is described as a novel, it was probably a work of fiction. Another *Shudraka-katha*, attributed to a writer called Pancha-shikha, is known from other sources.

Based on information from other sources, it appears that one *Shudraka-katha* (probably that of Ramila and Somila) narrated how Shudraka won over a woman called Vinaya-vati, with the help of his friend Bandhu-datta. The other work (probably that of Pancha-shika) was a [Prakrit](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Prakrit)-language novel that featured a heroine named Harimati and an old parrot acting as her messenger.

[Dandin](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Da%E1%B9%87%E1%B8%8Din)'s *Avanti-Sundari* provides a summary of the various narratives about Shudraka, probably based on these novels. *Avanti-Sundari-Katha-Sara*, a paraphrased version of Dandin's work, states that Shudraka was originally called Indrani-gupta. Although born a [Brahmin](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Brahmin) himself, he despised the Brahmins, and was cursed as a result. After several misfortunes, he became a warrior and acquired royal fortune.

According to Rajashekhara's *Kavya-mimansa*, Shudraka was reputed as a patron of literature, and presided over a literary circle.[[9]](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Shudraka#citenoteFOOTNOTEAKWarder197759) Some legends pesent Shudraka as a ruler of central India. E.g. the [*Kadambari*](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Kadambari) places him in [Dasharna](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Dasharna), and the *Avanti-Sundari-Katha-Sara* calls him "Malava-raja" (the king of [Malava](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Malwa" \o "Malwa)).  [Bhoja](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Bhoja)'s *[Shringara-Prakasha](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Shringara-Prakasha" \o "Shringara-Prakasha)* also mentions the narratives about Shudraka. Vidyapati's *Purusha-pariksha* contains a fanciful story that portrays Shudraka as an ideal lover.

## **Identification**

No historical records mention a king by the name Shudraka (which literally means "little [servant](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Shudra)"). The first four acts of *Mrichchhakatika* are virtually a copy of the corresponding acts from [Bhasa](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Bhasa" \o "Bhasa)'s unfinished play *Charudattam*. One theory is that the poet of *Mrichchhakatika* simply finished Bhasa's play out of respect, styling himself as the "little servant" of Bhasa.

A fourteenth century text attributes *Mrichchhakatika* to a duo, Bhartrimentha and Vikramaditya. The *Mrichchhakatika* is set in [Ujjain](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Ujjain). It is known that an Ujjain-based poet by the name Bhartrimentha was a contemporary of [Kalidasa](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Kalidasa); the legendary king [Vikramaditya](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Vikramaditya) also lived in Ujjain. However, identifying these two as the authors of *Mrichchhakatika* is chronologically impossible.

Indologist [A. K. Warder](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/A._K._Warder) notes that even the earliest sources that mention Shudraka present him as a legendary figure. Therefore, the existence of Shudraka is doubtful. Some scholars, such as Farley P. Richmond, suggest that Shudraka was simply a mythical figure, and the authorship of works attributed to him is uncertain.

According to another theory, first proposed by [Sten Konow](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Sten_Konow), Shudraka was the pen name of a 3rd century [Abhira](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Abhira_dynasty) king, possibly Shivadatta, the father of [Ishvarasena](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Ishwarsena" \o "Ishwarsena)). This theory is supported by the following points:

* The Abhiras succeeded or supplanted the [Satavahanas](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Satavahana" \o "), who are also known as the Andhras, and who were probably overlords of the Abhiras at one time. A *[Skandapurana](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Skandapurana" \o "Skandapurana)* legend calls Shudraka an "Āndhrabhṛtya", meaning a vassal of the Andhras. According to the Jain tradition (e.g. [*Vividha-Tirtha-Kalpa*](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Vividha_Tirtha_Kalpa)), a king named Satavahana gave Shudraka half of his empire. According to other legends, such as the one mentioned in Dandin's *Avanti-Sundari*, Shudraka either ascended the throne after the premature death of the Satavahana prince Svati, or defeated Svati.
* *Avanti-Sundari-Katha-Sara* mentions that Shudraka was born in the [Ashmaka](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Ashmaka" \o "Ashmaka) region. The *Vividha-Tirtha-Kalpa* states that he was born in [Pratishthana](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Pratishthana" \o "Pratishthana), which is located in the same area. Shudraka is among the earliest dramatists to use the [Maharashtri Prakrit](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Maharashtri_Prakrit" \o "), the language of this area, in a play.
* The *Skandapurana* places Shudraka in the [Kali](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Kali_Yuga) year 3290, which corresponds to 188 CE, close to the Abhira period.
* Shudraka invokes the god [Shiva](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Shiva) in his play, and the Abhira names (known from their inscriptions) suggest that they were Shaivites.