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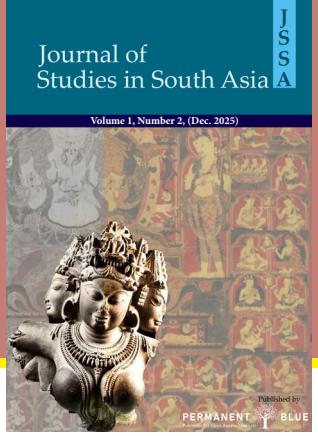

Socio-Religious Life in the Works of Vatsarāja during the Chandella Period with a special focus on Hāsyacūḍāmaṇi Prahasana and Karpūracarita Bhāṇa

PRAKHAR SRIVASTAV
Research Scholar (PhD), Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi-221005, India. E-mail: prakhar97@bhu.ac.in

Abstract: The dramatic works of *Vatsarāja* provide a nuanced reflection of the socio-religious life of urban society during the *Candella period*. Far from depicting an idealized order, these rūpakas capture a society in transition, shaped by shifting political realities, evolving social norms, and expanding artistic and material pursuits. While avoiding overt political critique, Vatsarāja's alignment with Paramardideva underscores the courtly orientation of his dramas. The plays illuminate diverse aspects of city life, households with servants, artisans, courtesans, and performers, alongside the coexistence of *Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Śākta,* and popular cult traditions within a vibrant religious landscape. Equally, they reveal a culture of pleasure and refinement, where betel, liquor, cosmetics, music, and seasonal revels coexisted with hypocrisy, crime, and fractured familial ties. Taken together, these works emerge not only as literary achievements but also as historical testimonies, offering important sources for reconstructing the social and religious life of the Candella period.

Keywords: Vatsarāja, Sanskrit drama, Candella period, urban society, religion, material culture, courtly life, city dynamics

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Introduction

In 1914, Dr C. D. Dalal, then serving as the Head of the Baroda Sanskrit Library, undertook the task of cataloguing a collection of old manuscripts preserved in a Jain *bhañḍāra*. His efforts resulted in the publication of a descriptive list of seventy-six manuscripts of considerable antiquity. Among these, two manuscripts were of particular significance, as they were specially presented to Dr Dalal by the patron of the collection, Śeth Gabharūcanda Vastācanda. Both manuscripts were written in Sanskrit, employing the Nāgarī script, and could be palaeographically dated to the thirteenth century.

These manuscripts contained a valuable collection of six varieties of *rūpakas* (Sanskrit dramas), composed by a certain poet named Vatsarāja. According to the colophon preserved in

the texts, Vatsarāja is associated with the reign of the Candella king Parmāḍideva (c. 12th–13th century CE). This information not only situates the works in a historical context but also lends credibility to the literary activity under the Candella courtly patronage.

Of the six dramas, one play, the *Hāsyacūḍāmaṇi Prahasana*, was already known prior to Dalal's discovery. A manuscript of this play had been preserved in the library of the Deccan College, Pune, thereby establishing the circulation of Vatsarāja's works beyond a single manuscript tradition. However, the Baroda manuscripts brought to light the larger collection of six *rūpakas*, significantly expanding the corpus attributed to Vatsarāja.

Recognizing their literary and historical value, Dr. C. D. Dalal published these texts in 1918 under the collective title "*A Collection of Six Dramas of Vatsarāja"* as part of the Gaekwad Oriental Series (No. 8). In his introduction, Dalal emphasized the remarkable versatility of Vatsarāja, observing that apart from Bhāsa and Vatsarāja, no other Sanskrit dramatist demonstrated such a wide-ranging command over the different types of dramatic composition. This places Vatsarāja in a distinguished line of dramatists whose works not only reflect the vitality of Sanskrit drama in the medieval period but also challenge the oft-repeated assumption of its decline after the classical age.

Vatsarāja's extant literary output, as preserved in these manuscripts, consists of six *rūpakas* representing different dramatic types: *Hāsyacūḍāmaṇi* (Prahasana), *Karpūracarita* (Bhāṇa), *Rukmiṇīharaṇa* (Īhamṛga), *Tripuradāha* (Ḍima), *Samudramanthana* (Samavakāra), and *Kirātārjunīya* (Vyāyoga). This impressive variety demonstrates his mastery over almost the entire spectrum of Sanskrit dramatic genres, confirming Dalal's assessment of his exceptional versatility.

Life and Background of Vatsarāja

Vatsarāja explicitly names his patron as King Parmardideva of the Candella dynasty, whose reign extended from 1165 to 1203 CE. After Parmardideva's death, his son Trailokyavarmanadeva ascended the throne and ruled until 1241 CE (Jha 2019: 519–520). Epigraphic and historical evidence indicate that Vatsarāja's position at court was not confined to literary activity; he also served as *Mahāmātya* (chief minister) from around 1165 to 1225 CE, thereby enjoying the confidence and patronage of both kings. His long tenure points to his dual stature as an administrator of high standing and a poet of considerable repute.

Scholars generally trace his origins to Mālavā or the Vindhyan region, a culturally fertile area that had earlier produced great poets and dramatists such as Kālidāsa, Bhavabhūti, Śūdraka, Bhaṭṭanārāyaṇa, and Rājaśekhara. The literary vibrancy of this milieu makes it plausible that Vatsarāja too emerged from the same tradition. Internal evidence from his dramas strengthens this view: he provides detailed descriptions of the Vindhyan forests, their flora and fauna, the customs of tribal communities like the Kolis, Śabaras, and Kirātas, and sacred sites including the temples of Nīlakaṇṭheśvara and Cakrasvāmin, as well as cities such as Cedi and Tripurī. These references clearly root both his imagination and lived experiences in central India.

Historians further note that the Candellas followed a deliberate policy of selecting their courtiers and officials from within their own cultural and regional background, guided by ideals of *kula-paramparā* (family lineage) and *vaṁśa-pratiṣṭhā* (dynastic prestige). This policy makes it highly likely that Vatsarāja, who rose to the prestigious rank of *Mahāmātya*, belonged to the

same geographical and cultural sphere as his royal patrons. Taken together, the evidence presents Vatsarāja not only as a versatile dramatist but also as an influential statesman whose career embodied the political and cultural vitality of the Candella court.

Significance of the Study

In the six *rūpakas* composed by Vatsarāja, only *Hāsyacūḍāmaṇi* (a *prahasana*) and *Karpūracarita* (a *bhāṇa*) are based on fictional themes. The others - *Rukmiṇīharaṇa* (*īhamṛga*), *Tripuradāha* (*ḍima*), *Samudramanthana* (*samavakāra*), and *Kirātārjunīya* (*vyāyoga*), are drawn directly from *Purāṇic* narratives. These mythological plays, while occasionally reflecting glimpses of contemporary society, leave little room for the author to alter the main storyline. By contrast, the fictional framework of the *prahasana* and *bhāṇa* allows Vatsarāja greater creative freedom, enabling him to embed observations of the social realities of his own time.

The study of *Hāsyacūḍāmaṇi* and *Karpūracarita* is therefore indispensable for understanding urban life in Central India during the Candel̲la period. Unlike inscriptions and monuments that emphasize rulers and religious life, these plays open a window onto the everyday world of the city, its actors, dancers, courtesans, gamblers, and merchants, thereby projecting the vibrancy of urban culture. They highlight the flourishing of fine arts, literature, and music under both royal and civic patronage, while also revealing how entertainment was integrated into festivals, temple rituals, and courtly events. At the same time, they mirror social tensions, such as debates around drinking and courtesans, alongside expressions of devotion and ritual practice. Together, these texts offer a more intimate, human perspective on society, portraying the occupations, amusements, and aspirations of townspeople. As literary sources, they are invaluable complements to epigraphic and archaeological evidence, providing direct insight into the cultural and social fabric of Candel̲la cities and their contribution to the broader history of medieval Indian urbanism.

The Two Rūpakas: A Summary

Karpūracarita, a *bhāṇa* by Vatsarāja, begins with the *Sūtradhāra* introducing Karpūraka, a witty rogue who justifies his life of deceit with mythological examples. He boasts of duping courtesans, their families, and even servants through gambling, theft, and trickery. When Virodhaka reports the disastrous outcomes of his schemes, courtesans ruined, allies betrayed, and Vilāsavatī's rejection, Karpūraka still sees it as destiny's favour. A divine voice then grants him protection, and the play ends with his triumphant *Bharatavākya*, celebrating the victory of a trickster.

Hāsyacūḍāmaṇi, a *prahasana*, satirises fake ascetics and blind faith. The courtesan Kapaṭakeḷi seeks the help of Jñānarāśi, a fraudulent monk, to find her stolen ornaments. He shifts blame for bribes, supports gamblers, and lusts after her daughter, Madanasundarī. Fooled by his disciple's prank, he flirts with Kapaṭakeḷi and is later beaten and blinded in a chaotic comic scene. The play ends with reconciliation, while Jñānarāśi ironically recites the *Bharatavākya*.

Together, the two dramas humorously expose greed, fraud, and hypocrisy in society through the antics of rogues, courtesans, gamblers, and false ascetics.

Society as depicted in the works of Vatsarāja

The works of Vatsarāja reflect the transitory character of Indian society during his time, when the arrival of the Turushakas (Muslim invaders) had begun to influence the established order of Indian

social, cultural, and artistic life. The varna system, which formed the fundamental basis of Hindu society, appears weakened or less emphasized in these works. Kshemendra, a near contemporary of Vatsarāja, already predicted in his *Daśāvatāracarita* (X.5) that the Turushakas and other foreigners would subdue the whole earth like the disease of leprosy, polluting the social fabric. This broader atmosphere explains why varṇas are not given prominent mention in *Hāsyacūḍāmaṇi* (HC) and *Karpūracarita* (KC).

Nevertheless, occupational castes are occasionally noted, reflecting the urban social structure. For instance, the *udyānāpāla* (gardener; HC pp. 134, 142), the *mṛgayu* (hunter; HC I.16), and the *śauṇḍika* (distiller; KC pp. 32–33) are described. In *Karpūracarita*, the *śauṇḍika* even possesses his own tavern (*śauṇḍikāgāra*, KC p. 32), is regarded as *dharmapita* (law-father) by drunkards (KC p. 33), and receives their complete devotion. This portrayal contrasts sharply with Manu's injunction (Manusmṛti IV.214–16), where *śauṇḍikas* are condemned as a low caste whose food must not be consumed. Vatsarāja's depiction instead mirrors the urban acceptance of drinking culture, which was prevalent among both common folk and the aristocracy.

The āśrama system retains some relevance. In *Hāsyacūḍāmaṇi*, Kauṇḍinya represents the *brahmacarya āśrama*, studying under his guru Jñānarāśi in a *maṭha* (HC pp. 124–27). Yet Vatsarāja also critiques hypocrisy within religious life. He refers to impostor monks as *ḍambhikas* (HC I.21), a type also mocked in Kṛṣṇamiśra's *Prabodhacandrodaya* (PC II.1,5), where such men spend nights in brothels and disguise themselves as hermits by day. This reflects a critical awareness of urban religious corruption.

The family (kula), though considered the smallest social unit (KC v.21), is not always depicted in idealized harmony. Instead, domestic discord surfaces. In *Hāsyacūḍāmaṇi*, Mudgaraka highlights the repeated offenses of Kapaṭakeḷi, the eldest female of the household (HC pp. 121–22). Suspicion also corrodes family ties, as Kapaṭakeḷi accuses her own daughter Madansundarī of theft (HC pp. 121–22). Similarly, in *Karpūracarita*, the daughter Vilāsavatī expels her own mother Kalāvatī from the house (KC p. 35). Such instances reflect urban individualism, mistrust, and weakening of traditional familial bonds.

Regarding women, Vatsarāja presents a critical tone. In *Hāsyacūḍāmaṇi* (II.6), he mocks women's artificial attempts to display youthfulness: inflating cheeks to look healthy, puffing chests to show expanded breasts, and claiming to be younger than their daughters while dyeing their white hair. A parallel appears in *Prabodhacandrodaya* (I.27), where women are described as deluding and intoxicating men before leaving them dejected. This reflects urban anxieties about female sexuality and appearance.

The prostitution system is given extensive attention, testifying to its prominence in urban society. Courtesans are referred to as *veśyā* (HC p. 134; KC V.8), *śambhalī* (KC V.4), *kuṭṭanī* (procuress; KC V.30; HC p.119), and *varaṅganā* (KC V.3). The tradition of prostitution had reached a peak, with courtesans even kept in royal harems. Vatsarāja describes them leaving palaces at dawn (*KC* V.3), echoing Kalhaṇa's account of Harṣa. Wealth not spent on courtesans is mocked as "wealth in a dream" (KC V.8), while their embrace is declared preferable to penance (HC p.135).

Courtesans are praised for their beauty, manners, and artistic skills in music and theatre (KC p.26, V.18). Kapaṭakeḷi, for example, is skilled in *kāmaśāstra* (erotics; HC p.141) and adept at computation (HC p.131). Two categories of courtesans appear: (1) high-status ones, unavailable

to common folk (e.g., Vilāsavatī in KC, Madansundarī in HC), and (2) those accessible to anyone with wealth (e.g., Candrasenā in KC, Kapaṭakeḷi in HC). Their primary motive was wealth accumulation; those deviating from it were condemned, Kapaṭakeḷi, for instance, traduces her own daughter (HC pp. 120–21). Their greed is likened to theft (HC I.8). The courtesan culture, closely tied with inebriation, gambling, and conspicuous consumption, highlights the urban prosperity and moral ambiguities of city life.

Urban customs such as honouring guests (HC p.145), congratulations upon victories (e.g., Karpūraka congratulating Candrasenā after a gambling success, KC p.30; Virodhaka congratulating Candanaka for defeating his rival Haradatta, KC p.34), and gift exchanges (betel, sandalwood, garments, and rings, KC p.30) demonstrate sophisticated civic traditions of courtesy, celebration, and exchange.

Daily life and Amusements

Betel-eating was an integral part of cultural life in the city, enjoyed by both men and women. Characters like Mañjiraka (KC V.15) and Madanasundarī (HC p. 134) are depicted as chewing betel leaves, while its use as a gift for loved ones (KC p. 29) underscores its social and emotional significance. Alongside betel, liquor consumption was also deeply rooted in the fabric of urban culture. Drinking parties or *pānaghoṣṭhīs* (KC p.27, HC pp.127, 134, 146) and drinking festivals such as the *madira-mahotsava* (KC pp.30, 33, HC pp.123, 134) emerge as social occasions central to recreation. Brothels and *madanodyānas* frequently served as venues for such gatherings (KC pp.27, 30, HC pp.119, 121, 134, 146). In HC (II.12), Kokila remarks, "Which quality of liquor is there which has not been tested by us?" a statement which suggests the easy availability of numerous varieties of liquor in urban markets. Excessive drinking is depicted as commonplace, people fell asleep in intoxication (HC p.119), collapsed as if stricken by fever (*sannipāta*, KC V.28), and sometimes remained oblivious even when their houses were being looted (HC p.120). Drinking, particularly in the evening, appears as a routine affair, with young men muttering drunken songs (KC V.25). Women too, particularly courtesans, participated in drinking (KC p.30, HC pp.119–24). Festivity and intoxication went hand in hand, Caturaka celebrated his brother Nipuṇaka's return with wine (KC pp.32–34), Kapaṭakelī promised Mudgaraka a wine festival upon recovering her stolen goods (HC p.132), and gamblers like Kalākaraṇḍaka and Candraśenā organised lavish parties after successful wins (HC p.134, KC p.30). Such portrayals clearly reflect a culture of indulgence which was deeply tied to the rhythms of urban life.

Urban amusements extended to hunting, literary gatherings, and seasonal festivities. Hunting was not confined to kings alone, even townsfolk pursued it. Vatsarāja refers to three methods, *pāśajā* (noose), *jālajā* (net), and *mādavikāraja* (hunting deer in rut), which parallel the thirty-one varieties of hunting enumerated in the *Mānasollāsa* (HC II.16). Recreational culture further embraced literary assemblies (*kāvya-goṣṭhī*, KC V.30), water-sports (*jala-krīḍā*), woodland frolics (*vana-krīḍā*), and moonlit revels (*jyotsnā-krīḍā*, KC V.21). These depictions clearly mirror the culture of amusement and leisure characteristic of urban society.

Cities are often portrayed as spaces of luxury, indulgence, and sensory pleasures. Eating, drinking, ornamentation, gambling, and varied recreations appear not as incidental but as defining features of life. The dramatist, in his characterization and episodes, is not merely entertaining but

reflecting the actual patterns of urban living in early medieval India, where refinement, fashion, festivity, and indulgence constituted the essence of cultural existence.

Urban religious life in the works of Vatsarāja

Vatsarāja, in his works, portrays the religious fabric of the urban centers of the Chandella period. Among the *sampradāyas*, Śaivism appears to have had the strongest hold under the Chandella rule. The Chandellas were predominantly Śaiva, and most of their temples were dedicated to Śiva. Both *Hāsyacūḍāmaṇi* and *Karpūracarita* revolve around the pilgrimage festival dedicated to Nīlakaṇṭha, the celebrated shrine of Śiva at Kālanjara. These two dramas were intended to be performed during the *yātrā* of Nīlakaṇṭha, when large gatherings of people assembled to have *darśana* of the deity (KC p.23, HC p.118). Inscriptions testify to numerous grants being made to this temple (H.C. Ray, *The Dynastic History of Northern India*, pp. 705–706). Within these plays, Śiva is referred to by various names such as Candra-ardha-cūḍāmaṇi (KC II.14), Cūḍāśaśin (HC I.1), and Hara (KC I.17). Some of these appellations directly reflect iconographic features of the deity, such as Candra-ardha-cūḍāmaṇi - "he who wears the crescent moon on his forehead." Vatsarāja himself appears as a devout Śaiva, for in both dramas the benedictory verses are dedicated to Śiva.

Vaiṣṇavism emerges as the second most prominent *sampradāya*. Chandella kings such as Yaśovarman and Kīrtivarman were worshippers of Viṣṇu, and numerous temples constructed under their patronage were dedicated to him. Within these dramas, names such as Puṇḍarīkākṣa (HC I.15), Madhuripu (KC v.6), and Cakrapāṇi (KC v.7) are invoked for Viṣṇu. Popular stories, such as Rāma slaying Vāli and the tale of Bali (KC v.7), also emerge, indicating their widespread currency in folk imagination. Viṣṇu is even referred to as the father of Kāma (KC II.9), a notion drawn from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (X.55.1–2), where Kāma is said to be born from Lakṣmī. In *Hāsyacūḍāmaṇi*, the character Jñānarāśi claims to be a staunch Vaiṣṇava, proficient in mantras that gamblers like Kālakaraṇḍaka hoped would bring them victory (HC p.132). He is also shown to possess knowledge of other mantras, such as the *Jvaravitaraṇa-mantra* and the *Vāśīkaraṇa-mantra* (HC p.136), which highlights the practical use of religious knowledge within the urban setting.

Devī-worship, though comparatively less popular, is nevertheless present. Names such as Devī (KC v.2), Śivā (KC v.1, HC I.2), and Bhavānī (KC v.10) occur for the Goddess. She is invoked through musical performances (KC p.26) and hymns (KC v.10). Lakṣmī is associated with wealth and Sarasvatī with learning, while their proverbial rivalry was well-known, even finding mention in HC I.4. Gaṅgā too is revered as a goddess, referred to as Surādhunī (HC I.1).

Among the minor deities, Sūrya-worship held a prominent place in Chandella religious life, with temples dedicated to him. He is addressed as Dīnanātha (HC p.136). In *Karpūracarita* he is described as a god whose feet are worshipped even by gods, demons, and men (KC p.24). Gaṇeśa is known as Heramba (HC I.1). Kāma is invoked under several names, Kandarpa (HC II.2), Samara (KC v.3), Ratipati (KC v.3), Ratirāmana (KC v.10), Pañcabāṇa (KC v.17), and Makardhvaja (HC p.123). The *grahas* (planets) are also depicted as worthy of veneration (HC p. 129).

Worship of Yakṣas, particularly Maṇibhadra, was also prevalent. In KC (pp.31–34), Maṇibhadra appears as the foremost among the Yakṣa deities. (Agrawal 1970:190–191) notes that Maṇibhadra was second only to Kubera in importance, with shrines spread across North India. Somadeva's

Kathāsaritsāgara (II.5.165–166) also testifies to the widespread popularity of Maṇibhadra's cult. KC (v.18) further depicts women observing *vratas*, such as the character Vilāsvatī, suggesting the everyday religious practices of urban households.

From these references, it is evident that diverse *sampradāyas* flourished within Hinduism. Vatsarāja makes no mention of Buddhism or Jainism in these dramas, suggesting their declining visibility in Chandella urban life. Yet, Jainism did maintain a presence in the region, as evidenced by the construction of numerous Jain temples. Buddhism, however, seems to have lost ground in Central India by this period. Advaita Vedānta also left its imprint, with Vatsarāja himself reflecting the *Smārta* tradition of invoking five principal deities. At the same time, traces of Cārvāka influence can be detected in the behavior of urban folk, characters indifferent to *dharma* and *mokṣa*, focused instead on *artha* and *kāma*, indicating a materialist urban ethos.

Thus, the religious references do not remain abstract theological allusions but function as a mirror to the urban religiosity of the Chandella period. They project a world where grand temples and shrines structured civic and ritual life, where sectarian traditions intersected in urban festivals, and where both devotion and pragmatic ritual knowledge coexisted in shaping the everyday religious practices of the city-dwellers.

Conclusion

The works of Vatsarāja, though composed within the refined framework of Sanskrit drama, serve as vivid mirrors of the urban life of the Candella period. They do not present a static or idealized social order; rather, they reflect a society in transition, shaped by new political realities, shifting social norms, and an increasing orientation towards material and artistic pursuits. Significantly, nowhere in his plays does Vatsarāja offer any criticism of the governance or administration of Paramardideva. The absence of even implicit censure suggests not only the poet's deliberate avoidance of politically sensitive commentary but also his pronounced inclination towards the reigning monarch. Instead of questioning authority, his works maintain a tone of affirmation, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy and stability of Paramardideva's rule. This tendency indicates that Vatsarāja's dramatic world, while attentive to the complexities of social and religious life, remained firmly aligned with royal interests and courtly sensibilities. Urban society appears bustling, layered, and diverse. The dramas open windows into the lived experience of city-dwellers, households filled with servants, artisans sustaining urban markets, courtesans wielding cultural influence, and actors and musicians animating public and private spaces with performance.

Religion itself is portrayed as both a unifying and diversifying force. Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, Devī-worship, and popular cults coexisted in a dynamic civic space where grand temples structured the urban landscape and sectarian traditions expressed themselves in public festivals. At the same time, materialist and pleasure-seeking attitudes reveal a pragmatic, sometimes sceptical dimension of city life.

Daily life, as dramatized by Vatsarāja, was steeped in pleasure and refinement. Betel, liquor, ornamentation, fashion, and cosmetics formed part of a culture of indulgence, while gambling, music, hunting, and seasonal revels completed the picture of leisure and festivity. Yet beneath this glitter lay tensions, fractured families, hypocrisy in religious life, and crime in urban alleys, all of which reveal the complexities of city existence.

Taken together, these works portray the medieval Indian city as a space of convergence, of politics and culture, of wealth and art, of devotion and indulgence. Vatsarāja's dramas are thus not only literary creations but also historical testimonies, preserving the texture of a society negotiating change while celebrating the vitality of urban life.

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