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DEFYING THE CASTE AND CLASS HEGEMONY: A STUDY OF RABINDRANATH
TAGORE'S PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore's influence as a literary figure has been lauded internationally. Yet his ideas about Indian caste and class biases have received the least attention from historians. In his writings he was vocal about social and political issues, caste and class prejudice being one of them. During Tagore's formative years, caste was a factor to be reckoned with. The development of Tagore's ideas on caste and class issues kept getting more radical with time. Although himself a Brahmin he gradually came to realize the inhumanity of untouchability prevalent in Indian Hindu society. He could now see into the biasness of caste prerogatives and the social stagnation caused due to impermeability into irrational caste hierarchy. It is interesting to see how caste bias intersects with class hegemony as well. Tagore was overwhelmed by the economic, social and political misery in which the poor of society and peasants lived. He was deeply moved by the plight of the underdogs of society and stressed the need of making them aware of their exploitation at the hands of the powers that be. The present paper is a study of the theme of caste and class hegemony in his famous plays *Natir Puja* and *Sanyasi*. Both plays convey the message that a person must not be judged by his birth but by his deeds.

Keywords: Caste, Class, untouchability, biasness and hegemony, Tagore's radicalism

Natir-Puja and Sanyasi

The identity of a nation is because of the advancement of culture and traditions of the society. Literature mirrors all of them and the social mobility becomes the life-spirit of all literary creativity. A writer and an artist confirm the social changes of the contemporary times while adding his imaginative genius to it. In this regard Radha Krishnan aptly remarks: ...drama creates the conscience of the age. We cannot make people good by acts of parliament. Nor is it possible by constitutional provisions to remove deep-seated social prejudices. We influence social behaviour by creating public opinion. (169)

Tagore confirms this idea through his immense dramatic output. He was concerned with social problems of his times. Though he was mainly occupied with literary works, social problems did not escape his keen

attention. Different social problems formed the subject matter of his plays. The human conditions were portrayed sympathetically and literary treatment brought in richness and vitality to his plays. Tagore was concerned with social problems of his times. Though he mainly produced literary works, social problems of our country did not escape his keen attention. His writings provide a powerful glimpse of his viewpoint regarding the values and traditions related with social set up of his times.

Das confirms Tagore's enlightened conscience on the issue of societal taboos in following words:

All good writing is sustained by the same forces that are shaped and directed by society and it is through the long corridors of history that a heritage eventually takes its birth. Social mobility is the life-spring of all creative literary effort and it is precisely for this reason that the pre independence period produced master minds, great writers and artists, notable among whom was Rabindranath Tagore. (121)

Tagore's writings authentically reflect the cultural patterns and ethos of India. Social consciousness was deeply ingrained in Tagore's writings. He knew that the contemporary society was plagued with an inescapable divisibility owing to caste and class barriers. A true artist, Tagore never divorced himself from the life-pulse of society he was part of- be it in respect of the efflorescence of culture or a keen awareness of the problems plaguing the society of his times. Almost all the works of Tagore are inextricably associated with literary, social and cultural scenario of his times. Tagore knew that as a social being he owed it to society to have an understanding of his social responsibility as a writer and an artist.

The description of Rabindranath Tagore as a "Man among men" "a citizen of the world", "A liberated spirit", "an ecumenical (universal) man", "and a modern rishi" is the measure of his stature in the scale of "human nobility and greatness" (Dhar)

Tagore saw the fundamental defect inherent in the caste system. He said, "In her caste regulation India recognised difference but not the mutuality which is the law of life." (Das 131) He analysed it and concluded that the caste system was not essential and created barriers.

Tagore pointed out the evils of caste system in following words:

In trying to avoid collisions she (i.e., India) set up boundaries of immovable walls, thus giving to her numerous races the negative benefit of peace and order but not the positive opportunity of the expansions and movement,...therefore, life departed from her social system and in its place she is worshipping with all ceremony the magnificent cage of countless compartments that she has manufactured. (Qtd. in Das 132)

The above view of the caste system also influenced the colonial administrators of India, "who too got most of the information about caste matters from Hindu religious authorities" (Basu xiv). Partha Chatterjee remarks about the importance of caste to Indians, "If there was one social institution that... characterised Indian society as radically different from western society, it was the institution of caste" (Qtd. in Basu xiv).

Caste disparities in India led to the polarisation of society. The upper castes were believed to be 'pure', while the lower castes were considered 'impure'. These ideas evolved out of the basis of the work performed by the castes. The lower caste people were called 'outcastes' and sometimes they were called 'chandals'. This division of society led to the evil of untouchability in the Indian society. Untouchability came into being due to rigidity and hardening of caste system. Though it is said that untouchability is not inherent in the caste system, social behaviour reveals that it is the result of the caste system.

Mahatma Gandhi spearheaded the protest against this rigid system. He clearly stated that such divisions are "harmful both to spiritual and national growth" (Basu 151). Saints like Nanak and Kabir have strongly criticized the caste system. All the major writers have responded seriously to this malaise, making it one of the dominant themes in Indian literature. Tagore was a severe critic of this system and he condemned the caste system in a poem published in the year 1910:

My wretched country, those whom you have Crushed and trampled, deprived of their Rights, made them stand and never drew them close. Share you must their indignities and suffering (Qtd. in Basu 151).

Tagore was ahead of his times in his indictment of the caste system. He aimed to give back to the poor and the marginalised, what had been snatched by the privileged few - the right to freedom and dignity. In 1935, Will Durant, the great philosopher and historian said:

Today he [Tagore] is a solitary figure, perhaps the most impressive of all men now on the earth; a reformer who had the courage to denounce the most basic of India's institutions - the caste system - and the dearest of her beliefs - transmigration (Qtd. in Bhattacharya 122).

Tagore's criticism of the Indian caste system and the prejudices prevalent as a result of this is a recurrent theme in his novels, plays and poems. His indignation towards caste system and untouchability found expression in his famous plays *Chandalika*, *Natir-Puja*, *Achalayatan*, *Sanyasi* and *Karna and Kunti* etc.

Conflict between the traditionalism of Hinduism and true human values preached by Buddha is amongst the major themes of Tagore's plays. Another significant aspect of his work is that it attacks the hypocrisy and pseudo notions associated with the powerful and the great. Tagore revolted against illiteracy, ignorance, poverty and rigidities of social structure. At the same time he waged an open war against exploitation on the basis of caste and class. In the process he gave a lesson in revolt to the lower classes. He believed that the man who bows to injustice and takes it lying down is equally guilty as the person who commits it:

He who commits an unjust act,

And he who tolerates an unjust act calmly,

Must be burnt by thy contempt like a tiny blade of grass. (Qtd. in Bhattacharya 123)

Thus, Tagore warns the exploited humanity to raise its voice against all oppression. He "gave a clarion call to the Brahmins, the law makers, and asked them to give these ignorant simpletons their due place in society." (Bhattacharya 122)

Ernest Rhys aptly sums up Tagore's protest against caste and class discrimination: The union of nations, the destroying of caste, religious pride, race prejudice - in a word, the 'Making of man'; there lies his human aim. 'It is', he says, 'the one problem of the present age, and one must be prepared to go through the martyrdom of sufferings and humiliations till the victory' of God in man is achieved. (Qtd. in Chakravorty 260)

"Among the most despised communities of India were the chandalas." (Iyer 10)

Prabhat Mukherji describes chandals as "Beyond the Four Varnas"- the most outcaste category" (Qtd. in Iyer 10). Chandals were not included into the stratification of four Varnas of Indian society." The chandals, perhaps, belong to the total rejects in society" (Iyer 16). They were the lowest and supposed to be the worst of all human beings. Strong hatred was expressed against them and their touch and even sight was regarded as pollution as considered low by caste and thus were untouchables.

To quote Michael Moffat: The "untouchables" very often try to replicate within their very varied ranks the hierarchies of the caste system of which they are at the receiving end" (Qtd. in Basu xv). Ananda, the monk represents the voice of Tagore proclaiming that every individual must recognise his/her worth as a human being. Caste and class barriers rob the dignity of human beings. A man must not be judged by his caste but by his individuality and above all his deeds.

Tagore's basic social philosophy is enunciated in "*Kartar Ichchhay Karma*" (*The Master's will be Done*) and "*Satyer Ahvan*" (*The Call of Truth*). Tagore's viewpoint and approach is:

...dwells in their union. Tagore believed in the slogan of self determination. Man must respect others, not enslave others. Freedom cannot be had by mere begging; it is to be earned. Contradictions have to be solved by conscious efforts. (Naravane 103)

Tagore was overwhelmed by the economic, social and political misery in which the poor of society and peasants lived. He was deeply moved by the plight of the underdogs of society and stressed the need of making

them aware of their exploitation at the hands of the powers that be. He gave a description of them at a later date:

Our so-called responsible classes live in comfort because the common man has not yet understood his situation. That is why the landlord beats him. The money-lender holds him in his clutches; the foreman abuses him; the policeman fleeces him; the priest exploits him; and the magistrate picks his pocket, (Qtd. in Jha 2)

These conditions, he thought, cannot be changed by appealing to the religious sentiments of the landlord, policeman or money-lender. In human society, necessity is a greater force than charity. The first requirement therefore is that people should discover the bond that holds them together as a society. If there is one path likely to achieve this, it is education.

Tagore realized from his own experience of the farmers' attitudes and their social behavior that strength can be generated only in a self-reliant village society developing its own power and its own momentum of growth. As he says: 'Poverty springs from disunity and wealth from co-operation. From all points of view this is the fundamental truth of human civilisation' (Qtd. in Jha 3).

The discrimination and inequalities that exist in our society are man-made. In the eyes of the supreme power all beings are equal. But men make distinctions amongst themselves on the basis of their birth. This differentiation has been blindly followed since ages. And in the name of religion people abuse their own brethren. Religious discrimination also arises because of such evil practices. Lower class people are not considered worthy of offering worship to God. Tagore deals with this aspect of discrimination in his play *Natir Puja*.

Originally written in Bengali, *Natir Puja* was translated into English by Marjorie Sykes. Tagore's own translation of the play appeared in *Vishvabharti Quarterly* in 1927. The play created history by presenting only women characters. Interestingly, no male characters appear on the stage. Tagore himself trained all the women characters. It was a ground-breaking performance of its own kind in the history of Indian Theatre. The play is based on a Buddhist legend found in Rajendralal Mitra's *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, which was published by Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1882. (Mukherjee 68)

According to this legend:

King Bimbisara had built stupa in memory of Lord Buddha. When Ajatsatru came to the throne after the murder of his father, he forbade the worship of Buddha in any form throughout his kingdom. Srimati, a female slave, defied the order and lighted the stupa with a row of lamps. She was executed by the King's order. (Chakravorty 150)

Tagore has made some vital changes in the legend for dramatic reasons. *Natir Puja* is a dance drama. In this play Tagore concludes that worship of God is not the privilege of just one class or caste. All are equal in the eyes of God and thus have equal right to worship Him. At the same time he focuses on the fact that no religion is good or bad.

The play begins with Upali, the Bhikshu, asking for alms in the name of the Lord at the palace gate. Srimati, the palace dancer is the only one who is awake. Srimati is a poor and lowborn girl. Like Prakriti, her mind is also conditioned by her environment to believe that she is not worthy of giving alms to a Bhikshu; it is only the privilege of princesses of the palace. But the Bhikshu assures her that her gift will be equally acceptable to the Lord. Srimati says: But I am so poor! In your alms bowl anything that I could give would seem so mean. What can I give, tell me?" The monk replies, "Your best gift...Indeed he will take it, child. He will accept the flowers of your worship (*Three Plays*, 88-89). These words of Bhikshu highlight the principle of equality among all men. The Bhikshu shows no hesitation in accepting alms from Srimati, who is mere Nati in the palace, a lowborn creature.

The play conveys the message that a person must not be judged by his birth but by his deeds. It does not matter how much a person has to offer to God; what matters is his devotion towards God, which should be steadfast. The Bhikshu's assurance stimulates in Srimati the sense of essential human dignity which is innate in

every individual irrespective of his social status. It is the birthday of Lord Buddha and Srimati is chosen by the 'Order' to offer worship at the altar beneath the 'Ashoka' tree. The female members of the palace are shocked at this news. No one is able to accept that the dancing girl, a person belonging to the lower strata of the society, will perform the most prestigious task generally assigned to the princess.

Princess Ratnavali reacts furiously on learning this and asks the Bhikshuni as to who gave Srimati this right:

Bhikshuni: Upali is one.

Ratnavali: Upali- a barber.

Bhikshuni: Another is Sunanda.

Ratnavali: He's a cowherd's son.

Bhikshuni: Another is Sunit.

Ratnavali: He is Pukkush by caste, isn't he? (105)

This dialogue clearly shows the discriminative attitude of upper caste people towards the lower castes. Ratnavali accuses the Order for being partial and sympathetic towards Srimati because she also belongs to lower caste just like them. She says: "Perhaps there's no difference between their caste and hers. That's why they have such a regard for her, no doubt!" (105). Ratnavali is angry with other princesses as they also support Srimati. She cunningly remarks to them: "How charming! Srimati will serve the altar, and you, her maids-in-waiting, will do the fanning!" (106). According to Ratnavali this all is "completely against all nature" (106). "If that dancing-girl is allowed to make offering here, this place will be desecrated. I can live here no longer" (113).

The decision of the 'Order' has come to the princess and the queen as an insult. And they would never allow a lowborn creature to take away the rights of a Queen or a Princess. Their hatred for the girl is evident in these words uttered by Queen Lokeshvari: "Pity her! I would have her thrown to the dogs, I would watch her torn limb from limb" (113). These women are ready to destroy the worship "root and branch." Queen is ready to have altar destroyed as she cannot endure that the rights of the queen and the princess are being usurped. So she exclaims: "But for the feet of a dancing-girl to tread the royal shrine- that I cannot bear!" (114).

The upper class people feel that their royal dignity has been attacked because a lowborn girl is chosen to perform the coveted act of worship of the God. In order to take their revenge, the royal ladies plot against the dancing girl. Ratnavali suggests: "Bid her dance, dancing-girl as she is, before the very altar where she was to have worshipped as priestess!" (113). Forcing her to commit sacrilege, they order her to dance at the altar where she has to offer her worship. Their hatred and jealousy for the girl is deep. Therefore, In order to maintain their so called dignity and pride, the people of the upper class can stoop to anything. They can even force the death of their enemies but never compromise on their pseudo notions of grandeur and dignity. Queen Lokeshwari and Princess Ratnavali go to the extent of desiring death for Srimati because they cannot bear the glorification of a dancing girl.

Queen Lokeshwari's anger is intensified when she learns that people want to become the disciples of Srimati because they consider her a saint. One of the maids warns princess Ratnavali about the sin she is committing: "Princess, this sin will not touch the dancing girl. It is on your own head alone" (134). But Ratnavali is totally unmindful of the maid's warning. She wonders how a dancing girl can be considered a saint. The maid tells her: "We never thought of her as a dancing girl. We saw in her the light of heaven" (134). These words have no effect on the princess. She only wants Srimati to be put to death. Class distinction is also illuminated in the play.

Queen Lokeshwari believes that if Srimati is a saint then their religion has been debased. She mocks at the new religion saying that the "fallen will come preaching salvation" (101). In her view all those who believe in such a religion are fools: O what fools are you, you girls of royal blood, to be set on welcoming this religion—

this religion that will drag your proud throne in the dust. Beggars will rule henceforth from the thrones of the Kings. (101)

Class consciousness is clearly visible in the above words uttered by the queen. The play portrays a society, full of disparities. The upper classes, citing the Holy Scriptures, uphold their right to worship. But they forget that in the eyes of the Lord all are one and have equal rights to worship God. According to Ratnavali, King Bimbisara's murder is "the fruit of his own deeds" (127). She believes:

King Bimbisara murdered the Vedic religion of his forefathers. Wasn't that an even worse deed than parricide? The Brahmins have been saying ever since that a day of reckoning would come. The hungry sacrificial flames he quenched must devour him in his turn. (127)

She calls this new religion, that is, Buddhism, the beggar's creed. She does not understand the fuss about the killing of Bhikshuni by Devadatta's followers. "Why make such a to-do about that? She was only a farmer's daughter.... I can't tolerate that! This beggar's creed of yours saps the glory of kingship" (127). In the end Srimati is slain by the King's order. But she is not afraid of death and proves her faith by sacrificing her life.

Buddhism had a profound influence upon Tagore. Buddha disregarded the caste system and revolted against the old and worn out dogmas and preached the lesson of equality and love for all. Buddhism has inspired the great thinkers of our country. Tagore too believed in the teachings of Buddha and possessed a deep understanding of Buddhism. He believed that the metaphysical aspect of Buddhist philosophy has a basis in friendship, mercy and universal love. The teaching of Buddha generated two currents of thought: The one, impersonal, preaching the abnegation of self through discipline and the other personal, preaching the cultivation of sympathy for all creatures and devotion to the infinite truth of love. (Naravane 32)

Tagore advanced the interpretation of Brahma-Vihar meaning that love should be extended to all. Buddhism declared that strict moral principles must be observed. Rabindranath was not keen to follow the moral principles but stressed the expansion of love for all creatures. According to Tagore the love for fellow creatures was the pillar of Buddhism. There lies Nirvana. So he realised: The human soul is on its journey from the law to love, from discipline to liberation, from the moral plane to the spiritual. Buddha preached the discipline of self-restraint and moral life; it is a complete acceptance of law. But this bondage of law cannot be an end by itself; by mastering it thoroughly we acquire the means of getting beyond it. It is going back to Brahma, to the infinite love, which is manifesting itself through the finite forms of law. Buddha names it Brahma-Vihara, the joy of living in Brahma. (Das 201)

Tagore invokes the spirit of Buddha in many of his plays. *Natir Puja* is one such play. In this play, the influence of Buddhist teachings is evident. Tagore was impressed by the fundamental equality preached by this faith. Buddha had once challenged the infallibility of the Vedas and the hierarchy of the Hindu caste. Worship of the Divine cannot be the monopoly of this caste or that, nor can its expression be imprisoned in one particular Vedic pattern... Social institutions distort the fundamental equality of all human beings, by their artificial snobberies and standards exalting some and degrading others. (Kriplani 324)

Social customs and traditions warp this fundamental equality of all human beings by their false values and their snobberies, by applauding some and disgracing others. But true religion is that which disregarding man-made prejudices restore the fundamental judgment by which all human beings must finally be measured and redeemed. As an English poet has put it:

The soul of music slumbers in the shell
Till waked and kindled by the master's spell;
And feeling hearts—touch them but rightly-pour
A thousand melodies unfelt before. (Three plays, 84)

Srimati through her unwavering devotion experiences the true awakening of her soul and asserts the innate dignity of her spirit by embracing death: "True worship is the surrender or dedication of the best we have

to the call of the Truth. The sage dedicates his learning, the man of action his deeds, the poet his songs, the humble Nati her dance" (86).

Tagore has interpreted the Buddha's Gospel of renunciation very powerfully through the motifs of sacrifice, fearlessness and surrender.

Tagore attacked all prevalent social institutions because he was against discrimination of all kinds. In his first important play *Sanyasi*, Tagore presents a subtle attack on the curse of untouchability. In the original version *Sanyasi* was named *Prakritir Pratishodh* or *Nature's Revenge*. Written in the year 1884, it is a verse drama. Tagore translated the play in the year 1919 when he was travelling from India to Japan. There are two main characters in this play, the Sanyasi and Vasanti the daughter of Raghu, an outcaste. The Sanyasi undergoes a spiritual conflict in the play. Vasanti represents the oppressed strata of society. She is an orphan. The village people refer to her as 'pollution'. She is prohibited to walk on the road that leads to the temple because she is daughter of an untouchable person. A woman says to her: "Girl, you are Raghu's daughter, aren't you? You should keep away from this road. Don't you know it goes to the temple?" (*Sanyasi* 467)

The attitude of hatred and insensitivity towards the untouchables is evident in the way the village people respond to the little girl. The following words of the village woman further highlight the mindset of the people, in whose psyche is embedded the unbridgeable difference between the upper and the lower castes: "But I thought my cloth-end touched you. I am taking my offerings to the goddess - I hope they are not polluted" (467). The touch of the little girl is considered 'impure' because she belongs to the lower caste. This shows the extreme form of discrimination amongst human beings, which has no meaning. There is no basis of such discrimination because the touch of one person can never ever make the other person impure.

The Sanyasi has turned away from the world of materialism to the spiritual world. He has completely detached himself from all worldly objects. But the very first contact with the little untouchable girl Vasanti arouses a sense of parental affection in Sanyasi's heart. Vasanti tells the Sanyasi that she is considered as 'pollution' by the people at which the Sanyasi says: "But they are all that,-- all pollution. They roll in the dust of existence. Only he is pure who has washed away the world from his mind" (468).

The Sanyasi is a stoic, who is neither attached to nor detached from worldly objects. He knows no inequalities and considers all those humans impure who are caught in the tangle of worldly desires. He tells the girl that she is innocent and not impure. The girl however, is aware of the way the world treats her. When the Sanyasi asks her to come closer to him, she is utterly surprised. She asks the Sanyasi, "Will you touch me?" (468). The girl feels "deserted by gods and men alike" (468). After the death of her father, she has been left to fend for herself in a hostile society. No one treats her kindly except the Sanyasi. She asks Sanyasi, "...Tell me, is there no shelter for me in the whole world?" (469).

She further says:

Father, this creeper trailing on the glass, seeking some tree to twine itself round, is my creeper. I have tended it and watered it from the time when it had pushed up only two little leaves into the air, like an infant's cry. This creeper is me, - it has grown by the roadside, it can so easily be crushed (472).

As Sanyasi's attachment grows towards the little girl he fears that he will move away from the infinite. He considers her to be the "messenger of the unknown". In his rage he tears the creeper apart and leaves that helpless girl as he is not prepared to allow himself to be trapped in worldly illusions. For him this world is "kingdom of lies" (464).

Tagore depicts the pathetic condition of the little girl and the naiveté of the ascetic:

Vasanti: Leave me not father -I have none else but you.

Sanyasi: I must go, I thought I had known- but I do not know. Yet I must know. I leave you, to know who you are.

Vasanti: Father, if you leave, I shall die.

Sanyasi: Let go my hand. Do not touch me. I must be free. (473)

Thus, the Sanyasi runs away from the little girl. In course of time, he realises he is unable to live without Vasanti. He realises the blunder he committed by deserting the little girl. He undoes his vows of Sanyasi and comes back to shower his love on the girl, breaking his staff and alms-bowl. In pain, he cries out:

This stately ship, this world, which is crossing the sea of time, - let it take me up again. The bird flies in the sky, not to fly away in the emptiness, but to come back again to this great earth.-I am free. I am free from the bodiless chain of the Nay. I am free among the things and forms and purpose. (477)

Thus, he returns to Vasanti singing: "The finite is the true infinite, and love knows its truth. My girl, you are the spirit of all that is, -I can never leave you" (478).

Unfortunately, the realisation dawns on him too late. By the time he reaches the village, the girl is already dead. The death of the little girl shocks him and he accepts that true emancipation can only be achieved through bonds of human affection. Thus, Tagore gives a message of love and equality among all human beings. Tagore's treatment of the caste and class disparities that destroys the fabric of society is sensitive and profound.

Conclusion

Through *Natir Puja* and *Sanyasi* he brings to the fore the need for a reassessment of the barriers created by man himself. These plays epitomise the dream of a new world, where these boundaries of caste and class can be dissolved once and for all. Tagore's views were shaped by his reading of the Upanishads and the Buddhist philosophy. He felt that his countrymen must enlighten themselves through the wisdom of the sacred books which embody the essence of the Indian values since ancient times. Though Tagore was not a revolutionary in the strictest sense of the term, yet his oeuvre reflects and echoes the sensitive perception of a liberated mind. He could gauge the pain inflicted upon the downtrodden and the marginalized sections of the society owing to the caste and class biases. Different social problems appear as subject-matter of his novels, plays and short stories. Tagore portrays the human condition sympathetically. Its literary treatment brings in richness and vitality to his oeuvre. Tagore realised that the country was afflicted by many social evils which hampered its progress. These had begun to eat into the vitals of the society, thereby creating a cultural void. He was sensitive to the anguish of the people.

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