



Resistance against Caste Discrimination and Untouchability in Tagore's Plays '*NatirPuja*' and '*Chandalika*' in the Context of Buddhist Doctrine.

Dr Hukum Chand

Asst. Professor, Department of English

Bareilly College, Bareilly. U.P.

Abstract

In the majority of his works, particularly plays, novels and poems, Tagore has shown a great deal of love and sympathy for the unprivileged, oppressed and disadvantaged groups in Indian society. In these works, he emerges as a renowned humanist and champion of social justice. His goal is to unite all people under a common tie of love and compassion. He detests everything that divides individuals from one another. Being a fervent supporter of liberty and equality, Tagore strongly condemns untouchability and opposes all forms of discrimination based on caste, creed, language or religion. Through his creative writings he spreads the message of truth, goodness, love, freedom, worldwide brotherhood and compassion. Without a question, a variety of internal and external factors have contributed to the development of Tagore's thoughts, attitudes and overall personality, but the Buddha's philosophy and teachings have had the greatest impact of all.

This paper outlines Tagore's revolutionary beliefs and unwavering opposition to artificial and man-made divisions that undermine humanistic principles of equality, unity, and fraternity and deny people their social rights as envisaged in Buddhist philosophy. Although this ideal concept and philosophy can be found throughout many of Tagore's works, they are most clearly expressed in his plays '*NatirPuja*' and '*Chandalika*'. For that reason, in order to address these particular issues, the main focus of this study is these two plays.

Keywords: Humanism, Buddhism, Caste-System, Caste Differentiation and Untouchability.

Rabindranath Tagore stands out among all the Anglo-Indian writers who have dared to criticise the abhorrent practices of caste-distinction and untouchability in their works in the harshest terms. Almost all his creative writings especially his plays bear eloquent testimony to it. In these, he articulates his vehement denunciation of these social evils, which not only denigrate humanity but also foster artificial distinctions between individuals who share the same natural heritage. He is a virtuous defender of humanism who places man above all else and believes that God manifests Himself through man. Describing the specific features of Tagore's humanism Kakoli Basak observes——

Perhaps no one else, before or after Tagore accorded such a high place to man. I think, Tagore should be called a humanist due to three reasons; Firstly, he attributed humanity to God, secondly, he attributed divinity to man, and thirdly, for him man is great not only as a divine being but as a finite being who has infinite possibilities within. (Basak VI)

It is obvious that Tagore's humanist philosophy serves as the foundation for his criticism of the inhuman practices prevailing in Indian society particularly in Hindu society. From this humanist perspective, Tagore considers the idea of caste and untouchability to be the greatest sin on earth because it hurts man's divinity, which is the place where the Almighty resides and through whom He expresses Himself. It is for

this reason that he believes that no man is untouchable or impure. As a result, he totally rejects the long-standing myth in Hindu society that certain people are untouchable and that caste is determined by divine decree as revealed in the Vedas. Being a great humanist and believer in humanity, Tagore finds it very intolerable to witness the brutal denial of fundamental rights to a vast majority of people who are treated as outsiders or untouchable.

This philosophy of Tagore's spiritual humanism has its roots in the tenets of Buddhism and the teachings of the Buddha. This quote on Tagore from Krishna Kriplani helps to explain how much the life and teachings of the Buddha have inspired him, "Only once in his life did he feel like prostrating himself before an image, and that was when he saw the Buddha at Gaya (Sykes 86)." There is no doubt that Tagore has been greatly influenced by the Buddha's teachings on humanity, equality, fraternity, love for mankind, human welfare and universal brotherhood. However, what has most impressed Tagore is his opinions on religion, caste and untouchability. The Buddha was the one who for the first time in the history of India rebelled against the Chaturvarna System of the Vedic Age, which divides society into castes and classes based on one's birth than individual value. The Buddha also questioned the Vedas' infallibility and rejected the idea that Brahmins are superior to other classes. He opened the doors of his religion to all, even the lowest of the low and proclaimed his religious doctrines to everyone regardless of caste, creed or religion. "In the Buddha, according to Tagore, the Hindu race and thought had achieved its finest flowering (Kriplani 94)"

It can be doubtlessly said that from this revolutionary zeal of the Buddha against the inequality and regressive tenets of the Vedic religion, Tagore himself must have developed a revolting and resisting fervour in his attitude, which are reflected in all his creative writing notably his plays. Tagore's unconventional approach to religious rites, his revolutionary beliefs against societal superstition and his strong antipathy for casteism and untouchability are all direct outcome of the Buddha's teachings and Buddhist way of life. That is why V.S. Naravane insists that, "No other Indian thinker of our age has written about the Buddha with such deep reverence and understanding as Rabindranath has done (Naravane 32)."

Tagore attributes the origins of the caste system and untouchability to the Chaturvarna System of the Vedic Age which divided society into four distinct classes based on varna, or merit. However, this worth-based division gradually gave way to a birth-based division, which is how the current caste system came to exist. As a result, castes were established only on the basis of birth, and tasks that had previously determined solely on worth were now determined by birth only. The upshot of the caste system was that it denied the socio-economic rights of those in lower position while benefitting those in the profitable stage. Ultimately, owing to the inflexibility of the system and the upper section's malicious agenda, the lower-class people were reduced to the status, worse than animals and subjected to discrimination and treatment as untouchables and outsiders. As Tagore appropriately states—

There is no harm in a cat sitting by and eating beside you, but if certain men so much as enter the room, the food has to be thrown away. How can one not condemn the caste system which has resulted in this contempt and insult of man by man? If that is not unrighteous, I do not know what is. Those who can despise their fellow-men so terribly can never rise to greatness; for them, in turn, shall be reserved the contempt of others. (Sen 41)

It is this class that has got the greatest sympathy from Tagore, who fiercely opposes the caste system on the grounds that is impracticable, detrimental and hazardous for society. The idea of dividing society based on birth is something he strongly disagrees with. In several of his works, Tagore questions as to how one's duties or professions can be predetermined by birth. Work that requires a specific level of efficiency and skill from an individual cannot be inherited. Thus, according to Tagore, this division of labour that results from the caste system is not merely flawed but an outright failure. He views it as a faux pas. As he puts in the following words—

It is evident that the caste-idea is not creative, it is merely institutional. It adjusts human being according to some mechanical arrangements. It emphasizes the negative side of the individual—his separateness. It hurts the complete truth in man. (Sen 41)

The play *Natir Puja* is a powerful expression of Tagore's strongest abhorrence against the caste system and the hierarchical divisions of the Hindu society based on the Chaturvarna System of the Vedic period. Being a strong proponent of equality and unity, Tagore opposes the stratification of society that is determined more by birth than by ability. The famous dramatist claims that this system is extremely discriminatory because it grants specific rights to some groups, particularly the upper classes. Thus, it deprives the great majority of people, who are part of society's lower classes, of their social and religious rights which are enjoyed by the caste Hindus. The theme of the play revolves around a religious controversy that arises from Buddhist monk Bhikshu Upali's decision to take alms from Srimati, a low-born dancer in the palace, while avoiding royal members. The narrative reaches its pinnacle when, once more, she is selected by the Buddhist Order to lead the worship at the shrine—a privilege hitherto only granted to the princesses. By means of this struggle, Tagore exposes the harsh, dehumanising and discriminating mindset of the royal personages, which is deeply ingrained in the Indian caste system and targets the weakest and lowest segments of society.

The play is an indictment of that mentality of the caste Hindus who because of their elevated social status hold that the people from lower classes shouldn't attempt to go beyond the boundaries set by the caste system. In the play this group is represented by Ratnavali, Lokesvari and other princesses. They adamantly support the rights and duties that the Chaturvarna System lays forth for every class and demand that they must be followed strictly in the same way. They are of the opinion that all social and religious privileges are meant only for the aristocratic class and not for the Shudras, whose jobs, they believe, are to serve or always to remain submissive to those who are higher up in the social hierarchy. This is the reason that they are against any religion or institution that deviates from accepted social and religious norms and try to keep both the higher and the lower on an equal footing. This is proved when the Bhikshu Upali, avoiding the princesses who usually offered alms to the monks, accepts alms from Srimati with the assurance that it will be equally acceptable to the Lord. This very deed of Bhikshu Upali and Srimati hurts the feudal pride of the royal personages so much that they see it as a challenge to their social hierarchy and royal privilege. Their sarcastic comments at Srimati's defiant act after this incident reveal their indignation and hurt sentiments. The way that queen Lokesvari responds to princess Ratnavali when she sarcastically informs her that Srimati has turned into a preacher and that all the princesses are now prepared to become her disciples is a clear indication of her caste mentality. As she says—

This dancing girl's disciples; yes, that is just what will happen with this religion. The fallen will come preaching salvation. Srimati has suddenly become a saint now, has she?...O What fools you are, you girls of

royal blood, to be so set on welcoming this religion.....this religion that will drag your proud throne in the dust. Beggars will rule henceforth from the thrones of kings!(Sykes 101).

This casteist mentality of Ratnavali comes to the fore again when she comes to know from Bhikshuni Utpalaparna that the Buddhist Order has chosen Srimati to perform worship in the shrine. The princess uses caste indicating words to insult the senior members of the order in a very insulting way. She asks the Bhikshuni—

I cannot have heard aright. What Srimati are you speaking of?

Bhikshuni — This Srimati, here.

Ratnavali — This palace dancing- girl?

Bhikshuni — Yes, This dancing girl.

Ratnavali — Did you get this from the elders?

Bhikshuni — Yes, it is they who gave the order.

Ratnavali— Who gave the order? What are their names?

Bhikshuni — Upali is one.

Ratnavali — Upali — a barber.

Bhikshuni — Another is Suganda.

Ratnavali — He is a cowherd's son.

Bhikshuni — Another is Sunit.

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

The above remarks made by Lokesvary and Ratnavali are clearly reflective of the caste-ridden mentality which is found deep-rooted in the psyche of the caste Hindus. The way the members of the royal family subjected Srimati and the Buddhist Order to humiliating torture and personal attacks is sufficient evidence of how even a small and insignificant task performed by a man of low-birth can be taken personally by those of a higher social class simply because they believe it is their right to do so. This intolerance, narrowness and false feeling of superiority on the part of the upper class, according to Tagore, are the root cause of the evils of caste-distinction and untouchability in India. For a great upholder of unity and equality like Tagore, such intolerance and narrow-mindedness have no place in a civilized society. They incite in the hearts of one group of people feelings of insensitivity, jealousy and hatred towards others. The finest illustration of it is when Lokesvari called Srimati a 'beggar' and 'fallen' just because of her low-birth. Otherwise, she is one of the noblest persons in the entire palace.

Through the aforementioned comments Tagore also highlights the doctrines and teachings of Buddhism. The Bhikshu Upali's rebellious act of accepting alms from Srimati, a lowly dancer, neglecting royal princesses reflects the humanistic ideal of Buddhism, which are based on love, compassion and mutual respect without any considerations of the difference of caste, creed and religion. As an outstanding social reformer, Tagore repudiates all religions and religious faiths, as well as all man-made organisations and

systems that obfuscate the fundamental equality of all human beings by creating artificial differences of caste, place of birth and man-made social hierarchy. According to the great poet-playwright a religion that gives more importance to a man's caste, birth and social standing than his inner beauty, spiritual awakening and purity of mind and soul cannot be a true religion. It insults the divinity in man. The beauty and greatness of a religion, asserts Tagore, lies in uplifting even the most deprived and degraded by awakening in them a sense of the essential human dignity which is inherent in every individual whether he is a slave or a king, a low-born Nati or a royal princess, a Chandalini or a Brahmin.

Srimati is the finest example of it in the play. Her transformation from a lowly, and timid Nati who initially feels scared to give alms to the monk due to her low-birth to a bold and dedicated devotee who even gives her life to carry out the rituals of worship at the shrine is truly inspirational. Upali's acceptance of alms from her hands with the assurance that it will be equally acceptable to the Lord awakens in her the essential human dignity. With her newly discovered spirit and knowledge, she not only overcomes her sense of lowliness but also triumphs over all the obstacles presented by the princess Ratnavali and finishes the religious duty prescribed by the Buddhist Order. When Ratnavali plots to force Srimati to dance as a dancing girl, with the intention of preventing her from performing the rites of worship at the alter on Buddha Purnima, she takes it as a challenge. Having finally realised the true meaning of worship, she is left with no choice but to use her profession of dance to perform the acts of worship. In the following dance song her inner sentiments are effectively conveyed—

I bring no woodland flower,
 No fruit for worship meet,
 No jar of holy water
 To offer at Thy feet.
 But into my slender body poured
 The streams of my heart are free,
 In music and gesture shines
 My worship, Lord, of Thee (Sykes 138).

Through her worship in the form of dance and by means of her devotion, sacrifice and pure spirit that leads to her religious martyrdom, Srimati not only frees herself from the curse of humble origin but also elevates to the status of an adorable being. This is proved when Ratnavali, her arch enemy and ardent follower of the traditional religion, realises the falsity of her pride and falls at the feet of the dead Srimati uttering the hymns of forgiveness—

My refuse is in the Buddha!

My refuse is in the Dharma!

My refuse is in the Sangha!(Sykes 140).

In the play *Chandalika* Tagore's dislike and hatred for untouchability resonates in a more powerful way. Being a prominent social reformer, he regards untouchability as one of the worst social evils of Hindu society. Nothing hurts his humanistic soul so deeply as this cruel and inhuman practice and for this reason he considers it as the darkest blot on the face of India and Indian civilization. As an advocate of harmony and equality, he is shocked that such dehumanising practices have persisted in society for such a long time. He finds it even more astounding that a man hates other people so much that he treats them as untouchables and think that mere their touch may pollute him. For this, Tagore primarily blames the Indian caste system because it split the society in an inflexible structure and those who were in the prominent position within it misused their power and position. In order to serve their selfish and nefarious interests, they deprived the members of lower groups of all socio-economic rights. Later, they expelled the people of these sections from main stream society, forced them to adhere several social and religious norms and labelled them as misfits and outcasts. Their entry in the temples was denied. Not even that, they were also prohibited from using public spaces and even a little breach with rules and guidelines would result in harsh punishment. Consequently, the status of individuals from lower social classes was reduced to that of animals. This gave birth to the practice of untouchability in India. The worst aspect of this inhuman practice, in Tagore's opinion, is that it not only made caste Hindus more vicious and inhuman but it also developed in the hearts of the low-born, untouchables a sense of self-degradation and self-humiliation. Due to centuries' injustice, inhuman treatment and unimaginable tyranny at the hands of the caste Hindus, these people lost the sense of self and accepted themselves as lowest and untouchables as tagged them by the caste Hindus.

The play *Chandalika* is a true reflection of Tagore's strongest resistance against the deep-seated sense of self-humiliation and self-degradation accumulated in the psyche of the people of low-birth and untouchables. Their deeply rooted sense of humiliation is the result of centuries of atrocities perpetrated on them under the guise of the caste system, caste differentiation and social code of conduct. Tagore holds this very feeling of self-degradation even more responsible for the worst condition of the downtrodden and untouchables than the discriminatory caste system that still exists in India. In Prakriti's mother this sense of lowness runs so deep that she gets really scared when her daughter Prakriti recounts her the story of Ananda, the Buddha's most devoted disciple, who asks her to give him water. She couldn't believe in it at all. The subsequent remarks she says to Prakriti clearly reveals her sense of inferiority "Heaven defend us! He said to you 'Give me water?.....who was it? Someone of our own caste?.....You didn't hide your caste? Did you tell him that you are a Chandalini(Sykes147)?"

This query of Prakriti's mother is clearly a manifestation of deep-rooted sense of fear born of the social code of conduct that the caste-Hindus impose on those of lower social status. As per this social code the low-caste and untouchables cannot offer water to any man of caste-Hindus from their well. If anyone, who is not of their caste, approaches their well and asks for water, they should inform him by pronouncing their caste. Tagore strongly opposes the social code of behaviour and these abhorrent practices of

untouchability. Tagore disregards all these artificial differences through the following enlightened words of Ananda as stated by Prakriti to her mother—

I told him, yes. He said it wasn't true. If the black clouds of Sravana are dubbed Chandal, he said, what of it? It doesn't change their nature, or destroy the virtue of their water. Don't humiliate yourself, he said; self-humiliation is a sin, worse than self-murder(Sykes 148).

In these lines Tagore's profound admiration for equality and his philosophy of life, as envisioned by Buddhism, are genuinely expressed. By revealing this marvellous truth to Prakriti and her mother through Ananda, the great playwright enlightens the underclass that treating themselves as Chandals, Shudras and other outcasts is not only wrong but also against the law of Nature. Nature, says Tagore emphatically, has made us all equal. Men and society are the ones who created all birth-based discrimination including caste, section and social hierarchy, which includes Brahmin, kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. They have nothing to do with their birth. Furthermore, neither God nor mother Nature has created them. If these distinctions were created by God or by Nature, they would also be followed by the objects of Nature. Pouring water of the clouds of Sravana on a Chandal without changing or destroying its virtues proves this fact.

Actually, what Tagore wishes to convey to the oppressed community is that they are not to blame for their deplorable situation. They are in this situation because of society, man-made system and the orthodox mindset of those who belong to the so-called upper classes. They are on par with any other man or woman from other caste or class. They are fit for any service to any one and their services will be valued by both man and God alike. This enlightened sense of equality and freedom from self-deprecation resonates more loudly in the following words Prakriti says to her mother—

Only once did he cup his hands, to take the water
from mine. Such a little water, yet that water grew to
a fathomless, boundless sea. In it flowed all the
seven seas in one, and my caste was drowned, and
my birth washed clean(Sykes 148).

These lines show the liberation of Prakriti from the sense of self-degradation that had accrued to her psyche through years of social injustice. By accepting water from the hands of Prakriti and telling her the wonderful truth about her equality as a human being with all men Ananda frees her from the curse and stigma of low-birth. The little water she pours into the monk's hands seems to Prakriti to have turned into fathomless and boundless in which her low-birth and caste submerged forever and forever. Prakriti's final resolution not to accept herself any more as a Chandal on the basis of her birth presents the view of the playwright in a profound way in the following declaration she makes to her mother who warns her not to forget her identity—

Fie, fie, mother, I tell you again, don't
delude yourself with this self-humiliation—it is false, and a sin.
Plenty of slaves are born of royal blood, but I am no slave;

Plenty of Chandals are born of Brahmin families, but I am no Chandal (Sykes 152).

Thus, the plays under discussion demonstrate that Tagore's philosophy of reform is founded on the sublime teachings of Buddhism. Through these plays, the great-playwright imparts the lessons of equality, love and compassion to all oppressors and die-hard supporters of caste system. With these plays, Tagore sincerely attempts to awaken the sleeping souls of the caste-Hindus who have been torturing and dehumanising the underprivileged for generations. By depriving the people of these sections of their fundamental rights and by treating them worse than animals the caste-Hindus, asserts Tagore, have caused enormous harm to society and humanity as a whole. Tagore's dream of an ideal society is founded on the principles of unity, equality and universal brotherhood as envisaged in Buddhist doctrine. In his ideal nation, he wishes that each and every individual regardless of caste, birth, language and religion will have full freedom and right to grow, get education and develop all inherent qualities he is born with. By giving adequate treatment to the injustice, cruelty and oppression meted out to the downtrodden and untouchables by their own fellow citizens Tagore shows a mirror to the oppressors that they are not only the enemy of society but of the mankind as well.

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