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Caste and Class Intersection: Protest and Re-assessment in Tagore's Plays

Abstract

The paper analyses caste and class intersections in Rabindranath Tagore's Plays. He was a staunch believer in the equality of all beings. As a person and as a writer he had strong views about the abominable practice of untouchability. The paper discusses three powerful plays written by Tagore namely, *Chandalika*, *Natir Puja* and *Sanyasi* dealing with the theme of untouchability. His sensitive handling of the curse of untouchability lends these plays their power. Tagore was against discrimination based on caste, class, and gender and he opined that the oppressed must not yield to injustice. In these three plays he portrays characters that belong to lower strata of society but they show extraordinary courage to fight injustice.

Key Terms: Caste, Class, Outcast, Protest, Untouchability.

Literature is a mirror of society as it also reflects the age in which it is produced. More often than not, a writer expresses his point of view as regards the social mores, values and views prevalent

in a particular society and age. Perhaps, the most powerful and sincere admiration or indictment of any system can be found in the literature of that period. Rabindranath Tagore's writing provides a powerful glimpse of his convictions and viewpoint vis-à-vis the values and traditions associated with social set up of his times. Though he was not a revolutionary in the strictest sense of the term, yet his writing reflects the sensitive perception of a liberated mind. He could gauge the pain inflicted upon the downtrodden and the marginalized sections of society owing to the caste and class bias.

In its primary sense, caste refers to a division of society on the basis of birth, rituals and occupations. It is the infrastructural basis of Indian society. It governs the laws of marriage, interpersonal relations and the labour rules. The word 'caste' was first used by Portuguese in the sixteenth century to refer to divisions within the Indian society. They found the separate groups of Hindu society and called them "castes, meaning tribes, clans or families" (Rau 107). The religious texts of the earlier times also refer to the concept of caste in the Indian society. This society is characterized by hierarchical gradations of hereditary groups or 'jatis' according to ritual status. The groups are placed "in ascending or descending order" (Basu xvi) as laid down in the religious texts.

A sketch of this society is compiled by the priests and is present in the Vedic literature. In one of the famous passages in Rig Veda, the order of the caste is viewed in terms of the parts of human body. "The Brahmins occupied the top most position; they were followed by Kshatriyas (warriors) and Vaishyas (traders and farmers). These groups together formed the upper castes. This sketch did not include the Shudras (menials) who comprised the lower castes of society" (Basu xvi-xvii). This depicts the accepted view of the Indian caste system that is extremely biased and has led to discrimination in society.

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, to colonial mind... characterized Indian society as radically different from western society, it was the institution of caste” (Basu xiv).

Caste disparities in India led to the polarization of society on the basis of caste. The upper castes were believed to be ‘pure,’ while the lower castes were considered ‘impure.’ These notions evolved on 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.

The society was, thus, afflicted with several evils arising out of such disparities. The upper castes could be supposedly polluted through the contact with the lower castes. Whenever the shadow of a lower caste fell on an upper caste person, it supposedly defiled him and he would not eat or drink anything until he had bathed away the ‘polluted effect.’ The lower castes always had to maintain a distance from the upper castes and they were forbidden to speak loudly in their presence. The upper caste people prohibited the lower caste people to enter their temples or to walk on the roads on which the upper class people walked. Discrimination of such enormous degree has marked our society since early times.

A significant depth that is illuminated after a careful analysis of this discrimination is the way the caste and class intersections work in the Indian set up. According to Sisir Kumar Das, “caste intersects class to ensure control over material resources such as land and labour by the dominant interests in the society. Class power usually replicates caste though it ultimately goes further concealing the concentration of class power in possession of elite, and in the perpetuation of that

possession through compulsion and coercion” (Basu xxiii). With the intersection of class and caste, discrimination has increased day by day. Caste struggle has led to class struggle.

As pointed out earlier, caste was an integral part of Hindu religion but this system led to inequality within the society. Consequently, several great thinkers raised their voice against this rigid system. Mahatma Gandhi spearheaded the protest against this unjust system. He clearly stated that such divisions are “harmful both to spiritual and national growth” (Basu 151). Saints like Nanak and Kabir have criticized caste system from time to time. All the major writers have responded seriously towards this problem. It is one of the dominant themes in the Indian literature. Tagore was a severe critic of this system and he condemned the caste system in one of his powerful poems written 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 sufferings (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 marginalized, what had been snatched by the privileged few – the right to freedom and dignity. In 1935, Will Durant, the great philosopher and historian wrote, “Today he [Tagore] is a solitary figure, perhaps the most impressive of all men now on the earth; a reformer who had had the courage to denounce the most basic of India’s institutions – the caste system – and the dearest of her beliefs – transmigration” (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. He dared to touch upon the subject of untouchability in that day and age when people did not exactly look down upon this practice. It was largely acceptable. His oeuvre, therefore, is particularly significant because of the underlying revolutionary zeal. Dealing with the marginalized and the oppressed sections of

society, Tagore's drama highlights the fact that, essentially all human beings are the same – their hopes, fears, passions, desires, emotions have the same intensity. By foregrounding this aspect his drama attempts to reverse the traditional core-periphery equation, that is, those who live on the margin are brought centre stage. His protest may not be of a very strong nature yet it is subtly, but firmly conveyed. The need to show compassion towards the underdog is part of the emphasis his drama places on doing away with the orthodox conventions of society.

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 down to injustice and tolerates 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 the contempt like a tiny blade of grass" (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 remarking that "the union of nations, the destroying of caste, religious pride, race-hatred and 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" (Chakravorty 260).

Tagore strongly attacks the evil of untouchability in his play *Chandalika*. The play was originally written in Bengali under the title *The Untouchable Girl* in the year 1938. Marjorie

Sykes translated the play into English, giving it the title *Chandalika*. The play is based on the Buddhist legend of *Sardulakarnavadana*. As per the legend, “Ananda is the favourite disciple of Buddha. One day returning from a visit he feels thirsty. He reaches a well and asks a girl to give him water. The girl belonged to the lowest caste of untouchables known as chandals. She gives him water and falls in love with the handsome monk. Unable to forget the monk she makes her mother exercise a magical spell on the monk. The spell proves stronger than Ananda’s will and he presents himself at the cottage of the girl . . . overcome with shame and remorse. He offers prayers to his master to save him. Buddha hears his prayers and the magical spell is broken. Thus, the monk is saved in the end and he returns back” (Kripalani 369-370).

Tagore has transformed this legend into the story of a courageous untouchable girl Prakriti who falls in love with the monk. Tagore’s portrayal of Prakriti, the chandal girl is both powerful and touching. Prakriti is a beautiful and sensitive girl who gets attracted towards Ananda, the monk. As per the norms of society, she clearly tries to over-reach her boundaries. Tagore sensitively acknowledges the basic instinct of all human beings – the right to fall in love, cutting across barriers of all kind.

Chandalika is the “tale of the new birth” (148) of a chandal girl, Prakriti. She falls in love with Ananda at first sight. The monk feels thirsty and he asks water from Prakriti, the chandal girl. She hesitates in giving Ananda water and tells him: “I am chandalini, and the well-water is unclean” (148). Ananda replies: “As I am human being, so also are you and all water is clean and holy that cools your heart and satisfies our thirst” (148). This is a very significant comment made by the monk because it emphasizes the essential oneness of all human beings. The same heart throbs in all beings who are made of flesh and blood. The words of the monk keep on haunting Prakriti who suddenly realizes her dignity as a human being. Prakriti tells her mother that the

little water which the monk drank grew into a “fathomless, boundless sea” (149) in which “my caste was drowned and my birth washed” (149). These words of Prakriti describe her moment of revelation which would never have come had she not met the monk.

A very important aspect of the play is that it not only emphasizes the fact that Prakriti’s self-respect and individuality are restored but also illuminates the ennobling influence of love on human beings. Initially, Prakriti is irresistibly drawn towards the monk. Overcome by the power of love she asks her mother to cast a spell on the monk who is eventually dragged to her doorstep. Besides being overpowered by her love for the monk, Prakriti is also goaded by an urge to express her desire, something she would never have done, had she not awakened to a realization of her true self. Tagore, however, emphasizes that her awakening needs to be carried further. She is still naïve that is why she refers to her mother’s spell as the ‘primeval spell,’ “the spell of the earth which is far more potent than the spiritual self-hypnotism of the monks” (Kripalani 370). The monk appears at her door but Prakriti is shocked to see Ananda, as a man who has lost the radiance of God he once possessed. She says:

Where is the light and radiance the shining purity, the heavenly glow? How worn, how faded has he come to my door! Bearing his self’s defeat as a heavy burden, he comes with drooping head. (165)

Instead of experiencing any elation Prakriti is shocked to see the ashen face of the monk. Obviously, the monk has been forced to come to her door under the impact of the spell. Prakriti the young chandal girl now shows even greater maturity. She realizes that love cannot grow out of force. Although aware of the fact that undoing of the spell would lead to her mother’s death she asks her to do so. She sacrifices her mother to save the dignity of the monk “Prakriti,

Prakriti, if in truth you are no chandalini, offer no insult to the heroic. Victory, Victory to him!” (165).

Tagore invests Prakriti’s character with a profound understanding of what love really means. It is a lowborn girl who convinces the audiences about the importance of sacrifice in love. To Prakriti, therefore, love does not mean the attainment of one’s desires; it also means understanding with compassion the dignity and individuality of the other human being. The monk shows compassion towards the chandal girl, which leads to an awakening of her conscious. Later, it is the turn of the chandal girl to show compassion. Tagore impresses upon the audiences that the low caste chandal girl is as much capable of dealing with things sensitively as the monk, who belongs to a higher order.

Ananda, the monk is the messenger of Tagore who teaches that every individual must recognize his/her worth as a human being. Caste and class barriers rob the dignity of human beings. A man is not judged by his caste but by his individuality and above all deeds. *Chandalika* is an important social comment. Dealing with the sensitive aspect of discrimination on the basis of caste and class, it highlights the way in which the lowest of the low have the capability to fight for an identity of their own. Thus the awakening of the conscious of the chandal girl is the awakening of the society at large. This ultimately leads to the bridging up of the gap that exists in society.

The prejudices that exist in our society are man-made. In the eyes of God all beings are equal. But men differentiate amongst themselves on the basis of their birth. This differentiation has been blindly followed since ages. And in the name of religion people exploit their own brethren. Religious discrimination 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 first show of the play was historically very important. Interestingly, no male characters appear on the stage. Tagore himself trained all the women characters. It was a revolutionary 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 a 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 essential changes in the legend for dramatic purpose.

Natir Puja is a dance drama in which 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 Bikshu, accepting alms from Srimati, the palace dancer. This highlights the principle of equality among all men. The Bikshu has no problem in accepting alms from Srimati, who is a mere 'nati' in the palace, a lowborn creature. The play conveys the message that a person is not judged by his birth but by his deeds. It does not matter how much a person has to offer to the Gods, what matters is his devotion towards God, which should be true.

It is the birthday of Lord Buddha and Srimati is chosen by “order” (113) to offer worship at the altar beneath the “ashoka” (113) tree. The female members of the palace are shocked at this news. The dancing girl, a person belonging to the lower strata of the society, will perform the most prestigious honour of the princess. Princess Ratnavali reacts furiously on learning this, “if that dancing girl is allowed to make offerings here, this palace will be desecrated. I can live here no longer” (113). If the dancing girl is allowed to offer worship, the palace will be debased. The decision of the “Order” has come to them as an insult. And they would never allow a lowborn creature to perform 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 will destroy the altar but they will never allow “the feet of a dancing girl to tread the royal shrine” (114). This shows the reaction of the upper class people, whose royal dignity has been insulted because a lowborn girl is chosen to perform the coveted act of worship of the God. In order to take their revenge and prevent the sanctity of the palace, the ladies plot against the dancing girl. They order her to dance at the altar where she has to offer her worship. The hatred and jealousy of the royal ladies for the girl is deep. Thus they force her to commit sacrilege. In order to maintain their dignity and pride, the people of the upper class can stoop to anything. They can even force the death of their enemies but never let themselves down at any cost. Hence, caste as well as the class discrimination forms the basis of the play. The ladies of the palace believe that it is their birth right to worship God and a dancing girl is not fit to perform this sacred duty.

Queen Lokeshvari and Princess Ratnavali just want the death of Srimati because they cannot bear the glorification of a dancing girl. Queen Lokeshvari’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 her 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 the death of Srimati because she cannot bear her glorification.

Class distinction is also illuminated in the play. Queen Lokeshvari believes that if Srimati is a saint then the religion has been debased. She mocks at the new religion saying that the “fallen will come preaching salvation.” 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)

Thus 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 texts 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.

Among the influences on Tagore, a very deep one was that of Gautam Buddha, who preached the lesson of equality and love for all. Buddhism has inspired the great thinkers of our country. Tagore 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 teachings 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 invokes the spirit of Buddha in many of his plays. However, particularly notable in this respect are *Chandalika* and *Natir Puja*. In both the plays, 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. (Kripalani 324)

Tagore attacked all such 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 *Prakriti 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. The attitude of hatred and insensitivity towards the untouchables is evident in the responses of the village people to the little girl. The following words of the village woman throw light on the mindset of the people, in whose psyche is engraved the discrimination 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 prevalence of discrimination amongst human being, 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 a ‘pollution.’ 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 knows no attachment or detachment. At the same time, disparities have no existence in his mind. He considers all those humans impure who are entangled in the whirlpool of worldly desires. He tells the girl that she is innocent and not impure but the awareness of discrimination has cast its shadow on her mind. When the Sanyasi asks her to come closer to him, her misery and astonishment is evident. 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 at the mercy of society. No one, however, accepts her except the Sanyasi.

As Sanyasi’s attachment grows towards the little girl he feels that he’ll be detached from the infinite. He considers her to be the “messenger of the unknown” (473). In the following dialogue 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 also runs away from the little girl, because he fears detachment from God if he accepts the little girl. As the time passes he is unable to live without Vasanti. Finally, the Sanyasi realizes 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. He breaks his staff and his 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. (477)

Thus he returns back 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, his realization works no wonders because 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, class intersections that destroy the fabric of society is sensitive and profound.

Through *Chandalika*, *Natir Puja* and *Sanyasi* he brings to the fore the need for a reassessment of the barriers created between human beings. These plays epitomize the dream of a new world, where these boundaries of caste and class can be dissolved once and for all. Tagore strongly believed that till the time the exploited continue to yield to injustice, they can never get their due place in society. He wants the oppressed to come forward and march along towards the progress of humanity. Tagore's characters who belong to the lower strata of society show extraordinary courage to fight injustice. In *Chandalika*, Prakriti shows indomitable will to transgress the limits imposed by society by falling in love with Ananda, the monk. Srimati, in *Natir Puja* is bold enough to make her dance an act of worship, thereby preventing herself from committing sacrilege. This depicts her intelligence and bravery. She finally proves that worship of God is not the privilege of the chosen few. Every human being, no matter how high or low, has the right to worship God.

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