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## GANDHIAN TOUCH TO THE INDIAN DRAMA BHARATI SARABHI

### ‘THE WELL OF THE PEOPLE’

In Indian English writing, Drama is sparsely cultivated field. Consciously or unconsciously the fear of women intruding into the boundaries of writing plays might have triggered the men writes not to encourage women venturing into the dramatic creation. It is almost impossible to trace out the women dramatists from Sophocles to Shakespeare as there is no mention of them in literary history. There arouse a women dramatist, Aphra Behn, a friend of John Dryden who earned her livelihood by writing plays. She challenged the dominant literary men and dared to write and establish herself as no other woman could do ever before. She became the mother of all women writers around the world. Virginia Woolf hails from contribution of Aphra Behn, and pays tribute to her in the essay "A Room of One's Own". She acknowledges that all women ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it is she who earned them the right to speak their minds. Though there are less number of women Dramatists, but still one can find some silver lining in the clouded atmosphere of Indian English Drama. The foremost playwright is Bharati Sarabhai followed by Mrinalini Sarabhai, Swarna Kumari Devi, Ghosal, Smt. K.B. Thakur, Shanta Rama Rao and few others. Bharati Sarabhai is the first, most distinguished woman dramatist, who gave a Gandhian touch to Indian English drama. Her first play, The Well of the People (1949)

upholds Gandhi's well-known doctrine 'Daridra Naravana' (worship of the poor as God). The plot of the play is based on a real story published in Harijan.

Sarabhai has to her credit; two plays "The Well Of The People (1943) and two women (1948). In the play "The Well Of The People" the writers try to give a new meaning to age old beliefs and customs. She projects a picture of synthesis of religion and social service. Sarabhai uses this story for her play with her personal symbolism and crafts it into the contemporary social and political situations of Indian society.

As Dr. Prema Nanda Kumar says, "It is a bold attempt on the part of Bharati Sarabhai to have taken up a challenge to present a spiritual problem in terms of physical action, she achieves success not because of novelty of the genre, but because she controls the use of symbols and at the same time avoids. The monotony of a long vague story what she has chosen is also a simple theme." (Nanda Kumar 254). This play is one of the first plays in Indian English Drama by a woman, set in the pre and post-independence period. The vedantic concept that god is within, is presented in the story. Sarabhai was the only woman playwright of pre-independent times. Though the theme of the play is social reform, the verse contains the mysticism of Kabir, the philosophy of Tagore, the romanticism of Wordsworth and Keats and the symbolism of T.S. Eliot, Yeatsian influence is seen in the opening line.

Things take sudden shape, (WP1)

The well of the people has its origin in the Haridwar Kumbh Mela. In 1938 Bharati Sarabhai was touched by a story that appeared in Harijan, (WP Preface) a weekly journal edited by Gandhi. An old woman fails to achieve her ambition of going on pilgrimage to Kashi and Haridwar and she decides to please god by building a well for "The untouchables" in her village with her savings. Sarabhai has taken up the bold task of merging diverse, themes-social, individual, political, mystic and philosophical. The play comes in a period when the term 'Feminism' was unheard of in the Orient. A study of the work "The Well of the People" is attempted in this article.

It is evident that the story is symbolically changed with Gandhiji's socio-political ideologies. The prophet, who has come to show the right path to the pilgrim who has wrong vision. "The well of the People" is poetic and symbolic and seems to be influenced by Gandhi's thoughts. The workers say that Gandhi is the saviour.

"Oh, who to be our saviour,  
 Who the new visionary  
 Paring his eyes discover  
 This Stark, bare pageantry?" (WP29)

The play has no act or scene division. It is poetic and symbolic and Sarabhai ideals move from specific to general, from the old woman to the suffering humanity and to the children of dust. A voice is heard giving the philosophy of life:

"Why do you to Haridwar, to Kasi,  
 O my Soul, When I am within?  
 Pilgrim, Pilgrim, which, what is it you seek  
 Outside.?" (WP 22)

Rani is the first female protagonist in Indian English Drama. She is a maithili Behari Brahmin widow without enough money to go to Benares and Kasi. Rani like mother India is old with centuries of age behind her and bent with the burden of tradition and culture. Metaphorice Zyrical and philosophical significances beautify the verses,

I may not see Benares, god does not  
 Push a sick vessel like this body to  
 Each post of earthly pilgrimage, always  
 To Full and fill, still stop and fill to full,  
 But my soul, my free swan, can  
 Bring indeed  
 On a small well, with water pure as mother Ganga. (WP 41)

Rani is also the spokeswoman of Gandhian Ideas. She is physically weak but strong in sprit. Rani's condition is pathetic as she has lost her husband and son. She lived by weaving Dhaka Muslim which had become a dying art. She worked for twenty years and once every seven days she takes the woven threads and sells it and save money with such hard labour she saves seventy silver coins and dreams,

With my own eyes I shall see Benares  
 And my Husband and son will  
 Reap salvation (WP 37)

The woman wants to go with the intention of bringing moksha to the souls of her dead husband and son but with her poor broken leg she cannot make it to Benares. No one risk

making the long journey with her she is loud voiced but kindhearted. She bathes in this river and cooks her food on its banks.

The Darshan (Sight) of Gandhi, who comes on foot to Mithila, the mythological city of Sita's birth inspires Rani. She lifts Harijan sweeper boy who is straining to see Gandhi. The boy reminds her of her own son and it is then she decides to build a well near the temple of her own village and water of that could be as pure as Ganga. The well is not built in her life time but there is a promise that it would be done as she had given her hard earned savings to build a well. So the Karma Yogi turns into Gnana yogi as realization dawns her. There are two scenes the village scene and the Haridwar scene which are in total contrast representation modern British India and India of Epic. The poor peasants are crushed constantly by one oppressor after the other - feudal lords, Moghul rulers, and the British. The women are the worst lot and they are helpless as in these images-

"generation crushed him, bullied  
Helpless in his mother's stomach" (WP 25)

and

Brocaded landlord with tenants' disgorged  
Wife" (WP 25)

The characters chetan, sanatan and Vichitra represent younger generation. They are Gandhian workers. Chetan is cynical in his attitude towards the woman. He express actuality that no miracles happen in spite of the long pilgrimage. If untouchability marginalized one section of the society, the women were twice moved from the mainstream one by the caste and then by their gender. The writer further describes the pathetic condition of the women.

"Doorless, widowless much raised  
Huts exposed old and young and child woman  
Pottering about and men scarce, wonderful  
As peacocks." (WP 34)

The villagers were full of widows as mentioned in the play as there was no widow remarriage. The poor women were the ones who suffered the most. Rani has taken up the Herculean task of building a common well in the premises of the temple with the intention of breaking the barriers of caste and also allowing Harijans into mainstream society. The class

and caste conflict, the practice of untouchability and the exploitation of the poor out caste is mentioned in the line,

"Better the cow that scavengers." (WP 24)

Like cow, the well is also an integral part of the Hindu culture and tradition. It is not only the source of life but also a strange force in sustaining the caste order and a source through which the upper caste can deprive the untouchables and exercise power, authority and superiority over them. A common well for all the communities invalidates the caste based power politics and helps to remove untouchability and this revolution comes from a woman of higher caste. The play highlights a moral message that doing service to mankind by making available to many people the very source of life, water.

It carries a very strong contemporary appeal and is highly performative with its vivid dramatic aspects. The woman's dying wish was that the well should be built. From the orthodox being she moves to Advaita of Sankaracharya's philosophy of 'God lives within every human being' and Gandhi philosophy to humanity. She condemns blind faith and superstition and casteism. But the last stanzas express the feeling of despondency. The youth do not take up the work of building the well immediately. They were involved in the freedom struggle, they are arrested and await the time for conditions to become favourable to take up such idealistic activity.

Sarabhai describes the protagonist - "There Love is filling her picture from the well yet she has no rope wherewith to draw water" (WP) The woman is full of love for mankind that she envisions a better life for them but her wish is not fulfilled as the rope i.e. society does not lend the support to her to enable to distribute the, water of love. The chorus pays homage to the great woman.

"Mother, you will, you will,  
Even now your senses love,  
Fall and wash, splashing along  
Within you will live, live  
To see the people's well  
Spell in rose golden walls" (WP 46)

The old woman is not an individual but mother India who wants her children to live as one, and root out evil of caste system. Though she is ignored as mother India is, she persists in her love for her children. Like the river and the well she only bestows and never denies.

One realize that from despair and disappointment comes a social reform which will bring about a new social order.

Sarabhai asserts the truth that god lives within us and it is a futile attempt searching for god elsewhere. Life itself is a pilgrimage - a search for truth - all rivers have the same water, all images of god are lifeless, all scriptures are mere words and the world itself is Maya (mystic) as Kabir says,

"I laugh when I hear that fish in water is thirsty" (WP 23)

Meaning that god is everywhere in us and around us. The old woman can be considered as a representative of all women in India. Sarabhai's ideals and aspirations are thus mouthed by the protagonist, Rani India is a mother to her, neglected by her sons and hence she is troubled. But she consoles herself that a mother can never be destroyed. Mother is the source of sustenance to her children. Finally she says it is not Haridwar that a true Bhakta must aim at, it is humanism and social service that brings real moksha by washing away sins. The path of idealism is the path of moksha. The journey to holy places or dip in the Ganga does not bring salvation. Hence, service to mankind is service to god. The story/play gives us a clear picture of how spirituality had been transformed to humanity.

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Ashanti Henderson, 22 April 2014(27/5/17)