

Conflict And Note Of Protest: A Study Of Rabindranath Tagore's Play *Achalayatan*

Dr. Seema Banta

Asst. Professor

Dept. Of English

Govt College Of Teacher Education

Dharamshala

Kangra

Himachal Pradesh

India

ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore emerged as a rebel dramatist protesting against the prevalent social evils. In his writings he often criticised the evil customs and superstitious beliefs. In Tagore's plays there can also be found an undertone of spirituality. True to his liberal background, he was invariably against religious bigotry, fanaticism, and other malpractices arising out of a misconceived sense of religion. In fact, he unequivocally attacked worn out and useless conventions that hampered the progress of mankind. The theme of self-discovery in relation to fellow-men, Maker (God) and the whole universe is the major idea of his play *Achalayatan*. The play drives home the idea that true religion is not the institutionalised religion but the religion of love the path of uprightness and compassion is true religion's essence. Quintessence of religion consists in kindness and love towards all which in the play *Achalayatan* is personified by Panchak and Dadathakur and Acharya to great extent.

Key Words: Protest, man, Maker (God), religion, love, self-discovery.

The theme of protest is not alien to Indian drama. In the recent times, this genre has gained popularity all over the country. But in the early years of the twentieth century, this tradition was more visible in Bengali drama. When Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote the play *The Persecuted* or *Dramatic Scenes* illustrative of the present state of Hindoo society in Calcutta in the year 1831, it carried the seeds of protest. The play was an open revolt against the prevalent social and religious prejudices in our country. In his preface to the play, Banerji observes:

Inconsistencies and the bleakness of the influential members of the Hindoo community have been depicted before their eyes. They will now clearly perceive the wiles and tricks of the Bramins [sic] and thereby be able to guard themselves against them. (qtd. in Naik 98)

Banerji's plays were an expression of sporadic protest in society against orthodox practices. Such views gained momentum with the upsurge of ideas from the west among other things.

In the year 1857, when the 'Great Revolt' occurred, Ram Narayan Tarakratna wrote *Kulin-Kul-Sarbasva*. This play attacked the practice of polygamy among the upper caste men. Significantly, drama during the period had completely become the drama of social relevance. Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nildarpan* was a protest play where Mitra brings to the fore the ruthless oppression of Bengali peasants by British Indigo planters.

Such was the literary background inherited by Rabindranth Tagore, who emerged as a rebel dramatist protesting against the prevalent social evils. In his writings he often criticised the evil customs and superstitious beliefs. In Tagore's plays there can also be found an undertone of spirituality. His plays, like his poetry embody a streak of mysticism, which is not inhibited by narrow concerns but characterised by the universal values of love, unity, brotherhood and compassion. True to his liberal background, he was invariably against religious bigotry, fanaticism, and other malpractices arising out of a misconceived sense of religion. In fact, he unequivocally attacked worn out and useless conventions that hampered the progress of mankind.

Tagore's writings emphatically convey that mere animal existence can never be man's destiny. His idea of civilisation consists in going beyond bare subsistence. He holds that man needs to discover his complete existence by realising his kinship with the world, by establishing perfect harmony with the universe, by giving expression to his universal nature. Man, he firmly believes, has to be on the move; he has to come out of the shell of his self to widen the range of his feeling and the scope of his consciousness. Naravane observes that Tagore's drama conveys the idea that "man is marching from epoch to epoch for his fuller realisation; he undergoes martyrdom for his freedom, for his self expression. Thus life is in movement; it does not stand still; it has to grow; it wants to go on" (101-02).

This theme of self-discovery in relation to fellow-men, Maker (God) and the whole universe is the major idea of his play *Achalayatan*. The play drives home the idea that true religion is not the institutionalised religion but the religion of love. Its spark may be kindled in the heart of one and all. The path of uprightness and compassion is true religion's essence. Quintessence of religion consists in kindness and love towards all which in the play *Achalayatan* is personified by Panchak and Dadathakur and Acharya to great extent.

Man's greatness lies in his capability to understand the eternal truth. That instead of slavishly accepting the ways of the world, he can redeem himself through the power of love. Love has the power to broaden his mind limitlessly as he develops a bonding with environment, nature and humanity. As Naravane puts it:

There is the relation of love with the world. Love is expressed through service to society, through loyalty to the higher purposes of man, through graceful acceptance of the rhythmic throb of the universal life. (101)

In Tagore's writings, the quest to achieve harmony between discordant forces is a theme of paramount importance. He envisages a society where mankind's interest is safeguarded above all things. It is important for man to realise that his role to work for society's well being is his biggest challenge, overcoming which would lead to a realisation of his inherent connection with his surroundings.

Tagore suggests that the infinite expresses itself through the finite, and the divine is found in the human. It is not in the great deeds alone but in common acts that the essence of existence lies. The simple and natural affections of the heart are the root of all the great philosophies of life. The small acts of kindness and compassion nourish life and enrich it. “The great is to be found in the small, the infinite within the bounds of form, and the eternal freedom of the soul in love” (qtd. in *Rabindranath Tagore’s Sanyasi and Sacrifice* 24).

In words of Chakravorty:

Tagore stands for a synthesis of contemplation and action. Contemplation comes first, for that helps the purification of the mind. But the fullness of spiritual life can be realised only when the life of contemplation is merged into the life of action-the life of service to humanity. (131)

This is the message that Tagore seeks to convey to us through *Achalayatan*.

Yeats was not wrong to see a large religious element in Tagore’s writings. The idea of a direct, joyful and totally fearless relationship with God can be found in many of Tagore’s religious writings, including the poems of *Gitanjali*. From India’s diverse religious traditions he drew many ideas, both from ancient texts and from popular poetry. “But ‘the bright pebbly eyes of the Theosophists’ do not stare out of his verses. Despite the archaic language of the original translation of *Gitanjali*, which did not, I believe, help to preserve the simplicity of the original, its elementary humanity comes through more clearly than any complex and intense spirituality” (Sen 96).

Leave this chanting and singing and telling
the beads! Whom dost thou worship in
this lonely dark corner of temple with doors
all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is
not before thee!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard
ground and where the path maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and
in shower,
and his garment is covered with dust. Put off
thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil! (*Gitanjali* 11)

Tagore certainly had strongly held religious beliefs of an unusually nondenominational kind. He had realistic, plainly expressed views about nationalism, war and peace, cross-cultural education, freedom of mind, the importance of rational criticism, the need for cultural openness, and so on. He consistently condemned certain religious notions that were prevalent in Indian society. Tagore precisely presents a man in conflict at physical and mental level and his endeavour for the freedom; to break through the taboos and earnestly protests against the wrongs prevalent in the society leading towards disintegration.

Achalayatan expresses the idea of a wider freedom in the context of an infertile, typecast society. The play is satirical as well as symbolical and a ruthless attack on Hindu orthodoxy. This is shown through the contrast between the two brothers, the narrow-minded Mahapanchak and the younger, liberal, forward looking Panchak. Characteristically, Panchak makes friends with the tribals, the peasants and the untouchables. "One day, accompanied by his rabble retinue, a singing, surging crowd, the Guru comes, the tables are turned. The walls of Achalayatan crumble. What will happen to Mahapanchak that the old order is no more? The more tolerant and thoughtful Panchak tells him the compromising formula: You and I together will open the windows" (Ghose 62-63).

Tagore's theory of mobile society was powerfully proclaimed in *Achalayatan*. Social institutions have their rules, customs and traditions. All these are vital for growth. But when they start hampering growth, they become blind forces which bind human mind, discourage innovation but to breed the forces of slavery. Tagore strongly believed that we have to battle against all forms of blindness and to break down fetters that enslave human mind so that it can discover new truths, create new paths and accept no bondage. We should not be afraid of failures or mistakes, but what is to be

dreaded is the stoppage of experiments. Hence, the door has always to be kept ajar for those who dare and experiment.

Achalayatan presents an arena of conflicting faiths. Built on a stony resistance to the naturalness of life, Mahapanchak's '*Achalayatan*' representing a quest of dry wisdom, turns into a petrified land of illusion and immobility. On the other hand, the Sonpangshus are work addicts to the extent that they mistake work for the end and not the means, while the Darvaks remain happy with their simple, unquestioning, selfless devotion. All three fail to realise that life is to be tasted in its totality. Knowledge, power to work, and devotion are to be assimilated to achieve the true vision of life. And for that, the Guru's help becomes necessary.

Panchak is singing when the play starts and he gets scolded for doing so by his elder brother Mahapanchak:

Mahapanchak: Singing again? How dare you?

Panchak: oh, dada, you have seen. What a failure I am at your mantras and tantras, your rite and rituals. (*Achalayatan*1)

Panchak asks for the relevance of learning all the mantras: "Let me ask you one thing-what is the use of learning this mantra?" (2)

Mahapanchak wants Panchak to be inspired by his example of rose to the eminence on his own. But Panchak is unmoved and thinks it can't motivate him. He replies: "...You are your own example and don't need my support. So I remain content" (3).

Then comes the news of the Guru's coming to *Achalayatan* after a long time. Nobody has seen the Guru. Everyone is curious to know about him and starts preparing to welcome his visit. But Panchak thinks of it as unnecessary

A little boy Subhadra commits the sin of opening a window in North which belongs to the goddess Ekjatadevi. The boy peeps out of the window which is supposed to bring a curse on everyone

living in Achalayatan. He asks Panchak to tell him which penance he should perform to get rid of his sin. In response Panchak says:

I can't recall. There are twenty or twenty five thousand forms of penance. If I had not come to this institution, most of them would have remained recorded in books only; after I came, I went through almost all of them, but I don't remember any. (12)

These lines of Panchak are sarcasm on the rigidity and foolishness of various forms of penance invented to arouse fear in the mind of human being and which makes the religion a religion of fear. Panchak makes fun of the worthlessness of reparation by saying: "Doing penance is great fun. It's all so monotonous here, one can't survive if there is no penance to perform" (13). But the little boy is too much afraid as what will happen to him now. Panchak says: "...I know nothing about cause and effect. But whatever happens cannot make me afraid even a little" (13). To give some courage to Subhadra, the little boy, Panchak says that he would also open the same window once so that Subhadra will have company. Panchak is not afraid and says: "Where's the fun if something is not terrible" (15).

Other boys of Achalayatan are also terrified at the opening of window by Subhadra and one of them says: "Mahapanchakdada has told us that it amounts to matricide, because the North belongs to Ekjatadevi" (15). But Panchak is not satisfied with logic and asks: "I am extremely curious to know how I can commit the sin of matricide without killing my mother" (15).

Subhadra is not satisfied with the condolence of Panchak and approaches Upadhyaya, one of the elder of Achalayatan, to confess his sin of "opened the window and looked out" (19). Upadhyaya sits down, shocked and exclaims: "Oh, it will be the ruin of us! What have you done! Nobody has opened the window for three hundred and forty-five years- do you know that" (19)? Subhadra is terrified at the expression of Upadhyaya but Panchak tries to calm him down while embracing him:

People will sing your glory, Subhadra. You have removed the bar of three hundred and forty-five years. Upadhyayamoshi is dumbfounded to see your courage. (19)

Acharya, The head of the institute is troubled by the news of the coming of Guru. He confesses to Upacharya: "Sometimes I fear that he is coming because we are overfilled with sin" (20). His mind

and heart are full of doubt, fear, confusion and conflict. This speech of Acharya shows the perturbed nature of his thoughts.

Acharya says:

When I started my spiritual quest here, I was young. I hoped to achieve something in the end. The more difficult the quest became, the more inspired I felt. Then, revolving and revolving on the wheel of the quest I totally forgot that there was such a thing as attainment. My mind made a sudden halt when the news of guru's arrival came today. I asked myself: You, pandit, you have mastered all the holy texts, you have performed all the rites, now tell me, you fool, what really have you achieved? ...Now I see that this long pursuit is nothing but going round and round your own self-that results in a heap of endless reiteration every day. (21)

Panchak confesses his grievance to Acharya that he has failed to stick to the rules of this institution and Acharya must not touch him. Acharya asks Panchak: "My boy, you know that for a thousand years thousands of people of this place have felt safe following rules; can just anyone of us break those?" (24) Panchak replies: "Acharyadeb, the truth of a rule cannot be tested, if we do not let it be broken" (24).

Acharya makes clear his point that: "I do not fear so much the breaking of the rule as the suffering of the rule-breaker- why should we let that happen?" (24) Panchak is ready to obey Acharya's any order as he says: "...I don't know anything about rites and rituals, I know only you?" (25) But Acharya is bewildered and feels to be not in position to order Panchak for doing anything. He explains to Panchak:

When I see you, I see freedom itself. When I saw how your life-force defies all pressure, I realised for the first time that the mind is truer than mantras, truer than age-old customs. Go, boy, go your own way. Don't ask me anything. (25)

Acharya himself yearns for the freedom which Panchak enjoys. He says:

Our guru is coming, Panchak- only if I could sit at his feet as a boy like you, if he undid the chain of my old age and set me free, and said: 'Don't be afraid. From today I'm giving you the right to know the truth through mistakes.' - if he took off the burden of two thousand years from my mind! (26)

On the other hand Upadhyay, Upacharya and Mahapanchak are worried about the consequences of opening the window in north which belongs to goddess Ekjatadevi. Upadhyay says: "One can never say how far the wind from that side has polluted the closed, hallowed air of our institution" (27). Mahapanchak also comments in this regard: "The wind from outside has blown into our institution, we are impure now" (27). They agree that Subhadra will have to undergo penance for this sin but nobody remember any said penance in Shastras. They have forgotten it. Upadhyaya says: "For three hundred years the need for this penance did not arise- we have forgotten it" (27). But Mahapanchak suggests the penance written in one of Shastras which states that "...the culprit should do 'Mahatamas' for six months" (27). Which meant that Subhadra will not be allowed to see a single ray of light. "...Because what is committed in light can only be expiated in darkness" (27).

But Acharya does not allow Subhadra to undergo any penance. He says: "No, I won't allow this to happen. If there's any sin, it'll be mine" (29). He speaks to Subhadra:

You haven't done anything sinful, my boy. It is really the sin of the people whose contorted faces have been threatening you for thousands of years, though you haven't committed any crime. (29)

But other elders of Achalayatan do not agree to the order of Acharya. Mahapanchak says: "We have been made unclean. All our burnt offerings, rituals and fasting have come to nothing- it is hard to tolerate this" (29). Upadhyaya also agrees with Mahapanchak and says: "No question of tolerating this. Does the Acharya want us to be ranked with the untouchables?" (29)

Mahapanchak cannot tolerate that to save Subhadra, Acharya shall murder their ancient religion. According to him Acharya has gone mad and in such situation "we can't accept him as the Acharya any longer....So long as Acharya Adinpunya remains here we will remain unclean and all our religious activities should stop" (29-30). Thus to save their religion Mahapanchak and others are ready

to revolt against Acharya. On the other hand Panchak mingles with the Sonpangshus whom Achalayatan suppose not to be touched as they are impure

While Achalayatan has forbidden itself from the outer world and are living a constricted life within the wall of their institution, Sonpangshus on the other hand are unaware of the charm of nature around themselves. Sonpangshus have great reverence for Dadathakur and Panchak also respects him a lot. One of the Sonpangshu Says: “We are all petals and he is our hundred-petalled lotus” (41). Panchak admits to Dadathakur:

You have overcome all hurdles, Dadathakur- all. Who else can laugh and play and mix with all, work and give up work at will? I feel restless when I see you like that. I pine for- what would I say- the absolute, the ultimate or whatever it is called. (43)

Panchak is amazed by Dadathakur’s fearless and assuring personality and further expresses his dilemma:

A bird born in a cage fears the sky most. The metal bars of the cage give it pain yet if the door is opened for it, its heart throbs in fear. It thinks, how shall I live if I am not caged? We have not learnt to let ourselves go- without fear. That’s our age-old habit. (47)

Panchak wants Dadathakur to give his restlessness some peace, to guide him. But Dadathakur replies: “I won’t save you that easily, Panchak. When the order will come from within your own self, I’ll order you” (54).

Conflict of constricted ideas and desire to set the spirit free can be seen as keen in Panchak as in Acharya himself. The difference is that Panchak is more daring and independent in his action than Acharya who feels him to be shackled by centuries old traditions and practices and is desperate to shred off.

Panchak snatches Subhadra from the ‘Mahatamas’ the remedy for the sin which he has committed by opening the window in west. And he does so as per the order of Acharya himself. Other

elders of Achalayatan are infuriated on this act of Acharya and Panchak. Thus in order to control Acharya, Mahapanchak gives the idea of locking him up.

Acharya confesses his deep rooted anguish of being an Acharya of a sapless Institute: “The guru left, we got preoccupied with ancient manuscripts in his place. The more their dry pages failed to satisfy our hunger, the more we increased their number.” (60)

Other members of Achalayatan request Acharya to hand over Subhadra to them and let him perform the penance by doing ‘Mahatamas’ expecting that Subhadra will be “deified” by doing penance. But Acharya rejects their request by saying: “Don’t make me commit the sin of creating gods by force. He is a human being, a child, and dear to gods for that reason.” (62)

Mahapanchak believes that this change has come due to the curse of Ekjatadevi and it makes everyone lose their heads and “by and by not a single stone of Achalayatan will remain in place.” (61) Simultaneously the King Manthargupta comes to visit Achalayatan and informs Mahapanchak that Dadathakur with Sonpangshus has started breaking down the walls of their kingdom. King believes that it must be because of the some fault in their rites and rituals. King comes to know that it happening due to the curse of Ekjatadevi and that Acharya is not allowing any penance to be performed for this sin. The king orders to banish Acharya and declares Mahapanchak as the new Acharya and it is decided that Acharya with Panchak will have to go to the neighbourhood of Darvaks (supposed to be untouchables and outcastes) on the outskirts of Achalayatan.

Now the conflict aggravates and comes out from the inner selves of Panchak and Acharya to the outer level between the King, Mahapanchak and others from ‘Achalayatan’ at one front and on the other side are Panchak, Acharya, Dadathakur and his followers. Protest against the shackles of worn out traditions and constricted ideas which makes a man weak and drained, takes the form of a war in which the forces of suppression and ruling the other are defeated by the vigour of free human spirit.

Panchak feels very happy that he is exiled and in that manner he is saved at last from living that dungeon life of Achalyatan and is happy to find the company of Darvaks. But Darvaks are hesitant to offer them their food as it is being touched by them thus unholy to be offered. Panchak

explains to them: “When hunger sets the stomach on fire, it does not care for caste. It makes all food sacred” (69).

Panchak is moved by the melody of simple and soulful song of devotion sung by the Darvaks and says overwhelmed:

Come, brothers, make me forget all my mantras, all my learning power. Teach me that song of yours....that song of the lowly, lament of the weak. I had always been searching for the wisdom of the ignorant, riches of the destitute. That is why, I neglected my studies. Whatever I did came to nothing. Brothers, give me another song- the thirst of a long, long time does not get quenched by one song. (70)

Even Acharya is overwhelmed by their song and exclaims that his “exile has become meaningful” (71-72)

By the time Upacharya Sutasom also leaves Achalayatan to join Acharya because Achalayatan had become “dried and hard” the moment Acharya left it. Upadhyaya informs Mahapanchak that gates and walls of Achalayatan “have been flattened to the ground in such a way that you don’t have to worry about them anymore. (79)

Dadathakur appears on scene dressed as a warrior and declares himself the Guru. But Mahapanchak is not ready to believe it and orders Dadathkur and Sonpangshus to leave. He says: “I am the Acharya of this institution. I order you to leave this place immediately with your troop of outcastes.” (86) Mahapanchak instructs Upadhyaya to “drive them away and shut all the doors of Achalayatan again” (86). One of Sonpangshus informs that all their doors are opened, “like the sky” (86). But Mahapanchak is not ready to accept this change and says: “You may break down stone walls, and open iron doors, but here I close all the doors to my senses-even if I sit fasting and die, I won’t let your light and air touch me” (86).

Panchak and other Darvaks find out that Dadathakur is their own Gosain and Acharya recognises him as the Guru himself.

Panchak wants to set out with Dadathakur, but he orders him to go back to Achalayatan. Panchak thinks of Achalayatan as a prison. Dadathakur says: “The prison is no longer there, I have broken it down. You have to build a temple in the same place, taking materials from there....You need not fear, Panchak. You’ll never see that peace in Achalayatan again anymore. I’ve drilled a hole in its door and brought the stormy winds of war through it. I have ended forever their days of sitting still, looking at the tips of their noses.” (96)

For Sonpangshus, he thinks that they need to learn to be still as “they take freedom for fun-but they never realise that only after sitting quietly can they take out the meat of the fruit. Leave them for some time to your Mahapanchakdada and they will be quiet and will have time to let the meat inside them ripen” (98). He engages them in rebuilding the broken foundation.

Dadathakur decides to take Acharya with him and all others join hands to “make white foundation of the new sky-scraping edifice stand in the light of the sky. The two groups must join hands and start working.” (101-102) Thus Sonpangshus and people of Achalayatan have to build once again the foundation of ‘Achalayatan’.

Achalayatan is more dramatic in its portrayal of conflict. An attack against soulless rituals and institutionalised religious power, *Achalayatan* gives a call for breaking down the walls of bondage. The play angered a section of the public because of its alleged attack on religious practices and was never staged in any of the theatres in Calcutta. (Raha 110)

In essence this play is strong condemnation of our ethico-religious and educational system drained of all meaning and turned into bloodless, dry and sterile through over-emphasising rules for rule’s sake. Complex symbolism coupled with a fine allegorical structure makes *Achalayatan* as applicable and relevant today as when it was written nearly a century ago.

Thus, there is an unbreakable relation between the man and the Maker. Religion plays an important role in connecting human being with the Supreme. Tradition in the form of religious faith complies with the wish of the Maker and forces a man to protest against the bindings on his free human spirit. At the same time the modern knowledge of science and its interference in the life of a man in the form of machines makes the man uneasy. However, between the propelling force of religion and science, Tagore tries to find a solace and balance of ideas. He wants the man to be free

from the slavish dependence on the machines and to follow simple life -away from fears, lust for power and wealth. Man's prior endeavor is to connect and unite with the Supreme Maker as well as with fellow human being by the strength of love and faith, while prospering intellectually, to undertake and accomplish his journey from 'finite to infinite'.

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