

Dalit Feminine Voices in Tagore's Work: A Journey From 'Prakritir Pratisodh' to 'Chandalika'

Unmana Mukherjee

Research Scholar, Dept. of English
The Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata.

Abstract

Dalit Feminism advocates equal rights for dalit women regarding caste, gender and other relevant issues. Rabindranath promoted this view in his writings much before the official coinage of the term Dalit Feminism. Tagore always voiced for the dalit women and depicted their upliftment from the socio-cultural oppression and heralded the empowerment of the marginalized women. For that reason he supported the Harijan Movement (1920) from the core of his heart. Being a Pirali Brahmin, an outcaste to the Brahminical hierarchy, Tagore truly empathized with the dalits. In this article, we select 'Prakritir Pratisodh'(1884), "Jalapatra"(1932), 'Chandalika'(1933 and 1938) to intersect the problems of untouchability and caste distinction in Rabindranath's works and promote his view in this respect.

Keywords: Rabibdranath Tagore, Dalit Women, Caste, Gender, Untouchability, Empowerment.

1. Introduction

Dalit Feminism questions caste and gender roles within Dalit population and extends its ideas within feminism and larger women's movement. Dalit women are obviously poor, illiterate and socially marginalized. They live mainly in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and other South Asian countries. Dalit Feminists advocate equal rights for dalit women regarding gender, caste and other issues. In India dalit women were active in anti-caste and anti-untouchability movement of 1920s. They were also involved in Non-Brahmin movement in the 1930s. They passed resolutions against the issues like child marriage, dowries, enforced widowhood etc. At that time Rabindranath was in his late years. He always reproached caste division and the practice of untouchability of the Hindu society. For this reason he praised the Harijan Movement whole heartedly. He preached equality among all human being. Being a Pirali Brahmin, Tagore empathized with the socially outcaste people. While intersecting between caste and gender Dr Sharmila Rege coined the term Dalit Feminism to define the marginalized oppressed women in India and Asian sub continent in her book - 'Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies' in 2006 .Tagore promoted this view in his verse play, novel, poems, dance dramas and the like almost a century prior to the official coinage of the term Dalit Feminism.

2. Literature Review

Since most of the researches on dalit feminism in Tagore's work locomote around 'Chandalika' (1933 and 1938), Other dalit feminine voices are to some extent neglected in previous researches. Sikdar¹ deals with the theme of untouchability in 'Chandalika' and depicts its similarities with Tagore's former verse play 'Prakritir Pratishodh' (1884). Mukhopadaya², Sen³ and Bhattacharya⁴, Kripalni⁵ truly advocate that Rabindranath preached humanity and voiced for the curse of Untouchability in 'Chandalika'. But many other Tagore critics like Bhattacharya⁶, Sen⁷, Ghoshal⁸, Bhattacharya⁹ discussed about the other part of the play regarding the complicated love relation between Prakriti and Ananda, the supernatural way to attain the love, the moral hesitation of Prakriti, Ananada's inner battle between his celibacy and sexual desire without looking upon the untouchability issue. Some researchers talked about dalit males in Tagore's work in some poems of 'Parishesh' (1932), 'Punashcha' (1932). This paper tries to address the research gap and deal elaborately with the pangs of dalit females and show their upliftment from socio-cultural degradation. The novelty of the article lies in the fact that Tagore's treatment of untouchables has never been before decoded in the light of his social status - Pirali Brahmin.

3. Methodology

The dissertation would address its content through a critical reading of Rabindranath Tagore's writings, biography, autobiography and related letters. The analysis is done keeping in mind the context of the then colonial background, problems of caste distinction and untouchability.

4. Journey from 'Prakritir Pratisodh' to 'Chandalika'

At the beginning of his literary endeavour Rabindranath promotes the view that untouchability and caste division are a curse to the marginalized segment of the society. In his verse play 'Prakritir Pratisodh' (1884) he introduces the mental agony of an orphan girl who belongs to a lower caste. That girl called "Raghu's daughter", is an untouchable and treated as an outsider to the mainstream society. She is even denied a name, the basic identity of a human being. Seeing the girl the pedestrians are walking aside in the 3rd scene of the play uttering- "Panthagan sare jao./ Hero, asiteche dharmabhrashtha anachari Raghur duhita." ¹⁰ ("Pedestrians, keep aside; for the religiously corrupt and licentious Raghu's daughter is coming" (author's translation)). The first traveller forbids her from touching him- "chhnus ne chhnus ne more" ¹¹ ("don't touch me don't touch me" (author's translation)). The second one calls her an impure girl- "sare ja ashuchi" ¹² ("go aside the impure one" (author's translation)). The third one addresses her as a daughter of a 'mlechchha' (person belongs to a different religion) - "Hatabhagi Janis ne rajpath diye/ Anagona kare jata nagarer lok./ Mlechchhakanya, tui kena chalis e pathe" ¹³ ("Dammed fate, don't you know all the upper-caste-urban people are going and returning through the royal road. Why are you going on this road, being the daughter of a "mlechchha" (author's translation)). It indicates that Dalit people need to tread on a different road. They have no right to walk on the main road with the high-caste people. Even an elderly woman who is eager to show love and affection to the orphan girl looks down upon her after hearing her dalit status. Also the temple-guard rebukes her- "Dur ha. Dur ha tui anarya ashuchi./ Ki sahase esechis mandirer majhe" ¹⁴ ("Get out. Get out you Non-Aryan impure girl. How dare you to come to the temple!" (author's translation)). Moreover the pilgrims avoid the untouchable girl.

Finally, the girl finds refuge in a hermit even though introducing herself as Non-Aryan and impure girl saying- “Chnuyo na, chnuyo na, ami Raghur duhita.”¹⁵ (Don’t touch don’t touch me, as I am Raghu’s daughter”). But the hermit assures her comfort and promotes humanity by giving her love and shelter. However, destiny has in store for her, something different. Tagore sets the dalit orphan girl free from her daily drudgery through her death. She bestows upon the monk the realization of the beauties of an ordinary life, through her death.

Tagore wrote a poem named “Jalapatra” almost a half century later on the same theme of untouchability. “Jalapatra” was published on 24th July 1932 and is now included in his ‘Parishesh’ anthology. The poem talks about the pain and agony of an untouchable woman who calls herself as “hinnari” (inferior woman) and her rescue from a state of degradation by the touch of a saviour. The saviour asks her for drinking water in a scorching noon. But the woman is unable to give him water as the very act would make her offensive for quenching thirst of a high caste person. But the man breaks her hesitation and assures that he does not follow any caste system. He compares the lady with a lotus flower which is born out of mud and rotten water. He says that she is as pure as the mother earth – “He mrinmayee / Punya jatha mrittikar ei basundhara/ Shyamal kantite bhara / Sei mato tumi/ Lakshmir asan, tnar kamalcharan acho chumi. / sundarer kono jat nai, / mukta se sadai.”¹⁶ (“Oh daughter of the earth, you are as holy as mother earth with greenery. You are kissing the feet of goddess Lakshmi. All that is beautiful do not have any caste distinction, they are free forever” (author’s translation)). The savior man with his compassion endowed with creative powers gives her a new life.

In 1932-33, untouchability became a thematic preoccupation with Tagore and he wrote a number of poems, often in free verse, on the same theme when the Harijan Movement was in its prime. His play ‘kaler Jatra’ where the ceremonial chariot refuses to move until the ‘sudras’ put their hands on the rope, was also composed in 1932. In Rabindranath’s ‘Punashcha’(1932-33) anthology we find some poems where he reproaches unhealthy caste system and advocates humanity. Poems like ‘Shuchi’, ‘Premer Sona’, ‘Snan Samapan’ hover around the epiphanic realization of Guru Ramananda about the inhuman caste system and untouchability. All through these poems Ramananda raises his voice for “muchi”(Cobbler), “chandal” (Cremator), “chamar”(Tanner) and other dalits and gives them equal treatment. In the poem ‘Pratham Puja’ in the same anthology, Tagore reveals the dichotomy and the hypocrisy of the society regarding caste and untouchability where the renovation of the shrine of Trilokeshwar would not occur without the labour of the untouchable Kirat tribe. But Madhab, the leader of the Kirats, has no right to see the idol while remodelling it, after a massive earthquake which devastated the erstwhile temple. After the successful completion of his assignment Madhab pays the price of his audacity for beholding the idol of the deity, who formerly belonged to the Kirat tribe, through death. We can consider Rabindranath’s poem like ‘Brahman’ (1902) in ‘Katha’ anthology in this respect. In his novels like ‘Gora’(1907) we can easily find traces of caste distinction in some incidents of Chorghoshpur. In all the cases Tagore voices for the dalits, outcastes and shows the upliftment of these characters by some religious saviours or male figures from the higher caste.

All these thoughts regarding caste distinction and untouchability culminate in Rabindranath’s play ‘Chandalika’ (1933). Shantidev Ghosh truly observes in ‘Rabindra-Sangeet’ –“... ‘Chandalika’r samay bharatbarshe Mahatmajir Harijan-andolan khub jore chaleche – ei andolaner samarthanei Gurudev ‘Chandalika’ natak likhechilen.”¹⁷ (“The Harijan Movement

was at its peak at the time of writing ‘Chandalika’. Rabindranath wrote the play ‘Chandalika’ in support of the movement.” (author’s translation)). Rabindranath wrote the prose-play ‘Chandalika’ in August, 1933. He was so perturbed by the contemporary situation that he could not resist him taking the story line of ‘Chandalika’ from ‘Sardulakarna Avadana’ in ‘The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal’ edited by Rajendralal Mitra. Tagore curtails the Buddhist story. ‘Chandalika’ portrays the upliftment of an untouchable girl Prakriti coming in touch with a Buddhist monk Ananda. By providing drinking water to Ananda she sets herself free from the shackle of societal domination. Rabindranath rewrites the prose-play ‘Chandalika’ in the form dance-drama with the same title in February 1938, however with slight additions and alterations. Especially the opening scene of the dance-drama was absent in the prose-play ‘Chandalika’ where the dalit girl Prakriti was insulted and refused by the flower seller, curd vendor and the bangle seller. The dance-drama begins in spring when the flowers are abloom and when young women are buying garlands and bangles to ensnare their lovers. But Prakriti is deprived of all such privileges which higher caste women enjoy. Tagore minutely depicts the agony of a young dalit girl when other girls of higher caste give cautions to the vendors about her dalit status- “Oke chhnuyo na, chhnuyo na, chhi, / O je chandalinir jhi...”¹⁸ (“Don’t touch her as she is the daughter of a chandal woman”. (author’s translation)) And her mother reminds her that she should go about her daily chores without wasting time with such useless lamenting. Soon appears the Buddhist monk Ananada with his message of humanity and all-encompassment. Ananda accepts water from the dalit girl Prakriti and blesses her saying –“Je manab ami sei manab tumi kanya, sei bari tirthabari, jaha tripta kare trishitere.”¹⁹ (“You are of the same humanbeing as I am. And that water is sacred that gives satisfaction to the thirsty.”(author’s translation)) The words of Ananada –“Kalyan hok taba Kalyani”²⁰ (“Blessed be you O blessed one” (author’s translation)) leaves her mesmerized. Prakriti gains her honour as a human being in Buddhism at last. But ‘Chandalika’ is much more than a mere exploration of the problems of untouchables. Thus Prakriti’s womanly desire for Ananda, the magical power of her mother, Ananda’s failure to resist it and Prakriti’s ultimate renunciation of her efforts to seduce Ananda are different issues for the present context.

5. Tagore as ‘Pirali Brahmin’, an outcaste to the Brahminical hierarchy

Tagore belongs to a Pirali Brahmin family. One of his ancestors named Jagannath Kushari married a lady whose family was considered as Pirali Brahmin. It is said that the lady’s two uncles were converted to Islam. But their innocent family was punished to be a fallen one by the society. Rabindranath was the offshoot of that Jagannath Kushari of Pithabhog. It is a known fact that the Islamic influence of Pir Ali was the main cause of converting the family as Pirali Brahmin. Pirali Brahmins lost their usual honour as Brahmins. They are denied to ‘Pangti Bhojan’ (caste based sitting arrangement for community lunch) . Nobody donated to a Pirali Brahmin because there is no divine gain donating something to an outcaste. They are thrown away from the society like the dalits. These Pirali Brahmins do not have any divine land, no disciples, no right to pursue livelihood by priesthood. Even it is said by some people that the Piralis have lost their right to wear the sacred thread. Most likely Tagore’s ancestors like Panchanan Kushari lived like half-dead as Pirali Brahmin in Baropara, Khulna now in Bangladesh. Rabindranath is well aware of his family history. Even in Tagore’s time marriages in Jorasanko Thakurbari are held within the Pirali Brahmin families. They cannot marry a Kulin Braham boy or girl. Those girls of Thakurbari were married to a Kulin family, their husbands

stayed at Thakurbari as house-son-in-law terminating all relation to their paternal family both materially and emotionally. And brides are taken from the families belonging to lower social hierarchy and from the families of the employees of the Tagore Estate. For example Mrinalini Devi's father, Benimadhab Roy, was a mere staff of Tagore Estate. When the marriage between Jyotirindranath and Kadambari Devi was settled, Satyendranath and Jnanadanandini Devi opposed the alliance as Kadambari Devi was not a suitable match for enlightened Jyotirindranath. But Maharshi Debendranath did not pay heed to Satyendranath's discomfort as well as displeasure regarding this because being a Pirali Brahmin and Brahma believer suitable brides were not available for his sons. That's why Maharshi agreed to the marriage. While writing for dalits Rabindranath might have in his mind his own social status and discomfort as a Pirali Brahmin.

6. Conclusion

Rabindranath talks about untouchability which now a day's called dalit issues. He takes into account especially female victims of caste issues and the problems of untouchability in his works. That is why all these concerned texts can fall under the umbrella of Dalit Feminism in present day term. And Tagore's main concern was to uplift these women from darkness to light. Initially the girls or women do not have any name but finally in 'Chandalika' the dalit girl has a proper name. In initial treatment of Dalit Feminism reveals the fact that the hapless victims found no route to escape in their mortal lives. Thus according to Tagore death was the only solution from sufferings in 'Prakritir Pratisodh'. However the rich experience he gathered during the course of his life strengthen his belief in humanity. Thus the outcaste feminine figures find saviours in upper caste male protagonists. This further implies that male would play a pioneering role in salvaging the plight of oppressed dalit females. Most of the victims seek refuge to religion or religious people in his works. Tagore to some extent depicts Buddhism as a shelter for Hindu dalit people. In reality we take into consideration the conversion of Dr B.R. Ambedkar along with his five lakh followers to Buddhism. As Buddhism practises no class distinction and promotes the idea of 'maitree/ metti', the dalit Hindus seek solace to Lord Buddha both in fact and in fiction. Moreover Tagore's own standpoint as Pirali Brahmin perhaps makes him empathetic to the dalit issues especially to the untouchable dalit female protagonists of his writings. Nonetheless, Tagore's positive attitude towards this burning question makes us astonished even today. We can conclude this paper with the view of Moitra²¹ who articulates that Tagore has given voice to the voiceless which is considered as the stepping stone for the empowerment of the marginalized people as Prakriti admits in 'Chandalika' – "Je amare diyeche dak,/ Bachanhara amake diyeche bak."²² ("Who heralds me and gives voiceless myself voice" (author's translation)).

Works Cited

- 1 Sikdar, Ashrukumar. 'Rabindranatye Rupantar O Aikya'. Ananda Publishers, 1993. (PP-129-35)
- 2 Mukhopadhyay, Prabhtkumar. 'Rabindrajibani', Vol 3. Visva Bharati, 2018. (PP-363-64)
- 3 Sen, Sukumar. 'Bangla Sahityer Itihas', Vol 4. Ananda Publishers, 1914. (PP 245-46)

- 4 Bhattacharya, Sadhankumar. 'Rabindranatyasahityer Bhumika'. Dey's publishing, 2017. (PP- 280-81)
- 5 Kripalni, Krishna. 'Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography'. National Book Trust, 2011. (PP- 393-95)
- 6 Bhattacharya, Ashutosh. 'Banglanatyasahityer Itihash', Vol- 2. A.Mukherjee and co. pvt. Ltd., 1961. (PP- 48-49)
- 7 Sen, Ashok. 'Rabindranatya-Parikrama'. A.Mukherjee, 1975. (p -356)
- 8 Ghoshal, Satyendranath. 'Rabindranather Natyapratibha'. Orient Book, 1984. (P 87)
- 9 Bhattacharya, Upendranath. 'Rabindra-Natya Parikrama'. Orient Book Company, 2019. (p 471-73)
- 10 Tagore, Rabindranath. 'Prakritir Pratisodh'. Visva Bharati, 1977. (P- 11)
- 11 ibid (p-11)
- 12 ibid (P- 11)
- 13 ibid (P- 11)
- 14 ibid (p- 12)
- 15 ibid (P-12)
- 16 Tagore, Rabindranath. "Jalapatra", ' Parishesh'. Visva Bharati, 1948. (PP- 166-167)
- 17 Ghosh, Santidev. 'Rabindra-Sangeet'. Ananada Publishers, 2019. (PP160-61)
- 18 Tagore, Rabindranath. 'Nrityanatya Chandaliika'. Visva Bharati, 1938. (P – 3)
- 19 ibid (P- 7)
- 20 ibid (P- 7)
- 21 Moitra Shefali, 'Rabindra-Nrityanatya: Ekti Naribadi Patha'. Ebang Mushayera, 2019. (P-133)
- 22 Tagore, Rabindranath. 'Nrityanatya Chandaliika'. Visva Bharati, 1938. (P- 11)

References

- Rege, 'Sharmila. 'Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies'. Zubaan, 2013.
- Mitra, Rajendralal. 'The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal'. Asiatic Society, 1882. (P- 219)
- Tagore, Rabindranath. 'Kaler Jatra'. Visva Bharati, 1932.

Tagore, Rabindranath. "Shuchi", 'Punashcha'. www.tagoreweb.com

Tagore, Rabindranath. "Premer Sona", 'Punashcha'. www.tagoreweb.com

Tagore, Rabindranath. 'Snan Samapan', 'Punashcha'. www.tagoreweb.com

Tagore, Rabindranath. "Pratham Puja", 'Punashcha'. Visva Bharati, 1932.

Tagore, Rabindranath. "Brahman", 'Katha'. Visva Bharati, 1900.

Tagore, Rabindranath. 'Gora'. Visva Bharati, 1910.

Khastagir, Ashish. Debendranath Tagore: Chithipatra. Sopan, 2022.