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Dr. Suprita Jha
Associate Professor,
Department of English, Mata
Sundri College, University of
Delhi, Delhi, India

Vijay Tendulkar's 'Ghashiram Kotwal: A creation of socio-political forces

Dr. Suprita Jha

Abstract

The development of modern theatre in India may be attributed to a change in the political set up in India. Post-Independence Indian theatre and drama got a new footing with the new found cultural confidence. The year 1972 turned out to be a landmark for the Indian vernacular theatre when Vijay Tendulkar's Marathi play 'Ghashiram Kotwal' made waves by its brilliant use of traditional folk forms in modern contemporary theatre.

'Ghashiram Kotwal' has been in the controversy since its very inception. It was staged in 1972 but soon it was banned for its anti-Brahmin stance and the distortion of facts about great historical figure who played a key role in Maratha polity. The play reveals how the state is ruled by a defunct descendent of glorious Shivaji. The ruler is Peshwa but he is governing the state through his chancellor, Nana Phadnavis, who is cunning and crafty and knows no scruples. The people under his rule groan for want of freedom in speech and movement and honourable way of living. Ghashiram Kotwal grows up under the patronage of such a lecherous crafty man. He is ruthless and tyrant and prosecutes all-innocent as well as defaulters. Actually, Ghashiram Kotwal was harshly treated on his arrival to Poona with the intention of getting suitable employment to support his family and so, the spirit of vindictiveness never leaves him.

Undoubtedly, 'Ghashiram Kotwal' is a biting satire on contemporary society, police administration and power politics. It portrays the falling standards, degradation of society, the mannerism as well as the conduct of the citizens. The paper I propose to write brings forth this issue of corruption that is running rampant on all levels in this play and the police administration is no exception. As a matter of fact, the dramatist, Vijay Tendulkar, has brought under his focus the political and police administrations and their faulty ways of working as it is today or may be an extension of the yesteryears.

Keywords: Theatre, British rule, satire, political, Brahmins, Peshwa, corruption, society, pioneer, Kotwal, socio-political force

Introductions

Over 200 years of British rule brought Indian theatre into direct contact with Western theatre. The seeds of modern theatre were sown in the late 18th century, with the consolidation of British power in Bengal, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. It was in the thriving metropolises of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras that they first introduced their brand of theatre, based on London models. The initial purpose of the British, while introducing modern theatre in India, was to provide entertainment for the British soldiers and citizens trying to acclimatise themselves to a foreign country. Initially, most dramatic works were composed in English, Bengali, Tamil and Marathi. Post Independence Indian theatre and drama, with the new-found cultural confidence, got a new -footing, when Sangeet Natak Academy was started in January 1953. Later, the National School of Drama did much for the growth and promotion of modern Indian theatre. In the 1960's, by suitable mixing of various styles and techniques from Sanskrit, medieval folk and western theatre, modern Indian theatre was given a new, versatile and broader approach at every level of creativity. Among other pioneers of the dramatic revival are Ranchhodbhal and Nanalla Kavi in Gujrat, Verasalingam, Guruzada Appa Rao and Ballary Raghavachari in Telugu, Santakavi Varadachari and Kailasam in Kannada, Laxminath Bezharua in Assamese, Kerala Varma Thampuran and C.V. Raman Pillai in Malayalam, Ramshankar Rai and Kalicharan Patnaik in Oriya, Habib Tanvir in North India and P. Sambandha Mudaliar in Tamil.

The year 1972 turned out to be a landmark for the Indian vernacular theatre when Vijay Tendulkar's Marathi play "GHASIRAM KOTWAL" made waves by its brilliant use of traditional folk forms in modern contemporary theatre. Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (born January 28, 1928) is a leading contemporary Indian playwright, literary essayist, screen

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Suprita Jha
Associate Professor,
Department of English, Mata
Sundri College, University of
Delhi, Delhi, India

writer, political journalist and social commentator. He has been the most influential dramatist and theatre personality in Marathi. "Griharsh" was his first play that appeared in 1955. He wrote many plays thereafter such as "Silence, Court is in session!", "Shrimant Sakharam Binder" and "Safar". In his plays he portrays the human lives which are stagnated in the mire of personal frustration and sexual innuendoes. He always tries to expose the essential artificiality of the society. Truly Speaking, his plays are a fine blend of fact and fiction in which reality appears in sharp colours. He has made use of material that came to him through the observation of life around him, from news report and the incidents which occurred during his own career.

Exposition

Tendulkar has been considered not only as a pioneer in Maratha theatre but also as the first dramatist of the new age who has discontinued the traditions of the theatre of history, mythology and sentiments. His play: "Ghashiram Kotwal" exposes the vulnerable segment of brave Maratha history. Dances and songs are re-introduced in Maratha plays which are well-integrated with the narrative. The play is a deadly combination of topicality and timelessness. The story is set against the backdrop of late 18th century, Pune. In fact, it is a political satire, written as historical drama and comments on the socio-political situation we live in. The play deals with the theme of selfish motifs and how men in power give rise to ideologies to serve their own purposes and later destroy them when they become useless. It was first staged in 1972 but soon it was banned for its anti-Brahmin stance and the distortion of facts about great historical figure who played a key role in Maratha polity. Gradually, the storm of criticism subsided and the artistic merits of the play came to be more appreciated. It was subsequently performed a number of times not only in India but in abroad also.

"Ghashiram Kotwal" is the story of a Brahmin from Kannauj, Ghashiram Savaldas, who moved to Pune with his wife and young daughter, looking for a better life. He has a run-in with the vicious and powerful Brahmin lobby of Pune and then plots revenge. He returns to the city and manages to wrangle the post of the Kotwal (police chief) by using his daughter as bait for Nana. Nana is infatuated with his young daughter, Lalitha Gauri. Ghashiram, promoted by a desire to avenge the humiliation he customarily suffers at the hands of the city's Brahmins, agrees to play Nana's game. Literally procuring his beloved daughter to provide food for the old politician's lechery, he uses this gesture as the stepping stone in his career. Nana makes him Kotwal of the city and gradually Ghashiram unleashes his vendetta against those very Brahmins who had once treated him like vermin.

According to history, Ghashiram was a North Indian Brahmin, a resident of Aurangabad, who was appointed as the police perfect of Poona on 8th Feb, 1777 and continued to hold office till his death which took place on 13th August, 1791 under violent circumstances. He had earned Nana's confidence by his faithful service during the critical times that followed the Peshwa Narayan Rao's murder. He enjoyed the full trust of Nana Phadnavis and his administration was notoriously worse than that of his predecessors. He was the man who had been appointed to watch the movements and plans of Raghunath Rao and his family and he reported to Nana whatever suited his purpose. He had under him a large body of unscrupulous spies, everyone possessing ample means of harassing innocent

people in consequence of which the word "Ghashiram" has become a permanent synonym for oppression and tyranny. As it happens so often with a work that questions contemporary values and phenomena from a radical position, the play has been attacked on peripheral counts rather than on its basic assumptions. He has been attacked for having shown Nana Phadnavis a cult hero. But in an author's note, Tendulkar says, "This is not a historical play. It is a story in prose, verse, music and dance set in historical era. Ghashiram is the creation of socio-political forces which know no barriers, of time and place. Although based on a historical legend, I have no intention of commenting on the morals, or lack of them, of the Peshwa, Nana Phadnavis or Ghashiram. The moral of the story if there is any, may be looked for elsewhere".

Viewed less narrowly, the play is an indictment of any tyrannical order, whose morality has been subverted by a position of authority held without adequate justification. Ghashiram becomes a terror. On the pretext of maintaining law and order, he makes life miserable for people. Perhaps this power-struggle could have been regarded as something related to specific people and a specific time. But it exposes the tendency of exploitation and victimisation of others for one's own selfish goals which has an all time relevance. This tendency is common in people of all social strata, at all levels. At the same time, this play, intentionally or unintentionally, relays a message that it is always the common man who suffers during the power games of the great people. The end of Ghashiram is, of course, very much true and there is no opposition to it. It is a historical fact that Ghashiram Kotwal was imprisoned after a summary trial as he had been accused of the death of thirty five Telegu Desh Brahmins who were returning home on the eve of some festival. They were arrested and kept confined during the night in a small cell at Bhavani Death lock-up. Twenty-five Brahmins died of suffocation. A Maratha Sardar happened to pass that way and rescued them reporting the matter to the Peshwa. Ghashiram was already in news about his rough treatment and brutality and this incident created a wave of anger, resentment and revenge among the Brahmin community. They assembled in large number and surrounded Nana's palace and shouted slogans. Meanwhile Peshwa asked Nana to look into the matter and take action. Nana assured Peshwa that he would punish the guilty at all cost. However, the summary trial found Ghashiram guilty to some extent, of course, and not completely responsible for the tragic death of the Brahmins. The Brahmins were relentless and they demanded that Ghashiram be trampled over by an elephant as laid down in shastras. Nana tried to shield him by appointing a judge to go through the incident. By trial the case would have been deferred but the mob was furious and demanded handing over Ghashiram to them. Then Peshwa himself intervened and ordered for him to be given to the people. Nana meekly followed the order. The mob shaved his head, dabbled it with snider, put him on a camel, paraded him in the street and finally stoned him to death.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Ghashiram Kotwal is a biting satire on contemporary society, police administration and power politics. It portrays the falling standards, degradation of society, the mannerism as well as the conduct of the citizens. It reveals how the state is ruled by a defunct

descendant of glorious Shivaji. The ruler is Peshwa but he is governing the state through his chancellor who is cunning and crafty and knows no scruples. In this play, the dramatist gives us a glimpse of contemporary Maratha society in complete decay. It shows how Maratha society has fallen from its exalted position during Shivaji's rule and subsequent Maratha rulers. Now the Maratha Sardars are hypocrite, unscrupulous and without pity. The civic administration is practically non-existing and in a shabby state. Moreover, this play also shows erosion in values. The society has degenerated so low that certain shameless happenings are tolerated without any protest. Firstly, it is the Poona Brahminary that receives a scathing attacks in this play and the vile Brahmins are exposed mercilessly. They are guilty of double-speech and double-standard. The dramatist throws his search light on Brahminary thus:

Night comes
Poona Brahmins go
To Bavannakhani.
They go
To Bavannakhani
They go to cemetery.
They go to Kirtan.
They go to the temple-as they have done everyday.
The Brahmins go to Bavannakhani.

The dramatist also shows women folk of Brahmins in poor light. While their men go to the prostitutes, Gulabi's place, the women invite other men and thus a vicious circle grows up. The moral depravity and degeneration are visible everywhere.

Even the priestly class has gone down morally so much that there remains a little difference between a courtesan's house and Krishna's garden at Mathura. Both places have been grotesquely juxtaposed:

The gardens of Poona
Become the garden of Mathura
Where Krishna played.

The Brahmins are rowdy and their leader and patron. Nana is no better. It shows a scathing attack on the immoral way of living in high echelon of society. We too get an idea of the corruption, artificiality, craftiness and duplicity in the morals, situations and dialogue of the people of the City of Poona. The sutradhar tells us sarcastically:

Did he Fall?
Tumbled down.
Slipped down
Tripped down or did he put his foot wrong?

The sexual imagery shows how Nana was deeply immersed in loose morals and depravity. There is another instance of Brahmins' depravity when Brahmins assemble outside the park where royal honours are being bestowed upon them. How some settle their personal score by implicating other fellow Brahmins in false cases. Ghashiram is thus beaten when some Brahmins shouted that his pocket was picked and Ghashiram was thrashed, though he was not involved at all. The whole police department also stands exposed with its brutality and callousness. The corruption is running rampant on all levels and the police administration is no

exception. As a matter of fact, the dramatist has brought under his focus the police administration and its faulty way of working as it is today or may be an extension of the yesteryears.

Tendulkar's drama may be discussed in terms of his exploration of themes, his skill in characterisation and his ingenuity in structure. Although Tendulkar's art is marked by many innovations in technique and subject, he relies on traditions which are social and literary and play an important role in his work. The inevitable conflict between tradition and modernity, conventions and unorthodoxy, a fixed system and the unchecked course of individualism, social restraints and freedom create the tensions in his plays and contribute to their basic forms. It is strange that Tendulkar continues to be attracted by the theme of individual versus society in play after play. In "Ghashiran Kotwal" he aims at dealing with a slightly different confrontation, the individual is a product of a part of society and when this product tries to be over dominating and menacing, there is clash. Unfortunately, Ghashiram does not appear to be so as well as an individual. Through a leaf from history, Tendulkar succeeds in "Ghashiram Kotwal" in creating his own space to address the political and sociological dialectic of times from a rebellious position. What becomes relevant is the insistence on such combination in the backdrop of its universal aims for art.

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