TAGORE’S TREATMENT OF BUDDHISM IN HIS PLAYS: MALINI AND SACRIFICE

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ABSTRACT

Lord Buddha taught that selfishness is the chief evil of human life. His preachings known as Buddhism, was a religion of proper moral conduct and not a religion of priests, temples, gods, sacrifices or rituals. Buddhists agreed to achieve salvation by starvation and self denial had no meaning. They believed that a clear mind nourished by a healthy and well cared for body was essential for the attainment of ‘Bodhi’ (enlightenment) and realized that man is evil when he tries to achieve physical pleasure, power, fame and riches. History of India shows the dominant position of Brahmans. They declared themselves to be above all other men and taught that in this as well as in the next world happiness could only be obtained through sacrifice of cattle, food, and melted butter to fire and other rituals. They divided the society into sections ‘varnas’. It is now an established fact that the Buddhism is a religion for common man while it is being philosophical guide for an intellectual. Buddhism succeeded in winning the support of many oppressed people suffering from lack of rights, poverty and hunger. In referring to early Buddhism, it should be noted that it succeeded, under the definite socio-historical conditions of the times, in expressing in a special form the aspirations of the people for a better life. The rational and humanistic aspects of the teachings of the Buddha and Buddhist culture have attracted Rabindranath Tagore. He has recalled contributions of Buddhist rulers and Buddhism in Indian civilization and the role of Buddhist philosophy and culture in art, literature and intellectual life of India, in his poems, plays, essays, and lectures. Buddhism has a great impact in the thoughts and reflections of the poet.

KEYWORDS: Selfishness, Moral Conduct, Salvation, Enlightenment, Sacrifice

INTRODUCTION

Tagore (7th May 1861-7th August 1941), winner of Nobel Prize in Literature and founder of Visva Bharti University, Santiniketan, is highly impressed to see the Buddhist culture and civilization in different countries. He exchanged views with the noted scholars on various matters including art, literature and world peace in Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, Sri Lanka and China. He has not only written a lot on Buddhistic thoughts but also encouraged others to write on the teachings of the Buddha as they stand for love, kindness, regard and non-violence. He is of the view that old customs and traditions are now out-dated. They could flourish in the olden days when man was under the control of orthodox people. Professor of Chinese Studies in Visva Bharti University, Santiniketan, Tan Yun-Shan in ‘My Devotion to Rabindranath Tagore’ writes “In China Rabindranath Tagore together with Mahatma Gandhi had long been regarded as the Buddhas of modern India. Rabindranath’s visit to China in the year 1924 had been a great event in Chinese cultural history. He had awakened the dormant conscience of the Chinese nation which had been intoxicated and doped by the modern splendours and glories of materialistic west for over a hundred years.”

Orthodoxy, traditionalism, ritualism and ceremonial form of worship are of little consequence for Tagore. For this reason, his writings are pregnant with reason and rationality. His plays like Malini, and Sacrifice are replete with the spirit of Buddhism. In fact, Tagore is not against any religion but moral teachings and morality affect him. In his view
true religion is one which is imbued with humanity. He keeps humanity at the centre of his thought and writings. He says, “We die when we lose our physical life, we parish when we miss our humanity. And humanity is the Dharma of human beings.”

Tagore himself is greatly influenced by the teachings of Buddha. He expressed his views through different characters in his plays. His play Malini depicts a conflict between Buddhism and Brahimanism, true religion and false religion. A new religion called Buddhism prevailed in ‘Kashi’. The principles of the new religion were different from those of the old religion. The teachings of the Buddha consisted of love, truth, kindness, selfless service and non-violence.

People who believed in these values adopted this religion. Malini, the daughter of the King, is very much affected by the teachings of the Buddha. She wants to spread the new religion in her father’s kingdom. Kemankar, a fanatic, is one of the hurdles for Malini to complete the task. He thinks that religion, which was maintained by his ancestors through the ages, is perfect. All that is in vogue through the ages cannot be wrong. Nobody has the right to go against that.

In this play, Supriya represents the views of Tagore, Malini a religious teacher and Kemankar, a fanatic. Supriya values the new creed called Buddhism. He does not believe in rituals in which the followers of Brahimanism want the banishment of Malini. She is an innocent girl, the messenger of Buddhism. She decides to adopt the new creed and give up the old orthodox beliefs. It is like lighting the festival lamps at the funeral pyre of the sacred religion. Kemankar rejects the principles of Buddhism and says to Supriya, “…spurn not your neighbours who must go for their draught of water to their ancestral pond with the green of its gradual slopes mellowed by ages and its ancient trees bearing eternal fruit.”

Tagore criticizes customs and traditions, which have become worn-out and outdated. Kemankar reposes full faith in old creed and customs. He is so rigid that he pleads for punishments of death. He warns the King that if he pardons him and not pronounce the death sentence for his crime, he will start his incomplete work again. His fanaticism inspires him to take the military help of another country. He plays a role as a defender of old religion, which is threatened by the fresh flame of Buddhism.

Once Kemankar admitted before Supriya that he was impressed by the energetic face of Malini for a moment and says, “I also once set my eyes on that face, and for a moment dreamt that religion had come at last, in the form of a woman, to lead man’s heart to heaven.” But his superstition turns him back to his worm-eaten religion. People like Supriya, value the new creed, Buddhism. He does not believe in fanaticism in which followers of Brahimanism want the banishment of an innocent girl. They have false pride in their religion. He wants to tell them that by shouting slogans together and by numbers, they cannot determine the truth. True religion does not consist in such things. He says, “…… I am shamed to own as mine a creed that depends on force for its existence.”

Supriya has deep faith in Malini who is a symbol of light, love and peace. He does not want to bind himself with the old religion, tradition and scriptures. He believes in a living person to lead him and answer his questions. The dumb books and God, who belongs to the people, are unable to do so. He says to Malini, “You made me live again in a new land of birth. ‘Love for all’ was a mere word, waiting from the old time to be made real……”

Supriya thinks that all his learning are invaluable though he is a learned man among the learners of the false creed. In their religion there are so many ways but all are without light. He says to Kemankar that his sacred books are useless to him because they are dumb. But he has seen a dawn in the princess. Tagore has created two characters of different faiths to present his view of religion and truth. The other stands for Brahimanism, fanaticism and orthodoxy. The Queen, mother of Malini, is full of nobility, gentleness and innocence. She is in agony of indecision in the matter of her daughter and religion. She is worried about her daughter but favours her to bring the new creed against the old religion of false teachings. It is her motherhood, which opposes the banishment of Malini and her duty permits to do so.

She stands for the conflict between womanhood and patriotism. She is afraid of the rumors that the Buddhist monks practice black art and spell it upon men’s mind. Malini is deeply influenced by the new teachings.
presented as a representative of the new creed. She feels that it is her moral responsibility to spread the message of the Buddha all over her state because the old religion is no more congenial to the happiness and welfare of the people. She feels that the time has come to reform the society. It is time to banish the wrong practices and evil customs. She says all these things under the influence of Buddhism. Here Tagore tries to give us lesson that it is not easy to reach the top. He appreciates the new creed and its principles, but along with all this he wants to tell us through the character of Malini that a deep knowledge and long experience are necessary to run any system successfully. Malini has no mastery over her subject. She has not seen the world of sorrow, fear, and sufferings. Then how can she take the wanderers home? When she faces real life and meets people of various sects, she feels tired and finds herself all alone and empty-minded. She leaves her house in the manner of Siddhartha, the founder of Buddhism. She asks for the help of Supriya, “Where is that voice in me, which came down from heaven, like an unseen flash of lightning, into my heart? I do not know how to hold the helm of the great ship that I must guide.” She proves that the correctness of the teachings when she requests the King to pardon Kemankar for his crime, which is one of the Buddha’s principles. The message of the play is that “…truth and love are the body and soul of religion” and knowledge without love or devotion is blind. Buddhism stands for the first.

SACRIFICE

The play Sacrifice is one of the best examples of the Buddha’s teachings. The motto of Buddhism Ahimsa Parmo Dahrma had influenced Tagore up to the extent that he created this great play. In Tagore’s native place animal sacrifice, eating of animals’ flesh and many other old traditions were in vogue and he never appreciated any of them. So through this play he expresses his disapproval of these outdated customs. In Sacrifice there is an orphan girl Aparna whose goat has been sacrificed at the altar of goddess Kali. It is believed that this kind of offerings can make the goddess happy and she will bless the Queen with a baby and save from the wicked souls and help in getting boons from the goddess Kali. Raghupati, the priest of the temple is a fanatic, superstitious and a follower of outworn custom offers blood before the statue of the goddess Kali and Jai Singh, the follower of Raghupati, opposes it. The priest warns that the King must not interfere with the scriptures. He says, “You have no power to alter laws laid down in scriptures.” No one is allowed to temper with the scriptures. Raghupati wants to punish King Govinda who had the presumption to disobey the scriptures and override the Brahmin priest. The pathetic appeal of Aparna gives message that it is against humanity to sacrifice animals as the goddess does not drink blood. King Govinda feels that the words of Aparna are not hers but of the goddess. Her pathetic cry before the King compelled him to forbid sacrifice from his kingdom “This blood-streak running down the steps is it his? O my darling, when you trembled and cried for dear life, why did your call not reach my heart through the whole deaf world?” He himself realized that blood cannot be the offering of goddess.

Raghupati thinks that he is the representative of the goddess, not of the King. He is an orthodox follower of Brahminism and has unswerving faith in traditions. The reason behind this was that Brahmans declared themselves to be above all other men. They taught that in this as well as in the next world happiness could only be obtained through sacrifices of cattle, food, and melted butter to fire. So he says, “......... You alone have heard God’s words, and not I?” 10 Nakshatra, the King’s brother, also believes in the priest and his customs, so he is also surprised. Raghupati thinks that the King is against him and his holy books. He says to the King that the goddess does not dwell in his land and is not his subject also. He must pay the dues to the goddess in the form of an animal sacrifice. The citizens and the officials of the kingdom are accustomed to practicing customs and sacrifices. They oppose the King. Nayan Rai resigns because the thinks that as his ancestors served the kingdom without opposing the customs, he cannot oppose the rituals. He says to the King that though he is his servant, he is a man above all. “I have reason and my religion, I have my king, --- and also my God.” 11 According to him, the King has no right to remove the sanctions which are in vogue since ages. Similarly, the
Minister says, “Our ancestors have performed these rites with reverence; can you have the heart to insult them?” Buddhism rose against these senseless sacrifices and old customs.

According to the teachings of the Buddha, Ahimsa Parmo Dharma and Nakshtra does not believe in his teachings. He has been seeing blood in the temple since his infancy. Therefore he cannot tolerate the insult of the deity. He says to the King, “Are we, then to come down to the level of the Buddhists,” and “Are we, then, to come down to the level of Buddhists, and treat animals as if they have their right to live”13 Raghupati has little mercy in his heart because he has no children. He looks after Jaising from his childhood as a foster-child. So he never felt pain in his heart. The daily sacrifice of innumerable innocent animals has never disturbed Raghupati’s soul. He says, “Old Time is ever writing the chronicle of the transient life of creatures in letters of blood.”14 When King Govinda forbids sacrifice in his kingdom, he feels his defeat. He says to Jaising, “Defied you and me, all scriptures, all countries, all time, defied Mahakali, the Goddess of the endless stream to time,--- sitting upon that puny little throne of his.” 15 Raghupati makes a lot of efforts to get the ban removed from animal sacrifice, which is imposed by the king, but he fails. He even plans to kill the King to get success. But he could not succeed. At last, when Jaising sacrifices himself before the goddess Kali, Raghupati realizes that animal sacrifice in not well for humanity and the goddess is not thirsty for blood. Jaising’s suicide causes great revulsion in his soul. When dumb beasts are sacrificed, he could not take lesson and when his loving Jaising gives his life, he realizes how precious life is. Then he opposes the rituals of sacrifice in the temple to please the goddess. The change in Raghupati’s heart indicates the validity of Buddha’s teachings.

The play shows the real impact of the Buddha’s teachings and humanitarian approach of Tagore. That is why he opposes orthodoxy, ritualism, selfishness and false pride through Raghupati. He opposes the tradition of animal sacrifice in the temple. He has beautified the play by making Aparna, a beggar girl, the spiritual guide of the high-priest. She awakens in his soul true religion and destroys his blind faith in orthodoxy and ritualism. She compels him to see the hollowness of scriptures and heartlessness of traditional rituals. It is a very hard task to convince a dogmatic person like Raghupati and bring him on the right path of humanity. Tagore’s advocacy towards sacrifice has been powerfully displayed through this play and it is now an established fact that the Buddhism is a religion for common man while it is being philosophical guide for an intellectual. Buddhism succeeded in winning the support of many oppressed people suffering from lack of rights, poverty and hunger.

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