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History of Caste Politics by an Angry Young Man: A Study of Vijay
Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*

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Abstract

Vijay Tendulkar's play *Kanyadaan* is an open-ended terrain of explanations and interpretations of the caste politics implanted by Brahmin colonialism and false religious dogmas. The re-reading of the play manifests the hegemonic power structure prevailing in the society. The play shows that Break the Caste System is a good slogan for politics but very difficult to apply in social life and family life. This research article discovers Arun as an oppressed anti-hero who tries to find out the "history from the below", a term used by the subaltern historians. Arun throws light on the fact that dalits were dispossessed of their homes and lands during the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial period. The re-reading of the play presents the character of Arun as a subaltern historian who unearths the subjective history of subjugation, humiliation, deprivation, discrimination and subalternization. Arun reminds every one of the histories of struggle fought by caste subalterns down the ages. After looking back with anger, Arun looks forward with fire and wants to set fire to the whole world. This article shows that Tendulkar wanted to present Arun as a dalit intelligentsia in front of his would-be in-laws with no marks of highly cultured person. Arun does not want to change himself because he is afraid of losing his identity. Identity crisis or search for identity is an important theme in postcolonial studies. Arun would always be the "Other" to the Brahmin or upper caste world. Jyoti as a true wife stands by Arun to awaken the god slumbering within man. Through Jyoti's mouth, Tendulkar propounds that without a comprehensive realization of humanity, it is difficult to appreciate the real human self beyond social prejudices. This comprehensive realization or empathy would be the first step to liberate the caste subalterns from the thrall of social stigma.

Key words: History, caste, politics, subaltern, dalit, postcolonial.

Introduction

The visions we had of the future of this nation before independence! And what we are forced to see today! Disgusting. It hurts. - (*Kanyadaan*, Tendulkar 498)

The decolonized India has failed to achieve what its colonized citizens dreamt of during their struggle for independence. The new postcolonial elites imitated the white colonizers and subalternized the subalterns (non-elites), as the terms used by Ranajit Guha. Thus, postcolonial subalternization continues in the decolonized India too. The above speech of Nath Devalikar, a Member of State Legislative Council and a follower of Gandhian idealism, bears some special weightage for understanding caste politics in decolonized India. The deep rooted caste politics implanted by Brahminism and colonialism in the fabric of Indian culture will never be uprooted if people are not unchained from the thrall of *shastra* and false religious dogmas. Vijay Tendulkar's play *Kanyadaan* is an open ended terrain of explanations and (mis)interpretations. Its multidimensional aspects brought for Tendulkar awards as well as hurling of sleepers:

I have written about my own experiences and about what I have seen in others around me. I have been true to all this.... I did not attempt simplify matters... You are honouring me with *Saraswati Samman* today for a play for which I once had a slipper hurled at me.... As its creator, I respect both verdicts. (Tendulkar 598)

Discussion

The play was penned in Marathi in 1983 and it was first translated into English in 2005 by Gouri Ramnarayan. The play was written at a time when Ranajit Guha and his Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) were generating storm about historiography with their project. The elitist historiography was challenged by the subaltern historians who wrote about the life and struggle of subalterns. Vijay Tendulkar inspired by Ranajit Guha and his group wrote this play about the life and struggle of dalits during the colonial and decolonized period. Tendulkar himself has confessed in the aforesaid speech that he wanted to be true to his experiences and to others while writing this play. This statement is an ample proof of the robust subaltern historian lurking within Tendulkar. This subaltern historian comes out through his depiction of dalit character Arun Athavale who puts forward a counter discourse on caste consciousness and caste practice propounded by Nath Devalikar and his family. Arun Athavale presents a history of caste subalterns down the centuries. Being a poet and a writer, Arun easily becomes a historian as well as a chronicler of his time. Thus the re-reading of Tendulkar's play from the perspective of the history of caste subalterns by an angry young historian, who is none but Arun Athavale, would open new vistas for further studies.

The plot of the play revolves round four characters. Nath Devalikar is a Brahmin by caste. He is a socialist and a follower of Gandhi. His wife Seva is also a social activist working for women's rights. Jyoti is their daughter. Arun is a dalit, a scavenger, and a writer. Jyoti wants to marry Arun inspired by his writings. The marriage of a Brahmin girl and a dalit boy is definitely a hard nut to crack. Being a follower of Gandhi, Nath is very much delighted at Jyoti's decision to marry a dalit. He thinks that his dream of social equality would come to a reality by this marriage. He declares enthusiastically to his wife:

Seva, until today, 'Break the Caste System' – was a mere slogan for us. I have attended many intercaste marriages and made speeches. But today I have broken the caste barrier in the real sense. My home has become India in the real sense of the term. (Tendulkar 519)

But this plan of synthesis of social obligation and personal relationship creates a unique dramatic situation in the play.

Like Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956), Arun Athavale looks back in anger in the history of caste politics and depicts the subalternization of caste subalterns. Most of the

critical discussions on the play present Arun as an example of typical dalit, a wife-beater or an opportunist. Arun, however, is very conscious that he is a dalit and has a dalit background. He may be discovered as an oppressed anti-hero who tries to find out the “history from the below”, a term used by the subaltern historians. Arun throws light on the fact that the caste subalterns were dispossessed of their homes and lands during the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial period. Arun and his family live in a small hut and he “feels uncomfortable in big houses.” He tells Jyoti angrily:

If you see my father's hut you'll understand. Ten of us, big and small, lived in that eight feet by ten feet. The heat of our bodies warms us in winter. No clothes on our back, no food in our stomach, but we felt very safe. (Tendulkar 512).

Then, as a chronicler of castism Arun describes the miserable life of dalits.

Our grandfathers and great grandfathers used to roam, barefoot, miles and miles, in the heat, in the rain, day and night... till the rags on their butt felt apart... used to wander shouting 'Johaar, Maayi-baap! Sir-Madam, sweeper' and their calls polluted the brahmin's ears. (Tendulkar 513)

Arun bluntly as well as honestly tells Jyoti that her romantic world along with “ghee spread, and wheat bread culture” (Tendulkar 513) would create problem to adjust with him after marriage. Arun gives a vivid picture of the ways of the world of dalits. Generation after generation their stomachs used to the stale, stinking bread that they had collected by begging from door to door. Their tongues always tested the flesh of dead animals and they ate it with relish. Such a life style is totally opposite to the culture of upper castes. He knows that Jyoti as a daughter of a Brahmin, would not be able to face the hard core reality, hardships and disgusting world of dalit. He frankly asks Jyoti – “Will you marry me and eat stinking bread with spoilt *dal* in my father's hut? Without vomiting? Tell me, Jyoti, can you shit every day in our slum's village toilet like my mother?” (Tendulkar 513). His fiery words touch every reader/audience when he utters that the upper castes have made their lives hell. To them life means hell – “It is hell and I mean hell. A hell named life” (Tendulkar 514). Arun knows that the caste politics and Brahminism would never let the dalits stand up and flex their “muscles and challenge the establishment” (Tendulkar 520).

Thus, after looking back with anger, Arun looks forward with fire and wants to set fire to the whole world, “strangle throats, rape and kill. Drink up the blood of the beasts, your high caste society.” (Tendulkar 514). These hostile and aggressive reactions of Arun are not the expressions of an individual's fury but reflex actions of all the accumulated tortures of dalit psyche through generations. The experiences of life made Arun an angry and rebellious against the higher sections of society. His reaction reminds us of Michel Foucault's observation in his book *Power/Knowledge* “The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a reaction of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, and desires forces” (Foucault 74). The disgust and the hatred are the inborn fate of any caste subalterns and Arun is no exception. The history of the life of dalits causes great pain in Jyoti and tears roll down her red cheeks. Realizing this Arun apologizes to Jyoti for outbursting his pent up feelings of injustice, frustration and inner desire for revenge. It pleases Jyoti and she smiles wiping out her tears. Arun metaphorically utters a rhyme:

Hasli re hasli,

Ek baamaneen fasli

(It's a jolly game, caught a Brahmin dame.) (Tendulkar 514)

The first meeting of Arun with the family of Jyoti turns out to be an uncomfortable one for everyone because it brings to the surface the encounter of two different castes. It manifests the hegemonic power structure prevailing in the society. The mother of Jyoti directly attacks Arun about the financial condition of his family and his future plan. This query actually asserts her superiority by

humiliating him for his meager income. In fact, healthy financial condition is the basic thing which makes the upper castes powerful and dominant. In the words of Karl Marx, the society is divided into only two class/caste – the rich and the poor. All other divisions are nothing but mirage. Naturally, if Arun had been financially superior to Jyoti's family, there would have been no objection on the part of Jyoti's parents in intercaste marriage. Arun, as a representative of dalit society, replies justly to indicate the age old profession of dalits. After marrying Jyoti they will be brewing illicit liquor. "It is a first class profession for two persons. The man bribes the police and the wife serves customers. People call her aunty. The more striking the aunty's look, the brisker the trade". (Tendulkar 517). Seva, "shocked and silenced", comes to the conclusion that Arun is uncultured and uncivilized and she would never accept him as her son-in-law. Actually, Tendulkar wanted to present Arun as a dalit intelligentsia in front of his would-be in-laws with no marks of highly cultured person. Arun meets them as simply as he is with his pristine glory.

After marriage with Jyoti, Arun, as a chronicler of dalit life, unveils the psyche of dalit. Tendulkar's purpose of writing this play was not to show that an educated dalit ultimately becomes a member of Brahmin family, rejects his "uncultured" dalit culture and lives happily ever after. The conjugal quarrel of any kind is a part of all family life. But the quarrel of dalits, complains Arun, and the resultant "beating is what gets publicized" because they do not have acquired "any white collar culture". They "don't know the non-violent ways of Brahmin". (Tendulkar 540). Dalits, like Arun, are made of all the hellish environments in which they live and thrive. Wife-beating, drinking and abusing are knitted in the webs of their lives. Arun presents a gruesome living picture of dalits:

When have I claimed that I am civilized and cultured like your people? From childhood I have seen my father come home drunk every day, and beat my mother half dead, seen her cry her heart out. Even now I hear the echoes of her broken sobs. No one was there to wipe her tears. My poor mother! She didn't have a father like Bhai, nor a mother like you... (Tendulkar 539-540)

Arun does not want to change himself because he is afraid of losing his identity. Identity crisis or search for identity is an important theme in postcolonial studies. Arun would always be the "Other" to the Brahmin or upper caste world. According to Arun, history proves that "after all scavengers like us are condemned to rot in shit". (Tendulkar 538)

His autobiographical novel is a part of Dalit Literature and the *Progressive Dalit Literature Circle* is going to have a discussion on the novel. The aim of Dalit Literature of this kind is to generate a counter discourse against the traditional system which is based on inequality and deprivation. It also focuses on the evil and double standard of higher castes. It presents the actual life history of caste subalterns. Arun invites his Brahmin father-in-law to preside over the discussion because Nath always pretends to be a well-wisher of the dalit community. The original self of Nath as a Brahmin comes to the surface when Arun outwits him in caste politics. The follower of Gandhi's idealism and champion of casteless society, the launcher of *satyagraha* for dalits transform into an ordinary caste conscious Brahmin who abuses his son-in-law thus:

... his visit has polluted this drawing room, this house, and this day.... It stinks.... I feel like taking a bath, like cleaning myself ! Clean everything! This furniture, this floor... all this... he has made them filthy, dirty, polluted! (Tendulkar 553)

Though Nath rejects Arun and his idealism of intercaste marriage is shattered into pieces, Jyoti as a true wife stands by Arun "to awaken the god slumbering within man" (Tendulkar 563). Actually, Arun "is like unrefined gold, he needs to be melted and moulded. This is the need of the hour". (Tendulkar 527)

The following last delivery of Jyoti to her father with which the curtain falls on the stage, is pregnant with thought for those who think for the subalterns from the core of their hearts:

I have my husband. I am not a widow. Even if I become one I shan't knock at your door. I am not Jyoti Yadunath Devlalikar now, I am Jyoti Arun Athavale, a scavenger. I don't say harijan. I despise the term. I am an untouchable, a scavenger. I am one of them. Don't touch me. Fly from my shadow, otherwise my fire will scorch your comfortable values. (Tendulkar 566)

The content of this fiery speech reminds us of the life of Mahasweta Devi who lived her life with subalterns in remote villages to uplift their socio-economic position.

Tendulkar presents the character of Arun as a subaltern historian who unearths the subjective history of subjugation, humiliation, deprivation, discrimination and subalternization. Arun reminds every one of the history of struggle fought by caste subalterns down the ages. His subjective caste consciousness is totally different from the objective view of Nath Devlalikar. The history of struggle makes it difficult for him to forget his past and to reconcile with the upper castes. As a sensitive dalit writer, he fights with his two selves (a dalit and a sensitive write) but finds no solution. The re-reading of the play from this perspective would open new vistas for the days to come. The character of Jyoti is undoubtedly a victim of "triply subalternized" – first as a woman, second as a daughter of Brahmin and third as a wife of a dalit. Undoubtedly, she is the true model for those who want to work for the subalterns from the core of their hearts.

Conclusion

The re-reading of Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* shows that Arun Athavale has been discovered as a chronicler of caste politics. Arun looks back in anger, like Jimmy Porter in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, in the history of caste politics and depicts different aspects of caste system. He tries to find out the "history from the below". Arun throws light on the fact that the caste subalterns were dispossessed of their homes and lands during the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial period. As a mouthpiece of Tendulkar, Arun puts forward a counter discourse on caste consciousness and caste practiced.

Jyoti, wife of Arun, creates the enabling circumstances for dalit Arun to speak. Jyoti is the role model for those social activists and intelligentsia who want to stand by the subaltern so that they can speak. According to Spivak, the first step in this respect should be to try and learn from the subaltern and sensitize ourselves to the needs and desires of the subalterns. This process of learning from the subaltern will create the enabling circumstances for the subaltern to come out and speak. Jyoti follows Spivak's cryptic but powerful statement- "learn to learn from the subaltern".

Jyoti as a true wife stands by Arun "to awaken the god slumbering within man" (Tendulkar 563). Actually, Arun "is like unrefined gold, he needs to be melted and moulded. This is the need of the hour". (Tendulkar 527) As a mouthpiece of Tendulkar, Jyoti shows the ways of dealing with caste subalterns. As man and his inherent nature are never really two different things, we have to accept it first as the production of its circumstances. Naturally, Arun the beast and the lover, the demon and the poet, the filthy crusher and the frenzied lover mingle in one personality. These opposite aspects cannot be separated from him. Jyoti confesses that "Arun is made of all these things bound together and I have to accept him as he is, because I cannot reject him" (Tendulkar 564). Now, the mission of Jyoti's life is first to "drag out" the beast lurking within Arun and destroy it, then to "rouse" the god in him from sleep.

Therefore, in order to bring Arun to the main stream of society, Jyoti announces empathetically her position as the wife of a scavenger. Through her mouth, Tendulkar propounds that without a comprehensive realization of humanity, it is difficult to appreciate the real human self beyond social prejudices. This comprehensive realization or empathy would be the first step to liberate the caste

subalterns from the thrall of social stigma. The re-reading of the play *Kanyadaan* brings forth the following recommendations to root out the dirty caste system from our society.

Recommendations to Root out Caste System:

- i. Financial condition of a family should be the criteria for providing certificates. No caste certificates stamping the caste or sub-caste should be issued by the government authority because it infects the society.
- ii. Caste certificate must be illegal. To ask someone about one's caste should be an offence because it hits one's dignity, and humiliation starts from that moment. Legislation is required in this respect. Practicing untouchability is an offence since 1950 but asking about caste or issuing caste certificate is not an offence. How ridiculous it is! It should also be an offence because discrimination starts after knowing one's caste.
- iii. The ragging of the upper caste on the lower caste is going on from the last three thousand years. Therefore, just like anti-ragging cell in every college and university campus, anti-caste cell in every educational institution, government sectors from Panchayet to Collectorate, and in Non-government sectors is the crying need of the hour. Any kind of caste-based humiliation or discrimination must be registered on line or off line.
- iv. Proper education about the different theories on the origin of caste system should be introduced in the curriculum of school and college. The myths and concocted stories related to caste system must be explained to the mass without religious biasness. It is a blatant lie that caste system is a part of religious practices. Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism never permit any caste system.
- v. The text books of schools and colleges need to be carefully revised. Lessons should be included to teach the students that caste is a man-made system. It is a part of the division of labour. One's caste is not determined at birth. Our blood admits no caste; it has only four groups all over the world. .
- vi. Voters need to be educated about how they are exploited by caste leaders without any developmental benefits. No biased vote can change the social scenario of castism.
- vii. Election Commission too has an important role to play. It may find out ways to curb the use of caste because electoral politics plays with castism for the vested interests of some caste political leaders. Strict imposition of code of conduct related to caste politics should be maintained by the Election Commission.
- viii. Political parties should stop playing caste-based politics and not encouraging castism. They should think of nation building. Democracy is not merely winning or losing elections.
- ix. Social Media and mass media campaign to promote caste-harmony would encourage people to live and work together.
- x. Civil society, Corporation, Municipality and Panchayet have to take awareness programme against the caste system. The similarities among different castes should be stressed rather than the differences.
- xi. By promoting inter-caste marriage and by providing special offers for people who do inter-caste marriage can bring change for the next generation.
- xii. The issue of caste and its abolition should be campaigned as a Civil Rights Movement which would be a movement for human rights and human dignity.

- xiii. "Decastism of mind" just like "decolonization of mind" is the burning need of this time. For this purpose, the rituals or systems which subalternize the caste subalterns for centuries and enslave their minds, should be abolished or rejected.

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