

Indian Culture Embodied in Tagore's *Natirpuja*

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Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is considered a prolific and versatile writer who tried his hand successfully in all the major forms of literature. When his poetry collection *Gitanjali*, one of the major masterpieces of world literature received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, Mahatma Gandhi praised Tagore as 'The Great Sentinel' and 'The Voice of India'. Tagore's works are the creations of his age and the harbingers of a new era. He is a writer of international repute, writing with the avowed purpose of bringing about social change.

The three major plays of Tagore are 'Muktadhara', 'Chandalika' and 'Natirpuja'. Any piece of literature is written with some specific purpose which the writer wants to convey. In his plays, Tagore uses the wealth of Indian tradition, culture and certain national attitudes to drive home his ideas. The most notable thing about Tagore's plays is their variety. Tagore wrote forty plays of all kinds - social comedies, allegorical and symbolical plays during the span of more than fifty years. Some of his plays are: *Karna and Kunti*, *The Sanyasi*, *Malini*, *Chitra*, *The King and the Queen*, *Sacrifice*, *Red Oleanders*, *The Post Office*, *The King of Dark Chamber*. Tagore's greatness lies in his lyrics, short stories and paintings. His plays are also equally popular because of strong didactic quality in them.

The dramatic art of Tagore is both simple and complex. It is simple in style and expression. It is complex in the variety of its forms and in the depth of its meaning. Tagore is primarily and essentially a lyric poet and his dramatic art is also poetic and subjective. He writes of the mental states and moods of men and of the progress of human thought and aspiration. His plays are intended to produce an aesthetic and emotional experience and impression.

Natir Puja

Natir Puja is the simple and most moving play of Tagore. In *Natir Puja*, Tagore creates the female character strongly faithful to Lord Buddha. Srimati, a lady belongs to a low and downtrodden society. She devotes her life completely with hope and sacrifice for the sake of God Almighty. Her role is very significant in the play and she establishes the fruitfulness of true devotion and obtains martyrdom in the end.

Raja Bimbisara, was receiving the knowledge of truth from the lord. He had built a big stupa over the Lord's nails and hairs in his Zenana. His maids were cleansing the place everyday. When Ajatasatru obtained the throne by parricide, he prohibited the female maids to sweep the stupa on pain of death. Srimati, a female servant, caring not at all for her life, washed it clearly and lighted it with a row of lamps. The king got angry and ordered her for execution.

Bimbisara, the disciple learnt from Lord Buddha the wisdom of renunciation. He found that Ajatasatru was ambitious of the throne. So he voluntarily gives his kingdom to the latter and retires outside the city to spend his days in meditation and prayer. The new king, Ajatasatru, under the influence of Devadatta, a cousin and rival of Buddha, forbids the practice of Buddhism in the country and persecutes its followers. In the meanwhile, on the Vasanta Purnima day, which is the birthday of Lord Buddha, Srimati, the Nati (palace dancer) is chosen by the order to offer worship at the shrine. This was a privilege hitherto reserved for the princesses. Ratnavali, the princess is highly incensed at the idea of a low creature like the palace dancer being honoured with this right. To humiliate the Nati, Ratnavali gets an order from the King (who has already forbidden, on pain of death, any worship at the Shrine) that the Nati should instead dance before the stupa. Srimati accepts the order and at the appointed hour appears on the scene dressed for the dance, which turns out to be one of religious ecstasies. She kneels down and recites the final verses of formal worship. Her head is struck off by the order of the king. The spectacle of this supreme and heroic devotion of the Nati melts even the heart of Ratnavali.

In this play, Tagore interprets the Buddha's gospel of renunciation. There is more joy in renunciation than in possession. Srimati is a complete personification of one single emotion i.e. devotion to Lord Buddha. The teachings of the Lord fills her with a new life. She receives a sense of new self-respect and hope of salvation. A.N. Gupta and Satish Gupta comment, "Base Metal is transformed into gold; a member of a degraded class is sanctified and a frail woman is transformed into a heroine. (**Tagore's Three Plays**, 197). Srimati hears the call of the Blessed Lord. Now her life has become a continuous act of devotion and worship to him. She completely contemplates and lives for the Lord only. She agrees even to dance at the shrine, for true devotion makes everything an act of worship.

A sage dedicates his preaching, man of action his deeds, a poet his poems to the Lord. Similarly, the Nati dedicates her dance to the Lord. True worship consists in the complete surrender of all that we have to the Lord. Srimati is a supreme example of such a worship. The main interest of the drama lies in the psychological analysis of the character of the Queen Mother, Lokeshvari. She is torn by a conflict between her genuine reverence for Lord Buddha and her bitter anger against a religion which deprives her of the rights of her womanhood and her motherhood. She seems to feel that the very humanity of the new religion tramples under the foot

the claims of human love. Religion should not break society; it should uphold it. Lokesvari's character shows a conflict between Hinduism and Buddhism in India.

About this A.N. Gupta and S. Gupta write:

The masses were immediately touched by the simple call of social justice given by Buddhism. But Hinduism seemed to satisfy more than Buddhism the needs of man. Hinduism consequently came to be regenerated and drove Buddhism out of the land of its birth. But people have continued to be moved by the five ethical idealism of Buddhism and the noble and lovable personality of the Buddha (**Tagore's Three Plays**, 201). Hinduism is not wholly dead, and Buddhism has never ceased to inspire the best minds of India.

“Tagore and Gandhi are the two greatest witnesses to this fact. The Upanishads and the personality of the Enlightened were the two deepest and most lasting spiritual influences on Tagore's life. Tagore has again and again invoked the spirit of the Buddha, in poem, song and drama. Equally may it be said about Mahatma Gandhi whose life was a living example of all that was best in Hinduism and Buddhism”, (**Tagore's Three Plays**, 187).

The main action of the play centres on the exalted fervour and devotion of Srimati and reaches its climax in her martyrdom. Her religious emotion rises to greater and greater heights of fervour with the development of the action. It reaches its climax with her self-sacrifice with a prayer for forgiveness for wrong-doers. It is here that the readers come to realise the grandeur of the human spirit and a glimpse of Buddhism at its best is provided.

Tagore followed both in precept and practice, Buddha's gospel of love. His emphasis - simple faith and devotion in preference to dogma and ritual and the message of social equality all these are all nicely brought out in the play. The people under the influence of Buddhism were roused to a moral and religious endeavor never seen before or after on such a vast scale.

Srimati, like a typical Indian woman is a combination of sweetness and strength of melting love and steel like sternness. She is warm and living and into the mouth of this simple girl, the poet has put some of his sweetest lyrics. Srimati playing on her veena sings,

At dead of night, what whisper came?
I know not, I
Was it in waking, was it in dream?
I know not, I
I bend to common tasks of home,
I wonder down the open ways,

What secret word that bids me come
Haunts all the traffic of the days?
I know not, I (**Tagore's Three Plays**, 99).

Regarding 'NatirPuja', K.R. Kripalani writes,
"It is comparatively free from symbolic complexities and intellectual abstractions which make many of his other plays at once puzzling and fascinating. Though at least one of the characters in the play provides deep psychological interest, the main action of the drama centres in a simple religious emotion which rises to extraordinary heights of richness and nobility as the drama culminates in its tragedy of martyred devotion" (**Rabindranath Tagore**, 81).

Tagore glorifies Indian Culture in this play. All religions preach the same truth i. attainment of God through love and diligence. People in India have the freedom to follow the religion they like and it is very important to note that there should be 'give and take policy' among different religion. Thus, to conclude we can say that in its undisputed literary excellence, in its suitability for successful presentation on the stage and last, but not the least, in the vision of a higher life, lies Tagore's greatness. This drama provides a rich feast to the eye, ear, mind and soul.

Primary Source

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