IV

VIOLENCE IN THE FAMILY AND IN SEX

The play Sakharam Binder was eulogized by Girish Karnad as the best play in the last thousand years. From the violence of the middle class society in his earlier two plays Tendulkar moved on to the violence of the lower middle class society in this play Sakharam Binder.

The play opens with Sakharam, the hero, bringing Laxmi, who has been kicked out of her house by her husband because she had borne him no children, to live with him in his two-room hovel in a slum in Bombay. Sakharam introduces himself to Laxmi in a speech which has become a set piece with him, since he has used it on so many other women in the past. He says that he does not really care if Laxmi agrees to live with him or not, but he is secretly sure that she will agree since she has nowhere else to go and is dependent on any man who is ready to provide her shelter. Sakharam, as he speaks to Laxmi, reveals himself as "a brutalized and aggressive bully who drinks, takes drugs and whores and is ready to turn
violent at the least provocation". He tells Laxmi:

I am hot-headed. When I lose my temper, I beat the life out of the people. I've a foul mouth. There's always a bidi or an oath on my lips - that is what the whole town says about me .... May be I'm a rascal, a womanizer, a pauper. Why may be? I am all that. And I drink.2

But it soon becomes apparent that his violence, which is never too deep below the surface, is only an aspect of the tremendous energy which characterizes every move and mood of his. This energy has made him an extremely independent man. It caused him to run away from home at the age of eleven for he could not tolerate the violent beatings from his father and to strike out a path for himself.

Sakharam, a social castaway, a brahman turned-press worker, is now adrift in the labour-market. Alienated from his family he never called his own father, father. He was "like the son of a wretched

"Mahar, a scavenger" to his mother. He grew up like "a cactus-out in the open". There is a streak of vengeance in his character against men in general and women in particular. He is given to treating women as disposable commodities. He picks up women, casts off wives, brings them home, to slave it off with him. When he brought Laxmi, he has had six already. He tells Laxmi:

Once a person crosses this threshold, she belongs here. When she leaves this house it's all over between us — But .... I give her a sari, a choli and fifty rupees. Plus a ticket to where she wants to go. (p.135)

In the course of his life Sakharam has evolved his own philosophy and code of values which he announces with great gusto to the world. He tells his friend Dawood that as long as one manages to be happy without doing any harm to the others that is enough. He is against dishonesty. He continues that "a whore can get to God much faster than all of us" because she hides nothing from God.

Sakharam takes pride in speaking his mind openly and bluntly, but he also takes pleasure in the
fact that this open expression of his views hurts others' deepest sentiments. When, Laxmi, who is naively and superstitiously religious, asks, if there are any pictures of gods in the house, Sakharam replies crudely that he is more interested in his 'Chillum' and 'Ganja' than in the gods. And when Laxmi expresses the traditional Hindu belief that a husband is like a god, he bursts out that husbands ought to be whipped in public for the way they treat their wives. "In fact Sakharam is a bitter critic of the institution of marriage and attacks husbands while pitying the wives". 3

But for all his denunciation of tyrannical husbands, Sakharam frames certain 'rules', for his woman-companions and behaves like a husband to Laxmi and Champa. He fixes codes of conduct to Laxmi that she must cover her head and speak only briefly with the strangers. She must not allow any one in his absence into the house. He must be respected in his house. She must prepare food for herself as it is a "woman's job". Above all, she must be a wife to him.

He beats Laxmi, kicks her and at the end of the first act after a domestic quarrel such as may be typical of unloving husbands and wives, he throws her out of the house in presumably the same kind of way she had been thrown out by her husband earlier.

Tendulkar himself is accused of making his wife tuck away her talent to tend to his needs and raise his children while exploiting on stage and screen the theme of the new woman and her struggle to find a voice. His wife Meena complains of him:

> Even when I used to be a working woman, soon after our marriage, he was very possessive and cautious .... He used to keep an eye on who I spoke with, moved about with ... it's only now, with age, that he has become more understanding".  

It is not at all surprising that this play soon became controversial. The custodians of the society labelled it as pornographic. The censor board of the Maharashtra Government banned its performance. The writer was drawn into many law suits. A lot of dust was raised, but ultimately the court

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annulled all the bans. Members of the so-called gentry who had raised eye-brows against it, now vied with one another in booking seats in advance for viewing it. The main reason for the whole turmoil against it was that this creation of the writer, a very, very ordinary man, Sakharam Bindar, exposed for the first time the hidden filth of the society so mercilessly, striking at its false value system, that the custodians of the society were shaken to their roots.

Referring to this aspect of the play, Tendulkar was asked:

This is a highly controversial play of yours. Some people say, sex and violence reign supreme in this play, whereas there could be a balanced amalgam of both. Would you like to comment?

He replied:

No body would write a play to show sex and violence. For this purpose, blue films and cabaret shows are enough. I have created three-four characters in this play and every one is an individual with a distinct background. These characters are outcaste. Such people have always pent up
fury, a very strong grievance against the society. Their anger looks for an occasion to burst out, but it does not find an outlet and gets misdirected. All these characters, particularly Sakharam Binder, are of this type. If you take violence out of him, he could cease to be what he is and take a different turn.  

Sakharam is a Brahman by birth. He left his parents for he was violently beaten by his father, actually whatever he did was not at all right for his father and came to live in the slums of Bombay and never considered himself a Brahman. "Night is when God rules everywhere on the day man reigns. And he remained a bachelor and started living with casteaway women, and the reason for this could have been there was none to look after him, to guide him. He could have actually experienced a feeling of isolation from the society which is a favourite theme of Tendulkar and as a consequence has come to hate it. This explains why he never tries to confirm to the established norms of social morality and his violent treatment of the women and his contempt for the so-called husbands.

5. "Vijay Tendulkar, Drama: The Most Difficult, But the Most Powerful Medium", Interviews with Indian Writers, New World Literature Series, B.18, p.282.
Discussing the nature of the play Kumar Ketkar accuses Tendulkar that he
gave up the relatively balanced approach he had in the early years of his writing
career and began to fondle the theme of violence mindlessly. With the eye of the
voyeur and the ideology of nihilist fatalism he concentrated on fake theories of sexual
suppression and violence. The rest of the world faded into oblivion.  

He said that Laxmi, in Sakharam Binder views the world through Tendulkar's glasses, "men are sinful, cruel and mean". (p.197)  

The play doubtlessly deals with man and his dominion as it is clear in the treatment rendered to Laxmi by Sakharam. He goes on forcing the view on Laxmi that he is the master of the house. He almost scares her out of wits. Seeking escape from the cruel world of man and his dominion, which has enjoined on woman faith, devotion and fasting - all feudal virtues - and alienated from real human beings including other women, Laxmi makes friends with an ant or a crow. She  

can only talk freely to and laugh heartily with a black ant, as though he is her real companion. She gives him sugar, and he crawls all over her, pawing her all the time. Sakharam who is in on her secret, eggs her on to laugh as she did for the ant. Or, he tells her, "I'll twist that foot of yours" and squeeze life out of her. It is under this threat that she forces herself into a maniacal laughter. This is the one humility, absurd to the extreme, to which Laxmi has been reduced by men. Laxmi can not laugh every time Sakharam coaxes and threatens her to do so. Her forced laughter, tragi-comically punctuated with agonished means keeps rhythm with his intoxicated laughter. Even her passive reserves of patience are thus drained by his high-handed demands and behaviour.

However, the violence of Sakharam is only surface deep. When he meets his eighth woman, Champa, a full-blooded rebel like himself, all his mastery is shattered. When he brings Champa into his house to live with him he launches off on his set introductory speech with which he had impressed and frightened Laxmi, but Champa barely listens to what he has to say. And when, during their speech, their eyes meet, Sakharam
is bowled over. He is infatuated with Champa as he has never been with any other woman, in so far as he is capable of love, he falls in love with her. This is a new emotion for him and he expresses it by fawning over Champa, losing his bluster and rhetoric, and finally performing her commands instead of ordering her about as he has done with Laxmi.

The animal energy, independence of spirit and gross language of Champa are reminiscent of Sakharam's own personality in connection with Laxmi. And as Champa takes on the role of Sakharam he himself reveals the extent to which he has Laxmi's meekness in him. When Sakharam made his first overtures of love to Laxmi, by taking hold of her hand, she has expostulated: "somebody might see us ..", to which he has replied, "you think I am afraid of any one?" But when Champa is about to change her sari in the living room, he remonstrates: "Not here". He says "Do all that in the kitchen". And again, at the end of the scene, when she is about to go off to sleep in living room he remonstrates: "Not here. Go in. Suppose somebody drops in? What'll he say?" (p.161) His words are almost a perfect repetition of Laxmi's words earlier. And Champa, in her answer, reveals the same contempt
of public opinion that had characterized Sakharam earlier. To his objection against her sleeping in the living room she answers: "He'll say, she's sleeping" and "Sleep is not his father's property!". For all his unconventional talk he is as conventional as Laxmi. This is what perhaps Tendulkar wants to say, whatever may be the way of life a man leads, he likes his woman to be obedient to him.

At the end of the play after murdering Champa, Sakharam, shocked and stunned, stands still and it is Laxmi who draws him to the immediate action and assures pardon for him from God. The scene reveals Sakharam's moral cowardice and Laxmi's moral strength. Mohan R. Limaye studies Laxmi as the archetypal figure of Savithri. He says: "Laxmi represents the archetypal figure of Savithri, the heroine of a mythical episode in the Hindu epic, the "Mahabharata". For Laxmi, Sakharam is husband. When Laxmi's legal husband deliberately snaps her wedding necklace, he ceases to be her husband in the spirit of matrimony. Her de facto husband, as far as she is concerned, is Sakharam, who gives her shelter.

Since for Laxmi an irrevocable marriage bond exists between Sakharam and herself, she, like a good wife, exerts a wholesome influence on him. Sakharam himself recognizes how she affected him in an uncanny and mysterious way. During a domestic quarrel between them he argues with her whether he had not cut down on drinking over the past year? He totally stays away from alcohol on holy festivals he smoked pot only two times during the last month. He worships the household gods and takes bath every day before worship.

What Laxmi does to Sakharam, the bringing about his spiritual regeneration, parallels Savithri’s service to her husband and to his parents, the gifts she procures for them from Yama.... After he kills Champa, Sakharam is close to death even in a literal sense, for now his life is forfeit to the law. If his crime is discovered, he will be subject to capital punishment. In this situation of mortal danger to Sakharam, it is Laxmi who ready-wittedly hits upon a plan to save him. Just as she proved the savior of his spiritual life before, now she proves the savior of his physical life. When he is dazed and unable to act after his murder of Champa, Laxmi takes the situation in hand and makes a daring suggestion. 8

That is, they should bury her in the kitchen. She, a holy and virtuous woman would request God not to condemn him as a sinner.

This is reminiscent of Savitri’s intercession with the god of the dead for the life of her husband. ⁹

Thus, Sakharum’s violence is superficial. He even becomes impotent in the presence of Laxmi after she returns to him again, that is, when Champa was staying with him. When asked by Mrs. Veena Noble Dass “What is the relation between Laxmi’s ritual and Sakharum’s growing impotence?” Tendulkar replied:

You have to consider Sakharum’s growing. He comes from a Brahman family. He virtually runs away from the house, he is an outcaste in his family. He leads a different life, his roots are in that culture, and then he is a god-fearing man. He keeps referring to God in a number of situations. He is very non-chalant as far as society is concerned. When it comes to God, when it comes to something higher than human beings, he loses his confidence. He brings Laxmi to the house and then she leaves the house. Within that span she has established certain creeds in his mind.

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⁹. Ibid., p. 140.
At one point he says, 'Look, because of you I started doing my puja', because of you I started taking bath everyday. He has changed even though he doesn't want to change. He wants her to adjust, but he undergoes a change because of her existence in the house. Her religiosity, her personality is something that is telling for him. After she leaves, he feels that "Well, it is over" because it appeals to him and therefore it restricts him and then it becomes a burden. He feels that "no, this won't work". Then Champa comes, an entirely different person and he is, in fact, trying to have it his way when Laxmi turns. And Laxmi at this point of his life in his relation with Champa, becomes a restrictive factor. And then he cannot perform the sex act. 10

It is not only through the character of Sakharam that Tendulkar exposes lack of morality in lower classes but also through the other characters of the play.

Laxmi is thrown out by her husband because she could not bear any children to him. With all her

religiosity and with all her confidence in God she could not question him whether she alone is responsible for this lack of children as a modern woman could have asked. She meekly submits to her husband's violence of pushing her out of the house and leaves the house. She has none to look after her now except a distant nephew. This poor state of Laxmi makes her follow Sakharam to his house, a two-roomed hovel in the slums of Bombay and hear his raving and ranting behaviour which tortures her both mentally and physically. Unable to bear the roughness of his language and the all demanding nature of Sakharam she bursts out that she has never heard a kind word from Sakharam but always kicks and blows. She must always laugh, even at the point of death. Hell is preferable to that life with Sakharam. She is prepared to stay back, to adjust with him because of her realization that she has no roof over her head if she leaves the house and she has also developed an attachment to the house and has come to look after Sakharam as her husband.

She leaves the house but only to return. She goes to her nephew who is newly married, she comes back within a few days and finds another woman, Champa,
in her place. Sakharam stubbornly refuses to admit her into the house. But Laxmi is clever like the woman of her class and in the absence of Sakharam she tells Champa that she left her nephew's house as he is newly married and she does not like to stand in the way of the couple and wins over her sympathy and gets a place in the house. However she tells Sakharam that she is sent away by her nephew on the false charge of theft. It may be because Laxmi thinks Champa is new to her and may believe her nephew's charge. She tells the truth to Sakharam because he knows her nature and believes in her honesty.

Laxmi is narrow-minded, stubborn, ungrateful and capable of intrigue. She does not allow Dawood to join Ganapati puja because he is a Muslim. Sakharam insists on the contrary. "Is this some kind of secularism of the poor?" However she remains strong in her will. Even when she thinks of Champa's affair with Dawood she is shocked not only at the faithlessness of Champa but also because Dawood is a Muslim. When Sakharam asks her to leave the house at the end

of the third act because he could no longer bear her influence that makes him impotent for which he is tantalised by Champa, she plays the role of an ungrateful wretch. When she returns to Sakharam's house from her nephew Champa admits her against the wishes of Sakharam and lets her stay in the house. She divides her work with Champa. She will look after the work and Champa will look after Sakharam. All that she forgets and without any scruples of conscience confides to Sakharam of Champa's secret affair with Dawood.

Another character in the play through whom Tendulkar introduces a tremendous energetic revolting woman to us is Champa. Unlike Laxmi she walked out on her impotent husband. She tells Laxmi:

Champa : .... I put up with quite a lot. I can tell you that. But when I couldn't take it any longer, I turned my back on him and walked out .... (p.181)

She barely listens to the set speech of Sakharam after she enters the house. She retorts : ".... Is this a school or a court or something?" (p.160) From the beginning she bosses over everyone she meets.
asks Dawood to get a nice pan with tobacco. She asks Sakharam to find something for eating. Sakharam is baffled at her reckless behaviour and he pleads for recognition of his mastery in the house. But she was not afraid of her husband earlier, she could even beat him and now also she does not fear Sakharam. When she turns to Dawood after Sakharam becomes impotent she seems to tell the latter that she likes men when they are strong and takes recourse to another man. She remains as detached with Sakharam as he used to be with his previous mistresses. She is such a bold and dominating woman that in spite of his "bravado", "She straightens all his curves", and he is found sometimes helpless before her.

She is charming too. Sakharam is taken by her attraction. Even Dawood says that he has "never seen anything like this". Sakharam becomes so possessive with regard to her that he asks Dawood not to come to his house, but if necessary he will meet him in the shop. Even when Champa admits Laxmi into the house he could not argue with her but lets Laxmi stay in the house as it is liked by Champa.
Champa was a virtuous woman before she met Sakharam. Disgusted with her husband's impotence and inefficiency she left him. We find in the beginning she has a psychological block against sex. She is incapable of losing herself in sex. As she puts it, "I don't like it - all that mon-woman stuff" (p.168). Her experiences with her impotent husband might have made her frigid. At the same she realizes that she can't stay in Sakharam's house unless she is willing to give herself to him and the only other way left for her is that of the life of a prostitute outside his house. So she prefers the first. However she can't ordinarily bring herself to Sakharam's physical needs and so takes drink and loses all her sexual inhibitions. Within a short time we find her perpetually drunk. And Sakharam even though disgusted with her drunkenness neglects his work and begins to drink.

The presence of Laxmi and Champa at the same time has a strange effect on Sakharam as if the two different strands in his character come into direct confrontation, creating a psychological turmoil in him and resulting in his temporary impotence.  

When he comes to know of her infidelity he loses his wits and murders her on sheer impulse. His reaction after the murder is also characteristic of Sakkharam. He stands dazed, however much Laxmi tries to awaken him to the immediate action.

Thus the hellish fires of feudal reaction consume all the characters in the play. They carry all the contradictions involved in man-woman relationship to an absurd extremity.  

Symbolically speaking Laxmi stands for the spiritual enlightenment of man and on the other hand Champa represents the physical requirements of man whereas man stands in dilemma as Sakkharam stands static at the end of the play.

Fouzdar Shinde is a weak character, the type of which we find not rarely in the lower strata of society. He has been sacked because a pistol was stolen from the station. He was so drunk that he could not even notice it had gone till the next day. Champa regards him as her "clown face husband". He

was impotent. Without any sense of decency he describes his wife's beauty to Sakaram so vulgarly that the latter feels a contempt for him. Even after he is beaten with chappals by Champa he hankers upon her. He comes in the absence of Champa and finds a solace in the company of Laxmi who sympathizes with his plight. At the end of the play when Laxmi is trying to burn the dead body of Champa he knocks on the door calling Champa. He waits for some time to see the door opening as it does not, he

sets up an eerie howl for Champa, a feeble, terrifying and monotonous whimper. It goes on, and on and on. Night reigns.(198)

The continuous long drawn moaning cry of Shinde reminds one of the screeching of vultures at the end of almost each scene in _The Vultures_ and is in keeping with the tone of the play. Tendulkar is known for dealing with the untouched problems of the society. The character delineation of Shinde, even though weekly drawn is an instance of Tendulkar's social consciousness.

None of the characters in the play is "good". We do not wish to be like any of them, we don't identify with them or suffer with them. At the same time none
of them is "bad". We do not react to any of them with loathing and disgust. They appear to be, in fact, people for whom we may have compassion, but with whom we have no wish to identify ourselves. This is the "realism" of the play.

It is said:

One of the reasons why there was such a reaction against Saktharam Binder was its burning naturalism. Here was a raw chunk of life with all its ugliness and crudity which was more than a shock to refined and prudish middle-class audiences. Such a direct confrontation with 'vulgar' reality was difficult for them to bear.  

Thus Tendulkar has ruthlessly exposed the violence of lower middle classes without sugar-coating it, and in the characters of Laxmi and Champa he "touches on his pet subject of the down trodden, hapless female as he did in Shantata and Gidhade". However, as Arundhati Banerjee sees:

Yet there is in this play, as in Gidhade, a subtle underlying tone of sensitivity and

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tenderness towards humanity as a whole. One can discern, if one delves into the core of the play, the seeds of basic human values. In Sakharam's playing of the mridanga and the joy he finds in it, in his pleading with Laxmi to adjust with him for he has already changed a lot under her influence, in Laxmi's friendship with birds and insects, in Dawood's loyalty to his friend until he is lured by Champa's attractions, in Sakharam's insistence on Laxmi to allow Dawood to join Ganapati puja, in Champa's generosity towards Laxmi - "the kinder aspects of human nature and its inclination towards higher values are unfolded". This is the strength of Tendulkar's creative faculty that touches the finer elements of human life which is usually ignored in the midst of the wrath of the writer's thrashing attacks on the low-class morality in the play, where he uses a vulgar and vicious language to make his criticism more acute. The play is a thunderbolt from the "angry young man".

15. Ibid., p. xv.