VIOLENCE IN SEX, RELIGION AND POLITICS

Following the banned success of Sakharan Binder Tendulkar came up with Ghashiram Kotwal. This time, instead of dealing with middle class morality as he had done in The Vultures, Silence, the Court is in Session and Sakharan Binder he chose the Brahmins of Poona and the generally respected historical figure of Nana Phadnavis.

According to history Ghashiram was a North Indian Brahman, a resident of Aurangabad and was appointed Police prefect of Poona on 8th February, 1779 and continued to hold office till his death which took place on 31st August, 1791 under violent circumstances. He had earned Nana's confidence by his faithful service during the critical times that followed 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,
every one possessing ample means of harassing innocent people in consequence of which the word Ghashiram has become a permanent synonym for oppression and tyranny.

Tendulkar has used this piece of history for his play Ghashiram Kotwal. Tendulkar portrays Nana "as a lecher with an over-powering weakness for young brahman girls flitting through the thorough-fares of Poona".¹ As it happens so often with a work that questions contemporary values and phenomena from a radical position, Ghashiram has been attacked on peripheral counts rather than on its basic assumptions, that is for having shown Nana Phadnavis, a cult hero, in an unsavoury light. But the play is not really about Nana, the late eighteenth century Marathi Machiavelli who was the Peshwa's chancellor in Pune, the Royal Deputy's Deputy — but a deputy who "no longer owes his position so much to solid popular or military backing as to the diplomatic address with which he can play one party off against another."²

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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. Ghashirmas are 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 history if there is any, may be looked for elsewhere.

The burden of the play develops with Nana's encounter with Ghashiram a brahman who the Poona Orthodoxy treats as an outsider. And when Nana becomes infatuated with Ghashiram's young daughter, Lalita Gowri; Ghashiram, prompted by a desire to avenge the humiliation he customarily suffers at the hands of the city's brahmans, 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 a stepping stone to his career. Nana makes him the Kotwal of the city and gradually Ghashiram unleashes his vendetta against those very brahmans who had once treated him like vermin.

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In unfolding of these events which have some basis in history Tendulkar paints "an explosive picture of the moral decadence of the Poona Brahmans during the decline of the Peshwa regime."4

The Brahmans of Poona, leaving their wives alone in their houses, go to Bavanakhani, to see the dance of Gulabi, the courtesan. To drag the truth out of those Brahmans. Sutradhar plays a covert trick of asking them indirect questions like "Can we ask others where he is coming from?" for it is "a bad omen" to enquire "where another is going". And in a mood of forgetfulness a Brahman slips out that he is on his way to Bavanakhani. Then they try to divert sutradhar's attention by saying that they were going to the temple to listen to a sermon on temptation. But when sutradhar persists hisquiry by questioning "what man is giving Sermon". Three Brahmans reply: "Not a man, but a woman", and they bite their tongues as if they have spoken something untoward. Sutradhar is not to be easily pacified so they were compelled to reveal the whole truth that they were going to Bavanakhani to see the dance of Gulabi. Sutradhar comments:

The Brahmans go to Bavanakhani
And the Brahman wives stay at home.
They stay at home.
Oh! they stay at home.
They wait.
They cannot sleep.*

The Brahman women who are sentenced to
solitary confinement are as immoral and corrupted as
their men. They have their lovers. Vijay Tendulkar
tells about their moral degradation in a stage direction.

a Brahman woman with a saucy air. She
waits. A Sardar (Maratha land-owner)
comes in a Maratha turban. He knocks at
the imaginary door. She opens the door.
He goes in. They embrace and go further
inside. (p.8)

These Brahmans are lacking not only in sexual
morality but also in common decent behaviour. They
can rob one another without any consciousness of guilt.
They are cruel and also thoughtless. They go on
beating Ghashiram ignoring his plea of innocence. At
the "dakshina" ceremony they fight like dogs that
flock around the discarded heaps of food at the back
of a hotel.

* Vijay Tendulkar, Ghashiram Kotwal, translated from the
Marathi by Jayant Karve and Eleanor Zelliot (Calcutta :
Seagull Books, 1986). All the references to the text
are from this publication.
Sutradhar comments on the Brahmans: "The Brahmans have started to fight. They're gulping down the food, they're laden with gifts." (p.13)

Tendulkar strikes a superb ironical hit here by making Sutradhar say that this is an honour given to the Brahmans by the Peshwa himself. Tendulkar told 'The Sundary Observer' that men, in many respects are like mice:

In Walt Disney cartoons - a doughty little mouse never gets famished and fights on. We, the two legged mice of reality, get finished, get caught in nets, get hung, broken and beaten but never stop fighting. And little moments of happiness, little triumph in the fight keep flitting by and keep us going. In this battle one mouse kills another. Many mice gang together by increasing their strength and end up ruthlessly destroying one another. I see this as a sort of 'blind justice'.

The behaviour of the Brahmans fighting for food is like that of these mice. The language spoken by the Brahmans is vulgar and abusive. When Sutradhar collides against a Brahman, without accepting the

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latter's expression of regret the Brahman goes on calling names at him: "Don't you have any manners", "Don't you have any brains?", "You son of a bastard!", "You monkey". Even the police forces of Poona are corrupted. They live on the criminals. Sutradhar remarks when Ghashiram complains to him how he was beaten by the police:

I am a thief
You are a thief
Our only hope is
the mercy of the Police
Your theft is their bribe
If their mercy ends
We end so we bend. (p. 3)

It is not only the Brahmans, their wives, and the police who are morally degenerated but also their ruler. Sutradhar tells:

The night progresses
The night progresses
The night progresses
And the Peshwa's Chief Minister,
Nana of the nine courts,
Nana of the wealth and power
Nana Phadnavis
To Gulabi's place proceeds. (p. 8)
Nana Phadnavis had married nine times. Still he is a lecher. For his lechery there are no limitations of time and place. Even in a temple he looks at the women with a look of lewdness. That is where he sees Lalita Gowri, Ghashiram's daughter, and becomes infatuated with her youth and beauty.

When Samik Bandyopadhyay asked Tendulkar -

Did you really conceive the play as an expose of Brahman corruption and pretensions, or as a study of the power game in more general terms?

He wrote back:

It is rather difficult to go back to the point when I thought of writing this play and recollect everything that happened to me on the conscious and subconscious levels. Broadly speaking, I had in mind the emergence, the growth and the inevitable end of the Ghashirams; also those who create and help Ghashirams to grow; and the irony of stoning to death a person pretending that it is the end of Ghashirams. The rest just happened; or if that sounds pretentious, happened at a sub-conscious level. The decadence of the class in power (the Brahmins, incidentally,
during the period which I had to depict) also was incidental, though not accidental.

However it is thoroughly irrelevant to ask whether the playwright is being faithful to the so called historical fact. For he has created his own theatrical reality and is solely guided by its own organic laws.

This reality is eminently theatrical since Tendulkar has not cast the dialogue and acting of the play in the tried and tested moulds of Marathi theatre. With unique imagination and invention he has used a variety of functionally effective theatre forms such as mime, dance, music and dialogue in verse, all invested with apt folk or western associations in the play-goer's mind. He has blended this mixture with an artistry which is incomparable in the annals of Marathi Theatre. Dhyaneshwar Nadkarni appreciates the play:

Apart from its superb theatricality, the play is important from another point of view .... its theme is a searing comment on the power politics of the type of

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oligarchy which we see increasingly taking root in Maharashtra's politics. Tendulkar achieves this without deviating from the artistic propriety of his characters or situation; but it is foolish to imagine that we are witnessing a good old 'historical' with nothing pertinent to our times.7

The play is widely admired as an evidence of Tendulkar's contemporary social and political consciousness. Though the play is carved in Peshwa period of Maratha history, it exposes the nature of decadent rulers. And that is what is supposed to make it contemporary.

In 'Ghashiram' power is defined 'horizontally' (in the sense in which Maurice Duverger uses it in *The Idea of Politics*, London, 1966), in terms of individuals against individuals, from humiliation, to revenge in assertion, to eventual victimization; played out against a background of political and moral decadence and degeneracy, with sexuality impinging on strategies of power.8

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The Brahmans of Poona are set against the Brahmans who come to Poona from outside. Ghashiram, an outsider to Poona, is ill-treated by the Brahmans of Poona. The Brahmans attribute a theft to him. He was beaten and tormented on the false charge of theft by the soldiers. Humiliated by the treatment meted out to him by the Brahmans and the soldiers who ask him to leave Poona, Ghashiram threatens them fiercely that he would come back and avenge on them. He would show his strength. He is no longer a Kanuj Brahman, he has become a sudra. They have made him an animal and a criminal. He warns them:

I'll be a devil. I'll make pigs of all of you. I will make this Poona a kingdom of pigs. Then I will be Ghashiram again, the son of Salvada. (p.17)

To avenge himself on the Brahmans of Poona he agrees to play Nana's game. He gives his only daughter to Nana to satisfy the latter's lust on the condition that he would be made the Kotwal of the city. Nana remarks:

Bastard. You have got me in a narrow pass.

Ghashiram accepts his intelligence:

Yes, the narrow pass of my daughter. (p.24)
But Nana had his own secret plans. He will use Ghashiram as a counterfoil against his enemies. He feels a vicious joy at heart. He made him Kotwal but "there are two bullets in this gun". With the first one, he would feed his hunger with his luscious daughter. But with the second he would make the city of Poona dance. He employed Ghashiram as a counter check to all those conspirators. You will not be able to join them; they will never trust you even if you do. Because you are a stranger, you are an outsider. (p.25)

Tendulkar artistically blends together, sex and religion into a fair play. A whole aura of hymns and religious ceremonial provide the ironic screen that is pierced through and through by the crudest exercises of power. A typical scene is the one in which Nana tries to seduce the girl praying before Ganapathi, at the end of the ceremonies and when the girl points to the god saying, "He will see". He retorts mockingly:

that idol of holiness? That all holy Ganapati? The maker of Good? Look he has two wives. One on the side, one on that side. If you sit on our lap, he won't say anything about that! (p.19)
and the facade of ceremony collapses at once.
Religion manifest in caste dominance and ceremony is a device of power in Ghashiram but more as an abstraction of awe than as a material force. The material force is provided by the agents who construct and operate hierarchies that they can topple or reshuffle at will. Significantly enough, the omnipotent Nana fails to catch the girl and "in blind lust grabs the servant at the door" - with whom he has to work out a deal, to get his girl. Tendulkar suggests the sexuality implicit in power in the brilliant innuendo that caps the situation: "Our grandeur's gone if she's not had." Nana needs Ghashiram and Ghashiram needs Nana; but in the shifting game of power, it is only a temporary adjustment that Nana exploits as long as necessary and can drop unceremoniously the moment it has served its purpose.

Like ceremony, both religious and secular, the deceptions of deputation constitute another device of power. The real power uses the masks of deputation to mediate the exercise of power, to hide from the victims the real face of power, so that all resistance is effectively deflected. Even Ghashiram, the fool
that he is, thinks that the power of Kotwal will be always in his hands. Nana tells in a soliloquy: "what'll happen is that our misdeeds will be credited to your account?"

Earlier, Tendulkar has shown religiosity and sexuality combining in the strategies of power. Now he shows "sexuality and the strategy of deputation working hand in hand". Tendulkar also shows, at the end of the play, how politicians of the present day use religion to solve their political problems. When the furious mob tries to enter Nana's mansion Nana advises Sutradas: "Do a special 'puja'. Pray to the Gods. Make a deal with the gods. Promise them anything". (p.51) This is a cutting satire on the outlook of the present day men who make promises to Gods several objects like money, ceremonies etc., in times of crisis.

Once Ghashiram has got his trumpcard of power in hand he becomes a domineering ruler and cleanses Poona of her decadence and deterioration. He forces orders on the Brahmins of Poona:

No whoring without a permit.


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ANANTAPUR-515 003
No cremation without a permit.

... ...

Who ever does wrong will be punished severely, will not be pitied. (p.26)

... ...

Ghashiram Kotwal started making the rounds of Poona at night, after the eleven O' clock cannon, started ruling in person. Accosted anyone he met in the streets, whipped people. Arrested people. Demanded people's permits. Imprisoned people. Sued people. (p.27)

As a consequence Prostitutes Lane was desolate. The chasing of women was halted. Pimps turned into beggars counterfeit coins were worthless.

Ghashiram turns into a revengeful animal. He literally loses even common sense. When Sutradhar was going to fetch the midwife he demands, "why does she deliver in the middle of the night?" (p.28) Ghashiram lost his wits so much that he could not understand that his question was ridiculous. If he listens to any sound coming from any house he roused and ascertained whether the woman and the man in that house were husband and wife. He unscrupulously awakened even their neighbours to make sure of it.
Ghashiram Kotwal's harshness disheartened the citizens of Poona. Just as he was punished earlier by the Poona soldiers he makes a Brahman undergo the orderal of holding red hot steel balls for stealing. The tormented Brahman curses him that Ghashiram would be tormented likewise and he would die "a dog's death" grinding his heels in the dirt. Just like Malvolio, the steward of the house in Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night", Ghashiram flew to far-fetched heights in his effort to "straighten out" Poona and outraged the people of Poona. "The bad deeds were cooled down/The good deeds were cooled down too". (p.37) This is the tragedy of Ghashiram's life. A fool, that Ghashiram was, he thinks that the whip of Kotwal would be in his hands forever and plans for the marriage of his daughter that once he finds a fitting husband for his dear daughter and gets her married, then everything will be the way he wants it. He is confident that it is easy to find a bridegroom when "one has money, jewels and respect".

Ghashiram becomes a part of the moral decadence of the Brahmans of Poona by fancying that his power, position and jewels would shut the mouths of the people and he would be able to marry off his daughter conveniently.
But once he learns of his daughter's death he becomes numb and cowed. This is a "Tendulkar Twist" in the play. This is what makes the play contemporary, the stunned grief of a father on the loss of his beloved child. "Indeed Tendulkar is a significant playwright because he tackles topical, relevant, and present day themes". Nana rises to the occasion and defends himself that his hands have never killed even an insect. "In these hands is only the flute of Lord Krishna which made the Gopis forget hunger and thirst". (p.44) He asserts his position "And you should think before you accuse the Peshwa's Chief Minister". (p.44) "Here "Tendulkar uses irony - irony of communication and that of situation - for dramatic effect". Nana's consoling of Ghashiram is a typical example of it. Nana comforts Ghashiram:

Let's forget what's happened. All merges into the Ganga. Thou shalt not grieve over what is gone. The Vedas have said that. After all, Ghashya, will we live forever? (Sighs). We too every one of us, will leave. (p.44)

He asks Ghashiram to remember the responsibility of Kotwal. But Ghashiram has lost his wits already. He imagines that everyone is laughing at him and he becomes worse with regard to the people of Poona. The way a wounded tiger becomes addicted to blood so the Kotwal has come to love the smell. The prison cells are filled with the arrested Brahmans. During the night some of the Brahmans died. The situation is ripe for Ghashiram's dismissal. Fed up with Ghashiram's wickedness the Brahman mob demands from Nana an order to "behead Ghashiram Kotwal". Nana like a typical present day diplomatic politician decides to "use a thorn to take out a thorn. That's great. The disease has been stopped. Any way, there was no use for him any more". (p.52) One of the themes of the play is "how society corrupts, uses and then discards individuals and this will certainly engage and interest the modern theatre goer". 

Ghashiram invites his doom. He accepts his punishment without any opposition as he thinks that he deserves this ordeal of death for having destroyed

his daughter's life. Ghashiram feels himself isolated from this world. Tendulkar's favourite theme is isolation of the individual from the society. Kashi-nath, Madhav, Rama, Benare, Sunetra, Ghashiram are isolated individuals. Society is the major part of the surroundings. Tendulkar makes the individual's frustration intense by their cherished dreams in his earliest plays and/or making the helpless individual confront a pitiless society in his later plays. Ghashiram "finds at the end of the play the same senseless mass that he has so far humiliated unscrupulously out of revenge".  

R.V.Dhongde comments that in Ghashiram "the individual is a product of a certain phase of a society and when this product tries to be over-dominating and menacing, there is a clash". When the crowd surrounds him and beats him violently Nana gives out a sigh of relief. "A threat to great city of Poona has been ended today". In 'Ghashiram' Tendulkar traps the fortune-seeking Kanuj Brahman makes him into "a bellicose villain and after a high-pitched melodrama" destroys him.

14. Ibid., p.36.
Tendulkar has created a sensational character in Ghashiram. "For sensationalism he (Tendulkar) even destroys the story and chokes the character. That is the tragedy of Ghashiram".¹⁵ The crude revengeful and dominating Ghashiram suddenly becomes humble and obedient the moment he knows the loss of his daughter and welcomes his death at the hands of the furious mob.

The play is full of violence but is clothed in verse music, dance and mime. In a production note the Theatre Academy says:

The basic structure of the play is a human wall which is basically a singing chorus, impersonally commenting on the episodic developments. But it also breaks into smaller tableaux, grouping and regrouping endlessly. The human wall ceases to exist when its back is turned to the audience. The Sutradhar or narrator interposes in the proceedings to keep the audience abreast of things, the actors switching parts with perfect timing. A fact of opera with verse, music and prose fusing into one another in a strange compelling alchemy. The ballet blending with the

traditional folk dances sets the mood and tempo of the decadent and bawdy era.16

The human wall serves as an excellent symbol of the mechanism of secrecy, hiding and revealing happenings by human devices. It is the wall again that the singing chorus uses for the chant of saints' and Gods' names as yet another screen of complacence and consolation cast over the yawning horror of corruption and tyranny. The sheer thrill of the musical does to a certain extent weaken the thrust of the satire and the sting is blunted. Tendulkar himself admitted:

The criticism has a point. Even when the sting was felt in Maharashtra. The Delhi production (done by Abhiyan in Hindi) had a somewhat different impact. It had 'less entertainment value' i.e., less music and more impact as a serious play the musical form has its advantages and disadvantages like other forms. I could not think of an alternative when I had to write the play. The form had a certain inevitability.17

Sutradhar plays the role of chorus. He comments on the action and through his commentary externalizes the inner conflict of the central characters. He comments on the action of the Brahmins who were going to Bavanakhani to see Gulabi's dance, on the lechery of Nana Phadnavis and on the beastly revenge of Ghashiram Kotwal.

Balchandra Kelkar, founder president of the Progressive Dramatic Association said while banning the play directed by Jabbar Patel:

The whole drama has been written with an animus for Brahmins (alluded to as 'asses'); patriotic Maratha Chancellor Nana Phadnavis has been portrayed as a lecherous character and a golden period of the Peshwa rule has been shown as a period of decadence.

Countering the charges, Tendulkar said that Ghashiram Kotwal was not a historical play and he had merely used some historical anecdotes and incidents to project the contemporary caste-politics and power game in which women have been used. He explained "History interests me only in so far as it relates to my period and the situation around me". 18 So "The play

deals with the power game. Though it is carved in Peshwa period of Maratha history, it exposes the nature of decadent rulers. And that is what is supposed to make it contemporary." 19

The play not only exposes the lack of morality in the rulers but also brings to light the moral decadence in their subjects. And in the process has gone back to history for his story but has outwitted the ancient folk forms like dashavatar and khele by using the screen of human wall to hide behind it the horror of violence in the play like the ordeal of holding red hot balls by Ghashiram and later by a Brahman. And the violence of _Vultures_ is softened in this play, as it is enwrapped with music, dance, mimes and such other techniques. The psychological insight of Tendulkar into his characters renders a new dimension to the play. For instance, Sutradhar knows the corrupted nature of the police but he is helpless and is incapable of attacking them. And Nana knows his game with Ghashiram but does not think about the meanness of his plan. Whereas only at the end of the play Ghashiram realizes after the death of

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his daughter how he has sacrificed his only daughter for appeasing his own revenge on the Poona Brahmans. This realization of one's own sins is a step towards moral development in the person. But he is not given a chance by Tendulkar to show the change in him as Tendulkar has said elsewhere that his aim is to present a problem but not to find any solution for it. He leaves it to the readers/audiences.