CHAPTER - V

Ghasiram Kotwal
Ghasiram Kotwal by Vijay Tendulkar is a controversial play. Tendulkar has used Marathi history for this play. He portrays Nana "as a lecher with an overpowering weakness for young Brahmans flitting through the thorough-fares of Poona". As it happens so often with a work that questions contemporary values and phenomena from a radical position, Ghasiram Kotwal 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, 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".

In an author's note Tendulkar himself told:

"That is not a historical play, it is a story in prose, verse, music, and dance, set in historical era. Ghasirams are creations 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 Ghasiram. The moral of the history if there is any, may be looked for elsewhere."

Though the play is carved in the Peshwa period of Maharashtra history, it exposes "the failure of human relations due to man's inherent cruelty to his fellow men." The fact remains that there is an innate urge for cruelty in man whether he is a ruler or a subject.

The Brahmans of Poona humiliate Ghasiram, a Brahman of Kanauj, on a false charge of stealing money. The soldiers of Poona beat and torment him, inspite of his attempts to establish innocence. Finally they imprison him. Sutradhar comments on the violence of soldiers when Ghasiram tells him of his sad plight:

May be you are,
May be you are not,
In this place
Matters not a jot. (*p. 15)

Ghasiram is tortured by the soldiers without any sense of justice. Offended by the treatment given to him by the Brahmans and soldiers of Poona he threatens them fiercely that he would go back and avenge on them. He shows the strength of his cruelty. He is no longer a Kanauj Brahman but a revengeful monster. 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 Ghasiram again, the son of Salvadas once more. (p. 17)
To avenge the Brahmans of Poona he agrees to play Nana's game. He procures his only daughter, Lalita Gauri, to Nana to quench 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, (p. 24)

Ghasiram accepts his cunning technique:

Yes, the narrow pass of my only daughter. (p. 24)

In one moment, morality, power politics and sex are commingled by Tendulkar:

"In Ghasiram, power is defined 'horizontally' (in the sense in which Maurice Duvenger 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."5

Once Ghasiram secures his trumpcard of power he starts victimizing his offenders. He cleanses Poona of her decadence and deterioration. He enacts laws immediately, without any hesitation, on the Brahmans of Poona: "No whoring without a permit, No cremation without a permit and Ghasiram Kotwal says to eat with a lower caste person is a crime" (p.27). All the wrong
doers are punished severely, without any pity. He starts making rounds in the streets of Poona at night after the eleven 0' clock 'canon'. He accosts everyone that is in the streets. He whips people. He arrests people. He demands people's permits. As a consequence prostitute lane in Bavannakhani has become desolate. The chasing of women is halted. Pimps turned into beggars. Counterfeit coins lost their worth. In enforcing his rules on the Brahmans of Poona he has lost all his common sense. When Sutradhar goes to fetch midwife he demands: "Why does she deliver in the middle of the night?" (p.28). Ghasiram has lost his wits so much that he fails to understand the irrelevance of his question. If he catches any sound coming from any house at night, he rouses the inmates and learns the reason for the noise. Once he suspects a husband and a wife, sends them to prison and unscrupulously awakens their neighbour to ascertain it. Ghasiram Kotwal's harshness disheartens the citizens of Poona:

Ghasiram Kotwal's harshness was like that. The trouble he brought was like that. Poona lost heart, Poona lost heart. (p. 31)

Insolence of power breeds tyranny in him. Just as he was punished by the soldiers of Poona earlier, he torments a Brahman by making him undergo the ordeal of holding red hot steel balls on the charge of theft. When the yelling Brahman falls to the ground and writhes in agony, Ghasiram goes on enjoying it. That is the zenith of his sadism.

Without any sympathy he treats the Brahmans inhumanly. His cruelty
has become so awe-inspiring that ‘The city of Poona began to tremble at Ghasiram’s name, and No one dares to look straight in the eye’. His name becomes a symbol of terrorism. His name straightens thieves and adulterers. Sutradhar comments:

The bad deeds were cooled down.

The good deeds were cooled down too. (p. 37)

That is the tragedy of Ghasiram. He has purged Poona of its crime with his monstrous despotism but not with his philanthropy. Like Malvolio, the steward in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, Ghasiram flew to farfetched heights in his efforts to ‘straighten out’ Poona and outraged the people of Poona. He is possessed by a kind of overweening confidence in his power. He thinks that the whip of Kotwal would be in his hands forever and muses over his daughter’s marriage. Once he finds a fitting husband for his dear daughter and gets her married, then everything will be the way he wants it. He thinks he can hush up his daughter’s adultery with his money and rank:

It is easy to find a bridegroom when one has money, jewels and respect! (p. 37)

Once he learns of his beloved daughter’s demise he becomes numb and cowed. This is Tendulkar’s ‘Twist’ in the play. He goes wrathfully to Nana but he is easily subdued and bows humbly to Nana as ordered by him. He has hallucinations. He fancies that everyone is laughing at him:
In the wings Ghasiram growls: 'Son of a pig. You are laughing at me. You laugh. Why? Tell me, why? You just wait. I'll smash your face?" (p. 46)

He turns worse, Sutradhar and the others analyse the situation:

**Sutradhar:** The way a wounded tiger

becomes addicted to blood

so the kotwal has come to

love the smell (p. 46)

The Kotwal has acquired ‘a penchant for human blood’. He will never find satisfaction. Nothing delights his mind. He beats people for the slightest reason. "The mouths of Poona were dry with fear". (p. 46) For simple reasons the Brahmans are thrown into prison. Even strangers are arrested on silly pretexts like plucking fruits in Kotwal's garden. The prison cells are filled with arrested Brahmans. During night some of them die of suffocation.

Finally Ghasiram is cruel to himself. He doesn't raise any kind of opposition when the Poona mob surrounds him. He finds "the same senseless mass that he has so far humiliated unscrupulously out of revenge", confronting him but he doesn't resist because he likes to be cruel to himself. He doesn't care for his life. He starts moving back as if surrounded by animals. But he invites them to kill him:
I danced on your chests but I wasted the life of my little daughter.

Beat me. Beat me. Hit me. Cut off my hands and feet. Crack my skull. (p. 54)

Thus Ghasiram takes revenge on the Brahmans of Poona for humiliating him and later allows himself to be stoned to death. He punishes himself for destroying his daughter's life. This is a crude self-annihilation.

Fortune also plays havoc with Ghasiram's life. There are references to the role of ‘fortune’ in the play itself. When Sutradhar inquires Ghasiram what has brought him to Poona, he replies that it is fortune: ‘Came to find my fortune’. But he is sorry, for within two weeks of his arrival at Poona he has lost his reputation. He is stamped as a thief on the false charge of stealing. As a result he becomes cruel and is cursed by the Brahman whom he compels to undergo the breath-taking ordeal of holding red hot steel balls in his hands on the charge of theft:

You have tormented a poor innocent Brahman. You'll die without children! You yourself will endure torment greater than mine. You'll die a dog's death, grinding your heels on the dirt. (p. 36)

The Brahman’s terrifying curse comes alive. Ghasiram does an outrageous offence of giving his daughter to lecherous Nana for political power and so dies a childless death.
Fortune is a simple synonym for the Omnipresent. Ghasiram Kotwal's life turns as the Omnipresent wills, not as Ghasiram likes. Nana consoles Ghasiram when the latter asks for his daughter:

This is your misapprehension, nothing else. He - the Omnipresent - He makes everything happen....

(p. 44)

He continues saying that we are merely instruments. This is the irony of situation that Tendulkar handles with superb skill. Nana has secretly buried Lalita Gauri, the prime of life. But he speaks of the Omnipresent and immediately orders Ghasiram to forget his daughter's death as no life is permanent on the earth and he must do his duty. He must not speak about it. He must silence every one. He can even behead anyone who gossips about the Kotwal. Sutradhar remarks:

Gauri went. Nana says. Ghasiram engraved the sorrow of Gauri on his heart. The Kotwal's work must go on.

(p. 45)

There is a direct reference to fate. Sutradhar tells the strangers who come to Poona: 'Fate shows you what you want'. And Fate renders them death in Poona. Sutradhar reports the matter to Sardar:

Your Highness, a penalty of death for stealing fruit. What kind of justice is this?

(p. 50)
This injustice meted out to the Brahmans turns against Ghasiram:

**Sutradhar:** Ghasiram's time has come.

**Others:** *(coming on stage)* The tide has turned. His good luck's gone.

**Sutradhar:** But he doesn't know it yet! Even though Ghasiram ordered the Brahmans to be arrested, he didn't put them in jail himself. But ...

**Others:** His good luck's gone, his time has come. *(p. 52)*

Ghasiram comes to Poona in search of his fortune. Fortune blesses him with power and wealth but she takes his beloved child. That is the will of fortune. Overwhelmed with his grief for his daughter he welcomes death as a redemption from his unfortunate life.

Ghasiram's Fortune illustrates the treachery in politics. Politicians use ordinary men for their selfish ends and after their purpose is served they sack them mercilessly. Tendulkar has not dealt with politics alone; he has artistically blended it with sex and religion. Nana Phadnavis (the chief administrator of Poona) is a diplomatic politician. He is a lecher. He is an opportunist. He corrupts even gods.

Nana Phadnavis has married nine times. His licentiousness knows no bounds. Even in a temple he looks at women with a look of lewdness. He sees Lalita Gauri, Ghasiram's daughter, in the temple of Ganesha and becomes
infatuated with her youth and beauty. He tries to seduce her in the temple itself at the end of the ceremonies and when the girl points to Ganapati, ‘He will see’, he mocks at the God:

The idol of holiness? That all holy Ganapati? The maker of Good?
Look, He has two wives. One on this 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. The quintessence of religion is misinterpreted by Nana for his lecherous purpose. Significantly enough, the Omnipotent Nana fails to catch the girl and 'in blind just grabs the servant at the door. "Tendulkar suggests the sexuality implicit in power in the brilliant innuendo that caps the situation: our grandeur's gone if she's not had." It is by baiting Nana with his daughter that Ghasiram becomes the Kotwal of Poona. But Nana has his secret plans. He makes him Kotwal but "there are two bullets in this gun". With the first one, Lalita Gauri, he will satisfy his licentiousness and with the second one, Ghasiram Kotwal, he will make the city of Poona dance.

Dnyaneswar Nadkarni appreciates the theme of the play:
“.... its theme is a searing comment on the power politics of the type of oligarchy which we see increasingly taking root in Maharashtra's politics. Tendulkar achieves this without deviation 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."

Though the play is carved in the Peshwa period of Marathi history, it exposes the cruelty of decadent rulers of all times.

After Lalita Gauri's death Nana has no use of Ghasiram. So he disposes him with his malicious intelligence. He is frightened by the furious approach of Ghasiram after Gauri's death. But very tactfully he tames him. He asks him to remember that he is speaking to the Peshwa's chief minister. He asks him to bow to him. He advises him that he should discharge his duty promptly and asks him to take action on any offender. He creates an impression of his good will in the heart of Ghasiram and cools down his rage. But when the Brahman mob, fed up with Ghasiram's wickedness, demands from him an order to "behead Ghasiram Kotwal", he is secretly overjoyed. Sadism incipient in this demagogic diplomat reveals itself in his immediate sanction of the mob's demand. He is at first terrified when the mob gathers in front of the palace, but as soon as Sutradhar informs him the demand of the mob he jumps in happiness. He says:

O shit, is that all? Bring my pen, you idiot. Bring paper. (Takes the instrument and writes) Take this. Take it. Give it to them. The order for Ghashya's death. Give it to them, Tell them to be happy. Tell them to humiliate him all they want. Run! (p. 52)
He rejoices at his own intelligence in using the mob against Ghasiram:

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)

When the crowd surrounds Ghasiram and stones him violently to death, he gives a sigh of relief: "A threat to the great city of Poona has ended today". Later, he bans funeral rites for Ghasiram and banishes his family from Poona to the contentment of the mob:

Whoever attempts to take away the corpse will be punished.

Whoever mourns for him will be hanged. All living relatives of Ghashya Salvadas will be found, bound and expelled from the city. (p. 55)

And he commands the people of Poona to celebrate the happy occasion of Ghasiram's death. Ghasiram's death reveals "the characteristic violence that is a concomitant of all desire for power".

Nana not only twists political situation for his advantage, but tries to corrupt religion also. When the enraged mob attempts to enter Nana's mansion Nana asks Su-tradhar: "Do a special 'puja'? Pray to the gods. Make a deal with the gods. Promise them anything" (p. 51). Soon after Lalita Gauri's death he marries another girl and consoles Ghasiram by quoting scriptures:
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 for ever? ('Sighs') We too leave, every one of us will leave...

And he contends after his death:

Everything has happened according to the wishes of the gods.

The mercy of the gods is with us always.

Nana is, thus, a typical impoverished politician of the present day who can exploit not only people and politics but also religion for his political stability. Tendulkar has exquisitely managed to make Nana an incarnation of evil and cruelty by embodying in him all kinds of corruption - moral, political and religious.

Not only the administrators are immoral, corrupted and cruel but their citizens are also so. The Brahmans of Poona and their wives are morally degenerated. The Brahmans go to the courtesan, Gulabi at Bavannakhani whereas their wives wait at home for their sardars (Maratha land-owners). Sutradhar sings:

The Brahmans go to Bavannakhani
And the Brahman wives stay at home.
They stay at home.
Oh! they stay at home.

They wait. (p. 7)

These Brahmans are quarrelsome. They can rob one another. They are indecent and impulsive. They are cruel. They go on lashing Ghasiram, ignoring his attempts to establish his innocence. At the ‘dakshina’ ceremony they fight like dogs that flock around the discarded heaps of food at the back of a hotel. Tendulkar strikes at a superb irony here by making Sutradhar say that this is an honour given to the Brahmans by the Peshwa himself.

The Brahmans' struggle for food is like that of the mice. The language spoken by the Brahmans is vulgar and abusive. When Sutradhar collides against a Brahman, in spite of the former's repentance, the Brahman goes on shouting at him:

"Don't you have any manners?"

"Don't you have any brains?"

"You son of a bastard",

"You monkey", (p. 4)

Even the police forces are corrupt and cruel. Ghasiram was beaten on a fake charge. Sutradhar tells Ghasiram about the dishonesty and cruelty of the police:

I am a thief.

You're 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. 15)

Broadly speaking Ghasiram deals with a power game. There is a shifting of roles - Rescuer, Persecutor, Victim - in the play. Steiner's explanation of the roles elucidates this situation:

"Being a Rescuer gives us the feeling of being one-up, and this is the only pleasure. It does remove us from the victim, one-down role. We can also get one-up by becoming Persecutors, but this role is not sanctioned as fully. Generally to be a Persecutor we have to have some sort of official title or badge which legitimizes our persecution."\(^{10}\)

Gulabi, the courtesan, rescues Ghasiram, the Victim of poverty, by taking him into her house as a servant. But she changes her role into that of the Persecutor by snatching the chain of Ghasiram which is gifted to him by Nana. The Brahmans and the police of Poona persecute the Victim, Ghasiram. They become the Victims and are persecuted by the Persecutor, Ghasiram, after he is made the Kotwal. He rules them strictly. He restricts them from going to Gulabi’s house and so Gulabi's house becomes deserted. At the end of the play their roles are reversed again. Ghasiram shifts to the role of the Victim and is
persecuted by the Brahmans. Thus they get involved in the "Drama Triangle" and the Rescuer-Victim transaction shifts to Persecutor-Victim transaction. Nana's power is deputed to Ghasiram. Through Ghasiram he ‘will make the city of Poona dance’ and Ghasiram will act as a ‘countercheck to all those conspirators’. All his ‘misdeeds will be credited’to Ghasiram's account. Later he sanctions the request of the mob to ‘behead’ him. He uses ‘a thorn to remove a thorn’. The Rescuer feels powerful over the Victim. Likewise the Persecutor enjoys the suffering of the Victim. These roles are interchangeable. The Stage-Manager, the Peshwa, like the Omnipotent controls and guides the situation as he likes and rejoices at his success from behind the scene. In all these there is a sadism in a dormant state.

Seen from the angle of a Shakespearean tragedy Ghasiram Kotwal is a crude Revenge Play. Offended by the humiliating treatment meted out to him by the Brahmans of Poona he prophesies that he would come back and humiliate them. Ghasiram takes revenge on them by harassing them after he becomes the Kotwal of Poona and so sins against himself. The forces of retribution scourge him at the end of the play and he meets his tragic death. Before the catastrophe there is a tragic waste of his beautiful innocent daughter. At the end of the play there is no message for mankind. Ghasiram's death is not the end of Ghasirams. And the evil in Nana Phadnavis and in the Brahmans of Poona persists. Tendulkar himself believes in the everlasting presence of evil in the world. When Samik Bandyopadhyay asked Tendulkar:
Did you really conceive the play as an expose of Brahman corruption and pretensions, or as a study of power game in more general terms?

He wrote back:

"Broadly speaking, I had in mind the emergence, the growth and the inevitable end of the Ghasirams; also those who create and help Ghasirams to grow; and the irony of stoning to death a person pretending that it is the end of Ghasirams."\(^{11}\)

Apart from the deceptive diplomacy of Nana and the disgusting demeanour of the Brahmans; it is Ghasiram’s outrageous and abnormal cruelty manifested in his governing of the Brahmans of Poona that precipitates his tragedy. Looked from an artistic point of view the play is a triumphant experiment attempted by Tendulkar in Modern Indian Drama.
REFERENCES


