Chapter – III

Defying the Caste and Class Hegemony

Literature is referred to as mirror of society. It reflects and reveals the age in which it is produced. More often than not, a writer expresses his point of view as regards the social mores, values and views prevalent in a particular society and age. The most powerful and sincere appreciation or indictment of any system can be found in the literature of that period.

The identity of a nation is because of the advancement of culture and traditions of the society. Literature mirrors all of them and the social mobility becomes the life-spirit of all literary creativity. A writer and an artist confirm the social changes of the contemporary times while adding his imaginative genius to it. In this regard Radhakrishnan aptly remarks:

...drama creates the conscience of the age. We cannot make people good by acts of parliament. Nor is it possible by constitutional provisions to remove deep-seated social prejudices. We influence social behaviour by creating public opinion. (169)

Tagore confirms this idea through his immense dramatic output. He was concerned with social problems of his times. Though he was mainly occupied with literary works, social problems did not escape his keen attention. Different social problems formed the subject-matter of his plays. The human conditions were portrayed sympathetically and literary treatment brought in richness and vitality to his plays.
Tagore was concerned with social problems of his times. Though he was mainly produced literary works, social problems of our country did not escape his keen attention. His writings provide a powerful glimpse of his viewpoint regarding the values and traditions related with social set up of his times. Though he was not a revolutionary in the strictest sense of the term, yet his oeuvre reflects and echoes the sensitive perception of a liberated mind. He could gauge the pain inflicted upon the downtrodden and the marginalised sections of the society owing to the caste and class biases. Different social problems appear as subject-matter of his novels, plays and short stories. Tagore portrays the human condition sympathetically. Its literary treatment brings in richness and vitality to his oeuvre.

Tagore realised that the country was afflicted by many social evils which hampered its progress. These had begun to eat into the vitals of the society, thereby creating a cultural void. He was sensitive to the anguish of the people. Das confirms Tagore’s enlightened conscience on the issue of societal taboos in following words:

All good writing is sustained by the same forces that are shaped and directed by society and it is through the long corridors of history that a heritage eventually takes its birth. Social mobility is the life-spring of all creative literary effort and it is precisely for this reason that the pre-independence period produced master minds, great writers and artists, notable among whom was Rabindranath Tagore. (121)

Tagore’s writings authentically reflect the cultural patterns and ethos of India. Social consciousness was deeply ingrained in Tagore’s writings. He knew that the contemporary
society was plagued with an inescapable divisibility owing to caste and class barriers. A true artist, Tagore never divorced himself from the life-pulse of society he was part of - be it in respect of the efflorescence of culture or a keen awareness of the problems plaguing the society of his times. Almost all the works of Tagore are are inextricably associated with literary, social and cultural scenario of his times. Tagore knew that as a social being he owed it to society to have an understanding of his social responsibility as a writer and an artist. The great sage Vivekananda believed that an individual cannot be perfect without the realisation of social self:

All men have to transcend their petty interests for the well-being of the society. There is no short cut to such a life. It can be done only through gradual transition. Only in this lies the individual and social happiness. (qtd. in Das 1)

Similarly Tagore accorded a spiritual importance to society. As he puts it, “By nature all men are dwija or twice born, first they are born to their home and then, for their fulfillment, they have to be born to the large world.” (qtd. in Das 123) He gave a new meaning to the word dwija. According to him human-being has two selves – individual and social. When one is able to realise one’s social self, he will be dwija. Like Tagore, Swami Vivekananda also shared the view that religion is intimately connected with society. “In India”, Swami Vivekananda declared: “Social structure and religion are organically interwoven. Caste hierarchy, sex inequality, untouchability, and social taboos flourished because of the misinterpretation of religion” (qtd. in Das 123).
The word *Caste* is derived from the Latin word *castus-* “pure, cut off, segregated”, and is etymologically related to *carere* "to cut off". As defined in *Wikipedia*, “Caste is an elaborate and complex social system that combines some or all elements of endogamy, hereditary transmission of occupation, social class, social identity, hierarchy, exclusion and power” (“Caste System in India” Web). Haviland defines caste as a “closed form of social stratification in which membership is determined by birth and remains fixed for life; castes are also endogamous and offspring are automatically members of their parent’s caste” (qtd. in Wikipedia, “Caste System in India”). The word ‘caste’ was first used by Portuguese in the sixteenth century to refer to divisions within the Indian society. They found the separate groups of Hindu society and called them ‘castes’ meaning- tribes, clans or families. (Rau 107) The caste system in India is a system of social stratification, social restriction and a basis for affirmative action. Historically, the caste system in India consisted of four well known categories (the Varnas): Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (commerce and Shudras (workmen). Some people were left out from these four caste classifications, and were called outcasts or untouchables - these were shunned and ostracised. The *varnas* themselves have been further subdivided into thousands of *jatis*” (Wikipedia, “Caste System in India”).

The religious-legal texts of the earlier times also refer to the concept of caste in the Indian society. This society was characterised by hierarchical gradations of hereditary groups of ‘Jatis’ according to ritual status. A sketch of this society as compiled by the priests is present in the Vedic literature. In one of the famous passages in *Rig Veda*, the order of the caste is viewed in terms of the parts of human body. The Brahmins occupied the top most position; they were followed by *Kshatriyas* (warriors) and *Vaishyas* (traders
and farmers). These groups together formed the upper castes. This sketch did not include the *Shudras* (menials) who comprised the lower castes of society (Basu xvi-xvii). This depicts the accepted view of the Indian Caste system that is extremely biased and has led to discrimination in society. Dr. Ambedkar says: “By the Hindu social system the communities are placed in an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt.” (qtd. in Ingole, 2)

Almost all the writers and scholars conform to this view of Ambedkar. Sociologist G. S. Ghurye outlines the following features of caste in Indian society:

1. Segmental division of society

2. Hierarchies

3. Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse

4. Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections

5. Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation

6. Restrictions on marriage. (qtd. in Ingole 1)

Thus, a number of features govern the caste system which is responsible for inherent division within society. Selection does not determine profession in these castes. It is by birth that a profession is forced upon a person. It is the caste infrastructure that governs the laws and traditions of the India society. Marriage, relationships and the laws of labour—all stem from the caste hierarchies.
The caste-ridden society places the lowest castes at the bottom of the structure. They are, condemned to carry out menial jobs and forced to serve the castes above them. Ambedkar aptly remarks: “Caste does not result in economic efficiency, caste cannot and has not improved the race, caste has however done one thing, it has completely disorganised and demoralised the Hindu” (qtd. in Ingole 2).

In *Manusmriti*, the ancient Indian text on laws, Manu the law-giver refers to society as divided into four classes. The division is not based on heredity but was to be determined by qualities of character. This social organisation was designed to meet spiritual needs. It has been said, "The first and most important thing to be noted is that Manu proposed his organisation of society into four classes for which he divided the life of an individual into four stages, namely, the attainment of the spiritual freedom or *Moksha* by every member of the community" (Das 130).

Though Manu linked the division of the society with some spiritual significance; this eventually disintegrated the social fabric, corrupting it entirely. Subsequently these divisions led to perpetuation of certain norms which resulted in dividing the society. The division led to discrimination on the basis of caste. The classification did not serve the purpose it was initiated for. Moreover it was not scientific:

The complex nature of the caste structure is evident from the fact that after a century of painstaking and meticulous research in the history and function of the social system, we do not posses yet a valid explanation of the circumstances that might have contributed to the formation and development of this unique system. (Das 131)
Tagore saw the fundamental defect inherent in the caste system. He said, “In her caste regulation India recognised difference but not the mutuality which is the law of life.” (Das 131) He analysed it and concluded that the caste system was not essential and created barriers. Tagore pointed out the evils of caste system in following words:

In trying to avoid collisions she (i.e., India) set up boundaries of immovable walls, thus giving to her numerous races the negative benefit of peace and order but not the positive opportunity of the expansions and movement,...therefore, life departed from her social system and in its place she is worshipping with all ceremony the magnificent cage of countless compartments that she has manufactured. (qtd. in Das 132)

The above view of the caste system also influenced the colonial administrators of India, “who too got most of the information about caste matters from Hindu religious authorities” (Basu xiv). Partha Chatterjee remarks about the importance of caste to Indians, “If there was one social institution that... characterised Indian society as radically different from western society, it was the institution of caste” (qtd. in Basu xiv).

Caste disparities in India led to the polarisation of society. The upper castes were believed to be ‘pure’, while the lower castes were considered ‘impure’. These ideas evolved out of the basis of the work performed by the castes. The lower caste people were called ‘outcastes’ and sometimes they were called ‘chandals’. This division of society led to the evil of untouchability in the Indian society.

Untouchability came into being due to rigidity and hardening of caste system. Though it is said that untouchability is not inherent in the caste system, social behaviour
reveals that it is the result of the caste system. While characterising the *Shudras*, Manu says:

…they are not much above the highest of the lower animals; self consciousness is just beginning to be stirred into activity in members of this group…. Because of his mental and moral backwardness the *Sudra* cannot be benefitted by the sort of education prescribed for the *Brahmins* and the *Kshatriyas*. He is also incapable of participating fully in social life. It would not be wrong to say that he is in cradle stage of humanity. (qtd. in Das 132)

Such ideas aimed at marginalising the lower castes and perpetuating the hegemonic status of the upper castes. Eventually such attitudes led to untouchability. The society was, thus, afflicted with several evils arising out of such disparities. The upper castes could be supposedly polluted through contact with the lower castes. Whenever the shadow of a lower caste fell on an upper caste person, it supposedly defiled him and he would not eat or drink anything until he had bathed away the “polluted effect.” The lower castes always had to maintain a distance from the upper castes and they were forbidden to speak loudly in their presence. The upper caste people prohibited the lower caste people to enter their temples or to walk on the roads on which the upper class people walked. Discrimination of such enormous degree has marked our society since early times.

A significant depth that is illuminated after a careful analysis of this discrimination is the way the caste and class intersection works in the Indian set up. In India, social, religious and economic structure has always been caste based. Caste
stratification though distinct from class, is not completely unrelated to it. The inequality underlying the Indian society is basically due to the application of evaluative standards in placing particular caste as high or low. These standards are deep rooted in our society. According to Sisir Kumar Ghose, “caste intersects class to ensure control over material resources such as land and labour by the dominant interest in the society.” He further says, “Class power usually replicates caste though it ultimately goes further concealing the concentration of class power in possession of elite, and in the perpetuation of that possession through compulsion and coercion” (qtd. in Basu xxiii). With the intersection of caste and class, discrimination has increased day by day. Caste struggle has ultimately led to class struggle.

The caste system’s fundamental characteristic of fixed civil, cultural, religious and economic rights for each caste by birth, with restrictions for change implies forced exclusion of one caste from the rights of castes. Exclusion in economic spheres such as occupation, education and labor employment is therefore, internal to the system, and a necessary outcome of its underlying principles. All major assets of production are owned and concentrated in the hands of upper castes and lower strata of society particularly depressed classes are people without assets. The unnatural distribution of national wealth forced depressed classes to depend for their survival on upper caste Hindus to a large extent; this is the main reason for their socio-economic exploitation in India. Thus the line of differentiation between caste and class is blurred and caste intersects with the class determining the position of all castes.

Thus, caste system led to inequality within the society. Consequently, several great thinkers raised their voice against this rigid system. Mahatma Gandhi spearheaded
the protest against this rigid system. He clearly stated that such divisions are “harmful both to spiritual and national growth” (Basu 151).

Saints like Nanak and Kabir have strongly criticised the caste system. All the major writers have responded seriously to this malaise, making it one of the dominant themes in Indian literature. Tagore was a severe critic of this system and he condemned the caste system in a poem published in the year 1910:

My wretched country, those whom you have
Crushed and trampled, deprived of their
Rights, made them stand and never drew
them close.

Share you must their indignities and suffering. (qtd. in Basu 151)

Tagore was ahead of his times in his indictment of the caste system. He aimed to give back to the poor and the marginalised, what had been snatched by the privileged few – the right to freedom and dignity. In 1935, Will Durant, the great philosopher and historian said:

Today he [Tagore] is a solitary figure, perhaps the most impressive of all men now on the earth; a reformer who had the courage to denounce the most basic of India’s institutions – the caste system – and the dearest of her beliefs – transmigration. (qtd. in Bhattacharya 122)
Tagore's criticism of the Indian caste system and the prejudices prevalent as a result of this is a recurrent theme in his novels, plays and poems. His indignation towards caste system and untouchability found expression in his famous plays *Chandalika, Natir-puja, Achalayatan, Sanyasi* and *Karna and Kunti* etc. Conflict between the traditionalism of Hinduism and true human values preached by Buddha is amongst the major themes of Tagore's plays.

Another significant aspect of his work is that it attacks the hypocrisy and pseudo-notions associated with the powerful and the great. Tagore revolted against illiteracy, ignorance, poverty and rigidities of social structure. At the same time he waged an open war against exploitation on the basis of caste and class. In the process he gave a lesson in revolt to the lower classes. He believed that the man who bows to injustice and takes it lying down is equally guilty as the person who commits it:

He who commits an unjust act,

And he who tolerates an unjust act calmly,

Must be burnt by thy contempt like a tiny blade of grass. (qtd. in Bhattacharya 123)

Thus, Tagore warns the exploited humanity to raise its voice against all oppression. He "gave a clarion call to the Brahmins, the law makers, and asked them to give these ignorant simpletons their due place in society." (Bhattacharya 122) Ernest Rhys aptly sums up Tagore's protest against caste and class discrimination:
The union of nations, the destroying of caste, religious pride, race-prejudice – in a word, the ‘Making of man’; there lies his human aim. ‘It is’, he says, ‘the one problem of the present age, and one must be prepared to go through the martyrdom of sufferings and humiliations till the victory of God in man is achieved. (qtd. in Chakravorty 260)

“Among the most despised communities of India were the chandalas.” (Iyer 10) Prabhat Mukherji describes them as “Beyond the Four Varnas”- the most outcaste category” (qtd. in Iyer 10). Chandals were not included into the stratification of four Varnas of Indian society. “The chandals, perhaps, belong to the total rejects in society” (Iyer 16). They were the lowest and supposed to be the worst of all human beings. Strong hatred was expressed against them and their touch and even sight was regarded as pollution as considered low by caste and thus were untouchables.

Chandalika

Tagore strongly attacks the evil of untouchability in his play Chandalika. The play was originally written in Bengali under the title The Untouchable Girl in the year 1938. Marjorie Sykes translated the play into English, giving it the title Chandalika. The play is based on the ‘Buddhist legend of Sardulakarnavadana’ (Mukherjee 6-9). According to this legend:

Ananda is the favourite disciple of Buddha. One day returning from a visit he feels thirsty. He reaches a well and asks a girl to give him water. The girl belonged to the lowest caste of untouchables known as chandals. She
gives him water and falls in love with the handsome monk. Unable to
forget the monk she makes her mother exercise a magical spell on the
monk. The spell proves stronger than Ananda's will and he presents
himself at the cottage of the girl overcome with shame and remorse. He
offers prayers to his master to save him. Buddha hears his prayers and the
magical spell is broken. Thus, the monk is saved in the end and he returns
back (Kriplani 369-70).

Tagore has transformed this legend into the story of a courageous untouchable girl
Prakriti who falls in love with the monk. Tagore's portrayal of Prakriti, the Chandal girl
is both powerful and touching. Prakriti is a beautiful and sensitive girl, condemned by her
birth to be untouchable. She suddenly awakens to the consciousness of her rights as a
woman touched by the humanity of a follower of the Buddha, Ananda, the monk.
Because of his warmth, she gets attracted towards him. As per the norms of society, she
clearly tries to over-reach her boundaries. Tagore, however sensitively acknowledges the
basic instinct of all human beings – the right to fall in love, cutting across barriers of all
kind.

*Chandalika* is the “tale of the new birth” of a Chandal girl, Prakriti, who falls in
love with Ananda at first sight. The monk feels thirsty and he asks for water from Prakriti.
She hesitates in giving Ananda water and tells him: “I am a Chandalini, and the well-
water is unclean” (*Three Plays* 148). Ananda replies: “As I am human being, so also are
you and all water is clean and holy that cools your heat and satisfies our thirst” (148). This
is a very significant comment made by the monk because it emphasises the essential
oneness of all human beings. The same heart throbs in all beings that are made of flesh
and blood. Ananda reminds her that she is a human being and that the value of a human being rests in a loving heart, not in caste. "The gift of water which a cloud makes to the earth is not the less blessed if the cloud is black" (Naravane 111). The words of the monk keep on haunting Prakriti who suddenly realises her dignity as a human being. She says:

For the first time in my life I heard such words, for the first time I poured water into his cupped hands- the hands of a man the very dust of whose feet I would never have dared to touch. (148)

Prakriti tells her mother that the little water which the monk drank grew into a "...fathomless, boundless sea" in which "...my caste was drowned, and my birth washed clean" (149). This revelation would never have come had she not met the monk. Ananda tells Prakriti:

If the black clouds of Sravana are dubbed Chandal, what of it? It doesn’t change their nature, or destroy the virtue of their water. Don’t humiliate yourself; self humiliation is a sin, worse than self murder. (148)

These simple words uttered by the handsome monk came to Prakriti, the chandal girl, as "a message of liberation." (Naravane 111) But Prakriti’s mother is astonished at her daughter’s talk. She is afraid of this boldness of Prakriti. "O, you stupid girl, how could you be so reckless? There will be a price to pay for this madness! Don’t you know what caste you were born in?" (148) She further says: "You were a slave. It’s the writ of destiny, who can undo it?" (152) But these words of mother have no effect on Prakriti. She says:
Fie, Fie, Mother, I tell you again, don't delude yourself with this self-humiliation—it is false, and a sin. Plenty of slaves are born of royal blood, but I am no slave; plenty of Chandals are born of Brahmin families, but I am no Chandal. (152)

Mother can make nothing of Prakriti's talk and says: "Why even the way you speak is changed. Do you understand yourself what are you saying? ...I don't recognise your speech." (149) She is afraid that her daughter is under some kind of spell. Prakriti replies to her mother: "All these days you have never really known me, Mother. He who has recognised me will reveal me. And so I wait and watch.... "He came to give me the honour of quenching Man's thirst" (149).

A very important aspect of the play is that it not only emphasises the fact that Prakriti's self-respect and individuality are restored but also illuminates the ennobling influence of love on human beings. Prakriti is irresistibly drawn towards the monk. He makes her realise that she is capable of loving and being loved. 'And since her own self is the most she can give, and since none is more worthy of the gift of her surrender than the Bhikshu who has redeemed, or, as she puts it, created her, she yearns to worship him by serving herself to him' (Three Plays 141).

Ananda once again crosses the hamlet, where Prakriti lives. Detached from all earthly cares and immersed in his inner self, he knows nothing of Prakriti's mind and passes by without recognising her. Prakriti feels humiliated. Overcome by the power of love she asks her mother to cast a spell on the monk who is eventually dragged to her doorstep. Besides being overpowered by her love for the monk, Prakriti is also goaded by
an urge to express her desire, something she would never have done, had she not awakened to a realisation of her true self. Tagore, however, emphasises that her awakening needs to be carried further. She is still naïve. That is why she refers to her mother’s spell as the ‘primeval spell’, “the spell of the earth which is far more potent than the spiritual self-hypnotism of the monks” (165). The monk appears at her door but Prakriti is shocked to see Ananda, as a man who has lost the radiance of God he once possessed. She says:

Where is the light and radiance the shining purity, the heavenly glow?
How worn, how faded has he come to my door! Bearing his self’s defeat as a heavy burden, he comes with drooping head (165).

Instead of experiencing any elation, Prakriti is shocked to see the ashen face of the monk. Obviously, the monk has been forced to come to her door under the impact of the spell. Prakriti the young chandal girl now shows even greater maturity. She realises that love cannot grow out of force. Although aware of the fact that undoing of the spell would lead to her mother’s death, she asks her to do so. She sacrifices her mother to save the dignity of the monk: “Prakriti, Prakriti, if in truth you are no chandalini, offer no insult to the heroic. Victory, Victory to him” (165).

Tagore invests Prakriti’s character with a profound understanding of what love really means. It is a lowborn girl, who convinces the audiences about the importance of sacrifice in love. To Prakriti, therefore, love does not mean the attainment of one’s desires; it also means understanding with compassion the dignity and individuality of the other human being. The monk shows compassion towards the Chandal girl, which leads
to an awakening of her conscious. Tagore impresses upon the audiences that the low caste girl is as much capable of dealing with things sensitively as the monk, who belongs to a higher order.

Prakriti’s mother in *Chandalika* is a victim of dead and worn out traditions. She believes that being an untouchable, her daughter must not trespass her limits. Prakriti must always remember that she is a lower caste Chandalini. When Prakriti tells her that she offered water to a Bhikshu, she is frightened and rebukes her for her recklessness. Prakriti’s mother thinks that the bonds of caste cannot be broken and she accepts her fate as an untouchable. She advises Prakriti to accept the same and not to cross the boundaries. Prakriti’s mother has been conditioned by the suppression and discrimination perpetuated by society through centuries. Tagore makes a significant point by highlighting this conditioning which makes the low castes look upon themselves as impure or polluted in essence. To quote Michael Moffat: The “untouchables” very often try to replicate within their very varied ranks the hierarchies of the caste system of which they are at the receiving end” (qtd. in Basu xv).

Ananda, the monk represents the voice of Tagore proclaiming that every individual must recognise his/her worth as a human being. Caste and class barriers rob the dignity of human beings. A man must not be judged by his caste but by his individuality and above all his deeds.

*Chandalika* is an important social comment. Dealing with the sensitive aspect of discrimination on the basis of caste and class, it highlights the way in which the lowest of the low have the capability to fight for an identity of their own. Thus, the awakening of
the poor, low caste girl is the awakening of society at large. This ultimately leads to the bridging up of the gap that exists in society.

Tagore's basic social philosophy is enunciated in "Kartar Ichchhay Karma" (The Master's will be Done) and "Satyer Ahvan" (The Call of Truth). Tagore's viewpoint and approach is:

...dwell in their union. Tagore believed in the slogan of self-determination. Man must respect others, not enslave others. Freedom cannot be had by mere begging; it is to be earned. Contradictions have to be solved by conscious efforts. (Naravane 103)

Tagore was overwhelmed by the economic, social and political misery in which the poor of society and peasants lived. He was deeply moved by the plight of the underdogs of society and stressed the need of making them aware of their exploitation at the hands of the powers that be. He gave a description of them at a later date:

Our so-called responsible classes live in comfort because the common man has not yet understood his situation. That is why the landlord beats him. The money-lender holds him in his clutches; the foreman abuses him; the policeman fleeces him; the priest exploits him; and the magistrate picks his pocket. (qtd. in Jha 2)

These conditions, he thought, cannot be changed by appealing to the religious sentiments of the landlord, policeman or money-lender. In human society, necessity is a greater force than charity. The first requirement therefore is that people should discover the bond that holds them together as a society. If there is one path likely to achieve this, it is education.
Tagore realised from his own experience of the farmers’ attitudes and their social behaviour that strength can be generated only in a self-reliant village society developing its own power and its own momentum of growth. As he says: ‘Poverty springs from disunity and wealth from co-operation. From all points of view this is the fundamental truth of human civilisation’ (qtd. in Jha 3).

The discrimination and inequalities that exist in our society are man-made. In the eyes of the supreme power all beings are equal. But men make distinctions amongst themselves on the basis of their birth. This differentiation has been blindly followed since ages. And in the name of religion people abuse their own brethren. Religious discrimination also arises because of such evil practices. Lower class people are not considered worthy of offering worship to God. Tagore deals with this aspect of discrimination in his play Natir-Puja.

**Natir-Puja**

Originally written in Bengali, *Natir Puja* was translated into English by Marjorie Sykes. Tagore’s own translation of the play appeared in *Vishvabharti Quarterly* in 1927. The play created history by presenting only women characters. Interestingly, no male characters appear on the stage. Tagore himself trained all the women characters. It was a ground-breaking performance of its own kind in the history of Indian Theatre.

The play is based on a Buddhist legend found in Rajendralal Mitra’s *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, which was published by Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1882 (Mukherjee 68). According to this legend:
King Bimbisara had built stupa in memory of Lord Buddha. When Ajatsatru came to the throne after the murder of his father, he forbade the worship of Buddha in any form throughout his kingdom. Srimati, a female slave, defied the order and lighted the stupa with a row of lamps. She was executed by the King’s order. (Chakravorty 150)

Tagore has made some vital changes in the legend for dramatic reasons. 

Tagore has made some vital changes in the legend for dramatic reasons. *Nadir Puja* is a dance drama. In this play Tagore concludes that worship of God is not the privilege of just one class or caste. All are equal in the eyes of God and thus have equal right to worship Him. At the same time he focuses on the fact that no religion is good or bad.

The play begins with Upali, the Bhikshu, asking for alms in the name of the Lord at the palace gate. Srimati, the palace dancer is the only one who is awake. Srimati, is a poor and lowborn girl. Like Prakriti, her mind is also conditioned by her environment to believe that she is not worthy of giving alms to a Bhikshu; it is only the privilege of princesses of the palace. But the Bhikshu assures her that her gift will be equally acceptable to the Lord. Srimati says:

> But I am so poor! In your alms bowl anything that I could give would seem so mean. What can I give, tell me?” The monk replies, “Your best gift...Indeed he will take it, child. He will accept the flowers of your worship. (*Three Plays*, 88-89)

These words of Bhikshu highlight the principle of equality among all men. The Bhikshu shows no hesitation in accepting alms from Srimati, who is mere *Nati* in the palace, a lowborn creature. The play conveys the message that a person must not be judged by his
birth but by his deeds. It does not matter how much a person has to offer to God; what matters is his devotion towards God, which should be steadfast. The Bhikshu’s assurance stimulates in Srimati the sense of essential human dignity which is innate in every individual irrespective of his social status.

It is the birthday of Lord Buddha and Srimati is chosen by the ‘Order’ to offer worship at the altar beneath the ‘Ashoka’ tree. The female members of the palace are shocked at this news. No one is able to accept that the dancing girl, a person belonging to the lower strata of the society, will perform the most prestigious task generally assigned to the princess. Princess Ratnavali reacts furiously on learning this and asks the Bhikshuni as to who gave Srimati this right:

Bhikshuni. Upali is one.

Ratnavali. Upali- a barber.

Bhikshuni. Another is Sunanda.

Ratnavali. He’s a cowherd’s son.

Bhikshuni. Another is Sunit.

Ratnavali. He is Pukkush by caste, isn’t he? (105)

This dialogue clearly shows the discriminative attitude of upper caste people towards the lower castes. Ratnavali accuses the Order for being partial and sympathetic towards Srimati because she also belongs to lower caste just like them. She says: “Perhaps there’s no difference between their caste and hers. That’s why they have such a regard for her, no doubt!” (105). Ratnavali is angry with other princesses as they also support Srimati. She
cunningly remarks to them: “How charming! Srimati will serve the altar, and you, her maids-in-waiting, will do the fanning!” (106). According to Ratnavali this all is “completely against all nature” (106). “If that dancing-girl is allowed to make offering here, this place will be desecrated. I can live here no longer” (113).

The decision of the ‘Order’ has come to the princess and the queen as an insult. And they would never allow a lowborn creature to take away the rights of a Queen or a Princess. Their hatred for the girl is evident in these words uttered by Queen Lokeshvari: “Pity her! I would have her thrown to the dogs, I would watch her torn limb from limb” (113).

These women are ready to destroy the worship “root and branch.” Queen is ready to have altar destroyed as she cannot endure that the rights of the queen and the princess are being usurped. So she exclaims: “But for the feet of a dancing-girl to tread the royal shrine- that I cannot bear!” (114). The upper class people feel that their royal dignity has been attacked because a lowborn girl is chosen to perform the coveted act of worship of the God.

In order to take their revenge, the royal ladies plot against the dancing girl. Ratnavali suggests: “Bid her dance, dancing-girl as she is, before the very alter where she was to have worshipped as priestess!” (113). Forcing her to commit sacrilege, they order her to dance at the altar where she has to offer her worship. Their hatred and jealousy for the girl is deep. Therefore, In order to maintain their so called dignity and pride, the people of the upper class can stoop to anything. They can even force the death of their enemies but never compromise on their pseudo notions of grandeur and dignity.
Queen Lokeshwari and Princess Ratnavali go to the extent of desiring death for Srimati because they cannot bear the glorification of a dancing girl. Queen Lokeshwari's anger is intensified when she learns that people want to become the disciples of Srimati because they consider her a saint. One of the maids warns princess Ratnavali about the sin she is committing: "Princess, this sin will not touch the dancing girl. It is on your own head alone" (134). But Ratnavali is totally unmindful of the maid's warning. She wonders how a dancing girl can be considered a saint. The maid tells her: "We never thought of her as a dancing girl. We saw in her the light of heaven" (134). These words have no effect on the princess. She only wants Srimati to be put to death.

Class distinction is also illuminated in the play. Queen Lokeshvari believes that if Srimati is a saint then their religion has been debased. She mocks at the new religion saying that the "fallen will come preaching salvation" (101). In her view all those who believe in such a religion are fools:

O what fools are you, you girls of royal blood, to be set on welcoming this religion--this religion that will drag your proud throne in the dust. Beggars will rule henceforth from the thrones of the Kings. (101)

Class consciousness is clearly visible in the above words uttered by the queen. The play portrays a society, full of disparities. The upper classes, citing the Holy Scriptures, uphold their right to worship. But they forget that in the eyes of the Lord all are one and have equal rights to worship God. According to Ratnavali, King Bimbisara's murder is "the fruit of his own deeds" (127). She believes:
King Bimbisara murdered the Vedic religion of his forefathers. Wasn’t that an even worse deed than parricide? The Brahmins have been saying ever since that a day of reckoning would come. The hungry sacrificial flames he quenched must devour him in his turn. (127)

She calls this new religion, that is, Buddhism, the beggar’s creed. She does not understand the fuss about the killing of Bhikshuni by Devadatta’s followers. “Why make such a to-do about that? She was only a farmer’s daughter… I can’t tolerate that! This beggar’s creed of yours saps the glory of kingship” (127). In the end Srimati is slain by the King’s order. But she is not afraid of death and proves her faith by sacrificing her life.

Buddhism had a profound influence upon Tagore. Buddha disregarded the caste system and revolted against the old and worn out dogmas and preached the lesson of equality and love for all. Buddhism has inspired the great thinkers of our country. Tagore too believed in the teachings of Buddha and possessed a deep understanding of Buddhism. He believed that the metaphysical aspect of Buddhist philosophy has a basis in friendship, mercy and universal love. The teaching of Buddha generated two currents of thought:

The one, impersonal, preaching the abnegation of self through discipline and the other personal, preaching the cultivation of sympathy for all creatures and devotion to the infinite truth of love. (Naravane 32)

Tagore advanced the interpretation of *Brahma-Vihara meaning* that love should be extended to all. Buddhism declared that strict moral principles must be observed. Rabindranath was not keen to follow the moral principles but stressed the expansion of
love for all creatures. According to Tagore the love for fellow creatures was the pillar of
Buddhism. There lies Nirvana. So he realised:

The human soul is on its journey from the law to love, from discipline to
liberation, from the moral plane to the spiritual. Buddha preached the discipline of
self-restraint and moral life; it is a complete acceptance of law. But this bondage
of law cannot be an end by itself; by mastering it thoroughly we acquire the
means of getting beyond it. It is going back to Brahma, to the infinite love, which
is manifesting itself through the finite forms of law. Buddha names it Brahma-
Vihara, the joy of living in Brahma. (Das 201)

Tagore invokes the spirit of Buddha in many of his plays. However, particularly notable
in this respect are Chandalika and Natir Puja. In both the plays, the influence of Buddhist
teachings is evident. Tagore was impressed by the fundamental equality preached by this
faith. Buddha had once challenged the infallibility of the Vedas and the hierarchy of the
Hindu caste. Worship of the Divine cannot be the monopoly of this caste or that, nor can
its expression be imprisoned in one particular Vedic pattern… social
institutions distort the fundamental equality of all human beings, by their artificial
snobberies and standards exalting some and degrading others. (Kriplani 324).

Social customs and traditions warp this fundamental equality of all human beings
by their false values and their snobberies, by applauding some and disgracing others. But
ture religion is that which disregarding man-made prejudices restore the fundamental
judgment by which all human beings must finally be measured and redeemed. As an
English poet has put it:
The soul of music slumbers in the shell

Till waked and kindled by the master’s spell;

And feeling hearts—touch them but rightly-pour

A thousand melodies unfelt before. (Three plays, 84)

The Nati through her unwavering devotion experiences the true awakening of her soul and asserts the innate dignity of her spirit by embracing death: “True worship is the surrender or dedication of the best we have to the call of the Truth. The sage dedicates his learning, the man of action his deeds, the poet his songs, the humble Nati her dance” (86). Tagore has interpreted the Buddha’s Gospel of renunciation very powerfully through the motifs of sacrifice, fearlessness and surrender.

Sanyasi

Tagore attacked all prevalent social institutions because he was against discrimination of all kinds. In his first important play Sanyasi, Tagore presents a subtle attack on the curse of untouchability. In the original version Sanyasi was named Prakritir Pratishodh or Nature’s Revenge. Written in the year 1884, it is a verse drama. Tagore translated the play in the year 1919 when he was travelling from India to Japan.

There are two main characters in this play, the Sanyasi and Vasanti the daughter of Raghu, an outcaste. The Sanyasi undergoes a spiritual conflict in the play. Vasanti represents the oppressed strata of society. She is an orphan. The village people refer to her as ‘pollution’. She is prohibited to walk on the road that leads to the temple because
she is daughter of an untouchable person. A woman says to her: “Girl, you are Raghu’s daughter, aren’t you? You should keep away from this road. Don’t you know it goes to the temple?” (Sanyasi 467) The attitude of hatred and insensitivity towards the untouchables is evident in the way the village people respond to the little girl. The following words of the village woman further highlight the mindset of the people, in whose psyche is embedded the unbridgeable difference between the upper and the lower castes: “But I thought my cloth-end touched you. I am taking my offerings to the goddess – I hope they are not polluted” (467). The touch of the little girl is considered ‘impure’ because she belongs to the lower caste. This shows the extreme form of discrimination amongst human beings, which has no meaning. There is no basis of such discrimination because the touch of one person can never ever make the other person impure.

The Sanyasi has turned away from the world of materialism to the spiritual world. He has completely detached himself from all worldly objects. But the very first contact with the little untouchable girl Vasanti arouses a sense of parental affection in Sanyasi’s heart. Vasanti tells the Sanyasi that she is considered as ‘pollution’ by the people at which the Sanyasi says: “But they are all that,-- all pollution. They roll in the dust of existence. Only he is pure who has washed away the world from his mind” (468).

The Sanyasi is a stoic, who is neither attached to nor detached from worldly objects. He knows no inequalities and considers all those humans impure who are caught in the tangle of worldly desires. He tells the girl that she is innocent and not impure. The girl however, is aware of the way the world treats her. When the Sanyasi asks her to come closer to him, she is utterly surprised. She asks the Sanyasi, “Will you touch me?” (468). The girl feels “deserted by gods and men alike” (468). After the death of her father, she
has been left to fend for herself in a hostile society. No one treats her kindly except the
Sanyasi. She asks Sanyasi, “...Tell me, is there no shelter for me in the whole world?”
(469). She further says:

Father, this creeper trailing on the glass, seeking some tree to twine itself
round, is my creeper. I have tended it and watered it from the time when it
had pushed up only two little leaves into the air, like an infant’s cry. This
creeper is me, - it has grown by the roadside, it can so easily be crushed
(472).

As Sanyasi’s attachment grows towards the little girl he fears that he will move away
from the infinite. He considers her to be the “messenger of the unknown”. In his rage he
tears the creeper apart and leaves that helpless girl as he is not prepared to allow himself
to be trapped in worldly illusions. For him this world is “kingdom of lies” (464). Tagore
depicts the pathetic condition of the little girl and the naiveté of the ascetic:

Vasanti: Leave me not father - I have none else but you.

Sanyasi: I must go, I thought I had known- but I do not know. Yet I must
know. I leave you, to know who you are.

Vasanti: Father, if you leave, I shall die.

Sanyasi: Let go my hand. Do not touch me. I must be free. (473)

Thus, the Sanyasi runs away from the little girl. In course of time, he realises he is
unable to live without Vasanti. He realises the blunder he committed by deserting the
little girl. He undoes his vows of Sanyasi and comes back to shower his love on the girl, breaking his staff and alms-bowl. In pain, he cries out:

This stately ship, this world, which is crossing the sea of time, - let it take me up again.....The bird flies in the sky, not to fly away in the emptiness, but to come back again to this great earth.- I am free. I am free from the bodiless chain of the Nay. I am free among the things and forms and purpose. (477)

Thus, he returns to Vasanti singing: “The finite is the true infinite, and love knows its truth. My girl, you are the spirit of all that is, - I can never leave you” (478).

Unfortunately, the realisation dawns on him too late. By the time he reaches the village, the girl is already dead. The death of the little girl shocks him and he accepts that true emancipation can only be achieved through bonds of human affection. Thus, Tagore gives a message of love and equality among all human beings. Tagore’s treatment of the caste and class disparities that destroys the fabric of society is sensitive and profound. Through Chandalika, Natir Puja and Sanyasi he brings to the fore the need for a reassessment of the barriers created by man himself. These plays epitomise the dream of a new world, where these boundaries of caste and class can be dissolved once and for all.

Tagore’s views were shaped by his reading of the Upanishads and the Buddhist philosophy. He felt that his countrymen must enlighten themselves through the wisdom of the sacred books which embody the essence of the Indian values since ancient times.
Tagore borrowed his themes from classical sources, Buddhist legends as well as myths from the great Hindu epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. *Karna and Kunti* (1897) is a beautiful dramatisation of dialogue between the castaway son Karna and socially conscious mother Kunti. The well known story from the *Mahabharata* reveals the relationship between the mother and the son:

The Pandava Queen Kunti before marriage had a son, Karna, who, in manhood, became the commander of the Kaurva host. To hide her shame she abandoned him at birth, and a charioteer, Adhiratha, brought him up as his son. (Tagore 561)

Like Gandhari and Duryodhana in *Gandhari’s Prayer*, in *Karna and Kunti*:

...Tagore snaps another pair, another mother and another ill fated son:

Kunti the mother of the Pandavas and her eldest son, Karna, whom she had cast away as a first-born baby on the waters. It is a lacerating soul-searing scene. Kunti too is the mother of sorrows, she too is great because she has suffered as few have suffered, and Karna is great because fate has played with him and cast him for a cruelly difficult role. But now mother and son try to salvage what even at this late hour is possible from general wreckage. (Iyenger 139)

The play is set on the bank of the holy river Ganga, which stands for purity and uninterrupted flow of life. The themes of the play are the conflict between illegitimacy and unmarried motherhood, traditional social values and eternal love of a mother for the
child, and that of a child for the mother. As a result of Kunti’s invocation of the Sun god in the days of her virginity, Karna was born, but in order to keep her social image untarnished, the unmarried mother Kunti left him flowing on the waters of the holy Ganga, and a charioteer, Adhiratha, brought him up as his son.

Karna though a Kshatriya by birth but being brought up in lower caste household, is not allowed to participate in royal arms trial and to prove his strength. Dronacharya, a Brahmin and master of arms would not allow him to do so: “No youth of mean birth may challenge Arjuna to a trial of strength” (562). It was Duryodhana who perceived Karna’s worth and then and there crowned him King of Anga. Karna laid his crown at his father Adiratha’s feet and proved “the heroic pride of such humility” (562).

The play focuses on the love of the mother for the child. Though Kunti had deserted Karna because of compelling social circumstances, she still wanted him to have his rightful place in society. However, she was unable to do so until the most crucial stage of the battle of Kurukshetra arrives. As in the epic itself, in this play, Kunti comes to Karna to accept him as her eldest son, saying, “Your place is before all my other sons” (562). Karna not recognising her, asks her of her identity, then she says, “I am the woman who first made you acquainted with that light, you are worshipping” (561). May be Kunti has approached Karna at this stage out of sheer love for him, but the greater possibility is that she offers him his rightful place in order to make him spare Arjuna, whom he has taken a vow to kill. She is prepared to take him to her breast thirsting for his love, but for fear of social humiliation and disgrace, she cannot claim him as her son at social level. Karna not believing her and unaware of his royal descent asks, “Fortunate mother of five brave kings, where can you find place for me, a small chieftain of lowly descent?” (562)
Karna, abandoned as an innocent baby, now a fully grown up man and warrior, seeing his mother before him, in his heart of hearts, is overcome with strange emotions:

I do not understand: But your eyes melt my heart as the kiss of the morning sun melts the snow on a mountaintop, and your voice rouses a blind sadness within me of which the cause may well lie beyond the reach of my earliest memory. (565)

Kunti wants him to come with her to the side of Pandavas and take his rightful place. However, Kama expresses the pain of an abandoned child:

Am I there to find my lost mother forever? ...Then why did you banish me—a castaway uprooted from my ancestral soil, adrift in a homeless current of indignity? Why set a bottomless chasm between Arjuna and myself, turning the natural attachment of kinship to the dread attraction of hate? ...What made you rob your son of his mother’s love! (563-64)

Kunti again implores him to join the Pandava’s side: “Come and receive, as a king’s son, your due among your brothers” (564). But Kama rejects this proposal saying:

I am more truly the son of a charioteer, and do not covet the glory of greater parentage....Must you, who once refused me a mother’s love, tempt me with a Kingdom? The quick bond of kindred which you severed at its root is dead, and can never grow again. Shame were mine should I hasten to call the mother of kings mother, and abandon my mother in the charioteer’s house! (564)
Karna is a true warrior, representing manhood, heroism, loyalty, faith and friendship. He sides with Duryodhana because of the latter's obligations, while he knows clearly that the Pandavas shall win ultimately. He says, "Mother, have no fear! I know for certain that victory awaits the Pandavas" (565). He, being a Kshatriya, is always prepared to help others. He can offer at the feet of his mother anything that his manhood and his honour as a Kshatriya permit. He shows great nobility and does not want to go into the details of his abandonment by his mother. He says to her, "Never explain to me what made you rob your son of his mother's love! Only tell me why you have come today to call me back to the ruins of a heaven wrecked by your own hands?" (564)

The dialogue comes to an end with Karna's refusal to join the Pandavas. He, being a man of principles, loyalty and commitment, cannot leave his friend Duryodhana in the lurch. Karna's concluding words to his mother show his humanity and magnanimity:

Ask me not to leave those who are doomed to defeat. Let the Pandavas win the throne, since they must: I remain with the desperate and forlorn. On the night of my birth you left me naked and unnamed to disgrace. Leave me once again without pity to the calm expectation of defeat and death. (565)

Through the Mahabharata myth of Karna's birth and his emergence as a great warrior, who has become a potent threat to the life of the Pandavas, particularly of Arjuna, Tagore presents a dialogue between the illegitimate and abandoned son Karna and the unmarried mother (later on the wife of Pandu and the mother of the five Pandavas) Kunti. Through
this dialogue the playwright presents a conflict between social taboos and human emotions. He projects Kunti as a sorrowing mother and Karna as an abandoned son languishing for mother’s love and blessings. Kunti stands for the predicament of an unmarried mother torn between regard for the norms of morality and love for her son; on the other hand, Karna represents those who are born to face ignominy.

Tagore was religious not in a traditional orthodox sense. He was a mystic and believed in God. He was a humanist and believed in the equality of all. In Karna and Kunti, he puts on trial a myth that has seldom been questioned. Throughout history, Kunti and the Pandavas have been invariably glorified. Giving a new dimension to this myth, he underscores the caste and class conflict that the relationship between Karna and Kunti epitomises. According to Tagore, society stagnates when the relations between different sections become artificial. The moment the scale between the high and the low is tilted, jolts are inevitable. Historically speaking, the dominant sections in society have always turned to the weaker sections whenever their authority is threatened or challenged:

In the mechanism of social welfare Tagore insisted on two basic propositions. First, the common people have to be served with sympathy and understanding. Service is to be doled out, not with indifference or contempt. Social welfare is not an act of condescension; it is to be pursued as a matter of social obligation. Thus, the social conscience of the individual is to be awakened. Secondly, we invite corrosion of our strength and vitality when we tyrannise and exploit others. By weakening the common people, leaders of society weaken themselves. (Naravane 102)
Tagore puts his case as, "when we take away the swords of others, our own swords become definitely arbitrary. That is the greatest disaster to mankind" (qtd. in Naravane 103). Hence, Tagore stated it as his fundamental philosophy:

The spirit of harmony becomes widespread throughout the country when the path of relationship between the distant and the near, between the present and the future is cleared of all eddies and obstructions. Man grows when mind is active and mobile. Man can acquire strength when man knows how to widen his horizon and expand his activities. (Naravane 103)

Thus, Tagore's plays are a significantly represent the discourse which gives full throated voice to the modern man's subtle means of exploitation and to examine it in the Indian context, as a social construct arising out of imperialist politics. He does not advocate traditions blindly nor does he disregard the Indian values mindlessly. There is inherent a blend of tradition and modernity in Tagore's drama. He places emphasis on traditional wisdom but rejects useless vestiges of traditions that hamper progress of humanity.

Tagore dared to touch upon the subject of untouchability in that day and age when people did not exactly look down upon this practice. It was largely acceptable. His oeuvre, therefore, is particularly significant because of the underlying revolutionary zeal that marks it. Dealing with the marginalised and the oppressed sections of society, Tagore's drama highlights the fact that, essentially all human beings are the same – their hopes, fears, passions, desires emotions have the same intensity. By foregrounding this aspect his drama attempts to reverse the traditional core-periphery equation, that is, those who live on the margin are brought centre stage. His protest may not be of a very strong nature
yet it is subtly, but firmly conveyed. The need to show compassion towards the underdog is part of the emphasis his drama places on doing away with the orthodox conventions of society.