Chapter II

Man, Machine and the Maker: Conflict and Note of Protest

The origin of the Indian theatre is attributed to religious rituals. The sole purpose of ritual drama was to provide entertainment to the playgoers. During the heyday of classical drama, the focus remained on form, technique and stagecraft. Sometimes, entertainment was combined with instruction, but not invariably so. With the passage of time, drama underwent several experiments. Besides entertainment it also began to highlight many issues of social and political importance becoming a source of social awareness.

The theme of protest is not alien to Indian drama. In the recent times, this genre has gained popularity all over the country. But in the early years of the twentieth century, this tradition was more visible in Bengali drama. When Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote the play The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta in the year 1831, it carried the seeds of protest. The play was an open revolt against the prevalent social and religious prejudices in our country. In his preface to the play, Banerji observes:

Inconsistencies and the bleakness of the influential members of the Hindoo community have been depicted before their eyes. They will now clearly perceive the wiles and tricks of the Brahmans [sic] and thereby be able to guard themselves against them. (qtd. in Naik 98)
Banerji’s plays were an expression of sporadic protest in society against orthodox practices. Such views gained momentum with the upsurge of ideas from the west among other things.

In the year 1857, when the ‘Great Revolt’ occurred, Ram Narayan Tarakratna wrote *Kulin-Kul-Sarbasva*. This play attacked the practice of polygamy among the upper caste men. Significantly, drama during the period had completely become the drama of social relevance. Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Nildarpan* was a protest play where Mitra brings to the fore the ruthless oppression of Bengali peasants by British Indigo planters.

Such was the literary background inherited by Rabindranath Tagore, who emerged as a rebel dramatist protesting against the prevalent social evils. It was not just the genre of drama in which Tagore emerges as a severe critic of the dogmatic institutions of society. This protest is reflected in his poems, stories and essays too, where he often criticises the evil customs and superstitious beliefs. In Tagore’s plays there can also be found an undertone of spirituality. His plays, like his poetry embody a streak of mysticism, which is not inhibited by narrow concerns but characterised by the universal values of love, unity, brotherhood and compassion. True to his liberal background, he was invariably against religious bigotry, fanaticism, and other malpractices arising out of a misconceived sense of religion. In fact, he unequivocally attacked worn out and useless conventions that hampered the progress of mankind.

Tagore’s writings emphatically convey that mere animal existence can never be man’s destiny. His idea of civilisation consists in going beyond bare subsistence. He holds that man needs to discover his complete existence by realising his kinship with the
world, by establishing perfect harmony with the universe, by giving expression to his universal nature. Man, he firmly believes, has to be on the move; he has to come out of the shell of his self to widen the range of his feeling and the scope of his consciousness. The animal in man wants to gain power by acquisition; the universal in man achieves power by giving away and working in a detached way, by living the life of the soul, not of the self. Naravane observes that Tagore’s drama conveys the idea that “man is marching from epoch to epoch for his fuller realisation; he undergoes martyrdom for his freedom, for his self expression. Thus life is in movement; it does not stand still; it has to grow; it wants to go on” (101-02).

This theme of self-discovery in relation to fellow-men, Maker (God) and the whole universe is the major idea of his plays Red Oleander, Muktadhara, Sacrifice, Malini, Sanyasi and Achalayatan.

**Man and Machine**

The age in which Tagore lived was an age of scientific innovations and discoveries. Man was busy in the perennial hunt for materialistic powers. This resulted in misery, suffering and lack of happiness. Industrialism and capitalism grew side by side. Man was treated more like machine. In his plays Red Oleanders (Rakta Karabi) and The Waterfall (Muktadhara), Tagore presents a conflict between the machine and the free human spirit. In The Waterfall, he depicts the tyranny and oppression that results due to hunger of power. In Red Oleanders, he portrays a world of dead values, where greed for gold transforms man into a lifeless machine.
With the advancement in science and technology, human life has been endowed with much comfort. Achievements of science and technology have unfolded new horizon for humanity. "Science has liberated man from much of the tyranny of the environment but has not freed him from the tyranny of his own nature" (Das 57). So it is difficult to argue against the need for religion. Rabindranath Tagore’s drama conveys this idea in no uncertain terms.

*Red Oleanders (Rakta Karabi-1924)* is a symbolic play by Tagore. Written in a similar vein, is the play entitled, *The Waterfall*, which, incidentally, Edward Thompson considers as the ‘greatest of his symbolist plays’ (qtd. in Chakravorty 115). He wrote both these plays after he had returned from an extensive tour of Europe and America. Apparently the amorality of materialistic society and the dehumanising effect of a social order dominated by machines saddened and angered him. Both *Muktadhara* and *Raktakarabi* are a disapproval of a civilisation subjugated by these evils. In the October 1925 issue of *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* Tagore wrote of *Raktakarabi* that the purpose of the play was to show the avarice of western societies. He added that “the gain of affirmation (of acquisitiveness) is intensely real. Its hot breath is upon us, its touch all over our shrinking souls” (Raha 110-11). Both the plays affirm his faith in freedom, beauty and human dignity.

Tagore was an environmentalist in the modern sense of the term. What came to known as ‘eco-criticism’ in the later part of the twentieth century can very aptly be applied to Tagore’s drama on account of his sensitivity towards nature and environment. Tagore was certainly against manipulating natural resources. *Red Oleanders* and *The
Waterfall bring to the fore the concern of Tagore against indiscriminate abuse of shared natural wealth.

**Red Oleanders (Raktakarabi)**

The play *Red Oleander* is set in a strange town called Yakshapur. “Yakshapur or Yakshapuri literally means city of ‘Yakshas’. In Hindu mythology, the Yakshas form a class of demigods serving Kuber, appointed to guard the underground treasures of the earth” (Ray 214). Yakshapur town in the play has a similar implication.

The people of the town are enslaved to carry out the work of digging mines. They contribute to the riches of their King by extracting gold from those mines. Their king remains in the background. It is the Sardar, his Assistant and the Headman who rule in the name of the King. The miners have no identity of their own. Their life has become mechanised and they are exploited by the powerful for their greed of gold. They are not known by their names but by numbers. Thus, their individuality has been reduced to numbers. One of miners, Bishu says:

…There’s no such thing as getting finished here. We’re always digging—one yard, two yards, three yards. We go on raising gold nuggets, - after one nugget another, then more and more and more. In Yaksha Town figures follow one another in rows and never arrive at any conclusion. That’s why we are not men to them, but only numbers. (226)
These gold miners have to work hard continuously. Once they reach Yaksha Kingdom there is no way to go back home. One of the miners says, “The road to our home is closed for ever....we are closely fitted to their profits only,—like husks to grains of corn,—with nothing of us left over?” (222). Here they do not enjoy freedom and wish to go back to their village: “Freedom itself was enough for the holidays in our village. The caged bird spends its holiday knocking against the bars. In Yaksha town holidays are more of a nuisance than work” (222). In his essay “The Spirit of Freedom”. Tagore’s comments on the loss of freedom in India, reeling under the yoke of the British rule are reminiscent of the plight of these miners, whose suffering seems interminable.

By squeezing human beings in the grip of an inelastic system and forcibly holding them fixed, we have ignored the laws of life and growth. We have forced living souls into a permanent passivity, making them incapable of moulding circumstance to their own intrinsic design, and of mastering their own destiny. Borrowing our ideal of life from a dark period of our degeneracy, we have covered up our sensitiveness of soul under the immovable weight of a remote past. We have set up an elaborate ceremonial of cage-worship, and plucked all the feathers from the wings of the living spirit of our people. (Tagore “The spirit of Freedom”)

The feathers of the living spirit of the miners in Yakshapuri too seem to have been plucked. Their sense of rebellion, however, is unmistakably evident. Tagore’s message is that the spirit of freedom cannot be suppressed eternally. Bishu plays a very significant role in the play. His words are full of meaning and carry a sense of revolt. He has very
clearly understood the system of Yaksha Kingdom. Talking to his friend Phagulal, he observes:

Your Governor has closed the ways as well as the will to return. If you go there to-day you will fly back here to-morrow, like a caged bird to its cage, hankering for its drugged food. (225)

These words highlight the bondage to which the miners are subjected. There is no end to their exploitation. They do not get adequate money in return for the hard work they put in. Moreover, once a person has entered the town he can never leave it till death because:

“...As soon as one enters the maw of Yaksha Town, its jaws fasten, and the one road that remains open leads inwards” (225).

Thus, the miners live and die in this world of gold where they have been robbed of the spirit of life. The situation remains dismal till Nandini comes to the town. Representing the spirit of love and liberty, she inspires the workers to rise up in rebellion. The Professor describes her as the “beautiful one, is not of the dust, but of the light which never owns any bond” (214). She wears a bracelet of red oleanders. “The red flowers become the identification of her courage. The red oleander is a symbol of love, passion, vitality, courage, beauty and nature” (Naik 70). And Nandini possesses all these virtues. She makes the workers revolt against the brutality of the Sardar. And she is successful in luring the King to come out of his locked doors and put an end to the bondage of the miners. The whole scenario changes as awakens the workers to the realisation of what they are losing. To see the miners digging the mines endlessly, Nandini is astonished. She says:
It puzzles me to see a whole city thrusting its head underground, groping with both hands in the dark. You dig tunnels in the underworld and come out with dead wealth that the earth has kept buried for ages past. (214)

She wonders as to what these people are trying to dig from the dead treasure of many yugas, which lies buried in the earth. Nandini is distressed to see the young men of the town who have been reduced to skeletons. The Professor aptly remarks: “those small ones continue becoming ashes, and the great one continues burning as a flame. This is the essence of becoming great.” (167) Thus, Nandini is astonished to see the world where people are busy collecting money but have no time for love and leisure. The Professor describes the town to Nandini:

Yaksha Town is a city under eclipse. The Shadow Demon, who lives in the gold caves, has eaten into it. It is not whole itself, neither does it allow anyone else to remain whole. (216)

Finally, Nandini decides to see the King of the Yakshapuri kingdom. She learns that the King is not visible to anyone for he remains locked behind the doors. The King merely represents an “awesome force, strained of inhumanity” (143), who exploits the innocent workers. But Nandini is successful in teaching the King the real meaning of freedom.

When she learns that Bishu has been arrested and whipped she decides to break “the golden chains” (155). Nandini looks up to her husband Ranjan to fight the mechanised monsters of town. Ranjan is a rebel, who has resolved to bring God’s own laughter to the labourers. Unfortunately, he is killed at the behest of Sardar. The realisation dawns upon Nandini that it is not so much the fault of the King that the
common people are suffering, but it is the Sardar who is merciless and uncouth. She informs the King about the treachery of the Sardar. The King realises that he has been tricked. His helplessness is evident in these lines: "These people have tricked me. Disastrous! My own machine doesn’t obey me. Call, you people, call and bring the Sardar, bring him tied up" (182).

Thus, begins the rebellion against the life of bondage. The death of Ranjan flares up the revolt. The workers join hands with Nandini to break the network of gold to pieces. Thus, the imprisoned human spirit is ultimately freed.

Ranjan’s death not only crumbles the network of the king but it also brings a sudden transformation in the King. He tears the flag and breaks the staff. The world of crass materialism and industrialism crumbles and love and freedom are realised as representing the spirit of life. Sombu Mitra rightly says: “This play has in it a total picture of the crisis of civilisation of ‘contemporary’ world. It deals with the frightful dilemma of the modern man in the grip of an acquisitive society” (qtd. in Naik 71).

Thus, Nandini and Ranjan are rebels in the true sense of the term. They free the humanity from the bondage of exploitation. In the materialistic world of Yakshapuri both of them stand for the spirit of life. According to Tagore, “Nandini is the torch bearer for the oppressed. Ranjan is the symbol of joy in work, and together they embody the spirit of life. They bring down the barricade, but in the process they are broken’ (qtd. in Naik 71). However, their sacrifice does not go in vain. They successfully spread the message of the true secrets of life, love, affection and freedom.
The play brings to the fore the idea that with the growth of capitalism and industrialism, the exploitation of man has increased. Man's importance is negligible as compared to that of the machine. The machine rules and man's identity is reduced merely to numbers.

Tagore's faith in humanistic values and culture was absolute. He strongly believed that mindless pursuit of materialistic wealth would lead man to total degeneration. He noted that the equilibrium that exists between man and nature was being threatened by the "entropy of material wealth and prosperity" (Museindia, 'The Religion of the Forest' 2).

**The Waterfall (Mukta Dhara)**

In *The Waterfall* as well, Tagore openly revolts against the machine age. The character of Prince Abhijit is Tagore's voice of rebellion against depravity and exploitation of man caused by machine. He is the hero of the play who saves his people from tyranny and bondage. His death declares the triumph of the spirit of man against machine. Dhananjay, the ascetic is another rebel in the play who teaches people to fear none but God. He gives them the lesson to be strong to fight exploitation and free themselves from the shackles of oppression.

The play opens with the celebration of the dam that is erected on Mukta-dhara—the waterfall—by Bibhuti, the royal engineer. Mukta-dhara is a mountain spring which reaches Shiv-tarai by flowing down the slopes of Uttarakut. The people of Shiv-tarai are subjects of the King Ranajit of Uttarakut. In order to enforce his power more effectively,
the king of Uttarkut exploits them economically. He gets a dam erected to prevent the waters of Mukta-dhara to reach the plains of Shiv-tarai. The dam has been planned and built under the supervision of the royal engineer Bibhuti, utilising the resources of modern science as well as with the help of the recruited labour. Bibhuti successfully achieves the feat, though with considerable loss of life.

As the play opens the people are busy in the celebrations after the dam has been completed and a religious festival is arranged in the honour of the Machine. A pilgrim passes by Uttarakut and he sees the dam. He is awestruck to see the dam:

What’s that, up in the sky there? It’s a fearsome sight....It looks like a demon’s head, a grinning skeleton head, lying in wait to devour your city in its sleep. To have it before your eyes night and day will dry up your souls like dead wood. (*Three Plays*, 10)

To him the construction of dam “seems like blasphemy that it should soar so high above the temple tower.” (10) He feels that the height of the dam is more than the temple, symbolising the empowerment of demons over God.

It is believed that the water of Mukta-dhara is a gift of Lord Bhairava. With the erection of the dam the God has been defiled. For this reason the people of Uttarakut and the King offer worship to Bhairava to beg forgiveness for the gross defiance. Moreover the erection of dam has led to death and starvation in Shiv-tarai. The people are deprived of water and still they have to pay the taxes. But Bibhuti is full of professional pride; he has nothing to offer to the gods. He says: “To them the gods gave only water; to me they gave power to imprison the water” (12).
Bibhuti has no concern for the number of human lives that have been lost while the dam was being built. He believes that the deaths that occurred during the construction of the dam are not a cause for mourning: "Their lives were not given in vain. My dam is completed" (12). His lack of humaneness and impudence is evident in these lines:

The purpose of my dam was that human intelligence should win through to its goal, though sand and stone and water all conspired to block its path. I had no time to think whether some farmer's paltry maize crop would die.... My thoughts are full of the splendour of the power of the Machine.

(12)

He does not even fear the curse of God. In his pride he says:

Curses! See here, at one time there were no labourers to be had in Uttarkut....we seized every boy of eighteen years upwards. Most of them never returned. All their mothers cursed me, yet my machine has triumphed. When a man fights the power of gods, does he care for the curses of men? (13)

Bibhuti is untouched by the suffering of the people of Shiv-tarai and very proud of his achievement.

Messenger: Cannot the wailing of the hungry break upon your thoughts?

Bibhuti: No. The rushing waters cannot break my dam and the stress of their tears cannot shake my Machine. (13)
He challenges the gods themselves. "The gods? – in the strength of my Machine I can take over their divine office myself, and undertake to prove it." (13) It is also evident from the discussion of citizens of Uttarkut and Shiv-tarai:

Third citizen: He has got your drinking water in his hands, you innocents; and unless he chooses to let you have it, you will all dry up like toads when the rain falls.

Second Shiv: Our water in Bibhuti’s hands? Has he suddenly become a God?

Second Citizen: He has sent the gods about their business and is going to take on the job himself. (43)

Not content with denying water to the people of Shiv-tarai, Bibhuti wishes to close the Nandi pass to prevent them food supply as well. For this purpose, he shall need a many men ready to die. The King’s guard Kankar tells him that there is no lack of men to die, “if we have men to ship them up.” (70) This highlights the brutality and barbaric attitude of the higher authorities. But Prince Abhijit, who symbolises compassion and sincerity, opens the Nandi pass road “to save the people of Shiv-tarai from continual famine” (31). The construction of the dam symbolises total disregard towards human life. The play brings to the fore the basic conflict in Tagore’s drama between man and nature.

The King and Bibhuti have no sympathy for the starving people of Shiv-tarai. Dhananjaya, the ascetic requests the King to end the exploitation of humanity and free the people from bondage. But King pays no regard to his words because he is full of greed. Dhananjaya, finally warns him:
He who gives all, keeps all; greed brings you only stolen goods, and they won't last. There is your mistake. What you seize by violence can never be yours. What you set free is yours for ever. (47)

The King puts the ascetic behind the bars as a punishment for his courage. Finally comes prince Abhijit, who revolts against his own father, to provide the deprived subjects what is theirs by right. The first step he takes in his revolt is the opening of the Nandi pass. The King has closed it to prevent the supply of food to the people of Shiv-tarai. One of the royal guards says that the King is ready to help the people but Abhijit refuses: “I have opened the road by which food may freely come and go. I cannot bear to see a poverty that depends on charity.” (32) His next task is to locate a weak point in the dam and break it to prevent the deprivation and starvation of his people.

The Crown Prince Abhijit is aware of the fact that he is not part of the royal pedigree. He was picked up by the King from near the source of Mukta-dhara. ‘This unexpected revelation profoundly affects his mind, making him believe that his life has a spiritual relationship with this waterfall: that its voice was the first voice which greeted him with a message when he came to the world. From that moment onwards, the fulfillment of that message has become the sole aim of his life, which is to open out paths for the adventurous spirit of Man’ (Three Plays, An Appreciation 4).

The prince cannot see his mother Mukta-dhara in bondage. He says: “I must pay my debt, the debt of my birth. Mukta-dhara was my nurse. I must set her free” (57). Abhijit believes “…it is my destiny on earth; my river of life must run free, overleaping
the palace walls" (28). He feels himself to be in a prison when he comes to know that Mukta-dhara had been dammed up.

Prince Abhijit professes open sympathy for the people of Shiv-tarai and protests against Bibhuti’s soulless achievement. Now he has only one mission in the life—to save his people from being overpowered and enslaved. Ultimately, he decides to guard the grace and beauty of Shiv-tarai. The Prince determines to sacrifice his life in an attempt to liberate the imprisoned current by applying force at a point which he happens to know was weakly built. He breaks the dam at that weak point. The leaping torrent breaks free, carrying away the body of its foster child in its turbulent rush. The strong current of the flowing water sweeps away Abhijit along with it. His brother Sanjaya, cries out: “Mukta-dhara, like a mother, took up his wounded body in her arms, and carried him away” (76).

Abhijit’s sacrifice brings freedom to the people of Shiva-tarai. They are saved from starvation and death. Thus, in Mukta-dhara “freedom from a heartless and unjust system comes through the martyrdom of the prince Abhijit” (Ghose 64).

The King as well as the bulk of the people of Uttarkut (for the little imperialism depicted in the play is of the modern ‘democratic’ type in which the people are more ‘royal’ than their ruler, where a subject race is concerned) are very proud of the Machine and quite confident that the poor and defenseless people of Shiv-tarai will now for ever be at their mercy. Neither the recurring wail of the poor, demented mother, looking for her son, one of the conscripted victims sacrificed in the building of the dam, nor the
warnings of the simple, god-fearing folk who presage ill for such colossal pride and
greed, touch their hearts. (*Three Plays, An Appreciation* 3)

The author has re-introduced into the play that remarkable character, the ascetic
Dhanajaya, who first appeared in *Prayashchita (Atonement)*, published in 1909 (*Three
Plays, An Appreciation* 4). Dhanajaya, the Vairagi teaches the people to resist their
ruler's unjust claims non-violently but fearlessly. He exhorts the subjugated people:

As soon as you can hold up your head and say that it does not hurt, the
roots of violence will be cut...Nothing can hurt your real manhood, for
that is a flame of fire. The animal, that is flesh, feels the blow and whines.
But you stand there gaping- don't you understand? (36)

A disciple answers that they understand him but not his words. They are afraid of the
King but Dhananjaya is fearless:

First Shiv. : You are not afraid of the king, but we are.

Dhananjaya: Yes, you are, because in your hearts you still want to injure.
I have no wish to injure, and so I have no fear. Fear fastens its fangs only
in those who hate. (38)

He further says:

What is worse than being crippled in one leg? Kingship is crippled, if is
the King's alone, and not the people's. You may shiver with fright to see
that one-legged kingship limp along, but the eyes of the gods fill with tears.
For the king's own sake, men, you must demand your kingship. (39)
Like Abhijit he is also embodiment of rebel against the atrocities of rulers upon their subjects and tries hard to let people know their own strength and stop subduing to the power of King.

He ensures people of Shiv-tarai who are afraid that king would not listen to their entreaties and would drive them out by acknowledging:

When a higher than the king approves your claim, the king’s violence will drive out the king....Shall I tell you truth my friends? No claim to the throne can stand, neither the king’s nor the people, if you do not recognise it to be His. A throne is no place for getting puffed up, but for folding the hands in prayer....You can’t rule your own spirits, yet you run after an outward kingdom. A king takes his seat on a throne, but a throne does not make a king. (39-40)

Tagore’s philosophy unequivocally condemns the subjugation of man by machine. ‘All through the play sounds the menace of God’s gathering anger at the hardness of men’s hearts and the sordidness of their hopes’ (Three Plays, An Appreciation 7). The words of the messenger of Prince Abhijit succinctly sum up the playwright’s message: “You have built your monument and won your fame, says the Yuvaraja. Now break it down yourself, and win a greater fame” (13). Mukta Dhara is one of the most moving and well-knit of Tagore’s drama. Edward Thompson has called it ‘the best of his prose dramas’ (Three Plays, An Appreciation 6).

‘His deep distrust of all government machinery and of all prostitution of science to serve violence and oppression, his hatred of a slavish system of education, his scorn of
race-hatred and of all politics which seek to make one tribe dependent on another instead of risking the gift of the fullest freedom, his certitude that it is in freedom that God is found- all these are so prominent that each may with justice be claimed as the play's message. Through all, as a tender undertone, runs the murmur of the Free Current, a haunting sound in the soul of the boy whose foster-mother she was and whose lifeless body, after he has broken her fetters, her waves are to carry majestically away' (*Three Plays*, An Appreciation 7).

B. C. Chakravorty says it correctly that 'the machine is the manifestation of man's power and as such has its significance and value in life. As long as it is subservient to the beauty and joy of life, as long as it increases the happiness of man it has a right to exist. But when it threatens to crush the spirit of man, when it becomes an instrument of tyranny and drags him down to the level of sub-human existence, it forfeits its right to existence.' (140) But in the conflict that arises between man and machine, Tagore emphasises that the machine must be defeated not by a strong machine but by the invincible spirit of man.

In the play *Muktadahra* the machine is destroyed by the sacrifice of a living man, crown prince Abhijit. Bibhuti and Abhijit stand in contrast to each other. As Chakravorty puts it:

If Bibhuti is the representative of the world of today, Abhijit the crown prince is the messenger of the world of tomorrow.... Bibhuti stands for the victory of the machine, while Abhijit stands for the victory of humanity. (140-41)
The destruction of the machine is with the purpose of creating a better and happier human subsistence. Chakravorty further asserts that *Muktadhara* presents the most pressing problem of today and suggests the remedy. According to him *Muktadhara* is a great play with "its forceful presentation of a modern problem" (141), of man and machine dichotomy.

Tagore's drama is a celebration of the invincible spirit of man. Thus, man should not allow himself to be conquered by machine. It is the machine, which must be subjugated by the indomitable spirit of man. For Tagore it was of highest importance that people be able to live, and reason, in freedom. His attitudes towards politics and culture, nationalism and internationalism, tradition and modernity, can all be seen in the light of this belief.

Rabindranath's qualified support for nationalist movements- and his opposition to the bondage of alien rule- came from this commitment. So did his reservations about patriotism, which, he argued, can limit both the freedom to engage ideas from outside 'narrow domestic walls' and the freedom to support the causes of people in other countries. Rabindranath’s passion for freedom underlines his firm opposition to unreasoned traditionalism, which makes one a prisoner of the past "lost", as he puts it, in "the dreary desert sand of dead habit" (Sen 98).

**Man and the Maker**

Tagore believes that detachment does not come to man naturally; he cannot lead an isolated existence. At every step man is to take into account others and to show the
universality of his being. “In us we have the world-man who is immortal. Man is great when he reveals, not so when he displays” (Naravane 102).

Buddhism had an enormous impact upon Rabindranath Tagore. He was deeply impressed by its middle path concept. Simplicity and universality of the religion of Buddha moved him deeply. Buddhism observed tolerance towards other religions. Non-violence towards others was the living principle of Ahimsa. Sacrifice and Malini are the plays with Buddhist theme of Ahimsa in the background.

**Sacrifice**

Tagore consistently condemned certain religious notions that were prevalent in our society. One such notion was the sacrifice of animals in the form of offering to God. In the play Sacrifice, Tagore attacks the age-old convention of sacrificing animals before Goddess Kali. In the year 1890 Tagore had used the same plot for his play Visarjan that was written in blank verse. He translated the play into English as Sacrifice in the year 1917.

*Sacrifice* is one of Tagore’s most powerful plays. It developed out of his novel Rajashri (*The Saint King or The Royal Sage, 1887*), which in turn was the outcome of a dream which Tagore had during a train journey. In his dream he saw a girl and her father standing on the steps of a temple. Over these steps blood was flowing and the girl kept on asking, “Why this blood?” (*Rabindranath Tagore’s Sanyasi and Sacrifice* 25). To this dream Tagore added the story of the King of Tripura who introduced Vaishvanism in his state.
Tagore presents a conflict between the King and the priest over the question of animal sacrifice in kingdom. The introductory note of the play is dedicated to the heroes who revolted against such practices and sacrificed their own lives for the same cause. The note reads:

I dedicate this play

To those heroes who

Bravely stood for peace

When human sacrifice

Was claimed for the

Goddess of war. (Collected Poems and Plays 502)

In the play, Queen Gunvati offers worship to the goddess by sacrificing the goat of a beggar girl, Aparna and refers to that goat as mere “beast of sacrifice” (503). The Queen is childless and the priest Raghupati tells her that this sacrifice would fill her empty womb. The priest assures the queen:

Our mother (Goddess of War) is all caprice, she knows no law, our sorrows and joys are mere freaks of her mind. Have patience, daughter, today we shall offer special sacrifice in your name to please her. (503)

The tears of Aparna, whose pet goat had been sacrificed before the image of Goddess Kali, moves king Govinda, the ruler of the kingdom of Tripura. Aparna’s love and tenderness for the goat was extraordinary. Therefore, the killing of the goat comes to her
as a shock. She questions the king as to where she should complain about this cruel act in the name of Goddess. Jaising, the son of Raghupati, the priest tries to convince Aparna by saying that she should not shed her tears for her goat as the goddess herself has accepted that goat as offering. But Aparna says: “Mother has taken? It is a lie. Not mother, but demon.” (504)

In these lines Tagore makes it clear that the practice of sacrificing animals to please gods is abominable as this is not a devout act but a demonic show. Aparna in her grief asks: “Mother, art thou there to rob a poor girl of her love? Then where is the throne before which to condemn thee? Tell me King” (504).

But the King has no answer, he is speechless. He is unable to react or to take any action. The misery of the little girl who has lost her dear animal really perturbs the King. Aparna says:

This blood-streak running down the steps is it his? Oh, my darling, when you trembled and cried for dear life, why did your call not reach my heart through the whole deaf world? (504)

These words signify the agony of Aparna who has lost the dearest thing of hers. People, who are imprisoned by orthodox beliefs, show no mercy towards her goat. It is brutally killed by them. But the King is deeply moved and comprehends the cruelty inherent in the age old convention and forbids the practice of the ritual of animal sacrifice in his kingdom. This proclamation is deeply resented by Raghupati which starts the conflict between the King and the Priest. The priest of the temple says that a King has no right to defy the laws of the God. He calls the King as “Atheist” and “Apostate”. The King calls
his decision as “awakening” rather than a defiance of Goddess. He says: “It is awakening. Mother came to me, in a girl’s disguise, and told me that blood she [Goddess] cannot suffer” (505).

King: No dream father. It is awakening. Mother came to me, in a girl’s disguise, and told me that blood she cannot suffer.

Raghupati: She has been drinking blood for ages. Whence comes this loathing all of a sudden? (505)

The priest is full of anger over this decision. He believes that he is the authority in religious matters so the King has no right to take such decisions. The following dialogue makes clear the consciousness of caste superiority of Brahmins: “I warn you, think and consider. You have no power to alter laws laid down in scriptures.” (505)

To this the King gives an appropriate answer by saying that, “The God’s words are above all laws....God’s words are ever ringing in the world, and he who is willfully deaf cannot hear them” (505). The priest Raghupati is full of caste consciousness. He states: “King’, I never bent my knees to any mortal in my life. I am a Brahmin” (527).

The priests believe themselves to be of a superior creed and are of the opinion that the knowledge of scriptures and the right to religious decisions is their sole right. Raghupati asks the King to give “back to the Brahmins what is theirs by right” (510). However, these words have no effect on the King because he can no more let the temple be flooded with animal blood. He says:
It is not the Brahmin’s right to violate the external good. The creature’s blood is not the offering for gods. And it is within the rights of the King and the peasant alike to maintain truth and righteousness. (511)

The priests believe that the King is trying to “usurp god’s dominions” and depriving Brahmins of their rights. (507)

King: We dare not delay to uproot sin from our realm.

Minister: Sin can never have such a long lease of life. Could they be sinful, - the rites that have grown old at the feet of the goddess? (506)

Minister further tries to argue: “Our ancestors have performed these rites with reverence; can you have the heart to remove it?” (506) But to this the King has only one answer: “From to-day shedding of blood in God’s temples is forbidden in my land” (509).

These arguments between the King and the priest take the shape of a revolt. The priest wants to punish the king for disobeying the scriptures. He instigates King’s brother Nakshatra to kill the King, but does not succeed. Finally, he summons his own son, Jaising, to kill the King and bring the royal blood as an offering to the goddess.

Raghupati’s wounded pride makes him grossly insensitive. He tries to instill the same feeling in his son Jaising, by impressing upon him not to think of this act as sinful: “To kill is but to kill—it is neither the sin nor anything else. Do you know that the dust of this earth is made of countless killings?” (517)

Jaising is shocked to hear such words from his father. In Sacrifice there are “two kinds of conflicts: External and internal. The external conflict takes place mainly between
king Govinda and Raghupati. The internal conflict takes place in most acute form in the
mind of Jai Sing. This conflict arises in his mind in the form of doubt and questioning in
the beginning of the scene, when Aparna asserts that it is not Mother but Demon who has
taken the life of her pet goat” (Chakravorty 118). He is in love with the beggar girl,
Aparna. But he feels that love has no significance in this world, which has had a long
history of bloody wars. He realises that there is no place for love even in his father’s heart.
Utterly sad and disappointed, he observes:

Is, then, love a falsehood and mercy a mockery, and the one thing true,
from beginning of time, the lust for destruction? [...] The Mother, who is
thirsting for our love, you accuse of blood thirstiness. (517-18)

This perplexity grows deeper as the play progresses. As Chakravorty observes:

The conflict between the dictates of conscience and age-old conventions,
between the call of love and the orders of the preceptor, becomes keener
and keener. But this conflict remains unresolved till the end. Torn by this
conflict Jaising finally resolves it only by putting an end to his life. (118)

Jaising makes an attempt to explain to his father that true worship of God is humility and
faith in God and not the offering of blood of the animals. He believes that there is no
goddess who is blood thirsty. All such beliefs are mere man made notions: “We enshrine
falsehood in our temple, with all devotion; yet she is never there.” (524)

The poignancy of Aparna’s words foregrounds the harsh facts that society
does not acknowledge. In absolute despair complains to the goddess:
You the image whom nothing can move. You rob us of all our best without uttering a word. We pine for love, and die beggars for want of it. Yet it comes to you unasked, though you need it not. Like a grave, you hoard it under your miserly stone, keeping it from the use of the yearning world. (515)

King Govinda also comments, “For a man loses his humanity when it concerns his gods” (520). When the plan to kill the King fails then it is queen Gunavati who advises Prince Nakshta to kill little boy Druva as she is afraid that he is snatching the right of her unborn child to be the heir to King. She cannot bear to see Druva in place of her own child. So she says to Nakshatra: “Offer him to Kali. Have you not heard that Mother is thirsting for blood?” (523)

Unfortunately, Jaising also has to sacrifice his love for Aparna to abide by the order of his father. He must kill the King because his father has to offer royal blood to the Goddess. Thus, he is in a dilemma to choose between love and duty. He loves and reveres the King and similarly he can’t hurt his foster-father Raghupati by defying the oath he has taken to offer royal blood to goddess. Finally, he sacrifices his own life at the altar considering his own blood to be royal: “My ancestors have sat upon thrones, and there are rulers of men in my mother’s line. I have kingly blood in my veins. Take it, and quench thy thirst for ever” (530). “The sense of desolation deepens and his mental anguish becomes fierce as he prepares himself for the final catastrophe” (Chakravorty 120).
Raghupati is stunned by the death of his step-son Jaising because he loved him more than life. He realises the futility of his belief in the ritual of sacrificing animals. Tagore’s supreme courage in that day and age to put forth his radical ideas through his characters is admirable. Particularly notable is the fact that he portrays a temple priest’s disgust at the practice of sacrifice. Raghupati is benumbed by the tragedy and cries out in pain:

...look how she stands there, the silly stone,- deaf, blind,- the whole sorrowing world weeping at her door,- the noblest hearts wrecking themselves at her stony feet! ...Our bitterest cries wander in emptiness,- the emptiness that we vainly try to fill with these stony images of delusion. Away with them! Away with these our impotent dreams, that harden into stones, burdening our world! (530-31)

In a fit of anger, he throws the stone idol of Goddess Kali and tells the king that Jaising has killed himself “to kill the falsehood that sucks the life blood of man.” (532)

The agony and sorrow of a father is very much evident in these lines. He realises that it is only love that can overcome hatred in this world. Thus, Aparna is the symbol of love in the play and Raghupati, who once chided her away as a beggar girl, now accepts her as the last gift of his beloved son: “Come, child. Come, Mother. I have found thee. Thou art the last gift of Jaising” (532).

Thus, the conflict is resolved in the end with the death of Jaising who sacrifices his own life to put an end to the brutal practice of killing animals for the sake of worship. His death illumines the consciousness of Raghupati and brings about a reunion between
King Govinda and his queen' (Chakravorty 121). Therefore, his sacrifice does not go in vain.

The conflict between “the universal law of humanity, based on compassion, and the ritualistic code sanctioned by an inflexible tradition” is disintegrated. At the same time the “personal conflict between “the secular power [the king] and the religious authority [the priest]” is resolved too” (Naravane 101). Tagore portrays the perennial opposition between spirituality and dogma of religion. Jay Singh comes very close to making the right choice. But his ingrained loyalty to tradition is part of his conditioning. Challenging it is not so easy. This is the reason why he has to pay the terrible price as his conscience signals him that true religion is the religion of humanity. He has to make the ultimate sacrifice but not in vain. “His very failure brings about, decisively though tragically, a resolution of the conflict” (Naravane 101).

Tagore thus, shows how the love of a poor girl, Aparna wins over the mighty force of Raghupati and the superstitious masses. She awakens the spirit of true religion in Raghupati’s heart. In this protest against evil social custom, Tagore aptly sums up the power of love: “Love has no army, no money- but in the secret font of heart it goes on getting strength” (Bhattacharya 124).

The play drives home the idea that true religion is not the institutionalised religion but the religion of love. Its spark may be kindled in the heart of even an ordinary beggar girl, Aparna. The path of uprightness and compassion is true religion to which Aparna leads all. Quintessence of religion consists in kindness and love towards all which Aparna personifies.
Naravane while quoting Tagore’s words says:

In this wonderful festival of creation, the lover constantly gives himself up to gain himself in love. Indeed, love is what brings together and inseparably connects both the act of abandoning and that of receiving. (101).

Man’s greatness lies in his capability to understand this eternal truth. Instead of slavishly accepting the ways of the world, he can redeem himself through the power of love. Love has the power to broaden his mind limitlessly as he develops a bonding with environment, nature and humanity. But as Naravane puts it:

...that is not all. There is the relation of love with the world. Love is expressed through service to society, through loyalty to the higher purposes of man, through graceful acceptance of the rhythmic throb of the universal life. (101)

In Tagore’s writings, the quest to achieve harmony between discordant forces is a theme of paramount importance. He envisages a society where mankind’s interest is safeguarded above all things. It is important for man to realise that his role to work for society’s well being is his biggest challenge, overcoming which would lead to a realisation of his inherent connection with his surroundings.
Malini

Tagore’s play *Malini* voices protest against religious bigotry. The play is a powerful comment against institutionalised religion practiced by society to safeguard its own interests. The play strongly advocates the right of an individual to be the follower of any religion. A man is born free and remains free to make a choice in this regard. In the play Malini, the King’s daughter, practices Buddhism. She finds herself disillusioned with the comforts and riches of the King’s palace much to the agony of her parents. This is evident from the following dialogue between the queen and her daughter Malini:

Queen: My child, what is this? Why do you forget to put on dresses that befit your beauty and youth? Where are your ornaments? My beautiful dawn, how can you absent the touch of gold from your limbs?

Malini: Mother, there are some who are born poor, even in the King’s house. Wealth does not cling to those whose destiny it is to find riches in poverty. (*Collected Poems and Plays* 483)

Malini is a true devotee of the Buddha and she has little interest in the worldly matters. Her mother tries to make her realise that she is a woman who must adorn herself with beautiful clothes and jewellery. However, Malini tells her mother that she has risen above the desire of wealth and gold. The priests believe that by following Buddhism Malini is insulting Hinduism. They blame her for heresy and demand her banishment. The leader of the Hindu orthodoxy, Kemankar is adamant that Malini be banished from the kingdom. Supriya is a very good friend and follower of Kemankar. But he does not agree with his
friend that Malini is a sinner. He is the only one who has the courage to defy the majority comprising the religiously intolerant people.

One of the Brahmins calls Malini "a snake" who is "aiming at the heart of our sacred religion" (486). To this Supriya remarks: "Tell me, sir, is it your religion that claims the banishment of an innocent girl" (486)? His words seem audacious to other Brahmins. In spite of trying hard, he is not able to persuade Brahmins against their false belief. He says: "...I am ashamed to own as mine a creed that depends on force for its existence" (486-487). Even the Queen is surprised to hear that people want the banishment of her innocent daughter. She says: "Are all truths confined in their musty, old books? Let them fling away their worm-eaten creeds" (484). These utterances of Tagore's characters bear out the radical streak of Tagore's theatre—a feature which somehow has not got the attention it merits.

Tagore's women have been portrayed by him as having minds of their own. Malini gets vociferous support from her mother who says that she is not committing a sin by following Buddhism. Moreover, she swears to save her daughter from the hands of the accusers who desire her banishment. But Malini is herself bold enough to face her enemies and decide to come out from the protective walls of the palace to face the aggressive crowd of the Brahmins. She says: "Father, grant to your people their request. The great moment has come. Banish me" (484).

She further says:

Those who cry for my banishment, cry for me. Mother, I have no words in which to tell you what I have in my mind. Leave me without regret, like
the tree that sheds its flowers unheeding. Let me go out to all men,-for the world has claimed me from the King’s hands. (484-85)

Malini is not just a girl but she is the voice of God itself. She says:

I dream, while I am awake, that the wind is wild, and the water is troubled; the night is dark, and the boat is moored in the haven. Where is the captain, who shall take the wanderers home? I feel I know the path, and the boat will thrill with life at my touch, and speed on. (485)

Malini’s words have immense power. As soon as the crowd sees her, they feel as if the goddess has come in the form of a girl. Making a strong plea that she is here to acquaint herself with the sorrows of the world, she tells them that she was born in the King’s house and was unaware of the unhappiness of the outside world: “I had heard that it was a sorrowing world- the world out of my reach. But I did not know where it felt its pain. Teach me to find this out.” (488-89)

Except for Kemankar, all are moved by the words of the Malini, including Supriya. He is awestruck to see the crowd sway in favour of Malini: “... the rebellion slunk away in shame before the light in your face and the music in the air that touched you” (494). They all realise that if Malini follows Buddhism she is not insulting Hinduism. Thus, she gives them the message that “purity is the essence of religion and religious bigotry can lead only to misery and suffering” (Chakravorty 122).

Tagore had an entirely different conception of the essence of religion. He laid the foundation of radical ideas which were to dominate the mainstream Indian writing in the rest of the century. In the play Supriya is deeply moved by Malini’s courage and purity of
motives. He undergoes a total change of heart after his first contact with Malini. He realises the futility of his belief in the scriptures that do not answer his queries. He says to Kemankar:

Your hope of heaven is false, Kemankar. Vainly have I wandered in the wilderness of doctrines, - I never found peace. The God, who belongs to the multitude and the god of the books are not my own God. These never answered my questions and never consoled me. But, at last, I have found the divine breathing and alive in the living world of men. (489-90)

His words carry a strong significance. Tagore seems to drive home the point that rituals and traditions do not convey the essence of spirituality. Thus, he extends unequivocal support to Malini and revolts against his own friend. He raises a voice of protest against the orthodox Hindu society that believes in saving a religion by banishing an innocent girl: “The insolence is not mine but theirs who shape their scriptures to fit their own narrow hearts.” (486)

In a way, the true rebel in the play Malini is not Malini but Supriya, who strongly opposes the dogmatic belief of orthodox Hindu society. S.C. Sen Gupta aptly remarks that “the central character is not Malini but Supriya who finds in her something for which he looks in vain in her antagonist Kemankar” (149).

Kemankar is unable to bear the betrayal of his friend and at the same time he cannot forgive Malini. He kills Supriya and the King in turn orders Kemankar’s death as the punishment for the crime he has committed. But Malini prevents the death of Kemankar.
Because of Kemankar, Malini lost a friend and a follower, Supriya, whom she loved and revered because he showed faith in her belief. Still she prevents Kemankar’s death because she believes in non-violence. The only uniting force in this universe is love— and his is what she has learnt in Buddhism. Her idea of non-violence and universal love is the reason behind her forgiving Kemankar and preventing him from death sentence.

In *Sacrifice* and *Malini* there is a conflict between orthodox religion and conventions on the one hand and the claims of humanity on the other. There is also a close similarity between the main characters in the two plays. Raghupati and Kemankar, Jai Singh and Supriya closely resemble each other. (Chakravorty 115)

It is believed that Rabindranath’s religion is a poet’s religion. Tagore once said that his religious life followed the same enigmatic line of development as his poetical life. Like his poetry, his religious thoughts are expressed in a simple language. Yet his spiritual philosophy has the depth and richness having been nourished by different ideas and replenished by essence of different religions. But the course of his religious thought is his very own, working independently of the influences that played an important role in the formation of his religious thought.

Rabindranath Tagore is also a mystic poet. His mysticism is different from mysticism in ordinary sense. His mysticism gives profound insight into the essential nature of reality. His poetical life roams in the world of man, and in the world of God. His mysticism covers beauty, humanity, and immortality. “The poet conceives that man in his very being unites spirit and nature. He is finite-infinite being. Man has an inner
power within him which enables him to realise his unity with the whole of mankind, with nature, and also with god” (Das 75). Tagore conceives this inner power as the divinity latent in man which is characterised by him as the universal man. Tagore has reached for the exaltation of the spirit in man. “It is possible for man to realise the supreme personality through love in his life-time” (Das 75). Tagore’s religion centres round this idea. Universality is also an essential ingredient of his religion. Harmony should prevail amongst all and it should bring peace and amity.

Sachin Sen in his essay ‘Tagore’s Concept of Free Society’ suggests that man must grow. And he can grow when he realise the great harmony between man’s spirit and the spirit of the world. He cannot live in isolation: he has to live in fellowship with others. Tagore put much emphasis on the ideal of self-realisation which consisted in bringing about a harmony between individual and the universal. (qtd. in Naravane 101)

Sanyasi

The play Sanyasi revolves around the conflict of the human mind in search of the truth and joy in this world. Tagore wrote in My Reminiscences, ‘the play should be looked upon as an introduction to the whole of my future literary work; this has been the subject on which all my writings have dwelt-the joy of attaining the infinite in the finite’ (235). This theme of the play Sanyasi recurs in much of the later dramatic works of Tagore.

The central figure of the play is a lonely hermit who tries to arrive at the ‘Ultimate Truth’ by cutting off all connections with the world. Led by the thought that
this world is only maya or illusion, he tries to seek reality by shutting out all the aspects of the unreality, or illusion, of this world. He thinks that he is free from fear and desire, and celebrates his loneliness, “I sit chanting the incantation of nothingness” (Collected Poems and Plays 463). He is untouched and unmoved by the sorrows of humanity. In the opening long monologue he takes an oath that he would take revenge upon ‘interminable appearances, mistress of endless disguises’. The dark eternity is contrasted with the confined earth. Sen Gupta has interpreted this play as ‘representing a stage in the poet’s own development, because like the Sanyasi he was absorbed in his self and like the Sanyasi he emerges into the open-air life of nature, beauty, human love, joy and sorrow’ (Gupta 145).

Anil Wilson opines, ‘The Sanyasi is seeker after truth and reality, who tries to approach his goal via negative, or the way of negation. In his solitary state of meditation he develops an attitude of detachment and disregard for everything else. In his withdrawal from all that is human and worldly it may be said that he has regressed into a state of irresponsible comfort and egotistical carelessness’ (Rabindranath Tagore’s Sanyasi and Sacrifice 21).

The Sanyasi erroneously believes that he can find truth in the blankness of self. He incise all bonds with the world but he cannot defy the affection of a little girl, Vasanti, the untouchable, whose death shocks him and make him realise that true liberation can only be attained through the bonds of human affections. It is through the child that the Sanyasi realises, “You bring to my mind something which is infinitely more than this Nature- more than the sun and stars. It is as great as the darkness. I understand it not. I have never known it…” (Collected Poems and Plays 473). He has never known any
attachment and is, therefore afraid of any claim that anyone might possibly have on him. So, he leaves the child to her fate and escapes into his fêted oblivion. Chakravorty aptly remarks that: ‘The Sanyasi in Nature’s Revenge commits the mistake of trying to realize God only in his inner consciousness by ignoring the outside world altogether’ (127).

Anil Wilson in Introduction to Rabindranath Tagore’s Sanyasi and Sacrifice puts forward the idea that:

As long as he struggles against life he suffers from a sense of nada, of futility and pessimism; but when he surrenders himself to the rhythm of life, he is on the path to the awareness of the glory of existence. (22)

‘The escape has not been an easy thing, and the playwright has successfully exploited the dramatic conflict inherent in the situation’ (Naik 53). The Sanyasi spends many a day and night searching for the child he has forsaken: “O my child, the sorrow of your little heart has filled forever all the nights of life with its sadness” (Collected Poems and Plays 477). He realises that his earlier vows are hollow and worthless. So he should part with them:

I break my staff and my alms-bowl. This stately ship, this world, which is crossing the sea of time- let it take me up again, let me join once more the pilgrims. Oh the fool, who wanted to seek safety in swimming alone, and gave up the light of the sun and the stars, to pick his own way with this glow worm’s lamp. (Collected Poems and Plays 477)

Sanyasi and Vasanti present the central conflict of the play. ‘It is tussle between the forces of involvement against those of detachment, will against affections, asceticism against humanism, indifference against concern.’ (Rabindranath Tagore’s Sanyasi and
Sacrifice 24) The opposite sides of the conflict are brought together by love. Tagore in My Reminiscences writes:

On the one side are the wayfarers and villagers, content with their home made triviality...and on the other the Sanyasi busy casting away all his imagination. When love bridges the gulf between the two, the hermit and the householder meet. (qtd. in Rabindranath Tagore’s Sanyasi and Sacrifice 24)

The great lesson that Nature teaches Tagore is, “The bird flies in the sky not to fly away into the emptiness, but to come back again to this earth....The finite is the true infinite and love knows its truth.” (Collected Poems and Plays 478) Naravane remarks: “Nature had led the Sanyasi on the pathway of the heart and head brought him in the presence of the Infinite-the Infinite who is enthroned in the finite.” (99)

Tagore suggests that the infinite expresses itself through the finite, and the divine is found in the human. It is not in the great deeds alone but in common acts that the essence of existence lies. The simple and natural affections of the heart are the root of all the great philosophies of life. The small acts of kindness and compassion nourish life and enrich it. “The great is to be found in the small, the infinite within the bounds of form, and the eternal freedom of the soul in love” (qtd. in Rabindranath Tagore’s Sanyasi and Sacrifice 24).

In words of Chakravorty:

Tagore stands for a synthesis of contemplation and action. Contemplation comes first, for that helps the purification of the mind. But the fullness of
spiritual life can be realised only when the life of contemplation is merged into the life of action—the life of service to humanity. (131)

This is the message that Tagore seeks to convey to us through Sanyasi and Malini.

Yeats was not wrong to see a large religious element in Tagore’s writings. He certainly had interesting and arresting things to say about life and death. The idea of a direct, joyful and totally fearless relationship with God can be found in many of Tagore’s religious writings, including the poems of Gitanjali. From India’s diverse religious traditions he drew many ideas, both from ancient texts and from popular poetry. But ‘the bright pebbly eyes of the Theosophists’ do not stare out of his verses. Despite the archaic language of the original translation of Gitanjali, which did not, I believe, help to preserve the simplicity of the original, its elementary humanity comes through more clearly than any complex and intense spirituality. (Sen 96)

Leave this chanting and singing and telling

the beads! Whom dost thou worship in

this lonely dark corner of temple with doors

all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is

not before thee!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard

ground and where the path maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower,
and his garment is covered with dust. Put off
thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!

(Gitanjali 11)

Tagore certainly had strongly held religious beliefs of an unusually non-denominational kind. He had realistic, plainly expressed views about nationalism, war and peace, cross-cultural education, freedom of mind, the importance of rational criticism, the need for cultural openness, and so on.

*Achalayatan*

*Achalayatan* expresses the idea of a wider freedom in the context of an infertile, typecast society. The play is at once satirical and symbolical, two modes hard to fuse. Actually “at no little cost to his popularity”, it was a not too oblique attack on Hindu orthodoxy. This is shown through the contrast between the two brothers, the narrow-minded Mahapanchak and the younger, liberal, forward looking Panchak.

Characteristically, Panchak makes friends with the tribals, the peasants and the untouchables. One day, accompanied by his rabble retinue, a singing, surging crowd, the Guru comes, the tables are turned. The walls of Achalayatan crumble. What will happen to Mahapanchak that the old order is no more? The more tolerant and thoughtful Panchak tells him the compromising formula: “You and I together will open the windows” (Ghose 62-63).
Tagore’s theory of mobile society was powerfully proclaimed in *Achalayatan*. Social institutions have their rules, customs and traditions. All these are vital for growth. But when they start hampering growth, they become blind forces which bind human mind, discourage innovation but to breed the forces of slavery. Tagore strongly believed that we have to battle against all forms of blindness and to break down fetters that enslave human mind so that it can discover new truths, create new paths and accept no bondage. We should not be afraid of failures or mistakes, but what is to be dreaded is the stoppage of experiments. Hence, the door has always to be kept ajar for those who dare and experiment.

*Achalayatan* presents an arena of conflicting faiths. Built on a stony resistance to the naturalness of life, Mahapanchak’s ‘*Achalayatan*’ representing a quest of dry wisdom, turns into a petrified land of illusion and immobility. On the other hand, the Sonpangshus are work addicts to the extent that they mistake work for the end and not the means, while the Darvaks remain happy with their simple, unquestioning, selfless devotion. All three fail to realise that life is to be tasted in its totality. Knowledge, power to work, and devotion are to be assimilated to achieve the true vision of life. And for that, the Guru’s help becomes necessary.

Panchak is singing when the play starts and he gets scolded for doing so by his elder brother Mahapanchak:

Mahapanchak: Singing again? How dare you?

Panchak: oh, dada, you have seen. What a failure I am at your mantras and tantras, your rite and rituals. (*Achalayatan* 1)
Panchak asks for the relevance of learning all the mantras: “Let me ask you one thing—what is the use of learning this mantra?” (2)

Mahapanchak wants Panchak to be inspired by his example of rose to the eminence on his own. But Panchak is unmoved and thinks it can’t motivate him. He replies: “...You are your own example and don’t need my support. So I remain content” (3).

Even other students of Achalayatan suggest him that he:

...must learn at least ‘Sringabheribrata’, ‘Kakchanchupariksha’, ‘Chhaglomsodhan’, ‘Dwabingshapishachbhaybhanjan’- Otherwise how can you introduce yourself to people as a student of Achalayatan? (5)

Then comes the news of the Guru’s coming to Achalayatan after a long time. Nobody has seen the Guru. Everyone is curious to know about him and starts preparing to welcome his visit. But Panchak thinks of it as unnecessary. He says:

If he comes he will be ready himself. Readiness on our side might create unnecessary confusion....I fear, perhaps the guru would find our readiness the opposite of what should be. (8)

A little boy Subhadra commits the sin of opening a window in North which belongs to the goddess Ekjatadevi. The boy peeps out of the window which is supposed to bring a curse on everyone living in Achalayatan. He asks Panchak to tell him which penance he should perform to get rid of his sin. In response Panchak says:
I can't recall. There are twenty or twenty-five thousand forms of penance. If I had not come to this institution, most of them would have remained recorded in books only; after I came, I went through almost all of them, but I don't remember any. (12)

These lines of Panchak are sarcasm on the rigidity and foolishness of various forms of penance invented to arouse fear in the mind of human beings and which makes the religion a religion of fear. Panchak makes fun of the worthlessness of reparation by saying: “Doing penance is great fun. It’s all so monotonous here, one can’t survive if there is no penance to perform” (13). But the little boy is too much afraid as what will happen to him now. Panchak says: “...I know nothing about cause and effect. But whatever happens cannot make me afraid even a little” (13). To give some courage to Subhadra, the little boy, Panchak says that he would also open the same window once so that Subhadra will have company. Panchak is not afraid and says: “Where’s the fun if something is not terrible” (15).

Other boys of Achalayatan are also terrified at the opening of window by Subhadra and one of them says: “Mahapanchakdada has told us that it amounts to matricide, because the North belongs to Ekjata Devi” (15). But Panchak is not satisfied with logic and asks: “I am extremely curious to know how I can commit the sin of matricide without killing my mother” (15).

Subhadra is not satisfied with the condolence of Panchak and approaches Upadhyaya, one of the elder of Achalayatan, to confess his sin of “opened the window and looked out” (19). Upadhyaya sits down, shocked and exclaims: “Oh, it will be the
ruin of us! What have you done! Nobody has opened the window for three hundred and forty-five years- do you know that” (19)? Subhadra is terrified at the expression of Upadhyaya but Panchak tries to calm him down while embracing him:

People will sing your glory, Subhadra. You have removed the bar of three hundred and forty-five years. Upadhyayamoshi is dumbfounded to see your courage. (19)

Acharya and Upacharya are discussing the coming of the guru as Upacharya says that may be he is pleased with us and that is why is coming to visit us. But Acharya confesses to Upacharya: “Sometimes I fear that he is coming because we are overfilled with sin” (20). He is in doubt and says:

Doubt? I admit, I have some doubts. You see, Sutasom, for quite some time I have been experiencing an agony which I cannot share with anybody. I am the ‘Acharya’ of this Institution: when I am assailed by doubts, I have to bear them silently. I have that all these years. But ever since the day I received the letter carrying the news of the guru’s coming, I have not been able to control it any longer. Every day, in all my work, I hear it crying-pointless, pointless, it’s all pointless. (20)

Upacharya admits that he doesn’t remember for how long he has been in this institution: “...To grow old in the mind before time is not uncommon here. I feel I have been sitting here since even before I was born.” (21)

Acharya says:
You see, Sutasom, when I started my spiritual quest here, I was young. I hoped to achieve something in the end. The more difficult the quest became, the more inspired I felt. Then, revolving and revolving on the wheel of the quest I totally forgot that there was such a thing as attainment. My mind made a sudden halt when the news of guru’s arrival came today. I asked myself: You, pandit, you have mastered all the holy texts, you have performed all the rites, now tell me, you fool, what really have you achieved? Nothing, Sutasom, nothing. Now I see that this long pursuit is nothing but going round and round your own self-that results in a heap of endless reiteration every day. (21)

This speech of Acharya shows the perturbed nature of thoughts and conflict going on inside his mind. He asks Upacharya: “Have you found your peace of mind, Sutasom?” (21)

Upacharya replies:

Not a bit. My days and my nights are totally tied up by rules. The ties are a thousand years old. Gradually, they have hardened like stone. I don’t have to think even for a moment. Can there be any peace better than this?” (21)

Acharya says in his confusion: “No, no! Then I made a mistake. Whatever is there is right, absolutely right. We have to find peace in this at any cost.” (21)

Upacharya does not like the ways of Panchak and want Acharya to talk to him as Panchak listens to Acharya only. He says:
How could a boy like him be possible here in this Institution? From his very childhood, a terrible disorder has been at work within him. We have failed to control that. I fear that boy. He is our bad omen. (24)

Panchak confesses his grievance to Acharya that he has failed to stick to the rules of this institution and Acharya must not touch him. Acharya asks Panchak: “My boy, you know that for a thousand years thousands of people of this place have felt safe following rules; can just anyone of us break those?” (24) Panchak replies: “Acharyadeb, the truth of a rule cannot be tested, if we do not let it be broken” (24).

Acharya makes clear his point that: “I do not fear so much the breaking of the rule as the suffering of the rule-breaker- why should we let that happen?” (24) Panchak is ready to obey Acharya’s any order as he says: “…I don’t know anything about rites and rituals, I know only you?” (25) But Acharya is bewildered and feels to be not in position to order Panchak for doing anything. He explains to Panchak:

When I see you, I see freedom itself. When I saw how your life-force defies all pressure, I realised for the first time that the mind is truer than mantras, truer than age-old customs. Go, boy, go your own way. Don’t ask me anything. (25)

Panchak says: “Acharyadeb, you don’t know but it is you who pulled me out from under the wheel of rules…. I don’t know, but you have given me something which is far greater than rites and rules.” (25) Acharya is not in position to give any instruction to Panchak and on the contrary he says: “I have no instruction. If you want to do something wrong, go ahead and do it- don’t listen to us” (26).
Acharya himself yearns for the freedom which Panchak enjoys. He says:

Our guru is coming, Panchak—only if I could sit at his feet as a boy like you, if he undid the chain of my old age and set me free, and said: ‘Don’t be afraid. From today I’m giving you the right to know the truth through mistakes.’—if he took off the burden of two thousand years from my mind!

(26)

On the other hand Upadhyay, Upacharya and Mahapanchak are worried about the consequences of opening the window in north which belongs to goddess Ekjatadevi. Upadhyay says: “One can never say how far the wind from that side has polluted the closed, hallowed air of our institution” (27). Mahapanchak also comments in this regard: “The wind from outside has blown into our institution, we are impure now” (27). They agree that Subhadra will have to undergo penance for this sin but nobody remember any said penance in Shastras. They have forgotten it. Upadhyaya says: “For three hundred years the need for this penance did not arise— we have forgotten it” (27). But Mahapanchak suggests the penance written in one of Shastras which states that “…the culprit should do ‘Mahatamas’ for six months” (27). Which meant that Subhadra will not be allowed to see a single ray of light. “…Because what is committed in light can only be expatiated in darkness” (27).

But Acharya does not allow Subhadra to undergo any penance. He says: “No, I won’t allow this to happen. If there’s any sin, it’ll be mine” (29). He speaks to Subhadra:
You haven’t done anything sinful, my boy. It is really the sin of the people
whose contorted faces have been threatening you for thousands of years,
though you haven’t committed any crime. (29)

But other elders of Achalayatan do not agree to the order of Acharya. Mahapanchak says:
“We have been made unclean. All our burnt offerings, rituals and fasting have come to
nothing- it is hard to tolerate this” (29). Upadhyaya also agrees with Mahapanchak and
says: “No question of tolerating this. Does the Acharya want us to be ranked with the
untouchables?” (29)

Mahapanchak cannot tolerate that to save Subhadra, Acharya shall murder their
ancient religion. According to him Acharya has gone mad and in such situation “we can’t
accept him as the Acharya any longer….So long as Acharya Adinpunya remains here we
will remain unclean and all our religious activities should stop” (29-30). Thus to save
their religion Mahapanchak and others are ready to revolt against Acharya. On the other
hand Panchak mingles with the Sonpangshus whom Achalayatan suppose not to be
touched as they are impure. Panchak likes to dance with them and enjoy the life but he
concludes his idea about them that:

It’s true that these Sonpangshus live in the open, but they can’t see what’s
around them. They spin like tops day and night wherever they are, they
make things reel by their restless activities. Now that they are gone, the
whole sky has started singing. They fail to hear anything when they are
silent. They hear only their own noise and that’s why they love to make
noise. But this blue sky, so full of light, has started talking in my blood, my whole body is humming songs. (39)

While Achalayatan has forbidden itself from the outer world and are living a constricted life within the wall of their institution, Sonpangshus on the other hand are unaware of the charm of nature around themselves. Sonpangshus have great reverence for Dadathakur and Panchak also respects him a lot. One of the Sonpangshu Says: “We are all petals and he is our hundred-petalled lotus” (41). Panchak admits to Dadathakur:

You have overcome all hurdles, Dadathakur-all. Who else can laugh and play and mix with all, work and give up work at will? I feel restless when I see you like that. I pin for- what would I say- the absolute, the ultimate or whatever it is called. (43)

Panchak tells Dadathakur:

There is a great tug of war going on inside me, Thakur. I am praying for the guru’s coming. Let him decide which way I should go—let him give me an assurance of safety and set me free in this wide open here, or bury me under leads of books and manuscripts and flatten me from head to toe. (44)

Dadathakur assures Panchak that he will be able to drag him out from under the heap of books and manuscripts.

Panchak amasingly asks Dadathakur: “How you can be so assuring, Thakur? You won’t let us have any fears or worries, yet from the moment of our birth, we live in fear”
(45). For all kinds of fears they recite different mantras. Panchak further expresses his dilemma:

A bird born in a cage fears the sky most. The metal bars of the cage give it pain yet if the door is opened for it, its heart throbs in fear. It thinks, how shall I live if I am not caged? We have not learnt to let ourselves go-without fear. That’s our age-old habit. (47)

Dadathakur explains to him: “You put many locks on your chest and feel happy- you don’t know what is there inside the chest.” (47)

Panchak wants Dadathakur to give his restlessness some peace, to guide him, and to order him: “You order me and I will be saved. I can’t argue with myself like this all the time.” But Dadathakur replies: “I won’t save you that easily, Panchak. When the order will come from within your own self, I’ll order you” (54).

Conflict of constricted ideas and desire to set the spirit free can be seen as keen in Panchak as in Acharya himself. The difference is that Panchak is more daring and independent in his action than Acharya who feels him to be shackled by centuries old traditions and practices and is desperate to shred off.

Panchak snatches Subhadra from the ‘Mahatamas’ the remedy for the sin which he has committed by opening the window in west. And he does so as per the order of Acharya himself. Other elders of Achalayatan are infuriated on this act of Acharya and Panchak. Thus in order to control Acharya, Mahapanchak gives the idea of locking him up.
Acharya confesses his deep rooted anguish of being an Acharya of a sapless Institute:

The guru left, we got preoccupied with ancient manuscripts in his place. The more their dry pages failed to satisfy our hunger, the more we increased their number. The less nutritive the food, the more its quantity. What did you come here for, to this storehouse of tattered manuscripts-group after group every day, opening your young hearts to me-what did you want? Amrita-words? Amrita message? The words of God? Ambrosial words? Nectar-words. But my mouth was dry like wood! (60)

Other members of Achalayatan request Acharya to hand over Subhadra to them and let him perform the penance by doing ‘Mahatamas’ expecting that Subhadra will be “deified” by doing penance. But Acharya rejects their request by saying: “Don’t make me commit the sin of creating gods by force. He is a human being, a child, and dear to gods for that reason.” (62)

Panchak inspires others to come and join him in the dance of freedom:

Let all dry leaves be blown away by your gusts of wind bringing the new rain….can’t you hear the call of freedom in the deep blue clouds in the sky? Dance, dance today! (60)

He encourages them to dance:

….Dance, friends, dance-

You have become free
You have got back your life,

Throw fear and shame to the winds.

There's none to stop you! (62)

Mahapanchak believes that this change has come due to the curse of Ekjatadevi and it makes everyone lose their heads and “by and by not a single stone of Achalayatan will remain in place.” (61) Simultaneously the King Manthargupta comes to visit Achalayatan and informs Mahapanchak that Dadathakur with Sonpangshus has started breaking down the walls of their kingdom. King believes that it must be because of the some fault in their rites and rituals. King comes to know that it happening due to the curse of Ekjatadevi and that Acharya is not allowing any penance to be performed for this sin. The king orders to banish Acharya and declares Mahapanchak as the new Acharya and it is decided that Acharya with Panchak will have to go to the neighbourhood of Darvaks (supposed to be untouchables and outcastes) on the outskirts of Achalayatan.

Now the conflict aggravates and comes out from the inner selves of Panchak and Acharya to the outer level between the King, Mahapanchak and others from ‘Achalayatan’ at one front and on the other side are Panchak, Acharya, Dadathakur and his followers. Protest against the shackles of worn out traditions and constricted ideas which makes a man weak and drained, takes the form of a war in which the forces of suppression and ruling the other are defeated by the vigour of free human spirit.

Panchak feels very happy that he is exiled and in that manner he is saved at last from living that dungeon life of Achalayatan and is happy to find the company of Darvaks. But Darvaks are hesitant to offer them their food as it is being touched by them thus
unholy to be offered. Panchak explains to them: “When hunger sets the stomach on fire, it does not care for caste. It makes all food sacred” (69).

Panchak is moved by the melody of simple and soulful song of devotion sung by the Darvaks and says overwhelmed:

Come, brothers, make me forget all my mantras, all my learning power. Teach me that song of yours….that song of the lowly, lament of the weak. I had always been searching for the wisdom of the ignorant, riches of the destitute. That is why, I neglected my studies. Whatever I did came to nothing. Brothers, give me another song-the thirst of a long, long time does not get quenched by one song. (70)

Even Acharya is overwhelmed by their song and exclaims:

My exile has become meaningful….As I was sitting with a guilty mind, taking myself for a sinner from head to toe, they returned from their work in the evening and started singing-….As I listened I felt like a statue of stone melting. I carried so much of useless weight so long! It is so easy to take the ferry of that helmsman with an easy, simple soul. (71-72)

Panchak agrees with Acharya and says:

I have noticed one quality of these Darvaks-they know how to take his name clearly. My tongue has become so stiff uttering tato tato totayo, totayo that I can’t utter any simple word. Acharyadeb, our hearts have gone dry because we haven’t been able to call him clearly. I want to call
him at the top of my voice, but my throat is choked. My throat is choked reading pages of so many holy texts, master. So much so that even my tears get choked. (72)

By the time Upacharya Sutasom also leaves Achalayatan to join Acharya because Achalyatan had become “dried and hard” the moment Acharya left it. Upadhyaya informs Mahapanchak that gates and walls of Achalayatan “have been flattened to the ground in such a way that you don’t have to worry about them anymore. (79)

Dadathakur appears on scene dressed as a warrior and declares himself the Guru. But Mahapanchak is not ready to believe it and orders Dadathkur and Sonpangshus to leave. He says: “I am the Acharya of this institution. I order you to leave this place immediately with your troop of outcasts.” (86) Mahapanchak instructs Upadhyaya to “drive them away and shut all the doors of Achalayatan again” (86). One of Sonpangshus informs that all their doors are opened, “like the sky” (86). But Mahapanchak is not ready to accept this change and says: “You may break down stone walls, and open iron doors, but here I close all the doors to my senses—even if I sit fasting and die, I won’t let your light and air touch me” (86).

Panchak and other Darvaks find out that Dadathakur is their own Gosain and Acharya recognises him as the Guru himself. Acharya shares his agony with the Guru and wants him to order him:

Order me, master. Knowing full well that I was doing something wrong, I could not correct myself. I knew I had taken the wrong path which would lead me nowhere, yet I could not stop. I was afraid. I thought this going
round and round the same way a thousand times would help me find the way. (95)

Dadathakur explains to him:

The wheel which is the wheel of habits only, which does not taking anywhere, only makes you go round and round yourself,-to take you out of that and make you stand on the straight road with all the traveler of the world, I have come today. (95)

Panchak wants to set out with Dadathakur, but he orders him to go back to Achalayatan. Panchak thinks of Achalayatan as a prison. Dadathakur says: “The prison is no longer there, I have broken it down. You have to build a temple in the same place, taking materials from there....You need not fear, Panchak. You’ll never see that peace in Achalayatan again anymore. I’ve drilled a hole in its door and brought the stormy winds of war through it. I have ended forever their days of sitting still, looking at the tips of their noses.” (96)

For Sonpangshus, he thinks that they need to learn to be still as “they take freedom for fun—but they never realise that only after sitting quietly can they take out the meat of the fruit. Leave them for some time to your Mahapanchakdada and they will be quiet and will have time to let the meat inside them ripen” (98). He engages them in rebuilding the broken foundation. About Mahapanchak, Dadathakur says:

...All these days, in the darkness of his closed room, he thought that the wheel was running fine. He could not see that the wheel was turning on the same man any longer. He has the job of teaching others how to rise
above themselves. The mystery of how to pierce the cover of hunger, thirst, greed, fear, life and death for self-revelation is in his hands. (98)

Dadathakur decides to take Acharya with him and all others join hands to “make white foundation of the new sky-scraping edifice stand in the light of the sky. The two groups must join hands and start working.” (101-102) Thus Sonpangshus and people of Achalayatan have to build once again the foundation of ‘Achalayatan’.

_Achalayatan_ is more dramatic in its portrayal of conflict. An attack against soulless rituals and institutionalised religious power, _Achalayatan_ gives a call for breaking down the walls of bondage. The play angered a section of the public because of its alleged attack on religious practices and was never staged in any of the theatres in Calcutta.

In essence this play is strong condemnation of our ethico-religious and educational system drained of all meaning and turned into bloodless, dry and sterile through over-emphasising rules for rule’s sake. Complex symbolism coupled with a fine allegorical structure makes _Achalayatan_ as applicable and relevant today as when it was written nearly a century ago.

Thus, there is an unbreakable relation between the man and the Maker. Religion plays an important role in connecting human being with the Supreme. Tradition in the form of religious faith complies with the wish of the Maker and forces a man to protest against the bindings on his free human spirit. At the same time the modern knowledge of science and its interference in the life of a man in the form of machines makes the man uneasy. However, between the propelling force of religion and science, Tagore tries to
find a solace and balance of ideas. He wants the man to be free from the slavish
dependence on the machines and to follow simple life -away from fears, lust for power
and wealth. Man’s prior endeavor is to connect and unite with the Supreme Maker as well
as with fellow human being by the strength of love and faith, while prospering
intellectually, to undertake and accomplish his journey from ‘finite to infinite’.