

RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S DRAMA IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF INDIAN THEATRE

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Chapter 10

VISARJAN AS PERFORMANCE: A ROAD TOWARDS RITUAL HEALING

Seetha Vijayakumar

Why should we be spared? Life itself would spring from the shedding of our blood.

– Camara Laye¹

I

Rabindranath Tagore's *Visarjan* (1890) revolves around themes of religious devotion, and also its opposite of how religious orthodoxy and fanaticism consume human lives. A readaptation of his own novel named *Rajarshi* (1886), this play has enormous contemporary significance at a time when religious orthodoxy is firming its grip on Indian society. Contemporary India is marked with the fight between the orthodoxy and the progressive voices in society. Even the state, which is considered as a modern institution, is either being encroached upon or being made helpless by the orthodox interpretations. There are several examples of the growing clout of religious fanaticism in society, be it the murder of rationalists for their views, killing of people over their food habits, dishonour killings, communal polarization and the like. For an author, speaking of the pressing social problems needs enormous courage. But if a drama written in the last quarter of the nineteenth century still resonates with the social realities of society, it marks both foresightedness of Tagore and the failure of the society to progressively transform itself.

Visarjan deals with the King of Tripura Govinda banning animal sacrifice in temples which causes an orthodox, cunning priest called Raghupati to protest. Tagore's modernism intertwined with cultural universalism gets its finest expression in *Visarjan* which adds to the play's contemporary relevance. The incidents unravel in a temple where all the characters, from the righteous

King Govinda to the beggar girl Aparna, gather to discuss a sacrifice and its ramifications on human lives. The sacrifice of animals before the idol of Kali, the goddess of power, constitutes the main premise of the play.

It is not surprising that Tagore dedicated *Visarjan* to 'those heroes who bravely stood for peace when human sacrifice was claimed for the goddess of war'.² The significance of *Visarjan* lies in the conflict within Jaising's soul vacillating between the demands of religion and the claims of humanity. The binary between the role of the King and the Brahmin priest Raghupati offers another thematic dimension in the play. But more than anything else, *Visarjan* talks about a ritual; a sacrifice to appease the Goddess Kālī which takes it to the elements of ritual theatre. It can be said without a doubt that *Visarjan* is dramatically the best of Tagore's plays. It has an intricate plot which is foreshadowed through well-developed stages, with full-grown characters playing an equal part with distinctive personality, and the playwright's tightly marked portrait ruthlessly ignores all the irrelevant details to prove it to be the finest dramatic art.

A.N. Gupta rightly points out:

The dramatic art of Rabindranath Tagore is both simple and complex. It is simple in style and expression; it is complex in the variety of its forms and in the depth of its meaning. Tagore is primarily and essentially a lyric poet and his dramatic art, too, is so poetic and personal that it would be more appropriate to call his plays as lyric dramas or dramatic lyrics.³

The period during which Tagore penned down this play is momentous in contributing to its profundity and appeal. It has been a few years since he published his magnum opus on religion *The Religion of Man*. It is to the ideas expressed in this work that he returns while writing the play. Therefore, we should further see *Visarjan* as a stage performance on *The Religion of Man*. Ignited as Tagore was with the new spirit of humanism, he challenged most of the secluded centres of thoughts and actions misleading the conduct of the practitioners of religion in general. His philosophy of the self concerned the larger humanity and gave the self the necessary freedom to evolve itself into a joy of meaningful existence. Tagore held the view that the 'individual finds his meaning in a fundamental reality comprehending all individuals - the reality which is the moral and spiritual basis of the realm of human values'.⁴ This was when Tagore was brought up in an atmosphere seething in religious fervour.

The verses of Upanishads were a matter of daily utterance in the family. Later, he ventured to identify with the crux of different religious practices like Buddhism, Christianity and also various philosophical schools. But the

self-motivated mentality of Tagore could not be a passive receptor of the accepted doctrines. As he himself puts it in *The Religion of an Artist*,

I have not come to my own religion through the portals of passive acceptance of a particular creed owing to some accident of birth [...] Owing to my idiosyncrasy of temperament, it was impossible for me to accept my religious teaching on the only ground that people in my surroundings believed it to be true.³

For Tagore, religion has a predominantly spiritual significance. Tagore envisioned religion not just as a system to be followed, but as a way of life to achieve the transcendental. He says that the deeds are done solely for the sake of self-confining our soul; the objective action performed for the sake of the giving up of self is the true sacrifice. This change in the concept of sacrifice is indicative of a high level of religious development.

II

Visarjan is a very daring attempt to resolve the conflict between religious fundamentalism and spiritual humanism. Tagore tries to make an important point which is deeply political, that is, the need to exercise any system not for the sake of itself but for the sake of humanity. Raghupati the priest is an example of the way we misinterpret religion, which in turn leads to ignorance and chaos. He is all for blood sacrifice as he says 'There is King Govinda. Jaising, keep still. Do you understand? Kill him in secret. Bring his blood, while warm to the altar.'⁶ The play problematizes the concept of religion and reminds us that religion has its function in reconciling the contradiction by subordinating the brute nature of what we consider as the truth of man.

Moreover, Tagore's perspective on sacrifice is a challenge to the traditional idea of sacrifice to propitiate gods and goddesses as a means to achieve fortune and glory. The practice of offering sacrifices to a deity seems to have had existence in every religious system known to man. In *Primitive Culture*, Edward B. Tyler maintained that sacrifice was in its origin a gift offered to supernatural beings, either to secure their favour or to avert their wrath.⁷ Tagore's attack on this primitive system of cruelty had greater significance in the context of the large-scale killing of innocent beings as worship to Goddess Kali. He opposed the practice of sacrifice and its bloodshed on the ground that it is irrational, inhuman and misleading. But equally important in his view is the fact that he was questioning our blind faith in the system of religion and showcasing how certain parties misuse it for personal gains.

Gunavati, the queen of Tripura, who has no children, offers to sacrifice a goat at the altar of Kali to seek her blessings for a child. The goat to be

- Govinda: God's words are ever ringing in the world, and he who is wilfully deaf cannot hear them.
- Raghupati: Atheist! Apostate!
- Govinda: Father, go to your morning service, and declare to all worshippers that henceforward they will be punished with banishment who shed creatures' blood in their worship of the Mother of all creatures.¹³

Sacrifice is believed to help the individual to bridge the world of the humans and the world of the supernatural or inhuman, and get purified. What makes sacrifice so special is the fact that it helps us achieve something out of the ordinary. In condemning animal sacrifice and resisting it powerfully, Tagore proposes a kind of ritual healing to the spectators. Nevertheless, in achieving this solution through the sacrifice, we undergo an underlying paradox. What we see in the form of Jaising's killing of himself proves the fact that sometimes we cannot get away with sacrifices altogether. He proclaims 'I am of the royal caste, a *kshatriya*. 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 forever.'¹⁴

Tagore spills blood on stage to stop the very act of bleeding of any kind. Jaising's martyrdom highlights the brutality and futility of sacrifice given to the goddess in the name of age-old customs and traditions. *Visarjan* is a ritual enactment or performance in itself. The play comes to life through the ritual actualization while condemning the very act of sacrifice. The significance of blood as curative factor has immense value in the play. The queen wants to offer blood to get a child; on the other hand, Jaising offers himself at the altar of the goddess to cure the society as well as himself. Blood is a 'divine sanguinary substance' which revivifies the divinity and so gives force to rituals.¹⁵ Blood is that substance which equally connotes life and death, something that purifies and takes life at the same time.

As the title indicates, the ritual of sacrifice is the key element of the play. It is the one pivotal idea on which every other character or setting revolves around. References about two types of sacrifices happen in the play: one is animal sacrifice which characters like King Govinda want to avert and the other is the accidental/voluntary human sacrifice. Therefore, in a broad manner, Tagore, by staging a ritual performance, goes back to the genesis of theatre and touches upon its very essence.

For instance, Richard Schechner on the interconnection between theatre and ritual states:

Rituals are performative: they are acts done; performances are ritualized: they are codified, repeatable actions. The functions of theatre identified by Aristotle,

sacrificed turns out to be of a girl named Aparna, who loves the animal as a mother would. Aparna pleads with King Govinda to spare the goat from sacrifice. Convinced of the irrationality of sacrifice as a ritual, the King bans all bloodshed in the temple without delay. The Brahmin priest Raghupati challenges the King and warns that as the priest, he has paramount authority in the temple. The following conversation throws light on the rift between the King and the temple priest.

- Raghupati: She has been drinking blood for ages. Whence comes this loathing all of a sudden.
- Govinda: No, she never drank blood, she kept her face averted.
- Raghupati: I warn you, think and consider. You have no power to alter laws laid down in scriptures.
- Govinda: God's words are above all laws.⁸

As a result of which, the temple priest Raghupati inflames everybody from the palace to the army to turn against the King and kill him to preserve the divine system of sacrifice offered to the Goddess Kālī. When he fails in all his plans, he prepares the temple boy Jaising, whom he had so lovingly protected from his childhood, to take arms against the King. But unable to bring himself to murder the King, Jaising sacrifices himself at the altar of Kālī. The loss of his loved one touches Raghupati's mind deeply and leads him to denounce blood sacrifice in the temple. The words of Jaising to Aparna, the girl who loved Jaising and loved her goat, bring back the true meaning of sacrifice as follows: 'You bring to me your sacrifice every moment, as a mother does to a child. God must be all sacrifice, pouring out his life in all creation'.⁹ These words clearly point out Tagore's worldview that sacrifice is not taking life but giving life to people. This interpretation of sacrifice, in a land ridden with blind faith in ritual killing, was a challenge to the powerful prevailing attitude of the people and an act of great courage on the part of the playwright to dramatize it. Gunavati, the Queen, sides with the priest as she wants to please the goddess to receive the gift of motherhood. She also promises to offer the blood of three hundred kids and one hundred buffaloes, and adamant on carrying it out.¹⁰

Raghupati, the priest, stands for the conformist interpretation of religion in *Visarjan*. He is not only a blind supporter of the merciless killing of innocent creatures but is also unwilling to alter his mindless faith in the system of religion. He abets Jaising to kill King Govinda for the sake of continuance of sacrifices even though these are absurd and unreasonable.

- Raghupati: Then come and learn your lesson once again from me. Sin has no meaning in reality. To kill is but to kill, it is neither sin nor

anything else. Do you not know that the dust of this earth is made of countless killings? Old Time is ever writing the chronicle of the transient life of creatures in letters of blood. Killing is in the wilderness, in the habitations of man, in birds' nests, in insects' holes, in the sea, in the sky; there is killing for life, for sport, for nothing whatever. The world is ceaselessly killing; and the great Goddess Kāli, the spirit of ever changing time, is standing with her thirsty tongue hanging down from her mouth, with her cup in hand, into which is running the red life-blood of the world, like juice from the crushed cluster of grapes.¹¹

Tagore criticizes the superstitions attached with some of the pointless rituals of Hinduism existing in Indian society. He was opposed to innocent animals being killed in the name of religious sacrifice. He was against executors of such practices.

III

Visarjan highlights the pits of an ignorant society and throws light on the malevolent attitude of its religious custodians. But above all, *Visarjan* is deeply rooted in the concept of ritual healing and its performance on the stage. It is Tagore's supreme theatrical achievement. *Visarjan* offers a kind of purgation and purification not just for the characters but also for the spectators. It introduces the question of sacrifice, whether to commit bloodshed or not, revealed through the opinions of King Govinda and the priest Raghupati and finally ends up in a ritual cleansing of the spectators. Unfortunately solving the superstition required the killing of a human life, which again points to the deterioration of the belief practices. Karen Morell, while commentating on African theatre, opines thus:

It is a truism that the theatre is simply but effectively in its operational totality, both performance and spectators; and there exists already in this truth a straightforward dynamic of drama which is not to be found in painting, a technique whose only end can be change, not consolidation. – It suggests that theatre is perhaps the most revolutionary art form known to man.¹²

The schism between two powerful forces – religious orthodoxy and spiritual humanism – is developed through dialogues written concretely to show the depth of the conflict. The relationship of power between these forces is shown as of equal importance. The following scene is an apt example of the idea:

Horace – entertainment, celebration, enhancement of social solidarity, education (including political education) and healing – are also functions of ritual.¹⁶

Some scholars also argue that ritual is the very origin of human language, myth, narratives and religion. The idea of ritual origins of theatre coincides with the final sacrifice of human blood by Jaising who was at the threshold of various 'isms'. Healing of the unswerving faith of the Brahmin priest Raghupati is made possible only with the help of another sacrifice; the sacrifice of a human being. To make us understand the nonsensical practices in society, Tagore takes us on a ritual passage. What we see on stage is the sacrifice of the play to save the society from its grave errors. From the very first scene, like a breathtaking ritual act, *Visarjan* unfolds before us with all its conflicts, arguments and tensions. In Bengal, the Kali cult has been one of the most pious and religiously observed rituals during Tagore's times. The placing of Kali as the central figure of the play, chants invoking her Shakti, the use of a larger stage space as well as the use of songs and dance elements enhance the ritual effect of the play. The need for blood sacrifice or its absence points to the importance of Kali worship. Moreover, Kali's presence within the play is the prime factor that enhances its ritual dimension.

IV

Tagore uses the stage brilliantly to narrate the concept of ritual sacrifice both in form and content. *Visarjan* is a complete success in making it entertaining to the masses and teaching the imprudence of certain belief systems. The tension building up between two equal forces – the King and the priest – culminates in the sacrifice of an innocent victim Jaising, who is torn between these forces. By grabbing our attention to the burning problem of religious conservatism and the exploitation in the name of it, *Visarjan* proffers itself as a ritual. It is one of the most influential and modern play of Rabindranath Tagore. The task before Tagore was to educate the masses and influence the collective consciousness of the society by the use of elements of ritual theatre. As King Govinda declares, 'To the Goddess? Then I cannot blame him. For a man loses his humanity when it concerns his gods. You go to your work and leave me alone.'¹⁷

Visarjan is luminously used as a medium for commenting on social and political issues related to religion and culture in the country, especially in Bengali society. The symbolic ending of *Sacrifice* is evocative of Tagore's vision of the harmonious and divine in relationship between beings in the universe. 'You are my Goddess', Jaising tells the beggar girl, towards the climax of the play, 'Do you know how I know it? You bring to me your sacrifice every moment, as a mother does to her child'.¹⁸

Since ritual is both a symbolic and repetitive exchange of an idea, Tagore visualized the play's immense scope of directing it as a ritual to the spectators, because they are the representatives of the larger society's consciousness. From the very first scene, with the gathering of Gunavati, Raghupati, Aparna and Jaising, we delve into the issue which after a series of ups and downs finally culminates in the self-immolation of Jaising. A fine rapport is established between the performers and spectators on the basis of theatrical competence. Therefore, *Visarjan* is a theatrical or performance text rather than a dramatic text. A dramatic text's possibility of transforming itself into a performance text is explored with the very act of bringing ritual sacrifice at the centre of the performance space. The energy and immediacy in actions/gestures of the characters indicate a kind of violent frenzy, an uncontrollable mental/physical urge towards a possible action to happen, the ritual of sacrifice. This prompt body movement or bursts of energy is again a sign of the theatrical space merging with the dynamics of ritual theatre.

Visarjan proves that not just a relevant theme but the entire spectrum of theatrical language is important to communicate with the spectators. The mood and diction are never normal but always kept on a higher scale in accordance with the urgency of the ritual theatre. All these factors make *Visarjan* theatrically the most spectacular play of Tagore. The play invites the spectators to take part in the performance/ritual and emerge finally healed of their orthodox mindsets.

Notes

- 1 Camara Laye, 'Becoming Man' in John Beck et al. (eds), *Toward a Sociology of Education* (1976), 29-49. Here quoted from p. 30.
- 2 Epigraph in Rabindranath Tagore, *Sacrifice and Other Plays* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1917). Kindle edition, n.p.
- 3 A.N. Gupta, 'Rabindranath Tagore: His Dramas and His Dramatic Art' in Tika Ram Sharma (ed.), *Perspectives on Rabindranath Tagore* (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1986), 150.
- 4 Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 193.
- 5 Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of an Artist* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1963), 15.
- 6 Tagore, *Sacrifice and Other Plays*, n.p.
- 7 Edward B. Tyler, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, Vol. II (London: John Murray, 1920), 341.
- 8 Tagore, *Sacrifice and Other Plays*, n.p.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Karen L. Morell, ed. *In Person: Achebe, Awoonor and Soyinka* (Seattle: Institute for Comparative and Foreign Area Studies, 1975), 105.
- 13 Tagore, *Sacrifice and Other Plays*.

- 14 Ibid.
 15 E. O. James, *Sacrifice and Sacrament* (London: Barnes & Noble, 1962), 27.
 16 Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater* (Atlanta: Applause, 1994), 613.
 17 Tagore, *Sacrifice and Other Plays*.
 18 Ibid.

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