

VIOLENCE VS NON-VIOLENCE

## Theatrical 'Contemporarisation' of Tagore

Pachu Ray

Rabindranath Tagore would have died again and again if he would have been so unfortunate as to be forced to watch the theatrical performances based on the words written once upon a time by himself and now being transformed into stage performances at random by different groups in order to commemorate his one and a half birth centenary. The performers say that they want to highlight the views of the poet on the contradiction between violence and nonviolence. But after watching their performances this writer has no option but to opine that, in most cases, they have dealt more with their own views regarding this matter than that of the poet himself. Why then Rabindranath, who died almost seventy years ago? Why this man, born in nineteenth century, is being bothered even in the twenty-first by his fellow Bengalis in a manner which possibly the poet does not deserve at all? Is it just to exploit the viability of the market using his title?

This piece deals with contemporary theatrical performances based on Rabindranath's plays *Raktakarabi* and *Visarjan*, and adaptations of the poet's novels *Char Odhyay* and *Gharebair* and poem *Birpurush*. Apart from Tiritiyo Sutra's marvelous *Visarjan* and Pancham Baidik's *Gharebair*, one cannot muster any positive attitude towards the rest.

### RAKTAKARABI

In 2004-2005, many groups again ventured to stage the great *Raktakarabi*, which had remained practically untouched by theatre persons for fifty years since 1954, the year when Bahurupi under the leadership of Shambhu Mitra staged *Raktakarabi* and dazzled Indian theatre.

During this 150th birthday commemoration, *Raktakarabi* is being staged mainly by two groups—'Purba Paschim' and 'Onyo Desh' respectively. Before passing any remark on these performances, it is better to reproduce the renowned theatre person Mohit Chattopadhyay's opinion on *Raktakarabi*. He said that Rabindranath, by writing *Raktakarabi*, has propelled Indian theatre through a hundred year's great leap forward. Shambhu Mitra went deep into each and every line and, also, in between the lines of *Raktakarabi*, and then consulted Shishir Bhaduri, Nandlal Basu and others among the then eminent intellectuals, before staging *Raktakarabi*. He did all these not because the play was itself fragile, but because it was extremely sensitive to treatment.

*Raktakarabi* was written sometime in 1923. Rabindranath visited USA in 1922-23, and this visit took a heavy toll from the poet. People say that *Raktakarabi* is the product of this toll. But there isn't a single direct signature in *Raktakarabi* from which the geography or the history or the then political economy of USA could be identified as that of Yakshapuri. As a printed volume *Raktakarabi* came up in 1926. So it was left unpublished for almost three years. It is said

that, during this period, the poet twenty-two times revised the script. All these facts are being mentioned here in a nutshell, only to show the extent to which Rabindranath was meticulous about *Raktakarabi*. A close look at the present outrageous attempts to ruin this memorable meticulousness is self-explanatory.

It is to be mentioned that the historical incidents at Jalianwalabag and Chourichoura happened before *Raktakarabi* was written. The religious trumpet was not uncommon at that time. Then why in *Raktakarabi* there was no police, no military, no fire arms, and no religious trumpet? Rabindranath could have incorporated all or any of them had he intended to do so, had he wanted to 'contemporarise'.

*Raktakarabi*'s Nandini, Ranjan and the Raja are each supposed to be a metaphor, the play itself is considered to be an allegory and, above all, it is beyond any narrow boundary of time and space. It is always contemporary.

In Purba Pashchim's production the performance starts with the action of a military force armed with modern artillery and ends with two dead bodies, one of Ranjan and the other of Nandini, lying side by side up-stage. Down-stage the rally of "dhwajapuja" was accompanied by a huge trumpet, locally called "tasa party". The beginning and the end of the performance show not only the departure from but the utter devaluation of Rabindranath's thought.

Another *Raktakarabi* was staged by 'Onyo Desh' where, by and large, marginal people were the participants. The whole performance was compressed to a time span of less than an hour. And at the end a spokesperson of the group declared that they could perform the play, at short notice, and anywhere, no matter whether it was a verandah or a rooftop, a corridor or even a small kitchen space! And three girls, with little likeness among themselves, played Nandini. In 1977, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjya, as minister of culture, requested Shambhu Mitra to stage *Raktakarabi* once again, this time under the sponsorship of the government of West Bengal. Shambhu Babu refused the offer because a proper Nandini was unavailable, Tripti Mitra having aged. But here in 'Onyo Desh' there were three Nandinis, and the Nandini of Purba Pashchim was more than forty years old.

Disgustingly the 'Onyo Desh' performance was flanked with people whose faces were covered with *gamcha* to resemble that of 'Kishenji'. At the end, Raja, Nandini, Bishu and others were kept at the point of a gun (lathis raised like guns) by the *gamchha* covered performers, meaning that the Kishenjies are the real state apparatus. What a ridiculous and perverted trashing of Rabindra-nath's work! Is it a simple matter of pleasing the present ruling party?

#### CHAR ODHYAY

Total Theatre's 'Char Odhyay' is equally disappointing. It does not matter whether one likes or dislikes the content of Rabindranath's *Char Odhyay*. What matters is the discourse among Antu, Ela and Indra in the context of violence and nonviolence. The discourse is an asset of Bengali literature.

But Total Theatre's performance started again with people whose faces were covered with *gamchha* and who had open pistols with them as if chasing someone all the time. Rampant use of pistols and crackers, cover of *gamchha* on the faces of most of the male performers, including even Indranath himself who appeared with open pistol, folded pajama (one leg only)

and face covered with *gamchha*, made the whole thing an utter fiasco, a childish, audacious perversion of Rabindranath. Total Theatre finally put one AK47 also on the shoulder of Antu who went along to jangalmahal. And it is better not to speak any further about the rampant exhibition of pistols all through the play. Pistols were not unknown to Rabindranath and though AK47 was not invented during Rabindranath's life time, he knew what a rifle was. The book was published in 1934. Revolution had long been brewing in Kolkata at centres not far from his house. Had he wanted any brandishing of revolutionary symbols, he would have put them in the play. Alas, no one in the novel carried fire arms, nor was there any display of fire arms on any page or in any line.

This writer had the opportunity to watch Shambhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra as Antu and Ela, respectively. Perhaps this was the trouble again.

### BIRPURUSH

Kaushik Sen is a powerful theatre person of this time. An outspoken and imaginative director-actor, Kaushik Sen is an asset of contemporary Bengali theatre. In the recent past Kaushik acted in and directed Swapnasandhani's *Dakghar* and *Bidushak* (more Kaushik's Swapno-sandhani's creations than Rabindr-anath's). Rabindranath's *Bidushak*, written in 1936, consists of less than 250 words. Conversion of this tiny piece of fiction into a full length play demands huge extrapolation which Kaushik did according to his own purpose of making things compatible with the then political situation. But still, even at that time, it had been difficult to show the relevance of Rabindranath in the production named *Bidushak*.

But in *Birpurush* he did something which is very difficult to accept. The performances of *Raktakarabi* and *Char Odhyay*, which featured in this discussion earlier, were not of the quality which gives full houses. But *Birpurush* will attract people—one, for the commanding directorial work and acting, and, two, for the thematic part, which is compatible with the ruling party's propaganda and some intellectuals' campaign of the sandwich theory regarding the Jangalmahal's affairs.

Well, anyone can write or direct or produce anything he wants to. So long as it is his own work no one else can object. But, why do these people distort and devalue Rabindranath and entangle his name with theirs? Perhaps the market has something to do with it.

### VISARJAN

Amidst this utter darkness came Tritiyo Sutra's *Visarjan* as a bright flame, under the leadership of Suman Mukhopadhyay. Chance has allowed this author to have attended Shambhu Mitra's, Utpal Dutta's, Bibhas Chakraborty's, Salil Bandopadhyay's and Habib Tanbir's *Visarjan*. With technical support from Dipak Mukhopadhyay (light) and Sanchayan Ghosh (stage) and with challenges from Debojyoti Mishra (music), Suman Mukhopadhyay, has startled the audience with a true depiction of Rabindranath's *Visarjan*. Without any so-called contemporari-sing, Rabindranath's *Visarjan* is realised in the context of violence and nonviolence. Following Rabindranath word for word, Suman makes people understand that any extreme creed of any kind may lead to uncontrolled violence devoid of any logical development.

Thus, the production starts with Aparna's cry—"Give him—Give him back to me", after her pet goat was sacrificed by Raghupati before the idol of Goddess Kali, and, after his foster-son Jaising, in order to satisfy the thirst of his foster-father for blood, sacrifices himself, the

production ends with Raghupati's cry—"Give him Give him Give him! Give him back to me!" downstage, while upstage the actually destitute Aparna appears as a symbol of blind love. In between, lies the lifeless body of contradiction-torn poor Jaisingha. Raghupati and Aparna, at the end, face a stabbing realisation of the truth which lay hidden from both of them, especially from obsession blinded Raghupati. At the very end, they are on the same boat.

Rabindranath wrote the play on the Shakespearean model, in 1890 when a fierce race was being pursued in the name of Nationalism by every state power to capture its own market. The poet apprehended that this race could lead to violent destruction. *Visarjan* is the result of this apprehension. He translated the play, which was published as "Sacrifice" in 1917, when the first world war was at its height. The poet dedicated *Sacrifice* "to those heroes who bravely stood for peace when human sacrifice was claimed for the Goddess of War".

Suman's editorial and directorial philosophy on *Visarjan* seem to be based on no 'Goddess', but on the 'almighty God' of political violence. Today the root of all types of violence is political and political only. In a brilliantly subtle way this has come up in Tiritiyo Sutra's *Visarjan* which, again is the best translation into theatre of Rabindranath's *Visarjan*, in this writer's expedience.

### GHAREBAIRE

Now a few words, on Pancham Baidik's *Gharebair*. Arpita Ghosh directs it and also acts in it. 'Gharebair' was published in 1916. The legendary Tripti Mitra did *Gharebair* in 1974, her 7th directorial work in Bahurupi. Shambhu Mitra directed *Visarjan* in 1961. It had only 13 performances, his legendary Raja had 56 performances, while *Gharebair* had 48. How far Arpita can go with her work is not known but she has certainly concluded a Himalayan task by picking up only those elements of the novel which satisfy her purpose of projecting the question of violence versus nonviolence. But this is probably not the only essential motif in this novel, since Bimala, the protagonist's upbringing and character has been depicted by Rabindranath in earnest detail, bringing out unity and diversity. Tripti Mitra dealt with this matter in her production which, however, all in all, was somewhat weak in comparison to that of Arpita.

When the Swadeshi movement started in Bengal in 1905, Rabindranath was in the van of the agitation and composed many patriotic songs which were passionately sung then and are popular even today. But, at the same time, he considered violence to be essentially destructive to the movement. Someone may or may not agree with this notion of the poet, the notion reflected in *Gharebair* and 18 years afterwards in *Char Odhyay* as well. It is to be noted that the said discourse is much more enriched in the latter novel than in the former. This inherent character of the text ought to be reflected in any honest transformation of *Gharebair* based only on the issue of violence. And it's needless to mention that Arpita was very honest in this transformation.

To conclude, here is a synopsis of Ethic Belghoria's "Kothay Pabo Tare" (Where can we find him), written and directed by Debashish Sengupta.

Rabindranath is the synonym for a protracted journey consisting of innumerable turns and crossroads. And, at the very last, the end point of the journey could be open or there could be a multi-terminal ending. As a theatre worker one can handle any of his texts religiously or try updating the text—crumbling and twisting— according to one's motive...

Members of a theatre group may intend to observe the journey of this great philosopher in the context of their endangered country....

Their life then gets entangled with their journey and in turn with the journey of that great personality. And in this process they get involved with Raktakarabi-Dakghar-Visarjan-Gharebaire-Conception of Cooperative-Humanity-Crisis of Civilisation- Plundering of Natural Resources or try to get inside his Musical Creations. They search the paths of Nandini-Ranjan-Amal-Govinda-manikyo-Nikhilesh and find that actually they are searching their life- their time....

“The story of this journey is a journal., unfinished, open, possibly multi-terminal..... We have tried to frame this journal in a theatre..”

Ethic has really in their production made a sincere journey through which they wanted to map and measure their capability of understanding Rabindranath.

Without this mapping and measuring one’s ability, ventures based on Rabindranath’s works may lead to disastrous end games. □□□