



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Tagore's Reverence For Buddhist Culture: With Reference To His Three Poems.

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Poet Rabindranath Tagore, as may be safely affirmed, had a revered admiration for the Classical Buddhist Literature. This affinity left a permanent mark in the literature Tagore created centering round Lord Buddha. As an inspiring story of the age of the Upanishada or the Ramayan – Mahabharata or even a trend setting episode narrating an act of chivalry from the lives of Shikh, Marathi or the Bengali, so was the stories of Jataka had always been a source of inspiration to Tagore so far as the creation of his eternal poetry was concerned. Raja Rajendralal Mitra's immortal creation '*The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*' had, perhaps, been served as the principal source for Tagore to re-create the Buddhist environment in his poetry. Tagore, as is believed, preferred to carry the book in time of his personal trips. This book was the treasure-house for the creation of Tagore's poems namely 'The Best Elms' (Shresthaviksha), 'Head-Selling' (Mostak Vikroy), 'The Female Worshipper' (Pujarini), 'The City Goddess' (Nagar Luxmi), 'Repayment' (Parishod), 'Minimal Loss' (Samanya Kshati), 'Value- Receiving' (Mulyaprapiti), etc. By the devotional and pedantic touch of Tagore's pen the poems gained the quality of eternal sensibility.

It is apparent that Tagore trusted the traditionally known stories of Buddhist origin while narrating the story-line in ' Shresthaviksha'. As the story-line progressed we are made aware that Anathapindada –the Buddhist Monk, has gone out for search of the best elm for his Lord. It reminds us about another celebrated search of Christian origin for the lost Grail by Sir Galahyde. After a frantic journey of a thousand nautical miles across the high-rise buildings of Shrivantipur and after being offered with a thousand Gems, Anathapindada remained uncontended. He uttered:

O city dwellers, please listen,

Buddha - the best-beggar,

Would be the Recipient

Offer your best elm...

For search of the best elms a Monk's quest continued till he reached the forest crossing the bankrupt citadel of concrete. His quest was put to an end as the poor woman sacrificed her much-torn cloth- the only rag she had to cover her shame- to Tathagata. Anathapindada eagerly gone back to his Lord considering the offering as the best elm for his Lord.

It may be safely affirmed that as per the Buddhist prescription 'tyaga' or sacrifice stands supreme. Tagore, as it appears, left no stone unturned to highlight this elemental message of Tathagata. As a devoted volunteer of Lord Buddha, Anathapindada urged upon the dweller of Shrivantipur:

... Calamity destroys earthly attributes

Among the everlasting attributes of all -

Sacrifice (tyaga) stands supreme.

It appears natural that as a devoted disciple of Lord Buddha – Anathapindada will value an Absolute Surrender more than a thousand Gems. He, thus, accepted the rag from the woman as the most valuable offering for his Lord as the sacrifice marks an Absolute Surrender to the worshipped.

Mostak Vikroy(Head-selling) is another such poem by Tagore where the Buddhist ideal of Sacrifice stands supreme. The story-line tells us that the kind and benevolent king of Kushal has taken a refuge in the lap of remote forest after being defeated by the jealous King of Kashi. For arresting the 'Kushal Raj' - the epitome of temporal jealousy 'Kashi Raj' has announced that :

'He will be honoured with a hundred lotus

Who can place Kushal Raj before us...'

On the other way, knowing the pecuniary ill luck of a merchant, kind hearted Kushal Raj, by his instinct, had expressed his willingness to assist him in his days of financial crisis. As a gesture of supreme sacrifice for his subject, Kushal Raj placed himself before the self of Kashi Raj with a plea to hand over the amount declared for his arrest so that the merchant may overcome his pecuniary crisis:

'...whatever price You promised for my capture

Please hand over to my distressed friend'.

Listening the appeal, every courtiers of Kashi Raj became numb. Even the:

'...heard hearted Armed Guards –

Couldn't hold their tears for long'.

Tagore has made the transformation of Kashi Raj more touching:

' O Prisoner!

--planned to defeat me by martyrdom-

In sacrificing your Life.

But I will win over the battle-

By donating your kingdom-

With an additional offering of my Heart'.

The message related to the virtue of 'Tyaga' as in 'Jataka' has got a more vivid expression in the charismatic creation of Tagore. That Sacrifice can play a vital rule in transforming even frozen heart is exemplified here. Though the narrative had been taken from Buddhist 'Mahabastyaabdan', the glaring originality of a Tagore creation is visible throughout the poem.

The poem 'Pujarini (The Female Worshipper) bears a similar testimony. It may be mentioned here with concern that the poem 'Pujarini' is a thematic allotrope of his dance - drama " Notir Puja (Offerings of Noti). The character, under the able patronage of Tagore, has become an ideal devotee – free from all worldly narrowness. The poem demonstrates how an average female attained a Himalayan height in the process of sacrificing her life by denying King's order for the

sake of keeping the prestige of her Guru (Teacher). Tagore has left his mark of originality in both the portrayal of Pujarini and the Dashi(devotee) named Srimati. Tagore, thus, writes:

...it marked the end of an Autumn-day –

A devotee named Srimati

After taking a dip in holy water

Carrying the garlanded dish of offering – spreading fragrance ...

Stood silently before the Queen with bowed-down gesture...

The sacrifice of Srimati for the sake of her devotion for Lord Buddha by denying the King's order is an exemplary episode of 'Samarpan' (supreme sacrifice). But in 'Notir Puja' (Worship of Noti), written after twenty seven years, bears almost the same testimony but, perhaps, with a more bigger canvas. Tagore, himself, opined that what Noti(the worshipper) wanted to offer Buddha was her Dance. What other worshippers wanted to offer Him was the immediate Truth but what Noti actually offered was, perhaps, - the ultimate Truth which adds totality to a performance - as she realized after a lifelong asceticism. This addition, perhaps, is Tagore's offerings for Lord Buddha.

Ref :

1. Rabindra Rachanabali, Viswa Bharathi, Kolkata.
2. Chhinnapatrabali, Viswa Bharati, Kolkata.

Note: I have chosen the Original Bengali version of Tagore's works as primary source and all incidental translations are made by the current author.

N.B : I extend my sincere apologies to those writers whose works I might have referred to but inadvertently missed to acknowledge them.