


Dance Drama Chandalika

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OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ASH-2022-09034464

Volume: 9

Issue: 3

Month: January

Year: 2022

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 07.11.2021

Accepted: 24.12.2021

Published: 01.01.2022

Citation:

Ray, Sushmita. "Dance Drama Chandalika." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2022, pp. 56–60.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v9i3.4464>



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Abstract

This play of Rabindranath Tagore depicts beautifully the 5th Century BCE saga of an untouchable Chandal girl, who is an outcast of society since her birth. She suffers from untold humiliation and harsh treatment from all sections of society. She holds God responsible for such an ignominious situation for all her life. Then comes thirsty Ananda, the most favourite disciple of Lord Buddha. Seeing Prakriti drawing water from well he utters the phrase 'Give me water, give me water.' Ananda's request takes Prakriti by surprise and she tells him that she is an untouchable Chandal girl and that the water of the well, drawn by her, is impure. If she gives him water, she commits a great sin. Ananda declares that she is the same human being as he is and assures her that every water is pure that quenches thirst. Prakriti now overcomes her conflict of mind and gives him water. She falls in intense love with exceptionally handsome Ananda, but he ignores her. She asks her mother Maya to use her magic spell to bring him down to their cottage. Again, there is conflict in her mind about the persecution of Ananda due to her mother's magic spell and her love and respect for him. Ultimately, however, Ananda comes to their cottage, though pale and sickly, and forgives them all in the name of Lord Buddha.

Thus, the Nriyanatya or Dance Drama Chandalika is an extremely powerful play of Rabindranath exhibiting the curse of untouchability and liberation from the menace of caste structure and in the process resolving the conflicts Prakriti nurtures in her mind.

Keywords: "Give Me Water", Untouchability, Liberation, Conflicts, Caste structure, Lord Buddha.

Background of "Chandalika"

Inspired by Rabindranath Tagore (1861 - 1941) his young colleague Satish Chandra Ray (1882-1904) wrote a long poem 'Chandali' based on the 'Shardulakarnabadana' of the Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal (Mitra 219) in the 'Magha issue of Bangadarshan 1310 BS' i.e., in January 1904.

After a long 18 years, the Malayalam Poet Kumaran Asan (1873 -1924) again wrote a long poem "Chandal - Bhikshuki" in 1922 based on the same theme.(Tagore, Rabindra Rachanabali. Vol. 16. 772). Rabindranath wrote the play initially called "Chandalini" later changed to "Chandalika" in the second week of August 1933 (Ghosh 64) based on the same "Shardulakarnabadana" as was used by Satish Chandra Roy in 1904 after a long gap of about 30 years. Rabindranath was deeply concerned with the Harijan (untouchable) movement during the years from the middle of 1932 to the middle of 1933. The British Government always encouraged the division between the Hindus and the Muslims but in 1932 they wanted a further division within the Hindu community itself. Mahatma Gandhi (1869 -1948) resorted to a "fast unto death" in the Yerwada Central Jail in Poona (now Pune) on September 20, 1932, to register his vehement protest against the creation of a separate electorate (communal award) for the Hindu depressed classes. Gurudev rushed for Poona on September 24, 1932, to meet the Mahatma in Yerwada. The fast was broken by the Mahatma in the presence of Rabindranath on September 26, 1932, after the Government conceded his main demand of deleting the separate electorate clause.

After his return from Poona, Rabindranath set up a committee for reformation of our society whose aims were:

1. Nobody will be looked down on socially; nobody will be untouchable, and everybody will be allowed to bring water to use higher castes.
2. Ordinary temples, places of worship, and water reservoirs would be accessible to all, irrespective of castes.
3. There will be no restrictions to the entry of any caste into schools, places of pilgrimage,

meetings, etc.

4. Society will not allow anybody to hurt the self-respect of any individual based on caste.

This was signed by Rabindranath on December 1, 1932. (Mukhopadhyay 493).

While getting involved in Mahatma Gandhi's Harijan movement, Rabindranath was also profusely writing poems from 1932-33 on the atrocious theme of untouchability, which becomes evident from the following Table 1.

Table 1: Seven Poems of Rabindranath written in 1932-33 on Untouchability

Name of the Collection	Rabindra Rachanabali Vol. No.	Name of Poem with Page No.	Date of Writing
Parishesh (Conclusion)	2	Jal Patra** (Water Vessel) 963 - 64	24 July 1932
Punascha (Post Script)	3	Pratham Puja (First worship) 57-61	28 Shraavan 1339 BS(1932)
	3	Shuchi (Holiness) 99-101	Nov 17, 1932
	3	Rang rejini (female painter) 101-103	25 Agrahayan 1339 BS (1932)
	3	Premar Sona (Golden Love) 104-105	24 Poush 1339 BS (1933)
	3	Mukti (Liberation) 103-104	14 Magh 1339 BS (1933)
	3	Snan Samapan (completion of bath)	14 Falgun 1339 BS (1933)

** *Jalapatra* has already been translated into English by Sushmita Ray (Ray 2016, 1-2)

Nrityanatya Chandalika

The Prose drama Chandalika has been discussed earlier (Raj and Sunitha 16 - 20). The present work, however, deals with the Dance Drama Chandalika. In the prose drama of 1933, the untouchability and its attendant humiliation of the chandal girl Prakriti are not sufficiently highlighted. This prompts Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) to convert the prose drama into a dance drama Nrityanatya Chandalika in 1938 like the earlier conversion of the poetry drama Chitrangada into the dance drama Chitrangada in 1936. The main impetus for the dance

drama Chandalika however, comes from Pratima Devi (1893-1969), his daughter-in-law (Ghosh 218 - 220). In a letter dated January 21, 1938, he writes to Amiya Chakravarty: "I have been pretty busy for some time to convert the prose dialogues of entire Chandalika into melodious songs. I have been so much absorbed in this project all day and night that all social obligations seem to be insignificant" (Tagore, Chithipatra 206).

The prose play (Tagore, Rabindra Rachanabali. Vol. 6. 305 - 321) has two scenes - the first scene has ten songs, and the second scene has five songs - total

fifteen songs, all sung by Chandalika and a Buddhist hymn sung twice - the first time by the mendicants in the first scene and the second time by the most favourite disciple of Lord Buddha Ananda at the end of the play. The prose play has only three characters: Prakriti, the chandal girl, her mother, Maya, and Ananda.

Nrityanatya Chandalika (Tagore, Rabindra Rachanabali. Vol. 6. 429 - 448) has three scenes. The first scene brings out the utter humiliation and harsh treatment meted out to the untouchable chandal girl Prakriti by girls of the upper echelons of the society while she attempts to buy flowers, yoghurt, and bangles from the vendors concerned. These vendors refuse to sell their products to Prakriti after being warned by the upper-class girls - "do not touch her, do not touch her, she happens to be an untouchable chandal girl." Prakriti feels terribly insulted and holds God responsible for all her maladies originating from the utter disgrace showered on her by the upper-class girls and the vendors. In a fit of pique, she even does not want to worship God who has forced her to be in such an ignominious situation for all her life.

Significantly, in this hour of the crisis of Prakriti, a group of Buddhist Mendicants travels on the road chanting the hymn adoring Lord Buddha in Pali "Yo Sannisino... Panamami Buddha" whose Bengali rendering is given in (Basu 76). We give the English Translation of the hymn in Bengali:

We bow to Lord Buddha, who is a superior being with infinite knowledge and who has attained proper consciousness sitting under the holiest fig tree after overcoming the force of destruction.

It is important to note that the above hymn does not appear in the prose play. The Nrityanatya is set into a recitative form with six songs taken from the prose play and other prose lyrics set to music.

Prakriti's mother Maya notes that the day passes off with scorching sun and Prakriti has not done her duties of covering the floor of the yard with cow dung paste, drawing water from the well, bringing down fruits from trees, blowing up a fire in the hearth, grazing the goats. Maya urges her to come quickly to their hut with water drawn from the well. She does not feel like doing the household chores. Let them go to the dogs. Prakriti wonders

why her mother gave birth to her subjecting her to endless humiliation and curses for no fault of her. Maya brushes aside her charge. Ananda comes when Prakriti draws water from the well and says that he is very thirsty and utters the phrase "give me water, give me water." Prakriti expresses her inability to offer Ananda water as she is a chandal girl and the water of her well is unholy. Ananda does not agree with her and says that she is the same human being as he is following the tenets of Lord Buddha, which, as a matter of fact, came into existence as a protest, against the rigid Hindu caste system. The water which satisfies the thirst of a person and cools a distressed person must be holy. He implores Prakriti to give him water. He cites in the prose play the instance of Guhak, a chandal man, supplying water to Sita for her bath in the beginning of her forest abode (Tagore, Rabindra Rachanabali. Vol. 6. 310). Ananda takes a small quantity of water in the fold made by joining the hands which looks like a lotus bud. Prakriti thinks that her well has turned into a vast sea with its waves dancing up and down. This creates ripples in her mind inducing unsteadiness in her life. She is overjoyed to get a taste of liberation. She is amazed to find the mighty power of this small amount of water. It has completely blotted the eternal curse from her life. She is so deeply absorbed in the joy of liberation that she turns down the request of the village folks to join them in the harvest song. She is lost in thought about Ananda. If he comes to her, she would solemnly ask him to consider her agony and ardent desire of her destitute life in a voice choked with tears.

The second scene begins with some Buddhist women proceeding towards the temple with offerings of new glittering golden 'Champa' flowers to worship at the lotus-like feet of Munindra. The air becomes fragrant by their sweet smell. Munindra is also worshipped at the feet with garlands of flower.

Maya is surprised to find her daughter Prakriti to undergo penance in the blazing sun like Uma (as narrated in the mythology) for whom she does not know. When asked she says that she worships the man who has given her a clarion call and who has restored her speech. Maya thinks that some evil spirit of the hell is trying to lure her, and she would like to nullify this enticement with her magic spell.

Prakriti claims that the phrase “give me water, give me water” still rings in her heart. She says that Ananda tells her that her Chandal status is absolutely false as she is a human being. Ananda also advises her not to abuse herself because it is a sin. She knows that many maidservants are born in royal families, but she is not a maid. In Brahmin families, there are a large number of “Chandals” but she is not a “Chandali”. This is reminiscent of the Verse 10. of “Manusanghita”, (Bandyopadhyay 1013) where one finds that the children born out of the union of a “Shudra” man and a Brahmin woman are called “Chandals”.

Prakriti has been thinking of seeing Ananda again. At this time a royal attendant comes with the order of the Queen to her mother Maya to locate her tame bird escaping from the cage, if necessary, by applying her magic spell.

Getting the clue from this, Prakriti entreated her mother Maya to utilize her skill in magic to bring Ananda to their cottage. The very thought of dragging the pure soul like Ananda to Maya’s cottage sends in her body a deadly chill because she considers this act on Ananda would be a great sin. She, however, thinks that Ananda, a great saint-like soul would be able to condone her sin for dishonouring him.

Prakriti feels that her life has been brightened up very intensely by the simple phrase “Give me water” used by Ananda. It has dispelled all darkness from her life and has made her happy.

Prakriti’s mother Maya notices a group of Buddhist mendicants on the road wearing yellow attire and chanting the Pali hymn whose Bengali rendering (Basu 76) has been translated into English by me thus:

Oh Sun-like Buddha, Oh Moon-like Gautama,
Oh Possessor of a vast sea of everlasting qualities,
Oh Son of Shakya Clan, Our courteous
Obeisance to You.

Ananda leads the group steadily unmindful of the environment. In particular, he does not pay any attention to Prakriti who feels ignored at this behaviour of Ananda and asks her mother to use her magic spell so that he is forced to take cognizance of her in future. Accordingly, Prakriti’s mother gives a call to her disciples to participate in the Mantra attracting Ananda from wherever he is

available - whether it is seashore or mountain top. Maya now starts magic dance and shows Prakriti her magic mirror and assures her that she can watch his predicament when she dances with this mirror in hand. Maya asks earnestly the son of furious Shiva to perform Tandava dance.

The third scene focuses on Prakriti’s conflict in her mind. She is happy to see her mother’s magic spell to work on Ananda. However, looking at Maya’s magic mirror she feels extremely perturbed at the persecution of Ananda. This shows the sad conflict within Prakriti involving her intense love and sensual lust for Ananda on the one hand and the extreme regret to the point of scourging herself for her action on the other. Prakriti can see in the magic mirror what Ananda does but for the audience Rabindranath introduces in this dance drama a novel technique of Ananda’s shadow play the idea of which may have been imbibed by him from Javanese shadow play (Tagore, Javayatri Patra, Letter No. 14, dated 17 September, 1927, Rabindra Rachanabali 811) showing his clear movement of crossing the river, venturing into road through dense forest or getting fettered by a serpent-like noose all over his body when Maya invokes the Serpent God. Looking at the sorry plight of Ananda Prakriti again implores Maya to take back her magic spell immediately. She laments over the loss of radiance of pure grace from his body and entreats Maya not to insult a hero. She shouts: Victory to Ananda. When Ananda comes to their courtyard under Maya’s magic spell, Prakriti expresses her gratitude to him for rescuing her from the unbearable wretched condition. She asks for his forgiveness for dragging him to their courtyard. Ananda blesses Prakriti and Maya and wishes them well.

Now everybody makes obeisance to Lord Buddha with great respect and chants the Buddhist hymn in Pali whose Bengali rendering (Basu 76) has been translated into English by me thus:

Salutation to the highly compassionate and purified soul Lord Buddha, who possesses great insight and who liberates people from sin and alleviates their sufferings.

Conclusion

This powerful play of Rabindranath Tagore firmly establishes the curse of untouchability of a 5th century BCE Chandal girl. The menace of caste structure as visualized as late as 1932-1933 motivated Rabindranath to take the initiative to reform our society and eradicate its evils. In this short period, he also wrote as many as seven poems in Table-1 highlighting this gloomy aspect of our society. Although the Indian Constitution gives equal rights to all men and women irrespective of caste, creed, and colour, in practice, a large section of our society suffers from the malady even today. Therefore, we do need great men like Lord Buddha, Ananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore to heal this deep wound.

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