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Social Issues and Political Interference: Impact of Bal Gangadhar Tilak on Marathi Theatre

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Abstract

The literary history of Maharashtra is very vibrant and so does the impact and influences that helped in shaping Marathi theatre into a new direction. Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak's name is one of them who indirectly supported Marathi theatre and gave many reasons to convert itself into a new form. Whether it is the issue related to social, political or economical; he was a great supporter of theatre. The plays written during 1880 to 1920 were especially focused on Bal Gangadhar Tilak and his ideology. He was a dominant figure in Indian freedom movement; therefore, it is not surprising but interesting to know that how a political personality can become the major subject matter of the play. For Marathi theatre, Tilak was a ready-made available material. Although he was not fully connected with theatre but it was his magical influence that almost every activity related to him became the subject matter of the plays. Even the name of the plays and name of theatre groups could not remain untouched by his dominant personality and ideologies. The present paper is an attempt to explore the influence of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and his policies on Marathi theatrical practice and how he became the medium to expose the current social and political issues of colonial India.

Key Words- *Influence, Motivate, Social Reform, Political Issues.*

Drama, in Maharashtra, has been used for the spiritual uplift of the people, and at the same time, it became the most powerful weapon against the social, economic, and political

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problems. The development of drama in Maharashtra is one of the supreme dedication of the playwrights and writers, who have given their extraordinary support and extreme dedication. Began in 1843, it continuously changed its shape with the passing of time. Sometimes it got influenced by social issues, and sometimes political issues attracted it towards itself. But the one personality that directly or indirectly dominated Marathi theatre for the long period of forty years was a leading national leader, and he was none other than Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

The plays of the phase, i.e. from 1880 to 1920, were especially based on Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak because during this phase Tilak rose as one of the most influential leading director among national leaders. Since he was a political figure, therefore he was not fully connected with the theatre, so in the first instance, it may be said that what is the relation between this dominant political personality and theatre. His association with theatre was like Eklavya and Guru Dronacharya because he was related to theatre either overtly or covertly. He became an icon for Marathi theatre; his relation was not one dimensional but multi-dimensional with theatre. It was the influence of 1857 revolution that people were filled with a strong sense of national pride. Tilak became a leading figure of Indian independence who continued the fire of 1857 revolution and therefore almost all the political events in which Tilak was involved became the readymade material for theatre. These events were highlighted by the newspapers *Kesari* and *Maratha* which were run by Tilak himself. Hence, Tilak became the main subject of the plays. The magic of Tilak was such that almost all the theatre owners, actors, playwrights, contemporary writers, were profoundly influenced by the Tilkaite ideology and hence they started copying him in their plays either directly or indirectly. Tilak became the chief protagonist of many plays of Marathi theatre. Even the songs of women started writing mentioning him. Example: "The whole world is void without Tilak/ It is like a body without life" (qtd. in Sathe Vol I 172).

Tilak was related to every minute activity of theatre, and therefore he gave importance to these not because to entertainment, but he wanted to use it as a tool against colonial regime. The main reason was that he was very much aware of the importance and potential of theatre. He knew that how theatre can be used as a political tool to aware and gather the audience in as many as possible. He was also conscious of the fact that the potential of theatre can be propagated for

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social and political perspective as well. Therefore, he took an interest in every activity related to theatre, and also in those in which he was unavailable, he takes them as if he was there and involved in it. There are various examples that prove that Tilak and theatre both were interdependent. On the one hand, it was Tilak who was taking theatre as a tool to fight against foreign invaders, on the other, Marathi theatre was dependent upon Tilak for its theme and subject matter. Few of the examples that show how theatre played a crucial role in independence are: there was always the huge need of money to fight against colonial powers, to fulfil this need of money theatre practitioners always helped him. The second one and the best one among these is when Tilak was sentenced to long-term imprisonment the two biggest theatre rivals came forward to help him. They were Balgandharva and Keshavrao; they jointly acted in a play entitled *Sangeet Manapman*. The income from the play was donated to Mahatma Gandhi for Tilak's release from jail. One of the most famous playwrights Khadilkar and the Marathi superstar actor Balgandharva were also not remained untouched by his glory. Therefore they were counted among those who were the biggest admirers of Tilak. Although, the political icons like Baba Saheb Ambedkar and Agarkar were related to theatre, and even they encouraged a lot to the theatre, but the place of Tilak is unforgettable and incomparable.

Everyone who was related to theatre was profoundly influenced and motivated by Tilak and his personality. In few dramas, Tilak was made the central character, or in others, his thought and beliefs were the themes. Almost thirty years, from 1890-1920, Marathi political theatre was dominated by his thoughts and his ideas. Therefore it would not be an exaggeration if it is said that during this time Marathi theatre was entirely coloured in the colour of Tilak. Even many theatre companies were named after Tilak, like Balwant Natak Mandali (Balwant was Tilak's first name), and Lokmanya Natak Mandali, Balmohan Natak Mandali, etc.

Tilak supported theatre through his paper *Kesari*. The theatre that helped and supported by Tilak was primarily political in nature and ideology. One important work that political theatre has done was, it helped to rouse patriotism in the people of Maharashtra and hence led to cultural nationalism. It is because of Tilak whose main aim was political freedom and to maintain unity among Indians. "The plays were structured to depict the characters and views of both the sides,

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the traditional and the reformist; however, characterizations and the situations created in a very shrewd and clever way, always showed the reformist as westernized, over enthusiastic, ridiculous and a hypocrite” (Bhatia 224). “It can be seen from many events and articles that a strong connection between theatre and political freedom from the country was established in the minds of the common people.” (qtd. in Sathe Vol I 114). The people took him as a great prophet; they accepted him as their saviour. It is not the exaggeration to say that Tilak has not just provided the ability to include various topics in Marathi theatre but also became the reason of arousing the feeling of nationality and patriotism in countrymen. Therefore due to Tilak, theatre became an ideal medium for political topics. There are many reasons that prove that why theatre was suitable for such subjects. One of them is related to the conflict. Conflict is the necessary ingredient for any political movement. Therefore, it matches with theatre. Makarand Sathe has mentioned that it may be possible that the other genres like novel or poetry have or have not any conflict. Since conflict arises tension, therefore, it relates with theatre because tension is the need of theatre (Vol I 108). Hence it became a tool for those who wanted to fight against the colonial regime. The late nineteenth century was the highly intense period of political conflict in Maharashtra. This is the one main reason why Tilak was being copied in theatre. Adarkar in her essay on “In search of Women in Marathi Theatre, 1843 to 1933” has mentioned:

Most theatre company owners, playwrights (especially Khadilkar), actors (such as Balgandharva) were highly influenced by the personality and political ideology of Lokmanya Tilak. Plays like Rana Bhimdev, Khara Rajput (Real Rajput) glorified virtues of self-righteousness, strength, valour, national and religious pride and martyrdom. All these plays were not subtle in conveying the messages and directly provoked the british rulers by characters and situations identical to the then prevailing political events (Bhatia 223).

The popularity of Tilak was in such a position that many theatre groups named their theatre companies names after his name like; Lokmanya Natak Mandali, Bal Mohan Natak Mandali, Balwant Natak Mandali. He has said, “I am the subject of theatre” (qtd. in Sathe Vol I 113). Tilak himself understood the importance of theatre for independence because through this medium he

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can reach to common people and therefore he gave his support to it. He helped theatre companies like Kirloskar Natak Mandali through his newspaper Kesari; accepted to become the chief guest and chaired many theatre festivals. It was he who awarded the title of 'Balgandharva' to the great singer and actor Narayan Rajhans. If Balgandharva, the great singer and actor would not have in theatre, then the history of Marathi theatre would have been different from the present history. The credit to discover Balgandharva and transforming Marathi theatre also goes to Tilak.

It was Tilak's magic that he was portrayed through various ways in plays. The actors were dressed up in such a manner as Tilak used to. The most remarkable example is a play whose title was *Dandadhari*. Tilak had also attended one of the performances of this play and got highly felicitate by the performance of the actresses because they were prostitutes who were casting male role. Being impressed by her role, "Tilak said in his acceptance of felicitation, 'In my busy schedule I do not find time to look at myself in the mirror. I did not know now what I looked like. This play made me see myself' (Sathe Vol I 174). These kinds of plays gained a huge success. Consequently, a flood of Tilkaite plays came at this era in Maharashtra. It became a tool to spread the message of nationality to the Indians against the colonial power. The success and effectiveness of these plays alarmed Britishers, and as a result, they banned hundreds of plays and Khadilkar, who was a major playwright of Marathi plays had to be hidden from British secret police (qtd. in Sathe Vol I 113). Few plays that were influenced by Tilak are *Swadeshi Chalwal*, *Divya Arunoday* (reflection of Vang Bhang Movement), *Barisalchi Dhamdhum*, etc.

Tilak, on the one hand, has given priority to political freedom rather than social, whereas, on the other, social reformers like Agarkar, Bhandarkar, Lokhitwadi focused on social issues. Tilakite theatre has not given importance to the issues related to women, but these social reformers' primary focus was to improve women's condition. Hence, the social theatre has not only raised various problems that were related to women but also on those that were prevalent in colonial India. There are ample of examples that show the hypocritical behaviour of reformists themselves. Although the actors, directors, and others who were related to these reformist plays talk about child marriage, women's education, widow remarriage, infanticide by widows, divorce, dowry, love marriages, etc. in their plays but in reality, they were spending a hypocritical

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life. Even the reformers who were not involved with theatre were not untouched by it, for example, Justice Ranade who was a famous leader of social reform movement supported widow remarriage, but himself remarried a young girl of 11. Another example is a play, entitled *Sampati Kaydyache Natak*, focused on Consent Act of 1891. This act was for women who prevented them from their husband having intercourse under the age of 12. In a real sense this act was a supporter of women, and apparently, it must be happened, but this play presented how the sections of this act become responsible for ruining the married life of a young man. But here there was play like *Dandadhari*, “who advocated a cautious and restrained attitude towards remarriages of widows, not hurting social sentiments. In contrast the character of a reformist stresses the immediate importance of remarriages” (Bhatia 224). On the one hand, where the hypocritical situations were occurred from male playwrights, on the other, here a paradoxical situation arose because this time these were the prostitutes as actresses who were advocating against the widow remarriage. Interestingly this play was social but untouched by the personality of Tilak, and it is also a crucial play in the history of Marathi theatre because it was the play which was performed by women’s under a theatre company founded by a lady named Ekamba, who was a prostitute. Her theatre company’s name was Balgaonkar Stree Mandali. It can also be mentioned that whether these actresses were against widow remarriage that is why they performed on such a theme, or they were presenting the reality which they had seen in the society, as it was Tilak who was actually advocating that widow remarriage must not happen.

In this way due to two powerful mediums of different ideology, theatre divided into two streams- social and political. Social and political plays started taking their place in theatre. At some instinct, the growth of social and political theatre was paralleled in Marathi theatre. However political theatre was dominant over social theatre. Nearly each and every play that came in this period was influenced by political and social events of that time. As a result, every activity whether it was a new law, discussion, any new movement, meetings, thoughts of leaders, etc. became a topic of plays.

With the uprising of political theatre, social theatre was also gaining popularity. It also had its audience in quality and quantity. During this phase, theatre was still in the hands of

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Brahmins. It was an irony that in social reform movements, leader came from various castes but in theatre, Brahmins were the head, and therefore castes issue was rarely seen in the theatre. What were the main problems that were dramatized in social theatre? Makarand Sathe has answered in his book *A Socio-Political History of Marathi Theatre Vol I*: What the reformist plays were concerned about were issues mainly related to the condition of women in society, especially-

1. Marriages of very young, sometimes even infant but certainly from pre puberty age girls to old men,
2. Women's education, and
3. Issues related to widows (107).

The plays were written by those playwrights who were nationalists and therefore the plays which came at the beginning of the second phase of Marathi theatre, related to these issues were highly regressive in nature. The playwrights who wrote on these matters were highly influenced by Tilak and so there plays remained untouched by Politics. Although social issues were represented through plays but the political interference was also there. Political leaders always talk about social uplift. In their speeches and work, the priority remained social welfare. It is another thing how much they seriously take it, but their main focal point is the same. It is the politics that can make villain, hero and hero-villain. Therefore it is arguably true to say that to separate society theatre from politics is impossible to remove. Social and political, these two terms cannot be separated. At some level, either of them can be of higher authority, but still it will, connect with the other whether directly or indirectly. Priorities can be changed, but pure division is impossible. Social and political history of Maharashtra is interdependent and so the theatre. Approximately each and every play that was performed on the stage was influenced by society or politics or both. Some of these plays are: *Swatantrya aale Ghara* (Freedom Comes Home), *Swadeshihitchintak* (A well-wisher of motherland), *Sammati Kayadyache Natak* (Law on Age of Consent), *Swarajyasundari* (Independence beauty), *Vande Mataram*, *Sangeet Sthanik Swarajya Arthat Municipality* (Freedom of local Bodies alias Municipality, a Musical), etc.

In this way, one cannot find a perfect example like Bal Gangadhar Tilak in the history of Marathi theatre, who not only supported and helped in flourishing this genre but also gave his

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entire to the nation and therefore, theatre became one of the most influential mediums to raise the voice against social issues and to focus political issues.

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