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Decoding Caste and Power-Structure in Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*

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Abstract

Social structure is a power-structure where every social category reflects the power relations with other in hierarchy. Caste is one of the decisive derivatives in India to measure human relations. It is something which has defined the social hierarchy based on the birth of an individual. Caste has become the most striking method of discrimination of people in India with its maligned and fabricated interpretations. Indeed, it has been originated for distribution of people on the basis of their work for proper functioning of society. Vijay Tendulkar, a Marathi playwright and one of the founding pillars of Modern Indian Drama along with Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad, has discussed the problems of caste discrimination and general perspectives about inter-caste marriages in India in his play *Kanyadaan*. Through this play Vijay Tendulkar also tries to reflect his thoughts on contradictory relationship between imaginary idealism and harsh realism; and also on texture of modernity and social change in India through the marriage of two people of different castes and backgrounds. The present paper is an effort to analyse Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*, originally written in Marathi and later on translated into English, as social documentary on relationship between caste and social structure based on power-relations, caste-based discrimination, inter-caste marriage and pseudo-idealism prevalent in the course of social and cultural progress. The present paper also deals with decoding of the phenomenon of 'violence' employed in caste-based power relations in the society.

Keywords: Society, Power, Caste, Idealism, Violence, Cruelty, Exploitation

In Indian society caste is a big factor for both unification and disintegration. In almost every walk of life the impact of caste value can be easily perceived whether it is profession, social communication, education, cultural behavior or marriage. Generally, caste is defined as a social group which has common characteristics of life style, occupation and social status received by birth. The term 'caste' has been derived from the term 'casta' of Portuguese origin which is associated with race, lineage and breed of pure origin. According to G.S. Ghurye the term caste can be defined as "a segmentation of society into groups whose membership is determined by birth following a hierarchical system wherein generally the Brahmins are at the head of hierarchy and others living on the periphery; restrictions on feeding, social intercourse and marrying a person outside; generally inherited occupation" (1969, 21).

In understanding the concept of caste we come across with hierarchical ladder of various people who are higher and at centre than other who reside at lower and margin. The central and higher placement gives them 'power' and authority to rule upon 'inferior Others' who are 'less powerful' or 'powerless'. This social structure denotes 'social relations' of power structure. Imbalance of these forces brings social tension and disturbance. Marriage is one of the determining factors of caste system in India, and inter-caste marriages are considered to be medium of abolishment of caste. Vijay Tendulkar in his play *Kanyadaan* broods over nature of power relations in caste system, power structure of social relations, devastating aspects of inter-caste marriage, miserable plight of women in Indian society, and a journey of self-

realization from idealism of social change to realism of human suffering. The institution that is in question is the marriage between Jyoti, a well-educated, Brahmin woman of affluent and politically influential family and Arun, a poet, Dalit man by caste from scavenger family, politically ignorant.

Tendulkar's play *Kanyadaan* has its opening in the house of Nath Devalikar who is an MLA, an active social worker and a true follower of Gandhian philosophy. He lives with his wife Seva, a social activist and champion of woman's rights. Due to being socially and politically active they do not get enough time to care their children Jyoti and Jayaprakesh from their childhood. Nath's idealistic views on human life, society, politics and cultural values have been their guiding force since their childhood. They have not gone through any harsh realities. The marriage is the centre around which the play moves. Critically, the play is an effort to show nature of power relations prevalent in matrimonial relationship like other social relationships. Jyoti, an educated woman from socially and politically advanced family decides to marry Arun Athawale, a young Dalit poet with whom she has been acquainted for three days only. Her mother and brother forewarn about marriage and the misery that may befall her aftermath of it. A debate starts among them in regarding to Jyoti's inter-caste marriage with Arun as given below:

SEVA: He is not someone who can fit in among us.

NATH: Why? He is a dalit, is that why?

SEVA: [Sharply] Don't imagine you are the only one with a liberal soul among us. We too know what it is to look beyond caste.

NATH: Then what is it that prevents his fitting in here, in this home.

SEVA: His culture...

NATH: [Breaking out in fury] What do you mean by that? Manners and culture, are they your ancestral property? He is good boy...he is well behaved...can anyone be that without culture? (521-522)

Their discussion reflects that the caste and its culture have been an integral part of an individual in society and they are judged and received the social place on their basis. Here Seva and Jayaprakash, being at the uppermost part of the hierarchical ladder in the society, are not ready to accept Arun, a Dalit, unemployed without any house of his own, short-tempered, unruly and placed at the lowest stage of social structure. But Jyoti's idealist father, who believes in a society that is casteless, appreciates Jyoti's stand because he has firm faith in the fact that alone words cannot transform the society; some steps should be taken. Trying to convince Seva, Nath says, "We have to act as catalysts in this transformation. The old social reformers did not stop with speeches and writing articles on widows' remarriages. Many of them actually married widows" (524).

Nath stands with Jyoti's decision to marry Arun, who, according to Nath, is 'not bad at heart, by nature he is not vile', whose 'complexity has been generated by his circumstances' (525) because he is certain that their marriage will uphold 'the norms of civilized humanity' (527). At the end of the Act One Nath is ignorant of the fact that only inter-caste marriage

based on idealistic thoughts does not change the course of caste system because it does not break equation of 'power-relation'.

It is ample clear in the Act Two of the play when Arun starts his atrocities on Jyoti to take revenge against higher caste through beating to Jyoti. Arun is of opinion that this is only way to change in 'power relation' in social system and he can go higher in social ladder equal to Jyoti. When his exploitations become unbearable, Jyoti comes back to her parents' house. Arun comes to take her back. He is drunk and conscious to his caste, inferiority and discrimination his forefathers had gone through hands of upper class in the past. He says to Jayaprakash, "Whatever I do, I will not be forgiven. Never can I be forgiven. I am great scoundrel, rascal, motherfucker,... I... I beat her with these hands...After all scavengers like us are condemned to rot in shit" (538).

On having been asked by Seva why he beats Jyoti, Arun bluntly answers that he is son of scavengers who do not know the Brahmins' non-violent ways to treat their wives like them; who drink and beat their wives sometimes without no reasons which is publicized; and he is barbarian by birth, and he has not claimed any white-collar culture. The consciousness of Arun about his caste makes him inferior, weaker and violent. He does not hesitate to use physical, mental, psychological and even sexual violence against Jyoti to exploit, abuse and threaten her on the name of his lower caste.

The atrocities, agonies and pains being inflicted upon Jyoti by Arun on the name of humiliations gone through his forefathers in the past do not come to end even after she becomes pregnant. He starts to kick her on her belly. Arun constantly taunts her about her caste and about her parents, heaping foul abuse on them for being highborn. Seva comes to the conclusion about his behavior and says in sarcasm, "Why not? Doesn't his wife belong to the high caste? In this way he is returning all the kicks aimed at generations of his ancestors by men of high caste. It appears that this is the monumental mission he has set out to fulfill" (544).

The 'power-relation' in the social structure becomes more penetrative when Arun, the victimizer uses violence of different kinds against Jyoti which is called as his defense strategy. On this support from Nath, Jayaprakash critically condemns Arun's approach and his exploitations against Jyoti, his pregnant wife. He is of opinion that the exploitations on Arun's forefathers in past by people of higher caste do not give him license to beat his wife without any reason. Taking the example of Arun and Jyoti, Jayaprakash clarifies the 'victim-victimizer pattern' in power-relation of social structure on the basis of caste:

But this means that the very victims of violence may go on penetrate the same brutal violence upon others...Perhaps those who are hunted derive great pleasure to do so. The oppressed are overjoyed when they get a chance to oppress others...the moment one gets the chance one becomes a greater tyrant... one persecutes others with a vengeance, because one exults in doing that...In other words, yesterday's victim is today's victimizer. If he has been shot at yesterday, he shoots today... Therefore, there is no hope of man's gaining nobility through experience, he can only become a greater devil. (547)

About this violent exploited-exploiter relationship Vijay Tendulkar writes that it is inevitable in social structure because it is generated by various reasons and must be shown without any fabrication. He is of opinion that “As a writer I feel fascinated by the violent exploited-exploiter relationship and obsessively delve deep into it instead of taking a position against it. It takes me to a point where I feel that this relationship is eternal, a fact of life however cruel, and will never end. Not that I relish this thought while it grips me but I cannot shake it off” (2003, xliv).

Arun, due to his lower caste-driven anger, is unable to reconcile with his present conditions and always feels troubled in his mind. He feels tortured in his whole existence, and he always wants to revenge against higher caste people by beating to Jyoti. She herself narrates Arun’s mental conditions to her father:

Arun is both the beast, and the lover. Arun is the demon, and also the poet. Both are bound together, one within the other, they are one. So closely bound that at times it is not possible to distinguish the demon from the poet. Filthy cursing is a part of his frenzied love; a sudden shower of hard, ardent kisses accompanies the rain of blows. (564)

At last of the play the web of caste becomes so powerful that Jyoti accepts her powerlessness and inferior self as a woman and even as representative of higher caste in ladder of hierarchical social structure before Arun, a lower caste on the ladder. The reversal of earlier victimizer into the present victim and the previous victim into present victimizer reflects the power pattern in social hierarchy. Due to agonies she starts to feel that she has been converted from Jyoti Yadunath Devalikar to Jyoti Arun Athavale, from a Brahmin to a scavenger. She requests her parents to ‘Fly from my shadow, otherwise my fire will scorch your comfortable values (566).’ The play *Kanyadaan* gives expression to inherent disease of caste and its agonies. Shailaja B. Wadikar, brooding over the theme of casteism in the play, remarks that ‘play is, despite its being based on actual life, appears to be Tendulkar’s comment on Indian society, particularly on the conflict between the upper and the lower-class people (2008, 102).’ Arundhati Banerjee is of opinion that that the play is remarkable for its realism and sarcasm on caste system and inter-caste marriage. She remarks that “Tendulkar is highly realistic not only in the delineation of characters and human relationships but in the depiction of the setting in which these characters enact the drama of their lives” (2005, xv). Shilpi Rishi is also of the same view that the theme of caste system and its different shades makes the play striking, penetrating and thought-provoking. She writes that, “Vijay Tendulkar appears realistic. He raised the burning social question of untouchability through intellectual confusion” (2008, 111).

In the conclusion we can analyse that Vijay Tendulkar in his play *Kanyadaan* does not only highlight the caste system deeply-rooted in socio-political milieu of India but also concentrates in decoding the ‘power-structure’ inherent part of the social relations in caste system. Power-structure operates through caste in the form of victimization, exploitation, threat, violent treatment against the victim and changing patterns of exploiter-exploited. Hence the play is a remarkable in its deep deconstruction of the human psyche in respect caste pattern

through the inter-caste marriage between Jyoti and Arun, and shattering of Nath's dream of social change.

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