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## Rabindranath Tagore's Chandalika: A Critical Perspective

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### Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore turns a well-known Buddhist tale about an untouchable girl's longing for a Buddha student into one of self-awareness in his 1938 play *Chandalika*. This essay focuses on Tagore's recounting of this story and makes the case that by giving Prakriti, the play's protagonist, agency over her own destiny, he also empowers a Dalit woman. According to this paper's textual analysis and examination of pertinent literature, Prakriti's yearning for Ananda is not merely a woman's desire for a man, as some critics have claimed, but rather the soul's yearning for the Supreme Soul. This essay comes to the conclusion that Prakriti defies Hinduism's definition of the ultimate goal of existence when she awakens.

**Key Words:** Untouchability, self-awareness, society, struggle and freedom.

### Introduction

The general belief that "drama is a representation of life" stems from the widespread recognition of drama as a constructive medium for reflecting society. Drama therefore teaches and informs in addition to entertaining. Throughout the years, playwrights have used this potent quality of drama to offer insightful commentary on societal events and so influence beneficial changes in both man and his surroundings. Sanskrit literature is where Indian drama's roots can be found. The ancient texts that outline the fundamentals of stagecraft, such as plot development, characterization, dialogue, music, dance, postures, and stage settings, are Bharatamuni's *Natyasastra*, Ramchandra Gunchandra's *Abhinaya Darpan*, and Abinav Gupta's *Abhinaya Bharati*.

Drama was regarded as the fifth Veda by Bharata, who gave it a divine origin. It appears to have originated from religious dancing. Bharata claims that the drama attempts to reconcile the eight fundamental emotions—love, joy, anger, sadness, pride, fear, aversion, and wonder—into the ninth holistic sense of peace. The oldest known Indian dramatist is Bhasa. His works of art, *Karna*, *Dutavakya*, and *Urubhanga*, are renowned for their dramatic style and intensity. Kalidasa, who is frequently referred to as the Shakespeare of India, is without a doubt the pinnacle of Indian play. The world now has a profoundly spiritual perspective on life because to him. "*Abhinjana Shakuntalam*," his masterpiece, is regarded as the most lavish and fully gratifying romantic drama.

The theater of the people flourished for many years and served the Indian masses after the Sanskrit drama was no longer performed and was only read as literature. The traditional grandeur and richness of drama were absent from these productions. Only after the British established their rule in India did the crippled Indian drama gain new vitality and experience a resurgence. When Krishna Mohan Banerji's *The Persecuted* was published in 1831, Indian-English play had a modest start. However, Michael Madhusudhan Dutt's *Is This Called Civilization*, which debuted in 1871, marked the beginning of the actual Indian English theatrical journey.

During the pre-independence period, prominent figures like as Rabindranath Tagore, Sir Aurobindo, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, and Bharati Sarahi made significant contributions to the expansion and advancement of Indian English drama. The first great Indian writer to earn the Nobel Prize in Literature, Rabindranath Tagore's works in poetry, prose, and drama offer an excellent Triveni of Philosophy, Mysticism, and Humanism. In Bengali dramatic literature and theater, Tagore is regarded as a significant figure. He cannot be placed in a certain location in time, and it is difficult to categorize his plays with helpful categories or explain how they relate to theater. Over a lengthy period of time, he wrote a great deal of play. It is astounding how diverse they are in terms of language, structure, theme, intent, and treatment. His plays and theatrical concepts evolved in ways that diverged from the overall trajectory of Bengali theater and drama. He was a bold critic of religious beliefs and social behaviors, such as the caste system, the world-denying tendency of ascetics, the position of priests, etc., because of his more radical and constant non-conformism. Romantic nostalgia is ineffective in attracting him.

The socio-political cycles of his era are responsible for the creation of any artist. Tagore is not an anomaly. As a result of the growing colonial exploitation by British imperialists, some societal changes occurred. Due to a lack of unrestricted relations with the world's progressive forces, religious and community superstitions were reflected in the nation's social life. Practices such as Sati, polygamy in higher castes, widows' prohibition on remarriage, unfair caste systems, untouchability, etc., were glaring examples of societal injustice. Raja Ram Mohan Roy challenged the social mores and beliefs of the day. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the development of social democratic theory. Because he believed that the uninformed and docile masses needed to be awakened, Tagore urged on a sense of national pride. Three things contributed to the development of a realistic trend in Tagore's writing: the national movement in the nation, Ram Mohan Roy's activities, and Bengali literature from the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly Bakim Chandra's writings.

Since the beginning of India's social renaissance, all social philosophers, philanthropists, and creative artists have been gravely concerned about the long-standing and deeply ingrained practice of untouchability. Because of his strong religious beliefs, Tagore made an effort to prove that every person is distinct and maintains his identity even after achieving union with the godhead. As Gandhi had referred to him, "the great sentinel," Tagore was a supporter of cultural advancement. One of his pet peeves was untouchability. He believed that, in the eyes of the civilized world, it was one of the darkest places that degraded humanity, and that, if not stopped, it would continue to be a source of humiliation and suffering for all time. Therefore, anytime Tagore wrote about injustice and suffering resulting from caste and untouchability, there is a unique intensity of feeling and outrage in his writings.

Tagore's belief in human freedom and dignity sprang from his religious beliefs and was strengthened by his embrace of humanism, the dominant school of thought at the time. He was directed by an integrated perspective that aimed to attain balance and harmony among the various components that make up society. According to him, India's unique contribution to human civilization is found in her elevation of the idea of unity in variety. The diversity of languages, religions, cultures, and castes is all part of a divine plan.

The monopoly of the ruling class over financial resources, long-standing blind orthodoxy, and established social norms are the main causes of caste-based discrimination in society. In India, the caste system is armed with the sense of social and class supremacy that has been cultivated over 6,000 years. "Chandals and untouchables should live outside the village, they should use earthen pots instead of utensils, they should have dogs and monkeys as their property, and they should put on the clothes as taken off from dead bodies," Manu, the codifier of Hindu religious laws, stated in the "Manu Smriti".

Due to its long history of repression, untouchability has had a profound impact on the lives and psyches of those who practice it. Since it has left them physically and intellectually disabled, even the notion of protest appears to be a pipe dream, and they are unable to consider holding any grudges against it. The issue of untouchables is actually not a religious custom; rather, it is a component of the binary system that was at the core of the social structure and involved the politics of subjugation: rich against poor, male versus female, east versus west, elite versus subaltern. Lower castes were condemned to perform dirty and untouchable tasks like scavenging and sweeping, while Brahmins controlled the social structure and had the authority to speak for God. They were condemned as untouchables since they were compelled to remove all of the Hindus' dust and grime. However, the truth is that pollution is caused by their actions rather than by their presence. Tagore presents the argument that while religion must endure on the basis of reason, it should not be supported if it does not uphold the dignity of the individual. Religious ideology need to be founded on judgment and reason.

*Chandalika* by Tagore was composed in 1933. The voice of the disadvantaged and suppressed throughout history is revealed by *Chandalika*, an untouchable and the daughter of a black sorcerer named Chandan. She is a rebel who challenges the social mores that have condemned her to the status of an untouchable, a lesser being. This drama was written by Tagore during the height of the caste system. The British Raj denounced such a dramatic mode of expression and considered it intolerable under the Victorian rules of cultural "purity" during the same era that Tagore conceptualized *Chandalika* as a dance drama. The educated, middle-class, and urbanites limited their definition of "dance" in relation to prostitutes, courtesans, and village people in order to comply with the English authorities. Dance drama was first shown as a possible means of subverting the regressive yet widely recognized social conventions by Tagore's literary brilliance. The "dancing body" turns into a representation of freedom, resistance, and mobility. *Chandalika* expresses her love and rage through her dance moves. Love for a monk who respects and acknowledges her as a human being, and anger against a social rank that has been forced upon her and to which she feels bound for life. It makes an effort to see how the play is a place where Tagore portrays two individuals who are at odds with one another because of their caste, religion, gender,

and sexual orientation in order to synthesize the conflicts that exist between them and demonstrate a social point. A Buddhist legend serves as the basis for *Chandalika*.

*Chandalika* comes to terms with who she really is. One of the play's pivotal scenes is when Ananda, a follower of Lord Buddha, begs for "give me some water," and Prakriti refuses by expressing her inability to relieve the monk's thirst. When the monk informs the Chandali's daughter that she is not "impure," but rather the child of the same Almighty as everyone else, it marks her turning point. At the same time, Prakriti, who had denied her identity and internalized herself as a victim of societal stigma, is abruptly lifted to a moment of realization. She tells her mother about the occurrence, saying, "This is my new birth, in quenching his hunger I feel baptized, I am aware of myself now mother, I now know what freedom tastes like".

Prakriti's love becomes possessive: the monk does, in fact, appear to Prakriti as a symbol of liberation, but unlike the Buddhist tale that tells the story of Ananda's journey, he is not the play's main character. According to Tagore, the voyage of Prakriti takes center stage. It is hilarious to observe how a girl named Prakriti, which means "Nature", may become entangled in a web of caste, class, and gender differences.

She begs her mother to call him to her by reciting the most powerful magic spell, known as the "nagpash mantra", since she wants to pose with him. She only becomes aware of her guilt for causing someone to suffer without his will in the penultimate scene. She falls at his feet pleading for his pardon after she sees him standing in front of her in a nearly pitiful state. She repents and gives up in shame. In a struggle between spiritual strength and magical chanting, Prakriti realizes that love is something that can never be controlled or coerced. Ananda begs the Buddha to spare him from this guilt and regret; as a result, the Buddha dissolves the magic spell and releases Ananda, leaving Chandali as clean as when he arrived.

The master dramatist's experimentation with three important issues—"spirituality, untouchability, and self-realization"—is exemplified by *Chandalika*. Three major themes run through the play, which is a perfect maze of Indian culture. The most prominent of these is "spiritual liberation", with the other two underlying themes being "emancipation from the scourge of untouchability" and "self-realization". The drama shows how caste, gender, and religion are closely related in meaningful and subtle ways.

Tagore expressed alarm about the aberrant caste consciousness in Bengal and throughout India in the 1930s. More than any other Indian, he was able to clearly see its insidiousness because of his keen sensitivity and global experience. However, despite his best efforts, he was unable to eradicate it, especially when it came to religious divides. In November of 1932, he once more took up the cause of untouchability, which Gandhi now referred to as "this white ant", which had to be touched at its source. Nothing had changed on the ground as a result of Gandhi and Ambedkar's Poona Pact. For months, Tagore was preoccupied with this issue. He penned *Chandalika*, a drama based on an ancient Buddhist narrative, in 1933.

However, in Tagore's *Chandalika*, Prakriti purposefully refrains from seeing the world and is unable to overcome the divisions between caste, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Although this conclusion appears to be mocking, Tagore intended to highlight the predicament of Indians. Thus, the lack of the union confirms that there are irreversible distinctions between Dalits and non-Dalits. Tagore attempts to inspire Indians to act against the practice of untouchability by using play as a medium. Therefore, drama as a social tool seeks to inspire, educate, inform, and awaken people's consciousness in order to make them aware of their obligations as members of society, whose job it is to take control of their own lives and improve the world.

We have so far tried to analyze Tagore's play *Chandalika* in order to demonstrate how drama is employed as a vehicle for social criticism, and we have succeeded in proving that “playwrights throughout the world use their works to show the ills inherent in their society”. Tagore has made an effort to live up to the dramatist's expectations. Consequently, it is clear from this analysis of *Chandalika* that the playwright can use drama as a powerful medium for societal criticism. The artist has employed this medium to draw attention to a society's value system in an effort to inform, inspire, and enlighten the populace.

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