

INTERROGATING AUTHORITY: THE CASE OF *GHASHIRAM KOTWAL* (1972)

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Abstract:

The trajectory of performing arts in India illustrates its diversity and evolution. Owing to the variegated socio-cultural peculiarities, India is home to a myriad of folk theatrical forms, ranging from 'jatra' to 'tamasha', 'yakshagana' to 'ankiya naat bhaona' etc. In the postcolonial phase, there emerged an endeavour to reinstate the rich traditional roots of India in the Indian theater, which was otherwise increasingly relying on its Western counterpart. Vijay Tendulkar's celebrated play, *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) brings to the fore an arresting negotiation of the past and the present. The play, set in the Peshwa reign, moves beyond its bracketed historical timeframe to accommodate issues which are pertinent across time and place. The play meditates on the dichotomy of the institution and the individual. Besides, the essence of India is encapsulated in the use of folk dance, music, religious celebrations etc., and underpinning indignity. The paper is an attempt to examine the thematic universalism of the play, adjunctively reflecting on its determinants as belonging to the "theater of roots" genre.

Keywords: authority, power, institution, individual, society

It is a truism that power vested in the wrong hands invites mayhem, the concentration of power being directly proportional to the intensity of its effects. In the parlance of power, people either control or are controlled by forces wherein the former gains a free pass to exploit. Vijay Tendulkar in his play, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, delineates the exercise of authorial power, in its two extreme forms- of utter negligence and ruthlessness. The abuse of institutional power ushers in a total upheaval of circumstances for individuals. The play, set in the late 18th century Poona, primarily revolves around the eponymous figure, Ghashiram Salvadas, a Kanauj Brahman who attains the position of kotwal in the Peshwa court. Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (1928-2008), one of the prominent personalities in the realm of Indian theater, accommodates real life issues in his plays that possess a universal appeal.

Some of his popular works include, *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Kamala* (1982), *A Friend's Story* (2001) etc. He wrote primarily in Marathi, and also translated seminal works such as Mohan Rakesh's *Adhe Adhure*, Karnad's *Tughlaq*, and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The play

Ghashiram Kotwal was written in 1972, translated into English by Jayant Karve and Eleanor Zelliot, and first staged in the same year in Pune by Progressive Dramatic Association. Though a historical play, its thematic concerns cater to a global audience beyond time. Originally written in Marathi, the thespian, Tendulkar makes a conscious use of Marathi and other Indian folk theater elements, such as the sutradhar, lavani, the Ganapati dance, kawali, or the incorporation of the classical music and musical instruments-raag bhupali, mridanga drum, shehnai, tabla etc, exhibiting Indian culture and traditions, exemplary of the ideology behind the theater of roots. The ambience transports the readers or the audience to the particular past; however, throughout the play it reminds them of the contemporary socio-political milieu. The characters can be easily placed in the present day context and they would still be relevant.

The decadence of the Poona city is evident since the first act of the play. The Brahmans, the occupants of the highest strata of the Hindu societal fabric, revered in the Poona society for their wisdom and priestly pursuits, indulge in lecherous activities during the night hours. The spectacle of the pious Brahmans immersed in the Ganapati worship is subverted the very next moment through their stealthy escape to Bavannakhani, hinting at their illicit affairs concerning Gulabi, a courtesan. In a similar vein, the absence of her husband from home prompts one of the Brahman wives to indulge in adultery with a Maratha. The scene of the Brahmans and Marathas retreating to their respective homes at dawn, in their disheveled and dreary miens portray the ruckus prevailing in the city. The presence of Nana Phadnavis, the Peshwa's Chief Minister, marked by his demeanour of "no labour, just lust" (Tendulkar 53), in the house of Gulabi, along with his hedonistic lifestyle evident throughout the play, displays his sheer negligence towards his duties. His ease and revelry at Bavannakhani depicts his approval and support to the Brahmans, granting them license to violate the set social code of conduct. Apart from the royal court, the Brahmans, also the dominant class, gain unauthorized power over the mass. Ghashiram owing to his alien demeanor is deemed as the other by the Brahmans of Poona which caters to his yearning for vengeance. The text also unveils the oppressive caste structure, which still subtly manifest in the 21st century Indian society. The unprecedented liberty towards the Brahmans among other people in the play parallels the prejudices held towards select set of people, or minority groups in contemporary scenario.

Ghashiram's lust for authority is rooted in the episodes of his ignominy. He is publicly thrashed, called a thief, denied of his Brahman identity etc. His run for the post of kotwal is driven not by his will to reform the city, rather backed by personal vendetta. He ventures out to avenge his humiliation by converting Poona into "a kingdom of pigs" (Tendulkar 47). Ghashiram reinstates all the old orders, but with its stricter version. He restricts the free movement of the people, for instance, even in the process of cremation one is supposed to possess a permit. He, representing the institution ushers fear among the

individuals, and demands respect by coercion. There ushers frenzy and paranoia among people, thereby reinforcing a dystopic scenario. His restrictions contour the censorship imposed on people when the opinions of the centre and the mass do not fuse. His tyranny resorts to barbarism on individuals just to achieve law and order on his terms. He resolves to silence the ones by intimidation who speak ill of his daughter, thus misusing power to accomplish personal goals. The foreign Brahmans, who pluck fruits from his garden without their knowledge about the owner, are considered as criminals by Ghashiram and are hence arrested, thus indicating his allegiance to a homogenous idea of crimes. The deaths of the Brahmans in the prison are an outcome of his irrational attitude. Similarly, he forces a Brahman to admit a crime he has not committed by resorting to bestial techniques. He does not adopt a fair trial for the accused Brahman despite his pleading, moreover deriving monstrous pleasure by physically torturing him. His inhumanity blinds him of his past when he was akin to them, a foreigner in Poona in search of a fortune. Ghashiram owing to his institutional ascendancy considers himself supreme and forms his own idea of justice. His strict disciplinarian stance drastically minimizes the good deeds along with bad deeds in the society.

The Sutradhar familiarizes Ghashiram as well as the readers (audience) with the corrupt administration. He says that the public resort to bribery in order to escape penalty. The police are deemed as “official thieves” (Tendulkar 45) in contrast to the ordinary thieves. The soldiers beat Ghashiram and imprison him for stealing without possessing any proof, relying on the sole criteria that he is a non-brahman. It corresponds to the present day operations of the state apparatuses, as Althusser classified between its types. The Repressive State Apparatus, like the police resorts to coercive means to suit the centre's needs. The Brahmans, belonging to the privileged section equally participate in fraudulent schemes, transparent in their monetary negotiations to provide people the access to witness the dakshina ceremony, otherwise designed solely for the Brahmans.

On the surface level, though Ghashiram sets out to reform the city on his lines, the very act of issuing permit for immoral activities dilutes his stringency, thus exposing his hypocrisy. The irony is, while Ghashiram seeks to end adultery in the city within six months, he himself sets up the adulterous proposition between Nana and his daughter. It depicts the present day authorial figures that propagates to end a vice, yet indulges in the same within its domain. The figure of Angelo in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* resonates in Ghashiram, who is driven by an urgent need to reform the kingdom when entrusted with uninterrupted power, but gives in to his own vices in the process. In the labyrinth of power politics, characters such as Gauri end up as its victim. Ghashiram offers her as a sacrifice to satiate Nana's lustful desires while earning the position of kotwal in the transaction. In a parallel vein Nana's obsession over Gauri gains precedence over his administrative roles, as he vests the authorial power to an outsider without even considering

his competence for the position. Prior to Ghashiram's kotwali, the partiality towards a select class i.e. the Brahmans, denied the socially inferior groups of equal liberty. The complete lack of representation of the underprivileged people in the play further evinces the systemic othering in the society. Similarly, later in the diegesis, the Brahmans confront the quandaries of everyday sustenance, owing to Ghashiram's angst towards their prior treatment of him. Nana ignores the complaints of his public regarding the atrocities meted out by Ghashiram on the pretext of breaching the law. The instance of a woman pleading to hold the funeral of her father-in-law and Nana's utter disregard to the common people's plight posits the protector as the detractor. Though, it indicates resistance to the institutional authority to suit individual goals, the others accept it as the law. The Peshwa, authority at the apex level does not appear in the text. His ignorance of the degeneration of the city and its people allows Nana to act as the proxy ruler. It depicts that the present day operations of undergoing at the secondary and tertiary levels, without the knowledge of the ones in supreme power. Even Ghashiram does not rebel against Nana for his daughter's death, and after a brief discussion resumes his kotwali and with a more inhuman maneuver.

The authorial powers grant Nana the liberty to debauchery, to impregnate Gauri out of wedlock and consequently end her life to save himself from law. He considers Gauri a "prey" to his "hunter" self. The predatory nature of the authority raises questions regarding the safeguarding of the mass. Though Ghashiram attempts to manipulate Nana, he is entrapped into Nana's cunning agendas, thus they end up using each other to suit their demands. Ghashiram uses Nana to gain favours in order to mobilize in the political ladder. Nana uses Ghashiram as a pawn to confront the public, and subject him to their wrath: "We do it, our kotwal pays for it" (Tendulkar 54). For Nana, Ghashiram as an outsider would pose obstacles for the Brahmans who were conspiring against him.

The outburst of Ghashiram prompts Nana to admit that he could kill him at his will. His political authority adheres to a God-like stance, an all-omnipotent figurine that holds the reign of lives. Apart from inviting his own doom, Ghashiram thus fashions in the text as the scapegoat of institutional conspiracy. The hierarchy in the institutional framework depicts the individuals in the lower rungs often dependent on the whims of their superiors. In the play, set during colonial administration, the arrival of British official invites attention and respect. Ghashiram's ambitious ego is analogous to Macbeth's overriding concern for power and authority, wherein the distinction between right and wrong is blurred. Like Macbeth's conscious criminal actions, Ghashiram too realizes the pangs of grief and anger while handing out his daughter to Nana. Akin to Macbeth's reversal of fortune, Ghashiram too succumbs to tragic consequences, as he is compelled to a walk of shame and consequently lynched by a mob. Despite Ghashiram is unaware of the prison house ordeal, his ignorance is overlooked by Nana as it could bring the former down and put him into good books with

the Brahmans. The death of Ghashiram and the end of the play only suggests the return of old ways, to the public's social and moral crisis.

The previous state of affairs exposed a complete negligence of responsibilities while, Ghashiram's stringent policing is devoid of humane attributes owing to his own selfish mode of revenge. The play maps the institutional jujitsu that act as the denominator in both the scenarios and the characters of Ghashiram and Nana, proving detrimental for the public. It exposes the readers and the audience to the primary instincts of man, i.e. sexuality, violence, lust for power etc. It is alleged that Tendulkar had written the play in response to the rise of a regional political party. The play has been drawn to controversies, and even banned for a period; however, it remains as one of the prominent and realistic art productions of India. The Sutradhar, a narrative device of the Indian performing arts aids in delivering the critique of institutional authority through satire. Though the locus of action is 18th century Poona, the characters and issues manifest a tropical essence, relevant across time and place. Horace deliberates on the aim of the poet as to instruct or delight, or a combination of both for the readers and audience which Tendulkar through the political satire seems to accomplish.

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