

Ravindra Nath Thakur's Contribution in the Revival of Theravada Buddhism in Bengal: Revisiting the Ethico-Socio-Religious Contents of his Play 'Natirpūjā'

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Through his short play called *Natirpūjā* in Bangla, Kavi Ravindra Nath shot many arrows at one go- entertained his audiences, without converting anybody to Buddhism he made them get inclined towards it and made people fearless in the backdrop of freedom struggle against colonialism. In this way, after the popularity of Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacaritaṃ* in popularizing Buddhist doctrines in India and the world, *Natirpūjā* may be said to have occupied the second most popular work. This paper aims at revisiting the ethico-social and religious contents of Ravindra Nath Thakur's short play *Natirpūjā* in the revival of Theravada Buddhism in Bengal and India. The acceptance and practice of any religion depends on the character of its founder, the quality of his religious philosophy, writing down of the scriptures and books based on his religion and the selfless propagators. All these elements had once made Buddhism an ethically and morally respectable religious system in India and the world. But due to various reasons, Buddhism had, except a few small pockets in India like the Chakma hill regions where it was practiced in a hybrid form, vanished or got assimilated in various forms of Brahmanism/Hinduism until the late 18th century when some enlightened European scholars began to collect materials of all sorts to write and know the proper history and culture of this country. For doing it properly, sir Jones, on the pattern of some of the enlightened societies of London, established the Asiatic Society at Calcutta in 1784 and attracted a band of enthusiastic scholars to serve this cause. They did immense good service to the revival and upliftment of knowledge for the Indians. Hence, the first great initiative in the revival of Buddhism/Theravada Buddhism can be said to have been provided by the great Asiatic Society of Calcutta and the brilliant band of scholars, both foreign and native, associated with it right from the late 18th century. To them goes the credit of providing a sense of enquiry, modern methodology and love

of knowledgeⁱ for the benefit of mankind, collecting, translating and publishing manuscripts, beginning Tibetology and Sinology,ⁱⁱ talking of Buddhist Art and chronology,ⁱⁱⁱ deciphering of Brahmi Script by Prinsep^{iv} and thus opening up the Ashokan Studies^v through his edicts. The second great step was doubtlessly taken up by the writers and litterateurs. Ravindra Nath Thakur stands foremost amongst them who, through his play ‘*Natirpūjā*’ (offering of *pūjā* by the court danseuse named Śrīmatī) introduced some of the most basic gospels of early Buddhism to the audiences and the readers in Bengal. The author, through this play, made the readers and the audiences get acquainted with some of the loftiest ethico-social and religious ideals preached by the Buddha like the creation of a religious order in which there was no discrimination on caste, class, gender and which was based on the humane ideals of compassion, love, kalyāṇa (welfare), emancipation (*mukti*) from worldly attachments (*māyā* and *moha*), fear (*bhaya*), ego (*ahaṃkāra*) and sorrows (*dukha*)^{vi}. We shall revisit these contents in a little more detail in the play.

Poetic literature has always served as second but most powerful communicative channel for the dissemination of religious injunctions amongst the lay devotees-the *upāsakas*. This short but effective play *Natirpūjā* may kindly be taken to be an illustration of the ‘*Sastra*’ (scriptural injunctions like *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*) in ‘*Kāvya*’ (literary) form. I am reminded of the recent reading session (*pāṭha*) of a scholarly piece of writing ‘*Śāstra kī kavītā aur Kavītā kī Śāstra*’ by an eminent Sanskrit scholar Prof. Ramakant Pandey, in which I was an audience, in which the author has dilated upon the oneness as well as the duality of ‘*Śāstra*’ and ‘*Kavītā*’ and said that they both carry and supplement each other.^{vii}

Although Thakur has picked up this ‘*Ākhyāna*’ (story) from ‘*Avadānaśataka*’ (a century of noble deeds related to the Buddha and Buddhist devotees and kings like Ashoka and supposed to have been written down about 2nd -3rd centuries AD) but its being in classical Sanskrit, it had lost touch and dialogue with the lay devotees and ordinary readers. Thakur reinvigorated it with new and soft treatment by transforming it into a short yet charming play.^{viii} How much was he charmed by the compassionate religion of the Buddha can be gauged by the fact that it was first staged at Visvabharati in the year it was published in 1926 in Bangla and the same year, when he added the character of monk Upāli to act as the *sūtradhāra* (the director who introduces the subject and informs the audience about the story to come subtly) of the play, he himself played his role at his Kolkata residence at Jodasanko. His love for the character of ‘*Naṭī*’ is also proved

by his composition of another poem by the name ‘*Pujārinī*’ in his anthology of poems ‘*Kathā o Kahinī*.’^{ix} This play was enacted time and again in Bengal and was translated in many languages. A Bengalee scholar Shri Dharendra Nath Mukherjee translated Thakur’s poem called ‘Pujarini’ by the name ‘*Pujārthinī*’ in Sanskrit in the Sahitya Academy’s Journal ‘*Sanskrit Pratibha*’s first issue edited by noted scholar Dr.V. Raghvan.^x These translations show the growing popularity of the theme of this play.

The whole story revolves around the pious character of the devotee danseuse at the court of the kings of Magadha-Bimbisāra and his son Ajatśatru. It so happened that once lord Buddha happened to visit Bimbisāra’s court palace and sat under an Ashokan tree. The place so sanctified was later converted into a *Stupa*- seat of veneration and the king began to offer worship and ablution (*arghya*) every year on Buddha’s birth ceremony. The Buddha’s character and sermons also had a dramatic influence on the danseuse and she became a devout worshipper of the Buddha and she gradually came to be respected by all, except a few princesses in the palace. The poet has portrayed her noble character in a way which shows her as an embodiment of love, devotion, non-violence and a character emancipated (*mukta*) from the worldly attachments like *māyā*, *moha*, *krodha* (anger) *ahaṃkāra* (ego) and *bhaya* (fear). It looks as if there is a shadow of the character of another famed courtesan ‘*Āmrāpālī*’ of Vaiśālī on her who renounced all worldly pleasures and donated her entire property to the Buddhist *Samgha* and was accepted as a respectable nun in the order. She is still revered all over the Buddhist world. This shows that in Buddhism there was no discrimination on flimsy grounds and even a courtesan could find a respectable place with the change in her character and faith.

Venerable monk Upāli’s visit to the palace for his alms is a prelude to the sanctification of the character and the elevation of the status of the ‘*Naṭī*’. The princesses had still not woken up from their sleep and the danseuse *Naṭī* who came to receive him had nothing to offer in alms. Although the monk returned without any alms but was very impressed by her devotion and predicted that she had something very precious with her and one day the Buddha will himself ask her to donate whatever is her most precious thing and this way predicted that she will one day preside over the function of offering ‘*arghya*’ (ablution) and *pūjā* (worship) on Buddha’s birth ceremony. She said that she will wait for that fortunate moment when the lord himself will ask her to offer her most precious thing in gift. In the meantime the princesses woke up and came to

offer alms to the monk but he had already left the palace even though the princesses tried to call him back but perhaps he had gone beyond the hearing distance. Except the nonconformist princess Ratnavali, they all became very depressed and thought that their day was unmade because of a monk of Upali's stature had returned without getting alms. Here there seems to be a similarity in the episode that unfolds up in the play *Abhijnanaśākuntalam* in which the anger-prone Vedic sage *Durvāsā* announces his arrival at the hospice of the teacher-sage *Kaṇva* with the words- *Ayaṁ ayaṁ bhoh !* 'It is me', do you hear, it is me who have come here' and he waits a while for the attention required for a revered guest but Śākuntalā lay engrossed in her thoughts about her recent love with King Duṣyanta. She could not know the arrival of the sage. The sage thought that she is discourteous and unattentive from mind- '*ananyamānasā*'. He then cursed her that the man she is engrossed in thought about, and has thus neglected his presence, will forget her.^{xi} This sage is vindictive and curses Śākuntalā for being unattentive on a guest, a moral duty being in practice those days which she unknowingly neglected, but the Buddhist monk *Upāli* is not vindictive and he only returns without any alms as there came no authorized person from the royal family to give alms. Only Nati, an employee of the court came to receive him with sweet gesture and kind words which impressed the monk so much that he anointed the 'Nati' as the rightful worshipper who will one day be blessed to offer *arghya* and worship the lord on his birth ceremony at his *stupa* under the Ashoka tree. This was a spiritual right reserved for the members of the royal family and upper echelons of the society, perhaps as this spiritual elevation of the lowly danseuse Śrīmatī was not liked by the jealous princess Ratnavali who took a vow to avenge this indignity and degrade her on that fateful day. She obtained the order of the new king Ajātśatru- her brother, under the evil influence of Buddha's rival Devadatta, which put a ban on the worship of the Buddha at the *stupa* and that the danseuse will have to perform dance at that place instead of her pronounced act of worshipping the Buddha. The royal orders also stipulated that whosoever will violate the royal order and perform *pūjā* there that day will be severely punished with death. But Śrīmatī had become such an ardent follower of the Buddha and a fearless one, that nothing could deter her now from celebrating the birth ceremony of her lord and offering *arghya* and *pūjā* as she thought that she had been picked up by none other than the venerable monk Upāli for the spiritually elevating job. She had become a recluse by heart, emancipated from the worldly attachments and fear.

In fact, the themes of fearlessness and disattachment have been stressed in the play so much that it seems that the poet wanted to drive home this point to his countrymen who could fight against their colonial masters-the Britishers only when they would be disattached and fearless. If we recall then we will find that the extremist phase of Indian national congress led by Lal, Bal and Pal stressed on '*Ātmāsakti*' (inner courage) and a will to be ready for sacrifice for their motherland. It does not seem to be an exaggeration if we say that his world famous poem 'Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high' was inspired by *Avadānśataka*'s character of '*Natī*' or '*Pūjārthini*'. The above-said themes of fearlessness and disattachment, non-violence, freedom from the worldly bondages become amply clear in the fourteen lyrical songs that the Nati sings from time to time in the play. The monk Upali enters the scene with a song which says that in the east a very good morning has appeared with the rise of a soft red Sun. It exhorts the unknown listener to make this point of time a meritorious one and fill it up with nectar (amrt-the nector of the devotion to the Buddha). This reverberates in the subconscious mind of the danseuse again and again and she says that 'No more, No more' means no more bondage, no more attachment to worldly affairs which makes one weak. She wishes to go away from all this.^{xii} 'Today I shall practice the austerity of breaking the chain of bondage. Don't be fearful, don't be fearful'- she says.^{xiii} 'Don't keep me in the dark any more, let me see and explore myself.'^{xiv} She says that the world has gone mad due to violence. O great soul! (lord Buddha), o meritorious one, o compassionate one! Protect us through your nector-like speech and make the world blotless.^{xv} She exhorts the lord to be a preceptor one and to get the people initiated into the act of renunciation. May everyone forget grief (*śoka*) and attachment (*moha*). Let the Sun of knowledge rise and let the blindmen enjoy the pleasure of sight. The whole world is crying in the flame of agony and everything is getting ruined, yet dissatisfied, because of the poison of carnal pleasure.^{xvi} O compassionate Buddha! Take me under your benign protection and take away my distress and fear.^{xvii} Then at least in three songs she says O lord! Your very remembrance has filled up my heart with the mood of dancing and I shall only be able to offer *arghya* to you today through my music, songs and dances. Kindly accept it.^{xviii} Another beautiful character is Lokeśvarī, the chief queen of emperor Bimbisara who is torn between the sorrow of her husband King Bimbisara abdicating the throne in favour of his son Ajatshatru and her only son becoming a monk and her reverence to the Buddha. Her inner conflicts are very beautifully described which adds luster to the play but here we are

concentrating only on the pious and bondage-free character of the court danseuse Shrimati who ultimately sacrifices her life because of her devotion to her dear lord- the most compassionate one, the most meritorious one, the most peaceful one and the ultimate protector of the people which has been the motive of the poet in authoring this play.

So she came well decorated with dancing attires and jewelleryes and gave the pretense of obeying the royal order of performing the unreligious act of dance at the sanctified place but inside also wore the religious yellow robe of the nuns and began throwing her outer garments and jewelleryes one by one chanting the *Pāli* stotras (hymns) and singing *gāna* (songs) laden with the basic Theravada doctrines exhorting the lord to kindly accept her worship in her songs and dance actions only as she was bound by the royal orders that day. Ratnavali opposes her actions and singing hymns by asking what kind of dance is this. Is this not like worshipping the Buddha and violating the royal orders? She commands the royal female guards to obey the royal order of not allowing her to offer worship in any form or else attack her. She was stopped by the female guards for offering worship and thus violating the orders of the king. But The *Nati* did not stop from doing what she had decided in mind. The guard once again tried to stop her but she continued to pray and chant as if she was in a mood of religious frenzy:

*‘Buddham saranam gachhāmi,
saṃgham saranam gachhāmi,
dhammam saranam gachhāmi’.*

The guards, against their wish, then obeyed the commands of the king and attacked her with arms at the seat of Buddha’s worship. The danseuse fell on the ground. Then the guards became remorseful and with moist eyes touched the dust of her feet. Suddenly everybody, including the queen-the wife of king Bimbisara who was also against her till that time, becomes remorseful and fearful. Everybody, except Ratnavali, chants

*‘Natthi me saranam ayyam Buddho me saranam varam
Etena sacchavajjena hotu me jayamaṅgalam’*^{xix}

(There is no refuse for me other than the Buddha and he alone is my best protector. The one who speaks the truth may shower well being on me.)

Then the queen asks to arrange palanquin for her sacred body and when they began to take her body to the cremation ground even Ratnavali touched her feet and sits down to chant:

Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gachhāmi,

saṃghaṃ saranaṃ gachhāmi,

dhammaṃ saranaṃ gachhāmi.^{xx}

This way we see that Ravindra Nath Thakur picked up this story of the noble deed of this court danseuse and transformed it into an effective short play with his high imagination and filled it up with most quoted *Pāli* verses in honour of the Buddha. He also made it charming by adding some lyrics, which the danseuse sings in the play from time to time, to spread some of the basic ideas of early Buddhism in a very simple and musical manner to the people of Bengal during the first half of the 20th century. This play must have played an effective role in reintroducing the compassionate personality of the Buddha and his basic principles amongst the people which had long faded from the land of its birth. One reason why the people loved this play was that they related with the pious character of the court danseuse who became a devotee of the Buddha and became fearless and unattached from the *māyā*, *moha* and pleasure of the world and readily sacrificed her life for her love of her master. The idea of disattachment and fearlessness also might have gone well with the exhortation of the political leaders who were asking the people to rise and become fearless and show *ātmaśakti* against the British colonial exploitative administration beginning the second decade of the twentieth century.

ⁱ Sir William Jones, (2010), *Man and Nature: The Discourses*, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, pp.2-6.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p.3, 23-24

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, pp.24-25

^{iv} A.F.Rudolf Hoernle (first publ.1885, rpt.1986), 'Archeology, History, Literature, & c'. in *Centenary Review of the Asiatic Society*, Kolkata, pp.61-63

^v Ibid, pp.64-65

^{vi} Bhagavati Prasad Chandola (tr. in Hindi) *Nati ki Puja (Naṭīrpūjā* in Bangla) by Ravindra Nath Thakur, published by Mohanlal Vajpayee, Hindi Prakashan Samiti, Visvabharati Granthan Vibhag, Santiniketan, 2nd edn. (first published 1939), pp. 1-80.

^{vii} Ramakant Pandey, (2014), 'Shastra ki Kavita aur Kavita ka Shastra', *'Madhyabharati'*, Journal of the Department of Philosophy, University of Saugar, Sagar Vol.67, July-December, 2014, pp. 10-21.

^{viii} Chandola, *Nati ki Puja*, P. 81.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Dharendra Nath Mukherjee, (April 1959), *Sanskrit Pratibha* (ed.by Dr.V.Raghvan), *Pratham unmeṣaḥ, Pratham vilāsaḥ*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, pp.107-9.

^{xi} See Abhijnānaśākuntalam's most famous episode in which sage Durvasa curses Śakuntalā for being unattentive on the sage.

^{xii} Chandola, Nati ki Puja, pp.1,12-13,20, 26..

^{xiii} Ibid, p.44

^{xiv} Ibid, p.49

^{xv} Ibid, p.55

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} Ibid., p.68

^{xviii} Ibid., pp. 74-76.

^{xix} Ibid., p.79

^{xx} Ibid., p. 80