

NANA PHADNAVIS: THE CULT HERO AN EXPLORATION OF VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *GHASHIRAM KOTWAL*

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Abstract:

Nana Phadnavis - the great Maratha Machiavelli of the 18th century who protected the kingdom of Maratha from the Battle of Panipat Massacre through his immaculate intelligence and power of supremacy was the celebrated hero of the then Punites (locales of Puna). His dedication towards the Peshwas lead him earn an important and privileged position during the regime of Peshwas.

In his play Ghashiram Kotwal, Tendulkar projects the character of the 18th century Maratha Machiavelli - Nana Phadnavis as a philanderer, a flirtatious sexist obsessed with unbridled sex. Further, he improvises and connects the theme of Politics, Power and Sex games with the present status of politics that exists in the Indian society.

Keywords: *Power, Politics, Polygamy, Indian Society.*

Vijay Tendulkar (1928- 2008), the leading contemporary Indian playwright imprinted his foot in the galaxy of Indian theatres through his immaculate works particularly the plays that shuddered the world's emotion and made the readers plunge into the existing status of the middle class Indian Society.

The chronicles of reigns and battle for the throne have been existing as a classic culture in every society. Long back, the Indians observed a transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic republic. But the incontrovertible statement is that people's independence and reputation is still at stake as described by Tendulkar in his play *Ghashiram Kotwal*. The Play *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1970) is a perfect model of *Yakshagana* or the musical drama drawing its theme from the incidents that took part in the eighteenth century Peshwa regime. About the play, Shanta Gokhale quotes, "If there is one play in Tendulkar's entire body of work that confirms his standing as one of the country's finest playwrights, it is *Ghashiram Kotwal*." (73) The playwright successfully brings out the political traits and throws light on the treacherous game of the politicians and their characteristic features. One cannot repudiate the statement that the vivid picture of the political situation produced in *Ghashiram Kotwal* is a perfect image of politics that fits for all time and all societies. As Tendulkar registers,

This is not a historical play. It is a story, in prose, verse, music and dance set in a historical era. Ghashirams are creations of socio-political era forces which know no barriers of time and place. Although based on a historical legend, I have no intention of commentary on the morals, or lack of them, of the Peshwa, Nana Phadnavis or Ghashiram. The moral of this story, if there is any, may be looked for elsewhere (Qtd by Bandyopadhyay viii).

After a rigorous rehearsal, the play was first performed on 16 December, 1972 at the Bharat Natya Mandir, Pune. Besides winning several awards in the Maharashtra State Drama Competition and receiving accolades of success, the play received controversies as it "happens so often with a work that questions contemporary values and phenomena from a radical position". Tendulkar was criticised for showing Nana Phadnavis, the Maratha Machiavelli in an unsavoury light. When asked by Samik Bandyopadhyay about

the depiction of Brahman corruption and pretensions and the study of power game in the play, Tendulkar answered,

It is rather difficult to go back to the point when I thought of writing this play and recollect everything that happened to me on the conscious and subconscious levels. Broadly speaking, I had in my mind the emergence, the growth and the inevitable end of the Ghashiram; also those who create, and help Ghashirams to grow; the irony of stoning to death a person pretending that it is the end of Ghashirams. The rest just happened; or if that sounds pretentious, happened at the subconscious level. The decadence of the class in power (Brahmans, incidentally, during the period which I had to depict) also was incidental, though not accidental (Qtd by Bandyopadhyay ix).

Breaking all the barriers of controversies, Ghashiram Kotwal became a significant text in the history of Modern Indian Theatres that is stamped as the landmark works of all time. It is now regarded as one of the best works of Vijay Tendulkar which stands as the innovative model in theatres and the best example of political and cultural avalanche.

Nana Phadnavis (Balaji Janardan Bhanu), popularly known as the Maratha Machiavelli was born on 12th February 1742 at Satara, Maratha Empire. Phadnavis was the title bestowed on to the minister handling finance and administration during the regime of Peshwa. Balaji Janardan Bhanu inherited the name from his grandfather who was one of the most influential ministers at the Peshwa's court and the title Phadnavis was bestowed upon Balaji Janardhan Bhanu at the age of fourteen after the death of his father. Nana Phadnavis was physically feeble but he was intellectually so strong that he was able to play a crucial role in retaining the power of Maratha kingdom in the third battle of Panipat (1761). Thereafter Nana's power rose to prominence and through his acute intellect he brought the instable Maratha camp in order. After the assassination of the Peshwa Narayana Rao (1773), the little Savaai Madhava Rao born posthumously was brought up and guided by Nana Phadnavis and twelve others (popularly known as *Baarabhai*) and was made Peshwa of the Maratha Kingdom. Vijay Tendulkar, when asked what inspired him to write up a text like *Ghashiram Kotwal*, answers thus

The inspiration for the play was a topical situation. I was working for Loksatta when the first major riots were launched in Bombay by the Shiv Sena. Bal Thackeray seemed an ordinary man, not at all the sort of person who would indulge in dare-devilry. The middle-class boys who followed him were not demons. In that particular situation, they acquired power, abused it and spread terror. I sensed that terror in my newspaper office. We were not free to write anything about the Shiv Sena. If the title "Senapati" was not prefixed to Thackeray's name in a report, a morcha would be taken out with burning and looting. (Ananya 2)

Further he adds,

Actually, the Shiv Sena was deliberately fuelled by the ruling party to establish a force against the masses. Then came Krishna Menon and his election campaign when the Shiv Sena was pitted against the communists. You can see the similarity between the Ghashiram incident and this event to which we were witnesses. The hunting dogs got transformed into ferocious tigers and the Government began to fear them. When I saw this, I felt the urge to use this theme in a play and as I traversed backwards in history, I noticed that this was a repetitive pattern - such individuals and parties had been created through history. Hitler was one such example (Ananya 2).

Ghashiram Kotwal is universally acclaimed for its contemporary relevance and the tinge of protest over the social and moral issues existing in the society. In Ghashiram Kotwal, Power and Politics take the centrality of characters portrayed by Nana Phadnavis and Ghashiram Savaldas. The play takes the high form with the help of music, folk form and narration by the Sutradhar. The twelve Brahmans on stage

perform accordingly to the situations taking various forms and characters when the scene changes. The twelve Brahmans symbolically represent the twelve men (Baarabhai) who were instrumental in protecting and bringing up the young little Peshwa Savaai Madhava Rao. The very first scene of the play produces Puna and takes the spectators to the situation dipped in divinity with the invocation to Lord Ganpati (God of Power and wisdom), Saraswati (Goddess of Knowledge) and Lakshmi (Goddess of Prosperity). The day descends with invocation and night progresses with Lavani (love song). Sutradhar, the stage manager or the narrator while introducing the locales of Puna, witnesses some Brahmans making a hasty move rushing towards something very significant. The spectators are made to know the fact that the priestly Brahmans are in a hurry to reach Bavannakhini, the locale of Gulabi the courtesan. The erotic dance performed by Gulabi in the company of Gashiram, makes the Brahmans hum:

It's like Mathura
Ho !Bavannakhini
Ho !Bavannakhini
It's like Mathura (11)

As the day falls, Nana Phadnavis, the Chief Minister of Peshwa enters Bhavannakhani. While he proceeds with his silver handled stick and garland on his wrist, the dancers follow him in a line. The loud chanting of devotees engulfs the dancers and when the dance takes the high form, Nana gets hurt in the ankle. Ghashiram notices it and in a way of rescuing Nana, bends to the injured leg so that Nana can rest it on his back. Here, the fall of Nana and the help rendered by Ghashiram transforms the image into “one of power and patronage, with the idea of patronage-seeker's 'bootlicking' built in. The outsider, Ghashiram, waiting for a chance to find legitimate position in the rich city of Pune while working for the courtesan, sees his opportunity in Nana's predicament”(Gokhale 77). Through his gesture Ghashiram gets the attention of the mob and Nana pleased with his timely help decides to reward him with a pearl necklace. Nana enquires Ghashiram's whereabouts and expresses his high regards for him. Gulabi, the courtesan in an enticing tone gives Nana the information that Ghashiram had come to that place four days ago and that he is involved in all sorts of domestic works like washing utensils and accompanying her in dance and singing. Frisky Nana pats on her cheek and leaves in the palanquin. Samik Bandyopadhyay says that initially the play was banned for three reasons. One of the prominent reasons was that Nana was shown in an unsavory light- a cult hero as a lascivious wolf. But recently RAS (Royal Asiatic Society) of Great Britain and Ireland in London released some documents that opened the autobiography of Nana Phadnavis written in his own hand. In it “Nana candidly talks about his attraction for women” (Sharma 2). It's the best proof that confirms that Tendulkar has portrayed the real Nana Phadnavis in his play.

After the exit of Nana, Ghashiram fondles the necklace with a great love and joy. When he tries to leave, Gulabi stops him for want of the necklace. She gestures at the ruffians. Ghashiram is beaten, humiliated and is thrown on to the street. He is even insulted when he stares with hungry eyes at the great *Dakshina* ceremony in the park at the foot of Holy hill of Parvati. He is addressed as a thief and he is beaten, tormented and once again forcibly thrown on to the streets by the soldiers. For the false charge of robbery, though not found guilty he is taken to the prison. There he expresses his agony and the shame he met with in his conversation with Sutradhar. To his shock and surprise Sutradhar informs

Friend, the thief is dependent on the Police.
If not- they'll soften your bones.
Sometimes they break your bones.
Sometimes they crack your bones.
The thief earns that he thieives.
It's easy income for the police.
It's a partnership.
The thief is a simple thief.

The police are official thieves (20)

Ghashiram feels completely vulnerable about his morbid situation. While getting discharged from the prison, Ghashiram is thrown on to the streets by the soldiers. All including, "Brahmans, Brahman women, Gulabi and the Marathi lovers" (20-21) look down at him. This brings a rage and beastly change in Ghashiram. It is in this platform, the innocent Ghashiram turns vengeful to react to the humiliation, injustice, hatred and jealousy shown by the Punites. After all the unjust and inhuman treatment, he in resentment says, "You've made me an animal; I'll be a beast inside. I'll come back like a boar and I'll stay as a devil. I'll make pigs of all of you. I'll make this Poona a kingdom of pigs" (21). The repetitive humiliation forces him to ditch himself in the gulf of corruption and embrace brutality by mislaying humanity. He knows well that Nana is a womanizer and to quench the thirst for lust he would do anything.

In a religious ceremony Ghashiram finds Nana's interest in his dear daughter Lalita Gauri. The Lusty Nana tries to catch hold of Gauri who as a deer in the den of lion startles at the very gaze of Nana. But he proceeds towards her saying, "Child what do you want? All your dreams this Nana will fulfil....No one in Poona has the audacity to watch the great Nana Phadnavis!" (22) The tender hearted Gauri reminds him that he is like a father to her but Nana replies, "My dear, you are like a daughter to us- someone else's" (23). She escapes narrowly from the clutches of Nana. Gashiram in servant's attire watches the lustful game of Nana and his beastly corrupted conscience gets ready to go to any extent. He promises Nana to bring the girl back. Nana says, 'we tell you, if she is found, then this nine court Nana will conquer Hindustan! What a bosom! Buds just blossoming... We'll squeeze them like this!' (24) The power motivated Ghashiram surrenders his daughter to Nana but as a responsible father he cries out, "Oh you people, look! I've given my beloved daughter a whore. That old overripe bastard! Look at him, eating her like a peach... Spit on me. Stone me. Look, look, but I will not quit. I'll make this Poona a kingdom of pigs" (26).

After enjoying the company of Gauri, Nana yearns to have her permanently by his side. He pleads to Ghashiram to bring her once more. He says, "Just one more time, Ghashiram. Just one more time, you bastard." (27) Instead of saving Gauri from the clutches of Nana, Ghashiram makes use of the opportunity but acts as a reverent father primarily. Here in this view, Ghashiram uses his patriarchal power on his daughter to seek political power. He says, "Majesty... I will be humiliated all over Poona. What will people say about me?" (27) He, in order to get power, like a clever politician gives an idea to Nana that he be announced as the Kotwal to get away from humiliation openly in Poona. He says, "This is the only way. Otherwise the lovely Gauri will not come to this palace again" (29). Nana chooses to surrender to the will of Ghashiram and makes him the Kotwal of Puna. As *Yudhishtira* keeps *Draupadi* in the Pawn game to retain his kingdom, Ghashiram sends his dear daughter Gauri to Nana in order to attain power in the kingdom of Poona. Nana falls in lust and Ghashiram rises in power.

The spectators witness Nana as a perfect Politician of Power game who after the exit of Ghashiram sounds sly and sneaky. He clearly exhibits the status of a foreign ruler. He is so firm that neither the conspirators nor the people of Poona will have faith on Ghashiram since he is a foreigner. Nana knows well that Ghashiram is now a wounded dog and he would certainly behave in a bitter way to the people of Poona and would try to take revenge for all the humiliation he faced from the Punites. Nana would make use of this opportunity to have a cold snap in the name of Ghashiram. Here, "The real power uses the masks of deputation to mediate the exercise of power, to hide from the victims the real face of power, so that all resistance is effectively deflected" (Bandyopadhyay x). Nana expresses "sexuality and the strategy of deputation working hand in hand" (Bandyopadhyay x) when he says, "our misdeeds will be credited to your account. We do it; our Kotwal pays for it (*Claps his hands*). The opportunity comes in the form of Ghashiram and that luscious peach is at hand to be devoured by Nana" (30).

Ghashiram is announced as the Kotwal of Poona. He turns authoritative overnight. Strict rules are implemented all over Poona. He uses his whims and caprices to make the Punites as puppets in his hand. Ghashiram's oath is now fully served as he gets sadistic pleasure from the distressed and anxious

Brahmans. His demonic attributes end nowhere till he finds Nana marrying seventh time. His dream of getting his dear Gauri married respectfully to a young and prosperous bridegroom shatters when he hears that his daughter was replaced by the seventh bride by offering land and money. He discovers that Gauri is dead and is already buried. With the death of Gauri, Ghashiram's authority and sovereignty dies. When he tries to seek justice from Nana for the death of his dear daughter, Nana says, "Are you mad! You fool! Ghashya, child. These hands have never killed even an insect... In these hands is only the flute of Lord Krishna which made the Gopis forget hunger and thirst." (51) Further in a philosophical tone he describes the destiny of life and death. He says, "No one belongs to anyone. No one is anyone's daughter. No one is anyone's father. In the end, only oneself belongs to oneself. Life is a dance of four days' charm" (51).

Towards the end of the play, Ghashiram is stoned to death by the infuriated people of Poona for he is alleged for the death of twenty two foreign Brahmans whom he imprisons in a suffocating cell. Nana orders the penalty of death to Ghashiram for the demands of the victims. Nana says, "Take this. Take it. Give it to them. The order for Ghashya's death... Tell them to be happy. Tell them to humiliate him all they want. Run!" (59) After the death of Ghashiram, Nana while addressing the people of Poona says,

Ladies and gentlemen. Citizens of Poona. A threat to the great city of Poona has been ended today. A disease has been controlled, The demon Ghashya Kotwal, who plagued us, has met with death... Let the corpse of sinful Ghashya rot. Let the wolves and dogs have it. Let the worms have it. whoever attempts to take away this corpse will be punished. Whoever mourns for him will be hanged.... We have commanded that there be festivities for three days to mark this happy occasion (62).

Ghashiram served Nana's need by offering his only daughter dear to his heart in the game of power and Nana exploited him as long as he needed and dropped brutally at the end using Power and Politics as a powerful weapon in his hands. It is true that Nana though physically feeble is intellectually strong for having an acute sense of crafty and witty spirit. Tendulkar seems to be more focused in screwing up the status of power operation in the society. Ghashiram being the victim of power chooses the same power structure to avenge the citizens of Poona by selling his daughter to the lusty Nana Phadnavis. Nana's repeated desire for having sex with Gauri and his getting married for the seventh time seeking the company of young girls just bloomed traverses the journey of the politicians in their political life filled with Power and Polygamy. In this sagacious attempt, Tendulkar's text perfectly and coherently documents the degeneration of socio-political frame of the Indian Society.

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