

Outcaste but Not Cast Out: Politics, Women, and Religious Ideals in Rabindranath Tagore's Buddhist Plays

Orada Lelanuja¹

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore was a poet, novelist, musician, and playwright whose works are both political and spiritual and reflect the socio-political and religious upheaval of his time. The combination of Tagore's spiritual and national beliefs is clearly seen in his collection of Buddhist plays, in which he employed female characters as the main agents of the plays' actions. This paper discusses Rabindranath Tagore's life as a Pirili Brahman, the outcaste who had no real place in the orthodox Brahman organization, and his personal construction of Buddhism. It explores Tagore's use of Buddhism as a means to criticize the Brahmanical society, the Hindu belief, and the Indian caste system that is evident in his Buddhist plays. It also examines Tagore's use of the lower-class female characters as a paragon of virtues in connection to Buddhist thoughts and the role of women in the Indian society

Keywords: Theatre; Rabindranath Tagore; Plays, Buddhist Plays

¹Lecturer of Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Burapha University.

Many people see Buddhism as a passive and contemplative religion practiced by those who wish to give up the worldly life, but Rabindranath Tagore knew that Buddhism is based upon strength and meant to bring changes, not only to the individual but also on society. Born in 1861, in Calcutta, India, to an influential Pirili Brahman family, Tagore moved to Bengal in 1880 and established himself as one of the writers who introduced Buddhist culture to the field of Bengali literature. Having been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature (poetry) in 1913, Tagore also wrote novels, short stories, songs, plays, and essays. He often wrote about the lives of common people, advocating that each individual should have the right and freedom to shape his or her own right in his or her own way, not only the political freedom, but “a freedom that would remove poverty, social tortures, inhuman social customs and outrages meted out to the downtrodden by the so-called aristocratic class of people.” (Banerjee 433) Tagore’s work is also deeply philosophical. Even though he was influenced by the Vedas and the Upanishads, the ancient Sanskrit texts that contain the thoughts and ideas of Hinduism, Tagore also explored other philosophical concepts, one of which was Buddhism.

In his Buddhist plays, Tagore employs female characters as the main agents of the plays’ actions to express his spiritual and political beliefs. In this paper, I would like to discuss three of Tagore’s Buddhist plays: *Chandalika*, *Malini*, and *The Court Dancer* in relation to Tagore’s spiritual and political ideals. All three are full-length plays that feature women as their main characters. I will explore Tagore’s use of Buddhism as a means to criticize the Brahmanical society, the Hindu beliefs, and the Indian caste system. Finally, I will examine Tagore’s use of female characters in connection to Buddhist thought, the role of women in Indian society, and Tagore’s own feminine ideals. Female characters as the agents of action in Tagore’s Buddhist plays not only portray Tagore’s idea of feminine qualities but also reinforce his Buddhist ideals of non-violence and compassion. This also draws attention to class division and social oppression in the Brahmanical Indian society, both during the Buddha’s lifetime and during Tagore’s own time.

Tagore’s Spiritual Ideals

Tagore’s religious ideals came from his understanding of the Upanishads and the teaching of Siddhartha Gautama or the Buddha. In reference to Tagore’s spirituality in *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, Kalyan Gupta states that “the term ‘spirituality’ is the most appropriate one for characterizing the general tenor of Rabindranath’s poetic thinking”

(9). Gupta also explains that “in his sense of spirituality, he was deeply influenced by the Upanishads, into which he was initiated by his father, Devendranath” (9). What attracted Tagore in the Upanishads was the “amity or loving-kindness towards other people, and the corresponding rejection of apathy, cruelty, violence, and everything else that is destructive of cordial, harmonious relations with one another” (Gupta 9). The Buddha’s teachings also present similar ideals; therefore, the basic commitment to the good of others is important to an intellectual and philosophical understanding of both the Upanishadic and the Buddhist doctrines.

Tagore, however, adapted the doctrine of the Upanishads to his own spiritual outlook: “While Tagore’s understanding of spirituality was inspired by the Upanishads, it does not simply imitate Upanishadic doctrine. Indeed, he emphatically denied that his own position rested on ancient authority” (Gupta 9). Sudhansu Bimal Barua warns us in *Studies in Tagore and Buddhist Culture* that there is a great difference between Tagore’s religious ideals and the teaching of the Buddha when he says that “the emancipation as preached by the Buddha might not necessarily be perceptible to the poet. The poet is very much with this world with all its bounteous love and beauty. So he needs not be so eager to free himself from earthly bondages” (60-61). Unlike the ultimate Buddhist goal of achieving Nirvana or breaking the bondage of births and deaths, Tagore believed that emancipation could be achieved through attachment and infatuation with the beauty of this world. In his plays, Tagore emphasizes some Buddhist ideals such as compassion and non-violence but never once mentions the Buddhist aim of enlightenment; he only utilizes certain Buddhist ideals in order to serve his political and aesthetic ideology.

The Caste System

Tagore’s family is a Pirili Brahman family with no real place in the orthodox Brahman organization. According to Edward Thompson in *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, Pirili Brahmans are “outcastes, as having supposedly eaten with Musalmans in a former day. No strictly orthodox Brahman would either eat or inter-marry with them” (12). From a strictly social point of view, Tagore would be looked down on with certain contempt as a Pirili in spite of his family’s great position as officials in the pre-colonial India. This rejection of his family within Indian society may have contributed to Tagore’s resistance to the Indian caste system that he portrays in his Buddhist plays.

Tagore spoke openly against the caste system, and his Buddhist plays strongly express this opinion. In India, there are four castes according to the Vedic religion: the priests (or the Brahmans), the warriors, the merchants, and the unskilled laborers. This ranking is determined by birth; therefore, one can never move up or down the social ladder. Tagore's opposition to the caste system is shared by the Buddha, who, according to Donald Mitchell, "not only founded his own religious communities but also spoke about the broader social and political condition of his time. According to the early texts, he often denounced the injustices of the caste system, and the Sangha [Buddhist community] was open to persons of all castes" (25). The Buddha also taught that one should earn respect through moral actions and spiritual achievement, not through the basis of one's birth.

In his plays *Chandalika* and *The Court Dancer*, Tagore directly attacks the injustices of the caste system. *Chandalika*, which literally means "untouchable," the lowest of the low, "reprised once again Tagore's recurrent concern with Buddhism and the promise of equality it held for the down trodden class" (Lal 25). The play juxtaposes the Buddhist idea of equality against the harsh conditions of the lives of the untouchables, who, in the play, cannot even buy milk from the milkman. The girls in the village say to the milkman in the first scene of *Chandalika*: "Don't touch her. She is a *Chandalika*. She is untouchable. She'll spoil your curd. She'll spoil your milk" (65). The play demonstrates what Tagore writes in *Nationalism in India* that "in her caste regulations India recognized differences, but not the mutability which is the law of life. In trying to avoid collisions she set up boundaries of immovable walls, thus giving to her numerous races the negative benefits of peace and order but not the positive opportunities of expansion and movement" (67). In the play, Ananda, the Buddha's disciple and personal assistant, asks Prakriti, the untouchable girl, to give him some water. Prakriti refuses, saying that if he drinks her water, he will be polluted. Ananda insists on receiving the water from her, saying that "I am a human. You are a human too. Any water that's given to a person when he is thirsty is like the water of a pilgrimage. Any water that soothes and cools the throat is pure" (67). The play intentionally sets the injustices of the caste system against the Buddhist belief of equality by putting a female untouchable in the midst of the two conflicting beliefs.

The Court Dancer also deals with the social class structure and the Buddhist idea that there is no boundary within one's spiritual and ethical achievements. *The Court Dancer* tells the story of Srimati, the lowly court dancer who is devoted to the Buddha and his teachings.

Other women in the palace are either jealous of her devotion or annoyed by her goodness. Ratnavali, a jealous princess, orders Srimati to dance at the sacred altar, which would be considered sacrilegious. Unable to refuse the royal command to go to the altar, Srimati goes there, takes off her costume, and reveals a nun's robe underneath. Instead of singing and dancing, Srimati recites a chant in honor of the Buddha. Ratnavali then orders the guards to kill Srimati. The play demonstrates the narrow-mindedness and the senselessness of the corrupt royal court in the Brahmanical society as well as the struggle of the lower classes who cannot advance socially and have to obey the command of the authority.

The conversion to Buddhism that took place in India also affected the Brahmanical society in general. I.B. Horner pointed out in *Women in Early Buddhist Literature* that "with the coming of Buddhism, the traditional structure and function of society undoubtedly underwent some alterations" (4). As mentioned earlier, the Buddha often denounced the injustices of the caste system, and his community welcomed people, including women, from every caste. This practice unquestionably shook the social structure and threatened the people who had power, especially the Brahmins. In Tagore's *Malini*, a group of Brahmins is upset by Princess Malini's conversion to Buddhism that they demand the King to banish his only daughter. When the King refuses, one of the Brahmins, Kemankar, flees to a nearby kingdom to raise an army to attack the King's palace. Upon his return, Kemankar also kills his friend, Supriya, because Supriya tries to protect Malini. Malini's parents are also upset about her religious conversion. Malini's mother warns her against Buddhism: "Where did you pick up your new creed, which goes against all our holy books? My child, they say that Buddhist monks, from whom you take your lessons, practice black arts; that they cast their spells upon men's mind, confounding them with lies" (483). *The Court Dancer* also depicts a similar problem: "You fools, you care for a religion that pulls the royal throne down to common dust. The monks rule now where once a king reigned" (21). In Tagore's plays, Buddhism not only disrupts the order of the Brahmanical organization, it also challenges the absolute power of the ruling class.

Even though Tagore presents problems regarding Hindu society and Buddhism in his Buddhist plays, he does not provide the audience with easy solutions to these problems. Tagore criticizes the rigidity and the injustices of the caste system, but he does not directly say that the society should get rid of it. He simply sets the scenes that dramatically portray this inflexible system against the more liberal thoughts of Buddhism.

The Female Characters

The prominence of female characters in Tagore's Buddhist plays further emphasizes the difference between Tagore's Buddhist ideals and the role of women in Hindu society. In Tagore's plays, women are not valued because of their traditional and domestic roles, for example, as mothers or wives, but because of their inherent morality, no matter how high or low they are in society. The Queen in *Malini* confirms the roles of women in the Brahmanical society by saying that "I only know that women's true objects of worship come to their own arms, without asking, in the shape of their husbands and their children" (483). Horner summarizes the role of women in Indian society:

We must now look at what was regarded as women's proper sphere, namely the home. We have to remember that in India women as mothers had always commanded much veneration and gratitude. By bearing a son she had done what she could and what had been expected of her to ensure the continuance of the family line and had provided for the due performance of the "rites of ancestor." . . . If a woman had no son, she might be superseded by a second and a third wife or even turned out of the house. (4)

Buddhism thus provides a place for women who do not fit into this domestic sphere as well as women who do not wish to fulfill this role.

In all three of Tagore's Buddhist plays, the agents of the plays' actions are female characters: an untouchable, a court dancer, and a royal princess. Even though they are different in their caste and in their status, they are united in the common theme that the Dharma (the teaching of the Buddha) transcends all classes and all beings. Ananda Lal comments on the use of female characters in Tagore's plays:

Tagore held that civilization had begun to ignore the individual by becoming totally masculine in nature, thereby generating more wars and strife among people. He had a great respect for the feminine principle; in his opinion women had sensitivity and sympathetic quality and innate spirituality and a freshness of mind that eclipsed the more earthly desires and attributes of the opposite sex. (46)

These feminine qualities, therefore, coincide with Tagore's spiritual ideals based on the Upanishads and the Buddhist scriptures.

In *Chandalika*, Prakriti is blindly in love with Ananda, the Buddha's disciple, and attempts to bring him back through her mother's black magic, which represents female spirituality. Prakriti is a strong woman who is associated with the dark power of nature; she is confined by the Brahmanical rules of her society, but her power transcends all of these physical rules. Even though Prakriti does not seem to possess any of Tagore's spiritual ideals, she is deeply touched by Ananda's kindness which suggests that she has the ability to recognize goodness and to morally progress. The play ends with Ananda forgiving Prakriti for performing black magic. Even though the end is abrupt and ambiguous, it is clear that Prakriti is deeply touched by Ananda's compassion and kindness and will probably follow in his footsteps.

The Court Dancer focuses on Srimati, a court dancer in the palace who is depicted as a paragon of virtue; her depiction confirms the Buddhist idea that one's birth has nothing to do with one's moral character. In the play, King Bimbisar converts his court to Buddhism; however, almost everyone in the court is still attached to the old Brahmanical rules and still look down on the court dancer and other lower class devout Buddhists. An example is when Princess Ratnavali says to Srimati, "I don't intend to visit heaven with you as my tourist guide. I would rather have death than a dancing-girl masquerading as a moral guide!" (18). Even the lower-class Buddhists know their place in society. Malati, a new court singer, confesses her true motivation in becoming a singer: "The palace ladies offer prayers there in the evening. I have no such rights. I have joined the group of singers hoping that I may one day sweep the spot" (16). To Malati, sweeping the sacred place is the highest task she can hope to perform. This demonstrates that even in a Buddhist community, class divisions still exist, and only royalty has the right to offer prayers at a holy place. Tagore, however, through the character of Srimati, proves that one is not a better Buddhist simply because he or she is allowed to offer prayers. The royalty has the right only because of their social status, while Srimati, who lacks that privilege, follows the teaching of the Buddha diligently.

In *Malini* Tagore uses a higher caste female character, a princess, to create a conflict between the Brahmanical society and an individual Buddhist. Because Malini is a princess to whom everyone refers as *mother*, her action concerns the whole kingdom and its people. A group of Brahmins marches to the palace and demands her banishment because she is ruining society and its sacred religion. It is important to note that, in the play, only the

Brahmans are deeply troubled by Malini's conversion to Buddhism, not the rest of the kingdom. The Buddha's community was open to people of all castes and genders; everyone was treated equally no matter if they were slaves or kings. This practice upset the Brahmans who maintained their power by claiming that people were born to their castes because, according to Barua, their selfish motive "deprived the so-called lower orders of the society from their basic right of education and sometimes they employ education to protect their overlordship (15). Moreover, "while some people were disillusioned by the Vedic ritualism and urban materialism and were attracted to the ideal of liberation, they were also suspicious of the spiritual integrity of the learned priests and sages. These religious leaders were, for the most part, married and making a living from their teaching and ritual celebration" (Mitchell 10). For this reason, the fact that a member of the royal family has become a Buddhist is a threat to these Brahmans. This does not mean that all Brahmans are greedy and corrupted. Some of them may be genuinely concerned about the wellbeing of their religion; however, the fact that they are willing to banish a girl from her home portrays their lack of compassion and understanding, moral qualities that are also taught in Hinduism. To quote Supriya, the only Brahman character who is against the banishment of Malini: "To think of saving your religion by banishing a girl from her home! But let me know what is her offence? Does she not maintain that truth and love are the body and soul of religion?" (487). Throughout the play, Malini stays strong against all the commands and persuasions from both the Brahmans and her own parents. In the end, when Kemankar kills Supriya, Malini displays the firm belief in her religious ideal by asking her father, the King, to forgive Kemankar. Again, like in *Chandalika*, the play ends with forgiveness.

Even though Tagore's Buddhist plays depict events that end tragically-the death of Srimati in *The Court Dancer*, the death of Supriya in *Malini*, and the death of Prakriti's mother in *Chandalika*-the plays themselves offer hopeful messages. All the characters who have done wrong are forgiven in the end, no revenge is sought, and the only punishment they receive springs from their own resentment: "Tagore's drama reveals a strong underlying current of optimism. The affirmative attitude of life, the broad humanism, the conviction about the inviolable relationship between man and his maker, the deep faith in women and the beauty of nature, all contribute to the pervasive of harmony and the invincible spirit of hope in his plays" (Lal 47). While Tagore cleverly uses Buddhism and his spiritual ideals to criticize the Bramanical society and the Indian caste system,

he, at the same time, through his plays, expresses the universal truth that the soul cannot be classified by castes or genders, or even religions. He successfully puts forth the idea that forgiveness, compassion, and understanding can be established through conflicts and tragic events as demonstrated in the plays.

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