

Representing Nation in Imagination: Rabindranath Tagore's *TasherDesh* and its recent English translation.

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Abstract: Concept of 'nation' whether real, imagined or represented has always been an extremely problematic one drawing numerous social scientists and academicians into debate. Even before our eminent literary theorists like Benedict Anderson and HomiBhava have probed into this problem of defining 'nation' and theorizing it in the literary contexts, there has been great visionaries in India/Bengal who have expressed their inspirational ideas of the 'nation' and its derivative 'nationalism'. One such radical visionary and Renaissance man worth mentioning is Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's works were what he called 'the play of feeling and not of action'. True to the very words, he wrote about a wide range of subjects from social to political and philosophical, his authorship too ranging from children to adults. But in most of his seminal works, either for children or for adults, his concept and imagination of nation is prominent or at least impressive.

TasherDesh is one of Tagore's most famous dance operas, a unique genre that he had developed. Inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, though *TasherDesh* sometimes is canonized under children's literature and also as a musical, it imbibes a deeper reading and thinking of the text. *TasherDesh*, in its text and context definitely stands as a satire on the rigidity of the class systems of the British Raj and India even in the post-modern and post-colonial era. In this paper therefore, we propose to read *TasherDesh* and its English translation as *The Land of Cards* by RadhaChakraborty, as a text representing nation in imagination shaping and providing a direction to the emerging perspectives of 'Nation' with special reference to the Indian scenario.

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Concept of 'nation' whether real, imagined or represented has always been an extremely problematic one drawing numerous social scientists and academicians into debate. 'Broadly defined nationalism is the assumption of an identity by a group of people primarily on the basis of territory, language, religion, and, culture.' [1] Often inflated and exclusive emphasis is laid on values during conceptualization of nation; thereby leading to a futile and adamant overrating of one's own nation and a subsequent underestimation of others.

Even before the eminent literary theorists like Benedict Anderson [2] and HomiK.Bhabha have probed into this problem of defining 'nation' and theorizing it in the literary contexts, there have been great visionaries in India who have expressed their inspirational ideas of the 'nation' and its derivative 'nationalism'. One such radical visionary and Renaissance man worth mentioning is Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore in his essay 'Nationalism in India' called nationalism "a great menace", stating, that he was "not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations". [3] He believed "Political freedom does not give us freedom when our mind is not free." Therefore he probably dreamt of a 'nation' as a land where people lived together with a free mind and shared equal liberty and fraternity with all irrespective of caste, class and religion. Considering the political and social background of India and Bengal in particular, Tagore's concept of Nation and nationalism thus evolves more with a revolutionary vision and gets reflected through his written texts like *Gora*, *GhaireBaire* and many more with special mention to the text we have chosen to analyse today, the *TasherDesh*.

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It is interesting to note that Tagore in comparison to other nationalists had a different understanding of the constituents of the nation – culture, language, history and idea of nationhood. Tagore's worshipful attitude towards his nation or Indianness was precious to him. For instance, he wrote in the *Swadeshi Samaj* (around 1904) that the 'realisation of the one in many, attaining unity in diversity – is the inherent quality of Bharatvarsha'. [4] He was in fact, an internationalist who wanted all human beings to be treated equally regardless of the country or nation to which they belonged. He denounced narrowly defined concepts of nationalism and patriotism saying nationalism 'is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India's troubles' [5]

Tagore's profound nostalgia for freedom and emancipation of his country is reflected throughout his works. The notion that colonial rule was an artificial barrier to the normal development of the country, was a fundamental idea in many of his writings. Tagore's works were what he called 'the play of feelings and not of action'. True to the very words, he wrote about a wide range of subjects from social to political and philosophical, his authorship too ranging from children to adults. But in most of his seminal works, either for children or for adults, his concept and imagination of nation is prominent or at least impressive. Our text for discussion, *TasherDesh* is one such.

Tagore composed *TasherDesh* in Santiniketan. As recollected by the famous musician Shantidev Ghosh [6], *TasherDesh* had a very interesting performance history. It is said that the play was a combination of Pratima Devi's [7] idea for a dance opera in August 1933, a short story *Ekti Ashare Golpo* (One Absurd Story) that Tagore wrote in 1898 and his poem '*Banijye Boshoti Lakshmi*' meaning -The Goddess of Wealth Dwells in Business Deals. At the first performances in 1933 at the Madane Theatre (now Elite Cinema) in Kolkata, *TasherDesh* was only seventy five minutes long in two scenes. By the second set of performances in Mumbai, more dances had been added. In the performances in 1938 during the birthday celebrations of Tagore in Santiniketan, final changes were made with new songs and dialogues. Though performance history records the play only for its innovative dance drama style, there is the underlying context of 'a dream nation' that is interestingly constructed within the text of the play. Further, Tagore ensured to put forward many revolutionary ideas that could shake the social norms of the so-called cultured Bengali/Indian culture. One such was the idea that men would play the male characters and women the female characters during the performance of the play, which itself was a challenging idea as women were hardly allowed to participate in such events in those days. Again as the play unfolds we find that it is The Queen of Cards of *TasherDesh* that brings in leading changes in the lifeless society of cards. This is highly symbolical of the revolution that Tagore intended to raise in order his frame his dream nation.

The play is set in an apparently naive background, where the hero, a prince goes in search of adventure as he finds the peaceful monotony in his palace suffocating and unbearable exclaiming in the beginning of the play '...we are fenced in with falsehoods. Languishing in the cage of safety, our wings have grown stiff...' Accompanied by a far more conventional travelling companion, a Merchant, the ill-assorted duo gets shipwrecked and is tossed into a land of childlike imagination; the land of cards. The inhabitants of this place are playing-cards, well synchronized but completely lacking in warmth and emotions. Observing these coordinated motions, the prince realizes the lifelessness of the inhabitants of the land of cards. This is exactly what Tagore also feels about the appearance of his countrymen under the British rule '...this appearance is not real but invented, imposed from above, an outer shell created by the learned pundits of this land...' The song of the pack of cards and the merchant's observation quite clearly sketches the lifelessness of the people of British India '...rising falling, lying, sitting, for no reason at all...' These people are not even in a position to ask '...What use is meaning? We want rules...' As the Prince feels their pathetic condition, he pledges to bring out the very true selves of the cards—that which is pure and eternal and to inject commotion into a morbid society. He declares through his exuberant song 'Heralds of new life are we... ever ready are we'.

The India of Tagore's aspiration was to be an India of multiple cultures, an India where the impoverished village is given education and dignity of life, an India building its strength and nationhood by uniting castes and communities under an enlightened leadership. As mentioned in *TasherDesh*, this dream nation must have '... no caste, no lineage, no sacred ancestors, no village, no clan, no community, no class, and no status.' Tagore envisages this dream nation through the voice of the prince as he says '...In hints and suggestions, in my dreams...' expressing his thoughts through the song "A green isle in the ocean's lap... if I can reach that land someday" that speaks of the carefree life that Tagore yearned for the people of his nation. The 'Nabina' - who embodies newness, is what his new nation in imagination was.

Tagore recognized that the colonial education system was out of touch with Indian life. He would never support the idea of country's future generation '... been reared by traditional gurus...' This was why he pressed for an education to foster self-reliance and human dignity which he wanted to combine with modern scientific know-how from which the Indian society could learn and make progress. His ideal hero, the Prince '...roam[s] restlessly...diving into water, climbing mountaintops, hacking [your] path through forests...' thus expressing a carefree life that gets his education from the heart of Nature itself. At the same time, he is severely

critical of people running after vanity, doing funny things and assuming '...painted, decorated style.' Thus we see that almost each and every dialogue of the Prince envisages the urge for newness and almost every song used in the opera foregrounds the underlying theme of a nation in imagination shaping and providing a direction for a dream India.

Not only the context of the play but the Bengali title '*TasherDesh*' too, gives us the sense of imagining a nation. The very word '*Desh*' signifies 'Nation'. Again '*Tash*' symbolizes game of cards whose movements and counts are all restricted to certain rules. So, '*TasherDesh*' literally meaning Nation of Cards implies a nation full of restrictions and rigidity forcing the thinker to perceive his poor slave country as '... a cage, a living death'. Here the metaphor of the cards skillfully puts in a nutshell the unproductiveness of caste, class and regulation. The pitiable condition of Tagore's nation like the land of cards '...resembles a wooden grove constructed by a carpenter...' His suffering and feeling the pains of his countrymen becomes even more vivid when he demands 'can this dead place be called a new land?' The passionate, enthusiastic and frenzied nature of the Prince can knock down this painful stiffness and induce transformation in the land of cards. With the wild vigor of his traits, the Prince transforms the Cards and gradually their human qualities begin to surface. Thus through the character of Prince, Tagore appeals to his miserable countrymen to display courage when he makes the cards exclaim 'how desperately my heart longs to challenge... death... set out to rescue an imprisoned woman.' Even the female weakness is shown shaken off as a female card retorts '...breakdown this fence of idleness... discard all this meaningless clutter' and together they vow to 'tear away the veil... Become free, pure and whole!' These attempts to break free from all bondage of orthodox rules not only satirizes the pitiable condition of British India but also show Tagore's Nation in imagination as well as the kind of energy and motivation that Tagore wishes to see in the people of his dream nation.

Tagore had an insightful conviction in the vitality of childhood innocence. A contemplation over the inner meaning of *TasherDesh*'s theme masked behind such rollicking drama often leaves us wondering why Tagore had manipulated this theme in a supposedly children's play. One possible answer can be his idea of preparing nation's future generation by incorporating such grave yet important philosophies since childhood which are clearly delineated in *TasherDesh*. Tagore's mouthpiece; the prince confides in his mother 'my spirit feels suffocated in the world of maturity, walled in by wisdom' ultimately to realize his reverie which Tagore believes every true Indian must have secretly cherished '...daytime's fettered bird found freedom in a dream.' The true nationalist in Tagore would love to feel '...stirring of new life within these puppets...' and adamant that he is 'not going to leave without seeing this through to the end' Tagore appeals to his people through the song asking them to 'Desire...' for he tells it is the very '...power that smashes lock and key, severs shackles and breaks free...' The recurrence of the same message echoes till the end of the play through the melody 'Break down the dam... Set our captive spirits free... release the flood of the life force... A new life beckons.' All celebrate the Prince's successful mission which is the mission of the great bard, too.

Universality of thought about 'Nation' of Tagore keeps *TasherDesh* relevant even today. Its recent translations as *The Land of Cards*, merely as a literary text as well as its demand for repetitive performances in the original and in translation are a proof that *TasherDesh* though written merely as a children's drama for performance, has definitely a greater purpose and reflection. The satire that Tagore implied on how rigidity of class, caste and convention deadens a land is very much appropriate even today as we progress into the 21st century along with the reservation policy. "*TasherDesh*" that fittingly uses the metaphor of cards to project two-dimensional sterility is a hint of vulnerability of the Nation which can crumble down/collapse any moment if foundation is weak. Tagore imagines and perhaps provides a caution that India too would be by nature fragile if it keeps alive its reservation policies and continue to encourage class, caste and also gender discriminations. The visionary philosopher urges 'When the law of the fence is broken, the law of the open road reveals itself. Else, how can we progress?'

References

- [1] Gangeya Mukherji's "Open Texture of nationalism: Tagore as a Nationalist", published in the special issue of Tagore by Rupkatha Journal Vol.2 no.4.
- [2] Anderson's definition of Nation as found in his famous book *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Revised and extended. ed.). London: Verso. pp. 224. ISBN 978-0-86091-546-1 was that a Nation is a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group.
- [3] Tagore, 'Nationalism in India', in Ramachandra Guha (ed.), *Nationalism*, Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009, p. 73
- [4] Tagore, 'Swadeshi Samaj' in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthana Bibhag, 125th anniversary edition, 1986, p.640.
- [5] Tagore, 'Nationalism in India', in Ramachandra Guha (ed.), *Nationalism*, Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009, p. 73
- [6] Shantidev Ghosh (1910-1999) came to Santiniketan as a teenager and lived there for the rest of his 89 years. Known as an author and authority on Asian Music and especially on Rabindranath Tagore, he dedicated his life to Tagore and was considered the greatest exponent of Tagore's music and dance. In 1930 he was appointed a music teacher in Visva-Bharati, becoming Director of the Sangeet Bhavan in 1939 and Principal in 1945. He received many awards and has left a legacy of numerous books on dance, music and Tagore. He was sent by Tagore to various parts of India as well as Sri Lanka, Java and Bali to further his musical education. His lessons from the trip to South India for Kathakali and Sri Lanka for Kandy dance, was incorporated in his choreography of his role in *TasherDesh*. He always played the Prince in *TasherDesh* during Tagore's lifetime.

- [7] Pratima Devi was the daughter-in-law of Rabindranath Tagore and a trained dance exponent. She was responsible for the choreography of much of the dances in the first production. She was a pioneer in female performance and her wide experience in European modern dance, Indian classical and folk dance was instrumental in the fusion style of the piece. Initially Manipuri (Bengal) style was combined with folk dance forms and Western Dance. Later Kathakali (Kerela) and Kandy (Sri Lanka) forms were included in the mix with European dancing for the cards before they turned into humans. The more experimental elements were only used in solos and not in the group dances on such styles as the choreography were still difficult to assimilate. Pratima Devi designed the costumes of the female characters for the first performance when she used Balinese and Javanese costumes for the girls. As these proved to be difficult for the dancers to perform in, they were later modified into more typical Santiniketan sari style with batik drapes and cardboard card attires.

* All quotations from *The Land of Cards*, by Rabindranath Tagore, tr. RadhaChakrabarty. Penguin Books India, 2010