



## RABINDRANATH TAGORE: DALIT ISSUES IN HIS VERSES

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### ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore has his own way to speak for the downtrodden of the society. His name does not configure in the category of Dalit writers. But there is ample example that proves his writing is pregnant with Dalit issues. Many characters like servant, sweeper, vendor etc. with several aspects of poor life are portrayed in his novels and dramas. His poems are also no less important in this matter. In the present article I have tried to explore the Dalit issues Tagore has dealt with in his poems. The "Shudra", "Downtrodden", "Outcast" all are justifiably present in his verses.

**Key Words:** Caste, Community, Dalit, Downtrodden, Outcast, Poor, Untouchable, Domination, Power.

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### **"Come Ye Outcast, come Ye lowly ones Fling away your load of shame!"**

Tagore welcomed the downtrodden people for the building of nation. Along with the "Aryans", "non-Aryans", "Hindu", "Muslim", "English", "Christian" "Brahmin" he also called the "poorest and lowliest, and lost" to "hold others by hand" and "Unite and consecrate the waters on the shore of vast Humanity that is India." Tagore, through his works tried his best to reform the society. He took up many themes and penned them down to change the mind of so called "touchables" and orthodox Indians to accept the poor and lowly people as fellow human being.

The term to define the downtrodden, oppressed and neglected peoples varies from time to time, place to place. Sometimes they are "Negro" or "Black", sometimes "Untouchable" and sometimes "Adivasi". The Govt. of India has given them the official terms "Scheduled castes and

Scheduled tribes". Mahatma Gandhi adopted the word "Harijan" which can be roughly translated as "Children of God". Rabindranath Tagore called them "Outcast". Now a comparatively new term has been rolling on the floor i.e. "Dalit", a word which was perhaps first used by Jyotirao Phule in the nineteenth century and popularized by economist and reformer B. R. Ambedkar. Though it's a political identity of the castes in India who were formerly considered "untouchable", they are found throughout South Asia, in India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and emigrated to the United States, United Kingdom, Singapore, Malaysia, South Africa, Canada and the Caribbean and others. Recently a new kind of literature is evolving in the field of Indian Literature where the Dalit People themselves are writing novels, dramas, poetries, autobiographies etc. and expressing their own sufferings and feelings.

It's not mandatory to be Dalit himself or herself for writing about or on Dalit people. When, in an Interview Manohar Biswas, a revolutionary and outstanding figure in Bengali Dalit Literature, was asked whether he thinks - being a Dalit Writer one has to be a Dalit by Birth or not, he replied "Literature and none of its activity is related with the birth. Anybody can write about the Dalits". In the same interview he was asked to talk about the Dalit writers in West Bengal. He opined - "In West Bengal, Dalit writers have a history different from the rest of India. They have their history of writings from hundred years back. Recently I've compiled a book titled "Shatobarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya" where I've accommodated about hundred Dalit writers whose books had been published from 1911 to 2010, on choosing and covering mostly all the genres of writing such as essays, short stories, novels, dramas, poetries and autobiographies. Beyond this group of writers there are more writers left out."

Rabindranath Tagore, who is the first Noble prize winner from India in Literature, wrote in Bengali Language and translated many of his poems in English himself. As far as Tagore is concerned, his name does not fall in the list of now famous "Dalit Literature" nor was he from any "Dalit community". Rather he belonged to a rich and renowned family. But what he wrote for the "Dalits" of his time can never be ignored at any cost. Not only of his own time, he had also taken many Upanisadik stories to enrich his verses with the theme of Outcast issues. It is remarkable that Rabindranath's writings, which are of a hundred years ago, have alerted us to the social injustices that continue to hurt our lives to this day, the injustices of caste and creed. Let me present a real example about the concern and sensitivity of Tagore regarding the poor and oppressed people he met in his day to day life. Tagore generally had spent most of his time writing, composing poems and stories etc. But in his early adulthood he was sent to Shilaidaha presently in Bangladesh to look after his family business as a Zamindar (land lord) there. The poet was very deeply hurt on seeing the ruthless attitude towards the mere poor peasants. During those days an incident moved him so much that it provoked him to

write a poem. As a Zamindar he deeply saw and felt the poverty and the misery of the poor peasants working under him, on the other hand he saw the lavishness and the ruthless attitude of the Zamindars towards the peasants. This created a deep wound in the poet's heart which compelled him to compose a poem on a real incident.

This incident is beautifully depicted by Tagore through his wonderful Bengali poem "Dui Bigha Jomi" or roughly translated "My Little Plot of Land" or "My two Bigha of Land". The poet here describes the 'Zamindaripratha' (Zamindarisystem or Land Revenue System) of Bengal and how the innocent and poor peasants were brutally tortured and abused by the cruel and rich Zamindars. The poet himself being a landlord was quite acquainted with the brutal behaviour of the other Zamindars which he never accepted. It inspired him to write this very poem.

The story revolves around a poor farmer Upen who becomes a destitute in the hand of a cruel capitalist. Upen possessed nothing but a small piece of land which the Zamindar wanted to grab for building a beautiful garden there. He completely ignored the pitiful condition of the farmer which compelled him to leave his own home. A false case is filed against the farmer and he was not given a single penny. The emotions of the poor peasant are portrayed in this poem in a very sensual manner. The farmer travelled many places for several years and became a hermit but could not forget his own land. At last, after a long period of time he thought to return back to his native land. After the painful roaming he reached his own land. In his journey the poor man remembers the past incidents and gets emotional. The farmer became shocked to see the complete changed condition of his poor mother land. After a long search he saw the old mango tree and became nostalgic and recollected all the golden memories of his childhood as well as youth days. He became tired and sat under that mango tree. Here he began to think about the past happenings regarding this tree and convulsed into emotional mood. During this thinking a fruit fell on his lap. At this his mind was filled with joy and he thought that the tree has recognized him and gave him its blessing. The poet relates this incident with the

adorable hands of mother. This poor man believes that the fruit is the part of his mother's love. All of a sudden a gardener came and took the farmer to the landlord for stealing the mango from the tree. The landlord denied him to recognize and accused him as a thief. The farmer was shocked and shattered. His heart was filled with sorrow. Tears rolled down his eyes. He laughed at his fate and muttered – "indeed...he (Zamindar) is the Saint now and I am the thief!"

Next poem I would like to take on is "Ora Kaj Kore". Here Tagore sings a hymn to eulogize the proletariat. He talks about the ubiquity of poor people who work hard for the rich and powerful for their whole life. "Ora Kaj Kore" means "they work" or to go to the more nearer meaning, we can say "they have been working". Here "they" implies the proletariats or the working class people who have been working and working from the time immemorial to the very present moment to make civilization go forward. The "Pathan" had come and gone. Same with the "Mughal". None of them has any sign left today. Tagore says, in the same way the English have come to India, and assures that the mighty time will go by their path too and certainly their empire will also be washed away one day. But what remains forever is "the huge crowd" moving and clamouring "in groups" who are at work forever to serve the mankind in its every need. They are the people who "hold the oar and hoist the sail". They are the people who "sow the seed on the field and harvest the grain". They work in the city and also in the wilderness. They work within the country and abroad. Day and night they work and they will also be consistently working even after the ruin of hundreds of Empires.

In "Leave This Chanting", one of his poems in Gitanjali, the poet points out the futility of worshiping God in the "lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut". He tells the worshiper "Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!" Because God cannot be prisoned within four walls by upper-class people. Rather "He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones." He emphasises on breaking the barrier of caste and creed. He not only calls upon the poor people to come out of their

inferiority complex but also he asks the worshiper in question here to "Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil", because Tagore feels God is in the scorching sun and in the torrential rain with the working people whose "garment is covered with dust."

In the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century caste played a dominant role in Indian society. The hypocrisy of castemen was in peak in our country. Tagore strongly opposed this hypocrisy and warned those castemen about their fate. In his poem "The Great Equality", he writes –

"Proud casteman of my unfortunate country!  
Throw aside your pride of caste,  
Lest on your unwilling head  
Should be heaped the burning insults  
That you now shower on other.  
You have deprived the outcastes;  
Of the common rights of man.  
With your very eyes  
You have beheld their misery.  
And yet you refused to take them to your heart  
But remember, please do remember:  
Someday you shall have to be  
The equal of them all in ignominy.

Tagore shows us the picture of the day. How the low born people were treated by those who used to dominate the society.

"You have stifled your own power  
When you pushed aside your brothers,  
And trampled them under your haughty feet..."

He warns them about the dire consequence they are going to face. Letting one community live in wretched condition would not let the whole society grow further.

"Proud casteman of my unfortunate country!  
They whom you so joyfully trample under your feet  
Will drag you down to the spot  
Where they lie humble today;  
They to whom you deny advancement  
Themselves shall block your progress."

It's an age old sin and not any new phenomena. Whole society should prepare itself for retribution for the wrong it has done by depriving the poor of their right. The poet here almost shouts and accuses the sinner in cursing tone-

"For centuries you have humiliated  
These children of God"

In next lines Tagore praises the human virtue in those poor and pitiable people. Though they are in poor condition materially, inwardly they are wealthier.

"...And you still fail to bow low  
To the divinity that is in them.  
Why do you not bend your head,  
And open your eyes to see  
The God of the poor and helpless  
Dwelling in the dust where grovels  
The victims of your suicidal pride..."

Sometimes Tagore wonderfully tells the story of people who were in power but descended and came to the poor to find the way "to God's presence". In the poem "Raidas, the Sweeper", tears flow down from Rani's eyes after listening to "some songs born of his (Raidas) silent vision". She not only cries but go to that very sweeper "who guided her to the God's presence". But this type of incidence happened to some lucky ones. Otherwise the scene was completely different. In the next lines of this poem Tagore portrays how "The old Brahmin priest of the king's house" scolded the Rani "for her desecration of sacred law by offering homage as a disciple to an outcaste". But Rani had a pure soul. She promptly defences herself and answers in very wise and didactic way "Brahmin, while you were busy tying your purse-strings of custom ever tighter, love's gold slipped unnoticed to the earth..." She proudly declares "I am proud to receive love's wealth, the gift of the lowly dust, from my Master, the sweeper".

In ancient times the disease of caste system was epidemic. Tagore explored through the old days and picked up the ingredients for his poems. Here too he looked for the Outcast-lives and highlighted the issue before his readers. The story of Satyakama is very presentable here. It starts like this:

"The hermit boys had brought the cattle home,

And sat round the fire to listen to the Master,  
Gautam, when a strange boy came,  
And greeted him with fruits and flowers,  
And bowing low to his feet,  
Spoke in a bird like voice-  
'Lord, I have come to thee to be taken  
Into the path of a supreme truth.  
My name is Satyakama.'

But the boy comes to know that it is only Brahmin who can aspire to get the highest wisdom. Hearing this Satyakama rushes to his mother to enquire about his blood and she replied "In my youth I was poor and had many masters" and "had no husband". This was the harsh reality of that time. The so called "touchables" many of the times did not hesitate to "touch" the "untouchables" and consequently impregnate them exposing to the bitter world. And the children who were conceived by those very "touchables" in their mothers' womb were condemned as Outcasts along with their mothers. When Satyakama returns to Gautama and informs him about his blood in front of other disciples, Tagore describes the strange reaction among them: "The students muttered at the shameless insolence of that Outcast". The Outcast had no right or privilege to come forward. Anyway, for the awakened people all human being are same. All are equal without discrimination. Human virtues are not restricted to any caste, creed or race. Here the human virtue of Satyakama the Outcast is highlighted and is recognised by Gautama who is portrayed as an awakened being. He accepts Satyakama thus-

"Took the boy to his bosom, and said;  
Best of all Brahmins art thou,  
My child, thou hast the noblest  
Heritage of truth"

Buddha preached about equality and egalitarian thoughts. But the elite people of that time have started treating the servile caste in a disgusting way. They have made such social codes that the Outcast people had no right to touch awakened being. This had a psychological effect on the deprived people. It's beautifully presented in a poem. It begins thus:

"Sudas, the gardener, plucked from his tank  
The last lotus left by the ravage of winter

And went to sell it to the king at the  
Palace gate.”

In the next lines Tagore describes how Sudas got two customers at the same time for the lotus, a traveller and a King, both of whom want to have the lotus to lay at the feet of Buddha and both offered equal money demanded by him, and how after looking this, Sudas refuses to sell his lotus and wishes to offer it to Lord Buddha by himself. He directly goes to Buddha, and in last two lines Tagore realistically draws the psychological picture of Sudas mind:

“Buddha smiled and asked” what is your wish, my son?

Sudas cried, the least touch of your feet.”

Outcasts were rejected in any field of society. They were made to accept that they had no right to stand before their Lord. Nor they had courage to touch him and seek bliss. That’s why Sudas wants “the least touch” of Buddha’s feet and he fails to pray for anything more. He could not imagine himself to be in a place to demand beyond this.

In the poem “Go not to the temple” Tagore directly talks about the “down-troddens”. He here tries to convince the temple-goer not to go “to light candles before the altar of God, First remove the darkness of sin from your heart...” He emphasises “First bend down to lift someone who is down-trodden” and then go “to the temple to pray on bended knees”

The poem “Give Me Strength” of Tagore is like an ardent prayer to God. In this poem of nine lines he seeks for several things and does not forget the poor in his prayer. He prays “Give me the strength never to disown the poor”

To conclude I would say, no matter how much Tagore was enchanted by nature, how much loud with his political opinion, how much strong anti-nationalist he was, how much in love with his spirituality or how much busy in uniting East and West; he never distanced himself from the harsh realities of life. He observed life and society around him, weighed down by rigid customs and norms and plagued by orthodoxy. His criticism of societal dogmas is the underlying theme of most of his works. Especially his verses provide an insight into the society which was rife with religious and social

tenets and was infested with ill-practices such as caste system. In many of his poems he has successfully highlighted these issues and condemned the practice of domination of one community by another.

**Note:** Translation of few words, phrases and sentences of Tagore’s Bengali poems – “Ora Kaj Kore” and “Dui Bigha Jomi” are done by me.

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