

Tagore's Poem " Shresthaviksha': A Re-visioning Through Mortal Eye

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Tagore, as is apparent, had a firm faith and respect for the Buddhist literature, and naturally enough the affinity left a deep mark in the literature, Tagore created centring Tathagata. Like any inspiring episodes from the age of Uponishada, Shikh-Maratha and Bengali trend-setting act of chivalry – the stories of Jataka and the life of Lord Buddha had always been a centre of Tagore's admiration. *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal* of Raja Rajendralal Mitra was, perhaps, the most important source for Tagore so far as the his creations on Buddha was concerned. Tagore found the book as a treasure-house for his immortal creations in poetic and dramatic forms like 'SHRESTHAVIKSKA(the best elms), Mostak vikroy'(head-selling), Pujarini(the female worshipper), Nagar Luxmi (the city- Goddess), Parishod(repayment), Samanya khati(minimal loss), Mulyaprapti(vale-receiving), etc. With the crude stories from the source Tagore's addition of his devotional pedantic attachments and traditional cultural value help his creations adorable with eternal sensibility- the resting place for a noble mind.

In narrating the Buddhist story in 'Shrestha viksha' Tagore, by and large, remained faithful to his source or to the traditionally known stories. The storyline tells Anathapindada- a Buddhist Monk has gone out in search of the best elms as the offering before the Tathagata. His was a search like the finding out the Grail by Sir Galahyde. Travelling a thousand mile across the sky-scrapers of Shravanitpur he had been offered with a plenty of gems and jewels, but he was not contented. He still uttered:

O city dwellers, please listen
Buddha - the best-beggar would be the Recipient
offer your best elm...

The quest of Anathapindada, in search of the best elm, continued until he reached the the forest crossing the pride of concretes. The thirst was quenched by a poor woman by sacrificing her much –torn cloth – the only cloth she had for covering her shame. The Monk was satisfied and left for offering the best elm to the Tathagata.

As per the Buddhist prescription, sacrifice (tyaga) counts the supreme and Tagore- as is apparent left no stone unturned to vindicate this basic value of Buddhism. The disciple of Lord Buddha, Anathapindada, urged the city-dwellers of Shravantipur:

... calamity destroys earthly attributes
Among the transitoriness of all -
Sacrifice(tyaga) stands supreme.

So it sounds natural that from a monk like Anathapindada a sacrifice with absolute surrender may be valued more – more than a thousand gems. The monk accepted the rag from the woman as the most valuable offering for his Tathagata.

If the story line is viewed by a mortal eye also, the offering stands supreme but the restoration of the woman's prestige left uncared for. One may easily understand the situation of jeering, the woman might have to absorb. Moreover, she was not only poor but alone and helpless. The imagined social torture drags the storyline towards a societal atrocity. A Tagore usually sounds best, when atrocity to the womenfolk is avoided. But, here, the source of the content did not allow him to sing his natural:

...coming at an auspicious moment...
(you) covered my shame.

On another occasion, Tagore sang the story of a beggar who delivered a small amount of rice to the King (of Heaven) which he received back in the form of gold grains. Even in Mahabharata, Lord Krishna, by providing the endless source of cloth, saved Draupadi from the hellish dishonour of her womanhood. The episode, among many odds of the Shabhagreha of Hostonapur, saved the tongue of the audience from being bitter. In Treta yoga, enormously powerful Ravana-the emblem of temporal power and the king of Swarna Lanka, even, did not dishonour the womanhood of mother Sita, rather he invented the golden lines of gratitude for a woman:

Atithidebo bhavo(guests are our Gods).

Here also, from a down to earth point of view, the story could have been more convincing had the women been allowed to protect her shame. The generosity of the Great is not witnessed at least till the end of the poem. The story of, **Shrestha viksha**, on our consideration, remained only as a episode of a kingly zest – though the poetic quality is at its best.

Ref : Rabindra Rachanabali, Viswa Bharathi, Kolkata.

Note: I have chosen the Original Bengali version of Tagore's works as primary source and all incidental translations are made by the current author.