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## The Verse Dramas of Buddhadev Basu: Unique Synthesis of Myth and Modernity

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From the beginning of the Twentieth century, the area of Bengali poetic drama saw a lot of activity, and Buddhadev Basu was one of the sparkling stars in that star-studded sphere. His powerful writing opened new horizons in the realm of verse drama. The hallmark of his writing is a blend of reality with imagination and an effort to impose modern outlook and reasoning upon ancient texts. Basu applied myth in his poetic dramas and created a synthesis of ancient tales and modernity. He embedded the exquisite grace of mythology in his creation with a rare erudition and penetrating insight. The characters of his verse dramas those were taken from ancient texts had a striking relevance in modern times. He searched the *Puranas* to address the issues of his contemporary world. The spiritual crisis, struggle for existence, the pang and pathos; agony as well as ecstasy of both the past and the present intermingle in his composition.

Keywords: Modernity, Verse drama, ancient text, mythology, characters

Representation of the contemporary sentiment and consciousness, added with ancient myths, can make literature enriched and resonant. Some prolific writers have ventured to wade through the complexities of modernity by harnessing the allegorical sense of ancient texts, and with an aim to locate the trajectory of eternal values. Buddhadev Basu was such a literary polemicist. The mythical mode of Basu was noted by the post-Tagorean Bengali avant-garde authors. He intermixed the basic ingredients of the Western poetic dramas with the ancient Indian texts such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Puranas* etc. The prime objective of this paper is to examine how the verse dramas of Basu attempt a discursive synthesis of ancient texts and modernity.

From the beginning of the Twentieth century in India, there was a trend of re-

juvenation in the area of poetic drama through the imitation of Western thoughts and outlook. T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, for example, inspired many Bengali verse dramas. A number of famous plays were written in quick succession by the renowned poets of the time. Basu, inspired by the Greek dramas, played a pioneering role for the enrichment of verse dramas in Bengal. The language of those Greek dramas was symbolic and images from these ancient texts were still relevant in modern civilization. In a similar way, Basu exploited myth in his poetic dramas because to him the *Puranas* were the breeding place of all sorts of conflicts. The extent of conflict scattered through centuries together violating the geographical boundaries and spread out the essence of new ideology upon which the present civilization flourished. He wanted to establish the eternal truth so that the darker aspect of life could be enriched with poetic fervour.

Basu stepped into the sphere of verse drama with his unparalleled composition *Tapaswi O Tarangini* in the year 1966. Afterwards, he composed innumerable poetic dramas. It is worth noting in this context that in his early life he composed a poetic drama named *Anuradha Roy*. The subject-matter and style of representation were not as attractive and appealing like that of his later creations. The characters of the later verse dramas of Basu were adopted from the *Puranas* and were presented from a modern perspective. Basu himself opined that the characters of *Tapaswi* and *Tarangini* were the products of his imagination though they were the inhabitants of the ancient period: psychologically they were our contemporaries. When a severe famine broke out in Anga, astrologers prophesied that only if saint Hrishyashringa, a lifelong dweller of the forest be brought to the capital and married to the princess, the catastrophe would come to an end. *Tarangini*, a prostitute was deployed to break the austerity of *tapaswi* Hrishyashringa. *Tarangini* became successful in her job: the *tapaswi* was brought to the capital and was married to Shanta, the princess. As a result, the rain poured on. *Tarangini* rediscovered her inner self through the association with the *tapaswi*.

The evolution and elevation of feelings was a noticeable characteristic of this play. It was a story of transformation from sensuality to love. *Tapaswi*, on the other hand, could not confine himself within the bondage of his marital life because he had an eternal quest for the divine path. The transformation of both the characters was considered by Amiya Dev as "two faces in a mirror." He also viewed that it was the conflict between two forces in a single point. Apart from this, the pang and pathos; agony and ecstasy; the trauma, the struggle for existence were portrayed in this poetic drama in an artistic way. Here laid the perfection and competence of a writer who created the fusion of past and present through his literary brilliance. Under his magical poetic touch, the ups and downs of

ancient people, their sorrows and sufferings, and their defeat and victory were intermingled with the modern civilization. The tale of sorrow and conflict of human life was skillfully projected in this superb masterpiece. The ancient thoughts, the outlook of the people has been transformed in to modern world adopting a new method and new technique. In a word, his prime objective was to maintain a close relationship between the past and the present which were the integral parts of our modern society.

After completion of three years of his publication of the *Tapaswi O Tarangini*, Basu composed another legendary verse drama in 1969, known as *Kalsandhya*. It was based on the Moushal part of the *Mahabharata*. Two eternal truths of human life i.e. construction and destruction were presented on contemporary context through this verse drama. The death, blood, pathos, cry, anarchy all were the factors moving through the vicious circle. After completion of one circle, another one got started. The author through his verse drama *Kalsandhya* escorts the audience from the known to an unknown destination. The pain of separation and the feeling of melancholy were inevitable in their journey from known to unknown. It was the eternal truth that the death was the inevitable fate of all things created. Nothing there on earth could or in any account escape this destiny. It was meaningless to repent in this regard. Those combinations of moments created Eternity. One moment converted into another moment to create the circle of Eternity and it was a continuous process. This lofty philosophical realization was presented from a modern standpoint. The script of *Kalsandhya* no doubt was based on the *Mahabharata* but its appeal was eternal and universal. The drama was sketched luminously by Basu where he projected the continuous historical process of ups and downs of life.

*Kalsandhya* signified the declination of the past and greeted the advent of the new. The confluence of those two was known as 'Kalsandhya'. The term was used to denote the beginning of the start of evolutionary changes. None could predict the moment of elevation similarly the moment destruction. This was the inner truth of the human civilization: any sensible person like Basu could not avoid sensing the fury of destruction. He could realize it well that these were the indispensable part of life that could not be averted. Even Lord Krishna could not escape himself from inevitable destruction of time. He had to embrace death with the stroke of an arrow of a fowler named Jora. This poetic drama was divided into two acts; in the first act, two old citizens were horrified, terrified and totally perplexed over the prevailing situation of anarchism, terrorism, atrocities in Dwaraka. On the other hand, the woman-folk sensing impending danger became restless and perturbed. Satyabhama and Subhadra also became anxious. The turmoil of Dwaraka remind-

ed about the imprecation of Gandhari that Lord Krishna would die in a gruesome manner and the womenfolk of Jadav clan would be humiliated and insulted. Even Shri Krishna considered the situation as inevitable. *Kalsandhya* was composed in a time when a political turmoil had prevailed in Bengal from 1967 onwards. Some upright young people mostly students joined the Naxalite movement against the existing political system. The orthodox leaders became puzzled and helpless. The similar incident was depicted in *Kalsandhya* where Arjuna became helpless to face the Avir robbers: he became a mute spectator. In the preface of *Kalsandhya*, Basu opined that the narration surpassed the destruction of Jadavas and Dwaraka and extended far more.

The class discrimination, the merciless and inhuman torture of the masters was vividly expressed in his *Anamni Angana* published in the year 1970. The story was based on the *Mahabharata*. Bichitrabirja, the king of Kuru was married to Ambika and Ambalika who were the princesses of Kashi. He died on the battlefield without leaving any heir. The character of Angana had been presented as a domestic help who belonged to the lower strata of society. Her dream to build a happy nest of her own remained unfulfilled following her captivation. She was always looked down upon by the Queens. Rajmata Satyabati was kind and sympathetic to her but ultimately she utilized Angana for future heir of the kingdom. Satyabati also instigated Vyas for the same purpose. Vyas was the son of Rajmata during her spinsterhood. Angana was rather compelled to accept the heinous proposal of Rajmata with an expectation to be freed from the bondage of slavery. Afterwards, Vyasdev blessed Angana to be the mother of a wise, erudite, soft-spoken and brave son. This incident allured her to be a glorious mother despite her lower status in society. She preferred to confine herself in the domestic environment of the palace. This psychological tussle of Angana was the central point of the drama. Through the conversations of master and slave, the clear picture was available regarding the cruelty of masters and helplessness of the maid. This type of class struggle is also noticed in the modern period. Even in modern society, these types of exploitation, denial, deprivation and hatred are still in existence. The subaltern people of the period who were carrying the seeds of lives silently and patiently used to hide behind the bars. The dramatist ventured to bring them out from complete obscurity and from profound darkness to daylight. Each and every dialogue of this drama was enriched with dramatic qualities and poetic efficiency. The prime objective of the dramatist was not to impose importance upon the subaltern people or to glorify them, but to give importance on their dormant dreams of emancipation and to materialize the same.

In the year 1970, the verse drama the *Pratham Partha* came out. The theme

was based on the *Udyoga Parva* of the *Mahabharata*. This part dealt with the preparing stage of the battle of Kurukshetra between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. This poetic drama initially started with the conversation of two old Brahmins of Hastinapur. They were the representatives of common mass who were not in favour of war. The episode proceeded further through their conversations. In order to avoid the conflict between the two groups of kinsfolk, Lord Krishna took the role of mediator. But the mission became futile. During the course of his journey to the city Upalabya, Lord Krishna lifted Karna in his chariot. The drama centred around the conversation between Lord Krishna and Karna. Karna was the son of Kunti at her maidenhood stage. From this point of view Karna was the eldest son of Kunti and eldest brother of Pandavas, so in this verse drama, Karna had been addressed as 'Pratham Partha' by Basu. It will not be out of place to mention in this context that Rabindranath Tagore composed his "Karna Kunti Sambad" on the basis of the conversation between mother and son i.e, Kunti and Karna of the *Mahabharata*. Both the authors presented and viewed Karna from different angles. In the writings of Basu, the character of Karna was sketched as a self-styled warrior full of self-confidence and intrepidity. In this verse drama, Basu narrated how Kunti convinced her son Karna about the fact that from a religious point of view he too was Draupadi's husband. This news inspired Karna to strengthen his dignity though he was not entitled to enjoy the dignified position of the royal aristocrat family. He was encouraged by the spirit of self-confidence, coupled with valour and reasoning both in war front and in personal life.

Another outstanding creation of Basu was *Sankranti* which was also based on the *Mahabharata*, published in 1973. The theme was based on the incidents occurred before the demise of Duryodhana. This poetic drama stressed on the destiny. From that point, it was comparable to *Kalsandhya*. Both the verse dramas gave sufficient hints of destruction where the all the characters were the silent spectators. There was no doubt that contemporary social unrest had a deep impact upon this sensitive dramatist and prevailing situation also perplexed him to a great extent. He accepted everything as destiny. In this poetic drama destiny is a guiding force. In the *Mahabharata*, both Dhritarashtra and Gandhari had to face successive bereavements due to death of Kauravas but Durjodhan was still alive. Sanjoy had a divine farsightedness who narrated the battle between Bhim and Durjodhan. In *Sankranti* the character of Sanjay was invisible but he narrated the battle of Kurukshetra from behind the screen. The description of dual fight puzzled Dhritarashtra and saddened Gandhari. The 'sankranti' was the clear indication of life and death, construction and destruction. In the said poetic drama the eyes of Gandhari remained uncovered. From the point of truthfulness and justice, she

was impartial. She was judicious, reasonable and unhesitant even in condemning the evil design of her sons. She had a firm conviction that crime indulged crime and jealousy indulged revenge. In *Sankranti*, the character of Gandhari had been represented as a symbol of eternal motherhood. Gandhari used to hide behind the screen of truth and righteousness which gave a clear indication of her suppressed sufferings.

Basu composed two other significant verse dramas viz. *Prayaschitta* and *Ikkaku Sennin*, but those were not his original compositions. *Prayaschitta* was a transcription of W.B. Yeats's *Purgatory*. Yeats wrote the book on the basis of folklores of Ireland. Basu applied his poetic excellence in transforming the characters to the ancient period with a view to make the moments relevant in the modern period. The play consists of two vital characters of a father and his son. The character of the old man was a living example of suffering. The play started with a curious question of a boy and ended with the lamentation of the old man who was conscious enough in maintaining the purity of the earth. The incidents of the play took place in front of a bare tree and a dilapidated house. The old man narrated his son about the background of the destruction of the house. The father of the old man was confirmed drunk and oppressor who was responsible for setting ablaze the house. At the age of sixteen, being vexed with the constant inhuman torture of his father upon him and his mother, he was compelled to stab his father to death. The old man visualized the shadow of his deceased tyrannical father on the countenance of his son. Being apprehended observing the image of his deceased atrocious father on his son, the old man took instant decision to kill his son. His dream of maintaining purity failed miserably. He became the victim of mental sufferings, depression, repentance and helplessness. According to Basu, this repentance was nothing but a sort of the purgation. Yeats stressed on sufferings of life whereas Basu stressed on atonement. Here he made a sharp departure from the age-long outlook of Christianity because the Christianity believed in acute suffering, not on expiation. This poetic drama has presented an indication of complete annihilation so far as human and humanity was concerned.

He composed some remarkable poems and poetic dramas using and interpreting old stories from that hoard. His full-blown poetry showed likings for weaving both foreign and native Indian myth and legends into the fabric of his work. Basu got new impetus from the Japanese Noh mask drama of Komparu Motayasur titled *Ikkaku Sennin* in 1976. There was a striking similarity of this verse drama with Hrishyashringa episode of the *Mahabharata*. The drama consisted of some themes like magic, Divine power etc. It was designed on the Hindu mythology and was presented in a fantastic way. Ikkaku led a pious life and used to reside on

the peak of a rock. He was also a magician. He got involved in warfare with the demons. By dint of his magical power, he captivated the demons in a cave. As a matter of fact, those demons were none but the Gods who used to bring the rains. But the defeat of Demons brought a disaster as they made the rainfall stopped in Benaras. Finding no way out a beautiful lady named Senda was sent by Demon King to Ikkaku to deviate him from his path. Being lured he agreed to quit his magical power. Resulting which the Demons were freed and an inundation swept over the country that washed out the meditation of Ikkaku. During this time a complete change came over him. He realized that he was also a human being. Formerly he felt boast of his rigid status as a saint as well as a magician who would not face old age or death. But when he faced the grim reality then forth he faced the sudden death of his mind. Basu depicted here the awakening of common people, their suppressed pain and surprise under the mask of Ikkaku. This verse drama was a symbol of arousing of inner self from deep slumber which was applicable to the human being of the whole universe.

Basu procured mythical ingredients both from East and West. In all of his verse dramas, he transformed the ancient period into modern contemporary time. All the characters though extorted from ancient texts, bore the striking similarities with that of the modern era. Their hopes and despairs, their ups and downs, their trauma and triumph were blended with modern civilization. He intermingled the epical characters with modernity in such a fashion that their conflict, their pathos, their life struggle reflected in our modern social life. He had the credit of weaving their existence with our existence. The living and the dead got a new and different dimension in his works. Sometimes death became superior to life in his creations. He never thought to separate death from the flow of life. He experienced self-destroying politics of the period, saw the frantic modernity, witnessed attachment towards earthly pleasures; so his philosopher's mind shifted to the ancient texts for the survival of declining civilization.

During the turbulent period of World War II, a good number of hidden questions were vividly raised in the verse dramas of Basu. Basu selected the characters who had to traverse a long way full of hurdles. They were tired of their long strive to overcome their agony and sufferings. In the writings of Basu consciously or unconsciously the struggle, pathos and misery of the ancient characters were amalgamated with the modern people. He had to search into *Puranas* in order to quench the thirst of the contemporary period and to unveil the mystery of time. Coming in close contact with the modern concepts of the characters of the *Puranas* also got a new dimension. The supermen, the Gods or the demon characters were nothing but the reflection of the anxiety of the modern earthly human be-

ings in one way or other. Despite the scientific and technological excellence of the present era, the angst of human being remained unaltered from the very dawn of civilization. So modern writers with the help of ancient texts tried to find out the solution of the complexities of modern age where they belonged to.

Basu was the most versatile literary figure in Bengal someone about whom it could be said that Tagore's mantle had come to rest on his shoulders. As a writer of verse dramas, he has left a significant output.

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