



## **Theme of Power Politics in *Ghashiram Kotwal* by Vijay Tendulkar**

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### **Abstract:**

Vijay Tendulkar in the play *Ghashiram Kotwal* (originally in Marathi but translated into English by Jayant Karve and an American professor Eleanor Zelliot) unravels through the persona of the protagonist Ghashiram, a tale of human actions and reactions at a time when a man is confronted with tempting opportunities and situations where power is offered to him either by coercion or he himself is driven by the ambitious urge to make such a choice of power grabbing. Ironically both situations if not motivated by the sense of service to humanity lead to the catastrophic end. Political upstarts like Ghashiram instantly become scapegoats and mere puppets in the hands of the likes of Nana Saheb Fadnavis – a shrewd power-mongering & megalomaniac politician and mastermind behind the game of power politics. In this paper an attempt has been made to draw out attention to the fallouts and repercussions of power-driven Eurocentric, autocratic and despotic mentalities and their anti-humanistic decrees as embodied and reflected in bloodshed, killings, atrocities, sexual perversion.

**Keywords: Catastrophic, Megalomaniac, Eurocentric, Despotic, Perversion.**

### **Introduction**

Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (6 January 1928 – 19 May 2008) was a leading Indian playwright, movie and television writer, literary essayist, political journalist, and social commentator primarily in Marathi language. Tendulkar has written 27 full-length plays and 25 one-act plays which bear testimony to his massive contribution to drama and theatre. Several of his plays have proven to be Marathi theatre classics. Besides drama for theatre, Tendulkar's literary legacy includes a biography; two novels; five anthologies of short stories; 16 plays for children,

including *Bāle Miltāt* (1960) and *Pātlāchyā Poriche Lagin* (1965); and five volumes of literary essays and social criticism, including *Ratrani* (1971), *Kowali Unhe* (1971), and *Phuge Sobānche* (1974). In most of his plays society and its politics are strongly, realistically and objectively highlighted.

Vijay Tendulkar's play *Ghashiram Kotwal*, originally in Marathi, is translated into English by Jayant Karve and an American professor Eleanor Zelliot. Tendulkar's play is reflective of those sordid and corrupt social and political practices, realities and circumstances where the political custodians of society, meant to protect the society, turn out to be the opportunists and oppressors to crush people under them by imposing draconian laws on them. Obviously, they cannot do this all by themselves. Hence, their egoistical sense gives birth to a coterie of followers who blindly attend to their calls as a gospel truth. These irrational followers or unquestioning believers in greed of small posts and positions at local, district, state or national levels derive sadistic pleasures by misusing their unchecked capacities causing a great danger to the integrity of a state or a nation. And when they are of no use, they are left in the lurch to bear the brunt of their wrongs. This happens with *Ghashiram*— a North Indian Kannauj Brahman also who comes to Poona for making fortune but much to his surprise faces humiliation at the hands of Poona Brahman Community and swears to transform into a callous, cruel, vengeful despot like Nana. This strong urge for vengeance first kills *Ghashiram*'s conscience and then prepare him ready to stoop to the lowest level of immorality. Nana grabs this opportunity as a part of his political vendetta by giving air to *Ghashiram*'s sense of revenge as long as his (Nana Phadnavis) own malicious designs are meted out. Ashok Kumar Sharma's remarks are pertinent in this connection:

“The play shows that the desire for power and the desire to settle score with one's opponents are so strong that one can touch the bottom in the realization of any of the two or both.” (47)

Characters are historical but the dramatist emphasises on the point of how an inner urge of deriving pleasure by becoming powerful to wield authority culminates only to meet the catastrophe. It is pertinent to quote Aristotle here, “Man is by nature a political animal”. It is but natural in the case of an ordinary man to fall prey to the lure of power that always attracts the



public, gather followers, unleash an inexplicable fear; and cherish the sense of never dying supremacy. The play is thus about this power politics.

Remarkably, this drama depicts the archetypical images of relentless and implacable exploitation of the powerless at the hands of one in power. The dramatist handles the idea of power politics of divergent nature exceptionally well. He at once makes us identify the political situation of our time with the similar situation elsewhere in history. But his main aim is not to acquaint us with the history and its facts but takes us deeper and deeper to understand the game of power in politics where political upstarts under the air of supremacy temporarily fulfil their vested interest. But largely become the scapegoats in the hands of the seasoned politicians. These politicians carry out their hidden agenda without ever letting it to anybody's notice and befool the large sections of divided people. When Samik Bandhopadhyay asked Vijay Tendulkar whether he really conceived the plays as an expose of Brahman corruption and pretensions, or as a study of the power in more general terms, Vijay Tendulkar wrote back to him "Broadly speaking, I had in mind the emergence, I had in mind the emergence, the growth and the inevitable end of the Ghashiram; and also, those who create, and help Ghashirams to grow...." (Introduction p.ix)

Thus, the political masterminds unleash their sinister designs of atrocities, tortures, exploitation, violence, killings and bloodshed. Their apartheid, lust for power, exemplary ambition and epicurean sensibilities; beyond the understanding and imagination of the mere political puppets like Ghashiram emanate social anarchy. This culminates to the irresolvable chaos much to the disappointments of the common people in general who are nowhere in this game of politics.

An attempt has been made in this paper to depict, through the following points and particularly through the character of protagonist Ghashiram Kotwal what ambitious people do to obtain positions; how they fail to understand the dynamics of shrewd politicians with hidden agenda; the way they become puppets in their hands; how women are exploited by the minds carried away by sense of authority and above all the social anarchy caused by the misuse of power.

### **Prompts leading to Power Politics**

Power is required to fulfil the dreams, to satiate the inner desire, to derive all pleasures and to avenge the humiliation meted out. Ghashiram -- a Kannuaj Brahman comes to Poona with his

wife and a daughter, to make a fortune. But in the already divided section of the Poona Brahmans, it is difficult to find welcoming gestures for a foreigner like him. He is confronted with the question of survival and much against his Brahmanic position does odd jobs of singing, dancing and washing utensils at the house of Gulabi -- a courtesan. Worst of all he is then not only driven out of Gulabi's house with humiliation but also was beaten and imprisoned by Nana Phadnavis's corrupt and cruel soldiers in the case of theft. Now an already ambitious man who comes to Poona to make a living has very early got familiarised to and learnt the ways of surviving only by power; first through personal first-hand experience and later on the all-seeing character of Sutradhar. Sutradhar acquaints him with the corrupt and cruel officials of Nana Phadnavis. He infuses in his mind that in such a dystopian society it is on the "The bloody body rests well on cold stone". When Ghashiram is fabricated into a false case of theft, he says, "One petty thief less in a world of big thieves" makes no difference to anybody. He further adds, "No one will weep" for a layman like him. Because the arrogant and cruel officers' minds are swayed by the powerful support of Nana Phadnavis. As he says, "The police are official thieves." They have free hand to the extent, "Sometimes they break your bones./ Sometimes they crack your bones./ Sometimes you lose your life." (20) For him values and goodwill takes a back seat as Mulk Raj Anand states in his *Apology for Heroism* "It is very difficult "to remain moral in an immoral world". (20)

In order to wield power for the fulfilment of his vested interests, he starts crafting the ways of obtaining authority and position. No doubt the circumstances cause a great deal for his bruised self. But a controlled and balanced man who is aware of the catastrophe of the sinister designs, false show, unfair means and foul practices would refrain from falling to such temptations of power. But for Ghashiram, he chooses the path of destruction and devastation. He has already come across the spectacular power of Nana. He realizes that a pauper like him without money and power cannot materialize his fire of revenge. Hence, the first move towards acquiring power is offering his own daughter to Nana. He concedes his degenerated mind, "Look! I've given my beloved daughter into the jaws of that wolf! Look. Look at this father. Putting the child of his heart up for sale." (26) He takes this course of wicked and immoral action in retaliation of insults and humiliation hurled on him at the hands of native Brahmans of Poona. He bares forth his emotionally scarred and damaged soul, ". . . Spit on me. Stone me. Look, look, but I will not quit. I'll make this Poona a kingdom of pigs." (26)



### **Flattery means to gain favour of authority**

In the game of politics, in order to ascend on the ladder of power, one needs to become sycophant and opportunist. Ghashiram avails the opportunity to carve a niche in the heart of Nana Phadnavis to win his favour and support. He takes Nana Phadnavis's foot with a sprained ankle in his (Ghashiram's hands) and flatters him with an air of complete submission to him like a divine power, "In my hands has fallen-- grace!/ All here envy me my place./ This is a gift to last me all my days." (14) Nana Phadnavis too as a part of the game of power politics recognizes the buttering gestures of Ghashiram. He even makes a show of refusing to take a "pearl necklace" from Nana Phadnavis in return for helping Nana Phadnavis out with the sprained foot. For, this is just one of the moves undertaken with something big in his ambitious mind to achieve. In another instance in order to get an appointment order as a Kotwal, Ghashiram butters Nana Phadnavis, "What is hard for Nana Phadnavis? In Poona the sun rises whenever Nana Phadnavis tells it to." (28) This buttering keeps the authority happy with the sycophant.

### **Power Thriving on Divided People**

Lord Elphinstone's famous Roman statement "divide et impera" meaning 'Divide and Rule' or 'Divide and Conquer' bears testimony to the fact that power thrives on the people divided on lingual, cultural, racial, sectarian and religious lines. Brahmans of Poona were also divided for their personal vested interests. Whatever is the reason, such ground is congenial for power to breed and grow. Incident of misuse of power is also depicted at another level when a Brahman demands "three silver rupees" from a British officer called as 'Sahib' to sneak him in the ceremony of the giving of 'royal gifts to the Brahmans.' Greed of a majority becomes the strength of a handful of rulers, this is true when another brahman interferes and demands one rupee from the 'Sahib' to arrange entry into the ceremony. He uses the term 'Misgotten bastards' for his fellow Brahmans standing there with an expectation to earn from the Sahib. At this point, another Brahman quarrels and abuses the Brahman who offers one rupee. Nana Phadnavis was taking advantage of this weakness of the majority of Brahmans who were immoral at the time. R. Venkataraman pertinently quotes Will Durant in this connection, "The political power triumphs because it is a united minority against a divided majority (62).

Even Nana Phadnavis works on the fact of Ghashiram being an outsider. As he says about Poona Brahmans, “they’ll never trust you even if you do. Because you’re a stranger, you’re an outsider”. (29) Shrewd and well calculated Nana Phadnavis’s remarks can be substantiated by the fact that the Poona Brahman deliberately insults and humiliates Ghashiram even after being informed by an Englishman about Ghashiram not being the culprit. They do not bother to save Ghashiram. It shows their mendacity and prejudiced attitude. Ghashiram though Brahman but an outsider fails to earn their concerns. He excites only their jealousy and hatred.

### **Ideologues/Followers: Mere Puppets in the hands of Egoistic Powers**

In a game of politics, it has always been experienced and witnessed that the atrocities and tortures are inflicted indirectly by the supreme power by thrusting the pawns as frontiers to taste the onslaught of rebellion by common people. In this play, Nana Phadnavissaheb Phadnavis uses the mindless ambition of Ghashiram to carry out his sinister design. The cunning and shrewd craft of Nana is palpable in his soliloquy:

“This time there are two bullets in this gun. With the first one, we will make the city of Poona dance. Ghashy, child, you’re a foreigner. I have put you on Poona’s back. Why? As a countercheck to all those conspirators. You’ll not be able to join them; they’ll never trust you even if you do. Because you’re a stranger, you’re an outsider. (29)

Ghashiram like a puppet dance to the tune played by Nana Phadnavis. The strings always remain in the hands of the supreme player like Nana Phadnavis till the impersonated favour and mercy gets busted. And when the vicious craft is exposed, the real power crushes the pseudo power. Ironically, it is historically proven that people like Ghashiram (who are meant to be used and thrown) invariably fall prey to the contrivance of Nana Phadnavis. Even Nana Phadnavis, while appointing Ghashiram as a Kotwal in return of quenching his sexual thirst with Ghashi’s daughter Gauri, has had a calculated plan of how to use arrogance and ignorance of Ghashiram in the capacity of Kotwal against the rising protest of Chitpavan Brahmans in Poona without coming to the fore. He is pretty sure of the serious repercussions following the appointment of Ghashiram as a Kotwal as he says, “What’ll happen is that our misdeeds will be credited to your account. We do it; our Kotwal pays for it.” (29) Ghashiram just gets carried away by his becoming Kotwal is completely unknown to the fact that he is a mere puppet playing the devil’s role in the game laid



down by the callous and cruel Nana Phadnavis. As he soliloquies, “Go, Ghashya, old bastard. We made you. We made you Kotwal. Raise hell if you wish. But you don’t know the ways of this Nana Phadnavis.” (29)

That is why Samik Bandhopadhyay points out:

The real power uses the masks of deputation to meditate the exercise of power, to hide from the victims the real face of power, so that all resistance is effectively deflected. (1986: IV)

Eventually, when “The city of Poona began to tremble at Ghashiram’s name.” (43) Ghashiram unwary of his puppet position and Nana Phadnavis’s hidden agenda of subjugating the voices of the rising section of Poona Brahman, gets carried away by his power-driven defiled mind and says, “I’ve got the Kotwali and I’ve got Poona straightened out! All these hard, proud Brahmans are soft as cotton now. No one dares to look Ghashiram straight in the eye!” (43)

Undoubtedly and undeniably as for Ghashiram, he suffers from a flaw of ambition too. A fault in his character creating lust for power. However, Ghasiram-like-people forget that they have always been made scapegoats by the likes of Nana Phadnavis. Ghashiram completely fails to understand the true colours of such powers holding remote control to change the scenes as per their desires and fulfilment of their personal interests. But before Ghashiram realizes this politics of power, he does irreparable damage to him and his family by offering his own daughter to Nana Phadnavis; unleashing a macabre of unprecedented violence; oppressing poor people beyond level of tolerance; levying high taxes etc.

And when Ghashiram is no longer of any use and turns out to be a threat to Nana plays a trump card in the game of politics. As Nana says, “Use a thorn to take out a thorn. That’s great. The disease has been stopped. Anyway, he was no use any more.” (59) In order to carve out a niche in the hearts and minds of people of Poona, he arranges Ghashiram’s execution. And after the tragic death of Ghashiram, just to impress the people he declares with pretension, “Ladies and gentleman. Citizens of Poona. A threat to the great city of Poona has been ended today. (The crowd cheers.) A disease has been controlled.” (61) This kind of pseudo-concern with high level of pretensions has always been the forte of the ruling hypocrites in a society since time immemorial.

Evidently workers, whether those who upstart their political career or the people in general, never realise their pawn-like positions in the bigger game and hidden agenda sinisterly designed by their political masters, creators and the rulers.

### **Despotic Hierarchy: A Symbol of Power and Tyranny**

Sutradhar's description of the haughty and rowdy police officers working under Nana Phadnavis's shelter is aptly suggestive of the despotic Nana Phadnavis who is busy in his lavish and lustful life. He is the man who misuses the subordinates to face the public and their affairs so that he can gratify his animal instinct. Thus, Sardars and Officials of Nana Phadnavis are free to wreak havoc in an otherwise not so painful society. No responsibility and accountability of power has been set by the Peshwa. Ghashiram as a Kotwal has been motivated by the absolute power Nana Phadnavis has been entrusted with and blinded by. Threatening, bullying, oppressing people has always been a common and heartrending scenario in such an anarchic state of a power-driven autocrat like Nana Phadnavis. He immediately uses this power when Ghashiram denies offering of Gauri second time by threatening, "Ghashya, you know the price of disobedience." (27) Peshwa is happy in his life leaving the Poona citizens at the whims and fancies of Nana Phadnavis. Thus, tyranny and barbarism wreaked by officials is attributed to the power in the hands of mindless, greedy and corrupt bosses. There seems to be nobody to take care of justice. In such a scheme of things, selectivism and favouritism is inspired not by merit, values, loyalty, dutifulness or sense of integrity but by the fact that who benefits you the most in a situation that suits you best. Thus, the exercise of power which is result oriented as regards frontline politicians like Nana Phadnavis is not the same in case of Ghashiram who is willing to exercise power but has limited understanding of it and does not know how to and to what extent to use it. It is relevant to cite Margaret Atwood who says in *The Second Words*:

The exercise of power depends on who has got it, who wants it, how it operates: in a word who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets away with it and how.  
(1982:353)

### **Misuse of Absolute Power**

There is always anarchy, corruption and violence when the power and position is not directed towards the welfare of the proletariat. When the normal minds misconstrued power as a





means of mastering and enslaving people, in no time, the mind is defiled by it. It gets so blinded that it fails to differentiate between good and bad. It fails to discharge the expected duties in different roles of life. It unleashes and inflicts unspeakable and unforeseen violence. Such minds eclipsed by power stoops to the level of immorality.

There are many such instances in *Ghashiram Kotwal* revealing that hatred, violence, oppression and tortures are writ large in the ill destined common people. Ghashiram just after becoming Kotwal passes many unjust and inhumane decrees – ‘no cremation without a permit’ and eating ‘with lower caste persons a crime.’ The governance immediately becomes ‘permit’ governance. Instead of averting all the criminal and forbidden acts, having been intoxicated with the power of kotwal, he allows all these on a condition of having a ‘permit’ from him. It simply means to earn money from wrongful and unfair means misusing power. Sutradhar gives a glimpse of the bizarre, chaotic, unjust and biased state of the Poona under Ghashiram. Now the definition of good and bad depends on the eccentric mood and power-driven defiled mind of Ghashiram. The words of Sutradhar are worth quoting to substantiate the irrational, brutal, intolerable situation prevalent at the time, “Ghashiram Kotwal says:

“. . . .to kill a pig, to do an abortion, to be a pimp, to commit a misdemeanour, to steal, to live with one’s divorced wife, to remarry if one’s husband is alive, to hide one’s caste, to use counterfeit coins, to commit suicide, without a permit, is a sin. A good woman may not prostitute herself, a Brahman may not sin, without a permit.” (32)

Ironically, in his tyrannous rule, a sin is no sin if done within the purview of his orders. All else is a sin if fails to get his permit. Common people stop coming out of their houses to evade the imperious glances of the tyrant Ghashiram. As for Ghasiram, “Accosted anyone he met in the streets. Whipped people. Arrested people. Demanded people’s permits. Imprisoned people. Sued people.” with twirling his moustache. (32) Thus, contagious effects of absolute power are obvious when it comes to the wrong hands. Completely blinded by the unlimited and unchecked power, Ghashiram brutally hits a man escorting his own pregnant wife for delivery for not having a so-called ‘permit’ with the spouse is really ridiculous. Objecting a woman’s wedding necklace (Mangalsutra), convicting her living illegally with her own husband; and bullying the couple’s neighbour to declare the lawful couple to be unlawful is the acme of the tyranny and cruelty done by Ghashiram.

Sutradhar poignantly depicts the blood curdling and horrifying incidents at the hands of Ghashiram, a megalomaniac. Terror of Ghashiram is reported by Sutradhar when he reports the gruesome and heinous act of Ghashiram, “The nails of the Brahman’s right hand are pulled out. The fingers are washed with lemon juice and soap.” (40) Cruelty is indelibly etched on our mind, when the same Brahman is made to take a hot steel ball into his hands to pass the ordeal imposed on him. He orders apathetically, “Bring that hot ball over here. Hold his hands. Tightly. If he yells, don’t let go. Let his hands burn. You should smell them burning. Smell them!” (P.no.42) Despite being innocent, the Brahman concedes the crime of stealing which had not been committed by him. He does so because he was threatened to go through the ordeal of placing the hot steel ball once again. Inebriated with power, Ghashiram, unempathetically pronounces draconian order as soon as the innocent Brahman accepts stealing, “Go, cut off his hands and drive him out of Poona. I will see to it that no Brahman steals!” (42) Feeling of enmity and malice harboured in his heart against Poona Brahmans coupled with unchecked power set him on the path of destruction and devastation.

Ghashiram resembles Tughlaq in carrying out his atrocious acts. As per an order passed by him, during a celebration of ‘Rangapanchami’, nobody can throw colour powder on anybody except husband or wife. Justice is impossible when the whole system vertically downward and upward is spiritually degenerated and devoid of values. Another incident of cruelty is when, a woman whose husband and brothers-in-law are falsely implicated and arrested, comes to Nana Phadnavis for justice. The case is that even after having ‘permit’ for creation of a dead father-in-law, she is not allowed to do so. She entreats, “The permit is real, but they call it counterfeit. Sir-- the corpse has been lying in the cremation ground since morning. The dogs are gathering. Sir-- please-- give us justice. . .” (38) But all her beseeches go waste as Nana remains busy in watching erotic lavani of Gulabi that he apathetically and rudely orders, “where are the guards? Take this woman away at once. Who let her in without a permit?” (38)

## **Conclusion**

Although the play soon after its publication invited criticism and became controversial for presenting the Brahman’s of that time in a bad light; its popularity is extant particularly for its appeal to social and political issues that coerce the likes of Ghashiram to take birth. When the



autocracy becomes the social and political standards to emulate in a society as in case of Nana Phadnavis; or when it is misconstrued by irrational man like Ghashiram to be the source of fulfilment of desires by all means; then the society is necessarily to be doomed. Undoubtedly such powers unchecked with wile and beguiled designs thereof tend to produce an anarchic society stricken with violence, atrocities, injustice, inequality, oppression and exploitation of venerable masses of the society. Racism, discrimination, riots are ensued by the misuse of power. Contrary to this, for a utopian society and welfare state, a leader should practise the quality of mercy which is, undoubtedly, his or her mightiest weapon to reign the hearts of millions. Thus, power in the hands of merciful makes the society heaven. Whereas, people infected with and suffering from Eurocentric and colonial mentality create hells everywhere. Although the power lies in the sword and sceptre, it is a temporary one which is likely to face catastrophe. That's why Portia in *Merchant of Venice* stresses the significance of the quality of Mercy which is divine power with reference to the people in power in the following words:

His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;  
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself;

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