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Analysis of Asif Currimbhoy's *An Experiment with Truth* (1971)

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Abstract:

The Paper discusses Asif Currimbhoy's dramatization of Gandhi's later part of life. Gandhi experiments with incidents and actions of his own life. Asif Currimbhoy skillfully presents two faces of Gandhi as a common man and as a father of the nation. Gandhi's fast up to death aims at the unity of the Hindu, the Muslims and the untouchables. The paper discusses the three approaches of Patel, Ambedkar and Ali toward Gandhi's death. Asif Currimbhoy successfully brings the national event of Salt March and death of Gandhi on stage. The play is a presentation of philosophic and spiritual glimpses of Gandhi.

Keywords: Experiment, Salt March, Satyagrah.

Introduction

An Experiment with Truth (1971) moves around Mahatma Gandhiji, the father of nation. The play is published in 1972 exactly after twenty four years of his assassination by Nathuram Godsay. The main theme of the play focuses on Gandhi's faith in satyagrah, truth and non-violence. The political play also reveals inner conflict of Mahatma Gandhi and Kasturba's yearning for her two children to possess property to get good earning in life. Mahatma Gandhiji has accepted the fact that every man has some faults; no one is perfect. Asif Currimbhoy also dramatizes the personality of Gandhi in the same light. Hence Gandhi is shown as a man and a Mahatma.

The play opens with three shots ring in the darkness which is a dream-like situation where Gandhiji's assassination is attempted and simultaneously there is the recollection of the Salt March. There is a collective evil force, malignant and do some harm to the life of Mahatma Gandhiji. The back flash technique shows that this is not the first attempt to kill him but several attempts were made earlier. Gandhiji never stops his satyagraha which aims at Hindu-Muslim unity and to stop violence caused by the partition of India, the times of 1947-48.

Someone throws a hand – bomb but it misses the mark. An old illiterate woman caught hold of the assailant, Madanlal and surrenders him to the police. Sardar Vallabhai Patel, the minister for security is worried about the life of Gandhi. He orders police protection to be doubled but Gandhi believes that his life and death are in the hands of God, when He wants to take back his life He will do it, hence there is no need to be worried about his life.

Madanlal, an unhappy fanatic Hindu R.S.S volunteer is a misguided youth, who is encouraged to kill Gandhi. They called Gandhi as Muslim-lover. Gandhi is unable to understand the feelings of some fanatic Hindus. He loves all; hence, he wants him to be called as "Christian-lover"¹ and "Buddhist lover"(p.12) too. Patel insists Gandhi that he would take time to understand R.S.S and will love R.S.S also. Patel interrogates Madanlal, all Hindus and Muslims are extremists; hence it has to be balanced. He remains blind to R.S.S activities within limits. When it comes to the security of Gandhi he would not tolerate. He makes Madanlal to starve as this is the method of Gandhi to search love and hate and this is an experiment . . . with truth.

Sardar Vallabhai Patel is a true patriot of the nation. He believes that strict rule of the country can bring peace and order in the country. He has faith in R.S.S, it would do well to the country, as the volunteers of R.S.S are patriot Hindus but they are misguided youth. Both the Hindus and the Muslims are extremists. Hence the strict rules and harsh violence are needed to bring peace. Gandhi has faith in Patel and his arrangement of security. Gandhi appreciates Patel as he has struggled a lot to give proper shape to the party and politics of this nation.

Gandhi believes in the high values of human life. He has greater faith in God. His philosophy is taken from Isa Upanishad "The whole world is the garment of God. Renounce it then, and receive it back as a gift of God" (p. 14). Hence, he is not afraid of death. Gandhi is not worried whether he would die of fasting or assassination, but methods would surely have effect on views of people. Patel and Sheean force him to stop fasting as he is becoming weak day by day. Gandhiji is a strong follower of satyagraha and does experiment with truth. For him, Truth is God and absolute, means and end are equally important. Fasting teaches a great lessons to human being and he has great aim to achieve through fasting as he says:-

"What is the hunger of the stomach compared to the bleeding of the heart? I fast as much for myself, my own penitence, as I do for you, your own salvation . . . that millions should die slain by our own hands, brutal, mass, insane, killing, when our quest in life was one of peace and non-violence . . . when I strove for freedom of our soul. There can be no freedom without brotherhood between Hindus and Muslims, without unity with Sikhs and Christians" (p.10). Fasting will bring change in the heart of people because they cannot tolerate the suffering of loved one for their welfare. The fasting is to achieve love, co-operation, co-existence and fraternity of the Hindu and the Muslims. Gandhiji, in spite of being a great leader of the nation, is also a common man. He accepts that every human being commits some mistakes.

The attempts of assassination and Gandhi's fasting take place in parallel. Sheean is much worried of increased weakness of Gandhiji due to fasting, meanwhile Patel is worried of assassination attempts. Gandhi is not worried of anything because he knows that God will have the final hand. "Nothing can happen to me other than the great release from life. Our bodies are captives to the divine spirit." (p.16)

One of the great movements of the nation is the Salt March, a historic event. The British laid tax on salt, a very essential requirement of every home and God has given vast ocean for this purpose. Hence as Gandhi agrees, there should not be tax on salt. Gandhi

knows that the British government's Salt tax is a wrong step, so he opposes it through the salt march. He has sent a letter to the British Viceroy expressing the intension of the Salt march. There are seventy eight Satyagrahis to follow him. It aims at breaking a foreign tax law. Everyone has freedom to use salt and the salt march starts at dawn. Gandhi has plan of covering the 241 miles in three weeks. All are free to join the March and the tax - law will be broken "when we reach the shores of Dandi, I shall pick up some salt on the beach and break the law of the land. This nation will follow my example everywhere". . . (p.20)

The second scene is important one because it shows that the Satyagrah started and all sathyagrahis are lead by Gandhi are moving very fast from one village to the another one singing songs of glory. All wonder how Gandhi could cover 20 miles a day even at the age of sixty. While marching for Dandhi, Gandhi recalls the philosophy which he believes from Gita as – "Realise that pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, are one and the same; then go into battle . . . poise your mind in tranquility . . . your business is with action alone; not the fruits or results of action . . . Aspirants can find enlightenment though different paths; for the active it is the path of selfless action" . . . (p.39)

As the Satyagrahis move from village to another, the headmen of the village make request to join it. Now the strength of the march reaches from seventy eight to ten thousand. Gandhi has only one condition that the march should be a peaceful, the Satyagrahis should show their strength by remaining peaceful and patient to the violence of the police.

The most impressive action in the play is encounter of the police with the Satyagrahis. There are strong Satyagrahis who are ready to face the police with force but they resist themselves for the sake of Gandhi's words. The conversation is worth quoting:-

First: Don't you understand, we're going to be dubbed to death!

Second: Yes

First: And we're not supposed to resist it?

Second: Yes

First: (exasperated) but why? Why?

Second: It's like any belief . . . any kind of faith, I suppose. No explanation is possible . . . or necessary. (In yet another part of the crowd)

One: The Satyagrah believes in ahimsa. It's like a duty ordained, our karma. This is the time to prove it . . .

Other: (to himself) How long can you beat a lathi before the arm gets tried . . . ?

One: (continues, each one to himself, but party aware of what the other is saying) . . . become a karma, yoga, like the Mahatma. Our salvation lies in this action . . .

Other: . . . there will be rows, upon rows of Satyagrahi's advancing before the police lathis . . .

One: . . . Selfless action, without caring for the fruits of labor . . . (p. 52)

Gandhi is happy that Satyagrahis did not resist the police, the Satyagrahis come rows after rows, got beatings on head. They bleed and fall but have not raised their hands against the police lathi charge. Gandhi realizes that the earlier attempts of Satyagrah failed. This Salt March is highly successful and Gandhi shares their views as he wants to impress on the nature of man. The survival is not violence and men are not beasts.

Non-violence is a peaceful method of resisting or fighting against injustice. One should prefer violence to cowardice. The Satyagraha is an experiment to get justice. Gandhiji accepts violence and non-violence but prefers non-violence, he justifies it by quoting Gita as he says "The Gita, which speaks of battle, becomes a justified mental conflict. . . Ahimsa means even more. I am, basing the Salt March, on non-violence. . ." (p.21) He expects there would be a violence but Satyagrahis must show their stronger will of peace. Inspiring word of Gandhi show his strong character. All the seventy- eight Satyagrahis would turn the tide of a mighty empire of the British. In spite of Gandhi's weak body, he challenges the biggest empire of the world. Gandhi gives the strongest weapon of Satyagraha to the freedom fighters, the ways of non-co-operation, non-violence should be followed by Satyagrahis and freedom can be conquered by the enormous struggle with these weapons. This cannot be called as a physical cowardice.

Asif Currimbhoy presents sexual desires of Gandhi. He felt physical pleasure is also an experiment. He has imposed celibacy on himself and Kasturba. Gandhiji has been constantly making experiments to win over common instincts of common man. Gandhi is attached with the touch. Gopal massages the legs of Gandhi. This touch takes him to the past where Gandhi's father was at the verge of death and needs his son's presence. A touch of his father aroused physical pleasure in him and goes to Kasturba, though she is pregnant he forces himself on her; then he hears the news of his father's death. In the Ashram, when Manu a girl helps him to get up, the touch aroused again the sexual pleasure in him. He wants to know whether Manu also has same sensation. Manu cannot understand Gandhi's words. He made girls and boys to bath together in Africa. He has a vision or an experiment whether it is possible to achieve oneself consciousness, desire-less, voluntary and truthful and without deliberate repression. Gandhi failed in his experiment with celibacy. After the death of Kasturba he is disturbed. His restlessness is explained as:

"After almost forty years of practicing Brahmacharya and abstinence. I was shaken to find my weakness still there . . . prayers and fasts. That was the condition of mind. I had achieved through many years of yogic chastity. I mad others practice it too . . . in the earlier stages with Satyagrah's who should practice Brahmacharya . . . until I had the dream!" (p.59)

The blooming Manu becomes near and dear to Gandhi; her physical charm and her touch disturbs his celibacy. Her touch encourages his sensuous pleasures in him. Manu understands him and finally both had physical relation resulting in the failure of Gandhi's experiment of controlling the sexual desires. K. A. Agrawal writes it as – "some critics do not agree with this presentation of Asif Currimbhoy. But Faubion Bowers says that Asif Currimbhoy in this drama has presented the reality of Gandhi. It is one of the most electrifying scenes ever written in his play *An Experiment with Truth*. The dramatist has also presented a naked sexual biography of this great man, which may create some pains to his

followers. They may oppose it. They may be correct but Asif Currimbhoy has no purpose to defame Gandhi. He simply wants to say that Gandhi was a great soul of India. He never tried to hide anything without caring for the consequences. After all he was making some experiment with truth.²

Untouchable is another major theme. Gandhiji called untouchable as Harijan, children of God. Hence they should not be treated in an ill manner. Kasturba has prejudiced mind with them. She feels presence of Gopal, (untouchable) uneasy, rich class people neglect the untouchables. Gopal represents this group. Gandhi has sympathy and affection for these neglected people. Hence, he asked an untouchable to bring a glass of milk for him and Kasturba stares at him.

Asif Currimbhoy presents several moral and spiritual conflicts in the play. The major conflict is between Gandhi and the British, the non-violent fight against salt tax imposed by the British government. The seventy-eight Satyagrahis start the Dandi march and they have to control their mind not to be violent against any pressure of the British. There is another conflict between Kasturba and Gandhi. They have different views towards life. Kasturba is a common Indian woman who yearns for common life of her children. If her children study then they might get a job to lead a common life but Gandhi opposes it as they should not be working as clerk in British Government. Kasturba is disappointed with Gandhi when he forces her to give all her ornaments, brought from Africa. Gandhi accepts renunciation as a major crux of his life. Hence, he renounces everything and believes that all people of India are his family and expects the same from Kasturba. The dramatist presents different layers of inner conflicts in the mind of Gandhiji.

There is another layer of conflict of thoughts among Sardar Vallabhai Patel, Savarkar and Ali. There are the several attempts of assassination. Hence Patel is worried to give full-fledged security to Gandhi. Savarkar believes that Gandhi is the champion of Muslims. In India the Hindus are leading an unsafe life in a hostile environment of the British and Muslims. Savarkar's view is that the nation is a Hindu nation. He knows the tricks of Gandhi. He uses fasting against the British and now his fasting is to pressurize the Indians to love the Muslims. Hence, Savarkar does not want Gandhi to die of fasting. It would mean martyrdom and achieve the objective of Hindu-Muslim unity. Savarkar focuses on the issue where Gandhi would insist the Congress government to “pay old assets worth 550 million rupees to Pakistan, later Pakistan will use this money for aggression in Kashmir. It's political suicide”(p.31). Patel realizes this upcoming danger in the future.

Ali, a representative of Muslims, forces Patel to do something to stop fasting of Gandhi which aims at fraternization between the Hindus and the Muslims. He says that “It is difficult for a Muslim to love anyone . . . other than a Muslim”(p.33). Asif Currimbhoy gives a clear picture of intention of Patel and Savarkar to assassinate Gandhi and intention of Ali is to save Gandhi. Both care for their own religion and people belonging to their religion. The Muslims have political and economic convenience to stay on in India. Patel opines that the death of Gandhi is more profitable to India than his living. In spite of all these differences Gandhi has a great aim of unity or brotherhood between the Hindus and the Muslims and this

would be accepted by all without any violence and hatred. This experiment with truth for him is difficult to be realized, because people are going very far from truth and non-violence.

The back flash technique is impressive and unique. Wherein Sheean recalls his experiences with Mahatma Gandhi from the Salt March to the freedom struggle. Gandhi recollects the sick condition of Kasturba on death bed. She is worried about her son, who are not worthy of anything and she dies in grief. Kasturba has compromised and adjusted herself throughout her life. She is a traditional wife accepting her husband's conditions and way of life. She says to Gandhi that her life is spend in waiting for Gandhi to return home.

The death of Gandhi is presented through the sounds of shots by a Hindu and Gandhi uttering words of "He Ram, He Ram"(65) and dies. Sheean narrates this to the audience and he says: " I have journeyed far and wide since that fateful evening of life . . . through darkness and fear, courage and light, in this our mortal plight . . . never will I forget, and always do I remember, this man who led me, his kindly light. (p.66)

There are three sets, in the first set there is a description of Ashram. The other sets of jail and mud-hut emerge. The second set includes the Salt March takes place in front of the stage. There is use of props in this set. The third set includes prison. The action takes place in one corner of the stage. The prison is presented through lights and shadows. There are several props like spinning machine, charaka wheel and a glass of milk which is used to break fasting.

The language is lucid and simple. It is understandable to Indian audience. There are Hindi words like mahatma, satyagrah ,ahimsa, lathi, dandi and so on, These words give the touch of native atmosphere.

The characters are the expression of the ideologies. The character of Gandhi is represents the satyagrah, non violence, unity and truth. Kasturba is attached with material goods. she is a common woman with mundane desires. Patel and Savarkar are political leaders. Patel works for the peace and order in the nation and he is concerned with the safety of the Hindus. Madanlal is a misguided youth, a revolutionary; attempts to assassinate Gandhi. Ali is a representative of Muslims. Ambedkar is worried of the welfare of the untouchables and demands for separate electorate for them. The characters like Savarkar, Ali and Ambedkar are worried of their own sects of people but Gandhi is worried of the unity of all these and starts fasting unto death to bring unity among all people in the nation.

The play *An Experiment with Truth* has theatrical vitality because the dramatist uses flashbacks, shadow cutout and music technique to give unforgettable impression of the play to audience.

To conclude, it is assessed that the dramatist presents the personal and private life of the great personality of Mahatma Gandhi. The whole nation is moved with the fast unto death for the unity of all religion. One of the significant national event of the Salt March is artistically brought on the stage. Asif Currimbhoy skillfully presents the different outlook of the three persons representing three sects namely the Hindus, Muslims and the untouchable. The milieu of the period is depicted through thought process of the characters. The title of the

play is apt because Gandhi makes his life as an experiment with instincts, unity of the nation, principle of Satyagraha and non violence in the Salt March. Gandhi is happy that the Salt March is highly successful. The assassination of Gandhi is presented through the dialogues of Sheean. The play is a presentation of philosophic and spiritual glimpses of Gandhi.

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Note: - Subsequent dialogues are taken from the same book, hence there is no need to give reference each time.

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