

# Tracing the Dystopian Trail of Collective Trauma in Vijay Tendulkar's Play *Ghashiram Kotwal*

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## **Abstract:**

*Collective trauma is a social cognitive process in which the combined population experiences trauma, consequent to the cataclysmic event. It affects entire groups of people, communities or societies. It often occurs during wars, subversive attacks, natural catastrophes, economic stagnation, pandemics, famines, systematic and historical oppression etc. Collective trauma exposes people to a shared experience of anguish, despondency, mental stress, economic uncertainty, awareness of confusion, loss of identity, increased feelings of susceptibility, insecurity of vocations, damage to national pride. Vijay Tendulkar's play Ghashiram Kotwal is an apt document to locate the collective trauma of a society under repressive regimes. The present paper adopts an analytical approach to encounter the traumatic experiences of the people of Poona and their response to such crises.*

**Keywords:** *Collective trauma, Women, Cruelty, Ghashiram, Nana Phadnavis, Vijay Tendulkar*

COVID-19 pandemic re-inaugurates the cataclysmic discourse of 'collective trauma' through its dystopian trail. The dictionary meaning of trauma is the experiencing of a deeply distressing or disturbing situation by a private individual or a few persons. Whereas, collective trauma is a social cognitive process in which the combined population experiences trauma, consequent to the cataclysmic event (Hirschberger). Danielle Render Turmaud precisely defines it as an "impact of a traumatic experience that affects and involves entire groups of people, communities or societies" (Turmaud). Collective trauma often occurs during wars, subversive attacks, natural catastrophes, economic stagnation, pandemics, famines, systematic and historical oppression etc., (Aydin 125-137). The cataclysmic events expose people to a shared experience of anguish, despondency, mental stress, economic uncertainty, awareness of confusion, loss of identity, increased feelings of susceptibility, insecurity of vocations, damage to national pride etc., (Chang 1-5). The modern age experienced collective trauma during the Spanish Flu, Second World War, partition of India, September 11, 2011, attacks in the U.S., the economic recession of 2008, and demonetisation of Indian currency in 2016, etc.

Literature has been faithfully recording these upheavals in human societies. Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, etc. are outstanding examples of global writings depicting traumatising of individuals (Abubakar 121). Indian literature has not misplaced the moment of detailing dystopian events. A wide body of writings pertaining to the trying moments of India's partition exist. Khuswant Singh in *A Train to Pakistan*, Manohar Malgaonkar in *A Bend in the Ganges*, Chaman Nahal in *Azadi*, Attia Hosain in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines*, etc. discuss the traumatic experiences of one of the world's largest human displacement. In the universe of Indian theatre, dramatists like Vijay Tendulkar have depicted various traumatic experiences in his illustrious plays. Plays like *Kamala*, *Sakharam Binder*, *The Vultures* and *Kanyadaan* delineate the traumatic

encounters of victims of domestic or intimate partner violence. His celebrated play *Ghashiram Kotwal* portrays the collective trauma of the denizens of late nineteenth century Poona who were subjected to endure distressing conditions under the cruel policing of Ghashiram Savaldas and the power-politics of Nana Phadnavis.

Vijay Tendulkar's outstanding play *Ghashiram Kotwal* portrays the authoritarian regime of Nana Phadnavis and his law enforcement chief, Ghashiram Savaldas. The former is the appointed Chief Minister of Poona, but he was the de facto ruler of the Maratha Empire as the Peshwa remained in name alone. Nana possesses the Machiavellian qualities of a scheming politician and shrewd diplomacy to deny the British to take over the Maratha Empire under its expansionist programme in India. As an administrator he represents an exalted personality, but toxicity of power induces him to develop certain habits disapproved by the civilised society. Vijay Tendulkar's dramatic lenses focus on the dehumanising face of this skilful Maratha leader. Ghashiram Savaldas is an immigrant Brahman from Kannauj who lands in Poona in hunt of sustainable employment. But the influential and powerful Poona Brahmans and the corrupt police administration of this cultured city not only deny him livelihood space but also subject him to abuses and humiliation. Through an unethical practice he gains access to the handle of power to avenge cruelly the transgressions of his oppressors.

Nana Phadnavis's libidinal urges make up the evil side of his personality. His night life is consumed in the infamous Bavannakhani, the red-light district of Poona. He is the chief patron of the erotic dances performed by the courtesans of Bavannakhani. Juvenile girls or attractive married women cannot escape his sensually coloured gazes. Some of them have to submit to his sensual callings as they are overpowered by his power and money. But his staunch critics, the Maratha *sardars* or chieftains closely monitor him. They stand as impediments to his immoral adventures. To ensure continuity of his sensuous escapades, Nana brings about a cultural transformation in the city. Brothels receive legal sanctions and flesh-trade functions under unrestrained commercial license. No sooner the filthy promotions penetrated into entire chunks of Poona's adult male population. Most married and unwedded male members, irrespective of class, caste and community swarm the sleazy spaces of Bavannakhani for fulfilling erotic pleasures. Vijay Tendulkar is convinced that the 'new normal' has ramifications enough to dehumanise a society by depriving it of lofty ideals like moral principles and sublime human values, including inviting economic hardships.

Collective trauma of women in Nana's totalitarian regime is on a vertical trajectory. Married wives of Brahmans are the worst victims of the changed cultural circumstances of Poona as their priestly husbands are not left out. Under the disguise of attending religious obligations like performing "kirtan" (Tendulkar *Ghashiram Kotwal* 13) prayers and funeral rites of the deceased, the Brahman husbands virtually tread to the dance-floors of Bavannakhani. There they immerse their nights watching the erotic dances of the courtesans or satiate the cravings of their libido with the whores of the place. When the husbands are having the fun of their lives, the Brahman wives wait restlessly for the return of their husbands. Their traumatic experience remains unabated as they are underpowered to question masculine privileges. They silently absorb the trauma as they cannot afford to invite further disturbance in their family lives. The women also feel the pressure of running the kitchens as their husbands squander their hard-earned money in undesirable pursuits.

The Brahman wives equally experience group trauma from "male gaze." Laura Mulvey, in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," defines the male gaze as an abnormal tendency of the heterosexual man to objectify or sexualise women (Mulvey 835). Nana Phadnavis extracts perverted pleasure from gazing at the female body. He frequently invites Brahman wives to exclusive sessions of *kirtan* prayers at his grand palace. In those holy gatherings, *kirtankars* recite hymns from sacred

texts. Then under his orders the devotional songs change to “*lavani—a change from a religious song to a love ballad*” (22). Nana takes full advantage of the events to ogle and leer at the intimate areas of the good-looking Brahman women. These not only hurt the religious sentiments of the women but equally placed them in traumatic situations. They concentrate their time not in listening to the hymns but in covering and adjusting their garments, away from the seductive gazes of Nana. Through the collective trauma of these Brahman women, Tendulkar points to a larger picture of the agonizing times that the fair gender encounters because of the objectification of the body, the perennial gender inequality, asymmetrical distribution of political and social power between the two sexes, and the ideological discourses of patriarchy (Mulvey 6-18).

Child sexual abuse and child marriage are two heinous crimes against the girl child. Pereda et al, estimate that globally about twenty percent of girls are sexually abused annually. Responsible bodies like the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) identified child marriage as the most pervasive form of sexual abuse and exploitation of girls (“United Nations” 12-13). The negative implications of these harmful practices are enormous for child abuse victims and they include isolation from their peers and families, early pregnancy leading to deaths during delivery, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and depriving them of education etc., (“Child Protection...”). India is one of the most notorious countries where the girl child cannot feel safe from the sexual predators, and Vijay Tendulkar has taken note of this perennial issue in his play *Ghashiram Kotwal*. The playwright depicts that no attractive girl in Poona can feel safe from the immoral propensities of Nana. Lalita Gauri, the teenage daughter of Ghashiram meets Nana in one of his *kirtan* ceremonies, and the alluring beauty of the girl attracts immediate attention of the elderly administrator. After the ceremony is over, he tries outraging her modesty. Gauri barely escapes from the sexual predator and runs for her life, but, Nana brings her the next day and gets a complete measure of the shy, innocent girl’s body. Gauri endures sexual trauma for months together and when she conceives, Nana directs her to a midwife for an urgent abortion. Her traumatic ordeal finally ends after she succumbs to the unscientific abortion. One more instance of feminine trauma extends to another juvenile girl of exquisite beauty. Nana stops short of plying her like a kept mistress and decides to wed her. She cannot refuse the marriage to an old man as her parents are bribed with land and expensive gifts. The marriage eventually exposes her to a traumatic existence of sharing a common roof with the grey-haired man and his six other wives. By taking up the twin issues of child sexual abuse and child marriage, Tendulkar seeks to highlight the effects of psychological trauma like anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Widom 1223-29) etc., on the psyche of the victims.

Child prostitution and human trafficking are other heinous crimes against the fair gender and as per the Central Bureau of Investigation’s own admission about one million Indian children are in the prostitution industry (“Official”). In Nana’s Poona, juvenile girls from impoverished poverty-stricken families are bought or kidnapped and forced to join the thriving flesh-markets of the day. Mainstreaming of prostitution in Poona exposes the girls to live in filthy cells and made to serve multiple numbers of customers daily. Exposed to unprotected sex, these girls give birth to babies of unknown fathers or coerced to undergo abortions under unqualified persons. They are equally exposed to sexually transmitted disease and economic instability and have to live for the rest of their lives with the social stigma of a sex worker. The dramatist stays away from mentioning the traumatic encounters of the sex slaves, but it is obvious for the reader/audience to figure out the harrowing situations of these socially vulnerable and stigmatised beings.

Nana's appointment of Ghashiram as the *kotwal* or police chief of Poona elongates the collective trauma to the entire population. Ghashiram Savaldas is an impoverished Brahman from Kannauj who arrives in Poona to earn his livelihood. But the maltreatment from Poona's partisan society strengthens Ghashiram's resolve to avenge the humiliations heaped upon him. He passes a decree forbidding certain activities of the people without prior approval from his office. The draconian measures include killing of pigs, carrying abortions, involvement in prostitution, stealing properties of others, sleeping or cohabitating with divorced wives, remarrying during the lifetime of one's husband, concealing one's caste, circulating and using counterfeit coins, committing suicides, etc. Women from respectable castes and communities cannot prostitute without valid licences. Poona wears the silence of a crematorium after 11 o'clock as curfew reigns. He directs his anger against his sworn enemies – the Brahmans of Poona – by refusing allowance to “sin without a permit” (32). He grants no mercy to the violators by inflicting severest of punishments, including imprisonment on mere suspicions. Citizens of Poona shudder at the mere mention of his name and have to live a life forfeited of their fundamental rights.

Ghashiram's reign of terror continues unabated, rendering traumatic existence for the people of Poona. On one occasion, he denies permission to a woman for cremating the last remains of her father-in-law. It may be mentioned that denying appropriate burial to the dead is a blatant violation of human rights. Ghashiram's refusal causes extreme trauma to the family and relatives of the deceased. On another occasion the dramatist gives the reader/audience an elaborate insight of his cruel functioning. Power intoxicates Ghashiram to such exalted levels that he catches anyone on mere suspicions. He arrests a respectable Brahman of Poona on an unfounded charge by a member of the same community and subjects him to inhuman tortures like forcing him to place his bare hands on the surface of a red-hot iron ball.

Moral policing is an administrative measure of Ghashiram to stop the nefarious dispositions of the Poona Brahmans. His intention to impose the night curfew is to suspend the Poona Brahmans from visiting the red-light area. By slamming the brakes, he ensures that the Brahmans spend the nights with their legal spouses. He issues an official order to arrest the adulterers and whoremongers. Ghashiram accompanies his cops to ensure that his diktats are followed in letter and spirit. In one of the patrolling duties, he raids the house of a Brahman and discovers that the latter was sharing a bed with a woman. The man introduces the woman as his spouse, but Ghashiram declines to purchase the story. He calls for his neighbours to verify the authenticity of his claims. Ghashiram arrests the couple and suitably punished them after the neighbours produce a negative statement. His decision to impose restrictions on the social evil of prostitution may gain approbation on moral grounds. But, he loses sight of the fact that people engaged in the flesh trade industry will ultimately suffer from joblessness and economic insecurity. Unfortunately, Ghashiram's administration did not have any compensatory packages to mitigate the trauma of livelihood losses sustained by these people.

Collective trauma of the populace of Poona, particularly the influential Brahman community, reaches the boiling point when Ghashiram transforms into a blood-thirsty beast after the premature death of his only daughter. In his new avatar, he beats and kills anyone for the slightest of crimes. He imprisons a group of immigrant Brahmans from Tanjore in a narrow cell of his police station. Their crime is that they intruded into the fruit garden of Ghashiram to pluck some mangoes for driving away the hunger in their appetites. The following morning Poona wakes to hear the news that twenty-two Brahmans died of suffocation and an equal number lying in semi-dead conditions.

The isolated examples tell the story that every section of Poona's populace suffered from the cruel policing of Ghashiram. Entire Poona “trembles at Ghashiram's name” and the city stands

“straightened” (43). The mouths of the people are dry with fear and they are clueless where to complain for addressing their genuine grievances. The proud Brahman community of Poona is always at the receiving end of Ghashiram’s barbarity. His policing reduces them to the softness of cotton balls. However, the incident of the tragic death of the Tanjore Brahmins bolsters the resolve of the Brahmans to fight against Ghashiram’s terrors. They make a collective march to the palace of Nana to register a protest against his cruelty. Nana realises that Ghasiram has become a real thorn in his flesh and accordingly issues a death sentence to end his barbarism. The group effort of the Brahmans to avert the crisis finally brought relief to their traumatised existence.

Thus, Vijay Tendulkar’s *Ghashiram Kotwal* remains an appropriate document to read and comprehend collective trauma and its effects. Nana’s libidinal cravings and Ghasiram’s satisfaction of narcissistic drives unfold collective trauma on enormous sections of Poona’s ordinary citizens. Under such whimsical and authoritarian regimes women suffer from insecurity while others lose autonomy to experience a life of their choice. However, the collected resolve of the Brahmans to conclude the tyranny of Ghasiram is a lesson for humanity that every crisis produces opportunities and there is certainly light at the end of a tunnel.

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