



PORTRAYAL OF GANDHIJI IN S. K. OHJA'S *RIDING THE STORM: A PLAY ON MAHATMA GANDHI*

DR. L. RONALD DAVID

Associate Professor of English,
SSM Institute of Engineering and Technology,
Dindigul. (TN) INDIA

ABSTRACT

S. K. Ohja's play Riding the Storm: A Play on Mahatma Gandhi (1990) presents vignettes of Gandhiji's life from 1919 to 1948, highlighting his part in the major events of the Indian struggle for freedom and his association with the leading historical personages of the period such as Rajaji, Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, Acharya Kirpalani, Sir Stafford Cripps and Lord and Lady Mountbatten. The events and the personages have been chosen with the objective of bringing out the essence of Gandhiji's ideals and illustrating his practice of satyagraha. The play shows how Gandhiji could raise a political storm throughout the country and control it with confidence and ease. The play is unique in all that all the events and places revolve around Gandhiji and in that imaginative dramatic devices like shadow display and audience participation are used, as is the classical native device of a sutradhar or male announcer and his female counterpart.

INTRODUCTION

The opening scene is laid in Madras in March 1919 in front of the bungalow of Rajaji. Two news boys are selling newspapers and calling out the news of the day, the passing of Rowlatt Bill. Rajaji hurries out of the house and buys a copy. Gandhiji's honorary p.a. Mahadeo Desai buys another. Rajaji says that he never expected the Bill to be passed. Mahadeo says that Gandhiji opposed the Bill and hoped that it would be withdrawn. Rajaji mentions that Shastri has threatened the Government with an agitation. Neither of them can understand what an agitation is (Ohja [9-11]).

Gandhi enters and says that he too doesn't know how to agitate. Commencing his customary spinning, Gandhi says that the Rowlatt Bills are "Symptoms of a deep seated disease in the system of Government," because they "Ignore the fact that by nature the millions in India are the gentlest on earth." He declares that they will refuse to obey these laws and follow truth

DR. L. RONALD DAVID

1P age



and non-violence. However he admits that he himself doesn't know what to disobey and how. He adds that an idea came to him the previous night: they should call upon the country to observe a general *hartal* suspending business for one day and spending the day in fasting and prayers, beginning the sacred fight with self-purification (Ojha [11-12]). Mahadeo reminds Gandhi of the doctor's advice to him. But Gandhi says that he is in the hands of God and Mahadeo. Sarojini Naidu enters and says that a large number of people have gathered on the beach right in front of the bungalow and wish to hear Gandhi on the Rowlatt Bills. Gandhiji agrees to speak. Rajaji tells the crowd of Gandhiji's non-violent fights in South Africa against the colour bar in through Satyagraha. Gandhiji tells the crowd that this is a challenge to the nation and that they should take up the challenge at any cost because conscience calls. Sarojini Naidu announces that the *hartal* will be observed on the second Saturday after the publication of the viceroy's assent to the Rowlatt Bill (Ohja [15]).

There is a shadow display of the preparations of a showdown between the congress under the leadership of Gandhi and the British Government in India. The people shout patriotic slogans followed by a 'sloka' from the Bhagavad Gita while soldiers with guns and bayonets march towards them. Mahodeo tells Gandhiji that Delhi observed fast on the 30th March instead of 6th April by mistake under the leadership of swami Shradhanand, a great leader of the Arya Samaj, in the Jama Masjid; the police tried to disperse the procession and four Muslims and five Hindus were killed and many are missing. Gandhiji calmly says, "For satyagraha, it is not a bad beginning." He adds that

"No country has ever risen- no nation has ever been made without self- sacrifice." A shadow display shows Swami Shradhanand facing with bared chest the bayonets of the Gurkhas. Sarojini Naidu and Shankarlal Banker enter the stage. She shouts "'Hind Swaraj' for annas, Independence of India' for four annas," which evokes laughter from the audience. One of them buys the book. Sarojini warns the buyer of the imprisonment that awaits him; he buys it saying that he is not afraid of jail. Sarojini and Banker tell Gandhiji about the *hartal* in Bombay where all shops were closed and business suspended. Gandhiji asks whether there was any violence (Ohja[16-19]). Gandhiji and Mahadeo go to Delhi as suggested by the background music of a train moving. Mr. Bowring, a British Inspector of Police, tells Gandhi about the Government order that prohibits him to enter Delhi and Punjab and that if Gandhi refuses to oblige he will be imprisoned. Gandhi gladly accepts imprisonment saying "My arrest makes me free." Gandhi is brought back to Bombay and set free. In the background rumblings of fights and roars are heard while Gandhiji stops and listens. Umar Sobani enters agitated and tells Gandhi about the violent procession of people towards the Crawford market because of the arrest of Gandhi.



The police charged with their lances, people were trampled under horses' hoofs and some were mauled and crushed. Mr Griffith complains Gandhi that the people have misunderstood his ideas and that they have thrown stones on police parties and obstructed tramcars. Gandhi gravely says that he should suspend Civil Disobedience, adding a fast for the people for one day. He adds that the moment to offer satyagraha against ourselves has arrived. He tells Mahadeo of his seventy-two hours fast.

On 30th April 1919 at the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, the rumblings of marching soldiers and gun carriages are heard. General Dyer arrives with an Indian Inspector of police. Dyer declares the gathering of the people unlawful and adds that they have killed five to six Europeans. He says that he will teach them a lesson. He asks the soldiers to open fire at the crowd. The shooting starts. The crowd panics, cries and shrieks. Gandhiji, who is at the back, closes his ears with his hands. Dyer enjoys the sight of people running for their lives and compares them to rats caught in traps. The firing stops when there is no more ammunition. Dyer appreciates the inspector. Gandhiji looks around with pain and he disengages a baby from the hands of a dead woman. Tears trickle down from his eyes. He walks up and down chanting "Hey Ram." And calls this as a Himalayan Blunder and says with determination that the British rule must go (Ohja[24-26]).

On March 18, 1992 in Ahmedabad, the District and Sessions Judge's court is packed with distinguished members of the public and people from Gandhiji's Ashram. Gandhiji the accused is brought into the court where he sees a lot of familiar faces and comments that "This is like a family gathering, not a Law Court." There is laughter everywhere. The Advocate tells Gandhi that he is charged with attempting to bring about hatred and disaffection towards His Majesty's Government through his articles in Young India. The judge asks Gandhi whether he has any defense counsel. Gandhi replies "A satyagrahi needs no defense," which evokes laughter in the court. Asked if he pleads guilty to these charges, Gandhi admits it. And says that he knows the consequence of his action. He was aware that he was playing with fire but adds that he would still do the same if he was set free. He also says that non-violence is his first and last article of his faith. He feels sorry for the mistakes committed by his people and, to the astonishment of all, he says that he is not asking for mercy or a light penalty. He narrates his experiences in South Africa and finally points out that under the British rule people of India have lost all dignity and manliness. Therefore he holds it a virtue to be disaffected towards such a government. The judge is surprised and says that Gandhi is a man of high ideals and of noble and saintly life. He also sentences Gandhiji to undergo six years imprisonment. As they move out of the court the crowd bursts into a sad farewell to their master (Ohja[29-32]).



Rabindranath Tagore visits Gandhiji's Ashram. Still spinning charka, Gandhiji welcomes Gurudev, glad of his presence. Tagore mentions the 'Purna swaraj' resolution passed by Gandhi in the last congress sessions. He asks Gandhi how he is going to get complete independence. Gandhi tells Tagore about the decision of the congress to observe 26th January as Independence Day (Ohja[35-38]). On the 12th March in Gandhiji's Ashram on the banks of River Sabarmati, Gandhiji and the members of the working congress committee are present. Gandhiji addresses his 78 followers on the Dandi March of 240 miles. Gandhiji points to the failure of the Simon Commission and the casualties of the processions where Lala Lajput Rai was beaten to death and Jawaharlal injured. Gandhiji says that the British Government has levied a tax on salt, which is basic to life, thereby bringing the heaviest burden on dumb millions. He adds, "On bended knees I ask for bread and I have received stones instead."

Gandhi tells the multitude that it is his sacred duty to break the compulsory peace that is choking the heart of the nation for want of free vent. Gandhi agrees to allow women to join the Dandi March. He also advises marchers not to commit violence in anger. He says, "For me there is no turning back whether I am alone or joined by thousands. I would die a dog's death than return to the Ashram a broken man." (Ohja[39-42]). On April 6, 1930 on the Dandi beach Gandhiji, with his 78 followers breaks the Law by picking up a lump of natural salt, thus starting the Civil Disobedience Movement amidst the shouts "hail the Law breaker" by Sarojini Naidu and others. Gandhiji persuades the people to break the Salt Law throughout the country wherever possible. He also tells them to boycott foreign goods and to use 'Khaddar'. He encourages women as worthier interpreters of non-violence because he feels they have a greater spirit of self-sacrifice. Asked what he will do if is arrested, Gandhiji says that he has left Abbas Tyabjias his successor and asks them to follow him. Gandhiji told them that if police snatch the salt using force, they should let fist holding the salt be broken but there should not be any voluntary surrender of the salt. Gandhiji motivates women to picket liquor shops, opium dens and foreign cloth dealer's shops. He asks them to spin and tells the Hindus to eschew untouchability (Ohja[44-46]).

Mirabehn reports that illicit collecting of salt has been forcibly confiscated by the police and she adds that a band of women carried away illicit salt in their sarees. Gandhiji is pleased to hear this. Mahadeo tells Gandhiji about the illicit manufacture of salt in Gujurat and Bombay and the arrests that followed. Mirabehn tells Gandhi that everywhere Civil Disobedience has been answered with lathi charges and firing. Gandhi says, "if we are to stand the final heat of the battle, we must learn to stand our ground in the face of cavalry or baton charges." Gandhiji is shocked to hear of the arrest of Nehru and he persuades Motilal to take over the leadership of the Congress. Learning that women have started picketing liquor shops and that Vithalbhai has resigned from the speakership of the assembly, Gandhi attributes these incidents to the triumph of satyagraha. He also prays God to give strength to suffer more and

DR. L. RONALD DAVID

4Page



more in retaliation. Mahadeo brings the news of assaults by the British everywhere. Gandhi asks Mahadeo to make arrangements to write a letter to the viceroy. At 12:45 pm a magistrate with policemen comes there to arrest Gandhi. Gandhi prays for a few minutes and asks Khare to sing 'Vaishnava jan to tene keliye' and Gandhiji goes out with the magistrate. At the Dharsana Salt Works Compound on 21 may 1930, Sarojini and Manilal, son of Gandhiji, are leading 200 volunteers in Civil Disobedience. With tricolour flags the volunteers march towards the policemen with lathis. Mr. Miller of the United Press and Sarojini naidu greets the volunteers and she emphasizes the need to fulfill the proposed mission of Gandhiji. She tells the assembly that Gandhiji has become the main subject in American papers and clergymen headed by Dr. Holmes have requested Mr. Ramsay Macdonald, the British Prime Minister, to settle amicably with Gandhiji. An officer orders a lathi charge and the beating starts. The volunteers fall down and the police drag away the wounded. The brutal treatment moves the journalist Miller who confesses that he has never seen such harrowing scenes and he takes a vow to tell this story to the world and he adds that this will be published in 1350 newspapers throughout the world.

On March 1942 in Delhi Sir Stafford Cripps, a member of Mr. Churchill's war cabinet tells Gandhi about his mission, which seeks the cooperation of India to defend India and the British Empire. Cripps asks about Gandhiji's Mission, but Gandhi says that he doesn't represent the congress but himself. Cripps says that Gandhi represents unrepresented millions of India and his views carry much weight for them and to him and his mission. Cripps tells Gandhiji about his mission: Creating new Indian union with the full status of the Dominion; a constitution of India to be framed by Indian representatives; and Indian cooperation in the war. Gandhi tells Sir Cripps that if England wants cooperation in the war there should be an Indian Defense Minister and asks if the viceroy will treat his new council as a cabinet. Cripps reacts negatively. Gandhi asks Cripps why he came to offer nothing and advises him to take the first plane home. On August 8 1942 the All Indian Congress Committee's session is held in Bombay. Leaders like Nehru, Maulana Azad, Rajagopalachari, Acharya Kirpalani are there. The talk turns to the circular issued by the secretary to the Government of India on 27th July which mentions mobilizing opinion against Gandhi's threat to 'Open rebellion'. Gandhiji enters and says that the British should leave India to God and to anarchy. Nehru offers to work in the British army if they grant complete independence to India. Asked what will he do if the British don't accept the demands, Gandhiji says that he will start Civil Disobedience and drafts the 'Quit India' resolution. Nehru proposes it and Patel seconds it. Later Gandhiji addresses the gathering stressing Ahimsa and its greatness. He says that it is a non-violent fight and not a fight for power.

The "Mantra" is to do or die. He says that either we free India or die and adds that "He who loses his life will gain it he who will seek to save it, shall lose it" ¹ Freedom is not for the

DR. L. RONALD DAVID

5P age



coward or the faint-hearted.” This makes everyone mentally and spiritually uplifted. The police arrests Gandhi (Ohja[63-68]). It is in the winter of 1947 in Noakhali East Bengal. Gandhiji walks barefoot to the village to inspire courage in the sufferers of the great carnage that took place on 16 August 1946 where the Muslim League celebrated ‘Direct Action Day’ in India. Gandhiji’s secretary Nirmal Kumar and his grandniece Manu are with him. He asks Manu to sing a song composed by Tagore. Gandhi feels depressed and realizes that he can see some grave defect in himself. He says that each one has to go alone to the villagers and give courage and consolation to the inhabitants. Gandhiji says that though we are unarmed yet we have a great weapon called satyagraha to defend ourselves from the armed European army. He also says that the reason even today the white men respect the Indian in South Africa. He advocates a traditional kind of heroism, which is to infect others with fearlessness and courage when faced with death. Gandhi meets Maya, a young girl who was raped by Muslim gangsters but yet the presence of Gandhiji inspires her and she joins Manu. They become good sisters. In May 1947 Gandhiji stays with the downtrodden in sweeper’s colony, Manu informs Gandhiji the arrival of Lord Mountbatten. Mountbatten tells Gandhi that he needs his advice and guidance on the knotty problem of liquidating the British Empire in India by June. Gandhi tells Mountbatten that the British should withdraw and leave India and though India may have to go through chaos and fire it would only purify us. Gandhi avers that this will do a lot more for India than the Partition of India. Mountbatten points out that the Muslim League is not happy with the provisional government of Nehru. Gandhi says that if so the Nehru Government should be dismissed and Jinnah should be called to form the Government and assures that the Congress will support it. After Mountbatten left Pyarelal brings the news of partition and Gandhi says that he could see blood streams flowing in the aftermath of partition. He adds that he has to swallow this bitter pill.

On 14 and 15 of August 1947, the Independence Day of Pakistan and India, Gandhiji is in a house that is in absolute shambles. Sushila Nayar tells Gandhi about the arrival of a government representative to gather Gandhi’s message on the day of independence. Gandhi tells him that there is no message. Manu tells Gandhi that the BBC wants a message for the Independence Day. Gandhi gets irritated and asks if they want a message for Independence or for Partition day. Gandhi finds some youngsters shouting and pelting stones and calls them as cowards and says that they haven’t learnt any thing from Vivekananda and Gurudeo. The youngsters blame Gandhi saying that he favours Muslims. Gandhi says that he is both a Hindu and Muslim and that he is not a coward. He asks them to forget the past and treat Muslims like brothers. Gandhiji tells Manu and Sushila “We will observe the Independence Day by fasting and prayers.” He meets ministers of Bengal and warns them that power corrupts (Ohja[69-82]). Gandhiji with Manu Sushila and Pyarelal enters the Birla Bhawan, Delhi. He enquires about the place in the sweeper’s colony where he stayed once and learns that the refugees from Punjab occupy it. On seeing the kind of hatred people have for their

DR. L. RONALD DAVID

6P a g e



brethren Gandhiji asks whether they have any humanity left in them. He says that he can rest only after breaking the vicious circle of revenge and retaliation. Gandhi again broods over the feeling that he has failed somewhere in his conception and practice of Truth and Ahimsa. Gandhi says that he must go on a fast and pray to gain what he had lost. Gandhi escaped a bomb that was intended to kill him. Gandhi says that he is ready to face bullet with a smile and praising God's name. Gandhi feels very bad about partition and adds that the communal relations should improve or he should perish. Rajendra Prasad tells Gandhiji about the pledge taken by leaders of all communities to effect unity and peace. Gandhi breaks his fast. He talks as if he has a premonition: if somebody puts a bullet through my bare chest. I wish to die with Rama's name in my mouth and as he hurries out he was shot three times. Gandhi sinks to the ground chanting 'Hey Ram!'.the crowd sings 'Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram" with tears rolling down their faces and Nehru in a deep and dull voice acknowledges the greatness of the Mahatma.

WORK CITED

Ohja S K. *Riding the storm: a play on Mahatma Gandhi*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1990.
Print.