

Satish Alekar's *Pidhijat*: A Representation of Corruption and Dilapidation of Culture in Modern Society

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Satish Alekar is a Marathi playwright, actor, and theatre director. A founder member of the Theatre Academy of Pune, and has penned plays: *Mahanirvan* (1974), *Mahapoor* (1975), *Atirekee* (1990), *Pidhijat* (2003), *Mickey ani Memsahib* (1973) and *Begum Barve* (1979), all of which he also directed for the Theatre Academy. Today, along with Mahesh Elkunchwar and Vijay Tendulkar, he is one of the most influential and progressive playwrights of modern Indian theatre. He received a prestigious award for play *Pidhijat* from Maharashtra Foundation in 2004. Its translated English version is titled as 'Dynasts' and it is translated by Pramod Kale.

Pidhijat moves around the 'Gupchup' family who are an active part and parcel of contemporary politics. They represent upper middle – class in the modern times who speak of the changed cultural values and degradation of morality and ethics. The play also portrays the changed dimensions of corrupt culture and feminism.

The very opening scene of the play shows conversation between Mahadev, an active politician and strong contestant of cabinet ministry and Radha, an emancipated Brahmin housewife. Her husband is a government employee and is a treasurer and fund - raiser for his political party, Bhartiya Janata Party. Alekar has intentionally kept this character nameless since he represents a voiceless husband and a pawn in the game of politics who is happy with his share in the loot of corruption. Neither political power nor craze for chair appeals him. Mahadev is his friend. However, throughout the play, he hardly suspects the intimacy between his wife and Mahadev. Mahadev is a typical power – mongerer politician awaiting his party's triumph in the state elections since his party was already in power at the center. He wants to be a state cabinet minister.

The play focuses on the present day trends of political parties and politicians. It also speaks about the shattered ideologies of politics which works more for vested interests rather than common welfare. What matters are only the levels of corruption one has crossed and how far one has sunk into the fathomless river of corruption? The play shows that no political party practically follows any of its ideology. Radha says: "What ideology? Which party has it? There are only two parties left now. Those in power and those out. I have seen them all." (236)

Politics is played over many factors. One of them is caste factor or the very caste – based vote banks. In fact it is the caste which defines one's identity in politics. Ashutosh, Radha's son, for example, as a child use to call Mahadev, 'OBC uncle.' Caste is used as a tool for playing politics. Radha rightly comments:

Radha: Party politics is always caste – based but the relationship between the party's men and women is always casteless. Like I am a Brahmin and you are an OBC.

Mahadev: And generally such relations are extra-marital.

Radha: It took your party fifty years to get this casteless angle of personal relationships into the broad spectrum of political life. Look at the Congress Party. They kept the non – Brahmin factor in circulation and ruled for fifty years not always smoothly – but still, for a good fifty years! (238)

The play portrays the working of shrewd politics. The parties sustain their existence not due to their ideologies but through their skills at playing the power game of politics. They victimize the 'Aam Aadmi' and fulfill their motives. Radha speaks about it:

Radha: How they approach their faithful! They always disguise their directions as polite requests. They are so clever in assessing a man and his situation.

Mahadev: And if anything goes wrong, there is always the carrot of religion to get commitment from people!" (240)

Though politics is caste based, it spars none. It encompasses all the classes, religions, castes and sex when it comes to achieve motives. The play also shows the injustices towards the so – called privileged upper caste like the Brahmins. Father says to Ashutosh,

"Come on, tell me. (Pointing to the photograph of his father) He used to tell us. We had a house in the village. In 1948 they torched it after Gandhi's murder. Why? Because we were Brahmins!" (244)

Ashutosh, in the play, represents the frustration of the younger generation at the degradation of ethics in every walk of life. The drama voices the frustration of the younger generation with corruption which is represented by Ashutosh. He accuses his father of bribery:

Ashutosh: ...Tell me. Are you corrupt? You gobble money? Tell me, straight. Don't be afraid. Don't worry. How do you make this money?

Agreed! But why this jeweler comes to our house? How would I match your salary from the government job and this kind of lifestyle? How can we afford all this? You had such an excellent upbringing. *Guru-Purnima*, Reverence–for the guru. Now you say you abhor all ritual and show. So my thread ceremony was performed in the house – simply – quietly. You yourself don't wear the thread anymore. But your face reflects the inner light of that sacred thread, worn so long ago. Like you I fold my hands to all gods automatically with no feeling like surfing through the channels on TV. Like you I get worked up about the provisions of Clause 370 for Kashmir. How could I ever forget your face glowing with contentment in the glare of a thousand firecracker garlands set off to celebrate the demolition of the Babri Mosque on 6 December? (246)

In the play, Ashutosh's father confesses about his initiation and participation in politics and how he entered the world of corruption. His father wanted him to become a lawyer or an IAS officer. But the untimely death of his father and his sick mother suffering from tuberculosis made him directionless in life. To heighten his problems, Emergency was declared by the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi. He joined the party organization and started looking after the party accounts. He joined in against Congress and was imprisoned. His imprisonment enriched his life experience. When there was a split in Janata party, he joined BJP and became its loyal follower and thereby money matters were entrusted to him. When he narrates to Ashutosh about this pathway of political participation, Ashutosh feels that this cannot be a justification to his father's corrupt behavior. He is rather giving lame excuses for his participation in active corruption. Ashutosh's reaction is:

Ashutosh: Great, Terrific! Powerful! What a powerful character you are! But why are you talking so much? I have nothing to do with your fuckings during the last twenty – five years.

Come to the point, Daddy. If this river of corruption that everybody is screaming about originates in my house, show me the sacred source of that holy water...

Come on, speak up. I have given you your cue. Tell me you gobble money to provide for my payment seat. Don't get scared father. I am not an income – tax raiding party. I am no different from you. Many of my friends' fathers are in the same boat. We have our own group. A club for money gobbling fathers' sons. We discuss things – the different corruption strategies followed by different fathers. Don't worry. We will all join in to sing the praises of corruption, the main spring of all our happiness. Who will oppose it? For corruption is not an issue for any party. Corruption is a fundamental factor of our development strategy. Aren't we agreed on this? (247 – 249)

As a parent, the father is least bothered about setting good ideals before his son. Instead he shamelessly admits of corruption:

Ashutosh: Have you ever felt any guilt, making money like this?

Father (bursting out): What guilt! What for? A dozen more jewelers could come here tomorrow. No big deal. Yes, I made money. More than anyone in the last ten generations of our family. Ask any industrialist. He will say the same thing. 'I create wealth – wealth for the nation.' I say the same thing. I create wealth for my Party. The money I make is for the welfare of the Party. Where else could you get money for elections? How could you pay the Party workers? People are not allowed to contribute openly to the Party, so they send the money through me. I am proud of it. Many institutions are helped by the Party. We camp on the borderline of active politics. Starving yourself to serve the Party, that idea is past history. We run the Party like a machine. We run it as an enterprise – industry. Transactions are made on Trust orally. No accounts – no audits. The main thing is Trust and friendship. Keep that intact – whether it is an Industrialist or the Secretary of a department. Yes, I made money – a great deal of money. But my mind is clean, my head is sharp. (253)

Father confesses openly that his assets were made out of corruption. Also with years in corruption, he knows how to be corrupt in a smart way without being caught or being suspected of it. Father knows about the loopholes in every government department and also knows the possible pathways of smart corruption. A good example of his knowledge is found when his son Ashutosh asks him about the possible corrupt paths of various government departments:

Ashutosh: Suppose you are an officer in the irrigation department.

Father (laughing): Irrigation Department! Man, no better place! Pure luxury! Cement – cement is the mantra. I made a lot in Antule's time. Your mother's first gold necklace dates back to those days. Observe and understand the religious tolerance operating here. Radha's first necklace under Antule's mandate. *Sarvadharmasambhava* in action! Secularism is the key. Take the next Department.

Ashutosh: Desk Officer at the Home Ministry –

Father: Transfers! That spells transfers! Transfers of police officers. Funds for the Party and for us too. Our farmhouse near Sinhagad dates back to that time. Next – ask me anything. (Explaining patiently like a teacher) There is a constant stream of corruption flowing between the Minister and the Secretary of the Department. Never be greedy, never showy. Be humble. Cup your hands, scoop enough water for yourself and divert the stream to the Party. One who can do this is the king of the hill. Arrogance never pays. Be patient, be flexible. You have to be human – caring, understanding. You have to create a network of those working under you. Find out which way the water flows. Watch your Minister and Secretary. Follow their thinking, anticipate their moves. It's the game of rock and earth. Anybody can turn into a rock in a trice. It is a matter of great responsibility. Many Party workers are scattered all over the country, toiling and laboring. For them I am a pillar of support. I am closer to them than anybody else. You have to keep so many secrets locked into the bottom of your heart, even at the cost of your own feelings. At times one has to give aid even to anti – corruption movements!

Ashutosh: What if they raid our house tomorrow?

Father: Let them. I will tell them, take whatever you get. Enjoy yourself. None of this is mine. My mind is clean. I have not taken anything for myself. Whatever little there is – those are handling charges, nothing much. I am not attached to any of these things. I can turn my back on all this and go off. Become a mendicant or a wandering fakir.

Of course, this will never happen. I am smart enough to forestall them and plan my own countermoves. (254-255)

Ashu's father shamelessly accepts his corrupt deeds before his dead father, Appa. Appa was a primary school teacher and throughout his life cherished honesty, ethics and principles in life. Father is now at such a degraded state of ethics that he boldly accepts his corrupt status before Appa, who had led a life full of ideals:

Appa: Where does this money come from?

Father: I gobble money. Why should I lie to you?

Appa: Drink?

Father: Yes, I drink.

Appa: In front of your son?

Father: He is a grown boy now.

Appa: And your wife – my daughter – in – law?

Father: Didn't you see her in the bar and a while ago? Weren't you there to make a fool of yourself? Why are you asking me now? She drinks there, I drink here. Cheers!

Appa: You agree to all this? You accept all this?

Appa: Her behavior...

Appa: Aren't you ashamed? Ashamed to make money like this?

(Silence)

Father: Umm... no. I am helping the Party. I am doing Party's work. Inside, I am totally uninvolved, unattached. Take a trip to Delhi. You will know. (272-273)

Father justifies his corrupt behavior and present day politics to his father, Appa:

Father: We are not drowning in these waters Appa. Merely dipping. This Ganga of ours is shallow. Our feet touch its bottom. This is water sport! We dive, we dip. We get wet. But we don't drown! On the bank, fresh clothes are ready – cleaned and ironed! If you think there are any regrets, that phase went off with your generation. There aren't even the faintest memories of it. Everything is shallow now. Deep pools of water are drying up without use. Virtual reality – that is the thing! We are trying to find ways to live fully the life of fun in shallow tanks – here in our courtyards. Sometime the mud at the bottom smears your feet! But never mind -

....

No one wants to make a firm stand against it. It is a non – issue. That's why all parties need money. Our party has not got the capacity to rule. And this century – old Congress Party does not die. For forty years the Congress kept us swaying to their tune. All this talk of principles – shallow, brittle. No real principles. The principle is to be in power. No one can stand up and take a few firm steps. But our own people pull us back like crabs. Wet and slippery.(273-274)

What matters is the root cause of political degradation. If we observe political degradation has begun with cultural degradation and this degradation has encircled every walk of life. Almost every character in the play is degraded culturally in some way or the other. What is astonishing is that none of them realizes that they are missing something crucial in their lives. They hardly realize their fatal mistakes in life but instead advocate of the same in the play. Radha confesses her adultery at the very beginning of the play and is free to do it:

Radha: Married woman.Caste Brahmin.Husband government employee and politician.Fundraiser and treasurer for his party.Lots of money on hand.All cash.More than needed.Ashutosh our only son, is deep into his studies for the dreaded Board Exam for High School graduation, The Twelfth! As for me, I have all the time in the world. Lots of free hours to watch closely all our Hindi movie – screen goddesses hour after hour. I don't know how or when, but some of their seductive charm rubbed off onto my skin like fresh cream. I began to crave for fulfillment beyond the confines of marriage. And at this point, Mahadev, you entered my life. Your percussive beat melted into the slow adagio of our conjugal dance. I woke up to the possibilities of my own self... Oh! These worries! Our son's preparation for the Twelfth! So difficult to share these tensions. My son's tensions for the Board Exam, my husband's tensions, balancing his government job and political responsibilities. And to add to all this tension to my friendship with you! ... (234)

Drinking liquor was supposed to be the monopolistic right of the men in the patriarchic society. With doors of education thrown open to women and with newly acquired liberty, women have surpassed men in all

walks of life. Radha aptly represents the modern emancipated women. She supports drinking and also justifies her adultery in her own way to Mahadev:

Radha: That's why I am drinking. What do you know of the tensions of the Board Exam? As a matter of fact the Board should start a special bar for us – a parents' bar. There we can relax and plan strategies for securing payment seats, NRI quotas, donation techniques. What do you know of these tensions? Are you a parent? How could you fathom the depth of our anxiety? We have to wait. Wait and wait. Stand for hours on our two feet in a line. Shouldn't they open a special bar for us? (236)

Mahadev is single and therefore feels his adultery is more justified than any other character in the play. Moreover, he has no regrets that he is moving around with Radha, his friend's wife. He hardly bothers about breaking the trust of his dear friend. He has his own version of advocating his adultery:

Mahadev: Look, one of us is married. That's good enough. Relationship between man and woman should lead to marriage. That's the age – old custom. It's not always followed, is it? And who the hell doesn't cheat? The primal relationship between the male and female is the only true relationship. Love, feelings, emotions are all incidental, that lost out long ago to the uncluttered biological need and impulse of the moment. (237)

The play also tries to focus the dilemmas and troubles of the young generation who face cut – throat competition in their lives. Ashutosh represents the young generation and the set of problems one needs to face. The initial dialogues in Scene two shows Ashu's trouble of facing twelfth examination and his torture for it by parents. Also Ashutosh is aware of the namesake relationship his parents share. They hardly interfere into each other's life nor do they have any intimacy or attachment in their marital relationship. He also wonders as to how they can sustain such a relationship without arguments or complaints.

Father comments on Radha's habit of making excuses to Ashutosh:

Father: She must have said something. She must have given some reason for going out. As a matter of fact she should get a computer printout of all these reasons. Well, what is the reason for tonight?

Ashutosh: Tonight's reason. Mangala – Gauri night. Celebration for her friend's daughter. I forgot.

Father: Any message from Radha?

Ashutosh: Yes, she said, tell your father – it's the month of Shravan – first light the lamp in front of the Gods and then open the soda. (244-245)

Unfortunately Ashutosh neither has a sound family nor ethical parents to his virtue. Throughout the play, we find him troubled due to his father's infatuation to bribery and corruption. He represents the frustration and loss of ideals for the young generation. He accuses his father of bribery:

Ashutosh: "Why? Is this necklace expensive? Is this gold pure? Come here father, come here. Come, come, come, sit down. Relax.

(Father does what the son tells him to do.)

Sit. Sit properly. Don't get scared. All this is yours – Daddy, all this is yours! This house, this gold. You are the head of the family. I live in your house, Daddy dear! Look at me. Don't look so downcast like a tenant in your own house. Look straight into my eyes and tell me. This gold – where does it come from? Not from your government salary. Tell me. Are you corrupt? You gobble money? Tell me, straight. Don't be afraid. Don't worry. How do you make this money? (246)

We find in the play that Ashutosh is not attached emotionally to his parents and vice – versa but this is true also of Ashutosh's father. He too has no attachment to his own parents. In the play, Ashutosh is surprised that his dead grandfather's photograph is hanged over the wall in the house whereas; this is not the case with his dead grandmother as she nowhere has any representation in the house. When Ashutosh asks about her to his father, his father's attitude towards his mother is seen:

Ashutosh: Why didn't you put grandmother's photograph by the side of grandfather's? She died later, right?

Father: I should have. I forgot.

Ashutosh: You forgot? To hang your mother's photograph?

Father: She harassed me! I mean her sickness and her temperament. She was so obstinate and suspicious. No happiness, ever. She died eating all those TB medicines. In her last days, she was totally bedridden. Everything in bed. I nursed her, did everything for her. I was so tired after that. I had no energy to hang her photograph. Thought she would come back, coughing out of her photograph. (251)

The play shows a major change in the relationship between a father – in-law and daughter – in-law. A daughter – in – law no more bothers about how she represents herself before her father – in – law. Appa is eager to see his emancipated daughter – in – law. He has his own ideas about her. When Appa confronts Radha, he says:

Appa: ... So I came to see her. Had heard a lot about her. You are here very often, they told me. So I came here to see her – my daughter – in-law's face. When you first see her face it should be with a gift of coconut and blouse piece. Well, instead I brought this can of beer. (259)

Father and Radha are well aware about their shattered relationship and they do not want to mend their relationship. They are happy with each other's non – interference. They refer to their relationship:

Radha: Have we discussed them any time?

Father: No.

Radha: Have we ever touched the main point?

Father: No.

Radha: And still we are staying together. Right?

Father: Yes.

Radha: Why do we tolerate all this? ...Why do we tolerate all this? What's been going on?

Father: All this – why did this come up so suddenly – today?

Radha: Because he came to see...

... Father: Why?

Radha: His son's wife's face. I look like her, he said. That's how the talk started.

Father: That's why he came to see. When did we see...?

Radha: What?

Father: Each other. It's been many years...

Radha (looks at him in surprise. Drinks her beer): Goodness! Did you bring some flowers with you or what?

Father: I used to in the past. One bouquet. Now I have to get three. Still we adjust to it. What do we get out of this?

Radha: Tolerance. It seeps it through, so nicely!

Father (bursting out): Certainly. No discussion! No frustration. No anger. No conflict. No consensus! No acceptance! No resistance. No feeling! No vitality!

Radha: Long ago I had put up a warning sign! As money began to come in, I told you. The craving will grow on you. You will cultivate a taste for it. But the warning sign was wiped out by the flow of funds. From somewhere inside the urge came. Our relationship got tangled in it. My wedding necklace stretched itself shapeless. It did not break. Even my words of warning lacked conviction when I said them. It stretched... (262)

Father: I never- I never what? I never hit you. Never kicked you. Never took you by the hand and threw you out of the house. I never did any of these things. Everything was noiseless – Gupchup! Hush hush! Everything was understood. Taken for granted. Why should it be so? Why didn't we cut clean with one stroke?

Radha: Because we are broad – minded. We are mature. Our vision is exceptional. (263)

Appa regrets coming out of his photograph on his death anniversary. He wanted to meet his son's family especially his daughter – in – law. He is disappointed at meeting his son's family. He is shocked to see the moral degradation of his son. He speaks to his son about the broken ideals of morality and about the shattered dreams and his frustration over his corrupt son:

Appa (agitated): Their house sank under the waters of the dam! I was telling him. Become a lawyer! Become an officer! But no. The only thing that interested him was the organization. All his energies went into their work. Just went around with them and landed himself into jail during Emergency. No interest in study! No future – no plans. Everything unclear!

In 1948, after Gandhi's murder, they came – to burn our house. She was expecting – anytime. More than nine months. Full term. She was waiting to go to her mother's place. riots started. Everybody began to run away. The Brahmin lane became empty. Not a person around. We were alone in the big house. Got her out somehow by the backdoor. The mission people took us in... I was telling him. Study law. Become a lawyer. The British gave us the rule of law. We must always use it interpret it to keep things going in our favour.

Later, the tenancy acts! We lost all our lands. We left the village for good. We came to live here in this city by the river for good. Thought he would become a lawyer – get back our lands but they changed the laws.

He and his friends. The organization! They met on the river bank. He used to play the trumpet in their marching band... jail under the Emergency! The shock was enough to give me heart attack. Flew straight into the photograph for good! (271-272)

The play also speaks about the changed dimensions of the father – son relationship in the past generation. The son is no more obedient and sharply points out the follies of his father. Now, Father voices the follies of his father, Appa like Ashutosh does of his father. Father comments on Appa's adultery and changed perspectives of the modern life:

Father: What about your behavior in the school? It was not for nothing that mother became so tense and suspicious all the time! Who was that woman – Malatibai. We grew up listening to all that gossip. The other children teased me about it at school and at home, mother used to fly off the handle and cries profusely to hear it. And now you are giving me lessons on character building! You can't keep these boundaries clear of incursion – this is domestic – this is public. Everybody has the freedom! The freedom to enjoy the power! At home or in the Party. How he does it is his own personal equation. This is our private concern. No entry for the Dead or the Living. You heard that in the bar. You saw her bar. Each one has his or her bar. Her way is different. Don't ask the same question again and again!

Appa: You and cope with this? Are you happy?

Father: Bravo! What a question! Who in this world is happy? Could I give you an answer as a living person? Appa, all these things are relative – depends on the individual! Why did you come? We are alright, Appa. Your point of view is one, ours in another. We are raising this flag which you handed over to us. You now think the colours have faded. Why didn't you give us a flag whose colours would not fade? In our forties, we develop cataract now! All the colours blend and mix together! Cataract in forties, blood pressure and angioplasty in our fifties or bypass! We are alright Appa. Little time is left. If you can't find anything else, go and stand by our newly built super highway! Watch the accidents. Time will just fly! The driver dozes at the wheel, after a sleepless night's driving – loses control and the highway bathes in blood. (274-275)

Appa is crying with agony at the end of the play. Alaka gets a gun license for Ashutosh and both are happy with it and find nothing wrong with it. It is rather a matter of pride and snobbery to own a gun license. Appa recites the poem of B. S. Mardhekar since he is positive about the bright future of the young generation but the only exception is his own son's family. Except Appa nobody finds anything wrong with the degraded state of ethics in life. Corruption is omnipresent and a vital ingredient of life. Alekar through his play has aptly portrayed modern life and the status of corruption and cultural degradation through the portrayal of an upper middle class family in the present times.

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