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# “MUKTA-DHARA” – TAGORE’S COLONIAL ALLEGORY AND TYRANNY OF NATIONALISM

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper critically examines the political, social, and philosophical dimensions of Mukta-Dhara by Rabindranath Tagore, with particular emphasis on Tagore’s critique of political oppression, mechanized civilization, racial prejudice, and exploitative systems of governance. As one of Tagore’s most accomplished symbolic dramas, Mukta-Dhara presents a profound conflict between humanity and machinery, freedom and authoritarian control, spiritual values and materialistic ambition. The paper explores how the symbolic representation of the dam constructed by the engineer Bibhuti becomes an instrument of imperial domination over the people of Shiv-tarai, reflecting Tagore’s deep distrust of science when detached from ethical responsibility and human compassion. Through the contrasting characterization of King Ranajit, Bibhuti, and Prince Abhijit, the play articulates Tagore’s democratic ideals and his advocacy of freedom, justice, and human dignity. Abhijit emerges as a symbolic liberator whose self-sacrifice restores the natural flow of Mukta-Dhara and symbolizes the triumph of humanity over tyranny and mechanical oppression. The paper further analyses Tagore’s criticism of racial arrogance, economic exploitation, and regimental education that suppresses independent thought and promotes blind nationalism. Employing textual and thematic analysis, this paper demonstrates that Mukta-Dhara transcends its immediate socio-political context to offer a universal humanistic vision relevant to contemporary debates on technology, authoritarianism, ecological ethics, and social justice. The paper concludes that Tagore’s symbolic imagination transforms the play into a timeless critique of dehumanized modernity and an enduring affirmation of liberty, moral courage, and spiritual fulfillment.*

**KEYWORDS**

*Rabindranath Tagore, Mukta-Dhara, Symbolism, Political Oppression, Humanism, Mechanization, Freedom, Imperialism, Race Prejudice, Spiritual Liberation, Social Justice, Modern Civilization, Tagore’s Political Philosophy*

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Edward Thompson who considers ‘*Mukta-Dhara*’ to be “the greatest of Tagore’s symbolic plays” and the best of his prose dramas, says:

*“It has many strands of significance woven into it so that it is like shot-silk suggesting many colours, the play’s achievement is that in it he has attained a synthesis of his different convictions and message. His deep distrust of all government by machinery and of all prostitution of science to serve violence and oppression his hatred of a slavish system of education, his scorn of race hatred and of all politics which seek to make one tribe dependent on another... all these are so prominent that each may with justice be claimed as the play’s message. It is the greatest of his symbolic plays.”*

— Edward Thompson- “Rabindranath Tagore”

## 1. OBJECTIVES OF THIS PAPER

- (i) The primary objective of this paper is to critically examine *Mukta-Dhara* as a symbolic and political drama that reflects Rabindranath Tagore’s humanistic philosophy and critique of mechanized modern civilization.
- (ii) The paper further examines Prince Abhijit as a symbolic embodiment of sacrifice, moral courage, spiritual resistance, and humanitarian leadership against oppression and injustice. In addition, the paper investigates the relationship between humanity, nature, and ethical consciousness as portrayed in the play and evaluates the continuing relevance of the drama in the contemporary context of technological domination, ecological crises, and political violence.
- (iii) The paper seeks to analyze the symbolic significance of *Mukta-Dhara* as a representation of natural freedom, human vitality, and liberation, while exploring Tagore’s criticism of technological arrogance, authoritarian governance, imperialism, racial prejudice, and exploitative nationalism through the images of the dam, the character of Bibhuti, and the political structure of Uttarakut.
- (iv) The paper aims to analyze how Tagore employs symbolism, characterization, and dramatic conflict to advocate freedom, ethical responsibility, and resistance against authoritarian power. Ultimately, the study aims to understand Tagore’s vision of human freedom, spiritual humanism, and moral civilization through the dramatic structure, symbolism, and philosophical depth of the play.

## 2. HUMAN FREEDOM AND RESISTANCE TO MECHANIZED POWER IN MUKTA-DHARA

Rabindranath Tagore’s *Mukta-Dhara* stands as one of the most intellectually compelling and artistically refined symbolic dramas in modern Indian literature. The greatness of the play lies not only in its dramatic excellence but also in its penetrating exploration of modern civilization and its crises. Through symbolism, philosophical depth, and dramatic intensity, Tagore transforms the play into a profound critique of political oppression, technological arrogance, racial prejudice, and the dehumanizing effects of authoritarian power. The drama reflects Tagore’s enduring belief that humanity, compassion, and spiritual freedom must prevail over mechanical domination and imperial ambition.

The action of the play is centred on *Mukta-Dhara*, a mountain stream flowing from the hills of Uttarakut to the fertile plains of Shiv-tarai. This free-flowing stream symbolizes the natural energy of life, liberty, and human welfare. However, King Ranajit of Uttarakut, driven by imperial ambition and political greed, seeks to control the people of Shiv-tarai by depriving

them of water. For this purpose, his chief engineer Bibhuti constructs a gigantic dam across the stream. The construction of the dam is not merely an engineering achievement; it becomes a symbol of mechanized authority attempting to dominate both nature and humanity. Through this image, Tagore exposes the dangers of scientific advancement when it loses its ethical and humanitarian foundation.

Bibhuti represents the cold intellect of modern technological civilization. Obsessed with his invention and the power of machinery, he remains indifferent to the suffering of ordinary people. The cries of the starving peasants and the grief of parents who lost their children during the construction of the dam fail to disturb his conscience. Tagore therefore presents science as destructive when it serves political tyranny instead of human welfare. The towering machine erected above the temple of Bhairava further symbolizes the pride of modern civilization that attempts to replace spiritual values with mechanical power.

Against this world of oppression stands Prince Abhijit, the moral and spiritual centre of the play. Abhijit embodies compassion, courage, sacrifice, and resistance against injustice. Unlike King Ranajit and Bibhuti, he believes that political authority must protect human dignity rather than exploit the weak. His sympathy for the people of Shiv-tarai and his decision to open the Nandi Pass reveal his democratic ideals and humanitarian vision. Abhijit recognizes that true leadership is founded upon service and freedom rather than fear and domination.

The climax of the play acquires immense symbolic significance when Abhijit destroys the dam, fully aware that the act will lead to his death. His sacrifice liberates the imprisoned waters of Mukta-Dhara and restores life to the oppressed people of Shiv-tarai. The breaking of the dam symbolizes the destruction of artificial barriers created by greed, power, and mechanical arrogance. At the same time, Abhijit's martyrdom transforms him into a symbol of spiritual liberation and moral victory. Through this ending, Tagore emphasizes that freedom cannot be permanently suppressed by political force or technological control.

Another important dimension of the play is Tagore's criticism of racial arrogance and false nationalism. The people of Uttarakut consider themselves superior to the people of Shiv-tarai and attempt to justify exploitation through ideas of racial difference. Tagore satirizes such attitudes by exposing the absurdity of educational systems that cultivate prejudice and blind obedience among children. The play therefore condemns any form of education that destroys independent thought and encourages hatred in the name of nationalism or racial pride.

Structurally, *Mukta-Dhara* demonstrates Tagore's mastery of dramatic art. The play maintains unity of action and atmosphere while blending poetry, symbolism, and philosophical reflection into a coherent dramatic form. The movement of common people, peasants, workers, and devotees across the stage creates a living social background that strengthens the realism and emotional depth of the drama. Their presence reminds the audience that the struggle in the play is not limited to individuals alone but concerns the destiny of humanity itself.

Ultimately, *Mukta-Dhara* is a timeless dramatic statement on the conflict between humanity and oppressive systems of power. Tagore warns against civilizations that worship machinery, political domination, and material progress at the expense of moral and spiritual values. Through the symbolic liberation of the river, he affirms the eternal strength of freedom, compassion, and human dignity. The play continues to remain relevant in the contemporary world, where societies still confront the dangers of technological exploitation, authoritarian politics, and social injustice. Thus, *Mukta-Dhara* emerges not merely as a symbolic play but as

a universal humanistic vision advocating liberation, ethical responsibility, and the triumph of the human spirit.

### 3. PRINCE ABHIJIT AS THE SYMBOL OF FREEDOM AND SACRIFICE IN MUKTA-DHARA

Prince Abhijit emerges as the spiritual and moral centre of Mukta-Dhara, embodying the ideals of freedom, compassion, justice, and self-sacrifice. Although he is brought up as the adopted son of King Ranajit, Abhijit is originally a foundling, and this hidden truth symbolically distances him from the oppressive ideology of the royal court. Unlike King Ranajit, whose authority is rooted in domination and political control, Abhijit possesses a deeply humane vision of governance. When appointed governor of Shiv-tarai, he develops profound sympathy for the hardships of the oppressed people and succeeds in winning their affection and loyalty through kindness, justice, and sincere concern for their welfare. Abhijit's humanitarian outlook sharply contrasts with the exploitative policies of Uttarakut. King Ranajit deliberately blocks the mountain pass in order to prevent trade and maintain the economic dependence of Shiv-tarai. Realizing the injustice behind this political strategy, Abhijit boldly opposes the king's decision and reopens the pass for free trade and communication. This action symbolizes resistance against economic exploitation and reflects Rabindranath Tagore's faith in liberty, equality, and human dignity. Abhijit's defiance exposes the conflict between authoritarian rule and democratic compassion. Enraged by the prince's rebellion, King Ranajit imprisons him, thereby revealing the intolerance of oppressive political systems toward voices of justice and humanity. Yet physical imprisonment fails to crush Abhijit's spirit of freedom. Escaping from captivity, he resolves to destroy the gigantic dam built by Bibhuti across the waters of Mukta-Dhara. The dam, which symbolizes mechanical tyranny and imperial power, has deprived the people of Shiv-tarai of their natural resources and livelihood. Abhijit knows that the dam possesses a vulnerable point and that striking it would inevitably lead to his death. Nevertheless, he proceeds fearlessly, placing the welfare of humanity above his own life. His act is not merely a political rebellion but also a spiritual mission aimed at restoring harmony between humanity and nature.

The destruction of the dam becomes the climactic moment of the drama and carries immense symbolic significance. By releasing the imprisoned waters of Mukta-Dhara, Abhijit liberates both nature and the oppressed people from the chains of tyranny. His sacrifice transforms him into a symbol of moral victory and spiritual fulfillment. Through Abhijit's martyrdom, Tagore emphasizes that true freedom can only be achieved through courage, selflessness, and resistance against injustice. The prince's death therefore signifies the triumph of humanity over machinery, compassion over cruelty, and spiritual truth over political oppression.

Abhijit ultimately emerges as the moral hero of the play and as a timeless symbol of liberation.

### 3. REIMAGINING POLITICS AND HUMAN FREEDOM IN MUKTA-DHARA: CONVICTIONS OF TAGORE ON MODERN POLITICS

Rabindranath Tagore's *Mukta-Dhara* offers a penetrating critique of modern political systems that sustain authority through violence, economic manipulation, technological domination, and ideological control. Far beyond the boundaries of a symbolic play, the drama functions as a philosophical interrogation of power and an ethical defence of human freedom. Written during a period marked by imperial expansion, industrial modernity, and rising nationalist tensions, the

play reflects Tagore's anxiety over the transformation of political authority into a machinery of oppression. Through symbolic characterization and layered dramatic conflicts, Tagore articulates a political vision grounded in compassion, justice, and spiritual humanism.

The political structure represented in the play is deeply hierarchical and exploitative. Uttarakut, situated on the summit of the mountain, symbolizes concentrated power and authoritarian sovereignty, whereas Shiv-tarai, located below, represents the marginalized and economically dependent community subjected to imperial domination. King Ranajit governs Shiv-tarai not through mutual trust or ethical responsibility but through coercion and calculated deprivation. His political philosophy is founded upon the assumption that subject populations must remain weak in order to remain obedient. The deliberate control of water resources through the construction of the dam reveals how political systems convert nature itself into an instrument of subjugation. Tagore thereby exposes the violence embedded within imperial governance, where domination operates not only through military force but also through economic dependency and ecological control.

The dam across Mukta-Dhara becomes the central metaphor of mechanized political authority. It signifies the human attempt to arrest natural freedom and redirect life according to the interests of power. The stream, which traditionally nourishes the agricultural life of Shiv-tarai, is transformed into a political commodity controlled by the state. By depriving the people of water, the ruling authority effectively threatens their survival. Tagore presents this manipulation of natural resources as an ethical failure of modern civilization, particularly when scientific knowledge becomes detached from human values. The play therefore anticipates contemporary concerns regarding ecological exploitation, state control over resources, and the dehumanizing consequences of technological absolutism.

The figure of Bibhuti intensifies this critique of modernity. As the royal engineer, he embodies a mechanistic worldview driven by ambition, efficiency, and technological pride. His obsession with the success of the machine renders him emotionally indifferent to human suffering. The cries of hunger, displacement, and death remain insignificant before his devotion to scientific accomplishment. Through Bibhuti, Tagore challenges the ideology of progress that celebrates technological advancement while ignoring its moral implications. Science, in the absence of ethical consciousness, becomes complicit in systems of violence and domination.

In contrast to the authoritarianism of Ranajit and the mechanistic rationality of Bibhuti, Prince Abhijit represents an alternative political and moral imagination. His governance is rooted in empathy, social responsibility, and respect for human dignity. Unlike the king, he refuses to perceive Shiv-tarai as a territory to be exploited. His decision to reopen the Nandi Pass demonstrates his commitment to economic justice and collective welfare. By enabling trade and communication, Abhijit attempts to dismantle the structures of dependency imposed upon the people. His actions challenge exploitative statecraft and redefine leadership as an ethical relationship between ruler and society.

Tagore's political criticism extends beyond imperialism to include racial prejudice and ideological conditioning. The hostility between the people of Uttarakut and Shiv-tarai reveals the absurdity of racial superiority and cultural arrogance. Tagore exposes how prejudice is institutionalized through education, where children are taught distorted notions of nationalism and racial identity. The educational system in Uttarakut functions not as a means of intellectual liberation but as a mechanism for reproducing obedience and intolerance. In this respect, the

play critiques political systems that manipulate historical narratives and cultural myths in order to legitimize domination.

The climax of the drama transforms political resistance into spiritual liberation. Abhijit's destruction of the dam is both a revolutionary and sacrificial act. By releasing the imprisoned waters of Mukta-Dhara, he restores the natural balance disrupted by authoritarian power. His sacrifice signifies the victory of moral truth over coercive authority and reaffirms Tagore's conviction that freedom cannot be permanently suppressed by machinery, political violence, or institutional control. Liberation, in the play, is not merely political independence but the restoration of harmony between humanity, nature, and ethical consciousness.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Tagore lived in a period of revolution – economic, political and educational thoughts. It is also a period of social reforms and political upheavals.

*“It is a period of revolution – economic, social, political and all. We find a chain of reform movements and innumerable reforms... In this period of political turmoil, Tagore wants here to contribute his share of political activity. Tagore as a thinker and guru did not fail to offer his ideas on practically every aspect of human endeavour.”*

Ultimately, *Mukta-Dhara* presents Tagore's enduring critique of dehumanized modernity and authoritarian politics. The play rejects all forms of domination that reduce human beings to instruments of state power, economic utility or technological systems. Instead, it advocates a civilization founded upon compassion, freedom, ecological balance, and spiritual integrity. By combining political insight with symbolic artistry, Tagore transforms the drama into a timeless meditation on the ethical responsibilities of power and the indivisible relationship between human liberty and moral truth. Rabindranath Tagore lived during an age marked by intense political conflict, social transformation, economic restructuring, and educational reform. The early twentieth century witnessed the rise of imperial domination, industrial expansion, nationalist movements, and ideological struggles that profoundly shaped intellectual and cultural discourse across the world. In such a turbulent historical context, Tagore emerged not only as a poet and dramatist but also as a visionary thinker deeply concerned with the future of humanity. His literary works consistently engage with questions of freedom, justice, ethics, education, and human coexistence. Among these works, *Mukta-Dhara* occupies a unique place as a dramatic synthesis of his philosophical, political, and humanitarian ideals.

The play transcends the limits of conventional political drama by integrating social criticism, symbolic expression, and spiritual reflection into a unified artistic form. Through the conflict between Uttarakut and Shiv-tarai, Tagore critiques systems of governance founded upon domination, economic exploitation, and technological arrogance. The dam constructed across Mukta-Dhara symbolizes the modern state's attempt to regulate nature, suppress freedom, and transform human life into an object of political control. At the same time, the drama exposes the dangers of scientific advancement when detached from compassion and ethical responsibility.

The richness of the play lies in its multidimensional portrayal of life. Farmers struggling for survival, devotees engaged in spiritual practices, ordinary citizens absorbed in everyday conversations, and rulers driven by ambition together create a living social landscape that reflects the complexity of human existence. Against this dynamic background emerges Prince Abhijit, whose courage and self-sacrifice transform him into a timeless symbol of liberty and

moral resistance. His destruction of the dam signifies not merely a political act but the restoration of harmony between humanity, nature, and spiritual truth.

Tagore's vision in *Mukta-Dhara* ultimately affirms the supremacy of human values over mechanical power and authoritarian politics. The play insists that civilizations founded solely upon domination, racial arrogance, and material progress inevitably lose their moral centre. In contrast, freedom, compassion, sacrifice, and ethical consciousness emerge as the true foundations of human fulfillment. The symbolic victory of nature and humanity over oppressive machinery reinforces Tagore's enduring faith in the resilience of the human spirit.

Therefore, *Mukta-Dhara* remains profoundly relevant in the contemporary world, where societies continue to confront political violence, technological excess, ecological crises, and ideological divisions. The drama is not only a critique of its own historical moment but also a universal meditation on the relationship between power and morality. Through its symbolic depth and philosophical insight, the play continues to invite scholars and readers to reflect upon the ethical responsibilities of modern civilization and the eternal human quest for freedom and dignity.

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