

The Relevance of Bernard Shaw to Our Times

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Abstract

Contrary to general assumptions, Bernard Shaw's writing have contemporary relevance. His views on cruelty to animals, censorship, democracy, medical profession, women's status etc., are all live issues even today. His plea for compassion for all creatures is timely because of the mass slaughter of animals and birds. He disapproved censorship since it delays enlightenment. His comparison of democracy to a balloon, stampede and auction is appropriate now. His expose of the medical profession anticipates its unethical practices. He championed women's cause before 'feminism' became known. Shaw was far ahead of his times. Hence his ideas have continued relevance to us.

These prefaces of mine are no more out of date than the Gospels, or Utopia, or Tom Jones, or Little Dorrit, or even the plays of Aristophanes and Euripides and the Socratic dialogues of Plato

-George Bernard Shaw (1938)

1. Introduction

Bernard Shaw was a one-man university like Aristotle in his day; he mastered and assimilated many branches of knowledge including music, drama, literature, religion, political science, philosophy, psychology, and biology. He was, in fact a 20th century Socrates. In his search for the wise man, Socrates unwittingly exposed the shallowness, incoherence and illogicality of other people's knowledge and thinking. His mode of discourse was dialogue through which he questioned every belief and institution and concluded: "an unexamined life is not worth

living." The mode of discourse in Shaw's time was public speaking, pamphleteering, and play-writing. In all these he was masterly. Through his persuasive oratory and ready wit, he fought relentlessly against the cruelty, inhumanity, unfairness, and purposelessness of many an institution and convention. Through his pains-taking industry he gathered masses of material, through his sharp intellect he analyzed the problems, through his mastery of the written and spoken word he gave lucid expositions of the important issues of the contemporary world. His monumental works, *An Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (1928) and *Everybody's Political What's What* (1944) and the collected *Prefaces* (1938) are a treasure trove of ideas, arguments and analyses. They are characterized by thorough research and incontrovertible arguments. These expository works of Shaw deserve a score of doctoral degrees from any respectable university in the world.

It is generally assumed that Shaw's themes were topical and hence his plays and other writings have no continued relevance. However, he touched upon a wide range of topics which have a bearing on our lives even today. His views on cruelty to animals, censorship, democracy, medical profession, status of women and other subjects are live issues six decades after his passing.

2. Concern for animals

First, let us look at Shaw's concern for animals. He was a strict vegetarian by deliberate choice. He had a 'sense of kinship with animals' (*Prefaces* 140). He condemns cruelty to animals whether for sport, fashion, education, scientific investigation, or medical research. He laments the 'callous extermination of our fellow creatures' (257). On the use of animals for research, he says: "We connive at the most abominable tortures in the hope of discovering some magical cure for our diseases by them" (182). Recent events have shown that we have scant regard for species other than our own. They can be exterminated in large numbers and the creatures are dumb and powerless to protest and retaliate. In the last few years, millions of poultry are being culled because they are suspected to have bird flu; pigs are being killed in large numbers as they are believed to have encephalitis; cows in their hundreds were slaughtered in the United Kingdom a few years ago because of suspected foot and mouth disease. A group of leading film actors was reported to have killed *cinkara* deer in Rajasthan, India, for sport. A tigress was murdered in the Hyderabad zoo a few years ago, maybe for commercial gain. The culprits are rich and influential people and can escape punishment for their crimes against animals. While compassionate noises are occasionally made when stray dogs are caught, or monkeys are used for research,

or other animals are trained for circus feats, there is hardly a murmur when there is systematic annihilation of animals. The argument is that those animals are infected and so they are a hazard to human health. AIDS and the most recent swine flu are scares created periodically by giant pharmaceutical companies, governments, and the media, which plunder the gullible public world-wide. Maneka Gandhi argues that several of these diseases cannot be communicated to human beings at all and that profiteering triggers the panic. Assuming for argument's sake that these animals or birds are infected, how did they get the infection? Wasn't a human agency responsible for feeding and protecting them? If a number of people in a village are found to suffer from a contagious disease, are we going to kill all the villagers mercilessly? If large numbers of human beings are killed, we call it 'genocide.' If large numbers of birds, beasts, or fish are killed willfully, we haven't got a word to describe such mass slaughter. The fact is that we do not have a holistic reverence for life. If we did, we could have prevented the ecological disaster that is looming large. Shaw's plea for 'widening the range of fellow feeling' (*Prefaces 141*) to include all living creatures is a timely and necessary admonition to all of us. In this context, it is salutary to remember that Shaw had visualized that his funeral would be attended not by mourning men and women but by herds of oxen, sheep, swine, flocks of poultry and a small traveling aquarium of live fish in honor of the man who had the same respect for all species.

3. Censorship

Another issue of great importance today is freedom of expression of an author, an artist, or the press. There are disturbing signs of mounting intolerance of others' views in several parts of the world. We have seen authors being hounded out for their writings. Shaw is forthright in stating that "the attempt to suppress art is not wholly successful; we might as well try to suppress oxygen" (95). Censorship and persecution will only delay 'the general march of enlightenment' (411). In India, a state government sued *The Hindu* because the newspaper dared to criticize its policies some years back. That newspaper had enough resources to fight its case legally and otherwise. But there is another kind of censorship which Shaw calls 'mob censorship' which is much in evidence. The Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, Pune, was attacked and its library ransacked by a mob because an American scholar obtained material for his book in which he made comments on Shivaji which were not acceptable to them. Exhibitions of M.F. Hussain's paintings have met with mob violence. Some films with unconventional views were not allowed to be shot or screened by agitators. The level of tolerance, the willingness to

listen to an opposite point of view with an open mind is becoming rarer by the day. Every person or organized group is jealous of his/its privileges and rights while he/it is insensitive to the privileges and rights of other fellow-citizens. The legislators, the bar, the bench and the media are easily annoyed by criticism of even the mildest and fairest kind. Privilege motions in legislatures, contempt proceedings in courts, and damage suits indicate the sensitivity of people in different positions. Another phenomenon of modern times which is euphemistically called 'media management' amounts to projecting and publicizing a preferred point of view and deliberately suppressing other points of view. The nexus between the media, big business, and the ruling class leads to a dangerous form of censorship. For instance, support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq was achieved through deft media management, although an overwhelming majority of people all over the world opposed the invasion. It was reported that President Bush summoned the top brass of the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* to his oval office to warn them against the publication of a report which was damaging to the U.S. government. The TV channels through the simple expedient of repeating the same story *ad infinitum* often distort the news. The capacity of the media to make the worse appear the better reason is immense. Recently, the owner of a newspaper in Hyderabad, India was investigated for illegal financial deals and tax evasion in his several businesses. Immediately there was a hue and cry that it was an attack on the freedom of the press. Some newspapers and political parties joined the chorus of protest, but the court drew a line between freedom of the press and illegal financial deals in other businesses by the same person. Shaw points out in his preface to *The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet* in which he discusses censorship by the Lord Chamberlain that the works of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Carlyle, Ruskin, Butler and others "would not have been published as they were all immoral and heretical in the very highest degree, and gave pain to many worthy and pious people" (411-412). Mohammed, Jesus, Galileo, Luther and Washington said and did things which were against the prevailing morality. An enlightened censorship by 'experts in morals, philosophy, religion, or politics, will lead to 'stagnant mediocrity' (422). Enlightened censors may examine plays, films, books, or art-works, and object to them and thus unwittingly promote the *status quo*.

4. Democracy

Bernard Shaw's views on democracy merit serious attention to anyone committed to improve the functioning of democratic institutions. Unfortunately, democracy even in the land of Abraham Lincoln, whose definition of democracy in his

Gettysburg address has become justly famous, is now a government controlled by financiers, industrialists, the military–industrial complex instead of being a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. As if to underscore this point, there was a popular adage until recently that what is good for GM is good for America. The U.S. presidential election in 2000 exposed the inefficiency of the U.S. electoral system. Doubts are cast over its fairness and legitimacy. The American senators and representatives are under the powerful influence of vested interests. There are 35,000 registered lobbyists in Washington D.C. alone, averaging 60 lobbyists per congressman. The lobbyists influence the legislators to vote for or against, to promote or prevent particular legislation to suit their clients. The confessions of Jack Abramoff, a corporate lobbyist, of his illegal activities such as bribery, fraud and tax evasion should be a matter of grave concern. The lobbyists in the U.S. spend \$25 million per congressman per year to get political advantage. They have created a "culture in which there is no distinction between what is legal and what is unethical" (Younge). A Republican congressman, Randy Cunningham, confessed that he had taken \$2.4 million in bribe and evaded \$1 million taxes. Ethics are a dispensable luxury for many legislators. The recent scandal in the British House of Commons, which prides itself as the mother of parliaments, revealed that members of different parties had no qualms in claiming tax payers' money for their personal expenses and luxuries. The elections in India in 2009 have brought many millionaires to the Parliament. Also, there are many members with criminal records. To cap it all, hardly a week after taking his oath, a member was arrested for murder. The criminal activities of members of Parliament, or of state legislatures, include human trafficking with fake passports, taking cash for asking questions, money laundering, bigamy, tax evasion, etc.

Shaw correctly identifies that the political problem in democracy is "how to select our rulers and prevent them from abusing their authority in their own interests or those of their class or religion" (*Prefaces* 327). His play, *The Apple Cart*, exposes how the parliamentary system is run by a private company, Breakages Limited, 'the biggest industrial corporation in the country,' owned by a member of the cabinet. Writing in 1930, Shaw states that the voters have 'no real choice of representatives' (328). What choice does a voter have when one candidate is an abettor of murder and his opponent a murderer; when a candidate steals electric power for his industries and his rival steals water for his farm? This happens across parties. The occasional name-calling by different political parties is only a case of the pot calling the kettle black. If some honest, public-spirited persons get elected it is more a matter of chance than willful choice. The ironic fact is that most political parties which swear by democracy do not really believe

in it, nor do they practice it. If elected, they maintain a facade of democracy. Again, politicians of all hues say that they want to serve the people. Is politics the only way to serve the people? Cannot someone remain an honest civil servant, police officer, or actor and do a lot of good to the people? Does one have to join a political party just when elections are due?

In the preface to *The Apple Cart* Shaw likens Democracy to "a big balloon filled with gas or hot air, and sent up so that you shall be kept looking up at the sky whilst other people are picking your pockets. When the balloon comes down to earth every five years or so you are invited to get into the basket if you can throw out one of the people who are sitting tightly in it...the balloon goes up again with much the same lot in it and leaves you where you were before...the balloon as an image of Democracy corresponds to the parliamentary facts" (329-330). Another comparison that Shaw makes is that most general elections are 'stampedes,' a description which fits our situation very well. There are stampedes for party tickets, stampedes while filing nomination papers, stampedes during canvassing, stampedes during polling, stampedes to celebrate victory, stampedes all the way. These stampedes occur across party lines and cause a lot of inconvenience to the public and resentment amongst the multitudes. Quite a few people lose their lives and many are injured during these jamborees. Quoting Dean Inge, Shaw says that "general elections have become public auctions at which the contending parties bid against one another for our votes by each promising us a larger share than the other of the plunder of the minority" (332-333). Parties in recent Indian elections tried to outbid each other by promising, free electric power, color TV sets, cheap rice, cash deposits, etc. Hence the analogy of the auction is very apt. Party tickets are often given to those who have money with the excuse of 'winnability.' The candidates for election literally buy their tickets, buy the votes through cash or kind, buy the legislators to form pressure groups, and finally buy cabinet berths. All this in the name of the party which in India has the word, "people" as a part of its title: Janata Dal, Bharatiya Janata Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Lok Janshakti Party, Praja Rajyam, etc. Shaw recognizes that 'government by the people,' if literally interpreted, is impossible. We cannot have a nation of Prime Ministers. Some of our Chief Ministers have attempted even that by forming omnibus cabinets to please as many as possible. The smaller the states and the ruling party's strength, the larger (that is, disproportionately) the cabinet. Everybody must be kept in good humor. In India, there are instances of only three members of a party in a coalition where all three end up as ministers. The prime minister is praised for his 'coalition skills' and for providing a 'stable' government. There is intense lobbying for

ministerships. Can't an M.P. or M.L.A. serve the people without being a minister? Oh, no! The simple fact is that there is much more money in a ministership than in an ordinary membership of a legislature. Money gives power, power gives money. It is a circle, vicious or otherwise. King Magnus in Shaw's *The Apple Cart* threatens to abdicate and contest the election as a commoner and form a government. This is nothing new in independent India. Many former maharajahs and maharanis joined one or the other political party, contested and won elections. Some became ministers; one became a chief minister. The elected ministers in Shaw's play pretend that what they do is sanctioned by 'the will of the people,' an oft-repeated political cliché. They seek to serve an ultimatum to the King to forgo his veto which they see as a threat to their power. But the King says that the veto is the only safeguard against 'the tyranny of popular ignorance and popular poverty' (Plays 1026). The real problem is not between democracy and tyranny, but between opportunism and integrity: Proteus, the Prime Minister, confesses: "I am Prime Minister for the same reason that all Prime Ministers have been Prime Ministers: because I am good for nothing else" (1021). How many of our ministers have the honesty and courage to make similar confessions? Ministers who lose elections are like fish out of water.

5. Medical profession

Bernard Shaw's clinical analyses of the medical profession are more valid today than perhaps in his day. He makes a blanket condemnation of the so-called noble profession: "it not only advocates and practices the most revolting cruelties in the pursuit of knowledge, and justifies them on grounds which would equally justify practicing the same cruelties on yourself or your children" (*Prefaces* 237-238). Shaw complains that it is difficult to prove anything against them. "The only evidence that can decide a case of malpractice is expert evidence; that is, the evidence of other doctors; and every doctor will allow a colleague to decimate a whole countryside sooner than violate the bond of professional etiquette by giving him away. And the doctors stand by one another at all costs" (247). That is a fine example of esprit de corps! It is indeed rare to find a doctor being punished for wrong diagnosis, for administering wrong drugs, for wrong surgical procedures, etc. If a patient dies, he is said to have died of natural causes; if he recovers, the doctor claims the credit. "In surgery all operations are recorded as successful, if the patient can be brought out of the hospital or nursing home alive though the subsequent history of the case may be such as would make an honest surgeon vow never to recommend or perform the operation again" (242) A number of

operations, Shaw feels, are quite unnecessary. There is a fashion in surgeries as there is a fashion in miniskirts. Caesarean section was once fashionable in the U.S. Tonsils, appendices, and uvulas were removed as such removal was fashionable for the public and very profitable for the surgeon. Plastic surgery and cosmetic dentistry are in vogue now. Shaw says " the psychology of fashion becomes pathology...fashions, after all, are induced epidemics, proving that epidemics can be induced by tradesmen, and therefore by doctors" (270). It is unfortunate that the medical profession thrives on disease. Shaw declares: "Of all the anti-social vested interests the worst is the vested interest in ill-health" (280). He was up in arms against the system of private medical practice as it obtained in 1906 when he wrote *The Doctor's Dilemma*. The Labour Party came to power four decades later and introduced the National Health Service in England.

The healthcare situation in India is pathetic. Medical treatment and health services are going out of reach of the bulk of the people, especially the middle and lower classes. Corporate hospitals which made an entry into the field in a big way run their establishments on avowed business principles. They are out to make profits and declare dividends to their share holders. Some of these corporate hospitals are located far away from the city and are not easily accessible to the common people. If a person goes to a doctor with even a minor complaint such as a headache, stomach pain or common cold, a battery of expensive tests and scans are ordered; four or five medicines are prescribed for the same ailment for a week. If these medicines fail to work, a new set of medicines is recommended. Our faith in the doctor's infallibility is such that we don't question him. Our own people discourage us from arguing with a doctor because they are afraid that the doctor may harm the patient instead of curing him. The number of scans and tests conducted and the number of drugs prescribed leaves a clear impression that there is a nexus between the pathology laboratories, the scanning centers, the pharmaceutical companies and the medical profession.

In the USA, there was a recent report on how the faculty at Harvard Medical School have pecuniary ties with many big drug companies which pay large amounts as consulting and speaking fees. The drug industry's bad reputation and its links with the Harvard Medical faculty are a cause for worry among the students (Wilson). The U.S government is waking up to this colossal fraud which endangers public health. Drug "manufacturers have repeatedly used consulting payments in illegal schemes to persuade doctors to prescribe drugs or devices in inappropriate and unapproved ways" (Harris). Legal action against such practices has been initiated a few months ago. No wonder the costs of

hospitalization reach astronomical figures! Corporate hospitals at times receive a number of concessions from the government like allotment of land at a low price, waiver of customs duty on imported equipment. In return, they promise to treat a certain percentage of poor patients. But they may occasionally fudge their records and bestow their attention and resources on affluent patients. Another reprehensible practice is that these hospitals provide shelter to rich and influential persons who are involved in crimes. Such criminals go straight to the corporate hospital instead of the prison. They stay in five star hospitals as long as they wish and the doctors are willing to certify that they are under treatment and hence cannot be disturbed or discharged. There are also instances of doctors performing surgery on the wrong side or the wrong organ causing irreversible damage to the patient. The Supreme Court of India recently ordered a well-known hospital in Hyderabad to pay Rs.one crore as compensation to a patient who suffered permanent disability due to wrong treatment.

6. Status of women

In the second half of the 20th century, the feminist movement spread in many parts of the world. Shaw was a feminist long before the term, 'feminism,' became familiar and fashionable. In his innumerable writings he championed the cause of women. Shaw's plays on Cleopatra, Joan of Arc and Catherine II encompassing different epochs of history show women as intelligent, wise, practical, and human. Cleopatra in Shaw's characterization in *Caesar and Cleopatra* is not a Circe, but an intelligent and determined teenage girl who graduates to the queenship of Egypt. She learns statecraft quickly; she captivates two of the greatest Romans of her day—Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. Another teenage girl who made an inerasable mark on European history is Joan of Arc. In *Saint Joan*, Shaw shattered the romantic image of the Maid. Shaw's Joan is guided by her common sense in all her activities. She declares: "I do not want to be thought of as a woman. I will not dress as a woman, I do not care for the things women care for....I dream of leading a charge, and placing the big guns" (*Plays* 977). Shaw shows Joan confronting the Dauphin, leading the French army at Orleans, facing her trial with defiance, and going to the stake with fortitude. In the 'Epilogue', she is projected as a saint, putting all her critics and foes to shame. This village girl took on a number of entrenched interests such as the French military establishment, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Feudal society. These are clearly brought out in the play. In *Great Catherine*, Shaw's focus is not on the intellectual accomplishments, diplomatic triumphs, and political

conquests of the Russian empress, but on Catherine the woman. In the play, she fancies a visiting British Captain, Edstaston, and tickles and tortures him. Shaw hints at her imperial indiscretions and royal debaucheries and pulls her down from the pedestal. Her human weaknesses in the context of her failed marriage put her on par with other ordinary women. There is nothing imperial or 'great' in Catherine the Great as far as her amorous adventures are concerned. She is jealous, cruel, and vindictive and without the trappings and grace of a cultured empress who presided over Russia for 34 years and cut a "magnificent figure" in 18th century Europe.

Shaw's women characters, historical or fictional, do not fit the popular stereotypes such as earth mother, docile housewife, or fashionable companion. Candida and Ann Whitefield are two women in Shaw's plays who do not exactly suit the prevailing notions of womanly woman and ladylike lady. Shaw started the process of de-romanticizing women from the beginning of his career. His second novel, *The Irrational Knot*, written in 1880, depicts the New Woman who thinks and acts on her own. Marian Lind, a self-willed woman, marries Cyril Connolly, an American electrical engineer, and soon discovers that her husband cares more for his profession than for her. She tells her cousin "I want to be a wife, not a fragile ornament kept in a glass case. He would as soon think of submitting any project of his to the judgment of a doll as to mine" (202). Shaw wrote this dialogue six years before he had heard of Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*, and read it in English translation. Shaw had specifically used the words, 'doll' and 'fragile ornament' referring to the position of women in Victorian society. If Marian Lind is a 'fragile ornament' to be handled with great care, Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* is taken as sturdy material for a phonetic experiment by Professor Henry Higgins to win a bet with Colonel Pickering. Higgins is too engrossed in and excited over the success of his experiment to care for the future of a transformed Eliza, the young woman. Cyril Connolly and Professor Higgins in their different ways didn't care for women as women, a point Shaw drives home. The treatment meted out to Marian Lind by her husband and to Eliza Doolittle by her teacher are extreme attitudes, neither of which takes cognizance of the woman. Shaw condemns both these attitudes and thereby upholds the individuality and dignity of women. Shaw is not content with presenting women as unwomanly and with portraying the New Woman who asserts her independence and fights for her rights. In his scheme of things, woman has a higher and nobler purpose. Although there are suggestions of this higher purpose even in Shaw's early writings, its fullest expression may be found in his *magnum opus*, *Man and Superman*. Here he turns the conventional view that man is the

hunter and woman the quarry upside down. In Shaw's view, man is an instrument for realizing the grand design of the Life Force. Ann Whitefield had chosen Jack Tanner without his knowledge to be the father of the Superman who is omnipotent, omniscient and infallible. Ann is Everywoman. Joan of Arc is another manifestation of the Life Force as Shaw sees her. The quintessential male feminist that was Shaw pulled woman from the pedestal, but he accorded her the status of the Life Force which would eventually produce a superior race.

7. Conclusion

In the foregoing pages, only a few topics on which Bernard Shaw's opinions are still valid are discussed. But there are many other issues on which his views shed light. A cursory glance at the index to his *Prefaces* reveals the astonishing range of his interests. From Adam and Eve to Atoms and Electrons, from the Abbey Theatre to the Zetetical Society, from aeronautics to x-rays, he has written on a vast variety of topics with the knowledge of an expert and the acumen of a judge. Many of the problems such as slum landlordism (*Widowers' Houses*), prostitution (*Mrs. Warren's Profession*), divorce (*Getting Married*), children's rights (*Misalliance*) and anti-romantic view of war (*Arms and the Man*) which he had dealt with in his plays, prefaces, and other works, have a validity even today. To be able to write with authority on topics of his period and yet make his writings surprisingly relevant to future generations is the mark of a genius which Bernard Shaw undoubtedly was. He was far ahead of his times and his claim that his prefaces, and one might add, his entire canon, will last as long as the Gospels and Socrates' dialogues, is no idle boast, but plain statement of a fact.

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