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GANDHIAN THOUGHT AND POLITICAL MORALITY: A STUDY OF G. SHANKARA PILLAI'S *SABARMATI DOOREYAANU*

Dr. RAJESH MK

Asst. Professor, Dept. of Malayalam, MES Kalladi College (Autonomous),
Mannarkkad, Palakkad Dist., Kerala state, India

Abstract: This study analyzes G. Sankara Pillai's play Sabarmati Dooreyaanu through the interrelationship of history, memory, Gandhian politics, social relations, and power. Rather than merely glorifying Gandhian ideals, the play problematizes the gap between the values of truth, non-violence, social equality, and human brotherhood associated with the freedom struggle and the realities of post-independence Indian society. The symbolism of "Sabarmati" and its being "far away" forms the central metaphor of the play. The Sabarmati–Noakhali duality represents conflicts between ideal and reality, non-violence and violence, and human brotherhood and social hatred. History is presented not as a closed sequence of past events but as a living memory that interrogates the present. Gandhi's presence becomes a moral criterion through which the deficiencies of contemporary society are measured. Through a close reading, the paper examines the workings of caste, class, ownership, power, and residual feudal values within family relationships. The play's aesthetic strength lies in representing larger political history through intimate human relationships and everyday conversations. Character language, forms of address, power relations, Venu's blindness, and the ancestral portrait function as dramatic symbols that reveal the complexity of social history. While engaging with certain features of Brechtian political drama and encouraging critical reflection rather than passive emotional identification, the play transcends any single political theory. It explores the interconnectedness of personal life, social structure, and national history. The paper concludes that the declaration "Sabarmati is far away" is not an end to hope, but a call for collective self-criticism and moral introspection.

Index Terms - Gandhian thought, Sabarmati, Noakhali, historical memory, political drama, social power, feudal memory, symbolism, Brechtian theatre.

I. INTRODUCTION

G. Sankara Pillai is a prominent playwright who has developed drama as a critical medium for exploring social, political, and moral crises rather than merely as entertainment or storytelling. His plays bring history, politics, social relations, and individual conflicts into dynamic interaction. In this context, *Sabarmati Dooreyaanu (Sabarmati is Far Away)* deserves particular attention. The play engages explicitly with Gandhi and Gandhian thought, problematizing the contradiction between Gandhian values and the realities of post-independence Indian society.

The title itself provides an entry into the play's central idea. Sabarmati is not merely a geographical location. Associated with Gandhi's life and political philosophy, Sabarmati Ashram occupies a significant place in Indian historical consciousness as a symbol of truth, non-violence, self-reliance, human equality, and moral politics. In the play, however, Sabarmati functions not as a historical monument but as a moral standard against which the present is measured.[i]

The declaration "Sabarmati is far away" signifies more than geographical distance; it questions how far truth, non-violence, and equality have receded from contemporary life. The distance is therefore moral and

ideological, marking the gap between Gandhian ideals and post-independence social reality. This study examines the play through Gandhian political morality, historical memory, social relations, caste and class structures, feudal remnants, power, and symbolism. It focuses particularly on the Sabarmati–Noakhali opposition, ideological conflicts, family relationships, and the social history embedded in language. The central argument is that the play's politics emerges not through slogans but through its revelation of larger social histories within everyday human relationships.

II. G. SANKARA PILLAI AND THE POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF MODERN MALAYALAM DRAMA

Sabarmati Dooreyaanu cannot be adequately understood through its theme alone; its literary and historical significance becomes clearer when situated within G. Sankara Pillai's theatrical vision and the development of modern Malayalam drama.

Modern Malayalam drama moved beyond traditional linear conventions to explore social experience, historical consciousness, and political crises. It increasingly examined not merely why events occur but the social structures and power relations shaping individual lives. Sabarmati Dooreyaanu reflects this modern dramatic consciousness. Its significance lies less in plot development than in the ideological conflicts emerging through character relationships. Conversations and emotional tensions within a family gradually reveal larger social contradictions, bringing national history into intimate personal life. Gandhi's presence evokes the national past, while the characters' everyday experiences expose its unresolved consequences. The tension between the ideals of the freedom struggle and a reality marked by hierarchy, possessiveness, and inequality forms the play's political structure. Politics operates through domestic conversations, forms of address, attitudes, and claims to property. The play's major aesthetic achievement lies in condensing larger historical realities into intimate human relationships.

III. SABARMATI–NOAKHALI: IDEAL AND HISTORICAL REALITY

"Why all this celebration? ... Sabarmati is far away; Noakhali is near" constitutes the central conceptual axis of the play.[ii] Sabarmati and Noakhali function not merely as historical locations but as two contrasting moral possibilities within human society.

Sabarmati symbolizes Gandhian ideals of truth, non-violence, self-discipline, human brotherhood, and social equality, reflecting the belief that morality, social action, and politics are inseparable.

Noakhali, by contrast, evokes communal violence, division, and the moral failure of politics. Gandhi's intervention during the 1946 riots gives this reference particular significance. Together, Sabarmati and Noakhali form the play's moral map: one represents human brotherhood and the other hatred and division. Their relationship is not geographical but reflects opposing possibilities in human history.

The play suggests that political independence does not necessarily ensure social liberation. Caste, inequality, communal hatred, and structures of power may survive freedom. Thus, *Sabarmati Dooreyaanu* dramatizes the unresolved gap between political independence and moral-social transformation.

IV. HISTORY, MEMORY, AND THE PRESENT: A SENSE OF TIME IN DRAMA

A distinctive feature of *Sabarmati Dooreyaanu* is its treatment of history not as completed events but as a force confronting the moral and political crises of the present. "Sabarmati" evokes Gandhian values, while its being "far away" highlights the distance between those ideals and contemporary reality. History thus becomes an active presence that interrogates the present.

The connection between Sabarmati and Noakhali reinforces this historical consciousness. Recalling Noakhali amid celebration foregrounds the violence concealed by narratives of historical success. Gandhi therefore appears not as an object of nostalgia but as a moral criterion for evaluating the present.

Memory does not become nostalgia, since Sabarmati represents not a lost golden age but an unrealized moral possibility. Its remembrance produces discomfort by exposing the erosion of values and changes in social relations. The play consequently challenges linear notions of progress: political independence alone cannot guarantee moral or social advancement. "Sabarmati is far away" therefore signifies not abandonment of hope but recognition of society's moral distance. The intersection of history, memory, and the present deepens the play's political and ethical critique.

The Central Metaphor of 'Distance'

The concept of "distance" in the title provides the key to the play's symbolic structure. Sabarmati's distance is not merely geographical but moral, measuring how far truth, non-violence, and social equality have receded from contemporary life.

While Sabarmati represents an aspired moral world, Noakhali evokes its historical failure. Similarly, the house brings characters together physically while maintaining invisible social and emotional distances. Different social experiences and generations divide those who share the same space. Thus, "distance" becomes a metaphor for historical, social, political, moral, and personal divisions.

The metaphor operates at several levels: historical distance between Gandhi's time and the present; generational distance between those who experienced Gandhian politics and those who know it through history; social distance created by caste and class; moral distance between professed equality and practice; political distance between independence and *Swaraj*; and personal distance between individuals living together.

Thus, physical proximity does not ensure moral closeness. In *Sabarmati Dooreyaanu*, people may share the same house yet remain distant from one another, making "distance" a philosophical and political problem of human relationships.

Rereading Gandhi: Beyond Idealization

To understand Gandhi's presence in the play, it is insufficient to view him merely as a historical figure. Gandhi functions as a question. A society may commemorate him through portraits and celebrations, yet remembering Gandhi is not the same as practicing Gandhian values. The play exposes this contradiction between public commemoration and lived ethics.

For Gandhi, non-violence was not merely a political strategy but a moral approach grounded in truth. In the play, Gandhian thought becomes a moral criterion through which social relationships and practices are examined. Its central question is: *Where do Gandhian values exist in our lives?* Rather than presenting Gandhi as an unquestionable saint, the playwright brings his ideas into confrontation with the present. Gandhi thus becomes a disturbing question concerning political power, social hierarchy, and human relationships.

The title and opening statement establish a fundamental political contradiction: alongside national celebration exist violence, division, and suffering. Gandhi's observation, "Why so jubilant? Sabarmati is far off; Noakhali is near," questions the moral meaning of political achievement. Political victory, the play suggests, cannot automatically be equated with human liberation. A nation is constituted not merely by territory or political authority but also by the values and relationships of its people. When a politically free society continues to reproduce hatred and inequality, the meaning of freedom becomes questionable.

Power in the play extends beyond the authority of the state and operates through social structures, human relationships, and cultural values. Gandhian ideals of equality and human dignity provide a moral counterpoint to these structures. Violence is similarly understood in a broader sense, including humiliation, hatred, social division, and oppressive systems. The memory of Noakhali reinforces this understanding. Non-violence therefore becomes not passive pacifism but ethical resistance to conditions that normalize violence.

The play's central political irony lies in the gap between Gandhi's symbolic presence in national memory and the absence of Gandhian values in social practice. This distance gives "Sabarmati is far away" its political force. Rather than offering a simplistic solution or idealizing the past, the play compels the audience to recognize this moral distance as a condition of political consciousness. Thus, *Sabarmati Dooreyaanu* interrogates freedom, power, violence, and morality, questioning whether political independence necessarily constitutes human liberation. Significantly, these concerns emerge through conflicts within an ordinary family, demonstrating that politics operates not only in public institutions but also in everyday conversations and intimate relationships.

VI. CHARACTERS AND IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICTS

The political and philosophical dimensions of the play emerge primarily through relationships between its characters. What initially appears as the private world of a family gradually becomes an arena in which social history, politics, and caste and class relations intersect. Characters such as Shanti, Thevan, Venu, and Madhavan embody different forms of social consciousness, and their relationships dramatize ideological conflict.

Shanti: History, Memory, and a New Language of Relationships

One of the striking opening moments of the play is Shanti's reading of Gandhi's statement beginning, "Why so jubilant?" Initially, it appears as a lesson, yet she cannot understand its meaning without seeking an explanation. This question reveals a generational problem: Gandhi survives as history, but the moral context of his words has become distant from contemporary life.

Gandhi's words remain in textbooks and national memory, while statues and commemorations preserve his public image. Yet the younger generation must rediscover their living meaning. Shanti's question therefore exposes the gap between historical remembrance and social practice. Her response to Thevan's address, "Kochuthamburatty," further illustrates this awareness. The term carries the memory of an unequal social order, and by rejecting it, Shanti challenges the social hierarchy embedded in language.

However, Shanti does not reject Thevan himself. She seeks a new language of relationship by understanding his memories and emotions. When Thevan recalls the deceased Mala, Shanti suggests that he may address her simply as "Mala." This gesture represents the possibility of relationships beyond inherited status and conventional social boundaries.

Thevan: The Living Presence of Social Memory

Thevan embodies the memory of an older social order, but cannot be reduced to a representative of feudalism. His consciousness combines social hierarchy with emotional dependence, affection, and attachment to the past. Having lived within older relations, he struggles to adopt the language of equality; history continues to shape his speech and emotions.

Feudal relations involve complexities beyond domination, as power may coexist with protection and dependence with intimacy. Thevan embodies these contradictions: though shaped by the old order, he remains emotionally attached to its values. His character shows how social history becomes inscribed in individual consciousness, while memory can both recall the past and preserve older power structures.

The play thus shows that structural change does not immediately transform consciousness. Even after feudal institutions decline, their language, values, and emotional patterns may persist. Thevan therefore represents the psychological complexity of historical transformation.

Venu: Moral Vision Beyond Sight

Venu's physical blindness creates an important symbolic distinction between physical sight and moral vision. Shanti approaches the blind Venu to understand the Gandhian statement. The irony is significant: one who cannot physically see helps another recognize what must be morally seen.

His blindness is therefore not merely a personal limitation but a dramatic device redefining vision. True vision lies in recognizing injustice, inequality, and human distance. A society may possess physical sight yet remain morally blind by celebrating freedom while ignoring inequality or honoring Gandhi without practicing his values. Venu's blindness is also connected to his political experience. He recounts losing his sight when a grenade exploded during his work for the Non-Cooperation Movement and Hindu-Muslim unity amid communal violence. Though physically blinded, he retains a clear vision of equality. This paradox gives his character strong symbolic significance.

Madhavan: Ownership and the Language of Power

The relationship between ownership and power is embodied in Madhavan. His repeated assertion—"This is my house... my house"—is more than a property claim; the language of "mine" becomes an assertion of authority over space and others. The question of whose house it is thus becomes a question of inclusion, exclusion, and social legitimacy.

Madhavan's conflict with Shanti and Venu is therefore not merely personal. His consciousness reproduces a social order in which relationships are structured by hierarchy. The play presents feudalism not only as an economic system but also as a psychological and cultural residue that survives institutional change. This is evident in his treatment of Muhammad Kasim and Thevan. Madhavan blocks water from reaching Kasim's field, driven by communal prejudice rather than agricultural necessity, and sends Thevan to prevent Kasim from opening the embankment despite the danger. His actions target both Kasim and Thevan, making Thevan the vulnerable victim of these structures. Madhavan thus embodies feudal consciousness intertwined with communal hatred. His language further exposes caste and class consciousness, making his conflict with Venu a confrontation between opposing moral worlds. Beneath this personal conflict lie the caste, class, and feudal histories that continue to shape Kerala society.

VII. HOME: FROM PRIVATE SPACE TO POLITICAL SPACE

The play interrogates the relationship between private life and politics by transforming the family home into a reflection of larger social structures. The home becomes a site where ownership, status, authority, inclusion, and exclusion are negotiated. Madhavan's possessiveness, Thevan's inherited social position, Shanti's egalitarian consciousness, and Venu's moral vision create competing worlds within the household. Thus, the home becomes a miniature form of society.

Power operates not only through state institutions but also through families, language, habits, and everyday relationships.[iii] How individuals address one another, who makes decisions, whose presence is considered legitimate, and who controls property may appear to be domestic concerns, yet they reveal larger structures of social power. National history and family life are therefore inseparable: inequalities embedded in society are reproduced in intimate relationships.

VIII. THE POLITICAL AESTHETICS OF THE PLAY

The play's major artistic achievement lies in transforming political concerns into dramatic conflicts without reducing them to abstract discourse. Gandhi, non-violence, caste, class, equality, and power are embodied in human relationships: social history emerges through Shanti and Thevan, power through Madhavan's language of ownership, and moral vision through Venu. These intimate conflicts generate the play's larger political

questions. Rather than instructing the audience, the drama creates political and moral unease, leaving questions rather than ready-made answers.

In this respect, the play engages with the broader consciousness of modern political theatre. While it cannot be treated as a direct example of Brechtian drama, its emphasis on critical reflection rather than passive emotional absorption resonates with Brechtian theatrical principles.[iv]

The play's aesthetic strength lies in condensing larger history into intimate human relationships. Politics emerges through everyday interactions: caste becomes a lived relationship, power becomes behavior, feudalism survives as an attitude, and Gandhism becomes not a lesson to memorize but an ethical way of life. This integration of political consciousness with dramatic form makes *Sabarmati Dooreyaanu (Sabarmati is Far Away)* a significant work of modern political drama.

Gandhian Equality and Kerala Social Reality

The caste and class dimensions of the play acquire greater complexity when read alongside Gandhian ideals. Although human dignity, service, and social equality are central to Gandhian thought, caste hierarchy remained deeply embedded in Indian social life. The distance between the ideal world represented by Sabarmati and social reality therefore operates not only at the level of national politics but also within the family and local community. In this context, the title *Sabarmati Dooreyaanu (Sabarmati is Far Away)*acquires an additional social meaning. Sabarmati is distant not merely because the politics of non-violence has weakened, but because human equality has yet to become an everyday reality. The play implicitly asks how Gandhian humanism can be realized when social structures prevent people from even relating to one another as equals.

Old and New: Beyond a Simple Dichotomy

The play avoids a simplistic opposition between the old and the new. Older relationships may contain affection and intimacy while remaining shaped by unequal power, just as the younger generation's language of equality may still carry inherited historical burdens. Social transformation is therefore a prolonged process in which old values persist while new one’s struggle to emerge.

The relationship between Shanti and Thevan represents this complexity rather than a simple generational conflict. One generation seeks to transform social relationships, while another preserves its memories and identity through inherited patterns. Thus, social change involves not only institutions but also deeply embedded memories, emotions, and ways of relating to others.

Journey to Sabarmati: The Politics of Hope

The reference to Sabarmati at the end of the play acquires particular significance in this context. To say that Sabarmati Dooreyaanu (Sabarmati is Far Away) does not mean that the journey towards it is impossible. Recognizing the distance is itself the beginning of a sense of direction. The political vision of the play therefore does not end in despair. Rather than declaring Gandhian values permanently lost, it urges the audience to confront their distance from them.

Hope emerges from this recognition. Only those who recognize the distance can understand the necessity of the journey. The hope articulated by the play is therefore not one of passive consolation but of critical awareness—a hope that confronts social failures without concealing them and seeks the possibility of a renewed moral direction.

IX. CONCLUSION

G. Sankara Pillai's *Sabarmati Dooreyaanu (Sabarmati is Far Away)* is a political and moral drama that interrogates the gap between Gandhian ideals and the realities of post-independence Indian society. Sabarmati, associated with truth, non-violence, equality, and human brotherhood, becomes a moral metaphor, while its "distance" signifies the gap between these ideals and their lived realization.

The play effectively represents national history through intimate relationships. Through Shanti, Venu, Thevan, and Madhavan, questions of caste, class, authority, ownership, hierarchy, and feudal remnants enter the domestic space, transforming the family into a microcosm of social history. The play suggests that political and legal changes cannot immediately erase inherited values, which continue through language, behavior, and relationships.

The Sabarmati–Noakhali opposition reinforces this critique. While Sabarmati represents non-violence and human solidarity, Noakhali evokes violence, hatred, and division. Gandhi's memory therefore functions not as nostalgic celebration but as a moral question addressed to the present. The play distinguishes between commemorating Gandhi and practicing Gandhian values.

Its political force emerges through conversations, conflicts, silences, and symbols. Venu's blindness becomes a metaphor for moral vision, while the ancestral portrait signifies the continuing presence of the past. Thus, political and historical questions are transformed into lived dramatic experiences.

Ultimately, the play neither offers an easy solution nor returns nostalgically to the past. "Sabarmati is far away" signifies the continuing distance between society and its ethical aspirations. At the same time, recognizing this distance creates the possibility of ethical reflection and social transformation. The play therefore remains relevant as a continuing interrogation of inequality, hatred, power, and moral responsibility.

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[i] Sabarmati Ashram was one of the principal centers of Mahatma Gandhi's political and social experiments. In Indian historical consciousness, Sabarmati has come to symbolize Gandhian ideals and practices associated with truth, non-violence, self-reliance, and social equality.

[ii] As independence approached, Gandhi became increasingly disturbed by the growing competition for power and political self-interest. On 5 June 1947, he wrote: "It is very difficult—practically impossible—to achieve real Swaraj without self-denial... But today we are in competition for positions of power. Shall I call it my own tragedy and the tragedy of truth, non-violence, and the struggle?"

Competitive nationalism reached its peak during the Partition. On 25 July 1947, Gandhi wrote to a colleague: "Why all the celebration? Purna Swaraj is so far away. Have we got Swaraj? Is Swaraj only the end of British rule? Not so in my mind. Sabarmati is so far away for me; Noakhali is near."

[iii] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Pantheon Books, 1980.

[iv] Modern theatre increasingly conceives of the audience as active participants in the dramatic experience rather than passive recipients. Brechtian political theatre, in particular, emphasizes the development of critical consciousness beyond emotional identification. See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett, Hill and Wang, 1964.

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