

Subaltern Consciousness in Odia Poetry : An Approach

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At present many places in outlying Odisha dubbed beneath the pressure of a war like situation between ultras left and the security forces. The operational strategy of the former appears like gaining strength posing a formidable challenge to the state machinery. Is it a law and order problem alone? Unless the Government takes a serious view of this social catastrophe, further damages to the state can't be overruled.

Socio-economic disparity leading to unemployment, poverty, malnutrition and such other indicators of a falling society come to occupy our mindset whenever we come forward to tackle a problem of this kind. The idea of emancipation of Dalits is an off shoot of this burning issue. In a global sphere, problems covering international issues may not generate that much heat equalising this. Both Government as well as social thinkers has to think aloud to find out a solution or else it will cost further human lives and properties thus forcing many of us to cry in wilderness.

When we closely watch the ebb and flow of an Indian society, several scenes occupy our mind. Let us hear such kind of a real story sketched by P. Sainath in his book 'Everybody Loves a Good Drought'

“Almost all the labourers are migrants from the Kalahandi-Nuapada and Bolangir areas of Orissa. They are trying to escape hunger at home – by slaving at brick kilns in Andhra Pradesh. Rana Nahak is very pleased, though to learn that I visited his native Tarbod village in Nuapada just days earlier. Were all in the village well when you went there?”

“Mean while, the old man moves towards the stocking area. Each brick he carries weighs about two and a half kilos and he carries twenty of them. In the course of the day, he could make forty five trips between pit and yard a distance of 25 to 50 metres depending on which end of the stocking area he is headed for. And he would be lugging along 45 k.g. on every trip. Each carrier does this with a half-running goose-steps of a gait. They maintain this sort of rhythm to avoid dropping the bricks and to be able to do the required number of trips. When the old man with or without the aid of his family members has lifted nearly two tonnes of bricks in this manner, they earn around nine rupees.”¹

Although the above scene is in retrospect way back to the year 1996, nothing much has changed so far except a smaller increase in the value of human labour.

So is it not the need of the hour for the poets to sketch the stress and strain of this toiling class, who has been deprived of minimum necessities in life. The burgeoning middle class to which majority of the Odia poets belong, as yet think it prudent not to portray a subject matter of this kind presuming it unattractive. In stead, they drip with their creativity picking subjects at random which hardly have relevance for many. "Instead of fabricated situations and imaginary problems, the life around us should be portrayed realistically". So time would be out of gear, if a poet starts booking plot in the moon. It is high time to think of life in real terms.

A book entitled "Talisman" is translated from Tamil into English written by Thrumaa Valavan and the translator is Meena Kandasamy. Some excerpts

"For the sole reason of their being people of the Cheri (in Tamil, a Dalit ghetto), Dalits have excrement and urine forced into their mouths, such cruelties take place in broad daylight without the least bit of reserve. Recently, in Madurai district, a woman poured excrement mixed in water on the face of Muthumari, a Dalit woman of the Keela Urappanur village, in front of several others. The woman who did this was an 'Upper' caste woman! How can a person be a writer, if she/he doesn't surge with emotions even after she/he sees and hears about such atrocities?"²

Of course, it is true that the literary world rarely bothers an incident of this kind. The fancy of middle class stands like a filter to avoid such scenes in any creative form, may be story or poetry. 'Such historical records have been destroyed only because the history of the oppressed people is continuously blacked out.'

Subaltern consciousness in Odia poetry is more akin to Dalitism and its depiction. The

framework initiated by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Bhimmarao (Babasaheb) Ambedkar, although took its root in Maharashtra, it left indelible prints in the minds of several intellectuals, poets and writers belonging to different languages and literatures including Odia. However, some scholars lay their opinion such as "It wants to enable the Dalits and others to visualise the intellectual journey from the immediate to the abstract from the familiar to the universal from the empirical to the theoretical."³ Subaltern consciousness is more or less similar to that of portrayal of Dalitism in literature.

Romila Thapar, the Historian "traces the roots of this category in Pali literature in which Dalit means "the oppressed". Sunita Reddy Bharati goes a little further. She says "Today, the subaltern communities that have been discriminated against for centuries identify themselves as Dalits. They find a new identity by coming together with the perspective 'Dalit is dignified' thereby rejecting the sub-human status imposed on them by the Hindu social order."

Subaltern consciousness can also have new bearing against an established tradition of cult hood preaching several abstract theories. Gangadhar Pantwane's letter to Zelliott in 2001 may add further thought to this. He says "To me, Dalit is not the caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He doesn't believe in God, rebirth, soul, holy books, teaching separatism, fate and heaven because they have made him a slave"⁴. In Odia poetry Sachi Routray, Rabi Singh, Brajanath Rath, Hussain Rabigandhi, Sadashiv Das, Prasanna Patsani and many others have spelt out this theory in a wider form. For instance, they are commonly accessible for the general readers.

Where is the Almighty?
the sky and the

gust of wind
reverberate in my ear
no.....not the least.

Where is the Almighty?

Sachi Routray

Tr. A. K. Mishra.

Sachi Routray, the veteran of Oriya poets negates the existence of God in unmistakable terms. Similar is with Rabi Singh, another connoisseur in the line. Surendra Mohanty, the Novelist once said, "In poverty and humiliation persons like you and I shall go down to a stage of roughness but for a poet, it makes him steel tempered." He aimed at Rabi Singh, the rebel poet championing the cause of Dalits. His rhythmic urge explores matching creative impulse to fuse with the cause of the oppressed. The God, lone justification of worship is now besmirched with the blood of a killing. It is not understood, if by saying this, he has acknowledged the existence of a super power or something, the other way round.

Religion

can't be the cult of a coward
or the meanness of communalism
man, wherever
belongs to the same sect
eh! Why don't you appreciate
this smallest truth.

"An appeal"

Rabi Singh

Tr. A. K. Mishra

Rabi Singh's poems are models of simplicity, although at times accused of clogged thoughts. While evaluating Odia poetry, it is proved that emancipation of Dalit is very often an overlooked chapter. Our poets deal mainly with soft-focus theme, so that there is no scope for

bitterness with any one. Something like crying for a flower when the whole garden is engulfed in fire. One has to take care of the society, when the society takes care of oneself. It is a set pattern of natural law and Odia poets subscribing to the idea of Dalitism uphold a common consciousness on this. Hussain Rabigandhi cries "The kingdom of appetite expands to the horizon, before which the vast empire of Alexander looks smaller. Prasanna Patsani's poems define his connection with ground reality a cumulative mundane substance, defying any experiment in the name and style of modernism. What kind of myopic a king could be!

The king could come across
no tear-drops
on the blade of grass,
leaves of the tree
turns yellow
not even a single bird is seen anywhere
the eastern sky
fades away
into the thick mist
the king yelled
with a smile
dawn of a golden age
breaks against my land
to fill years of void.

"The King" ⁵

Tr. A. K. Mishra

Here, the poetic tone is anti-feudal, laughing fun at the throne while taking sides with the cause of the oppressed. Raghunath Das poem leads more to its persuasive theory of depicting the severity of human trade. He emphatically takes the cause of the oppressed, say downtrodden. Historically, in a feudal hierarchy, subjugation of labour force at the lower strata has been rampant Excerpts:

Eh king ! Listen
 there is deafening sound from
 thunder, the raw human flesh
 was put to sale
 for a profitable gain
 but now, one has to figure out
 in details, both principal and interest
 slaves are not we
 in no way life is futile
 no.....not at all.

“Gana Pati”⁶

Raghunath Das
 Tr. A. K. Mishra

Manmohan Mishra lent out a trend espousing the cause of workers and peasants. During 50s emergence of labour strike became a common phenomenon in several industrial establishments. Mishra’s poems, with lyrical grandeur proved their mettle for many and the labour class found the same as their ways of emancipating them from social oppression: Like Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet, commented by another poet Garcia Lorca, Mishra is ‘closer to blood than to ink’.

The more is the rise of sin
 anguish and rule of despot
 urging on with the whip of
 exploitation
 the more would be the mood
 for a son of the soil
 to get awake
 in tearing the poison out,
 for letting the nectar in.

Manmohan Mishra
 Tr. A. K. Mishra

Patterns of social deal, as carved out by higher castes, were followed dogmatically by lower castes because of a notion to acquire

greater prestige by the latter. In Maharashtra, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and others voiced against this blind following. Resultantly, women became arbiter of their own destiny. The freedom of choice to decide upon one’s own marriage stood solidly against the system of child marriage. In marriage, slowly self-choice became the deciding factor in stead of the material attainments of parents like property, social status etc. The evils of dowry got opposed in several platforms by none other than women folk themselves. The weaker voices of women find mighty echo in the poems of Giribala Mohanty, Kanakalata Singh and others.

Responsibility of Odia poets gradually increases to devote their creativity for the cause of Dalits. The committed group doesn’t agree to the idea of experiments in poetry through imagism, impressionism, existentialism, surrealism and such other ‘isms’ found in the writings very often. Dalit aestheticism doesn’t agree to the concept of beauty in ‘sunrise’ or ‘moonlit night’. It doesn’t praise a ‘rose’ or ‘jasmine’ as they have nothing to do with taming the bellies of hungry millions. Their basic endeavour is to highlight the concern of downtrodden more in the form of sharpening their consciousness against the rottenness of the society. It is not the fact that a Dalit writer does not love to see the dancing of butterflies in the mid-air or the twinkling of stars in the mid horizon but they count such scenes as back benchers in the teeth of a fluid class based vision. In a succession of toiling moments, when we see farmers sticking to their ploughs in country side, rarely any one looks at the vast sky to derive aesthetic solace out of it. Let us take a case study from P. Sainath’s ‘Everybody Loves a Good Drought’.

It was in July 1985 that Phanas Punji, in her early thirties, shot to notoriety. She had, so the story went ‘sold’ her fourteen-year-old sister-

in-law, Banita Punji, to the nearby blind Bidya Podh. He paid Rs. 40.00 to buy Banita and use her as a 'domestic servant'. When the society sends shock waves to mass media through a news of this kind, will not the same society expect a much better sense and sensibility from the pen of its poets. This reiterates an earlier saying of the poet Shelley "that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind." Stephen Spender, the British poet puts it in other way: "Yet I would not care to dispute the truth of the observation of someone who said that a modern poet, launching forth his slim volume of verse today, is like a person dropping a feather over the edge of the Grand Canyon and then waiting for the echo." ⁷ Dalit poetry or poetry based on Dalitism can not borrow anything from an observation of this kind. It is altogether a parallel set up to communicate its effectiveness like an incandescent spirit. Spender says 'The contradiction between' 'personal issues' and 'newspaper issues' disappears when one reflects that no newspaper issue is a subject for art unless it is felt by the artist as one affecting him personally." But what would happen when even newspaper doesn't take care of highlighting events happening at the ground level ?

Ashutosh Parida, the poet, satirises a slavish tongue and the destructive phases of one's identity. The broken status of a Dalit is well pronounced :

Let you
fulfil the first condition
of tempted slavery,
offer up the tongue
in your own hand
cherishing a free will,
turn into a dumb
to testify a full-proof
loyalty, well

voice of protest
doesn't sound from
any where

"Sacrificing the tongue"

Ashutosh Parida

Tr. A. K. Mishra

'Human Rights Watch' in their compilation entitled "Broken People" (2001) have conducted systematic investigations into the affairs of Dalits in India. On Dalits, there have been critical comments in the book such as "They may not use the same wells, visit the same temples, drink from the same cups in tea stalls or lay claim to land that is legally theirs. The caste system is an economic order. It prevents some one from owning land or receiving an education. It is a vicious cycle and an exploitative economic arrangement. Land owning patterns and being a high-caste member are coterminous. (R. Balakrishnan, Chairman, Tamil Nadu Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes). ⁸

Appropriate legal step in safeguarding constitutional guarantees in the form of freedom and justice are to be ensured through state machinery. "Untouchability" is prevented vide article 17 of the Constitution of India. Further. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (prevention of atrocities) Act, 1989 is there to uphold dignity of these communities and govt. in the helm of affairs is sufficiently armed to ensure protective measures. At both state and district level, state and district level vigilance and monitoring committees function as envisaged by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (prevention of Atrocities) Rules, 1995 and the Act both. Unless atrocities on these communities are redressed effectively and implementation of both Act and Rules are enforced strictly, eradication

of caste violence and discrimination will still remain an unsolved proposition. Article covering sec-14 of Indian Constitution spells out clearly that the state shall not deny to any person equally before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. Similarly article 15 expresses prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth or any of them.

Like Hindi Dalit autobiographies as revealed from the text from *Tiraskrit* by Surajpal Chauhan “The Thakur’s ground was very big. And my back was breaking to clean such a big area. That day, I realized how much pain my mother must feel when she cleans such a large area and picks up the dung of the cows and buffalo.” Although these are in prose lines, this has safely been experimented in Odia poetry by poet Basudev Sunani in his poetry collection “Asprusya” (Untouchable) :

See ! He houses
in the outskirts of the village
bathes separately
in the pond while at walk
maintains distance from others.
We have built up
road to our dwelling places
without elevating the verandah
and making the same
like a cow-shed
so that people could identify
from a distance, that
is the front yard
of the untouchable.

“Go to the outskirts of the village”

Basudev Sunani
Tr. A. K. Mishra

‘Dalit Panthers’, set up since 1972,
pioneers the cause of Dalit in Marathi literature

with Arjun Dangle, J. V. Power, Namdeo Dhasal and many other poets as its front runners. They are writer-activists too. ‘Poisoned Bread’, ‘No Entry for the Sun’, ‘Homeless in My Land’ and many such anthologies have been edited by Arjun Dangle. He writes: “Silenced for centuries by caste prejudice and social oppression, the Dalits of Maharashtra (formerly called ‘Untouchables’) have only in the last forty years found a powerful voice in Marathi literature.” In “An Ultimatum”, poet Yashwant Manohar expresses” I fill a foreigner among the people, bearing the burden of such a bastard life”⁹

Sadashiv Dash welcomes the advent of a new culture with an eye on every working force to get due share of his labour. The changes might be in the form of turbulence transgressing its erstwhile morbidity.

Who are those waves
of the Ganges,
the fertile soil
the bird of smiling grief
like fragrance from flowers
and chorus of colourful
approaching days
who knows him
who has stirred up
the violent storm
in the calm water.

‘Aspiring freedom’
Sadashiv Dash
Tr. A. K. Mishra

Bharat Majhi, the poet abhors all beliefs relating to image worship. Through Poetry, he determines fresh values denying metaphysical equations with divine power:

Past night
I have sold away

the necklace, *Kaustubha*
of the God, the earring
of Ma Laxmi
and in exchange
consumed drinks
in the rural *haat* of Habaspur.

‘Conspirator’
Bharat Majhi
Tr. A. K. Mishra

Ranjit Guha in his book “Subaltern Studies (V)” states “Historians should not in my view rank forms of consciousness on a scale (which is inevitably ethnocentric), but rather see how consciousness relates to specific historical conditions and ways of life in different circumstances.”¹⁰ At times, some of the Dalits form an opinion that it is due to their sheer fate, they are pushed to this corner of their life. One may judge upon how rationalistic or logical their opinion on life is. Unless they accept an inevitable cruelty of a living force through such an idea, life may become too severe for them to leave through.

The poets express their concern for the downtrodden and in their deeper quest for a meaningful life acts like panacea for a morbid society. To them the values of the past seem like cheating which cannot shine any more! Poetry may be the matchstick to dispel the gloom that encircles them like a luckless circle. It may communicate a sacred lovely tune, as if from a golden flute. May be a sweet fragrance surviving the onslaught of air pollution. Their revolt is no

meaningless. It is certainly for a cause and the cause has to be dissected more and more.

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