Fantasy and the Representation of the Dispossessed in Badal Sircar’s Bhoma.

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Abstract: This paper examines fantasy and the representation of the dispossessed, specifically of agricultural labourers and marginalized peasants in Badal Sircar’s Bhoma. It studies the representation in relation to the structure of Indian agricultural society in 1970s and compares it to the plight of peasants in the British India, besides showing its relevance to the condition of farmers in recent times. It also discusses the representation in terms of ‘false consciousness’ of the dispossessed and reveals the drive in the play to replace it with ‘class consciousness’ through fantastic vision of agricultural labourers and marginalized peasants becoming conscious of their interests, fighting injustice, exploitation and oppression perpetrated against them.

Index Terms: agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, false consciousness, class consciousness, class contradictions, dream, hope.

Badal Sircar is regarded as one of the major playwrights that gave direction to Indian theatre in 1960s and 1970s. He initially wrote plays for the prosenecium theatre, but later became dissatisfied with it. Then he started working for a theatre that would do away with what he observed as the constraints and inadequacy of the prosenecium theatre and would be suitable for what he wanted to achieve through the theatre. After formulating this theatre, he named it as ‘the third theatre’ which took two forms, one as Anganmancha, a non-prosenecium stage made of minimal theatrical means in available halls, and the other as Muktamancha, an open-air performance of his plays. His formulated theatre was not just meant to be different from traditional theatre in not using prosenecium and low-cost sets, but it was also intended to be remarkable in terms of the content of his plays. Its productions were meant to deal with progressive ideas and to be connected with the “problems of emancipation—social, economic and cultural” (3 Sircar) of the people. As he intended, all his major third theatre plays are connected with the problems of social, economic and cultural emancipation of the people. Bhoma, one of his major third theatre plays, is a testimony to it. It was first performed on 21st March 1976 at village Rangabela, West Bengal, in India, in Bengali, by Satabdi, and directed by the playwright.

The play is in the form of a discourse between the characters, but is directed at the spectators, in which six characters in their connected speeches bring forth several issues. These characters called as ‘One’, ‘Two’, ‘Three’, ‘Four’, ‘Five’ and ‘Six’ in the course of the play talk about the problems of contemporary India in general and Bengal in particular. These problems can be listed as the urban-rural divide, inequality in society, miserable condition of small firms and organizations, ineffectual banking system supporting only big industrialists, impoverished rustic life in Bengal and apathy on the part of the Government to improve the plight of the people by providing financial assistance to them, failed urban planning in Bengal, youth led astray by the politicians, experiments with atom bombs and its effects on society, materialism and selfishness of the middle class people, loss of humanitarian values and so on. Alongside these issues that are raised in the speeches of the characters, the image of a person called Bhoma is made to develop slowly and gradually in the imagination of the characters and the spectators. The character called ‘One’ repeatedly refers to ‘Bhoma’ in the play. The play starts with statements of ‘One’ who says that he now fully knows that ‘Bhoma’ exists, but makes it clear to others that he has only heard about him. At one place he says: “... unless Bhoma lives, unless Bhoma sustains us, I can’t live, nobody lives” (82)! Shortly afterwards he says: “I can’t, Bhoma. I just can’t put you into a neat and tidy formula” (82). “There’s no Bhoma. There’s only I” (82). At another place in the play he says: “Bhoma doesn’t destroy. Bhoma creates. We destroy Bhoma . . . Three quarters of India’s population live in the villages. Millions and millions of Bhomas. In the cities we live on the blood of Bhomas . . . If Bhomas had rice, we would not have anything left to eat. Bhoma’s blood, red blood, blossoms into white jasmine of rice on our plates. Twice every day” (94-95).

Later he ascribes the name ‘Bhoma’ to those agricultural labourers who were employed to clear the forest of Sunderbans, in order to make cultivable land possible in a region filled with dangerous wild animals such as snakes, crocodiles and tigers. Referring to Bhoma’s immutability he says: “When Bhoma was 20, the tree that he could fell alone in three hours two men couldn’t work all day” (99). But ‘Bhoma’ had to suffer despite all his hard work. He was made to suffer the pangs of hunger because if he had rice “we would not have anything left to eat”(95). Owing to the attack made by the wild animals on him “Bhoma is blind in the right eye. There’s a gaping hole where his right cheek was”(100). It is not only he who suffers; his family also receives the outcome of living in life threatening conditions: “Bhoma’s mother died of snakebite. His father was dragged away by crocodile before his very eyes. The younger brother couldn’t stand the tamarind and salt-water mixture and died of diarrhea.”(100).

It has been asserted in the play that there are millions of Bhomas that live in the villages of India in general and Bengal in particular. They collectively form the agricultural workforce of India. If one makes an attempt to roughly categorize Bhoma, then there are five categories of Bhoma that emerge in the play. They are either directly mentioned or are implicit. The first category consists of small cultivators, that is, poor peasants that have one or even less than one acre land which itself is mortgaged to the moneylenders. They are on the verge of proletarianization, that is, becoming agricultural labourers. The second category includes those peasants who have been turned into labourers by landlords and rich peasants, because they don’t have enough money to get requisite agricultural means such as water, electricity, fertilizers, pesticides, and so on, therefore they cannot cultivate their land; the landlords and rich peasants have means of production, so they either cultivate the land of the peasants for them or provide them with agricultural means, but take away maximum of the production. Both these categories, that is, the first and the second category have been directly mentioned in these speeches of the characters:
ONE. Is that your own pump set?

TWO. Good heavens, no, sir, where could I get it? I have only one acre of land, sir, and that too mortgaged to the moneylender. What can I get bank loan on?

ONE. Whose is the pump set then?

TWO. Gadai Mitter’s. He doesn’t have much land this side, so he sells water. . . .

ONE. Those fields there—do they belong to Gadai Mitter?

TWO. No, sir, that land belongs to three different people. Gadai Mitter cultivates those on sharecropping terms.

ONE. What? A rich man like Gadai Mitter—a sharecropper?

TWO. Well, sir, it’s a different kind of sharecropping. Those people have no money, how can they cultivate in the dry season? The land would have lain fallow if left to them. So Gadai Mitter cultivates it on a share basis, gives them three quintals per acre.

ONE. Only three? From an yield that’s going to be at least 20 quintals?

TWO. Yes, sir, that’s how things are in the villages. If I don’t have any luck this year, that’s what’s going to happen to me next year. What’s to be done, sir? We have no money. (75-76)

The third category includes landless agricultural labourers that receive certain amount of money for their labour on the land of the landlords. These people neither get appropriate wages nor have regular work. One talks about this category in his speech:

ONE. Listen! Listen! I’m going to tell you a story now. . . . A tiny village. Name Bhaduria, anchal Simulpur, subdivision Banagaon, district Parganas, state West Bengal, country India. There are 250 families in the village of which 60 families have less than an acre of land, 90 families have no land at all. They work on other people’s lands as hired labourers. They get four rupees a day as wages. Each of these labourers has five, six, 10 dependents. At four rupees a day you can’t afford to buy rice; wheat, yes, but not enough for chapattis. If you make a porridge of it with water and salt it goes a long way and fills you up. If you can’t get wheat flour, there’s cornflour, if you can’t even get hold of that, you starve. You can’t always get a four rupees a day job, maybe at most for 100 or 125 days a year. (67)

The fourth category comprises the aboriginals which were employed on wages by landowners in various regions of West Bengal to transform dense forest land into the land that can be cultivated. Most of them belong to the marginalized social groups including aboriginal tribes such as “The Oraons, The Mundas The Santhals”(98). The Fifth category is implicit in the play. It embraces the sharecroppers who are tenants on cultivable land of landlords and receive only a little of their entire production. All categories of Bhoma despite their hard labour don’t earn enough to fill their bellies. They live in shacks of mud and old tin; they die uncared and untreated due to lack of health services; they face social humiliation when their wives, sisters and daughter are raped in the houses of landlords where they work as domestic servants. It is not only social forces that oppress them but they also become victims of natural calamities such as cyclone, floods which add to their misery as agricultural labourers. Their houses, crops, and the fields on which they work are destroyed by salt water of flooded rivers and ocean. They get mercilessly evicted from the land of landlords as tenants and also from their own land by moneylenders due to debts accrued. Plenty of them feel compelled to migrate in groups to cities in search of the work as a waged labourer when they don’t get enough work in the villages. Nevertheless, even the migration doesn’t prove good for them as they are found leading a life of pavement dweller in shanty towns.

The name Bhoma looks like a derivative of the Sanskrit word bhoomi which means earth or soil. Just as earth gives life to others, Bhoma in the play exists for others. He has been portrayed as an individual who creates and produces for others. Within the contemporary social set up, the marginalized people such as labourers or farmers who depend directly for their subsistence on earth have been reduced to bhoomi, as they are meant more to produce than to receive, therefore have been termed as Bhomas in the play. As it is there in the play, they are deprived of what they produce as peasants and as agricultural labourers even to the extent of what human beings require for their subsistence. They have become so much associated with the earth that others start identifying them with the earth and forget that like others they too are human beings.

From whatever is said about him in the play, Bhoma emerges out as a universal paradigm of exploited lower class. Specifically, he represents the marginalized agricultural workforce of contemporary India which was subject to exploitation and oppression by big landowners and neglect of the democratic government. The marginalized agricultural workforce which Bhoma represents includes both landless agricultural labourers who work on the land of the landlords either as waged labourers or as tenants that receive certain portion of their produce, and landed peasants who have less land, so feel compelled either to work as casual agricultural labourers for the landlords or to turn into sharecroppers on their own land due to lack of agricultural means.

These people desperately need help. They require financial assistance from the government for electricity, dredging of canals and tube wells; they need loan from the banks, even if they get it at usual 14 percent bank interests it would be sufficient for them; they need fertilizers and pesticides at subsidized rates which at present have become unaffordable for them. If the poor peasants have these means, then the villages of the state and of the country will yield a bumper crop. It is not only the small farmers which will get the benefit, the farm labours will equally be benefitted as they will get work even in dry seasons of the year. (68-69)

The play articulates the miserable condition of this marginalized section of the Indian agricultural society, specifically in 1970s. Ashok Rudra’s analysis of the class composition of Indian agricultural society of this period identified two classes; one of those was ‘the class of big landowners’, and the other ‘the class of agricultural labourers’. His classification is based on the Marxist idea that the classes are defined by class contradictions. These classes, that is, ‘the class of big landowners’ and ‘the class of agricultural labourers’ were in contradictions with each other as per their interests. The class of big landowners included those who cultivated their land using agricultural labourers; those who leased their land to tenants; those who indulged in usury; those who traded in grain and other commodities and those who are involved in investment in agriculture related activities such as sugarcane crushing, oil crushing, dairy fairing and so on. The class of agricultural labourers included landless labourers, landed labourers and poor tenants who did not hire other labourers. The class of big landowners constituted the ruling class, because they were involved in the exploitation of the class of
agricultural labourers by appropriating surplus value generated through the channel of wage labour employment. This class was a part feudal and a part capitalist (998-1004).

However, the emergence of the class of agricultural labourers which was exploited by the class of big landowners can be traced back to the ascendancy of British rule in India (232 Gupta). Before that though there were agricultural labourers which were in hereditary servitude to landed families but they don’t constitute a class; their servile status was associated with a specific position in the caste hierarchy, in terms of which they were almost social outcasts. (4 Patnaik). It particularly happened with the introduction of the Permanent Settlement by the British in 1793 which declared Zamindars as owners of agricultural land while treating peasants as their tenants. The Permanent Settlement was first introduced in the state of Bengal which spread over all of the Northern India by a series of regulations dated May 1, 1793. With this system, the peasants who had earlier been the owners of the land now became tenants and agricultural labourers. Besides collecting land revenue, this system was used by the British to strengthen the industries of England by supplying them with raw material such as cotton and jute, silk, tea, coffee and so on. Accordingly, Zamindars and their intermediaries as per instructions from the British authorities forced tenants to grow cash crops such as tea, coffee, opium, indigo, sugarcane, oilseeds in place of traditional crops like wheat and rice. The exploitation of tenants and waged agricultural labourers by Zamindars and Planters of big plantations became a well known thing during that period. In this regard, Clemen Dutt wrote:

The most fully developed capitalist exploitation of agriculture occurs in the big plantations worked by limited liability companies for the production of industrial crops. There are some 800000 workers work on the organized tea, coffee, rubber, and sugar plantations, including men, women, and small children. The profits of these companies are very large, while the wages of the labourers are low even for India.

After India attained independence, as Patnaik notes that there were attempts made on paper to formulate agrarian reforms to solve the problems of agricultural labour. One of the earliest was the Congress Agrarian Reform Committee which published its report and recommendation in 1949, but the actual content of laws was indeed opposites of the reform. One of the aspects of reform laws was “abolition” of feudal tenures such as Zamindari, Jagirdari, etc, and establishment of a uniform tenure system consisting of landowners with right to transfer and occupiers of the land without right to transfer. Abolition of feudal tenure did not mean doing away with landlordism, for the feudal lords could keep large area with themselves by calling it personally cultivated while evicting tenants in the process and then claiming full ownership right on it. At the same time, the portion of the feudal estates that was taken over by the government, the landowners were paid generous compensation. The enforcement of such laws was that the rentier landlords turn into capitalists while allowing them to retain their land monopoly and receiving heavy compensation for the minor part of the estate which was taken over. Many landlords in different states of India used compensation money to intensify production on merchandise basis on their land from which the tenants were mercilessly evicted. By that way, they constituted an emergent trend of landlord-capitalism. The second aspect of reform laws was conferring permanent heritable rights of position to certain categories of tenants, but these did not apply to the ordinary mass of tenants on unrecorded, oral leases that form the majority of the tenants (3-11).

Alongside, a number of states passed their respective Zamindari abolition bills. To secure constitutional validity to these state reform bills, the amendment to the Constitution was made with the Constitution (First Amendment) Act, 1951 and the Constitution (Fourth Amendment) Act, 1955, but the problem of agricultural labour did not improve with the enforcement of reform laws; in fact, it heightened with increase in the number of agricultural labourers. As recorded by the Census of India, there were about 28 million agricultural labourers in 1951 which further increased to 32 million and 48 million in 1961 and 1971 Census respectively (qtd. in Rural Indebtedness Among Agricultural Labourers in Karnataka). In case of the state of West Bengal, as per Census there were 1771620 agricultural labourers in different districts of West Bengal in 1961 and this number increased to 3277642 in 1971 (qtd. in “Causes of Sharp increase in Agricultural Labourers, 1961-1971”). Bhoma as a play and as a representative of the marginalized class of Indian agricultural society emerges out of such historical circumstances of economic production of Indian agrarian economy. The stark picture that the play portrays of those times did not change much in subsequent years and even in the twenty first century. The distress of poor people who depend on agriculture for their livelihood is evident in large number of suicides committed by poor farmers in different states of the country. As per the records of the National Crime Records Bureau, 296438 Indian peasants committed suicide from 1995 to 2013. (qtd. in “Farming and its Crisis: Maharashtra Crosses 60000 Farm Suicides”). As asserted by Devinder Sharma, it seems like that small farmers are being punished in India for producing food as they receive for their produce a ridiculously low price which he calls a ‘distress price’; many a time the input cost of farmers becomes higher than the output price; due to high prices of fertilizers, equipments, seed and fuels they have little choice but to depend on the credit which traps them into a never ending cycle of the debt which remains unpaid; the poor farmers have been receiving legal notices from the banks threatening to sell their farm-land to recover their outstanding dues, and hundreds of them are in jail for non-payment of dues.

The play becomes a poignant account of social and economic oppression that this class suffered from the doings of big landowners, rich peasants and moneylenders that constituted the ruling class of those times. The scenario as revealed in the play is not in keeping with Gandhi’s ideals regarding the self-sufficiency of rural India which he called ‘Gram Swaraj’. In order to realize these ideals the freedom movement was launched and fought, but the picture that the play displays of the post-independence India shows rural society segregated into classes in which the marginalized class of agricultural labourers and poor peasants struggle to earn their livelihood in the presence of the dominant class which seeks every opportunity to seize from them the product of their hard labour. It is unfortunate that colonial models of exploitation have not been rooted out even in the free India.

In spite of such hardships which agricultural labourers and marginalized peasants faced during those times, these people as depicted in the play suffer passively. They find themselves helpless; therefore, become easy victims to the dominant forces. None of the categories of Bhoma considers either protest or fight as a solution to the subjugated life they are leading; for instance, the landless agricultural labourers neither vehemently demand higher wages nor they make any protest against social humiliation they receive from the ruling class; the small cultivators who are on the verge of proletarianization don’t raise objections against high price of water and other agricultural means which rich peasants sell them; in the same way, the peasants who are forced to be sharecroppers on their own
land don’t challenge rich peasants and landlords that take away from them almost 90 percent of their agricultural production; the aboriginals who have wielded their axe to make cultivable land in the forest area don’t use their axes against those landlords that go on exploiting and oppressing them both financially and socially as waged labourers.

These people go on living miserably without raising their voice against their exploiters who condemn them to live and die in poverty. They accept their sufferings, exploitation and oppression with silent resignation. They view their exploitation as their destiny about which they can do nothing. It seems social conditioning that incapacitates them to consider that the way out of their situation is to protest, and if necessary, putting up a fight against those who exploit them. The passivity of the labouring class toward their exploitation and the way the capitalists make their hold over the labourers that makes possible continuous exploitation of them have been addressed in Marxist theory. In Marxists view, the proletariats let them exploited as they are the victims of “false consciousness”. The concept of “false consciousness” was first dealt by Karl Marx in his book German Ideology in which he wrote: “Hitherto men have always formed wrong ideas about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be . . . . Let us liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pinning away” (23 Preface). It is clear from this statement that Marx implicates the dominant ideas and dogmas in leading people to form a wrong perception about them and what their self-goals should be. However, as a term, ‘false consciousness’ was put into circulation through Engels who wrote: “Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness. The real motives compelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives.” In other words, as per Engels view, the people have false consciousness when they are unaware of influences which drive them to think in a particular way.

So it can be said that ‘false consciousness’ refers to perceptual failure of the people that hides from them their true nature and also the things as they are, and what is actually advantageous to them. It is a kind of misconception and misjudgment that the person makes, about which they are not even aware of. It implicates certain ideological force that leads to false consciousness of the people that influences people’s perception of things, in a negative way, because they render them somewhat incapable to see their interests. This ideological force is the ruling ideology which is, in fact, a network of the ruling ideas and beliefs. “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force”(59 Marx and Engels ). In that way, the ideas that are in prevalence, in a given time, are the reasons for false consciousness of the working class. These ideas sustain the ruling class in its ruling over the society for a period of time. The ruling class, in fact, needs ideology “to present its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only rational, universally valid ones (60)”. The ruling class through its ideological system naturalizes, universalizes and validates existing relations of production which are exploitative to the proletariat. It gives to the proletariat a false perception that existing relations are necessary for their survival. In that way, the passivity of the marginalized agricultural workforce comprising poor peasants and agricultural labourers in Bhoma can be attributed to their false consciousness that clouds their minds. They have been incapacitated by the ideas of the ruling class, that is, the class of big landowners to see the fact that existing relations of production are exploitative to them, however, they take these relations as natural and pre-destined. They don’t see that they have been reduced to be the means to generate surplus value for the landowners and rich peasants.

Bhoma as a representative of the marginalized agricultural workforce of post-independence India remind Hori, his well known predecessor of the colonial period in Munshi Premchand’s Godan. Bhoma resembles Hori in his sufferings, and the way he is exploited and oppressed by dominant social groups and also in the way he responds to his exploitation and oppression. Hori, the protagonist of Godan all through the novel leads a hell like life owing as much to corrupt officers of the British Raj which appear in the novel as Revenue Clerk Pateshwari Lal, Police Inspector and Zamindar Rai Saheb, as to cunning local faces such as ‘Panchas’, Brahmins, and moneylenders which not only financially exploit him but also socially oppress him; however, nowhere in the novel he raises his voice against them, instead he holds these people in reverence and silently accepts his suffering believing them as the result of his past karma; even at the last moments of his life, he has no grievance against them. However, it is not only the one called Hori who suffers silently in Godan, there are hundreds of peasants that have been mentioned who share the same fate; they live and die in poverty and are caught in the same web of moneylenders, Zamindars and local dominant social groups. Like Hori and other peasants of Godan nowhere in the play any out of millions of Bhomas wages a protest against his exploitation and oppression which shows that not only exploitative forces of colonial India have continued in the post-independence India, however, with slightly different faces, but also the reaction of poor peasants and waged labourers towards their exploiters and oppressors have remained almost unchanged who go on accepting their exploitation and oppression silently.

Though Bhomas have been represented as victims of the dominant agricultural class and ineffectiveness of the democratic system which fails to alleviate their distress, in addition of their own false consciousness that bring them miseries which in totality throws light on the agricultural crisis of the period, yet Bhoma cannot be termed as a play of despair. The play is optimistic which expresses faith in dreams, hope and social change. To quote One who talks about his dreams:

ONE. . . . I have dreams. Dreams. Bhoma has risen, Bhoma has risen. He has taken up his rusty axe, he’s grinding it, sharpening it. There are forests all around him. There’s the forest in Bhoma’s eyes. Bhoma’s grip becomes stronger. The vice of the grip presses harder on the handle of the axe! The torn eye lights up with the fire that killed tiger, Bhoma is rising! . . . .The forest! The forest! The forest of poisonous trees! Pick up your axe, Bhoma! It’s too heavy, I can’t pick it up! You pick it up, Bhoma. Come on, hit it . . . .(109-10)

The dream expresses the hope that that all Bhomas of the country would raise up their axe and cut down the forest of poisonous trees which is killing them. The forest of poisonous trees means the network of rich peasants, moneylenders and Zamindars which is exploiting these people and it is hoped that these people which include aboriginal woodcutters, landless agricultural laboure and poor peasants would fight against these forces and put an end to their exploitation. Then this dream is enacted before the spectators by the
characters who as they get persuaded by One pick up an imaginary axe and start wielding it strenuously as if they were cutting down the forest of poisonous trees with shouts of the ‘heave ho’.

Thus it can be concluded that Bhoma reveals a stark picture of rural India in 1970s which have remained more or less unchanged even in the present. This picture which shows the distress of agricultural labourers and marginalized peasants who are either starved or lead a life worse than hell, owes not only to the dominant class which exploits and oppresses them, but also to the negligence of the democratic government of those times which failed to do something substantial to improve their lot. It can also be asserted that the helplessness of these people and their subservience to the dominant class is due to social conditioning which hides from them true nature of their exploitation which is social while these people believe it as natural which incapacitates them to raise their voice against their exploiters and oppressors. Nevertheless, the play visualizes that it would not last for long; one day these people would see their interests and in order to achieve them they would not only protest, but also put up a fight against their exploiters and oppressors.

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