



MARGINALIZATION: RE- READING OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S SHORT STORY *FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND BHIKARI DUSAD*

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was a prolific author in Bengali Literature. She wrote a number of short fictions and novels. She was a deeply political and social activist who worked with and for the tribal and marginalized communities like the landless labourers, Share croppers etc. "Postcolonial " refers to 'after Colonialism' or 'after independence '. It is not restricted to any historical periodisation. It describes any kind of resistance, particularly against Class, race and gender oppression. In Postcolonial Studies we find an ongoing attempt to retrieve histories that have been silence or erased by both Colonial and nationalist powers. This attempt is known as "Subaltern Studies". Part III of the Constitution of India deals with the fundamental rights of the citizens. These fundamental Rights represent the basic values cherished by the people of India. They are calculated to protect and create Conditions in which every human being can develop his personality to the fullest extent. In spite of this security given by the Indian Constitution the human rights of the common people are often being curtailed. This Paper shows how the rights of the poor Indians are curtailed by the so called privileged section of the society and the struggle of the deprived section to resist and to achieve identity.

Key words: Marginalized, Postcolonial, Subaltern, Fundamental rights, Identity.

Introduction

The fundamental Rights have been guaranteed by the Constitution of India under Six broad Categories namely -

1. The Right to Equality including equality before law and equal protection of laws (article 14),prohibition of discrimination on ground of religion, race ,caste, sex or place of birth (article 15), equality of opportunity in matters of public employment (article 16) and abolition of untouchability and the system of titles (articles 17 and 18).
2. The Right to Freedom including the right to protection of life and personal liberty (article 21) and the right to freedom of speech and expression, assembly, association or union, movement and to reside and settle in any part of India, and the right to practise any profession or occupation(article - 19).
3. The Right against Exploitation, prohibiting all forms of forced labour, child labour and traffic in human beings(article 23 to 24).
4. The Right to freedom of Conscience and free procession, practice and propagation of religion (25 to 28).

5. The Right of Minorities to conserve their culture language and script and to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice (article 29 and 30).
6. The Right to Constitutional Remedies for the enforcement of all the Fundamental Rights (article -32).

Some of the fundamental rights like equality before law and equal protection of laws (article 14), protection in respect of conviction for offences (article-20), protection of life and personal liberty (article 21) free and compulsory education for all Children of 6-14 years (Article 21 A), protection against arrest and defense in certain cases (Article 22). Freedom of religion (articles- 25 to 28) etc. are available to all persons. There are however, some rights which can be claimed only by the citizens e.g. not to be discriminated on the ground of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (article-15). Equality of opportunity in the matter of public employment (article-16) and freedom of speech and expression, assembly, association, movement, residence and profession (article -19).

Originally, article 19 (1)(f) and article 31 Contained the right to property i.e to acquire, hold and dispose of property subject to the right of the state to compulsory acquisition for public purpose by authority of law. However, right to property ceased to be a fundamental right when the constitution (44th Amendment) Act,1978 omitted Sub-clause(f) of clause(1) of article 31 from the constitution.

The right to property proved to be the most complicated and Controversial. Finally, the constitution (44th Amendment) Act, 1478 repealed article 19(1)(f) and 31 from the Category fundamental rights completely w.e.f 20th June, 1979. Instead, in part XII of the Constitution, a new chapter - Chapter IV and a new article - 300 A were added to provide that no person shall be deprived of his property saved by authority of law. Thus the right to property ceases to be a fundamental right but still remains a legal right.

Discussion

The story *Fundamental Rights and Bhikari Dusad* is concerned mainly with the right to property along with right to equality, right to freedom and right against exploitation.

The zamindar of Noagarh received the title 'Raja'. At the time of the independence of India (1947) he was only one year old. At the time of the transfer of states much of his lands had been kept 'vested' in the name of manifold gods and goddesses. Later, the state and the Central governments appropriated all vested lands to build railways and motor roads. But all these were tactfully handled by the efficient Rajmata and her faithful lawyer after the discussion with Ranchi and Patna lawyers. Six years of continuous efforts has been brought out the desirous results. Rajasahib has been granted the Six Lakh rupees as compensation for his loss of property. He has achieved this for his right to property which was originally a fundamental right in the then society. So, today Noagarh is celebrating and Rajasahib has sent words to the people to make merry and celebrate.

But, about ten months ago, there was a great unrest among the bataidars, the share - croppers. Such unrests have been a regular feature over the last eight years, but the police have never needed to set up permanent camp there. At first, Rajasahib's henchmen beat up the bataidars, then the police came and arrested those suspected of being the ringleaders.

Meanwhile, the number of the share-croppers and the right of the harvest has also increased. Police suspected that there was some third force at work. Three months ago, the bataidars showed a new brand protest. They took a strip of cloth and painted a slogan across it: "Mehnat ka fasal ka aadha ka batta par hum logon moula adhikar hai!" (Devi, 61) "we have a fundamental right to half the crop we grow with our labour". So Rajasahib felt an acute sense of deprivation and injustice.

This time, the bataidars did not allow Rajasahib's men to harvest the crop. Mathura Singh was wounded seriously and Chandan Mal's gun was

snatched from his hands. Finally, Rajasahib himself was Compelled to open fire and some bataidars died. This fable of rich land-lords - poor peasants-Sharecroppers-bataidars is never any different . nobody can change the plot.

But this time, some body changed the plot. As they were beaten up they yelled out slogans. Hence, the police were posted at Noagarh. These was a charge against the bataidars for violence law lawlessness. But there was a bolt from the blue. The bataidar's union also petitioned the court. They're willing to fight to achieve their ' moula adhikar'. Three months they spent like that, silent, mute. Now, the stagnant air of Noagarh seemed to be lifting, clearing up and during this period Rajashaib was given a compensation of six lakh rupees for his lost property.

Nobody paid attention to Bhikari Dusad, an extremely timid and harmless soul. His flock of goat was his only livelihood. It was Bhikari's misfortune that the number of his goat does not go up. He bought Sattu, lemon pickle and Salt at Lalaji's Shop. Lalaji asked him about the reason of his misfortune. He replied that the wolves and jackals would eat them. He feels embarrassed by the sheer insignificance of his own existence. Suddenly, he becomes fearful and afraid because police is coming – "They take away my goats?"- (Devi, 157)

The police is his enemy because they take his goats, So, he steals into the jungle and starts hacking at the trees with his axe, builds a goat-pen with branches . Herd his flocks inside and sits down at the opening, trembling.

Bhikari has no other property except his goat. He dreams to have a wife and a family but in vain. He gradually moves to Bada and Nada to make his fortune but in vain. The landlord of Bada and Nada robbed him of his goat. Later he moved to Tahad. The dusads of Tahad received him very kindly. When he went out to graze his flock, an old dusad woman looked after his goat and cooked his meals. They requested him to live there. He was getting on fire there, but a daroga came to Hanuman Misra, the priest at the Tahad Shiva Temple and he said –

" Bhikari Dusad! Give a goat for the daroga to eat.

- But I was going to the market to sell it, deota.

- What? A daroga is second only to the gods and brahmans. He'll eat and you take the money?" (Devi, 219-223)

Bhikari gave his goat in fear and fled Tahad.

Later, he met Sukhchandaji, a teacher in the primary school, under the banyan tree. He told Bhikari to attend his evening class to make him educate – "In the evenings I teach the adult to read and write. You come also, Bhikari" (Devi, 241-242)

Listening to this, Bhikari becomes fearful as it is impossible to him. He may be driven out from Noagarh. Even grocer won't sell to him and he won't be allowed to take water from the well –

"I won't be allowed water from the well." (Devi, 246)

He also mentions that a torch is not sold to him. Lalaji says –

"Why Bhikari, you're a dusad, menial labour, think you're good enough for a torch ?" (Devi, 250)

The problem lies in the society. People think that a dusad, a menial labour has no right to lead a good and comfortable life. He lives in the shell of a broken-down bus. Sitting in the forest he thinks that police never loot Lalaji's shop, never grab the milkman's cows. Langra, Kani and the leper lad Dora help him. Ranka helps him buy things and sell goats. Kanu Dusad informs him that police camps are going from Noagarh. Then Bhikari decides to go there and finally arrives at Noagarh. He returns to his old shelter . Kani sweeps his bus and engages in gossiping with him. She informs him about the celebration and the fireworks in the evening.

Bhikari goes to meet Sukhchandaji, sitting beneath the banyan tree. Motihar and Bhakat, the milkmen, were sitting there too. They wear thick soled nagras, brass earnings, turbans and carry strong lathis. Bhikari is afraid of them. Motihar wanted to know why did Rajasahib take them to court when the govt. acquires his land to build rail—roads and motorable roads.

- " Rajasahib had a right to the land?

- What are you saying, ji? Of course he did!
- Now, this right of an individual to his property is called a fundamental right in the constitution of India." (Devi, 393-396)

Thus, gradually, Sukhchandaji explain the fundamental right. Listening to them, Motihar asserts –

- “No difference of cast – creed – religion? Bhikari Dusad and I are equal ?
- Certainly. The constitution says so.
- Still, it’s a lie. Our own eyes show us so. The upper castes won’t drink water touched by him” (Devi, 418-422)

This is the mindset up of the society. Even today, it is prominent in the society.

Later, Sukhchandaji makes Bhikari understand about his fundamental right regarding his goat. His property is his flock of goats. If anyone takes his property away he is bound to give compensation –

- “... policemen carry off my goats and I don’t get even a rupee. Has the government forgotten to remind the policemen of fundamental rights?
- The policemen do juloom, take your goats by force, Bhikari.” (Devi, 514-517)

Sukhchandaji grieves at this reality. But on the other hand, he himself cannot imagine eating food served by Bhikari, though he thinks that he is not a believer in casteism and untouchability.

Bhikari returns home. He washes his clothes, cooks his food and eats. In the meantime the sun sets. He was about to shut the wicker door when they arrive – Rajasahib’s sepoy, two policemen.

Gajanan – policemen grins and reeks of drink.

- “Do bakraa nikaal.” (Devi, 631)
- “No, no, I haven’t got he goat.
- Then give us the females.

- Please don’t do this sipahi – sahib,...” (Devi, 633-635)

Then they say – “Shut up bloody dusad” (Devi, 638)

Now Gajanan slaps Bhikari hard across his face with the back of his hand. The nightmare drives Bhikari into frenzy. He screams – “ I have the same right to my goats as Rajasahib had to his land and when they took away his land, he got compensation because of his rights!

Why should I give up my right then ?” (Devi, 648-650)

The policemen beat up Bhikari.

- “Sala! Bastard! Police mustn’t eat ?” (Devi, 658)

They leave the battered, blood – spattered Bhikari sprawled on the ground and go away.

He now feels deprived and thinks that Sukhchandaji spoke a lie.

- “ If BhikariDusad’s fundamental right to live with his goats is violated, the government of India has no power to ensure his security – is that why Bhikari gets no compensation ?” (Devi, 674-677)

Kani, Langra and Langra’s woman nurse Bhikari. It takes ten days for the wounds to heal and now he can stand on his feet again. Then, one day Bhikari sells off the four kids for twenty rupees. He’ll never stand straight again, his badly scarred face will always bear witness to the results of his first and last attempt at protecting him fundamental rights. Now he decides to take the profession of a beggar. He gives them three rupees each, pays off his six rupees debt at Lala;s shop, gives Motihar’s servant two rupees for a rope. He keeps three rupees for himself. He will buy a bowl from the Tohri haat and will start the job of begging.

Sukhchandaji comes down and sees Bhikari who informs Sukhchandaji that he is going to live on alms. Now, he does not fear anybody. No longer scared even of the police. The policemen grab all he’s got. But they will never beat up beggar dusad. A dusad can not live like human beings in the land of his motherland. Now, he does not feel lonely

because there is no place in the country without beggars. So he is a member of a large society.

Sukhchandaji now thinks that though Bhikari can not enjoy the right to property he still can enjoy the right to freedom which allows him to pursue any occupation to earn living. Bhikari has taken to the occupation of begging. The author ironically points at the machinery of the state.

- "Surely the Indian constitution will guarantee that he stays that way, stays a beggar all this life and even the next? And if anyone strives to raise him to a better standard of living, to a better occupation? The Constitutional will never tolerate such a blatant violation of a fundamental right. No matter where in India such an injustice occurs the constitutional machinery will at once deploy the police, reserve police, military police, The military, tanks and combat aircraft, everything." (Devi, 741-749)

Finally Bhikari dusad walks away dragging his feet painfully.

Conclusion

Thus, we find that the problems lie in the mentality of the society. Even today, we find in the society that the weak, the marginalized the poor and the helpless are deprived of the fundamental rights. That discrimination on the basis of religion, class, gender and cast identity remains intact and continues with new force and form. In postcolonial age, the marginalization of tribes, minorities and weaker sections of the society is done by the dominant ethnic groups, classes and castes which are characterized by crime, corruption, immorality, injustice and hence deprivation and victimization. Though the civilization has entered into the Age of Internet, the attitude of the dominant classes towards the marginalized and weaker sections has not been changed and the myth of "equal rights" and "fundamental rights" has become a cry in the wilderness. Matrimonial columns in the newspaper and biased attitude of the mob lynching on the basis of caste, creed and class keenly point out the dark side of discrimination. The author has tactfully

portrayed the realistic picture of deprivation and victimization of the marginalized.

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