

Reflection of Nationalist and Social Consciousness in Literature: A Study on Select Plays of Bishnuprasad Rabha

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Abstract: Bishnuprasad Rabha, one of the distinguished creative writers and cultural icons of Assam has been designated distinct position by activists, critics and readers. These activists, readers and critics have tried to establish their understanding of Rabha based on his texts. Therefore, the creations of Bishnuprasad Rabha provide a space for reassessment of different ideological leanings. Rabha's plays are the repository to understand his nationalist and social consciousness inculcated through several phases of experiences of his life. The researcher has selected the plays *Krishak* and *Sapon Kuwali* of the author to understand reflection of nationalist and social consciousness in literature. The plays of Bishnuprasad Rabha lend readers quite easily to a reading of nationalism at different forms i.e. worth of national glory, growth of nationalism among the youth, cultural unity, aspiration for ethnic harmony and political unity. The sort of cultural nationalism in Assam reinforced by Bishnu Rabha is apparent from the select plays.

Keywords: Nationalism, Cultural Icon, Multicultural, Imperialism, Middle class

1. INTRODUCTION

Bishnuprasad Rabha ((1909-1969) is one of the dominant writers who has contributed for the development and growth of Assamese nationalist consciousness in literature. His writings are not only confined to communist thought. It also reflects nationalist consciousness and patriotism. His essays essentially reflect national glory, growth of nationalism among the youth, cultural unity, ethnic harmony and political unity. He dreamt to form a society of unity, harmony and equality in India and Assam based on nationalist consciousness. For this reason many critics like Arun Sarmah passionately terms Bishnuprasad Rabha as a "revolutionary artist"[1]. His revolutionary ideology gave spirit to his artistic existence for which he became a poet, playwright, music composer, singer, dancer and actor. The exile of his life provided a great space to understand the lives of common masses and thus he shaped the artist in him with handy experiences. Rabha internalized the indigence of the proletariats. He rejected to accept the huge amount of land from his forefathers and distributed it among the poor people of Assam. He also understood the core ideals of Assamese society where the public is always at the top of the social hierarchy. He gave emphasis to developing revolutionary consciousness among the common people. Rabha was also dedicated to fulfill a complete Assamese society with recognition of the ethnic (tribal) people.

Most of the literary creations of Bishnu Rabha clearly express the failure of existing political and economic systems to give certainty to the poor class. He felt the need of change and therefore, joined politics as a way of changing the society. There are 26 plays as included in *Bishnuprasad Rava Rachana Sambhar*. Many of them are incomplete. The already mentioned perceptions of Bishnuprasad Rabha about social reality imbibe his plays. The plays, where the participation of youths in freedom movement is distinct are the reflection of his political experiences of young age [2]. His plays can be divided as social plays, lyrical plays, fantasies, poetic plays, historical plays and biographical plays. On the other hand many plays were written in the style of scripts for films. His social plays are mainly centred on the freedom movement of India. Most of the plays depict the rural scenario of Assam. Among these plays, the present study makes an attempt to analyse the plays *Krishak* (Farmer) and *Sapon Kuwali* (Hazy Dream) to understand the socio-nationalist consciousness of Bishnuprasad Rabha.

2. UNDERSTANDING NATIONALIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN KRISHAK

One of the remarkable social plays of Bishnuprasad Rabha is *Krishak*. This play has depicted the circumstances of 1942 and post-independent period of Assam. The protagonist of the play is Madhav Chandra Choudhury who takes

active participation in the freedom movement since his student life. Being a brilliant student he goes for higher studies. But he is suspended from the college for his participation in Quit India Movement and comes back to his native village. He starts to organize the movement against the British from his village. But the movement has been announced unlawful by the British. For that he has to escape and work secretly against the British. Madhav has been caught by the British volunteers and imprisoned for one year. Getting released he goes for studying I.Sc and then M.B.B.S. After completing his study he associates himself with social service of his village. India has already got independence from the British. Madhav becomes depressed by observing the condition of independent India. Madhav has a deep insight about the future of India as well as Assam. He compels the common villagers to think about the post independent society of Assam. Therefore, he tries to make the common villagers aware that unless and until they get all the facilities from daily survival to education, medical etc. for all the members of the society Assam will not be free in the real sense. He asks the masses to make it sure that all the agriculturalists will get profit for their labour and all the labourers of industries will get the share. He visualizes that it is possible to free India, in complete sense, only through the establishment of socialist economy.

In spite of this insight he is unable to keep his ideology stable till the end of the play. Because of the critical economic condition of his family finally he goes for service under an owner of tea garden who is familiar as malevolence businessman. The play ends here. But it seems incomplete.

The social play *Krishak* has highlighted the emerging national consciousness among the youth of Assam. The characters like Madhav Chandra Choudhury, Arun Chandra Sonowari etc. are the representative of those youth. They united and inspired the youths and common public to the freedom movement of Assam. Their concern for the nation can be seen through their motivational speech, poems etc. in public gathering. Arun recited a poem in the meeting held to form executive committee for Non-cooperation movement of India. Through the poem Arun motivated Assamese youth by saying them as the powerful son of the nation. Their life will become unfruitful if they do not stand by the nation in the difficult time. He even inspired them to come out from the religious bigotry and stand with unity to rescue the motherland.

The aspiration for making India free from imperialism is clear from the speech of Madhav. Madhav made the public concern about the distressed condition of India and Assam under the two hundred years of rules of the British. He mentioned that the British were a foreign nation who came to India for commercial purpose. Later they started to rule India and exploited the Indian society and economy by extracting freedom. Therefore, it was high time for the public to stand against the British.

Somehow the character Madhav has resemblance with Bishnu Rabha. During the student life, Bishnuprasad Rabha followed the ideology of non-violence of Gandhi and the Congress. He took active participation in the nationalist activities of the Congress. But gradually he lost faith in the Congress and quit it. He was drawn towards communist ideology and in 1946 formally accepted the membership of Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI). Being part of RCPI Bishnuprasad Rabha considered the independence of India as false one, because the new ruling party of Independent India could not equally guarantee the interest of all people. It was the emergence of a new kind of dominance over the lower class people. Therefore, Rabha tried to inspire people towards equality of their rights. This ideological insight is directly reflected through the character Madhav in the play *Krishak*.

The playwright reflects the sensible condition of post independent Assam which compelled a person to give up his ideology. The economic condition was responsible for his ideological change. The tea garden owner represents the emerging bourgeois class to whom the common people had to obey only for securing their livelihood. The intention of Bishnuprasad Rabha was to draw attention to the actual condition of post independent Assam through such kinds of representations. It is true that Bishnu Rabha realized the condition of post independent Assam which has its impact even today. So he felt the importance of a play like *Krishak* in order to make people conscious about their condition in upcoming days.

3. SAPON KUWALI: REFLECTION OF NATIONALIST CONSCIOUSNESS AND MULTICULTURAL ETHOS

Sapon Kuwali is one of the plays of Bishnuprasad Rabha devoted to the freedom movement of India. The story of this play is set in an urban environment and it is centred on an aristocratic family. The head of the family dies as a

result of the torture of the police as he participated in the procession of Quit India Movement. His wife and children are inspired by his ideology.

Sewali, a character from the play prefers to sing song. Her songs reflect the condition of the poor classes of the society. She is stopped by her mother in the midst of her song. Sewali's father dreamt of a free India and for this reason he was killed by the British. His death brings darkness to the family. Sewali's mother is mentally disturbed after the death of her husband. Sewali understands her mother's condition and she never tries to dissatisfy her mother. Her mother requests Sewali to sing among the public the song which can reflect the dream of independence and hope of the poor section. At that time Miss Seri Beruini (Charubala Baruani), a childhood friend of Sewali comes to their home. Miss Seri is the idol of modern "Venus the Milo". She was the unannounced leader of any women's group. Seri knows about the violent movements of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Italy, Burma, Malay and Singapore. In the post war period she held high rank in Delhi. Her husband died just after two days of their marriage at the age of thirteen. But she knows how to move forward in her life. She forgets the past and is able to triumph over the miseries of her life.

She asks about Deuti, the younger brother of Sewali. At that moment, a procession passes with the slogan of "Ban de Mata ram", "Mahatma Gandhiji ki Jay", "Congress Jindabad" etc. under the leadership of Deuti. Deuti and his friends dreamt about an independent India and they gave emphasis on fulfilment of the dream of "Rama Raijya" (State of Rama where everybody is happy with equality). The soft hearts of Deuti and his friends can even internalize the grief of the lack of independence. Seri, Sewali and her mother discuss regarding Gandhi's dream, the sacrifice of life of several people in this movement and uncertainty about fulfilment of this dream.

Deuti is a thirteen year old boy. The depth of the dream of independence that is imprinted in his mind is really inspiring. He is quite excited regarding upcoming 15th August. He insists his mother to buy bomb and light to celebrate it. He also asks his mother to clean the photo of his father. He will keep that image just bottom of the image of Mahatma Gandhi and it will be surrounded by the photographs of Jawaharlal Nehru, Tarunram Phukan and Nabin Bordoloi. He will decorate it with flowers, light and enjoy the moment by dancing and singing with friends. At that time his mother asks him to sleep and he starts to dream as soon as he falls asleep.

Deuti sees many women labourers in the paddy field who are busy in planting saplings. They have deep concern which is expressed in their eyes regarding the exploitation of the British and they are ready to take revenge against them who killed Kanaklata, Bhogeswari Aideu and Phehuli Kuwari. All the "girls of dream" dance by surrounding Deuti. He calls in the women labourers toward him. These labourers are women with traditional attire from different communities like Miri, Rabha, Bodo, Deuri, Mikir, Kamrupi, and Assamese from upper part of Assam etc. It is a splendid blending of different ethnic groups. All of them hug him with affection and express the story of sacrifice of Assamese people in the freedom movement against the British. The exploitation of the British is still prevailing. Deuti vaguely notices that the British have totally disturbed the peace of the country. Deuti dreams everything what he actually has learnt from his contemporary times. Though he is a little boy still he has a deep concern regarding the pathetic condition of the country.

The play *Sapon Kuwali* reflects the glorious history of Assam. Assam is a land from which many people stood boldly against the colonial rulers. Many Assamese sacrificed their lives for the nation and brought freedom to India. This prestigious part of history is recalled in the form of dream by the little boy. Bishnuprasad Rabha realized that the lesson of freedom should be rooted from the beginning. Therefore the thirteen-year-old boy Deuti is portrayed in order to convey this message. Deuti is aware about the sacrifice of the patriots Maniram Dewan, Torun Phukan, Nabin Bardoloi, Hem Baruah, Kanaklata Baruah, Bhogeswari Phukanani and Kushal Konwar.

The conversation between Sewali and Seri gives the idea of the real nature of the freedom of India. Both the characters are socially conscious and enlightened through education. Seri raises idea of the democratic nation where the powerful are in the position of ruling class. She therefore doubts the freedom of India. In the name of democracy the society may turn to a system where everything will be decided by the bourgeois. If we analyse the life of Bishnuprasad Rabha it is found that his political life has two parts - political life as student and political life as a mature citizen. In his first part of life he was a freedom fighter who stood against the British with the belief in Gandhian philosophy and in later part he became a Marxist-Leninist and revolutionist. He realized the exploitation

and oppression of the poor people. He desired real freedom of the proletariats and as solution he became attracted to Marxism. The deep study about Karl Marx, Lenin, Mao Se Tung and their activities, the communism in Soviet Russia and China enlightened his knowledge. All these knowledge inspired him to follow the path of communism where freedom exists in real sense for all people from all the classes. Rabha's ideological transformation is evident from the conversation of Sewali and Seri. The inspiration for communism is no doubt a social consciousness but at the same time it is also for the sake of the nation. Therefore, the social and nationalist consciousness which emerged from the representatives of educated youths like Sewali and Seri are expected to attain its goal through the future generation like Deuti.

According to the critic Arun Sarmah, the scene of Deuti's dream reflects Bishnu Rabha's hope to create the image of a vibrant Assam in the mind of the new generation. The greater society of independent Assam will be formed by the harmony and assimilation of ethnic groups [3]. Bishnu Rabha thought for the oppressed and neglected tribal communities of Assam. Being associated with tribal league he experienced the tribal lives, culture and history of different parts of Assam. It is seen that each and every state and society is multicultural considering the existence of people from diverse cultures:

But when cultural groups in a particular society possess or attain a degree of numerical strength and also consciousness about their distinct identity which makes their continued existence as a specific cultural group viable, the society has to be specifically identified as multi-cultural society [4].

In its primary nature though Assam seemed to be multicultural but in genuine observation it becomes pluralistic because of the domination of one community over the rest of the communities. The partial assimilation is found here in which the dominant society allows minorities to achieve full participation yet at the same time permits them to maintain many of their cultural and social differences. The nationalism which began to emerge from the second half of the nineteenth century with the growth of educated elite in Assam gradually came to be dominated and led by the Assamese middle class, which emerged as the hegemonic class in this region. The late emergence of middle classes, amongst the other ethnic communities, gave hegemony to the Assamese middle class and it became the most advanced middle class of North-East India. The nationalism which developed in Assam grew under the leadership of this dominant Assamese middle class. They came to play the role of a dominant nationality in the region. The Assamese nationality exerted pressure on rest of the people through imposition of their ideas, values and culture. The tribal communities desired to be a part of Assamese nation by attaining proper position of their cultural characteristics. They protested against the negligence. On the other hand they did not demand separation. The protest by the ethnic elite minorities against such kind of attitude was absorbed by the Assamese middle class. Bishnuprasad Rabha realized that these kinds of problems could be solved by multicultural existence, not by absorption or dominance. It is true that all the communities are dependent on each other for constitution of the greater Assamese society. Therefore all the deprived people of Assam irrespective of class, caste, community have to be united against the domination of imperialism/colonialism and capitalism. This multicultural ethos of Bishnu Rabha is reflected in *Sapon Kuwali* through the dream of Deuti.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The select plays of Bishnuprasad Rabha reflect his ideology in the form of social and nationalist consciousness. The image of Indian freedom movement and participation of Assam is clear from his plays. Bishnu Rabha's nationalist and social consciousness are reflected in his plays *Krishak* and *Sapon Kuwali* in the forms of national glory, growth of nationalism among the youth, cultural unity, ethnic harmony and political unity. His sharp observation on his contemporary society is well reflected in those plays. These plays hold the communist ideology and revolutionary consciousness among the common masses of Assam. Rabha had a deep insight regarding the ethnic communities and their problems. His cultural ideology recognized the critical importance of the ethos of multiculturalism for the coexistence of different communities that lived in Assam. The nationalism led by Rabha proceeded through his reliance on the glory and cultural diversity of Assam. Therefore, throughout the plays Rabha is able to boost up a sort of cultural nationalism in Assam. However, activists, critics and readers of the present times have used and appropriated Bishnuprasad Rabha as cultural icon in the discourse of Assamese nationalism based on these different levels of understanding of nationalism through his plays.

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