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Reflections of the Freedom Movement in Poets and the Oppressed Classes

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The nationalist sentiment began to appear openly from about the last three decades of 19th century and it was echoed by poets like Dalpatram, Narmad, Behramji Malabari and Jivabhai Patel. As the sentiment began to grow stronger in time, the poets also began to put it in words in poetry. Now the time was of a great movement for freedom under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi against the British imperialism. In earlier Chapters we have discussed in detail how these poets expressed this sentiment beautifully in their compositions of songs and poetry.

However, one has to admit that the poets could not command a huge reach among people. Indeed, they did not portray the poor of India nor showed any enthusiasm in showing the scenes of poverty graphically. The later poets, such as Snehrashmi, Sundaram and Umashankar Joshi of course gave voice to the tears of the poor. But their language was so full of classic terms that the illiterate and oppressed classes themselves could not understand them. It was a miniscule beginning still. Another reason for this could be the basic attitude of national movements under guidance of Gandhiji was of cooperation between classes rather than class conflicts. There was no place of any violence in it.

Yet the question remains: was then Gujarat made up of merely high caste people like Brahman-Bania men and women? Were not thousands of untouchables, Adivasis, Bhils, and Koli people living in Gujarat? If we pay greater attention to this important point, we shall understand that in fact the number of the oppressed people was much larger than that of the caste Hindus. The traditions and style of living of the Adivasis or Bhils were very different from those of the upper classes. For instance, they considered divorce a normal social practice, allowed widow remarriage, and consumption of liquor was normal for them.¹ How can anyone say that some of their social practices were backward in comparison to those of upper classes? But efforts were made to bring them in line with those of the caste Hindus. The irony was that on one hand their traditions were looked upon with contempt, but on the other there were talks of 'social reform' for the upper classes based on western thought for such practices as widow remarriage. Among the lower classes already widow remarriage was an accepted custom called 'Natara'. Also, the Bhils were already fighting the British

dominations and its unjust policies even before the arrival of Gandhiji. In the Rebellion of 1857 also the Bhils of Nandod, Dahod, Godhra, Revakantha, Mahikantha and Lunawada had rebelled against the British Government.²

It is not our intention in this to say that the Bhils had already had the nationalist sentiment. However, they could not tolerate the manner in which the oppressive ways the British and even the native rulers exploited them and bringing them to near extinction, and resorted to armed opposition to the best of their ability. When Gujarat suffered a very severe drought called 'ChhappaniyoDukal' (1899-1901) it also affected the Bhils. Some songs were composed about this drought, and some were composed by the Bhils too. In both of these types of poems we get to learn about the terrible conditions that prevailed then. For example, describing this drought Karunashankar Kalidas Havey wrote a poem:³

ગાં રૂદા
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Thousands were victims of this drought and thousands suffered pangs of hunger in this drought, and at such a time a poem was composed about a cow, crying and appealing for help!! The poem also refers to 'Malka Victoria' to whom the appeal was being made. Thus, such poets could not bring themselves from expressing their dependent nature. Another such poet RavashankarVallabhji wrote about the drought, a poem titled 'Marasiya',⁵⁶

Both the poems cited above show that the poets from higher classes sigh about the drought, ask for relief from the state like beggars. The Bhils on the other hand tried to remove their poverty and pain even through sacrificing their lives for it. They too are affected by the drought, but they have traditionally resorted to plundering and robbery. They were not ashamed of this activity however. They had found that whoever forms the Government, whoever dominates the State, be it the Sultanate, the Mughals or the Marathas, or even the British, it was their fate to fight exploitation, and this was a matter of their self-respect. The British labelled them as 'criminal group' due to this attitude.⁷

Fortunately, however we have preserved the poems that expressed resentment of the Bhils. Working as a Teacher in Pratapgadh, Nathji Maheshwar Pathak published a book titled, "BhilonaGeeto" in 1915 AD. The Bhils were themselves uneducated and illiterate. But Pathak lived among them and noted their songs. He had to suffer a great deal while collecting them; yet he collected them in their original Bhil tongue, as he describes this experience in his Introduction. Some parts of this are given here:

I have had to suffer a lot of difficulties in collecting these poems. I used to visit the Bhils as they sang, but they were abashed at my entry and would stop singing. I had to persuade them a lot so that they would resume singing. As the lines were sung two times, it was easy for me to note them. In case I could not note down a few words from the first rendering, I could catch up in the second one. Many times, due to their method of singing with loud voice, I could not understand the meaning of their words. However, Kalji Puna, an assistant teacher of my school, belonged to Pratapgadh and was a Bhil personally, I used to take him with me most of the time. When a song began lines dealing with plunder, the singers clammed up. They were perhaps afraid that I will go and tell authorities the information and get them jailed. When Ubek Saheb was camping at Pratapgadh, such a thing did occur. Singing a song about seeking shelter in Vagad, the singer stopped as the description of fighting. My assistant and I tried to persuade them and go on, but they did not comply and we had to return. Finally my assistant had them complete it the next day. Gradually their fears subsided and my difficulties also began to lessen.

I have received help in collecting these songs from my assistant and also from the Pratapgadh School Committee Member PargiBaghar Mavji and Pargi Kesara Puna. I thank them all from my heart for their help in this task.

I have taken care that the language of the Bhils has not changed while noting it down. I have copied them in the way they were pronounced when sung. I have also taken down meaning of difficult words directly from the Bhils. When I could not understand a word and they could not explain it well, they would just say that they were spoken thus, e.g. 'Ma Raja Heli'.⁸

When the drought known as 'Chhappaniyo' was going on, the Bhils had resorted to looting just in order to survive this long deprivation. One Bhil, Mangaliya was caught in this activity and the British had punished him by death sentence. This is a true incident and it is expressed in the Bhils' songs.⁹

The above poem expresses the resentment of Mangaliya against the British. The 'firangi' or the White man (British) summons him and asks him to explain, who was the one to fire down the homes at Jhalaiwad, or cut off the feet of the woman who prepared liquor, and broke off her bangles? When Mangaliya says, without fearing the British Political Agent even one bit, "All this was done by this stud (meaning himself)." A case was lodged against him in the court and he was sentenced to be hanged until death. As the punishment was carried out, the song adds a tragic note, 'Summon the wife and children of Mangaliya and his uncle now, because Mangaliya has been now hanged.'

Just as the Adivasis of South Gujarat were exploited by Banias, Anavil Brahmanas, Parasees, Patidar landlords and money lenders, the Bhils of Panchmahal and Revakantha areas were exploited by Muslim Bohras.¹⁰ Nathji Pathak writes about the Bhils that they never speak lies, but now some who are in contact with the people of cities and some higher social statuses have begun to resort to lies. As they do not know how to bargain, they are cheated by banias and Bohras and merchants.¹¹ In the poem given below we find a good description of how during the drought the Bhils looted the carts full of goods belonging to the Bohras. It says that when the fair at Galiakot the carts of the Bohras were arriving, these were accompanied by 'goravalaviya' or whitemen as escorts and guards. The Bhils came to know of this and they hid themselves in the nearby place. When the goods began to arrive belonging to the Mullajisi.e.Bohras, the Bhils attacked the carts at a lightening pace and looted them. In the struggle that took place for it however, a Bhil name Vaghji was killed.¹²

During this drought the Bhils had also looted the Queen of Udaipur. The Bhils call this drought as 'Dhhandu kal' and describe the evil effect it had thus, "Kothe khutudhan ne raj, manavimartalajya raj'. (Grains are no more in stores and the govt should be ashamed at so many human deaths.) In this drought the fodder for animals also was not to be found. The Bhils had no grains to eat. At such times the Queen of Udaipur had golden plates for her dinner in her palanquin. The circumstances of the time also need to be considered when this 'loot' took place.¹³

The drought of 1888-1901 AD was known as ChhappaniyoDukal is described by the Bhils here. Brahman poets like Karunashankar Kalidas Dave and RevashankarVallabhji also describe it. However, we can easily see the huge differences in their viewpoints. The Brahman poets call out to save the cows at this time, appeals to Queen Vicotria with humility, cry out with helplessness by singing 'marasias'. But the Bhils have no such points. They just act, they rob and loot and even get death sentences. This shows us how there was a big difference in the talk of the Brahmins and the emotions of the depressed classes regarding poverty and deprivation.

The Adivasis also held different emotions and attitude regarding this situation. Their lifestyle was much different from that of the caste Hindus. They consumed Tadi and liquor freely, and ate such animals as goat, sheep, squirrel, hen, etc. They got their girls married at an advanced age; they practiced 'natara' tradition for remarriage of women and accepted divorces too. Perhaps due to these practices the upper classes considered them in South Gujarat as backwards. Premanand Dholidas Patel has noted in 1901 AD in his study of

Adivasis, “From these backward people we have nothing to learn. The reforms of western people is being copied in the higher society of the eastern people, and observing this the lower classes are also copying them. For instance, the Brahmins now accept ‘ghado’ (water) from the Banias and the lower classes like the ‘Vasvaya’ accept ‘ghado’ from even lower people like the ‘kali’ (black?) people. But there is nothing in the ‘kali’ people worth being copied from for the others.”¹⁴

Even then the Adivasis had their own exclusive life style. Their view of the British rule was also different. It is expressed in a poem...¹⁵

The above poem says: the Government calls me, O Young man, to collect the grass and I am leaving for that work, and will come later. O Young man, the govt is calling me to grind the corn and rice. O Young man, I am leaving for that work and will come later. O Young man, the govt is calling to store the rice and I am going for it, and will come later.

This song indicates how the Adivasis had to compulsorily do the duty of the government first.

Gandhiji came on scene of Gujarat in 1915 AD and popular movement began to take place. Some noted social workers such as Ravishankar Maharaj, Thakkar Bapa and Jugatram Dave began to work with the oppressed classes of the society. For the Adivasis of South Gujarat Jugatram Dave (B. 1891) did basic reforms. He was a silent and great field worker of the rural reform program of Gandhiji. He was born in the Audichya Brahman caste at Vadhvan city. After he came in touch with Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, Swami Anand, and Gandhiji, he decided to give his life for the Adivasi advancement. In 1938 AD he published ‘Gram Bhajana vali’.¹⁶ In the poem titled ‘Apna tranjananijodi’ Jugatram has graphically described how the Adivasis were exploited during our freedom struggle: ‘Aapni Tran Janani Jodi’¹⁷

Groups of three ‘friends’ could be very powerful – such as moneylender-police-liquor baron; rifle wielder – liquor barn – one with gold coins; distiller – trader – official; distiller – moneyed – corrupt official. If these triplets were close, they could win the world for themselves.

Gandhi’s workers made the people take an oath not to consume liquor and ‘Tadi’. A lot of money was wasted after it by the Adivasis, Garasias and Bhils. Jugatram describes the consequences of drinking in a poem¹⁸

[Do not drink; please do not drink the liquor that fires you to ashes.]

Leadership that followed Gandhian principles also began to be formed among the Adivasis of Gujarat. Some of them argued against the liquor as the reason behind poverty which should be removed. Marvadi Ukra Chaudhari, an Adivasi himself, wrote a poem on this issue titled ‘Dariu ni Moka’¹⁹

Thus during the freedom struggle under Gandhiji’s guidance Jugatram Dave and some young Adivasis began a movement against liquor, but most of the Adivasis continued to consume Tadi and liquor as can be seen from this poem.²⁰

If the Adivasis had the passion for liquor, the Parsees had the passion to make them drink it. The Parsee distillers made great profit out of this activity. They exploited Adivasi women too. The manner in which a Parsee distiller sold the liquor and cashed in on it is clear from the following poem:- ‘Paadare Parsi nu Pithu’²¹

[As he fills up the glass for the customer, Parsee distiller reads out the debt he has incurred; the person who serves the liquor drops the glass and his consumption is thus said to be even more than he had made, but the money for the total is written as his debt in Parsees books anyway.]

The way in which the Adivasis were being exploited is also mentioned by Jugatram Dave in his poem titled ‘Lakhmidhar Sheth’. Making fun of these rich men he writes “How

big is my stomach? It can house the entire stock of gold and silver of the world. My real happiness lies in the hunger of the victims of the drought, as I can earn a good name by giving charity.” Resenting such mentality of the rich Jugatram writes...²²

Due to their habit of drinking the poverty of the Adivasis was worsening, in fact. However, we must also remember that liquor and Tadi besides non-veg food were a part of his lifestyle anyway. At all social occasions, such as birth, wedding and death, they enjoyed a drinking session in group. The main question is that was really their poverty tied up with that habit? Were not the Anavil Brahmans, Patidars and Parsees moneylenders also exploited them too much? Anavil Brahmans had become their ‘dhaniyama’ i.e. owners for generations due to ‘Hala’ tradition applied to the Adivasis. Even a devoted Gandhian worker like Jugatram Dave in his poems like ‘Lakhmidhar Sheth’ and ‘Apani tranni Jodi’ avoided the mention of this tradition of exploitation by Patidars and Anavils. This goes to show that merely poetry will not be able to remove this evil of exploitation of the Adivasis. Their resentment was clearly expressed only by Ukabhai Chaudhari. He was also a follower of Gandhiji, but was himself an Adivasi and he had their cause close to his heart naturally. In his poem ‘Dubiyā, dubiyā, dubiyā’ he expressed the pain of his people in words thus: ‘we are drowning in the ocean of poverty, and the upper classes push us recklessly towards deeper poverty. Those who drowned are from our community and the others who are around just stand by and look at the whole thing. By God’s grace we are not yet at the very bottom. And the arrival of Gandhiji has helped us. Gandhi Babu has given us the Spinning Wheel and tried to uplift us.’ The poem goes like this: ‘DubiyāDubiyāAapne’²³

Marwadi K Uka Chudhari was a follower of Gandhiji and he began a movement against liquor drinking among the Adivasis. He just did not raise his hackles at intoxicating items, but also protested against the huge rate of interest charged by moneylenders and he used his pen against them too. He has expressed this in his poem ‘ChhatkaniDurdasha’²⁴

In 1930 AD Fakirbhai Govindbhai Amin published a collection of patriotic songs. In that also he made fun of a moneylender who charged exorbitant interest. On one hand a bania draws a ‘tilak’ on his head and goes to temple to bow to the God, and on the other he lures the poor, sweet-talks to him and then oppresses him. This sentiment is very nicely expressed in the poem titled ‘Vania ne araj’. Based on the style of ‘Prabhatiya’ of Narasimh Mehta, it had become very popular.²⁵

Jugatram Dave was a true friend and helper of the oppressed classes. He knew how the moneyed class enjoys luxuries and the poor classes are hurt by hunger. The jobbers in mills slapped the workers, or even caned them to get work done and the landowners also beat them in fields. The heart – rending description is seen in his poem he composed when in jail, titled ‘Mar lathi Mar’²⁶

Chimanlal P. Bhatt was a well-known poet of times of Gandhiji. A graduate from Gujarat Vidyapith he joined Jugatram Dave in service of the Adivasis. His songs were simple and emotional and so were highly popular. He sang the significance of hard work, for that leads to welfare of a person as well a society. Expressing this sentiment, he composed ‘Shramjivi nu Geet’ in 1945 AD.²⁷

If during the period of Gandhiji’s leadership in freedom struggle also such exploitation of the poor and depressed classes went on, then one can just imagine their situation before his arrival. RanjitramVavabhai Mehta was a distinguished patriot before Gandhiji returned to India. He was an intellectual and a literature as well. Before his death in 1917 AD he had collected many folk songs of Gujarat and the collection was published after his death, in 1922 AD. We cite here two poems from it that gives an idea about the lives of the labor and oppressed classes.²⁸²⁹

Gandhiji began a movement to remove the economic injustice practiced against farmers of Gujarat as well as India, and similarly he also tried to uplift the labor suffering in

mills. No doubt before his arrival people like Sorabji Shapurji and Narayan Meghji Lokhande had made noteworthy efforts for that cause. But their movement was not deep or wide. Also, the labor class was highly affected by the First World War (1914 - 1918), its impact in India, and the Russian Revolution of 1917 AD. Gandhiji himself began in 1918 AD a movement for the mill workers of Ahmadabad. The strike of the labor lasted as long as 22 days and attracted attention of the whole country. The reason was that this struggle was being carried on in non-violent manner. As a result of this struggle, a Majoor Mahajan Sangh was set up on principle of arbitration.³⁰

However, after about 1923 AD the labor movement came under the influence of S.V. Ghate and A.S. Dange who were leftist in their philosophy and actions. In 1924 AD Dange started his periodical 'Socialist' and began to propagate communist trends among the workers. The leftists of India were influenced by the Russian Revolution of 1917 AD and the Government set up afterwards in USSR.³¹ Of course in Ahmadabad the influence was strong from the Majoor Mahajan installed by Gandhiji. But that did not mean that the workers were not under communist influence. In fact, some followers of Gandhiji, such as Jhinabhai Desai and even poets were influenced by it. Sneharashmi had written a heart-rending poem called 'Bal Majoor' in the 'Satyagraha Patrika'. It depicts in clear terms the exploitation to which the workers were subjected in mills of Ahmadabad and other industrial cities. The idea of happiness and lack of it is comparative. Until a man does not see a huge palace, he has hardly any cause to be dissatisfied with his small hut. In the poem the woman worker is so harassed by the injustice of the world that her heart has gone sour at everything. She feels jealous of even those small stars that are sleeping in the skies! Certain lines make the comparison clear, such as 'Usha plays in the sky, while her child will have to fill the reels of cotton thread at the mill.' Usha comes to play as she dances and she has a wide space of skies to play in, her child has to play confined to the mill premises. Usha colors flowers, while her child has to fill the reels that kill (his childhood). The sense of injustice grows gradually in her mind and then she is hesitant to continue to have faith in God that she has received traditionally. The seeds of aethism like communism lie in this and similar situations, right?³² The poem portrays the mother's emotions graphically: 'Bal Majur',³³

Sneharashmi sculpted the pain of exploitation of child labor and the pain in the heart of the mother. Umashankar Joshi gave this kind of social justice a universal form. In fact he also gave it an ethical and philosophical edge. In his poem 'Hu Gulam' he has spoken of rivers, springs, mountains, trees, flowers, leaves and even animals and birds- all enjoy freedom, but then why is it that a human is created to become a slave? The manner in which a man is exploited by another indicates, does it not, the victor of base nature? He wrote this poem in 1930 AD: 'Hu Gulam',³⁴

Joshi's heart was full of compassion for the workers' slavlike situation. The young poet was full of resentment against a social structure that created and allowed it. he questioned, "For how long would the capitalists continue such exploitation and terrorizing? If they continue it too long, a day will come when the resentment of the hungry will flares up and turn to ashes all the wealth of the oppressors. Also expressing such sentiment in another poem, 'Jatharagni' that he composed in 1932 AD, he wrote:

રયો, રયો અંબરચુંબી મંદિરો,³⁵

Many poets, like Sneharashmi and Umashankar Joshi, expressed the helplessness felt by the working and oppressed classes, and in their poems both Gandhian and Marxist philosophies were intermingled. However, basically they were devoted followers of Gandhiji. As we have noted earlier, however, there were some intellectuals who were influenced by communism. For example, after 1930 AD Dinkar Mehta began to be inspired by leftists. How he shifted from Gandhian philosophy to Marxism is explained in his autobiography.³⁶

However, as back as 1924 AD though, poems were written about class struggles and the mill workers of Ahmadabad used to sing them as well. Yet it is a shame that these songs have not been well preserved. Most of these had been composed by mill workers themselves. Some are given here: ‘Mahajan LooteLavajam Lai’³⁷

The two poems given below express the pain of the mill workers in graphic terms; and naturally display a different stance than one taken by Snehrashmi or Umashankar Joshi.³⁸

When the fire of unhappiness is going on in the hearts of workers, how could happiness be expected to be there? When there is no surety of food for next meal, how can the poor even think of philosophy? This poem expresses the reality. In the poem ‘Talapi talapimaro mar’ depicts the feeling of child labor in a very different manner than that in the poem ‘Bal Majoor’ of Sneharashmi. While ‘Bal Majoor’ does give voice to the pain in the heart of the mother, this poem shows the signs of lashing that the worker gets in reality. This song was also composed by a mill worker: ‘TadpiTadpiMaaro Maar’³⁹

[Okay, beat us as you please, for what can a worker do? If we speak even, your lash comes down on us, as it does when we ask for leave, or defy you a little. After all the power is with you, and worker is a fool.]

The nationalist sentiment flared up in Gujarat and spread wide. As a result, the fire of freedom struggle spread like wild fire in its towns and villages. Even then the economic inequality continued as before. The manner or degree of exploitation of the poor did not change and continued as earlier. It was indeed a shocking and pathetic reality of freedom struggle days. The poets picked up this strange phenomenon and composed their poems which they presented to the public.

FOOTNOTES

¹Bombay Government, Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Gujarat population, the Hindus, vol. 9, Part –1 (Bombay, 1901), p. 294-95

²Ibid

³Karunashankar Kalidas Dave, ‘ChhapaniyakalniutpattiathavaGaurakshakaravaniAvashyakata’ (Limbdi, 1900) p. 7-8

⁴Ibid

⁵RevashankarVallabhji, ‘Chappan no bhayankarDukal’(Limbdi, 1900), p.1

⁶Ibid. p. 5-6

⁷Bombay Government Gazetteer, op. cit., p. 294-295

⁸NathjiMaheshvar Pathak, ‘Bhilona Geet’ (Ahmadabad, 1015), p. 5-6

⁹Ibid, p. 90

¹⁰For more details, see David Hardiman, ‘The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India’ (Oxford Uni. Press, 1987)

¹¹Pathak, op. cit. p. 9

¹²Ibid. P. 100

¹³Ibid. p. 88 – 89

¹⁴Premanand Dhobidas Patel, ‘Navsari PrantnaKaliparaj’(Vadodara, 1901) p. 4-5

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- ¹⁵Ibid. p. 168-69
- ¹⁶Granth aneGranthkar, Book – 1, p. 115-116
- ¹⁷Gujarat Praudh Samiti, Surat, ‘Gram Bhajan Samgraha’(Surat, 1948)
- ¹⁸Jugatram Dave, ‘SvarajyanaGeeto’, p.121
- ¹⁹Ibid. p. 123
- ²⁰Dahyabhai Nayak (ed.), ‘Adivasi Gujarat’, vol-1(Ahmadabad, 1979) p. 12
- ²¹Ibid. p. 18-19
- ²²Ishvarlal Desai (ed.), ‘Raniparaj ma Jagruti’(Surat, 1971) p. 198
- ²³Bhikhabhai Purushottam Vyas (ed.), ‘Rashtra Kirtan’ (Ahmadabad, 1923) p.10
- ²⁴Ibid. p. 59
- ²⁵Fakirbhai Govindbhai Amin (ed.), ‘AzadinaMantronaGayano’ (Ahmedabad, 1910) p. 12
- ²⁶Kapilprasad Dave (ed.), ‘Rashtra no Ran naad’(Ahmedabad, 1930), p.1
- ²⁷Chimanlal Bhatt, ‘Gandhikatha Geeto’ (Ahmedabad, 1949), p. 32
- ²⁸Ranjitram Vavabhai Mehta (ed), ‘Lok Geet’ (Surat, 1922), p. 61
- ²⁹Ibid. p. 72
- ³⁰Mahadev Desai, ‘A Righteous Struggle’ (Ahmedabad, 1940)
- ³¹Makrand Mehta, ‘Sansthanik Bharat no Arthik Itihas’ (Ahmedabad, 1985),p. 254-56
- ³²Sneharashmi, Arghya (Mumbai, 1935) -. 191-2
- ³³Ibid, p. 6-8
- ³⁴Umashankar Joshi, Samagra Kavita, (Mumbai, 1981), p. 24
- ³⁵Ibid, p. 40
- ³⁶Dinkar Mehta, Parivartan, (Ahmedabad, 1966), p. 22
- ³⁷Paresh Mamundar, Industrial Relations in the Cotton Textile Mill Industry of Ahmedabad, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Gujarat University. Ahmedabad, 1973) p. 88
- ³⁸Ibid, p 12
- ³⁹Ibid p. 14