

Role of Bishnu Rabha in the Freedom Struggle of India

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It is generally seen that, every society is characterized by the existence of two contradictory classes - the propertied and the property less class. The propertied class always tends to exploit and oppress the property less and thereby establish its own dominance. Hence, these classes can again be called as the exploiter and the exploited. The dominant class strives to maintain its status quo and perpetuate its regime leading to the loss of freedom of the exploited mass. However, such regime often faces stiff opposition from the dominated class when exploitation and suppression reaches a climax. But for such a kind of revolt to take place there must be a consciousness amongst the people. It is here, the need of a leader arises who can successfully motivate the people to oppose the ongoing process of exploitation and to launch a revolution. It is interesting here to mention that in India, during the period of freedom struggle, the imperialist force along with the native ruler started to exploit and oppress the common people. On the other hand, similar condition was prevalent in Assam too. The class structure of Assam was constructed in such a way that led to the suppression of the poor. The colonial ruler, planters, Marwari traders, Bengali middle class, Asomiya middle class, the Zamindars in Goalpara and Mouzadars in the rest of the Brahmaputra valley together constituted the dominant class. Below them, the fragmented peasantry, the landless agricultural labourers, who migrated from East-Bengal, peasants and tea-plantation labourers most of whom were the tribal from Jharkhand region, stood virtually at the bottom of class structure of colonial Assam.¹ As such, the peasants and labourers often had to face exploitation and oppression from the dominant class as mentioned above. But, in such a situation Bishnu Rabha, the versatile genius of Assam, could not remain silent. Having witnessed and experienced a complex socio-economic system in Assam and the problems arising out of it during and after the freedom struggle, Rabha couldn't confine himself

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to the ivory tower of art and felt the need of joining the fight against injustice and exploitation. It is in this light, the paper will assess the role played by Bishnu Rabha during and after the freedom struggle of India.

It is found that Bishnu Rabha was a born revolutionary. He started to fight against injustice and exploitation in his student life. During his college life he, in fact, played a leading role in the fight against the imperialist rule, especially when he was in Victoria College of Coachbihar. He was involved in revolutionary activities to overthrow the British rule. It becomes clear that he was an ardent advocate of freedom. But it is interesting to note here that he did not mean freedom to be one-dimensional that is freedom from the British rule only. By freedom, he meant liberation from poverty and all types of hegemony as well². It is liberation from injustice and exploitation. Therefore, it can be said that his struggle against the British rule was part of a greater struggle against injustice

It is found that Bishnu Rabha was involved in Indian freedom struggle both in his action and in thought. His anti-British activities in Coachbihar and later in Rongpur bear the testimony of his active participation in the freedom movement of India. On the other hand in several writings of his, he referred to the struggle led by M.K. Gandhi. However, due to his revolutionary temper, he later lost faith in Gandhism and adopted Marxism as his life's philosophy.³ Therefore; he was both a patriot and a nationalist. He, in fact, was disturbed by the foreign rule. His anti-British sentiment was reflected in his social play named '*Krishak*'. In the beginning of the play, he expresses his deep concern against the subjection of his country to British rule, which is evident in a song sung by the 'Garuwan'. * The song is as follows:

Sonar Asom O'.... Mur
Paradhinotar Uur
Nahal Dekho Autodineu
Kino Bhygya Tur
Sonar Asom... O' Mur⁴
(Oh, my Golden Assam!
What a misfortune it is
For you not to be free yet
From the bondage of ages
Oh, my golden Assam.)

In this song, his ardent love for his motherland is reflected. In the same play, Madhab, the protagonist, stated that it is the duty of every Indian to fight against the injustice and exploitation unleashed by the British.⁵ It is observed that 'Madhab' was actually a dramatical image of Bishnu Rabha.

Although, India became independent on 15 August 1947, Rabha believed that this political freedom could not bring any change in the fate of thousands of downtrodden people. That is why, in a dance-drama titled 'Na-Prithibir Notun Yug',* he declared Indian independence as a sham. It was actually a transition of power from a section of elite people to another. He wrote:

Aamuthi Dhanir Haal Sukh

Kuti Kuti Raijor Haal

Bidhe Bidhe NaNa Dukh

Aye Haal Swadhinota, Bhuwa Swadhinota

*Kuti Kuti Manobor Ghinya Adhinota.*⁶

(The rich who are a handful became happy

Millions of the people

Reaped lots of sufferings of various kinds

And this is freedom, fake freedom,

The bondage of teeming millions of humanity)

Moreover, in an article titled "Aaigyatbashar Katha' he again affirmed that the so-called freedom of India was not freedom for the people. In 1947, he himself hoisted a black flag and stated that the freedom of India is not for the poor peasants and labourers. The benefit of freedom, for which people fought against the British, is now enjoyed only by the rich or affluent sections of the society. The British have been replaced by a new exploitative regime under the leadership of local bourgeoisie. He also mentioned that Congress should not take sole credit for independence of India. RCPI, to which he belonged, also contributed a lot towards it.⁷ He further stated that the freedom that has been achieved by the Indian masses brought happiness only to the bourgeoisie class who constituted the minority. It resulted in more misery to the majority. He pointed out that the British had left India paving the way for new kinds of exploitation. He expressed it in the following lines:

*Bharat Sagar Aari Gol
Tyaji Sashonar thaal
Garhi Sushonor Kol
Britainor Soudor Dal
Gol gol Bangal Engraj
Pati Dhnraj
Kari Barbad
Bharotor Jatiyotabad.⁸*

(The British fled the Indian Ocean
And the region they ruled,
Leaving behind them machineries
They created for exploiting the people,
The foreigners left,
And left behind them the capitalist regime
To crush the nation called India.)

It implies that Rabha, as a patriot, was disturbed by the destruction of the India nationalism and emergence of capitalism. The British left India after transferring power to Congress that can be conceived as a bourgeoisie organization. Rabha wrote about the nature of post independence Indian Government as follows:

*Bharat Sarkar
Dhani Mahajan Raja Maharaj Zamidnar
Hihotor Sushonour Nirmam Hathiar
Tile Tile Saara, Tupi Tupi Tez Piya Dukhiare
Swadhin Deshar Maha-Bharator Aane Sarkar.⁹*

(The Indian Government.....
An instrument of exploitation
In the hands of the rich:
The Mahajan, the king, the Zamindar,
Sucking blood dripping from the poor.)

Indian government is nothing but a mere instrument of exploitation. It is used by the rich Mahajan and Zamindar to oppress or exploit the poor. He also felt that the Assam Government, after independence, had become a kingdom for the rich.¹⁰ He, on the other hand, drew a picture of post-independence India

through a conversation between 'Veda' and 'Mulung', two characters of the play '*Krishak*'. He wanted to highlight a picture where after the departure of the British there would be Ram-Rajya, which could be equated with Krishak-Majdur Raj.¹¹ In this Ram-Rajya, everybody would get equal opportunity and there would be no class-division. Bishnu Rabha, was of the firm opinion that although India had got political freedom, it was yet to get real freedom. For him, real freedom is not possible until and unless the misery of the peasants and the workers are eliminated. It would be possible when the peasants will enjoy the fruits of his or her labour, when every labourer will be a shareholder of big factory. In other words, real freedom will not come up until socialism is established.¹²

It is thereby apparent that Bishnu Rabha, felt the need of a socialistic revolution as a counterattack against the oppression of the poor by the native rulers and the Government of India. This extensive exploitation was visualized by Rabha in his play '*Sunamuwa Gaon*'. In this play, he with the help of a conversation between 'Dukhi and Jibon',* drew a picture of miserable condition of post-independence Indian society. Through their conversation, he attempts to persuade the masses that without the destruction of capitalism and establishment of socialism, happiness of the people is not guaranteed. For that; establishment of '*Krishak-Bonua Panchayat*' is of utmost importance.¹³ Although Rabha always mentioned the term KBP as a means for the emancipation of the downtrodden, but nowhere had he clearly defined the term. He often used the term something synonymously with Socialism. From his analysis on socialism, it can be assumed that KBP is a society of the peasants and workers. Since, it is the peasants and workers, who keep the society alive, therefore, Rabha believed that they have a dominant position in the society. In *Krishak-Bonua-Panchayat*, Rabha believed that peasant and workers would control the government and the factories.¹⁴

It is clear that Rabha sought economic freedom along with political, an economic freedom which would free the people from economic exploitation. In addition, this freedom could only be achieved through a revolution. For Rabha, a revolt can bring about a total or drastic change. This change will take place gradually but it will bring about a marked change in the society.¹⁵ The capitalist system was responsible for the miserable condition of the poor.¹⁶ In other words, the law acts hand in glove with the capitalist to inflict more sufferings on the already oppressed. Rabha believed that the bourgeoisie class brought in exploitation at two levels- both economically and culturally. In order to end such kind of exploitation, a socialistic revolution is of utmost importance.¹⁷ We find Rabha

urging for a revolution of such kind through his writings. He stated that as long as people do not break or destroy the state apparatus, which is controlled by the rich, freedom or 'Mukti' would not be possible. It is only revolution which could destroy capitalism and create new order i.e. *Krishak-Bonua Panchayatiraj*.¹⁸

It is seen that Bishnu Rabha through his artistic works tended to create a revolutionary atmosphere. All the songs included in his dance drama, '*Mukti Deol*' are revolutionary in character. He exhorted the peasants and the proletariat to be conscious and to march forward through his songs. He writes:

Bal Bal Bal Bal
Krishak Shakti Dal
O' Banuwa Somoniya
Aaag Barhi Jau Bal.¹⁹
(Onward, you army of peasant power
Fore forward, you toiling comrades)

In another song, he urged the oppressed class to be aware of their condition.

Jaag Jaag Jaag Jaag
Majdur Na Juwan
Nirjyatrira Nipirita
Krishak Shaktiman.²⁰
(Wake up, Young workers, suffering farmers,
You the mighty, wake up.)

He believed that the peasant and the proletariat constitute the revolutionary class. Only through a joint endeavor can a revolution be initiated. He exhorted the peasants and proletariat to fight against the rich and to destroy the old institution or system held up by the later. To usher in a new order, the old order needs to dismantle. This old order is constituted by the rich and characterized by the perennial exploitation of the peasants and labourers. Referring to the social system of Assam, he mentioned that Assam Government had been exploiting the people by levying tax and harassing the people by the police forces. But Rabha believed that such a decayed social process couldn't proceed for long. History has been witness to the fact when oppression reaches the limits of human endurance there has always been a revolution. For Rabha, such a revolution is possible only

when the people are made conscious about it. He tried to do the same by infusing a revolutionary spirit among the masses through his writings. The uneasy silence of the people is only momentary and a violent struggle is not far off. In this context, he mentioned the revolutionary activities that started in Howli, Dighali, Belshor, Beltola, Sibsagar etc. He opined that suddenly the whole of Assam would become revolutionary and the old system would no longer be there. The old system will be replaced by a new one i.e. Socialist society.²¹

He saw every possibility of revolution in Assam. He even held the uprising of 1942 as part of a world historical revolution for the emancipation of the poor. It is different from the revolution that occurred in other parts of the globe as it took place in a non-violent manner in place of armed struggle as a means.²² Bishnu Rabha, on the other hand, believed in armed struggle. He, in fact, urged the poor to destroy the authority of the rich through violent means. It is this reason why he could not get involved in the movement led by Indian National Congress. He preferred revolutionary or extremist activity to non-violence. He always used to keep a gun with him; although none was killed by him.²³ It was under the Marxist influence that he took up arms to launch a battle against the landlords and Zamindars. He himself admitted that Marxism brought stability or perfection to his unstable life.²⁴

In order to realize his goal of creating a class less society he joined politics. Being influenced by Marxist philosophy, he joined in RCPI in 1945. The main aim of RCPI was to replace the bourgeoisie rule of India by proletariat rule. Bishnu Rabha also shared this view. Rabha, like RCPI believed that power should be transferred to the peasants and labourers. Keeping this aim in mind, RCPI however, launched an armed struggle in 1948. During this period of armed struggle launched by RCPI, Rabha went underground as the Congress Government of Assam announced a reward of Rs. 10,000 on his head-dead or alive. He remained underground from 1948 to 1951 and this period was considered most valuable by Rabha as during this time he wrote most of his revolutionary writings. Acting on the direction received from his party, he got involved in various activities to organize his party. He travelled to remote places in Assam and performed different cultural activities to awake the poor downtrodden people.²⁵ It, in fact, was a part of his attempt to attain real freedom for the masses.

But the decision of armed struggle taken up by RCPI later proved to be wrong. It could not achieve success through its methods. Most of the leaders held their principles as responsible for their failure and left RCPI to join in CPI.²⁶ In

the meantime, Rabha was arrested on 17 July 1952 in a village named Ghilaguri of Goalpara District.²⁷ He too, in 1955, like his other comrades joined the CPI and started believing in parliamentary democracy as a possible means to attain his goal i.e. to create a new society.²⁸ In 1967, he was elected to Assam Legislative Assembly from Tezpur constituency. Although, he was elected as an independent candidate, he kept good terms with the members of the CPI within the floor of Assembly. The speeches he delivered in Assam Legislative Assembly clearly reveal that his urge for revolution was still in his mind.²⁹

Thus, it appears that inspired by the ideas of Marx and Engels, Rabha wanted to build an egalitarian society with equal rights and equal share of wealth for every section of society. His concept of freedom, as such, was not as narrow as the one held up by the Indian National Congress. In order to ensure real freedom he believed in class struggle and for this, he took up arms to launch a battle against the landlords and zamindars. He considered that only the true tillers of the soil should have right over the soil. He raised the slogan "The man who has plough has the land" (Nangal Jar Mati Taar'). Along with the gun, he took up the pen to wake up the people and to make them to come forward to break the bondage of slavery and exploitation from the hands of the rich. But it is unfortunate that he could not succeed in his goal because of the decision of violent struggle taken by the RCPI to which initially he belonged. Therefore, his dream of an egalitarian society remained unrealized.

Notes and References:

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2. Hazarika, Surjya Kanta (ed. 2008): *Bhinnajananar Dristit Bishnu Rabha* p.628; also *Assam Tribune*, June 20.
3. Bhattacharya, Nalinidhar (2007): *Goriyoshi*, December.
4. Das, Jogesh (ed.): *Bishnu Prasad Rabha Rachana Sambhar Vol-I*, p.344. *Garowan was one of the characters of the drama 'Krishak'.
5. *ibid.*, p.345.
6. *ibid.*, p.329.
*This dance drama was published by Progoti Bhabon in 1951 and has been included in this book.
7. Das, Jogesh (ed.): *Bishnu Prasad Rabha Rachana Sambhar Vol-II* p.1182.
8. Das, Jogesh, *op.cit.*, vol-I. p.329.

9. *ibid.*, p.331.
10. *ibid.*, p.331.
11. *ibid.*, p.358.
12. *ibid.*, p.359.
13. *ibid.*, p.402.
* Dukhi and Jibon, two characters of the drama 'Sunamuwa Gaon'
14. Das, Jogesh, *op.cit.*, pp-988-89.
15. *ibid.*, p.996.
16. *ibid.*, p.683.
17. *ibid.*, pp.994-96.
18. *ibid.*, p.682-83.
19. Das, Jogesh, *op.cit.*, vol-I, p.316.
20. *ibid.*, p.319.
21. Das, Jogesh, *op.cit.*, vol-II, p.996.
22. Das, Jogesh, *op.cit.*, vol-I p.37.
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27. Hussain, Ismail: *Bishnu Rabhar Jibon Aaru Darshan* p.6.
28. Deka, Nilomonisen, *op.cit.*, p.20.
29. *ibid.*, p.21.

