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- ★ A CRITIQUE OF A FILM NAMED 'HIDEKO THE BUS CONDUCTRESS'
 - ★ HOW ELECTIONS GOVERN PEOPLE
 - ★ REGISTERING VOICE: WOMEN WRITING POETRY IN CONFLICT SOCIETIES
 - ★ TIGER SIBLINGS AND THE IDU MISHMIS
 - ★ CAN THE SUBALTERN PROTEST? TEA PLANTATION WORKERS OF ASSAM AND INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT
 - ★ 'DEVELOPMENT' IN THEORY AND PRACTICE : THE CASE OF INDIA
 - ★ DEVELOPMENT AND WEAKER SECTIONS : UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM AND ITS IMPACT IN THE CONTEXT OF ASSAM
 - ★ CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ECOLOGICAL ABJECT : THE POLITICS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE IN GUN ISLAND
 - ★ CHINA'S HUMANITARIANISM: AID, PANDEMIC AND FOREIGN POLICY
 - ★ THE PROPAGANDA MODEL AND DEVELOPMENTS IN INTERNET AGE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INDIAN POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT WITH REFERENCE TO ASSAM LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTION, 2021
 - ★ CLASS QUESTION IN THE WRITINGS OF BISHNU PRASAD RABHA
 - ★ COMMENTARY ON THE DYNAMICS OF US-GERMAN RELATIONS : FROM 'GUARDIAN-WARD' TO PARTNERSHIP IN CRISIS?
 - ★ THE NEO-LIBERALISM AND THE STATE : A DISCURSIVE FORMATION OF THE POST-LIBERAL INDIA
 - ★ REVISITING AMARTYA SEN'S NOTION OF JUSTICE : A CRITICAL ANALYSIS
 - ★ LANGUAGE AND GENDER: INTERACTION AND CONTESTATION
 - ★ RE-VISITING THE IDEA OF POWER THROUGH NEHRU'S IDEALS OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY : A THEORETICAL ESTIMATE
 - ★ ECOLOGICAL CRISIS OF LABOUR PROCESS UNDER CAPITALISM : A CRITICAL INTROSPECTION
 - ★ THE CHINA FACTOR IN INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY : IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NORTHEAST INDIA
 - ★ STATUS OF PESTICIDES PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION AND GOVERNMENT POLICIES IN INDIA
 - ★ INDIA-MYANMAR STRATEGIC CO-OPERATION THROUGH NORTH EAST : BILATERALISM TO SUB-REGIONALISM
 - ★ THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC STATE AND POLICE IN INDIA
 - ★ POOR AND ELECTRICITY POLICY: AN ASSESSMENT IN ASSAM
 - ★ AFGHANISTAN IMBROGLIO-OPTIONS FOR NEW DELHI
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CLASS QUESTION IN THE WRITINGS OF BISHNU PRASAD RABHA

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Abstract

Literature embraces human concerns and experiences and expresses our opinions in creative moulds. It also serves as a reflection of reality and an expression of our ideology. Therefore, literature has been often used to promote, incite and advance revolutionary cause. Bishnu Prasad Rabha was one of the most dominant figures of Assam and besides his immense contribution to the literary and cultural fields, he actively participated in the political field being motivated by the political ideology of Marx and Lenin. His writings clearly reflect his ideology of communism. Rabha used writing as a tool to express his revolutionary aspirations and to arouse revolutionary consciousness among the oppressed masses. Defying the recent tendency to establish Rabha only as an extreme nationalist artist and Kalaguru (Master of Arts), this article tries to bring forward how Rabha addressed the class question of Assam, especially his message to all the downtrodden classes of peasants, workers, women and indigenous communities who he entrusted with the responsibility of leading a socialist revolution.

Bishnu Prasad Rabha, often referred to as the 'Biplobi Xilpi' (Revolutionary Artist) was a multifaceted artist and a prominent revolutionist who was vocal about the rights of the masses. Rabha, from his very childhood, was influenced by the anarchist movement started by a few rebel Indians by exploiting the opportunity created by the Swadeshi movement. This handful of rebellious youths inspired by the Soviet Revolution always believed that independence from colonial rule would not bring the people overall freedom. This freedom was possible only through leading their way towards the path of socialism. Even after India got independence, people who believed in this ideology, engaged themselves with greater enthusiasm in promoting the belief among the masses that the achieved independence will not be able to bring greater development to the lives of peasants and middle-class sections of our society. Rabha actively participated in raising this consciousness amongst the masses both before and after independence (Mahanta, 2014). Rabha's article '*Agyatbaxor Kotha*', "... the fruit of Indian independence was snatched away only by the richer section... British left, money rule started.." (Rabha, 1997, p. 1182). Therefore, Rabha, who became a member of RCPI in 1945, favoured continuing the independence struggle on the basis of 'revolutionary class-struggle'.

Literature in its various forms and modes carry enormous power and potential and acts as a powerful instrument to articulate change and mobilization in the society. Literature, thus, has been used in different reformations and revolutions in the world like the American Revolution, French Revolution and many others, to articulate and to bring consciousness among the masses. In 1942, Mao Zedong, in his '*Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art*', emphasised that the goal of literature was not to express the author's own private feelings or artistic inspirations. Instead, he said that literature and art should inspire the masses by presenting positive examples of heroism and socialist idealism (Zedong, 1959). Rabha was among those revolutionaries who used writing as a medium to articulate and arouse consciousness among the mass. A reading of Rabha's writings reveal that he believed in the united strength of all the downtrodden and dominated classes that could bring about revolutionary changes in the society rather than one specific class. In this article we identify the role and revolutionary responsibility of three groups that find significant mention in his writings.

The Peasants and Workers

Peasants from different parts of the world have been playing crucial roles in different movements and revolutions around the world. Like Mao, who entrusted revolutionary responsibilities on the peasants, Frantz Fanon also talked about the inevitable role of the peasantry in the anti-colonial movement in his book '*The Wretched of the Earth*' (2004). Revolutionary attitude of the peasantry against exploitative conditions was witnessed in Assam too in the 18th century, when peasants revolted against the Ahom administration under the banner of Moamoria Rebellion. The root cause of this rebellion was in the repressive mandatory labour service called the Paik System. Rabha recognized this strength of the peasantry and hence he assigned great political and revolutionary responsibilities to the peasant class. Together with the peasantry, he also acknowledged the power of the working class emerged as a result of simultaneous policies of colonialism, capitalism, industrialization and the like.

Bishnu Prasad Rabha donated almost 2500 *bighas* of inherited land among the poor landless farmers and embraced their lifestyle to have a closer understanding of their problems and to declass himself as an expression of his commitment towards the cause of peasantry. This was because Rabha was aware of the policies and practices adopted in different communist countries like Soviet Union's collectivization of agricultural land between 1928 and 1940 during the tenure of Joseph Stalin; Agrarian Reform Law crafted by Che Guevara in Cuba that aimed at bringing transformations in the lives of peasants. It was also done in response to the Indian government's failure in successful implementation of zamindari abolition, tenancy reform and the like. This apart, Rabha also wrote extensively addressing the peasantry and working class informing them of their rights, the exploitative practices and the course of action required. For example, Rabha wrote-

"You feed the world

Tearing apart the land

You provide the rich with

Strong weapons
 Factory is your creation,
 Fields wider...

 Onward onward onward
 Army of peasant power
 O' worker friend
 Let's march onward
 Wake up wake up wake up
 Young workers
 Persecuted oppressed
 Peasants stronger....." (Rabha, 2008, p. 134)
 (Flexible rendering from Assamese by the first author)

Through this poem, Rabha speaks of the significance of the peasantry as the producer class. Likewise, he brings forward the exploitation of the workers who were denied the rights to the products of their labour. Rabha foregrounds the role of the working class within an industrial setup by depicting that although different machineries make a factory, without man-power (labour power) a factory cannot be run or built up. Which is why, Rabha in this poem proclaimed that a factory is the creation of the workers. In the same vein, he highlights that agricultural product, food grains are products of human labour particularly of the peasants. This is because the zamindars and land owners do not really put any effort in the production process. But profits earned goes into the hands of feudal lords and the factory owners. There-fore, Rabha expects and urges the peasantry and working to fight against the oppressive and exploitative practices and the phrase 'wake up, wake up' is a reflection of this.

Similarly, Rabha addressed the labourers of the newly established industries of Assam like tea, oil, coal, electricity who were the primary producing force of these industries-

"On whose strength earth's coal-stone rely;
 Whose hearty Ganges is earth's in-streaming oil;
 Whose arm force brings electricity
 Tearing apart blank bust of outer space;
 Those food and landless world's millions of proletariats
 Uproar in imprisoned heart." (Rabha, 2008, p. 272)
 (Free rendering from Assamese by the first author)

With the arrival of colonialism witnessed the off shooting of industries in Assam. To work in these industries- tea, oil, railways, electricity, coal- huge numbers of native and mi-grated workers were employed. Coal mines and oil fields demand hazardous tasks. Workers in these industries were not adequately paid as per the drudgery they undergo in these indus-tries risking their lives. Most often workers would be under debt bondage or the bonded la-bour system in which a worker has to provide labour service for a fixed duration to the credi-tor in exchange of advanced cash. This denies the worker the right to choose his employer or even to negotiate the terms of the contract which gives the creditor opportunity to make the terms of the contract in favour of himself with utmost exploitation of labour. Ranjit Das Gup-ta in his article '*From Peasants and Tribesmen to Plantation Workers: Colonial Capitalism, Reproduction of Labour Power and Proletarianisation in North East India, 1850s to 1947*' has discussed the plight of tea garden labourers most of which were recruited through allurements, deception and naked violence. They were provided very low wages and were kept under strict surveillance and if a worker was absent from work for more than seven days he was liable to imprisonment and chastisement (Das , 1986). These workers whether in coal, oil or electricity as Rabha wanted to depict in the poem are the primary force of production are landless and are even deprived of sufficient food to survive.

Gramsci in his '*Prison Notebook*' argued that the ruling class can maintain hegemony or dominance over the masses through 'civil society'. Through the instruments of 'civil society' like religious and educational institutions, poems, songs, media, the ruling class or bourgeois develop a hegemonic culture that disperse its political, social and cultural values and norms in such a way that it takes the form of 'common sense' among the masses. There-fore, Gramsci argued that capitalist power is needs to be challenged by building a 'counter hegemony' through creating alternative ideology in contrast to bourgeois ideology by organic intellectuals. Because of such bourgeois hegemony the peasants and workers could not gain consciousness about the exploitations they had been facing and to fight back. Justification of such exploitations becomes a part of their common sense, which was created through differ-ent instruments and agents of the ruling class (Gramsci, 1971).

Rabha's short story '*HiyarPung*' depicted such processes of consent creation within the Assamese socio-economic structure. In this story, while the protagonist Lakhra has lost everything he had - land, field and even his home to the Mahajan (village money-lender), the Ojaa (village exorcist) tries to console him saying that all those were the wish of God and Lakhra only was unlucky that he had to go through that. Hearing his words Lakhra becomes furious and tells him that the people like the Ojaa, the rich, have spoilt the minds of the poor like Lakhra himself and it was neither the wish of God nor of luck; but of the localized insti-tutions like Mahajan, Ojaa etc. The people like the village exorcist are the representative of bourgeois ideology who tries to justify the works of the ruling class by spreading their ideo-logical values and norms and tries to get consent from the subordinated class (Rabha, 1997, p. 676-689).

Indigenous Communities

Bishnu Prasad Rabha mentioned the role of indigenous communities like the Mising, Bodo, Hajong, Karbi in the formation of larger Assamese nation and the importance of unity and integrity among different communities, the people living in the hills and the plains in his poems, dramas, speeches and articles. In his article '*Bor Asom*' (Greater Assam), he wrote that if the indigenous communities would not be given their dignified status in the society the sparkle of revolt among

them would definitely destroy the base of the Assamese nation. Rabha belonged to the Bodo Community by birth, although he used the title Rabha as his father was brought up by a person from the Rabha community after the death of his grandfather, his philosophy towards life, society and politics did not limit himself to the thoughts and processes one community alone. Rather, he established close connections with different communities and Assam, learned several languages and was accustomed with traditions of several communities. These communities are not free of exploitation and they are subjected to cultural, linguistic and various other forms of exploitation (Doley, 2008). Chandan Kumar Sharma in his article '*Tribal Land Alienation: Government's Role*' (2001) discusses tribal land alienation from a historical perspective. He brings forth how colonial policies brought about tremendous changes in the pattern of land use among these communities, dependence on forest affecting their relation with nature (river, forest and other natural resources) reshaping their relationship with other communities. The British created feudal interest in the land belonging to these communities by the grant of 'zamindari' who were to collect revenue but many of them also indulged in importing non-tribal labourers to work in tribal areas so that more revenue could be generated. This paved the way to commercialization of resources which were earlier regarded by the tribal as their community holdings like bamboo, thatch, reed and wood in the forest and fish in the rivers - everything was brought under taxation. These indigenous peasants were not able to meet the growing revenue demand of the British administration which made them bound to take loan from Marwari money lenders who also migrated to Assam for trade purpose during the colonial rule and sometimes the peasantry had to sell their land in order to meet the revenue demand (Sharma, 2001). Rabha could understand their plight and he described in his article '*Samajtantrabaad Hole Ki Laabh*' (1997) that only through socialist revolution freedom of marginalized groups like workers, labourers and indigenous communities can be achieved. Here, he vehemently criticised the Tribal League which was established for bringing welfare to these communities but, in contrast the leaders of the league established their own leadership over the tribal masses

by giving them false hope of peace, prosperity and freedom. He brings forth how leadership squeezes these indigenous populations in the "*squeezing machine of law*" (1997; pp. 990)- a machine that protects the rich and exploits the poor. Because like other parties such as the Congress and Muslim League; Socialist Party, Forward Block and the Tribal League too has its faith in the machinery of the law. To substantiate his argument, Rabha even brought in the example of Rupnath Brahma, who despite having a very honest personality could not do welfare to the indigenous communities even after being a Minister for so long. According to Rabha Brahma's failure owes to his belief in law and other class institutions which were discriminatory in nature. Such institutions can never bring felicity, peace and freedom (Rabha, 1997).

Owing to the indigeneity of these communities, Rabha believed that they hold great responsibility in building up an egalitarian society. Therefore, Rabha through his writings highlighted their problems and prospects and worked toward raising their consciousness re-garding their roles and responsibilities toward a socialist revolution that would them ensure dignity and freedom from Caste practices prevalent within Assamese society. Rabha tried to provide a glance of such negligence in his only novel '*Mising Koneng*', based on Mising so-ciety. In this novel, Rabha portrayed an incident when the male protagonist Kumong, who was then just a school going teen-age boy goes to drink water from a public well of a Hindu village. Knowing that he belonged to Mising (an indigenous community inhabiting parts of the Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh), a middle-aged man who was present there scolded him for touching the well as according to the man the well became impure with his touch. This incident incited questions in Kumong's teen-aged mind that whether Misings are not Assamese, why they have been treated as non-Assamese despite being the aboriginals (Rabha, 1997). Rabha believed that such practices should be abolished and the dignity of these communities must be restored. They had no idea that socialist revolutions in different part of the world have established new classless societies. Rabha's commitment to the cause is reflected from his words-

"Tribal! Wake up tribal!
Forsaking your age-old slumber.....

.....

See once the new earth
Brightening up by the new sun
Surmounting the darkness;
Open your eyes and see
The fresh tidings of the new era."

.....

In the lonely woods of assam
Used to roam several animals - huge and terrible
Fighting with them number of your kins
Had lost their lives.

.....

Assam's primitive men and women- tribal!
Open once the golden pages of that era
Peruse the ancient stories of your old period.

.....

O' indigenous tribal belle!
Mother Assam.
Tribal is the first man! Father of Assam
Creator of the Assamese nation.
Listen listenlisten o' tribal women!
How many full moons, how many moonlight
Have passed with time quietly
One day while you were sitting alone -
Secretly whispered in your ear

Taught you the chant of creative power.
 Initiated with that chant
 Learned with creative power
 Your young body got brightened up
 Thus, carrying for ten months ten days
 You gave birth to the first Assamese
 Making the lap of Assam elegant.
 Today you are the ever-respectable mother Assam-
 You are the indigenous Assamese." (Rabha, 2008, p 161-165)
 (Free rendering from Assamese by the first author)

From the above excerpts from the poem Jag Tribal (wake up tribal) it becomes evi-dent that Rabha accorded the aboriginal status to the indigenous communities which are clear from his reference to them as 'AadimAsomiya' (Indigenous Assamese). He also called them the father of the Assamese language. His mention of indigenous women in the above excerpt informs that he also addressed the women question in his writings which will be dealt with in the next section.

Women in the writings of Rabha

An analysis of the writings of Bishnu Prasad Rabha also reflects his concern for the women and his attempts at addressing the women question. He was against the oppression done to women in every capitalist society. Rabha wrote a number of articles on the problems faced by women in capitalist society and what benefit a socialist society can provide to wom-en with. In his article '*Narir Samasya Ki Hobo*' he wrote, "religion, society, politics and gov-ernment have pushed women down to the lowest category. Today women have nothing as their own. They have even lost their freedom and cannot do anything on their own - cannot go out, read, and write. They cannot eat, dress, give speeches, discuss politics, sing or even dance. Today women are prisoners in their own home" (Rabha, 1997, p. 988). Here, we can see the similarity between the ideas of Rabha on the

status of women with that of Kate Millet. Kate Millet in her book '*Sexual Politics*' slammed the institution of patriarchy as it establishes the relationship of dominance and subordination between men and women. She wrote that military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance - in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands and these institutions license man's dominance over woman in the society (Millet, 2000).

His '*Sovietor Nari*' is an important document through which he wanted to show the world the difference in the lives of women between a socialist society and a capitalist society. He vehemently criticised the Indian tradition which severely discriminate between men and women in every aspect of life. According to Rabha, the Indian society terming its women as chaste, virtuous wife makes them eternally dependent upon man and that is why the independent image of Soviet women, in the eyes of many Indians becomes depravedness. But the actual truth is that, here, in this country, marriage is considered as the only way of survival and livelihood for a woman and for which the growth of humanistic qualities in women has always been suppressed. Husband is considered as the provider of food, cloth and shelter for a woman and that is why she has to worship her husband like a God no matter whether he deserves it or not. The society frames hardest punishment against a simple fault of women but the same society forgives even the disgusting crimes by a man. In contrast to our society, Rabha said that in the Soviet, men and women enjoy equal rights in the eyes of society, law and economy. Parents there do not get their daughters married just to ensure their survival because they know their daughters are capable of earning money and taking care of them-selves. A mother shares the responsibility of her children equally with the father (Rabha, 1997, p. 996-999).

Rabha not only limited his ideas on the status of women from the economic perspective but he also touched the sensitive issues of reproduction. With sharp contrast to Indian society as portrayed by Rabha, there is no absolute right of a father over his child in the so-cialist society of the Soviet. A woman can bear and rear a child even without the name of a father and such s child would by no means

be regarded as illegitimate in Soviet society. In such cases, the mother and the child are never discriminated against or alienated from the rest of the society. Still, the couples are encouraged to register their marriage in order to secure their child's future but it is not in any case mandatory. And these changes in the Soviet have been introduced after the establishment of socialism and more drastic changes according to Rabha were destined (Rabha, 1997, p. 996-999).

Through these writings Rabha clearly shows how a socialist society can bring welfare to the lives of women and establishment of such socialist society is not possible without a revolution. Soviet society which was an inspirational and benchmark society for Rabha went through such socialist revolution which according to Rabha altered the soviet societies in a better way giving women their due rights. Rabha also understood that if women do not come out along with their male counterparts to lead a socialist revolution there will be only little change in their status even if a socialist society is established. To achieve their due rights they must participate in the revolution to establish the goal of socialism. Rabha wrote -

"Taking seedlings of new era, of new mind,
Planting them in ploughed muddy earth,
Let's march on flying flaming flag
Poor worker faction of slender young women,
Ruined in greed, burnt in hunger, lean, withered
Weaver of the land of assam.
.....
The bugle of war is blowing
It's time to be ready taking the oath of life and death
.....
Get dressed like a warrior and let's proceed to the last battle"
(Rabha, 2008; pp. 140)

(Free rendering from Assamese by the first author)

Rabha's commitment to the women question in Assamese society is reflected through the above lines where he depicts the deplorable status of women. The lines also depict his recognition of women as a revolutionary class who through their own labour and awareness of the cause shall fight for their own freedom.

We see that Rabha used his writings as a means to address different issues of inequality, exploitation, discrimination whether it is economic, political, social or cultural. He used his writings also to arouse consciousness and awareness amongst the exploited sections of the society Rabha was exemplary in the sense that he did not confine his assessment and analysis of the socio-political and economic condition of Assam only to a particular marginalized group or community

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