

An Analysis of the Plight of the Adivasis as Depicted in B C Joshi's Prarthana Mein Pahar

Subhajit Bhadra

Assistant Professor, Post-Graduate Dept. of English, Bongaigaon College, Assam.

Email - subhajit.bhadra@gmail.com.

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to highlight the Adivasi life and concerns as depicted in the novel *Prarthana Mein Pahar* (Mountain in prayer) by Bhal Chandra Joshi, the renowned Hindi novelist and short story writer. This novel depicts the lives of Adivasis with sensitivity and compassion. This novel is significant because here the adivasi life is not depicted through an outsider's gaze or a tourist's perception, rather we are drawn into the inside of the lives of the Adivasis and from there we look into the lives of others. This novel happens to be a saga of a Adivasi village where the inhabitants live in a naked, unsheltered and helpless way as they have to negotiate with natural life. It seems as though time gets freezed into the prehistoric time to the contemporary period. However the interesting thing is that these Adivasi's are no longer desirous of living an animal life but they are gradually turning out to be subjects of the so called civilized media and newspapers. The discourse of politicians give space to their lives and the revolutionary leftists can foresee a hopeful future for those Adivasis. But the harsh truth is that the so called civilized people cannot take pain to cross a long distance to visit the interior place where these Adivasis live. Thus they (the Adivasis) meet death because of an epidemic without medicine, and this makes us realize that our rhetoric of progress, development and revolution remain empty slogans. This novel thus makes us ashamed as we cannot improve the lives of the Adivasis. What make this novel a great one is its mythical dimension. In the particular Adivasi village depicted in the novel, only two people survive in the wake of the epidemic and they want to start a new life like Adam and Eve. Myth carried us back to the days of great deluge and this novel provides a counter narrative caused by the great drought. But it also symbolically ends on a hopeful note with the onset of rain.

Key Words: adivasi, myth, progress, counter narrative, humane.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the Adivasis' life and concerns as depicted in the novel *Prarthana Mein Pahar* (Mountain in Prayer) by Bhal Chandra Joshi, a renowned Hindi novelist and short story writer. This novel depicts the life of the Adivasis with sensitivity and compassion. This novel is significant because here the Adivasis' life is not depicted through an outsider's gaze or a tourist's perception, rather we are drawn into the inside of the life of the Adivasis and from there we look into the life of others.

This novel portrays an entire Adivasi village where the inhabitants live a naked, unsheltered and hapless life, as they have to negotiate with natural conditions. It seems as though time freezes into the prehistoric period even in the 21st century. However, the interesting thing is that these Adivasis are no longer desirous of living an animal-like life but they are gradually turning out to be the subjects of the so-called civilized media and newspapers. The discourse of politicians creates a new space for them and the revolutionary leftists can foresee a hopeful future for the Adivasis. But the harsh truth is that the so-called civilized people cannot take the pain to cross a long distance to visit the interior place where these Adivasis live. The Adivasis meet death because of an epidemic without medicine, and this makes us realize that our progress, development and revolution remain empty slogans. This novel thus makes us ashamed as we cannot do anything to improve their life. What makes this novel a great piece is its mythical dimension. In particular, in the Adivasi village as depicted in the novel, only two people survive in the wake of the epidemic and they want to start a new life like Adam and Eve. Myth carries us back to the days of great deluge, although this novel provides a counter narrative caused by the great drought. Nevertheless, the story ends on a hopeful note as the showers from the sky drench the earth.

In *Prarthana Mein Pahar*, Bhal Chandra Joshi tries to capture the life of a group of Adivasis in a remote village called Vitara. There are many reports and documents on the life of the Adivasis written by several authors. But Joshi writes as an insider because he has observed the life of the Adivasis closely and that is what makes this novel authentic. The Adivasis have always been looked down upon by the civilised people and animal qualities have been ascribed to them. The life of the Adivasis are not merely news pieces, neither are their life filled with celebrations of festivals. The life in the mountain is difficult, tall, rough and hard as mountains. The Adivasis derive pleasure from minuscule sources and their life depends on the grace of nature or sheer luck.

The village, Vitara, faces a dire consequence as the nearby wine company run by Mr Bajaj has drained liquid wastage to the local river and as a result of this the water becomes contaminated. As the novel starts, we find the inhabitants of Vitara searching for water everywhere. Everyone in the village including the children know that there is hardly any sign of water but still they have not lost hope. However, their only hope is that of a well where there may be some water. The inhabitants of Vitara are searching for water desperately and the village boy Rotan searches almost

every nook and corner of the mountain and forest but to no avail. Everyone in the village faces the threat of hunger, thirst and death. Everyday someone in the village dies after being infected by the poisonous water of the river.

Everyone in the village is warned not to go near the river but everyday someone falls prey to the poison of the river water. A few children and old people have no option but to fetch water from the same river to quench their thirst. As they sip the water, they instantly die and some others come back to the village after having been infected. The bodies of the dead human beings are cremated. But a large number of animals who have died because of the poisonous water were left where they were. Some animals die near the river itself and others die in the jungle. The stench fills the whole atmosphere emanating from the corpse of innumerable dead animals. The Adivasis live life on the fringes and there is no one to worry for them as it evident from the following lines: “Any person who is not acquainted with the jungle and mountain may be afraid but these Adivasis have become a part of the jungle and the mountain where they have grown up in a natural way. The perfume and wind of the jungle have mixed up with the blood of these Adivasis. This mountain and this jungle are their homes. They roam around these mountains and jungle without any fear and in a natural way.”

Even the animals residing in the jungle have become silent as though they have been terrified because of the extraordinary havoc and panic created by the absence of rain because of which the poisonous water could not be cleaned. Ratan is a brave boy or rather a young man who is undeterred by such happening as he moves in search of water. His movements are only watched by the mountains and trees which are almost dying. One of the specialities of this Adivasi villagers is that their cultivable land is not like plain field but the slopes on the mountain, which needs a different skill of cultivation. Even the bullocks have been trained to cultivate on such slopes. They have inherited this land from their ancestors and they have inherited the art of cultivation also from them. To a so-called civilised person, it might have looked uncommon but to these Adivasis it has become a daily routine. These people rely only on land for cultivation as they lead a primitive life. There is a mythical dimension to their life when Joshi points out that Rin is their Goddess and Indra is their God. The Adivasis generally erect their houses near the fertile land. They live in small makeshift tents made of bamboo. As Ratan goes forward in search of water, his setting off is given again a mythical dimension when Joshi writes: “Where the cultivable land ends there resides a number of traditional gods. He silently halts near his gods for sometime. In response the gods are also silent. The dry leaves and dust coming from the wind of the jungle have made them silent. It seems as though they have to take some vengeance on the people of Vitara because of some mistake.”

Joshi weaves a romantic subplot in the Adivasi village as it is shown that Ratan and Rupa love each other from the core of their hearts. Rupa understands how and what Ratan feels and because of this fact they compliment each other. Rupa makes her intension clear when she says that Ratan would have to be the custodian of her life.

Joshi lashes out at people like Mr Bajaj who does not feel any moral qualms for draining poisonous substance to the river of the Adivasis for greed for money. Every year Mr Bajaj’s company drains the waste liquid to the river of Vitara and later on when rain arrives everything becomes perfectly normal as the rain cleans the water. But this time, the rain does not grace the sky on the Adivasis. Joshi marvellously portrays two parallel places: the village Vitara where the Adivasis live, and the city where the industrialists like Mr Bajaj live. They have now become worried because they know if the information regarding the waste liquid is leaked, they will have to face a severe consequence. Mr Bajaj is a reckless and heartless businessman as he says that he does not care whether the Adivasis live or die, he is rather worried for his hide business. When he uses his personal secretary to provide sexual pleasure to the renowned journalist or when he sends his own daughter-in-law to sleep with the minister to please him for giving further business permit he does not suffer from any guilt. Mr Bajaj’s secretary Mr Garg says that since Vitara is 150 kilometres away from the city, it would be impossible for anyone to go to Vitara for enquiry regarding the plight of the Adivasis.

Joshi wonderfully shows how mean the industrialists can be and how they can be heartless to the extent of being notorious. Joshi exposes the selfish nexus between the industrialists, politicians, reporters and other bureaucrats who can do anything for their personal benefit. Unable to find food and water in their native village, the Adivasis move to different places in the vicinity of the jungle but all their efforts go in vain. Every new day brings death for them and not a single day passes without someone getting infected with the poisonous water. A time comes when only twenty-five villagers or Adivasis are reportedly left in Vitara and even this number descends every passing day because of new deaths. Nobody cares for these Adivasis as they do not constitute part of the vote bank because their village does not officially come under any voting constituency. That is why no one wants to visit the village. They lack food, water and clothes and there is no one to succour them. The only exceptions are people like Samir and Paritosh who make it a point to visit the village of Vitara because their morality does not allow them to stay quiet. Unable to find any charity, Ratan and his two friends move to the city to earn some money to be able to purchase food for their fellow Adivasis. No one wants to give them any job, instead they are cheated by a big businessman and his cohort who employ them at lower wages and compel them to work. These Adivasis think innocently that they have been the objects of mercy. In this town, Ratan and his friends meet their well-wishers like Sukhram and Paritosh who are leftist trade unionists. They teach Ratan and their friends the lessons of equal right to get appropriate wages. Paritosh initially wants to use them but later on he suffers from the pricks of conscience and ultimately he dies by visiting the village of Vitara being infected by the deadly epidemic, which is a result of unscrupulous action of people like Mr Bajaj.

Joshi shows how simple life-style attracts people like Paritosh. When they do not get rightful wages and Ratan is asked to work in spite of his fever, Paritosh intervenes and provides them justice by sorting out the problems. The Adivasis in the village are waiting for Ratan and his friends to come with food, other eatable stuffs and water. But when Ratan and his friends participate in the rally in the town, they are immediately arrested by the police who, in turn, cease all their hard-earned money. Anyhow after returning from their work, they and Paritosh always meet in the evening and discuss politics and future plans over drinks. One day Ratan finds that one of his companions is going to die and when he goes to a local doctor, the doctor behaves with him as if he is talking to an animal. The plight of the Adivasis is compared with those of the animals. Several animal symbols have been used in the novel. Joshi takes the opportunity to lash out at the heartless medical practitioner who earned the degrees to garner money by any means. No body regards these Adivasis with compassion and sensitivity. However, exceptions are there as it is evident from the incident of Paritosh who lays down his own life for others' benefits. We see the moral nakedness of people like Garg, Bajaj, the local M.L.A, the state minister, and the police who connive together to deprive the Adivasis of justice. Joshi's following narrative brings out the indifference of the city dwellers towards the plight of these victimized Adivasis. "No relief has come from the city. Ratan's pessimism has become deeper than the depth of the local well. There have been seven days. The food is gradually disappearing. As he turned his back he found Rupa looking towards the sky with desperate glance. But the sky did not send rain, instead, it spread pessimism".

Ratan sees how his friends die but he withstands all the wreck. He himself becomes ill, visits the village repeatedly and comes back to the city to earn money, falls prey to the infection, refuses to be admitted to the hospital, carries many sick Adivasis to the town for treatment, and he himself almost dies but ultimately survives. At the end, we find that only Ratan and Rupa survive in the village and towards the end, the rainwater washes away the poisonous water of the river. Ratan witnesses all the cruelty of the city-dwellers and big business merchants. Finally all the culprits are punished by the law and Ratan and Rupa mingle together with the onset of rain. Joshi depicts the life of the Adivasis of Vitara with tremendous skill and authenticity.

Bhal Chandra Joshi has shown in this novel how the Adivasis live a neglected, cocooned, isolated, marginalized and subjugated life. They are often treated merely as animals but if one looks at them quite introspectively it would be apparent that they are true human beings. Their plight is highlighted by Joshi in a pathetic way, but it is not because of the writer's lack of compassion and sensitivity, but stems from the ignorance of the mainstream of the society. In India, the Adivasis' life is often ridiculed as is apparent from the conversation between Mr Bajaj and Mr Garg. This tendency often forces the mainstream people to neglect their sorrows and sufferings. Joshi has demystified the life of the Adivasis by making them more humane than the so-called humanists. The liberal humanists talk about the Adivasis' life sitting in air-conditioned rooms; people like Mr Bajaj, Mr Garg and the Minister somehow try to avoid them. A political activist like Paritosh tries to initially use them but later on tries to assuage their suffering by giving up his own life. There are honest schoolteachers like Nandu Matsab who also sacrifices his own life for the cause of the Adivasis.

The treatment of the theme of social and political deprivation comes out quite adroitly as the Adivasis become mere toys in the hands of persons like Bajaj, Garg, the Minister and the Munimji. The Adivasis have their own cultural rituals and indigenous identity and Joshi dexterously points out their life with pathos. Joshi shows how people like Sumer Kaka and Ratan are simple human beings, who spend their life on their own terms. Joshi shows what happens within the inner corridors of power regarding the life of the Adivasis. The village of Vitara is neglected as it is geographically and politically cut off from the so-called civilized existence. These Adivasis are not selfish, they have fellow feeling and are compassionate. But the people they encounter are oblivious of the suffering of the people of Vitara. Joshi does not jump into a conclusion; he rather shows how the Adivasis are perceived by the rest of the world. These Adivasis believe in hard working and through their hard-earned money, they want to live a simple life. They do not disturb the so-called civilized people. Everyone from the city tries to garner benefits from the situation that the inhabitants of Vitara fall in. Samir goes there as a reporter but he cannot stay there for long as he is not accustomed to such harsh life. He tries to do some good to the Adivasis of Vitara but fails in the process except his genuine reporting towards the end of the novel. Joshi mercilessly lashes out at those who look at the Adivasis with scorn and disdain. When Ratan and his friends come to the town to earn money they are awestruck by the city's cruelty as they are often deprived off their wages but the presence of Paritosh assures them that no wrong can be done to them. Joshi makes a perfect blending between his theme and style and his narrative is very subtle and nuanced. He paints an authentic and horrible picture of the plight of the Adivasis. Joshi shows how the Adivasis live a simple and honest life but how the people of power play with their condition.

It is something which is prevalent in every part of our country and Joshi's narrative weaves the magical life of the Adivasis which ultimately acquires mythical and symbolic dimension. Joshi wants equal treatment for the Adivasis and his novel is a plea to regard the Adivasis as human beings.

Reference:

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