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Foregrounding the Snake Charmers and Dalit Issues: A Study of *Sapua* *Kela (The Snake Charmer)* by Ramachandra Behera and *Sapua (The Snake*

Charmer) by Kalindi Charana Panigrahi

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Abstract

The present scenario makes it quite conspicuous that our society still grapples with a lot of pressing issues in this 21st century which hugely problematize the existence of human beings. In spite of all the endeavours to eradicate a social evil like casteism, we have failed utterly to protect the interest of the Dalits who are still marginalized in one or other way. However, literature being a mirror reflection of society never hesitates to address various issues confronted by the so-called Dalits through various literary outputs. In this respect, Odia literature does not lag behind. Many of the Odia litterateurs have made sincere efforts in foregrounding Dalit issues in their writings. Sometimes, the attempt of Odia writers in highlighting Dalit issues is explicit and other times it is quite implicit. The main apogee of this paper is to interpret two of the Odia short stories, *Sapua Kela* by Ramachandra Behera and *Sapua* by Kalindi Charana Panigrahi with a view to examine the ways Dalit snake charmers have been represented.

Keywords: Dalitism, Casteism, Discrimination, Prejudice

Introduction

Dalitism is nothing but an outcome of an epistemological manipulation of the upper caste people in Indian context. The so-called Dalit community has been primarily constructed and legitimized through the Hindu brahminical ideology and unjust caste system which has been very often validated by various religious scriptures. The unjust caste system is solely responsible for the subjugation or subordination of lower caste people in Indian society. The caste Hindus define their fake supremacy against the inferiority of down-trodden Dalits or lower caste people. The terms like High Caste/Low Caste can be interpreted as binaries—one can be defined or understood in opposition to another. Commenting on the subjugation of Dalits, Bama notes,

Because Dalits have been enslaved for generation upon generation, and been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and self-worth, untouchable; they have reached a stage where they themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart. (2000:24-25)

The unbridgeable gap between Dalits and caste Hindus always fractures the foundation of society in one or other way. Hinduism and its deadly coils of caste often pose a serious threat to those Dalits who have been subjugated and marginalized by the so-called brahminical ideology from the time immemorial. The oppression of caste is in the bone of the nation and the resistance or revolution against such social evil has been unceasing since a long time.

The vulnerable people are always cordoned off and exploited or silenced and this is quite evident in case of Dalits like snake charmers who are always segregated and subjected to

immeasurable exploitation and humiliation. The snake charmers usually reside at the outskirt of the villages. Such residential segregation is a strategy for the domination of the Dalit snake charmers by the upper caste people.

However, literature being a transformative weapon has incited articulations of various voices on Dalit issues. Coming to Odia literature, like other Indian indigenous literatures, it deals with Dalit issues with a view to bring about certain changes. Writers like Fakir Mohan Senapati, Gopinath Mohanty stand tall in this respect. Their writings have sincerely projected the exploitation and pathetic disposition of Dalits. The revolt against the caste system and discriminatory social practices is quite pronounced in Odia literature authored by both Dalit and Non-Dalit writers. Apart from Sudramuni Sarala Das, Bhima Bhoi, many other writers like Bichitrananda Nayak, Anand Mahanand and others have expressed their concerns over Dalit issues in their writings.

Dalit literature basically highlights the lives, struggles and experiences of Dalit community in details. This paper intends to critically analyze two short stories entitled, *Sapua Kela (The Snake Charmer)* and *Sapua (The Snake Charmer)* by Ramachandra Behera and Kalindi Charana Panigrahi respectively. Ramachandra Behera has secured a distinct place in Odia literature. He has tremendously contributed to the enrichment of Odia literature by the virtue of his exceptional insight into human life and unmatched creativity. His stories have fetched him unparalleled popularity and success. Eulogizing Odia short story as a genre, Bijaya Kumar Das says, “Story telling is in the blood of Odia writers” (13).

Further while glorifying Odia short story writers, Jatindra Mohan Mohanty says, “Behera’s as well as Pratibha’s, Bina’s and Rabi’s are representative voices of the new power and dimension which Oriya short story started acquiring

beginning from early eighties and spread out across country" (620). He has been in the vocation of producing some exquisite literary works with a commitment to take Odia literature to a new height. By means of his scholarly rigour and exceptional insight into human life, Ramachandra Behera has carved a niche for himself in the gamut of Odia literature.

Kalindi Charana Panigrahi is undoubtedly a name to reckon with in Odia literature. With a literary career spanning over a few decades, Kalindi Charana Panigrahi has substantially contributed to the growth and development of Odia literature. His creative brilliance has fetched him a wide recognition alongwith some illustrious awards like Padma Bhushan and Sahitya Academi award. With some timeless works like *Matira Manisha*, *Amarachita* etc., he has left his indelible imprint in Odia literature. Both Ramachandra Behera and Kalindi Charana Panigrahi can be considered as bright stars in the firmament of Odia literature.

***Sapua Kela* by Ramachandra Behera**

Though, Ramachandra Behera has some thought-provoking novels to his credit, his incisive and riveting short stories have fetched him unparalleled acclamation, popularity and wider readership. Instead of offering an escape into a world of enchantment, his short stories present some ordinary characters who strive hard to overcome all the hurdles by the virtue of their indomitable passion and fortitude. Some of his characters being endowed with invincible power overcome their misfortune and come out victorious while others succumb to their ill fate. His short story collection, *Gopapura* that earned him Kendriya Sahitya Academy Award bears a testimony to his dexterity and inventiveness as a story teller.

His stories traverse multiple themes, time frames and locations but can be enjoyed as a whole. In majority of his

short stories, Dr. Behera goes for an evocative portrayal of the life of ordinary people and thereby foregrounds the struggle they undergo and the challenges they undertake for their survival. With his stories, he delves into the shadows and fragility of human relationships.

Life and struggle of the ordinary people constitutes the core of his writings. His keen observation of society, outstanding narrative style and befitting language very often result into the creation of certain characters who look quite lively and leave a lasting impression in our mind.

Arjuna, the protagonist of *Sapua Kela* suffers a tragic end. He falls prey to a creature which he was closely familiar with since a long. Inspite of his commendable expertise in handling venomous snakes, he couldn't escape from the deadly coil of the python. Though, apparently, this story narrates the life of Arjuna, a snake charmer, it digs deeper and acquaints the readers quite tacitly with the life of snake charmers and Dalit issues. It voices the difficulties and miseries of the entire community of snake charmers. This short story can be taken as a summation of the writer's engagement with caste system in Odisha. And this engagement has more salience in the present context.

Sapua Kela is always considered to be one of the finest short stories of Ramachandra Behera. The entire story centers around the character of Arjuna, a snake charmer belonging to a Dalit community known as Snake Charmers in Odisha. Arjuna is the central character in the story who manages to eke out a living by his art of snake charming which he off course inherited from his ancestors.

Arjuna can be taken as a representative of his own community. Ramachandra Behera in his story *Sapua Kela* represents the entire community of snake charmers through the character of Arjuna. He represents the entire community

of snake charmers through the personal suffering, acute poverty and frustration of Arjuna. The writer brings the unspeakable misery, misfortune and hardships of Dalit snake charmers to the fore through the voice of Arjuna in quite an implicit way. While describing the physical appearance of Arjuna, the writer says,

The name of the snake charmer was Arjuna. His body was black. He wore a dirty dhoti, and another short piece of cloth across his shoulder. He was a man who never wore a vest or a shirt. There was a large moustache under his nose. Half of it was gray. The hair on his head was full and coarse....His lips were thick and dark. (2004:01)

Such an accurate physical description is enough to draw the image of a Dalit and his social status in the mind of the readers. Arjuna's inability to afford a vest or a shirt is suggestive of his poverty and his physical appearance serves the purpose of projecting him as an impoverished Dalit.

However, keeping his poverty and excruciating pain aside, Arjuna keeps on entertaining the people and thereby manages to make a living. His arrival is always considered as a treat for the eyes and this is reflected in the words of the narrator, "For our village , Arjuna's arrival was a day of entertainment, a day to be bewitched" (01). So, Arjuna never fails to live up to the expectation of his audience or the so-called society which hardly accords any value to the existence of Dalits. The pathetic condition of Arjuna is expressed in his own words:

I have come to an end of my life. What have I done for myself? At best, I can go around a village or two in a single day. But how much do I earn from that to live? Seven years ago my wife

died. And last month, my daughter eloped.
(2004:04)

Further, Arjuna delves deep while ventilating his agony and frustration, “The house is all that I have. I can’t even afford to thatch the roof with straw. The rain seeps through every year” (04). These lines throw light not only on the plight or frustration of Arjuna but also the entire Dalit community.

In addition to this piteous condition of Dalits, Ramachandra Behera harps upon the discrimination against the so-called Dalits, especially snake charmers in a very laconic and implicit way. Arjuna is appreciated a lot by all the people for his dexterity in terms snake charming. While being fed up with such profession, Arjuna thinks of an alternate way of living, but he is never encouraged for that. Such persuasion for sticking to snake charming can be interpreted as a sort of apprehension of the upper-caste people. The so-called caste Hindus define their fake supremacy against the inferiority of the Dalits. In this story, Arjuna’s idea of bringing in a change in his profession or life for his betterment is not somehow approved of by the upper caste people. Arjuna is expected to live with that fixed identity and that badge of inferiority throughout his life. His upliftment in any form can pose a threat or menace to the brahminical ideology.

Untouchability is always considered to be a social evil and so many attempts have been made over the years to eradicate such a blatantly unjust practice, but, it still operates in various levels of the society. The writer in this story touches upon this untouchability or discriminatory practices prevalent in society not in an emphatic voice rather through implication. It is quite unusual or uncommon on the part of the upper caste Hindus to be in relationship with the lower caste ones - this is always taken as an affront to the dignity of the former. This unequal relationship is simply touched upon by the writer in this story.

The narrator says, “Although he was of a higher class, my grandfather was friendly with Arjuna” (02). By the use of such figurative language, the writer denigrates the discriminatory attitude of the upper caste people towards the Dalits. Arjuna can be an entertaining stuff but can never be at par with other high caste people. He always stands for that inferiority against which the superiority of the upper caste people can be defined.

Assertion of Dalit identity is something which matters much for the Dalit writers or activists who strive hard for inculcating that Dalit consciousness. Even though, this story, *Sapua Kela* highlights the pathetic disposition of Dalit snake charmers, it reflects the way Arjuna takes pride in his own tradition, culture and so-called Dalit identity. In the midst of all his shortcomings and difficulties, Arjuna clings to his own culture and identity. He stands in harmony with his own community and the values associated with his existence from the time immemorial.

Being disgusted with his own worrisome existence, Arjuna momentarily decides to give up his profession but again realizes the importance of his tradition. Out of momentary vexation Arjuna says, “I do not relish this work anymore...but it is my family tradition. I cannot give it up” (03). Such temporary desire to abjure his own profession further surfaces in the words of Arjuna, “ I tell myself that I will do something else. I tell myself that I will stop this work. Day and years go by thinking of this. But, I cannot give it up” (05). Commenting on such a beautiful proximity existing between Arjuna and his art of snake charming, the writer says,

Arjuna stuck to his basket or rather, the basket stuck to Arjuna. He was not capable of doing anything else. As the years passed it was difficult to tell whether Arjuna was keeping the snakes

imprisoned inside the basket or whether snakes in the baskets imprisoned him. (2004:05)

The affinity that Arjuna shares with his own profession, community and age-old tradition finds expression in these above words. It is almost impossible on the part of Arjuna to budge an inch from his own traditional or ancestral art of snake charming which runs into his vein.

Sapua by Kalindi Charana Panigrahi

Kalindi Charana Panigrahi's *Sapua* centers around the character of Madana, a snake charmer who leads a semi-nomadic life and earns his livelihood by street performance. Like most of the people of his community, he leads a poverty-stricken and burdensome life in Patia, Bhubaneswar. His leaking thatched house and deplorable living condition inform the readers about his pathetic condition. But, he has never shied away from his inherited profession despite his acute poverty and hardships.

In spite of his poverty, he looks content and leads a placid life with his wife, Sauri. But the imposition of rent by the landlord for their temporary settlements, apathetic attitude of the upper caste people and prejudice against his entire community gradually add to his disappointment.

Sauri keeps on enticing Madana to have a house of his own and do farming for a better and hassle-free life but Madana never pays any heed to it. But, the frequent raids on their houses, unwarranted arrest of the snake charmers and the discriminatory attitude of the upper caste people eventually compel Madana to build a house of his own. But, his dream of a peaceful life shatters when almost all of his people get arrested by police in connection with a series of thefts in a nearby village.

Madana being aware of such false accusation musters up courage to bail out the people of his own fraternity. But Madana does not succeed in his venture to prove his own people innocent. Madana's endeavor to save his own people from disgrace and subvert the so-called domination of the upper caste people seems to be an utter failure. Sauri still waits with a lot of aspirations and conviction for Madana to release all the innocent snake charmers. But, that dream does not materialize. The small thatched houses at the entrance of the village, Patia which used to witness all the clamoring of the snake charmers turn into debris in the course of time. It is infructuous to think of removing that badge of inferiority in a blatantly unjust society.

It is quite pertinent to quote Bama in this context.

In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after your death, caste-difference does not disappear; caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us in to frenzy. (2000:22)

So, Madana has neither respite nor joy in his life. Changing location or shifting from temporary thatched house to his own house could never change the real identity or Dalit existence. The same prejudice or aversion chases Madana throughout his life.

This story begins with the description of the temporary thatched houses of the snake charmers of Patia at the entrance of the village. While portraying the life of the snake charmers, the writer says, "In the outskirt of the village, you can find a row of small thatched houses sheltering the snake charmers and their venomous snakes" (1). This opening remark hints at the residential segregation of the snake charmers. This residential segregation can be taken as a strategy of

domination and discrimination of the upper caste people against the lower class people or outcasts. Ghanashyam Shah et al. takes this issue farther in *Untouchability in Rural India*, “ The most visible and long-lasting form of caste discrimination in rural India, and also the most taken-for-granted aspect of untouchability in the public sphere is the residential segregation of Dalit households” (73).

The discrimination and prejudice against Dalits, especially snake charmers pervade the entire story. When Madhu, a henchman of landlord exerts pressure on all the snake charmers for paying the rent for their temporary thatched houses, Madana goes against such extortion and expresses his frustration in the following words:

If we pay the rent today, you will auction our houses for the non-payment of rent in future. We owe nothing to the landlord. We cannot pluck a mango from the tree. We cannot fetch a bucket of water from the well. We do not even walk on the way you use. (2007:05)

Through these words, Madana not only reflects on the predicament of the snake charmers who undergo immeasurable hardships on account of untouchability, rigid casteism and discriminatory attitude of the so-called upper caste people, but also casts his aspersion on these upper caste people for their hypocrisy and pretension.

However, despite Madana’s protest, all the snake charmers of his community reach a consensus to pay the rent, fearing the dire repercussions. Apart from Madana, Nidhia, an old snake charmer also reproaches the prejudicial and contemptuous attitude of the upper caste people. He says, “If there is a theft in village, we come under suspicion and get arrested. If someone is village suffers snake bite, people point their finger at us” (06).

To evade such malice and injustice of the upper caste people, Madana builds a house of his own in his own land that he purchased from Dina Dalai but it was all in vain. Within a few days, almost all the people of his fraternity are falsely accused of robbery and arrested. Madana shoulders the responsibility of fighting against this injustice and come to the rescue of the people of his own. But this effort of Madana does not come into fruition.

Conclusion

The titles of these two short stories are quite suggestive of the fact that these stories are drawn on the snake charmers. The snake charmers who belong to a Dalit community have constituted the core of these two short stories. Even though, these two short stories tell us tales of snake charmers, they share some commonalities as well as differences. Ramachandra Behera in his *Sapua Kela* though throws light on the discriminatory attitude of the upper caste people towards Dalits like snake charmers; his attack on caste system is not that vehement. *Sapua Kela* primarily revolves around the character of Arjuna alongwith his dire poverty and tragic end. But, the suffering of Dalits is more pronounced in case of *Sapua* by Kalindi Charana Panigrahi. The story vividly delineates the penury and pathetic existence of the snake charmers. Apart from this, this story delves deep into the lifestyle of the snake charmers in details. Besides this, instead of being subservient, Madana, the protagonist endeavours to resist the dominance of the upper caste people and rigid caste system. Such rebellious attitude of Madana challenges the so-called dominance of the upper caste people and asserts Dalit identity. However, both the stories feature the Dalit issues through the protagonists and thereby appeal for a social transformation and parity.

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