

Stories of Two Gandhians: Reading Caste and Gender in Odia Autobiographies

RAJ KUMAR

Abstract: The idea of India is closely associated with the concepts of caste and gender. With the emergence of the Women's movement and Dalit movement across India, we have new perspectives to understand Indian society, culture and literature in a better way. The objective of this essay is to read caste and gender issues in two Odia autobiographies written by two Gandhians: Ramadevi Choudhuri (1899-1985) and Nishakar Das (1927). Ramadevi was a famous Gandhian from Odisha. Like M.K. Gandhi, she devoted a significant part of her life to India's Freedom Movement. In post-independent India, she undertook several constructive works for the upliftment of the rural, tribal and underprivileged people of Odisha. Her Odia autobiography, *Jiban Pathe* (1984), which is translated into English as *Into the Sun: An Autobiography* (1998) is a unique autobiographical document about her life and time. Nishakar Das, on the other hand, is a poor Dalit whose evolution to become a Gandhian has prompted him to write a short autobiography, *Kharasuanru Kulabiri* (Odia, 2006), which has been translated into English as *From Kharsuan to Kulabiri: A Journey through Life*. Influenced by Gandhian ideals, Nishakar joined in the Bhoodan movement of Odisha and undertook social works. In his autobiography he narrates about village reconstruction works among the Adivasis and Dalits in Koraput, one of the most backward districts of Odisha. Both the autobiographies give exciting accounts of caste and gender dynamics in Odisha.

Keywords: Caste, gender, Dalit, lower caste, Gandhian, Bhoodan Movement, Odia, Odisha

The idea of India is closely associated with the concepts of caste and gender. With the emergence of Women's movement and Dalit movement across India, we have new perspectives to understand Indian society, culture and literature in a better way. My attempt in this essay is to read caste and gender issues in two Odia autobiographies written by two Gandhians: Ramadevi Choudhuri (1899-1985) and Nishakar Das (1927). Ramadevi was a famous Gandhian from Odisha. Like M.K. Gandhi, she devoted a significant part of her life to India's Freedom Movement. In post-independent India she undertook several constructive works for the upliftment of the rural, tribal and underprivileged people of Odisha. Her Odia autobiography, *Jiban Pathe* (1984) which is translated into English as *Into the Sun: An Autobiography* (1998) is a unique autobiographical document about her life and time. Nishakar Das, on the other hand, is a poor Dalit whose evolution to become a Gandhian has prompted him to write a short autobiography, *Kharasuanru Kulabiri* (Odia, 2006), which has been translated into English as *From Kharsuan to Kulabiri: A Journey through Life*. Influenced by Gandhian ideals, Nishakar joined in the Bhoodan movement of Odisha and undertook social works. In his autobiography, he narrates about village reconstruction works among the Adivasis and Dalits in Koraput, one of the most backward districts of Odisha. Though ideologically, both Ramadevi and Nishakar are Gandhians, socio-culturally, they are different in many ways. While Ramadevi belonged to a reputed and well established upper caste family of Odisha, Nishakar comes from a poor Dalit background. So how do we read their autobiographies? Being Gandhians, do they cherish

the same ideals, or do they differ from each other? What are their visions about Odia society? How do they construct their private selves while narrating their public lives? Do they evoke any caste and gender issues in their respective autobiographies? These and many other questions will be addressed while critically analysing their autobiographies. But before we begin to analyse their autobiographies, let us briefly discuss Odia society and culture so that we can place these two autobiographies in their proper perspectives.

Odia Society and Culture: An Overview

Odisha is unique in more than one way. Geographically it is divided between the coastal plains and the western hills. Odisha has a long sea coast, several mountains, plateaus, rivers and forests and thousands hectares of fertile cultivable agricultural lands. These geographical settings contribute to the making of Odisha's economy and culture in various ways. Though the state has rich mineral resources, neither the state nor the central government has been able to utilise these resources for the economic progress of the state. As a result, Odisha has remained backward economically throughout these years. A majority of the population in the state have remained poor and underprivileged. The Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward classes combine eighty five percent of the total population of the state. In spite of being a majority, they are powerless: be it social, economic or political spheres. On the other hand, the upper castes such as the Brahmins, Karanas and Khandayats, who constitute only fifteen per cent population of the state, have been ruling Odisha for several decades now. Since the upper castes do not want to lose their powers, there is status quo in politics and development in the state. So Odia society continues to be feudal in many aspects despite India having a progressive and democratic Constitution.

There were several organised protest movements against the caste system in Odisha. Buddhism which emerged in the fourth century BC as a protesting religion against the Hindu religion, had widespread presence in Odisha beginning from the third century BC. It was in the aftermath of the Kalinga war which was held in 261 BC that the emperor Ashoka became a Buddhist in the Odisha soil. Several Buddhist sites are located in Odisha even today: be it Khandagiri, Udayagiri, Dhauligiri, Ratnagiri, Pushpagiri, etc. to name a few. The remaining of these Buddhist sites suggests that Buddhism was once a popular religion in the state.

The evidence of Buddhism also can be found in the *Charyapadas*, the songs of the Nath-Yogis. The Nath-Yogis were the Buddhist Sidhas who moved from village to village begging alms, singing ballads and bhajanas rich with moral and spiritual lore, approximately between the 8th and 13th centuries. Hadi Pa, Kanhu Pa, Tanti Pa, Chaurangi Nath, Gorakh Nath, Mahendra Nath or Lui Pa, the authors of the *Charyas*, are well known among the Nath sect of saints and constitute a distinct social tradition in Odisha. Under the patronage of the Hindu kings, Odia Buddhism gradually lost its hold over the people. But there is evidence that the poet-saints of the *Charyapadas* profoundly influenced later poets. Thus a tradition of protest is quite explicit in Odia literature, especially among the poets who wrote in anger against social inequalities and injustices through popular and very effective literary creations.

In the medieval time beginning from the fifteenth century, it was Sudra Muni Sarala Das who began to write on caste issues in his famous puranas: the *Odia Mahabharata*, *Bilanka Ramayana*, and *Chandi Purana*. Following Sarala Das Panchasakhas, the five fellow-saint poets: Balarama Dasa, Jagannatha Dasa, Achyutananda Dasa, Jasobanta Dasa and Ananta Dasa, who dominated Odia literature and society for a century (1450-1550) went on raising caste and gender questions both in public as well as in their literary creations. Balarama Dasa's *Laxmi Purana* is considered to be an early literary text raising issues on

gendered equality. Further, in the nineteenth century Bhima Bhoi, a tribal poet and activist, protested against the upper caste monopolies by creating a new religious order called Mahima dharma which was attracted by Dalits, Adivasis, lower castes and women of all communities, including widows. In the post-independence time, Dalits in Odisha brought caste, class and gender debates in the public spheres by writing Dalit literature and protested against caste injustices, class inequalities and the patriarchal system. In spite of regular protests against caste, class and patriarchy, no structural changes came in the social, economic and political order of the state.

In most recent years, when people throughout the world are celebrating freedom Odia society, it seems, is going through a crisis. Social scientist like Manoranjan Mohanty has the following observations to make,

Odisha presents a crisis of democracy with upper caste, patriarchal domination that has been consolidated through the formation and expansion of a middle class, which provides services to the capitalist extractive economy while vast sections of the population, especially adivasis, dalits, and agricultural workers, remained marginalised. This process has been accentuated during the recent decades of neo-liberal policies, during which the scale and magnitude of mining-based industries and their implementation through a massive deployment of security forces have hugely grown. The strategy has done little to reduce the regional disparity between the coastal districts and inland regions. This system of dominance and governance has been legitimised through the electoral process, welfare support, and the media. (Mohanty 46)

The observations made in the above paragraph are certainly detrimental to the already burdensome lives of the poor Dalits, Adivasis and women of Odisha who always bear the brunt. In that scenario, what can be a way out? It may be emphasised here that the political economy of Odisha entirely depends on their labour. And yet, they are the ones who are mostly deprived of their basic needs. The two Odia autobiographies chosen for discussion in the present essay give some accounts of how Dalits, lower castes, and women cope with their lives. Before we start analysing these two autobiographies, let us briefly discuss the emergence of the autobiographical tradition in Odisha.

Odia Autobiographical Tradition

Odia is recognised as one of the Indian classical languages. Odia literature has been written since the fifteenth century AD. Poetry, short stories and novels are some of the popular literary genres. But the genre of autobiography evolved quite late. To be precise, with the coming of Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Atmajivana Charita* (Autobiography) in 1917, there began a trend in Odisha to write one's life story. In the meantime, several autobiographies have been written by writers, politicians, social reformers, bureaucrats, lawyers, artists, sportspersons, and academics. These autobiographies are mostly written by the upper caste men and women who are privileged to speak to the world. However, Dalits, Adivasis and other marginalised sections of Odia society have not attempted to write their life stories as education was not available to them earlier due to the stringent Hindu caste laws. Only after India's independence, the Indian Constitution made provisions for compulsory education for all children till the age of fourteen. But even after seven decades of the enactment of the Indian Constitution, literacy among the marginalised sections of Odisha is abysmally low. Therefore there are not many autobiographies written by the members of the marginalised communities.

As mentioned earlier, Fakir Mohan's *Atmajivana Charita* is considered to be the first Odia autobiography. Even before Fakir Mohan, Radhanath Rai seems to have published a part of his autobiography titled *Atmanibedana* (1907). Since Rai did not publish a full-fledged autobiography, Fakir Mohan's *Atmajivana Charita* is considered as the first Odia

autobiography. Fakir Mohan must have found it difficult to write his autobiography as there was no precedence before him. In fact, in the preface to his autobiography, Fakir Mohan mentions that he does not know how to write an autobiography. He attempts to write his autobiography because many of his friends requested him to write one. He hopes that after him, more and more people will write their autobiographies in Odia. To quote Fakir Mohan's preface,

For the last four or five years, several friends and educated young men, for whom I entertain a paternal feeling, have been pressing me to write my life story. I do not find it easy to ignore their pleas, for the Oriya language is remarkably lacking in biographies; though, unfortunately, my own life is equally remarkably lacking in the kind of weighty matter that merits a biography. Furthermore, I am remarkably lacking in the seductive art of so setting down my tale as to fire prospective readers with any enthusiasm to pursue it. In fact, for the temerity, with which I embark upon this present enterprise, I have only one excuse to offer: I am firmly convinced that the not-too-distant future will find this sacred soil of ours teeming with autobiographers. All I want to do is to provide a path for them. (Senapati i)

True to Fakir Mohan's belief today there are a considerable numbers of Odia autobiographies available in the market. After Fakir Mohan's *Atmajivana Charita* some of the outstanding Odia autobiographies which need to be mentioned here are: Gobinda Chandra Mishra's *Jatiya Jibanara Atmabikasha* (1940), Harekrushna Mahatab's *Sadhanara Pathe* (1949), Baishnaba Pani's *Pani Kabinka Atmakahani* (1955), Godabarisha Mishra's *Ardhashatabdira Odisha O Tahinre Mo Sthana* (1958), Nilakantha Das's *Atmakatha* (1963), Adhiraj Mohan Senapati's *Drushtipata* (1965), Ramakrushna Nanda's *Jibana Taranga* (1969), Surendra Dwibedi's *Agasta Biplaba* (1972), and Kalicharan Patnaik's *Kumbhara Chaka* (1975), Sita Devi Khadanga's *Mora Jiban Smruti* (1978), Ramadevi Choudhuri's *Jibana Pathe* (1984), Gopinath Mohanty's *Srotaswati* (1992), Manmohan Chaudhury's *Kasturi Mruga Sama* (1995), Annapurna Maharana's *Amrutara Anubhav* (2005), Nishakar Das's *Kharasuanru Kulabiri* (2006), Basant Kumar Satpathy's *Manepade* (2008), Pratibha Ray's *Padmapatrase Jeebana* (2014), and Sourindra Barik's *Bata Chalu Chalu* (2018) among others.

If the list of autobiographies given above is any indication, only a few Odia women have written their autobiographies as compared to their male counterparts. There is only one Dalit autobiography so far. The reason, of course, is not so difficult to understand. Education for lower castes, Dalits and women was restricted before India's independence. Because of caste discrimination and patriarchal traditions, Odia women and Dalits were not privileged to write their autobiographies earlier. Therefore the autobiographies written by Ramadevi and Nishakar are pretty significant. Let us look into their autobiographies.

Ramadevi Choudhuri's *Into the Sun*

Among several modern women's autobiographies, Ramadevi Choudhuri's *Into the Sun: An Autobiography* stands unique. Not because *Into the Sun* is out and out a personalised feminist text where the author makes her anguished private self visible to the public but because of exactly the opposite reason. *Into the Sun* as an autobiography diametrically stands opposite to many Indian women's autobiographies such as Rassundari Devi's two parts autobiography *Amar Jivan* (Bengali, 1868 and 1897), Ramabai Ranade's *Amchya Ayushtil Kahi Athavani* (Marathi, 1910), Binodini Dasi's two parts autobiography i.e. *Amar Katha* (Bengali, 1912) and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* (Bengali, 1924-25), and Lakshmi Bai Tilak's *Smriti Chitre* (Marathi, 1934-37), to mention a few. The reasons for this may be several. Firstly, the family background of Ramadevi was such that getting an education was never a problem for her as it was in the cases of all the early women. Secondly, Ramadevi came to the scene when the reform movement in India had reached its zenith coupled with the freedom struggle led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Brought up in a Brahmo family,

Ramadevi did not encounter traditional orthodoxy. Thus Ramadevi lived in an advantageous world compared to her predecessors, for whom living in an orthodox family was a big problem for them. Ramadevi's entire family actively participated in India's freedom struggle organising mass political movements in the backward state of Orissa. After India's independence, the Choudhuri family once again took up the responsibility of restructuring the state led by Nabakrushna Choudhuri, Ramadevi's brother-in-law. Being influenced by Gandhi and later Vinoba, both Ramadevi and her husband Gopabandhu Choudhuri devoted their entire life doing rural reconstruction works in Odisha and outside, the details of which have been analysed later. But at this point, what is essential about Ramadevi's *Into the Sun* is that as a woman's autobiography, it departs from several other women's autobiographies by situating a 'self' that is more public than private political than personal, and more stable than unstable. Y.P. Anand, in his Foreword to the English translation of Ramadevi's autobiography writes that her narrative flows like a clear, deep stream, unselfconscious and self-effacing and yet absorbing. Anand compares this autobiography with that of Gandhi's *My Experiment with Truth* and states that it can be read as social history of Odisha.

Ramadevi, at the beginning of her autobiography, explains the purpose of writing her autobiography. Her explanation echoes that of Gandhi's idea of writing an autobiography. It may be recollected that Gandhi started writing his autobiography so that he would be able to narrate his experiments with truth which could be emulated by his followers. In Ramadevi's case, it was Sarala Devi, a freedom fighter and well-known woman writer of Odisha, who urged Ramadevi to write down the story of her life so that others could derive valuable lessons from it. Ramadevi agreed to the proposal when she was herself convinced that her autobiography would probably give the right directions to young women of the next generation. Of course, Ramadevi had no pretension to write her autobiography like the other great men and women of public importance. She was humble in her approach to state the reader that her life was as insignificant as that of any ordinary person,

What should I write? ... I spent the first fifteen years of my life with my parents, like any other girl. When I got married and came to live with my husband and his parents I had to busy myself looking after the household and bringing up the children that I bore. Of course, it may be of interest and of some use to young women of my kind, that is, those who have only a little education, to know how I regulated my life during this later period and quietly prepared myself for public life in the midst of my domestic chores. They may see from my life that one can serve one's country and society by cultivating one's inner qualities even if one does not have any formal education. But then, how many care to read the lives of even great men and who would care for the story of an insignificant person like me? (1)

Ramadevi, in the first few chapters, writes on the traditional autobiographical topics such as, childhood days, healthy influences from family members, marriage, parents-in-law, homemaking, births, deaths and marriages in the family, etc. These topics are of personal nature. What follows after these topics is illustration of various public events from which Ramadevi emerged as a public persona. The topics include the non-cooperation movement, Gandhi and the Congress, the Salt Satyagraha, civil disobedience movement, the Harijan movement, Gandhi's walking tour, basic education in Odisha, Khadi work, the gramdan movement, a student's strike in Odisha and famine in Kalahandi district, etc. These are the events which she describes in great detail giving particular dates, places and names of the persons involved with in the programmes. Going through these events, the reader is reminded of the similar trend, though in different settings found in the autobiographies of Surendranath Banerjee, M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, where the nation and national events get priority over the personal life of the autobiographer. This unique trend in autobiographical writing evokes several questions in our minds. For instance, can

autobiography be read as a historical text? To what extent can an autobiography be considered social history? How far is the blending of national history with personal life history permissible in an autobiography? How do women autobiographers treat Indian history as compared to men autobiographers? These and several other questions involving history, gender, nation and narration can be addressed while analysing Ramadevi's autobiography in the following pages.

Ramadevi tells us that at the wake of India's freedom her patriotic feelings went back to her childhood days. We have earlier mentioned the patriotic family Ramadevi hailed from. Ramadevi's paternal uncle, Madhusudan Das was considered to be the father of Odia nationalism, who along with Fakirmohan Senapati and Radhanath Ray played vital role in achieving statehood for Odisha in 1936. Madhusudan also emerged as a national leader representing Odisha as early as 1920s. His direct political activism must have influenced little Ramadevi. She narrates an incident of her childhood concerning her uncle. The aftermath of non-cooperation movement in 1920 brought the Montague Chelmsford reform under which national governments were formed in different parts of India. Madhusudan became a minister in the Government of Bihar and Odisha. When Madhusudan came to Cuttack after having become the minister he expected a tumultuous welcome from the public. But people instead wanted to burn his effigy in protest against his acceptance of ministership at the wake of non-cooperation movement. Interestingly Ramadevi's own cousins, brothers-in-law and nephews were among those who took that decision. Ramadevi herself though opposed his uncle accepting ministership she never appreciated the idea of anybody's effigy being burnt stating that such an event might grow into an undesirable practice.

Incidentally Ramadevi started her public work in 1921 when Gandhi had taken leadership of the freedom struggle by giving a call of non-cooperation movement. After the speech Gandhi made in 1921 in Cuttack to draw public support, he became a 'pole star' for Ramadevi. She joined the movement. By 1930 she led the Salt Satyagraha in Odisha and courted arrest for the first time. Her participation in the Satyagraha brought a symbolic message for other women who left their domestic confinements to act publicly. The following passage is an example of how women jointly made a powerful force to act creatively during the Salt Satyagraha,

At midday we took rest at the Inchuri Satyagraha camp and went to the Shrijang village that was nearby in the afternoon. We went from door to door in that village and told the women that a number of us women were going to break the salt law that day and appealed to them to join us. The women of the village responded. About fifteen hundred women came out and went with us [us] to collect salt impregnated mud from the sea shore from which salt was to be extracted by a simple indigenous process. All of us gathered some of the mud but the police were nowhere to be seen. We were told that the police have been instructed not to interfere with whatever the women did. This indifference of the police irked us. We gave a talk to the women of Shrijang about the larger aspects of the movement and returned to Balasore in the evening. (116)

Ramadevi organised women from various parts of the state to supplement a strong contingent of women for the national movement. When she got arrested for breaking the salt law, she had already become a cult figure among people. This she realised when a sea of people gathered outside the collectorate on the trial day to extend their support and respect for her by singing patriotic songs and slogans. This public act rekindled her enthusiasm, and she became doubly determined to continue her long struggle. She actively took part in various phases of the freedom movement, including the civil disobedience movement, Gandhi's Harijan movement and accompanied Gandhi in his walking tour in Odisha in 1934. Being an active participant in the freedom struggle, she was dismayed at

the aftermath of our independence. Like any other freedom fighter, she regretted that India as a nation-state had miserably failed to bring up a civil society for all her citizens to live a life of dignity and self-respect. She observes,

Freedom came in 1947. A new constitution was adopted for the country. All Indians were assured of their fundamental rights. But let us ask our consciences if untouchability has been banished from the land. Does the faith that the Diving Spirit [Divine Spirit] resides in every human being guide us? Do we give every individual the respect that is due to all human beings? We will have to pay the price for our failure to achieve even this modicum of humanness even after having become the citizens of a free country. (150)

After realising that the newly independent state hardly had any regard for the poor and the deprived, Ramadevi and her husband Gopabandhu Choudhuri and a team of co-workers comprising of Annapurna Das, Rambhadevi, daughter-in-law Sumitra and daughter Annapurna started village reconstruction work at Bari and in other parts of Odisha. They undertook village reconstruction works in the Gandhian model launched at Seva Gram by Gandhi himself. The projects included small agricultural works, weaving, cow keeping, beekeeping, gardening, and organising various training for men and women for their self-employment. In 1951 Ramadevi and Gopabandhu undertook a walking tour throughout the state, spending eight long months with the people. During this tour, they preached the message of Bhoodan, collected land gifts from the wealthy farmers and gave them to the poor and landless. During the tour, they realised that there were no facilities available for the pre-school children in rural areas. With the active support of the Utkal Sarvodaya Mandal many nursery schools, known as Shishu Vihars, were set up in many parts of Odisha. In 1962 after China's aggression most of the North-East provinces, such as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram witnessed violence, and the Indian army faced heavy casualties. Ramadevi volunteered to be a part of the Shanti Sainiks, peacekeepers, to help the Indian army by providing food and medical care. During this service, she moved from Assam to Bomdila and Dirang to Cachhar to Mizoram. In 1964 she once again joined the Sarvodaya Movement, on a call given by Vinoba Bhawe. This time she went to the Gramdan areas of Koraput district of Odisha and organised the triple programme for social reconstruction, such as Gramdan, Khadi and Shanti Sena. In 1964 Odisha witnessed a terrible communal conflict in Rourkela between the refugees of the then East Pakistan and the local people. Peace finally prevailed by the active intervention of Ramadevi and her group, of course, with the help of the local administration and state government. Ramadevi also organised relief work for the victims of the great famine of Kalahandi in 1966 and the powerful cyclone that hit the coastal areas of Puri, Cuttack and Balasore in 1967. There were also many other reconstruction programmes where Ramadevi was actively involved.

Though Ramadevi continued to do social work till 1984 when she breathed her last, her autobiographical narrative came to an end in 1975, the year of national Emergency was declared by Indira Gandhi. The Emergency, as everybody knows, was a black spot in the history of India as a nation-state. The ghost of the Emergency still haunts many even today when people recall that fateful summer day of 26th June 1975 when every right of the individual was snatched away. For people like Ramadevi the Emergency was a horrible event. During this period most of her companions went underground and a few of them who organised protest against the draconian rule which the Emergency brought, got arrested, including Ramadevi's only son Manmohan Choudhuri (who is also the translator of her autobiography into English) and her brother-in-law and former chief minister of Orissa Nabakrushna Choudhuri. Though for some unknown reason Ramadevi was spared from being arrested, she was perturbed to witness cruelty all over. Those twenty months of Emergency brought trials and tribulations to many innocent lives. The resolution she

took during the period seemed to be quite significant, for it challenged the hegemony of the state power vis-à-vis the people. Ramadevi thus reflects,

But it has become impossible for me to forget the fearful events of those twenty months. I am always thinking of the advice Gandhiji had given, that persons with a national consciousness should always remain by the side of the people and help to keep the latter alert. The people should voluntarily give up untouchability, caste feelings, the dowry system and other weaknesses of our society. They should, in particular, resolve to put an end to the use of 'black money' for winning elections. Otherwise, how should they be able to get out of this vicious circle of corruption, immortality, misrule and so on? Thousands of patriotic men and women should come forward to carry the message of Total Revolution to the people and establish a Government free from corruption. To this end of saving the nation, they would have to give up their secure and comfortable ways of life. Only then will the nation be able to overcome the dangers that face it. It was not for nothing that Gopabandhu Das had sung, "Let my body fall on the soil of this land and let my countrymen walk over it". And neither was it without reason that Gandhiji had given the call for seven hundred thousand ever-vigilant sentinels in seven hundred thousand villages for awakening the people. (257-258)

At the end, what must be said about Ramadevi's *Into the Sun*? Does it echo in the line of Gandhian perception of 'self' which is more spiritual than the real? What is its socio-historical conjuncture? Ramadevi's autobiography displays a genuine concern for the needy and deprived, primarily rural women. As a result, her activities do not come as 'experiments' as they happened in Gandhi's case; they seem rooted in the ground reality. Thus, Ramadevi's long descriptions about her involvement in various socio-political and economic activities are not just a balance sheet to tell the world about her achievements. It is a bold document recording the life of an Indian woman in transition, making it clear how women who once were not allowed to live with dignity in their own homes can now make history by crossing the threshold.

Nishakar Das's *Kharasuan to Kulabiri*

As mentioned earlier, Nishakar Das's *Kharasuan to Kulabiri* is the first Odia Dalit autobiography. It is a short autobiographical account of the author as a Gandhian social worker. Having been influenced by the Gandhian ideology, Nishakar joined the Bhoodan movement and got involved in the welfare programmes of Dalits and Adivasis in the Koraput regions of Odisha. Nishakar, in his autobiography, recollects the various events of his life, which suggest that being a Dalit it is not so easy to work in public because he has to face caste humiliations almost daily. In his autobiography Nishakar even writes that once he was beaten so severely that he was about to die. Nishakar writes all these not to gain any sympathy from his readers but to put the record straight that in a caste-infested society like India what is most dangerous is the caste prejudices. But Nishakar as a Sarvodaya activist, is determined to continue his works even at the cost of his life. At the end of his autobiography, he writes,

Gopabandhu Chaudhury, Ramadevi, Manmohan bhai, Chuni apa, Sarat Guruji, Malati Chaudhury, Nabakrushna Chaudhury have made me what I am today. Most of them are dead. Their love and blessings still guide me and, till the end of my life, I shall go on working for the sarvodaya movement and for establishing gram swaraj. This is the goal I have set myself. I have recounted some of the important events of my life. In spite of all the difficulties I face, I continue the struggle. As a sarvodaya activist I have discharged my duties with sincerity from the beginning till today. (54-55)

Nishakar belongs to the Pana Vaishnava, a Dalit community of the coastal Odisha. Because they are the followers of Vaishnavism, the Pana Vaishnavas consider themselves superior

to the other Dalit communities. Nishakar's father was the community priest responsible for performing rituals during births, marriages and deaths. But the priestly job never gave a steady income. So the family members, including Nishakar's father, had to work as labourers to earn their livelihood. Nishakar's family was very poor. So it was difficult to survive. He writes,

Our life was full of hardship. Often we had to make do with a little rice, water, salt and green chillies. We had watered rice for breakfast and watered rice for lunch. We had boiled rice at night; sometimes we ate cakes made of rice. Our lot improved only when the three of us were able to earn our livelihood. (15)

Nishakar was the youngest among three brothers. When he was still a child his father passed away. So his elder brother took charge of family responsibilities. Nishakar was sent to school hoping that after his study he would get a government job and help the family. But Nishakar took seven years to complete his class three and finally became a drop-out. He joined his brothers as a labourer. Nishakar recollects that untouchability was practiced in the school even by the teachers. He recollects,

Those days, the sabarnas did not touch anyone who belonged to pana, kandara and gokha castes. We sat apart from the others at the chatsali. The abadhana, if he wished to punish us, would throw the cane at us, he would not touch us even while beating us. When the cane touched our clothes, we would take it back to the teacher and keep it away from him. I recall another significant incident. Perhaps, I was six or seven years old at the time. We had completed our studies with the abadhana and had just enrolled ourselves in the village school. On the way to our school, a young brahmin boy of our village named Dibakar Das, used to accompany us. If ever we walked close to him, he would jump over our shadows. The brahmins reasoned that, not only our persons, but our very shadows defiled them. Caste prejudices relating to untouchability were very strong at that time. (19)

Following the caste system the upper castes have hatred towards the lower castes and Dalits. Throughout his autobiography, Nishakar documents the various instances of caste atrocities perpetuated by the upper castes towards Dalits on whimsical grounds. He recollects an incident when an educated Dalit young man was beaten by a zamindar just because he was wearing a new dhoti and carrying an umbrella. Nishakar writes,

Untouchables like panas and kandaras were not allowed to carry umbrellas, wear shoes or nice white dhotis while walking down village roads. They were scared of being beaten by landlords. The period of British rule and that of the rajas and zamindars can be described as an age of darkness ... There was a young man of kandara caste ... He passed his matriculation examination from Jajpur high school. He went to visit relatives, wearing a nice dhoti and carrying an umbrella. As he passed through Sundarpur village, the khandayat zamindar of Sundarpur, who was talking to his friends, noticed him. He enquired about him, and was told by those who knew him, 'He is an untouchable boy from Olai village. He has returned after passing his matriculation examination.' The zamindar called him over and said, 'You wretch, don't you know that this is the village of Sundar Ray, the zamindar? How dare you walk down our village path wearing a dhoti and carrying an umbrella?' They thrashed him, made him take off his dhoti and wear a torn one instead, broke his umbrella and sent him back home ... (20-21)

Nishakar writes that with the change of time, caste practices are also changing. But caste prejudices are still going firm and strong. As a Gandhian who believes in truthfulness, nonviolence and peace in everyday life, he wants the upper castes to shun caste prejudices and treat the lower castes and Dalits as fellow human beings. He observes,

The untouchability community has changed its habits, customs and dress since my childhood. But the intolerant, conservative attitude of the other castes in society has caused the infamous barriers dividing castes to grow stronger in villages in all fields. Last year, I went to our

village, Singhapur. I heard from children that the harijans are still not allowed to get a hair-cut at the hair-cutting shops in the bazaar. However, young men from the untouchable community and those belonging to other castes sit together and eat. But the fear ingrained within the upper castes has kept caste prejudices alive. (53-54)

Nishakar's autobiography documents the changes the Odia society witnessed over the years. Being a Gandhian, Nirakar advocates ethical and moral principles while working among the people of various castes and communities in Odisha. He devotes his life working among the rural and tribal people of Koraput, Odisha so that people can live in peace and prosperity. Nishakar's vision to restructure rural and tribal villages of Odisha through Gandhian principles is praiseworthy.

Conclusion

The present essay is an attempt to understand caste and gender issues in Odisha as narrated by Ramadevi and Nishakar in their respective autobiographies. Being Gandhians, both of them believe in the ethical and moral values of labour and therefore they work hand in hand with the rural and tribal people of Odisha to achieve Gandhi's dream of gram swaraj. The way Ramadevi devoted her life for the welfare of the people clearly suggests that women can do wonders if they get freedom. In the case of Nishakar, being a Dalit he had to face caste humiliations daily. But his determination and dedication to his duties make him a true Gandhian. Both the autobiographies are a testimony to the fact that it is through will power that one can brave all odds and achieve new heights.

University of Delhi

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