

Socio-cultural and political background of Bhojpuri Dalit Literature

Maryam Afzal

Ph. D Research Scholar

Dept. of English

Patliputra University

Patna, Bihar

Abstract

Bhojpuri region is one of the most ancient regions of North India. It has a rich and zestful culture. This region has a rich tradition of folk songs. Bhojpuri language has a long history, tradition and dense population of its speakers. Bhojpuri is the most important and dominating component of Hindi along with other vernacular dialects and regional languages. Caste discrimination is rampant all over the country as well as in Bhojpuri region. “As a matter of fact, poetry is the soul of folk-literature. Memory keeps alive and preserves folk literature and poetry inhabits memory effortlessly. That is why the major portion of folk literature is found in poetry” (Panday 19). This paper aims to study socio-cultural and political background of Bhojpuri Dalit literature. The people of Bhojpuri region are conscious of their own beings. The Dalits of Bhojpuri region are aware of their living conditions and present it through literature of their region. Bhojpuri poetry is the soul of Bhojpuri literature. Therefore, it is the best medium to reflect the life of Dalits living in this region.

Keyword: Dalit, Bhojpuri region, North India, caste discrimination, folk songs.

Bhojpuri Region

Bhojpuri region is one of the most ancient regions of North India. The area of Bhojpuri region includes parts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in northern India. The language spoken in this region as a mother tongue is Bhojpuri. Bhojpuri region has a rich and zestful culture. “There is a vast expanse of folk-songs in Bhojpuri. Here, the entire life of a man from birth to death is intertwined with folk-songs” (Panday 19). There is an old tradition of singing folk-songs on every important family occasion such as marriages, birth ceremonies, and festivals. Jyotsana Prasad writes “Bihar does not lag behind in the field of folk-songs. There is a tradition of singing different songs on every occasion in Bihar” (Prasad 14). They are sung mostly in group settings without the help of many musical instruments. Sometimes musical instruments such as dholak, bansuri, tabla and harmonium are used. Bhuneshwar Bhaskar in the introduction of *Bhojpuri Lok-Sanskritiaur Paramparain* remarks how these folk-songs are interrelated to the life of the people living in this region:

“This is the region which has been struggling for years. The victims of various types of superstitions, taboos and expectations, the people of this region are aware of the reality of their dependency. Though the social system is shielded in the feudal structure, there is the enthusiasm to collide and find the meaning of its being in it. An intense influx and the

euphemistic form of this also appear in the folk songs of the people of this region, from which we are amazed to see the life of Bhojpuri language”(Bhaskar i).

Bhojpuri region is also rich in customs and traditions. The people consider customs and traditions virtuous because it is old, carries the ancestor’s wisdom and arouses positive sentiments among the people. There are many customs and traditions that are deeply rooted with the life of the people living in this region. The customs such as chauk- chanda, panchait, karma-dharma, godhan, kohbar-lekhan, banskala, odiya-daliya, jalua (domkach),kapdokekhilone, panchkosmeladefines the life of the people living in this region.

Caste Atrocities in India and Bhojpuri Region

India, having the world’s largest Hindu population, is a home to most of the Hindus of the world. Hindu society is divided on the basis of caste. Caste atrocities against Dalits, are perhaps not new for most Indians. It is the Human rights violation which works in association with barbaric cruelty, brutality and inhumanness and several other abuses against Dalits. Caste atrocities mark the feeling of enmity among the savarnas and the avarnas. Dalits are the targets of humiliation, insult, sexual abuse and injury. Dalits in our country are not considered worth to be treating as a human being. There is a vast majority of Dalits living in the villages and urban slums in India and an extreme form of untouchability is practiced against them. This paper aims to study socio-cultural and political background of Bhojpuri Dalit literature.

Caste discrimination is rampant all over the country as well as in Bhojpuri region. The entire Bhojpuri land and society is based on the caste system as it is highly dominated by the Hindus. Bhojpuri region is divided into five castes and they are Brahmins, Bhumihar, Rajput, Baniyas and Kayastha. The schedule caste in this region consists of Dom, Chamar, Dhobi, Nut, Pasi and Musahar. On this land, about 2600 years ago, the Buddha and Mahavira pronounced ‘non-violence’ as the solemn solution of all human sufferings. It is disturbing to know that the most enchanting thought of ‘non-violence’, in the history of mankind first stemmed from the land of Bihar and on the same land today brutal massacres such as the Bathani Tola massacre and the Laxmanpur Bathe massacre take place. These massacres are the most shameful incident in independent India because most of the victims were Dalits and untouchables who are considered to be the lowest in the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system.

The increase in the number of atrocities against Dalit in India is alarming. “According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), crimes against Dalits(a broad category including rape, murder, beatings, and physical violence related to land matters) have, for instance, increased by 29 percent from 2012 to 2014. In 2014, 47,064 cases of crimes against Dalits were registered, up from 39,408 in 2013 and 33,655 in 2012”(Chauchard 60). In our country every hour two Dalits are assaulted; every day three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit homes are set to fire. To understand the instances of caste atrocities against Dalits in Bhojpuri region, a region namely Bihar has been taken and the instances of caste atrocities against Dalits in Bihar has been studied.

1996 Bathani Tola massacre

The 1996 Bathani Tola massacre was a brutal incident of caste violence in which an upper-caste militia RanveerSena killed 21 dalits. “Considered to be the most barbaric carnage of its kind in Bihar, for the first time 13 women and eight children (the youngest of whom was a two-month-old baby) were killed. The victims included only one man. All the victims were gunned down by the well-armed marauders, nearly 150-200 in number, belonging to the Ranveer Sena” (Sinha 2908). This mass-murder is considered to be the most barbaric killing of its kind in Bihar. On 11 July 1996, the members of Ranveer Sena, descended on the village and set 12 houses on fire. A little infant cringing in its mother’s lap was slaughtered with a sword. A little infant’s tongue was cut off and his head was chopped off with a sword, another little baby’s fingers were cut off from his hand. A young girl died after she was raped and her breasts were chopped off. A pregnant woman’s womb was slit open and others lost their life in the fire. The brutality against the Dalits and poor is not something new and no one can deny the fact that such a degree of brutality is exceptional in the history of independent India.

1997 Laxmanpur Bathe massacre

Following the BathaniTola massacre, there were further attacks on dalits and Labourers organized by the RanvirSena. On 1 December 1997 in LaxmanpurBathe in Arwal district of Bihar, 58 Dalits were allegedly killed by the members of Ranveer Sena. About 100 members of Ranveer Sena carrying firearms had descended on Lakshmanpur Bathe at around 11 pm. They forced their way into huts and fired indiscriminately at people who were asleep at that time. In the massacre, 58 dalits died including 27 women and 16 children. The youngest victim who died was a one-year-old child.

Ranveer Sena

Caste lies at the heart of Indian society. In the cities, caste distinctions might have broken down but in the countryside they still exist. Higher caste landlords have formed private militias like Ranveer Sena to terrorize the Dalits. “Ranveer Sena is composed of criminal youths drawn from (mainly) bhumihar and rajput castes” (Sinha 2908). It is a private militia of Bihar which works with collusion of the police to annihilate the Naxalite opposition. Ranveer Sena has not only perpetrated the brutal massacre of BathaniTola and Laxmanpur Bathe. It has been known to perpetrate 16 other massacres in Ara, Arwal, Bhojpur, Gaya, Aurangabad and Jehanabad from the year 1995 to 2000 in Bihar. These massacres have killed more than 400 dalits and advasis, a majority of them being poor agricultural labourers.

What led to these massacres?

The tyranny of the caste massacres has horrified the nation and its people. Any assertion by the Dalits leads to violence and social boycott of the whole community. Even today, a Dalit is not allowed to wear new clothes in front of a Bhumihar landlord. The real reason for these caste massacres could be seen in the assertion of the rights by the Dalits. The assertion of the rights was viewed as an act of defiance against the hierarchical class and caste order. It was totally contrary to the economic, social and political entitlements of the oppressed classes and, therefore, the possibility of justice for them were quite bleak.

During the colonial era, Bihar was the heart of the zamindari system. Land has been the central issue in the politics of Bihar. The districts of Bhojpur, Gaya, Patna and Arwal in Bihar are the hub of political movements because of its fertile land irrigated by the Ganga. The eastern state of Bihar is notorious for its poverty and lawlessness and for an ongoing conflict between lower caste Dalit Naxalites and private upper-caste militias. The Badki Khadaon village of Bathani Tola has nearly 400 households; most of them were Dalits and agricultural labourers. “Since 1988, agrarian struggles over minimum wages and ‘gairmajarua’ (government land) land are being waged. The struggle for minimum wages led to a total strike in 1994, which brought all agricultural operations to a halt. The local administration intervened into the matter in 1995 and cultivation work was resumed after amicably resolving the minimum wage issue. The agrarian tension erupted again on the issue of illegal occupy-ing of more than 100 acres of gairmajarua land by the landlords” (Sinha 2908). Therefore, the attacks on the poor labourers and Dalits were allegedly by members of the Ranveer Sena, in response to Dalit labourer’s demand for wage increase.

Who Was Responsible?

After years of wait for justice, the Patna high court has acquitted all the accused convicts who were put behind bars by the judgment of lower courts for both Bathani Tola massacre as well as Laxmanpur bathe massacre. The higher court found all prosecution witnesses unreliable. The 30 accused for the Bathani Tola massacre and 26 accused for the Laxmanpur Bathe massacre were released by high court due to the lack of evidence. The question arises that if those who were accused were innocent then who was guilty for the death of so many Dalits? Who is to be blamed, the state, the police or the political system? Why the perpetrators responsible for the death of so many are let off by the supreme authority of our Nation?

Bihar is the worse state in corruption and nepotism in India which could be seen as the sole reason responsible for the mess. To consolidate their power, nearly all Bihar’s ministers have appointed civil servants from their own Upper-caste groups who take the law into their hands. They produce a number of caste-based mercenary armies whose only purpose is to protect the agrarian interests of landlords and farmers. The lower castes have established their own vigilante groups to counter them. This leads to a cycle of unending vicious violence in which the line between right and wrong gets blurred, and in which justice is seldom served to the victims. The Bathani Tola massacre and the Laxmanpur Bathe massacre are the example of such vicious violence in which justice was denied to the family member of the dead.

Dalits are socially, economically and politically inferior to caste Hindus, and hence, they are treated more like an animal than human. The above mentioned massacres are the examples of few of the most barbaric incidents in the history of our country. These incidents remind us of what Mark Twain says in his dystopian novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885): “Human beings can be awful cruel to one another” (Twain 239). The cruelty of the caste Hindus towards the Dalits knows no bounds. But it can also be noticed that most of the crimes against Dalits are not committed because the perpetrator would easily escape the punishment but as a revenge against their assertion. Earlier, atrocities were limited to the level of humiliation but now it has changed its shape and has become more brutal, physically destructive and more violent.

Thus, in our country Dalits are not even treated as a human. There is no question of human rights or its violation. If they are not considered human, could their maltreatment be called an atrocity? No, certainly not. A Dalit is meant to be trampled in every possible sphere of his/ her life. He/ she do not have the right to exist and their existence is nothing more than dirt. Indian caste system is based on the principle of discrimination, where savarnas are superior and the avarnas are inferior. The above incidents show that the Caste system in India might have weakened over the decades for a civil society but the practice of untouchability still prevails in the country.

Marginality of Bhojpuri Language and Literature

Language is the core of humanity. It enables men to convey their feelings, desires and emotions to others. It is a mirror of society because the value of a society is reflected in its language. According to Edward Sapir, “Human beings...are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society” (Sapir 69). For the people living in Bhojpuri region, Bhojpuri language is not only a medium of expression for their society but also a reflection of their values and their identities. Ngugi writes, “Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in the history...Language carries culture and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (Thiongó 15-16). What Ngugi says in relation to the African culture and language is also true for the Bhojpuri culture and language. How Bhojpuri-speaking people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, their society, their politics as well as to other human beings. Thus to denigrate or damage a language will have harmful, potentially fatal effects on the culture which it carries.

Bhojpuri is the most important and dominating component of Hindi along with other vernacular dialects and regional languages. Bhojpuri language has a long history, tradition and dense population of its speakers. Peter Manuel writes “Although the population of the region has expanded dramatically, the spread of standard Hindi in some respects marginalized Bhojpuri as a set of pocket Dialect. However, the recent vogue of Bhojpuri cinema and folk-pop music has lent a new vigor and prestige to a standardized form of the dialect” (Peter 20). George Abraham Grierson calls Bhojpuri the ‘language of the courageous’, but today the language and the speakers are thought to be old-fashioned, uncivilized and uncouth by the intellectuals of the urban highborn. In media also Bhojpuri language and society is depicted as perennial symbol of comedy. In films and television, Bhojpuri speakers are usually presented as buffoonish

characters and the butt of ridicule. Manager Pandey writes, “In films and television, Bhojpuri speakers are usually presented as buffoonish characters and the butt of ridicule. This clichéd picture of a Bhojpuri is becoming an entertainment myth for the urban culture. Though the aristocratic urban culture has always considered rural people uncouth, yet even after independence the imperialistic-minded, snobbish modernism has seen the lifestyle and language of rural people with a sheering contempt” (Panday 22).

“Bhojpuri language and literature has almost been excluded from the history of Hindi literature... As a matter of fact from 15th century to the end of 18th century there has been a long tradition in Bhojpuri of saint-poetry, devotional poetry especially mentionable among whom includes Kabirdas, Dharnidas, Dharamdas, Shivrinarayandas and poets of Sarbang cult. This tradition continued in a minor way including Shridhar, a poet of 19th century and the Amar-sidhe’ poet Lakshmi Sakhi in the beginning of the 20th century” (Panday 16). Poets such as Kabir and Ravidas who were against the orthodox Brahmanical tradition have been included as part of Bhakti movement in Hindi literature from Bhojpuri region. Unfortunately, due to the egoistical attitude of powerful Hindi writers Bhojpuri literature has been included as part of Hindi literature. For this reasons, it is usually assumed as a dialect of Hindi. There has been a persistent demand from Bhojpuri language activists to recognize Bhojpuri as an official language.

Bhojpuri language has managed to produce a substantial amount of literature but it has been deliberately made deprived of being the part of mainstream literature in India. In fact, these politics of inclusion has been a move by the mainstream society which is primarily dominated by the upper caste Hindus to deny Bhojpuri literature as well as the Dalits of the Bhojpuri region their recognition. Though, Bhojpuri language has abundance of speaker, it never enjoyed the status of a literary language. Therefore, it can be said that it is difficult to remove the phrase ‘linguistic minority’ from Bhojpuri language.

Bhojpuri Literature and Poetry

Bhojpuri has a vast reservoir of folk-literature. Bhojpuri literature is rich in prose as well as in poetry. “There are more than 50 writers in Bhojpuri who have published at least one collection of prose. Apart from them, there are several other writers whose prose has been published through the medium of newspaper and magazine... In modern Bhojpuri literature prose developed around 1948 where writers tried to present the history of Bhojpuri society” (Krishan 121). The first prose collection of Bhojpuri literature was *Jehalka Sandi* (1948). The popular form of Bhojpuri literature after poetry is novels. There are more than 50 novels written in Bhojpuri language. *Bindiya* was the first novel of Bhojpuri literature written by Ramnath Pandey in 1956.

Plays in Bhojpuri literature is considered to have developed in 1974. It is an important form of Bhojpuri literature. *Shuruat* by Kedar Pandey published in 1977 was the first play of Bhojpuri literature. Among the writers who outshined Bhojpuri plays Bhikari Thakur’s name needs to be mentioned. Bhikari Thakur is an iconic figure of Bhojpuri language and literature. He is known for his contribution in Bhojpuri theatre plays, poems and songs. He is called the

Shakespeare of Bhojpuri Literature. He is best known for the creation of the twentieth century theatre play *Bidesiya* (The Foreigner). The narrative of *Bidesiya* was based on lifelike stories which presented a realistic picture of poor joint families of the region. It was made effective through the medium of vibrant dances and pleasing music. It cannot be denied that this theatre style is a powerful expression of cultural heritage of weaker section of society which is Bhojpuri region. "His drama had a great effect in the Bhojpuri region, which the British government acknowledged and gave him the title of Rai Bahadur¹" (Prasad 15).

Though Bhojpuri literature is available today in many forms but the most popular form of Bhojpuri literature is poetry. The major portion of Bhojpuri folk-literature is found in poetry. According to Manager Pandey, modern consciousness in Bhojpuri poetry has three aspects. First, 'capitalism' with the introduction of railways affected the life of people living in this region and destroyed the human relations. The second aspect is committed to the 'freedom struggle of 1857'. Bhojpuri region remained a burning effigy of revolt during the freedom struggle of 1857. Bhojpuri poetry had a strong patriotic tone during the colonial era but its concern shifted after independence and it turned towards community. In later periods, due to the low economic development of the Bhojpuri region, Bhojpuri poetry got more skewed towards the human sentiments and struggles of life. And the third aspect of the modern consciousness in Bhojpuri poetry manifests in 'dalit consciousness'. "As a matter of fact, poetry is the soul of folk-literature. Memory keeps alive and preserves folk literature and poetry inhabits memory effortlessly. That is why the major portion of folk literature is found in poetry" (Panday 19). The people of Bhojpuri region are conscious of their own beings. The Dalits of Bhojpuri region are aware of their living conditions and present it through literature of their region. Bhojpuri poetry is the soul of Bhojpuri literature. Therefore, it is the best medium to reflect the life of Dalits living in this region.

Works Cited

Bhaskar, Bhuneshwar. Lok-Sanskriti aur Paramparain. New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Govt. of India, 2007.

Chauchard, Simon. "Untouchability in Rural India: Persistence and Evolution." Chauchard, Simon. Why Representation Matters: The Meaning of Ethnic Quotas in Rural India. Delhi: Chambridge Uni. Press, 2017. 35-64.

Dangle, Arjun. Poisoned Bread. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1992.

Dev., New Delhi. Inst. for Human. Poverty in Bihar: Pattern, Dimensions And Eradication Strategies.

Hussain, Taiyab. Bhartiya Sahitya ke Nirmata Bhikari Thakur. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008. Print.

¹Rai means "prince" and Bahadur means "brave" or "most honourable". Rai Bahadur was a title of honour bestowed during British rule in India to individuals for their service to the Empire. The title was accompanied by a medal called a Title Badge.

---. "Bhojpuri Kavita me Dalit-Vimarsh". 23rd Akhil Bhartiya Bhojpuri Sahitya Sammelan: Samarika Ispatika. 2011: 64-66. Print.

India, Govt. of. "Final Report on 20years Perspective Tourism Plan." 2003.

Larsson, Thomas. The Race to the Top: The Real Story of Globalization. Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute , 2001.

Krishan, Krishnand. "Bhojpuri Kahani Sahitya." Uni., Nalanda Open. Bhojpuri Literature. Patna: Nalanda Open Uni., 2008.

Limbale, Sharankumar. Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010.

Panday, Manager. "Truth Fears No Test." Indian Literature 44.1 (2000): 12-23.

Peter, Manuel. Tales, Tunes, and Tassa Drums: Retention and Invention into Indo-Caribbean Music. United States of America: University of Illinois, 2015.

Prasad, Jyotsana. "Bihar, Sanskritik Parichay." Aakhar 15 Apr 2013.

Ravi, Ravikant. Sanchipt Bhojpuri Gyan Darpan. Gazipur: Vishwa Bhojpuri Prakashan, 2011. Print

Roy, Arundhati. Annihilation of Caste. New Delhi: navayana, 1936.

Sapir, Edward. "The Status of Linguistics as a Science." Sapir, Edward. Culture, Language, and Personality: Selected Essays. Ed. David G. Mandelbaum. London: University of California Press, 1949. 65-77.

Singh, Rajendra Prasad. Aadhunik Bhojpuri ke kavi aur Kavya. Delhi: Gautam Book Centre, 2010. Print

Sinha, Arvind,Indu Sinha. "State, Class and 'Sena' Nexus: Bathani Tola Massacre." Economic and Political Weekly 31.44 (1996): 2908-2912.

Teltumbde, Anand. The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid. New Delhi: Navayana Publishing Pvt Ltd, 2014.

Thiongó, Ngugi Wa. Decolonising the Mind . Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 2004.

Twain, Mark. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Ed. Thomas Cooley. New York: Norton, 1999.