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LOOKING BACK ON DEHUMANIZATION AND GENOCIDE: A READING OF BIRENDRA CHATTOPADHYAY'S 'AFTER DEATH: TWENTY YEARS'

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ABSTRACT

Independence, in the history of mankind, has never come alone. It is often preceded by relentless struggles, sacrifices, shattered dreams and, of course, the hope of a bright future in its aftermath. Indian independence from colonial rule in 1947 is no exception, especially with the unforgettable trauma of partition that keeps lurking from the dark recesses of its gory history. It is in the light of this statement that this paper attempts to analyse the post-independent Bengal scenario for the obvious fact that Bengal, along with Punjab, were the worst hit victims of the blow. This paper particularly focuses on one of the poems of Birendra Chattopadhyay who had been a witness to the events. His poem seems special because it is not simply about the dehumanising atrocities and genocide. It also points out the fallacy of one of the most influential philosophers and thinkers of India, Rabindranath Tagore. It is this cross-border communication that allows the poet to bring out the discrepancy between expectation and reality.

KEYWORDS: Independence, Partition, Bengal, Dehumanisation, Genocide & Tagore

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INTRODUCTION

Birendra Chattopadhyay (1920-1985) is one of the most famous poets of modern Bengali literature. While it is true that he tried to save the beautiful dream of love, life and nature amidst a romantic society till the last moment, his poems are mostly about anti-humanitarian events against which he voices a valiant and vibrant song of protest and resistance. Consequently, he has even experienced life threats and imprisonment. His poetry expresses the pain of deceived people all over the world, with a sense of awareness and responsibility, rarely found in his contemporaries, most of whom preferred to turn a blind eye to the fevers and frets of the outward world. While many wise and prudent personalities ridiculed his moves, young poets often found inspiration in him. His poems were not published in any major newspaper and yet, he gained unprecedented popularity.

The poem 'After Death: Twenty Years' is an English translation, by Debjani Sengupta, of the Bengali poem 'Mrityur Por: Kuri Bochhor' which got published in 1998 as a part of the anthology titled *Shrestho Kobita*. He seems to have dedicated the piece to Rabindranath Tagore who died in 1941 is referred to in the title. He intends to communicate to Tagore the turbulence of the twenty years after his death which the latter was fortunate enough to evade.

Birendra Chattopadhyay was a predominantly political poet who, in his twenties, witnessed the "terrible catastrophes", the bloody riots, widespread mass killings and massacre preceding and following the 1947 partition of British India into a Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan— an event that was deemed necessary for India's independence from colonial rule (B. Chattopadhyay). He, as such, relates about the dark days of terror, pain and cold silence with the fiery tongue of his poetry. He points out to Tagore how the fulfilling of his dream of

an independent homeland, “Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high”, incurred the cost of inhuman bloodshed which stained the entire nation red in 1946 and 1947 (Tagore).

The poet has referred to the great Bengal famine of 1943 which belongs to the same period, just preceding the great wave of 1946. It resulted in the widespread death of Bengalis, making Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy highly unpopular amongst large sections of the Hindu population due to his alleged responsibility in causing it. It is this same minister whose speech on the morning of 16th August 1946 incited the outbreak of the Great Calcutta Killing.

Through the phrase “tortuous fire of ’46”, the poet refers to this notorious Calcutta riot, also known as Direct Action Day in the pages of history (B. Chattopadhyay). The peaceful nationwide protest for a separate Muslim homeland announced by Mohammad Ali Jinnah took an unruly form when the Indian Muslim gangs, influenced by Suhrawardy, unleashed large-scale violence on the Hindus. This led to incessant counter attacks between Hindus and Muslims, “sons” of the same “land”, in the city of Calcutta. The bloodthirst took the horrendous form of “epidemic”, culminating in a cycle of barbarity. The vicious ferocity was not confined to the public sphere alone. Homes were entered, destroyed, and women and children attacked, to unmask the terror of “a living hell”(B. Chattopadhyay). As historians Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh write:

> There are numerous eyewitness accounts of the maiming and mutilation of victims. The catalogue of horrors includes the disembowelling of pregnant women, the slamming of babies' heads against brick walls, the cutting off of victims’ limbs and genitalia, and the displaying of heads and corpses. While previous communal riots had been deadly, the scale and level of brutality during the Partition massacres were unprecedented (67).

It is about all these insanities and many more atrocities encompassing the 1947 partition that the poet refers to in this poem and in many other pieces. The “madness”, as he depicts, is “Worse” than what one may witness at the Lumbini Park Mental Hospital of Kolkata (B. Chattopadhyay). It was infused with the selfish politicians’ greed and hunger for power and position which was being fed by some perfectly healthy yet unmindful blind followers.

Tagore's experiences, by contrast, were markedly different, living in a world where he could be humane enough and enjoy the innocent leisure of indulging in versification, romanticism and daydreaming, something that Birendra Chattopadhyay confesses about having learnt from him. He says, "We too had learnt to dream from you", drawing attention to a generation of emotive and enthusiast budding poets and their thorps of dreams of revolution (B. Chattopadhyay). Birendra Chattopadhyay's 14 Station Road Dhakuria residence is, in fact, remembered as "the fireplace of the dreamers of dreams" (A. Chattopadhyay). However, as Chattopadhyay ruminates, these young poets could not relish the pleasures of dreaming, living in a country which has endured a series of adversities in the years after Tagore's demise, ranging from the famous Bengal famine and partition atrocities in the pre-independence period to ghastly incidents like The India-China War of 1962, the Naxalite peasant uprisings of the 60s and 70s, assassinations of poets and Naxalites like Ashu Majumder, Murari Mukhopadhyay and Saroj Dutta by the police, the Emergency of 1975, anti-Sikh riots of 1984, followed by Indira Gandhi's assassination on 31st October 1984. It is the “history” of India’s partition which has led to the occurrence of all these mishaps. As such, these are no less than abhorrent “sewage” which is continuously surfacing, rendering everything toxic and “inhuman”, from mere “thirst” and “bath” to entire “life” in general (B. Chattopadhyay).

The poet further says that this inhumanity is of an unprecedented scale— something that surpasses the brutality of the elderly brothel keeper of Shonagachi who forces the prostitutes into repeated exploitative sexual encounters with varied

customers, purely for materialistic interests. He also severely condemns the insensitivity of ministers, especially the chief minister of his time, and all other poets, artists and intelligentsia who prefer to keep silent amidst the tyrannies of the police and of the administration of the then Congress Government in power. This cold silence even provokes the unintimidated poet to go beyond the ranks ofcivility, comparing these hollow men to "Dogs on heat" who are intoxicated in their own world's pleasures and concerns, keeping their "conscience mortgaged to the ruling class interest" and "pursuing research of their home affairs" (B. Chattopadhyay; A. Chattopadhyay, A. Chattopadhyay). He further mentions how an independent nation, bereft of the traditional caste system, has indeed brought everything on the same pedestal so that such comparison is absolutely justified.

Thus, though the poets of his generation have inherited the "dreams" of a bright future in an independent homeland, they have been unable to realise the same (B. Chattopadhyay). It was, indeed, a question about how one should "hold one's head high even in the midst of hell" (qtd. in Dutta). The monumental dreams have descended to be mere "drunken jokes played on the reeds of an oft-used harmonium", allowing the drunk to break into irregular feats of heightened potency, challenge established social conditions, present alternative views— all of which is, nonetheless, just an illusion, devoid of any real sense of social responsibility. As such, the poet finally challenges Tagore's idealism who neither lived amidst such turbulence nor could foresee such dehumanising genocides while wishing for a "free country". However, the poet does not negate the optimism and the earnest leadership spirit of Tagore who sought refuge in not mere identity politics or petty religious segregation, in the name of patriotism, but in "humanity" at large (B. Chattopadhyay).

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