



Research Paper

Representation of the Predicament of Tea Garden Workers in Jaya Gowala's short play "Ghum Bhanganiya Din"

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ABSTRACT: *Jaya Gowala, a known name among the writers in Bengali in Tripura, is credited with bringing in a new experiential perspective and sensibility to her fictional writing. Born in the family of a Tea garden labourer, Jaya has opened up the recesses of emotional and existential vicissitudes of one of the most marginalized group of people in this world, the tea labourers in Tripura. Ghum Bhanganiya Din (1999-2000) is her second play, set in the backdrop of May Day celebration in a Tea garden at the beginning of the era of liberalization and globalization. The play is written in the traditional dialect of the Tea garden workers, called the chilomilo language. The bogey of American capitalism and the looming fear of closing down of the garden push the hapless people to build a resistance movement under the leadership of a leftist comrade. While critiquing the tenets of globalization, Jaya also highlights how leftist dispensation in the state whips up hysteria among the illiterate and ignorant workers to their benefit. As the title suggests, the play marks the coming of age of a new consciousness among the workers on the verge of May Day celebration, though they were quite unsure of the fate awaiting them beyond the May Day.*

KEYWORDS: *garden labourer, globalization, chilomilo language, capitalism, resistance*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Jaya Gowala was born in a family of a tea laborer in the Narendrapur Tea Estate in Tripura. Jaya's untiring efforts to represent the marginalized lives of tea garden workers have exposed us to a newer dimension of fiction writing in Tripura. Being an insider, she is able to depict a sensibility and experience through her writing which rarely others have succeeded before or after her. Her use of the dialect of the tea workers in her writing, the chilomilobhasa, gives an authenticity and approximation, which rarely can be achieved by any other writer in Bengali. That is why, Jaya Gowala is so precious a writer for Tripura. But it's unfortunate that at the age of 48, we have lost her. Jaya's Parbatiya is a highly acclaimed novel about the love story of two young characters from the Santal community, Manglu and Parbatiya. Ghum Bhanganiya Din (2014) is one of the two plays Jaya had written, the first being Izzat. Izzat was written, practiced and performed in a workshop of ten days at Durgabari Tea Estate, which was organized by Jhumur Sahitya Sanskriti Parishad in 1998 (Das, 2014). The manuscript was lost unfortunately before it could be published. Ghum Bhanganiya Din was published in Abhinay Tripura in 2014, twelve years after it was written.

Ghum Bhanganiya Din is based in a Tea Garden in Tripura just on the eve of May Day celebrations probably in the early years of the 2nd Millennium. The occasion is quite a charged one as the workers are traditional supporters of the Communist Party of India. The play is politically loaded, the reader must keep in mind that the ruling dispensation in the state was Left Front Government, while its arch rival NDA Government was in power at the Centre. The male characters are Rangiya, Rakhai, Chunu, Shankubura, Subala etc, while female characters are Sanjha (wife of Chunu) and Parbati (wife of Rangiya). The play begins in the morning with the male workers getting ready to go for the plucking of leaves. The most conscious of the male characters caution the rest that difficult days are in the offing. He talks of some omnipotent master, more powerful than the Tea garden owner, who is bent on ruining the garden workers. But he asks them to wait till the right moment when everything will be revealed. In the second scene, we find Chunu leaning against a pole on his porch, smoking a beedi, deeply engrossed in some thought. His wife Sanjha, mocks him, that he is carrying the trouble of the whole world in his head. His son of 8/9 yrs, Kalu, informs him that Subal and Rangiya want him to come to the school building immediately for a meeting. Both Chunu and Sanjha are irked that the only weekly holiday is spoiled through meetings. In the 3rd scene, same day at night, Sanjha is worried that Chunu hasn't yet come back home, she visits Rangiya's house to find out whether he has gone back home. Rangiya isn't home yet, but

Sanjha gets to know from Parbati that the men will be meeting the next day to prepare for the impending May Day celebrations. The latter also explains the significance of the May Day in the lives of the workers and urges her to attend the meeting compulsorily. No sooner than Sanjha leaves, Rangiya enters. He is irritated that the hut is still dark. Parvati retorts that there is no kerosene. That he is totally unaware of the market situation, the price of kerosene and rice have gone up, the Control price of these two things have equaled the market price. No one is protesting against all these. Rangiya agrees that they have to, there is no other way out. He swears at the Rambhakta Government at the centre which is pushing the workers to the wall, kicking at their belly. Parbati somehow pacifies him and pulls inside. In the fourth scene, the morning of the next day, we see two drunken workers Shanku and Kishna singing and weeping on their way to work. They are singing about how an evil eye has cast a spell on the tea leaves, causing them to wither away. Subla and Rangiya find them in this condition; berate them for drinking and being so despondent. Rangiyaremindsthem aboutthe words of caution spoken by the Comrade in the meeting of the previous day. The garden is going to close down soon. They reflect on the unfazedness of the common workers in the face of the impending crisis. But they aren't going to accept that lying down, they will raise awareness, unite every worker and fight for survival. This May Day will mark the beginning of a new movement, to protect their rights to work and fend for themselves.

Ghum Bhanganiya Din by Jaya Gowala is an interesting critique of contemporary reality from the perspective of tea garden workers of Tripura. For these marginalized people, there are two realities, they have to negotiate as in the case of most of the terminally situated population in Tripura. On the one hand there is the socio-economic reality: the menace of poverty, price rise, lack of minimum basic living conditions, on the other hand, the imagined reality of a better future, a sense of empowerment to be achieved through political engagement. Being marginally situated they subscribe to the socialist ideology, and are considered as vote banks of the ruling party in Tripura. Jaya Gowala's credit lies in conflating the two realities and showcasing the transformation of poor tea garden workers into committed voters of the ruling party by invoking the bogey of imperialism and anti-labour tenets of capitalism.

The workers are persuaded to believe that their socio-economic condition is a product of the alignment of the non-Leftist Government at the Centre and the Imperialist and capitalist forces of America. Their tea gardens will soon close down, unless they unite and unleash a war against all forces opposed to the interests of the Leftist government, who by default represents the interests of the tea garden workers. The latter refers to the Comrade as a true friend, who has woken them to a new reality which they were unaware of. Learning from the Comrade, the leaders among the workers explain the reason of closure of the garden to the rest. Since Indian government will be importing American tea, which is cheaper and well packaged, the demand for local tea will dwindle forcing the garden owners to close down. Starvation, thus, is the inevitable fate of the workers. Everything is a conspiracy of America in collusion with the NDA government who is selling the country to foreign interests. Even the God Rama has been hijacked, leaving them to fend for themselves. They are worried that some workers supporting Trinamool and Congress are lurking among them, their Sardar being one such, who is no. 1 Congress supporter and needs to be taught a lesson. When Rakhil informs them that the Sardar has alleged to the Manager against the three, Rangiya, Chunu and Subala, they accost the Sardar and beat him up.

In the fifth and the sixth scene, Jaya Gowala gives us an insight into the ideological indoctrination of the workers into Leftist agenda. After initial discussions on the preparations of the celebration, they shift to the implication of the sacrifices of the Hay Market massacre of the American workers in Chicago in 1886, who had laid down their lives for fighting for the right of an eight hours working day. They declare that those American workers are their inspiration. Everyone even the drunkard Shankubura assents that though they are aware of this history, they are at a loss to figure out why they should launch a movement now. Subala asks them haven't they been told by the Comrade that new machines will be installed that can get the work of eight hours done in two hours. If a labourer didn't have to work for eight hours anymore, can he expect payment for eight hours. So this May Day the demand of the labourers would be- right to eight hours of work. Chunu questions the veracity and logic of closing down of the tea gardens by the garden owners.

In the sixth scene, we find Parbati trying to decipher the meaning of globalization and liberalization. She asks Rangiya, who is at the end of his wit, to explain bishayan and udari fudari. Bishyayan (globalization) to them becomes bishayan meaning a slow poisoning, and they are mortally scared of this thing. Rangiya explains that it is a poison, which is insidiously percolating into the blood of every child, man/woman and old of this country. And udari is the thing due to which the kings of America are coming to India with their packets of tea. It is the thing because of which their working hours would be curtailed, they might also be out of employment. That is the trick of the American King and the Rambhakt King of India to perpetuate the subjugation of the working class. Parbati, at that moment wonders if the ministers of the state care for them or not. Subal answers that no one is interested in the upliftment of the poor. That's why it's more urgent that they must unite and fight for their rights. He creates an intricate logic of rhetoric where he links Government apathy to price rise to divisive politics to communal conflicts to a larger conspiracy of the Central Government, which can only be combated through a mass awakening of the working class on the auspicious May Day. They prepare

for an impending war-like crisis as suggested by the Comrade. They take a pledge and declare that the Comrade shouldn't exclude them from the looming struggle for survival. They aren't scared of dying because their inspiration is the sacrifice of those four American workers who were hanged on May Day. This May Day will also be their Ghum Bhangania Din (Day of Awakening from Slumber).

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