



Basudev Sunani's *Padaa Poddi*: A Subaltern Discourse

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Abstract

Etymologically, the term 'Subaltern' has been derived from the Latin roots 'sub' meaning 'below' and 'alternus' meaning 'all others'. The Vocabulary.com Dictionary defines the subaltern 'as someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalized or oppressed.' The Italian Marxist political activist Antonio Gramsci invented the term and used it in his article "Notes on Italian History," which later appeared in his book *Prison Notebooks*. According to El Habib Louai in Gramsci's view, "The subaltern classes refer fundamentally to any low rank person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of a local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation."

Basudev Sunani's first novel *Padaa Poddi* (Burnt to Ashes), published in Odia, is the poignant tale of a Dalit settlement burnt to ashes by the upper caste neighbours. Makaru, the protagonist, narrates the story of caste exploitation and discrimination that forced his father to flee from the village, abandon the land of their forefathers and Gods, to settle at Raipur. There is no end to the hegemonic treatment meted out to others in the village. However, there are voices that flutter signalling a protest. There are heads that rise and hitherto silent voices speak.

The objective of the researcher is to evaluate the novel as a subaltern discourse and how far the novelist has been successful in delineating the despair and defiance of a community that has been suppressed for long.

Keywords: subaltern, hegemony, exploitation, discrimination, elite, marginalization, subordination

Etymologically, the term 'Subaltern' has been derived from the Latin word 'Sub' meaning 'below' and 'alternus' meaning 'all others'. 'Subaltern' may refer to "someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalized or oppressed." (Vocabulary.com) The Italian Marxist political activist Antonio Gramsci was the first to make use of the notion in his article "Notes on Italian History" which subsequently appeared as part of his most famous book, *Prison Notebooks*,

written between 1929 and 1935. El Habib Louai writes, “The subaltern classes refer fundamentally in Gramsci’s words to any ‘low rank’ person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation.” (11)

In India, scholars led by Ranjit Guha came to be known as the Subaltern Studies Group or Subaltern Studies Collective. The members included some South Asian historians, social critics and scholars. Among the members prominent are Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Susie Tharu, Touraj Atabaki, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Gyan Pandey, Gautam Bhadra, and Sumit Sarkar.

In his essay “On some aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” Ranjit Guha uses the term ‘elite’ to refer to ‘dominant groups,’ foreign as well as indigenous, which included “feudal magnates, representatives of industrial and mercantile bourgeoisie, native recruits to the uppermost levels of bureaucracy, or members of a socially inferior strata who acted in the interest of the dominant all India groups”. On the other hand, he uses the term ‘people’ and ‘subaltern classes’ synonymously. These include the “lesser rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants, and upper-middle peasants”, especially people other than those grouped under ‘elites’. (8) The Subaltern Studies have been defined as “a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way.” (Guha) The term might also refer to “tribal, dalit, or lower-caste communities excluded from hegemonic power structures in postcolonial societies. In the Indian context, subalternity is critical for understanding resistance against caste, class, and gender oppression, as it amplifies voices silenced by colonial and elite discourses”. (Vinodh) In Postcolonial Studies after Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the term is used to refer to “dominated and marginalized groups” (Wolfreys)

Subaltern literature discusses “oppression, marginalization, subordination of the lower and working classes, gender discrimination, disregarded women, poor classes, racial and caste discrimination, and other concerns and concepts” (Jambaulkar & Joshi 525) The subaltern writer’s prime concern is to raise voice, and not simply sit silent and mum, against injustice, inequality and oppressive conditions that have dented the psyche of the underprivileged and the weak. These voices question the previously set ideologies, practices and institutions that were responsible for the vulnerable condition of their communities.

Review of literature reveals that there has been considerable research into the subaltern issue with researchers delving deep into the various aspects of the issue. Kaushik Nagadev Bhuyan and Supriya Agarwal in the essay “The Subaltern through Power Equations in Indian English Fiction” discuss the power-protest paradigms with regard to the subalterns as reflected in the Indian English Fiction, particularly those published in Marathi, Tamil, Odia and Hindi. Jeethukrishna S. traces subaltern issues in Maheswata Devi’s *Rudali*, Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*, Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and Bama’s *Karukku*. Hari Narayan Deka enquires into the subaltern woman’s voice and subversive cry for emancipation in Indira Goswami’s novels. Research has also been done to trace the subaltern voice in Arundhati Ray’s *The God of Small Things*. (Ilyas) Sarkar in her work has examined how Mamang Dai has dealt with the scuffling situations that the Adi community women face. Her research is an attempt to hear the voices of those women and is an attempt to give them a chance to bring their survival complexities in the eyes of mainland India. Attempts have been made to examine subaltern identities and Dalit aesthetics in the short stories of Limbale, especially stories like ‘Madhavi,’ “Rajni,” “Soni,” and “Ratna”. (Johri) Although Basudev Sunani is a significant Dalit voice in Odia, no attempt has been made to examine his novel *Padaa Poddi* from the subaltern perspective.

Basudev Sunani’s first novel *Padaa Poddi (Burnt to Ashes)*, published in Odia by Pakshighara Prakashanee in 2014, is the poignant tale of a Dalit settlement burnt to ashes by the upper caste neighbours. Makaru, the protagonist, narrates the story of caste exploitation and discrimination that forced his father to flee from the village, abandon the land of their forefathers and Gods, to settle at Raipur. There is no end to the hegemonic

treatment meted out to others in the village. However, there are voices that flutter signalling a protest. There are heads that rise and hitherto silent voices speak. The purpose of this research paper is to examine how the Gana community, a low-caste community in Western part of Odisha, the subalterns, is tortured in the hands of the high-caste people, how they raise voice, and the consequences they have to face when they fight against all kinds of injustices and seek their voices to be heard. The researcher adopts the technique of textual analysis and examines the novel through the theoretical framework of subalternity.

Mangalu Suna lived in Lathore village with his wife Sabesh and son Makaru Suna. He lived in Ganapara, a habitation of Ganas, a low-caste people, with other members of his community. Ganapara was situated at one end of the village. The villagers loathed coming here. If they needed the service of someone, they would stand on the road and call out the name. Mangalu worked as a farmhand, an agricultural attendant, attached to the village Gaauntia, a local high-caste zamindar, on an annual grant of paddy, sufficient to last six months of a year and rupees sixty only. Without any other form of employment at sight and considering the existential compulsions, he continues there, without any qualms. The Gaauntia's family exploits him, compels him to work in their fields for hours, but hardly lets go any opportunity to denounce him and point out at his low-birth. He is not the only one to suffer such ignominies, but his entire community is subjected to such humiliation:

Of course, no one ever heaps praise on these low-caste people. He (Mangalu) ploughed the land even when it continued raining incessantly, transplanted paddy in muddy fields with ankle-deep water, cut the ripe crops, carried those to the Gaauntia's backyard to be harvested, and even kept awake through the night to harvest those. Despite this, he was denounced ever, and praised never for his efforts. (*Padaa Poddi* 15) (My translation)

There was no end to the inhuman treatment meted out by the Gaauntia and his wife. Once Mangalu was injured in the leg while cutting down firewood with an axe. Although he bled profusely, none of the Gaauntia's family cared for him or carried him to hospital. Mangalu had to collect some wild plants, burn their leaves, and put a coat of the ash on his wound. The Gaauntia's wife flew into a rage when he did not report to work for a long time: "The Gaauntia's wife abused him (Mangalu) frequently as the wound took days to heal. The stock of firewood had exhausted; she was finding it difficult to cook. Makaru's father limped to the Gaauntia's backyard and cut some firewood for use." (15)

On another occasion when Mangalu was carrying firewood to be stacked in the stock room, he brushed against the Gaauntia's wife. She immediately flew into a rage. She said, "Be careful! You only work for us. Don't you dare consider yourself as a member of our household". Soon thereafter, she took bath and changed into fresh clothes to purify herself.

One freak incident compelled Mangalu to leave his village with his son and wife. Just as a hungry Makaru threw a few sticks at a bunch of ripe tendu fruits, one of them hit the Gaauntia's grandson on the head. The wound bled profusely. Makaru fled from the spot, climbed up a tree in a nearby forest, and sat there till midnight. Message spread in the village that Makaru had hit the child with a stone and deliberately cause so much blood to flow. Without Makaru anywhere at sight, Nandakumar, Gaauntia's son took Makaru and his wife to task:

Hey...you...mother fucker. Just get me your son, that bastard. He has hit my son with stone and shed so much blood, I'll drink his blood in retaliation. What does that mother fucker think of himself? Having said so, he landed kicks after kicks on Mangalu's crotch. When the latter's wife intervened and beseeched to be pardoned, he said, 'You whore of a woman! What a demon you have given birth to! Bloody bastard! He has hit my son. Bring him to me. Where have you kept him hidden?' (20)

Mangalu's repeated pleas "My lord! Please pardon my child...this once only. We lick your feet. The child has sinned. Please spare him" falls into deaf ears. That evening the 'Beheran' or 'village meeting' was convened. Mangalu, his wife Sabesh, inhabitants of Ganapara, the Gaauntia, his son Nandakumar, and Nandakumar's son were present. The novelist highlights the hegemony of upper-caste people in such meetings. The low-caste people either remain mum on such occasions or their words are hardly given a damn. The narrator says, "Usually, they sit silent in a corner. They hardly pass any remark. Why should they when such remarks are ridiculed or ignored?" (21-22)

It was decided that in order to expiate the sin Mangalu would have to arrange "Six sacks of rice, one male goat, besides one hundred and twenty rupees as fine." In addition, Mangalu had to present his son before the committee. Since he had hurt the child on the head, the Gaauntia's grandson had to reciprocate and hurt him on his head."(23) This he was asked to do as per custom of the village.

Sashank, a villager present in the meeting says, "According to our custom if a low-caste Gana beats a high-caste villager, the latter becomes an outcast. In such a case, a meeting of the fellow members of his caste is held. Community members from five villages gather. The head of the person beaten is tonsured. He is made to take bath, put on new clothes and drink holy Ganga water. After purification, he returns to the community." (23)

The amount so fixed at the meeting was equivalent to Mangalu's two year's earning. If he failed to deposit the sum, he "would have to slog at the Gaauntia's for the next two years for free." (23) The enormity of the fine, lack of resources to meet the huge demands, and the certainty of harm intended to his only child compel Mangalu abandon his homestead land, the village deity Nialimali, and the village soil where he was born and where he grew up, to resettle at Raipur.

In the second part of the novel, Makaru recounts the burning down of the homes and the events that lead to the barbaric act.

The novelist delineates the psychological distress that the burning down has caused to the locals. Chitra, while describing their desperate condition cries out thus; "Makaru, my dear, we are finished. Everything has come to a naught. They have burnt down our homes. All the wealth accumulated over lifetime has turned into ashes." (118)

The male members of the distressed families looked like dead bodies without heads. It was as if they had directly descended from the funeral ground. "They somehow carried their battered bodies and soul, somehow dragging their wearied limbs. They had no idea where their wives, sons, daughters, sisters or parents were or how they were. They had lost their minds. Their eyes were dazzled up by the sights of the fire that burnt down everything. (113)

The condition of the village women was no better. "They bathed in the open, slept on the ground with other women around them, and shared food with others. In the absence of a proper place to hang their sarees, blouses, inner wares to dry up after bath, they hung those openly, without shame. When the fire burnt down everything, they rushed out, only in the clothes they were wearing, abandoning everything, for the sake of life." (113)

The discord and disharmony between the low-caste Ganas and the high-caste people arose a few months back. The Lathore villagers decided to organize Durgapujo, with contributions from all. The problem arose when one of the Ganas, Sankar Suna was not allowed to offer puja. He brought "sweetmeats, coconut, fine arua rice, and twenty-one lily flowers to offer to the deity. He had spent hours, that chilly morning, collecting the lilies from the village pond. He carried the offering with greatest reverence but was denied entry" (161) When the puja was organised the following year, the Gana youths demanded that there must be someone from their community in the organizing committee. One of the committee members barked, "Do you think we won't be able to organize the puja without your cooperation. Saala! These low-caste Ganas are

crossing their limits these days.” (161) The use of ‘Saala,’ a derogatory word, invited an atrocity case against the high-caste committee members. As per law, the committee members were to be sent to jail, without bail. When efforts were made to resolve the issue amicably, the Ganas put forth a condition that was unheard of. “For such disdainful behavior, the high-caste members will stand on one leg each, hold their ears, admit of their sins, and beg apology.” (162)

This demand of the Ganas created a stir among the high-caste youths. “The Ganas who dared not look into their eyes, who did not take bath in the same ghat as them, who dared not sneeze if they felt like, who swallowed spittle instead of spitting it out, who sought their advice when embroiled in a court case, who bent down low if they happened to pass by them” (161) had suddenly become impudent and presumptuous. Emboldened by their first victory, the Ganas realized that if they acted together “they could register protest and defend their dignity.” (167)

The high-caste young men like Himanshu Bagarty, Srikant, and Bhola Agarwal decide to seek revenge. Srikant was heard telling Himanshu, “Brother! We need to do something to punish the Ganas. Please think of a way. Mother-fuckers! They not only insult us openly but also eye our women greedily. They are crossing limits.” (175)

One winter evening, the high-caste mob launched an attack on Ganapara, looted the houses of the wealthy Ganas, burnt down the houses and razed everything to ashes. The attackers had but one complaint. “The Ganas had crossed their limits. They had grown proud and arrogant. They retorted on the faces of the high-caste people.” (188)

It is amply clear from the above discussion that Basudev Sunani’s novel *Padaa Poddi (Burnt to Ashes)* is in fact a subaltern discourse. The novel critiques the entrenched caste hierarchies and Dalit oppression that has been the part of our society for long. On the other hand, there is significant proof that the subalterns are no more ready to take thing lying down. They are ready to protest against years of domination and subordination, giving voice to the disenchantment and discontent brewing among them.

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