

Echoes of Marginalized Voices in Ranendera's Lords of The Global Village

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Abstract

*The present study explores the selected text *Lords of the Global Village* from the perspective of subaltern studies. The text from the perspective of subaltern literary theory focuses on the 'Asur' Tribe's lifestyle, their marginalization by the mainstream, their issues and their conflicts with the dominant structures. The paper, from the vantage point of subaltern studies, aims to explore the underpinnings of this novel. By taking into account the concepts of Subalternity, Hegemony, Resistance, Assimilation, Subversion of establishment, through a subaltern reading of *Lords of the Global Village* would be analysed. The study explores, treatment given to characters of different groups and ideological implication of this treatment. Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Ranjit Guha's ideas of Subalternity have been used for analysing and interpreting the selected work.*

Keywords: Subaltern, Marginalization, Suppression, Resistance, Tribal.

Tribal writings deal with the notion of social justice, freedom, resistance, marginalization of tribal people, to counter with structures of racial discrimination, deprivation of masses, sexual exploitation of women, and ill-treatment in all spheres of life by the dominant ruling mainstream class/caste/group. Thus Subaltern studies become a prominent perspective to inquire the writings which deal with tribal life about certain issues of tribal masses.

Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci for the first time used term 'subaltern' outside the non-military sense. Antonio Gramsci opines that the subaltern classes allude to any lower rank person or group of citizens in a distinct society suffering under the hegemonic domination of governing aristocratic class that denies them the fundamental rights of involvement in the making of provincial history and culture as active individuals of the same country. (202)

Subaltern literature reflects various themes such as oppression, marginalization, Gender discrimination, the subjugation of lower and working classes, disregarded women, neglected sections of society. So the term Subaltern identify the social groups who are excluded from a society's established structures for political representation, the means by which people have a voice in their society. In critical theory, the subaltern is the social group who are socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structures. Gramsci stressed the connotation of this expression in terms of Gender, Class, Caste, Race, and culture.

Later South Asian scholars used the term in a wider sense that focused more on what happens among the masses at the base level of the society than the elite. The term 'subaltern' by them is used to indicate oppressed and marginalized people who tried to resist hegemonic domination, the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of society. Ranjit Guha defined the Subaltern Studies 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 3). Subaltern perspective focuses on how subalterns are represented in official documents and elite writing. The lack and deprivation, subjugation and subordination, the resignation and silence, the resilience and neglect mark the lives of subaltern, even when they resist and rise up, they feel bounded and defeated by their subject positions. They have neither representatives nor spokesperson in the society they live in and so helplessly suffer and occupy a marginal or subordinate place or no place at all in the history and culture of which they are the essential part as human beings. The subaltern groups are actually oppressed and their oppression is legitimized by the democratic system. Thus the concept of subaltern not only contains the masses that are marginalized, oppressed and exploited on cultural, political, social and economic grounds but also unravel the functioning of these structure in maintaining the status quo against them.

Gayatri Spivak argues that subaltern cannot be represented. She reflected on the status of Indian women relying on her analysis of a case of Sati women practices under the British colonial rule. Spivak claims that Sati women as a subaltern group was lost between two polarities: the British humanist discourse and Hindu native policy. According to Spivak The "voice" of the Hindu woman herself disappeared while these two discursive groups tried to give her a voice; deprived them of their subjectivity and a space to speak from. Spivak concludes by the end that "the subaltern cannot speak" (294). Contesting Spivak's argument J. Maggio in his essay, "Can the Subaltern be heard?" discusses about this complicated subject position. Maggio comments, "... the appropriate way to understand the subaltern is to approach such discourse as informed by the methods

of translation. Specifically, I advocate a "translating" of the everyday culture and communication of the subaltern"(432). He argues further by using self-conscious methods of translation, the careful writer and/or activist can investigate the "arguments" and "assertions" made by the everyday culture of the subaltern. He argues instead of looking for 'deliberate act of speaking' one should strain to listen to the subaltern in the many ways by which they communicate (439).

Ranendera is a well-known Hindi writer and critic. He has published famous works like *Gayabhota Desh*, *Raati Baaki Evam Anya Kahaniya* and a collection of poetry, *Thoda Sa Eshtri Hona Chahta Hoon*. Novel *Lords of the Global village* is translated by Rajesh Kumar and it was published originally in Hindi by the title of *Global Gaon ke Devta*. Ranendra in *Lords of The Global Village* depicts the interaction of a middle-class government teacher with a Tribal community 'Asur', because of their deprived subject position facing misrepresentation in every sphere of life constitute a subaltern group in contemporary Indian society.

The protagonist of the novel named Master Sahib unravels the lives of a tribal community named Asur, after he got posted into a Girls school in the tribal area far away from city life. Master Sahib narrates the story in 1st person to the readers. Master Sahib's narration makes readers aware of the issues and problems of a community which has not been given any space in the main stream culture. After getting posted in a tribal forest area named Bhaunrapaat, rich with bauxite, Master sahib's description of his first few days brings into fore the difference between the life style of the main stream cities and the tribal areas. He travels to a mountain spring in jungle for his daily bath and ablutions. Master Sahib after surviving few first weeks finds himself "completely cut off from, civilization" (6). In the first chapter of the novel Master Sahib describes Bhaunrapaat, as a distant place which lacks the touch of modernity and most of the modern facilities is still unknown to the tribal people living here. He feels lost in this distant land until his interaction with tribal people lead to his deep involvement in their lives.

Master Sahib's first meeting with Lalchan invokes the mythical description of Asurs in his

mind. Master Sahib alludes to stereotype cultural description of Asurs in our myths as, “dark-skinned giants with protruding teeth and horns growing out of their heads”. The myth of this stereotype construction of an Asur got ‘dispelled’ for Master Sahib (8). In contrast to the mythical depiction Master Sahib narrates emphatically the physique of Asur community members just as other human beings. When he comes to know that his cook Etwari is also an Asur, He comments, “She had no long, pointed claws or blood-sucking fangs, what misconceptions I used to have! I was sorely ashamed of myself” (9). This first meeting paves the way the narration of Master Sahib about the lives of this community named Asur in these forest lands. In his efforts to make the world heard about the sufferings of this community, protagonist starts with breaking down the myths and stereotype about Asurs of being barbaric giants full with bestiality and provides them an agency of normal human beings who are deprived of space and agency in all spheres of main stream culture. Asur Master Sahib got closely associated with these people and tries to voice the issues of these marginalized people who are facing all kinds of oppression on the hands of Mining Corporations, Feudal Landlords, Corrupt Government officials, biased Media, and Scoundrel religious Babas.

Ram Kumar a doctor in the area in his first meeting with Master Sahib elaborates how the mining in tribal area has bring with it some facilities and big problems:

But the mines have brought ruin as well as livelihood. For the last twenty-five or thirty years, the cavernous ditches that mine owners have left behind fill up with water every monsoon and turn into breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Cerebral malaria is endemic here. (10)

Ram Kumar explains that the even the government don’t want these tribal people there. He says, “I feel the government is dithering and has an ulterior motive. It intends to decimate the population on the paat. The sooner they are gone, the easier it will be to extract the bauxite” (12). Ram Kumar furthers comments that the practice of establishing hospitals, Anganbadis and schools is a fake one and these things are not working properly here.

Rumjhum a young boy from Asur community who

has masters in Sanskrit and son of a science teacher, in his conversations with Master Sahib deliberates on the conceptions about his community. Rumjhum’s character can be identified with Gramscian ‘organic intellectual’ there are the “organic” intellectuals, the thinking and organising element of a particular fundamental social class. These organic intellectuals are distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong (131). Rumjhum replying to Master Sahib’s enquiry he describes the general conception about Assurs:

The word “Asur” reminds you of two things, one is the stories of giants, demons and fiends heard during one’s childhood. What terrible description! Ten to 12 feet tall, Protruding teeth. An assortment of weapons in their hands, Cannibals.. (18)

Rumjhum explains how in an effort to learn, and to dwell deep in the ancient texts to bring forth the reasons behind these kind of conceptions, he chooses Sanskrit as a subject for his masters. Rumjhum describes how in Assyrian-Babylonian civilization the word “Asur” has positive connotation of “a strong man” and even in “Rigveda 150 shlokas treat the Assurs as gods” (18). This deliberation about the shifting of meaning of the word Asur for god to demon opens up the space for the people of tribe like Rumjhum to question the main stream cultures conceptions of Assurs and he challenges the established notions by providing examples from mythical historical texts. Working as an ‘organic intellectual’ in Gramscian sense he tries to unravel the hegemonic cultural perceptions with their social, political, implications. He comments:

The struggle between the Surs (gods) and the Asurs (demons) is a complex riddle... was it a fight involving the Palaeolithic ore-smelting people? The stem “Su” means “production”, and is included in “Sur”. Therefor it was fight between the forest-razing, cultivator-producers on one hand, and the iron smelters dependent on the charcoal made from sakhua trees on the other?... There can by number of explanations... (19)

The sharp contrasts marked by different

characters bring forth the deprived lives of the Asur community. Rumjhum describes this huge gap when he accompanies Master Sahib while visiting the “world-famous school at Patharpaat” which again marks a contrast with the “residential school” (12) in which his Master Sahib has been appointed. As Master Sahib compares the facilities and infrastructure of both schools, he describes residential school of Bhaunrapaat as no better than a pigsty. Half constructed buildings, a poorly built hostel and teacher’s quarters like hen coops” (23). Rumjhum further elaborates how their community is marginalized because of their lower status in the cultural and economic structures. The lowly status in cultural, political, economic and social spheres leads to their marginalization in the hands of dominant groups. They are already deprived of basic human agency, face acute deprivation in ongoing development and so called progress of the Indian democracy. Rumjhum explains how “more than a hundred Asur families” were forcibly uprooted for acquiring the land for school. Even after getting land ‘not a single child from a single tribal family’ is admitted into the school. Rumjhum comments, “They erect a Taj Mahal-like school on our bosom to show us where we stand” (21).

Rumjhum describing “the silver city of India” where the bauxite taken from the tribal areas processed into aluminium comments, how it has ‘lush green lawns, glittering malls, club house, yoga centre, library, sports fields. For Rumjhum the Asur it is just like as if “Indra’s royal court had alighted on earth” (17). In contrast to this luxurious life style the odds of Asur community are drastically contrasting, Rumjhum describes how “the women there have to ‘waste half their lives fetching the woods and water’ and in rains it becomes difficult to differentiate between their children and pigs” and how even a dish of rice and pluses is equals to the festival delicacy (17). Further Assur community’s women not only face hardships of the forest life but also have to bear the sexual abuse by the mine officials and government official and by other influential persons of the area too. The Government officials and Mine owners and Officials exploit tribal girls in return of money and other permits. People like Singhjiyawa use tribal girls to please the officials of government

and mine company to reap great profits. As Lalchan tells Master Sahib, “The Singhjiyawa was a lot more interested in supply girls and women” (40). He explains how pimps mislead young tribal girls and frustrated wives and lure them into this thing. Singhjiyawa and likes of him, cheat tribal people by saying they will provide their girl jobs in big cities where in reality they are being sold as sex workers. Even in such odd conditions Asur community have powerful women too. Women characters like Bhudhani Di and Lalita are quite strong and enjoy equal agency and space with men. In contrast to main stream hegemonic structures treats women inferior to men, Asur as tribal community allows the women to play important part in shaping their own lives and also the community. Instead of being at the margins in main stream society in Tribal world of Asur community, they make active participation in the collective decision as well as grow taller than many of their counterparts on intellectual level and in understanding of current political and economic structures. Rumjhum’s Mother and Lalchan’s wife are “symbols of tireless labour” (26). He recognizes that the Asur Tribe use the word ‘siyani’ for women instead of ‘Janani’. As Master Sahib describes, “The word ‘janani’ was parochial binding them to the role of be getters of progeny; on the other hand, ‘siyani’ symbolized their vast experience and wisdom” (28). Bhudhani who runs a tea shop in Skhuapaat is one of them. She is strong sensible and wise character as Master sahib describes him, “She was an Asur Siyani! The molten iron swigged by her forefathers coursed through her veins too” (39).

The mine owners, big or small both were exploiting the Asur tribe by bribing the government officials. The community is marginalized to the extent that their plight is no concern of media, environmentalist or any other main stream organization who can raise voice and issues of the community. Master Sahib notes that, “illegal mining hand been rampant for years” (33). Master Sahib comes to know that even after Rumjhum and Lalchan’s awareness campaign and complaints to officials brings on change. When an inquiry was launched against ‘Shindalco’ (big mining corporation) on their insistence it only ended up in bribing the magistrate and lending facilities to Magistrate’s colony on the expenses of ‘Shindalco’

The Tribal people are not facing threats of extinction because of their land is slowly usurped by mining corporations illegally but there also facing the wrath of big landlords whom have the support of different political outfits and their strong influence in the government machinery at work. Lalchan Da's uncle's alleged murder by Gonu Singh's family makes it evident. The five-acre piece of land becomes the point of contention among the Asur Community and Gonu's Singh's family and his goons with in direct support of local administration. This usurping of Asur community's land forcibly, for Master Sahib echo's an ongoing conflict from the Ancient ages to till now. As Master Sahib looks back into mythology and history from the perspective of Asurs. Master Sahib unravelling hegemonic construction brings forth the continuity of oppression 'in the overt, and often covert, strife' going on for thousands of years (44). Master sahib in his effort to unravel the role of this contention for land as the origin of exclusion of Asur by the main stream, questions this 'othering' of Assurs. Master Sahib question the segregation of the Asur tribe. He comments:

What was it that had changed a community into the 'other' made them 'different', an enemy? Was it simply because their lifestyle was different from ours that they had become objects of abuse and butchery? Why did some of us take the discovery of fire and metals, and the art of smelting ores in such a bad spirit that this race of artisans had had to face continual assaults and retreats? (44)

Master Sahib goes further and deliberates how the modern civilizations throughout the world have persuaded themselves over the extermination of so called 'wild' or 'tribal' societies. Master sahib refers to the fate of native American tribes at hands of modern civilizations of West. Master sahib further comments on the brutality of Modern Democratic India's onslaught on the Asur community. He deliberates at least Americans have given space to these exterminated tribes in their museums etc. on the other hand in Master Sahib's words:

The self-proclaimed liberal and tolerant Indian culture had spared not even that much space

for the Asurs. They existed only as vestiges of myths. They had no literature, no history and no museum, and were not accorded even the faintest sign of their devastation.(44)

He further ponders how if some anthropologist or archaeologist claims about the historical retreat of the Asurs from the fertile river banks to the forests who would be called or considered eccentric and no notice of his work will ever be taken. With tinge of irony he mentions the historical indication of Asurs dominance and presence in fertile lands of Kunwar and Munghi rivers. He refers to an ancient but excellent road from Nawada to Rajgir known as 'Asurin' (45). Master Sahib sees his experience of Asur tribes' life not as an isolated event but in a continuation of history of discrimination, exploitation, and suppression. He comments:

it implied an aeons-long withdrawal, leading finally to this paat. The end of the earth. Where would this people go now? The juggernaut of annihilation ground on. The lands and the daughters submitted silently, mute, being deprived of their legacy, piece by piece. (45)

In a collective decision Asur community decides to put their claim on Lalchan Da's uncle's land against the Gonu's family. This fight once again brings forth the question of their survival and the hostile nature of the all dominating forces surrounding them. Rumjhum provides Master Sahib another book about the legend of Sing-Bonga while discussing about the book Rumjhum deliberates, "it never matters who emerges victorious, because he nurtures only one feeling towards the vanquished-hatred" (59). These revelations from the vantage point of subaltern perspective enables Rumjhum being an organic intellectual of the deprived class to shun out the whole the narrative of history. Rumjhum questions and validity of these mythical historical narratives:

He who is more violent, more barbaric and better trained in the art of killing triumphs; ... Truth and honesty do not win a war, contrary to what is said in stories... we accept the stories of these bootlickers and yarn-spinning toadies blindly. The power of their pens is employed in

attesting that that vanquished race was dishonest, unjust and unfair, all in an attempt to wash off the consciousness of guilt rising from the blood-soaked earth, women, wealth and the crown. (59)

Discussing Sing-Bonga legend Rumjhum challenge its traditional explanation and subverting it was the story of retreats and destruction faced by their race. He comments, “Nobody had reckoned in the annals how many times and how many Indras, Pandavas and Sing-Bongas had destroyed them over those thousands of years” (61). Rumjhum, Master Sahib, Doctor Ram Kumar and others inspires the Assurs to make allegiance with other exploited tribes and communities because only then they can rise a battle for their survival against the dominating forces. By forming an allegiance and they start to fight for their rights in tactical manner. Representative of the communities draft an inclusive memorandum citing all the demands of various oppressed section of the tribal people. They stop the work at mines and refused to return until their demand are fulfilled. The reluctant administration and biased media doesn't take a notice of this strike as Master Sahib comments, “The bureaucrats and press correspondents were used to talking to intellectuals and businessmen, and political leaders who moved about in luxurious cars” (74). Though the Assurs are demanding only their basic rights and inquiries in some matters, but the state machinery which can see beyond the impact of this strike and protest came heavily on the protesters. For them it is a symptom of growing awareness and organization of the deprived sections of the society. The multinational corporations who are functioning in mines business in tribal areas makes use of all legal and illegal means to garner the biggest possible profits. As the unity of protesters breaks down the work in mines resumes again and many leaders are arrested later the bail for these Assurs given by a Fraud baba Shivdas who symbolizes the use of religion and superstition by the hegemonic structure to advance their own interests and mould subaltern consciousness covertly. The contention between the government and Asur and other tribes grows more as the government launches a project for saving the wolves named “abhayaranya” (117).

As government issues notice to ‘vacate thirty-seven villages’ including ‘twenty-two villages of Assurs’, it is taken as a theft on their land. Assurs questions, “They’ll kill human beings to save the wolf? ‘Is it a real project or a plan to kill us?’” (117) Master Sahib elaborates how forest department considers Assurs and other tribal and encroachers on its land. Master Sahib extrapolates how the governments are asserting the rights on forest land without taking into account the life style and dependency of these tribal communities on these lands and how living here for centuries distant from the modern civilization the right to forest land and water should be considered as basic right of these tribal communities. He describes the deliberate ignorance of the forest department towards this fact:

It was not ready to pay heed to the fact that people had been living in the forest villages for hundreds of years, and that the Forest Department was the real encroacher. Like the animals and the trees, the men here were natural inhabitants of the forests. But the education imparted by the Sahibs told those in power differently, and now they were hell-bent on the removal of the villagers. (119)

Later comes into light that the contract for fencing the land for this project is given to company named ‘Vedang’ which is well-known giant company in the field of bauxite mining. Assurs and other tribes living in the area takes it as a threat to their existence and decides to put up their last battle. This time with growing political awareness they devise a strategy on no arrest. As in their words, “this time take care to avoid arrest. The police station would definitely declare us Naxalites. Vedang had bribed him” and they are well aware and prepared for the fatal consequences of this battle and their stakes too as they decide, “we shall die but not hand over our lands” (120). A letter to Prime minister office written by Rumjhum Asur presents the whole narrative from subaltern perspective. This letter seems to come out of the growing consciousness of subaltern community which is aware of political contention and their subaltern position against the state in function. Letter aimed at presenting miserable condition of

Assurs community makes an effort to rewrite the history from perspective of Assur community. It questions how the mythological deleterious portrayals of Asurs in forms of ‘demons and wicked fiends’ are the consequences of their resistance for saving the forests. This ongoing oppression and misrepresentation has led them to face the threat of extinction. Rumjhum in letter narrates:

... However, legitimate and illegitimate bauxite mines are swallowing our land like a giant python... we are hardly eight to nine thousand Assurs left alive now. We are scared. We don’t want to become extinct. (125-26)

The peaceful protest of Assur community builds a great pressure on the mine owner big corporation and government officials of the area. Thrashing of one innocent Asur youth results in a peaceful gherao of police station by thousands of tribal masses. Starting from a minor scuffle between a constable and some Assur youths gives the chance for the authorities and they open the fire on the peaceful crowd and later this incident covered as a minor story describing, “six Naxalites being shot dead in a police encounter at Patharpaat” (132) an encounter with Naxalites in the media. When Master Sahib meets Lalita after the incident her deliberations of history puts once again subaltern perspective in front, her take on history of nation state unravels the ignored perspective she delineates nation state as a building having ‘foundation bricks and its palaces made up of violence’ an establishment which ‘institutionalized bloodshed’. She further comments, “The nation state used humans to kill their fellows... there are very few species that prey on their own kind. The nation state had turned men into a cannibal who felt no guilt” (141). Master Sahib pondering on the whole event of this protest and brutal killings of Asur on the hands of state remembers Rumjhum’s statement, “The weak could not survive in this world. They would be systematically annihilated, like the Native Americans. Whatever the Spanish, Dutch, French and the British had done to the Native Americans earlier had happened to this community too, and it was happening again. The terrible silence of history could not deny it” (152) and these ponderings of

Master sahib continues to grow at the events take place. Assurs lead by Lalita and Bhudhani Di and others going to meet the authorities for handing over a memorandum get killed in a land mine explosion. With last batch of the leaders of Assur community wiped out Master Sahib sees this war ended, he comments:

The battle that had commenced in the Vedic Age, the same battle that thousands of Indras had not been able to end, had now been won by the deities of the Global Village... all the aborigines would now be part of the mainstream, the waves of which were leaping up to lap up the moon, winding through the capitals of various states, the swell rushed through Delhi to Washington DC. (157)

Ranendra through Lords of the Global Village bring forth the case of an ignored community in front of us.

Conclusion

The text breaks down the mythical presentation, stereotype associated with the community and unravels the politics of dominant power structure in creating such mythical, cultural stereotype of the dominated, oppressed communities and groups. By depicting and setting the narrative in contemporary times Ranendra not only intends to make readers aware the events taking place beyond the main stream cultural, political scenario. It also brings forth the fate of subaltern communities, misrepresentation of their resistance, rights and issues and justification of the oppression and exploitation of the dominant structure by creating a narrative in accordance with their own interests. Lords of the Global village is a narration from the perspective of marginalized to be heard and supported by the all others who are in one or another form facing the oppression in a different extent to get united and prepared for the worse times which are yet to come.

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