



From Repression to Resistance: A Study of Subalterns in two Odia Films Udandi Sita and Balidana

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Abstract— *With Independence, colonialism didn't end, rather the legacy was transmitted to the new elites who absorbed the attitude of colonizers and continued to oppress the subalterns consolidating their power and wealth through exploitative and unethical means. In Odisha, the new elite class, consisting of the Government officials and landlords, money-lenders of middle-class community perpetuated the colonial evils and exploited the poor subalterns resulting in their dispossession, destitution and displacement. The literature of the period and after tries to record these atrocities unleashed by the middleclass and how the subalterns reacted to it. This paper explores the representation of inexpressible oppression meted out to the subalterns, their sufferings, and their resistance in post-independence Odisha through two landmark Odia films, Udandi Sita (1992) and Balidana (1978). Through a counter-dominant narrative, the films aim to awaken societal consciousness about the plight of the oppressed and advocate for resistance against systemic injustices.*



Keywords— *Colonialism, Subalterns, Exploitation, Resistance, Oppression*

I. INTRODUCTION

The last quarter of the twentieth century is admittedly the golden period for Odia Cinema. With a significant rise in its popularity and in audience, the Odia film industry used several new techniques, adopted themes that could appeal to the masses, introduced new and skilled actors and actresses from different strata of society, and shifted its interest and attention towards the life and concerns of people in Post independence Odisha. This period witnessed the production of some evergreen films like Jaga Hatara Pagha, Balidana, Maya Miriga, Udandi Sita, Bhagya hatara Dori, Jor Jaar Mulak Tar etc. that vividly portrayed the Odishan tradition, culture, customs, and the realities of the society that the state had overlooked by far. Though Odia industry was apparently influenced by other Indian film Industries and Bollywood, it, at the same time, tried to live up to the tastes of the general public of Odisha by depicting the major issues and the social realities of the day, viz. the oppression of the peasants and the poor, their sufferings in the hands of the new elites, and their

resistance to the oppression. Udandi Sita (1992) and Balidana (1978) are two of the most famous films of that time that tell the story of oppression and dispossession from the counter-perspective of the dominant discourse featuring a female and a male protagonist respectively. They foreground the lived experiences of the peasants and the poor and documents the atrocities unleashed by the elites, who were “as oppressive and exclusive as the colonial master” (Nayar 100) and the trials and the tribulations of the lower class that led them to raise their voice through violence. The films, by presenting the oppression and resistance of the individual subalterns, try to create a consciousness among the people who had accepted their hegemonic position and submitted their voice before the elites.

II. SUBALTERN IN THE HISTORY OF POST-INDEPENDENCE ODISHA

According to the Latin roots ‘Sub’ means ‘below’ and ‘alternus’ means ‘all others’. The term ‘Subaltern’ was

primarily used in the military context meaning 'of inferior rank'. But it was adopted by Antonio Gramsci in a non-military sense to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class. This understanding of the subaltern was taken up by South Asian historians who used it for the Subaltern studies collective in the 1980s to rewrite the histories of the marginalised classes. Prominent historian Ranjit Guha used the term in the context of colonial India and placed it in opposition to the term 'elite'. In the same context, the term 'elite' not only covered the European colonisers, but also the dominant middle-class people who had access to hegemony and state power by virtue of their wealth, education or association with British officials and who enjoyed political, economic, and social agency. On the other hand, the term 'subaltern' refers to the people who didn't come under this category, regardless of their race, caste or class, and lacked the agency enjoyed by the elites. After Independence, when the middle class got direct access to the state power, the position of subalterns didn't change in the society. They remained in the same position of disempowerment, without any voice or agency as the new laws and policies couldn't help much in uplifting their conditions. In Odisha, mainly the peasants, tribals, sharecroppers, the lower caste and class people are considered as subalterns owing to their socio-economic condition and marginalised representation.

In the post-independence period, while Odisha was rejoicing with some phenomenal steps taken to assert its unique identity, it couldn't be successful in eradicating the long existing issues like the caste system, class division, oppression, and exploitation of the farmers and the lower class and so on. The new Government also worked in line with the colonial system that only gave advantages to the elites and the subaltern's voice was pushed far beyond the margin. Roosa says, "It replaced British officialdom only to create a kind of replica of British imperial government" (140). The Independence and ensuing reformations did not bring any remarkable change in the condition of the farmers and the lower class. The state policies, instead of encouraging them and uplifting their situation, depressed them further. After Independence, the middle class, as Franz Fanon says, acquired the power and agency of the colonial master; but they were devoid of any sort of sympathy. In this context, Roosa says, many Subalternists believe that "the Indian elite in power after independence in 1947 treated the peasantry in much the same way that the colonial state had" (139). The new elites like the middle-class Odias like the Sahukars or money lenders, Zamindars or landlords and other officials took advantage of the marginalised conditions, illiteracy and lack of agency of the farmers and the lower class and exploited them through several means that only enervated the condition of these subalterns. Due to

lack of any sort of political or economic agency, the subalterns' voice went unheard; any attempt of subaltern to raise voice was stifled readily by the nexus of middle-class and Government officials. However, "the long tradition of exploitation" (qtd. in Chakraborty) and extreme exertion of power by the middle class led to the revolt and resistance of the subaltern to bring an end to the rule of the oppressor. While much study has been done to recover the voice of subalterns in colonial Odisha, the subalterns of Post-independence Odisha, whose experiences and concerns the films depict, have been relatively ignored. Since most of the audience of the Odia film industry belong to this section of the society, the films of the time largely replicated these concerns and depicted the issues quite lively to create a kind of consciousness among the masses to raise their voice. The Odia films of the 70s, 80s and 90s largely addressed these issues of the poor class and tried to recover the experience of the subalterns by showing under what circumstances they resorted to violence. They also tried to decolonize the mind of the subalterns from the dominance of these middle-class people by showing the resistance of the oppressed class. The realities of these struggles, suffering, and the resistance are adroitly portrayed in two of Odia films of the time, i.e. *Udandi Sita* and *Balidana*.

III. UDANDI SITA: THE STORY OF STRUGGLE AND RESISTANCE

Udandi Sita is a 1992 film produced by Ganapati films and directed by Avtar Singh starring Aparajita Mohanty, Uttam Mohanty, and Raimohan Parida as its lead characters. Though primarily a male-centred film, it is named after its leading female character Sita, played by Aparajita Mohanty. The word "Udandi" can be literally translated as 'an unruly or undisciplined girl'. However, the title stands for the indomitable and undaunted female character, Sita who shows a strong will power to raise her voice and avenge her husband's death by killing the landlord and putting an end to his oppression. *Udandi Sita* accounts the oppression of the poor by the middle-class in the village of Raygarh. Ray Saheb is the single most powerful person in Raygarh. His power and dominance can be ascertained from a single fact that Raygarh hasn't seen any election after Independence and it is Ray Saheb who selects the Sarpanch of the village. The people of Raygarh have lost their voice and no one could even dare to speak before Ray Saheb. Ray Saheb leaves no stone unturned to exploit the people and oppress them. He eyes on women, sexually exploits them, misappropriates village funds, and even beats the collector when the latter objects to his wrongdoings. Showing the condition of the lower class, the film tries to give a new angle to the resistance by the

subalterns; it depicts that a woman in Odia society can also take revenge of the oppression and exploitation when the whole village has become the hegemonic subjects of Ray Saheb and accepted that their fate is not going to change.

The male protagonist of the film *Raju* works as a servant of Ray Saheb and he is also subjected to endless oppression by him. Raju is entrusted with the impossible task of straightening the tail of Ray Saheb's dog and Ray Saheb stops his salary until he accomplishes the task. In the turn of events, he becomes the nominal Sarpanch of Raygarh whose bridle remains in the hands of Ray Saheb. Ray Saheb uses his name to acquire funds and continues to exploit him as usual. The lower-class people think that their situation will change as Raju has acquired agency, but this is a dream that is never materialized. The agency given to the lower-class people in some cases is even controlled by the middle-class people. And when Raju tries to oppose Ray Saheb, he is falsely accused of killing the collector and is jailed. Upon return, he tries to unite the people to raise their voice, but the people don't have guts to even stand before Ray Saheb. In his lone fight against Ray saheb, Raju loses the battle and is killed. A subaltern's voice is suppressed forever by middle-class supremacy.

Along with highlighting the predicament of the subalterns, the film also delivers a powerful social message of resistance of women to their oppression. The lone resistance of Sita symbolizes a new form of empowerment in Odia society. Her resistance is not against an individual oppressor, but against the inherited colonial oppressive mechanism in entirety. Sita, in her attempt to take revenge, defies the codes of social discourse about the widow and she eventually kills Ray Saheb putting an end to his oppression. She is seen as a Devi or Goddess incarnated who saves the villagers. The film portrays her as an empowered subaltern who resists and raises voice unlike others who have accepted the tyranny of Ray Saheb.

Sita's character challenges traditional gender roles and the submissive expectations of women, especially widows, in her community. Her actions inspire other women and marginalized individuals to question and resist the systemic oppression they face. By portraying her journey from victim to avenger, the film underscores the potential for transformation and empowerment within subaltern communities, showing that even in the face of overwhelming odds, resistance is possible and can lead to meaningful change.

IV. BALIDANA: A STORY OF TRIALS, TRIBULATIONS AND RESISTANCE BY THE PEASANTS

“It would be no exaggeration to call the history of post-colonial Odisha the history of forced dispossession, state repression and resistance against it” (Padhi and Sarangi 1). In post-colonial Odisha, the new elites adopt and adapt the hierarchical and exploitative practices introduced by the British to continue the oppression and to satiate their unquenchable thirst for wealth and landed property. *Balidana*, produced under the banner of Basant Naik entertainment and directed by legendary film artist and director Prashanta Nanda, chronicles the life of two generations of a peasant family that suffered in the hands of a wicked Sahukar or Money-lender, the dispossession and displacement of the family, and the violent resistance of the protagonist. Showing the oppression of the middle class on peasants in Post-independence Odisha, the film also highlights another significant event in the history of modern Odisha, i.e. the peasants' violent resistance or revolution which was branded as terrorism. It brings to the light the helplessness of the subalterns or farmers that resulted in their turning into rebels and raising weapons towards the middle-class in resistance.

Land holds utmost significance in the life of the farmers and it is a symbol of their identity. But the commodification of land under British rule made it an object of buying and selling. *Balidana* revolves around this issue of land and shows how this commodification led the middle-class to occupy the lands of lower-class through manipulation. In that time, the middle-class, that emerged from the remnants of the colonial system, perpetuated the oppression of the peasants taking advantage of their illiteracy and backwardness. In the film, Jagata, the father of the protagonist Raju, mortgages his 2 acres of land near Sahukar to get married to Laxmi. He pays most of his annual harvest to repay the loan, but that falls short to the interest even. Eventually, the Sahukar usurps the land leaving the family deprived of their only source of income. The peasant can't oppose but puts blame on his luck. This rightly portrays the social reality of that time where farmers were not paid their dues and they had to mortgage their land near the wicked-money lender who used several means to usurp their land. The subaltern couldn't oppose due to lack of agency and his voice disappeared in the vast world dominated by the elites. He couldn't even seek the intervention of the state that worked in the interest of the middle-class.

There is a “line of continuity between the colonial and the postcolonial where both are linked by crime, immorality and corruption” (Nayar 99). Despite several

legal reforms, the postcolonial situation didn't change anything for the lower-class and the colonial legacies continued to plague the society. The middle-class maintained the existing hierarchies and perpetuated the oppression of the lower-class. The character of Raju, played by Prashanta Nanda, though doesn't directly suffer from brutal oppression like his father Jagata did, is a victim of Sahukar's manipulation and lost his way of life as the Sahukar encroached upon. Raju has a strong sense of attachment for their land from his very childhood and when it is snatched, he pledges to take revenge for this. Raju grows up to be an angry young man and an independent farmer who tills the government land to grow crops. But eventually Sahukar's manipulation played its role and Raju loses his land to an industrialist who takes the land to build a factory. His attempt of raising voice lands him in jail. Raju here stands for the hundreds of such voiceless farmers who became victims of the manipulation and exploitation of such middle-class agents and whose voice was suppressed by the dominant class. Though Aju, the industrialist, takes the land under the direction of Sahukar, this scenario exemplifies how elite industrialists often seized the lands of poor farmers through various means. In Odisha, the maoist movement that gained momentum in the 70s was also a result of this displacement of the subalterns from their home and land.

In the jail, Raju meets the school master who had become a rebel because of the oppression of the numerous Sahukars and Zamindars. Raju eventually joins hands with the master and both of them plan to take revenge from the Sahukar. This event highlights how the poor people adopted the ways of violence and terrorism because of the unending torture and oppression of the middle class. Raju and the master escapes from jail to fight for their right. Bereft of any sort of political or social agency, they had no other way but of violence. The film here tries to shed light on the constraints that made the poor people adopt the path of violence. They didn't have education or agency. Even the Government had betrayed them by taking sides of the middle class. So, the only means they could adopt to raise their voice against such oppression was of the violence. But the state didn't understand their constraints and to maintain its image, it disowned them. Unlike the Colonial period, it didn't want to put them into the discourse of nationalism and resistance; rather they were branded as criminals.

The story of resistance runs parallel with the love story of Raju with the daughter of the Sahukar. It is when the Sahukar tries to forcibly marry her off because she wanted to marry a low class 'criminal' Raju that Raju attacks the village. However, the master, to not let Raju's life get spoiled, kills the Sahukar saying that he is putting an end to the oppression of another Sahukar.

V. SUBALTERN'S ASSERTION OF VOICE AND DECOLONIZING THE SPACE

It is ultimately the policies and value system of the colonial administration which is transmitted to this new class of predators, represented by Ray Saheb and Sahukar in Odia society. The predatory attitude of these elites replicates the extractive and authoritarian nature of the colonial administration, demonstrating a continuity of oppression. Countless individuals and families in post-independence Odisha suffered in the hands of the elites and ended their life in destitution. However, the extreme exertion of power, limitless exploitation and oppression also compelled the lower-class masses to vent out their anger and anguish by waging a battle against the perpetrator. Both the films clearly lay bare the suffering of the farmers and the lower-class masses in the hands of the middle class and how this suffering drove them to adopt the violent means of resistance as the state had created no scope of agency for them. But in modern Odisha, these kinds of resistance were criminalized and the voice of the subaltern was invariably suppressed by the state. The state never attempted to explore the causes of their resistance and under what condition they resorted to violence. The films try to highlight the actual experience of the farmers and the lower-class people to justify their means of resistance. In the films, the subaltern, whose voice was long suppressed, can at last assert his identity and is successful in freeing the space and the mind of the people from the colonization of the middle class.

VI. CONCLUSION

Both *Udandi Sita* and *Balidana* are significant contributions of the film industry to enriching the popular culture of Odisha and they help create the unique identity of Odia film industry. Apart from their appealing patriotic songs, screenplay, cinematography and starring, the films are also credited with shedding light on the grim social realities and conditions of the lower class and farmers of their contemporary society. With the changed class equation in post-independence period, the middle class appeared as just the other-self of the colonizer and tried to keep the voices of the subalterns beyond the margins of the society with their continuous oppression and exploitation. And any attempt of resistance by the subaltern used to be criminalized. Though the subaltern studies project was certainly unreachable to the Odia film makers of that time, both the films have adopted a counter-dominant perspective to explore the experiences and pathetic and constraining situations of the subalterns that forced them to adopt the path of violence for resistance, as they couldn't withstand the exploitation more. With their respective unique

approaches of giving voice to the peasants and the lower-class people, the films have been able to show the assertion of identity and voice of the subalterns in the end, and thereby impart a subtle message to society to awake from a deep slumber and raise voices and awareness against the oppressors on behalf of the oppressed.

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