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## Bashai Tudu: A Symbol of Landless Peasants' Struggle in Postcolonial India

Aju Mukhopadhyay

Long after the struggle for *Right to Forest* was over, Bashai Tudu came to replace Birsa Munda as the hero of Mahasweta Devi's novel, *Bashai Tudu*. He was categorised as part of a class unlike the time of Birsa when no such thought of dividing the people in different conflicting classes fighting for the non-existent classless society, was ever contrived. Covering a period between 1967 and 1977, it is a story about the fierce agrarian revolution mainly by the landless labourers in Naxalbari region in the north of Bengal. "It inspired the exploited peasantry in the neighbouring states like Odisha, Andhra, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Kerala", notes the writer in her preface. (Tudu/Preface/16) Its hero fights for the comrades without a party membership. Though he always stays mysteriously at the centre of each struggle even after his death, he "stands out of the Naxalite movement," wrote the introducer of the novel. (Tudu/Intro/11) Unlike the hunger for forest, "The hunger for land felt for ages by the sons of the soil and their long struggle to retain their rights in the land found a climactic expression in the Naxalbari movement", (Tudu/Preface/18) wrote the author of the novel.

In 1954 Estate Acquisition Act was passed in the State limiting individual landholding to 25 acres, and to make it effective revised Act was passed in 1971 to limit the above land holding per family, but that too became totally ineffective. The ruling parties in the government were of mixed variety at the beginning of this period which changed to rightist government for a term and then came in power the left combine. The landless labourers and Naxalites were not only disliked but ruthlessly suppressed by all such rulers. This is a record of their intense struggle for existence by getting the minimum wages prescribed for them by the government, to keep themselves free from the clutches of Zamindar, Jotedars or big land owners and money lenders. But they were never favoured by the extended hands of law nor they attracted sympathy from any quarter; they grew restive living always in hunger and tension. "They were aware of the glory that the MW law had brought to the Government, how it had redeemed the administration's sense of guilt, how it had been a topic for discussion at several meetings held in air-conditioned chambers over steaming cups of Nescafe, and how it had drawn a blank in implementation . . . . the lives of the Santals are determined and regulated by hunger, not by any government." (Tudu/61)

Bashai Tudu is not a party member but Kali Santra, a veteran party functionary, always respects him. Bashai saved a big comrade, Samanta, carrying him on his shoulder when he suffered from Cholera.

"The babus are a caste by themselves, like the Bagdis, and the Kaoras, yes a caste. And that's why such a good man like you have to take your stand with the babus only because you are a babu yourself. And then in the Party study circle you would give us lectures on the *class struggle*. No Kali-babu, you'll never convince me." (Tudu/24)

The material world is full of contradictions, as we vividly find in this work. Operation Banari took place in May 1970. Pratap Goldar, the big jotedar, as the title seems to have been in replacement of Zamindar, owned 1666 acres of land violating all laws and rules. While a mile and a half long trek of naked and hungry people going into the sandy track

of river Charsha to dig into it with bare nails for water is an usual scene, in contrast Pratap has six wells and a big tank for use in the fields, for his personal pleasure. All the relief funds of the government come to his hand for distribution among the destitute people during drought, etc. An inquisitive government officer on enquiry found that all the agricultural labourers had no idea of minimum wage rate and ten percent of them had no idea that India was independent. This reminds us of Bibhutibhushan's "Aranyak", where Bhanumati does not know where is Bharatvarsha. What the Jotedar said was the words of Bible to them. They felt obliged to live at his karuna. But the days were changing and the people's movement made something known. Pratap was paying very little to such peasants for work at his fields; bare food for living, much below the minimum wages. They did not know their positions for illiteracy and ignorance.

Bashai and other peasants surrounded Pratap Goldar and his left handed farmhand, an assistant. They kicked the assistant and snatched the gun from Pratap. He sank to the ground. Bashai roared, "What about their wages, Pratap-ba-a-bu?"

"I'll pay them . . . I'll pay . . ." (Tudu/76)

They knew that Pratap had gone to the bank the day before and deposited his cash in it. "The sowing will be over today," Bashai said, "When do they get their wages?" (Tudu/77)

They gathered the information that Pratap had contacted outside workers to work after the sowing of seeds. It was found from Pratap's books, as he was marched to his house by all shouting ho-ho-ho; his cash in a box snatched at gun point and guns on the walls taken hold of. Pratap had managed to get everyone's thumb impressions agreeing to even get imprisoned if they demanded wages as they were indebted for more than their dues. This was the tricks played by them on the poor section of humanity for long years. From his house they all marched him and his assistant again to the river bank, and Bashai shouted addressing the peasants, "Now you know him. . . ." after he explained their precarious position there was a shouting demand, "Kill the Bastard!" Then "The spear in Bashai's hand leapt forward, struck its target, receded, then struck again. Pratap and the farmhand lay still on the ground." (Tudu/78)

After the operation he asked all to go into hiding into the wood and himself rode his buffalo telling, "Bhomra, this buffalo, has given me excellent service, like a true comrade. Let me take her home fast," saying, "Come on, Comrade" (Tudu/79)

The police surrounded the forest and village. At dawn when they tried to escape by crossing the river swimming, rain of bullets pierced them. The buffalo was swum, Bashai following it. "When the day broke, a dead buffalo and a man floated on the river. More shots. And the man's face smashed beyond recognition. The police ran along the bank." (Tudu/79) Here arises a doubt as to the floating of fresh dead bodies in water.

There must have been more such deadly clashes during 1970-71 but the next major incident reported in the book, was recorded as operation Jagula in 1972, enacted in Kankdasole, where Rameshwar Bhuinya was a scion of a great Bhuinya dynasty. Once his father, Shiveshwar, slaughtered a rebellious tenant on the chopping block where 108 goats would be sacrificed four times a year when they worshipped Goddess Kalika. Then the more rebellious tenants took the revenge by beheading him one day on a very opportune moment. Here the author remarks, "Born of the seed of such a father, Rameshwar naturally hated the lower castes." (Tudu/85) It is a common belief and idea that by birth things are settled against the scientific discovery that man is made by his

environment, training and education, etc. rather than by birth. It is known that hate begets hate. Those hated, hates the others. Logically then it may be deduced that all such low castes would be born low from the same seeds and would hate the upper caste. That is how the whole communist operation was based on hate, as taught by Mao Tse Tung himself. In this book also we find that the operators on both sides commit murder with hate, they urge for revenge. Can such fights ever bring peace? From among the proletariats grew up the dictators who subdued the others. So a classless society is a fallacy from its inception. A utopia. It has been amply proved. For this basic problem man requires turning towards the spirit, not just falling into the traps of superstitious religions that many a time divide and evades a real solution by claiming individual supremacy. Let us see more examples after the 1970-71 bloodbath, "There were more labourers available per acre of land than the quantity of grains it would grow . . . For every jotedar who lost his head, the administration set hundred heads rolling in retaliation. The troublemakers . . . were hounded out of their homesteads. . . a peasantry reduced by poverty and exploitation to a state of imbecility in which they could be kicked around without a murmur of protest." (Tudu/86)

Let us see the highly taunting and ironic tone of the writer in these lines, on the way, "In a democracy the government would never violate the fundamental right of a small peasant to be victimized by his jotedar or by his moneylender. The Indian constitution respected every citizen's fundamental right to become whatever he could by dint of his guts. The poor therefore had the right to become poorer still. A peasant today had the right to be a landless labourer tomorrow." (Tudu/87)

Biru Pathak, an honest party functionary who opposed the corrupt means of achieving the self interest of the party bosses, was killed by arrangement like the honest bureaucrat in the government was silenced. But in spite of all arrangements the situation worsened again, "There were hundreds of Santals standing grimly around with their primitive weapons . . . The golden paddy, the black men, the blue sky, and the green parakeets descending on the paddy." (Tudu/92) They did work for ten days and demanded minimum wage as per rules but Rameshwar declined and decided to engage labourers from outside for harvesting at yet cheaper rates. The SI of police too was there with his police force. It was Bashai Tudu again who was negotiating. "The SI said, 'Say something, Rameshwar-babu.'

"I have never paid the M.W."

"Bashai said, 'There are things you start doing some day, Rameshwar-babu. Do you ever die before you die the first time?'(Tudu/93)

Even if such statement on death is anti Shakespearean, it worked. Rameshwar agreed to pay the M.W. or minimum wage but for three days though they worked for ten days.

"No. It must be for ten days."

"No. Three days."

"No. Must be for ten . . ." The siren broke in upon his words. Jeeps. Jeeps. Vans. Sirens. The siren tearing the sky in shreds. Bashai's scream was heard above it. 'Maaaa . . hoooo . . ! Hide in paddy fields and fight back.'

"His war cry 'Maaaa . . hooo . . ' generated a powerful charge that made Rameshwar jump in panic as Bashai's spear pierced his larynx. There was a burst of gunfire directed at the Santals diving into the paddy fields. Arrows came in swarms from the paddy fields. The paddy fields bursting into flames. Fires all around. Bullets and arrows. The SI

screamed as he went down under the swift blow of a sickle straight on his throat. Bullets, bullets and more bullets. Bashai's multipronged spear struck in DSP's stomach. Bashai hit in the leg by a bullet. A bayonet in his stomach. His face slashed by another. 'I'm not giving up bastards!'" (Tudu/94)

In such a situation when the ruling party's men were trying to escape from the scene by using the police van, bullying the driver, the huge body of a sergeant appeared in the scene and prevented it. Such police officer was surely a part of the government but he had every authority in such a situation to take his independent decision when he came to be the senior most of the remaining force. Here, the author comes out with her usual satiric comparison, telling that the sergeant was like a Frankenstein, their won creation.

"(. . . yet another instance of the confused identity of disparities like the Creation and the Creator, the Dvaita and the Advaita, the Purusha and the Prakriti, the Finite and the Infinite, Shiva and Shakti, etc.) It was the six-footer sergeant Ramavatar, who thundered, 'Get off the van!'" (Tudu/94) All these are confusions for the non-initiates, it may be said, in respect of the religious as well as the material appearances; confusion to those who firmly believe in matters only when their confused faith is proved to be wrong.

The van left with the dead and the injured. Severely injured, Bashai was in his death-throe when Kali Santra was brought from a distance place to see and identify him for the second time. It so happened that among the babus Kali Santra, the communist party-veteran, ideologue, editor of a party paper and honest man, was the only person who knew Bashai personally. "They looked at each other. A tremor ran through Bashai's hands. The hands rose for a minute. They wrung the neck of the air. Then one hand fell back while the other scratched at the air to scribble something on it. Some-thing. The police photographer. The flash bulb. 'Step back, Kali-babu. Yes, the front face.'"

When the S.P. asked Kali how was it that the last time when Bashai died he identified his dead body but Bashai did not die? Kali replied that his face was so much defaced by bullets that it was unidentifiable but he did it as the police required him to confirm that it was Bashai. This time too he identified his body along with many, the next morning. Each time that Bashai dies, he wrings the neck of the air before his death. Kali heard that he had performed it on the first occasion too. With Kali totally 251 people identified the dead body of Bashai Tudu. A mysterious Santal woman, Draupadi or Dopdi Mejhen, with a body as if sculpted from rocks, alighted from a bus with her husband, the young Dulna Mejhi, who she married while Bashai wished to marry her. She nodded her head up and down, as if recognizing the dead, but without a sign of recognition in her eyes. The young man with her had a striking feature of the two eye brows joining together above the bridge of the nose, which has been a feature with Bashai too. The DSP and Rameshwar were recovered at a Calcutta hospital later but the vast paddy fields of Rameshwar, wherever they were, found doused with kerosene and fired.

Now it was the turn of Bakuli village where Surja Sau, the jotedar had 500 acres of land, a shop for kerosene at controlled price and the Ma Phullara bus service. Two of his cowsheds were burnt by Naxalites so he got huge compensation and had been planning of starting an industry at Bakuli with government subsidy. He was usually given all the relief fund to distribute among the needy. This was year of draught. The jotedars were under the protection of the government and Naxalites driven out from their villages. "There were men, women and children moving round in masses with eyes that were paler than the fruits of the cane plant." (Tudu/103) Surja Sau engaged share croppers. He

would not draw water from the canal to see that the yield is not big in his field to share half of it with the peasants. Instead, he would lend them to get fattened with interest. The Canal was made with government money but was under his control. After Draupadi Mejhen ridiculing him for not drawing water from the canal Bashai came. Unexpected, he said that he knew Bashai who had died and asked Draupadi if she was not a witness to it and if they had not observed fast for a day after his death. Draupadi said that that was their celebration. During the talks Bashai wanted to draw water for all peasants to thrive better but Surja declined. Draupadi said with a giggle, "He has taken on a new face to come and see you. Comrade, he's not the one to listen to reason." (Tudu/107)

Bashai said, "It's crooked staff, needs crooked treatment. So, you won't draw the water?"

"No."

The slant and satire in the description of the situation demand all attention here. Can we recognize the source of the incandescence?

"Surja had never imagined that there could be violence in 1973. In 1973, under the new regime, India was incandescent with the glow of the Sun of Liberation of Asia, sending one billion of fahrenheit, an incandescence that protected all the jotedars in a regime that was devoutly non-violent. All the violent acts that still took place were in the prison cells.

"They lifted Surja Sau up, and unfastening the bullocks from his cart, tied him to it and dragged him along to the bank of the canal, where they threw him down on the ground like one of those beasts offered as sacrifice to the gods, and Bashai struck the first blow. Then followed more blows from more hands. Rotoni ran to the police station." (Tudu/108)

The news reached from police station to police station to the Head Quarters of the government. Not only police but military marched under the leadership of Captain Arjan Singh. Indiscriminate firing from the machine gun followed killing 41 including women and children. Night fell and they left for removing the corpse the next morning. In the morning when they came to capture the dead bodies, some of the bodies dragged the military by the legs and toppled them to try to cut their throats with sickles held in weak hands. While all the jawans were flabbergasted with such behaviour of the corpses, one of the corpses sat up, wringing the neck of the air with both hands, declaring that he was Bashai Tudu, challenging any of the bastards to fight on him. He was caught and bound to a Pakud tree and shot by Arjan Singh himself to death, tearing innumerable holes into him. This was called 'Operation Bakuli'. Killings continued on the second day with multiple bullets pumped into each body, to be later called 'Frontal Encounter' which Bashais called 'Kounter.'

The dead bodies collected totalled to 39. Two were short. There was no trace of Draupadi and Dolna. Rotoni, the brother of Surja, who ran to police, was stunned at this for he saw the two taking a leading role in the fight. The face of Bashai was smashed beyond recognition by the Captain himself. This time too Kali Santra was called to identify to which he was vexed asking them why did they call him when after each identification it was found that Bashai lived? But he was the only educated person known to him besides others as a routine. The S.P. himself expressed doubt, "Kali came forward, and looked. A finger, the one after the thumb on the right hand, had a brass wire ring on it. Kali had noticed such a ring when Mushai had served tea to him and Bashai . . . Why

did you have to give up everything, Mushai, to become Bashai? A timid man, devoted to Bashai. So it was he who accosted Surja Sau and killed him?

“Kali spoke drily, ‘Seems to be Bashai.’

“‘Seems?’

“‘What else? Where’s his face? What’s there to know him by?’” (Tudu/113)

“‘It’s just too confusing. Maybe Bashai Tudu isn’t dead after all. Then? Could it be Bashai’s double *impersonating* him in death?’

“Kali said, ‘How can I say?’ (Tudu/111)

It was 1976. After 1968 the wages of agricultural labourers were revised once again in 1974; the same rates for men and women, everywhere in West Bengal. It was another difficult year with drought. Jagattaran Lohari was MLA of Kadamkhuinya, he inherited it as he was Zamindar-jotedar and money lender, from his grandfather’s time. “The funny thing about bonded labour is that the debt remains unpaid for over seven generations, and Jagattaran goes on playing the game. His entire estate is cultivated by twelve families of bonded labourers, who work only for the daily food that they are provided with.” (Tudu/131)

Until then they did not leave their place as bonded labourer but this time they gathered strength and met Jagattaran and said that they would not work as bonded worker and that they would move to nearby place to be paid their wages. They were confined in a room and their houses burnt. Gradually tension mounted, there were gathering with bows and arrows, with women and children squatting. The jeep reached Kadamkhuinya. Two buses were standing with slogans, “Work more talk less” and “The Nation is on the move”. It may be guessed whose slogans these were, like who was the ‘Sun of Liberation’, mentioned little earlier. While the peasants starved and worked they had no knowledge of the movement of the Nation. They had little time to talk unlike the leaders like the MLA. Bashai was in the middle of the gathering but he was suffering from many incurable ailments. For negotiation they approved Kali Santra, rejecting others. So it was a matter of trust that till he talked the other party would not disturb. But it happened otherwise.

“Kali called out, ‘Bashai, it’s Kali Santra here. I’m coming. I’m alone, coming alone.’” (Tudu/135)

He stepped on the river sand, walking over the open space towards the wood on the other side, but the police shouted and followed him, the DSP shouted, ‘Fire! Fire!’ There was firing. The shout, ‘Maaa ho!’ reverberated in the air. The SI fell on the sand. Skirmishes and run. Even amidst this Kali entered and began talking to Bashai who was suffering from incurable gangrene. “I’m dying, turning into a lahaash. And so, comrade, you’re here to identify me.’ With these words he wrung the air and crushed it in his hand in a fierce rage. Then he spat out at the nearest policeman.” (Tudu/135)

He was taken to Pakud hospital. The gangrene spread to the abdomen before the leg could be amputated. He died without uttering a word, turning his face when told that Jagattaran had released all bonded labourers. Draupadi did not appear in the identification parade. She was missing. Dulna Majhi too was missing and his mother roamed about weeping. It was found out that the SI died of police firing. This SI at first denied to fire at the women and children, defying the order of the MLA. The MLA saw to it that this was not published. He died out of encounter, it was reported. After the fourth death of Bashai there was a confidential and serious meeting at Calcutta on this issue. It was talked that Kali Santra and Bashai, when caught could be confined under MISA or Kali made to

vanish. Kali was not informed about this meeting, he being an important organ of the party. The MLA was sanctioned lump sum amount as compensation for releasing the bonded labourers and for starting a palm jaggery industry. Kali was made ineffective as the honest man lulled grudge against his own party which came to power in 1977. They continued to follow the same earlier policy of favouring and helping the jotedars at the cost of the peasants. Samanta became an honourable MLA. Minimum Wages Act got stuck on an injunction obtained on technical ground from the High Court by a Jotedar, Haridhan Sardar of Piyasole, and the ruling party was happy with it to continue without any trouble. Kali Santra sat with Samanta and asked, “It’s our government now. . . . Can’t this government correct the wrong wording and have the injunction removed? Can’t it declare MW to be obligatory and any violation of it subject to severe penalty? Why don’t you raise this demand in the assembly? That’s what I would like you to do.”

“Not possible.”

“The interests of a few thousand jotedars may have been more important in the earlier regime than those of 3.7 million agricultural labourers. But will it be the same even now? Samanta? Even now?

“Not possible.” . . .

“The agricultural labourers, under whatever party they organize, will remain agricultural labourers. They will fight, they’ll be turbulent. But, Samanta, is it the government’s plan to let all those who are turbulent to die fighting, get involved in rioting to be caught by the police and get framed in criminal cases so that the jotedar can rule merrily?”

“Kali, you’re taking anti-party . . .”

“Call me anti-party, reactionary, deviationist, Naxalite, or whatever you like. But every word I’ve said is true, and you don’t have an answer to it.”

“There can be no answer, Kali. But I’ll never forget it.”” (Tudu/144)

Let us remember that such jargons were used to identify the renegades to be denounced in the course of time during Mao’s struggle for establishing himself as the dictator. It seems that Kali had no other go than coming close and work together with Bashai, as he definitely knew that he had been identified. In search of Bashai he entered the jungle and proceeded as per the definite direction of the informer, Betul. When he came to the natural gate of a cave created, by the hanging roots of a banyan tree and pakud trees, he met Draupadi.

“Draupadi and Kali Santra stood staring at each other. Went on staring. Staring.

“Kali spoke softly, ‘Left?’

“Draupadi nodded.

“In the night?”

“Draupadi nodded.

“Haridhan Sardar in Piyasole?”

“Draupadi raised a finger to her throat, drew it across swiftly and said, ‘The puloce are in the east. Go west.’ And with that she disappeared in an instant. She was nowhere, did not seem to be there at all. All that remained was the forest. And Kali Santra. Kali Santra did not need to walk any further. This time too Bashai had escaped, gone to Piyasole, had arranged for the disposal of Haridhan Sardar before he left. Kali suddenly felt the weight of his sixty-one years. He felt awfully tired . . . . In his fifth death Bashai was dead and buried. In the night. The same night that he fled from his den. The sixth

time . . . the seventh . . . the eighth . . . There's nothing called death, comrade. All the trouble is with living. Bashai had wanted to marry Draupadi. Draupadi married Dulna. Operation Kadamkhuinya." (Tudu/147)

By all hints the author has indicated that Bashai Tudu was Dulna Majhi, in conjugal relationship with Dopdi or Draupadi, who was guarding the cave gate from where Bashai or Dolna in reality, escaped. More proof of it is that after the 'Operation Bakuli' there were 41 dead bodies in the evening as the soldiers had left but the next day it was found that only 39 dead bodies remained. It was found that Dulna and Draupadi had escaped. Each time a dummy of Bashai who daringly wrung the neck of the air at the last stage challenging the enemy to dare to fight with him, was killed by the police or the military beyond recognition.

"Kali fell asleep, leaning against the hanging roots. His mouth remained slightly open, his collarbone rose and fell . . . He would go through the day somehow. Then Betul would turn up in the evening . . .

"Kali slept. From the east, with their backs to the sun, a small police battalion entered the forest and moved with inhuman, uncanny skill towards where Kali slept. Their feet tramping on the wet earth moved silently." (Tudu/148)

This end is quite intriguing, hinting at betrayal somewhere on Kali's path, as was and is the way of such fights in the dark hole of human narrowness, misguided killing spree as if to clear the way for all incoming fresh hearts; actually to cover all undignified, silly underground murders, to keep safe from all attacks of honesty. Killing of capitalist happens rarely, mostly a showy affair. The movement seems to be strewn with this type of underground operations. The movement of police is quite symbolic of their sure aim. It became morning as perhaps no Betul came in the evening. Does Kali's fate remain unknown?

Inside a not-too-big screen Mahasweta Devi has painted a picture in her novel which vibrates with the reality of the time she has recorded. It requires a minute, intricate experience of the happenings and a thorough knowledge of the theories which push men to commit such things. Some times information and theories are quite long but that has become because the novel is written for a purpose. Besides the technicalities which critics may bring out more in this novel, the literary capacity of the novelist, the verve grown out of her disgust for the falsehood and dichotomy among the players of such parties, leading to cheating and killing the ignorant, innocent adivasi, have opened her heart to spread her fight by the strength of her pen, armed with irony and satire, which she has done indeed. The work also shows how much the strength can be of those who are honest, sincere and courageous, though not educated and self-conceited. Though they are often defeated and killed by the dishonest and deceitful, using the inhuman machines and technologies, using the modern government machinery, it is no guarantee that such victories will be for ever. The whole system may come to such an impasse that alternative methods become imperative.

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