



Crossroads of Identities: Subaltern Mobilization and a Bard in North Bengal

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ABSTRACT

After the Partition of India (1947) and even before it, when possibilities of the Partition became really apparent, the large-scale migration in the district of Coochbehar became vital to form 'us' and 'them', - to form '*bhatia*' and '*bahe*' (the local Rajbansi people used to taunt the migrated people as '*bhatia*', the migrated people taunted them as '*bahe*'). In such conditions such comparisons were used not only for the consolidation of the identity of the migrated people, but also for the consolidation of the identity of the Rajbansis. By that time the reforms initiated by Thakur Panchanan Barma to confer the *Kshatriya* status upon the Rajbansis, had gained acceptance of the large section of the Rajbansis; in such a situation, the presence of the 'other' and interaction with them on a daily basis became instrumental for consolidation and assertion of the identities of being a '*Rajbansi*' and being a '*Bangal*'. However, in the history of the afterlife of the Partition in North Bengal, there came several junctures where these identities coalesced, were compromised. The subjectivity of the poor subalterns, from both the immigrants and the host community, came together to serve their common interests. The large section of the migrant people who came from East Bengal, were peasants, now landless and also homeless. Apart from the local *Jotedars* most of the Rajbansis were landless laborers. As a result there was a huge demand for land, for cultivation- for earning livelihood, and for creating a 'home'. It created a fertile background of peasants' movement for the



acquisition of land. Nibaran Chandra Pandit and his writings, thus, came to stand at the crossroad of identities. On one hand, being an uprooted he was also a '*bhatia*' - an outsider to the people of North Bengal. On the other hand, his active participation in the 'class-struggle' with the poor and downtrodden pre-existing Rajbansis has made him an insider to the class. He was one of the few artists from remote areas of Bengal, who had managed to attract considerable attention during the cultural movement with the overt engagement of the Left in the 1940s. In this essay the present author proposes to analyze the songs and poems written by Pandit to locate the subjectivity of the subalterns of this particular locale.

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Post-Partition immigration to the districts of Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri was perceived over time as a pressure by the pre-existing population. Though the pressure was not felt at the very outset, later it came to be felt with successive waves of immigration spanning from roughly 1967-68 and 1971 till the end of the century and even after (Roy 2020, pp32-33). Thus this immigration became instrumental to form 'us' and them, to form '*deshi*' or the natives and '*bhatia*' (literally meaning people of from the land of ebb, here denotes all outsiders). Moreover, the tendency on the part of the post-Partition immigrants to ceaselessly reiterate emotional attachment to a left-behind '*desh*' and thus constituting themselves into a community of remembrance had the potential of widening the gap between the host society and the immigrants. Thus, these comparisons were used for the consolidation of the identities of the hosts as well as that of the immigrants. However, in the afterlife of the Partition in this geographical locale there came several junctures where these identities coalesced to serve their common interests.

Nibaran Chandra Pandit stands at the crossroad of identities. On one hand, being an uprooted he was also a '*bhatia*' - an outsider to the people of North Bengal. On the other hand, his active participation in the 'class-struggle' with the poor and downtrodden pre-existing Rajbansis has made him an insider to the class. He was one of the few artists from remote areas of Bengal, who had managed to attract considerable attention during the cultural movement with the overt engagement of the Left in the 1940s. After the Partition Pandit was compelled to leave his land in East Pakistan and eventually he resettled at Coochbehar. An extremely creative person as he was, later he adopted newer forms of



popular culture- like the Bhawaiya style to compose songs and poems on this side of the border. Such moderation of his styles not only provided him the acceptance of his poor Rajbansi neighbours; but it also signified how the ways adopted for mass mobilization by the Left leaders of the Cultural Movement of the 1940s were employed and utilized for similar purposes, even after the Partition.

I. Pre-Partition Days:

Pandit belonged to a sharecropper family of Sagara village in Kishoreganj subdivision of Mymansingh district of East Pakistan (present Bangladesh). He was born on 27th February, 1912. With the death of his father Bhagaban Chandra Pandit, he left his school and joined a local *bidi* (a kind of cigarette filled with tobacco flakes and wrapped in *tendu* leaves) manufacturing unit to support his family. He used to work as a sharecropper too. Pandit's association with the Indian People's Theatre Association or IPTA had earned him recognition. In his contemporary period "IPTA was the only organization engaged in serious creative activity which attracted ambitious artists with hardly any knowledge of Marxism and People's art" (Pradhan 1982, p. xvi). One of Pandit's poem, - *Janajudhdher Daak*- published on 1st July, 1942, in the newspaper *Janajudhdha* became particularly popular.¹ Pandit was one of the attendants of the first Congress of the Communist Party of India and IPTA, both in Mumbai, in 1943. His firm conviction on the efficacies of class-struggle of the downtrodden, the subaltern, was also reflected in his songs. As an active member of IPTA, his songs were certainly composed as an expression of creative form of Marxist cultural practices and under the party guideline. But as the IPTA never remained as only the "satellite" organization (Bandyopadhyay 2013, p.178) - neither the song movement of this time could be contained within the "straight jacket of the Party aesthetics" (Roy 2006, p. 71-84) the songs of Pandit too, as we shall note in the following pages, had moved beyond the dictation of the Party.

The song movement of this period portrays evident mass orientation (Roy 2006, p.76). While the themes remained within the ambit of Marxism and people's struggle; these songs exploited the forms of folk songs for the mobilization of the masses. Pandit's compositions portray how the aesthetics could have relevance in subaltern mobilization. During Hazong Bidroho, a local peasant struggle in Rangpur, these songs have acted as the welding factor for the peasants. Other songs, particularly those on

¹ Anon., Article on Nibarán Pandit, in the website of IPTA, Shibpur, <https://sites.google.com/site/iptashibpurwestbengal/home/kobi-nibarán-pandit>, last accessed on 09.06.2020.



misusing the newly introduced systems like ‘control’ and ‘contract’ by the middle class *babus* during the war also attracted attention.

In the song movement, with its evident the middle-class orientation, Pandit was also an exception. He was one of the few composers who belonged to the subaltern class itself. During this song movement, it was observed that, mere usage of folk diction and tunes could not bridge the gap between the middle-class proponents and the masses. The artists from interior even faced humiliation when they tried to use their local or folk forms of singing. Hemango Biswas narrates how Pandit was once humiliated in an event when the Calcutta Squad of the IPTA did not allow him to sing at a particular event, just to maintain the “standard”. To Biswas it was a shameful distrust (Biswas 2010, p.391) . However, Pandit being an insider, his usage of terms was free from the artificiality of the cultural hierarchies of upper classes. Moreover, he used to shift his style of composition from time to time and adapted new styles to suit the mood of the songs. As a result, his songs could appeal more to the listener. While the song composed during *Hazong Bidroho* was composed following the ‘*Ghosa*’ style, his song on famine had followed the ‘*Bhatiali*’ style. After crossing the border, as we shall note later, Pandit continued to adopt new styles for composing songs. Perhaps such adaptation was one of the reasons that when the cultural movement and impact of the IPTA was weaning in the early 1950s (Bandyopadhyay 2013, p. 186-187). Nibaran Pandit’s creativity could maintain its relevance in the region of his resettlement.

Nibaran Pandit’s firm belief in humanity, that the communal strife was only a break in the history of living together side by side, has held him and his family back in their ancestral village of Sagara in East Pakistan. But like many other, he was left with no option but to run to newly formed Indian Territory with his family in December, 1952. Being a Communist, he was considered as a potential threat to the Pakistani Police. They wanted him at any cost and had announced prize over his head too.² Such circumstances had forced him to flee alone to the other side of the border. Later, with the help of the fellow villagers, his family too crossed the border. Eventually they resettled at Dauyaguri village in Alipurduar subdivision of Jalpaiguri district. Till his last breath Pandit remained associated with the Left. In 1978 he was elected as a Panchayat member of the Dauyaguri village. He took his last breath in November 1984.

II. As the Bard Moved to West Bengal:

² As his daughter in law Sandhya Pandit informed during an interview with the author, on 10.06.2020.



Pandit has penned down more than three hundred poems and songs. The themes of these songs revolved around issues like migration, police firing on the peaceful rally of hungry people and the misery of the refugees, election, land reform acts, and misery of people during the Second World War, flood in North Bengal, declaration of Emergency in 1975 and others. All of these songs time and again brought the subjectivity of the toiling masses to the focal point of discussion. At the place of his resettlement, he continued to write about the poverty of his fellow villagers, most of whom were Rajbansis. Resettlement in a Rajbansi dominated locality had gradually made him familiar with their dialect and socio-cultural traditions. He adopted local dialect to compose songs. In the place of his resettlement such adoption and usage of local dialect added to his popularity. Moreover, such usage was also capable of presenting a common or less divergent identity.³

Pandit, the folk singer, was also deeply influenced by different styles of folk-songs of this region, especially by Bhawaiya. It was the most popular folk tradition of this region, particularly among the Rajbansis. Pyarimohan Das- a renowned Bhawaiya singer from this region,⁴ from his experiential world, referred to *Bhawaiya* as-

“kon je oggato kobider iha sanskritik obodan.

kar kotha sur nai pandulipi, sandhan jane na keu.

shudhu loko mukhe, procholito gaan bhasito surer dheu.

krishok , raakhal gariyaler konthe dhwanito hoto e tan.

mahut maishale gaito ar gidal gaito palagaan⁵

³For a discussion on how dialect mixing is related with identity formation, see for example, Donald. N. Tuten, - “In the context of dialect mixing speakers were understood to avoid salient features of their dialect of origin and adopt those of their inter locators in order to gain their acceptance or cooperation- and to present a common or less divergent identity”- in ‘ Identity Formation and Accommodation, Sequential and Simultaneous Relations’, *Language in Society*, 37:2, (2008), p.260.

⁴ He was the first receiver of the ‘*Lalan Puraskar*’ of the Govt. of West Bengal.

⁵ This is a part of one of his poem- ‘*Abbas Smarane*’ (In the Memory of Abbas), (Bengali), published in the *Souvenir of Abbasuddin Smaran Samity*, (Balarampur: 1990); also referred by Sukhabilas Barma, in *Gaaner Pakhi Abbas* (The Singing Bird Abbas), (Bengali), (Kolkata: Sapan, 2014), p.16.



[Cultural contribution of anonymous poets; nobody knows who composed, who deliberated the lyrics, neither we have the manuscripts. But people used to recite and the rhythm flowed. Peasants, shepherds, and cart-drivers used to sing these songs, as also mahout, *moishal* (buffalo shepherds), and bard].

This tradition was so popular that Dr. Sukhabilas Barma, a retired IAS and an acclaimed *Bhawaiya* singer from this region describes *Bhawaiya* as being the “heart-throb of all Rajbansis- rich and poor, high and low, literate and illiterate, singer and non-singer” of this region.⁶ Embracing such an extremely popular style like *Bhawaiya* has provided Pandit further welcoming reception of the host-Rajbansis.

To locate how Pandit accommodated local issues, themes, and styles in his compositions and brought the subjectivity of the subalterns to the fore, it is important that we focus on some of his songs composed in the post Partition period (Pandit 1987, p. 93-166) - after his resettlement in Jalpaiguri, and subsequently in Coochbehar.⁷ The poor, illiterate peasants could hardly understand all sections and clauses of The Estate Acquisition Act of 1953. The corrupt govt. officials and the local Jotedars were the ones, who used to explain the clauses to them, and their distorted explanations were directed to pursue their own interests. It was felt that the common peasants must understand those acts and simplified versions of those acts must be propagated. So Nibaran Pandit wrote three poems,- ‘*Jamidari Kroi Ainer Sarmormo*’ (The Essence of the Act of Purchasing the Zamindari) , ‘*Naya Ainer Dhara*’ (Clauses of the new act) , ‘*Jarip O Bhumi Samskar*’ (Land Assessment and Land Reform). These poems were compiled in leaflets and were published by Nandeswar Barman, a Rajbansi leader of the Communist Party of Coochbehar. Written in simple Bengali, these poems could easily explain the different clauses of the Act. These songs were propagated by the Left workers with the objective that the poor peasants must understand and safeguard their interests against the corrupt officials and the *jotedars*.

Another poem – ‘*Tasar Kotha*’ (the story of hearing-impaired people), a satire, has some polysemy involved. He describes a story of a peasant family; all of its members were hearing-impaired (*tosa*). After describing how hearing impairment lead to confusion within the family, he compared the scenario with the prevailing situation and wrote;

⁶ As replied through email to the author on 20.09.2020.

⁷ After Jalpaiguri, this family permanently shifted to Coochbehar- interview with Sandhya Pandit.



“..samay bujhe jemon kore temon aapon bujhai saar

tosar moto hoiyache mor congress sarkar .

shunena dhira kotha

shunena dhira kotha byatha dukkho kahare janai

bhumihinra bhumi chahiya bhumi painai.

Uteche jamidari

Uteche jamidari aaha mori shunte chatmatkar

gorib chashir ghore ghore cholche hahakar”.

(Our Congress Govt. is doing whatever it feels to be right. It is acting like a ‘tosa’. It does not pay heed to soft words. It does not pay heed to soft words. Now whom should we complain to? The landless peasants are asking for land to till, but they do not get it. Landlordism has been abolished; apparently, it’s a praiseworthy measure; but the condition of the poor peasants remains as it was in the past, they are only lamenting on their own condition).

Till this point, his songs continued with standard Bengali dialect. However, the songs written later incorporated local dialect and accommodated the lyrical flavour of the Bhawaiya style. To bolster the class solidarity among the subalterns, to emphasize the shared subjectivity and as an ardent supporter of the Communist Party he wrote songs in support of the party,

“o bahe dewanir ghor kemon achen ki khobor

kemon achen to sob val

...edi odi tari bari koya diben val kori

Bosaiben tomar dari ghor

goribdukhkhi ache ba kai koyadiben oi taritai

..bampanthi koi hush thakiben chatokkhelai na bhuliban



Congreso kkotti vote dibenna”.

(O respectable man, how are you. Hope everybody is well. Inform all of your neighbours; ask them to assemble in your outdoors, ask especially the poor of your area...not to be bluffed by the tall talks of the Congress. The Leftists are asking you to be alert. Do not vote for Congress).

The reception of this song among the subalterns of this area proves how gradually the Left was also gaining popular support, that the Left leaders have managed to weld an average poor and middle-class Rajbansi and a *bhatia* together. As the host remained mostly sympathetic to the immigrants, it must have provided the elbowroom for the Left workers. This growing popularity of the Left was also noted as they come to power in 1967. It was such compatible interests, the shared subjectivity, which have brought both communities together. So the usage of the term ‘*bahe*’ did not invoke suspicion about the intention of the poet- an esteemed Left Party-worker.

Encouraged by the popularity of his song Pandit continued with the ‘*Bhawaiya*’ style in songs composed later. Some of such songs are, –

“daradi mor bhai-

chol kori chol bachibar lorai

dine rate khatiya mori, chintiya katai raat

ore maiya chawai ruti chabai na pai peter bhat re...”

(O my fellow man, let us fight together to live. We work hard, day and night, we pass our night in anxiety. Our family lives on *ruti*, we cannot afford rice.); or

“hamragula halua kishan kamai kori khang

kam nai kaj nai kote elai jang

din hazira arai taka jodiba kam pai (pang)....”

(We, the landless labourers, have no job, where should we go. If we manage to get jobs as daily wage earners, we are only paid Rs. two and a half, per day).



The composition and propagation of these songs under party instructions, with their evident leanings on class solidarity, continued even after the Left acquired political power. This becomes even more pertinent as when these songs were being well accepted by the Rajbansis. Because it was the same period when the Rajbansi identity politics of post Partition years- with its overt hostility towards the 'bhatia', was gaining ground. And Pandit wrote - '*dadare, o mordada- dada- ha; mok halua jora de, tor pentikona de*' (O my elder brother, please lend me your bullocks and your sticks); '*amar desher garib chashi bhai, bhair- haler pachot hal nageya aamra bhal koria jomin choshe jai*' (We, the poor peasants of this land, we plough the field collectively); '*o kire halua, dakhol rakh bhuin dakhhal lekeya*' (O ploughman, take possession of the land, register it). The song '*omor sing daria hauser pasun re*' (O my ploughing tool with handle made of horn) depicts how the landless peasant lamented his joblessness. Two of his songs, also written in the local dialect, became much popular; and therefore claim special mentioning. The song titled '*geedaler jantrana*', depicts his reaction against the banning of the broadcasting of some of Tagore's songs, such as '*byartha praner aaborjona puriye felo. agunjalo*' in Akashbani, during the Emergency of 1976-

'mukku geedal hamragula bhawaiya gaan gai
haal barir kamai sari dutara dangai
sukhdukker kotha melai monote porilo
chatka sure dutara dang bajiya utilo
swadhin hoinu ,ghor harainu, nai ar bhita mati
porar bhinyat ghor bhandhi aporer bhuinyat khati
din monesei arai taka mojuri paiya
maiya chaoyai ruti chabai andharot bosia
...sensore koi agun shobdo bolare cholibena
aagun bad dia shudhu jal dia ki kore gaan nai
bhabe bujhinu dukkhkho paileo bolibar upai nai



hamar gaan tomra bhaire sango dhorio

samay ele aagun e gaan hazar kanthot gaio'.

(We, the illiterate bards sing *Bhawaiya* song. After finishing our daily jobs in the field, we play on *dutara*. As we play on the *dutara* following the *chatka sur*, we hark back to our days of sorrow and joy. We are free, but we are landless and homeless; we have been driven out from our ancestral home. We have to make a place for living in other's land, and labour for others. We earn only Rs two and a half after the day's toil. Our family is fed on *ruti*, sitting in the dark. We cannot pronounce the word 'fire' due to censorship. But I can't compose songs without fiery words. The situation does not permit me to speak my heart out, though I feel pity for it. Fellowmen, thus my songs end. If the situation permits again, sing my fiery songs in thousand voices).

Observations:

This song, on one hand, depicts the nostalgia for a lost home on the other side of the border. On the other hand, the poet associates himself with the collective misfortune of downtrodden people in "this side". Acutely conscious that he did not have any previous claim in the site of his resettlement, the poet laments how he had no other option left. How he had been forced to take 'refuge' in a place, on which he did not have a prior and therefore 'legitimate' claim. Thus, it prompts one to ponder into how memories of 'desh'-native place left behind, continued to remain present in the consciousness of an individual. Our poet, who placed the need for the class solidarity of the poor people before anything- he too in an intimate nook of his mind nourished a pull of a place left on the other side of the border. Conversation with his family members also reveals that though he had tirelessly worked for infusing class solidarity among the poor people in this region, he sometimes used to reiterate how his 'desh' was. So though his compositions continued to emphasize class identity, lyrics of these songs also preserved subtle hints of his uprooted self too-

'o mor bandhu dorodia

bujhi dekho kai banailo tomak nabin baudia.

kar doshot gail tor bhita mati

becheya khailek kulle gainagati re



kon doshot sesh thalabati khailek tu becheya

...dusmonot tu na raklu chiniya

...ki ache tor vaidor

bari bade ladai kor re...'

(O my compassionate friend, try and understand who is actually responsible for turning you into new vagabonds. Who is guilty that you have lost your homestead? To feed your family you sold all your ornaments. What was your fault that you needed to sell even remaining utensils? You have failed to recognize your true enemies. Now what remains there to lose, so let us fight).

The songs composed by Pandit demonstrate how the misfortune of a landless and homeless Partition-displaced found compatibility in the deplorable condition of a poor Rajbansi- who had been forced to sell all his belongings- his land, even his utensils used in domestic purposes. Thus Pandit called for unity of the immigrant poor and the pre-existing poor. He also tried to persuade the pre-existing Rajbansis that Partition-displaced per se was not responsible for their misery (*bujhi dekho kai banailo tomak nabin baudia*), on the contrary the poor “refugees” were victims of prevailing conditions, as they are. As already discussed, the Left was trying to manoeuvre the post-Partition situation to broaden their support base. In such conditions, they tried to mobilize the middle class and peasant-workers against the *jotedars*-hoarders-money lenders. With such agendas, any fission along ‘*deshi*’ (native) and ‘*bhatia*’ (outsider) lines had the potential to threaten the carefully created support base. As a Left leader Pandit too tried to intensify class sentiments over any other.

Conclusion:

However such solidarity among the subalterns, based on their shared subjective position, always remained susceptible to fracturing when identity politics based on ethnicity started to crystallize. As also discussed earlier, there were several trends, which could endanger such accommodation and partnership. Firstly, ceaseless immigration of such unprecedented scale after the Partition always had the potential to rupture the solidarity. After all, a host society cannot be expected to remain charitable for perpetuity. Secondly, the Identitarian movement of pre-Partition period has instilled a community identity in the Rajbansis. So, a pre-existing Rajbansi -imbued with an established sense of a distinct identity- accentuated by an identitarian movement in recent past- could easily accommodate the Rajbansi



counterpart of the immigrant people, but not the non- Rajbansi part of it. In addition to that, thirdly, the continuous and conscious ascriptions of cultural inferiority on the hosts by the immigrant on one hand, and their ascendancy in the socio-economic-cultural sphere on the other produced repercussions. Thus, though the Rajbansis largely remained helpful towards the immigrated, resentments against these immigrants increasingly saturated in subsequent years. The history of a later period demonstrates how a strand of Rajbansi identity politics accommodated the immigrant Rajbansis against the non-Rajbansis (immigrant and pre-existing). With such political mobilizations gaining ground, the connotation of 'bhatia' also changed. It came to denote the non-Rajbansis only, and the immigrant Rajbansis were accommodated as 'deshi'.

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