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## ***Dakhal* (1981): Fighting Identity Crisis of a Nomadic Woman of Bengal**

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### **ABSTRACT**

'*Dakhal*' is a 1981 Indian Bengali film directed by Gautam Ghose, starring Mamata Shankar, Robin Sen Gupta, Sunil Mukherjee, and Sujal Roy Chowdhury in lead roles. The film tells the story of a woman from a nomadic tribe of Andhra Pradesh, known as the Kakmara or crow hunters, who later settles in South Bengal. It highlights the exploitation of tribal people by a deceitful landlord. The film is based on '*Amma*,' a short story by Sushil Jana (1916–2008). Andi, the central character of the story, belongs to the Kakmara tribe. She marries Jaga Paik for love, and as a result, both are ostracized by their respective societies. They begin a new life together. However, their tranquillity is disrupted by the cruel Govinda Tashildar. The story follows Andi's struggle to maintain her homestead and arable land after Jaga's untimely death. As a mother of three children, Andi is determined to protect her land and family. However, the elite Hindu caste landlord, Govinda Chakkotti, seeks to cunningly grab her land. As a daughter of the nomadic Kakmara tribe, Andi knows how to fight for her rights. Through this narrative, we gain insight into the struggles of the woman of the nomadic Kakmara tribe and their way of life.

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In 1981, director Gautam Ghosh adapted the story of Andi from '*Amma*' written by Sushil Jana into the film '*Dakhal*'. Mamata Shankar played the lead role of Andi, a nomadic girl from the impoverished Kakmara community. Andi defies societal norms by marrying Jaga Paik, a man from a higher caste, for



love. As a result, the community ostracizes them. Through their hard work, Andi and Jaga transform the barren pasture land into fertile agricultural land. However, when the Kakmara community, including Sunil Mukhopadhyay, arrives at Andi's house, she realizes that their intentions remain unchanged and promptly drives them away. The village landlord, aided by his tax collector Govinda (Bimal Dev), attempts to seize Andi's land, and Govinda's men even set fire to her house. In a change of heart, the Kakmara community recognizes their mistake and tries to support Andi, but she chooses to fight the land struggle alone. This incident is reflected in the film, which won the prestigious 'Swarna Kamal Award' for its portrayal of the struggles faced by the nomadic Kakmara community.<sup>1</sup>

### **Brief Identity of Nomadic Kakmara Community**

The Kakmaras are a nomadic group.<sup>2</sup> They migrate from one place to another mainly because of food collection. They can be seen in various places of Contai, and Tamluk block in the south-eastern part of Medinipur district.<sup>3</sup> They still exist in seven to eight hundred families. Various interesting behaviour intrusions are seen in their life journey. They collect the pots and pitchers left in the crematorium and use them for their cooking, and also use half-burnt wood for daily work. They have no fixed abode. They have built temporary shelters. In this temporary shelter they return at some point in the year. This mobility made them a nomadic group.

The Kakmaras speak broken Telugu among themselves. But among locals, they also speak broken Bengali. In the 1951 census, they have recorded their identity as 'Madrasi'.<sup>4</sup> Due to being nomads, the social bond among them is quite loose in some cases. Usually near the market, or on the edge of a fair or under a big tree or on the bank of a pond, they make their shelter. Depending on how much they earn, they set a limit on how long they stay there. They usually stay in one place for ten to thirty days at a time. Begging is their main source of income. Kakmaras often use abandoned shop houses or empty rooms of closed schoolhouses as temporary accommodation for a night or two. They leave their bedding on the high branches of trees. Besides this they also hang other utensils. Although they earn their livelihood by travelling through nomadic occupations, their semi-permanent residence is found in some parts of Medinipur. Here mainly the elders and children of their families take shelter. When they recover a bit, they again move around in herds like nomads. Prabodh Kumar Bhowmick says, 'Contai, Tamluk and Sadar Mahakuma are the main wandering grounds of these nomads'. They can also be found wandering in Baleswar and Puri districts of the neighbouring state of Odisha. He also said, "These Kakmaras have lost many of their original characteristics as they have been separated from the main stream for almost two hundred years."<sup>5</sup>



As Kakmaras live by nomadic occupation, it is very difficult to know their actual numbers. Prabodh Kumar Bhowmick has given an indication of their number by selecting four *astanas* (shelter) of the Kakmaras.<sup>6</sup> He originally selected the various villages of Contai subdivision as the haunts of the Kakmaras. From his field survey data of 1958-59 we find 19 families of the Kakmaras. Eight Kakmara families took temporary shelter here after the devastating storm of 1942 in Krishnanagar village near Contai town. The local landlord gave them legal permission to settle here by giving them some free land. Their hideout was in a corner of the village by the sandbank. Prabodh Kumar Bhowmick said that during his field survey, five out of eight families had gone out for their daily livelihood. Slums of Kakmaras are also seen in Dingleberia. Then Kakmaras were found in Bajitpur slums. Chingurdaniya is a village of Khejuri located in Contai subdivision today. Kakmaras can be seen here.<sup>7</sup> They want to live permanently. The Kakmaras are also found in Kakdwip, Sagardwip block of South 24 Parganas.

### **Life Struggle Reflected in the Story**

Sushil Jana has narrated the life story of a Kakmara family in Midnapore. In the story ‘Amma’, we get to know a wandering Kakmara family. The story begins with a group of wandering Kakmara people who are about to move from one place to another in an unknown place.

“The night watchman of the group asked, ‘How much further is the journey?’

‘Hey—it’s two o’clock in the night—then go to the market and rest your head.’ The young man next to him said, ‘Walk now, keep your mouth shut.’

But it’s hard for him to keep his mouth shut—he finds himself stumbling, although he is holding someone’s hand. He is dying of hunger and thirst. Everyone else in the group is silent. His head is covered with a blanket—on his back, a sleeping child in a girl’s lap. There must be about ten girls and boys in the group—they have left the old market to open a new one. They are carrying the household, the household goods, the baskets of bread and butter on their heads and shoulders—even the bamboo poles used to tie the mother’s turban.

The name of the caste is Kakmara—they catch and sacrifice crows in a wild ritual, they eat the meat of crows with full satisfaction”<sup>8</sup>

The Kakmaras roam from village to village like the Bedes, the snake catchers. They set up temporary residences around the markets. This is their natural way of life. Their clothes are of peculiar kind. They attract and amaze the mainstream residents. They wear red and blue glass beads around their neck. The



male members of the Kakmara tribe hunt birds and have great feasts. The girls sell cheap soap, oil, mirrors, etc. in baskets from house to house. When they can sell them easily in a place, they set up temporary shelters there. In this case, they build their own huts around the markets. Their real mother tongue is Telugu but they can speak the local Bengali language fluently because they moved in Bengal many years ago. The exact date when they flocked to Bengal their homeland is not known. They mainly move in groups from one region to another, from the border area of South-West Bengal. Sushil Jana narrated the story of a woman of the Kakmara community and through this narrative he described the family's relocation.

The main leader of the Kakmara group described in the story is the old man Bagambar. The young, old, and young men of the group follow his instructions word by word. Once during their travelling they decided to stay in a next village where there is the home of Andi, a woman from their caste. The story goes on to say about her life before marriage-

“...a girl from our caste. One day she left the group with a poor farmer. Her house is in this Jalpai region.’ Bagambar himself described her land ‘The land is full of cows, goats, ducks, and hens—her house has a standard, she is very lucky for us. Isn’t she?’ Bagambar asked his fellow mates. ‘Andi. The daughter of a friend of mine. You don’t know her’<sup>9</sup>

Led by Bagambar, this travelling group decides to take shelter at Andi’s house. On receiving a hint that there will be a feast for the night, everyone quickly sets off towards their destination. Even at night, the pace of walking increases. They pick up pots from the abandoned crematorium on the way. The storyteller writes in describing their life-

“They have no hatred for the abandoned pots and urns of the crematorium - no fear or hesitation. They cook in these pots and sleep under trees, the wander from place to place this is how they live generations after generations”.<sup>10</sup>

However we come to know that Andi has an exceptional life, she was from the kakmara community, she is the protagonist of the story, She is also addressed as Amma which means mother, to highlight her role and mother of her children and protector of her land. The married Jaga, poor farmer, it was unusual for a nomadic girl to have a sedentary settled partner, but unfortunately her husband died and she is left with three children and his land, this land is everything to her, farming is her livelihood. We get to know from the story that she is full of youth, she drives the ox and cultivates the land like a man, she has the fearlessness of a nomadic girl and she equally has feminine qualities of a farmer’s wife.”<sup>11</sup>



Bagambar visited with his nomadic group in Andi's house to seek shelter, Andi at once understood the nomads came in as her guests, she wanted to drive them away with a broom but Bagambar the leader, requested that it was only for a night that they seek shelter. Andi agreed but she said she will not give rice for dinner but only puffed rice, Andi also said strictly that she knows how these nomads are and if any one tries to steal her chickens or ducks, she will beat them black and blue with her broom. Bagambar nodded his head and agreed.<sup>12</sup>

Andi, though a daughter of the Kakmara tribe, did not show any sympathy for the Kakamaras. Now she was a complete farmer's wife and mother. Her main job is to protect her land and keep its possession, a person named Govinda Tasildar is trying to grab her land by forgery. She has only Magan Mandal to support her, he informed her that the Tashildar had bribed the Surveyor and Amin. Andi almost choked and asked, 'What does the Surveyor say?' Magan replied that all the land that belonged to Jaga had been transferred in zamindars name on the grounds that he doesn't have any heir to his property and the surveyor accepted this.<sup>13</sup> Andi asks, 'Where will she go with her three sons?' She thinks Magan could not explain everything. She asks again and again, 'Have you told him everything? Have you told him how I cultivated the land and turned it fertile?' "I think you could not explain everything."<sup>14</sup>

Andi kept thinking about how to protect her husband's cultivated land from the hands of the evil tashildar all night long. It was already dawn. Bagambar's group started to rush to leave in a hurry, Andi felt it fishy and she asked them to show their bags. Description of this part—

"Everyone looked at her in shock. A sudden movement occurred. A chicken flew out of their bags, and a duck came out from under their clothes with a clucking sound. Gobna, realizing the danger, sat down on his bag, he stole from eggs they were all broken the yard was covered in broken egg yolks. Due to his night blindness he could not catch some eggs so he managed to steal some eggs. Andi was infuriated to see in spite of warning they dared to steal her livestock."<sup>15</sup>

Andi knew the nature of the Kakmaras. They have a tendency to steal eatables, as poverty is their constant companion. So sometimes they cannot control their greed when they see food. They lose the knowledge of good and evil, they forget ethics.

Finally, after swallowing many insults, Bagambar's group set off from Andi's house towards another destination. After passing the crematorium and taking a turn, the group arrived right near the zamindar's office. Govinda Tashildar saw them and invited them, he offered shelter and food for the nomadic kakmara group, but the leader of the group Bagambar politely refused him and said that he won't have



any respect if he stayed near the house of a girl from his community, she is like his daughter. He said “I am leaving now.”<sup>16</sup> But Govinda Tashildar was not one to leave them. He cleverly arranged for them to be entertained in his guest house—

“The feast was in full swing in the Kachari house. Three servants started running around. The nets fell in the pond, and the weed came in abundance, and Govinda himself started taking care of it. The group of Kakmaras sat down and ate for not just one day but two whole days. Others in the village doubted the intension of Govinda to entertain the Kakmaras, some said there was some young girls in the group and Govinda had evil eye on them, to get them Govinda is feeding the Kakmaras.”<sup>17</sup>

Bagambar thought that all this care was because of their lucky daughter Andi, who is now a resident of this village but Govinda Tashildar had other intentions. He wanted to keep the Kakmaras in his group and use them as evidence against Andi. Accordingly, when Magan introduced Andi as ‘wife of Jaga’ in front of the Hakim, he introduced Andi as ‘kept woman of Jaga’. This was basically done so that her children’s claim to the land be nullified as she was portrayed not as legal wife of Jaga. When the Hakim asked Andi if she was married to Jaga, Govinda said in a humorous tone,-

“Can there be any legal marriage between a Kakmara nomadic girl and a cultivator, is there any match, Andi was surprised by his claims, Govinda sent his servant to call Bagambar. Bagambar appeared wearing the strange and well-decorated clothes of the Kakmaras. A crow’s feather, a red shawl turban, a red and blue glass bead necklace around his neck, iron bangles in his hands and earrings in his ears. Govinda pointed to him and said to the Hakim, ‘Ask him, Hujur. She is of that caste.’ The Hakim pointed at Andi and asked him, ‘Do you know her?’ Bagambar prostrated and greeted him and said, ‘Yes, lord she is daughter of our caste.’<sup>18</sup>

Govinda said to Hakim that Jaga came in with is nomadic girl, she was just a kept woman not his wife, she trapped Jaga, and this is her nature, Andi was being humiliated, she was labelled as prostitute, Andi protested, Govinda shamelessly made a new story to put a stigma on Andi’s character, he called one of his servant Haradhan and said Andi now when Jaga is dead, she is in a relationship with him for two months, she is not chaste, she jumps from one man to another. Andi, hearing this, put down the boy in his lap and ran towards Haradhan. In a moment, she grabbed his throat:

“You bastard’s child.’



Govinda shouted loudly. Haradhan started shouting at the top of his lungs. The police came running. They caught hold of Haradhan and released him. Looking at the judge in a foolish manner, Andi shouted again, pointing her finger at his three sons, ‘They are my sons—look, these boys are mine. They will not get the land their father! Tell me—tell me—I am their mother! Tell me’—

Govinda mocked her and said What Child? The legal heir? What legal heir can a kept woman like you produce? There is your people, your caste group standing, go with them.

‘I will kill you—I will kill you, you bastard’—Andi roared and ran towards Govinda. Govinda jumped up and stood behind the master and said, ‘Look, my lord—the nature of a low caste and started to give slangs for Andi.’

‘I will kick you in the face!’<sup>19</sup>

On the orders of Govinda, his men put Andi’s hut in fire, here the reader can understand a class struggle between higher and lower caste people, the cows present in Andi’s house was ran for life, some goats died of suffocation from the fire, hen and ducks all were engulfed by the fire Anndi stood upright with her three sons next to the ashes.

Bagamber the leader of Kakmara stood by Andi’s side and comforted her that she is not alone and she could come with them.<sup>20</sup>

But Andi did not want to go back to that dirty life. He resolved in his heart that no matter how many obstacles and dangers he faced, he would not leave his home and go anywhere. So when Magan held Andi’s hand and said, -

“Come on Andi—move on— don’t stay a moment here. She replied ‘No.’—A strong voice suddenly burst out, with determination she said ‘Who will fight for me?’

Andi stood like a stone surrounded by the three boys—not moving a single foot.

A red glow was shining in the darkness—it was not like a extinguished stubble, it was the fire of the red eyes of that tigress girl, the angry glow of her entire body.”<sup>21</sup>

## Observations

Based on the preceding discussion, it can be conclusively argued that the Kakmara community represents one of the most vulnerable and structurally invisible nomadic tribes of Bengal. Despite the rich tapestry



of their cultural identity and survival strategies, they continue to languish on the absolute fringes of modern society. This marginalization is twofold, stemming from both institutional apathy and deep-seated social prejudice. Statistically and administratively, they remain largely excluded from critical government welfare schemes, development grants, and targeted conservation policies that are meant to safeguard endangered indigenous cultures. Deprived of stable land rights, formal education, and sustainable healthcare, their nomadic existence is less a cultural choice today and more a compulsory by-product of systemic neglect.

Furthermore, the structural violence they face is heavily compounded by the daily social stigma inflicted by mainstream civil society, which routinely exoticizes, belittles, or views them with criminal suspicion. This painful socio-cultural alienation finds poignant resonance in Bengali literature and cinema, which have occasionally attempted to vocalize the plight of the dispossessed. For instance, the heart-breaking narrative of *Amma* by Sushil Jana serves as a crucial literary testament to this reality, masterfully echoing how the settled populace strips nomadic individuals of their dignity, reducing their vibrant humanity to mere caricatures of poverty.

Similarly, Gautam Ghose's landmark film *Dakhal* elevates this discourse into the cinematic realm through the harrowing struggle of its protagonist, Andi. As a nomadic woman fighting a corrupt agrarian machinery for land and dignity, Andi's battles on screen mirror the lived experiences of Kakmara women, who endure layered vulnerabilities at the intersection of gender, tribe, and displacement. Ultimately, the parallels between the historical reality of the Kakmara people, Jana's literature, and Ghose's cinema underscore an urgent need for institutional recognition. If immediate steps are not taken to transition them from the margins of folklore to the mainstream of developmental policy, Bengal risks permanently losing a vital segment of its cultural heritage to the vagaries of forced assimilation and neglect.

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