International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education (INT-JECSE)
DOI: 10.48047/intjecse/v13i1.211321 ISSN: 1308-5581 Vol 13, Issue 01 2021

‘SHATAKIYA’ OF SUBODH GHOSH: COLONIAL INCANTATION

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Abstract: A writer reflects the realities of human life in literature, often using social awareness as a primary tool. With a deep sense of responsibility in portraying life’s struggles, Subodh Ghosh moves forward with a narrative of resistance. Dalit literature seeks to reassess the implications of colonialism, caste issues, and missionary activities while fostering a spirit of defiance. This undercurrent of resistance runs through Subodh Ghosh’s novels like a hidden stream.

Subodh Ghosh, as a literary figure, deeply understood the significance of social consciousness in literature through his lived experiences. His works consistently explore the innermost dimensions of human life, character, and relationships. One of his finest novels, ‘*Shatakiya’*, revolves around the struggles of an obscure community in an unknown region of Bihar. However, the novel is not merely a product of popular fiction; rather, it presents a vast social discourse. In contrast to the glossy image of a flourishing India, ‘*Shatakiya’* introduces the world of Madhukupi (a village of Bihar), exposing the grim realities of colonial stagnation. In doing so, Ghosh aspires to awaken the consciousness needed to dismantle colonial vestiges and pave the way for a new socio-cultural paradigm.

Keywords: Colonialism, Dalit Literature, Human Relationships, Social Awareness, Resistance.

The storyteller bears the responsibility of shaping the reality of human life in literature. In this regard, social awareness becomes a crucial medium for him. Denying reality is, in essence, an injustice to humanity. Since the responsibility of expressing life’s consciousness falls upon him, he cannot turn a blind eye to the struggles of a resistant life. It is not just economic exploitation; common people are also crushed under social and cultural oppression — something a storyteller can never forget. This oppression becomes even more severe when the oppressed masses fail to organize themselves into a united front against injustice. Only an artist who has closely observed life can use literature to fill this void. The essential role of a novelist is to stand by humanity in times of crisis.

As Manik Bandyopadhyay remarked in literary criticism: “*The fragments of life will naturally be chosen according to the writer’s consciousness and experience, that is, his philosophy of life. Therefore, the key to shaping the truth of life is the writer’s ability to grasp that truth”* (p. 395, ‘*Manik Granthabali’, Vol. 2*). Subodh Ghosh was a storyteller who, through experience, understood the importance and necessity of social consciousness in literature.

Subodh Ghosh was the second of seven children (five sons and two daughters) born to Satish Chandra Ghosh and Konkalata Devi. He was born on September 14, 1909, in the town of Hazaribagh, Bihar. A bright student, Ghosh had to discontinue his formal education after passing matriculation due to financial difficulties. Faced with the harsh realities of life, instead of succumbing to despair, he confronted poverty with courage. At just 15 years old, he embarked on a relentless struggle, overcoming numerous hurdles in life.

At different points in time, he worked as a municipal cholera vaccine worker in a rural labor colony in Hazaribagh, a conductor on the night buses running between Hazaribagh and Chotanagpur, and even engaged in the physical labor of carrying circus equipment. In his

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pursuit of livelihood, he even disguised himself as a fake monk for some time, gathering life experiences along the way. Later, in '*Sediner Alochhaya'*, he reflected on these difficult and struggle-filled years, writing: "*A mere hope of securing even a modest financial livelihood can be a terrifying illusion — I learned this the hard way before even stepping into my thirties".*

Perhaps, in his early youth, Subodh Ghosh witnessed more of life's darkness than its light. Or rather, it can be said that because he walked through that darkness, he was able to perceive life in its full illumination. The people who seem ordinary, aimless, or destitute at first glance may, under certain circumstances, reveal an immense sense of greatness. Life then becomes something far sweeter than mere sweetness itself and, inevitably, turns into the subject of literature.

Thus, Subodh Ghosh transformed his knowledge and experiences into the form of novels. As Mahasweta Devi once said about him: "*A writer who can seamlessly transition from rugged masculinity and raw austerity to smooth and natural sweetness, and from there to ornamented, Sanskrit-inspired Bengali prose, is none other than Subodh Ghosh".*

Breaking free from the grip of colonial modernity, Ghosh drew upon the lived experiences of marginalized lives to derive a revitalized inner essence for his novels. His adoption of life's truth as a literary technique naturally brought the essence of post-colonial consciousness into his fiction. Consequently, long before Debesh Roy's concept of '*nijeder kahini*' (our own stories) emerged, Subodh Ghosh, the author of '*Bharat Premkatha'*, had already paved the way. In 1958, he wrote '*Shatakiya'*.

Writer of 33 novels, Subodh Ghosh, was described by Srikumar Bandyopadhyay as follows: "*A writer must have the eyes of a discoverer. The extraordinary quality of Subodh Ghosh's writings is evident in this regard. Like mineral resources embedded deep underground, he has unearthed many hidden, mysterious layers of the human mind and revealed the intricate, novel patterns of life's struggles" (p. 350, Bangsahitye Upanyaser Dhara).*

Keeping this in mind, we observe that from his first novel '*Tilanjali'* (1944) to his last novel '*Sei Adbhut Abhrakhani'* (1977), Subodh Ghosh remained consistently engaged in uncovering the deepest aspects of human life, character, and relationships. His sharp intellect and profound understanding of life enabled him to analyze societal and interpersonal relationships with remarkable skill. His journey in literature formally began in 1940 when he joined the editorial department of *Desh* magazine, published by *Anandabazar Patrika*. He remained associated with the magazine until his passing on 8 Chaitra 1386 (Bengali calendar). It was in 1940 that his first short story, '*Fossil'*, was published.

Regarding the setting of one of Subodh Ghosh's greatest novels, '*Shatakiya'*, Arindam Goswami remarks: "*The society that Subodh Ghosh was familiar with since childhood — due to his upbringing in Hazaribagh — has served as the distinct backdrop for several of his novels and short stories. The Chhotanagpur plateau, with its rivers, hills, and forests, along with its land-dependent society, has been vividly portrayed in this novel" (p. 186, 'Subodh Ghosh: Kathasahitya').*

The novel moves beyond the familiar geographical boundaries of West Bengal to an obscure settlement in Bihar, portraying the relentless struggles of its unrecognized inhabitants. A small village, Madhukupi, lies three krosh (approximately nine kilometers) south of Babur Bazaar, beside the Dorani River. It is described as: "*A tiny colony of hardworking indigenous people" (p. 118, 'Shatakiya').*

Nearby are two hills named Chhotkalu and Borkalu. There is no railway line or hospital in the vicinity — only a dusty road covered with red gravel. The village is surrounded by the dense forests of Kapal Baba, where a tigress named Kanarani resides. Madhukupi is a village of laborers, where everyone is a wage earner : "*They dig others' land, plow others' fields, drive others' bullock carts, thatch others' roofs, and carry others' palanquins" (p. 118, 'Shatakiya').*

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It is evident that this is their life story — one that barely counts as a life. *'Shatakiya'* is certainly not a work of entertainment-driven literature. Even in the post-colonial era, the colonial influence lingered in India's air, and this novel compellingly exposes that reality. Later, Prafulla Roy would explore similar themes in novels like '*Akasher Niche Manush'* (1981), '*Manusher Juddho'* (1983), '*Ram Charitra'* (1985), *'Daybaddha'* (1986), and *'Janagan'* (1991), but Subodh Ghosh had already laid the groundwork with *'Shatakiya'*. He presents a vast socio-historical narrative, positioning Madhukupi in stark contrast to the illusion of a shining India, challenging colonial inertia and advocating for a new consciousness.

The plot unfolds with Dasu Ghorami returning to Madhukupi in the dead of night after spending four years and eight months in prison. His hard labor in jail earned him only eleven rupees and ten annas. Yet, before his imprisonment, he had a happy household, a loving wife, Murli — "*Whose age was beautiful, appearance was beautiful, and even her words were beautiful" (p. 123, 'Shatakiya').*

He also owned one and a half bighas of land, enclosed by a gulanch vine fence. However, his land caught the greedy eyes of a brick contractor, Ray Babu. Dasu refused to sell it for twenty-five rupees, which led to a violent confrontation. In the struggle, Dasu struck Ray Babu's overseer with a hatchet and was subsequently imprisoned. Upon returning, he is shocked by the transformation of his village: "*In the moonlight, many things are visible, but nothing is recognizable. What are these? Where were they? How did they come? What structures have emerged on the far side of Madhukupi's land? When was a bridge built over the Dorani River? Why are there so many roads now" (p. 124, 'Shatakiya')?*

Two years after the start of World War II, in 1941, Japan declared war against Britain and America. The dark shadow of imperialist aggression cast its toxic influence over India. In 1942, Japan bombed British-occupied India, and Allied forces began moving through Indian territory. Reports state : "*The red gravel road was soon filled with the movement of British soldiers; singing, whistling, raising dust, they rushed back and forth, day and night, in their military vehicles" (p. 127, 'Shatakiya').*

As a consequence, Dasu Ghorami's wife undergoes the most significant transformation. Just as Madhukupi was rapidly changing under external pressures, Murli also succumbed to the temptations brought by Allied soldiers and the harsh reality of survival – "*Murli now drapes her sari in the style of the women of Haranganj's church house. She wears a new kind of blouse. She has sandals on her feet. And her bed looks like the seating area of a courtesan's dance performance" (p. 125, 'Shatakiya').*

Thus, '*Shatakiya'* captures the inevitable transformation of a marginalized community under the weight of colonial and wartime upheaval, shedding light on the forgotten lives of those who remain invisible on political maps yet bear the brunt of history's violent shifts.

At first glance, after Dashu's colorful observation, Murli makes it clear that she is not Paltani Didi (Bharat's wife, Batashi), Tetari Ghasin (Mithua Ghasi's wife), or Phulki Masi (Dashu Gharami's stepbrother Tinkari's wife). She is Murli, the daughter of Mahesh Rakhal from Jhalda. Unlike the three aforementioned women, who were forced to sell their chastity, Murli did not have to sacrifice her purity in Dashu's absence in exchange for food and survival. She found refuge with Sister Didi of the church house in Haranganj — the woman with a 'red face, blue eyes, and a tuft of white hair'.

This was the same Sister Didi who spent thirty years moving from house to house in Haranganj and the surrounding fifty villages, sharing in people's joys and sorrows. Her face always carried a serene smile of tireless happiness, a smile so profound that even the most indifferent non-Christian could not help but feel devotion (p. 273, '*Shatakiya'*). It was Sister Didi who provided company to the lonely Murli in Dashu's absence, teaching her sewing, giving her a sewing machine, and enabling her to support herself by stitching and selling clothes. Murli lived a dignified and decent life.

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Now, Dashu starts dreaming again — dreams about Murli, their unborn child, and a beautiful future. He thinks, *"I need to go to Ishan Moktar's estate to get a fresh letter. If I can manage to lease at least three to five bighas of fertile land beyond Dronari, I can harvest a crop within six months"* (p. 139, '*Shatakiya'*). However, his thoughts remain just that — thoughts. Because, *"whether or not sharecropping fills the stomach, it never fills the heart. When the harvest is over, the land is no longer his. Once again, he must go to Ishan Moktar's estate, beg for a new letter, and without it, there is no way to plow the land"* (p. 139, '*Shatakiya'*).

Even though India gained independence in 1947 and the Zamindari Abolition Act was introduced nationwide by 1956, landless farmers did not gain true ownership of the land due to the lack of proper land documents. Especially in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, zamindars (landlords) exploited loopholes in the 'self-cultivation' rule and managed to retain most of their lands. The 1949 Kumarappa Committee had clearly stated in its report that *'only those who perform a minimum amount of manual labor and actively engage in farming should be considered real cultivators'.* However, Indian social structure traditionally dictated that *'landowners are those whose feet never touch the soil'!*

As a result, despite legal maneuvers abolishing the Zamindari system, the biggest beneficiaries were the privileged tenant farmers — those who had leased land directly from landlords. These were middle or wealthy farmers who then subleased the land to lower-tier tenants. The lower tenants, often referred to as *'voluntary tenants',* had almost no rights (p. 451, *'Bharatvarsha: Swadhinatar Pare'*).

This is exactly the plight of Dashu, Suren Majhi, and Sanatan in the novel. Their struggle for survival mirrors the historical reality of post-independence India. Later, Prafulla Roy's novels also vividly depict this periodv— whether in '*Akasher Niche Manush'* (1981), which portrays how independence, five-year plans, elections, and urban prosperity left rural laborers untouched; or in '*Dharmantar'* (1984), which describes how certain areas in Bihar remained beyond the reach of Indian constitutional laws like the Penal Code or the Hindu Marriage Act (p. 98, '*Dharmantar'*). Similarly, '*Yuddhajatra'* (1991) highlights how post-independence rulers established their own medieval tyranny in Bihar, disregarding India's constitution and legal system altogether (p. 23, '*Yuddhajatra'*).

So, where exactly is the difference between colonial and post-colonial India? Did driving out the colonial rulers only lead to the rise of an indirect, invisible ruling class that continues to crush the common people?

Theories of postcolonial consciousness help us better understand this situation. The core issue of postcolonialism is the conflict between identity and society, which is inherently tied to the struggle for existence. Colonial authorities legitimized their rule with the help of local collaborators, shaping a power structure and social hierarchy that postcolonial discourse seeks to dismantle. Theorists argue that *"colonialism does not just end with economic and political exploitation; cultural processes remain contaminated by its influence. Even after formal colonial rule ends, the colonial mindset lingers in thought, perception, and expression"* (p. 149, *'Pratichyer Sahityatattva'*).

What makes post-independence ruling elites even more dangerous is that they look just like us. This makes it harder to identify them. Thus, the role of postcolonial consciousness becomes even more crucial. The only real difference between pre- and post-independence India is the transfer of power, not a shift in the power structure itself. This is why postcolonial awareness is essential in the post-independence era — it exposes the self-serving continuity of power, fosters knowledge free from dominance, and encourages people to seek true liberation.

In the narrative, Kana Rani, who once played the role of a guardian of Madhukupi village, seems to disappear, while the arrival of the murderous bandit Gupi Lohar creates an atmosphere of terror among the villagers. Inside the coal mine, Dasu is injured in an explosion but is saved by the mine chief, Palus. However, it is also because of Palus that Murli is forced to leave her

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home, abandoning her marital status, a moment referred to as 'Sindoor Mati'. Ultimately, it is Palus' gunfire that brings about Kana Rani's death. Losing everything, Dasu dreams: "I must get five bighas of fertile land from Ishan Moktar. Why should Ishan Moktar only use us as laborers, Panch? Why shouldn't he grant us land without a bribe? We will take the land, and we will not rest until we do" (p. 253, '*Shatakiya'*). This dream resonates with the voices of Madhukupi's earth-covered people, who sing in unison. On the day of the Karma Puja, Dasu fearlessly declares to Dukhon Babu: "We will no longer work as laborers" (p. 255, *'Shatakiya'*). However, like the shadowy figures of Rahu and Ketu, Lal Babu and Dukhon Babu continue to loom over Madhukupi like a curse. They create a new 'Jat Panch' (an association of the Jatiya, Khadia, and Kukrashi communities) to divide the common people.

It is self-evident that colonial powers establish cultural barriers to dominate the masses. A critic remarks: "Cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention, authenticated by the originary past, is kept alive in the national tradition of the people" (p. 156, '*The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*').

The colonial forces in the narrative attempt to fracture this unity. Naturally, cultural divisions lead to the disintegration of social cohesion. In the context of Bihar, a researcher adds another dimension to the discussion: "Feudal exploitation influenced by upper-caste Hindus is compounded by administrative oppression, followed by capitalist industrial exploitation" (p. 398, '*Bengali Fiction and the Folk Life of Bihar'*).

Thus, Madhukupi's Fulki is forced to transition from a farmer to a laborer. Dasu, falling into the wrath of the Chaudhury, lands in prison once again. Meanwhile, Father Horn's 'colony' finds Murli a place in Sister Didi's convent in Harangunj.

Murli is given a new name — Johanna. The name seems to announce the birth of her new destiny! She marries Christian Palus Haldar and becomes Johanna Haldar. But this is only superficial. The narrative of '*Shatakiya'* reveals: "Palus Haldar's home was merely a transient dressing room in Murli's life. Beyond this house lay a place where she would have to undergo a brutal test to satisfy someone's insatiable gaze. Not just her appearance — Murli wished to transform her very soul" (p. 324, *'Shatakiya'*).

With a twinkling smile like the stars in the black sky, Murli wins over Dr. Richard. Murli sees in him a garden of flowers, while Richard, in turn, sees the shadow of his late wife, Stefana, in Murli. However, despite attaining financial security, comfort, and prosperity, Murli, as an individual, begins to disappear. As a researcher notes: "As '*Shatakiya'* portrays social ascension, it simultaneously depicts the destruction of the protagonist's human essence" ('*The Position of the Lower Classes in Post-Independence Bengali Novels'*).

We know that a 'colonial state is autocratic,' and therefore, we also know that despite becoming the wife of the impotent Richard Sarkar, Murli will ultimately remain in a void.

Meanwhile, time changes. The economic landscape of Baburbazar's square also shifts. A thick layer of dark smoke from towering factory chimneys begins to engulf the lush green forests of Kapal Baba. After three years in prison, Dasu returns to Baburbazar and finds that the world has changed. His forehead wrinkles with a series of questions: "Why is Kapal Baba's jungle in such a state? Why do the homes of the peasant laborers look like dried-up debris? Have the wives and daughters of the farmers all fled and become scavengers in the gutters" (p. 354, '*Shatakiya'*).

Upon returning to Madhukupi village, Dasu finds all his answers. Near the shade of the village's sacred peepul tree, he witnesses the brutal reality — people are digging the earth for the new road to Jamungarh: "Everyone is digging — old, middle-aged, young, and half-grown men. The women and daughters of the farmers' homes, the sisters, and even the little children are scurrying around with small baskets on their heads" (p. 357, '*Shatakiya'*).

Dasu's dreams shatter. Driven by the sheer need to survive, he ultimately joins the ranks of land diggers. The farmer turns into a laborer. Stability moves toward instability. Economic

uncertainty looms large. In a letter dated March 8, 1963, the novelist writes bluntly: "My longest novel, '*Shatakiya'*, critiques the present governance (i.e., the 1960s administration). It highlights the injustices of the current land system, the oppression of farmers, the corruption of capitalist industries, the blindness of the judiciary, and the tyranny of bribery-ridden police and administration. Amidst these injustices, a poor, honest man's spirit of rebellion is tragically extinguished. In its place, a frivolous democracy of wealthy, deceptive men — driven by elections and vote-bank politics — takes root."

As a result, no meaningful resistance emerges in the narrative. The toxic collaboration between the post-independence Indian administration and the upper classes deeply scars Dasu's body. His physical wounds mirror the socio-economic wounds inflicted upon society. Consequently, Dasu's body bears the marks of hardship: "His hands are covered with powdery remnants of broken hair; his fingernails, curled and shriveled, resemble tiny bits of earthworm soil. His entire body seems scaly, with cracked patches of skin glistening like parched ground" (p. 382, '*Shatakiya'*).

Even the cold water of the Dorani River fails to soothe his leprosy-afflicted body. However, Palus's abandoned wife, Sokali, steps forward with compassion. Yet, the generous-hearted Dasu reunites her with Palus. He also refuses Sister Didi's offer to convert to Christianity in exchange for treatment.

At least he gets a glimpse of his child, growing up in an orphanage. However, by then, "How terrifyingly dark Harangunj has become! The sky is layered with dense black clouds. Strong winds have begun to blow. Everywhere, streaks of lightning slither across the sky like restless serpents. In the distance, beyond the restless silhouette of the sal forest, even the current of the Dorani River has begun to swell" (p. 45, '*Shatakiya'*).

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