

THE ROMANTICISED FOREST-NATURE (?) IN BIBHUTIBHUSHAN BANDOPADHYAY'S *ARANYAK*

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Abstract:

Aranyak is essentially a novel about forest, nature in/of forest, the mankind/human civilization of forest. Reading Aranyak is a special experience. For the denizens of a civilized city culture, who normally grow up and live in/around town/city, reading Aranyak is definitely a different experience, which sometimes borders on the uncanny, and, sometimes, on the phantasmagorical; and, for someone like Satyacharan too, (the protagonist of the novel), who has to stay in a secluded forestry area for quite some time, to make both ends meet, by getting cut off from the din and bustle of the life of Calcutta. And, this experience of staying in the forest has to be of 'quite some time', and; for, this deep vision, and, intense realization of/about forest life would not be possible otherwise. The silent, desolate, shady, vast forest, with its various trees, fruits, flowers, creepers, does not only have an alluring, enticing effect to invite others to get synced/be one with its mystically beautiful tunes, but it also has the capacity to evoke an unknown fear in the mind of the same person, when he/she gets too close to it, or, starts to feel at one with it. The novel showcases the vastness/hugeness/magnanimity of forest life, as compared to the human existence, scarce and sparse in the huge forest.

Key Words: *Nature, forest, mankind, culture, civilized city, phantasmagorical.*

Unlike the city, where man has made everything according to his choice/wish, and cut down forests and trees at will to build up and spread human civilization (in fact, in today's deforestation era, rapid destruction of forests and the upsurge of flat culture have indeed become a style statement), the vast forest regimes of Lobotulia Boihar, Phulkia Boihar, Nara Boihar; it seems, are the places where the forest has its supreme say, and sway over the sparse human population that live in/around it. We, the readers are introduced to her (the forest's) own world/empire, and her various associations: her Nature; in all its beauty, serenity and crudity; various birds; wild animals (wild buffalos, tigers etc) and flowers; and, nobody, as it were, is to disturb and perturb her rule. Here, in *Aranyak*, following Bibhutibhusan, one can experience a state of prolonged leisure, and, a sense of boundless mystery; unfathomable, impenetrable layers of complexity, as it were, unintelligible to mankind. There is also a sense of unreal peace, and a queer inertia accompanied by a sometimes uncontrollable desire to feel anything, and do anything and everything (precisely which comes while standing in a wilderness, which entirely belongs to the forest/forests). The forest's is, a self-sufficient, autonomous world, as it were, and the human population/civilization who live in these forests, are completely at one with her, her mystically beautiful tunes; as if they are nurtured and nourished by them, fed by them, like her own child, irrespective of the numerous difficulties, and hazards of living in a forest:

While cutting the forest, I remember so many words, and I sit here thinking about them. This forest/jungle that you are seeing, is a very good place. The bunch of flowers has been blossoming from ancient times, and the bird is chirping, the Gods alight here on the soil of earth, by mixing with the air. The place which deals with greed of money, and the balance of due and debts, there the air gets venomous.

There the Gods do not reside. So, if we take a heavy-knife/chopper (with a haft) or, an axe in hand, the Gods come and snatch them from hand-whisper such words in the ear, that the mind gets far, very far from wealth and possession. (55, translation Debabrata Adhikari).

Or, elsewhere:

But, the subject of utmost curiosity to me is how Raju lives alone in this desolate place. I enquired him about this.

Raju replied-I have got accustomed to this, babuji. I have been living like this for so many days-I do not feel any trouble, rather live gladly, just like my own. I work throughout the day, sing *Bhajan* in the evening, chant the name of God, and life goes on.

Whether it is Raju, or, Gonu Mahato, or, Jaipal-there are many such types of person in this forest-I used to see a new world in them, a world which is not known to me.

.....

Raju is educated in Hindi, but he does not have any knowledge about the outside world. He has heard the name of Calcutta, but does not know in which direction it lies. His idea about Bombay or Delhi is completely unreal and foggy just like the concept of moonlight. Amid city, he has only seen Purnia, but that too, many years ago, when he went there for only a few days. (115, translation mine)

Dobru Panna Birbardi, the leader of the Santal revolution, 1862 also echoes the same thing, while talking to the speaker narrator; when he points out the essential goodness of residing in the forest, for; the forest is after all their own, their kith and kin, as compared to a complex big city like Calcutta:

....Looking at me with a good view, he asked-where is your home?

I replied-Calcutta.

-- Oh, that is very far. I heard that it is a very nice place.

--Haven't you been there ever?

--No, how can we go to the city? We stay fine in this forest. (109, translation mine)

We, the humans of the so called civilized world are not to call them 'uncivilized' or savage, they do not, as it were, depend upon our 'civilized' judgement in order to exist. And, the forest is not only a preserver of these forest folks, it is a place where they are essentially rooted, completely oblivious of the outside world. All these forest-folks-Dhaotal sahu, Jaipal Kumar, Giridharilal, Dhaturia, Raju Parey, Matuknath, Nokchedi Bhagat, Dobru Panna Birbordi, Benkateswar Prasad are poor, yet not ashamed of their poverty; awkward, in terms of their dress-habit, behaviour, speech, and culture (to a civilized eye, like the speaker-narrator), yet not aware of their awkwardness; and, these qualities are rather their priceless assets. All of them not only exhibit the artless simplicity, uncomplicated charitable human nature, and unselfishness, but they also colour the speaker-narrator, a representative of the essentially city culture, in their very hue, and help him to know/learn the other side of human mind. Somewhere or other, they share and mutually extend a cordial human bond between each other and, also to others, who need their timely aid; which the city or, the civilized city people are not aware of, in the midst of their hankering for money, and, material prosperity. It would be better here, perhaps, to quote the author:

There is no grandeur in their graveyards, no polish, no wealth like the deeds of the rich Egyptian Pharaohs-because they were poor, their culture and civilization were like man's ancient age's illiterate-like culture and civilization, they have solely made their royal palace (which is hidden inside the cave), royal tomb, and the demarcation pole with an essentially child-like human mind. (113, translation mine)

Instantly one gets reminded of Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, where Gray extols the simple, rural folks and their uncomplicated life style:

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
 If memory o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
 Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
 The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

.....

But knowledge to their eyes her ample page
 Rich with the spoils of time, did ne'er unroll;
 Chill penury repress'd their noble rage,
 And froze the genial current of the soul. (173)

All the womenfolk of the forest are just like their male counterparts simple, artless, hospitable. They speak their mind, follow their own instinct, and, obey their males (whether it is the husband, or, any senior member of the house). And, hospitability is indeed a characteristic that is perhaps the hallmark of all these women-folk who reside in the forest. To feed a guest with whatever limited resources they have, to make sure that every arrangement has been done perfectly regarding the guest's hospitality; to wait upon/attend a sick person, are their principle characteristics. And herein, perhaps, they differ from their city counterparts who busy themselves all the time in their petty self-interests and narrow-mindedness. Unlike their city counterparts, they know how to live life fully, spontaneously, artlessly, and, peacefully without any material craving, without any unnecessary complication/complexity in mind. Bhanumati, Kunta (widow of Debi Singh Rajput), Monchi, wife of Benkateswar Prasad-- they all represent the elemental simplicity of the primeval nature, the nature of forest, whose smell is mixed in their very body, in their very soul:

Truly, what a smile of pride and gladness, I have seen in her face. Unlike her civilized sisters, she has not learnt to hide her mental feelings; one pure, unmixed female soul reveals itself by the sheer exuberance of possessing these trifle things. We do not generally get an opportunity to see such a crystal-clear expression of the female mind in our civilized society. (103, Debabrata Adhikari)

Or, elsewhere:

I have seen more, that the vast expanse of land of this country is as free and open; the vast regions of forest, the string/series of clouds, and the rows of mountains are as free and thirsty for the far- as the behaviour of Bhanumati is hesitation-free, simple, and, free-flowing. It is quite natural like man to man behaviour. I have received similar behaviour from Monchi and the wife of Benkateswar Prasad. Forest and mountain have released their minds, made their vision liberal their love is free, firm, and, generous in like proportion. Since their mind is unbounded, their love is also limitless. (129, Debabrata Adhikari).

But, nonetheless the important question that comes/surfaces here, is whether Bibhutibhusan has tried to portray a too picture-perfect forest life with all its simple, rural, uneducated, poor, underprivileged folks around. Isn't this too simplistic a picture of the forest that Bibhutibhusan has painted? Isn't this too generalised a version of the forest life and the forest-folks? Hasn't Bibhutibhusan, in his attempt to portray forest life, and its essential folks, been homogenous? Doesn't Bibhutibhusan's representation of forest life somewhere hide/cover up the numerous conflicts/strifes/essential differences/contradictions that might lie/operate at various levels of the forest life and their lives respectively? Precisely while portraying the forest life hasn't Bibhutibhusan somewhere blurred the difference between the real and the imaginary? Also, another question that can surface is this, how long the forest, or, the forest-nature, in spite of all her diverse characteristics and mysterious charms, can entangle one, especially one coming from the activeness of the city? And, that too, for primarily economic reason, and not for a forest trip, or, for the love of it? Can it last for years after years? Normally, for a city, or, a town-person, the spell can last for a few

days; a week, two weeks, three weeks perhaps; because, the complexity of the city/town, and, the repetitiveness of modern daily life, probably have it in them to allow human beings to take a refreshing dip in/amid nature for some time; be it forest, ocean, or, high mountain. But it is quite unnatural for a person from the city to stay tuned and remain spellbound under the majestic influence of the forest/forest-nature for such a long period of time, however big a nature-lover he may be, as the speaker-narrator is shown here in the present text; also, in complete disdainment of the numerous difficulties and hazards of living a forestry life. Even, in spite of the unemployed condition of the speaker, as mentioned in the initial part of the novel. And, also we see that, however spellbound the speaker-narrator is, under the charm of forest, or, how much mesmerizing spell the forest has cast over him, ultimately she becomes unable to make him stay rooted here forever, and, the narrator ultimately goes back to the city in the end. Had he been that much in love with the forest and her nature, the speaker-narrator would probably have never returned from the forest, and, stayed there forever, by getting synced/harmonised with her mystic tune:

Could I but stay here! I would have married Bhanumati then. That simple, artless forest-lass would have told me various childish tales while cooking food in the full moonlit veranda, and I would have listened to them while sitting...Bhanumati is dark, but one cannot find such a chubby, healthy-looking girl in the whole of Bengal. (176, Debabrata Adhikari).

And, what is more, he would have definitely thwarted the attempt his employers to cut down forest. But neither does he marry Bhanumati, nor does he prevent his employers from destroying the forest. He does not prevent the distribution of the forest-lands to other subjects. At best he seems to be a sympathiser who feels bad about the destruction of the forest regions of Nara Boihar, Lobtulia Boihar., and the peerless forest range by the lake of Saraswati. So, it seems surprising, that the speaker-narrator who comes back to the routine life of the city at the end, and gets married to a 'civilized' non-forest girl, fails to come out of its mesmerizingly breath-taking beauty and charm in the text, and, goes on praising/eulogizing the forest-nature tirelessly, almost page after page. The contradiction is unresolved by Bibhutibhusan:

But that which I have been trying to say again and again, and, in various ways, but, have not been able to convincingly say ever, is the infinitely mysterious, inaccessible, vast, and dreadfully uncanny but beautiful aspect of nature. It is very difficult to explain what that is, until one has seen and felt it personally.

By sitting on/upon the horseback alone in this silent afternoon, amid the desolate and vast Lobtulia Boihar's wild tamarisk tree and Kaash wood, which are horizon-like extended; this beauty of the nature of this particular place has overwhelmed my entire mind by an infinite sense of mystery, sometimes it has come like fear, sometime like a disinterested, indifferent, and a grave/serious mindset, sometimes like a honeyed dream, like the pains/agonies of men and women throughout the country and abroad. That is just like a high quality silent musickeeping pace with the dim light of the star, the unreality of the moonlit night, the cry of cricket, and the lustre of the tail of fire of the rushing meteor, it just merges/fuses.

This aspect of nature is better not seen by that person who has to settle down to lead a domestic life. The charm of that enchanting beauty of nature makes one renounce/forsake home and domestic affairs, turns one into a stoic, indifferent, vagabond like Harry Johnston, Marko Polo, Hudson, Shackleton-does not allow one to perform household duties by being a family man it is impossible for that person to do household activities, who has heard that call; and, has personally seen that unveiled enchantress once.

...her beauty makes one mad-not to exaggerate even-I think those persons who are weak-minded, they should not see that beauty, that destructive beauty, it is really an uphill task to manage that sort of beauty. (69, Debabrata Adhikari)

Is it only a highly romantic description, as we find in the language of the Romantics? Can it be the language of one (from the city) who has been long in the forest pent? Or, is it rather, that Bibhutibhusan has

somehow managed to inspire his true nature-loving vision onto us so as to enable us to view the forest endearingly? For, after all the speaker comes in Lobtulia to give out/distribute the landed properties of the forests of Nara Boihar and Lobtulia on lease, to destroy the forest and her beauty (by those who would take them), and, not to preserve it by any means; for, this is the job he is employed in, by his friend Abinash; the job of a settlement officer of the estates of forestry, spanning thirty thousand bighas. And he even acknowledges the fact that he has destroyed the peerless charm of the forest in his own hands, after which his deep nature loving vision and version seems a little suspect; and, it seems rather, that the speaker has formed an attachment, a liking for the forest while staying in it for long, just as one forms for a long time friend/companion, with whom one has been staying, or, is familiar with, and, feels bad after losing him/her suddenly; that too, through his own undoing. The reminiscing, it seems, is but a sweet hangover of that long stay of the speaker, and, nothing more than that. The entire novel is but a projection of the memory, and, we know that all memories are either good or bad, and, they are not/cannot become real. They just remain as memories only to be evoked/remembered at some later point of time:

But this memory of mine is not of happiness, but of sorrow. That the free reign of the forest nature has got destroyed in my hand, the forest gods would not be able to forgive me for that ever. If one confesses one's own guilt through one's own mouth, then the load of the guilt becomes lesser/light. Precisely, that is why, I have embarked on writing this story. (4)

So, can we but say that *Aranyak* is a text that is essentially about nature; and, that it foregrounds the human and nature bonding, and tries to strengthen and promote it? Or, does it rather become an attempt, in the very end, to say that forest is definitely beautiful, mesmerizing, and, hence should be preserved; but it is unfortunate thing really, that, in today's materialistic world, she has to fall prey to the insatiable greed of human beings, has to get sold off as a means of pocketing the easy money in the name of tax fee, descriptive rent-roll (which is drawn up annually) and others, by the human beings:

Human being's greed is too much; for a bunch of maize, and, the seeds of China grass, spanning one cottah of land, he wouldn't simply mind destroying such a dreamy abode of nature. Especially the inhabitants here do not appreciate the beauty of trees; their eyes are not open to the majestic grace and grandeur of the earth, they only know to live life by only getting fed on stomach, like a beast. Had it been any other country, they would have preserved such place for beauty thirsty, Nature connoisseurs, by making law.....My landlords wouldn't understand that landscape, they only know tax fee, revenue money, collection of annual taxes, descriptive rent-roll. (150, Adhikari)

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