

The Vernacular in Writing: A Look into Nandita Devi's Text

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Abstract

Bongol Bohu Dur, written by Nandita Devi, is a novel about the colonial times and the partition of India that ensued. The story moves around the life of the priest (jajmaan/purohit) Ananta Thakur who is known to all as *Bongola Pite* (the local term for 'the elderly man'/ father who lives in Bengal). This novel is the site of exploration by the brilliant writer about a time and space that takes us to historical terrains with the complexity of two regions, the accompanying languages, cultures and rituals. The ease with which the villages of Kamrup and nearby areas are described highlighting their connection with Bengal and beyond, the novel succeeds in giving a vivid picture of those times. Certain striking aspects that connect us to the present theme are ---firstly, the use of the vernacular indigeneity in linguistic communication among the characters which gives the reader a feeling of ingenuity; secondly, the use of indigenous knowledge regarding various aspects of life by the villagers in their everyday life and their depiction by the writer ; the very act of rewriting about those times in a vivid and realistically imaginary way serves as a revisitation that takes us close to sustaining our indigeneity in a broader sense.

This paper is an attempt at exploring Devi's text in the light of the vernacular with its close connectedness to the history of the times.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge, vernacular, novel, partition literature, history.

This paper tries to read the indigenous in its various aspects from the text *Bongol Bohudur* written by an award winning , celebrated writer of fiction from Assam, Nandita Devi. Published in 2019, this text depicts the story of a *jajman*, a *purohit* (priest) Ananta Thakur who went to Bongol (Bengal) to practice priesthood for a better livelihood. (Jyotish xastrat khyat pragjyotishpurar brahmanar uttar bangat anek kadar...ahom rojai kanaujarpora ani sthapan kora belsor, gandhia , ximalia anchalar daibagya brahman xakalar anekei jajmani koribole uttar banga r Dinajpur, raiganj, amdah, piplan, patpixu, adi anchalaloi aah jaah korisil” (p.7) *For their expertise in astrology, the Brahmins from Pragjyotishpur had a special place of importance in Bengal ...They were brought to Assam from Kanauj and established in areas near the border of Bengal in Assam during the Ahom rule by the kings, and they began to settle down in areas like Belsor, Gandhia, Ximolia, from where they would very often move to places like Dinajpur , Raiganj, Amdah, Piplan, Patpishu, quite often to practice priesthood for which they were highly regarded.* (Translated by the author)

The paper tries to explore the concept of the vernacular in use in the novel that deals with the colonial period. In the words of the writer herself she chose to write about this village life in lower Assam in *Bongol Bohudur* because she was married to such an area where she had actually come across people like Ananta Thakur , ‘Bongol Pitte’ who worked in far off Bengal . She sketches elaborately in her book about this person in her text as the central character. The story, apart from having the plot situated in the colonial period and of the infamous partition in India, has for the Assamese reader the attraction of the use of varieties of the Assamese language. She actually dwells on it consciously and juxtaposes styles of spoken Assamese which are from Sarthebari as well as from *ujoni*. (*ujoniya thaas* in her words, with influence of upper Assam). So we get sentences like

“Bourenir hatitu pagla hoissi” (p.20) *Baruani’s elephant has become mad* or “Temi tu Sur koirba para, gaasdaal tainba nora” (p.24)*You can steal the container, but you cannot pull that tree trunk* vis-a -vis Bhadrakanta Choudhury’s language with ‘*ujoniya thaas*’, as he studied in Cotton College and was influenced by the non-locals in a cosmopolitan environment. So the narrator mentions he had learned to adopt the ‘*ujoniya leniya xur*’---“Ei hol amar poncho,

gutei jibon tar aaloi biloite gol,oine jura katibole loge bhage jur loi jai, aru ei moratue saki eta loi okole goise” (p.17) .*This is our Poncho, his whole life has been full of mishaps, others go for the particular act of fishing at night in group, he has gone alone.*

Or Bongol Pitte speaking a variety of Assamese that smacks of smart Bangla interpellation as he too was influenced by the region he lived in, in his speech. “Toi matric diyar pore Koithalkuchi stationor pora railot uthi gusi jabi. Raiganjat naimbi , ekta riksa lobi aru kobi piplaan chalo” (p.8) *After your matriculation examination, take a train from Kaithalkuchi station to Raiganj. Then get into a rickshaw and say you need to go to Piplan.*

I have used the very loaded and ambiguous term ‘vernacular’ to explore the text which highlights the local varieties of the indigenous in many aspects of its possibility. From the vernacular in language, we also find the ‘cultural’ in vernacular in the thoughts and customs that are mentioned of the people at various instances. There is the mention of the local custom of fishing done in the paddy fields known as ‘jura kota’ during which fishing is done at night by a group of people in the villages of western Assam .It is not fishing in rivers or other sources of deep water but in the shallow watery surfaces of the paddy field when there is the necessary amount of water present for fish to be there. This is a local custom that has been highlighted by the writer. In this context mention may be made of Seema Parihar, et al and their chapter *Conceptualising Space and Indigenous Knowledge* where they point out how rainwater is well utilised by the natives “ the importance of rain water too is well understood by the natives through the various practices followed by them” (Seema Parihar, et al, p.209).

Another striking feature seems to be the ecological references in the diverse forms of it. The close connection of the humans of the land with nature and its occupants is shown, (though not always realistically) through various contexts in which the characters are situated in close proximity with nature and animals and plants. Apart from fishing there is the mention of taming of a tiger with the use of incantations chanted by one ‘goxai’ (Biampur xotror Guxai) who could control a maneater (tiger) and also managed to put a garland around the tiger’s neck thereby taming it through the powerful mantra in it, and as a reward for it was given a huge mass of land by the king. The area of the land thus given away is also measured in a peculiar way. The King declared the reward to be ‘ek dhulor mati’ ,a unique unit of local measurement of land in which a drum was beaten and the distance that the sound of the drumbeat could travel to would be the extent of the land area given away by the king to the

receiver . So the Guxai received a huge area of land for his act of bravery in controlling the wild animal. The mention of elephants as gods (debota) is also an instance of the connection of the people with the animal world. The ‘bathan’ or the place where the milk giving cows are reared and how the many indigenous methods are used which work as effective tips for a peaceful and productive life of the cows thus kept are mentioned by the writer. These highlight the indigenous adequately.

In chapter Six we find the description of the custom of ‘morong kheda’. Morong is an epidemic that had spread across the village and its nearby areas killing many people. So the custom to shoo away the disease through local customs is practiced by the villagers working in groups. The writer describes it. The form of an old lady who calls herself the embodiment of the morong disease is described to highlight the local belief in her.

As another example, in the next chapter, is the mention of the local ‘bhalbholka’ festival or ‘moh kheda’ utsab. There is mention of the various spirits that are believed to inhabit particular natural habitats in the text. The *ghorapak*, the *baak*, the *bura dangoria*, which are indigenous names of some spirits with characteristic respective features unique to them, are shown as really existing ones in the text . Also she mentions about many indigenous practices like ‘jeuthamuri’. This is the practice of feeding the child who is born in the month of jeth (May-June) as custom has it. It is believed that one born in Jeth usually lives to have a good life, provided the child survives. These practices as part of the cultural vernacular plethora are mentioned throughout the text.

The people in the Assamese village of Paniduba are shown as knowledgeable about indigenous medicines available in the particular area of their village itself which had a collection of various medicinal plants. This is described by the narrator as possible because of some historical fact of a seer or a knowledgeable person who used to reside in that particular area with deep knowledge of Ayurveda. The area inherited some of that knowledge though with the passage of time, the medical plants became less and again unknown to the people with lack of pursuit of that knowledge base as had been earlier practiced. Still people would use some of the trees which they know to have medicinal properties. “Jadu adhyapak r mote ei bandarab burar bidhan bur uttar bangar anek gaon bhui t keba purux dhari jajmani kori fura ei daibagya brahman xokole oha juwa korute lagate loi oha.”(p.7) *According to Jadu adhyapak, these herbal medicinal knowledge were brought by the priests during their interactive transactions to and from Bengal to Assam.* There were such many plants still

available within that particular area. “futukanir maje maje baon doroberei guteikhon bhoi porale sai ...ei gosbur kiman purona, orthat kiman xotika bagora xei kotha jonar kunu upai nai”(p.7)*Amidst the wild shrubs, the herbal medicinal plants have grown in such a healthy and thick density, it just proves that they must have been there from a very long time, difficult to guess how many centuries since actually.* Kalindi would often tell Uddhab, “ja e uddhab, aubere fefe ase; dutaman konthikorir gutike ani di” (p.5) *Go uddhab, could you just get some konthikori seeds for your grandmother who is having problems with her respiration and is gasping while breathing.* Names of local plants like ulu kohuwa, nol khagori, kopilokhyo, konthikori abound.

From chapter 11 onwards the plot moves around the social and political events of the burning pre independence era. The cosmopolitan nature of the vernacular in the life lived in Assam and Bengal by Bongol Pitte is shown by the narrator in Bongol Pitte’s closeness shown with the members of other religions and tribes. In spite of being a purohit, he mixes with the Bengalis, the Muslims and Nepalis etc in an easy amicable way in both the places. The Communists also attract his attention because of their belief in the justified ‘nangal jar mati tar’ movement. In this we see Bongol Pitte’s broad-minded and enlightened world view in spite of living the life of a ‘jajman’. The ‘comunis’ as they are called, are judged by Bongol Pitte as being just in their ideologies. ‘Aah ei communis lorabure sabole golesun usit kothakei koi”(p.158)*Ah, but these ‘comunis’ boys are saying the right thing it seems.* And regarding the Bathan, the narrator mentions, “muthote mouzadar deutar ghorot jikono xokamot makbool hot noholei nohoi” (p.37) *In summary, Makbool and his companions were very much there to help the Mouzadar’s family during any occasion there.* Makbool is one of the boys who tend after the cows in the bathan.

The vernacular is usually understood to be precluded with the meaning of having a binary polarity within it with some aspect of the ‘other’. This polarity is not necessarily an opposition as in the opinion of Hans Harder “the vernacular usually operates in a binary constellation... (the binaries) they must not be conceived as oppositions but rather as polarities.”(Harder, p.17)

While the Indian vernacular at times is seen as a binary polarity of English, at other instances we realise it started with being not the classical or the Sanskrit. The original Latin etymology carried with it the connotation of the ‘slave born’ in it, which in some later stage was no more acknowledged in its usage. Vernacular came to be used in a more secular and

cosmopolitan way of being used for any of the many languages in India which are now also called the 'bhasa's as introduced by G.N.Devy and Bhal Chandra Nemade, et.al. There is flexibility in its usage with the passage of time and the derogatory sense of it has been no more acknowledged in its wide usage. Herder mentions that to shed the vernacular status it "has to be performative and can only be done in the vernacular". (Harder, p.23)

My exploration of the text as a vernacular text has been more so because of the time frame of the storyline described in it. The colonial period including the period of partition is described by the author passionately in the postcolonial reality of being haunted by the impasse of postcolonialism in which undoing the past is never an original exercise, but is always derivative. The spark of the period as captured by the text through the use of the vibrant, localised, lived reality of those years in sociological, political and also religious as well as cosmopolitan ways and moments, shows us a 'history from below' that needs to be written about again and again for our postcolonial reality. In my humble opinion, notwithstanding the fact whether we are ever successful in upturning it by reworking the period's historiography, we have to read and imagine the reality of those times to understand the present better. And the vernacular is the strong tool that gives us exact pictures. "At this moment the diversity of language is seriously threatened due to multiple factors....(we should) join the cause of indigenous people and their languages." (Akter, p. 315)

The novel also explores the subaltern realities of the times described with the depiction of the relationship of the Zamindar and the 'rayat's and the Zamindar and the landless purohitis in particular. Here the purohit faces a climax when the zamindar decides to handover a huge area of land to Ananta Thakur more to keep himself safe from the communis boys who were passionately influencing the masses with their 'nangal jaar mati tar slogan'. The equations distinctly showcase the localised historical truths of those times.

The vernacular is the strength in being grounded and also in being expressive which should be helpful in being able to withstand newer versions of imperialism that emerges to challenge language, culture or religion. In *Bongol Bohudur*, Bongol is also the metaphor for the 'other' that has been internalised to a great extent for the sake of professional and economic success and where the irony remains of it being 'bohudur' or faraway, so they decide to come back to Paniduba but unfortunately Bongol Pitte did not survive the tough journey. And as if to highlight the aspect of the indigenous philosophical belief in 'karmaphal', his body is brought back to his native place in a conflicting and almost

impossible situation only as the borderland police officer Utpal Barua sees to it personally. “Makori xaal jupat bandhi thua hatitur keneke edin foi singi ahi teuk xorute sodoki maribo khujisil aitake bohut dinole xei kotha koi thakisil... kijani ei ananta thakuroke baru gaon t bangala pitte buli janisil neki! (pp. 258,261)*The elephant tied to the makori Xaal tree had managed to get loose from it one day and attack the little boy who Utpal Barua had been then, and one Bongol pitte had saved him, his grandmother would often mention. Was this Ananta Thakur that Bongol Pitte!* This belief in the cycle of events and ultimate results can also be linked to the indigenous Indian philosophical belief in the cycle of *karma*. The cycle of *karma* is an intrinsic part of the Indian Astika philosophical traditions of belief in which it is considered as the absolute law of causation. It is the Karmic cycle where every action produces a proportional result, whether immediate or delayed. Utpal Barua, in his childhood, was saved from the imminent attack of a frenzied elephant by someone called Ananta Thakur as he could remember being told by his grandmother, as this cycle of events would have it, during his duty as a policeman he could serve by bringing back Ananta Thakur’s dead body to his home which seemed almost impossible during the days of partition of the country. This brought a gratifying closure to a long known event which had lingered however faintly in the grateful mind and heart of the Barua family and, especially, in him. There is polyphony of layered and intense contexts of events that are shown by the novelist within the pages of the tale that includes the many themes already mentioned. In all this, the striking aspect is the highlight of the local or the indigenous as the dominant narratorial layer. This is about the native’s world in the colonial times, and not so much about the domination of the colonisers that she is focussed on. The attempt is at preserving (and at, thereby, retrieving) the very small voices of history. This is indeed the more important factor as most of colonial history is silent about the native. So her description of the meeting of Bongol Pitte with the zamindar, the description of the trunk and its content as kept by kalinda are all a part of that lost heritage. The first scene (between the zamindar and Pitte) reminds us of Fakir Mohan Senapati’s *Six Acres and a Third* which is relatable as eastern Indian descriptions of a similar time.

Another point that is to be highlighted is the fact that the text dwells upon the intermixing of the languages of Bangla and Assamese and shows that in a seamless manner without getting into the language debates which have been having their effects in this transaction till a much later date in history. Having said that, it is worth mentioning that this free play of imagination of those times without focusing on the historical times of the

aforementioned debates have resulted in preserving in through literature a pristine aura through issues more important and are universally relevant to us, to humanity.

The Conclusion

In the appendix to the text the writer Nandita Devi attaches a few comments she had received from various critics about her work. The comments also include discussions on the use of language which we have already mentioned in our paper here. The use of the vernacular languages has provided the work with a vibrant polyphonic reality. This Bakhtinian layered reality of the ‘many voices’ can be found in the text in its exploration of various issues across many intersections including exploration of the characters of Kalindi and Priyambada bou , baruani mouzadarni and her young beautiful-eyed daughter-in-law, and other female characters which are interesting in themselves. While Priyambada manages to impress Bongal Pitte as the matriarch of the extended household being his sister-in-law since the time he was very young , and having had the rightful guardianship over him for almost bringing him up, the relationship is made more forceful by Priyambada when she reiterates to ‘maju’ or Bangal Apa how Laksman obeyed Sita by highlighting that from the Ramayana. That definitely is at the root of Kalindi, Bongol’s wife’s decision to leave Gandhia mouza and move with her husband to be at Piplan in Bongol. These are intersections of the feminist perspective, the social one, the political undercurrents of partition in Bengal and Assam, the subaltern’s position etc. which are very vividly reflected through the descriptions. This is historiographical information for the present reader from critical perspectives that can be applied. That the colonial, the indigenous, the classical (and the postcolonial reading of it) are all active agents of the polyphony is what the paper would like to conclude with.

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