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Stale News: A Struggle for Survival

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Abstract:

Badal Sircar is a popular writer in the Indian English Drama. He is known for his revolutionary and political writings. This paper explores the predicaments of Santhals by the Britishers in the play *Stale News*. Among all the tribes Santhals were considered as the largest tribes in India. Sircar says that the *Stale News* is different from his other plays because it deals with the theme of revolt. In the revolt millions of Santhals were died to save their mother land and its people.

Keywords: Santhals, revolt, predicaments, Britishers.

Badal Sircar's play *Stale News* was first performed in Bengal on sixth July 1979 in Calcutta. Anjum Katyal's *Towards a Theatre Conscience* says that the *Stale News* is a collage and it aims to discuss the Santhal rebellion of 1855 in the contemporary era. Since the play is a collage it aims to juxtapose various issues from the newspaper. Subaltern studies also taken up the ideas from census ratio, archives, newspapers, magazines and judiciary records.

Anuradha's "Cultural Sensibility in Sircar's *Stale News*" discusses about the Santhal tribe as one of the largest tribes in India who suffers a lot at the hands of Britishers. She says that the Satabdi group collects material from records, newspaper and magazines.

In Santhal language Hool is revolt and the flames of the Santhal hool spread like a forest fire. Their beats of drums changed to the beats of revolt. As long as their drums rolled, the tribals stood and fought and fell under the rain of British bullets. (38)

She says that juxtaposition of various news items is to relate with the current sociopolitical scenario. She says:

A contemporized adaptation of Badal Sircar's *Basi Khabar*... completed its maiden run on Sunday evening at Jagriti theatre. Directed by Ajith Hande, the play looks at the Santhal rebellion of 1855 and the juxtaposes it with the state of affairs in the current sociopolitical scenario... (24)

Sumana's "The importance of Indian Street Theatre with special reference to the plays of Badal Sircar" discusses how Sircar's play *Stale News* is different from his other plays. She says:

Stale News, which is different from both *Procession* and *Bhoma* in conception as well as in production, deals with the theme of revolt. It centres around a young man who is bombarded with shattering of information full of contradictions and contrasts which come to him as 'Stale News.' Though he becomes aware through the inspiring guidance of the Dead Man of the pathetic conditions of the poor and the need for the social reform, the young man is not ready to come out of the stranglehold of the traditional, routine life and develop a sense of commitment so as to revolt against the social and economic justice. (65)

The play deals with Santhal and their revolt against the British in Bihar region. Atreya Banerjee opines that indigenous people preserved their land and they also fight against the colonizers in order to save their land and its people. Santhals in *Basi Khabar* and Lakota community in *The Ghost Dance* fight against the colonizers and to save their people from the hands of colonizers in "Looking at *Basi Khabar* and Derek Walcott's *The Ghost Dance* from an Ecocritical Angle". Baneerjee says:

Sircar's *Basi Khabar* (or "Stale News"; 1998) talks about the Santhal Hool (rebellion) of 1855 against the British colonial and upper caste power- structure in the present day Jharkhand, India, while Walcott's *The Ghost Dance* (1989) depicts the tussle between the White Western European origin Americans and the indigenous Lakota Indians, in Dakota, the United States of America. (49)

Kathleen Gough's "Indian Peasant Uprisings" discusses the plight of peasant revolt. Her article discusses the death of forty-two Harijans (Dalits) in Kilvenmani in Tamil Nadu. Indira Parthasarthy's *Kuruthipunal* (The fire of Blood) also discusses the massacre of forty-two Harijans (Dalits) in Kilvenmani. She says: "Goons hired by their landlords arrived on their street at night, imprisoned 42 men, women and children in a hut and burnt these people to ashes" (2). Gough says like Harijans, Santhals also burnt alive and out of them ten were shot dead and thirty three severely wounded and punished. Above all their huts were burnt into ashes. Sircar points the death rate of the Harijans and the violence over the subalterns in the village of Chainpur. He says:

ONE. No! Last Monday, in Village Chainpur under Tekari Police Station in Bihar, a few former landlords opened fire over a land dispute, killing

two Harijans on the spot and wounding six more persons including a woman. It is learnt that the death were decapitated. Their heads were found in a bush last night. The police... (125)

Dipesh Chakrabarty was one of the popular members of Subaltern studies. His work *Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography* says that Peasant's insurgency and protest took place to cleave from the elite Bengali Historiography. He fought for the development of peasants.

Ranajit Guha, the founder of Subaltern Studies says that peasant insurgency took place between 1783- 1900. It is notable that Santhal rebellion took place in 1857 in the middle of the century. He further says that Subalterns' are the makers of their own history that is 'history from below' (4). Here it is contradictory to note Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern speak" she experimented it in the case of Bhuwaneshwari Dutta. She says that her death is not natural, she felt that some mysterious things happened in the case of Dutta. She encounters that her death is a murder rather than a natural death. With the background of peasant revolt and insurgency, it is good to know the history of Santhals.

Scholars believed that Tribes' root could be traced back to the early periods. They belong to the hilly areas and they are called as Adivasis (original inhabitants). The three important tribes are called the Gonds, the Bhils and the Santhals. Their population is up to thirty lakhs. It is good to know that the Government gives priority to the tribals' socio-economic and political development. Scholars believed that they are the victims of past colonialism. They opined that the major problems of tribes are poverty, land alienation, illiteracy and lack of communication.

The tribes not only struggled for basic needs but also suffered from the ecological degradation. The geohazards were considered to be major hurdles in the life of tribes. Besides ecological degradation, they had good time with nature. Santhals were the ancient peace loving tribes lived in the pre-historic times. For them agriculture is the prime livelihood and it is inevitable for them. Santhals were primitive and have discovered their own script called *Ole Chiki*.

Without agriculture they could not do anything in the world. For them forest and trees were their gods and goddesses and they strongly believed that nature would protect them from all kinds of evil. The problem arised when the entire forest region came under the British control. Britishers made Santhals to clean the forest region and to cultivate the land. After the cultivation of lands, they threw Santhals out of the forest without mercy. The Sengupta and Lochan's "Santhal Rebellion – A Counter Insurgency against 'Outsiders' As Ordained By a 'Thakur'" discusses the advent of Britishers and the issues of the Santhals. They say:

After the establishment of East India Company, they faced some major problems in their simple life. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Santhals began moving

towards the forests around the Rajmahal Hills. With the imposition of the Permanent Settlement by Governor General Lord Cornwallis in 1793 AD; the entire region came under the control of the Company. They had imposed various illegal taxes and revenue systems. East India Company gave power to Mahajans and zamindars to collect revenues. (103)

Earlier, Santhals resided in the hilly areas of Manbhum, Chhotanagpur, Palamau and Birbhum. They cleared the forest and made into an agricultural land for cultivation. Britishers in the nineteenth century colonized the hilly areas of the Santhals. The illiterate Santhals did not know anything and they claimed their rights to get back the lands. By seeing the anger of all the Santhals, both the Britishers and the local merchants worried much.

Later Britishers joined hands with the natives—uppercaste landlords, moneylenders and zamindars to fight against Santhals. Their collaboration worked out and most of the Santhals became landless slaves to their masters' houses. The Local moneylenders and zamindars offered loans with multiple interests. Inability to pay the loan amount forced them to become bonded slaves. Unable to bear the domination and exploitation, Santhal stood up for revolution. They revolted against the Britishers in July 1855. They say that it was a reaction against domination. In the revolt against moneylenders and zamindars, Santhals became rebels against moneylenders and the zamindars.

Santhals used the ancient bows and arrows to attack the colonizers. They looted the houses of Britishers and killed many British officials. In order to encounter Santhals the Britishers asked the help of Nawabs. The Nawabs in return gave thousands of elephants to crush down the huts of Santhals. Santhals never surrendered to the Britishers instead they fought against them until the last breath. Lord Dalhousie at last declared the Martial law to ensure peace and happiness.

With this brief background of Santhals, *Stale News* begins and it portrays the relationship between Man and Earth. TWO. "Man. Born on Earth. Chorus. Man. Born on Earth" (115). The play has the powerful message appropriating somebody else's possession is known as stealing. This is what happens in the lives of Santhals. Britishers entered the life of Santhals unknowingly and dominated them. Damim-i-ko is the name of the Santhal population and it is the name of the primitive tribes in prehistoric times.

FIVE. "According to scholars, they were the first in India" (119). For them agriculture is the main occupation for their living. FIVE. "The chief agricultural products of India are rice, jute, wheat, cotton." (117). They cleared the forest region to set up homes and to cultivate lands. They used to sing happily by beating their drums. The Drum is an ancient instrument and it symbolizes both happiness and misery. It is an instrument of the marginalized.

Santhals says that they were undistributed until the eighteenth century. The Britishers colonized the lands of Santhals and demanded for high revenue. FOUR. "...strengthen the foundations of British rule over India. Large quantities of rice, mustard and other oil seeds were sent off to Murshidabad, Calcutta and England. In return the Santhals received..." (126).

Xavier's *The Social History of England* says that "a Board of Revenue was established at Calcutta to supervise the collection of revenue. English Collectors were appointed in each district and the treasury was moved from Murshidabad to Calcutta" (3). The British people joined hands with the natives like uppercaste landlords and zamindars to snatch the lands from Santhals. The poor Santhals were cheated and forced to run out of their land and were asked to leave their property. Their agricultural products and poultry were snatched away and nothing to be left out. SEVEN. "...would lose the crop on his field, his plough, his oxen, even himself and his family to pay the interest. Even after he had repaid ten times the original loan, the burden of the loan..." (127).

In return the moneylenders gave Santhals a sum of amount with a multiple interest for their survival. FIVE. "... a small sum of cash, some salt, tobacco or cloth, the prices of which added up to something far below a reasonable price for their produce. In the rainy season the moneylenders would lend them some money, rice, may be a few other commodities, thus...(126). THREE. "They set up their camp at Barhait, the capital of Damin-i-ko. The Santhals called to then discuss. The dikus were joined in their exploitation of the Santhals by the landholding class created to..." (126). Santhals call the cruel moneylenders as dikus. The *dikus* let the cattle loose into fields of Santhals as a sign of protest. The colonial law is against the subalterns. ONE. The British judges and magistrates were bribed by the landholders and moneylenders. Innocent Santhals were therefore dealt the severest of sentences while their oppressors never received even a warning from the court. (133)

The revenue amount increased from two thousand rupees to forty-three thousand rupees. The Santhal region was frequently cited as a model of effective administration at low cost. In order to put an end to all kinds of oppression they thought that revolt is the only solution to all kinds of problems. The character one say: "In the meantime, years of ceaseless exploitation, oppression and torture had begun to quicken the slow beat their drums to the new rhythm of rebellion..."(133).

The drums inspired blacksmiths, potters, milkmen, oil pressers, leather workers, sweepers and all the oppressed low caste Hindus and also the poor Muslim weavers in Birbhum, Murshidabad, Bhagalpur and Chhotanagpur. Subaltern studies aim to focus the struggles of the subaltern classes. The drum is a powerful weapon of freedom of the subalterns. The moneylenders, zamindars and upperclasses turned a deaf ear to the drum beatings as well as the issues of predicaments of the subalterns.

ONE. The entire military force of the eastern region was assembled at one point on the orders of the Lieutenant-Governor to check the progress of the revolt. Zamindars and moneylenders loyal to the British provided weapons and supplies, arranged for food and shelter and night halts for the army on the march. The indigo planters provided men and money in plenty. The Nawab of Murishdabad was not content with sending only soldiers, supplies and weapons. He sent fifty elephants to crush the Santhals, their wives and children under their feet, to trample their huts into the ground (153).

The struggle of Santhals continued and they hide themselves in the forest region of Bihar. Whenever time occurred they come out and attack the British soldiers. Thousands of Santhals, young and old men and women and children lost their lives. It was Bir Singh Majhi and Gokko the two chief rebels who fought against the *dikus*. He and his rebels ransacked the houses of *dikus*. The British officer flogged Bir Singh and Gokko and arrested them without any proper enquiry.

The four legendary Santhal leaders are Sidho, Kanho, Chanrai and Bhairo inspired the entire Santhals. Their vibrant speeches made the Santhals to fight against the exploiters and oppressors. TWO. "Thirty thousand Santhals joined in the deputation. They carried their traditional weapons with them—the bow and the arrow, the battle-axe and the spear" (147). Unable to tackle the situations Britishers and zamindars ran away. Unfortunately, some of the leaders like Chanrai, Bhairo, Sidho, Kanho died one after another. The leaders died, but they were neither defeated and nor surrendered. The Santhals plundered the higher officials' palaces and houses.

ONE. The zamindars' palaces plundered!

FIVE. The Pakur palace

SIX. The Maheshpur palace!

TWO. The soldiers ran away!

CHORUS. Away!

TWO. The police officers and constables ran away! (150)

For the punishment of looting British houses, the British people exiled some of the Santhals and others were forced into the dangerous forest and shot dead. After the revolt, the Britishers proudly say that it is not a war but it was a genocide. In order to diverge from the power struggle most religious leaders of India led the nation to the religious path. Sircar's aim is to awake the peasant's religionalism. One could raise a question of what is necessary of religionalism in the midst of the revolt. All these social reformers are Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Sri Chaitanya, Rammohun, Sri Baba, Bankimchandra, and Gandhi are interested in spreading religionalism but not in peasants' revolt.

These reformers bring reforms in social, political and economic condition of nation. They are all the great reformers of Bengal Renaissance. ONE. "But the Bengal Renaissance? Reawakening? Nationalism? Social Reform? Vidyasagar?

Bankimchandra Chatterjee? The burning of the satis? Child marriages? (137)
Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the Indian reformist, in his novel *Anandmath* says that the revolt of Sannyasis brought the British to rule India. He says that India needs the help of British to make the country prosper.

BANKIMCHANDRA. Do not grieve, Satyananda. You were possessed of evil spirits which helped you amass your wealth and win your victory. A sinful course can never lead to a virtuous end. Hence you will never be able to save the country. Still it's all for the best. For, without the support of the English there is no way to revive the eternal religion. (138)

Sircar depicts various types of atrocities around the world—caste, communal violence, poverty, flood, police violence and labour clashes. He also discusses the myth of nationalism, anti-colonialism and regionalism. Sircar made all the reformers of Bengal Renaissance to favour the British colonialism. Sircar quotes Rammohun sayings:

RAMMOHUN. I now conclude my Essay in offering up thanks to the Supreme Disposer of the universe, for having unexpectedly delivered this country, from the long continued tyranny of its former Rulers, and placed it under the Government of the English, a nation who not only are blessed with the enjoyment of civil and political liberty... (137)

Sircar not only quotes the sayings of Raja Rammohan Roy he also quotes Bankimchandra Chatterjee's words and Swami Vivekananda's favours of religionism. Bankimchandra says:

BANKIMCHANDRA. Do not grieve, Satyananda. You were possessed of evil spirits which helped you amass your wealth and win your victory. A sinful course can never lead to a virtuous end. Hence you will never be able to save the country. Still it's all for the best. For, without the support of the English there is no way to revive the eternal religion. (138)

Bankimchandra favours the colonialism and he believed that it is good to be under the colonial rule.

VIVEKANANDA. Every improvement in India requires first of all an upheaval in religion. Before flooding India with socialistic or political ideas first deluge the land with spiritual ideas. (139)

Sircar through the two plays portrays the colonial exploitation and peasants' insurgency. These two plays also critique Sircar's anti-colonial struggle and also critique religionism.

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