

The Famine: An insightful journey into the past with modern spectacles

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Abstract- Kanhu Charan Mohanty (1906-1994) is a notable Indian Odia language novelist who wrote nearly fifty-six novels in his career. One of his most celebrated novels "Ha Anna"(1935), which is translated into English as "The Famine " by Manoj Kumar Dash is set against the backdrop of the Orissa Famine of 1866. Apart from the catastrophic effects of famine on human life and surrounding; the novel also deals with social issues such as caste, religion and female identity, economical exploitation and many more. It also presents the dominance of Bengali aristocracy in Odisha during the British Raj and the past glory of Orissa. This paper seeks to analyse various aspects of the novel from a modern frame of reference.

Keywords: Epidemic, Malnutrition, Starvation, Death, Colonialism, Malthusian, Humanitarian, Female Identity, Caste, Religion, Resilience Theory.

INTRODUCTION:

Natural calamities such as drought, flood cyclone, famine occurred once in a 50 years in the pre British history of Odisha - 1345, 1396, 1472, 1556, 1596, 1631, 1661; but in the colonial period, in the 19th century the calamities were frequent. Beginning from failure of crops of 1864 to drought of 1865 to the great famine of 1866 in which one-third of the population were wiped out due to malnutrition, starvation followed by diseases like cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery, smallpox etc. Within short intervals famines continued to hit in 1877, 1885-86, 1888-89, 1897, 1908 and 1918-20. The famine of 1866 also known as "Na - Anka Durbhikshya " is recorded in Kanhu Charan Mohanty's novel " Ha Anna " or "The Famine ". The novel begins with the subjects of the Naripur village especially the virgin girls celebrating Khudurukuni(a festival where unmarried girls worship goddess on every Sunday of Bhadraba/August-September month and offer her khuda/ukhuda or paddy sweetened with jaggery and pray for the well-being of their brothers). But soon this celebration came to an end when the subjects realised that in a greed of getting more money i.e thirty gauni(a kind of pot for measurement of grains)a rupee more than the ordinary price i.e fifty gauni a rupee, they have sold most of the rice to the Mahajanas who moved from one village to another to buy paddy; people waited to sow the seeds, but one after another months passed - Baisakha, Jyestha, Asadha, and so on. Six months passed by but there was no sight of rain. People had money, jewellery but no rice to eat. The Padhan or as villagers call him "Padhan Budha"/"The Old Padhan" of Naripur village had stored three hundred carts of rice in his backyard, but he was not willing to part away with them as he had heard from astrologer that the famine is going to last for over three years. The innocent, helpless and hungry subjects of the Naripur village with great hope decided to meet the Zamindar Pashupati Babu living behind half dead children with a promise they will come back with some food. On reaching the courtroom of the Zamindar, the villagers came to know that Naeb Babu, who manages the property and fulfils the needs of Zamindar, who was residing at Calcutta. On getting the command of Zamindar that "famine has struck Bengal come quickly with money or rice whatever you get to help people" (pg 54), he had opened the stores of paddy and rice to sell away and people from far and near reached to buy paddy in exchange of money and gold and in four days almost half of the paddy was sold and Naeb Babu loading fifty bullock cart with rice and carrying all the money had set out for Bengal. The outturn of rice crop of 1864, followed by scanty rainfall in 1865, the distress began to appear in many places subsisting on fruits and roots. People left their homes and wandered from village to village in search of "a handful of rice" and "gruel of water". A number of people, cattle died out of malnutrition and starvation. As if this much was not enough, soon after, diseases like Cholera and Diarrhoea began to spread. The villagers of Naripur decided to plea the old Padhan to distribute the surplus rice among the villagers, keeping away enough rice to serve his family for three years. But the old Padhan was adamant. He was not a person to expect kindness from. The cries of the innocent children and adults fell on deaf ears. Consequently, with the help of the servant Boia Bauri, the villagers set fire to the old Padhan's house and looted all the paddy from his granary. The old Padhan was badly burnt and died in guilt and regret for his past sins. Had he listened to their cries and pleas; and helped the villagers; he would not have seen such a horror-struck day. All around the state, when people were dying out of starvation and diseases; Padhan Budha suffered burnt skin for days and at last died as a result of his stone-heartedness; and thereupon, justice prevailed. Death is inevitable. No one can escape it, elite or not.

If not due to the famine, then for his own sins. For instance, in "The Masque of Red Death", the prince Prospero desperately tried to avoid the plague called "Red Death" and hides himself in his lofty walls, nevertheless, as at the end of the day there is darkness, similarly, at the end of seven rooms there was the "Black Room" which brought death and destruction to the prince.

The old Padhan's family constituted of his youngest son Jagabandhu Padhan, nick-named as Jagu; his late son's wife or his daughter-in-law and grandson Benu and a woman named Neti whom he had picked up from the street, gave her shelter in return she promised to fill up the gap his elder son had left i.e to take care of his family and property. The wicked Neti had other plans- she had the old Padhan in her control and like a Santaani ruled on every member of the family. She quarrelled with the daughter-in-law of the house and as a result the daughter-in-law preferred to stay at her brother's house. After the death of the old Padhan, the wicked Neti took away all the gold and money and ran away. Witnessing the destruction of Padhan dynasty Boia Bauri, the servant felt guilty and remorseful. He was trying his best to arrange at least one meal a day for Jagu, but day by day the situation was becoming severe. Jagu decides to leave Boia house and go in search of work. However, at a time like this, where people are unable to fulfil their basic needs, there is no food, no water who will have works to do. Thus, Jagu went on to the street to beg. On the other hand Boia went door to door and asked the villagers for some rice from the stolen stocks, but the villagers did not give him. Out of guilt and revenge he put on fire in the entire village and ran away. Hence, all the conspiracies of the villagers came to an end. The entire village got wiped out due to fire. People who survived the fire went on in search of "Annachhatras" (Public Kitchen).

Mahanta (the head of monastery) Paramanand Paramhans was a godly man who cannot bear the sorrows and sufferings of others. He got impatient on listening to the news of calamities and ordered his caretakers to open Annachhatras at many places in his Zamindari zone. The hungry ones on not getting food had been reduced to skeletons/"kangalas"; had occupied the entire land, sitting with their pots and pans. Could the Mahanta feed all these hungry mouths? Gradually the Annachhatras were closed, unable to maintain the demand and supply. Later on people got news that the Government had started relief works in Puri (May 1866) under the department of public works. The mode of payment was money wages. The nature of works started from the excavation of canals to the construction of embankments and roads. People did not have the strength to walk or in that case even stand. How would they work? When the initial plan failed, the government finally imported rice from Burma. Some wheat was imported as well. Half of the people died on their way to Puri. In addition to famine and drought, a great flood came to wash away everything. Those who survived the famine, had to fight the flood. For nearly twelve days flood water had surrounded many villages. People took shelter on the branches of trees. Hungry bellies, weaknesses and chilled weather led to fever and pneumonia. Some won the battle and some lost it. Every minute people died, it became difficult even for the bullocks to carry the dead ones to the graveyard. In a severe situation like this, who thought about feeding animals, when keeping the human alive was difficult. A handful of rice to the people who are starving for months was definitely not sufficient. As a result, to mitigate the hunger, they started drinking the drain water, collecting food particles from the drain water and eating it. Hunger was at a point where people did not mind eating dead bodies-"not far away another person is sitting in the shadows while holding a dagger in his hand. In front of him is lying a dead-body, stretched, one of his hands is lying on the lap of the kangala"(pg. 233); witnessing the sight Jagu anxiously says "for survival at last man will eat human flesh" Consequently, these insanitary conditions led to cholera and other epidemics.

By the time Jagu reaches Puri defeating hunger, weakness, temptation to eat human flesh; from a strong built man like Bhimsena he has become a skeleton, a kangala. At Puri he gets a glimpse of his sister-in-law i.e Benu's mother who has entered the house of prostitutes in order to save her life. He also comes in contact with the wicked Neti who had somehow managed to reach Puri and she has become insane. She is collecting food particles from the drainage water. Jaggu witnesses a group of hungry insane people have surrounded the dead body of a child. Jagu joins them in order to fulfil his hunger, takes a dagger, turns the body and suddenly is awestruck. It was the dead body of Benu, his nephew. He has become the food of the hungry men. He cries saying "Padhan dynasty perished". Unable to fight anymore, he takes his last breath and dies on the lap of Uma, his Mahaprasad sister and the love of his life.

ANALYSIS:

Examining the novel "The Famine " one can say that conflict is the biggest driver of famine. Hunger levels worsen when conflict drives large numbers of people from their homes, their land and their jobs. Famines tend to occur in areas where access is restricted, a common factor in conflict zones. Had the old Padhan compromised and stretched his friendly hands towards the villagers, embraced them with kind words and distributed his paddy and rice, keeping away enough for himself and his family; the situation of Naripur village would have been different. He would not have died a harsh death. Neither his, nor the families of other villagers would have perished. In the Annachhatras also, the hunger-stricken quarrelled among each other, stole others' cards which were provided to the people who come under Mahanta

Paramanand Paramhansa's Zamindari, to get food. Millions of people and the supply was less. It was Uma, an orphan girl of thirteen from Naripur village came to the street with Moti's mother to escape from the tortures of her cruel aunt and selfish uncle; who gave her palm leaf Card to the grandmother and granddaughter which Moti's mother had got it from the road. Good deeds are always rewarded. Mahanta sitting in his veranda was witnessing the scene in front of him. At such a tender age when she herself is a victim to the famine, she kept her morality intact. He gave her shelter. Similarly, Jagu, before going to Puri was working in Haripur State, Nimatira village, at Samanta Srijukta Sundar Pattnaik's palace. Along with the other workers, he worked as a pond digger. He was able to fulfil his basic needs- Food, Water and Shelter. Apart from that he saved the cheap wages he got. He did not complain. One day Pattnaik Babu accused Jagu of having stolen a gold chain from his six year old son, Hema's neck. Jagu, who once belonged to a dignified family, could not bear the insult and left the place. Later it was discovered that Mrs. Pattnaik had kept the gold chain somewhere and had forgotten. That day had Jagu not left the palace, he would not have starved to death.

Lack of technology is another major reason why the epidemics earlier to the 20th century could not be handled properly and protective measures could not be taken. Had it been the 21st century and not the 19th century, then the scenario would have been completely different. Through technologies like radio, television, newspaper, social-media, internet etc people could connect themselves with the world. On the other hand the people of Naripur village were unable to know that the Zamindar's pet servant, Naeb Babu had announced to sell rice and paddy. The villagers had money and gold but due to lack of communication they did not get the information at the right time and were at high loss. Through the use of technology, the government could reach the people, communicate with the people directly. In the novel when two officials/sahebs from the British government came to enquire about the situations and the circumstances. The villagers were incapable of communicating with them because of the language barrier. It was Hakim, who communicated and translated the voice of hunger-stricken people to the government officials. Listening to the grievances of the villagers The sahibs uttered "the Mahanta and Zamindars have kept a lot of paddy in store. There will be no famine. It is a known fact. In order to raise the rate, they have kept back the paddy and rice. When the rate rises they will naturally start selling." Ira Klein pointed out, "Millions of lives were sacrificed during the 19th Century because the pull of humanitarianism on the government was not as strong as the claims of Malthusianism and social Darwinism". The Malthusian theory of population was coined by Thomas Robert Malthus, 18th century British philosopher and economist who examined the relationship between population growth and food supply. He believed that disequilibrium exists because of increasing population rate and decreasing food supply. The theory states that the supply of food cannot keep up with the growth of the human population, inevitably resulting in disease, famine, war, and calamity. We might believe that the British government was a believer of Malthusian Theory rather than Humanitarian Philosophy. If not this, then why would the govt. not listen to the woeful tales of the victims? Why would they give some lame excuses and withdraw from their responsibilities? It was only the Mahanta, the head of Puri Matha or Monastery, who was kind-hearted, caring and empathetic towards the subjects. He believed the subjects are his god and it is his duty to serve the people. On his command Radhi, widowed from a very tender age has dedicated herself to the worshipping of Lord Lakshmikant, Uma and Sadananda Adhikari, a Bramhachari and nephew of the Mahanta along with other servants brought the malnourished bodies and diseased people to the newly arranged rooms inside the matha, served and medicated them.

Since the Bhopal gas leak disaster of 1984, 1999 Orissa Cyclone, 2001 Bhuj Earthquake, December 2004 Tsunami, Super Cyclone Phailin in Odisha 2013, severe cyclonic Storm Fani in Bay of Bengal in April 2019 and many more. The death toll in such storms have greatly reduced because of proactive actions by the Indian Government and Indian Air Force team. Helicopters assisted the team by transporting army and medical troops to affected areas; distributing food, water, clothes, medicines, supplements etc. Under the Colonial rule no such measures were confiscated, firstly, because Britishers believed the Indians were "the others", uncivilised, irrational, dirty brown beast and secondly, due to lack of technological innovations. The health care system was not well organised in the state. The District hospitals were ill equipped and had a large number of shortages of doctors and paramedic staff.

Apart from the dreadful and frightening famine, in the novel Mohanty also dealt with social issues such as caste, religion, identity and superstition. The famine had a great influence on each and every aspect of human life. The social habits and behaviour took up a new form to face the challenges of the time. For instance, in the novel, when Padhan Babu heard that his elder daughter-in-law or Benu's mother on her way back to her in-laws, her palanquin was robbed by beggars and she was beaten up to unconsciousness; having no alternative a Muslim gentleman of Bikrampur Village had given her shelter; Padhan retorts "she has stayed a night at a Pathan's place."(pg.76) He was adamant about discussing the matter with the other villagers of his caste, till then he asked the gentleman to send her to her father's place. However, when Padhan's house was burnt by the villagers, he took shelter at Bouri's place (a lower caste) explaining "let us survive first, then we think about caste matters."(pg.122). Later the Pradhan guilty confessed that he

was harsh towards the goddess Lakshmi of the dynasty and thus, the Lord of justice could not tolerate and cursed him to death.

In the novel, when Uma at first came to the street with Moti's mother, she was unable to accept the offering of rice from a Pathan old woman's hand. To which Moti's mother explained that yesterday, she had some rice from the pannas (a lower caste) hand and later, the leftovers from the house of Pathan. However nothing changed. She is still the same human. What matters more in such a catastrophic situation is to Survive. She further extended her explanation saying- "We all belong to one caste, the caste of the Wretched." (pg. 133). "Lord Jagannath has unfurled the flag of equality, the people of that land has stopped the consideration of caste and creed. In order to teach humanity a lesson, the famine as a scourge of the Gods has come only to open the eyes of the people. The consideration of caste and creed, touchable and untouchable, great and small are all illusions. All of us are the children of God. We all belong to one race, the human race." (pg.134). Hunger in acute form does not recognize any social barrier. Men and Women in hungry stomachs took food in the free kitchen called 'Chhattar' breaking all barriers of caste and religion.

The Identity Crisis is very much evident in the novel. The term "Identity Crisis" was coined by German psychologist Erik Erikson in psychological context. It is the stage of psychological development in which identity crisis may occur which is called identity cohesion vs. role confusion. During this stage, adolescents are faced with physical growth, sexual maturity, and integrating ideas of themselves and about what others think of them. Similarly, Identity Crisis is also talked about in diasporic and partition literature, where the writer or the characters have a nostalgic feeling towards the homeland, and continue to survive in the fragmented existence of unfamiliar hostland in a continuous effort to create a third space for themselves. However, the present novel doesn't come under either of these literature. The focus here is more on the loss of identity faced mostly by the female characters. For instance, Uma after being adopted by the Mahanta as his daughter to worship the Lord like Radhi; her name is changed to Lakshmi. A poor, orphan girl who has lived for 13 years under the name of Uma is suddenly exposed to a new world of Lakshmi. It's not her name, her complete identity changes. All of a sudden from an orphan, she becomes a daughter with a father, brother (Sadananda) and mother (Rani Ma or Radhi). Again, the daughter-in-law of the Padhan family was called Benu's mother, the aunt of Uma was called Renu's mother and the woman who accompanied Uma was called Moti's mother. These women certainly had a maiden name, however, after becoming a mother their maiden names got disbursed. We don't know how many times society has changed their name. In every new stage of life, a woman faces an identity crisis. A girl leaves behind all the pamperings of her maiden life and enters into a new stage of marital life. In earlier days girls were married off at a very tender age. Instead of mending the gap with care, the in-laws give her a new name, a new identity, and try to modify her personality according to their wishes. Later when the same woman sacrificing her previous identity, has created her own space and with a lot of hope enters the stage of Motherhood, her identity gets distorted. Motherhood brings a great change in a woman's life; she changes physically, mentally, her priorities shift from her usual work, husband and family to the new Being. What does a woman wish for? A little bit of consideration? Unlike Uma and other female characters, who continued to suffer the confusion, fragmentation and loss of one's own identity; a modern woman to some extent has created her own identity, where she can choose to keep her maiden surname, even after her marriage. Society now recognises her by her own name rather than her child's name. Now she has her own right, space, voice and independence.

CONCLUSION:

Resilience is made up of five pillars: self awareness, mindfulness, self care, positive relationships, & purpose. By strengthening these pillars, one in turn, becomes more resilient. To cope up with famines like that of 1866. The victims needed to strengthen these pillars. However, the Odia subjects were not educated enough to be aware of the grave condition of the state. Otherwise the villagers of Naripur would not have sold away their only hope of survival. Thereupon, we found that lack of education wiped out three of the pillars i.e. awareness, mindfulness, and selfcare. Positive relationships were also not seen among the people. Had they been more supportive to each other; the Padhan and in that matter the entire village would not have been wiped out in the fire in an inhumane manner. Had Uma's aunt been sympathetic towards Uma, if not loving like a mother; she would have not left the house and come on to the street. Yes, one pillar stood intact throughout the novel i.e Purpose. Each and every subject had a purpose. Be it life, their children, or love. And once the purpose of life is gone, the subject falls prey at the hands of famine. For most of the characters in the novel the purpose was to live their life, by hook or crook if they survive this year; next year there will be rain, harvest, festivals and happiness. But, how long one can live, leaving behind one's family, children, kith and kin. And how long can one pillar of purpose stand erect?, while all other pillars have not been established.