



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Lyrical Pathos of the Mutiny: 1857 in Folksongs

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Abstract

Words, words and words only can define the pathos and turmoil within. Bygone era could not be returned back, but its pathos could only be captured by these lexes intertwined in a strange combination and that too in folksongs. 1857 was the year on the historical canvas which captured this ethos and pain that was so difficult to obliterate from the mind. So, these words and lines crafted by the expert moulder of the lexes started becoming visible on the pages of the historical records. 1857 was the year, when the whole of India got united against the whites. They wanted to break the fetters and live a free life of their own and in their own country. They were called as rebels, because they rebelled against might of a supreme empire. They rebelled against an empire, which was supreme in power in comparison to them. This was an abortive rebellion, but the spirit it ignited flickered through the millennium and it gave them the strength that was later revealed in the freedom struggle. My paper is

an attempt to read the events related to the mutiny of 1857 as expressed in the folksongs.

Keywords

Mutiny; Folksongs; Rebels; Fetters; Whites.

1857 was a historical event, an event which shook the might of the white empire. 1857 was the event that caused upheaval throughout British India, that caused a spirit of freedom movement among the masses and its repercussions were heard throughout the country. It was such an event that became the part of historical records. Its pain and pathos was such that its lyrical version appeared in the folksongs. These songs in their rhyme and rhythm, lyrics and words captured the different events and sufferings associated with the event. Eastern Uttar Pradesh and the adjoining areas of Western Bihar, were the areas that were associated with the rebels activity and therefore the folksongs refer to these areas only. Humiliation, oppression and cruelty by the colonials were authentically recorded and expressed through the folksongs that would be discussed now onwards. Joshi writes that these folksongs are “a very reliable source material” and “they constitute a very authentic record of the outlook of the people, they are guides to the political experience and aspiration of the common people during and soon after the 1857 uprising” (ix).

White was the colour of terror during the English rein. It used to be colour of fear, authority and cruelty. The captains and colonels were devoid of mercy for the common man. They were white and stern faces full of anguish and wrath for the blacks who were the natives. In one of the folksongs, a common man’s terror on seeing the sight of colonial officers like Captain Lake was described:

Ten companies of jawans

are captained by one English man
They order, "God damn you! Fire"
It takes our breath away. (Joshi 3)

English, who were white in colour were looked with hatred by the natives of India. They wanted to humiliate them, oppress them and kill them. They were the usurpers of their land, usurper of their religions and customs, usurper of their happiness and liberty and above all usurper of their self-respect. There was an inner urge to humiliate these white people and to beat them, because they were responsible for the snatching of their rights and freedom. They were the ones who, brought thralldom on their threshold. Therefore, in one of the folksongs an English officer was humiliated publicly:

Oh come and look
in the Bazar of Meerut
The firangi is waylaid and beaten
in the open Bazar of Meerut.
Look, oh look, he is beaten
His gun is snatched
His horse lies dead
His revolver is battered
in the open Bazar
He is waylaid and beaten. (Joshi 9)

Sepoys were rebellious and full of courage and they started pillaging and looting the administrative structures which symbolized the power of the colonial masters. These structures were demolished and people were able to break the fetters and got themselves liberated from the colonial mindset. It was as if bondage was broken, as if colonial ideology was shattered, as if oppressive regime was broken and above all mindset became free. Rebels full of heroic spirit were racing through the streets and towns raising slogans and encouraging others to join them in the processions. One of the Panwara song

celebrates the freedom of sepoys and the prisoners. These prisoners were set free by the rebels from the Thana. It describes:

They are up now at Masaurhi, and
 Masaurhi thana smashed.
 The sipahees all gain freedom
 Now Punpun they raid.
 ...There they surround the Golghar
 stored much gunpowder there.
 The prisoners all gain freedom. (Joshi 129)

Mutiny also brought many realizations with it, i.e. realization of the hidden virtues in native lords. White master was alluring to the eyes, but in regard to the virtues like honesty, courage and idealism, native black master was more reliable. They all collected behind their native lords and not the white master. This white master imposed high land revenue on them, oppressed them and humiliated them. There was no trace of sympathy and benevolence in the eyes of these cruel and stern faces. But, these white masters tried to win the favour of native lords for their own benefit. It was the wish of the common people that the native lords should not be attracted towards the allurements given by the white master. One character Rana Beni Madho Singh in one of the folksongs was not attracted towards these allurements given by the English:

.....the Lat Implore: "oh, come, Brother Rana, join us."
 Martial honours from London
 I'll get in its lieu,
 A Suba in Oudh, I'll carve out, and place it under you.

Rana gave the answer: "As long as I breathe, my only resolve you must know/is to dig at your foundations and throw you out" (Joshi 37).

Kunwar Singh, one of the characters in the folk songs depicted as the leader who was conscious towards the atrocities committed by the English on the native people. He was enraged on listening to the acts of firangi like looting

and burning of the cities etc. He was attached to the people's needs and difficulties. Therefore, he is celebrated in these songs:

The firangi has oppressed my beloved country
 The tales of atrocities moved Kunwar Singh's heart.
 The firangi has come down as a looter.
 The firangi loots and burns cities and villages
 The tales of atrocities enrage Kunwar Singh. (Narayan 94)

There were characters who sided with the British, though they were the part and parcel of this land only, but they deceived their own people. They were labelled as traitors, deceivers and unfaithful. One of the folksong describes the Raja of Dumaraon, leader of the visen clan of rajputs as traitor and be in the party of the whites secretly:

There is a place Dumaraon in Bhojpur
 many a firangi live there.
 All the visens hide in their houses
 While Kunwar Singh is left alone. (Narayan 90)

One more character bania is also depicted in the folksongs as the one who deceived his own people and not willing to co-operate with the native poor people. He is depicted as evil minded person and not willing to give food to the sepoys. These sepoys requested bania: "We've had no bite/for full four nights and days/send us some ration and fuel wood". But he refused and asked them to feast on open feast of Kunwar Singh:

No ghee is here
 Nor fuel nor ration possible
 No succor hence, I fear (Joshi 109)

The merchants and banias sided with the British for their own interests and they oppressed their fellowmen who weak and poor. These poor people were also oppressed by the replacement of the policy of replacement of handmade clothes with machine made goods. These were the marginalized

groups and later they became active participants in the mutiny because of the wrong being done to them. Initially the aim of the mutiny was one to liberate the country from the whites, but as the time progressed, the aim was lost in the dust, rubble and chaos. They started looting and plundering the villages, because they wanted food and provisions. But there was none, and therefore they started looting the common man for ration and food. Some have criticized this act of plunder by them. But, in folksongs these acts of plunder are not criticized rather they show another point of view:

Other folk amassed in the loot
Shawls, oh such shawls!
My love, he looted kerchief's only
There's your Sadar Bazar of Meerut!
Oh, my love is so inept
in this business of looting! (Joshi 11)

Not only was the common man looted, but also the white man. His looting was great sense of enjoyment to them. In one of the folksongs, his looting is celebrated. In other words it could be said that it was an act of victory over the whites, to suppress them, to humiliate them publicly. His symbols of power are shattered publicly like, horse, tank and pistol:

The Firangi was looted in the market of Hathras
His horse was looted
His tank was looted
See, his pistol was looted in the open Bazar. (Rag 125)

It was not only a war, but it was something more. It was snatching of the glory, power authority and status from the native rajas. It was their land and they only wanted to rule, but these whites usurped their land and authority from them. Colonisers shattered their authority and tried to desecrate their religion. In one of the Awadhi folksongs, this mutiny was referred as the calamity. King's begum was weeping over the lost splendour and ravished

state. They were still optimistic about the regaining of the authority by the kings. Chaos and disorder was the scene of the day:

Sripati Maharaj, oh Lord of wealth and plenty

this calamity avert!

Oh, when shall his majesty, our king, regain

his own state?

....The artillery lies abandoned in the dumps

and the elephants are left unattended in their stables.

....In the Kaiser Bagh now the Begums weep and wail

hair hanging loose in disorder. (Joshi 27-9)

In many of the folksongs, women folk incited their men to fight for their honour. They even asked them to wear sari and bangles and hide their faces. They used to incite their men to fight bravely for the honour of their country. They do not even fear becoming widow. For them their country's honour is more of interest than their men. That itself shows the importance of their country:

There has been this proclamation of the babu

there has been invitation to break bangles

there has been an invitation to wipe the vermilion of

forehead

there has been an invitation to be called a widow

there is an invitation to fight fiercely (Narayan 88)

Thus folksongs depicted the varied perspectives on 1857. Common poor people were the most affected. They were the sufferers of the various exploitative policies of the whites. Colonial rule subjugated them a lot, and therefore they started resenting them after sometime. We came across different native rajas who took active part in the mutiny, different classes of the society who took active part in the uprising, different classes of the society who sided with the British, different classes of the society who motivated others and so on

and so forth. They echoed of loss of power, authority from the hands of the natives and commiseration over the lost splendour. They embody in their rhythm the spirit of nationalism. Their lyrics remind one of the bygone era, of the people's first combined effort of ousting of the whites. They are the records of spirit of the different region of the people. It was the calamity for them. It records the difficulties faced by the sepoys during the uprising. It records the aspirations of the people of a free country. Their words and phrases invoke in us the spirit of the bygone era and which could be read and sing only in the folksongs discussed above.

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

- Afrin, Farah. "Lyrical Pathos of the Mutiny: 1857 in Folksongs." *Literary Quest* 2.9 (2016): 26-33. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.