

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.6.Issue.2.2019 (Apr-June)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

KALI SANTRA: A SILENT REVOLUTIONARY IN *OPERATION? BASHAITUDU*

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.6219.17>



ABSTRACT

In Mahasweta Devi's *Operation? Bashai Tudu* the central action revolves around the character of Bashai, but the character of Kali Santra is also equally important. Bashai and Kali were known to each other for ages since the peasant movement, but Bashai withdrew himself from the Party-activity being disillusioned with the agenda of the Kisan Sabha. But Kali's loyalty to Party remained intact because the sense of being betrayed which was burning in Bashai was not present in Kali. It was Bashai who fought with the jotedars, moneylenders and establishments being driven by hunger and deprivation. Bashai was a hero to the landless and grief-torn tribal communities. Slowly but surely Kali came under the influence of Bashai and gradually he also turned as a revolutionary. He did not only support Bashai's armed battle, but also directly questioned Samanta, the big leader of the Front, to implement the Government approved minimum wage for the agricultural labourers. In this study attempts will be made to show how Kali misguided the administration and emerged from a loyal Party-worker to be a revolutionary.

Key Words: Party, Kisan Sabha, landless, loyal, revolutionary

In this distinguished work of Mahasweta Devi, *Operation? Bashai Tudu* (1978), Kali Santra is the second most important character after Bashai. Although some readers may consider him on the same level with Bashai because without Kali Santra, Bashai is an incomplete character and vice versa. Mahasweta, through this masterpiece exposes to the world how the marginalized are drowned in perpetual pains and sufferings. Bashai and Kali were known to each other for ages, but they separated on the ideological and the tactical ground of the Party-line. Kali Santra belonged to the middle class morality, inherited some landed property, which he gave away among the needy ones to create an image of a true comrade in the public perception. On the contrary, Bashai was born a Santal and as usual with such people, he was a landless agricultural labourer. Still, Kali had developed a deep sense of respect for Bashai because he was a true comrade who sacrificed his life to the cause of the most distressed and the most denied peasant community. Bashai is represented as a revolutionary symbol of the Medis, Lepchas, Bhutias, Santals, Oraons, Rajbanshis, Gorkhas, Mundas, Lodhas, Kherias, Mahalis, Gonds and many more. Being extremely neglected and deprived for a long time, Bashai had his own way of resistance, though in most of the cases it was an armed resistance causing violence and bloodshed. But Kali was a loyal Party worker unlike Bashai. Still, he secretly supported Bashai's armed revolution going against the party-line. During four deaths that Bashai had to die between

1970 and 1976, Kali Santra was summoned by the administration to identify Bashai's corpse. But from fifth death onwards Kali was not asked to identify Bashai's dead body because his integrity to Party was under suspicion. Kali felt extremely satisfied when he came to know about Bashai's battle against the Jotedars and the moneylenders. The following passage could be illuminating to understand Kali's political stand, 'Kali never succeeded in breaking out of this vicious cycle himself, but Bashai had. The thought itself brought a strange exhilaration to Kali. Bashai had succeeded. It gave Kali a strange sense of victory somehow'(70).

This novella has at its background the political and social history of the Naxalite Movement in Bengal between 1967 and 1977. The Naxalite Movement got its fuel from the Tebhaga Movement of 1946-50. The government approved acts on the ceiling of landholding in 1954 and 1971 went unimplemented and unaccepted. Moreover, Kisan Sabha which was formed in 1936 to look after the interests of the poor agricultural labourers, continued to appease the jotedars and moneylenders. In the Preface Mahasweta writes, 'The problem is not always confined to land. The peasant as an agricultural labourer is denied his legitimate wages. He has to struggle continuously for water, for seeds, for fertilizers, and live his life out in hunger and poverty' (xxii). So many novels, *Grame Chalo* (1972) by Swarnakamal Mitra, *Mahakaler Rather Ghora* (1977) by Samaresh Basu, *Shyaola* (1977) by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, *Ebhabei Egoi* (1978) by Jayanta Joardar, *Kalbela* (1982) by Samaresh Majumdar, *Hajar Churashir Maa*(1973) by Mahasweta Devi etc. have been written in the context of the Naxalite Movement, but **Operation? Bashai Tudu**, seems to go beyond the gross dimension of the then social reality.

From the police station, Mato Dome went to Kali Santra to inform him about, 'Bashai is dying'(2). Kali is introduced by the novelist very simply, 'Kali Santra, middle- aged, now part of the new regime, but once a colleague of Bashai's when they had been in the peasant movement together, edited and published Jilla Barta, a shoddily produced weekly'(3). But his role goes beyond this apparent presentation.

Kali Santra, through hard struggles developed the image of an old and committed party-member. He had his cataract operated when there was a free eye operation campaign. His son, Anirban, scolded him as a fool because he did not use his Party affiliation as an escalator to material prosperity. Mahasweta writes that, '...he had never known the prosperity that came so easily to the Party babus who flourished in the cities'(4). Kali felt himself utilized through his long experiences, 'The Party had only made use of him. If he ever wore well-laundered clothes, the more successful Party members would take it almost as an affront and accusing glances at him'(4).

Being informed from Mato that Bashai was dying at Charsha Forest, Kali immediately and secretly left his office for Sadar. But this was the first time when he was going on his own to see Bashai on his fifth death, the last four times he had to go under the instructions of the higher authorities to identify Bashai's corpse. Kali got down from the truck at Sadar and it was deadly darkness all around. To go to Charsha Kali needed Betul's help. When he reached Betul's hut he found him remaining awake from the pain in spine. Betul easily understood that there was something very serious, so Kali had come at this late hour:

'He said, 'Come, let's go to the courtyard.'

'Kali said, 'I'll go into the forests.'

'Bashai Tudu?'

'So you know?'

'This time he won't make it.'

'D'you know where he is?'

'Let's go. I'll come with you.'

'Would you? You know, the police are on the chase'(20).

Crossing a roaring river by the help of a buffalo Kali reached MushaiTudu's house at Paltakudi where he met Bashai. After a lunch with *khesaridaal* and rice, they sat under the shadow of a tree. They talked about the Party and their participation in so many political proceedings, meetings and conferences. It was Bashai who had to talk mostly. Bashai's tirades were concerned with the minimum wage of the agricultural labourers and his sense of betrayal by the Kisan Sabha, which indirectly upheld the interests of the Jotedars and the moneylenders. Bashai's contempt for the higher caste was as bitter as 'neem' leaves, but Kali could not protest because whatever he told was undeniable. Kali realized, 'Bashai's words were unpleasant, but bitter and true, like the juice squeezed out of the *neem* leaves. In bitter rage, Kali Santra's bile rose to his throat, but he had to admit that what Bashai said was the truth'(28). In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Mahasweta says,

'The tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel. There has never been a meeting point. The mainstream simply doesn't understand the parallel.....The Government of India has pauperized them. They have to beg for everything they need. They do not understand mainstream machination, so although there are safeguarding laws against land-grabbing, tribal land is being sold illegally every day, and usurped by mainstream society all over India, especially in West Bengal' ((Imaginary Maps, iii).

Kali always had nourished a sense of respect for Bashai because he believed that Bashai's life was dedicated to the well-being of the dispossessed and the disinherited. Bashai told Kali,

'You and me didn't join the Party to make capital out of our politics. But Samanta-babu? Lakshman-babu? Tarak-babu? Or our red comrade Hassan? Haven't they turned the Communist Party into a Jotedari deal? Samanta had his own house first, then a car, then a job for his son, all of them big leaders, they came to be known in Calcutta, and all that they made out of the name "Communist"'(34-35).

Bashai continued tirelessly to express his anger over the policies of the Left Party. He told Kali that nothing was done to redeem the pains of the agricultural labourers by the Kisan Sabha. The grass-root workers were the biggest asset for the Party, but in turn, Party did not allow them forming an organized movement for implementation of the government approved minimum wage that was first passed in 1953. 'Kali could have told Bashai that both the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party acquired a special Indian character on Indian soil, and came to follow the law of the ladder. Rise-a-rung-and-forget-the-lower-rung was the single law of climbing that persisted in every field of Indian experience, in religion, politics, business, education, culture, and personal life'(36). But he did not.

Kali clearly realized that Bashai's disillusionment of the Party started from his sense of injustice done to the 3.7 million agricultural labourers. In Left politics things are expected to have been something different. It meant love for all irrespective of social positions. Love is associated with responsibility. 'The politics of the left- being a Communist- meant loving. It could not mean delicacies for some and hunger for others. But that is what it has come to be'(41).

The honest Party-workers like Bashai were disappointed with the Party-designs. The life-line of the Party was its ground-level workers, but Party denied their rights. Instead, it indirectly pampered the Jotedars and the moneylenders who deprived the agricultural labourers of their legitimate rights. Kali felt,

'It was a destructive process for the Party. The honest Party cadres were the soil from which the Party drew sustenance, and when the cadres themselves were riddled with doubts, the soil started eroding. Finger erosion left the soil barren. If the erosion continued at the grassroots level, it could bring the Party crumbling down. The very thought set off a landslide within Kali'(44).

Kali was told that the first law for minimum wage was passed in 1953, then revised in 1959, revised again in 1968. But it existed in paper, in records, not in practice. The Jotedars did not accept the government approved minimum wage. Even, the Jotedars refused to draw canal water for cultivation because that would help the sharecroppers and the agricultural labourers. The loan business of the moneylender who was also a

Jotedar would face huge loss. So, they prayed for bad weather, famine, drought and natural calamity. The administration could not compel the Jotedars draw canal water for cultivation. 'Kali knew that the honest cadres of the Party were facing the same questions all over the tribal belt which was seething with resentment against the Front. They had had expectations from the Communists, never from the Congress. They complained that the Front was there to support only those peasant movements that would not affect the interests of the Jotedars'(55). During the conversation Bashai wanted to know what Kali was going to tell Samanta about him. Kali replied that he would tell Samanta that Kali had left Party but did not join the Naxalite. In the morning Bashai took Kali to the canal to catch fishes. Bashai was catching fishes standing in knee-deep water. The following passage was full of implications, 'Then Bashai did something that was totally unexpected. He dragged Kali by the leg straight into the canal. He said, 'It's not fair, with me in the water and you on the bank, watching. You need a splash yourself''(61).

One rainy night in 1977 Kali came back to the forest of Charsha in the hope of identifying Bashai's dead body fifth time. Betul, all on a sudden, caught his arm and took him to a desolate log hut in the forest. In that night, the army was searching the forest secretly. Kali was bound to remain confined to that log hut for some days and was recollecting his past association with Bashai. 'But time was running out fast for Kali. Time. Kali did not know if he would reach Bashai this time. To miss the fifth time after having identified Bashai's dead body four times earlier would be a criminal offence. If he failed, Kali would never forgive himself'(68). Kali was more loyal to Bashai than he was to his Party, and to keep Bashai's resistance permanently active, he betrayed the Party and the administration. Kali desperately felt the urge to reach Bashai by any means. He believed,

'Bashai's death meant yet another action that made the administration sweat with panic. When Kali did not go by himself, it was the police who had dragged him along. If he did not go, Bashai would say, 'Riding the high horse, comrade? I die, and you can't even come to identify the lahaash?' It hurt him there under the chest. Every time it seemed to be a new Bashai.....Yet whoever it was that he now meets, it was Bashai. Wringing the wind by the neck with both hands'(69).

Remaining confined to the log hut in 1977, Kali went back to 1970 May, the time of Operation Banari. He remembered how Bashai's face was shattered with bullets beyond recognition for killing the Jotedar of Banari, Pratap Goldar who was 'its uncrowned king, its patron goddess against diseases, its local deity, its incarnation of the ultimate law, all rolled into one'(71). Kali was taken to identify the corpse. Hearing a policeman who remembered that the man when he shot at him raised his hands and wrung the neck of the air, Kali confirmed the corpse as Bashai's. Kali came back grief-stricken and was waiting anxiously 'like a strung bow'(95). Fifteen days later some Sodan from Paltakudi arrived at Kali's office and informed him to meet Bashai in the village Dishai with 'Toramychin Kapchul'(95). Kali lied to the family and instantly left for Dishai with Terramycin capsules, cotton, bandages, Dettol and other necessary things. Kali 'sat through the night with Bashai, heating the water, changing the bandages, cleaning and compressing the wound, and administering the capsules at intervals of six hours, before leaving for home'(96).

Kali went on remembering the second operation in 1972, which was recorded as Operation Jagula. During this time Rameshwar Bhuinya, a big Jotedar and moneylender, was attacked by Bashai and in the violence Bashai again received serious physical injuries- a bullet in his leg, a bayonet in his stomach and his face was slashed. Kali was hurriedly brought to the hospital by the administration to identify Bashai. From hospital, he was taken to the police station. The conversation between SP and Kali was enlightening:

'Bashai Tudu?'

'Yes,' said Kali from far away.

'You said the same thing last time.'

.....

'Last time I was shown a distorted, swollen, putrid body. The police told me that the man, he died, had wrung...The man... had wrung... The man had wrung the neck of the air with his two hands'(111).

But this time except Kali two hundred fifty one people were brought down to identify Bashai's corpse.

Again, during Operation Bakuli, Bashai violently attacked Surja Sau, the Jotedar and the moneylender in 1973 and Bashai was charged with bullets making so many holes in his body. Kali was quickly brought by SP on a jeep to identify the corpse. Reaching Surja Sau's house where Bashai's dead body was kept Kali approached the corpse and examining him closely noticed a brass wire ring on his finger. Kali immediately called to mind that he found it on Mushai's finger when he served tea to him and Bashai. Kali realized that this time Mushai adopted the role of Bashai, but kept it a secret to his heart. Kali admitted that the dead body seemed Bashai's. It seemed because the corpse had no face. The mannerism of wringing the neck of the air remained only the reliable identification mark.

In the year 1974, minimum wage for the agricultural labourers was revised, but it was not given by Jagattaran Lohari, the father of the local MLA. The clash erupted between the bonded labourers and Jagattaran in the village, Kadamkhuinya. Bashai supported the cause of the agricultural labourers and a fresh attack was started- Bashai and his people on the one hand and the Police and Jagattaran's armed retainers on the other hand. Bashai was critically injured. When Kali met Bashai he saw, 'Bashai sat leaning against a tree, his left leg grotesquely bloated, purple, his abdomen swollen, his left leg stretched out at an unnatural angle'(157). Bashai was suffering from gangrene, and slowly succumbed to death.

After Bashai's fourth death, administration had a confidential meeting in Calcutta and in that meeting Kali's dubious role in identifying Bashai was specially discussed. It was unanimously decided that one day Bashai would be caught red handed, and so Kali would be kept alive. It was the harvesting season of 1976 and Bashai's image came to be fresh in Kali's mind. Kali himself tried to gather information about minimum wage, though he did not belong to that landless community. Here Kali seemed to act as an other self of Bashai. When Kali went deeper and deeper into the matter, he realized the true nature of administration. He came to feel the pains Bashai felt. He learnt that 335 posts of inspectors were created to look after the implementation of the minimum wage for agricultural labourers. Thirty Assistant Labour Commissioners' posts were created for the same purpose. Out of 335 posts 245 and out of 30 posts 2 were filled up on the basis of political recommendations violating the conditions of the recruitment rules. The following instructions were sent from a higher political authority to the inspectors of a district, 'Don't rush matters for the new rates of wages (Rs 8.10). It's a new thing and shall take a long time to be accepted by the landowners. But see to it that the agricultural labourers get a little more than what they get at present'(162).

In the year 1977 a new State Assembly was formed and there was no post-election celebration. What Kali experienced then was enough to shatter his loyalty to Party. Kali saw that, 'Samanta, Gora, Nakul- they were all released after March. Samanta emerged as the hero of Jagula. He came from the station in Rameshwar Bhuinya's car; he conducted his election campaign in his jeep'(165). This Rameshwar was attacked by Bashai for depriving the agricultural labourers of their legitimate rights. Kali and Rameshwar became the members of the same Party. The boys who were jailed in 1970, 1971, 1972 and 1973 were rotting in the jail in the new regime. The Calcutta High Court's injunction on 1974 order for minimum wage continued to exist in 1977. The powerful jotedar of Piyasole, Haridhan Sardar, pointed out a mistake in 1974 order where consumer price index was fixed at 233 in the place of 217, and an injunction was granted by High Court. After the change of regime Kali met Samanta and requested him to move lawfully in the favour of agricultural labourers. Samanta left it to those poor people who did not know how to move against government in the court of law. Kali told Samanta,

'The agricultural labourers, under whatever party banner they organize, will remain agricultural labourers. They will fight, they'll be turbulent. But, Samanta, is it the government's plan to let all those who are turbulent to die fighting, get involved in rioting to be caught by the police and get framed in criminal cases so that the jotedar can rule merrily?'(168)

Samanta warned Kali because he was taking an anti-party stance. Like Bashai, Kali burst into anger, 'Call me anti-party, reactionary, deviationist, Naxalite, or whatever you like. But every word I've said is true, and you don't have an answer to it'(168). Kali sounded almost similar like Bashai,

'I was never a Naxalite. But once the Front let us down, I learnt never to follow blindly the course laid down by the educated babus. But why don't you try to understand objectively why the Santals, the Oraons, the Mundas, the Bauris, the Tiors, and the Keots have become Naxalites in so many places? You'll understand if you go about it honestly. But the Front refuses to understand, Kali-babu. They would only sit on judgment and then order death by hanging'(56).

It is clear that Kali Santra, the middle class committed party-worker in Left politics who once decided, 'No, Kali would never come to Bashai again. The Communists went by an unquestioning class loyalty that Bashai seemed to have defied. It would be better to let Bashai have his say'(35), emerges as a revolutionary; though not violent like Bashai, still does resist in his own capacity. It is undoubtedly Bashai who influences this man and sweepes him off of his former Party stand. Kali dreamt of a continuous battle with the authority,

'As expected. In his fifth death Bashai was dead and buried. In the night. The same night that he fled from his den. The sixth time...the seventh...the eighth...There's nothing called death, comrade. All the trouble is with living' (171).

The conviction of Mahasweta Devi in the Preface is absolutely relevant in modern times, 'The Kali Santras, of course, are as dead as dodos in Indian politics'(xxv).

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