

ANNA BHAI SATHE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE INDIAN LABOUR MOVEMENT

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Abstract

The second half of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of industrialization in India and gave rise to the capitalist and working class. The working class became the victim of the capitalist class who in the process of maximizing their profits exploited them. This exploitation of the workers led to the rise of labour movement in India during the last quarter of nineteenth century. Number of leaders and personalities addressed the issues of workers and played an important role in Indian labour movement. Anna Bhai Sathe was one of the prominent figures amongst them. He expressed his views on various labour issues and problems through his writings and speeches. His philosophy of emancipation of workers runs through several genres of literature like novels, short stories, ballads (powadas), folk dramas (loknatya), poems etc. His writings and plays proved to be the catalyst for the labour movement of the twentieth century. His writings reflect a deep sensitivity to the questions of subaltern groups which includes working class, untouchables, women etc. As most of his writings are from literary perspectives, it is essential to contextualize his works and contribution to labour movement in a historical perspective. Though Anna Bhai played phenomenal role towards Indian labour movement, it has gone un-noticed by history scholarship and is excluded from the mainstream history of Indian labour movement. This paper is an attempt to understand his varied contribution towards the Indian labour movement through his varied forms of literature.

Keywords: Anna Bhai Sathe, Communism, Indian Labour Movement, subaltern, working class.

Introduction

The second half of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of industrialization in India resulting in the socio-economic growth of cities. Subsequently, it gave rise to the capitalist and working class. The working class became the victim of the capitalist class who in the process of maximizing their profits exploited them. This exploitation of the workers led to the rise of labour movement in India during the last quarter of nineteenth century. Number of leaders and personalities addressed the issues of workers and played an important role in Indian labour movement. Anna Bhai Sathe was one of the prominent figures amongst them. He expressed his views on various labour issues and problems through his writings and speeches. His philosophy of emancipation of workers runs through several genres of literature like novels, short stories, ballads (powadas), folk dramas (loknatya), poems etc. His writings and plays proved to be the catalyst for the labour movement of the twentieth century. He wrote primarily in Marathi language which became the vehicle of mass education for the Indian working classes. Besides his literary works, he was an activist in all social and political movements of his contemporary times. He used literature very effectively to describe the day-to-day life of common man, peasants and workers.

Anna Bhai Sathe deserves to be called an 'organic intellectual' who had both political and intellectual abilities to consider not only his caste-class people along with him but also the larger masses. His writings reflect a deep

sensitivity to the questions of subaltern groups which includes working class, untouchables, women etc. As most of his writings are from literary perspectives, it is essential to contextualize his works and contribution to labour movement in a historical perspective. Though Anna Bhai played phenomenal role towards Indian labour movement, it has gone un-noticed by history scholarship and is excluded from the mainstream history of Indian labour movement. This paper is an attempt to understand his varied contribution towards the Indian labour movement through his varied forms of literature. It will also throw light on those subaltern people and role of his literary works which created awareness among them about their rights, issues, problems and a proactive role in fighting for their rights by participating in movements.

Anna Bhai Sathe's Participation in Indian Labour Movement

Anna Bhai Sathe was born on 1 August 1920 at Wategaon in Sangli district of Maharashtra and belonged to Mang or Matang community which was one of the untouchable castes in Maharashtra. His childhood was spent in a very miserable condition. Poverty has deprived him of his formal education. In the search of job, he has shifted to Bombay and had to do various kinds of works. He has also worked in textile mills of Bombay as mill worker. At that time several developments had been taking place in Bombay. Strikes, closing of markets, morchas in the workers colonies of Bombay had negative as well as

positive effects on him. During his stay at Matunga Labour camp in Bombay, he was attracted towards the activities of study circle of Communist party. He joined the Communist party due to the work of eminent communist leader Comrade S.A. Dange and became the member of 'Lal Bavta (Red Flag) Union' in 1936. He deeply studied the policies, objectives and programmes of Communist party through party meetings and conferences which helped him to broaden his intellectual horizons. As mill owners were not ready to increase wages of workers, Comrade Dange asked Anna Bhau to declare strike in his own mill where he was working. Anna Bhau informed his fellow mill workers about strike and to create conducive atmosphere for the workers about strike and to inspire them, he sung 'Stalingradcha Powada' (Ballad of Stalingrad). This ballad was highly appreciated by his fellow workers and became very popular amongst the workers. He was removed from mill but decided to work in communist party to spread its activities in Bombay in very lucid manner to his fellow brothers.

Anna Bhau founded Lal Bavta Kala Pathak (Red Union Cultural Troupe) along with Shahir Amar Shaikh and Shahir D. N. Gavankar in 1944 under the guidance of Comrade Shankar Pagare and Comrade B.T. Ranadive and became the full-time propagator of communist party. He wrote number of ballads (powadas), folk dramas (lokmatya), novels, poetry etc. to spread the labour movement and to create consciousness amongst the workers. He actively participated in Samyukta Maharashtra movement and asked workers to join the movement in large number. This shows his dedication towards the labour movement which he continued through his writings till his death.

Anna Bhau Sathe's Writings and Indian Labour Movement

Anna Bhau Sathe's work with the communist movement and his critical perspectives on his life as a Dalit formed his prolific thinking and writing. His 35 novels, one play, a travelogue, 10 folk dramas, 23 collections of short stories and 10 Ballads (powadas) have been published in Marathi. He wrote all based on his true-life experiences and his novels reflects the fighting spirit in their characters who work against all odds in life. His approach was revolutionary and practical. He portrayed the social realities, both oppressive systems of power and the working classes miserable conditions. His writings are useful and are unique tools for understanding subaltern community's consciousness. The class question, according

to Anna Bhau, can be resolved only when it is followed by the emancipation of caste question. He uses the tools acquainted from his class analysis to approach the caste question.

Anna Bhau addressed several issues regarding the lives of workers and peasants in his writings. Due to his labour consciousness, he wrote on the life of urban Mumbai, on the problem of textile workers and labourers and depicted the rural life in his various genres of literature. He wanted to describe the history of communism in simple language and motivate the workers for joining the Indian labour movement. He did not go into the philosophical genre but use his literature to reach out the common masses and motivated them to participate in Indian labour movement. His contribution to Indian labour movement can be seen through his writings which can be studied in the following categories:

Ballads (Powadas)

Anna Bhau Sathe composed nearly 15 Ballads (Powadas) and many of his ballads throw light on the then contemporary labour issues. They were mainly used to awaken the workers and peasants and give them strength and inspiration. One of his works Stalingradcha Powada (Ballad of Stalingrad) stands influential. It has dedicated to struggles and histories that inspired people worldwide. This ballad was highly appreciated by prominent communist leaders and workers. This ballad shows that Anna Bhau's knowledge was trans-national as he knew the events of world and he incorporated it in his writings. He has also composed a ballad Bangalchi Haak (Call of Bengal), to raise funds for the drought affected. It was an attempt at creating global worker's consciousness.

Like Ballad of Stalingrad, Berlincha Powada (Ballad of Berlin) is also written and about an international warfare. Ammalnerche Amar Hutatme (Immortal Martyr of Ammalner) written in 1949 to commend and acknowledge the courage shown by communist activists who laid their lives and became martyrs. He wrote this ballad to inspire and motivate the workers. Mumbaicha Girani Kamgar (Mill Worker of Mumbai) written in 1949 and traces the struggles and miseries of Bombay's factory workers.

Besides above important Ballads, Anna Bhau wrote number of ballads to expose the exploitation of the workers by the capitalist class of Bombay and highlighted the problems of workers. From the above powadas, it is very much clear that Anna Bhau was the staunch supporter of communist party and its ideology. These ballads gave great inspiration to workers and it contributed to the

development of labour movement. He called them to unite for the proletariat revolution to end their suffering and exploitation. Due to his ballads, he became very popular amongst the Indian working class.

Folk Dramas (Loknatya) and Plays

Anna Bhau wrote in all fifteen folk dramas (Loknatya) during 1944-1962. But unfortunately, all of them are not available today. There seem to be two prominent aims behind his folk dramas, one is to criticize the congress party, its agenda and its style of functioning and second is to present the ideology of communist party and its programmes before the people in a favorable light. He used these plays to highlight injustice, ridicule oppressive exploitation and social relations of the powerful caste and to offer solutions and inspiration. He wrote the first folk drama entitled Akalechi Gostha (Story of intelligence) and presented at the peasant conference at Titwala in Thane district in 1944 which was highly appreciated by his party members and workers of Maharashtra. One of the central concerns of this play is to make uneducated manual labourers understand Karl Marx's theory of class struggle by using easy, simple, jargon-free and understandable language and also to impress upon their minds their place in the process of social change. He also wrote Deshabhakta Ghotale (Patriotic Mr. Confused), Nivadnukit Ghotale (Mr. Confused in Elections), Shethajicha Election (Election of the Rich Men) Bekayadesheer (Illegal), Lokmantryacha Doura (The Minister's Tour), Muk Miravanuk (Dumb Procession) etc. and expressed the grievances of workers and peasants and exposed the hypocrisy of Congress party, its capitalistic policies, feudalistic attitude and motivated the workers for Communist revolution.

Mazee Mumbai Arthat Mumbai Konachi? (My Mumbai means whose Mumbai) was written against the background of the issue of the formation of linguistic states in India which came into focus after India's independence in 1947. It highlighted the various problems and issues like migration, urban unemployment, plight of the workers and the Sanyukta (United) Maharashtra movement. Besides above plays, he also wrote number of folk dramas like Pudhari Milala (Leader Found), Inamdar (Landlord), Bilandar Budawe (Wily Defaulters) etc. and voices the grievances of workers. Thus, Anna Bhau used this genre of Marathi literature very effectively to describe the day-to-day life of common man, workers and subaltern masses. He was actively involved in Sanyukta Maharashtra movement

and motivated many workers to join the movement for their benefit.

Short Stories

Anna Bhau Sathe was the prolific short story writer. He has written number of short stories in which he depicted the life of subaltern masses. His short stories dealt with various social issues and problems both at rural and urban level. It contributed for the spread of labour movement as they created the labour consciousness amongst the workers. The short stories cover a wide range of characters, social conditions and eras - pre-independence and post independence and workers, poor, Dalits and women were the central characters. He handled various issues like caste dominance, poverty, unemployment, exploitation of workers etc. It was written in very lucid language so that lay men could also understand the contemporary problems. He has referred the inner life of the neglected, the exploited and the underprivileged and voiced their grievances through his writings. The prominent short stories of him are Nilu Mang, Bhomakiya, Mariaaicha Gada, Jatra, Bilwari, Mukul Mulani, Barbadhya Kanjari etc. His short stories are the reflection of his own experiences which he experienced in rural areas and the Mumbai city. He projected those people in Marathi literature who had been living on the level of a semi-human existence. This was one of his noteworthy contributions to Marathi short story writing.

Poems (Verse)

Anna Bhau Sathe wrote many poetic verses which were related with different aspects. His poems and lavanis enriched the poetry of Marathi literature and contributed towards the development of Indian labour movement. His poems related with labour movement can be classified into three main categories. They are:

Composition of Marxist Leanings

Anna Bhau Sathe composed many poems which had Marxist leanings. Kamagar Stavan (Praise of labourers) shows how worker is the real earth-mover and arch-revolutionary who destroyed oppressive powers. Kala Bajar (Black Market) talks of how the black marketers and hoarders create an artificial shortage of essential commodities. He also talks about how the government's Rationing Act has failed miserably to check the evil activities of the black marketers. Ekjuticha Neta (Leader of Unity) envisages the materialization of the dream of classless society in India under the leadership of workers.

Workers, he feels, will play the role of the unifying leaders. They will unite farmers and the oppressed and lead them for revolution. He also wrote poems such as Tu Marathmola, Bolat Kada Kapari, Shivari Chala, Duniyechi Daulat Saari, Telashivay Jalato Diva, Lavadacha Aika Parakar, Chini Jananchi Mukti-Sena, Lenin Shubhnamache etc. and expressed his vision of communist revolution. He highlighted the problems of Dalits and workers in his poems and gave inspiration to workers and peasants.

Compositions in Praise of Maharashtra and Its Culture

Anna Bhau Sathe also composed many poems and lavanis to praise the history and culture of Maharashtra. It contributed to the labour movement also because he depicted the life and condition of workers and their participation in Samyukta Maharashtra movement and labour movement. Mazi Maina Gavavar Rahili (My lover left in Town) is one of his most popularly known, most appreciated and much-quoted of compositions. In this Lavani, he depicted the life and economic condition of Mumbai. He described the condition of labourers, unemployed people, poverty and many other things. It became very popular in Maharashtra.

Unlike other communist writers, Anna Bhau gave much more importance to caste issues which is reflected in his most famous composition entitled Jag Badal Ghaluni Ghav, Sanguna Gele Mala Bhimrao (Bhimrao advised me to change the world with a hammer stroke). He appeals to seek inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar's mission, and to change the world as told by Dr. Ambedkar. By this poem, one could understand the importance of Dr. Ambedkar's influence on Anna Bhau Sathe. He handled both caste and class with the help of his understanding of Karl Marx and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and their philosophy as he lived the life of both untouchable and worker.

Bombay Poems

Anna Bhau Sathe minutely observed the lifestyle of Mumbai and tried to describe the life of workers in his poems. His poems related with Bombay presents two contrasting sides of life in Bombay – prosperity and poverty, dazzle and darkness, culture and cruelty. Katha Mumbaichi (Tale of Bombay) presents two sharply contrasting worlds that very much existed along with each other in Bombay. Through this poem he wanted to show his fellow brothers the difference between two different worlds in Mumbai and how workers can unite to change this situation through Communist party's programmes. He also wrote Mumbaichi Lavani (Poem of Bombay) in 1949.

This poem reflects the misery and destituteness of Bombay. In Mumbaichi Lavani, he wanted to tell workers that though so much disparity was there in Bombay, workers can unite under the banner of Red flag and workers revolution could take place. This poem reflects his positive approach towards the life and the problems which workers were facing. He wanted to give inspiration and strength to workers movement in Bombay which will lead to the communist revolution in India.

Novels

Anna Bhau Sathe wrote nearly about thirty-five novels. His novels are associated with different field such as adventures and courage, women's, peasants and workers problems, love and rural life. His most prominent novels are Waranechya Khoryat (In the Valley of Warana), Mangala, Fakira, Waranecha Wagh (Tiger of Warana), Master (Teacher), Dhund (Engrossed), Agnidivya (Ordeal), Chitra (Picturesque), Chandan (Sandalwood), Chikhalateel Kamal (Lotus in Mud), Fulpakharoo (Butterfly), Tila Lavite Mee Raktacha (I Put Gory Mark on Forehead), Aavadi (Loved and Liked), Vair (Feud) and Ratna (A Gem) etc. Through these novels, he spread the philosophy of class-struggle by picturing the rural life, exploitation of landlords and moneylenders and struggle of workers and peasants against their exploitation. Number of his novels was used for movies, through which his work has reached to the larger section of society.

Travelogue

In his entire writing career, Anna Bhau wrote only one travelogue entitled Maza Russiacha Pravas (My Passage to Russia). It was based on his trip sponsored by Indo-Soviet to Russia in 1961 which was financially sponsored by the workers of Bombay. He was so popular among the workers of Bombay that they came to see him at the airport during his departure to Russia. Even before he could go to Russia, his works were well-known to the people of Russia. Many of his works were translated in Russian language. He was very popular in Russia due to his "Ballad of Stalingrad" which was translated in Russian language. He travelled entire Russia and visited number of cities and met various Russian leaders during his tour which he depicted in his travelogue. The trip inspired him to write a travelogue which helped to further global proletariat consciousness. Through this travelogue he had shown that how anti-USSR propaganda was false and misleading. Though he was the follower of Communism, but his travelogue was very well balanced.

Miscellaneous Writings

Anna Bhau Sathe also wrote several articles in various magazines on literary issues like the process of story writing entitled *Mee Katha Kashee Lihito* (How I write a Story). He also wrote an article for the first Dalit Literary Meet held at Pune on 2 March 1958 of which he was the convenor. He presented his welcome speech and made one of his most famous statements: "hi prithvi shesha nagachya mastakavar tarali nasun ti Dalit, Kashtakaryanchya talahatavar tarleli ahe." (This earth does not rest on the head of the Shesha Nag, but it rests on the palms of hands of the Dalits and workers). From this it is very much clear that this earth has been preserved, developed and beautified by Dalits and workers and not by any God or preserver. Through this, he has explained the contribution of Dalits and Workers for the creation and preservation of this universe through the constant efforts of these classes.

Conclusion

To sum up it can be observed that Anna Bhau Sathe was not a typical academic writer, but his pen analyzed and reflected the day-to-day realities and social interaction that made up his life as an activist. He united the workers and made them conscious about then contemporary socio-economic and political problems. As a worker himself, he was an ardent supporter of the workers' rights and his literature contributed to create class consciousness among the workers. He used various genre of literature to spread the ideology of Marxism among workers and transliterated into activism. His work reflects his life's experience. His literature becomes the catalyst for the reform, improving the workers' conditions and for taking up the issues. He used both the philosophies of Marxism and Ambedkarism and Caste-Class analysis in his writings to awaken the Indian working class. Both these schools of thought help to give the clear understanding of the struggles of the marginalized. The struggle which he highlighted was not only the struggle of workers alone, but it was the struggle of those people who were in the periphery.

His writings were not taken cognizance of for quite some time because of his acceptance of a political and economic ideology. i.e. Communism. Since he adhered to and very enthusiastically propagated Communist philosophy, majority of Marathi literary critics ignored his works and contribution to Dalit literature. However, he courageously withstood all this negligence and did not lose faith in himself as a writer. Due to this approach and positive attitude towards life he has been emerged as a

prominent writer in Marathi literature as it was highlighted by Comrade S.A. Dange in 'Anna Bhau Sathe Memorial Issue' published by 'Yugantar' in November 1969. Dange explains that class consciousness was the characteristic of his writing.

Anna Bhau Sathe gave equal importance to both caste and class in India unlike the other writers. He opened up a mine of strikingly new themes and subjects in Marathi literature thereby making the centre of Marathi literature moved from urban middle class to the rural masses and there from to the erstwhile untouchables, dalits, nomads, tribals, workers, peasants etc. He followed the tradition of Karl Marx, Mahatma Phule, N. M. Lokhande and Dr. B. R Ambedkar and awakened the lower classes and workers through his writings. He blended both caste and class to understand the problems of the workers as he lived as worker and comes from untouchable castes. His writings reflect caste and class and the struggle which he highlighted are not only based on class but also on caste. These struggles were depicted in all his writings and varied forms of literature. Due to his performances of Kala Pathak, he reached out to all strata of Indian society. He devoted his entire life to spread the labour movement in India. He used his various forms of literature to sensitize the workers and blended his ideology of caste and class in Indian context. In Gramsci's term, he was an 'organic intellectual' in real sense. Thus, his contribution to Indian labour movement should be included in the mainstream history of labour movement in India.

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