

Pterodactyl: A monument of silence

Falguni Bharateeya

Abstract

According to G.N.Devy, silence is a communication zone which has the potency of language but no desire for verbal articulation. It is not absence of language, but a language frontier is negotiating with unexplored fields of great importance. The present paper is an attempt to appreciate the potential of silence among the tribals and also the non-tribal journalist's experience of such silence in Mahasweta Devi's *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*. The story refers to a painting on stone-wall by Bikhia, a tribal boy in the famine stricken *Pirtha block*. When asked about the painting, the boy remains silent. What is the message of the prehistoric world messenger Pterodactyl? What is the quality of silence experienced by Bikhia, the journalist Puran and the bird in absence of verbal communication? The paper tries to address the questions related with the myth of Pterodactyl.

Keywords : Silence, prehistoric, tribals, painting

As informed in natural history, Pterodactyl, or *Pterodactylus antiquus*, is actually a specific type of pterosaur in the group Pterosauria, which encompasses the entire group of prehistoric flying reptiles. *Pterodactylus antiquus* lived 150 million years ago, ate insects or fish, and had wingspans of up to five feet.

First published in 1993, *Imaginary Maps* by Mahasweta Devi, translated (English) by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak tells us three stories about tribal life-*The Hunt*, *Douloti the Bountiful* and *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay* and *Pirtha*. The writer has dedicated the book to 'all the Indigenous people of the world'. The paper focuses on the myth of pterodactyl and silence(s) in the story *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay* and *Pirtha*.

According to the writer,

Pterodactyl is an abstract of my entire tribal experience...If read carefully, pterodactyl will communicate the agony of the tribals, of marginalised people all over the world. (*Imaginary Maps*, -xiv)

Pterodactyl emerges as a symbol of the predicament of tribals when Mahasweta adds:

Pterodactyl wants to show what has been done to the entire tribal world of India. We did not know it, it was like a continent...I think of the two American continents. We did not try to know them. We did not try to find out what potential has survived in them through all these centuries. (pp-xv)

Pterodactyl belongs to pre-historic period. It cannot convey its message to modern people. There is no contact between pterodactyl and the mainstream. Sketching the central character of the bird-like creature, relating it with the map of famine-stricken Pirtha block and highlighting the chance of destruction,, Mahasweta writes:

The survey map of Pirtha block is like some extinct animal of Gondwanaland. The beast had fallen on its face, The new era in the history of the world began when, at the end of the Mesozoic era, India broke off from the main mass of Gondwanaland. It is as if some pre-historic creature had fallen on its face then.

(pp-98)

The state has denied the rights to the tribals and the tribals do not understand mainstream mechanism. They have a long history of being exploited by the dominant discourse.

Pterodactyl, *Puran Sahay* and *Pirtha* presents a story about draught-stricken tribal community in Pirtha block of Madhya Pradesh (Central India). Tribals of this famine affected area encounter a pre-historic creature-pterodactyl. It appears to them and Bikhia, a tribal youth has perhaps a vivid vision of it. It is considered as the discontented soul of their ancestors. Thus, a visitor from such remote past that it is difficult to connect with the creature. Puran Sahay is an empathetic journalist who visits Pirtha to write a story about an unearthly terror. Suraj Pratap, a journalist visited the place earlier to get a good story about pterodactyl along with its picture. He failed to do so and the photograph of pterodactyl taken

by the journalist and its negative are taken away by officers in charge of Pirtha blok. Pterodactyl remains unreported and would become a legend. Not that tribals believe in the sacrosanctity of the arrival of their ancestor's soul, but the government officers, the Sub Divisional Police Officer also do not want the story to be published as its information would mean more inquiry and reports. Harisharan, Puran's friend and a civil servant could not provide better civil services to the needy and there is always the tribal-non-tribal divide which has issues and conflicts about culture, civilization, health, education, finance and charity. They might have to search wide area to trace the bird. Puran, due to his genuine query and perhaps because of his concern for tribals could explore more and witness the presence and impact of pterodactyl till it dies in a small room where Bikhia was also present.

Puran is a reporter for the group of 'Patna Dibas Jyoti' (Patna Daylight) publication. He has reported about the massacre of the harijans (lower class community) and it was well received. He wrote about issues like water scarcity, enteric fever epidemic and the brutal treatment of prisoners. He came to Pirtha to know the truth about the situation as the chief minister of Madhya Pradesh (Central India) is not going to declare Pirtha a 'famine area'.

Shankar Nagesia, the only literate tribal person speaks after the arrival of pterodactyl about the issues of his community. There is absence of alphabet and history (no link with the mainstream). How to connect? If history of tribals are to be traced, one has to listen to their songs and perhaps stories.

Alas! In pain we are stone, mute. We failed to give peace to the ancestors. We are coming to an end, rubbed off the soil. And so the unquiet soul casts its shadow and howls... This is surely the curse of the ravaged land, village, field, home, forest! Now no one can save us. Now we all are unclean, in mourning... (pp-120)

As their ancestor's soul has come to tribal people, some rites are to be practiced and they consider them unclean/impure and observe mourning. They play music and the priest would make offering.

Again the dhomra [drum] starts playing softly. It is as if there is a chorus of sound because many dhomras are playing together. The priest comes up. He sacrifices the eggs with his bony meagre hand, offers the rice. All the men seem to be in mourning. The infants rest their faces like ticks on the chests of the skeleton mothers. (pp-128)

In *The Aesthetics of Silence*, Susan Sontag explores the subtlety of silence and relates it with art, spirituality and culture. Silence is put side by side of what is non-silence.

“Silence “ never ceases to imply its opposite and to depend on its presence: just as there can’t be “up” without “down” or “left” without “right,” so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence... (Brain Pickings)

Sontag elucidates the concept further and considers it a therapy, a shock therapy. , often an attack on the verbal expression, on language itself.

The efficacious artwork leaves silence in its wake. Silence , administered by the artist, is part of a program of perceptual and cultural therapy, often on the model of shock therapy rather than of persuasion. Even if the artist’s medium is words, he can share his task: language can be employed to check language, to express muteness... Art must mount a full scale attack on language itself, by means of language and its surrogates, on behalf of the standard of silence. (Brain Pickings)

Is not Bikhia’s silence, his painting and Puran’s silence about pterodactyl’s story an attack on language? Bikhia, who could visualise his ancestor’s soul clearly, paints the image of pterodactyl on a stone wall. There is feeling of impurity and mourning among tribals in Pirtha. Bikhia is mute. When asked by the mainstream people, he doesn’t utter a single word. There is pain and also the vision of the ancestor’s soul.

When the journalist (Puran) meets the SDO in Pirtha block, the officer tells the story of some terrifying event in Pirtha. He shows a painting - a creature that has webbed wings like a bat and a body like a giant iguana. It has four legs and a toothless horrible mouth. The boy who painted remains silent.

While Bikhia is sleeping in front of the engraving (painting) on that rainy night the soul of the ancestor of Shankar's people (Nagesia tribe) came in Puran's room, half clawscratching and half floating. It glided, did not not fly.

From the other side of millions of years the soul of the ancestor of Shankar's people looks at Puran, and the glance is so prehistoric that Puran's brain cells, spreading a hundred antennae, understands nothing of that glance. If tonight he'd seen a stone flying with its wings spread, would he have been able to speak to it? (pp-142)

Bikhia gesticulates Puran that both of them would now remain silent. In Bikhia's presence Puran could bear the intolerable burden of discovering pterodactyl. Bikhia is now full of a quiet (silent) wisdom. Puran weeps silently. The artist who became silent after drawing pterodactyl could connect with the journalist who is otherwise an outsider. Silence with the sound of rains in the background touches all the three – the ancestor's soul in the form of pterodactyl (past), the artist (art and community) and the empathetic journalist (outsider with concern). Pterodactyl thus becomes a monument of silence. It belongs to remote past and glides so cannot connect to the present. Bikhia, who visualised the ancestor's soul clearly could paint with chalk and then engraved the figure but remained silent after painting it. Puran's job is to report about the terror, about pterodactyl's painting witnesses the presence of the ancestor's soul and will remain silent about what he experienced. He was shocked but Bikhia provided him some comfort. He has questions for pterodactyl:

Why is Bikhia not speaking? Why is he remaining mute? Was some communication established between your prehistoric eyes and his eyes, so that he (illiterate, never having read a book, with no knowledge of the history of the evolution of the planet) grasps that to keep your affair secret is tremendously urgent. The world-of-today cannot be informed about you. 'Today' does not know the 'past', the 'ancient'. 'Today', the present times', civilization, becomes most barbaric by the demands of getting ahead... He [Bikhia] is a tribal, an aboriginal, you are much more ancient, more originary than his experience, both your existences are greatly endangered. (pp-156)

These questions that arise in the mind of Puran after his shocking experience which he would not put in words show how a non-tribal is getting related with and about tribal life. He is worried that Pterodactyl and Bikhia's lives are endangered. By observing silence about his experience of Pterodactyl and Bikhia he could perhaps not be a party to their fatal finale. What should Puran do then?

Love, excruciating love, let that be the first step. Now Puran's amazed heart what love for Pirtha there is in his heart, perhaps he cannot remain a distant spectator anywhere in life. (pp197)

In *A Nomad Called Thief: Reflections on Adivasi Silence and Voice*, a collection of essays Ganesh Devy talks about the Adivasis (indigenous people). Tribal groups (adivasis) in India have often experienced exclusion and oppression by 'mainstream' society. This is because the adivasis are considered as exotic, dangerous, or 'primitive' others. Devy discusses not only the terror of Adivasis being considered "criminal" tribes but also the simple Adivasi knowledge systems along with their language and literature. In his In his discussion with the investigator at Tejgadh Tribal Academy situated in the tribal area that falls between the borders of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, Devy mentioned how the story of Pterodactyl was often discussed in his talks with Mahasweta and her visit to Tejgadh cave paintings has close association with the story. He shared that the story of Pterodactyl was a moment of reckoning for Mahasweta.

In *Silence, Insanity and Language*, an essay in *The Being of Bhasha* (2009), Devy writes:

Silence therefore is not any absence of language, but like a dialect, it is a language frontier negotiating with unexplored fields of significance. (pp-14)

Neither Pterodactyl's nor Bikhia's silence indicate absence of language. Whereas it might be possible to understand the significance of Bikhia's silence, Pterodactyl's silence is a

challenge. Did it come to warn or for help? Why didn't Puran show the effect of quiet wisdom?

While presenting an in-depth analysis of silence with a special context of Ireland in *In Speaking of Silence: Comments from an Irish Studies Perspective*, Maria Beville and Sara Dybris McQuaid do bring in the issue of postcolonial subalterity and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question – whether or not the subaltern can speak.. Is it possible to break the subaltern silence and speak for the silenced other. From the Indian Tribal Studies Perspective, Pterodactyl's story could suggest that silence may not always be seen as disempowering symptom of colonial discourses of power, but an outsider, having experienced the unbearable burden of discovering their past could but love and not just be interested in reporting about them. The journalist does have questions but the representative of prehistoric period cannot use language that the outsider other could understand. He doesn't get the wisdom the tribal artist gets after the arrival of pterodactyl. He realises that Bikhia's community is more civilized. There is perhaps no word in their language which means 'exploitation'. He understands the failure of the mainstream people/system. He could think about the first step to take in the direction of correcting the relation (exploiter-exploited) or living in harmony with tribals. This step is to love and so to care for tribals. It is the arrival of Pterodactyl who would become a legend later, Bikhia's painting and Puran's genuine inquiry about the unearthly terror – their being together on a rainy night in silence make a complete, holistic possibility.

Bio- note

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