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Voices from the Margins: A Study on the Texts Based on the Life of the Tea Workers in the Tea Estates of Darjeeling

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Abstract

The study of Indra Bahadur's Rai's "Aaja Ramita Cha" (There is a Spectacle today) and Indra Sundas' "Juneli Rekha" (Silver Lining) two texts gain importance in the light of the continuing struggle for identity and representation amongst the people living in the hills of Darjeeling. After all, the characters in these novels were based on actual people and the Malinis and Jaseys still continue to struggle against the oppression of poverty, ignorance and inadequate political representation. The naïve and the simple nature of the Gorkhas living in the hills of Darjeeling continue to be economically, socially and politically exploited from within and outside. The importance of these novels even at the present day is highlighted by the fact that a profitable industry established over a century and a half still continues to pay in daily wages rather than in salary. The importance of these texts also becomes relevant in the continuing struggle of the people living, working and dying in the tea gardens to establish an identity in a country which refuses to call them its own. The fact that these texts continually force its readers to question their contribution towards the unchanged social and political scenario makes them relevant even today. The "ramita" or the spectacle in the heart of Darjeeling town is still on, maybe now at a more grander scale. The "Hattabahars" may have legally stopped yet the residents of the tea gardens are still deprived of the title deeds of the land. What then, has changed?

Key words: Representation of rootlessness and subalterns in the Tea Estates of Darjeeling

Literature has always been regarded as the closest reflection of the prevailing social conditions of a particular race of people. It has been used both by the oppressor and the oppressed. Perhaps it is this latent nature of literature which never makes it go out of fashion. Literature matters today and will matter in the days to come as well. In the light of the present study on the importance of literature, I would like to present a paper titled "Voices from the Margins: A study on the texts based on the life of the tea workers in the tea Estates of Darjeeling" to highlight the role of literature in sensitizing the people of Darjeeling towards their quest for identity and acceptance in the mainstream which

so far has been confined due to exploitation and voicelessness. While doing so, I would like to focus on Indra Bahadur Rai's "*Aaja Ramita Cha*" (There is a spectacle today) and Indra Sundas' "*Juneli Rekha*" (Silver Lining).

Darjeeling district is the northernmost district of the state of West Bengal in eastern India in the foothills of the Himalayas. The district is famous for its beautiful hill stations (often referred to as the queen of the Hills) and Darjeeling tea. Darjeeling is the district headquarters. Kalimpong, Kurseong and Siliguri, three other major towns in the district, are the sub divisional headquarters of the district.

Mirik, another town of the district, has been developed as a lake resort since the late 1970s.

The story of Darjeeling tea started some 150 years ago, when Dr. Campbell, a civil surgeon of the Indian medical service, was transferred to Darjeeling in 1839 from Kathmandu, Nepal and used seeds stolen from China (*Camellia Sinesis*) to begin experimental tea planting, a practice he and others continued during the 1840s. The British Government also established tea nurseries during that period (1847). Commercial development began during the 1850s. During 1860-64, the Darjeeling Company was established with 4 gardens. Today there are 86 running gardens producing Darjeeling tea. Darjeeling tea is indeed the champagne of tea.

Darjeeling, nestled in the foot-hills of Himalayas, has always been a bone of contention over the years. First, it was between the Nepalese and the Sikkimese, then between the British and the Sikkimese and in the recent times between the people of Darjeeling who want a separate state Gorkhaland and the administrative might of the Government of West Bengal. In all these the beauty and the serenity of the hills of Darjeeling have never failed to impress those who have wanted Darjeeling for their own. However, this serenity has also heeded the undenyng face of exploitation which still renders Darjeeling, yet another colony, surprisingly in an independent India. Governments have changed, reforms have been proclaimed yet the plight of those working and living in the tea Estates of Darjeeling has remained the same. The texts studied bring forth this voice of the voiceless which have forever been

throttled by continuing colonization, then and now.

Although initially chosen as a sanctuary to soothe the fragile British nerves from the sweltering heat of the plains, Darjeeling was gradually turned into a profitable colony fit for establishing tea plantations by the enterprising colonial masters. Forests were cleared, labour brought in to settle in these tea gardens and machinery imported from Calcutta and elsewhere to free the English from the Chinese monopoly of the tea market. Those who came to settle in these tea plantations toiled in day and night to transform Darjeeling to what it has become today, the producer of the world's finest tea. However in the process, somewhere down the line, these labours were dehumanized and rendered into machines by the colonial masters. It is this dehumanization which forms the core of both, "*Aaja Ramita Cha*" (There is a spectacle today) and "*Juneli Rekha*" (Silver Lining). These novels bring forth the subhuman economic and social conditions of the tea workers which still continue to be almost the same even in the contemporary times. This aspect makes these two texts an important read even today.

Dr. Indra Bahadur Rai's only novel "*Aaja Ramita Cha*" (There is a spectacle today) published in 1964 highlights the effects of the unrest in the tea gardens on the general community of Darjeeling. It is a novel which has been popular for his novelty in writing style, selection of plot and background of a middle class family of the hills of Darjeeling. The novel draws the plight of the labourers in the tea gardens and the resulting defiance through a unified stand. The "Ramita" or the spectacle is the protests and the

processions taken out against the prevailing exploitative laws. Rai uses the agitation of the Margaret's Hope labourers in 1955 as the main Inspiration for this novel. In continuing with the colonial practice in tea gardens even after the Independence, the manager of a tea Estate was regarded as the ultimate authority for the labourers with control not only on his or her job but also on his or her life. Infect the entire social, economical and judicial powers were vested on the manager which gradually began to be challenged. This novel captures this moment of change when the labourers resorted to political measures in order to ensure their basic rights. However, the novel does not just focus on the labourers rather it also presents the picture of middle-class life in Darjeeling town affected by these protests of the tea garden workers.

Rai divides his novel into two distinct sections, the first one depicting the middle class life in its quest for financial stability and intellectual transformation, while the second part of the novel deals with the difficulties of the tea garden workers and their struggles against exploitation. The urban and the rural merge at common point in Darjeeling's Chok Bazar where the "ramita" or the spectacle is to take place. This novel becomes important because it is the first work to sense the simmering discontent of the people of Darjeeling, urban and rural alike, towards the prevailing administrative system. It is also the first work to depict the political mindset of the people living in the hills of Darjeeling. Thus, as a study of the Darjeeling mindset, Indra Bahadur Rai's "*Aaja Ramita Cha*" is a definitive study.

Indra Sundas' "*Juneli Rekha*" (Silver Lining) on the other hand is a realistic

portrayal of blatant oppression. The form of exploitation practiced in the tea garden transcendent from just the economic level to almost a spiritual level. A labourer, for the most part was treated like a slave and denied to think oneself as a human. Sundas' "*Juneli Rekha*" exposes another repressive form of colonialism practiced in the tea gardens of Darjeeling, known as "Hattabahar" or to be literally "bundled off". If a labourer in anyway attracted the displeasure of the manager, immediately he was sent off along with his family from the tea garden never to be set foot on it again. It was a severe form of eviction which could be carried out almost any time in day or night. This practice made a worker just a tenant in the house in which he lived from where he could be evicted anytime at the manager's pleasure.

In the novel, the lecherous manager lusts for a young widow Malini, who is also secretly admired by a fellow labourer Jasey. Despite the numerous offers of the manager Malini refuses to yield to his lustful advances. This arouses the suspicion of a manager who suspects Malini to be attracted to Jasey. The manager orders Jasey to be "Hattabahar" or to be bundled off in a slight pretext of incompetence at work. Jasey leaves the tea garden, settles in the nearby town and comes back one night to steal Malini away from the clutches of the manager. The novel renders an accurate picture of the pre-independence social scenario in the tea gardens of Darjeeling. The exploitation, the dehumanization and the helpless state of the tea workers is realistically portrayed in the novel. However, despite the hardships, as the title of the novel suggests, there is always a silver lining as in the enduring love of Jasey and Malini.

The study of these two texts gains importance in the light of the continuing struggle for identity and representation amongst the people living in the hills of Darjeeling. After all, the characters in these novels were based on actual people and the Malinis and Jaseys still continue to struggle against the oppression of poverty, ignorance and inadequate political representation. The naïve and the simple nature of the Gorkhas living in the hills of Darjeeling continue to be economically, socially and politically exploited from within and outside. The importance of these novels even at the present day is highlighted by the fact that a profitable industry established over a century and a half still continues to pay in daily wages rather than in salary. The importance of these texts also becomes relevant in the continuing struggle of the people living, working and dying in the tea gardens to establish an identity in a country which refuses to call them its own. The fact that

these texts continually force its readers to question their contribution towards the unchanged social and political scenario makes them relevant even today. The “ramita” or the spectacle in the heart of Darjeeling town is still on, maybe now at a more grander scale. The “Hattabahars” may have legally stopped yet the residents of the tea gardens are still deprived of the title deeds of the land. What then, has changed?

If literature sustains life by nourishing it with the finer aspects of mankind through the emotions expressed in it, then perhaps literature too sustains hope. However, the people of Darjeeling are yet to find hope of a better future as their voices, voices from the margins are rarely heard.

Through my paper I hope to have made these unheard voices echo amongst the readers and conveyed their urgency to be heard.

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