

JOSHUA'S HUMANISTIC GABBILAM (BAT) – AS THE MESSENGER OF THE UNTOUCHABLE

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Abstract

Dr. Gurram Joshua (1885-1971), a self-made poet of high order, produced monumental poetry, a source of inspiration for the oppressed and suppressed people to strive to ascertain their inalienable human rights. Joshua rose from the gutter to great literary heights to become a venerable messiah of the downtrodden people. He will be ever-remembered and his poetry celebrated by the freedom loving and justice –seeking people.

His “Gabbilam” (Bat) is a modern epic. Joshua’s selection of the bird bat as his messenger to Lord Siva is highly symbolic. Joshua’s petition to God, sent through the bat was on behalf of the entire Dalit people. Joshua’s bird- messenger travelled from Tanjore in Tamil Nadu, progressing through several towns and places in Andhra Pradesh (including Guntur), Orissa, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to the abode of Lord Siva in the Himalayas. Thus Gabbilam acquires a more national and even a universal character.The translator, Sri.K.MadhavaRao rightly gauges, “What hurt Joshua the most all throughout his life were religious discrimination and the inhuman practice of untouchability. It is this anguish and pain that fired his imagination to write Gabbilam. Joshua has spoken for the entire lot of dispossessed people. Is there a place where religious congregations preach tolerance?”

Hailing from a similar social background as that of the poet, MadhavaRao could convey the spirit of the original poetry in English. The translator with dedication, has done commendable service to Telugu literature. Joshua’s Gabbilam is the ‘tearful’ tale of a depressed soul. Joshua’s was an anguished, ardent cry for justice and equality in the best traditions of humanism. An intense and spirited work of poetry, Gabbilam portrays, with touching poignancy, the plight and feelings of dalits, who for centuries have been discriminated against and exploited. It depicts the anguish and bitterness of the dalits while mirroring the contemporary historical and social context. The story of Gabbilam is the history of the dalits – also the history of our social reform movements.

This paper focuses on the depth of agony of Joshua and the cruel and dehumanizing caste system so much a part of the Hindu ethos for centuries.

Key Words- Gabbilam, Untouchability, Bird messenger, poignancy, Justice, equality.

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His “Gabbilam” (Bat) is a modern epic. Joshua’s selection of the bird bat as his messenger to Lord Siva is highly symbolic. Joshua’s petition to God, sent through the bat was on behalf of the entire Dalit people. Joshua’s bird- messenger travelled from Tanjore in Tamil Nadu, progressing through several towns and places in Andhra Pradesh (including Guntur), Orissa, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to the abode of Lord Siva in the Himalayas. Thus Gabbilam acquires a more national and even a universal character.The translator, Sri.K.MadhavaRao rightly guages, “What hurt Joshua the most all throughout his life were religious discrimination and the inhuman practice of untouchability. It is this anguish and pain that fired his imagination to write Gabbilam.

Joshua has spoken for the entire lot of dispossessed people. In one of the stanzas, he lamentingly queried:

‘Is there a place where religious congregations preach tolerance?
Is there a place where peace and harmony co-exist with caste conflicts?
Is there a place where a man condemns another as an untouchable?
But here is this wretched earth
Where you can see me spending
Every ounce of my energy
Dancing and drumming before the village-gods
For the enjoyment of people who prescribe these rites
These cruel and crooked people
Robbed me of my right for ages.’

Sri.K.MadhavaRao, an accomplished member of the Indian Administrative Service, who rose to the position of Chief Secretary to the Andhra Pradesh Governament, perhaps the first

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ever Dalit to hold this high position in Andhra Pradesh, if not in India, which raises Joshua's poetry to National and even international level. Hailing from a similar social background as that of the poet, MadhavaRao could convey the spirit of the original poetry in English. The translator with dedication, has done commendable service to Telugu literature.

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Only those who actually experienced the distress and agony of the exploited can give poetic articulation to that anguish. MadhavaRao's translation is an effort to convey the feelings of such a sensitive heart to English readers. Gabbilam (bat), chosen by Joshua, to represent the life of the dalits, has been further enshrined in the annals of poetry by MadhavaRao's translation. With involved verse and set in a complex emotional context, Joshua's poetry is not easy to translate. Even so MadhavaRao has succeeded in conveying the pathos and poignancy so central to Joshua's poetry.

Using elegant free verse, he broke free of the constraints of literal translation, while preserving the poetic integrity of the original.

MadhavaRao's translation has further secured the place of Joshua in national and international arena as a preeminent poet, humanist and social reformer. This translation is also a response to some people who are envious of the lyrical beauty of Joshua's poetry. Joshua was one who boldly, imaginatively and firmly swam against the tide of his time. MadhavaRao's translation is a passionate, sensitive translation of this great humanistic work by Joshua.

Those were the dark days when the untouchables were banished to live on the outskirts of the village, not allowed to draw water from the village well and not permitted into hotels and public places. Such social ostracism, combined with economic exploitation, condemned the untouchables to a weak and dispirited life, sapping them of all aspiration and enterprise. Growing up as an untouchable, experiencing that exploitation, and more importantly seeing his fellow untouchables so helplessly acquiescing in their fate made Joshua learn to wield a new weapon – the pen. The result is this unique piece of poetry "Gabbilam" which means "Bat".

Joshua modelled Gabbilam on the lines of Kalidasa's Meghadutam, which translates into English as Cloud Messenger. In Kalidasa's Meghadutam, Yaksha is an angel serving the God of Wealth, Kubera. One day Yaksha fails to turn up before Kubera at the appointed time as he is engrossed with his lady love. Kubera sentences him for one year separation from his beloved for his lapse. Unable to bear the separation Yaksha communicates the pangs of separation to his beloved using a cloud as his messenger. The contrast between the two works, deliberate and imaginative, compels notice.

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Kalidasa's hero is an angel in love; Joshua's is a hungry cobbler. Kalidasa's messenger is a superior pedigree cloud (according to Hindu mythology, there are different classes of clouds), which Joshua's is an inferior bird-the bat. Kalidasa's messenger is white and beautiful while Joshua's messenger is black and ugly. Kalidasa's messenger travels in broad daylight but Joshua's messenger is despatched on the errand in the darkness of night. Kalidasa's hero sends a message conveying the pangs of separation to his beloved. Joshua's hero sends a poignant, but spirited message to God enquiring about the reasons for his hunger and untouchable status. Kalidasa's hero is sentenced to separation from his beloved for one year. Joshua's hero has been condemned to hunger and social degradation for generations. Kalidasa's hero suffers from the arrows of cupid. Joshua's hero is the target of the arrows of the twin demons of poverty and social ostracism. Kalidasa's hero is punished for dereliction of duty, but Joshua's hero for no fault of his. Kalidasa's Meghadutam is an exquisite piece of art. Joshua's Gabbilam is an equally exquisite piece of art but with a great purpose.

'When you are hanging upside down in the temple

Quite close you will be to the Siva's ear

Narrate the story of my suffering to God

Making sure that no priest is around'.

The untouchable, the hero in Gabbilam, is the Individual Soul. Siva is the Universal Soul. The Universal Soul has to hear the entreaty of the Individual Soul. But the priest has become an impregnable barrier. Joshua condemned this artificial religious barriers and selects Gabbilam to bypass this barrier and convey his message to God.

Joshua's choice of a bat has great significance. The bat, a dark and ugly bird, is considered a bad omen and can, therefore, relate to the plight of the untouchable. Besides, a beautiful bird like a swan or an object like cloud may refuse to be the untouchable's messenger. Gabbilam was Joshua's weapon – not to fight the exploiters but to be used to bring about a social awakening among untouchables. To convey to them the message that they have a right to live with dignity and freedom. To exhort them to question and challenge the people who were driving them to deprivation. He wanted them to realize that their plight is not an act of God but the consequence of the selfish design of fellow human beings who stand to gain by such exploitation. Joshua acknowledges only two teachers in his life – poverty and religious discrimination. The former taught him patience; the latter a sense of revolt. He wanted to prove his mettle by getting over both these handicaps. His own deprivations as also his observation of the exploitation of his kinsfolk should have made him despair. But he rose above the milieu to inspire his fellowmen and therein lies his greatness. He is like a lotus born out of and risen well above the dirty mud of the lake. He chosen the pen as his sword in this war against exploitation, oppression and injustice. In writing Gabbilam, Joshua took his first step in his life long journey of reformation. Joshua said his struggle would go on till equality is achieved in the fields of knowledge, religion, social and economic relationships.

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But what hurt Joshua the most all through his life were religious discrimination and the inhuman practice of untouchability. It is this anguish and pain that fired his imagination to write Gabbilam.

To understand the depth of agony of Joshua in this book, one should have an idea of the cruel and dehumanizing caste system so much a part of the Hindu ethos for centuries. Here one cannot help referring to Manusmriti, also known as Manu Dharma Sastra, written by Manu. The treatise deals with how a man should interface with the society and his attitude towards elders, ladies and other caste groups. It tells how he should conduct himself as a family man and as an individual in various stages of his life. The part dealing with the caste system has the greatest impact on the lives of untouchables.

A person, who is not familiar with the realities of India may find it difficult to believe all this. But untouchability is as real as the inhuman slavery and as ugly as racial discrimination. Today, the situation on the untouchability front has improved as in the case of racial discrimination. Tragically the system is not totally dead yet.

No wonder Ambedkar was driven to burning the Manusmriti and Joshua spent his whole life decrying religious discrimination and untouchability perpetrated by Manu and his successors.

Buddha did not believe in the caste system. The result is easily seen. The perpetrators of caste system saw to it that his philosophy is more popular outside his country than within! SreeNarayana Guru, Vemana, PalanatiBrahmana, PothuluriVeerabrahmam, JothibaPhule and Periyar E.V. RamaswamyNaiker wrote against untouchability. Christianity and Islamic religions attracted a number of untouchables as these religions have no caste system. Dr.Ambedkar became a powerful rallying point for the untouchables and he demanded separate electorates, freedom and protection for his caste men as a greater priority than political independence from the British. Gandhi and the Congress party saw the writing on the wall. Gandhi started a movement for abolition of untouchability.

He batters the gates of heaven and challenges God himself asking why he is allowing such inhuman discrimination.

'Selfish religious bigots silence me

Declaring my misery the result of my sins of birth

Previous

Ask your God to explain what this reincarnation is

And why it bears a grudge against me?'

'I will challenge Eswar that his abode

Is no better than a Brahmin locality

His temples are no better than the main streets

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To which my entry is barred

I will make him admit

Community lunches are more dignified'

In part – I of the poem Joshua says that the untouchable is simple, innocent and contented with a penny. In suffering and suppressing hunger he is destined to live in penury. He is the unwanted child of the great mother, Bharat, that is India.

He pictures the untouchable as – 'He is magnanimous enough to stitch shoes. To protect the feet of the very sons of India'. Who exploit his labour and social dignity. Indebted indeed is this country to this poor soul.

He adds –

'Only he can raise the crops

And only he

Feeds the whole mankind

Alas, he himself has naught to eat.'

Even Ganges, the holiest river and the mightiest cleanser cannot wash his stain of untouchability.

One fateful day he toils from morning to evening. In his poor hut licking the remnant morsel of a meal, stretches his tired limbs to rest and heal.

Then he gazes in the silent darkness – a full of darkness, the shape of a face – the Gabbilam – which snuffed out the glowing wick of his tiny lamp.

The act of Bat did not infuriate him moreover he is happy at the sight of the devilish Bat as it kindles new hopes in his mind. He begins to unburden his heart to the bird. Here the poet - the untouchable can make friends only with worms, beasts and birds.

He greets the bat by saying

'Welcome to Thee, O Queen of Bats

Sacred temples you dwell in

Your 'head-down' meditation augurs well to the temples

You get respect denied to the untouchables'.

It puzzled him why the bat find his chamber of the darkness where no ray of hope can ever enter.

Here the poet warns the bat –

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'Beware! You can be banished from temple
If they know you visited this untouchable
And calls it a fool to enter the poor man's abode.'

He explains the bat that the world is heartless and the life is normal to all. Except for the poor untouchable.

In part -II of the poem - the poet wonders what the Bat tells God, as the messenger of the unfortunate untouchable. Suddenly the bird vanished into the dark clouds with his eyes full of tears. The poet is confident that the Gods themselves regret that untouchables were denied access to the temples all these centuries.

He feels that one day the tears of untouchables will burst like thunderbolt and doom the nation to destruction and he adds.

'This realisation spurred Gandhi
To toil for emancipation of untouchables
This great son of India
Proved compassion is an invincible weapon
Only truth can give peace and prosperity
And a spinning wheel canturu a dream
Into reality of freedom.'

He questions the bat - Whether she has seen all the holy places?

Did Eswar and His Consort hear the tale of his suffering?

He opines that the bat's role as his messenger will not be hailed as that of the celebrated cloud of Kalidasa, because people who worship stones and mud cannot recognize the talent in a living untouchable.

He asks the bat.-----

'Did you meet the two giant sages
Vyasa and Valmiki in their ripe old age in Heaven?'

He also asks whether he met the cloud that carried the love missive of Yaksha .

He wonders -

'How could you carry the heavy load of

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my melancholy message

Amidst the din of aeroplanes and rough weather?’

He calls it a sage bird and says that ‘No mishap can befall a good samaritan’

He says –

O benign being, I have no means now
To repay your debt, except being grateful
When our country attains independence
I shall surely recompense your help
And wants to engrave its image
On the fluttering flag of his community

He concludes the poem by saying that -

That poor untouchable expends his last drop of blood
Sending his tearful message to God through the divine bird
And receiving the reply of God.
Will he die of this exhaustion?
OR
Will he survive to reap the fruits of Independence?

A reformer may not be a poet. But if a poet is also a reformer, the cause of social awakening is served that much better. Joshua belonged to the rare class of poets with an intense message of social justice. Like all successful reformers, Joshua was, above all, a humanist who rebelled against injustice, inequality and exploitation.

The disgust at untouchable's being denied access to a common drinking well, pity for dumb animals cruelly sacrificed before petty village gods, anger at selfish priests deceiving and exploiting the ignorant in the name of religion, agony at the deprivation and degradation of women by men, drove Joshua to become a social rebel and a rebel poet.

“Sweetly but boldly expressing the truth that contributes to the welfare of people at large is real poetry.” Such definition of poetry could have come only from Joshua because that is what his poetry is all about in all his 36 books – a unique confluence of beauty and truth conveying a purposeful message of reform.

His own sufferings in life and his resolve to combat them influenced his poetic style. When Joshua was writing about economic, social and religious discrimination and exploitation

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his poetry flows with powerful and poignant thoughts that breathe and words that burn. Pathos and revolutionary style are thus, the chief characteristics of his poetry. When he is not dealing with exploitation and injustice his poetry is simply melodious. His poetry is so melodious that he makes cuckoos to despair. No wonder he is aptly conferred the title "Cuckoo among poets."

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