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Elusive Quest for Social Justice in Mahananda Dhakal's *Burhan*

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Abstract

Everyone in the world deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities. Every individual's rights and opportunities should be recognized and protected within the society where they belong. This is the state of "social justice". Social justice is inevitable as it promotes fairness and equity across different aspects of society. However, underprivileged people are denied social justice in an unjust society, resulting in missed opportunities across various sectors of life. As a result, a person may experience a cascade of difficulties in other different areas too. Burhan's hero Maila Tharu, and other characters also go through similar phases of unfavorable conditions, struggles and sufferings. This proves to be the destiny of underprivileged people in an unjust society, where the quest for social justice is elusive.

*This paper explores and analyzes persistent struggles for social justice in Mahananda Dhakal's *Burhan*. It attempts to explore different ways of exploitation and victimization of such innocent and helpless characters. This paper also contends that such characters are denied rights and opportunities within the society, and kicked out from their own land and properties. Through the critical analysis of the character's experiences, the paper examines the elusive nature of social justice in *Burhan*. The paper finally argues that *Burhan* serves as a powerful commentary on the ongoing struggle equity and the critical need for transformative change.*

Keywords: Social justice, equity, exploitation, victimization, quest

Introduction

Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are the inalienable rights of all human beings. An individual should have equal rights and opportunities in the society. Every individual's rights and opportunities should be recognized and protected within the society where they belong to. This is what we call "social justice", which is must for every member of a society. In fact, "Social justice is a normative concept centered on the notion of fairness and the principles of equality, equity, rights and participation" (Khechen, 2013, p. iv). However, right from the very beginning of the human civilization, most of the means and resources and opportunities are exploited and controlled by specific groups of the society. Powerful people determine the capacities, actions, beliefs, or conduct of other people in general. It means the other groups of people remain underprivileged, being deprived from access to different sorts of means and resources and opportunities, within the same society. To bring about equity and equality, and social justice in the society, the underprivileged people of the society have to go through several severe phases. They are obliged to struggle and suffer harshly to achieve the same status in the society, despite the fact that they are also the equal members of the same society. And, obviously, in most of the cases their tireless efforts lead them to nowhere else, but in vein. Mahananda Dhakal's *Burhan* depicts similar quest for social justice by the major characters, especially Maila Tharu and his son Shomlal, of the novel.

In fact, *Burhan* is the story of dream, struggle and self-respect. The first section of the novel is *Dream*, which depicts the dream of different characters of the novel. The characters like Maila Tharu, Shomlal and Parvati in the novel belonging to lower class and status have their own dream for better life. They all have their own circumstances. Maila Tharu and Somlal's origin is Dang, whereas Parvati's origin is Syanja. "In the story, mother Parvati and Maila Tharu's pain, sorrow, discomfort, lack, and poverty are the same. Destiny made mother Parvati weak, deprived, poor. The feudal system and society's elites who neglected Maila Tharu created and continued to create penury" (Nepali, 2022, para. 5). However, *Burhan* is dreamland for all of them, where they expect for better life, free from their problems and difficulties. They have dream to have their own land, own house, and hope to be capable of fulfilling at least their basic needs. "To solve their condition of penury for once and for all, they chose to migrate, but nothing dramatic happened in their lives" (Chaudhary, 2023, para. 7). Despite their unwillingness to abandon their beloved land and origin place, they are bound to do so. They have to leave it for their better life, for the bright future of their children and upcoming generations, and at least to get rid of several severe problems they have been suffering from.

The second section of the novel is *Struggle*, which depicts the struggle of the

prominent characters in the novel. Parvati struggles to support her family in terms of quality life. She strives to give better education to her children. On the other hand, Maila Tharu struggles even to join hands and mouth. He hasn't enough land to cultivate. Because of extreme poverty, he is unable to provide proper education to his children. As a result, he has to send his son as a *Kamaiya* (bonded laborer) in the house of a landlord. Their problems remain unsolved. It's not that they don't try. In fact, they fail to fulfill their dream because of the discriminatory socio-cultural, political and economic factors. They become the victim of systemic discrimination and oppression.

The third part of the novel is *Self-respect*, which depicts the characters' final and decisive action for their existence in real sense, i.e. self-respect. It's the state of do or die. After great suffering, long struggle, and living a life full of pain and disgust, the characters have come up to this stage. "Finally, in the *Self-respect* section, characters like Shomlal are engaged in a People's War for their self-respect, but there is also pessimistic feeling since the achievements are not as expected and the condition (fate) has not changed yet" (Aryal, 2023, para. 14). Even the last hope and efforts of the characters, like that of Shomlal, go in vein.

In fact, *Burhan* is a story of dream, struggle and self-respect, but it doesn't seem to be equal and achievable for all. Specially, Maila Tharu and Shomlal, who are the representative characters from Tharu community, have always been cheated by their fate and they have become the victim of systemic violence. Though Maila Tharu and Shomlal strive for social justice from the very beginning, all their efforts go in vein. This proves to be the destiny of underprivileged people in an unjust society, where achieving social justice remains elusive.

In the novel *Burhan*, the protagonist and other subsidiary characters face several severe problems i.e. poverty, discrimination, violence, injustice and many others. They had to suffer from such problems basically because of the then discriminatory social, cultural, political and legal practices in the western Terai of Nepal. The novel *Burhan* portrays its characters' quest for social justice in the then society, which was elusive in nature. The paper tries to answer the research questions: What is the central quest of the main protagonist in Mahananda Dhakal's *Burhan*? What are the hurdles in achieving his quest for social justice? How does the main protagonist's quest for social justice become elusive?

The paper is divided into five parts. Following this introduction, relevant literature is reviewed, which emphasizes some previous studies on the issue. Following that, research method is provided to answer the research questions. Afterwards, the textual

analysis is presented which analyses the text using the social justice theory. The last section concludes the possible conclusions based on the research.

Literature Review

Different critics and writers have analyzed and reviewed the text from multiple perspectives. Amrik Prasad Chaudhary in his article “*Burhan*: A Mirror of Tharu Reality” presents the novel as a reflection of Tharu’s way of life. He writes, “...the motif of the novel is to show the lifestyle of the Tharus, their role in the society, their sorrow, pain and struggle, their beliefs and their unchanging convictions” (Chaudhary, 2023, para. 2). He further states, “*Burhan*, in my view is a mirror of the Tharu tribe. *Burhan*, the setting of the novel, is the center of hope for shelter, cloth and food” (Chaudhary, 2023, para. 12). Further, he also puts on their faith and tireless efforts to overcome their long lasting problems. “It is a matter of sadness to say that even after continuous efforts and struggle, the expected result is not obtained. A question therefore makes an obvious appearance: What is the achievement for the Tharus after all these years of struggle and demonstration? Practically nothing” (Chaudhary, 2023, para. 10). This is how, the Tharus of *Burhan*, as portrayed in the novel, are conditioned to be within the same struggling and pathetic condition.

Raj Kumar Tharu and Bhagbat Poudel (2023), in their research paper “Does Maila speak? A journey of a common man in Mahananda Dhaka’s *Burhan*” examines the reasoning behind the voice (lessness) of Maila Tharu and his son Somlal Tharu, who are the prominent characters in the novel. Further, they highlight the Tharus’ social reality in the light of how the subaltern is misrepresented and altered during transitions. They write:

The ethnic uprising that took place during the Maoist insurgency period and some of the movements that followed, most notably the Tharu Movement in western Nepal, have not adequately addressed the genuine suffering of subaltern Tharus. Thus, marginalized people, such as the Tharus, remain behind mainstream political, administrative, and social lives in the practical realm... (p. 16).

The extraction clarifies the reason behind the backwardness of the underprivileged communities like Tharus of western Nepal. Though many revolutionary movements took place, they could not address and resolve the problems of the communities. Time changed, context changed, but their socio-economic conditions remained same. Maila Tharu and Shomlal, the representative characters of the novel, have the similar case. Though they actively participated in such movements, like *Kandra Andolan*, *Kamaiya Mukti Andolan*, *Jan-Andolan*, etc., they are not benefitted in anyway.

Another writer Begam Thapa analyses the character of Maila Tharu, protagonist

of the novel. He describes Maila Tharu as “a representative of Tharu communities living in *Burhan*, the place from where this novel is born” (Thapa, 2023, para. 4). Further, he describes Maila Tharu as “innocent, simpleminded, straight-forward, illiterate, economically poor yet culturally rich, honest, patient and laborious” (Thapa, 2023, para. 5). However, he is easily manipulated by the leaders of different political parties. Thapa writes:

Different political leaders from different parties show him greed to give land but it is only consolation. Maila Tharu participates in different Tharu’s movements but his lifestyle remains same, rather becomes more miserable. They start the Tharu movement risking their lives. They are injured during the movement and are threatened by the government to leave their homes. He is used by different political leaders in different course of time in his struggling life. (para. 9)

This shows that Maila Tharu has just been used as a scapegoat. Despite his active participation in different movements, and his tireless efforts to change his and his family’s economic and social condition, he is unable to do so. His illiteracy, simplicity, innocence, and the like are some of the factors which keep him lagging behind the progress. Even after generations and generations, his and his family’s overall conditions remain same.

Gita Aryal (2023), in her article “*Mero Najarmaa Burhan*”, elucidates the novel on the basis of three major sections: dream, struggle and self-respect. She asserts the condition of Tharus as *status quo*. “The novel expresses the fact that even when the Tharu caste is in crisis, their dreams are the same” (Aryal, 2023, para. 25). This is the bitter reality of Tharus is *Burhan*. Dhiren Anupam (2022), in his article “*Burhan: Sapana ra Sangharsh maa Aljhiyeko Jijiwisha*” also describes *Burhan* as “the dream world of the poor” (Anupam, 2022, para. 7). For him, “*Burhan* is the totality of sad stories that remain as they are despite lifelong struggles” (Anupam, 2022, para. 11). Though *Burhan* is a dream land, everyone’s dream is not fulfilled. Because of socio-economic, political and cultural structure, some communities like the Tharus could not make any progress. Thus, they are obliged to live in the same pathetic condition.

Despite extensive research on the topic, it often overlooks the intersectional experiences of marginalized communities like Tharus within the socio-economic, cultural and political structure of the society. While there is ample literature on social justice issues, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies regarding elusive quest for social justice. Thus, the research would be helpful in exploring and analyzing intersecting experiences of the marginalized communities, especially Tharus, in Nepal.

Methodology

Since this is a qualitative research, its findings and analysis are based on the application of relevant theories on the primary text. The research has used library research technique for the collection of related data and materials. The novel *Burhan* by Mahananda Dhakal has been taken as the primary data in the research and the secondary data have been derived from theoretical books, journals, theses, and other readings. Social Justice Theory has been applied as a theoretical framework to analyze the primary text. John Rawls, and other notable theorists' theories and ideas on Social Justice have been applied as theoretical bases for the research.

Central Quest and Hurdles in the Quest for Social Justice

The entire heartbreaking journey of Maila Tharu, from Chitrukuti of Dang to Rajapur of Bardiya (Burhan), for economic, social and psychological stability is no less than a nightmare. In the novel, Maila Tharu has to make this journey since all his ancestral land has been seized by a landlord deceptively. Before starting this journey, Maila Tharu had heard about Burhan from his grandfather. He had understood Burhan as a "Paradise". "Burhan was a story. A story of dream" (Dhakal, 2022, p. 42). In fact, Burhan is "the new land, which precisely indicates the region around Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur districts where the Tharus, migrating from their traditional estates in and around Dang, live" (Chaudhary, 2023, para. 2). Since Maila Tharu makes this journey for equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities, the central quest of the main protagonist in the novel is the pursuit of social justice.

The overall narrative of the novel revolves around the protagonist's journey and struggle for his and his family's better life and the community's improved status in the society. As Maila Tharu belongs to a poverty-stricken family, marginalized and underprivileged community, his journey is not as easy as the journey of a common man. His journey and pursuit of social justice is full of struggle, hurdles, and challenges. Maila Tharu tells the reason behind migrating from Dang to Rajapur of Bardiya (Burhan) to Ningma, the narrator of the novel. Landlessness, extreme poverty, *Kamaiya Pratha* (bonded labor system), extreme exploitation and abuse of landlords, and the like were some of the major factors that forced the underprivileged Tharus of Dang to leave their place of origin and homeland in search of a suitable place so that they could lead their life in a normal way. Even the journey was so difficult. Maila Tharu tells, "It was difficult. It took six days for others, but it took seven days for us" (Dhakal, 2022, p. 49). Further he states the reason behind taking longer time to reach Burhan. "Burhan didn't suit my younger brother. He died in the half way" (Dhakal, 2022, p. 49). This is how Maila Tharu and his family had to suffer even in the journey to Burhan.

John Rawls (1971), in his book *A Theory of Justice*, asserts “justice as fairness” and defines the “primary subject of justice [to be] the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation” (Rawls 1971). His idea of social justice emphasizes fairness in the society in terms of rights and duties. However, the scenario in Dhakal’s *Burhan* is just opposite. Maila Tharu, his family and his community in general are the victim of unfairness.

Maila Tharu had heard a lot about Burhan from his grandfather. “Grandfather used to tell stories about water, land and forest...” (Dhakal, 2022, p. 41). But he never knew why his grandfather didn’t migrate to Burhan himself. In the beginning, Maila’s grandfather had land. He had made cultivable land “by chopping down the forest.” However, he hadn’t the land ownership certificate (*Lalpurja*) of the land. In fact, the entire land was deceptively seized by a landlord. As a result, the family of Maila Tharu became landless in their own place of origin.

In the novel, Maila Tharu and his family became the prey of an unjust social structure. Unable to bear the burden and suffering, Maila’s parents, along with Maila and his younger brother, had to leave Chitrakuti, Dang. They left their beloved place of origin when Maila was about seven or eight, just to be away from all the existing problems and social injustice, and at least to have better life than they had been living in Dang. However, they continue to suffer because of unfair societal structure.

Thus, despite their relentless struggle, the deep-rooted social injustice faced by the marginalized Tharu community remains unresolved in an inequitable society.

Maila Tharu and Somlal’s Elusive Quest for Social Justice

A quest is a difficult journey towards a specific mission or a goal. This involves a quester, a place to go, a reason, challenges along the way, and the character learning about themselves. These elements resemble with the elements present in the Dhakal’s *Burhan*. Maila Tharu and his family are questers; they have a place to go, i.e. Burhan; they also have a reason, in fact many reasons, to go; they face several challenges along the way; and the characters learn about themselves too. The same thing applies to Parvati, another prominent character of the novel, as well.

It was expected that Maila Tharu’s family’s unfavorable condition would change after being migrated to the new land, i.e. Burhan. But everything does not go as expected. Maila participates in many movements actively. But various factors resist him from making progress and achieving his goals. “...the change in the family of Parvati and

Mahila that the level of political consciousness is increasing due to the *Kandra Movement*, *Sukumbasi Movement*, *Kamaiya* and *Kamlahari Mukti Movement* for their rights, but the Tharu community is comparatively backward due to lack of skills and education” (Sapkota, 2023, para. 6). Since the movements ended in an agreement, the expected achievements were not achieved. Though some Tharus were able to get a place to live, they were forced to return to work due to the lack of food and other basic needs. The compelling circumstances of Shomlal to become *kamaiya* (boned laborer) present the same scenario.

Though Maila Tharu and Parvati are from almost the same economic background, their present social and economic conditions are far different from each other's. As the time changes, the social and economic circumstance of Parvati also changes, though she also suffers a lot in her quest for change. At present, she has sufficient land. Her children are educated, and employed now. As a result her overall condition has improved. However, the condition of Maila is still helpless. Maila remains struggling throughout his life, but in vein. Maila Tharu's dream remains unfulfilled. It continues up to the next generation, i.e. even his son Shomlal suffers from similar problems. Their socio-economic circumstances do not change as the time changes.

In a just society, every individual is expected to have social justice. “Fair access to goods and services is a fundamental principle of social justice” (Khechen, 2013, p. 5). Regardless of one's class, gender, sex, origin, or any other factor, every individual has equal right to the means and resources of the society. Contrary to this, Maila and Shomlal's conditions are different. They are the victim of systemic oppression. In fact, the discrimination and mistreatment against them has been perpetuated by the society and the ruling system. In this respect, Tara Lal Shrestha (2012) argues:

The internal colonization mission has dominated and subordinated the women, Dalits, Janajaties, Madhesis and disenfranchised them in such a way that the subalterns are hardly able to overcome the layers of hegemony. The representation of the Nepali indigenous community especially Tharus, who are boycotted from mainstream politics. (p. 17)

This means that the disadvantaged groups like Tharus of Nepal have been the victim of internal colonization, and as a result they are unable to rise above their existing condition. Even the political system doesn't support and address their issue. With the change in time, several political reformations and changes have taken place. But unfortunately, their overall conditions remain the same.

Unable to bring any significant change, despite his tireless effort, Maila gives up his hope for social justice in the later phase of his life. Though he is able to have ownership

in a small piece of land, as an achievement of *Kandra Movement* in which he actively participated, this land is not enough to sustain himself and his family. So, he is bound to send Shomlal as *kamaiya* in a landlord's house where he is ill-treated and exploited. Even he loses his beloved wife there.

Though Shomlal was very simple and innocent in the initial phase, later he becomes revolutionary and aggressive in nature. For the self-respect and recognition in the society, Shomlal gets engaged in a *Jana-Andolan* (People's War). During this phase, he remains away from his wife Ramita, his son and other members of his family. He goes underground for long time. In the war, he got injury in his leg as a bullet was shot in it. He had ultimate hope from this war. But unfortunately, after the Peace Agreement, "Shomlal was disqualified. Both his body and fortune did not favor him. Shomlal's dreams did not get justice" (Dhakal, 2022, p. 301). This way, after Maila Tharu, Shomlal also remained and continued to be the victim of existing discriminatory socio-cultural, economic and political structure of the country. This shattered all his dream, hope and expectations.

Parvati's family becomes an ideal family with the help of Maila Tharu. Parvati's son Sagar becomes the President of *Sukumbasi Samasya Samadhan Aayog* (Squatter Problem Resolution Commission). Parvati's another son is in the good position of Nepal Police. However, the condition of Maila and his family is still worst. "He stood at the forefront of the movement for change. But Maila's family could not have the privilege to experience the change" (Dhakal, 2022, p. 321). They could never fulfill the dream of Burhan as seen by their ancestors. They remained suffering the scarcity of food, shelter and clothes continued for generations.

Betrayed by his fate, Shomlal expresses his frustration for not being able to achieve anything even after his great struggles and sufferings. Shomlal's frustration is clear when he refuses to accept the letter of appointment handed to him by Sagar. Shomlal bursts in a creeping voice, "The letter of appointment does not fulfill the dream of Burhan. This cannot be the outcome of my lifelong struggle for liberation. I do not need this mere paper. Is it enough to justify our identity? Is the ethnic existence limited only on it?" (Dhakal, 2022, p. 324). This pessimistic mood of Shomlal expresses the pain and suffering they have experienced. Most ironically, it is not certain how long this situation will continue.

Thus, the struggles of Maila Tharu and Shomlal in *Burhan* underscore persistent shortcomings of systemic reforms in achieving social justice, leaving marginalized communities trapped in a cycle of unfulfilled dreams and pervasive injustice.

Conclusion

Burhan, by Mahananda Dhakal, depicts the journey of the main characters, and their overall conditions from past to present. This paper views the novel through the lens of social justice. The novel delves on the impact of unfair social structure on the progress and change of the underprivileged community, particularly through the characters of Maila Tharu and Shomlal. Both the characters suffer severely in the quest for social justice. The paper also has tried to answer the research questions on the central quest of the protagonist, hurdles he faces, and the reasons behind his quest for social justice become elusive. While the paper provides an in-depth exploration of these key elements, the paper primarily focuses on Maila Tharu and Shomlal's experience in *Burhan*, which may overlook other relevant perspectives and broader socio-political contexts, thereby affecting the generalizability and comprehensiveness of the analysis. The analysis may not fully capture the complexity of social justice issues portrayed in *Burhan*, as it focuses narrowly on Maila Tharu and Shomlal. As a result, the findings might not be as widely applicable or relevant to other contexts or characters beyond Maila Tharu and Shomlal. Thus, incorporating additional characters and perspectives from *Burhan* and exploring the broader socio-political context could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the social justice issues depicted in the novel in future research.

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