

## Ghinua Santhal and Structural Violence

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The birth centenary celebrations of the revolutionary writer-activist Bhagawati Pani-grahi (1908-1943) happened to coincide with heightened occurrence of violence in India. The debate on the appropriateness of armed struggle by people's movements acquired a fresh relevance in the recent years especially because the Maoists expanded their areas of influence significantly in central and eastern India. Bhagawati Panigrahi's immortal story 'Shikar' (The Hunt) (1936) may provide a useful reference point at the present context. The story's 75th anniversary in 2011 prompted much reflection on strategies of violence, counter-violence and adivasi rebellion. The story of the Santhal tribal Ghinua tells the world how he was driven to kill the fleeing landlord Gobinda Sardar as the last resort.

Interpretation of this much commented story has thus far propounded the thesis of an 'innocent' tribal who considered Gobinda Sardar as yet another fierce tiger and killed him. After killing the landlord, Ghinua had brought his head to the house of the Deputy Commissioner hoping that the Deputy Commissioner would as usual reward him for hunting an even more powerful animal. Bhagawati's account of the trial has been thought to further reinforce the innocence thesis as Ghinua was expecting gold and silver for this valiant act of his right up to the moment of hanging. Even Mrinal Sen's famous movie, *Mrigaya*, did not alter that perception of Ghinua.

This writer would like to contest this interpretation and argue that it was a considered act by Ghinua. The story narrates a powerful account of the intersection of class, ethnic, gender exploitation carried on under the aegis of the colonial state. There are three elements to note in the treatment of violence in the *Shikar* story.

One relates to structural violence perpetrated by landlord and the colonial order. The second vividly depicts people's plight in the tribal areas pointed out in the story. It presents an account of rebellion against colonialism and feudalism one of whose leaders was Jhapat Singh who was killed by the Dora and was rewarded by the British regime. Third, the state as an organization of violence legitimated through the judicial process among other things also comes out very well in the story.

First, Ghinua describes how the landlord Gobinda Sardar was more ferocious than the tiger. The Sardar had taken over the possession of many people's land including Ghinua's own, depriving them of their source of livelihood. "He has amassed a lot of property by looting every household, hence he was a big devil. He has killed many people and rendered so many families helpless and harassed so many and raped countless women". This is how Ghinua justified the attack on Gobinda Sardar defending himself in the court. That Gobinda Sardar was carrying on his despotic reign under the protection of the British government becomes clear

when the Deputy Commissioner asks Ghinua to wait for his prize at the front door of his bungalow, goes inside and telephones to procure the armed police force. The police arrives and Ghinua is taken to custody, shackled and hand-cuffed, with his legs tied in chains. The court trial provides even more evidence of how the state maintained the violent structure of oppression.

Second, equally evident is the fact that tribals had risen in revolt against colonial rule that expropriated their forest resources and established direct control and domination over them.

Jhapat Singh, the rebel appears as a contrast to Gobinda Sardar the landlord. The British regime had announced rewards on the head of the rebel. The killer agent named Dora had got Rs.500/- as reward from the Deputy Commissioner for killing Jhapat Singh. In Bagawati Panigrahi's story Ghinua asks why was Jhapat Singh killed? "After all he never insulted women, he had not occupied anybody's land. Jhapat Singh only led attacks on government treasury and had killed some British armed guards". This was Ghinua arguing his own case in the trial courts and insistently demanding higher rewards because he had finished a 'bada bhayankar loka' (an extremely dangerous person).

Bhagawati thus depicts how mass uprisings, including armed attacks on state treasury, was a noticeable phenomenon. Ghinua's action was a part of that mass action. Many times before, people had tried to kill Gobinda Sardar, but they had failed. The Sardar always carried a rifle and was accompanied by armed guards. He rode a jeep and always escaped very fast. That fateful day he was in the house of Ghinua and was trying to sexually assault Ghinua's wife. Bhagawati, the Marxist writer points the depth of the class, gender, ethnic exploitation in that moment of cumulative aggression on humanity of the human, namely Ghinua's wife, a tribal woman whose land had been alienated. That is when the oppressor is noticed by Ghinua, the famous sharp shooter with his bow and arrows. Ghinua had the reputation of "shooting his arrow to hit a target right even a mile away". Sensing the arrival of Ghinua, Gobinda Sardar makes a quick exit in his vehicle. But promptly Ghinua shoots an arrow to puncture the jeep wheel and then follows with another arrow straight into the neck of the tormentor. He then reaches the jeep and separates the head with his axe as he usually did with his other animal hunts. This is how the author presents the episode to highlight the response of the victim of structural violence.

Third, how does the state treat him? The state system treats him as a dangerous murderer. The trial reveals the character of the state as a coercive organization protecting the system of feudal, patriarchal, ethnic domination and social oppression.

Was it a case of 'individual terrorism', an adventurist act of assassination and therefore not an act of 'revolutionary violence'? Bhagawati's story has been interpreted as a statement of tribal innocence on the one hand and 'individual terrorism' on the other. But the story may have more potency than either of these views may suggest.

The Ghinua Santhal thesis on the place of violence in people's movements does put violence as a part of the broader political movement against structure of oppression. But this is a last resort. Such violence does not target ordinary people. It is resorted to by those who, like Ghinua, loved humanity and was a close friend of nature. Ghinua Santhal was hoping that the demands of the adivasi rebels would be heard, land alienation and looting of forest would end and women's honour would be protected. When repression by the colonial state reached a peak point Ghinua was forced to counter-attack the oppressor. He and his people lived in peace before the arrival of the colonial officer. It was the colonial regime that brought the landlord Gobinda Sardar to rule over them. The adivasis wanted peace again and they were seeking peace by fighting for justice.

Bhagawati Panigrahi showed why the oppressed resorted to violence. The rulers as well as the democratic forces must understand this. Unless structural violence ceases and the nature of the state is transformed, and the voice of resistance is heard and acted upon, Ghinua Santhal will continue to appear in people's consciousness. □□□