

Unsettled lives and Migrant woes in India: Reflections on the Pandemic through the Works of Ruskin Bond

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Abstract - Social mobility of people is a sign of progress in many countries. In India, some unskilled workers migrate internally and a few others travel to different states in search of work. There is poverty and a discrimination of wages and occupation in India based on communities. The social inequality is visible even to this day during the pandemic. Migrants face social inequality due to caste, place, occupation, gender and many others. These unsettled ways of life and their woes have been in news during the pandemic COVID 19 but it is not surprising as this has been prevalent for many decades. Many of the Indian English writings have focused on migration and migrants' lives. Literature plays great roles, it is intended to teach and educate. An artistic philosophy that emphasizes instructional and edifying qualities in literature is called Didacticism. Books are an eyewitness to all that has happened, and still, live on as fresh as the day they were written. Ruskin Bond's stories focus on the simplicity of the lives of Indians on hills; these stories carry depth of sensitivity in a culturally synergistic society like the Indian society. The stories like *The Last Truck Ride*, *Dust on the Mountains* carry one into the lives of the migrant workers in the quarries. The values depicted connect one with society and humanity.

Keywords:

Migration, Migrants, Social inequality, Communities, norms, Socio-culture, Pandemic

1. INTRODUCTION (Size 11, Times New roman)

Unskilled workers are a part of all communities and in India, there's a large population of unskilled workers who do not get steady jobs. They are on the lookout for jobs to earn a livelihood. They do not get steady jobs but are hired as casual labourers temporarily seasonally. Such workers are called migrant labourers, they are found in many places in the world such as South Africa, western Europe, India, North America and the Middle East. Migrant labourers with fewer skills are chosen as contract labourers and the contractor hires them for a particular job. These contracts do not cover any health insurance or benefits. They do not have reemployment rights or unions to fight for their cause. The migrant labourer works to overcome his immediate need for food and shelter. The standard of living and wages for a migrant labourer is lower than that which a normal labourer works though the conditions of work are similar.

The woes of the migrants have been a chief focus during the SARS COVID 19 Pandemic in India and the world. The pandemic lockdown rendered many migrant labourers in various places in India jobless. The distress of bearing the rent and managing homes without jobs and livelihood prompted millions of migrants to return to their villages. The second wave brought in greater agony when there was a partial lockdown. Migrants

have begun visualising the pain and long walk without any means of transport to their native places. This also meant that they would not have a livelihood in their hometowns too. Many of the migrants from the hills of India work for the quarries. Ruskin Bond's works portray the life of these migrant's in quarries in the Himalayan environs. There has been an inconsistency in the employment of migration labourers' number wise and the laws of employment do not follow the mandatory provisions.

The Indian values of tolerance, love, fellow feelings, empathy and a thirst for knowledge are predominant in reflecting the socio-culture. Migration is not new to India though the laws and the provisions have shown remarkable progress in the modern days. During the last few decades, the pace of migration and the pattern has widened a gap between the urban and rural sectors and migration is concentrated in certain states where the employment opportunities are greater. Migrants and their unhappiness have been an important part of Indian English writings. Literature may also be intended to teach and educate. An artistic philosophy that emphasizes instructional and edifying qualities in literature is called Didacticism. Books are an eyewitness to all that has happened, and still, live on as fresh as the day they were written. Books impart values, build character, form good habits, and have the capability of destroying addictions.

2. Body of Paper

What could be a better example than the stories and narratives of Ruskin Bond to display the unsettled lives of Migrants, the woes and the Community for which they work? *Ruskin Bond's* writings react directly with the readers through his simple,

unmotivated and innocent world where man does not cheat another fellow being for his progression. Ruskin Bond's plots arise from his soul, which considers humanism as a religion. His humanism is depicted in his creative vision and indomitable spirit of man. Bond belonged to the British lineage and his father and grandparents had served India as soldiers. When India gained Independence there were many Anglo Indians who settled in India. There were difficulties and their lives were difficult in independent India but they loved India. There are numerous experts of migrant life in Bond's writings but his empathies are visible in the novella, *The Writers' life*.

"The exodus of British and Anglo-Indian families was beginning even as the war ended. For some, the choice was a hard one. They had no prospects in England, no relatives there. And they had no prospects in India unless they were very well qualified. For many Anglo Indians and poor whites assisted passages to England were the order of the day. By the time 1947, the year of Indian Independence came around, most of these people had gone to make some sort of living in the UK" (46)

Ruskin Bond's stories are a combination of the philosophy of life, and religious beliefs in Indian society. People declare reading his books as an unusual experience of goodness, ethics concerning humanity, bountiful nature and enthusiasm to feel. The stories like *The Last Truck Ride*, *Dust on the Mountains* carry one into the lives of the migrant workers in the quarries. The values depicted connect one with society and humanity. Fellow feelings, kindness, charity, punctuality and many other values are forgotten terms in today's modern

world. Ruskin Bond has left an indelible mark on the contemporary literary scene in the field of Indian English literature through his contribution. Bond's stories picture narrations filled with collective themes such as the simplicity of rural Indians, the woes of migrant labourers and Indian hospitality which helped Bond adore India. The rustic folks, their lives like the Gardener Dukhi, the untouchable, the Tonga driver, an awareness of the environment, and living in Concordance with nature have been an innate part of Bond's works creating a spirit of life, which is popular in this contemporary world. Bond's works are filled with Indian culture, language and philosophy of the Himalayan region with his British ancestry making it an interesting read. The writings are full of warmth and tenderness guiding into a world of purity.

Bond is considered a regional writer whose characters include simpletons, the unassuming and the apathetic who live in a world of virtues. Bond believes in one religion 'Humanism' owing to his close association to Indian culture and life. Bond gauges the dignity of man and his self-respect as the most important in one's life. He focuses on the human aspect of characters that remain veiled under the visible crookedness when they steal, murder or goes against the prescribed norms in society.

Bond's stories depict the colonial and postcolonial state in India. It depicts the racial discrimination in the colonial state and the pathetic state of Anglo-Indian in the postcolonial state. It depicts the mimicry and imitation of life followed by a few Indians aping the colonial life. Bond's stories reflect two main aspects. Bond is characterised as a subjective writer whose subjectivity resembles Leo Tolstoy in Anna Karenina. Bond as a subjective

writer motivates and bonds the readers to a world of the resemblance of truth based on religion, morality, gender and social class. He was impressed by Charles Dickens and Hugh Walpole's *Fortitude* and wished to be a writer with writings that could include both their works. Bond's writings resemble the works of Dickens in his mode of writing and his reflective thump in writing makes his claim to be an 'Indian Charles Lamb.'

Bond's story 'The Last Truck Ride' depicts a young cherub lad Nathu who works for the truck driver Pritham Singh. He cleans his truck and travels with him from the quarry to deposit the limestone at the depot. The young lad loves his plants and fir trees at home but the lack of rains drags him to the hills of Mussoorie in the Himalayan realm to the quarry for a job. He finds the life of the migrant labourers in the quarries pathetic. There are no rains in summer, and no money for salt, sugar, soap or flour. The work of breaking stones at the quarry and loading them in the trucks by the migrant labourers was difficult for Nathu, he starts accompanying Pritham Singh as a cleaner. The story depicts the life at the quarry and the barren hills with a few Oaks that grew on the steps of the hills. The quarry was laden with dust which was whiter and caused irritation in the nostrils and pain in the eyes, the limestone dust hung everywhere. Some sharp blasts and explosions hurtled the earth and the rocks hither thither making it dusty. The plants were flung into the air. These scenes depict the tough life that was led by the migrants in the hills.

In the story Dust on the Mountains, Bishnu a young boy travels to Mussoorie when the valley he lives in has no rains. The birds and nature seem silent and patient but human beings need work and food. Bishu travels by bus to reach Mussoorie. The hills

depict the barren hills and the throngs of tourists who make their way every year. He meets migrant labourers named Chitru and Bali at the tea stall in the complex that screened Cinemas. There were many just as him who had migrated to the cities for employment, food and livelihood. Bishnu was paid rupees 50 for the whole month's chores at the tea stall. Once, Bishnu split tea on a college student's shoes while serving it in the cinema. He was offensive and kicked Bishnu. On complaining, Bishnu wasn't consoled but the employer told him, 'The customer is always right, you should have got out of the way in time!'(494) At the end of the month, the labourers were issued a notice that the Cinema would be closed for winter. Bali decides to go to Delhi for work, he resolves to never go back to the mountains where there was no food or money. He invites Bishnu to Delhi; he says there's no dearth of job or money. Chitru decides to go to the lime quarries and Bishnu set out with him. These excerpts are revelling in Bond's narrations. These narrations touch the lives of the migrants in various ways. Longing to be with their families is a common emotion that every migrant has but there is a need to earn money for the family. Bishnu bravely decides to move to the cityscape from the magnificent green mountains. Bond's writings capture the simplicity and frankness in the day to day mundane happenings quintessentially.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Bond's child protagonists through their innocence many a time, shoulder adult problems in their crisis filled lives provoking the rational or philosophical thinking of the readers. These stories are a reflection of social inequalities in India. There have

been many inequalities but the income and distribution of income have been a great one. People employed in temporary jobs are paid lesser and their skills are exploited widely. Inequalities are visible in Communities and social groups. The caste system also encourages certain people to take up the menial jobs of scavenging. *The untouchable* is one such story that touches the prevalent inequality in the olden days but these inequalities are still visible. In India Caste is related to occupations as depicted in the story. Children of skilled labourers are preferred to the children of parents who are unskilled.

Bond's Stories like 'The Thief' raises intricate societal issues of good and bad in the society, the dignity and life of outcasts, the problem of employment and the effect of consideration and pity on the dignity of a person. Bond's stories are a revelation of Indian ethics and morals that Bond experienced through his observations though he belonged to British lineage. His stories are persuading due to the closeness they bear to reality with a first-hand personal association with life and creative expression. Bond's stories illustrate home as a place of belongingness rather than a mere firmament of physical dwelling. His stories include the beauties of Dehra, the treks, the bullock cart ride, the countryside hike and the swift swim across the streams making his stories abundant with simplicity.

Ruskin Bond's stories address these social issues adeptly in a subtle manner. In the cities, the children of unskilled workers get greater chances of employment than the children of skilled labourers. Thus we find the migration of labourers from the villages to the cities exactly similar to Bond's

stories. The opportunities also differ state-wise. The labourers usually prefer working in their states but due to increased opportunities in some well-developed states, there's a migration of workers. Good education is an equalizer yet there's a non-uniformity in education and educational institutes. When the population of a place outgrows the resources and space there is an inequality in jobs and wages. The wages reduce in amount when a greater number of people available for the same job.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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