

Understanding Thatha in Atulya Misra's *Oxygen Manifesto : A Battle for the Environment*

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ABSTRACT : Thatha was a simple boy in an ordinary family living near Moreh, Manipur and he was feeling sick at the merciless destruction of natural resources in the name of urbanization. He, going against the prevailing trends of life, tried single-handedly to change the desolate look of the locality and the adjoining areas by planting seeds in the slopes of hills. His love for nature and animals and his simple and dignified life style inspired the environmentalists and experts across the globe. He was a man of exceptional intelligence who considered the seeds are the most valuable assets in one's life.

Key Words : nature, urbanization, seeds, animals

Thatha (Thambi Durai) in Atulya Misra's *Oxygen Manifesto : A Battle for the Environment* was the eighth child of his parents and he was passing through an ordinary life. He had his primary education in a village school near Moreh in Manipur and knew Hindi, Bengali and Assamese. The author writes 'Thatha hardly had any belongings or possessions. His world consisted of his clothes, books, utensils and a few consumables, all of which could fit in a small tin box. A bicycle and a tiny living place completed his existence. He had no bank account, documents, certificates, photos or footwear. His presence or absence made hardly any difference to anybody in his family or clan or village or the outside world. Thatha lived this inconspicuous and insignificant life for many decades.' Manipur was changing rapidly in the name of modernization. Natural environment was being mercilessly destroyed in the name of development, 'The trees, forests and streams were shrinking fast. There was barely any vegetation to hold the soil on the hilly slopes.....Fields produced less and demanded more labour and inputs. The birds no longer sang...Flowers stopped blooming and monkeys and rabbits stood driven out. The sun came down hard and rain clouds retracted away and afar. Moreh looked like a concrete jungle as the hillside was dotted with ugly electric poles, even uglier wires and serpentine tarred roads.' Bill Mckibben in his influential book, *The End of Nature*, writes - 'We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us' (Source: *Ecocriticism, Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*). Thatha was utterly dissatisfied with such glittering developments like larger houses, bigger cars etc. He also did not have television, radio and newspapers. The absence of greenery in the locality was troubling him and ,therefore, he picked up ten seeds and carefully planted them near his

courtyard. As a result he saw saplings within a short period of time and gradually the courtyard appeared oozing with life. This success gave him a new meaning in life. Being highly inspired he was regularly planting seeds in the wilderness and in the neighbouring areas. And ultimately ‘trees returned to the valley and the vegetation came back to life and grew into forests. Native species and wild animals reappeared, birds started chirping, streams made their way and the rains got stabilized. The entire area was rejuvenated.’ He was the centre of attention of the Media, NGOs and politicians. He was nominated for many prizes. Even the Ministry of Environment financially helped a documentary film on him. He turned into a role model for Manipur. But Thatha was not moved at all by such developments and the euphoria about Thatha subsided very quickly.

Ravi (Ravi Chandran Bose), who was successfully discharging his duty as an IPS, was assigned a case study on Thatha for the Ministry of the Northeast and as a part of his duty he had to frequently visit Thatha’s place. ‘He was astonished by Thatha’s selfless service and commitment to the environment. Thatha helped Ravi realize the power of every individual and community action, and how the government is always not an essentiality.’ Thatha had an enormous influence on Ravi. Whenever he would feel low-spirited, he would visit Thatha to recharge his spirit.

Ravi was made the Chairperson of an International Conference on Environmental Issues in Dehradun unexpectedly and he keenly wanted to use this platform to the fullest in expressing his thoughts and ideas about the environment to the environmentalists and experts. Ravi requested Thatha to attend the Conference as the chief guest but Thatha was not interested to grace the event. Ravi tried to make him understand the kind of impression he could leave on audience in such event, but Thatha remained stick to some conditions that he would not accept money for his both ways journey, he would remain in Ravi’s house as his chief guest and finally he would not deliver any speeches in the Conference. Ravi could not but agreed instantly. Thatha arrived three days prior to the Conference and settled in Ravi’s bungalow. In the next morning Thatha left bed very early and wearing his shirt and lungi went to the hills to harvest seeds. Ravi’s wife Tara and his two children developed great fondness for Thatha. In the Conference, Thatha took the limelight, but he remained silent. It was Ravi who had to speak at length on the topic.

Ravi’s last meeting with Thatha was very significant and changed Ravi’s life. He lived few days with Thatha amidst green all around. Ravi witnessed that the trees planted by Thatha were blossoming and propagating. They were walking through the paddy field and Ravi saw that the hills were cut into several steps to make small grounds in order to preserve water and check soil erosion. The embankments were planted with shrubs and trees and some other native species. In some small places vegetables had been cultivated. The steeper slopes had pineapple and tuber cultivation. Cattle moved freely in the fields with bells hung around their necks. The green fields scattered among the forests. There was no empty plot. ‘The canvas had all the shades of green interspersed with foliage, flowers and fruits of different colours’. While walking they picked up pods and fallen fruits of various types and harvested them. On the way of returning home, they brought dry wood, mushrooms, berries and a big wild jackfruit. On the day of Ravi’s

return Thatha gave him rice stew to take during long journey and a packet wrapped in old newspaper.

At the time of unpacking the packet, Ravi wondered seeing the best seeds in a pouch which was made of Dhaka muslin. 'Thatha has given Ravi his greatest treasure, his only prized souvenir – a collection which spoke of decades of toil, scrutiny and experience. A gene bank of the best of the best collected over a lifetime.' In his last speech to the circles Ravi reminded them about their duty to the environment. Like an exceptionally remarkable leader he addressed the gathering saying : 'Above all, leadership is the capacity to inspire leadership. Leadership is a way to create an army of generals. It is about steering, not commanding. Leadership needs passion and a vision which by its virtue should be above ambitions and greed'. Before disappearing for ever he drew the attention of the gathering to the seeds glowing like pearls on the table. He told : 'So pick up your seeds, germinate them, nurture them and grow them into healthy and strong trees. Let the trees flower, bear fruits and produce many more seeds to be planted by the future generations. I wish you the very best'.

Thatha had a strong influence on Ravi's thought and personlity. His simple life style away from the glitter of city makes us remember Mahatma Gandhi. In his book *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi did not support industrialization as an option for India because from his experiences of West he came to believe that industrial society ... 'was selfish, competitive, and grossly destructive of nature' (Source: *Environmentalism: A Global History*). The industrialists can go to any length, even to the destruction of earth to meet their greed. Gandhi writes : 'If modern civilization stands for all this, and I have understood it to do so, I call it Satanic.' (*Environmentalism : A Global History*) To conclude we can quote from Ramachandra Guha : 'Gandhi's broader vision for a free India was a rural one. He worked for the renewal of its villages, in defiance of the worldwide trend towards industrialization and urbanization' (*Environmentalism : A Global History*).

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