Reel Life meets Real People by Manohar Khushalani



Reel Life meets Real Life

Producer of films & TV serials, Raja Bundela, now intends to produce a new state - Bundelkhand

Manohar Khushalani Mumbai

Actor, director and producer Raja Bundela and the Bundelkhand Mukti Morcha, are to have their way, a new state will appear on the map of India-Bundelkhand-carved out from not just one but two states Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

Recently elected president of the Bundelkhand Mukti Morcha, Bundela took over from Shanker Lal Mehrotra. He was on his way to Bundelkhand when I met him, with the intention of backing only those candidates who were willing to lend support to his movement, irrespective of which parties they belonged to. At present, only the BJP and BSP have included the formation of smaller states in their manifestos.

According to Bundela, Mayawati had won the greatest number of seats from Bundelkhand primarily because she had promised to support the formation of the proposed state. Unfortunately, however, the two parties left out in Uttar Pradesh and Mayawati was unable to deliver on many of her promises. Although Bundela has little hope from the Congress, he recalls that Lakshmi Narain Nath, a former Congress MP, was one of the early presidents of the movement. Back from Madhya Pradesh, where the BJP had recorded a thumping win in the recent assembly polls, Bundela claimed that at least two MLAs had won because of the support of the Bundelkhand Mukti Morcha. He advises that although the Morcha is not looking to fight elections at present, it intends to do so once it can gather enough resources.

HN: What is the present status of the movement for a separate state?

Bundela: This movement has been going on for at least 30-40 years, but in the last five to seven years, when Shanker Lal Mehrotra took on the leadership, the movement gathered steam.

HN: How did a person from the entertainment industry get involved in a people's movement?

Bundela: Shanker Lal Mehrotra asked me to visit Bundelkhand and see what they were doing. Admittedly, I went out of curiosity. But, on reaching the area, I realised that there was a need to create awareness among the people. Eighty per cent of the population in the region was illiterate. Also, there were no leaders at the grassroots level to take up their cause.

HN: Now that you have been elected president of the Morcha, are you considering a career in politics?

Bundela: Not at all. I was very reluctant to accept the post. I told them that my commitment was to the cause, not for any organisation. I have been going there for about a week every month over the last seven or eight years. But they felt that my involvement would be even greater if I took on some responsibility. That's more or less the case. Once I return to Mumbai, I get involved in my productions.

Taking on an official responsibility means giving more thought to Bundelkhand.

HN: What made you think you could make a difference?

Bundela: My connections with the media were a big help. Some came out of curiosity, but at the end of the day they heard me out, at least. I was also able to get some support from the film industry. Jaswinder Law and Ashutosh Rana hail from this region. I have been urging them to do something for Bundelkhand. I just happen to work in Mumbai. Maharashtra is not my land. It's my karma bhoomi. If I can do something for my region, there's nothing like it.

HN: What do you tell the people when you meet them?

Bundela: That the Congress, Samajwadi Party, BSP and BJP are doing all the thinking for them. They have stopped thinking for themselves. (tell them, you may leave other things to others but at least don't surrender your minds. It is worse than slavery. Fifty-six per cent of Bundelkhand's population lives below the poverty line. According to an India Today survey in 2002, every third person in Bundelkhand either dies of starvation or commits suicide. Isn't that shocking?



HN: Do you really think a separate state will solve the region's problems?

Bundela: No. Just a separate state won't solve our problems. It is a question of identity and self-respect. We have seven rivers but do not get water from them. All the electricity goes to Lucknow, Kanpur and Allahabad. We have power cuts for 8-10 hours every day. Yet another survey has revealed that the Bundelkhand region is more backward than other backward states like Assam. The maximum number of prime ministers and senior politicians have come from this region. Even Amitabh Bachchan comes from here. But nobody is willing to take any initiative for love of Vellum.

HN: Bundelkhand has a majority of Dalits, which is why Mayawati won so handsomely from this region. You are a Thakur, how did you become a mass leader of Dalits?

Bundela: The meaning of Thakurs has changed in this region. Now Thakurs are those who carry guns. I have always been against that kind of culture and my people know it. That's why I went to Mumbai. I am a self-made man. I travel without any bodyguards inside Bundelkhand.

HN: Will you give up your film and TV career if Bundelkhand becomes a separate state?

Bundela: The two are independent of each other. At the same time, my work in films has remained connected with my soil. My first big-budget TV serial for Zee, Majhe Chand (Dukiye, was made totally in the belt - Jhansi, Lalitpur, Urjha. From the royalties that I have made, Pratha and Kisse Bhaiyaaye Aliwe Lakhan Ka, were shot here and were based on local stories. I shot my films here because nobody else was shooting in this belt. I wanted my people to see how films are made. I wanted to give them some employment. Even if it was just a token gesture, it was my way of returning the love that I have received from them.