

Reel Life meets Real People by Manohar Khushalani



Manohar Khushalani: Mumbai

I actor, director and producer Raja Bhandari and the Bundelkhand Mukti Morcha, are to have their way, a new state will appear on the map of India-Bundelkhand earned its first state just one last time state. Bundelkhand Mukti Morcha, Bhandari took over from Shambhu Lal Mishra. He was on his way to Bundelkhand when I met him, with the intention of backing only those candidates who were willing to lead support to his movement, irrespective of which parties they belonged to. At present, only the BJP and BSP have included the formation of a new state in their manifestos.

According to Bhandari, Mayawati had won the greatest number of votes from Bundelkhand primarily because she had promised to support the formation of the proposed state. Unlike

himself, however, the two parties fell out in Uttar Pradesh and Mayawati was unable to deliver on any of her promises. Although Bhandari has little hope from the Congress, he recalls that Lakshmi Narain Malik, 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, Bhandari claimed that at least two MLAs had won because of the support of the Bundelkhand Mukti Morcha. He admits that although the BJP is not looking to fight elections at present, it stands to do so once it can gather enough momentum.

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

Bhandari: The movement has been going on for at least 20-40 years, but in the last five to seven years, when Shambhu Lal Mishra took on the leadership, the movement gathered steam.

HN: How did a person from the

entertainment industry get involved in a people's movement?

Bhandari: Shambhu Lal Mishra 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 hospitals at the government level for taking up their cases.

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

Bhandari: Not at all. I was very reluctant to accept the post. I told them that my commitment was for 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 made sense to me. 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?

Bhandari: 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 garner some support from the film industry. Javed Akbar and Ashwini Bhatti 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 home. If I can do something for my region, there's nothing like it.

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

Bhandari: That the Congress, Samajwadi Party, BJP and BSP are doing all the thinking for them. They have stopped thinking for themselves. Furthermore, you may have other things to offer but at least don't surrender your minds. It is worse than slavery. Fifty 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 died of starvation or committed suicide. Isn't that shocking?

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

Bhandari: 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 union politicians have come from this region. Even Aurangzeb Bakhtan comes from here. But nobody is willing to take any initiative for the betterment.

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?

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

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

Bhandari: The two are independent of each other. At the same time,

my work in films has remained connected with my soul. My first big, 10-episode TV serial for Zee, *Mahe Chand Chakore*, was made totally in this belt - Jhansi, Lathpuri, Ujhani. Even the twinkle that I have made, *Prithvi* and *Karna* *Manmang* *Ahira*



Lakhan Ri, 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.