

Tribal Representation and Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*

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Abstract: *The present age of globalization necessitates a cosmopolitan culture where every individual has rights to live life with dignity and enjoy their privileges. From time immemorial tribals have been living in geographical periphery due to their inalienable connection with land and forests. The concept of welfare state has tried to usher the light of civilization to the less known unique and rich cultural heritage of tribals. By encroaching upon their lands and rights a vicious cycle of exploitation was started thereby destroying their simple way of life. By giving them voice through literature a space has been given to them and their plight has been highlighted.*

Keywords: Subalterns, exploitation, intrusion, subordination, emancipation

In present times, especially in the Indian context Tribal Studies have become significant for social historians, researchers, political scientists, anthropologists, policy makers and also in the genre of fiction. Tribal studies have acquired a new perspective in the era of globalization as a result, problems and issues of less privileged, marginalized and voiceless population are finding expression.

Among others mentioned above fiction writers have substantially contributed towards tribal literature with a view to bring to the fore the problems and issues of the tribals and also to create awareness as well as social and political consciousness among the tribals themselves, ensuring their upliftment through public policy support and voluntary initiatives by NGOs and social activists working for and in tribal areas.

In Postcolonial era, the subaltern studies have become widely popular and the marginalized, unrepresented and the misrepresented voices in literature are gaining centre stage. Subaltern studies in India originated after the first war of Independence which the Britishers named as Mutiny of 1857 and in which the British elite was on one side and the Indian nationalists and the subaltern on the other. (Guha and Spivak, IV-V)

The word subaltern as given in Concise Oxford dictionary is 'of inferior rank'. It gained wider connotation with passage of time and became representative of the downtrodden, the neglected, the oppressed and the exploited population living under dire poverty and inhospitable terrains and jungles. Most of this population was tribal.

Through, the creative medium of novel the aim of subaltern studies is to awaken and deepen human sensibility towards the marginalized, deprived and voiceless sections of human society. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says that the oppressed if given the chance can speak and know their conditions. They must ask (25).

The laws established in British India worked towards the exploitation of the masses. The tribals had to face the dual exploitation, the one from the alien laws of land established by British in the name of welfare and good governance, and the other by the Indians, the non-tribals who encroached upon the lives and property of the tribals and thereby exploited and harassed them. In any case, the victims were

the subaltern classes, the deprived, the have-nots and the voiceless lot of Indian society.

Under the colonial economic order, the tribals were uprooted from their natural habitat and vicious cycle of greed, corruption, exploitation and malice ate up into the very vitals of the rich cultural traditions of the tribals. The aim of subaltern studies is to awaken human sensibility and to arouse the conscious will to transform society towards the marginalized and the have-nots.

It is a paradox that inspite of globalization which has brought world closer, there has been growth of erstwhile repressed, neglected classes, finding expression in the formation of Dalit, Tribal, Ethnic and Minority groups who have created separate body of literature.

The term 'tribe' refers to a type of society and designates a stage of evolution in human society. As a type of society the term signifies a set of social organization. The term is theoretically meaningful and important, but seems to be, as it is argued, fraught with harmful political implications. The terms such as 'tribe' and 'tribalism' are used to determine modern contradictions found in developing countries. The contradictions seen in 'tribalism' are not attributed to a relic of precolonial structures, but to a legacy of the colonial period and the new relations involved in neocolonial domination. Many of the so-called.

Tribal groups were creations of the colonial period. 'Tribalism with all its connotations of primitivity and traditionalism is the name given for the identity being used by groups competing for power and prestige in India and elsewhere. (Bahura, 30)

Tribal is usually considered an economically independent group of people having their own specific economy and thus having a living pattern of labour, and specialization, gift of ceremonial exchange, trade and value. Wealth and consumption norms, capital formation, land tenure and good tangible and intangible economic status. (Sah and Sisodia, 245) An ideal type of tribe can be characterized, as a socially homogeneous unit having its own dialect, political and cultural in situation and territory which isolate it from the outside influences. (Joshi, 24)

Tribal population in India is about 8% and their problems and issues are complex and enormous. Incidentally, most of these problems started with the immigration of foreigners

especially Britishers to this country. Most tribal people of India live in hilly or forested terrain where population is sparse and communication difficult. They are found from high valleys near the spine of the Himalayas to the hills of southern most India. The main tribal territories are in the broad central belt of hill country from West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa on the east, through Central India, to the upland parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra on the west. (Sounderapandian, 46)

The history of human development starts from man's association and intimation with forest resources. From the inception of human civilization man used to live in the sylvan jungle and was nurtured in the cradle of nature. The degree of his association with the forest signifies the status of tribals in rural-urban continuum. They have a symbiotic as well as mutually reinforcing relationship with forests. The tribe is an important component of the forest ecosystem in which they are in a multiplex relationship among populations or organisms for the means of exploitation (adaptation) within their habitat. This association between man and forests has two stages (i) The first is the tribal phase of history and (ii) the second is agriculture and advanced technology economy. The historical association with the forest through the ages made him 'Lord of the Forest' and in the Indian context the terms 'Vanabasi' (inhabitants of forests" or 'Vanaputra' (forest dwellers and Vanajati' (forest dwelling communities) were coined for them. (Debashish, 107)

The tribals from ancient India to colonial and feudal period have remained victims of oppression, exploitation and discrimination, During the ancient period the tribals were treated as a separate society from the Hindu caste system, most of the tribal groups were termed as Vanvasi i.e. indigenous people and adivasi or isolated people.

There have always been prejudices between these two communities, the reason being that the writers of epics and fictions had always been high caste Hindus and invariably they pointed the tribals as inhuman in their literary works. (Jain, 41)

During Vedic Age, the Oriental Sanskrit scholars, described the tribals as sub-human kind of people living at the periphery of a society. Due to their geographical isolation, civilization never penetrated and there was no problem of any oppression or exploitation by the caste rulers and by the system of caste occupation. It was because of this fact that there existed no social relations between the caste groups and the isolated tribals.

The tribals in medieval period, began the process of state formation which brought them into contact with the high caste Hindus. The tribals witnessed reversal because the non-tribals Hindu groups constituted a majority and tribal ethnicity was not acceptable to them. This led to drawing of separate societal lines between the tribals and caste Hindus. (Jain, 44-49) During the colonial rule they were considered backward and savage. In the princely states they were discriminated against by the native rulers. The tribals under the colonial regime were exploited by the rulers.

The discrimination was so acute that the tribals suffered deprivation of a high order. Atrocities on them were so strong that they could not fulfill even their basic needs of life. This had a perverting impact both on the personality of tribals and on the regime they inhabited for longer periods of history. (Jain, 18-19)

Before 1854, the tribals enjoyed forest rights and forest was their property. The beginning of a systematic Forest Policy is found in 1855 when the then Governor General of India Lord Dalhousie issued a memorandum on forest conservation. He suggested that teak timber should be retained as state property and trade in teak should be strictly regulated. In 1856, Dietrich Brandis, a German Botanist, was appointed as the first Inspector General of Forests to the Government of India. The First Forest Department came into being in 1862. Under Brandis, the Forest Department was organised and the first Forest Act of 1864, the forest exploitation, management and preservation was regulated. For the first time an attempt was made to regulate the collection of forest produce by Forest dwellers. Thus, the socially regulated practices of the local people were restrained by law. The Act was applicable only to the forests under the control of the government and no provisions were made to cover private forests.

By 1875, the Government of India thought it necessary to increase its control over forests and a new Act was passed which was more comprehensive than the earlier one. Forests were divided into (1) Reserved Forests (2) Protected Forests and (3) Village Forests. Persons were to be notified to record their claims over land and forest produce in the proposed reserved and protected forests. Certain acts like trespassing or pasturing of cattle were prohibited. Provisions were made to impose a duty on timber. Some provisions were also made for private forests. Certain actions were declared as forest offences and imprisonment and fines were also prescribed for them.

The first forest policy came into force in 1894, which made two major enunciations, first, the claims of cultivation were stronger than the claims of forest preservation and secondly the public (material) benefit was the sole object of forests administration. The British rulers were also reluctant at that stage to limit individual rights over forests for the sake of securing more protective services from forests. They sought to restrict only those rights which were inconsistent with the material (imperial) interest. However, several regulations were made for forest under their control for commercial use. Due to this fact, the people of India, particularly the tribals, faced a serious problem as they were deprived from using the forest resources.

The British forest policy was mainly based on commercial interests and aimed at supplying timber and other resources to colonial forest based industries. The commercial exploitation of forest was encouraged at the cost of the forest dwellers (adivasis) in the name of greater national interest. They issued permits to the professional contractors to collect forest produce and as a result they exploited the forests by all means without considering its consequences in future. (Debashish, 114-118) Also Britishers needed forestwood to

build battleships in England. It was also required to build railway lines. For this and other such purposes, the British government started cutting trees, as a result there were encounters with the tribals. Thus by The Forest Act 1894, the government took away all customary forest rights of tribals. As a result the tribals lost their land, habitat and milieu resulting into pauperization, casualization and psychological stresses and strains. Official and illicit felling of forest trees have benefitted outsiders while tribals face loss of their environment. (Joshi, 24)

Regarding tribal situation in contemporary times many social organizations and agencies are engaged and deeply concerned about tribal welfare. There are the social activists and the NGO's on the one hand, and on the creative level through literature an attempt is made to expose the system and draw attention and create friendly developmental environment and general welfare of the tribals.

In recent times the intellectuals and writers do not lag behind in this process and have contributed meaningfully in the nationwide debate on tribal welfare. Prominent among others are the works of authors like Mahasweta Devi (*Rudali, AaranyaAdhikar, Drapaudi*), Shivaji Sawant, Arun Joshi (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas 1971*), Pratiba Ray (*Yagnyaseni*), Phanishwar Nath Renu's (*MailaAnchal*). These and other thinkers of late, have acquired the role of social historian where social issues are finding an expression through the genre of fiction.

The depiction of tribal is a problematic issue not only in modern times but also since the epic period. Eklavya in Mahabharata, a tribal by birth was denied the privilege of acquiring the specialized skill of bow and arrow from Guru Daronacharya simply because he was a tribal. Ultimately Eklavya had to part with his thumb as a Guru Dakshina to Daronacharya as the former used his idol as Guru while practising the art of bow and arrow. This thumb cutting of Eklavya is seen as discrimination and exploitation by modern critics in the extreme sense this is a case of nepotism and favoritism by upper caste Hindus against tribals. Subaltern studies highlight such and other instances of injustice perpetuated on tribals by non-tribals from time immemorial.

The present paper relates to suppression and resistance of tribals in Koraput district of Orissa. The main objective of the study is to highlight the plight and agonies of innocent tribals at the hands of non tribals agencies such as the money lender, the state officials, for instance the Forest, Excise, Revenue, Police and Judiciary. Since the novel was written during the pre – independence period the issues and problems of tribals were partly the creation of colonial rulers. The non tribals infiltrated into hills which once belonged to the tribals and interfered in their day to day lives. Defective forest and revenue laws and their improper implementation by the law enforcing agencies added to their woes. *Paraja* is a remarkable narration of Tribal peasants who are the victims of non-tribal interference, physical exploitation and injustice.

Generally, speaking the agonies and torments of the Indian peasant who is crushed by the

colonial exploitation and oppression (Joshi, 118).

Paraja derives its name from 'Paraja' a well known tribe of Orissa. The term 'Paraja' is a local Oriya term sometimes pronounced as 'Paraja', 'Porja, 'Paroja'. It appears to be derived from Sanskrit word 'Praja' which literally means the common people i.e. subjects or citizens as distinct from the former ruling chiefs called the Raja or the Zamindar in pre-independence times. (Mohanty, 249)

The term 'Paraja' in Oriya language means peasant or Royat. The novel *Parajais* mainly about this particular tribe living in the forests of Koraput district along with other tribals such as Konds, Dombsetc, Orissa occupies a unique position in the ethnographic map of India for having the largest variety of tribal communities after Madhya Pradesh. Being one of the fascinating ethnographic states of the country, it has been the homeland of as many as 62 different tribal communities. (Mohanty, 43)

Among the tribes of southern Orissa, particularly the Parajas, all lands and natural resources were under the control of the village (Tribal) headman, who on approach used to allot plots for use to individuals. (Behura, 30-31)The tribals depended on these forests for their sustenance and survival. They were the original denizens of the forests but with the advent of foreign rulers particularly the Britishers, their natural rights were snatched from them and new land and forest laws were formed and subsequently imposed. With the passing of Indian Forest Act of 1873, the maintenance of forests and preservation of the climatic and physical conditions of the country was given foremost priority. Forests were classified into categories of reserved forests, protected forests and village forests. (Childyal, 138.)The tribals could use the forests by taking due permission from the forest officials. The new land and forest policy lead to the intrusion of non-tribals in the tribal belt and with this started the process of exploitation of the tribals.

The influx of non-tribal people to a predominantly tribal region due to the pull forces generated out of available employment opportunities, higher income and better standard of living naturally disturbs the state of stationary equilibrium of the above culturally isolated and forested tracts..... The 'well'off non – tribal population forming the microscopic minority are found to be economically and culturally dominant and the majority tribal people regress or further shrink back to the hills and in many cases, surrender their cultural identity to a condemned state of subordination and control, mainly due to the operation of a powerful mechanism of economic exploitation and cultural subjugation by a dominant group. (Devi, 97)

Paraja, describes the blissful innocence and idyllic surroundings of tribal territory inhabited by sons and daughters of the forest. They cut and clear forests for their livelihood but they also protect these forests like their

children. Forests are their very soul and give meaning and purpose to their existence.

Paraja, was conceived out of deep social commitment of the author towards tribals of Koraput district of Orissa. Gopinath Mohanty served as civil servant in the tribal district of Orissa. He saw the exploitation of the tribals by the non-tribals while working as an administrative officer. His commitment to the tribal welfare was so deep that he identified himself with the former and did a lot of work in the tribal belt during his service career. As a civil servant he was extremely sympathetic towards exploited tribals and this made the non-tribal landlords and moneylenders of Koraput to complain to the then Prime-Minister Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru in 1953:

Mohanty was always fond of Hillman and [behaved] like [the] Hillman himself'. They further alleged that "He behaves as if he was born for the Adivasis. (Sharma, 102)

Mohanty's aim in writing this novel has been to give voice to the emotions, feelings and experiences of the exploited tribals and since the novelist himself witnessed this exploitation and misery of the tribals by the non-tribals, he could identify with them. His aim is to bring about an awareness and emancipation for the agonizing ordeal and misery of the tribals who were not just exploited physically and economically but were deprived the very basic rights of human beings to live with dignity and honour.

During the colonial period "Literature in general focused more and more on the town and the city and its conditions and contradictions than on the countryside and its bulwark, the small peasant which was turning into a historical residue or anachronism". (Joshi, 102) But at the same time in disciplines of history, social science as well as in some literary works and politics in colonial India there was an outburst of new creativity through the discovery of the village and the peasant. In other words the marginalized and deprived in the form of tribal, dalit and minority were recognized as new agents of civilization, having in them something heroic dealing with Indian social life and emphasizing the modern idea of the autonomy of the subaltern in politics, social science and novel as a new creative form.

In the form of tribal literature, the writers, attacked with fierce criticism all contemporary state, new laws of land which gave a chance for the exploitation of poor tribals by the non-tribals. Tribal literature aims at exposing the hypocrisy of those in power centres. Gopinath Mohanty in *Paraja* depicts the tribals as victims of the historical process but at the same time the emergence of tribals as agents of reversing the victim's role by showing resistance towards the exploiters and the non-tribals. In the novel, *Paraja*, the author depicts the misery and exploitation of tribals and the very loss of the old world with no hope for the reconstruction of the ancient traditions, but the resistance against injustice by tribals is equally emphatic.

In *Paraja*, the agents of exploitation are not just outside forces of the non-tribal money lender, the officials of Forest

and Revenue Department, Court and Police but the inside enemy, the tribal kinsmen operating on behalf of rich money lender against their own brethren. Mohanty's work immortalise the agonies and torments of Paraja tribe who is crushed by the colonial system and the human agents of colonial exploitation and oppression. It gives an insight into the historical roots of tribal exploitation and oppression. It must be recalled that as elsewhere in the country exploitation of tribals started with the immigration of foreigners, (Britishers and other) who invaded the home land of the tribes and tried to displace them." (Fuchs, 288) With the advent of British rule, the interference in tribal affairs started and they (Britishers) tried to control the tribal areas. The result was tribal uprising against the exploiters in the country. The British rule was followed by the subsequent non-tribal agents who practised a new form of slavery which aggravated the miseries of tribal people. This internal colonialism further disintegrated the ethnic values and cohesiveness of the tribal society.

The writer Gopinath Mohanty (1924 – 93) started his career as a novelist during the pre – independence period. He became a prolific writer during the post – independence era. His classic novels include *Paraja* (1946), *Amrutara Santana* (1950), *Danapani* (1955) and *Matimatala* (1964) which have elevated Oriya literature to a height not attained before.

Besides novels, Mohanty has written volumes of short stories, essays and a grammar of the language of the Kondhs. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *Amrutara Santana* (Children of the Nectar, 1949) and the Jnanpith award for *Matimatala* (The Fertile Soil, 1964); and was awarded Padam Bhushan in 1981.

Mohanty's works can be divided into three main categories. First category includes novels which portray the life of the aboriginal tribes of Orissa. These include *DadiBudda*, *Paraja*, *Amrutara Santana*, *ShivabhaiAphanch*. Second category included novels of city based societies, *SharabambukGahi*, *Rahur Chaya*, *Sapanmatti*, *Danapani*, *Layvilay* and *Harijan* which depicts the life of untouchables in a society by caste Hindus. *Danapani* (1958) is portrayal of an individual who forgoes various hardships in life. Third category includes *Matimatala* and represents the rural based life. (Jain, 108).

The intellectual horizon and philosophic speculations of his novels surpass many others written before. Deviation from the beaten track in treatment and technique has been an important factor of the novels of Gopinath Mohanty. The language in his novels is colloquial and forceful and style is poetic and analytical sometimes the writer adheres to the stream of consciousness technique in his delineation of psychological aspects of the character. Gopinath Mohanty made bold experiments in delineating the lives and customs of the tribal people who have been very much neglected since Gopal Ballav Das's *Bhuima Bhuyan* (1906), a novel that first dealt with this neglected group of people.

Gopinath Mohanty, initially worked on the well known pattern such as the traditional conflict between poverty and affluence, rural and urban, tradition and modernity but he gradually expanded the scope of these binaries and has

invested them with new dimensions and perspectives. Mohanty mainly deals with domestic and socio-political themes, impact of industrialization on the human condition and attempts at subtler analysis of psychological aspects of men and women in society. (1)

Paraja is a poignant tale of endless sufferings of the Parajas, a tribal people who live in Koraput the largest district of Orissa. They undergo sufferings and exploitation by the non-tribals particularly the Sahukar. The oppressions of the state along with the Sahukar make the suppressed Parajas raise a revolt against injustice and exploitation and ironically in this attempt to resist injustice they themselves become oppressors of the worst kind with no hope for regeneration. The spell-binding tragic narration has made the novel a classic of Indian English fiction.

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