

RECOGNIZING LITERARY TRIBAL WEALTH: ROAD TO DEVELOPMENT OF INDIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

Scholars have established a positive relationship between languages, literature and culture; and the development of any nation is related to its cultural richness. Tribal languages, their culture and the people have always been relegated to the margins. Due respect and status when accorded to those in the margins will eventually bring the nation prosperity. The paper stresses the need to give Tribal Literature due recognition. Emphasis is laid on the oral epics of the tribes of Bastar which are lesser known, given the marginalised status accorded to the tribes and therefore their cultural output. The eco-centric epics epitomize sustainable living – a microcosm of what the developed world of tomorrow requires. In the pastness of the past lies our future. An in-dept study of such tribal literary works are harbingers of a sustainable future.

Keywords: tribal, Bastar, marginalised, ecology, sustainability, epics

INTRODUCTION

India homes the largest number of tribes in the world, yet we find prejudice and bias as definitions such as the following find their way into curriculum:

A tribe is a group of people, usually staying in jungle areas, in a small locality, absolutely illiterate poor, hardly clad in clothes, usually dark and frail, fully living within their own community whose marriage always takes place among themselves, engaged in hunting and searching for roots, shoots and fruits as their veg food and roasted animals as non-veg food, completely oblivious of the country's political and economic condition, resisting all efforts of development and have a strong dislike for strangers and educated modern community (Pankaj, 1).

The problem with a definition such as the above becomes acute especially when it is a part of a course material written for a Department of Social Work at a National Tribal University. No doubt the passage is followed by other definitions of the term put forth by researchers in the field; yet such an introduction by the course coordinator/course material writer smacks of highhandedness and pretentiousness that Oriental discourse indulged in.

R. C. Verma, Ramachandra Guha, Meena Ramakrishna, K. S. Singh, L. P. Vidyarthi, Dilip Desouza, G. N. Devy have written extensively on tribal people and their predicament. Their rich source of oral tradition – songs, folktales, myths, legends, ballads, and epics – has been documented by G. N. Devy, Randhir Khare, Sitakanta Mahapatra and Ramanika Gupta. The fiction of Mahasweta Devi has been instrumental in fusing tribal history into fiction thereby bringing Birsa Munda's Movement for tribal emancipation (*Aranyer Adhikar* (1977)) from the margins into the mainstream. Her work has highlighted tribal movements such as the Tilka Majhi Movement (*Chotti Munda Ebong Tar Tir* (1980) or *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*) or the Santhal Revolt (*Salgirar Dake* 1984).

INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS LEADING TO VIKSIT BHARAT

If the tribal people are the indigenous people of India why then are we not eager to know and incorporate the vast storehouse of knowledge and culture that they have in the mainstream. Ruby Hembrom laments that, "Dominant cultures have marginalized, eclipsed, and exploited our knowledge systems, positioning us in their structures, which we have to navigate and survive in" (Hembrom, 1464). The tribal historical and cultural narratives are known for their orality, which put them in line with our other well-known Indian epics – *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* – yet they are struggling to make a claim as epics for they are not yet documented. If writing systems were Western forms of imposing their hegemony over the colonies that had an oral tradition; are we not guilty of perpetrating the colonial tendency by according the oral traditions a lesser position just because they are not documented in the "written" form or do not have a script of their own.

Talking from the inside Hembrom asserts that her people, "Adivasi/Tribal/Indigenous peoples, singers and storytellers are not necessarily professionals or specialists. They are just members of the community: families, friends, and neighbors, who pass on, through their oration and singing, their communities' credo and literature, preserving and re-creating the community's idea of itself, its history, rituals, and culture" and therefore are "living documents ourselves" (Hembrom, 1466). The shared memory passed on from one generation to the other, is organic to the tribal community. Thus, for the women of Bastar the performance of the *Lachmi Jagar*, the epic, is a sacred ritual, "it is something that one experiences . . . when the singers sing of the arrival of the *gurumai*, the senior *gurumai* is possessed by the person she is singing about and when *Mengin* performs

austerities the woman who acts this out becomes possessed. Some women of the audience become possessed when listening to the song in the evenings but audience participation is greatest on the day of Mahalakhi's wedding when large numbers of women of all ages fall into trances" (Gregory,102).

THE TRIBAL WORLDVIEW

Community centered worldview is the pivot round which the tribal cultures revolve. It is not "I" that is at its centre but "we". The havoc that has been caused by the individual-centric western ideologies is evident by the natural ecological loss of balance; thus the solution to gain sustainability and ecological balance is to cultivate a worldview that nurtures a collective attitude, an attitude that gives importance to "our" needs as a universe rather than "my" needs; this worldview can be learnt from the tribal communities.

The epics of Bastar – the *Lachmi Jagar*, *Teeja Jagar*, *Baali Jagar* and *Aathe Jagar* have no large expanse of time or characters involving wars and killings but tell stories that are important to the people of Bastar as a community. The *Lachmi Jagar* can be understood as a "rice allegory", rice being the staple food of the people of Bastar. The epic begins with King Meng (meng meaning 'cloud') and Queen Mengin descending from the upper world to earth. The queen anxious to have a child sends her husband to get a mango from Mahadev who in turn promises that if a girl child is born to him she shall be married to Mahadev's younger brother Narayan. The girl Mahalakhi is then made to fulfill the promise, but being wary of the jealousy of his twenty-one wives, her father gets Narayan promise that he would stay with Mahadev thereby not with his other co-wives. Narayan starts missing his other wives and thus goes to visit them, there he misses Mahalakhi so abducts her from his brother's place but never lets her out of sight and so that his wives do not misbehave with her. When he resumes court, leaving Mahalakhi behind, the other wives harass her thereby forcing Mahalakhi to run away through a tunnel dug by a rat. Famine grips the land and all suffer much distress. After lot of adventures Narayan finds Mahalakhi, gets her home thereby returning back prosperity and happiness to his land (Ram, 217-219). This epic, a ceremonial ritual dance, is used to gratify Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, thus the epic is central to the livelihood of the people of Bastar; wherein Mahalakhi symbolizes the "rice" crop while the twenty-one wives are the pulses in the region.

The *Baali Jagar* is a rain inducing spiritual recitation in *Desiya*, spoken in rural western Orissa, organized every twelve years. The epic tells of the recreation of the earth after a heavy deluge. The epic is sung, *dhankul-geet*, as with the other epics, by *Gurumai* with the accompaniment of the *Dhanukul*, a musical instrument made instantly through the assembling of the day to day household articles – the pot with rice inside, the bow, the *supa* (bamboo winnower), the bamboo brush called *chirni-kaadi*, (Ram, 163) The *Gurumai*, along with her associate *Gurumai(s)*, creates an evocative background music of "chur-chur and bhum-bhum" – which has "strong animistic importance" and is believed to "possess the charm that supports vegetation rites viz., an enhancement in the fertility and productive powers of the farm and forest to support life and well-being in a spirit of cosmic harmony." (Ram 165)

The *Teeja Jagar* is in *Halbi* and is about barrenness turned into fertility through the performing of the *dhankul* followed by planting a tulsī sapling, building a lake, raising a garden of fruits and flowers, all in that order, each taking its own time. It tells the tale of Banjh Raja and Banjh Rani of Bhavarenagar who have no child, similar to another queen Mahapartrin. Both through the aforesaid performances gain a child, Dahakaraiyya and Janadei, who are later married to each other. Janadei too performs the *Teeja* ritual, "plants a tulsī", "builds a lake, digs wells and raises gardens" eventually causing her childbirth and "fulfillment in life" (Ram, 186) it is pertinent to note the performance of the Fertility ritual – planting a tulsī, building a lake, raising gardens. Thus, sustaining the natural green environment not only in the immediate surrounding but also benefitting the people of the community. To build a lake can never be an individual endeavour, thus the ritual necessitates community participation, thereby sustaining the environment, ensuring availability of water, fruits and flowers.

The fourth epic, *Aathe Jagar*, recited in *Halbi*, is predominant only in some parts of the Jagdalpur tahsil of Chhattisgarh (Ram, 172). Apart from the King – Bholenath, the Queen – Parbati, Devika and Basudev, the cruel Kamsa, Nanad Raja and Jasuda bringing up Krisna; the natural elements that are elaborated upon in the *Aathe Jagar* are interesting. The *raen* tree, that weeps and wails, implores the woodcutters cutting it to listen to its plight, submits to them its daughter that is named Raeni Baabi (Ram, 170). In another instance the *Usi* bird; when its nest gets trampled upon by the chariot wheels of the marriage procession of Basudev and Devaki, curses Devaki as its eggs are crushed in the nest; because of which the rest of the tragic events in the life of Devaki and Basudev ensue. Though the epic is regarding human kings and queens and their fates, the elements of nature play a pivotal role. "The curse of the *Usi* bird is a tribal invention. It conforms to the tribal world-view that accords equitable station to everything in life" (Ram, 172). The filial relationship that the tribal people share with nature is evident in the songs and ballads that are sung, as seen in the collection *Folk-Songs Of Chhattisgarh* by Verrier Elwin.

LEARNINGS FROM THE *GHOTUL*

Lot of learnings are possible from the tribal society. In line with Hutton Webster's magnum opus on primitive societies that stresses upon the fact that "‘promiscuity’ either before or after marriage, was the exception among primitive peoples" (Elwin, 270), Verrier Elwin, the anthropologist, on the basis of his in depth study of the Murias of Bastar and their *Ghotuls* asserts that the "Muria practice corresponds to what Seligman once described as the psycho-analytic ideal of education", thus such an education system of Indian origin should be made known. In the words of Verrier Elwin not only does the *ghotul* save the child from the psychological dangers of witnessing the 'primal scene'; it alters the entire parent-child complex by putting in the place of the father a new disciplinarian and in the place of the mother a new object of sensual attraction. 'When a boy or girl enters the *ghotul*', said a leading *chelik* at Masora, 'he usually forgets his relations altogether. They say they have no relations. The head of the *ghotul* is the father, and the *Belosa* is the mother' (323).

The co-habitation of the young boys and girls away from their parents, living together until they are of marriageable age, picking their own partners, have raised many 'civilized' eyebrows with regards to their attitude to sexuality and freedom related to sexual choices; as Verrier Elwin points out that the most important thing about the *ghotul*, is that it arouses one's curiosity and excitement in relation to the "sexual relation between *chelik* and *motiari*" (the young girl is called 'chelik; and the boy 'motiari'). Elwin points out on the basis of his detailed study, that "It is probably true to say that many people who live all their lives among the Muria hardly ever realize that the sexual relation is secondary and the magical, religious and social aspects of *ghotul* life predominant in the Muria's mind." Elwin's chapter on 'Moral Standards in the *Ghotul*' explicates how the suspicions of the 'civilized' mind regarding the *ghotul* as a place of sexual licence are unfounded. For the *Ghotul* has in place a system that underlines the fact, "If there is licence there is also taboo; if youth has freedom it moves on into a life of strictest decorum" (Elwin, ix). The *Ghotul* is the foundation stone of community life. Of the two types – the *jodidar* *ghotul* and the *mundi-badalna ghotul* – the latter is more modern and the one of the many reasons given for its prevalence is that "the Muria temperament which is fundamentally hostile to individualism, to exclusiveness, and to any kind of possessiveness", leads them to believe, "that if everyone belongs to everyone else in the *ghotul* there will be no room for jealousy" (Elwin, 344). Elwin cites the following episode:

At Esalnar a *chelik* said, 'We change partners because we want everyone to be happy; if one boy and one girl are always together as if they were man and wife, then some would be happier than others; the best boys and the best girls would be the property of individuals instead of being the property of the *ghotul*, and the rest would be miserable'. When someone told the *chelik* at Kabonga that they were behaving like a lot of goats, they indignantly explained that 'if a girl always sleeps with one boy, we feel that the unity of our life is being destroyed; in a *ghotul* all the girls should be the wives of all the boys. . . The result of this arrangement is—according to Muria theory—that everybody in the *ghotul* is in love with everybody else. 'Boys and girls in a *ghotul* love each other as brothers love sisters, as parents love children, as husbands love their wives. It is remarkable that this general diffused love and affection among *chelik* and *motiari* should lead them to identify parental, family and romantic love (Elwin, 345).

Whether we really take the above theory at face value is another thing but a greater understanding of the worldview of the tribes of Bastar, like other tribes, would help us learn that there is no room for individualism in the tribal world – a worldview that is very difficult for the western educated people to understand. The African tribal worldview of "ubuntu" (the African-origin value system that emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals with their surrounding societal and physical worlds) is the need of the hour for the ecological crisis that we have placed our universe in. When one articulates the Ubuntu Philosophy are we not speaking like the Murias who too believe in the interconnectedness of all beings and importance of maintaining unity and happiness of all.

Asserting the interconnectedness of the tribal ways of life D. N. Devy asserts, that "They accept a world-view in which nature, human beings and God are intimately linked and they believe in the human ability to spell and interpret truth. They live more by intuition than reason, they consider the space around them more sacred than secular, and their sense of time is personal rather than objective" (Devy, x). The imagination of the tribals that is "dreamlike and hallucinatory" according to Devy,

admits fusion between various planes of existence and levels of time in a natural way. In tribal stories, oceans fly in the sky as birds, mountains swim in the water as fish, animals speak as humans and stars grow like plants. Spatial order and temporal sequence do not restrict the narrative. This is not to say that tribal creations have no conventions or rules but simply that they admit the principle of association between emotion and the narrative motif. Thus stars, seas, mountains, trees, men and animals, can be angry, sad or happy (Devy, x).

Such a world-view thus makes the entire universe their "home" and the "forest" sacred. This is essential for the survival of humanity and sustainability of our environment and ecological well-being of the universe; something that the modern industrialized world has never understood and therefore exploited for individual benefit.

CONCLUSION

There is a lot to learn from the study of the vibrant tribal literature that is still very much living amongst us in the form of oral literature. Though the *Sahitya Akademi*, Government of India portal : *Indian Culture*, websites such as *Sahapedia*, an open encyclopedic resource on the arts, cultures and histories of India offer oral histories, songs and epics curated by experts and scholars, a lot of work is still required. We need more enthusiasts like D. N. Devy, the human rights activist who has worked relentlessly to conserve threatened tribal languages of India. He founded the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Budhan Theatre, Adivasi Academy and Himloka: Institute for Himalayan Studies. He has put to script for the first time for 11 languages existing in oral traditions, promoted and published literature in 26 languages, helped educate over 20,000 children from indigenous communities in non-formal schools, and has established economic empowerment activities in 1,200 villages in tribal Gujarat. He has worked closely with many tribal communities. It is his expert understanding of their ways of life that is crucial. Devy's insight into the tribal world can give us a lot of food for thought. His contention that "The tribal mind has a more acute sense of time than sense of space. Somewhere along the history of human civilization, tribal communities seem to have realised that domination over territorial space was not their lot. Thus, they seem to have turned almost obsessively to gaining domination over time. . ." The tribal art forms and their daily lives coalesce. The arts are their way of life wherein there is no demarcation between ordinary and the sacred, as Devy puts it:

The boundaries between art and non-art become almost invisible. A tribal epic can begin its narration from a trivial everyday event; tribal paintings merge with living space as if the two were one and the same. Though oral and pictorial tribal art creations are intimately related to rituals—the sacred can never be left out—the tribal arts rarely assume a serious or pretentious tone. The artist rarely plays the role of the Creator . . . One reason for this unique mixture of the sacred and the ordinary may be that tribal works of art are not created specifically for sale . . . tribal creations seem almost like prayerful offerings to the elements that make this world such a mysteriously beautiful place (Devy, xiii).

It is the wonder and awe of the tribal imagination of the universe that needs to be emulated by the ultra rationalised westernized ways of thinking that we have today adopted. The academic fraternity needs to walk that extra mile by incorporating tribal studies as part the syllabus in order to understand the tribal ways not as "their" ways but "our" ways , so as to accord a sense of pride of a legacy that will make our country truly walk towards the "vision of 'Viksit Bharat' (Developed India)," as "there lies an opportunity to steer the nation towards a transformative trajectory, ensuring that the echoes of its prestigious past resonate with a future brimming with promise and prosperity"(Quality Bharat Mission). When we pledge that, "Together, each and every citizen of the country, needs to forge ahead with determination, dedication, and a shared vision, propelling India towards a future where quality reigns supreme, illuminating the path to a 'Viksit Bharat' – a Developed India that stands as a beacon of hope, progress, and prosperity, for generations to come," (Quality Bharat Mission) we need to take along our harbingers of the living past – the tribal sensibilities their aspirations and their history – along with us as we embark on this journey that endeavours to bring a qualitative transformation in all aspects of our life.

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