



**THE CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS OF TRIBAL LIFE IN GOPINATH
MOHANTY'S PARAJA**

MR. SANJAY GOVARDHAN UIKE

Assistant Professor, Department Of English, Nutan Adarsh Arts, Commerce
And Smt M.H. Wegad Science College, Umred, Dist- Nagpur Maharashtra

ABSTRACT:

The present paper attempts to evince the customs and beliefs of the tribal life presented in Gopinath Mohanty's Paraja. It is a novel about Paraja tribe living in the remote forest of Koraput district that focuses on the lives, customs, beliefs, rituals, nature worship and their struggle for survival etc. The life of tribals changed significantly under British colonialism. Gopinath Mohanty had the first hand experiences with the life style, culture, customs, rituals, festivals, songs & dances of these tribal people which is seen in Paraja also.

KEYWORDS: Customs, Tribal, Rituals, Nature, Paraja, Colonialism.

INTRODUCTION:

'Tribe' means a group of people living at a particular place from times immemorial. Tribe's identities are differently by named at different places according to their geographical positioning, their social stratification in the society and so on which make them distinctive from others. Tribes are rich in their culture, customs and folk tradition etc. There are very few Indian English writers who have written about tribal and their identities, Gopinath Mohanty depicts tribal issues in literature as a discourse in societal, customs, traditional, and rituals.

There was also an urge to focus attention on neglected sections of our society. Many writers such as Munshi Premchand K. A. Abbas, Arun Joshi, Mulk Raj Anand, and Thakazhi S. Pillai also wrote on the life of the marginalized. Gopinath Mohanty, a student of literature in his formative years was

undeniably influenced by these ideas. Throbbing with these ideas, he focuses to represent tribals in his novels and stories, which was a daring and unusual step in the field of Oriya fiction. His novels bring a clear visualisation of the tribals rituals, customs, their practices etc.

Gopinath Mohanty is acknowledged as one of the most significant Odia writers of the 20th century. He was the first Odia to receive the prestigious Jnanpith award in 1974. Besides this, he was awarded the Sahitya Academy Award in 1955 and the Padmabhusan in 1981. He has to his credit twenty four novels, twelve volumes of short stories, three plays and various other literary outputs. He was an officer of the Odisha Administrative Service and he retired as Officer on Special Duty, Tribal Development Project. So he had the opportunity of working in the Koraput district where he had the first-hand experience of tribal life and culture, which he transformed into rich fictional narratives. Out of his novels on tribal theme, Paraja, Dadi Budha and Amrutara Santana (1947) are translated into English. His first novel Dadi Budha (1944) was translated by Arun Kumar Mohanty, and was brought out by Sahitya Academy as 'The Ancestor', deals with lives, customs, belief and rituals of the tribal communities and about the outer intervention that causes dissolution of tribal society. His most famous novel 'Paraja' (1945) was translated into English by Bikram K. Das and it is a story based on the life of a tribal community.

The novel 'Paraja' is a story of the inexorable descent family of Sukru Jani which represents the Paraja tribe. The setting of the novel is a small village Sarsupadar, of Koraput district in the tribal belts of Eastern Ghats of Orissa. Sukru Jani has two sons named Mandia and Tikra and two daughters named Jili and Bili in his family. The characters of Sukru Jani, Mandia, Jili, Bili, Kajodi, Bagla and Kau Paraja and even Sahukar Bisoi all have their own ways of approach to life's problems. Their way of facing these problems are unique and different. The way Sukru Jani tolerates the injustice done to him by the forest guard, Sahukar Ramchandra Bisoi, the village Headman and others, proves his strength. The forest guard wants Sukru Jani to send his daughter to him for a night. But when Sukru refuses to do so, the forest guard imposes heavy fine on them for illegal cutting of trees and then imposes fine on his son Mandia for brewing illicit liquor. Sukru's constant trials and consequent suffering and his relentless endeavor to save the situation are some of the important traits of his character.

We can observe the marriage customs of the Paraja community. Two types of marriage practices are present in Paraja tribe, the prospect of receiving bride price in the arrange marriage and the elopement where grooms need not to pay bride price. Both these practices are considered as legal. Dormitory system is prevailing in Paraja tribal community. The boys and girls spend their night in their dormitories and try to understand and know each other before their marriage. If they like each other, they express their love and rejoice by dancing together and singing songs. The girls are courted by the songs. Bagala Paraja courted Jili by singing an ancient ballad accompaniment of a

single-stringed instrument called dungudunga. It is the custom of the tribal people in this area that bride price is given to the family of the girl by the groom at the time of their wedding. The huge amount of bride price may lead to the groom towards ruin. And if a boy is unable to pay the bride price, he has to become a goti (bonded laborer) of his father in law for a particular period of time. After the boy paid off the bride price at the cost of his work, then he is given the hands of the girl and allowed to marry. In the novel, Bagala, who is the lover of Jili, wants to lend money and become a goti but Jili does not want him to do so. Nandibali, another character in the novel, is a penniless man and ready to become goti in order to marry Bili. It can also be observed that the paraja tribe may marry only in the months of February, March, April and May.

The Paraja people worship many of gods and deities for their well-being. They worship nature. Dharmu, Basumati, Earth Goddess, Jhakar and Bagh Debta (tiger god) are their gods. These gods are propitiated by giving the sacrifices of the birds like black rooster, pigeon and chicken etc. The harvest festival is celebrated in the months of December and the Earth Goddess is conciliated with the blood of a black rooster during this festival. God of spring is invoked with the sacrifice of the chicken. And a pigeon would be sacrificed on the appearance of two stars on Elephant Hill. Dishari, in the village, is the astrologer who decides the proper dates and moments for various activities like marriage ceremonies, communal festivals and rituals. In chapter 38 of the novel, Mohanty has given the detailed description of the functions of the Dishari.

In all his novels on the tribal people, Mohanty presents Nature as an important part of tribal life and culture. Nature controls their life and living. The seasons with their vibrant opulence, the ancient, formidable mountains and their streams, the flowers and foliage, the cloud and storms, the birds and beasts, the totems and taboos—all these have their presence in the life of the tribal people. Nature gives them solace in times of misery and sorrow.

SOCIAL REALITIES AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF TRIBAL LIFE

Tribe's identities are differently named at different places according to their geographical positioning, their social stratification in the society and so on which makes them distinctive from others. Tribes are rich in their culture, customs and folk tradition etc. Gopinath Mohanty is a significant novelist who has made a bold attempt in raising of Canon in tribal literature. Mohanty focuses on tribal traditional identities and historically transformed images, rituals, customs, and social structures of their own common, but diversified culture.

On the other side tribal folk tradition and literature are gradually falling into nothingness as the tribal villages are being uprooted and tribes are displaced from their environment. Their oral traditions have been recorded and documented by those who first came in contact with the tribals. Paraja tribes, also have their culture, customs, rituals, tradition and taboos etc. and identities are

different from main stream society and other tribal societies. The socio-religious structure is different from tribe to tribe but most often, they run along the same line and categories. The religious practices, customs, and political system changed significantly under British Colonialism in the 19th century. The Paraja tribal community became overwhelmingly Christian under colonisation. “An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being; if they did not exist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity.”

The novel Paraja consists of 114 chapters; each more emphatically portraying the life and culture of the Paraja tribes. The events in the novel begin in winter and trace the misfortunes of Sukru Jani and his family through a span of a full year till next December. It enables the reader to complete one complete cycle of year, festivals, crops and other activities of the region. The chapter first of the novel enhances our knowledge about the life of the Paraja tribe inclusive of their food habits, their clothes and their residential accommodations and all description spells out simplicity. In this chapter we are introduced to the protagonist Sukru Jani and his family who have been living in peace. Their needs are simple and their desires limited. Sukru Jani's wife Sombari is dead. A man-eating tiger had carried her away and thereafter the husband - Sukru Jani has been living with his sons - Mandia and Tikra, and his daughters - Jili and Bili. Chapter 2 further broadens our vision about the life style of the Paraja. If men worked in the fields and forests, the women of the house took care of the daily household chores, whether it was cooking or washing. There is a description of the market day at Podagod - a weekly market that takes place on Wednesdays. The day becomes a social event as women dress up in their brightest clothes and their gaudiest beads; and the place is meant for meeting friends and exchanging gossip. Chapter 25 and 26 are about the harvest festival. Despite the cold, misty morning the spirits of the people are high. From early morning they are busy with the preparations for the harvest festival. After an early meal the men have gone to the jungle to collect wood for the bonfire and the young women are busy cleaning and painting the house. Some are even busy with laundering clothes. Thereafter the personal grooming and dressing starts from the best of saris to the brightest of bangles and the beautification aspect occupies the minds of the women. Everywhere in the village there is feverish fun and activity taking place, except for Sukru Jani's house. He feels he has no home, no family to either rejoice with or to even share his sorrows. For him Tikra is still a child; Mandia too young to be entrusted with the responsibility of running the household; Jili is too busy dreaming of Bagla and Bili keeps fantasizing about young men. For him the house that was once in perfect order is now in complete shambles and his safe secure house has fallen apart. The festival begins at dusk and the dance and the rituals have started.

ECO-CULTURAL PRACTICES

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

The tribal world, surrounded by chains of hills, stretches of wilder forest and bountiful natural resources, has a distinctive idyllic flavour which influences the tribal people to be essentially, the part of it for thousands of years. This world may be characterized by its fair remoteness, peaceful ambiance, natural order and integrity of life. In this regard mention may be made of Charles Bucke, the early nineteenth century philosopher of nature, when he posits that “rocks or mountains” add immense sublimity to a country and water makes a landscape beautiful (The Philosophy of Nature 6). Thus, the tribal world is both sublime and beautiful with the presence of mountain, fountain and rivers, which may be perceived and behold, to quote Bucke, by “cultivated mind”. By “cultivated mind” Bucke means, the mind that is sensible to receive the effects of natural processes, to Wordsworth it is the mind having imaginative sensibility and to Eliot it is the mind that carries the values of the tradition to produce new knowledge. In addition to this, the wild flora splashed with multitude colours redoubles the beauty and thickens the ambiance with wild aroma. The novel Paraja is rich in ethnographic detail as Gopinath Mohanty minutely records the rituals, beliefs, ceremonies and tribal wisdom regarding the eco-system and the landscape. The novelist presents a pictorial and informative account of the mountains and forests of Koraput, a comprehensive account of the numerous activities of the Paraja starting from one winter to another winter spanning a full year. An important event in the novel is the hunt during the spring festival. All the able-bodied men of the village proceed on a hunting expedition which continues for two or three days. ‘The men would go out into the jungle, prepared to face the taunts of their women if they should return empty-handed. The women would tie their clothes together and hang them up on a rope, and anyone who failed to kill something would be made to crawl under the garments; he would be pelted with dung-balls and other filth...but success was greeted with garlands and dancing and rejoicing.’(159) The hunting expedition is metaphoric too as Mandia and Bagala set out not just to hunt an animal but also their mate. It is Bagala who captures Kajodi and runs away into the jungle and exercises the ancient Paraja right of marriage by capture.

TRIBAL'S STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL
“The oppressed if given the chance can speak and know their conditions.

They must speak” (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 25)

Most of the writing of Gopinath Mohanthy based on tribals struggle for survival. His novels depict an unequal battle between the powerful and the powerless; which, in turn, may again be read as a symbolic struggle of the ongoing strife for survival in a hostile environment divided in terms of class and caste. It is a story of misplacement, of alienation and suffering resulting from a deep sense of being uprooted from the ancestor's soil. Paraja is a novel, which presents a passionate panorama of tribal existence on an epic scale. The major theme of the novel is a social exploitation of tribal people and rhythm of tribal lives in all their innocence, their culture, social custom, tradition, rituals and their problems. Mohanty has very successfully turned Paraja into a poignant tale of human suffering, exploitation and their struggle for survival. The major theme of the novel is social exploitation of the tribal people and rhythm of tribal lives in all their innocence, their culture, social custom, tradition, rituals and their problems.

Sarasupura is a tiny Paraja village where Sukrujani a tribal patriarch, live with his two sons Mandia and Tikra and two daughter Jili and Bili. One day Sukru Jani, is fined for cutting down forest trees. The same trees that he had always thought to be free gifts of nature. He has to borrow money from the Sahukar to pay the fine. In order to pay off this small debt, he and his younger son become gotis to the Sahukar. However, the small debt is never redeemed. Their land is mortgaged and is never returned even when debts have been repaid. They go to the court of law but lose the case. Sukru Jani and his sons begin to live elsewhere as gotis , and the daughters are left at home. It is at this point that the daughters begin to feel an emotional vacuum. Their dreams are lost in such poverty and they begin to stray. Things get more complicated when the elder daughter, Jili, becomes the mistress of the same Sahukar who had snatched their land, cheated, exploited and tortured her father and brothers. Sukru Jani and his sons appeal once more to the Sahukar to return their land, but when their humble submission is met with abuses, they lose their head and kill the Sahukar .The tragedy in the life of Sukru Jani and his family is born out of the struggle over the scarce resources at their disposal. For their sustenance, they depended on the forest resources and the piece of agricultural land in their possession; but when they are denied access to the former and the second is cheated from them in order to pay for the fine imposed upon them. The operation of governmental laws limiting the access of the tribal who depend largely upon forest resources becomes the bane in case of the Paraja family in the novel, who in turn symbolically represent the Parajas as a whole. ‘Official and illicit felling of forest trees have benefitted outsiders while tribals face loss of their environment.’ (Joshi, 24)

CONCLUSION

The tribal people have a unique life style including their customs, rituals and beliefs and eco-agricultural values. But modernity has encroached into the world of tribal life. Gopinath Mohanty's novels visualize us the cultural heritage and the struggle for the survival of the tribal people in the Orissa.

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