

Representation of Tribal Life and Society in Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*

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Abstract

India is a country known for its unity in diversity, a land where different kinds of people with different taste, colour, nature, religion, lives hand in hand together. The people live here entertain 1600 types of languages. The multi lingual mosaic has provided this country a philosophy of tolerance and love for others. There are more unwritten languages in the country than the written ones. These unwritten languages spoken by those who live in forest, hills, mountains and inaccessible island. They are tribes and they are very much a part and parcel of the old heritage of the nation. Once they had been neglected and discriminated in literature but in today's literature they occupy a glamorous position. Many tribal languages are now in written form. The tribes have become the centre of attention in the writings of Kochereti, Almakabutri, Mahashweta Devi, Birendra Kr. Bhattacharya, Shanni and so on. The writers of Orissa literature are not far behind for Orissa is one of those lands where different types tribes dwell. One such eminent Orissa writer who represents tribal literature, giving it a prestigious form and position is Gopinath Mohanty (1914-1991) while writing Paraja (1945).

Key Words: tribal, diversity, neglected, discriminated etc

Introduction

Gopinath Mohanty appeared on the literary scene at post independence era. After his post graduation in English from Patna University, he joined the Orissa Administrative Service and retired as an officer on special duty – Tribal Development Project. His novels thus focused on the social issues, the life and cultural practices of the pre-literate and the tribal, the pain, the suffering, the anguish and the agony of the protagonists who are either poor or middle economic strata of society. His first novel *Mana Gahirara Chasa* was published in 1940 which was followed by *Dadi Budha* (1944), *Paraja* (1945), and *Amrutara Santana* (1947).

His twenty four novels, ten collections of short stories, three plays, two biographies, two volumes of critical essays and five books on the language of Kandh, Gadabe, and Saoratribes were published. Moreover, he translated Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Rabindranath Tagore's *Jogajog*.

Among his novels *Dad Budha*, *Amrutara Santana* and *Paraja* are remarkable for their portrayal of tribal life in the densely wooded hills and forests of the Eastern Ghats. His *Paraja* is the most significant contribution to the Indian Literature in English. Like other social novels in the pre independence period, it is 'born out of passionate social awareness'. Mohanty uniquely portrays the manner in which urban material civilization encroaches upon and gradually destroys a primordial way of life. He does not merely narrate a tale suffering; on the contrary it is a tale survival. In his portrayal of tribal life, Gopinath Mohanty invites comparison with the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. At one level both novelists' visions are almost identical; they visualize the disintegration of a primitive community under the impact of a new faith or as alien value system.

It is noteworthy that one fourth people of Orissa are tribes and the Paraja is one of them. They reside in a remote district named Koraput. Mohanty had the opportunity to study them closely during his service as a forest range officer. He wrote *Paraja*-a novel of tribal life with 114 chapters. Each chapter is very important in its minute presentation of the life style of paraja. The novel apparently rotates round the tragic tale of Sakru Jani, the protagonist and the misfortune that befall his family. But through spokesman Mohanty tactfully unveils his real aim i.e. the life style of Paraja. The paraja people dwell among 'untrodden ways', an inhabitation which is far away from the dean and bustle of modern city life. It is such a play where modern ammonites are rather luxury to imagine. The surrounding roads are dusty, full of pit-holes. So passing of motorized vehicle is just an occasion. The primitive parajas live there and they are quite happy at their own surroundings. They are in fact least bothered about the happenings beyond their own world. Of course they have to cross miles after miles to reach their bus stop or railway station. They are industrious and hard working. Each and every member including women remains busy through the whole day to earn their livelihood. Most of them depend on land; so land is Goddess to them. The irony however lies in that they do get very little from the land for most of the corns are taken away by the higher authorities as wages. The lands are not fertile always. They do not apply fertilizers or pesticides. they produce natural corns.

Mohanty in *Paraja* skillfully portrayed the socio-economic structure, political condition of Paraja society. They are well acquainted with the social system of different nations. Few customs and norms were historic or beyond the understanding of the modern men like us who live in their society. A clear distinction between the poor and the rich men can be seen. There

are government officers and they are closely knitted with the rich. The Naika collects the rent on behalf of the Raja. After collecting the tax, he then delivers it to the Ribini, the Revenue Inspector. Every villager has to pay a plough tax to forest guard. The poor primitive paraja are helpless when they take money as loans from the money lenders, they do not know the complexities of paper and pen. The conditions are signed but they are unaware of their impending fate or the disaster waiting for them. Very often they fail to repay their money within the scheduled time and as a result they have to pay the penalty to it by becoming Goti (bonded-laborer) for the rest of the life. This happens in the life of the protagonist Sakru Jani. This ancient barbaric slaving system still can be found in the world of paraja. Incidentally Sakru Jani takes loan of fifty rupees only from Ramchandra Bisio, the money lender who can be compared with the crude, merciless characters like Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* for unknown cause. When the time comes to repay his bills he fails. Now the powerful man takes everything from him and his misconduct is tolerated by Sakru Jani, the uneducated honest guy who endures some time. But when he fails to do that he commits a heinous crime and goes to the prison. Mohanty here castigates the so-called civilized man who oppresses and suppresses people like Sakru Jani.

The system of marriage is somewhat unique in the world of Paraja. The lovers meet their happy conjugal life at the end overcoming thorns of life. They love each other deeply and their love does not depend on any material benefits. During the occasion of spring festival which they celebrate at night by lighting the fire in the forest, all the villagers gather; they dance and on the eve of this the man who loves takes the lady with him into the dense forest, declaring her to be his would be mistress. The system of dowry is also here but in that case the boys have to give something to the father of the girl whom he is supposed to wait. Thus Cajody, a paraja lover who loves one of the daughters of Sakru Jani accumulates money to be given to Sakru Jani for the girl he woos. The Paraja people are fun-loving. Their life is not at all a bed of roses. It is very hard and tough. But still they enjoy themselves, their different occasions. It is as if they are Ulysses who wants to drink life to the lees. They celebrate different moments of the life. The novel covers one seasonal year in which the readers get acquainted with different types of festivals round the year. During the festivals everybody becomes and festive. The males come in best of their attires. The women wear their sarees and different types of bangles. It is not that their garments are new; neither are they expensive or gorgeous. Rather they are simple, rusty, and cheap. Actually they enjoy inwardly and thus they are happy with whatever they get. Songs are a part of their festivals. Even while they work, they sing songs in chorus. Every evening the main play on their "dungudungas" and the women dance. Through their songs they invoke their Gods:

O! God of joy, God of dance and song

God of the hunt

Come, make us gay.

The lovers are not far behind. They are romantic. They also sing songs to please their beloved. One such occasion comes when Bagla, the paraja flamboyant boy sings a song to soothe his coy mistress, Jili:

For my sake, beloved come out in your best.

Conclusion

Gopinath Mohany is very keen and minute in his representation of tribal life style, their culture, their festivals, their likes and dislikes and broadly speaking everything related to their life. As found in the novel, the paraja are primitive. They are down to earth, humble, rustic, honest, simple and alienated from the arena of so-called education. But in spite of that they are human and, far superior to civilized man in various respects.

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