

Historicity of Apathy and Antipathy in Nidhi Dugar Kundalia's "The Marias of Bastar" from *White as Milk and Rice: Stories of India's Isolated Tribes*

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Abstract

The tribals and their history have become the subject of interest at the international level only after the formation of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples in 1972. Our Indian 'tribes' are not homogeneous in tradition and culture. It is a pluralistic society where the generalisation of their life style and culture is impossible. The diversity in culture and the distinctiveness of lifestyle of the autochthonous communities necessitate micro study of the respective group to know their specific problems. The present study focuses on the Marias of Bastar, their culture, lifestyle and the threats faced by them in the hands of Maos and exploitation in the hands of capitalists. *The Marias of Bastar* is a narrative from Kundalia's collection of stories entitled *White as Milk and Rice: Stories of India's Isolated Tribes*.

Keywords: Historicity, Apathy, Antipathy, Indigeneity, Exploitation, Maoists, Marias

Sometimes, it is not the kings and queen who make for the most fascinating history but the shadowy souls who happen to be in the right place at the right time.

- Michelle Moran

Introduction

Tribal consciousness is a recent phenomenon that has gained momentum after the formation of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples in 1972. On the one hand the studies on the indigenous peoples of the world became a political necessity and on the other hand the colonial education was the reason for the birth of many consciousness raising indigenous scholars and writers. The indigenous writers account for the necessity to talk about themselves. They feel that their problems are not heard properly. There is no truth in what the outsiders have written and the outsiders cannot depict their values. As a result, a distorted version of the natives has been circulated among the public.

During the colonial period, the word 'tribe' was attributed by the British Administration to refer to the indigenous people(s). In the census report of 1891, V.A. Bains formed the subheading for the people of agricultural and pastoral castes as 'forest tribes'. Later, the 1941 census referred to the indigenous people of India as 'tribes'. Many anthropologists like S.C. Roy, Surajit Sinha, P.N. Mishra, S.C. Dube, I.P. Vidhyarti, Majumdar and Aiyappan have contributed to the field of tribal study in India. The

distinctiveness in geographical, cultural and historical features led to the difficulty for these scholars to conceptualise a universal definition of tribes. On the basis of some general characteristics, Majumdar's definition of tribes is highly convincing.

[A] tribe is a social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous, with no specialisation of functions, ruled by tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognizing social distance with other tribes or castes without attaching any social obloquy to them (unlike in the caste structure), following tribal traditions, beliefs and customs, illiberal of naturalization of ideas from alien sources, above all conscious of homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration. (18)

As far as India was concerned, the tribes were kept outside the varna system. Yet the great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha* talk about the interaction between the mainstream people and the tribes. For example, in *Ramayana*, Sabari, a tribal woman, is represented as a devotee of Ram. Similarly, in *Mahabharatha*, Ekalavya, a bhil tribe, is depicted as the most skilful archer who learns the art through observation rather than practice. The Indian tribal population constitutes 8.6% of the total world population and there are varieties of tribal groups and each group has a distinct culture, language, life style, tradition, rituals and so it is very difficult to generalise the whole fabric of lifestyle of tribes. This necessitates a micro study of the respective group to know its specific problems. The Marias of Bastar is one such group taken for the present study.

Need for the study

The mainstream literature does not talk about tribal literature. Any history of the land is the history of power. Hence, it is understood that there are not many works written on them. Moreover, any piece of writing on indigenous peoples by the missionaries or any outsiders may not be without prejudice. The travelogues and the history books of the colonisers depict them as rude and uncouth. Their records also include the savageous attacks of the tribes against the intruders. But these tribes have been either ignored by the mainstream society or considered as wild enemies by the pluralistic society. Hence, it is necessary to study the historicity of the tribes from the vantage point.

Nidhi Dugar Kundalia, journalist, is fond of focusing on socio-cultural issues of India. She undertook an arduous journey to meet the six tribal communities to know about their interaction with the outside world, their pains, celebrations, cultural beliefs and traditional wisdom. She has compiled their stories in the form of a book entitled *White as Milk and Rice: Stories of India's Isolated Tribes*. In one of her stories entitled "The Marias of Bastar" she has dealt with the lives of the Maria tribes. The present study deals with the story of the Marias to know their culture, issues and their conflicts with the outside world. Kundalia has depicted the historicity of the Maria tribes who were looked upon either with apathy by the outsiders or with animosity by the capitalists, industrialists or other intruders.

Methodology

Indigenous methodology is essential to study about the indigenous people for the reasons above mentioned. Indigenous research paradigm is the need of the hour as the academic writing, theories and research are of western origin. Linda Tuhiwai Smith says, "...reading and interpretation present problems when we do not see ourselves in the text. There are problems, too, when we do see ourselves but can rarely recognise ourselves through the representation" (35). There is a necessity for indigenous methodology where the author meets the native and the first-hand information is recorded by her. Kundalia recounts her struggle to make the tribal girl speak about herself. "I spent my nights in a government guest house in

Narayanpur, and most of my days in her village. Birsu let me into her life only after we negotiated a great deal of mutual mistrust, and we carefully sieved through her story” (WMR xi-xii). The birth of this story about the Maria tribe is through her interview with them. Her portrayal of the tribe being authentic, a critique on the Maria tribe highlights their issues.

Background History of the Tribe

Bastar is a treasure trove of ancient Indian tribal culture and heritage. Nearly 70 percent of the population are tribals. The major tribes of Bastar region are the Gond, AbhujMaria, Halba, Dhurvaa, Muria and Bison Horn Maria. The Maria tribes are the sub caste of Gond. They avoid mixing with the outsiders. They strive to maintain their own cultural practices. They inhabit the secluded enclaves of Narayanpur tehsil of Bastar District. The area inhabited by them is a dense forest that sprawls across 1500 miles of lush greenery. The tribe is hostile to strangers and sometimes shoots them with arrows. Money and material pleasure seldom tempt these people. Their isolated nature enables them to preserve their ancestral customs and traditions. The ghotul system is the unique cultural practice of these people.

Structure of the story

The writer sketches the post independent life of Birsu who has a girl baby of six years old. Her husband works as a peon in a government office. The first part of the tale describes her encounter with Naxals in the forest who grab her food and devour the same. On another occasion, when she travels to the village of Sukaru, she could see from a distance a young boy being shot by the Naxals fearing that he would be an informer. She recollects her childhood days in the village near Antagargh, north of Narayanpur, in Chattisgarh. She talks about the unique Ghotul system signifying the sexual freedom of the tribes. The girls of the village are sent to ghotul around ten years of age and the system of giving artistic comb to a girl marks the partnership between a boy and a girl. A girl is at liberty to change her partner if she does not like the boy. In the story Birsu changes her partner “as he had attempted to touch her in the night” (119). She narrates how pregnancy would harm the solidarity of the ghotul system but in case a girl becomes pregnant, abortifacient is tried on her. When that fails in the case of her friend, Janaki, the parents get the concurrence of the boy from another village for marriage and the ‘chelik’ (boy) who is responsible for pregnancy is only fined. The boy accepts Janaki and her baby in the womb and her marriage is solemnised as per their custom.

On the day of the wedding, Jhanaki was slathered with turmeric and given a bath by the motiaris while the cheliks fanned her. Her combs, the sign of youth, her love from cheliks and the ghotul, were stripped off her. Though her wedding was to be strictly a perfunctory ceremony (blame the pregnancy), the standard long *bidai* ceremony, or ceremonies, every evening at the ghotul as boys and girls sang songs, was not compromised upon. (WMR 127)

Birsu highlights the story of Krishna who is captivated by the gentleness of one of the Naxals and runs into the forest to become his wife forever. Birsu’s experience, the experiences of other women of her community, the threats faced by her people, her lifestyle, the issues faced by her community and the culture of her community drive Birsu to admit her daughter in a school.

Cultural Elements

Ancestral worship is a common aspect of the tribal communities. The Maria tribe believes that the spirits are called by the dead man’s family to “protect a new born child, bless a marriage, keep famines away,

ensure good rainfall, protect the crops and bring success in hunting and fishing” (WMR 132). Birsu critiques the act of the community. “The dead need just a burial, Birsu thought, but the living would ask and ask” (WMR 132). It is also understood that the content of their prayer is a proof of their simple living. Birsu narrates the wedding rituals of her friend Janaki. As a peer group the ghotul boys and girls are supposed to offer their service. They dress up in all their finery with beads and plumed headgear and dance throughout the night. “Boys in their peacock feather turbans and girls with their swan-like necks moved in and out of the circle For almost a week, they prepared for the wedding; Boys hunted the meats, erected the tents; girls made the leaf cups and plates for the feast and brewed liquor for the wedding party” (WMR 127).

The most important cultural feature of the tribe is ‘ghotul’. All the unmarried boys and girls of the tribe are the members of the ghotul. Ghotul is a ‘dear nurse of arts’. The boys carve the pillars and doors of the ghotul building. Kundalia says, “the ghotul is a place embedded in and nurtured by the larger socio-political landscape of the Gond society” (WMR 113). There is a myth attached to the birth of ghotul. The heroic Lingo, the youngest of the seven brothers and a charming musician, refused to indulge in lusty advances of his six sister-in-laws. His attention was attached to the little hut built outside the village. He used to play eighteen musical instruments and all the young boys and girls crept into the hut. His green-eyed brothers tried to slay him but the pure Lingo survived all their attempts. This turned Lingo into a cult figure, a phallic deity and the founder of the ghotul. Since then, it has been a custom that the young boys and girls used to go every day to ghotul and return home before dawn. Verrier terms the ghotul as ‘children’s republic’. The girl members are called ‘motiaris’ and the boy members are called ‘cheliks’. Both the boys and girls are in charge of maintaining the premises.

The girls would have to sanitize the floor with cow dung and clean ashes from the previous night, while the boys were in charge of the roofs and fences; any laxity in the duties led to consequent punishment. Both boys and girls were to be clean, oiled and dressed in their finest attire. (WMR 120)

The ghotul system prepares young ones to know the art of love making but at the same time it has the wider responsibility to prevent passionate love affairs. “In the soft, diffused glow of affection, boys and girls lived together in that dormitory for years; a charming mixture of learning and experimenting with lovemaking, none of it meant to be taken seriously” (WMR 123). Prenuptial sexual freedom is not something unusual in this community alone. Kundalia refers to New Guinea girls who are free to receive their lovers at night in their parents’ houses and also Uritoi men and women (Polynesia) and the Igorots of the Philippines who encourage live-in relationships (WMR 123).

Another age-old custom in the ghotuls is the practice of gifting combs by the boys to their desired girls. Boys would spend hours carving exquisite design on wooden combs. Kundalia says that the modern times witness only plastic combs and colourful clips instead of ingeniously crafted wooden combs. Moreover, the craft itself is extinct. Verrier Elwin in his book entitled *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* gives a detailed account of the ghotul system. “Here everything was arranged to prevent long drawn intense attachments, to eliminate jealousy and possessiveness, to deepen the sense of communal property and action” (164). The Murias believe that sexual congress is a good and beautiful thing when performed by the right people at the right time and in the right place. Verrier says, “I have no hesitation in saying that for the areas that I know intimately, there was more sexual excess among young people in ordinary villages than in ghotul villages” (167). The ghotul system is the reason for the non-existence of adultery, prostitution, divorce, infidelity and child marriage. “The incidence of divorce in Bastar was less than 3 percent” (168).

Post Independence Problems

In 1958, the government refugees from East Bengal came in. The hills were exploited for mineral wealth. The tribes were exploited by the feudal lords. The Naxal movements in their area after 1980 were not restricted by the forest dwellers for they helped them demand freedom for them too. The narrator says, “This mineral rich region is home to open coal pits, where massive quantities of the carbon rock are still mined and, in turn, the forest residents offered all sorts of compensation to the locals - jobs, money, alternative housing - in return for their land and their departure. While many have accepted this, for others, like Birsu, and her villagers, their forests and lands are everything to them” (WMR 133). Some men and women who have been engaged in the work of making roads and other odd jobs have joined Naxals preferring ‘self-rule’ instead of giving up their land to be slaves to the capitalists.

The Maoists have occupied 35000 square miles of jungle. Birsu, though not part of the Naxalite movement, often makes meals for them when they come to visit at nights. “She had developed for them not only fear but also respect, for unlike her villagers, they were brave and hardworking, fighting for what they thought was theirs” (WMR xii). The tribes sandwiched between the explosions from the mines and the bombs used by the Maoists to kill the police and CRPF officials. The losers of this massacre are the suspected government informers. Kundalia says that the official figure shows that there have been 15000 deaths in the last twenty-five years.

Birsu, a woman who can reason out her position used to feel that the cultural side of her society forces women to do three things namely tattooing, intercourse and child bearing. The post-independence problems, predicament faced by her clan in the hands of the dominant groups and the harsh lifestyle of the people make her think and she decides that education alone can bring in social change. That’s why towards the end of the story she decides not to send her daughter to ghotul and takes the application form to admit her daughter Radha at a school. “‘She may then become a police officer, or teacher’, she tells after him, or even a Mao, she whispers to herself” (WMR 137). Birsu is a sample of such women who have given up their traditional lives and adapted to the changes. Kundalia vouches the same: “The Marias and other tribals that I had come to know across the country were not bizarre and definitely not pitiable. They had adapted, and are rapidly adapting, to the fast-changing conditions around them, mostly at the cost of their traditional lives and livelihoods” (WMR xiii).

Conclusion

The cultural history of the tribes before independence focuses on dance, music and a simple living with nature. Post-independent India has offered them nothing substantial and they have been robbed of their territory and heritage. Geographical displacement has forced them to give up their traditional occupation and the tribes are forced to take up ruthless operations of the industry. The present situation has brought in conflicts with the larger goals of their own tribal society on the one hand and on the other hand the challenges that they are going to face in integrating themselves with the mainstream society.

Jawaharlal Nehru formulated Panchsheel principles to deal with the problems of the tribal people. He urged that the tribal themselves should be involved in their own administration and any government scheme should work through their social and cultural institutions and not work against their pattern of life. Ramachandra Guha mourns over the tragic state of the tribals. “Nehru’s prescriptions have been comprehensively disregarded by the Government of India, as well as by the governments of the different states which have significant tribal populations. The quality of schools and hospitals in tribal areas is abysmal. There has been little attempt to involve tribals in their own administration. Worse, state policies

have worked actively to dispossess tribals of their land and homes, and to deny them their traditional rights in the forest” (Hindustan Times).

The PESA Act of 1996 and the Forest Rights Act of 2006 are not known to the tribals. These acts are there to protect them from the mainstream society and at same time to have an integration with that society. The acts or movements should not strive to take them out of their places rather there is a necessity for re-constituting, re-writing and re-righting their position. One thing should not be forgotten that they are the interpreters of nature and the fate of our civilization rests in the sustainability of these original inhabitants of the soil.

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