

Tribal Literature and Languages in India: Some Observations

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Abstract

Mainly with their segregated environment, economy, society, beliefs, and long relationship with the Indian culture, the study of tribals has been one of the most seasoned anthropological concerns. Tribal literature is a form of writing that expresses the search for identity, the exploitation of tribal people, and resistance against threats to their existence. It is often passed down orally and is written in hundreds of indigenous languages.

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Tribal Literature

1. Angor by Jacinta Kerketta

This book is a collection of 41 poems in Hindi, with English translations, by the Oraon journalist, writer and poet Jacinta Kerketta. She writes that growing up seeing domestic violence at her house, “something like a piece of ember trapped inside” started to take the shape of poems. Kerketta’s poems are reflections of her lived experience and observations of her surroundings. The poems “Jamuni, tum ho kaun?”—Jamuni, who are you after all?—and “Hamdardi”—Compassion reflect on the violence against and exploitation of Adivasi women. The collection moves through various aspects of Adivasi life in villages, but the central theme provides us with a critical Adivasi perspective on the modern “development” model and its erosion of cultural and communitarian roots. Like many Adivasi poets, Kerketta uses metaphors from the forest and nature to depict the deep relationships Adivasi communities have with these. She recalls, too, the communities’ long history of resistance since the Santal Rebellion in the nineteenth century. Her portrayal of the community is not written as a victim’s narrative but an empowering story of survival and resistance.

The simplicity of her language and the depth of her critical worldview resonate with many young Adivasis who are experiencing a similar crisis in their ancestral homelands.

2. Motyarin by Usha Kiran Atram

Atram narrates the resistance of a Koitur woman against injustice, violence and discrimination. The book begins with a hard-hitting poem that portrays abuse against Adivasi women within and outside the household. She writes, “Bata maan, main kiski hun? Baba-Bhaiya ki? Mere Shauhar ki? Sawkaar-Ranger-Patil ki? Jameendaar-Darzi-Sonaarki? Kiski hun main?”—Tell me, mother, whose am I?

Father's or brother's? My husband's? Moneylenders-Rangers-Patils? Landlords-Tailors-Goldsmiths? Whose am I?

3. **Angal ,Pahad ke Paath by Mahadev Toppo**

Mahadev Toppo's poetry collection is a really valuable contribution to Adivasi literature, notable for his insightful reflections on his life experiences; the stories surrounding the hills, forest, rivers and nature; and his bold and satirical commentary on the appropriation of Adivasi knowledge and voices by non-Adivasis. Toppo, who belongs to the Oraon tribe, criticises the primacy of written histories and the stigmatisation of Adivasis in the writings of non-Adivasis; the ugliness of English writers being unaware of Adivasi life and worldviews, who are honoured with awards and then explain to Adivasis aspects of their own traditions and revolutions; and tourists who feel good about themselves after spending time in Adivasi villages, while Adivasis are left with their deprivation.

The poem "Rachane Honge Granth"—Books will have to be written—is a call for rewriting Adivasi histories subsumed in trees, rivers, rocks and sacred groves. Before the non-Adivasi society describes them as animals, Adivasis need to define themselves as "human beings." Toppo makes subtle, sarcastic allusions to the prejudices of his friends named "Pandey ji, Mishra ji, Singh ji" in the city. He also reminisces over childhood memories of his ancestral land, the songs, drum beats and festivals. Amid this turmoil, he expresses his struggle to protect his "Adivasi-ness."

Toppo mocks "civilised" society by asking them to name trees, leaves, roots, ants and spiders—knowledge common to most Adivasis. He proclaims that when we die, we will all mingle into the earth, and then asks, "My brother, why do you laugh at us?" In the poem titled "In the Cell of Questions," he notes several award-winning non-Adivasi scholars and activists who claim to be speaking on behalf of Adivasi rights. He thanks them, and then asks, "But why are we [still] helpless, Silent and boiling with anger?... Who will unveil the mystery of this question?" Each poem in the book is to be cherished, for its meaningful and satirical analysis of Adivasi and non-Adivasi worldviews, and the writer's experiential reflections on rural and urban society. Toppo rightfully declares, "I am a poet of the forest, I would plant trees and poems too."

Tribal literature is more about folklores and oral stories and poems of the tribal community. Every country has rich tribal literature and in India, it is known as 'Adivasi' literature. The availability of the same is in two forms; oral literature and the modern written literature. They call themselves the 'Orature'—the literature of the oral tradition. Every year in India more than 100 books are published in English and other major Indian languages of tribal literature. But the writing of tribal literature did not just start for expanding their stories and poems, but it is a search for identity, exposing the past and the present from the exploitation of outsiders and threats to the tribal identity and crisis. It is their form of resistance. One may wonder about how literature is a form of all of these, tribes are indigenous groups' cohabiting in forests with creating less to no harm. But when the Indian economy adapted liberalization, the open markets brought in manufactures which led to an abundant need for water, forest, and land, the primary source of the tribes. To state a simple example, over the last decade more than 10 lakh tribes have been displaced from Jharkhand alone. So tribal literature is not just to bring forward their songs and poems but an attempt to protect the tribal identity and existence in the face of intensified exploitation.

While tribal literature is lost among the piles of un-understandable languages, the literature is being translated to major languages giving it a national form. Amidst the diversity of India with more than 800 spoken languages, tribal literature tries to find its way in-between the official languages, to be seen, to be heard, and to be identified. Tribal Literature in India is a colourful one. It is indeed a vast one. One of the

basic problems leading to its slow recognition is that it is unrecorded or more appropriately it is unwritten. One of the best solutions to this issue lies in our modified notion of literature. It means that we need to concede that literature is not just written, but also oral in nature or form. In addition to this, India is best known for its rich oral traditions. Orality as a feature of communication embodies in it both traditional and modern characteristics. Timeless and unanchored, it freely travels from age to age, country to country and genre to genre. In fact, every written piece of literature contains substantial layers of orality.

Tribal literature or Adivasi Sahitya is available mostly in the form of songs or dance forms. These songs have been orally transmitted from one generation to another and have survived for a long time. Even some of the folk songs are lost forever. It is high time for us to collect and conserve tribal literature for the posterity. The glory of the mainstream literature in the country lies in the fact that it accepts oral or folk as complementary, as it gives a complete picture of the Indian culture and thought. Tribal people dwell in different parts of the Indian Union. They are found in small and big groups; they speak their own tongues or dialects; practice their own customs or culture; and attract the attention of linguists, anthropologists, scholars and researchers now –a- days. Tribal men and women are natural singers, dancers or performers. They are emotionally attached to their motherland; they are full of patriotic feelings and work for the progress of the nation. The tribal vision of life or the tribal philosophy of life cherishes close contact between man and Nature. The literature of the tribal groups is marked by a great variety of songs, dance forms or dramatic performances. A sincere effort is now being made to collect them, to compile them through translation or transcreation. The tribal story -teller can imagine the unimaginable; readers, listeners and viewers will be rendered willing to believe the unbelievable and to forget the demarcating lines between art and non-art. It seems that the primary aim of the tribal art is to amuse the audience.

Tribal Languages

Language is the only tool for expressing identity and culture as well as one of the greatest emblems of human diversity. There are around 7,000 living languages in the world and around 3,000 are considered as ‘endangered’. This means that almost half of the planet’s current linguistic diversity is under threat. The situation in India is alarming. Some 197 languages are in various stages of endangerment in our country, more than any other country in the world. Ganesh N Devy, founder-director of the Bhasa Research and Publication Centre, Vadodra and Adivasi Academy at Tejgadh, Gujarat, said, “India may have lost 220 languages since 1961. There were 1,100 languages since 1961, based on the Census number of 1,652 mother tongues. Another 150 languages could vanish in the next 50 years”. Linguistic expert Devy documented 780 living languages and claims that 400 of them are at risk of dying. There are five tribal languages that are moving towards extinction in India. Linguist experts say that the most threatened language is Majhi in Sikkim. According to a research conducted by People’s Linguistic Survey of India, there are just four people who currently speak Majhi and all of them belong to the same family. Similarly, the Mahali language in eastern India, Koro in Arunachal Pradesh, Sidi in Gujarat and Dimasa in Assam are facing extinction. Until recently, UNESCO has put Asur, Birhor and Korwa in its list of the world’s endangered languages with Birhor being categorised as ‘Critically Endangered’, with just 2,000 speakers left.

According to UNESCO, any language that is spoken by less than 10,000 people is potentially endangered. In India, after the 1971 census, the government decided that any language spoken by less

than 10,000 people need not be included in the official list of languages. Ayesha Kidwai of the Centre for Linguistics, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, said “Tribal languages are a treasure trove of knowledge about a region’s flora, fauna and medicinal plants. Usually, this information is passed from generation to generation. However, when a language declines, that knowledge system is completely gone. With the loss of language comes the loss of everything in culture and loss of solidarity, the loss of Man himself.” While the danger of extinction looms large over some languages, many other languages have been thriving. For example, Gondi (spoken in Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra), Bhili (Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat), Mizo (Mizoram), Garo and Khasi (Meghalaya) and Kokborok (Tripura) are showing an upward trend because educated people in these communities have started using these languages for writing. “They publish poems, write plays and perform them. In some of the languages, even films are being made. For instance, they have started making films in Gondi. The Bhojpuri film industry is prospering. The language itself is growing, probably the fastest in the country,” Devy said. Two major tribal languages that are included in the Eighth Schedule, namely Bodo and Santali, have also shown declines, though not negative growth. The number of Bodo speakers in Assam declined to 4.53 per cent of the total population in 2011, from 4.86 per cent in 2001. It shows a total decadal percentage increase of 9.81. On the other hand, Santali shows a total decadal percentage increase of 13.89.

Is MTBMLE a solution?

Mother Tongue Based Multi-Lingual Education (MTBMLE) could play a key role in preserving tribal languages, claim linguistic experts. Ignoring mother tongue-based intervention in early childhood for tribal children could potentially impede the early childhood learning process. There are some civil society organisations in Odisha that have demonstrated promising models of the MTBMLE education system. Take for instance, the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS), the largest residential institute in the world providing free and quality education from kindergarten to post-graduation for tribal children. KISS has been filling up the gap in the learning process among tribal children by implementing a robust MTBMLE approach. It has introduced ‘Transition Curriculum’ — an innovative pedagogic initiative, teaching and learning tools in 10 tribal dialects of the state. The approach helps bridge the gap between home and school languages and validates the child’s home culture and traditional knowledge, thus enabling better learning.

Sushree Sangita Mohanty, deputy director, MTBMLE, KISS, said, “The MTBLE not only improves the quality of education but also makes holistic mainstream education more accessible for tribal children enrolled in KISS.” Mohanty explained that the MTBMLE approach had developed significant cognitive reasoning skills among tribal children, enabling them to operate equally in different languages. The MTBMLE approach facilitates the learning of second and third languages. “Building a strong L1 (language 1) foundation, the student is then bridged to their second language (L2) by providing strong training in their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills,” added Mohanty.

Way forward

Tribal languages should be endorsed through innovative, cultural and entertainment programmes, suggest linguistic experts. For example, a local community radio channel called ‘Asur Mobile Radio’ in Jharkhand launched cultural programmes in the Asur language, which has only 7,000-8,000 speakers.

The Asur community is among the few PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups) in the state to preserve their language. The Asur language features in the UNESCO list of ‘definitely endangered’ languages. Manoj Lakra, a Jharkhand-based tribal development expert said, “The Asur community started popularising the language in their area. This has significantly aided the revival of the dying language.”

According to Lakra, local civil society organisations and cultural institutions should make dramas and films in native tribal languages. This will ensure a wider outreach and encourage the younger lot to preserve and respect their language. “There is a need to promote tribal languages as a medium of communication and education in tribal-dominated districts. It can significantly reduce the communication gap and school dropout rate,” recommended Kadey Soren, deputy director-academics, KISS. “It is important to integrate indigenous knowledge systems alongside modern sciences in the curriculum of schools. Tribal languages are fundamental to understand the world we live in, our origin, the roots that we all came from and what humans are capable of,” Soren said. Therefore, it is high time for others to appreciate the important contribution of tribal languages in enriching the world’s rich cultural and linguistic diversity.

CONCLUSION

The last decade of the 20th century witnessed some major political and social movement in the emergence of the marginalized literature. Various literatures came up with their voices into main stream to raise their identities into society. Tribes, Dalits, Women and Peasants were the ethnic groups who came up with the issues of their identity in the society. Tribes have their own unique culture and traditions. They usually formed their literature into oral form. Tribal literature, imbued with Tribal consciousness and identity, is also trying to carve out a place for itself in the world of literature.

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