

Tribal Literacy: Concerns, Crisis And Conflicting Identity In The Selected Works Of Gopinath Mohanty And Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract

The term 'tribe' is referred to the socially, ethnically, or politically connected group of people. It refers to all the tribal people spread across the country. Tribes have different names in different places based on the region they are located in, their position in the society, and various factors which makes them distinctive from others. They have their own unique customs, rituals and traditions. There are some authors who have contributed quality works based on tribal literature. The main objective of this study is to explore the representation of the tribal identity and other concerns in literature by giving textual analysis to the selected works of Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty. The focus of the research is the tribal literacy and identity issues in these authors works.

Keywords: Identity, culture, traditions, literacy, customs, rituals

1. Introduction

The term tribal or tribe does not denote to any particular section of tribal community. It refers to all the tribal communities existing in a country or place. These communities are further divided into tribes, sub-tribe or sub-clan. In India, the tribal are known as Vanyajati (caste of forest), Vanvasi (inhabitants of forest), Pahari (hill-dwellers), Adimjati (Primitive people), Anusuchit Janjati (Scheduled tribe) etc. Sanskrit, one of the oldest languages of India also named tribes as Nishadas, Sabaras, Bhils, Kollas, Kiratas, Dasas, Dasyas, Dramidas and Dravidas.

In India, there is no exact record available about tribal history except the references that scarcely found and that covers an account of around two thousand years. The colonial ethnographers have defined the tribals in various ways such as; savage, uncivilised, uncultured, pre-literate, non-literate, little community, animal like, primitive, barbarous and aboriginals. Through these identities the colonisers have designated a mortifying, undignified portrayal of tribal communities. The term 'tribal' categorises the semicivilised groups inhabiting the mountain and forest. After 1947, the independent India is looked as neo-colonial Nation. The government implemented various new policies considering the colonial versions. It tried to adopt a progressive policy for the tribals with the motto of preserving and safeguarding their rights.

The discourse that came up after colonialism got exploration during 20th century, and to some degree it is called as a modified form of colonial discourse. It talks about tribal rights and protection by preserving their cultural distinctiveness. The tribals who had been alienated due to the segregation policy of colonizers in the pre-independence period, remained isolated even in de-colonised India too. The tribal being alienated from the dominant life of India, remained unfamiliar with national movement. They could never take part in the Indian freedom struggle. Very few records are obtainable that communicated about tribal resistance against colonial rule. Whatever record is available about tribal; present them passive towards the colonizers. But the reality of their lives are necessary to mention because they have been active in their regions in the revolt against the colonial exploitative policies.

Segregation and elimination from the society are other causes of the tribe's alienation from the nation. But with the uprising of Birsa Munda in the last decade of 19th century, the tribal discourse got a new recognition among the nation's documentation. The middle India's tribal revolt during 19th and initially 20th centuries, proved tribal's discontentment against the colonial administrators and local Indian landlords and moneylenders.

It was colonial period that attracted various anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists and colonial administrators towards the life of the tribal community living in the dense forest areas. The study of earlier writers on the tribal people was entirely based on anthropology that was operated with various purposes. In colonial period, studies were conducted on the tribal people with aim to resist tribal revolt and to isolate them from the mainstream.

The objective of the colonial anthropologists was not to jot down tribal history or to glorify their legends. On the contrary, their main purpose was to alienate tribal from the freedom fighters. They

justified their presence in the name of civilising the tribal, whom they had identified under various names as mentioned above. Later the Indian anthropologist like G.S. Ghurye, S.C. Dubey and many others study tribal life from the point of their assimilation into mainstream life.

Some writers have documented the harm done by non-tribal people in the tribal regions. They have advocated on the preserved area for the tribal. Others have explored on the positive effects of the complete integration. They have suggested for total assimilation of tribal into non-tribal society. Through this way, various colonial and post-colonial writers have made their study to traverse tribal culture and influence from outsides. But their study either suggests the tribal isolation in the name of their protection or talk about their assimilation into the mainstream society. But they never explored on the sufferings and exploitation of tribal communities under materialistic and post-colonial discourse, nor they spoke about the continuity of colonial practices in post-colonial India. The earlier tribal literature has only depicted the tribal society with its social, cultural and traditional perspectives.

But Mahasweta and Gopinath Mohanty both have provided a new trend to tribal literature since they don't claim to protect tribal regions nor do they talk about the assimilation or exclusion of the tribal people into the mainstream society. But, on the contrary, the novels demanded for the equality, social justice, and emancipation from the bonded slavery, equal socio-political-economical right, and empowerment of the tribal people. They have not depicted tribal people as passive, silent, and mute observer. They have voiced to revolt and self-assertion. In this research paper, Gopinath Mohanty's *The Ancestor* and *Paraja*, and Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* and *The Fire Within* will be discussed. The main focus is the tribal literacy concern and their identity crisis.

Literacy and Educational attainment is one of the important indicator of any country's level of human development. Even today, the tribal people remain backward due to the lack of proper education and awareness. They still follow superstitious believes and remain ignorant. The growth of a nation happens only with the growth of each and every section of the society.

Contextualization of Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty's Literary Milieu

Mahasweta Devi, an astounding literary figure, toiled for the upliftment of the tribals by projecting their glorious culture to the world. She has contributed significantly for the welfare of tribals. She has deconstructed the conventional image of the earlier writers who recognised tribal as animal or animism, primitive, aborigines. Mahasweta Devi's texts offer the evaluation of civilization, the binary standards of nature and culture and the danger put forward by dominant forces of civilization. Her works throw light on the connection between ecological and economic concerns. She is known as a genuine artist writing about the past and the age-old struggles of the people.

She has presented tribals as the most civilized people who are unaware of exploitation, bonded slavery except democracy where each male/female tribe celebrates equal rights with no difference and discrimination. Mahasweta has not only depicted tribal society as the most civilised but she has also documented their history, their culture with their distinguish festivals and religious beliefs. Her literary works are a kind of voice for the tribal's equal share in socio-political-economical structure in post-colonial India. She has not used her literary works to romanticise any rural natural beauty.

Chotti Munda and His Arrow (2003) is one of the most noted fictional works of Mahasweta in which she has reflected colonial exploitation of tribal that is unchanged under the mainstream people's practice of the centre-margin binarism. Mahasweta has written it as an interlocking fiction that combine the colonial period and the post-colonial India. The novel depicts the tales and miserable condition of tribals and their relentless counteraction against corrupt, guileful invaders, and dominant oppressors. Chotti Munda, the main character of the novel, witnesses tribal's exploitation from colonial to post-colonial Indian. He found 1947 as the year of mainstream non-tribal's independent year in which tribal and other subalterns have equal slavery as they had in colonial period. Mahasweta Devi through Chotti Munda exposes a wide range of tribal's exploitation in the form of bonded slavery, land alienation, social injustice, political and economic exclusion, and merciless killing.

Even though the legends of the tribal like Birsa Munda, Dhani Munda fought against British colonizers' exploitative and land alienation policy, the main stream society does not recognise to their freedom movement. It put aside the tribal population from August movement, about which Chotti Munda said that it felt as if Diku (non-tribal) war for independence had begun. Dikus had never considered the adivasis to be Indians. They (tribals) were not drawn into the independence war. Chotti and his comrades' lives were unaffected by war or independence. They keep a safe distance and observe everything.

Chotti Munda reveals that post-colonial globalization of twentieth century that is gradually progressing towards the end - attract non-tribal capitalists towards tribal's natural resources. The capitalists, a replaced form of old feudalism or landlords, implement material discourse to exploit tribal's resources. But, like the old feudal lords, the neo-colonial capitalists too exploit tribal economically. They keep them at the periphery of the post-colonial Indian economy. The neo-colonial feudal capitalist, Tirathnath, believes firmly in the old exploitative system of bonded slavery and land displacement. He wishes that the tribal people have full faith in the old feudalism and bonded labour system.

In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Mahasweta Devi designates the political system of Munda tribe. In Munda tribe, Pahan, a priest, has a position of head man. He takes decision in the matter of religion and all other affairs related to Munda tribe. He is considered as the influential authority within Munda tribe, who makes decision in all affairs. He guides his community religiously as well as sociologically too. His decision is ultimate and no one can dare to challenge his verdict. The importance of Pahan within Munda tribe can be understood with Baijnath's statement, when he asserts that the Pahan, or priest, is the village community's chief, according to the adivasi social structure. They sit with the Pahan in order to work out any issues that arise. It's probable that the Pahan and the village headman are two distinct individuals. However, this is not the case here.

The novel briefly exposes that the tribal people of the Chotti village are deprived from their right to vote by the non-tribal like Romeo-Pehawan-Dildar, the political activist, at the gun point. The tribals were not given any basic rights. Their existence itself is questioned throughout. They feel like aliens in their own land and are forced to fight battles to claim their rights. In such a situation, gaining education is a dream for them and that is far from achieving. Becoming literate will lead to their emancipation in one way and also deconstructs the binary perception of civilized and uncivilized. This is something the powerful are not ready to let happen. Hence, a large population of the country remained illiterate for decades. Today, even though they have gained access to education,

there are other barriers present. The novel doesn't touch this part because even the basic rights of existence were denied. They have come a long way in this struggle and are yet to gain more.

Draupadi was published in Mahasweta Devi's collection of short stories, titled *Agnigarbha* (Womb of Fires, 1978). Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak was the translator and she included it in her collection of stories, titled 'Breast Stories' (2010). It is the story of a willful and strong woman Draupadi who dares to confront the oppressive system represented by the Senanayak and in the process is subjected to brutal rape and torture. Mahasweta Devi wrote *Draupadi* with the intention of representing the subaltern Indian Society. The economic, political, social and sexual oppression of the Dalit women in tribal areas is depicted in the novel. They suffer from triple marginalization in terms of caste, class and gender.

During her outrageous tribal uprisings against the government, the protagonist Draupadi gets captured. After her capture, she is beguiled for giving information about her companions. She is subjected to third degree in police custody because of her dedication. Since then, she has had suffering nights of brutal gang rape. After this excruciating and painful circumstance, Draupadi losing her honor doesn't remain silent. She proceeds daringly towards Senanayak and, she faces her exploiters naked and bleeding, thereby making the rapists shameful of how to face this unexpected situation. This cause distress among the readers and feel sorry for their cruelty. Dopdi is stripped, her hands and legs are tied to four posts, her mouth is gagged. It is described that after then, a billion moons pass by. a billion lunar years. Her vagina is bleeding, she notices. Her breasts have been chewed raw, and her nipples have been torn. Draupadi had passed out at four-five-six-seven. A coerced spread-eagled body that is still. Over it, active flesh pistons rise and fall, rise and fall.

Mahasweta Devi has not romanticized the character of Dopdi as a tribal woman. Dopdi has no similarities with Draupadi- written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power. Dopdi is at once are-inscription and a contradiction. There is nothing 'historically implausible' about Dopdi's attitudes. She loves her husband and keeps political faith as an act of faith toward him. She adores her forefathers because they protected their woman's honour.

Draupadi becomes a symbol of resistance. She represents millions of tribal women who are fighting against oppression and those who dare to challenge imperialism and patriarchy. The tribal woman is marginalized in more than one way as she lives in a constant fear of victimization. Mahasweta Devi portrays a realistic picture of the tribal woman which creates impact to the readers who are ignorant and for being unaware of the tribal identity and their rights. She does not romanticize her characters. They are real-life portraits. Mahasweta Devi is a south Asian writer and activist who has successfully portrayed the problems of ethnic groups in her fiction.

Gopinath Mohanty, is a renowned name in tribal literature and also belongs to Orissa. Though he wrote his fiction in pre-independent period. his works are quite distinct from other colonial writers. Like Mahasweta, Gopinath also voiced for the marginal tribals who had been a subject to exploitation and isolation in the hand of the mainstream society. His fictional works exposes to the economical exploitation, land displacement, social injustice. He documented "Oriya tribe" cultural, religious and sociological assumption, and attempted to provide a distinguish identity to the tribal community in Indian mainstream society. His literary works too, a kind of realistic report on tribal's cultural and religious belief and their economical exploitation.

Gopinath Mohanty's *The Ancestor* or *Dadi Buddha* (1944) is a soul. *The Ancestor* is based on Paraja tribal community and is set in Lulla Village in Oddisa state in India. Their culture, customs, rituals, tradition and taboos etc. are different from the 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. Under British colonialism in the 19th century, the religious practices, customs, and political system changed significantly. The Paraja tribal community were subjected to mass Christianisation. This identity crisis that arose among the community is terrible. Even after conversion they were considered as parajas. So, there was identity conflict within the community.

An important event in the Mohanty's novel *The Ancestor* is the hunt during the spring festival of Paraja tribes. This tribal society follow the western culture. Unmarried Paraja tribal boys and girls spend the night in their respective dormitories and enjoy with wine party and romantic songs to liberty of knowing one another more intimately. Boys and girls from Paraja danced. The seven Domb girls would cross past the line of Paraja girls and encircle the Paraja boys and dance at night, their hands around each other's waists, waving a piece of fabric, jumping and shouting. As they drank and danced, the night became darker. Variety of sarees, coloured blouses, parrot prints, star prints, and tiger prints, to name a few. The smell of scented oil in the hair would fill the air over there. And wine from barrel to barrel.

This novel deals with the issues of identity in Paraja tribal customs, and rituals, including family life marital frustration, sexual abuse, and domestic violence in marital lives which are regarded by the victims as degrading, humiliating, painful and unwanted throughout life. They were all human beings and they had to toil in the hope of a better tomorrow, although their tomorrow might turn out to be no better than their yesterday.

Gopinath Mohanty's *the Ancestor* highlights the incident of psychological and physical sufferings of Paraja tribal society. Their physical world represents their social and geographical identities. Their psychological structure is based on spiritual, the title of the text "The Ancestor" represents ancient myths and gods. They are not free from myth, God and ancient rituals in age of globalization. Tribe's identities are connected to ancient time to present time by their customs and traditional. They attempted to pay him in order to secure their future. They were all human beings who had to toil in the hopes of a better tomorrow, even if their tomorrows might be no better than their yesterdays. Dadi budha was a god, and his requests for rites and gifts had to be fulfilled as soon as possible.

Dadi Budha, embodied by the Date palm tree, is believed to be the representative of both the Ancestor's spirit and the natural spirit. Undoubtedly the innocent belief of the tribal people of village Lulla gives the status of supreme spirit and the presiding deity of the community to the palm tree. So, the palm tree along with the termite mound are not the mere natural agents rather they are the spiritual beings in the world of tribal faith.

Paraja (1997) is one of the wide elucidated works of Gopinath Mohanty. It reveals Oriya Paraja tribal's exploitation and physical torture under the colonial system of feudalism. The novel explores the story of Sukru Jani, an old Paraja tribe's man, who lives very peacefully in his village with his two sons Tikra and Mandia, and two daughters Jili and Bili. But his life along with his family bitterly

ruined under the effect of non-tribal's disturbance, who transformed him and his son into bonded slave.

The novel also reveals non-tribal feudal lords' seductive approach towards tribal's women. It exposes Ramachandra Bisoi, the local feudal lord, who persuades Jili, the daughter of Sukru Jani and made her his kept under the power of money. Another aspect that the novel explores is social injustice. Mohanty exhibits that all the judiciary agencies assist to the oppressive tendency of the Sahukar Ramchandra Bisoi, and it creates discrimination in social justice with the marginal subalterns. These available facts excite Sukru Jani and his sons to take charge against their exploitation and social injustice. They revolt violently against the feudal lord who completely destroyed to their life. Mohanty mentions how Sukru Jani urges in the court. Sukru Jani protested that he is not guilty. He hasn't done anything wrong. He said that he was innocent in the Book of Sections.

The novel has varied dimensions of inferences and deliberations the way the novel progresses centering the paraja people. The novel showcases aesthetic panorama of the Paraja tribe's songs and dances, foods and dresses, ornaments and decorations, marriage system and other varied details of socio- cultural aspects which they follow in their periphery of life and on the other hand their beliefs, gods and goddesses, rites and rituals, black magic, worshipping aspects of nature and animals, and knowledge of herbs and medicine. Their compliance with the nature is a balance between their life and works and the conservation of nature. Their materialist approach is clear with their objective reality as they have a strong affinity and love for their land, agricultural produce and other elements of nature.

A crystal living of life is their hallmark of earthly existence. They have their worries and moments of happiness, anger and hate, love and affection and these emotions are humanizing elements to live as a man in the world of give and take. But their darker side which portrays their deterioration of culture with the interference of non-tribals, the government policies and the officials as these non-tribal people have their vested interest in the huge natural resources available in the deep forest and in the mountains where these tribal people live.

With their vested interest, an exploitation of the tribe starts. This is clearly seen in Paraja how Sukru Jani symbolizes the entire paraja tribe men who today or tomorrow will have faced the same. Their exploitation is not merely limited to snatching their fertile lands but the exploitation on all counts including sexual exploitation of their girls and women. The moneylender, the forest guard, judiciary system and other government officials and road contractors have all their hands to exploit them, to harass them, and to finish them. Nobody empathizes for them. They are only interested with their benefits and selfish motive. The insiders' role has given chance to the outsiders to interfere with their life and to exploit them with the support of the insiders. He is forced to take loan and to be a bonded labour by his own men. More than that, they are corrupt and selfish. This results in the tragedy of Sukru Jani. This shows how the paraja people have lost their culture and tradition and they had to accept different ways for their livelihood. Leaving aside their legacy of culture, they became labourers at the construction site and are still leading a life of servitude.

2. Conclusion

The world in which tribal people live is self-sufficient in its own way. If scientific and practical knowledge is the only criterion to judge the world, then it is difficult to plunge into the tribal world, for their world is based on certain systems that science may not be able to explore (beyond the prudence of science). Their mythological history, religious culture, spiritual practices, eco-agricultural values, Knowledge of natural phenomena, of health and medicine inspire them to stay in the world with contentment and pride and being the essential part of the natural world. In other words, their eco-cultural practices are the modalities to preserve their nature and culture, in which the tribal life is implicated. They face marginalization and discrimination from the world outside in the name of civilization. They struggle for their basic rights and in this struggle, they lag behind in many other aspects of life. They are stuck with identity crisis and literacy concerns. They still face problems with gaining education and this is not a just a threat to them but to the entire human race. Only together we can build a better world. The works of Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Devi highlights all the issues faced by the tribals.

Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty both have concluded their selected works with a note of tribal revolt against the post-colonial legal system that make discrimination and assist the oppressors to oppress the tribals and other subalterns. Since literature is looked as a social document and a social monument, Mahasweta and Gopinath's selected works are documented in the sense that they reflect harsh social reality of the post-colonial Indian social practices – bonded slavery including bonded whore, merciless killing and exploitation. Mahasweta and Gopinath both have concluded their works with a note of promise because they have never been a preacher of fatalism, passivity, non-resistance to evil, suffering and so on.

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