

# RECIPROCITY BETWEEN MAINSTREAM AND TRIBALS AS DEPICTED IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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**ABSTRACT:** *Mutual attraction between the tribals and the mainstream India today has led to the intermingling of the two. If the so called civilized people of mainstream are drifted towards the tribal life for the realisation of fullness of life, the latter also migrate to the big cities in hope of ameliorating their poor physical conditions. In this process of reciprocity most of the times it is the innocent tribals who remain at loss in both the cases. Many Indian poets and novelists have celebrated the colourful mosaic of the tribal culture as well as their exploitation in the hands of the people from mainstream at the junctures of amalgamation. Some particular novels and poems have been referred here in support of the mentioned issue. A healthy reciprocity is possible, if the so called civilized ones develop a cooperative, non-exploitative, unprofitable and friendly attitude towards the tribals. They must be provided with the benefits of mainstream while remaining stuck to their culture without any deviation from the values that they have proudly been following since times immemorial.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Fullness of life, Exploitation, Migration, Uprooted, Agony, Healthy-reciprocity.*

## INTRODUCTION:

Tribal people in India are called “Adivasi” which is an umbrella term for a heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups considered the aboriginal population of India. Although the terms such as “Vanavasi” (forest dwellers) or ‘girijan’ (hill people) are also used for the tribes of India, the term ‘Adivasi’ carries the specific meaning of being the original and autochthonous inhabitants of a given region and was specifically coined for them. Although the tribes of India remain off the radar of Indian mainstream, they still form a rich part of cultural heritage in Indian history. Their way of life is unique which help them make a mark in mainstream India with their art, music, dance, handicrafts, sports or innovation. Various poets and novelists have found their culture romantic. The colorful mosaic of the tribal culture, their songs and dances, their exotic customs and rituals, their apparel and adornment have been the centre of attraction for the eminent writers of India. The ancient Indian literature deals with tribals with a considerable emphasis on the treatment meted out to them by the upper strata of society.

The Rigveda is the first ever literary text to depict a composite culture, a blend of Aryans and tribes called Adivasi or Adivasis’ people in Sanskrit literature. With their gradual advancement Aryans slowly assimilated cultural modes of adivasis’ superstructure. There are clear and distinct traces of intermingling of the Aryans and Adivasis. Adikavi Valmiki’s “The Ramayana” contains sporadic references to tribal life. In the epic we come across the classical examples of tribal characters. Guha, the Nishadraj, was the chieftain of the tribes who dwelt upon the banks of the Ganges. He was a man of great power and pelf and was the first man to come and welcome Rama. Along with his arm and elderly ministers he accorded a very warm welcome to the exiled prince of Ayodhya. After offering the cooked rice of excellent quality with many other sweet dishes Guha prostrated before Rama who lifted him immediately and embraced him. Not only this, he also erected a bed of grass and twigs on the ground for Rama, Sita and Lakshmana.

The episode of Sabari comes almost at the end of Aranyakand of the epic. This classical example reveals that in spite of being a tribal lady, Sabari, the “Tapaswini” reaches the land of lord after seeing Shri Rama. She was a female attendant of the ashram of Matanga, the head seer of the ashram. She cleaned and dusted and did such odd jobs in the ashram. Seeing her devotion and ascetic life Matanga blessed her before his departure to the heavenly abode. As was asked, she waited for the coming of Rama in the hermitage. On seeing the two princes, sabari welcomed them with folded hands. She felt inundated with extreme happiness at the sight of Rama before her eyes. Out of happiness she uttered that in spite of being a silly women of lower caste she has been blessed with the presence of Rama which even the great saints are not blessed with. To her utterance Rama replied that it is only through dedication and piety that one can reach him and for that there is no distinction of caste, creed or gender. Emboldened by Ram’s gesture, she clasps the feet of Shri Ram and the prudent Lakshmana and offered to her honored guests water to bathe their feet and mouth. After being seated on the mat made of grass, bestowing her hospitality, she offered them the sweetest of the berries, fruits, etc. Ram tasted them with full relish. Elsewhere, Rama has acknowledged that nothing on the earth was as sweet as the berries offered by Sabari. What might be in the mind of Adikavi Valmiki in the depiction of this character? Any system of classification or segregation based on colour, caste or creed is doomed to fail. It is not those virtues bestowed by caste or colour but the personal qualities that take one to the goal. Sabari was a sterling example of this sort. A woman of forest tribes, she faithfully served the Ashram of the old saint Matanga. This devotion elevated her above caste and creed, attained the peak of glory. She had not only attained the benefaction but had also been esteemed by the perfect soul. It can be surmised that in ancient India there existed reciprocal feelings of love, respect and brotherhood between the tribals and the mainstream.

When we turn to the Mahabharata, we come across the tribal characters who were the embodiment of heroism, joviality and devotion and played a very important role in the Mahabharata Battle. The heroic qualities of Abhiraj and Kirat which made them important figures and devotion of Ekalavya to his Guru have been beautifully portrayed in the epic. Although all these characters had been rendered with due respect but their intermingling with the mainstream seemed to have some reservations. Ekalavya has become immortal because of his devotion to his guru Dronacharya who refused to accept him as his disciple due to his birth in the tribal family. Ekalavya was a self-tutored and self-made archer, yet he held Dronacharya in high esteem and regarded him as his Guru while another person placed in his position would have nursed nothing but grudge and contempt towards Dronacharya. What if Ekalavya was a tribal—a man from so-called

low community, he possessed the noblest soul and the most magnanimous character which can be rarely found in men of so-called upper castes. Dronacharya demanded his disciple's right hand thumb as Guru-dakshina. The magnanimous Ekalavya was only too willing to fulfill the desire of his Guru as a true and loyal disciple. Without a murmur of protest he chopped off his right hand thumb without hesitating even for a second and offered it to his imaginary Guru. There cannot be an instance of a greater self-sacrifice on the part of a disciple than this. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Banabhatta has depicted tribal life in his Kadambari. The forest life of Sabars and Bhils has been beautifully depicted in this masterpiece of literature. Matangaka, a young hero of Sabars' army, was brave and strong and seemed as if he had been made of iron. Like Krishna, he had striking colour, like Ganesh he had quick mind, like Bhishma he was an enemy of shikhandi, like Vidyadhar, his speed was as quick as that of mind. There is no doubt that the Aryans attitude till the age of the *Ramayana* was one of tolerance and co-existence. However in the latter literature from the *Mahabharata* to the *Kadambri*, we notice lack of same kind of tolerance and co-existence. Nevertheless, from Sambara, a hero of Rigveda, to Eklavya and Matangaka, Adivasis have proved themselves brave, adventurous, courageous, stout, devoted, loyal, integral, honest, free, unintentional, innocent, skilled and well organized.

In the contemporary literature, we find numerous examples of intermingling of the tribals and the mainstream as rendered by many great novelists and poets. In both the cases, whether the mainstream people go to seek shelter with tribals or vice-versa, most of the times it is the tribals who suffer and remain at loss. In Arun Joshi's novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* The protagonist, Billy Biswas belongs to the upper crust of society. He is the only son of the Supreme Court Judge, well settled in Delhi. His father sends him to America to study engineering. But his deep interest in tribal life leads him to get registered in the University of New York for Ph.D. in Anthropology against his father's will. On being asked what drew him to Anthropology he replies:

"All I want to do in life is to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out about the aboriginals of the world" (p.12)

Evidently, his interest in tribal life is exceptional. He is also deeply interested in black magic and witch-craft for which the tribals have special liking. Another field of his interest is traveling to those places of India where the tribal societies exist. When the narrator asks him about his plan after completing his Ph.D., he replies:

"Teach, I believe but before that I would like to travel. Travel, travel, travel. A little bit here and there, but mostly in India. You have no idea what fascinating societies exist in India" (p.15)

These words of Billy force the narrator to think that it is around his interest in primitive man that his friend's entire life has been organized. Being the fast friend of Billy, the narrator, Romesh Sahai (Romi) takes it his privilege to know about the direction in which Billy wants to turn his life after completing his education. It is for this purpose that he puts a number of questions to Billy concerning his future. Billy's replies lead the narrator to conclude that the meaning of his friend's life lies in joining the tribal society in response to the call of the primitive force. As he puts it:

"If life's meaning lies not in the gloomy surfaces of our pretensions, but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun, then I do not know of any man who sought it more doggedly and having received a signal abandoned himself so recklessly to its call. In brief, I know of no other man who so desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end, no matter what pursued trials of glory or shattered hearts he left behind in his turbulent wake" (p.08)

Billy's interest in tribals intensifies with the passage of time. Instead of sparing time for his wife and son he devotes a larger part of his time to the library studying the books on Anthropology. Inner conflict is born in his mind as to whether he should eschew his wife, his small son and aged parents and join the tribal society or not. After pondering over this question for many days he ultimately decides to leave the civilized world and join the tribal world. Purposefully, he arranges a departmental tour to the Maikala hills near Jabalpur.

It is the primitive force within Billy that has been persuading him to join the tribal society since his childhood. It is under the spell of this primitive force that he enjoys spending one full night in the company of tribals in Bhuvneshwar at the age of fourteen. Now when Billy joins the tribal in the village near Maikala hills, he is received with great honour and a feeling of hospitality by Dhunia who is an influential tribal and commands a great respect in his village. Head of the tribal village, Dhunia is extremely happy at Billy's stay in the village. For him, Billy is a "mahaprasad" (the term used by the tribals for closest friend). He regards Billy as a priest, a god, a Messiah, etc. His following utterance illustrates his deep sense of respect for Billy:

"He is like rain on parched land, like balm on a wound. These hills have not seen the like of him since the last of our king passed away" (p.115)

According to Dhunia, Billy is not an ordinary human being. He is a professor-turned-tribals gifted with divine qualities and magical powers.

Like Billy, Dhunia is fully aware of the fact that the disclosure of Billy's whereabouts to anybody belonging to the civilized world may lead to undesired consequences. That is why he leaves no stone unturned to hide the news of Billy's whereabouts from the notice of police officers who visit the village in search of Billy. Giving credit to Dhunia for the obscurity of Billy from the civilized world the narrator observes:

"it goes to the credit of Dhunia and his village that although they visited several times by the police, no one even remotely hinted at having seen a creature like Billy" (p.106)

When Romy as collector by chance visited that village and met Billy, it is he who could not keep Billy's whereabouts a secret in spite of Billy's instructions. Chief secretary's warning puts the collector in dilemma as to whether he should perform his duty as per the directions of his boss at the sacrifice of his friendship or resign from the service so that he may fulfil the promise made to his friend. After pondering over the issue for sometime he decides to choose the latter option. This is how the materialistic men from the so called civilized world differ from the pure hearted tribals.

Like Billy Biswas, Helen, the heroine of Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dam*, turns to the tribal world when she fails to enjoy the fullness of life in grand bungalows. An English woman recently married to a self-styled British engineer, Howard Clinton, Helen comes from England to India along with her husband who has to complete the construction of a dam on a south Indian river in accordance with the contract made with the Government of India. Sometime after her coming to the tribal area of south Indian she develops predilection for tribals and cannot help expressing it even before her husband who is full of hatred for everything that is primitive. Helen had been seeking the fullness of life since her childhood, but to her frustration she could not find it in grand bungalows. Hence, she turns to the tribal huts, especially towards Bashiam, which holds promise of gifting her with fullness of life. One night when Bashiam comes back to his hut after working throughout the day, he is astonished to find Helen in the darkness of the hut. She had come here at such time to taste the coarse flavours of a burly tribesman like Bashiam, a tribal and Helen, an English woman, the narrator says:



“What do you want with me, he said and stood outside warily, because it was memsahib who wanted. Who would use him like a blackjack upon her white and exquisite body, suck him into her vortex to taste his coarse flavours and when it was done, the rare thing savoured, go leaving him to what? What about me, he whipped himself, what about me? While her nearness wafted warm currents about him, about his body”(p.135)

Helen's efforts to reach the climax of her closures to Bashiam bear fruit- the forbidden fruit which gives her the experience of the rare thing-the coarse flavours of a tribal. After intercourse, she feels a sense of satisfaction that she never got from her husband. But, what about Bashiam? Being a tribal, he cannot hope to be liked by an English memsahib so long as he survives.

Helen's statement “you are not something of a freak to me. We are alike, we are freaks only to the caste we come from, never to each other” (p.136) aims at assuring Bashiam that her relationship with him will continue till his survival. After getting the rare experience for which she had come to the hut of Bashiam in the darkness she feels a great mental peace arising from the physical satisfaction for which she had been craving since her marriage but could not find anywhere except in the hut of a tribal.

Helen's husband Clinton's callous attitude towards the tribal reaches climax when he shows no sign of concern at the untimely death of 30 labourer due to a thunderous blast at the site of construction of dam. Instead of sympathizing with the tribal community he gives vent to his anti-tribal attitude when he declares “the bodies can be incorporated into the structure”(p.163) Bashiam imperils his life by lifting the boulder so that the dead bodies of the poor tribal fellows can be disentangled from the machine. At one hand, his nobility is a sterling example of the sublime qualities that characterise the life of an Indian tribal, while at another Clinton's cruelty towards tribals tarnishes the image of the British engineers. Bashiam gets injured resulting from the collapse of the jib of the crane on him because of the injury being of serious nature and lack of the facility of immediate treatment his body gets disfigured leading to Helen's loss of attraction towards him. Helen's sympathetic attitude drives her to pay last visit to the Bashiam's hut. The purpose of this is altogether different from that which she made previous visits. After the project of the dam construction on the river is over she leaves India with the best impression about the Indian tribal life imprinted in her heart indelibly.

In Gita Mehta's novel *A River Sutra* the protagonist Nitin Bose is saved from being spoiled with the help of tribal. They selflessly devote their time and energy to the performance of rituals as a result of which Nitin is cured of madness caused by Rima. Nitin represents the social mainstream from which the tribals are cut off from time immemorial. His redemption from the possession of Rima's spirit with the cooperation of tribals reflect the role of marginalized chunk of society in finding out the way to redemption from the ills of life. Many of the problems facing the upper strata of society can be solved by following the way the tribals lead their lives in remote rural areas still cut off from the prevailing trends of modern civilized society. On being approached the tribals selflessly help in finding out the way to redemption from the maladies that have no remedies except through the rituals and sacraments that are part of the tribal culture.

People of the civilized world approach the tribal world for fulfilling their personal needs. Nitin approaches the tribals of Vano village for curing himself of madness. Billy Biswas, the hero of Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* leaves his service, social status and well settled family and join the tribal society for realizing the meaning of life. Helen, the heroine of Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dam* goes to the huts of tribals for the fullness of life that she could not enjoy in the grand bungalows. The tribal world invariably benefits those who approach it with an open mind. Billy's disgust with his life is removed when he comes in contact with the tribals living near the Maikala hills. Helen enjoys the fullness of life as a result of her unusual closeness to Bashiam, a tribal by birth and technician by profession. Nitin's redemption from the possession of Rima's spirit result from his adherence to the advice of tribals.

On the other hand when the tribals try to come out of their traditional boundaries so as to search for the opportunities to ameliorate their poor conditions, their efforts does not bear the desired fruit. Kiran Desai has given a limited space to the issue of tribal marginalization in her Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). The seventeenth chapter of the novel presents the pathos of the tribals of Stone Town (Zanzibar). A young boy of this town, Saeed, is a worker at the Queen of Tarts Bakery in America. One day he is landed into an unexpected trouble by the presence of some poor boys at the gate of the bakery. These poor are none else but the very tribals of his native town who having no source of livelihood in their native country, visit America for finding employment there. These boys, with Saeed's address and phone number that they got from his mother, reach the Queen of Tarts Bakery in the hope that Saeed will help them in finding job. But to their utmost dismay, Saeed, now a part of mainstream, instead of living up to their expectation nurtures contempt for them as soon as he sees them. Revealing his hatred for them he says:

“More tribes, more tribes, I wake up, go to the window and there-MORE TRIBES. Every time I look ANOTHER TRIBE. Everybody saying. Oh no visas anymore, they are getting very strict, it so hard, and in the meantime everybody who apply, EVERY BODY is getting a visa. Why they do this to me? That American Embassy in Dar-Why??!!Nobody would give that Dooli a visa. Nobody, One look and you would say OK, something wrong here-but they give it to hm.”

Saeed's antipathy to the tribals of his native town is representative of the unjust treatment that is meted out to them wherever they go.

Chandra Mohan, a poet of 21<sup>st</sup> century writes about the agony of the tribal people who try to mingle in the mainstream. The pain of migration result in loss of identity which Chandra Mohan beautifully explain in his poem, ‘Black Migratory’

*Birds Migratory birds  
most of them have dark feathers  
sing mostly Bhojpuri, Bengali, Odiya  
fly towards floating clouds  
lives lost in transit’. (online)*

How the so called civilized society exploit the tribals is narrated in another poem by Chandra Mohan ‘Rape of a tribal girl’. The whole country shouted loud for Nirbhaya and the ‘establishment’ responded with a ‘Nirbhaya Act’ but news of rape and murder of tribal girls do not prick our conscience. There is no protest; no dharanas for the safety and security of the Adivasi girls. They are victim of highhandedness of our security agencies. This poem exposes the duplicity of our sensitivities and the farce that our ‘intellectuals’ and ‘media’ play. He says:

*'No newspaper carried a headline or a photo feature,  
 No youth were roused to protests,  
 No city's life came to a standstill,  
 No furore in the parliament,  
 No nation's conscience was haunted,  
 No Prime Minister addressed the nation,  
 No TV channel discussions,  
 No police officials were transferred or suspended,  
 No candlelight marches,  
 No billion women rising,  
 A tribal girl was raped and murdered!'* (online)

In another poem, 'O, city!' he expresses the pain of tribals being uprooted and homeless. He avers;

**Leaving behind their homes,  
 Their soil, and bales of straw  
 Fleeing the roof over their heads, they often ask:  
 O, city!  
 Are you ever wrenched by the very roots  
 In the name of so-called progress?** (online)

**CONCLUSION:** In the process of reciprocity the mainstream and the tribals, most of the times it is tribals who suffer. Hence they have started nourishing a feeling of antipathy for the so called civilized society. We must develop a cooperative and friendly attitude towards the tribals for a healthy reciprocity between the mainstream and the tribals. In this regard the following statement of Dr. Radhakrishnan is worth attention:

"We must approach the tribal people with affection and friendship and not with contempt. We should not deprive them of their songs and dances, their feasts and festivals. We should give up the big-brother complex".

Of a great relevance here is the following statement of Mahatma Gandhi:

"We must approach the poor with the mind of the poor and so too, we must approach the tribesmen".

However, tribals may be brought to the mainstream of society by making them aware of the fact they can lead a better life if they progress educationally and financially by deriving maximum benefit from the government schemes launched exclusively for their welfare while remaining stuck to their culture without any deviation from the values that they have proudly been following since time immemorial. Encouraging the study of literature that deals with them may also go a long way in awakening them to the golden opportunities of advancement that may bring them at par with the people belonging to the upper strata of society.

We must keep in mind what Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru once wrote:

"There is no point in trying to make them a second rate copy of ourselves... they are people who sing and dance and try to enjoy life, not people who sit in the stock exchanges, shout at each other, and think themselves civilized."

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