

A SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDY OF TRIBAL LIFE IN GOPINATH MOHANTY'S PARAJA

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ABSTRACT

Odisha has the largest collection of tribal groups in a single state in the country with 62 distinct tribal groups spread over the eastern ghat hill ranges in Koraput, Kalahandi, Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh and Keonjhar districts. Each tribal group has its own indigenous customs and tradition which they keep up even today. And in spite of all the developmental programmes and projects undertaken by the govt., the tribes still lead a life of antiquity in the remote areas of the state where they are oppressed and exploited by the so-called civilized people.

This paper attempts to examine the socio-cultural heritage of Paraja tribes along with their trials and tribulations and struggle for survival as delineated in Gopinath Mohanty's Odia novel *Paraja* which has been translated into English by Bikram K. Das. In this novel, the Parajas are representatives of the entire tribal population, of the down-trodden and oppressed milieu. The novel draws the attention of the civilized society to the millions of tortured indigenous people all over the world.

Key words: -Paraja, oppressed, exploitation, tribal culture, bonded labour, bride price, tribal life.

Gopinath Mohanty is acknowledged as one of the most significant Odia fiction writers of the 20th century. He was the first Odia to receive the prestigious Jnanpith award in 1974. Besides this, he was awarded the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1955 and the Padmabhusan in 1981. He has to his credit twenty four novels, ten volumes of short stories, three plays and various other literary outputs. He was an officer of the Odisha Administrative Service and he retired as Officer on Special Duty, Tribal Development Project. So he had the opportunity of working in the undivided Koraput district where he had the first hand experience of tribal life and culture, which he transformed into rich fictional narratives. Mohanty has written as many as five novels on different tribes. Most popular among his novels are Danapani, Dadibudha, Amrutara Santana, Paraja, Mati Matala and Apahancha. In fact he spent his entire life trying to understand the way of life of the tribals of mountains and forests and he attempts to tell the stories of their suffering caused by the defective social systems and machination of the civilized society.

The novel Paraja deals with the life of the Parajas, one of the well-known tribes of Odisha. Their main concentration is in the undivided districts of Koraput and Kalahandi. The population of Paraja tribe in the state according to 2011 census was 3,74,628. The tribe has a healthy sex ratio of 1000 males to 1080 females. The overall literacy percentage of the tribe is 34.92% out of which 44.44% are male and 24.44 are female.

The name '*Paraja*' is derived from the Sanskrit word '*Praja*' which literally means the common people who are the subjects of a King or Raja. In Odia, it also means tenant or peasant or Royat. The Parajas live peacefully with other communities like Rana, Mali, Paika, Gadaba and Kondh. Having a lean and muscular body, they are in general very strong and hard-working. They are very innocent and gullible, friendly and hospitable, but like to remain aloof from the civilized society as they are very shy in nature.

Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* ranks among the classics of modern Indian fiction. Though it was originally written in 1945 and translated into English in 1987, the socio-cultural and philosophical concerns of the novel are still valid as there hasn't been any significant change in the way of life of the tribes, their beliefs and values, rites and rituals, customs and tradition. Moreover, the theme of exploitation becomes universal and the plot crosses the boundaries of nations and states to propagate the 'still, sad, music of humanity'.

The setting of *Paraja* is a small village called Sarsupadar of Koraput district inhabited by the Paraja and Domb tribes. It is a sad tale of the aboriginal tribe, their exploitation by the petty government officials and greedy money lenders (*Sahukars*) in the pre-independent period. SukruJani, the protagonist of the novel and his family in fact represent all the tribes to whom all the forests and hills once belonged. SukruJani is a patriarch of the Parajas. He is a widower with two sons – Mandia and Tikra and two daughters – Jili and Bili. Facing all hardships, he was leading a simple and blissful life with lots of joyful future dreams when he would be playing with his grand-children and great grand-children, as he had deep faith in *DadiBudha*, the spirit of their first ancestor, *Dharamu* (the Almighty) and *Dharatini* (Mother Earth). But life is not a bed of roses for this simple man. Very soon a train of misfortune befalls his family. The forest guard takes revenge on Sukru and his family when Jili refuses to satisfy his carnal desires. He makes false charges against him for illegal felling of trees and levies a heavy fine on him. If Sukru fails to pay the fine, he will be imprisoned. And in those days, one who is imprisoned even for a single day, is ostracized by the community for ever. Hence in order to escape imprisonment, Sukru is compelled to take a loan from the local money lender and doing so, he becomes a *goti* (bonded labour) of the latter. Gradually, the money-lender usurps his land and both his sons work as *gotis* for him. Bagala, Jili's suitor runs away with Kajadi when he sees her reduced to poverty. Kajadi is the woman whom Mandia, Sukru's son wanted to marry but could not as he was unable to pay the bride price. Being unable to live in utter poverty, Jili becomes the mistress of the money-lender. Sukru cannot tolerate this humiliation and in utter fury, he drives her out of his house. Jili goes to the *Sahukar's* house for good, to lead a life of luxury.

The harassment in Sukru's life never ends. His and his sons' patience give way when they are duped in the court. Sheer helplessness and frustration drive them in utter fury to murder the *Sahukar* – the source of all troubles. In the eyes of law, he may be a criminal, but from humanitarian point of view, he cannot be declared guilty as he had no other way to put an end to the vicious circle of corruption and exploitation. According to Mahasweta Devi, violence is justified when tribals are oppressed. 'When the system fails in justice, violence is justified.... The individual cannot go on suffering in silence.' (Mahasweta Devi: 2001: xii) After having murdered the *Sahukar*, Sukru and his sons go to the police station to surrender. Thus ends the tragic story of an honest man who is crushed under the machination of a hostile environment.

In his review of *Paraja*, Sitakant Mahapatra describes the work as –

A novel where an individual tragedy becomes a telling symbol for man unrelenting heroic battle against a hostile universe. It is indeed a classic of modern Indian fiction. (Indian book Chronicle, Vol. 12)

Paraja is obviously a pessimistic, Hardian view of tribal life. Even so, it is replete with charming depiction of the life style, customs and traditions of the Paraja tribes. The parajas lead a colourful life with their song and dance, marriage and god-worship. They have their unique rich tradition which needs to be preserved. Mohanty lets us have a vivid glance at their culture:

Dress & Ornaments:

- Men of these tribe usually wear loincloth and napkins and women wear cheap and coarse saree.

- The women put on bangles, armlets, bracelets, necklaces, rings, hairpins etc. usually made of silver, aluminium and brass.
- A number of brass ear rings dangle from each ear and the nose.
- The practice of tattooing is prevalent among Paraja women.

Life Style:

- Parajas are not nomadic in nature but often they shift from one place to another to get relief from the natural calamities, attack of wild animals, and other disasters which affect their well being.

Housing System:

- Some villages houses are scattered here and there while in some other villages the individual houses run in in two parallel rows facing each other on a common street.
- In the open spaces between houses, sheds are built to accommodate domestic animals like cattle, sheep, pigs and fowls. The Parajas are fond of using white or red-coloured soil mixed with cow dung or ashes for colouring the house.
- The dormitory system is prevailing in the Paraja society and the boys and girls spend nights in their respective dormitories to know each other more and develop intimacy.
- The dormitory for young men is called *dhangdabasa* and the same for the young women is called *dhangdibasa*.

Song & Dance:

- Whenever they like they meet at the communal dancing ground at the centre of village and rejoice themselves by dancing together or simply hold song competition. Songs are mostly of question-answer type. Through romantic love songs boys and girls communicate their ideas and feelings. Sometimes the whole night is spent on dancing.

Musical Instruments:

- In the novel *Paraja*, Jili and her friend Kajodi are courted by BagalaParaja and Mandia through songs to the accompaniment of a single-stringed instrument called *dungudunga*. The string is twanged and the gourd-shell base of the instrument is beaten with fingers covered with rings to produce a harmonious music. To the accompaniment of *dungudunga*, BagalaParaja courted Jili by singing an ancient song.
- Other instruments the use are *dhola*, *tamaka* and *mahuri*.

System of Marriage:

- The youths have freedom to choose their life-partner.
- Marriage is settled either by negotiation, or by purchase, or by capture or by elopement.
- In case of arranged marriage, the bride-groom has to pay a huge sum of money and/or livestock to the bride's father as bride price. Thus an unmarried daughter is not a burden, but a source of future income for a father.
- A young man, unable to pay the 'bride-price' has to become a *goti* (bonded labourer) of his future father-in-law for a particular period of time. After he has paid through his work, he is permitted to marry the girl. (It may be noted here that with the advent of modernization, the evil dowry system has crept into their culture.)

Drinks & Beverages:

- The Parajas are addicted to alcoholic drinks and beverages. Use of liquor is a customary practice in all the religious rituals.

Religious Rites & Rituals:

- They worship a number of gods and deities and ancestors. They believe that the deities are dispenser of life and death, joys and woes.
- The Parajas worship gods and goddesses for their well being. **Dharmu** is the chief god and the others are **Basumati**, the earth goddess, **Jhakar**, the god for all seasons and **BaghDebta**, the tiger god.
- Dead ancestors receive routine worship and sacrifices at festive occasions. **DadiBudha**, is believed to be the soul of their first ancestor, keeping a graceful watch over their life.
- They observe many seasonal festivals with pomp and show around the year in order to propitiate their deities and ancestors as well as for their own enjoyment. Animals and fowls are also sacrificed on such occasions.

Festivals:

- During the harvest festival celebrated in December, Earth goddess is propitiated with the blood of a black rooster.
- For the Spring festival, the god of Spring has to be invoked with the sacrifice of a chicken when the barking deer called. Just about at that time a pigeon would be sacrificed on the appearance of two stars on Elephant Hill. The 'shrine' of the god of spring is an ancient and enormous mango tree in the jungle (148), where the villagers worshipped with song and dance to the beating of drums.
- In the month of Asvina ,Durga Puja is celebrated with much pomp and show, which includes wild dances of the **kalisis** possessed by the deity along with deafening beating of drums, animal sacrifice and flag processions displaying tribal weapons like swords, axes, spears, bows and arrows.

Hunting during Spring Festival:

- All the able-bodied men of the village proceed on a hunting expedition which continues for two or three days.
- 'The men would go out into the jungle, prepared to face the taunts of their woman if they returned empty-handed. Success is greeted with garlands and dancing and rejoicing' (159).
- The hunting expedition is metaphoric too as Mandia and Bagala set out not just to hunt an animal but also their mate.

Commemoration of the Dead:

- The Parajas commemorate their dead by planting a stone vertically for a man and laying flat for a woman, in the open space in the centre of the village. It is here that the bonfire is lit and the young men and women dance during the spring festival. 'The dead and the living came together to worship the joy of spring' (149).

The conflicts that arise in the novel are out of both external and internal factors. The external causes include faulty government laws, defective social system, corruption and exploitation of tribes by non-tribal people, lack of resources and facilities and so on. Among the internal causes, the most significant is illiteracy that gives rise to ignorance which makes them weak and timid before the judicial and bureaucratic system; the others are their lack of unity, selfishness, jealousy and superstition. The villagers do not stand by SukruJani and his family at the time of need. They are friends only in prosperity. Further ostracizing a prisoner even if he is innocent invites troubles on themselves.

GopinathMohantyhints at the mercenary interest of the non-tribals which spoils the relation of the Parajas with their land. Chapter 32 of the novel highlights the horrific practice of **goti system** or bonded labour. They lead a very wretched life and are brutally treated by the sahumars like slaves. Being illiterate, they are cheated by the

money-lenders who charge heavy interest for the money they have borrowed. What they earn is insufficient to fulfil their basic needs. Thus they cannot even pay off the interest amount, let alone the capital; and hence they remain *gotis* for life. It may be argued here that though the system of bonded labour is abolished now, the standard of their life has not improved as expected. According to Kundan Kumar, 87% of Scheduled Tribes in South Orissa live below poverty line. (*Co-Acting*: Vol. I, 1; 2006; p. 3)

Thus the novel presents the hard-core realities of the life of the Paraja tribes, their struggle for survival and an undying hope. The author's mission is to create social awareness against the exploitation of the tribes and not to offer any solution. The novel is not merely a sociological and anthropological document, but a revolutionary cry of the sons of soil waging a heroic but futile war against a hostile world. It raises a question, "what right do we, the so-called civilized people have to trespass the land of the aboriginals, to which they belong for generations? What right do we have to alter and destabilise their way of life and shake their faith in the name of education or welfare programmes? If not, should we let them go on living the primitive way of life indefinitely? The answer, of course, is not a simple one.

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