

# Depiction of Tribal Life in Gopinath Mohanty's the Ancestor (Dadi Budha)

Dr. Ajit Kumar Mohapatra

Head of the Department of English, R.D.S Degree Mahavidyalaya, Kundabai, Udala, Mayurbhanj, Odisha, India

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**Abstract**— *The dissertation paper attempts to analyse the representations of tribal life presented in Gopinath Mohanty's novel THE ANCESTOR. It is originally written in Odia by Gopinath Mohanty, and later translated by Arun Kumar Mohanty into English. It is a novel about the lives, customs, belief and rituals of the tribal communities and about the outer intervention that causes disintegration of tribal society disrupting and affecting tribal harmony in adverse ways. Tribes are rich in their culture, custom and folk tradition. Tribal society lives in isolated areas and their social life style is different from the main stream society. Its culture, customs, rituals and traditions are in heritage from the earlier generations and moves to the next generation. The life of tribals changed significantly under British colonialism. This effect is also found in the Paraja tribe. Overall the study explores the blissful moments, the plight and the outer intervention of Paraja life.*

*Gopinath Mohanty, the first Oriya recipient of prestigious Jnanpith award is considered one of the most significant novelists of twentieth century. The pictures of the primitive world that his novels depict are purely honest Tribals, who could not be the part of main stream society and dwell in remote areas of forests and hills, sparkled as the prominent subject to his major novels. Working as a member of state civil service in Koraput district with a predominantly tribal population, Gopinath Mohanty had the juncture to be familiar with life style, culture, customs, ritual, festivals and songs and dances of these tribal people, as well as he interacted with the miserable conditions, poverty and pathetic scene of these blissful innocence tribals.*

**Keywords**— *Tribal, Culture, Significant, Society, Poverty, ancestor, Spirit, dirty, custom, adored, Lulla, Land, Community, Christinity, Colonial, Modernity.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Mohanty's literary and non literary works are elaborate portrayal of the past history and pristine culture identities of the Paraja tribal society, before the point of contact with western power. The Paraja tribal colony presented in novels is a self sustained community which has still retained their myths, customs, belief, religion, proverbs, tradition, tales and taboos with maximum sense of duty. But all these undergo drastic changes with the intervention of the white man Gopinath's novels map the various contours of the tribal life in its struggle against the systematic encroachment of their cultural space. (Chopra, p. 76)

The Ancestor (Dadi Budha) is Mohanty's first prominent novel published in 1944. It is based on tribal

life. Dadi' in Paraja language means 'grandfather!' and Budha' also means 'grandfather' in Kondh language. For the tribal people of the Koraput region, Dadi Budha is their eternal ancestor in the form of immediate God. Dadi Budha, the date palm tree, is a representative of both the ancestor's spirit and the natural spirit. The tribal people of Lulla village accord the status of supreme spirit and presiding deity to the palm tree. Their innocent belief makes the palm tree along with the termite mound the spiritual entity of their tribal faith. They have the belief that nature, mankind, the spiritual and ancestral worlds are interrelated. The through rituals and celebrations appease Dadi Budha as it brings forth stability and order, good health and harvest, and in case of failure of all these there is a discord at a large scale. Dadi Budha is benign deity, the eternal ancestor, a God who is calm and steadfast, a

mightiest spirit, the cause and creator of all phenomena and responsible for the prosperity and misery of everyone. Everything happens before his watchful eyes. The day passed and night came, but he remains silent to the witness of the joy and sorrows of these innocent tribals.

## II. STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Dadi Budha was a benign deity. He never expressed his anger until he was provoked. He was the eternal ancestor. Everything was his creation, his play. Anyone can speak on his behalf, for he was mute. All kinds of vegetables grew in abundance. Dadi Budha watched them all; he saw his children and grand children gathering in the harvest from the rocky fields. Then Dadi Budha took a short nap. The crows plucked the ears of maize one by one. The cattle strayed into the fields.

All this was his play (Mohanty, p. 8)

The Parajas of Lulla village not only worship the date palm tree as embodiment of ancestral spirit but also believe in natural objects-animals, birds, the river Muran, and the hill-as embodiments of divine spirit. They never forget the gift

of their mother earth and the importance of nature in their lives. They associate themselves not only with the biological mothers, fathers, but also with the ancestors that are the rivers, mountains, trees, and the changing season also. They believe that crops used as food for the tribals are the sacred gift of nature and they worship Mother Nature as a deity who brings nature's bounty to human world.

The village has at its centre the dormitories', the dhangda hall and the dhangdi hall for the young men and women respectively where they keep awake all night and pour their love through various songs accompanied by the sound of dungadunga. It is an institution which gives an opportunity to young tribals to know the essence of their tribal customs. It is indeed a democratic institution for promoting and carrying culture of the tribals. The marriage custom is praiseworthy as it takes into account a girl's wish and her acquiescence for her marriage. The headman on the occasion of his son's engagement with Saria Daan asks for her consent. "We are Paraja people, our minds are nobody's slaves. If you wish, you can give your consent and if not, you can refuse now, and I'll immediately return all his gifts. Be frank. onanty, p. 44). Marriage is not simply an arrangement between two individuals but it has community sanction and a moment of celebration for the whole village. Along with the customary bride price jhula) marriage, there exists another form of marriage preferably suitable for poorest of the poor, it is called udulio. According to this custom, the boy after getting girl's

consent kidnaps her and brings his would be bride to his house and gives a small feast to a few. There is no elaborate ceremony, no music, no drum, and no canopy, nothing of the sort. The girl's father searches for his daughter and finally by accepting a minimal Jhula in front of panchayat, marriage is solemnized. The tribal women are treated equally as men. They have their own will and no one dominates over them.

In the tribal culture, women are adored. They share equal rights in every matter with their male members. In the choosing of bridegroom or in the event of divorce, the tribal panchayat gives due weightage to the opinion of women. In their marriage, a bride price is given to the parents of the bride by parents of bridegroom. Thus, there is no question of dowry torture and bride burning in their cultures, which

are the evils of the modern society. (Panigrahi, p. 33)

In Paraja culture, festivals and seasons go hand in hand with celebrations as the essential part of the tribal festivals or rituals and are perhaps the metaphorical extension or enactment of the festivals in nature. Rituals with rigorous penance are meant to eliminate evil spirits and to overcome hard times whereas the festivals are meant to celebrate joy of good times. Most of the festivals are pertaining to various agricultural, ecological, conventional and spiritual practices. The ritualistic celebration includes worship and sacrifice before the deity, followed by dancing, drinking of home brewed wine, feasting etc. It indicates triumph or restoration of new energy as well as the supplication of the spiritual force to restore source of positive energies to the world. These are also the acts of propitiation to appease the divine beings as well as the evil spirits for happy and prosperous life and good fortune. They enliven their past heritage and culture despite their poverty and bad times.

The tribals, despite their poverty and struggle for survival, have tried to retain their rich and varied heritage of colourful dance and music! forming integral part of their day to day life. It is through the songs and dances the tribals seek to satisfy their inner urge for revealing their soul. Their songs are rare beauty and deep simplicity. They sing and dance during their work and in the evening after a day's hard work. (Panigrahi, p. 33)

The Parajas divide time in two categories - good or auspicious time and bad time; good times are those when the stars and planets are in right places bad times are when the planets are not in harmony with the universal system. "By the help of dishari, the Parajas determine the auspicious time for their rituals like the beginning of cultivation, harvest, festivals etc. They also predict the

approach of various seasons and weather, machination of evil spirits by studying the planets that helps them in getting good harvest (Mohanty, p. 3)." They are of the belief that prosperity depends on proper astrological calculation and meticulous study of nature's calendar; miscalculation leads to chaos, scarcity, disease, death etc,

The people of Lulla have the only desire and drive to enrich the land and the community. Land is an important instrument of ownership and it is a symbol of social status and is essential for their spiritual development. Losing their land means a loss of contact with the earth and a loss of identity. Land is not only an asset of economic and financial value but also an indispensable part of their belief systems. The fascinating and fertile land inspires the tribal people to engage themselves in toils, to enrich the productivity of the land, from which they may derive good health and happiness. They lead a life of self sufficiency with harvesting rice, alsi, swan, ragi and castor and collecting valuable products from jungle. Tribal world offers a contrast to the modern world because the warm sun, the delicate moon, sweet breeze, the green paddy fields, the hills and rivers, surrounded by trees give them the required joy. Instead of being busy in satisfying unlimited desires and hoarding for future luxury as is done by the so called modern man, they live in the present and a stomach full of rice and ragi gruel, home brewed wine is sufficient for immense joy and celebration.

The impact of modernity and glamour of city life is clearly discernible among the tribals especially in Domb tribals manifested in the character of Santosh Kumari whose visit to the town of Koraput has initiated an unquenchable thirst for rest houses in dark rainy nights, varieties of sarees, comed blouses --- parat prints, star prints, tiger prints. Her mind is lost in wide roads, vehicles, and trucks loaded with tribal boys and girls bursting with laughter. For her, the forests are like a desert, only a drowsy forest, with just rocks and trees and fields where people never come out of their houses being content with rice, sweet potatoes and spinach. It is this influence of modernity which makes her subvert the customary norms of their community and marry Thenga, a Paraja and finally run from traditional life. Mohanty hints that misfortune falls on the tribal village because Thenga Jani fled with Santosh Kumari, the Christian Domb girl, breaking social norms (it is like the inter-caste marriage of our society). That indicates the unbroken continuity of tribal life. It can be said that it is the story of disintegration of a tribal community under the influence of modern civilization. After Thenga and Kumari fled away from the Lulla village, the village witnessed the degradation of the Paraja

people. The dishari dies and after him ten or twelve others died of chest pain. In another year the cattle were covered with blisters. Several of them died of diarrhoea. The chicken died of some unknown disease. They drooped and collapsed. Within a month twenty persons fell prey to the man eater, the tiger. The village decayed. The Paraja people left the village with the message of Gurumai and the village became a desert "Lulla village became deserted. Wreaths of smoke would no longer rise from the thatches, garbage would no longer pile up: children would not make these houses untidy, herds of cows or

groups of men would not be seen coming down the hill to this village. There would be no dancing on moonlit nights (Mohanty, p. 74)." Mohanty points out that the entry of the outsiders into the tribal world signals disintegration. It is easy for the outsiders to motivate tribal people. Any moment can spread like fire in the tribal region. This is how Mohanty recorded the influence of Christianity among tribals and visualized the scientific perception among the Domb tribes against notion and hallucination under the influence of modernization. That is clearly shown in the conversation between Ram Muduli, the village head man and Eleo Sunna, the old man from Christian settlement at the beginning of the novel Ram Muduli said supporting with dumas (spirits of dead persons) existence.

Ram said: "If it's not dumas, who is it then? It's only they who make the night, the stars, mountains, valleys and all. They alone cause the fire and the rain. This is not what only we believe today; it has been the belief of our forefathers. These mysteries are beyond you Dombs. Bring your sahib here and show him the fire and ask him what it is. How can dumas not exist? So many people die. What do they become?" "Our faith recognises no such thing," said Eleo. Ram said: "is your religion older than me? I am as old as this hill. I died and my grandfather was born. My grandfather's brother died - I am his dumo. I'll die - my duma will have a rebirth. (Mohanty, p. 3)

Here, Mohanty emphasizes the superstitious notion of the tribal community. It

indicates that once the tribal people believe in someone or something, believe in, forever. They cannot be separated from their traditional principle and faith. For them, breaking the traditional disciplines constructed by their ancestors is to make the deity annoy, that causes different causes.

### III. CONCLUSION

Gopinath Mohanty canvasses the living history of tribal community and the way of its disintegration in the civilizing mission of colonial modernity in Orissa. The tribal life is deeply rooted in indigenous eco-ethics, traditions and beliefs which exist in antipathy to modernity. This impact of modernity has influenced their culture to some extent but the key tenets of their tradition remain unaffected. Despite an attack on the native indigenous system as unscientific and regressive by disparagement and devaluation, they preserve their mythological history, religious culture, spiritual practices and eco- agricultural values. This belief system renders them contentment, joy and strength and reinforce unity of life at one level and constitute their cultural identity on the other.

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