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Narrating Loss, Ecology, and Resistance: Refiguring Indigenous Voices in Odia Tribal Short Stories

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Abstract— *This article undertakes a critical exploration of selected Odia tribal short stories—Abani Kumar Baral's "The Bamboo Queen," Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi's "Jungli," Durga Madhab Mishra's "Buda Kirisani," Pranabandhu Kar's "The Vanquished" and "Two Friends," Rajat Mohapatra's "The Daughter of Niyamagiri," Bhubaneswar Behera's "The Flying Fringe," and Gayatri Saraf's "The Burning Mountain." These stories, while situated within the socio-geographical milieu of Odisha's tribal heartlands, transcend the realm of ethnographic reportage to emerge as aesthetic articulations of indigenous epistemologies, affective registers, and resistant subjectivities. This article interrogates the inadequacies of conventional historiographic and sociological discourses that often instrumentalize tribal existence as a static and legible category within the developmentalist grammar of the nation-state. In contrast, it posits literature—particularly fiction—as a counter-discursive site which articulates the ontological realities, emotional topographies, and political anxieties of tribal lifeworlds.*

Keywords— ***Indigeneity, Odia literature, Odia tribal short stories, Translation, Tribal stories.***

I. INTRODUCTION

The translated tribal stories from Odisha analysed in this article span divergent authorial voices and temporal contexts, thereby constituting a heteroglossic archive of tribal imaginaries in Odia literature. The stories selected for discussion foreground figures traditionally consigned to the peripheries of mainstream cultural representation—tribal individuals, nomadic communities, women, children, and the socio-economically disenfranchised—voices from the margin. In so doing, it not only recuperates excluded voices but also destabilizes the literary canon's entrenched hierarchies of representation. Stories such as Abani Kumar Baral's "The Bamboo Queen," Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi's "Jungli," Durga Madhab Mishra's "Buda Kirisani," Pranabandhu Kar's "The Vanquished" and "Two Friends," Rajat Mohapatra's "The Daughter of Niyamagiri," Bhubaneswar Behera's "The Flying Fringe," and Gayatri Saraf's "The Burning Mountain" delineate the entanglements of tribal communities with histories of colonial extraction, capitalist incursion, ecological dispossession, and the symbolic violence of developmentalist ideology. These texts eschew homogenizing tropes of the tribal as either idyllic primitive or pathologized deviant, opting instead for nuanced portrayals rooted in cultural specificity and narrative intimacy. It thereby invites a shift in perspective in how tribal stories are read and theorized—no longer as an object of anthropological curiosity, but as a legitimate site of literary production and critical inquiry.

II. SUBALTERN SENSIBILITIES AND GENDERED EMBODIMENTS

The story, Baral's "The Bamboo Queen" ("Baunsa Rani" in the Odia original), exemplifies the convergence of aesthetic form and subaltern thematics. The narrative renders visible the precarity of itinerant acrobat communities, with particular emphasis on the corporeal labour and spatial dispossession experienced by women performers. The protagonists, often suspended mid-air on bamboo poles,

inhabit a liminal position—literally and metaphorically—between rootedness and flux, visibility and erasure, embodiment and objectification. The spectral homelessness that pervades the narrative gestures toward a deeper ontological instability experienced by nomadic women, whose performative labour is simultaneously fetishized and excluded within the hegemonic spatial order of the sedentary society. The editorial insights of Samrat Sengupta, Editor-in-Chief of *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, in which an earlier version of my translation of the story appeared (July 2023), further illuminate the story's embedded critique of caste, gender, and the performative residues of pre-literate cultures. Sengupta remarks,

> The story deals with the complex question of caste, class, gender, and the crisis of subaltern women belonging to the community of nomadic acrobats, performing feats on the streets and roaming from place to place. The women playing on bamboo sticks and swinging freely above the ground, as represented in the story, suggest the ambiguous spatial relationship they share with mainstream society and their precarious existence. The game is supposedly a surviving trace of performative cultures that predates literacy and connects with other nomadic communities of the world, like the gypsies who roam from place to place and lack a permanent foothold in the mainstream sedentary society. The homelessness of this community in the story takes a more complex turn when we see the predicament of women from this community.

Panigrahi's "Jungli" (originally "Jungli" in Odia) constructs an allegorical landscape where the forest operates not merely as a spatial backdrop but as a constitutive site of ontological freedom and unmediated relationality. The male protagonist, a solitary figure shaped by his organic upbringing in the wilderness, encounters a lost Shabar maiden, initiating a fleeting yet affectively potent relationship that emerges outside the structures of kinship and sanctioned desire. The abrupt rupture of this fragile bond—through the intervention of the father of the maiden and the protagonist's consequent death—functions as a narrative allegory for the incursion of patriarchy and coercive social codes into the domain of instinctual love. The story's lyrical evocation of solitude and its tragic denouement render it a melancholic meditation on the violence of domestication and the loss of primordial connection, wherein the forest stands as both sanctuary and witness to ephemeral freedom.

In contrast, Mishra's "Buda Kirisani" elaborates a culturally embedded temporality through its evocation of *Chaita Parab*, a festival whose cyclical recurrence becomes the narrative's affective spine. It recounts the day when Buda Kirisani, amidst the festivities, encountered and pledged eternal companionship to Lachchami, only to lose her after fourteen years, on that very same day. Embedded within the narrative are profound insights into the customs and traditions of Kirisani's tribal community, offering a glimpse into their way of life. The interplay of desire, promise, and eventual bereavement inscribes the Chaitra celebration with a dual valence—ritualistic exuberance and private mourning. Mishra's narrative thus transcends mere documentation of tribal custom, offering instead a phenomenological rendering of how festivals serve as both cultural enactments and affective repositories, wherein the rhythms of nature and community coalesce into deeply personal experiences of loss and longing.

Pranabandhu Kar's "The Vanquished" ("Parahata" in the Odia original) marks a radical departure from the conventional victimology associated with subaltern female figures by centering on the sexually autonomous Sunti, a paana Christian woman. Sunti's deliberate erotic address to an itinerant stranger becomes a transgressive gesture that destabilizes normative gender scripts and bourgeois moralities. Her subject position—both hyper-visible as an object of clandestine male desire and simultaneously marginalized as socially expendable—unmasks the hypocrisies of upper-caste, urban respectability. The male gaze, typically assumed to be agentive and dominant, is here inverted: Sunti's observational detachment renders her suitors impotent, stripped of performative masculinity and laid bare in their furtive, almost desperate, pursuit of illicit intimacy. Kar's narrative operates as a trenchant indictment of the patriarchal double standards that valorise female chastity while covertly exploiting women rendered vulnerable by caste and class. The dissonance between Sunti's sexual self-possession and the performative fragility of male desire gestures toward a more profound critique of power, one that implicates the very scaffolding of social legitimacy and its complicity in erotic disenfranchisement.

Pranabandhu Kar's "Two Friends" and Rajat Mohapatra's "The Daughter of Niyamagiri" articulate, in divergent yet resonant registers, a literary praxis that simultaneously reclaims the emotional interiority of indigenous women and reinscribes their communities' epistemic sovereignty over land, ecology, and cultural memory. Both stories resist the instrumentalization of tribal narratives for anthropological curiosity or nationalist romanticism, instead constructing them as critical loci of affective, ecological, and political enunciation. Kar's "Two Friends" undertakes a delicate cartography of grief and feminine solidarity, centring on the lives of Basali and Mudani, two Kondh women whose affective worlds are irreversibly ruptured by the conscription and death of their

male companions in war. Eschewing the overtly rhetorical register of nationalist wartime narratives, the story privileges the experiential over the declarative, foregrounding the unspoken tenacity of women whose suffering lies outside the visible frames of political history. The text articulates a form of gendered mourning that does not seek redress or visibility, but instead cultivates intimacy, resilience, and silent endurance as counter-hegemonic forms of relationality. The shared sorrow of Basali and Mudani becomes a metaphorical and affective commons, wherein friendship functions as both a mode of survival and a critique of masculinist ideologies of sacrifice and heroism. Kar's refusal to spectacularize their grief or aestheticize their poverty reinforces the ethical gravitas of the narrative, situating tribal womanhood as a site of quiet resistance to both patriarchal violence and statist indifference.

In contrast, Rajat Mohapatra's "The Daughter of Niyamagiri" enacts a more overtly political and ecotheological narrative, one that sutures myth, environmental justice, and Indigenous cosmology into a potent literary intervention. Set against the contested terrain of the Niyamagiri hill range—a geocultural site at the intersection of biocapitalist extractivism and indigenous resistance—the story mobilizes a symbolic register to challenge dominant paradigms of development and modernity. Mohapatra's deployment of the figure of Niyama Raja, the ancestral patriarch and spiritual guardian of the Dangaria Kondh, serves not merely as an allegorical anchor but as an epistemological counterpoint to neoliberal logics of resource exploitation. In his vision of a non-alienated world, where sustenance and reverence for the land are axiomatic rather than aspirational, the story delineates an ecocentric ethic that disrupts the anthropocentric and commodified ontology of the state-corporate nexus.

The narrative's mythic scaffolding does not dilute its political urgency; rather, it deepens its resonance by invoking oral traditions and spiritual grammars that have historically been erased by colonial and capitalist cartographies. The referential grounding in the 2013 Supreme Court verdict—an unprecedented recognition of tribal autonomy via the gram sabha mechanism—underscores the juridico-political stakes embedded in the story. Yet Mohapatra transcends the juridical register, presenting the forest not merely as a legal territory but as a sacred cosmos, a lifeworld animated by reciprocity and interdependence. This ontological paradigm—radically at odds with the logic of extraction—recasts the Dangaria Kondh not as passive custodians of biodiversity but as sovereign epistemic agents whose knowledges are indispensable to the future of sustainable coexistence.

The culmination of "The Daughter of Niyamagiri" in the figure of Jhumki—an orphaned tribal girl symbolically adopted by the ethical authority of Niyama Raja—operates as a potent allegorical register through which the trauma of developmental intrusion is rendered legible. Her entanglement with Bideshi, the metonymic outsider whose machinations precipitate her death, literalizes the corrosive incursions of extractivist modernity upon the epistemological sanctity of Indigenous lifeworlds. Jhumki's drowning is a polyvalent event: a corporeal obliteration, a ritualized sacrifice, and a metaphorical submergence of tribal sovereignty beneath the inundating tide of neoliberal capitalism masked as benevolent progress. Her demise, staged within a narrative space charged with elegiac temporality and mythopoetic resonance, foregrounds the ontological stakes of contemporary indigeneity, caught between ancestral continuity and systemic erasure. In this sense, Mohapatra's tale becomes a dirge for a vanishing world and a speculative fiction of resistance, wherein ecological reverence collides with state-sanctioned violence in the crucible of tribal femininity.

In a markedly different yet thematically consonant register, Bhubaneswar Behera's "The Flying Fringe" ("Phara Phara Ude Panata Kani" in the Odia original) probes the moral fissures and socio-economic asymmetries that infiltrate the affective economies of tribal existence. The narrative's apparent simplicity—centring on the quotidian struggles of Tulu and Bhainri—conceals a deeply stratified critique of the patron-client relationality that undergirds tribal marginalization. The sahukar emerges not simply as a character but as an ideological apparatus: the embodiment of parasitic capitalism, predatory monetization, and coercive dependency. In positioning the sahukar's manipulation against Tulu's unguarded trust, Behera enacts a symbolic drama of epistemic dispossession, where knowledge asymmetry becomes the locus of systemic control. The "flying fringe," possibly an allusion to ornamental vulnerability or transient hope, encapsulates the paradox of tribal aspiration suspended between mobility and entrapment. The narrative thus articulates a sophisticated critique of internal colonization, where economic 'aid' camouflages extractive subjugation, and tribal innocence becomes the very condition of its exploitation.

Gayatri Saraf's "The Burning Mountain" ("Jali Jali Jauthiba Pahada" in the Odia original) extends this critical genealogy by situating the female tribal body at the intersection of labor, gender, and migration. Ukia's trajectory—marked by coerced mobility, sexual violence, and the commodification of her reproductive and productive capacities—renders visible the gendered cartography of postcolonial capitalism. The brick kiln functions as a

dystopic topos of industrial feudalism, where state absence facilitates private tyranny, and the laboring woman is doubly disarticulated—from land and from autonomy. Samara's death, the failure of masculine resistance, and Ukia's survival invert the gendered heroism trope, positioning female endurance not as passive suffering but as embodied testimony. Saraf's decision to frame Ukia's appeal to Sarojini—an urban writer who represents the metropolitan intelligentsia—imbues the narrative with a meta-critical reflexivity. It problematizes the ethics of ethnographic representation and foregrounds the necessary tension between voice and ventriloquism, narrative empowerment and epistemic appropriation.

Taken together, these stories collectively articulate a counter-archive of tribal experience—gendered, ecological, and economic—wherein literature emerges as a critical technology of memory, mourning, and resistance. They summon a politics of attentiveness that confronts the silences of developmentalist historiography and reclaims the epistemological richness of Odisha's tribal lifeworlds.

III. A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF COMMON TRIBAL ISSUES

The corpus of Odia short stories under consideration—spanning works by Bhubaneswar Behera, Gayatri Saraf, Rajat Mohapatra, Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi, Durga Madhab Mishra, and Pranabandhu Kar—constitutes a significant literary intervention that engages with the lived realities of Odisha's tribal communities. These narratives, diverse in aesthetic form and thematic thrust, converge around a cluster of recurring issues that critically reflect upon the socio-political marginalization, cultural displacement, and epistemic erasure of Indigenous lifeworlds within dominant national and capitalist discourses.

3.1 EXPLOITATION AND ECONOMIC SUBJUGATION

A recurring motif across these stories is the insidious exploitation of tribal communities under the pretext of economic development or social assistance. In Behera's "The Flying Fringe," the character of the sahukar epitomizes the predatory forces of rural capitalism that prey upon the innocence and socio-economic vulnerability of tribal individuals like Tulu. This asymmetrical dynamic is emblematic of a broader pattern where Indigenous communities are dispossessed of their agency through debt cycles, false promises, and manipulative patronage. Similarly, Saraf's "The Burning Mountain" powerfully foregrounds the exploitative labour conditions endured by tribal migrants in the brick kilns—spaces that serve as metaphors for industrial modernity's extractive logic. Here, economic migration does not lead to social mobility; rather it deepens precarity, especially for tribal women like Ukia who are doubly marginalized by class and gender.

3.2 DISPLACEMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

Rajat Mohapatra's "The Daughter of Niyamagiri" anchors its critique within the ecological and cultural disruptions faced by the Dangaria Kondh due to large-scale mining projects. The sacredness of the Niyamagiri hills for the Dangaria Kondh transcends mere ecological attachment and is embedded in a cosmology that G.N. Devy calls a "non-textual epistemology"—a mode of knowing grounded in oral traditions, ritual, and landscape. The incursion of mining projects is not only a threat to territory but a form of what Devy labels "epistemicide," the annihilation of Indigenous knowledge systems. The narrative brings to the fore the contestation between Indigenous ecological cosmologies and neoliberal developmental paradigms. The hills, for the Kondh, are not just territorial spaces but sacred geographies—repositories of ancestral memory, ecological wisdom, and spiritual sustenance. Their threatened displacement thus represents not only a loss of land but also a dismemberment of identity and epistemic continuity. This conflict echoes real-world environmental justice movements, positioning literature as a counter-discursive site that challenges state-corporate hegemonies and asserts Indigenous sovereignty over land, resources, and knowledge systems.

3.3 GENDERED VIOLENCE AND THE SUBALTERN WOMAN'S VOICE

Gender emerges as a critical axis of oppression in these stories, most forcefully in Saraf's "The Burning Mountain." Ukia's narrative exposes the gendered violence embedded in migration, labour, and poverty, highlighting how tribal women's bodies become sites of systemic violation and silenced resistance. Her narrative foregrounds what Spivak has provocatively termed the "epistemic violence" inflicted upon the subaltern woman, who is often rendered unhearable within the hegemonic scripts of modernity, development, and nationalism. Saraf's deployment of meta-narrative, wherein Ukia directly appeals to a writer to narrativize her trauma, serves as a radical intervention into the politics of voice and mediation. It simultaneously invokes and subverts the ethnographic impulse that has historically objectified tribal women's bodies as sites of anthropological curiosity. In this, Saraf's narrative strategy aligns with the feminist subaltern critique advanced by scholars like Lata Mani, who argue that the subaltern woman is "produced through a regime of visibility that paradoxically occludes her as a historical subject" (1990). The insistence on telling Ukia's story, and her self-reflexive

awareness of her narrative erasure, thus exposes the ethical dilemmas inherent in speaking for—and speaking about—the subaltern woman.

In "Two Friends," Pranabandhu Kar offers a subtler meditation on gendered grief through the emotional bond between Basali and Mudani, two tribal women coping with the loss of their lovers to war. The story illuminates how militarization and political conflict reverberate through the intimate and emotional lives of tribal communities, especially women, who are often the silent bearers of collective trauma.

3.4 CULTURAL EROSION AND THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY

Several of the stories articulate a deep anxiety about cultural erosion and the encroachment of external value systems. In "The Daughter of Niyamagiri," the death of Jhumki serves as an allegorical warning against the seductive but ultimately destructive influence of urban modernity, represented by the outsider Bideshi. The collapse of tribal moral codes under external influence marks the beginning of cultural fragmentation and identity loss.

In Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi's "Jungli," the titular character's tragic end illustrates a similar theme—the disruption of a natural, unselfconscious life by societal norms of possession, patriarchal control, and communal boundaries. The jungle, once a space of emotional and existential freedom, becomes a site of violence and exclusion.

3.5 RESISTANCE, AGENCY, AND INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGIES

Despite the narratives' sombre tone and tragic trajectories, they are not devoid of resistance. The collective decision of the Kondh villagers to reject urban interventions in their life in "The Daughter of Niyamagiri" affirms a form of grassroots, eco-political agency grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems. Similarly, Sunti's subversive sexual agency in "The Vanquished" destabilizes normative power relations and asserts an embodied form of resistance against caste and class hierarchies.

IV. CONCLUSION

These stories collectively resist the anthropological and sociological reduction of tribal life into objects of study; instead, they reposition tribal subjectivity at the centre of literary and political discourse. In doing so, they call for a rethinking of modernity's universalist claims, emphasizing the plurality of human experience and the legitimacy of Indigenous worldviews. Also, the selected Odia short stories offer a poignant and politically charged exploration of tribal realities in Odisha, foregrounding themes of exploitation, displacement, gendered violence, cultural erosion, and resistance. These narratives not only depict the multilayered oppressions faced by Indigenous communities but also critique the systemic forces—capitalist, patriarchal, and state-driven—that perpetuate such marginalization. The stories reclaim tribal voices and lifeworlds from epistemic invisibility, restoring their agency through literary representation.

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