



## Interrogating the Intrusion of the Civilized World in Mohanty's Paraja : Exploring the Clash of Cultures

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Very few Indian writers have given literary space for the tribal life in their narratives. This shows writers' apathy towards the tribal people in India. The colonial and early post-colonial literature mostly described them as 'the uncivilized others' or 'savages' in contrast with the 'civilized modern' or 'cultured intellectuals'. In the Government Act of 1935, the then depressed class or aboriginal natives were listed, and named as the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) by the Britishers as a provision for identifying their presence in India, and their representation in the various sectors of social life. In modern social and political discourses, the tribal people have been referred as Dalits, whereas the members of subaltern group treat them as 'subalterns' due to their primeval place in the society. Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* (1946) is an exception to such attitudes towards tribal people. For Mohanty, the tribal people are a self-sufficient and well-organized society. The tribal world was originally full of joy and exuberance. It was only when modern civilization encroached upon their space, they were disintegrated and shattered. His fascination for tribal life, later, inspired him to produce a great corpus of literature in the Oriya language; which put him in the line of greatest Indian fiction writers of all time. Five out of his twenty-four novels are based on different tribal issues. Among his novels, *Paraja* is the most lyrical, poignant and soul-stirring for its realistic portrayal of human pathos and its tragic close at the end. The study aims to explore the intrusion of tribal landscape by the so-called civilized and cultured world and how it wreaks havoc in the gentle family fabric of the tribal people, as seen through the eyes of Mohanty.

**Keywords:** *Subaltern, Paraja, Domb, Gotihood, Festivals, Marginality, Tribal Faiths and Customs.*



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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Tribal people are the most primitive groups in the history of humanity. Although they have a rich cultural heritage in the form of languages, traditions, customs, rituals, beliefs, folklores and their own civilization, they are still far away from the mainstream

developed societies. Most of the them have been isolated from the external world till recent times, but, with the rapid advent of industrialization and growth of human civilization, they are coming in contact with the outside world. There are plenty of references in Indian scriptures and ancient history wherein the tribal territories were invaded by the Aryans or

outsiders, and they were made 'Dasyus' or 'Dasas'. In spite of their direct or indirect contact with the civilized world, these people were excluded from modern society or major religious influences. It was only in the colonial and early post-colonial era, that the British missionaries tried to reach out to these tribes with the selfish intention of converting them to Christianity in the name of serving humanity and making them 'civilized'.

The Hindu scriptures like, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas* have descriptions of interesting stories of tribal people and their life. In *Ramayana*, Shabari, an ascetic who is believed to be from Nishadha tribal community, is known for her selfless devotion for Lord Ram, whereas Eklavya, son of the Tribal Chief in the western part of the forests of Hastinapura, whose scarification of his thumb to his Guru Dronacharya, has set an example of him being a great disciple in *Mahabharata*. These examples show that the tribal people have been represented as 'primitive savages' in many literary discourses. In recent time, very few Indian writers have given literary space to the tribal life in their narratives. This shows writers' apathy towards them. The colonial and early post-colonial literature mostly described these people as 'the uncivilized others' or 'savages' in contrast with the 'civilized modern' or 'cultured intellectuals'. In the Government Act of 1935, the then depressed class or aboriginal natives were listed, and named as the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) by the Britishers as a provision for identifying their presence in India, and their representation in the various sectors of social life. In modern social and political discourses, the tribal people have been referred to as Dalits, whereas the members of subaltern group treat them as 'subalterns' due to their primeval place in the society. **Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* (1946)** is an exception to such attitudes towards tribal people. For Mohanty, these people are self-sufficient and well-organized society. They are innocent and more close to the mother earth than any civilized human society. Tribal world was full of joy and exuberance. It was only when modern civilization encroached upon their space, they got disintegrated and shattered.

As a Sub Deputy Magistrate, Gopinath Mohanty came in close contact with the tribal people from Koraput district of Southern Orissa, and got highly intrigued by their world which was replete with unique customs, songs, moral values, beliefs, festivals and harmonious civilization. As a result, Mohanty developed his genuine interest in tribal civilization, and showed his appreciation for their life in his literature. His fascination for them, later, inspired him to produce a great corpus of literature in the Oriya language;

which put him in the line of greatest Indian fiction writers of all time. Five novels of his twenty four novels are based on different tribal issues. Among his novels, *Paraja* is the most lyrical, poignant and soul-stirring for its realistic portrayal of human pathos and its tragic close at the end. Gopinath Mohanty is the most influential Oriya fiction writer of modern time. He is a prolific writer who has enriched the Oriya language and literature through his enormous literary corpus such as twenty-four novels, almost ten collections of short stories, three plays and few critical books on the tribal languages. His translated books like, Maxim Gorky's *My Universities*, Rabindranath Tagore's *Jogajog* and Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* into Oriya are popular in literary circle. He has been awarded highest literary and civilian awards like, Sahitya Academy Award (1955), Jnanpeeth Award (1973) and Padma Bhushan (1981) for his significant contribution to literature. After his post-graduation in English literature, Mohanty joined the State Administrative Service as a Sub Deputy Magistrate in 1938. As a magistrate, he served them and came in direct contact with few tribal communities like, Paraja, Kondh and Domb. Once he candidly admitted, in one of the interviews, how he greatly gained experiential learning of tribal life and the landscape during his travelling:

*The special advantage in my life was I had travelled and had been travelling. Big mountains, thick forests, tigers, snakes, elephants, rivers, forest malaria, dead bodies, deaths caused by accidents, combination of fear and beauty; storm, cold, heat, rain, thunderstorm, darkness, forest fire, flood water in different seasons—all these I could acquire not from books, not by hearing but from my living experience of life. I have experienced by travelling and added to my life. (Mohanty, Pragna, 35)*

It could be easily found that Mohanty used his uncanny understanding of tribal life as a material in his fiction work. He lived tribal life during his interaction with tribal people and took great interest in the lives of common people. His literature shows that he has been highly influenced by writers, such as Munshi Premchand, Fakir Mohan Senapati, and Thakazhi S. Pillai who concentrated on the predicament of common people in their literature. Like the other writers with social conscience, Mohanty also shows his deep concern for marginalized people in his literature. Mohanty, in conversation with Sitakant Mahapatra, mentioned in one interview which was published in 1992 under the heading as 'Himself on his Writing':

*The plight of the simple, innocent, but exploited poor tribal people moved me deeply. At the same time I felt a compelling curiosity to study them and their culture as they seemed to represent for me an ancient stage of human civilization with much that was of sterling worth, least inhibited, and least sophisticated. The more I saw them, the more I liked them. I mixed with them, and I picked up their dialects. , (Mohanty, 8)*

His reflection on the tribal people and their problems, has been found in his major novels like *Dadi Budha, Paraja, Amrutara Santana* and *Aphanca*. *Paraja (1946)* is one of the finest novels of all of his novels, which sets a benchmark in literary craftsmanship for other fiction writers. It is a gripping and soul-stirring story of gruesome violation of marginalized tribal life by the outsiders such as moneylenders and government officials. The story of novel unfolds with Sukru Jani, patriarch of Paraja tribe from a small village, Sarsupadar located in Koraput district nestled in the lush jungle of Eastern Ghats of Orissa. He resides along with his two young sons, Tikra and Mandia, and two daughters, Jili and Bili. Ten years ago, his wife, Sombari was killed by a man-eating tiger when she went out to collect some edible leaves. Mohanty introduces all his major characters and the main trigger event of an unsolicited entry of outsiders in the life of Sukru Jani in the introductory chapters, and creates a perfect setting for the unexpected danger lurking in the darkness of the near future for the Paraja family. Sukru Jani is shown to be a self-sufficient and content tribesman who dreams of a 'bright and beautiful life' for his two sons, Mandia and Tikra and himself. The author narrates the fanciful 'Eden Garden of Sukru Jani' in which he dreams of being crowded around by grandsons and great-grandchildren, and having paddy fields and 'a big heard of cattle'. Sitakant Mahapatra, one of the most important critics of Gopinath Mohanty's work, rightly comments on the tribesmen's obsession for land and their passion for life:

*Paraja is the tale of the primordial attachment to land, the sacred soil of ancestors and the possibility of happiness. Life is meant to be lived in joy. (Mahapatra, 35)*

Mohanty, with his minute observation and creative prowess, creates a realistic tribal world of 'others', which has its own effervescent social life in which the nature plays an important role for the survival and destruction of primitive life. They accept the nature-made calamities without grumbling, as Sukru Jani had to accept that losing his wife to a man-eating tiger was a price that he had to pay for living in

the dense forests. But that doesn't deter him from living happily in the dense forest which he loves more than his own life. The tragedy of Sukru Jani begins when the evil eyes of Forest Guard falls on his daughters, Jilli and Billi while they were bathing in a water stream. The Forest Guard sends Kau Paraja to Sukru Jani to get Jilli for a night. Sukru gets furious at such a lecherous demand from the Forest Guard, and roars like a wild animal:

*You'll get what you deserve, you rascal, I'll break every bone in your body. Just wait, and I'll skin you alive, you scum! (Mohanty, 29)*

After beating up Kau, Sukru sends him back to the Forrest Guard warning the Forest Guard of dire consequences if he shows any advancement towards his daughter. The incident of asking to return the favor by the Forest Guard from the tribal people for allowing them to fell trees or showing leniency to tribal people, shows the gross plundering of these people, and their resources such as land, human labour, animals and other natural resources. Sukru Jani blames the Dombs for offering their women to the corrupt forest officials in return to get safety, and use the forest resources freely. Mohanty presents how corrupt these forest officials are, through one of the conversations of the Forest Guard with Sukru: "I have given you what you wanted, old man; next time I come back, will you give me what I shall ask?" (Mohanty, 21). The forest officers behave like a king, and treat the forest as their kingdom. They are often seen misappropriating the forest laws for the personal benefits. They literally hold tribal people to ransom for getting the things that they want from them. The Forest Guard is treated as a lord or ruler of the forest, and is offered goats, hens, eggs and vegetables as a part of obeisance to him. Mohanty gives minute details of Forest Guard's pillage of tribal people:

*Every villager owning a pair of bullocks had to pay a 'plough-tax' for the privilege of grazing his cattle in the forest, and the Forest Guard collected the tax. Anyone who had cleared the patch of jungle ...could be caught by the Forest Guard and fined or prosecuted. (Mohanty, 11)*

Like other tribesmen, Sukru Jani has already offered two fat hens, three big jackfruits and two rupees to get permission to fell trees in order to create a patch of land. But the Forest Guard wishes to get Jilli for a night which is vehemently denied by Sukru. The Paraja tribe is known for their integrity and self-respect. They do everything to keep the integrity of their family intact. Although Sukru Jani shows highest level of curtesy to the Forest Guard, but he doesn't

hesitate a moment to reject the unwelcome demand of the Forest Guard. In spite of being a primeval aboriginal, he is more civilized in protecting his daughter from the clutches of mighty Forest Guard than any cultured person. After realizing that the amount of fine is too hefty for him, in such a critical situation, he is advised to take a debt to pay off the fine and avoid imprisonment. Sukru prefers to be a 'goti' or a bonded labourer along with his son, Tikra rather than going to a prison because imprisonment was suicidal for the self-respecting Parajas.

Sukru Jani takes a debt of fifty rupees from a dreadful moneylender, Ramachandra Bisoi and , in return, accepts the gotihood along with his younger son, Tikra Jani. Mahanty depicts the easy sabotage of tribal family by the vicious trap of outsiders. The malicious action of Forest Guard robs Sukru of his dreams of living a peaceful family life with his sons and daughters. Sitakant Mahapatra rightly comments on the predicament of tribal people who come in contact with modern civilization:

*Paraja is, at one level, a social novel, a novel which on an epic scale portrays both the decay and destruction of the family of a tribal patriarch and that of a whole way of life which is vanishing slowly as modernization spreads into the hills. (Mahapatra, 33)*

The forest officer, as an outside agent of civilized world, tries to usurp tribesmen's natural resources and their bodies lecherously. For achieving his selfish vested interests, he blatantly misuses the colonial forest laws and legal forces against the tribal people. Such an oppressive colonial system was all pervasive in the remotest part of Orissa in the 1940's when the forest officials, local zamindars and Sahukars literally looted these poor tribal people, laborers and peasants. A prominent poet of 1940's, Gangadhar Mishra addresses the deplorable condition of peasants and tribal people of Orissa in one of his poems which was first published in a booklet named *Chasabhai* ("Ryot Brothers") in 1936:

*The oppressive forest laws which prevent the collection of fuel required by the peasants, as well as bethi, zulum [oppression] of the zamindar ... will end. The [new] Government will look into the oppressions of the moneylender, the burden of the loan will be eased. (Nanda, 65)*

The poem is a critique of feudal administration of colonial era which is working hand in gloves with the forest guards, police, local legal system and

moneylenders, and exercising its oppressive powers in the tribal terrains of Orissa.

Sukru Jani's agony of being reduced to Gotihood is palpable when he breaks down and sobs: 'Gotis, Tikrs! From today we are gotis, Slaves!' (54). Leaving his elder son Mandia, behind, to look after his family, Sukru Jani along with his another son, Tikra moves to Ramachandra Bisoi's big palace-like home, and assumes his responsibilities of goti which include all sorts of laborious activities ranging from grazing cattle to building the Sahukar's new houses. He prefers to take a debt of fifty rupees from Sahukar, Bisoi accepting his terms and conditions of gotihood (slavery). He pays the fine of fifty rupees to the revenue officials in lieu of facing rigorous imprisonment for fifteen days. Now all three men of Jani family work for Sahukar as debt-bound labourers. Mohanty narrates the reason for tribal people easily being trapped by moneylenders than facing imprisonment:

*Labour he understands, even unpaid labour under a tyrannical money-lender, for this he is born into; but anyone who goes to jail is forever stamped a criminal, and ostracized. It cripples him socially and economically; the law never relents once it has you in its toils. (Mohanty, 104)*

The pangs of suffering of Paraja family do not stop here; they wreck the innocent lives of Sukru's two daughters, Jili and Bili. They come to a stage of starvation and social alienation in the absence of all three men of their family. In spite of knowing that Paraja women don't work for others except for their father and husband, two young girls get compelled to step out of their house to work as labourers for a Road Contractor to make their living. During their stay at the worksite, they get sexually abused by the Supervisor. Bagla, Jili's lover, with whom she was betrothed, starts taking fancy in her friend, Kajodi. Kajodi too shifts her love interest from Mandia to Bagla as all men of the Jani family sink in the debt, and are trapped in Sahukar's salvery. Bagla decides to marry with Kajodi after paying the bride-price to her father. Jili loses everything she valued in her life, and is left jilted. Her loneliness is aptly described by H.P. Monanty in his comprehensive critical review of the novel in his scholarly paper entitled, 'A Novel on Tribal Life : In Empathy with Tribal Ethos: Gopinath Mohanty's Oriya Novel, 'Paraja' :

*Frustration and famine (two sisters lived on tubers and twigs for days) corrode Jili's spirit. The blithe sparkling girl crumples up with fitful gloom and real fear "thinking of nothing except*

her loneliness. She felt herself growing old without having received anything from life, she had gathered nothing, saved nothing and there was no one to call her own." (Monanty, 136-137)

After pleading and serving long, Sukru Jani mortgages his land to Sahukar and gets released from his 'gotihood' or slavery. He realizes that the Sahukar has duped him and grabbed his land which is close to his life. He decides to drag the Sahukar to the court believing that his God, *Dharmu* (God of justice) will do justice to him in getting his sons released from gotihood. But, in vain: Sahukar, being an influential person, bribes the court officials to get a favorable verdict. The middle aged Sahukar doesn't stop here, but he develops an illicit relationship with Jili, and keeps her as a concubine. Pushing the Jani family into his vicious web of debt, Ramachandra Bisoi controls their life and their precious land. After losing a legal battle against the Sahukar, Sukru Jani feels dismayed and cheated by his God *Dharmu*. Mohanty mounts the tension in the last chapter, and closes his story beautifully with poetic justice at the end. Without heeding to the sincere pleadings of Sukru Jani and his sons, Sahukar shamelessly says:

*'Yes, Jili! And isn't there another Bili at home still? Bring her to me. I have taken the land; I have taken one sister; I shall take other too. I shall take your wives; I shall drive you to court to court through the length of the country. I shall make you sweat out your lives as gotis, and I shall rub your noses in the dust. If I don't, my name is not Ramachandra Bisoi..!'* (Mohanty, 372)

Bisoi's ruthless words remind us of William Shakespeare's antagonist character, Shylock, a Jewish moneylender from *The Merchant of Venice*, and his infamous bond of 'a pound of flesh' from Antonio. These inhuman words show how these predators are insensitive to their fellow humans. This reflects that the exploiter is trying to crush the exploited to extreme levels, and leaves no option for the modest restoration of their fallen fortune which eventually leads to the fierce action of the hunter getting hunted. Mandia with the help of his father and brother brutally beheads Bisoi in a fit of rage. The trio, after consoling one another helplessly, surrender to the Sub-Inspector at the Police Station of Lanchhimpur.

Thus, the novel heightens its canonical standard narrating the aboriginals' gritty struggle against the invasion of external forces which displays the highest human virtues of tribal people such as

fortitude, obedience, patience and grittiness. Sitakant Mahapatra comments:

*A novel where an individual tragedy becomes a telling symbol for man's unrelenting heroic but a futile battle against a hostile universe. It is indeed a classic of modern Indian fiction (Mahapatra, 37).*

The Parajas are indomitable in their retaliation and confrontation. For them, their pride and self-respect is more important than anything in their life. Sukru Jani's relentless pursuit of finding ways to get his family out of the outsiders' oppressive grip through his concerted efforts, makes him a true warrior. His fight is elevated to a sublime level despite the tragic end because he never gives in to the fear which constantly lurks in the shadows of the future. Against the backdrop of darkest phase in his life, Suku Jani, as a true patriarch, gathers his courage, and faces the impending dangers appeared in the form of invaders. Hence, the novel depicts the existential struggle of voiceless aboriginals against the conquest of outsiders. Sukru Jani appears to be a true representative of all those Dalits who occupy a vulnerable place in the society, and resist the oppressive hegemonic forces in India.

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