

Decoding Strategies of Resistance in Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*

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Abstract

Tribal people form a major segment of our country and are found all over the world, called by different names such as primitive, tribal, indigenous aboriginals, natives and so on. The existence of the tribals is often faced with exploitation at multiple levels *viz.* social, mental, physical and financial. This perpetuation of the culture of oppression by the powerful gives rise to resistance which gets manifested in sundry forms and is demonstrated through various actions that range from silence to violence. Tribal literatures often tend to delineate the struggles of the tribal people and throw light on their strategies of resistance used by them to establish their identity. Gopinath Mohanty's novel, *Paraja* is a work that dives deeply into the cultural heritage of the Adivasi tribe *Paraja* of Odisha and showcases their struggles against numerous colonial activities that pose danger to their existence. It also subtly hints at the acts of resistance by the members of this tribe to fight against the unbearable oppression that they face at the hands of the civilised sections of society. This paper seeks to decode the strategies of resistance used by the *paraja* tribe in order to voice their existence.

Keywords: tribes, exploitation, resistance, oppression

Introduction:

A major segment of the world population is dominated by a class known as the tribals. They are found all over the world and called by different names such as primitive, tribal, indigenous aboriginal, natives and so on. The term tribe was first used in the Indian context by the colonial administrators under the govt. of India act 1935 to categorize a group of people who were not a part of the caste system. R.C.Verma says the tribes are “the autochthonous people of India who are believed to be the earliest settlers in Indian peninsula(1). Barun De and Nripen Bandopadhyay define tribes as ‘groups of people who use a common dialect and also observe common taboos but whose principal characteristic is that they have not been absorbed into the dominant culture of India, but which remains as social enclaves of under privilege with the ‘national fabric’”. Romila Thapar has pointed out the word ‘tribe’ in its “precise meaning refers to a community of people claiming to descent from a common ancestor” (3).

The literature that encompasses their lives deals with the ways these tribes were ostracised from their own lands and dispossessed of the forests, land, fields etc. that formed the very basis of their existence is termed as tribal literature. Ganga Sahay Meena defines it as ... “the literature of a search for identity, of exposing the past and present forms of exploitation by outsiders and threats to tribal identity and existence, and resistance”. A large number of literary work attempt to address these issues and focus their attention on the issues and conditions of the tribal population of the country. The writers try to delve into their historical experiences and present it various forms of writing viz. short stories, novels, travelogues, etc.

Gopinath Mohanty's Mohanty's *Paraja* is one such work that highlights the predicament of a tribal community today and the varieties of exploitation that they suffer on account of their tribal identity. It brings together two world views- tribal and non-tribal, the indigenous people coming face to face with the commercial and the bureaucratic forces that bewilder it, perplexes it and finally breaks it down. It is this conflict, the tribals against the non-tribals, the slow strangulation of the tribals by the bureaucrats, money lenders and the destruction of the aboriginal way of life that sets the ground for Mohanty's novel *Paraja*. It presents a tribal world before the outside forces begin to enter it and subvert the values deeply associated with these children of nature. He polarizes and constructs a binary opposition between two worlds- good and evil and the natural and the artificial. It also documents the retaliatory actions of the tribal people against the forces of the civilised/urbanised world where they are considered no better than slaves. The unspoken message of Mohanty in *Paraja* is that the intrusion of outside forces can only bring in ruin and devastation to these children of nature.

The tribal existence in the country is marked by incessant exploitations and oppression by non-tribal population and they have borne the brunt of negligence since ages. They have rarely been considered a part of the mainstream population of the country and have been victims of social alienation and discrimination. It is an established fact that any sort of repression gives rise to resistance. The existence of the binaries of power and powerless paves way to various modes of resistance which the oppressed devise to survive in such state. Initially the mode of resistance by tribals centred around the use of weapons which they used to fight against the onslaught of civilization, but with time, as they entered the world of the civilized (not as mainstream), they started using other modes of resistance as

well that comprises questioning, voicing their concerns, sometimes acts of overt resistance etc.

The Novel:

The novel *Paraja* is one such novel that showcases the lives of tribals known as *paraja*, inhabitants of Koraput in Odisha. It was originally written in Odia in 1945 and then translated into English by Bikram. K. Das in 1987. The novel foregrounds the theme of tribal exploitation and resistance. The novel centres around Sukru Jani, the protagonist of the novel, a widower who has two sons Mandia and Tikra and two daughters, Jilli and Billi. He is the representative of tribal life and the innumerable exploitations they face at the hands of the civilised world. Sukru Jani leads a simple and plain life devoid of any complexities. His peace, however, is disturbed by the arrival of the forest guard who is the first representative of the civilised world in the novel. He is a person of high authority, for he is a forest guard and it is his job to catch people felling trees in the village. The tribals try to please him with offerings so that he does not get offended and gives them clearance to fell trees in the forest. The very fact that the tribals try to please the forest guard is an act of covert resistance. It is evident that the tribals fear the fact that the forest guard would put them in trouble if they do not fulfil his demands in either cash or kind. Sukru Jani does the same and gets the clearance to clear the forest. However, things take an evil turn when the forest guard makes lustful advances to Sukru Jani's daughter which neither Jilli nor Sukru approve of. Self-respect is prime for tribals and they attach a great deal of importance to its preservation. Any form of blow to their idea of self-respect may flare up bouts of resistance from their side even if that retaliation leads them to greater dangers. Selling a daughter for money means violation of the essential values of that tribe, its integrity and honour and thus, Sukru retaliates to this

proposal in a manner any father would retaliate. Sukru Jani is a firm believer in divine justice. Kau Paraja's revelation that the forest guard wants Jili for a night makes him furious like an animal. He slaps Kau Paraja and showers him with abuses. He remains firm and says "I'll break every bone in your body, just wait, and I'll kill you alive you scum" (29). He tells Paraja to deliver a message: "Paraja women are not for sale. He can have our chicken, our millets, but nothing more" (30). Mohanty says, "A tribal roused to fury is like a beast of the jungle. Sukru Jani was flushed and swollen with anger, his vision blurred." (31).

Sukru turns aggressive and his angry response fetches him severe repercussions. The forest guard turns vindictive and frames him in a case of illegal felling of trees. Sukru Jani vehemently protests against the charge of illegal felling of trees. "I am not guilty.... swear at my innocence" (36). Sukru Jani is advised by people to raise a loan from the money lender Ram Bisoi and in exchange become a *goti* (Slave) which is not very welcome proposition to Jani and he is doomed to slavery. However, Sukru Jani and his fellow tribals are in awe and in mortal fear of law and police. In order to resist jail and imprisonment, he agrees to the suggestion of the fellow tribesman of borrowing money from the moneylender Bisoi. He gives in and raises a loan of fifty rupees and mortgages his freedom "Gotis , Tikra! From today we are gotis, slaves! (54). The *parajas* find slavery abominable, but prison for them is no less than death. "For ignorant tribesmen, there is no terror greater than the prison.... law never relents, once it has you in its toils" (104).

Sukru Jani and Tikra have to work as *gotis* for the money lender Ram Bisoi who lives eight miles away from Sasurpadar. Mandia takes charge of the household. He is the new patriarch of the family and has to ensure the survival of the rest of the members of the family. The entire family has been exploited at various levels. And there have been episodes of

actions resisting such exploitations, although at a lower level mostly veiled, sometimes open and confrontational. Their plight can be clearly visualised - father and son becoming *gotis* for no fault of theirs; there is no labour to reap the harvest; liquor is brewed illegally; and the daughters grow chillies to earn money by selling them. There is no end to their misfortune. Sukru Jani returns at the end of the harvest festival only to face further disappointments as Mandia is caught red-handed brewing and selling liquor. Mandia also becomes a *goti* and Bili and Jili are now faced with the worst of times. Mandia during his stay as a *goti*, opposes the unjust order of the *sahukar*. After the incident of Dasru Paraja's brother, Sania Paraja being killed by the man-eating tiger, Mandia Jani has a fierce argument with the *sahukar*. In spite of *sahukar's* curses and shouts Mandia Jani remains firm in his demands for the company in the forest to tend to the herd. Ultimately *sahukar* has to yield.

Not only Sukru Jani but his daughter Jili and Bili display resistance to the injustice and exploitation they face. Jili spurns the advances of the lecherous forest guard. When Shiba Paraja makes amorous advances to her, she gets tensed and breaks down into tears. The two sisters turn aggressive in putting out their anger and protest against those who insult and hurt them. Bili invokes the justice of God:

“How can anyone insult us just because our fathers and brothers are away! May the gods turn anyone who insults us blind in both eyes, and may the evil planet Saturn fall upon him and destroy all his children and all his cattle, and may he himself be burnt to ashes! The evil tongue that insults helpless women should be torn out by the roots!’ (187-188)

Sukru Jani is unable to bear the plight of his family and decides to mortgage his land in exchange of freedom. Even to decide such a thing was a difficult task for Sukru Jani and

the money lender shows little interest in his pleas. Tired of this life of penury, Bili and Jili decide to work under a contractor who was paying advance wages. She cried out: "I don't care about what my father will say! what does he care about us?" (204)'. Jili and Bili are given numerous presents and they are absolutely fine with it. They are in no mood to leave the work until one day their father reaches and takes them back. It is the life of penury and exploitations at the social, economic and even sexual levels that force the daughters to work for the contractor. It is their strategy of resistance, their way of protesting against the abuse they have been subjected to by the so called urbanised/ civilized population.

The *sahukar* takes fancy to Jili and entraps her and cleverly propose marriage to her. Jili accepts his proposal and the *sahukar* offers to pay bride price to Sukru Jani who refuses to accept it. The *sahukar* is enraged and refuses to free Mandia and Tikra and return their lands. They file a petition with the hope that they would be able to restore their property but in vain. The case is discussed and they are devoid of their property. They talk to the *sahukar* who refuses to help them. Sukru Jani and Mandia lose their long-held patience and in a state of emotional frenzy, Mandia beheads the *sahukar* and the three of them surrender themselves to the police. From sustenance to bondage, from happiness to grief, the lives of Sukru Jani and many such tribals are a tale of such endless troubles and tribulations. The trio kill the demon and save the land from being enjoyed by the treacherous fellow. They know the repercussions of this murder, but they are ready to face the consequences for it. The tribal justice is delayed but they finally put an end to their oppressor.

Conclusion:

Prolonged oppression of tribals at the hands of the civilised population is the root cause of all kinds of resistance. They have been tortured to such an extent that they retaliate

to ensure the cessation of such acts that question their freedom and pushed them to the edge where they lose their long-held patience and control. Their small acts of resistance take a sharp turn and acquire greater magnitudes as in the case of Sukru Jani and his sons who took to murder in order to voice their resistance. They may not have been successful in subverting the repressive structures entirely but definitely they have taken a step ahead in the path of their emancipation.

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