

Community, Identity and Rights in Gopinath Mohanty's Paraja

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Abstract

India is a country with multiple identities of cultures and social norms. The Castes, Communities, Classes, Languages, Literature, Genders, Music, Dance and other art forms are diverse, yet they altogether represent one unique colour of India. Gopinath Mohanty's novel 'Paraja' develops into the intricate interplay between community, identity, and rights within the context of tribal societies in Odisha, India. In 'Paraja', Gopinath Mohanty masterfully portrays the multifaceted dimensions of community dynamics. The novel underscores how communal bonds serve as a cornerstone of identity for the Dongria Kondh, influencing their collective consciousness, rituals, and social structures. Mohanty skilfully unveils the intricate web of relationships within the tribe, revealing the delicate balance between autonomy and interdependence. Furthermore, the novel probes into the notion of identity in the face of external pressures. As the Dongria Kondh grapple with encroachments on their ancestral lands and the imposition of external systems, questions of cultural integrity and self-identity become paramount. Mohanty deftly exposes the tensions arising from this clash, illuminating the struggles of individuals torn between tradition and the demands of a rapidly modernizing world. Moreover, 'Paraja' navigates the realm of rights, foregrounding the quest for justice and agency. Through vivid characters like the protagonist Majhi, Mohanty portrays the evolving consciousness of the Dongria Kondh, as they strive to assert their rights in the face of oppressive forces. The novel paints a vivid picture of the challenges faced by marginalized communities in their pursuit of dignity, self-determination, and the preservation of their way of life. Ultimately, 'Paraja' stands as a powerful testament to the resilience and tenacity of indigenous communities, offering a poignant reflection on the broader issues of community, identity, and rights in a world marked by cultural diversity and socio-political complexities. Through Mohanty's evocative prose, readers are invited to grapple with these enduring themes, prompting introspection and empathy for the struggles faced by marginalized populations worldwide.

Keywords: Ancestral lands, community dynamics, Indigenous communities, Marginalized populations, Traditional Identity.

In the rich tapestry of world literature, certain works stand as cultural touchstones, inviting readers into the intricate lives of communities that may otherwise remain unseen. Gopinath Mahanty's "Paraja" is one such literary gem, a narrative journey that unfolds against the backdrop of the Paraja community, inviting readers to explore the nuanced complexities of their existence. Born out of the author's deep connection to the cultural and social milieu

he seeks to portray, "Paraja" is more than a novel; it is an immersive exploration of identity, land rights, and the intricate web of relationships that define the human experience.

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. 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.

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 work 'Prajā' 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 moneylender 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. Kajodi 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 moneylender. 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's 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 this 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 wellbeing.

Housing System:

Some village's 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 wellbeing. Dharmu is the chief god and the others are Basumati, the earth goddess, Jhakar, the god for all seasons and Bagh Debta, 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.

Community:

Mohanty meticulously crafts the portrayal of the Paraja community, emphasizing their intricate social fabric woven with rituals, traditions, and an intimate connection with nature. The symbiotic relationship between the tribe and their environment emerges as a pivotal factor shaping their communal identity, fostering a deep-rooted sense of belonging and interdependence.

1. Social Hierarchies:

At the heart of "Paraja" lies a nuanced examination of social hierarchies entrenched in the fabric of the Paraja community. Mohanty skilfully dissects the caste system's impact, revealing its influence on power dynamics, relationships, and individual destinies. The narrative unfolds the subtle interplay between tradition and societal norms, offering readers a glimpse into the complexities of social structures in rural India.

2. Communal Solidarity:

The resilience of the Paraja community is exemplified through moments of remarkable communal solidarity. In the face of external challenges, the community acts as a cohesive force, showcasing the strength derived from shared histories, traditions, and a collective

identity. Mohanty masterfully portrays instances where the community rallies together, emphasizing the significance of mutual support in navigating adversities.

3. Conflict within the Community:

"Paraja" doesn't shy away from exposing the internal fault lines within the community. As characters grapple with changing times, conflicts emerge, reflecting the tension between adherence to tradition and the inevitable pull of modernity. Mohanty poignantly captures the human struggles born from conflicting perspectives, laying bare the challenges inherent in maintaining a cohesive community identity in the face of evolving societal norms.

4. Traditional Practices and Customs:

The novel offers a rich tapestry of the Paraja's traditional practices and customs, providing readers with a front-row seat to rituals, ceremonies, and daily life. Mohanty's meticulous detailing underscores the importance of these cultural elements in shaping the community's collective identity. However, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that these very traditions, while binding the community, can also become sources of tension as they grapple with external influences.

5. Impact of External Influences:

"Paraja" serves as a lens through which readers witness the clash between the Paraja community's traditional ways and the encroaching forces of modernity. External influences, in the form of land exploitation and changing economic structures, pose a significant threat to the community's cohesion. Mohanty prompts readers to reflect on the broader implications of such external pressures on the identity and sustainability of indigenous communities.

6. Generational Shifts:

As the narrative spans generations, "Paraja" unveils the evolving nature of the community. Mohanty delicately captures the tensions arising from generational shifts, where the older generation clings to established norms while the younger generation yearns for a different future. This dynamic exploration of generational perspectives adds a temporal layer to the community's identity, marking the passage of time and the inevitable changes it brings. Land

rights refer to the legal rights to possess, use, and control land. These rights are crucial for individuals and communities, influencing their economic well-being, cultural identity, and social stability. Here are some key points related to land rights:

Economic Importance:

Land is often a primary source of livelihood for many communities, especially those engaged in agriculture or traditional occupations. Secure land rights can enhance economic productivity, encourage investment in land improvement, and provide a basis for obtaining credit.

Social and Cultural Significance:

Land is often tied to cultural identity and heritage, and secure land rights contribute to the preservation of indigenous cultures. In many societies, land is a symbol of social status and belonging.

Gender and Land Rights:

Gender plays a significant role in land rights, with women in many parts of the world facing challenges in accessing and controlling land. Addressing gender disparities in land rights is crucial for achieving gender equality and empowering women.

Intersectionality of Rights:

The intersectionality of rights recognizes that individuals may experience multiple forms of discrimination based on factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. In the context of land rights, considering intersectionality involves understanding how various factors intersect to shape an individual's or community's access to and control over land.

Identity in the Context of Gopinath Mahanty's "Paraja": Cultural Identity:

Identity often encompasses cultural aspects, including language, traditions, customs, and rituals. In the context of "Paraja," Gopinath Mahanty may explore how the Paraja community defines and sustains its cultural identity.

Land and Identity:

Given the significance of land in many indigenous communities, including the Paraja, Gopinath Mahanty might develop into how the relationship with the land shapes the identity of the Paraja people. Land often serves as a foundation for cultural practices and economic activities.

Social Identity:

Social structures, roles, and relationships within the Paraja community could be a focal point. This might include examining how individuals identify themselves within the community and how societal norms contribute to the formation of their identities.

Economic Identity:

Economic activities, especially those related to agriculture or traditional livelihoods, can be integral to identity. Gopinath Mahanty may explore how the Paraja people's economic roles and relationships contribute to their sense of self.

Interactions with the Outside World:

The identity of the Paraja community may also be influenced by interactions with external forces, such as government policies, globalization, or changes in the broader socio-economic landscape.

Challenges to Identity:

Mahanty might address challenges to the identity of the Paraja community, such as displacement, loss of traditional practices, or external pressures that impact their way of life.

Intersectionality of Identity:

Considering that individuals may have multiple aspects to their identity e.g., cultural, gender, economic, Gopinath Mahanty may explore how these different dimensions intersect and shape the overall identity of the Paraja people.

Commemoration of the Dead:

The Parajas commemorate their dead by planting a stone vertically for a man and lying 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.

GopinathMohanty hints 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 sahkars 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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