

GOPINATH MOHANTY'S *PARAJA*: A STUDY OF ETHNIC OPPRESSION

Raj Kumar

Although the Indian society has for centuries been one of the most hierarchical among the known civilizations with a clear gradation in the exercise of power and privilege, the literatures of this country, until very recently, have never focused on this problem of inequality. The pen has by and large been in the hands of those who wielded power, and those outside the grid of authority and agency have generally been rendered invisible in the canonized literary texts of India. It is only towards the end of the nineteenth century that a few unusual novels take up the theme of social oppression as their major concern, and in the twentieth century there is a gradually growing awareness in literature of those who have so far remained outside the threshold of mainstream Indian society: the outcastes, the landless, the dispossessed and the tribals.

My attempt in this paper will be to study the literary representation of ethnic oppression through a close reading of Gopinath Monanty's *Paraja* (Odia: 1945, English translation: 1987). As an Odia reader, I have an advantage of reading the novel written in Odia. But for the analysis I will use the English translation of the text. The limitations of a translation, as we all know, are many, and have to be acknowledged. But my objective in this paper is to look at the representation of oppression — hence, the focus will be thematic rather than stylistic, and I would prefer not to take up issues regarding the quality or adequacy of translation in this limited space.

Paraja highlights the predicament of a tribal community today and the varieties of exploitation that the people belonging to it have to suffer. Gopinath Mohanty has firsthand experience of the tribes of Koraput region where he has lived, and he writes his two famous novels, *Paraja* and *Amrutara Santana* (Odia: 1947, English translation: 2015). They are moving accounts of the clash between two worldviews—tribal and non-tribal, the indigenous people confronting the commercial and the bureaucratic forces with

bafflement and in comprehension. Before I take up the novel for critical analysis it will be necessary to give a proper background to the term 'tribe' and also the ways tribal worlds are interpreted by the academics.

Defining the Term 'Tribe'

Defining the English word 'tribe' is not an easy task as it has been changing its connotations over the centuries. The word originates from Latin 'tribuz' referring to the three divisions into which the early Romans were grouped. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the contemporary meaning of the word thus: "a race of people; now applied especially to a primary aggregate of people in a primitive or barbarous condition, under a headman or chief".¹ Romila Thapar has pointed out the word 'tribe' in its "precise meaning refers to a community of people claiming descent from a common ancestor", but has been "used to cover a variety of social and economic forms not to mention claims to biological and racial identities; and this tends to confuse the original meaning".² Andre Beiteille defines the 'tribes' as "people who were considered primitive, lived in backward areas and did not know the use of writing".³ Barun De and Nripen Bandhyopadhyay define tribes as 'groups of people who use a common dialect and also observe certain 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'.⁴ Last but not the least, Surjit Saha defines the "tribes" which can be appropriately applied to the tribals in Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Paraja*: "The tribals are population groups which were able to resist effectively the pressures of unequal incorporation into Hindu society and thus remain outside the parameters of social control by the Brahmin elite. Societies which grew in these zones of exclusion from Hinduism created their own separate ethnic and cultural identities, subject to differentiations partly imposed by natural environment and ecology. These zones of exclusion were not only socio-cultural but also territorial".⁵

Today many anthropologists, administrators and scholars prefer the word 'aboriginal' to 'tribal'. Despite divergent definitions and different views of experts there are some common features possessed by all the tribal groups which have been resisting acculturation or absorption. A. R. Desai makes a list of these:

- (1) They live away from the civilized world in the most inaccessible parts of both forests and hills;
- (2) they belong either to one of the three

stocks — Negritos, Austoloids or Mongoloids; (3) they speak (same) tribal dialect; (4) they profess a primitive religion known as 'Animism' in which the worship of ghosts and spirits is the most important element; (5) they follow primitive occupations such as gleaning, hunting and gathering of forest produce; (6) they are largely carnivorous or flesh or meat eaters; (7) they live either naked or semi-naked using tree barks and leaves for clothing; and (8) they have nomadic habits and a love for drink and dance.⁶

Thus conceived, tribals are a self-contained community: they have a common history, common culture and common government. Since the members of a tribe consider each other to be related by ties of kinship the relationships of production are also homogenous. As a corollary to this, it follows that tribal societies are unstratified. Tribal economy by nature is non-monetized. For a society based on a domestic economy, where producers are themselves the consumers, the role of money is peripheral. One must remember that not all societies labelled as tribal are in the same stage of development within their boundaries, nor do they have the same relationship with the larger society in which they are situated. The Santals in West Bengal, the Thodas in Nilagiri hills and Ooty, the Jenukurubas in Biligiriranga hills in Karnataka, the different hill tribes of the North-East and the Kondh and Paraja tribes of Odisha have very different internal organizations and their interaction with the so-called 'mainstream' life is not uniform or similar.

At present, due to developmental activities, there are very few tribal communities which are in total isolation. New roads and communication facilities have opened up the remote areas and people have developed contact with the modern world. Most of the tribes, at least in Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Telengana, Chhatisgarh and Madhya Pradesh or even in Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura have adopted technology or modern agriculture, though not on a very large scale. But this contact may lead to the rapid disintegration of tribal society and the absorption of the aboriginals within the surrounding population, or it may result in conscious and self-chosen seclusion. These two possible alternatives lead one to ask: should the aboriginals be free to follow their inclination in accepting or rejecting the cultural and social patterns of the majority groups around them or should they be compelled or coaxed to abandon their own cultural traditional and values for the sake of a uniform ideal of economic development?

Most of these communities had their own traditional systems of education that socialized the member of the tribe into its own

mode of living. The standardized form of education that is now being imposed from above disturbs some of its ethical, moral and cultural norms of the community but is in some ways inevitable if these people want to get out of their isolation and aspire to a better standard of living.

This tension may be articulated in many scholarly debates in abstract terms, but only literature can give us the nuances of the predicament in a way that our sympathies get directly involved. Whether the autonomy of the tribal society be protected or not is a very troubled issue.

That the Hindu culture, otherwise known as 'Great Tradition', tries to incorporate the tribal cultures or the various 'Little Traditions' is generally known. On the other hand, the tribal people have been in various ways resisting the dominance of high caste culture. History offers evidence of these indigenous people fighting against the 'outsiders' and the new developments in historiography have succeeded in bringing out into the open more such struggles that had not been highlighted earlier. It is this conflict, the tribals against the non-tribals, the slow strangulation of the tribals by the bureaucrats, moneylenders and the destruction of the aboriginal way of life that sets the ground for Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Paraja*. What makes Mohanty to write on the tribals? Being an outsider to the tribal world what does he write about them? Let us address these questions to understand Mohanty's views on the tribals.

Gopinath Mohanty's Literary World

It may be mentioned here that among the major novelists in Odia, Gopinath Mohanty is remarkable for his epic representation of the changing rhythm of tribal life in his novels *Paraja*, *Amrutara Santana*, *Dadi Budha*, *Sibu Bhai*, *Apahancha*, etc. As a government officer, he was posted in different parts of Odisha including the tribal district of Koraput. He spent the most energetic years of his life among the tribes especially Parajas and Kondhs trying to understand their ways of life and their worldview. His total absorption in the landscape and customs of these people gave him a perspective that people outside the tribe seldom acquire. Bikram K. Das in the translator's introduction to *Paraja* emphasizes Mohanty's first-hand knowledge of the people he is writing about and his involvement with and participation in the lives of the people of the Paraja tribe:

The characters he creates are very real people set in a three dimensional landscape. He has known the sounds and smells of jungle he so lovingly

evokes; what is more, he has obviously suffered and exulted with Sukru Jani and his tribe, drunk rice-bear with them, sung their songs, danced at their harvest festivals and starved with them when the rains failed. The author's intense personal involvement is unmistakable even if one were ignorant of this background of lived and shared experience, and it lends *Paraja* surging power that very few Indian novels have.⁷

Mohanty's concern for the tribals may be further testified from the following extract which was a petition sent against him to the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in January 1951, by the landowners and moneylenders of Koraput where he was posted as a Special Assistant Agent combining the powers of S.D.O. and Sub-Judge under agency rule: "To our great calamity and disaster Sri Gopinath Mohanty is posted here as the Special Assistant Agent at Rayagada. He is always fond of hill-men and behaves like hill-men himself. He very little respects other classes of people before them. He behaves as if only born for Adivasis".⁸

As a writer, Gopinath Mohanty's literary career is quite impressive. Apart from writing on tribals, he has also written about other subjects. *Managahirara Chasa* (1940) was Mohanty's first novel. Subsequently he wrote 22 novels out of which 20 have been published, and in addition his short stories have been collected in eight volumes. He also has a two-part autobiography. His fictional work, particularly novels, can be divided into three main groups. The first group corresponds to his early service period when he was posted in the tribal district of Koraput. The novels are *Dadi Budha* (1944), *Paraja* (1945), *Amrutara Santana* (1947), *Sibu Bhai* (1955), *Apahancha* (1961) all of them dealing with tribal life. In the second group of novels, he focuses on the people living in towns and brings out the social nuances that differentiate the different castes and classes and highlights the predicaments of both individuals and communities. These novels are: *Harijan* (1948), *Sarata Babunka Gali* (1950), *Rahura Chhaya* (1952), *Sapana Mati* (1954), *Danapani* (1955), *Laya Bilaya* (1961), etc. In the last phase he wrote only one novel *Matimatata* (1964), which is a saga of rural life in Odisha.

The novel *Paraja* deals with the tribal people and begins at a point where their world is still whole, unstratified by the forces from the outside world. They are depicted as simple people, with modest aspirations and carefree lives. The details about the tribe emerge through an account of a small family in a Paraja village at some distance away from Koraput town. It is the saga of how this family, unable to confront the devious forces of the so-called 'civilized' world – bureaucracy and greed – gradually faces ruin and devastation.

Amrutara Santana depicts the lives of the Kondhs, a more ancient and more populous group having a philosophy of their own. The simple and lineal features of Paraja are now replaced by a complex organization and shifting relationship which give a deeper and more intense experience of life. The novel basically talks about Puyu, the heroine, who sacrifices herself for the sake of the family and for the hope of a new life to come.

Harijan deals with Dalits who stay in dirty hovels in derelict part of Cuttack town. Dalits in *Harijan* are contrasted with the rich upper castes, who exploit them and finally drive them out of the limits of the town. In the novel, Puni, a Dalit girl, is seduced by Aghor, the son of a rich contractor who occupies the land of Dalits driving them away.

Danapani narrates the story of a man's rise to a high position and in the process, he employs all means including the use of his wife's beauty and youth. In both the above-mentioned novels, the novelist exposes the so-called "civilized" veneer of the urban man to reveal his selfishness and greed.

Laya Bilaya is also set in an urban locale. A family from Calcutta comes to Puri for a short visit. The contact with the sea rejuvenates them and they feel nourished as they have never felt before. They have to go back finally into the drab lifelessness of the metropolis. While the dominant tone in the tribal novels was compassion, the urban characters are handled with sharp and biting irony.

Matimatata traces the life story of a committed young man Rabi, who decides to dedicate his life to serve his fellow villagers instead of taking up a salaried job. His father, a local zamindar, does not approve of this. But Rabi sticks to his decision and the rest of the novel deals with his continuous attempts at organizing the village life and the resistances he has to face. In the process, the changing structure of rural Odia life, its strength and weaknesses are laid bare in unique totality.

Though Mohanty's literary world can be interpreted in many ways and although apparently he seems to be dealing with many different worlds, he is really concerned with a single theme in almost all his novels — the conflict of cultures and impact of new civilization on the old. That is why his fictional world is full of tensions. This epochal experience that almost the whole of our country has gone through during the twentieth century with regional and class community variations is captured by Gopinath Mohanty with reference to Odisha, specially highlighting the collision of agrarian and technological world views.

Reading the Text

“Paraja”, the name of a tribe (pronounced ‘Paroja’ or ‘Poroja’ in Odia), is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘praja’ which literally means the subjects or the common people, as distinguished from the rajas or the zamindars of the pre-Independence time. In Odia language, the word “paraja” denotes ‘tenants’ or ‘royats’.⁹ Befitting the meaning of the term the tribesmen in the novel are thrifty, hard-working cultivators in comparison to their relatively primitive counterparts inhabiting adjoining territory. Sukru Jani and his elder son Mandia, strong and hard working, are eager to improve their lot with whatever means of betterment of living that the depths of Koraput jungle can offer. The author in the beginning presents a pre-lapsarian world untouched by the acquisitive tendencies of a complex urban life and its people. The Parajas practice barter system, a relatively self-sufficient village economy and are on the whole tuned to a harmonious rhythm of life. The agents of change, who enter this world of innocence to cause devastation, come from the outside. They are the forest guards, the foresters, the excise officials, the magistrates and the other representative of the administrative and bureaucratic machinery.

In most of Thomas Hardy's novels, as in *Paraja*, we find strangers entering into the unspoiled and unadulterated world of innocence. For example, Farfrae in *Mayor of Casterbridge* (English: 1886) is an alien who brings about a tragic end to the life of Henchard. In *The Woodlanders* (English: 1887) Edgar Fitzpiers and Mrs. Felice Charmond are outsiders who carry with them an urban value system. When they enter, the static world constituted mainly of Mr. Melbury, Giles Winterborne and Grace disintegrates.

There are two causes which bring about the disintegration of society that we find in both *Paraja* and *The Woodlanders*. First, it is due to the arrival of urban values in an innocent world and secondly, it is the desire for the social upliftment from within the Woodlanders and the Paraja people. Mr. Melbury in *The Woodlanders* is an established businessman. But he continually wants to raise his status and sends Grace to town for higher education. He wants to marry Grace above status so that people will respect him. In *Paraja*, Sukru has his own plot of land but he wants more to make real his dreams for comfortable position. He wants to get his sons and daughters married and hopes to see his grandchildren. He sees even further:

His grandsons are already fathers and the chubby urchins crowding around him are his great-grand children. His line has multiplied. He

has a big herd of cattle too; there they are—he counts sixty fine animals. And there in front of long row of houses which are all his, is a large cattle-shed, and this too is his. And there is... etc.¹⁰

In *Paraja*, Sukru Jani's travail begins with the brush with the forest guard, a lecher who covets Sukru's elder daughter Jili. Selling a daughter for money means violation of the essential values of that tribe, its integrity and honour. Sukru Jani's angry response to the forest guard's proposal has unfortunate repercussions. The message of refusal, sent through Kau Paraja, triggers off a course of ruthless vindictiveness on the part of the forest guard who brazenly reneges on the permission earlier given to Sukru to cut the trees. Some revenue officers also come down on him with notices of a fine, the non-payment of which would land him in jail.

There is no choice left for Sukru. At last he chooses paying the fine by borrowing money. And that choice yokes him inexorably to slavery. He becomes the Sahukar's *goti* or bonded labourer. His agony of being reduced to serfdom is brought out in the aging father's cry as he puts his arm around his son: "Gotis, Tikra! From today we are gotis, slaves!"¹¹ Slavery for the self-respecting Paraja is virtually death, yet he will not go to prison which is the only other alternative. Gotihood is horrible but imprisonment is an inconceivable ignominy. In their calculation, a jail sentence is eternal disgrace, eternal damnation. Mohanty describes that prison is the greatest terror in the lives of tribals:

For the ignorant tribemen, there is no terror greater than the terror of the prison. It is altogether beyond his comprehension for it belongs to a system in which he has no part, though he lives in its fringes. Labour he understands, even unpaid labour under a tyrannical moneylender, 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.¹²

The terror arises out of a total incomprehension of the judicial and penal system under which the tribal officially lives, but which remains as mysterious and malevolent to him as an evil fate.

The emergence of the money-lending class can be traced back to the British rule in India. The new British Revenue system of eighteenth century turned land into private property and in the process a new type of society evolved in our country. With the coming of the British to India there came industry and it partly replaced the agricultural set up. In the agricultural set up land was a matter of life and death to the peasants. But the introduction of

commerce changed the relationship between man and man to that of tenant and the landlord. Again the introduction of money as the only medium of exchange led the peasants to abject poverty. The British Government would no more take five bags of rice as was the practice with the kings and local zamindars, but demand cash. The natural calamities and especially the famine of 1866, which broke the backbones of most of the Odia farmers, gave rise to the moneylenders who ultimately started grabbing the land of poor peasants. As a result, the farmer became either a landless labourer or a migrant worker in the town. Several Indian writers, including Premchand, have dealt with this theme.

The oppression of the moneylender follows the same pattern in the tribal village as it does in any other village in India including the village Belari in Uttar Pradesh which Premchand had introduced to us in *Godan* (Hindi: 1936). In *Paraja*, Ramachandra Bishoi initially started a liquor business and the tribal people sold their land to buy liquor. Later he became a moneylender, giving money for the mortgage of land. He charged such a high interest on the loan taken that there was no possibility for a poor tribal to ever pay up the capital as well as the interest which was computed in a strange complicated manner. As a result, he became his *goli*, a bonded labourer for his whole life. Mohanty graphically describes the process in the following:

A tribesman comes to the Sahukar for a loan of mandia, and the Sahukar agreed to let him have it. The deal is closed and as the man is about to go, the Sahukar asks him:

'Have you taken your grain?'

'Yes, Sahukar', the man says.

'How much are you taking?'

'One putti'.

'All right. Now go and tell my clerk that you are taking a putti of mandia. He will write it down in his books'.

The loan is entered in the clerk's ledger.

'Have you informed by clerk?' the Sahukar asks again.

'Yes, Sahukar'. The man prepares to leave.

'Wait, the Sahukar says. You haven't informed my wife. She is inside the house.

Go and tell her. And tell my servant also.'

The poor Kondh or Paraja has to inform three other persons, besides Sahukar himself, that he is borrowing a putti of mandia, at fifty per cent interest. And each time one entry is made.

Next year, the borrower returns with a putti and half of mandia which should clear him of the debt.

'Is that all?' the Sahukar asks, looking at the pile of the grain.

'Why, yes, Sahukar. I took one putti, and the interest is half a putti.'

'One putti! Are you mad? You took one putti from me, one putti from my clerk, one putti from my wife, and one putti from my servant. How many *puttis* is that? There, count: one and one and one and one makes four. And the interest of four *puttis*? Two *puttis*. So you should have brought six *puttis* in all; instead of which you have brought one and a half. Why, even the interest is more than that! Do you understand?'

'No, Sahukar,' the bewildered tribesman says. 'But, you must be right.' And the poor man is hooked. A goti is born....¹³

The chronic indebtedness of the tribals is certainly due to rampant poverty and subsistence economy. Reliable ethnographic evidences prove that tribal people were not that much handicapped in their struggle for living a carefree life when their places of habitation were isolated and devoid of middlemen and contractors. They were living in self-sufficient economic conditions. They had forest wealth at their disposal to sustain themselves. But unfortunately when their abodes were thrown open as a result of economic development all around, they found themselves completely ill-equipped to enjoy the fruits of development. Outsiders, the so-called 'civilized' people, exploited their vulnerability in the absence of any concerted efforts on the part of administration. With the passage of time, their plight continued to worsen and they have been reduced to the position we find them in today.

The modus operandi of the traditional moneylender is very simple and convenient to the tribal debtors. Whenever a tribal needs money for whatever reason he has to walk a few furlongs or less to reach the moneylender's house where he is always welcome — day in and day out. The moneylender provides him money without any condition, sureties, guarantees and guarantors since an average tribal has very little to offer in the way of movable or immovable property. All that he has is his honest desire to fulfill his loan obligations out of his earnings and some land that he may possess. The moneylender recognizes these as good security, and demands mortgaging the tribal's land against the loan. By way of any formality the only thing a debtor has to do is to affix his thumb impression on a blank piece of paper or under a draft which he cannot read.

Since most of the tribal people are illiterate they have no idea of what is being entered in the account books of the moneylender. They put their thumb impression very submissively wherever desired by the moneylender and that seals their fate forever. In many cases these transactions are oral and they cannot afford to approach a

court of law for seeking redress. But even those transactions, which are recorded in the account books, are nothing but legal fictions because of the wrong entries of inflated amounts and the most the poor can do is to call the village panchayat which usually serves the interest of the moneylender. The indebtedness leads to bondedness and land alienation which is exactly happened in Mohanty's *Paraja*.

Thus, the size of the problem of indebtedness is enormous. Indebtedness among tribals does not only have economic dimensions but social and psychological ones too. The term 'goti' defined by Bikram Nanda as follows:

Whatever may be the nature of bondedness, every goti is attached to a particular household that exercises direct control over his labour or products of labour... The indebtedness always multiplies in some kind of geometrical progression. Bondedness is like an autograph in arrear so that once signed it can rarely be erased... Children of goti are in debt before they are born. A goti is, of course, assured of the bare minimum of diet and a roof. He is forbidden to possess means of production (land, plough, cattle, etc.). The Sahukar may decide to pay the goti a small amount of cash to buy luxuries as a token of his goodwill and allow an off day or so on a festive occasion.¹⁴

The oppression of the moneylender in Mohanty's *Paraja* is not a new phenomenon in Odia literature. The historicity of this can be traced back to the colonial rule in Odisha during the nineteenth century when the traditional Odia society was undergoing structural changes through the incorporation of many new professions. Ramachandra Bishoi's appearance in the *Paraja* community is not sudden. In literature, it is a gradual process continuing from Fakir-mohan Senapati's *Chhamana Athaguntha* (Odia: 1898). Ramachandra Mangaraj who grabs the land of innocent Bhagia and Saria in Senapati's novel appears in a different garb in Kalindi Charan Panigrahi's *Matira Manisha* (Odia: 1931) as Hari Mishra, a shrewd Brahmin who becomes the chairman of the village panchayat. Hari Mishra tries to divide a happy and prosperous joint family and to destroy the integrity of the village life for his selfish end but finds that people are becoming conscious of their rights. Their revolutionary protest eventually endangers his safety. It is as if Hari Mishra escapes from the world of *Matira Manisha* into the safer and more profitable world of tribal Odisha as depicted in *Paraja*. And then appears Ramchandra Bishoi in Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*. Here, he serves as the middleman, establishing a link between the tribal people and the revenue inspectors appointed by the government. Thus, the

predatory mediator between the market economy of the capitalist world and the pre-monetary values of the self-sufficient tribal village turns out to be a recurring presence in Odia fiction.

Colonialism, Commerce and Corruption

As we have seen earlier, the advance of the commercial frontier into a relatively simple, self-sufficient tribal economy was inaugurated by British colonialism. As a result tribals had to depend on the non-tribals who are basically exploitative by nature. In this connection Bikram Nanda writes:

The steady decline of the self-sufficiency of tribal produces increased the dependence of the tribals on the non-tribals. These non-tribal men and women who were peddlers in the highlands considered themselves “higher” in social status than the highland dwellers. This group of higher status Hindu men and women found an intermediary place between the product and consumption in the highlands. In years of bad harvest and during months of scarcity, the prices of grain were extraordinarily high and the tribals faced hardships in meeting their requirements of subsistence. This resulted in wide spread tribal indebtedness in the highlands ...¹⁵

In *Paraja*, market value is penetrating into a world where no markets existed. In the very beginning of the novel, we find the *adhikari*, an outsider as well as a government agent, imposing a fine of 80 rupees on Sukru Jani for whom the amount is exorbitant. Sukru then runs to Ramachandra Bishoi, the moneylender who eventually succeeds in keeping Sukru as his goti. Later Sukru’s two sons, Mandia and Tikra also remain as gotis under the same moneylender. Sukru also mortgages his land which is never returned by the Sahukar. Thus, the intrusion of money into a non-monetary society slowly destroyed a peaceful and happy family. There are some characters in the novel who in the beginning resist the market value system. Jili and Bili, daughters of Sukru Jani resisted tooth and nail the proposals of the forest guard, a bureaucrat, and the first ever representative of the outside world to enter into the tribal world in the novel. But they are so helpless in the face of a value system that was engulfing their society that they had to play the roles of concubines to the road contractor and later Jili had to elope with the moneylender Ramachandra Bishoi.

We also see there is a progressive loss of individual liberty due to the market value system. Bishoi is purely a moneylender and not a zamindar like Mangaraj in *Chhamana Athaguntha*. He lends money to

the needy people and turns them to bonded labourers, a process of which Sukru and his two sons Mandia and Tikra are victims. Freedom becomes a commodity and only money can give them freedom. The situation is something different in Hardy's *The Woodlanders*. In *The Woodlanders*, Giles loses his piece of land but becomes an independent labourer. In England, the landless people were free to sell their labour because the Industrial Revolution had opened up other opportunities of employment. But in a predominantly agrarian Indian society, land is often the only source of living and that is why it is imbued with so much emotion in our culture. The tribals in the novel try to get back their piece of land and in the end out of frustration and disappointment they killed the moneylender.

The killing of the moneylender in *Paraja* is a clear instance of tribal resistance. It shows that Mohanty's description of tribal world is not purely romantic, nor is it mainly a nostalgic evocation of pristine innocence. A comparison of the world of *Paraja* with Bhhe agabat Panigrahi's Odia short story "Shikara" (1936) will bring this point out clearly. In *Shikara*, Ghinua, a Santal hunter, is so innocent that after killing Govinda Sardar, an oppressor very much like Ramachandra Bishoi, he waits for the reward which he thinks he will receive from court for a brave and socially useful act. Instead of a reward, he receives a death sentence. In *Paraja*, on the other hand, the tribal people know that the killing of Ramachandra Bishoi, although morally right is nevertheless a criminal act. They are aware of the legal norms and they go to the police station to surrender themselves and await punishment.

The tribal world has now been sucked into the administrative network of bureaucracy, jurisprudence and penal system. But the court and the police station in *Paraja* are crucial sites of corruption and exploitation. That is why tribal people shudder at the very mention of words such as law courts. Mohanty describes the tribals attitude to courts in the following words:

They had seen from a distance the world of law courts, packed with buzzing crowds of clerks, peons, policemen, and lawyers carrying thick books under their arms, and it was a nightmare world for them. In the court there was always someone growling at you: what are you doing there; who asked you to come in? Who is that smoking? Stop that noise! And people ask you not only your name but also your father's name and the name of his father and his father, back to the fourteen generations, and everything that was spoken was written down in the books. The tribesmen lived in terror of the court, and the stories they heard only added to their fear.¹⁶

The alienation of the people from the system that administers them justice arises out of the superimposed nature of the judicial system. It has not evolved indigenously, it is a graft from above, and it is meant to intimidate and mystify rather than help and redress genuine grievances. The court is a terror not only to the tribals but also to the non-tribals, especially to the common men of the villages who are also uneducated like the tribals and are terrified of the magic potency of the written word on which the legal system rests.¹⁷ Another novel by Mohanty, *Matimatata*, which is an epic of Odisha village life, tells us how the common people perceive the law court and its complexities:

So many incidents occur in the village, it is not possible to go to the court for each and every thing. The experienced villager feels odd and afraid at the very mention of the word. It is said that entering the court is like the outbreak of cholera¹⁸

The tribal's fear of the court, the prison or any government official comes out of incomprehension. Anything unknown is mysterious and terrifying for a tribesman. Sukru implicitly attributes magic power to these administrative agencies. He addresses the court in the same way he addresses the sky and Dharmu, his God, the Just One. The literate people represented by the revenue and also the Sahukar in the novel as a class exploits the innocent and unlettered tribesmen. Sukru is intimidated and threatened by this literate world:

Sukru Jani stood like a criminal in the dock and when he saw the officials writing, he felt as if the point of knife was being dragged across his heart; for he had the tribesmen's instinctive dread of writings made on paper. He also heard them speak to each other in some dialect which no tribesmen could understand and this added to his terror.¹⁹

The tribals' culture is based on orality. They never maintain any records or any written document. Whatever deal they finalize, it is only through a verbal agreement. That is why the cunning Sahukar could swindle them very easily since there is no written evidence available to them.

Mohanty presents a tribal world as an uncorrupted paradise before the outside forces began to enter it and subvert its values. In one way this is an over-simplification, a kind of stereotyping that is not unknown in literature, that constructs a binary opposition between good and evil or the natural and artificial to polarize two communities and two cultures. Bengali literature (for example, *Aranyara Din Ratri*: 1960 by Sunil Gangopadhyay) is replete with texts where Santal tribe is imbued with qualities of simplicity, honesty, robust health and enjoyment of life to provide a counterpoint to the

decadent urban Bengali. Even in Premchand's *Godan* a tribal woman is introduced into the text merely to highlight her vigour, vitality and spontaneity in opposition to the fragile debility of Miss Malti, the urban woman. The tribals, thus, have had a tradition of being represented as "the other" in Indian literature.

Gopinath Mohanty cannot, however, be accused of total romanticization because he knows the tribal world far too well to realize that not everyone in a tribe is the repository of positive values. There are pimps like Kau Paraja and Madhu Ghasi who emotionally and sentimentally exploit their victims. Even the lumpen characters in the text: Barik, Dhepu Chalan, Faul Domb, Chambru Domb, Shama Paraja, Rami are portrayed realistically and their petty corrupt ways are exposed. Thus, we see that within the tribal community also a man is being exploited by his fellow man.

Conclusion

There is a controversy in the sociological and anthropological thinking on tribals about the degree to which their cultural autonomy can remain intact in today's world. Whether the changes brought in through development are undesirable because they upset the ecological balance of their lives is an issue on which endless debate is possible. The unspoken message of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* is that the intrusion of outside forces can only bring in ruin and devastation to these children of nature. This is not a theoretical or scientific position, but an emotional view based on the author's compassion for the tribes. This romantic notion ignores the dimension of change that is inevitable in any living society. Instead of thinking of an evolving society where the tribals can be accommodated along with the non-tribals, Mohanty dreams of a world where a Paraja's life can be presented in a museum-like stasis. While the reader is touched by the author's empathy for the predicament of the tribes when confronted with alien values, there remains a doubt whether the implied vision of an unchanging continuity of tribal culture is at all a desirable or possible in our complex and competitive world today.

Notes

1. N. R. Ray, 1972. "Introductory Address". In K. S. Singh (Ed.), *Tribal Situation in India*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, p. 8.
2. Romila Thapar, President's Address, Historical Congress, 44th Session, Burdwan, 1983, p. 3.

3. Andre Beiteille. 1977. "The Definition of Tribe". In R. Thapar (Ed.), *Tribe, Caste and Religion in India* Delhi: Macmillan, p. 13.
4. Barun De and Nripen Bandhyopadhyopadhyay. 1982. "An Approach to the Study of Tribal Economy in India". In K. S. Singh (Ed.), *Economies of The Tribes and Their Transformation*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, p. 10.
5. Surjit Saha, 1988. "The Territorial Dimension of India's Tribal Problem". In Mike Shepperdson and Colin Summons (Eds), *The Indian National Congress and The Political Economy of India*, Aldershot: Golden Press, p. 255.
6. A.R. Desai. 1977. "Tribes in Transition". In R. Thapar (Ed.), *Tribe, Caste and Religion in India* Delhi: Macmillan, p. 18.
7. Bikram K. Das. 1987 (1945). Translator's Introduction to Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. vi.
8. J.M. Mohanty. 1989. *Into Another Intensity*, Bhubaneswar: Shovana, p. 142.
9. K.S. Padhy and P.C. Satapathy (Eds). 1989. *Tribal India* Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 57.
10. Gopinath Mohanty, *Paraja*, op. cit. p. 5.
11. Ibid., p. 54.
12. Ibid., p. 104.
13. Ibid., pp. 121-2.
14. B. N. Nanda. 1989. "The Demise of Domestic Community in Highland in Orissa", Occasional Paper presented in Teen Murti Library, New Delhi, pp. 21-22.
15. B. N. Nanda. 1989. "Towards a Social History of Highland Orissa", Occasional Paper presented in Teen Murti Library, New Delhi, pp. 35-6.
16. Gopinath Mohanty, *Paraja*, op. cit. p. 339.
17. It is interesting to note here the point made by Jasper Griffin about Virgil's impact on written culture: "Grammar was learned out of Virgil's text, and the poet became the many minds more or less identified with grammar itself... For a barely literate age it was natural to connect literacy with uncanny power. 'Grammar' shaded into "grammarge", a word for magic ('glamour', another word derived from 'grammar', had originally the same meaning). See Jasper Griffien, *Virgil* (Past Masters), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986, p. 108.
18. Gopinath Mohanty, *Matimatala* (1969). Translated in English by Prajna Paramita, *Indian Literature*, No. 146, Sahitya Akademi, Nov-Dec. 1991, p. 149.
19. Gopinath Mohanty, *Paraja*, op. cit. p. 35.

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