

PARAJA BY GOPINATH MOHANTY AS REPRESENTATION OF THE INJUSTICE, EXPLOITATION AND MISERY OF TRIBALS IN INDIA

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Abstract

Gopinath Mohanty's Oriya novel Paraja (1945), translated by Bikram. K. Das into English is a novel portraying the culture and heritage as well as the struggle for survival of the Paraja as a tribe in Orissa. The Parajas represent the suppressed, Subjugated people in society irrespective of the geographical position. It is a universal tale of perennial struggle between the oppressed and oppressor. With materialistic progress, people are becoming less sensitive to the lives and cultures of the tribal people who worship nature and are completely dependent on the natural resources. Their lands and livelihood are gradually grabbed away from them. Thus, in the sway of globalization the tribal culture is endangered and in future we may find them in history. The novel "Paraja" is based on exploitation, poverty and suffering of Sukru Jani who lives with his sons Mandia and Tikra, and his daughters Jili and Bili. The writer involves the readers into social and cultural norms of Paraja community. Similarly, the novel enticingly makes the readers to empathise with the journey of Sukru Jani and various incidents in his life

Key Words: *Perennial Struggle, Oppressed, oppressor, exploitation, Tribal Culture, Gotis, Bride Price*

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India is a country with multiple identities of cultures and social norms. The castes, communities, classes, languages, genders, music, dance and other art forms are diverse, yet they altogether represent one unique colour of India. The present paper reveals the pathos of Parajas. Paraja is a tribal community in Orissa who live alienated and parsimonious life. They are beleaguered by the non-tribal high-class people, yet they try to celebrate life through their dances, songs, festivals. They follow the marriage rituals, exchange system and spend life happily with whatever they get through struggle. Unfortunately, just like the other tribes in India, the Paraja are homeless in their own land. The fast mushrooming landlords and other corrupt people are snatching their lands. Consequently, the cultural and economic annexation of tribal community is inevitable.

Gopinath Mohanty's Oriya novel *Paraja* (1945), translated by Bikram. K. Das into English is a novel portraying the culture and heritage as well as the scuffle for survival of the Paraja as a tribe in Orissa. The Parajas in the novel represent the suppressed, subjugated people in society irrespective of the geographical position. It is a universal tale of perennial struggle between the oppressed and oppressor. In the introduction Bikram Das expresses "*Paraja* is so much more than a socio-logical or anthropological documentation" of a tribe living among the mountains and forests of Koraput, Orissa. It is a story of "quintessential **man**, waging heroic but futile war against a hostile universe, struggling ceaselessly to accept and adjust".

With materialistic progress, people turned less sensitive the lives and cultures of the tribal people who worship nature and are completely dependent on the natural resources. Their lands and livelihood are gradually grabbed away from them. Thus, in the sway of globalization the tribal culture is endangered and in future we may find them in history. The novel "*Paraja*" is based on exploitation, poverty and suffering of Sukru Jani who lives with his sons Mandia and

Tikra, and his daughters Jili and Bili. The writer involves the readers into social and cultural norms of Paraja community. Similarly, the novel enticingly makes the readers to empathise with the journey of Sukru Jani and various incidents in his life. According to Yasodhara Mishra, "In *Paraja*, both the exploited and the exploiter emerge as human characters and in the end it remains a story of a people; of exploitation and how man tackles it for his existence."

The novel begins with the depiction of family situation of the protagonist Sukru Jani. His wife, Sombari becomes prey of a man eating tiger. He has brought up his sons Mandia and Tikra, and his daughters Jili and Bili with relentless hard work and now dreams to play with his grandchildren soon.

But his happy life comes to an end, when Jili refuses the advances of The Forest Guard. Furious Forest Guard incriminates Sukru Jani for cutting the forest trees illegally, though he seeks permission of the Forest Guard before cutting. It's too late when he understands that he will be imprisoned for his crime. To avoid imprisonment, he takes loan from the money lender, Sahukar Bisoi and becomes his goti i.e. bonded labour, along with his son, Tikra. Gopinath Mohanty reveals the cruel world of corrupt, selfish government officials and money lenders. In chapter 10, he describes that the illiterate tribal people take loan from the Sahukar for grains during the monsoon or for marriages to pay bride price. They are unable to pay the Sahukar back, as the interest is far more than the principal amount. Poor and helpless tribals mortgage their lands and cunning Sahukar becomes the owner of those lands.

Mohanty also depicts the horrifying life of gotis or the bonded labours. They work inexorably in Sahukar's land and they are treated just like animals. The gotis live in 'ragged mud-walled huts drooped as if they were too tired to stay up; the thatches had grown bald from the wind and the rain; tattered rags hung from the rafters, and men, women, children, chickens, dogs and swine groveled in the same dust.' If the gotis revolt, Sahukar beats them brutally or he hands them over to police men who are always in his favour as he greases their palms. Sukru and Tikra work day and night without a holiday. The house is run by Jilli and Billi by selling chillies and their brother, Mandia earns money by selling illicit liquor. But at the time of Harvest Festival Mandia is caught red-handed by the Salt and excise department. He is fined 50 Rs. To pay the fine, now Mandia also becomes the Sahukar's goti. Sukru Jani is quite disappointed. He

understands that his dream is shattered and life is nothing but never-ending hard work and harassment.

Next chapters are about the Spring Festival and the marriage tradition in Paraja. The best suitable months for marriage are considered to be February to May. The bridegroom has to pay huge bride price to bride's family. Mostly this custom makes the groom's family to borrow money from the money lender with huge interest and often, money lender snatches the lands of these poor people by taking their thumb impressions. Jili and Bagla and Mandia and Kajodi love each other. But Bagla runs away with Kajodi and both Jili and Mandia feel dejected. They realise that money is the root cause of their heart break. Amiya Bhushan Sharma comments - Bagla was shrewd enough to observe and take the right decision with respect to Kajodi at the right time. When he saw that Jili's father was descending into poverty he took no time to switch his loyalty away from his love, an unheroic quality that poetry does not celebrate but love supports. So does Kajodi. When she discovers that Man-dia cannot physically satisfy her owing to his bashful-ness she instinctively turns to Bagla and in their marriage we find the consummation of a truly worldly, expedient love affair...it is the graceless Bagla and the adaptable Kajodi who lead a normal life not the heroic but simple family of Sukru Jani.

Sukru Jani feels that he should mortgage his land to the money lender, so that he can free himself and his sons from the work of gotis. But the money lender flatly refuses this proposal. Thus, Sukru Jani's fields lie fallow. In next chapters Mohanty portrays the pathetic situation of illiterate and poor tribal people, when they work as migrant labour. Jili and Bili feel very helpless, as no source of money is left for them. Their neighbour and friend informs them that the construction of new highway is about to start and the contractor is looking for the construction labours who will be paid on wages in advance. Both the sisters decide to accept this work, for which they needed to leave their house and live in the camp. Jili and Bili knew that their father will never allow them to go away from home. But Jili in her utter frustration cries out, "I don't care about what father will say! What does he care about us?" (Paraja: p.204)

At the construction site people from surrounding village come to work. Men and women would often be together, without thinking of morality. The supervisor gets attracted to Jili. Very soon Jili and Bili get coins, saris, soaps, beads and rings from the supervisor and other young

men living in the camp. Sahukar surveys Sukru Jani's land and realises that the land is very valuable. He then calls Sukru Jani to settle the matter of his land. He then craftily frames an oral agreement without any witness. According to the agreement, Sukru Jani will be free from the work of goti. However, his sons will remain gotis to work for the Sahukar. The land could be transferred when Sukru Jani would pay Rs. 25 to the Sahukar. Sahukar knows that though the Parajas are ignorant, they very faithfully follows even the oral agreement. Thus, old, helpless Sukru is free, but without any source of income.

When he comes home, he is shocked to see his locked home and 2 daughters missing. He searches for them and finally, brings them back from the construction site. Kau Paraja who is interested in Jili, is ugly but multitalented man who helps Sukru's family to settle down and very soon another young man, Nandibali Paraja, who is orphan and poor is ready to get married to Bili. A few days later, Sahukar purchases some land in that village and stays there for some days. During his stay he is infatuated by Jili. He sends her his proposal of love with gifts. Jili begins to meet him regularly. When Kau Paraja informs Sukru about Jili's night outs with Sahukar, Sukru throws her out of his house. As there is no other place to go, Jili goes to Sahukar's house.

The tragic journey of Sukru Jani further proceeds, when Mandia and Tikra offer money to Sahukar to free their land through Sahukar. Sahukar blames that they have stolen the money, which in truth, is earned by Mandia and Tikra by selling illicit liquor. He also claims that according to the oral agreement the land is mortgaged for 30 years. He also threatens them with the police. Nandibali suggests that they should move to the court, where they will surely get justice. Here Sukru experiences another world of deception, treachery and exploitation. The world of law and court is a matter of fear for Parajas. In the court Sukru and Nandibali meet the Petition Writer who guides them to file a written petition and engage a lawyer. He also gives them confidence that they will surely get their land back.

Sukru Jani gets next date for hearing the case from the court and is also asked to bring a witness along with him. When Sahukar understands this move of Sukru, he secretly pays bribe to the Petition Writer. According to the order Sukru goes to the court with witness on given date, but he is shocked to know that his case is dismissed. The reason was Sukru didn't appear at the hearing. Sukru gets angry, discouraged and helpless. Sukru Jani along with his sons meet the

Sahukar and pleads him to give their land back, as it is the only source of their earning. But Sahukar refuses to give the land back and declines their plea. The cruelty and lack of compassion of Sahukar makes Mandia violent. Furious Mandia loses his cool and beheads Sahukar with his axe. Sukru and Tikra also assist Mandia in this crime. Three of them go to the police station and surrender themselves.

Thus, Sukru who in spite of his poverty, was living happy and self-dependent life along with his family, becomes prey of crafty Sahukar and his avaricious ways. His life ends tragically, shattering his simple dreams. This is a common representative tale of oppressed vs oppressor. It also depicts a harsh truth that poverty, illiteracy and lack of unity is responsible for the distress and calamity of Parajas and many other tribal people in India.

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