

IMPLICATIONS OF TRIBAL LITERATURE

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Abstract

In last decade of the 20th century observed the emergence of a host of new movements in India. Women, farmers, Dalits, Tribals and various ethnic groups came together like never before and raised demands and issues that could neither be recognized nor settled through the conventional academic and political idiom. They emphasized that their maltreatment was due to their particular identities and to fight that exploitation and inequity, they forged alliances with other groups/communities with similar identities and launched a joint movement for their liberation. Since identities formed the basis of their exploitation as well as their struggle against it, this process was began to be called "identitism". Besides socio-political movements, literary movements also joined this battle against exploitation of the underprivileged. Feminist literature and Dalit literature were the by-products of this process. Now, Tribal literature, instilled with Tribal awareness, is also attempting to shape out a place for itself in the world of literature and criticism.

Key Words – Oral tradition, identity, existence, progress, displacement

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The advance of literature and of different art forms in Tribal communities predated the budding of literature and arts in the so-called mainstream society. But the Tribal literary tradition was largely oral. Even after being pushed into the jungles, the Tribal communities sustained their creative literary activities. However, as this literature was in unrefined folk languages and because the Tribals were far from the centres of power, their literature, like they themselves, was mostly ignored. Even today, Tribal literature is being created in hundreds of native languages but we know little about it.

Historical and material factors led to the appearance of the present-day Tribal literary movement. About two decades ago, the central government adopted the policy of economic liberalization, thus throwing open the doors to market economy. In the name of free trade and free market, a no-holds-barred race for making more and more profits started. And this resulted into reckless loot of water, forests and land – the prime resources of the Tribals – even to the point of putting their lives at risk. Figures speak for themselves: Over the last one decade at least 10 lakh Tribals have been dislocated from the Jharkhand state alone. Most of them are working as household servants or daily-wage labourers in metros like Delhi. Sarcastically, the government then argues that as there is no Tribal community inhabitant to the National Capital Region (NCR) of Delhi, there is no provision for reservations for the Tribals in educational institutions and government jobs in the region. Where should these people, dislodged from the land of their ancestors in the name of

progress, go? It is said that when the United Nations decided to observe the year 1993 as the “International Year of Indigenous Peoples”, the Government of India’s official reaction was that “The Indian Tribals or STs are not indigenous peoples as defined by the UN” and that “all Indians are indigenous people”. It also asserted that

The entire issue boils down to giving Tribals the right to self-determination. Tribal literature is also voicing this demand. On what basis can the Tribals, deprived of their water resources, forests and land and leading a wretched existence in the metros, call this country their own? The government-market nexus has posed a threat to the existence of the Tribals. Those who are still living in their homes have been caught between the devil of the government and the deep sea of extreme Left. Those who have settled in another place have become like trees without roots. With rivers, hills and forests no longer their neighbours, their unique identity, based on their language and culture, is getting lost. Never did the Tribals face such a deep crisis of identity and existence. It is but natural for any community to oppose threats to its existence. This confrontation apparent itself at the social and political levels, and also in art and literature. Thus contemporary Tribal literature was born.

Whenever outsiders made unnecessary intrusion in their lives, Tribals resisted it. The past two centuries were witness to a string of Tribal uprisings. These uprisings also produced creative energy, but it was typically oral. Owing to the lack of means of communication, it could never get pan-Indian appreciation. From time to time, non-Tribal authors also dwelt on Tribal life and society. This whole tradition of depiction of Tribal life in literature may be regarded as the background of the present-day Tribal literature. It is obvious that no literary movement begins abruptly on a precise date. Its materialization and development is a slow, often imperceptible process, and is influenced by various circumstances. Broadly, it can be said that the contemporary Tribal writings and discourse began in 1991. As the economic policies of the government of India aggravated the subjugation and exploitation

of Tribals, the resistance to it also amplified. Since the exploitation as well as its resistance was a pan-Indian occurrence, so was the creative energy born out of it. We can thus argue that Tribal literature is the creative energy generated at the national level post 1991 to guard the Tribal identity and existence in the face of intensified exploitation due to economic liberalization. Both Tribal and non-Tribal authors are playing a role in it. The geographical, societal and linguistic context of this literature is as different from the rest of Indian literature as Tribals are from the rest of the Indians. And this uniqueness is its key specialty.

Tribal literature is the literature of a search for identity, of revealing the past and present forms of exploitation by outsiders, and of threats to tribal identity and existence, and resistance. This is a pro-change, positive interference, which is dead opposed to any sort of unfairness against the descendants of the original residents of India. It supports their right to guard their water resources, forests and land and their right to self-determination. Although the present-day Tribal writings and the discourse on it are in their early stages, it is heartening to find that useless debates like “empathy versus sympathy” are on its margins. Anyway, there is no reason the validity of sympathy and empathy should be given so much significance. The authenticity of expression definitely is, and should be, more important than the authenticity of feelings. It is true that authentic expression is not possible without long experience, close contact and sensitivity, especially with reference to Tribals. But empathy still cannot be made the sole criterion for judging authenticity.

As Tribal literary discourse is still in the making, its issues are also just taking shape. Beginning with “Who are Tribals?” the discourse has raised issues associated with Tribal society, history, culture, language and so on over the last decade. Magazines play a key role in the commencement and development of every literary movement. The following magazines have played important roles in raising Tribal issues in the world of literature and in advancing creative literature related to them: *YuddhratAamAdmi* (Hazaribagh, Delhi;

editor: Ramnika Gupta), *AravaliUdgosh* (Udaipur; editor: B.P. Verma 'Pathik'), *Jharkhandi Bhasha Sahitya*, *Sanskriti Akhda* (Ranchi; editor: VandanaTete) and *Adivasi Satta* (Durg, Chhattisgarh; editor: K.R. Shah). Besides, PushpaTete through *Tarang Bharati*, Sunil Minj through *Deshaj Swar* and Shishir Tudu through the evening newspaper *Jharkhand News Line* are also promoting Tribal discourse. Many mainstream magazines have also brought out special Tribal issues, thus contributing to the development of Tribal discourse. These include *Samkaleen Janmat* (2003), *Kathakram* (2012) and *Ispatika* (2012). Initially, the leading Hindi magazines showed limited interest in Tribal issues but with the increasing recognition of the discourse, Tribal life is increasingly finding place in the columns of such magazines. Tribal writers are getting ample space in small magazines.

Tribal writings are diverse. Tribal authors have benefitted from the rich oral literary tradition of the community. There is no central genre of Tribal literature like autobiographical writings in the case of women's literature and Dalit literature. Tribal and non-Tribal writers have depicted Tribal life and society through poetry, stories, novels and plays. The Tribal writers have made poetry the major weapon in their struggle for Tribal identity and existence. Autobiographical writings are few and far between in Tribal literature and that is because the Tribal society believes more in the group than in the self. Concepts like "private" and "privacy" remained unfamiliar to most of the tribal communities for a long time. Their tradition, culture, history, exploitation and its resistance – all are collective. And collective feelings are much better articulated through folk poetry than through autobiographical works. The sharp Tribal pen is expanding its reach at a fast pace.

In colonial India, the troubles of the Tribals were mostly related to ban on collecting forest produce, land revenues of various kinds, moneylenders' exploitation and brutalities of police administration. After Independence, the faulty model of development adopted by the government deprived the Tribals of their water, forests and land and dislocated them from

their homes. Today, displacement is the main problem confronting the Tribals. This, on one hand, is depriving them of their cultural identity and on the other, intimidating their existence. If they attempt to preserve their identity, their existence is endangered and if they try to secure their existence, their identity is lost. That is why, today, Tribal discourse is the dialogue of existence and identity.

As Tribal literature draws its energy from the tradition of tribal uprisings, the language and geography of those uprisings also assume importance. The original writings of the Tribal authors are in their native languages. The Tribal literature in Hindi is greatly influenced by the rich literary tradition of indigenous languages. A part of this literature has been translated into other languages. The literature being written in different Tribal languages is being translated into major languages like Hindi, Bangla and Tamil, thus obtaining a national form. Tribal literature is marching ahead, instilled with the rebellious sentiment of the Birsa, Sidho-Kano and other revolutionary Tribal leaders and their movement.

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