

**THE BONDA QUESTION IN PRATIBHA RAY'S  
THE PRIMAL LAND**

**DR. MARY MOHANTY**  
**READER, P. G. DEPT. OF ENG.**  
**S.C.S.(AUTO) COLLEGE**  
**PURI, ODISHA, INDIA.**

***Abstract***

*The aboriginal tribes in Odisha constitute twenty-four percentage of the total population of the state. Around 62 types of tribes like Kondh, Saura, Gond, Santal, Paraja, Gadaba, Koya, Oraon, Bhuiji, Bonda, Juang inhabit in Odisha. They mainly dwell in undivided Koraput, Sundargarh and Mayurbhanja districts. The aboriginal Bondas dwell in the inaccessible dense forests of Eastern Ghats Mountains in Malkangiri region of undivided Koraput district.*

*'The Primal Land' (2001) is an English translation of 'Adibhumi' (1993), an epic-novel by Pratibha Ray, a prolific living Odia writer with crowning glory of Jnanapeeth award. It reconstructs the social life, cultures, beliefs, customs, rituals and struggle of the Bonda tribe in Odisha. This narrative deals with the embattled Bonda tribe which has roamed freely among the mountains since time immemorial, but now its life and culture face the danger of extinction because of the invasion of civilization.*

*My paper would highlight the socio-cultural life of the marginal Bondas and the impact of the government attempts at uplifting and 'civilizing' them and their struggle to preserve their life and culture.*

**Key words- Tribal, Marginal, Culture, Civilization, Politics, Power**

## THE BONDA QUESTION IN PRATIBHA RAY'S THE PRIMAL LAND

-DR. MARY MOHANTY

The aboriginal tribes in Odisha constitute twenty-four percentage of the total population of the state. Of all states in India, around 62 types of tribes like Kondh, Saura, Gond, Santal, Paraja, Gadaba, Koya, Oraon, Bhuji, Bonda, Juang inhabit in undivided Koraput, Sundargarh and Mayurbhanja districts in Odisha.

*The Primal Land* (2001) is an English translation of an Odia novel *Adibhumi* (1993) by Pratibha Ray, a prolific living Odia writer who won the prestigious Jnanapeeth award. She has many novels, short-stories, essays, films and television scripts to her credit. She received the *Katha* prize twice for the best short-story published during a year. In 1992, she received the prestigious Moorti Devi award for her novel *Yagnaseni*. *The Primal Land* is the outcome of a project undertaken by Pratibha Ray as a part of her post-doctoral research. She spent several years in close interaction with the Bondas who are hostile *tokhangars* (outsiders) and studied the life and culture of the Bondas and the impact of government efforts to 'civilize' them and to bring them to the mainstream.

*The Primal Land* reconstructs the social life, culture, beliefs, customs, rituals and struggles of the embattled Bonda tribe which has roamed freely among the mountains in the southwestern corner of Odisha since time immemorial; but now its life, customs and culture face the danger of extinction because of the invasion of civilization. Like the Jnanapeeth awardee Odia novelist Gopinath Mohanty who voices the customs, traditions, rituals, social life and exploitation of the marginal aboriginal Parajas inhabiting in Koraput, Pratibha Ray gives voice to the marginalized Bonda tribe and makes them 'audible' (Bande 1) in this novel.

The Bonda is of Austro-asiatic origin and dwells in mostly inaccessible mountain areas of Malkangiri in Koraput district. This is his self-proclaimed land where outsiders dare not enter. His life has altered very little since the Stone Age (Das vi). In the words of the novelist:

Four thousand feet above the gorge where the Machchkund tumbles into the plains, along the mountain ridges and in the valleys on either side, hidden in the jungle, back turned into civilization, locked in battle with nature for thousands of years, a primitive aboriginal society has survived.

Its children call themselves the *remo*, which means "man". But the name given by the plainsmen to the *remo* is "Bonda", which means "naked" or "savage" (p.2).

The light of civilization has not entered the Bonda region. It is their own law which prevails in these mountains. The Bonda owns everything from the sky above to the mountain below. But these are not divided into fragments 'thine' and 'mine' as it is in the plain. They do not have fences separating village from village and caste from caste.

The novel has no central character. But most of it appears as the reflection of Soma Muduli, the patriarch. He is 'the unwritten history of the Bondas', 'the oldest surviving member of the tribe. A living ancestor' (TPL 6). He had once been the naik, the headman, of Mudulipara, the Bonda capital. Now he is the disari (priest and soothsayer) and has grown old and feeble, an ancient 'dokra'.

The Bonda men are aggressive and violent. As Bikram Das points out (vi) they are quickly enraged on flimsy grounds either real or imaginary and pick up quarrels and shoot at the opponent. They roam from one forest to another and one mountain to another 'cradling their deadly weapons' (TPL 2). Hence homicide is common among the Bondas. Every murder has to be avenged and hence bloody dispute across families continues through generations. The killer surrenders to the police in order to escape the revenge-killing by the father or son or brother of the person killed. Soma Muduli survives because he has never killed a man in the hundreds of years or more he has survived.

In the absence of the Bonda man, the Bonda woman takes charge of everything. She is capable of looking after everything because in the Bonda system of marriage, a boy of eight or ten years old is married to a bride of twenty. The wife is more a mother figure looking after her husband, their land and dia (home). Every Bonda sets up a separate dia after marriage: 'They are more mother and son than wife and man. And so the woman looks after everything while the man roams free' (TPL 11). The novelist wonders that perhaps the Bonda man takes shelter under the care of his wife-mother on account of his persistent fear of death; he does not trust anyone.

In Bonda society, the selani, that is, the woman carries most of the burden. Things have remained the same since the beginning. The 'purus' roams while the selani takes charge of the dia (home) and the awn awn (child). She looks after the fields, buys and sells in the market place. The novelist writes:

'When she is five years old she picks up the da to mow grass, to cut firewood and to harvest the crops. While the Bonda uses his arrow to kill, the Bonduni uses her da to sustain' (p.17).

But the purus listens to his selani because he finds a replica of himself in baby 'remo' and believes that the race survives on account of the selani.

The Bonda is inextricably linked to the salap tree: 'The juice of the salap is the life blood as well as death' (TPL. 11). Taking the salap juice, 'sapung', he becomes strong like a tiger, but it drives him mad as well. He is easily angered and he kills others over the ownership of a salap tree.

So the Bonda never mortgages his daughters and salap trees to the sahuakar, the money-lender. Once his daughter is given as a goti, bonded labourer, to the sahuakar, the Bonda loses two industrious hands to the sahuakar. Thereafter his daughter works for the sahuakar and when the selani marries, the sahuakar gets the bride-price. Similarly in Bonda custom a salap tree, once sold or bartered, cannot be redeemed.

Like the Parajas of *Paraja*, the ignorant and illiterate Bondas become gotis of the sahuakars on account of their abject poverty. Once gotis, they cannot extricate themselves from the clutches of the sahuakars because of the tentacles of compound interest.

A five year old Bonda boy puts on ghusi, a tiny loincloth. It is the badge of manhood of the Bonda boy and it allows him to visit the selani dingo, the dormitory of the Bonda girls. The Bonda girls do not sleep in their parents' hut. They sleep in the selani dingo where the Bonda boys from neighbouring villages visit them and woo them. A Bonda girl wraps a short 'ringa', 'a foot wide and three feet long, hand-woven, dyed vivid red, yellow, blue or green, with stripes of different hue, below the navel'(TPL 24) since she is a five-year-old. Her back, buttocks and calves are uncovered. Her bare neck and chest are almost covered under massed strings of beads and her head is shaven.

The Bondas live in abject poverty. They use primitive and wasteful methods of cultivation known as 'podu' cultivation that destroys the land. Their fields yield very less so that they live on leaves, roots and worms to supplement their diet. Their poverty compels them to take loans from the sahuakar and work as gotis for them. There is hardly a Bonda family which has not given away a daughter, son, or father as goti to the sahuakar. Their homes and villages are filthy and insanitary, and their children are malnourished and diseased. The effort of the government to educate them has miserably failed. Their minds have not changed in a thousand years. SitanathSahu comes from Bhubaneswar as the leader of the Bonda Project to implement government measures and to 'help them become civilized, progress into the modern age' (TPL 130). He is genuinely interested in bringing about change among the Bondas. He dresses like a simple villager and tries to speak their language. He is friendly to the Bonda leaders. He meets KharaBabu, the teacher of the Bonda School at Mudulipada. KharaBabu never goes to school, lives in Khairaput and gives pass certificates to Bonda children. He learns that the Bonda Schools function only on paper. Sitanath leaves no stones unturned to win their faith and confidence in order to 'civilize' them and to uplift them. He gets their loans written off and liberates them from the clutches of the sahuakars. He gives employment to Bondas at the Project office. Driven by abject poverty and utter destitution three dhangris, Adibari Toki, Sombari Toki and Mangli Toki join jobs at the Project Office and put on saris and keep long hair. A Bonda custom is broken. No dhangra would marry them. Though the Bonda headmen are scared that it would bring 'bad luck' to the community, they allow it with the condition that the dhangris would return to their traditional shape when they are of age to marry.

The three employed dhangris dream of marrying literate young men from the plain. But their dream is shattered. Made pregnant by a constable, abandoned by him at Jeypore, raped by a drunken truck-driver and his friends, Adibari is lost to the tribe. It is said that Adibari is devoured by a tiger, but her death is not announced by beat of drum. Another Bonda law is broken. Sombari gives up her sari and long hair—the promise of civilization- and marries a ten-

year-old boy of her mother's choice. Mangli educates her younger brother Mangla, who becomes a 'matric-fail', an achievement for a Bonda student. She remains unmarried, clinging to her sari and her native mountain. Another Bonda custom is broken as no woman--unmarried, widowed, single -- remains unmarried in Bonda society.

Government officials, politicians, social workers and journalists throng the Project Office, arrange feasts and report about the number of sari-clad Bondunis growing long hair, seedlings planted and surviving trees--the sign of progress. They send photographs of poverty-stricken Bonda household, rickety children, naked Bondunis, their weapons and tools and receive huge Indian and foreign grants. The sight of naked Bonduni is a feast for their eyes. But the Bondas do not partake of the feast. Whether it is Mudulipara or Bhubaneswar, they attend functions, dance and return hungry or eating something paltry.

Neither babus nor social workers want the progress of the Bondas as it would stop their financial grant and incentive. They get Sithanath transferred and another leader babu is posted. He does not do anything for the uplift of the Bondas. All development works for the Bondas are done on paper only. When a leader comes for inspection the babus take the signatures or thumb-prints of the Bondas on papers in exchange of packets of biris, showing that all development work is done 'satisfactorily.' The Indira Awas built by the government begins to crumble before a year.

The Bondas are politically inferior and economically backward. Pratibha Ray shows faint glimmerings of political awakening among the semi literate Bondas. She exposes lack of genuine interest on the part of the political leaders and the babus representing the Government to uplift the Bondas.

The ministers at the State Assembly and the Parliament make uproar about the death of Budei, BaghaBindhu's first wife who dies from starvation. They are concerned with power-politics. So they battle over giving an appropriate label to the death: 'Was it Death by Starvation or Death through Natural Causes?' (TPL. 279). As the Bondas do not grow 'rice' and 'millet', officially their area cannot be declared 'Drought-affected'. Besides, no Bonda has sold his children or gone on 'forced migration' on account of drought. So the Bonda land is not drought-affected.

A meeting is held to meet the Bondas in order to find out the 'truth' regarding the drought. The Bondas are elated that the Paramount Ruler of the Realm will come to enquire about their problems. Before the meeting, a number of solar lamps are installed and tube-wells are bored. But, neither the lamps nor the tube-wells function. The illiterate Bondas do not understand that they are cheated. But the semi-literate dhangras, young Bonda men, know that there is neither school for their children or medicine for the sick.

When the Bondas arrive at the helipad, the babus stop the dhangras outside the barricades and allow only the elders inside. Pratibha Ray highlights how the young Bondas are treated like beasts by the babus for voicing their grievances against the injustice:

"The Bondas are herded like sheep into a separate enclosure. . .



The dhangras were the target of every one's anger, as they had begun to question everything. They had acquired the language to dispute injustice' (283).

However, the dhangras can listen to their conversation as it is amplified by loudspeakers. The Paramount ruler and the Bondas speak different languages. Taking advantage of it, the babus deliberately misinterpret the questions and answers between them:

"'What is your food?' the Paramount Ruler asked in Hind. 'Do you get enough to eat?' A babu translated the question.

'Yes, mahapru,' Katu replied. 'What have food. We live on roots, yams, leaves, mango kernels, salapfibre, insects and snakes'

The interpreter explained to the Paramount Ruler that nutritious food was available to the Bondas in adequate quantities from a variety of sources"(TPL 283).

The Petty Chieftain explains that it is the traditional food of the Bondas and there is no scarcity of food and a princeling adds: 'One might say their food is better than ours, sir. There is no adulteration!' (TPL 254).

The joke of the petty leader is highlighted by the novelist through the voice of the Opposition member who: 'The Bondas admit that they are living on leaves and insects, and the administration finds this an amusing matter!' (284).

Anyway the Opposition member is also not genuine. Their attitude changes according to their position in the government. The simple BaghaBindhu flares up, seeing his hypocrisy:

'I remember meeting you two years ago. Then you were telling everyone that no children were being sold, no one was dying of hunger; that there was no drought! Why are you saying the opposite now? . . . We Bondas may be killers but we never lie!' (TPL 285).

The sympathies of the novelist lie with the Bondas who are truthful. They are tortured and silenced because they never tell lies and the semi-literate dhangras have learnt to voice their rights. The novelist delves deeper into the cause of differences between the literate people from the plain and the illiterate Bondas. In her words:

'Hatred and deceit were at the root of everything. You proclaim yourself to be what you are not, falsifying your words through your

actions. The Bonda announces himself as he is, does exactly what he claims to be doing. Since the beginning of time, truth and falsehood have been irreconcilable' (287).

The dhangras are beaten and tortured by the gulang (govt.) babus throughout the night. They are released before morning with the warning not to return or else they would be shot dead.

In another instance, the new bus to Mudulipada is of no use to the Bondas for whom it is introduced. Ironically, the passengers who have come to visit the Bonda Mountain resent the presence of the Bondas 'reeking of liquor, and the Bondunis, with their mountains of pots, on the bus' (TPL 288). Despite the request of Somra, Mangla and other dhangras to carry their Raja Soma Muduli, who has been lying under the tree since last night, the driver does not stop the bus. On the contrary, the driver and conductor shout to the dhangras to get off. Enraged, the Bondas shout back. The police arrive and drag the Bondas and Bondunis out at the point of rifles. The bus drives off and the drunken Bondas go on a looting spree. The Bondas and Bondunis ascend the mountain to reach their villages. Somra, Mangla and other dhangras carry Soma Muduli on their bruised shoulders up the mountain slowly.

Soon after, Katu's pregnant wife who was walking alone up the mountain is beaten to death by the police, the contractor's men and the people of Lower Bonda village. Hearing the murder of Chhotli, his step-mother, Somra is furious. The entire tribe is united and vows to take revenge. Instead of showing any sympathy to the Bondas for the brutal murder of Katu's wife, the police arrests Somra on the charge of murdering his step-mother and her unborn child so that he can inherit all of Katu's property. The dhangras protest against the false accusation: 'We Bondas treat all women as our own mothers. And no Bonda has ever killed his mother for property, let alone killed an unborn child!' (TPL 292).

Katu's dream that his educated son would be a 'civilized Arya', 'would become the sarkar and free the Bonda from sorrow' (TPL 293) is shattered. Himself a sahuakar, Katu mortgages his lands to the Dombsahukars, PoduHantala and TankoKhemundi, and borrows money for the bail of Somra. The 'dreaded' sahuakarKatu turns into the Domb'sgoti.

Pratibha Ray questions the so called measures undertaken by the government for 'civilizing' and uplifting the Bondas which turn the free Bondas to gotis: 'Once the Bondas had been free in a slave country; now they were slaves in a free country This was the measure of the tribe's progress' (290).

After getting bail SomraSisa is too grief-stricken to talk to his father, now a goti. Next day, Somra is shocked to see his pregnant elder sister, Sanki, and Adibari Toki's blind sister killed by the collapse of Indira Awas. Somra holds Soma Muduli who allows outsiders to the BondaMountain responsible for the unnatural death of all these women who, like Mother Earth, sustain and continue the Bonda race. He shoots Soma Muduli with his arrow immediately. Before his body comes to rest a gulangbabu shoots him with his rifle. Same night a son is born to Somra's wife, Kinker Toki, piercing the silence of the night. The novel ends with a note of

optimism: 'Kings die; their subjects die, but Man lives on. His struggle continues' (298). The 'new-born sun' appears out of the darkness.

In this epic-novel Pratibha Ray gives voice to the marginalized, voiceless and exploited aboriginal Bonda tribe of Odisha. They are economically, socially and politically backward. The novelist puts the blame on the apathy of the educated men from the plain. In her words:

'The British had gone but their successors had proved to be no more understanding or sympathetic. The army of officials and petty bureaucrats in the plains below were totally apathetic: people like KharaBabu, who had lived among the Bondas and could have helped them, were interested only in exploiting them'(138).

The Bondas have their own primeval culture, traditions and rituals which, paradoxically, face the danger of extinction when they are 'civilized'. In the words of the novelist:

'It was the government's policy to preserve the Bonda's traditions and beliefs. But there were a thousand hands conspiring in the destruction of those traditions: those of officials, politicians, social workers and journalists' (179).

In spite of this, there is hope for survival symbolized by the birth of baby 'Soma'.

Endnote

TPL- The Primal Land

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