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## **From Resistance to Reclamation: Representing Indigenous Concerns in Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja***

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### **Abstract:**

*Paraja* by Gopinath Mohanty portrays the life and struggles of the Paraja tribe in Koraput, Orissa, amidst changing socio-economic conditions. The work highlights the social, political, and economic exploitation of the tribal population of the region by various external and internal forces which disrupt the harmonious life of the native populace. These tribes share a symbiotic relationship with nature, away from the adulteration of the 'modern' civilization, and their paintings, songs, festivities, and other art forms represent their rich heritage and culture. However, the capitalist forces attempt to encroach upon the tribal land, consequently leading to the erosion of the tribal way of life. For a long time, the concerns of these Indigenous communities have been ignored, silenced, or at most underrepresented by mainstream academia, which often showcases tribal life through a homogenizing Nationalistic perspective, thus enforcing the existing stereotypes. Hence, the ethnographic narratives serve as a medium to delve deeper into the issues of identity, loss of community, culture, and the conflict over the control of natural resources between the external authorities and the natural inhabitants of the land. Keeping into account the above premise, the current study aims to draw attention towards the unheard narratives of the tribal populace.

This study utilizes Subaltern Studies as a theoretical framework to bring to the fore the non-



stereotypical, non-canonized, unheard narratives of ‘others’ that have been relegated to the margins by the dominant discourse. It attempts to create a dialogic space for acceptance and understanding of alternative cultures and narratives, thus promoting the ideals of relationality and plurality, with a special reference to Gopinath Mohanty’s seminal work *Paraja*.

**Keywords: Paraja, tribe, culture, exploitation, subaltern.**

### **Introduction:**

A subaltern refers to a person or a group of people who have been socially, politically, or geographically marginalized. Antonio Gramsci coined the term ‘subaltern’ in his article “Notes on Italian History”, later published as a part of the collection *Prison Notebooks* (written between 1929 and 1935). The term is primarily used to refer to the sections of society under the hegemony of the ruling elite class. In India, subalterns mainly include women, Shudras, Dalits, rural migrant labourers, and various tribal groups. Dr. Md Siddique Hossain posits, “Historically, Dalits, Adivasis, and females have been marginalised in Indian society. These disadvantaged communities articulate their distress and intricate circumstances via their literature, including the disintegration of familial systems, extreme poverty, degradation, and demanding living conditions” (2).

Historically, the Adivasis in India enjoyed autonomy and followed a distinct lifestyle. They exerted a certain amount of control over their lands, followed their traditions and customs, and developed a specific mode of economy. They had their own governance and conflict resolution system, based on customary laws and traditions. This autonomy allowed them to preserve their cultural heritage and way of life. However, the situation changed due to British colonial forces' interference. The Adivasis got sidelined and were restricted to their territories. The colonial administration attempted to encroach upon the tribal land by imposing feudalist systems such as the *Jagirdari* and the *Zamindari* systems. As a result, the lands that traditionally belonged to the Adivasi peasants were rapidly made the legal property of the landlords, who tried to exploit them and earn maximum profits. Moreover, due to these discriminatory policies, the Adivasis were gradually deprived of their traditional lands and resources. Hence, they were forced to work as bonded labourers for the zamindars and, in some cases, even coerced to give up their lands. Dr. Ruchika Chauhan states, “Under the colonial economic order, the tribals were



uprooted from their natural habitat and vicious cycle of greed, corruption, exploitation and malice ate up into the very vitals of the rich cultural traditions of the tribals” (1473).

The policies of land dispossession by the colonial rulers led to several revolts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as the Bhumji Rebellion of 1767–1833 and the Santhal Rebellion of 1855–56. However, in several cases, economic deprivation triggered internal migrations within India, and the Adivasis were forced to become subalterns in their lands. Anthropologist and educationist Dr. Nirmal Minz rightfully opines:

The Adivasis generally have lived through exploitative, oppressive and suppressive social and political structures in India. Mostly, they have been alienated from their land both by ‘greedy’ caste communities and by overzealous governments, which takes away tribal land for mining and big industries. Thus, poverty and estrangement from the means of their livelihood (land) threaten Adivasi communities in India. Along with this there is a serious threat to their traditional culture and worldview from the forces of both modernization and Hinduization. (Minz, 12)

Dr. Minz hints towards a potential erosion of indigenous tribal culture and worldview, due to the influence and dominance of caste-based social hierarchies. Furthermore, illegal mining and unregulated industrialization pose a serious threat to the indigenous communities, often leading to their subjugation, such as loss of livelihood, displacement, and consequent poverty. Hence, the current study aims to investigate the concerns of the native tribes of India, specifically the Paraja tribe, with special reference to Gopinath Mohanty’s *Paraja*. (1945).

Dr. Gopinath Mohanty is an Odia writer and the winner of the first-ever Sahitya Akademi Award (1955) for his novel *Amrutara Sanatana* (1947). He is also the first recipient from Odisha of the highest literary award of the country, Jnanpith Award (1974) for his epic fiction, *Matimatata* (1964). He is known for his apt depiction of the Orissan landscape, life pattern, culture, and heritage, including those in the tribal land through his literary texts *Amrutara Sanatana* and *Paraja* (1945).

Gopinath Mohanty’s *Paraja* is an acclaimed novel of modern Indian fiction, first published in Odia in 1945 and later translated to English by Bikram K. Das in 1987. It is an ethnographic study of the Paraja tribe residing in the mountainous hills of the Koraput district of Odisha (then Orissa). The work traces the story of a tribal patriarch named Sukru Jani and his family, who live a peaceful life in the forested landscape of Odisha, with their natural



surroundings being an intrinsic part of their lives. The work perfectly portrays the tribal way of life, including their songs, ceremonies, and traditions, as well as the eventual downfall of their harmonious lives due to the advent of outside forces. Mohanty has spent several years in Odisha and has a close affinity with the tribals living in the forested areas of the region. Hence, through his literary work *Paraja*, he aims to give an insight into the concerns of these Indigenous tribes.

### **Paraja tribes : Origin**

One of the largest Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Odisha, the Paraja tribe is also present in certain regions of Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, and Assam. The tribe, which views southern Odisha as their homeland, is mostly found in the region's hills and valleys. The Koraput district is home to most of the tribe, with Nabrangpur, Malkangiri, Rayagada, and Kalahandi following closely after. The word "Paraja," which is typically pronounced as "Parja" or "Paroja" in the regional Odia dialect, is an impure form of the Sanskrit word "Prajā," which refers to the common people or subjects of a specific state or nation. Additionally, it refers to the localized form of the Odia word "Prajā," which denotes common people, peasants, or Royat. It is frequently distinguished from the former ruling chiefs called the 'Raja' or 'zamindars' in the pre-Independence period.

Several ethnographers consider Paraja to be the offspring of the Dravidians, and these tribals often refer to themselves as 'Bastaria' as they have migrated from the Bastar region of Chattisgarh (then Madhya Pradesh). Their vernacular language is *Parji*, a Dravidian tongue, blended with elements of local Odia and Telugu dialects. However, in the undivided Koraput district, the common language spoken is 'Desia'. In Koraput, the Paraja live with other communities like the Rana, the Paika, the Mali, the Domb, the Gadaba, and the Kondh. These tribes predominantly practice a subsistence economy and coexist peacefully with the natural environment. They rely on the use of natural resources to fulfill their basic needs through hunting and gathering, cultivation of seasonal crops (through both settled and shifting cultivation), and developing small kitchen gardens. The tribe has a rich aesthetic tradition, and various festivals and ceremonies are celebrated across the year. Their affinity with nature is beautifully depicted in their folk songs, rituals, beliefs, and superstitions. The ancient Paraja ballads, which blend love, romance, and mother nature, are a beautiful representation of their intimate relationship with the natural world:



To the rhyme of the maize that is fried  
Or the maize that is boiled,  
I fashion my song;  
O my darling who keeps her word,  
Lovely is your nose-ring of gold.  
My dungudunga wears only a brass string  
But it makes exquisite music.  
Like a daughter crying out her heart  
When her widowed mother is taken away  
By another husband,  
I pine and weep for you.  
O my darling, do keep your word,  
Save me, for I die with your name on my lips,  
O Jili! (Mohanty, 18)

### **Life of Paraja**

The Parajas have been an inseparable part of their natural surroundings until the advent of external forces that attempted to impair their tranquil lives. As seen at the beginning of the text, Sukru Jani is sitting peacefully around the fire with his family, including his two sons, Mandia and Tikra, and his two daughters, Jili and Bili. There's laughter and happiness all around, as is beautifully depicted in the text: "Sukru Jani pulls out his half-smoked cigar from the niche between his ear and head, lights it again, and sucks the smoke in. A sense of peace and repose emanates from the quiet evening and the open hills and fills his being as he inhales" (Mohanty, 7).

The above-stated lines are an apt portrayal of the secure and fulfilled lives of these hill folks before the undue intervention of external forces, which eventually led to their downfall. These external forces range from the forest authorities, who tend to impose disproportionate taxes; the moneylender, who gives out loans to the helpless villagers at high rates of interest; the Judiciary which is practically inaccessible to the locals; and lastly, the Government authorities, who support the flourishing of this corrupt and unjust system. The common Paraja folk attempt



to showcase enough resilience/patience in these testing times but eventually retaliate when things go downhill.

### **Paraja Tribe: Exploitation**

In the introduction to the text, Bikram K. Das opines, “Sukru Jani is not merely the primitive tribesman ensnared by the predatory moneylender from the city; he is also quintessential *man*, raging heroic but futile war against a hostile universe, struggling ceaselessly to accept and adjust.” (vi)

The aforesaid lines underscore the incessant exploitation faced by the tribals at the hands of materialistic civilization. The Forest Guard, who should ideally be protecting the flora and fauna of the region he has been posted to, instead uses the opportunity to his benefit and resorts to corruption and bribery. Though his rank was quite insignificant in the official hierarchy, he was the only visible official to the tribals in these deep jungles and thus the tribals held him in awe and fear. He exercised his power and influence by collecting taxes from the hill folk, often undue, such as plough tax, timber tax, and honey tax. However, his exploitation was not limited to monetary benefits alone. He also preyed upon the tribal women and threatened unforeseen consequences in the event of refusal. He eyed Sukru Jani’s young daughter Jili, and upon Sukru Jani’s refusal to pawn his daughter, he became the catalyst in the saga of Sukru Jani’s destruction. The abuse of power by the forest officials is aptly described by the character of Kau Paraja: “We just can’t afford to displease our officials. When they ask us for something, it has to be produced—even if it’s our wives and daughters; or else they’d have us all in handcuffs on some excuse or another in no time at all. And the whole tribe would pray for one man’s obstinancy” (Mohanty, 30).

When Sukru Jani was penalized for felling trees on the forest land, he could not fathom why he was being punished for cutting the trees, which are an intrinsic part of their existence and for which due permission had been sought. He falls prey to the treachery of the forest officer, and his fellow tribals, despite their good intentions, are unable to help him.

By presenting the contrasting characters of Sukru Jani and the forest guard, the author also reflects on the innocence of tribals, trusting easily and untouched by the evils of modern civilization. On the other hand, the forest guard is a representation of the greed and manipulation of the outside world. Academician and critic Lakshminath Rabha duly suggests, “Poverty creeps



into the lives of the Paraja tribe with the collapse of their traditional mode of production and economic sustenance and it augments the germination of greed, treachery and disbelief in a social fabric based on community living and social cooperation” (7).

The exploitation faced by the tribals is manifold. To pay off the penalty imposed by the Forest Guard, Sukru Jani turns to the moneylender Ram Bisoi and agrees to work under him as a ‘goti’, a kind of modern-day slavery where the goti is forced to work at the moneylender’s farms, and a part of the debt is written off every year. But owing to Sahukar’s greed and manipulation, often the debt is never closed, and the cycle of drudgery continues forever.

The text provides a detailed description of Sahukar’s house as well as a poignant portrayal of the huts of the innocent villagers that lay just behind Sahukar’s ‘kingdom’, highlighting the irony of life. The grandeur of Sahukar’s mansion is deeply contrasted with the houses of the miserable tribesmen who now work for him. The ragged, mud-walled huts are in shambles, the roofs drooped, tattered rags hung from the ceiling, and the children wailed in hunger the whole day.

The metaphor of the Spider’s web aptly describes Sahukar’s nature and his evil intentions: “From every hill the red tracks came down and converged at the Sahukar’s house like the threads in a spider’s web, and along these tracks came many a tribesman from the remotest hills” (Mohanty, 123).

The Sahukar is a symbolic representation of the invasion of capitalist forces, which impinge upon the tribal lands, thus eventually leaving the indigenous population landless and at the mercy of the authorities. Bikram K. Das aptly states, “Here the exploited is a family of the tribals; the exploiter, outwardly a non-tribal moneylender, is in reality the entire ethos of a materialistic civilization seeking to encroach upon and engulf a primordial and elemental way of life.” (vi)

According to a report by the distinguished Ecological Economist Joan Martinez-Alier, Odisha is a victim of ‘Internal Colonialism’. It is abundant in fossil fuels and minerals, including Iron and Bauxite ore, dust, and earth, all of which are highly valued for industrial as well as hydropower projects. However, industrial progress and ‘development’ often come at the expense of the loss of Indigenous lives and livelihoods, large-scale displacement, and, above all, the destruction of the delicate balance of nature. Moreover, in many cases, the local and state administrations play a significant role in the execution of these projects without providing





enough compensation to the displaced. Thus, the unequal eco-exchange, internal colonialism, and extraction of minerals while ignoring the long-term impact on the environment led to the gradual erosion of the tribal communities of the region.

### **Paraja Tribe: Rebellion**

The local populace revolted against the capitalist forces, resulting in various armed and unarmed movements, such as the Kashipur Struggle (began in 1996), Vedanta versus Niyamgiri Hill (2004–present), the movement in Mayurbhanj (1949), and a struggle in Kalinganagar against the development of the Tata Steel Plant. A few of these movements were successful, such as the landmark judgment by the Hon'ble Supreme in the Vedanta vs Niyamgiri Hill Case. The court ruled in favour of the Dongra Kondh tribe and recognized their rights over the Niyamgiri hills, thus declaring that mining could proceed only with the consent of the Indigenous tribes. However, in most cases, the tribals were displaced from their lands and had to make peace with the paltry compensation offered.

On a similar note, in *Paraja*, the tribals resorted to several forms of resistance to reclaim their land and restore their identity. Mandia begins brewing and selling liquor illegally, despite his father Sukru Jani's displeasure. Furthermore, despite offering the complete loan amount, the moneylender Ram Bisoi refuses to settle the land issue. As a result, Sukru Jani and his family are forced to approach the court for justice, a place about which they knew nothing. "But how did one 'go to court'? They knew nothing about these matters; they had only heard that people 'went to court' and 'fought cases' and either won or lost" (Mohanty, 339). The tribesmen lived in constant fear of court, and the stories they heard only added to their worries. The justice systems and courts are representations of colonial modernity that are typically incomprehensible to the common public. Especially for the innocent tribals, the lack of understanding of the outside world and the ways of these complex systems become a curse. The corrupt systems of the world—the petition writer, the court officials, and even the judge—together result in Sukru Jani's defeat. As a final discourse, the tribals again decide to plead with the Sahukar to show some mercy. Sukru Jani wails, "Sahukar, you have enough money and land; give us back our bowl of rice, we beg you, and Dharmu will reward you" (Mohanty, 372)! Tikra and Mandia too plead, but to no avail. The impending anger against the injustice of the Sahukar and his evil remarks about Jili and Bili flare up the tribals and they finally turn defiant and strike the Sahukar



with complete might: “In a flash he raised his axe and brought it down on Sahukar’s head. Immediately, the two others joined in. The Sahukar fell like an axed tree, and Mandia went on dealing blow after blow, shouting: ‘You didn’t enjoy the land! you didn’t enjoy the land!’” (Mohanty, 373)

After ensuring unbearable exploitation, the Parajas eventually rose to reclaim their rights. This defiance is part of a long-standing struggle for self-determination, land rights, and cultural preservation against systematic marginalization.

### **Conclusion:**

The Dalit and Adivasi communities have faced substantial discrimination and expropriation owing to the repressive social and political structures in the country. The Paraja tribal group, which earlier had a rich culture and peaceful co-existence with the natural surroundings, were compelled to surrender their territories and means of living owing to ‘modern’ developmental policies, leading to a loss of Paraja heritage and way of life.

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