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Exploring the Adivasis and their Heritage in the Literary Works of Ramanika Gupta

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Abstract:

The term "Adivasi" literally means "Original Inhabitants" and is derived from the Sanskrit words "adi" meaning "beginning" or "origin" and "vasi" meaning "dweller." This definition makes it quite apparent that any species inhabiting our land since the beginning are referred to as tribal. Indigenous communities are currently facing challenges related to language and identity, separatism, cultural dominance, and underdevelopment because of being forcibly marginalized or feeling alienated in their own country. Ramnika Gupta lent her voice to these voiceless people through her writings. The purpose of Ramnika Gupta's book is to provide individuals with a means to express themselves. This article discusses her two works "Who is the tribal"(Adivasi kaun) and "The Tribal Voice of India"(bharath ka adivasi swar). It discusses about numerous unexplored facets of tribal life that were previously unknown to people and on the lives of indigenous people, its significance for the society.

Keywords: Adivasi, Culture, Identity, Ramnika Gupta.

Overview

From its inception in the 19th century, social themes have been a major focus in modern Indian writing generally and Hindi literature. Dalit and Adivasi literature, produced by authors from a low caste and tribal background, has been rather popular in recent years as Hindi genres. Economically most marginalized communities in India are Dalit and Adivasis. By reverberating the social, political, economic history, ethnographic identity, ecological reality, a whole picture of



life and beyond, literature reflects the very pulse of a nation. In the framework of India, the portrayal of Indian life/literature would be inadequate if we exclude Tribal literature together with "mainstream" literature since Tribal writing defines the soul of India's plurilingual-pluratorial existence. Dalit writing, characterized by the author's social identity, has been pushed as a significant genre in Hindi literature since roughly 1992. Before discussing more about the emergence of Dalit Literature we need to understand the origin and meaning of the word 'Adivasi'.

The word "Adivasi means "Original Inhabitants," which is coined from two words Adi meaning 'beginning or origin'; and Vasi meaning dweller', thus literally meaning 'beginning inhabitant', which makes it clear that if there are any sect that has been living in our country since time immemorial, then it is called tribal. The term Adivasi is a modern Sanskrit word specifically coined in the 1930s by tribal political activists to give a differentiated indigenous identity. Thakkar Bapa used the word to refer to inhabitants of the forest in the 1930s. The word 'Adivasi' is synonymous with the same lineage – 'Atvika' and 'Vanvasi' which are the oldest names. And the name Arvachin is 'Scheduled Tribe' which our policymakers have provided in the Constitution.”¹

The vocalisation of underprivileged groups marks the most significant development of the twenty-first century. Marginalized communities i.e. Dalits, women and tribals. This assertiveness is visible everywhere in society, literature, culture and politics. Certainly, it has the utmost importance in the current context. Because the fight for identity and existence that has found space here has remained almost untouched in previous literature. In this form, the most important discussion of the present era is the tribal studies. Tribal discourse is not a theory in itself. It is a continuous process that works to take the discussed topic to a specific goal through many dimensions. Ramnika Gupta, has niched her name in Hindi literature by giving voice to these voiceless through her works. She is a renowned Indian politician, author and activist who has worked for tribal rights campaigners. Ramanika Gupta has lived among the tribals for a long time; hence she is well acquainted with the social, religious, political, economic, and cultural life of the tribals. She has raised all the sensitive issues in her literature and has shown the readers her respect for the tribals. Her works has advocated for changing the approach.

Ramnika Gupta was a former trade union leader, politician, writer, editor, and supporter of tribal rights. She was born on 22nd April, 1930, in Punjab. She passed away at the age of 88 in Delhi on March 26, 2019. She was a labor rights, women's rights, Dalit, and tribal rights campaigner who



worked mostly with Jharkhand's coal mine workers. She released a collection of stories called *Bahu Juthai* and a novel *Sita Mausi*. Her writings in Dalit Tribal novels such as *Adivasi kaun*, *Adivasi sahitya yatra*, and *Adivasi samaj aur Sahitya* are also considered canonical. Ramanika Gupta was honored with the 'Lifetime Adivasi Bandhu' award by the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ICITP) Institute in 2011. From her books I have selected "Who is the tribal (*Adivasi kaun*)" and "The Tribal Voice of India (*bharath ka adivasi swar*)" which highlight Adivasi identity and culture. Let us now take a quick look at these two books.

Who is the tribal (Adivasi kaun) - Who is the tribal? What is their culture like? Which religion does she support? What is their real identity? In which category have they been included under the caste system? In what form are they mentioned in history and Indian folklore? What is the perception of non-tribals on all these questions? Answers to all these questions have been given by the tribal writers in this book. The tribal community is saddened by the so-called civilized society's interpretation of the tribal society as monsters, demons, devils, and this disgusting thinking of theirs. They oppose the conspiracy of the mainstream. In this book, tribal writers have also expressed their views on the change in the condition of tribals, education, system, and medium of education.

The tribal voice of India (bharath ka adivasi swar) - has been protesting against the conspiracy of the Diku Samaj, a silent tribal society for centuries, now it is preparing itself to face every challenge. In this book, tribal literature is taking steps to oppose the conspiracy of the bureaucracy. Knowing this, people have started campaign to expose the reality. He is vocalizing his own voice to make the community face to face with its real form which reflects boldness, fighting spirit, collectivity, independence, honesty and truthfulness. This book will introduce the society to many new truths.

India is a country of different ethnic groups, civilizations, cultures, languages, races, etc., so there will inevitably be differences in their social, cultural, and political aspects also. One of these groups is the tribal group. The tribal people are currently fighting to eradicate their identity since they have either been proclaimed strangers by force or have become strangers in their own home, land, and nation. Long-standing problems that tribal people have faced include linguistic and identity crises, separatism, cultural monopoly, and backwardness. The major society's exploitation policy has had the greatest impact on the tribe's existence, but there is always conflict among them.



Since ancient times, Dalits and tribals have always been deceived and persecuted by external powers like Aryans, heroes and kings of mythological texts like Mahabharata and Ramayana, Mughal rulers, Manuwadi system and its supporters the British, native kings, landlords, capitalists, moneylenders etc. Yes, everyone has tried to establish their dominance by suppressing them. An attempt has been made to erase their identity and existence by not giving place to their contribution and history in Indian history and literature. Today the tribals are being called anti-development by the mainstream society. According to Ramanika Gupta – “The tribal is revolting against the new system because this system is destroying the life-giving forces and sources of both his existence and identity. It is forcing him to migrate, get displaced, and face unemployment and this is why the silence of the forest is breaking.”²

If we talk about the Bodo tribe of Assam in North-East India, we find that since prehistoric times, there have been cultural attacks on the language, culture and lifestyle in the state of Assam, which hurt the Bodo tribes there, as a result, this tribe is living in many areas. Have lost their dialect and culture. In the words of Kamleshwar, a renowned Hindi literature writer – “Due to cultural interference, except some primitive tribal groups in the South like Toda, Kota, Banjara, Lambadi, etc., almost all the other tribal groups started adjusting to the regional culture of their respective states. especially in terms of language.”³

Language encompasses culture, civilization, and ideas; it introduces one to conventions, folklore, and other aspects of daily life. As a result, to eliminate the tribal civilization, foreign cultures are currently focusing their efforts mostly on its language, which is killing out innumerable languages every day and threatening the tribe’s continued survival. In this regard, Ramanika Gupta says that - “Even the culture of the people whose language is snatched is not saved, their dances are seen from different eyes in these strange settlements, hence they are also becoming limited. Where they do not have 'Sarna'(religion), new gods are being imposed on them. Their culture is either being appropriated or destroyed.”⁴

To understand any society, we must first thoroughly examine its social, cultural, and religious structures. Tribal culture, one of the many cultures that have been assimilated into Indian culture, has its own unique features. Tribal culture shows itself to be superior to other cultures because of its unique features. According to Dr. R. Vashubh, “I define culture as the entire complex world that encompasses knowledge, beliefs, arts, moral values, customs, and any other potential habits



that man may acquire as a member of society.”⁵ Therefore, we can classify our ideas, behaviors, festivals, customs, traditions, and so on as part of our culture. Our ideals and culture are tightly connected. C.R. Vijayo and Ratnakar Bhangra both state that tribal culture “has its own unique identity.” Among the many things that set tribal culture apart from all other civilizations are their strong relationship and love of nature, as well as gender equality, caste equality, participation, cooperation, collectivism, and fraternity. In tribal cultures, man’s life is quite basic. The ‘live and let live’ mentality underpins their practical one”⁶ The lifestyle, values, good and bad habits, marriage, religion, clan, traditions, customs, etc. that make up a tribal society. Tribal culture differs greatly from mainstream civilization. Tribal culture is entirely centered around nature and our relationship to it. As a result, there are no religious texts, gurus, or deity temples in this society. Instead, the religion practiced by the tribe is an antiquated one that is closely tied to their way of life, superstitions, and customs that keep them connected to the natural world. Ramanika states that “tribal culture is the oldest known human civilization. In addition to providing a window into the social and cultural norms of the early phases of human civilization, this society’s folktales and legends also offer us a glimpse into the primeval man. It also transmits a captivating legacy of human hopes and expectations as well as imaginative flight.”⁷

Culture is considered an important part of our society, culture remains actively present in the society through our festivals and dances. Mainly tribal culture inspires us to live a collective life. Tribal culture teaches us to be free from jealousy, hatred, lies, violence etc., and teaches us to live life with love. Song, music and dance are an integral part of tribal culture.

According to Bahru Sonawane – “To remove the fatigue after a whole day’s wandering, a fun gathering is organized in dim light. In that music festival, forgetting the body consciousness, tribal men, women, children, young men and women and elders collectively dance, sing and preserve their cultural values. These values are the special feature of their collective life. This cultural ethos of not just one but many such tribal generations has been inspiring their group consciousness. Their cultural uniqueness is created from within itself. This cultural uniqueness is the cornerstone of their group life.”⁸

Another specialty of tribal dance is that married women cannot participate in the dances performed on their Teej-festivals and once an unmarried woman participates in the dance, she has to participate for three consecutive years, it is not a violation of this rule. If this happens for some



reason then it is considered inauspicious in this society. Tribal folk dances are mostly performed in a circular or circular shape. These dances are performed on special occasions such as weddings, religious festivals, Teej-festivals, births, new harvests, on any joyous occasion, moonlit night, travel etc. These folk dances are sometimes performed with musical instruments like drums and sometimes without them, just in physical postures.

They have another dance in which the Khasi man(hill men) dances in a circle with a sword and the women dance inside this circle. This dance gives us an indication that a Khasi man will always be ready to protect his society or the entire women's society. Women's respect is the main characteristic of Khasi society. J.S. Shangpilang says "Other women of the world have been seen struggling for women's freedom since 1975, whereas Khasi women are born with freedom."⁹Folk songs, folk dances, and folk tales have their special importance in tribal culture, tribal life is incomplete without dance, songs, and music.

Music is an important part of the life of the Mizo tribe (Mizoram), the Mizo people have been creating various musical tunes for centuries. On the occasion of many festivals, these people keep dancing and singing all night, even after the death of someone, they sing a condolence song which is called 'Khoharhla' in Mizo language. Because of their love for music, people call the state of Mizoram as 'The State of Music'.

Teej and festivals also have their own importance in tribal culture. India's Bhil tribe, known as a big tribe, looks at the festival of Holi from a different perspective, in mainstream society it is celebrated for the victory of good over evil, the relationship between Prahlad and Holika is that of aunt and nephew but in the tribal society, Prahlad and Holika is seen as brother and sister. On the occasion of this festival, Bhil people play two types of plays (religious purpose and social awareness) in which the woman cannot participate, rather the role of the woman is played by the man. The men participating in this play give up the consumption of meat and alcohol fifteen days in advance. Bodo tribe celebrates Kartivhu festival, Maghvihu festival, and Bohagbihu festival, among these Kherai Puja has the most importance. In which their biggest deity Bathou Barai is worshipped, and is celebrated several times a year.

Fishing is their first hobby for which community programs are also organized. Weaving and rearing of silk-producing insects i.e. silk production are the main parts of their culture. Sericulture is considered to be their biggest household industry and, in a way, it is also the main means of



strengthening their economy. It aims to showcase one's culture through arts like embroidery, painting, weaving, etc. These arts have great importance in the life of women, a woman proficient in these arts is seen with utmost respect.

Teej festivals play an important role in the life of the Santhal tribe, known as the largest tribe of Jharkhand. All the festivals and festivals of these primitive wild tribes living in the lap of nature are based on nature, such as: Magha Parva, Baha Parva, Rohani Parva, Asadiya Parva, Gomah Parva, Janatad Parva, Sohrai Parva, Dansay Parva, Sakrat Parva, Pahad Puja etc. Magha Parva is celebrated between the months of January and February when new leaves appear on the trees, without performing this puja no Santhali plucks the leaves of the tree. Baha Parva is celebrated on the arrival of spring while Asadiya is celebrated in the month of Asadh to celebrate the arrival of greenery all around.

“Life is full of dance and song from birth to death. The valuable heritage of their culture inspires them to move forward smilingly in the journey of struggle. Dance and song are the basic elements of their health.”¹⁰

Their main food is made from a mixture of jowar, maize, kudai and kutki. Their children and old women all consume alcohol. There is a strange custom in Mongol tribes – all the unmarried men of the house sleep together in one room, and no woman is prohibited from entering this room. These people do not consume milk, they believe that if they drink milk then the children of the animals remain hungry, the milk of a mother has the right of her child and only from it he get life, hence One cannot keep the child hungry by consuming milk. Like the Gond tribes, these people are also fond of tattooing. Among these people, it is customary to perform the last rites of a deceased person on a high platform.

‘Hadiya’ has a lot of importance in the cultural life of the tribals, they use it on every occasion like for hospitality, worship, marriage ceremony, as a wage, to relieve fatigue, in the rites of birth and death. It is also used a lot on many festivals, without Hadiya any work seems incomplete. Even in the rituals related to birth and death, tribal culture is quite different from the mainstream society. At the birth of the baby, the boy (son) is named after his grandparents and the girl is named after her maternal grandmother. Similarly, there are rituals related to death and Shradha which are completely different from the mainstream culture.



'Gotra' has great importance in tribal culture, these people cannot marry in the same Gotra, they look at people belonging to the same Gotra as brothers and sisters. Contrary to mainstream thinking, this society addresses Surya as a woman, especially in Arunachal Pradesh, the land of the Sun. In this way, tribal culture is important from many points of view, at present the mainstream society is greatly influenced by their simplicity and their close relationship with nature.

Bahru Sonawane explains how tribal culture has impacted the mainstream society- "Today many people have developed love for our culture. It is becoming fashionable for them to come among us on Saturdays and Sundays and showcase the culture. They try to protect the devotees and tantriks among us. They try to protect our baskets, strings and mantras. Our culture is not just this. Therefore, it is even more important to clarify what we need to protect from our culture and what we don't."¹¹

Conclusion

Tribal society values the entire living world and rejects markets and consumerist cultures. However, mainstream society is forcibly imposing external cultural values and distorting their culture. As per Ramanika Gupta, "When a people's culture is destroyed, their identity is also destroyed."¹² Tribal culture teaches us to love and respect nature and our ancestors, tribals also look at other religions and beliefs with respect like their own, we need to learn from them as well as their culture, language, traditions, customs. -There is a need to study customs, religion, ideology, lifestyle, food habits, beliefs, superstitions, folk culture, folk literature, myths etc. so that we can change our attitude towards them. Our effort should be to have a feeling of love and affection towards them and to express sympathy and empathy.

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