

REPRESENTATION OF SUBALTERN VOICES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN TRIBAL LITERATURE: A STUDY

SAYAR SINGH CHOPRA

Research Scholar, University of Delhi, Delhi, India. Email: sayar2020@gmail.com

Abstract:

The main thematic concern of the present research paper is to discuss the conditions of contemporary tribal people in our society through select literary fiction. Subaltern is 'of an inferior rank', refers to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class. The word subaltern specially denotes the lower classes, oppressed people at the margins of a society and social group who are struggling against hegemonic globalization. The voice of subaltern, a by-product of social, economic, religious conditions of historical Indian society, attempts to expose the experience of discrimination, poverty and human rights violation of lower class in contemporary India. Subaltern writers' prime concern is to raise voice against the injustice and inequality in social and economic domain. Gayatri C. Spivak says in her article "Can the subaltern speak", the subaltern has no history and they cannot speak out, subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. In this research paper deals with the dynamics of gender discrimination in contemporary Indian tribal society. Our country is rich with a diversity of religions, arts, customs, races, traditions, and languages. On the other side Indian tribal literature is a document of life experiences of the marginal section. It is also a medium of expression of experiences that has been faced throughout the life in the form of excommunication, marginalization, exploitation and humiliation for centuries in the Indian caste and class-ridden society. These experiences are expressed in the contemporary Indian tribal literary fiction. Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*, Mahasweta Devi's *Dust on the Road*, Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*, and Hari Ram Meena's *When Arrows Were Heated Up* are select for this research paper.

Keywords: Tribes, Subaltern, Gender, Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*, Mahasweta Devi's *Dust on the Road*, Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* and Hari Ram Meena's *When Arrows Were Heated Up*.

INTRODUCTION:

Subaltern is 'of an inferior rank', refers to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class. The voice of subaltern, a by-product of social, economic, religious conditions of historical Indian society, attempts to expose the experience of discrimination, poverty and human rights violation of lower class in contemporary India. Subaltern writers' prime concern is to raise voice against the injustice and inequality in social and economic domain. The term 'Subaltern' owes its original to Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist writer, who used the term for the proletarian as subaltern meaning a class having no voice in power structure. Gramsci says that in the social life order there are two power categories the ruler and the ruled in our human society. The Subaltern Historians originally started as an Indian version of "history told from below" approach of the west.

The literal meaning of the word 'Subaltern' as given in the "Oxford Dictionary" is any officer in the British army who is lower in rank than a captain. So the term subaltern signifies subordination and Gramsci attached a special significance to this military term by incorporating peasant's workers and other groups denied access to hegemonic power. According to the subaltern school written documents, Indian history has always been

dominated by power. It has originated as an ideological product of the ruling class. According to Ludden:

The original substance of *Subaltern Studies* emerged from work-in progress in the late seventies. Eleven authors in the first three volumes-Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Gautam Bhadra, Dipesh Chakrabarty, N.K. Chandra, Partha Chatterjee, Arvind N. Das, David Hardiman, Stephen Henningham, Gyanendra Pandey, and Sumit Sarkar were doing close empirical work in social, economic, and political history (Ludden 8).

Gramsci says that in the social order there are two power categories - the ruler and the ruled. The ruled have no voice in the power structure, being a less privileged class and also because they lack means of production factory tools and equipment's raw material and the conditions of working:

In this project, historians and post-colonial critics stand together against colonial modernity to secure a better future for subaltern peoples, learning to hear them, allowing them to speak, talking back to powers that marginalize them, documenting their past (Gramsci 13).

However, the first issue of the Subaltern studies series, Ranajit Guha extends this term to characterize subalternity as the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, office and in any other way:

In the first four volumes of Subaltern Studies, twenty essays treat peasant, worker, and tribal struggles; in the next six volumes, only five. The "subaltern classes, specifically peasants" gave way in practice to the textuality of colonialism and resistance (Guha 12).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian literary critic proposes that the subaltern is a group of people who have been excluded from the centre of the society and their voices are unheard and lost under the bondage of colonialism. Where every human being must find liberty, honour, security and freedom from intimidation by the powerful elements of society. Anger, tribulations, shame, slavery, optimism and endless hope for better tomorrow is also the subject matter of subaltern voice. Spivak used the distinction in Marx's statement about the peasantry 'They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented, to examine the dynamics of the Subaltern 'Voice' and representation. The representation of the subalterns is always a controversial issue for its authenticity. The subaltern are represented by the others voice especially by the writers and the historians. The Subaltern remains silent always in the history of the nation.

Homi K. Bhabha a post-colonial critic emphasized the importance of social power relations in defining subaltern social groups as oppressed, racial minorities whose social presence was

crucial to the self-definition of the majority group: as such subaltern social groups, nonetheless, also are in a position to subvert the authority of the social groups who hold hegemonic power. (Bhabha n. pag.)

Subaltern writers' prime concern is to raise voice against the injustice and inequality in social and economic domain. The phenomenal growth in Dalit, tribes, and women literature came into the front when subaltern began to give voice to their experience. These voices question the previously set ideologies, practices and institutions that were responsible for their vulnerable condition. In our country Ranajit Guha has given a new significance to the world 'Subaltern' in the Indian cultural context as it signifies the oppressed section of the society. "And so it attributes all the major achievements in the history of the Indian nation to the elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas" (Guha 7).

Subaltern literature and its rise in the second half of the 20th century, enables touring away from White Western hegemony in literature towards assumption new literature with subaltern voice that have recently emerged. Indian Tribal literature, establishes the major part of the subaltern literature. Julian Wolfrey says, "It contains the groups that are marginalized, oppressed and exploited on the cultural socio-political and religious grounds" (qtd. in Satyanarayana 9). Thus, oppressed and marginalized people are the subject to discrimination. According to historical document, "The Imperial Gazetteer of India 1911" describes a 'tribe' as a "collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous though originally it might have been so" (Deogaonkar 14).

This research paper is concerns about to Indian contemporary tribalfiction, which is written by tribal and non-tribal writers. The tribal societies are double margined by economically and upper classes power structure. Mostly tribal literature and history are not written form; they are uneducated because they are living in isolate area from mainstream society. Firstly Indian tribal literature has composed by non-tribal writers by their own perspective. Tribals are untouched form urban areas, so tribal literature cannot provide them with bread and butter. On the other side tribal folk tradition, culture and literature are gradually falling into nothingness as the tribal villages are being uprooted and tribes are displaced from their environment. The tribal literature in the form of unwritten folksongs and folk-stories reflect in general the harmony between nature and man in peaceful social atmosphere. Their oral traditions, myths, customs, rituals have been recorded and documented by those who first come in contact with the tribes.

On the other side contemporary Indian tribal Community don't think in terms of individual rights over land, their lives are inextricably linked to the land, the hills, and the rivers. This research paper is based on tribal discourse in contemporary Indian society. In the academic circuits the terms tribes is widely used rather than the word Subaltern. In Indian tribal and non-tribal writers have been represented to their core by writing like Gopinath Mohanty, Mahasweta Devi, Arun Joshi, Narayan, G.N. Devy, Mamang Dai, Indira Goswami, Hari Ram Meena, Vandana Tate and Mahua Maji, etc. are embedded with tribal concerns, especially

tackling with the issues of tribes, who are suppressed since ancient time by patriarchy or upper hierarchy of the society.

On the other side, tribes are rich in their culture, customs, myths, festivals and folk traditions etc. There are few authors all over the world who writing tribal literature and their social life is rich in their creative works. The foremost objective of this research is to analyze the tribes' issue in literature as a discourse in societal, customs, traditional, rituals within the reference of the writings of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* (1945), Mahasweta Devi's *Dust On the Road* (1992), Hari Ram Meena's *When Arrows were Heated Up* (2008) and Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014). This research work focuses on contemporary Indian tribal and non-tribal writers including their prominent works. The writers belong to different geographical location, different tribal groups, and non-tribal communities. The writers wrote in different time period on distinct social issues. Selected authors depict deep-rooted tribal culture vis-à-vis folklore, folktale, legends, myths, customs, and their beliefs. In this research paper, Gopinath Mohanty, Mahasweta Devi, Hari Ram Meena and Mamang Dai are taken for critical study. The writers Mamang Dai and Hari Ram Meena belong to indigenous communities; their literary works also deal with tribal social life, political ambitions, and politics of representation in history. On the other side, writers Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Devi do not belong to tribal communities whereas they highlight issues concerned with tribal social life, contemporary politics, and historical relevance. Devi and Mohanty wrote more than one hundred books including literary genre such as fiction, poetry, drama, novel, songs and autobiography.

Mahasweta Devi has been represented the voice of the tribal and their conditions during colonization. Devi's creative works are visualises life in a tribal community against a cosmic background. Devi has interpreted the living story of the tribal community and the way of its disintegration in the civilizing mission of modernity in Jharkhand, India. Devi has made important contributions to literary and culture studies in our country. Her empirical research into oral history as it lives in the cultures and memories of tribal communities was a first of its kind.

Devi's fiction can be profitably studied as an ordered record of the struggles of Munda tribal society against business class command. They highlight the struggles of the Munda tribe in their progression from village to city life under the perpetual influence of the West's modernity. The narratives of Devi's novels can be grouped into the narratives of the village and city lives of the tribes. The early two novels *Dust on the Road* elaborate portrayals of the past history and pristine culture of the Munda tribal society, before the point of contact with Western power. The Munda tribal society presented in the village novels is a self-sustained community, which still retained their myths, beliefs, customs, religion, tradition, proverbs, tales and taboos with maximum sense of duty. Devi novels map the various contours of the tribal life in its struggle against the systematic encroachment of their cultural space.

The text tells the moving story of the disintegration of a tribal community under the impact of modern civilization. English version of Mahasweta Devi's novel has documented the life, the customs, the culture, the festivals and the songs and dances of the Munda tribe of the

Jharkhand as well as their poverty, struggles, deprivation and exploitation by the non-tribals. In the Introduction to the English translation of the novel, the translator Maitreya Ghatak says, Devi 'spent a life time trying to understand these tribals of the mountains and forests,' and that he attempts to tell their story in several of her novels.

The novel *Dust on the Road* is about the unwritten tribal history, experiences and culture, which are fast, disappear. The Munda tribe community as well as the other tribes are being ejected from their land and cultural and economic invasion is taking place. That time they were double margin form Western modernity and Indian Upper economic class, Mahasweta Devi has gone back in history, to the oral tradition of the Munda tribes and has created a novel which sheds light on their way of life and their thinking which is being corrupted by forces of a materialistic society:

On 8 September 1980, the Bihar Military Police (BMP), confronted by tribals assembled under the flag of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in the small and picturesque town of Gua, chased some tribals who had to run to the hospital caring a comrade injured in police firing. Eleven were shot dead within the hospital (Devi 69).

The tribal literature of social commitment like Devi's in the case of other tribal community literary fiction come out of his lived and shared experience among Santhal tribe. On the other side second example of tribal narrative of Gopinath Mohanty's *Parajait* is a historical tribal story of Paraja tribe's community in Odisha, India. Paraja tribal women have to live under patriarchal dominance. The fiction also explains the saga of despondency and helplessness, the text tells the story of exploitation of tribes by the non-tribals including, Sahukar, forest guard, highway contractor and forest supervisor. These heartless exploiters shatter the dreams of tribals, their daughters, and wives and play a pernicious role to rob them culturally, economically and socially. The corrupt forest guards degrade the dignity of tribal women for quenching their sexual thirst. He forces these girls into the pit of prostitution and criminalises the youth, so that he can take illegitimate advantages. This fiction demonstrates the helplessness and corrosion of tribal women physically and psychologically. Mohanty comments, "[t]he gradual corrosion of innocence by creeping, crawling, lurking evil is as maddening as any modem method of torture: It not only destroys but debases and humiliates. The contrast between natural and man-made calamity is glaring" (*Paraja*, preface vii). Thus, Paraja tribal women are sexually exploited by the forest guard and highway contractor.

In the *Paraja* tribal community father plays an important role in deciding the lot of their daughters; the girls in this tribe are the property of father. Bride price is considered as the compensatory payment from the groom's side. Bride price is compulsory to pay in accordance with the system of the Paraja tribe community. So it can be said that it is the opposite of the dowry system. Mohanty characters Bagla wanted to marry Jili but he failed, because he could not pay bride price to Jili's father. He expresses his desire to Jili, "[y]ou know I would run away with you now if I could, my darling. But tomorrow morning your father and all his kinsmen would come to our door, demanding the bride-price. How could I face them?" (Mohanty77). Bagla is scared of paying the bride price so he plans to elope with Jili. But marriages need permission of society only after paying the bride price in the paraja

tribes. Bagla waits only for the money; if he does get enough money to pay the bride, he will become goti (bonded labour).

Regarding the matter of gender based pay gap, it is obvious that women are paid less than their men counterparts. Though women handle the expenditures of family. Thus, it is an oppression and exploitation of women, and gender discrimination is seen everywhere. In Paraja tribal communities women are responsible for sustaining the livelihood of their families. For example, Sukaru, Mandia and Tikara-become the goti of Sahukar whereas the daughters of Sukaru Jani suffer from poverty, hunger and discrimination even in the tribal society. Nobody helps when they face hard and harsh realities of life. All the financial responsibilities of the family including her sister fall upon Jili, she works hard to survive as, and [f] or Jili was now the head of the family, the breadwinner She had to go out into the jungle each day and collect edible roots; there was no time for play” (Mohanty 109). Thus, Mohanty reveals stark gender bias in Paraja community wherein men have to become goti after getting married and women have to handle all the responsibilities.

Paraja tribal girls are compelled to seek employment wherein they are sexually exploited at their workplace. The entire family members of Sukru Jani is displaced when the Sahukar cheated Jani family and they become gotis and work as ordinary labour for the new small land owner. Neither the police nor any government law comes to their rescue; they are completely exploited and displaced from their society. The fiction outlines the plight of the two Paraja girls who work in a construction company. The girls in this tribe are the property of father; they seek bride price when girls reach at the age of puberty. Women are considered substantial sources who contribute and help gather money for the family. This transfer of money is an important component in the society of Paraja tribes. Bride price is considered as the compensatory payment from the groom’s side. Bride’s side become the property of man which signifies the commercialisation and objectification of women. Bride price is compulsory to pay in accordance with the system of Paraja tribe community.

On the other hand, Hari Ram Meena’s *When Arrows Were Heated Up* vividly portrays struggles and sacrifices of Bhail tribe at Mangarh hill in 1913 Rajasthan, India. Tribal women sacrificed their lives to save their culture, tradition and forest. They fought against the exploiting system of the British Raj. Unfortunately, tribal’ sacrifice and contribution in the freedom struggle against the British colonial empire is largely ignored. Meena portrays Rajasthani Bhil, Banjara and Meena tribe communities’ exploitation, oppression and their struggles against feudal system and British Raj. During British rule adivasi suffered a lot; women were exploited, murdered and raped by the outsiders and British officials.

In the case of farmers, the British Raj imposed a heavy load of tax which had become impossible for people to pay. People were badly beaten up by company people. Bhil tribal women and girls were raped by cruel officials. They did not make any law against discriminatory practices. In the historical fiction, Hari Ram Meena depicts plight of a tribal girl who is murdered and raped by Subedar Liaquat Ali. Kisan Singh and Subedar Liaquat Ali are alcoholics Liaquat Ali sent two forest guards to fetch the girl Dalli who grazes goats in the forest. Liaquat Ali had seen the girl in the forest and was mesmerised by her beauty. The

two forest guards bring Dalli to the Rest House. Kisan Singh heaves with relief of discovering that, “the girl was really a ‘forest fairy’ with a figure as perfect as the Subedar had described! “She might have been born in any family, but she is meant for the enjoyment of the people like us”” (Meena 373). The perception of non-tribal people towards a tribal girl indicates evil intentions. She cries to seek help from her community people. But none hears the voice of the subaltern and marginalised girl.

It is a common practice of the officers to rape and murder the girl if she rejects their proposal of ghastly sexual intercourse. She becomes unconscious when Kisan Singh goes to rape her. He finds, “She is unconscious. Her pulse is running. But is she going to die?” (Meena 372). Eventually, she passes away but the traces of brutality of the rape could be seen on her body.

Adivasi women are not secondary within their social circle and are even more active than the menfolk. They are not considered the ‘second sex’. In the fiction, *When Arrows Were Heated Up*, writer Hari Ram Meena portrays the picture of brave women who fought the war against the British Army with their traditional weapons. As Poonja Bhagat informs Govind Guru that the British Army will initiate war, he requests Guru to announce that the masses should move back. He announces, “The elderly and the women should immediately move with children towards the north. There should be no pandemonium. After reaching there they should hide behind rocks and trees. The British Army is advancing. There is a possibility of a war” (Meena 392). In this critical situation, some brave women request to stay near dhooni (when arrows were heated up) to protect it from the outsiders.

The fiction of Mamang Dai’s *The Black Hill* reveals the journey of women characters such as Gimur, Moi, Yenjee, Auli, and Nago. Some belong to the Abor tribe and others to the Mishmee tribe. Mamang Dai herself belongs to the Adi tribal community which is a nomenclature of the Abor tribe. The fiction articulates the story of the mid 19th century before 1857, the year when a mutiny took place in North India. Gimur is the main protagonist of the fiction whose story particularises the issues of motherhood, women under patriarchal system, polygamy, equality of women in their culture.

In the fiction *The Black Hill*, polygamy is usually practised in Mishmee community, for instance, Gimur is the second wife of Kajinsha. Likewise, Lamet also marries two times and has two wives, “both stocky, maternal-looking women with skin burnt brown by their outdoor work in the fields. They had borne Lamet many sons and daughters and each kept to her place” (Dai 217). Both the wives of Lamet work hard in the fields that are why skin has been burnt. This signifies that, they are being exploited because of the system of polygamy in the society of Mishmee.

This historical fiction explores the life of women who belong to the Abor cum Mishmi tribes in the tribal patriarchal system. Dai’s personal story depicts the daily struggle to resist disempowerment and stigmatisation. Through the character of Gimur, *The Black Hill* exposes complex and countervailing social and familial pressures.

The plight of mother for child saddens the atmosphere in the story as, “[i]n a barren land of white sand everything was still as if the world has ended and Gimur was the only living thing

on the planet” (Dai 163). She always wants to keep her children safe and secure. She protects her children from any difficult situation. She introduces them to the customs and traditions of the society.

Women have been exploited in a patriarchal society for centuries and have been marginalised from the point of division of labour and gender-based wage gap up. In this way, women have not only been exploited by men but also became the means of exploitation of tribals. Gopinath Mohanty’s character of Jili, in *Paraja*, portrays the blemish and harsh reality of tribal girl who is being exploited physically, sexually and mentally at the hands of Sahukar and contractor of the highway construction company.

In Hari Ram Meena’s *When the Arrows Were Heated Up*, the daughter of Panchya Bhil named as Dalli had raped by Subedar Liaquat Ali and Kishan Singh. It was a common practice of the officials of British Raj. Before Indian independence, they were exploited by British officials and the feudal system. After independence, adivasi girls are being exploited by the system of Lord. In *The Black Hill* too, the situation of the women is not so good because they are forced to live under a patriarchal system in their tribal community. So, the law of the father does not render enough freedom for women. Tribal women have to face many challenges at home and outside. Today tribal women are getting crushed in the mill of agony, labour, suffering and exploitation. Nowadays tribal women are compelled to bear molestation, rape, sexual harassment, oppression, exploitation and slavery. The novelists have expressed their condolences to the tribal women by presenting them in these fiction. Being a tribal woman and writer, Mamang Dai has portrayed a more realistic picture of Abor tribal women than that of social activist Mahasweta Devi’s representation of tribal women. Mamang Dai’s women characters from Abor and Mishmi tribal communities are presented with a sense of resistance against the suppression and exploitation. Whereas Mahasweta Devi’s characters are not confined to patriarchy. Tribal writer Hari Ram Meena has tried to portray Bhil tribe’s women as human beings, he does not reduce them to sensual images of tribal women anywhere in his historical fiction. Meena’s female character Dalli struggles for survival and raises voice against physical and sexual exploitation by outsiders. Thus, Gopinath Mohanty and Hari Ram Meena record the endless exploitation and plight of adivasis. Meena expresses his concern for adivasi society where outside interference becomes disruptive, and adversely affects tribal harmony.

With the development of industries, mines, and construction work, many tribal women workers migrate to cities in search of job. In the absence of males, they become object of sexual exploitation and abuse. Mohanty’s *Paraja* is the story of exploitation and plight of *Paraja* tribal but here, the main protagonist is the tribal father Sukru Jani. Jili and Bili represent tribal girls who in their fight for survival, have to compromise with their bodies and sexual relationship with the landlord. Mohanty portrays *Paraja* tribal women as object of sex for non-tribals. In the eyes of forest guard, private contractors, supervisors and moneylenders, they are very prone and wanted to have intercourse with them. Tribal women are sexually exploited when they arrive in urban areas and workplaces in search of employment. They are compelled to work as sex workers because tribal women are uneducated, illiterate, unskilled

and sometimes unwaged. Association between the women is shown through the relationship of Jili and Bili as they suffer silently unable to articulate their victimization. Paraja fiction however is conspicuous by the absence of non-tribal women characters.

Based on the foregoing analyses, subaltern studies discourse intends to focus on the voices of the minority sections. Subaltern studies concentrate upon the voices of the socially, culturally, and economically inferior people. Subaltern writers' prime concern is to raise their voices against the injustice and inequality that prevails in the social and economic domain. The prime focus of this group is to get back and replace the subaltern voices with the dogma of predominant voices. Subaltern authors and critics have rejuvenated the term 'Subaltern' in Indian history and cultural context.

The tribal literature has got recognition late but many writers documented the tribal life in their own indigenous languages. Both tribal and non-tribal writers are playing a role in it. English translations of these writers have come up to facilitate the world to know the life of tribals in India. Gopinath Mohanty, Mahasweta Devi, Hari Ram Meena and Mamang Dai have detailed themes related to the tribal exploitation in all the selected texts for the research study.

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