



Gopinath Mohanty's Paraja: A Realistic Documentation of Tribal Culture

Dr. Pawan Kumar

Assistant Professor

Department of English, Sahu Jain College Najibabad, Bijnor, U.P.

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Article History

Received : September 12, 2023

Accepted : September 25, 2023

Keywords :

Paraja, Tribal, Primitive,

Dormitory, Folklores,

Jholla, Goti

ABSTRACT

Paraja is a tribe of Odisha that live, Tentulikhunti, Nandahandi, Papadahandi, Dabugaon, and Jharigaon blocks of the Nabarangpur and Koraput district which is known for its distinctive culture. Gopinath Mohanty, an Oriya Novelist, has presented vivid colour of Paraja's culture in his novel "*Paraja*". He, in a very realistic manner, documents the dormitory system that plays a very crucial role in the life of Paraja people. It functions like primary school that educates their boys and girls and provides a free atmosphere to the tribal's young boys and girls to make an interaction and courtship. Bride price is a part of their marriage system. It is known as Jholla. According to tradition, if a young man wants to get married, he has to pay jholla or bride- price to the girl's father. If he fails to pay it, he has to offer himself as goti (bonded slave). Folklore is also a part of Paraja's like. They transfer their culture from generation to generation through folklore. Folklore connect them with their ancient myths, ritual, religious, mysterious and heroic activities of their historical legends.

Tribals are the indigenous people of India. They live far in the remote area of deep forests, hills and isolated places. They represent ancient pre-Aryan Indian culture, which was developed in the deep forest and hills during the primitive period. Even today, the tribal communities practice their ancient culture and tradition for which the modern generation recognizes them as animal like, uncivilized, barbarous and primitive. But this recognition does not present a true picture of tribal culture. When we think them primitive and uncivilized, we forget that the modern culture and civilization come out from the ancient

tribal culture. We should not forget that the tribal culture is the mother of all Indian as well as world cultures and civilizations that links our present with ‘the Neolithic period’ and provides information about the socio- cultural evolution of human races. Munda, Kondh, Gonds, Oraon, Khariya, Kuki, Garo, Anghami, Parhaiya, Bhotia, Buksa, Ho, Jounsari, Santhal, Kol, etc. are some tribes of India who are distinguished for their culture and socio-economic structure. Their culture does not have any documented history. It is only transfer from generation to generation through the word of mouth, folklores or a body of myth. That is the reason folklores and myth play an important role to understand tribal’s cultures.

Paraja is a tribe of Odisha that live, Tentulikhunti, Nandahandi, Papadahandi, Dabugaon, and Jharigaon blocks of the Nabarangpur and Koraput district. According to the 2011 census, this tribe has 74,253 populations. They are considered original inhabitant of Bastaria because they migrated from Baster area of Madhya Pradesh (now in Chhatisgarh). Gopinath Mohanty’s *Paraja* is a realistic documentation of Paraja tribe’s life. Being Sub-Deputy Magistrate, Mohanty passed a long period of his life in Koraput district of Orissa, where Paraja people live in good numbers and got chance to attach closely with their groups and to know their emotional attachment with their ancient culture, rituals, religious assumptions, and the romance of their festival celebration which are continuous passing from generation to generations. In his personal life, Mohanty immersed with tribal community so much that he even began to feel himself as a part of these tribal as he stated “it is just an accident that I was born in that part of Orissa, where I was born. I could as well have been born here, as for that matter anywhere in the world. I could have been a tribal which I later became” (*In Remembrance: Gopinath Mohanty*, 143). His novel *Paraja* is a faithful documentation of his personal experience and observation that he felt during his posting in Paraja region, Koraput Distric of Orissa.

Mohanty in *Paraja*, which was written in Oriya language and translated into English by B.K.Das in 1997, depicts every aspect of Paraja’s life and succeeds to touch every colour of their life. He, in a very realistic manner, portrays their celebration of various festivals like December Festival, Spring Festival, Hunting Festival, etc. These festivals present a true picture of their aesthetic assumption and emancipation towards their natural surrounding and arts. Parajas celebrate December festival before the upcoming of the new crop. During the spring festival, the Paraja people bonfire in the open spot of the village and dance around it. They perform their traditional dances like Dhemsa dance, Khadumara dance, Dungdunga dance on the sound of dhola, tamaka, dungdunga & mahuri (a musical instrument).

On festive day Paraja male and female wear dhoti. Females embellish their hair with fresh flowers and wear a flowers garland in their neck and bracelet in their hand. Some tribes like Oraon and Munda celebrate Hunting festival separately after the spring festival, but Paraja celebrate Hunting festival at the end day of the spring festival. It increases to the traditional excitement of the spring festival that provides distinctness to the tribal culture and their aestheticism. Both tribal male and female equally take part in the event of hunting without any gender discrimination. According to the tribal's tradition as Mohanty shows, it is the male who takes first chance to go to the jungle for the hunting with their traditional weapons, like bows and arrows, hatchets, knives, sticks etc. All the women of the village go to farewell the men till the margin of the village. They march with drums and groups of dancing women. But traditionally, some rules have been set for all the men who go for hunting in the jungles. According to the customary law of the tribal, if men go for hunting, return with empty hands, they are punished before all the village women, and the successful men in their course is welcomed warmly by everyone. This tradition of hunting is well delineated by Mohanty when he (1997) writes:

The men would go out into the jungle, prepared to face the taunts of their women if they should return empty-handed. The women would tie their clothes together and hang them up on a rope, and anyone who failed to kill something would be made to crawl under the garments; he would be pelted with dung- balls and other filth, and the women would shout at him: "Look at the mighty hunter! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Go back into the jungle. Such was the custom; but success was greeted with garlands and dancing and rejoicing. (*Paraja*, 159)

When men are failed to hunt anything in the jungle, then it is the turn of women, who go into the jungles with men to teach them how to hunt. They have liberty to go into the jungle with the men of their liking; especially unmarried girls like to go in the company of their lovers. In the forest they have equal right to do what they like. In tribal communities, drinking is not considered any socially offence, but, as a custom, it is equally taken by both men and women. Like men they also take "pendom-strong mandia beer- or landha" "They covered each other with wild flowers. The young men carry off the women of their choice, slung over their backs or shoulders or hanging from their necks, giggling, deeper into the trees, and rolled them into the bed of fallen leaves" (*Paraja*, 171).

As, the Paraja people live very close to nature. They firmly believe that forest is the home of God. They believe in various gods like 'Basumat', earth goddess; Jhakar, the god for all season, and Bagh-Debta, the tiger god. Besides this, the Sun, the Moon, and the Earth are considered within the Paraja tribe as the main creator or the sources of the whole universe. They are also worshiped by

different names within different tribal communities as the supreme power. For example; Santhal, Hos, Malers and Birhors tribal groups of Chhotanagpur acknowledge the Sun as 'Sing-Bonga' and accepted as the supreme God. In Santhal community the Sun is identified as 'Dharmesh', and it is considered as the husband of 'Dharti Mata', the Mal Paharias regard the Sun as 'Bera' and the earth as 'Dharthi', Kuvikandhas 'Parba', Paraja 'Basumati(the Earth Goddess), and so on.

Tribes also believe in the immortality of the soul. They believe that like the living people, the soul of a dead man also requires food. The tribe like Naga, Munda, Ho and Nicobar establish statues of dead men and treat them as a living human being. About this faith of the tribal, R.N. Sharma writes, "Among the Naga and the tribals of Nicobar Island, the skull of dead man is placed on a wooden statue believing that soul of the dead man will pass the skull to the statue" (*Social and Cultural Anthropology*, 227). The statue served among tribal as a living human being and effort are made to fulfill all its needs. Paraja people also have firm faith in the immortality of the soul. They planted stones under the mango tree in the memory of all dead Paraja tribes' men. They planted the stone vertically in the memory of a dead man, and flat for a woman. Behind this tradition, the paraja people belief that the spirits of their dead forefathers are entered into these stones and participates in all their festivals invisibly.

Paraja tribes also believe in the rebirth of the dead man or woman's soul. This belief of the tribes, bring them more close to the Hindu religious considerations. All Hindu epics communicate about the rebirth of the departure soul into the body of some animal, bird, man or woman and other living being. But in the Paraja community, the faith in rebirth is communicated with the help of their ancestor's spirits. The tribal priest, with the help of his assistant, forecast the rebirth of an ancestor's soul. Mohanty also exposes Paraja tribe's faith in rebirth of their ancestors. Paraja's priest Dasiri with the help of Beju (his disciple) informs about the rebirth of an ancestor's soul. It shows the Paraja's faith in rebirth of the soul. Mohanty (1997) writes:

When a child born, the Disari can tell which particular soul has been reborn. To help him in his divination, the Disari uses a medium, known as a Beju (or Bejuni, it is a woman), who is pressed by some ancestral spirit or tribal god or goddess, and temporarily acquires supernatural powers of prophecy. Every village has its Beju, through whose lips the gods or the spirits of ancestors speaks, and only the Disari can interpret what they say. (*Paraja*, 143)

The Dormitory system is an indispensable part of Paraja's culture. It functions like primary school that educates their boys and girls about their culture and tradition. As a custom the Paraja boys and girls left their houses at the age of seven or eight and live in the separate dormitory. There, they learn the manners and social values of their community under the supervision of a senior boy/girl. They collectively take part in all social function and entertain other married and old men and women by their dance and songs. It is Paraja's customary law that the married and old men are not allowed to take part in traditional dance and songs, as Mohanty (1997) observes: "the married men and women, young or old, were supposed to have no share in it (dance); they could only sit and watch" (*Paraja*, 153). The dormitory system also provides a free atmosphere to the tribal's young boys and girls to make an interaction and courtship. It gives them an opportunity to know personally about their would be life partners and helps the young boys and girls in searching of the suitable match.

Parajas, in the matter of marriage, are very liberal. Every young boy and girl is free to choose her/his life partner. But they are not allowed to choose their life partner out of their community. In Paraja communities, there are four months (February, March, April and May) in the year when the young boys and girls might be marriage. Every unmarried young boy who wants to marry has to wait for these months. Paraja have the custom of the bride price. That is known as 'jholla'. "A young man taking a wife would have to pay her father the jholla or bride- price, which was usually from forty to Sixty rupees. No marriage could be solemnized unless the jholla had first been paid. If a young man does not has money to pay the bride price, he has to offer himself as a goti (bonded slave) to the girl's father and work for him until the bride price has been paid" (*Paraja* 49). But it does not mean that the Paraja People are sold their daughters, but it is a kind of gift which the bridegroom paid to the girl's father.

The elopement in tribal communities, is not considered as a serious offence, rather it is an accepted convention. The elopement, some time is pre-planned. The Hos call these types of marriage as Rajikhusi marriage. Gopinath Mohanty (1997) also explicates this custom of elopement marriage, such as: "Boys and girls in love had the inalienable right to elope, which they often did, and after that the only thing necessary to get their relationship legalized was a payment of about forty rupees by the boy to the girl's father, as the customary bride price" (*Paraja*, 18). But, this custom of elopement is practiced in a particular condition. If a boy feels himself unable to pay the customary bride-price and he is not ready to become the 'goti' to his father-in-laws, he elopes with his beloved. For this elopement, the festival season is considered most suitable, when the young boys and girls both dance together at night

before their respective dormitory. The boy has to lift the girl and runs towards the forest. He passes sometimes there until the parents of both, make a compromise over price of the bride. After one or two days, the boy sends his message to his house. When the matter of bride price is solved, the parents along with their relatives of both sides go to the forest to receive the newly couple. “Bagla” (one character of the novel) , as Mohanty (1997) writes: “lifted Kajodi (his beloved) in his arms and rushed away into the jungle like a tiger carrying off it’s pray” (*Paraja*,157). He stays there until the bride price was paid:

He (Bagla) would have to send a special messenger, a barik, to his own village. His father as well as Kajodi’s father would be informed, and then the elders of the two families would meet to negotiate the price. When everything was settle, they would bring him and his bride back to the village, in honour and glory. (*Paraja*, 180)

At the time of marriage, Paraja tribes also pay many religious formalities. Disari, the soothsayer of the Paraja tribe, selects an auspicious day for the rites; a tiny roof, woven from twinges, is propped up on supporting sticks three feet above the ground, and pigeons and fowl are scarified to the sound of drums and bugles. They also follow the symbolic tradition of binding bride and bridegroom, use the turmeric paste and castor oil. Bagla the Paraja man is bind with his newly bride Kajodi and the turmeric paste and castor oil has been rubbed on his body. Some oil and the turmeric paste is taken from his body and it rubbed to Kajodi, the bride of Bagla. The wholeness of matrimonial tradition complete in the way as Mohanty (1997) dictates:

Then Bagla pressed Kajodi’s left foot with his right foot and spate three times in her face and Kajodi did the same. Their necklaces and rings were exchanged; the ends of their clothes were knotted together, and each took a ritual dip in the stream. The priest offers some eggs in sacrifice to the planet, Rahu. (*Paraja*, 187)

Folklores are inseparable part of tribal culture that links them with their ancient myths, ritual, religious, mysterious and heroic activities of their historical legends. Being primitive tribal’s myths, religious faith, rituals, legends and heroic deeds remain unscripted in the history that is why they turn every significant event, whether it is man-made or supernatural, into story, and communicate them through their traditional manner i.e. folklores. Verrier Elwin (1954) calls these tribal’s “folklores” as “a work of primitive art” (*Tribal Myths of Orissa*, 14), which transmitted from generation to generation in the form of folklores.

Gopinath Mohanty has also integrated the tribal's folklores in his literary works to present a complete socio-cultural wholeness of the tribal society. His novel *Paraja* abound with Paraja tribe's folklores which express their happiness and sorrows, hopes and frustrations, inferiority within the non-tribal social structure. Besides this his young characters also use folk song for their courtship. They make the expression of their love through their traditional folklores. These folklores are sung by both sexes from their respective dormitory. Bagla, a Paraja young boy, sings a song for his beloved Jili. He requests her to embellish herself for the sake of him and proposes for dance:

The garment of many colours which you wear,
That sari woven in Lower Maliguda,
Wash it clean again, wash it quickly,
For my sake, beloved, come out in your very best,
Wear your bangles around your wrists.
Come out quickly; come, my love.
Let us romp together, let us dance. . . (*Paraja*, 20)

At the every sphere of life Parajas express their feeling through their folklores. They sing to save themselves from the boredom of their work, as Mohanty observes:

Of which the chorus run:
Here today and gone tomorrow,
And money cannot buy it.
It was a song about young love. It continued:
No one can find it,
Though many die searching.
One moment you may see it
By the winding jungle trail;
But it quickly hide again.
Money cannot buy everything,
But love it cannot buy . . . (*Paraja*, 186)

This way Gopinath Mohanty has vividly portrait Paraja's culture that represents a rich ancient culture of India that developed in the lap of the wild nature. But unfortunately it is forgotten by the modern generation. The tribal's culture that links us with our past glory is now at the verge of extinction

under the effect of modern development. About the modern development, Mahasweta Devi writes; “Today” does not know the “past”, the ancient”. “Today the present time” becomes most barbaric by the demand of getting ahead.” (*Imaginary Maps*, 156) Besides this, deforestation on a large-scale has desolated to the tribal’s villages and badly affected to their traditional occupations, like farming, hunting, and handicrafts and forced them to dislocate from their culture. They are forced to migrate from their villages; the migration of tribal is stake for their ancient culture.

Work cited

Devi, Mahasweta. *Imaginary Maps*. Trans. Gayatri Chakarvorty Spivak. Calcutta: Thema Publication, 2001. Print.

Elwin, Verrier. *Tribals Myths of Orissa*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1954. Print.

Mohanty, Gopinath. *Paraja*. Trans. B. K. Das. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.

Mohanty, J.M, “In Remembrance: Gopinath Mohanty.” *Indian Literature*. Sahitya Akademi 34.6 (1991): 143-147. Print.

Sharma, R.N. *Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2010. Print.