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DEPICTION OF TRIBAL LIFE IN GOPINATH MOHANTY'S *PARAJA*

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ABSTRACT

Gopinath Mohanty stands out from among the novelists of the post-independence generation for his epic saga of a traditional way of life being reshaped by modernity. His works *Paraja*, *Amrutara Santana* and *Danapani* not only marked the acme of social realism; they also pushed prose fiction beyond the limits of realism. The novel takes its name from the aboriginal Paraja tribe which has its home among the rugged mountains and forests of Koraput in Orissa. *Paraja* is Gopinath Mohanty's most poignant and lyrical work, is a remarkable work by any standard and ranks among the masterpieces of Indian writing in this century. The novel *Paraja* is about the unwritten tribal history. The Parajas are one of the well-known major tribes of Orissa. The name "Paraja" came from Sanskrit and means "common people". The Parajas in general are strong, stout and hardworking: compact with other tribal communities, they show some cultural differences especially in respect of their settlement pattern, dress and ornaments, economic life, beliefs and worship, manners, customs, and folk traditions.

Keywords: Post-independence, tradition, tribes, *Paraja*, Orissa.

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Gopinath Mohanty stands out from among the novelists of the post-independence generation for his epic saga of a traditional way of life being reshaped by modernity. His works *Paraja*, *Amrutara Santana* and *Danapani* not only marked the acme of social realism; they also pushed prose fiction beyond the limits of realism. G. Mohanty, is considered one of the most significant Oriya novelists of the twentieth century. He is the first Oriya recipient of the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 1974. Among his novels published during the forties, the most widely read and acclaimed novels are *Dadibudha* in 1944, *Paraja* in 1946, *Harijana* in 1948 and *Amrutara Santana*, published in 1949. Three of these novels revolve around the lives, customs and

rituals of tribal communities and it is chiefly this element of his fiction which has earned for him fame and recognition at the national level.

Gopinath Mohanty has to his credit twenty-four novels, ten short-story collections, three plays and various other literary writings. As a member of the state civil service, he had the opportunity of working in Koraput, a district with a predominantly tribal population. He got deeply interested in the tribal lifestyle and culture and transformed them into rich fictional narratives. *Dadibudha* marks a significant shift of focus in Oriya fiction from the social conditions of coastal districts to those of the tribal districts of Orissa. The novel is a faithful record of the beliefs, manners, rituals and customs of the

Paraja tribe and also a moving narrative of hopes and fears of hapless tribals who are untouched by urban and modern ways of living and thinking.

The novel takes its name from the aboriginal Paraja tribe which has its home among the rugged mountains and forests of Koraput in Orissa. *Paraja* is Gopinath Mohanty's most poignant and lyrical work, is a remarkable work by any standard and ranks among the masterpieces of Indian writing in this century. The setting of *Paraja* is a small village, Sarsupadar, of Koraput district in the tribal belts of the Eastern Ghats in Orissa. The village is inhabited by the Paraja and Domb tribes. The plot of the novel is perceived against the exploitation of petty government officials and moneylenders in the contact of colonial Orissa.

Sukru Jani, the protagonist of the novel, is a patriarch of the Paraja tribe, his story is the story of the tribe-in fact of all the tribes to whom these mountains and forests once belonged. He is an old Paraja with two sons, Mandia and Tikra, and two daughters, Jili and Bili. The local forest guard asks Sukru Jani to send his daughter to him for a night. When Sukru Jani refuses to do so, the forest guard out of anger, imposes a heavy fine on them for illegal felling of trees and later imposes fine on his son Mandia on charges of brewing illicit liquor.

Gopinath Mohanty belongs to a generation of writers to whom social commitment comes naturally. *Paraja*, like all his other novels, is born out of a passionate social awareness, verging on anger. The citation of Mohanty's Jnanpith Award (1974) said:

'in Mohanty's hands, the social is lifted to the level of the metaphysical'. The novel *Paraja* is replete with description of tribal customs and rituals and the narrative style is movingly lyrical and dramatic. It is also a historical document that reveals the reality of the tribal life in terms of both celebration of joy and the passive endurance of pain, hardship and suffering in the face of exploitation and poverty.

The novels of Gopinath Mohanty published during the forties are not only among his best works, but are also forerunners of his later novels which continued to articulate his preoccupation with tribal

life, the predicaments of the downtrodden and the anguish of human existence torn between freedom and social restraint, nature and culture. Gopinath Mohanty's award winning Oriya novel *Paraja*, translated by Bikram K. Das into English has documented the life, customs, the festivals and the songs and dance of the Paraja tribe of the Koraput region of Orissa as well as their poverty, struggles, deprivation and exploitation by the non-tribals. In an Introduction to the English translation Bikram K. Das says, Gopinath Mohanty 'spent a lifetime trying to understand these tribals of the mountains and forests' and attempts to tell their story is several of his novels.

The novel *Paraja* is about the unwritten tribal history. The Parajas are one of the well-known major tribes of Orissa. The name "Paraja" came from Sanskrit and means "common people". The Parajas in general are strong, stout and hardworking: compact with other tribal communities, they show some cultural differences especially in respect of their settlement pattern, dress and ornaments, economic life, beliefs and worship, manners, customs, and folk traditions. They are simple, friendly and hospitable but like to remain aloof from the people of other communities as they feel shy of them. Men of these tribe usually wear loincloth and napkins and women wear cheap and coarse saree.

Common ornaments used by Paraja women consist of bangles, armlets, bracelets, necklaces, rings, hairpins etc. usually made of silver, aluminium and brass. A number of brass ear rings dangles from each ear and the nose. The practice of tattooing is prevalent among Paraja woman. Parajas are not nomadic in nature but often they shift from one place to another to get relief from the natural calamities, attack of wild animals, and other disasters which affect their well being. In some villages houses are scattered here and there while in some other villages the individual houses run in two parallel rows facing each other on a common street.

In the open spaces between houses, sheds are built to accommodate domestic animals like cattle, sheep, pigs and fowls. The Parajas are fond of using white or red-coloured soil mixed with cow dung or ashes for colouring the house. The dormitory system is prevailing in the Paraja society and the boys and

girls spend nights in their respective dormitories to know each other more and develop intimacy. Whenever they like they meet at the communal dancing ground at the centre of village and rejoice themselves by dancing together or simply hold song competition. Songs are mostly question, answer type through romantic love songs boys and girls communicate their ideas and feelings. Sometimes the whole night is spent on dancing. In the novel *Paraja*, Jili and her friend Kajodi are courted by Bagala Paraja and Mandia through songs to the accompaniment of a single-stringed instrument called dungudunga. The string is twanged and the gourd – shell base of the instrument is beaten with fingers covered with rings to produce a harmonious music. To the accompaniment of dungudunga, Bagala Paraja courted Jili by singing an ancient

As soon as the song is heard the girls leave the dormitories to meet their lovers. Jili's lover Bagala is not in a hurry to marry Jili as he cannot pay the bride price very soon. Bride price is the cash given to the girl's family by the groom at the time of the wedding – some kind of inversion of the dowry. The Paraja tribe may marry only in the months of February, March, April and May. The other types of marriage prevalent in this tribal set up are marriage by capture and marriage by elopement. The huge bride-price which the groom's family has to pay makes his family bankrupt. In the novel the author conveys it is quite an accepted thing, for a young man, unable to pay the 'bride-price', to become a goti (bonded labourer) of his future father-in-law for a particular period of time. After he has paid through his work, he is permitted to marry the girl. Bagala wishes to borrow the money and become a goti but Jili does not want him to do so. Nandibali, the strong but penniless man in the novel agrees to become a goti of Sukru Jani, in order to marry Sukru Jani's younger daughter Bili. It is a matter of great concern when a man becomes a goti of a moneylender. Bagala does not marry Jili as her father and both the brothers Mandia and Tikra become gotis of the Sahukar.

Oh Jili! (*Paraja* 18) The Parajas are dedicated to alcoholic drinks and beverages. Use of liquor is a customary practice in all the religious rituals. They worship a number of gods and deities and ancestors.

They believe that the deities are dispenser of life and death, joys and woes. Dance, song and music are a characteristic feature of their aesthetic life without which they feel that their life is meaningless. The Parajas worship gods for their well being, dead ancestors receive routine worship and sacrifices at festive occasions. They observe many seasonal festivals with pomp and show around the year in order to propitiate their deities and ancestors as well as for their own enjoyment.

During the harvest festival celebrated in December, Earth goddess is propitiated with the blood of a black rooster. For the Spring festival, the god of Spring had to be invoked with the sacrifice of a chicken when the barking deer called. Just about at that time a pigeon would be sacrificed on the appearance of two stars on Elephant Hill. The 'shrine' of the god of spring was an ancient and enormous mango tree in the jungle (148), where the villagers worshipped with song and dance to the beating of drums.

In the month of Asvina came the Durga Puja which is presented colorfully by the novelist: 'The spirit of the goddess was abroad, and the soothsayers and witch-doctors, the kalisis, and shamans and begumis more blood.' (322-323)

The novel is rich in ethnographic detail as the novelist minutely records the rituals, beliefs, ceremonies and tribal wisdom regarding the eco-system and the landscape. The novelist presents a comprehensive account of the numerous activities of the Paraja starting from one winter to another winter spanning a full year. An important event in the novel is the hunt during the spring festival. All the able-bodied men of the village proceed on a hunting expedition which continues for two or three days. 'The men would go out into the jungle, prepared to face the taunts of their woman if they returned empty – handed success was greeted with garlands and dancing and rejoicing' (159). The hunting expedition is metaphoric too as Mandia and Bagala set out not just to hunt an animal but also their mate. It is Bagala who captures Kajodi and runs away into the jungle and exercise the ancient Paraja right of marriage by capture.

The Paraja commemorate their dead by planting a stone vertically for a man and laid flat for

a woman, in the open space in the centre of the village. It is here that the bonfire is lit and the young men and women dance during the spring festival. 'The dead and the living came together to worship the joy of spring' (149).

The tribals are also horrified of the prison and the novelist says, 'it is altogether beyond his comprehension for it belongs to a system in which he has no part, though he lives on its fringes' (104). Once a Paraja goes to jail he is ostracized, crippling him socially as well as crippling economically. Hence Mandia decides to raise a loan of fifty rupees from the money lender and become a goti instead of imprisonment after getting caught for distilling illicit liquor. Gopinath Mohanty mentions, 'The law forbade anyone who is not himself a tribal.' to buy tribal land' (194).

The novel *Paraja* communicates the agony of the tribals, of marginalized people all over the world. Thus the novel is more than a sociological and anthropological document because its characters are not merely primitive tribesmen ensnared by a predatory moneylender. Gopinath Mohanty's protagonists are also quintessentially men and women waging a heroic but futile war against a hostile universe.

The tale of these tribals is a sad one but it has great charm. Gopinath Mohanty's attempt is highly successful in depicting the lifestyle, culture, manners and customs of the tribal people belonging to the Paraja tribe of Orissa. A recurring theme in Mohanty's fiction is indictment of social oppression and abuse. His works exhibit a deep social commitment.

The characters that Mohanty creates are very real people. He has spent a lifetime trying to understand these tribals of the mountains and forests of Orissa. Mohanty has known the sounds and smells of the jungle he so lovingly evokes; what is more he has obviously suffered with Sukru Jani and his tribe, drunk rice-beer with them, sung their songs, danced at their harvest festivals and starved with them when the rains failed. The author's intense personal involvement is unmistakable even if one were ignorant of this background of lived and shared experience, and it lends *Paraja* a surging power that very few Indian novels have. What is

remarkable is that the novel, written in 1945, should have dated so little. Its sociological, philosophical and moral concerns remain entirely contemporary. Sukru Jani is not merely the primitive tribesman ensnared by the predatory moneylender from the city; he is also quintessential man, waging heroic but futile war against a hostile universe struggling ceaselessly to accept and adjust.

The choice of the tribal canvas, becomes singularly appropriate to Mohanty's theme: the primeval consciousness of his tribal protagonists reflects perfectly the situation of the archetypal human being; their stark joys and interwoven anguish embody the complexity of human condition. Mohanty seems to know that the blissful innocence of tribal existence cannot endure; it is foredoomed. The theme of human endurance in the face of tragedy must be universal, but what is uniquely Indian about Gopinath Mohanty's rendering is a certain compassion.

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