



The Role of Literature in Preserving Tribal Identity in India

Prof. Dr. Rajabhau Chhaganrao Korde

Department of English,

Kalikadevi Arts, Commerce and Science College Shirur (Kasar) Dist. Beed

Corresponding Author – Prof. Dr. Rajabhau Chhaganrao Korde

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Abstract:

Literature serves as a vital tool for preserving Indian tribal identity by documenting oral traditions, cultural heritage, and historical knowledge, which fosters cultural pride and provides a platform for advocating tribal rights against oppression and exploitation. Through stories, songs, and written works, tribal writers connect generations, transmit unique worldviews, and raise awareness of their struggles and customs to global audiences, thereby ensuring the continuation of their distinct cultural practices and a strong sense of community. "Tribal literature" attempts to express the cultural, social, and historical aspects of tribes. The main objective of this literature is to share the unique identity of the tribes, their lifestyle, and their cultural heritage. This literature supports their identity through language, songs, stories, and poems. Tribal literature, often initially in oral form, now includes written narratives, songs, and stories that capture the essence of their culture, arts, music, and dance. Oral histories, myths, and traditional knowledge systems are documented, preserving them for future generations and making them accessible to broader audiences.

Keywords: India, Tribal, Literature, Civilization, culture and Adivasi

Introduction:

Diversity and the existence of distinct societies are an essential part of the being of Indian civilization. The tribes of India are an inseparable part of this diverse fabric of India. The tribal culture of India, its traditions and practices interpenetrate almost all the aspects of Indian culture and civilization. Each tribe has a way of life of its own. Each tribe has its way of behaving, thinking, feeling and acting. Each has its customs, traditions, morals, values, and culture. Indian tribal culture has also seen a tremendous merging of cultures within its people. The paper sets out to bring into light the diverse literature of the tribes of India and how it forms the threads of unity and belonging with the larger mosaic of Indian culture. The paper also brings into light the

numerous challenges it has faced in the face of progress and how literature acts as a shield that protects and preserves.

Literature is a repository of the happenings of the past as well as a vessel for the reconfirmation of their identity and one of the most powerful tools for the preservation and expression of a civilization's identity. Tribal literature is the literature of a search for identity. Tribal literature does not confine itself into a particular genre. Each literary work speaks for the struggles and captures the celebration of their unique culture. The development of literature and of different art forms in tribal communities predated the emergence of written records. Passed through generations, these oral traditions capture the very essence of the uniqueness of tribal

culture. The dissemination of these oral traditions has kept the cultural practices and the history of tribes thriving. For the tribes of India, literature is a means of self representation and empowerment. Drawing examples from various tribal writings, the paper seeks to bring out how the tribal literature preserves tribal identity.

Oral Traditions and Storytelling:

India is known for its diversity and multiplicity of languages. There are more than 1600 languages belong to seven different language families spoken in the country and a large number of them are preserved and sustained in oral forms. The oral tradition of the country is as old as 3500 years, and is still thriving. There are more unwritten languages in the country than the written ones. These languages are spoken by tribals as well as non-tribal, spoken even today by migrated and marginalized societies. Until the practice of printing and publishing literary works became well established during the nineteenth century, literature in India existed mostly in oral traditions. The development of literature and of different art forms in tribal communities predated the emergence of written records.

The tribal literary tradition was mainly oral. Tribal literature continues to be produced in hundreds of indigenous languages even today. This oral tradition includes works from scriptures to folksongs and drama. Even after the medium of printing became well established in India, some of the oral traditions have survived. They include epics, plays, songs, stories, narratives, proverbs, and aphorisms. Most of our oral literature faces the threat of being lost to oblivion because of lack of institutionalized support. The absence of any written form of these languages further aggravates the situation, pushing the traditions into a fear of endangerment. The oral

traditions preserve indigenous and traditional knowledge of the society, environment and history.

The oral and tribal literature emote current socio-political thought processes of the societies where they are spoken. Oral literature is a mix of contemporary and current. It is through these oral traditions that have helped us save information on civilizations and human coexistence.

Literature as a Form of Resistance against Colonization and Cultural Assimilation:

Resistance literature emphasizes the strength of the Indian voices in a constant battle against the colonial forces. A time of turbulence, the beginning half of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of the Indian independence movement. It brought forth significant figures who defied colonialism and fought for freedom. By creating anti-colonial works, authors used literature as a tool for creating a voice of resistance that signaled the turning tides.

The Santhal Rebellion in the 19th century spread its words of revolution through songs, folklore and oral narratives. Capturing the very essence of the rebellion and the collective rage and determination of Santhals, the oral traditions pass down the history of resistance through different generations and as a celebration of fighters like Sidhu and Kanha Murmu who led the fight. Each tribal rebellion that happened in colonial India has been immortalized through these oral traditions and folklores. It was through these mediums that the tribals expressed their spirit to ward off the colonial forces from the very root and establish their own identity. Even today, tribal literature is an expression of their fight for identity and resistance. A celebrated Oriya novelist Gopinath Mohanty through his writing "Paraja" brings into light the anti

colonial sentiments among the tribal communities. Through the story of one family, he captured the symbolic representation of the state of the whole tribe, their fight for identity and resources.

The book “Adivasi Astitva aur Jharkhand Asmitake” by Ramdayal Munda, a renowned linguist scholar from Chhotanagpur, belonging to the Munda tribe, is a collection of six essays that discusses questions around Adivasi identity, culture, religion, politics, language and industrialisation, in the context of Jharkhand as well as other parts of the country. Munda attempts to contextualize Adivasi history through Sanskrit texts, such as the Upanishads, Ramayana and Mahabharata and discuss the historical transformation of Jharkhand through various stages and the contemporary issues faced by Adivasi communities. Munda highlights various aspects of Adivasi identity in Jharkhand, the symbiotic relationship between culture and nature, their caste- and class-less existence, their co-dependent economy based on collective resources. With the changes in the economic structure of society, the tribes find cultural preservation difficult in the face of globalization. Literature has emerged as a powerful medium of expression for sustainable development. Advocating for tribal identity and economic progress to go hand in hand and finding representation in public policy to make a change where it is necessary.

Representation of Gender Roles with Tribal Literature:

The tribal literatures also contain the strong and assertive voices of Adivasi women against various forms of violence and articulate their views on Adivasi society at large. The poems and stories in the books put forward empowering narratives, grounded in the lived experiences of Adivasi writers. These

works reflect on the violence against and exploitation of Adivasi women. Through the writings, the author moves through various aspects of Adivasi life in villages and provides a critical Adivasi perspective on the modern development model and the erosion of cultural and communitarian roots. The poet Kerketta uses metaphors from the forest and nature to depict the deep relationships Adivasi communities have with these. She mentions the long history of resistance since the Santal Rebellion in the nineteenth century. Her portrayal of the community is not written as a victim's narrative but an empowering story of survival and resistance. The simplicity of her language and the depth of her critical worldview resonate with many young Adivasis who are experiencing a similar crisis in their ancestral homelands. The theme of the conflict with the ideals of modernity is of recurring nature present in the tribal literature. It is a reflection of the dilemma of these tribes who find themselves stuck between a twin path of preserving their ancestral knowledge and the ways of life while also adapting to the new norms of modernity.

The narratives include topics such as the displacement of tribes from their traditional lands, their loss of natural resources and the breakdown of traditional community structures, as an effort to bring into light the disruption caused in the social and cultural fabric of the indigenous tribes with the coming up of modernization and globalization.

Numerous tribal literatures draws its essence from the tradition of tribal uprisings, consequently the language and geography of those uprisings also assume significance. The original writings of the tribal authors are in their indigenous languages. The Tribal literature in Hindi is greatly influenced by the rich literary tradition of indigenous languages.

But there is a need for the translation of vernacular Adivasi literature into English.

The Koitur community, which is made up of fourteen million people, has not had a single book published in English so far, although there are many writers who have published in Hindi, Marathi and Telugu.

There are also books by Adivasi writers written in other vernacular languages including Gujarati, Bengali, Odia, Malayalam and Kannada as well as their own indigenous languages, such as Gondi, Kurukh, Santali, Ho and Bhili. Most of this writing in vernacular languages can mainly be found in jattras and annual gatherings of various Adivasi organizations. The tribals' voices find an artistic expression through the mediums of cave architecture, paintings and poetry. For example, the Sohrai and Khovar painting of Jharkhand. The Khovar paintings depict the marriage rituals among the tribes while the art in Sohrai paintings is matriarchal in its depiction which is insightful to the social fabric of the tribes. The tribes have found their canvas in various mediums of expression. The definition of tribal literature does not restrict itself to the boundaries of paper, rather a cultivation of oral, written and visual storytelling with recurring themes of resistance, nature, spirituality and cultural preservation. It is vital for tribal literature to break the barriers of translation in order to survive the contemporary challenges, to tell the tales of its heroic existence throughout centuries for the generations to come. ⁽¹⁾

Historical Context and Literary Representation Literature plays a significant and complex role in safeguarding tribal identity, as it is profoundly ingrained in the oral traditions and written works of indigenous communities worldwide. Tribal or indigenous literature comprises the oral transmission and subsequent transcription of myths, stories,

rituals, dances, and songs throughout generations. The corpus of literature not only safeguards the cultural legacy and shared recollection of a tribe, but also functions as a means for long-lasting selfhood, self-governance, and opposition to cultural absorption and obliteration. The historical backdrop of this function is characterized by its richness and diversity, which mirrors the varying experiences of indigenous tribes throughout different continents. Prior to the era of colonialism, numerous tribal societies depended on oral traditions as a means of safeguarding their history, beliefs, and identities. Storytelling, ceremonial rites, and other artistic expressions played a crucial role in preserving the social structure and educational institutions of these societies. Oral traditions played a crucial role in passing down information, moral values, and cultural customs from one generation to another. ⁽²⁾

Literature in Preserving Tribal Identity Literature is essential for safeguarding and conveying tribal tradition and identity. It serves as an intermediary between generations, transmitting the ancient knowledge and narratives of the past to the younger generations. Furthermore, it functions as a potent instrument for promoting and championing the causes of tribal communities, effectively conveying their challenges and viewpoints to a worldwide audience, so cultivating enhanced comprehension and backing for their rights and cultural practices. ⁽³⁾

Literariness of Tribal Ritual: Major part of tribal literature is composed of songs and chanting performed on special occasions such as birth, death or ritual performances. If analysed, it appears that some tribal rituals have Epical structure. By way of example, I would like to refer to a ritual performed by Dhangar (one of the nomadic tribes in India,

particularly living in Maharashtra) community. This ritual is known as Vaik or Khel (play). It is performed as homage to their god Biroba. It is a combination of song, dance, narratives, hallucination, and prophecy. The ritual starts with coronation of the god as a King. Devotee's bring tall decorated stick, as a symbol of God's palace, to the temple where ritual takes place. A group of singers accompanied by chorus sings a vowi (song) that describes the marriage ceremony of God beginning with turmeric ceremony to the marriage and coronate the newly married god as the King who should rule the world. It also includes dance sequence of performers. These dance sequences are preludes that consecrate the atmosphere. Among Khutekars- one of the sub tribes, only two people dance at a time, while among Hatkars- another sub tribe (there are more than twenty-two sub tribes of the Dhangar) a group of 20-25 men dance together. Both type of dances, known as Gajanritya (Gaja means Elephant, dance resembling to the movements of Elephant) are accompanied by the drum beating. A group dance of Hatkars is also accompanied by the women's song. Then the performers, usually two people, between the dance sequences, narrate anecdotes that describe bravery, valour, wisdom and virtues of either legendary figure or God specially undertaken to protect the livestock, community and sometimes an entire human race. It is followed by the central event in which priest invokes the spirit of God and enters in a trance to establish communication. Priest in a trance attaches his soul to that of God's totem (usually a snake) and in hallucinatory state dances to the rhythm of drumbeats. A group of singers help the priest to enter the trance by singing a vowi (long narrative song) that invokes God by calling him „O Mother, O my mother, please come and assist me in the task to tell your

message to the masses". God's spirit also proves himself to be supernatural by undergoing a test. Test involves beating a bamboo stick or a sword in the stomach, neck and back. Despite hitting hard, the priest is not injured. And finally, utter prophecies for the upcoming year. These are particularly advices concerned with upcoming rainy season, health of livestock, yielding of crops, market of livestock, incidents of natural calamities, health of humans and sometimes the major political transformations ⁽⁴⁾

Dalit and Tribal Literature:

This module talks about Dalit and Tribal literature together. Why do we choose Dalit and Tribal literature together here? We choose these two categories of literature together there because these two are most powerful category of Indian Literature and these two are most original Indian Literature. The mainstream Indian Literature what are written either in English or in different Bhasha and translated into English are mainly the result of generic and aesthetic adaptation of colonialism in India. Original Indian Literary genre, narrative, styles may be found mostly from the Tribal Literature of India and then from the Dalit Literature, along with the literature written in pre-colonial India. So, in this module, we try to understand a literary category which is understood as an original Indian Literature and through the study of translation of these categories of literature we try to understand India's most original contribution to the literary world.

English translation of Indian Bhasha literature finds an inclusive category of Indian Literature which can be reached to all the linguistic communities and also can contribute to the category of World Literature. In this regard translation of Dalit and Tribal Literature is also very much important to

understand India's contribution to the World of Literature. We try to understand not only the social, political or cultural aspects of these two literary category but also the aesthetic contribution of these two in formation of Indian Literature in English and World Literature too⁽⁵⁾

As Tribal literature draws its energy from the tradition of tribal uprisings, the language and geography of those uprisings also assume significance. The original writings of the Tribal authors are in their languages. The Tribal literature in Hindi is greatly influenced by the rich literary tradition of indigenous languages. A part of this literature has been translated into other languages. The literature being written in different Tribal languages is being translated into major languages like Hindi, Bangla and Tamil, thus acquiring a national form. Tribal literature is marching ahead, imbued with the rebellious sentiment of the Birsa, Sidho-Kano and other revolutionary Tribal leaders and their movement.⁽⁶⁾

Currently, tribal literature has become the most studied literature because some tribes were not yet connected or represented in the literature and without recognition they are somehow lost over time. It can lead to modernity in the minds of this young generation. This generation is influenced by modern times and cannot inherit the legacy of their ancestors. The heritage should be practiced so that its history remains alive in recent times. This time, when everyone runs behind popular things, but what our ancestors left us should also respect them. This is the difference between the outside world and the tribe. This requires the revival of all previous studies and narrations and reading them to find any gaps. With the above discussions, this will consider the addition of female writers in the field of tribal literature. They are putting their

place in the field by introducing their research into tribal communities. Some authors, however, did not know their original language well, but tried to preserve their culture through writing. The languages that lose their lights, the new writers who come to mind focus on keeping the lights to give them a new direction to shine⁽⁷⁾

Conclusion:

The function of literature in safeguarding tribal identity is a dynamic story of fortitude and adjustment. Indigenous literature, spanning from oral traditions to digital storytelling, remains a vital means of safeguarding and asserting cultural heritage and identity for tribal groups across the globe. It serves as evidence of the persistent determination of indigenous peoples and their unwavering bond with their ancestors, land, and customs. Literature serves as a means to preserve and commemorate the memories, values, and voices of indigenous peoples, providing a valuable heritage for future generations. To ensure the survival of tribal identity through literature, a coordinated approach is necessary. This approach should tackle the immediate issues of representation and access, as well as the long-term need for education, language revitalization, and digital involvement. The future of indigenous literatures has the promise of empowerment and resilience, contingent upon the provision of respect, resources, and acknowledgment that are essential for their flourishing. By examining these works, we not only acquire an understanding of the challenges and successes experienced by indigenous communities but also actively contribute to acknowledging and safeguarding their irreplaceable cultural legacy. As readers, writers, and scholars, we have a duty to make sure that these voices, which contain the profound knowledge

accumulated over centuries, are acknowledged and valued.

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