



Revisiting Tribal Voices: Representation of Indigenous Communities in Indian English Literature and their Role in Reconstructing Indian History

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Abstract:

*The tribal communities have long been woven into the patterns of India's socio-cultural and historical narrative, yet the dominating colonial and patrician historiographies have muffled their speech. Indian English literature—both in original and translated forms—now seeks deliberately to amplify those muffled sounds, to salvage tribal histories, myths, folklores, and the long, stubborn march of struggle. A close reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Right to the Forest*, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, Verrier Elwin's *Tribal Myths and Legends of India*, and G. N. Devy's anthology *Painted Words* shows how literature becomes a form of insurgent historiography, re-engineering the Indian past by lodging tribal experience in its nucleus. Simultaneously, a distinctive tribal environmental consciousness and cultural identity mount well-argued countermands to the assumptions of both colonial expansion and contemporary industrial, neo-colonial gestures. The paper concludes that Indian English literature actively re-inscribes the tribal elsewhere as the page's authoritative nucleus, obliging the broader national imaginary to accept their struggle and intellect as preconditions of India's past and its promise. Through this redistribution, texts seek to restore pride in social design and the independent aesthetic of tribal societies by repositioning them as necessary, not peripheral, to the country's unfolding collective narrative.*

Keywords: Tribal Literature, Indian English Literature, Marginalization, Resistance, Oral Traditions, Representation, Identity.

Introduction:

The making of Indian history has often been narrated through the lens of dominant castes, colonial administrators, and nationalist leaders. However, such accounts frequently marginalize the contribution of tribal communities, who have played a crucial role in India's cultural and political life. From early resistance against colonial oppression to environmental struggles in contemporary times, tribal communities have consistently shaped the socio-political fabric of India.

Literature, particularly Indian English literature, serves as a powerful medium for

reconstructing these silenced narratives. Through translations of tribal folklore, retellings of indigenous myths, and contemporary fiction highlighting displacement and marginalization, literature becomes a repository of tribal memory and an instrument of resistance. As G. N. Devy notes, "the oral traditions of the Adivasi communities carry their sense of history, their ecological vision, and their cultural pride" (Devy 22).

This paper examines how tribal voices are represented in Indian English literature and how these representations contribute to a more inclusive reconstruction of Indian history. It

focuses on three dimensions: the preservation of tribal folklore and oral traditions, the narratives of resistance against oppression, and the ecological and cultural identity embedded in tribal worldviews.

Tribal Folklore and Oral Traditions in English Writings:

The cultural identity of tribal communities rests significantly on their oral traditions, which serve as repositories of history, memory, and ecological knowledge. Unlike written texts that dominate mainstream historiography, tribal communities preserve their collective experiences through myths, legends, songs, and storytelling. These oral forms carry within them a vision of the world that is ecological, spiritual, and community-centered.

The English language, particularly through translations and anthologies, has played a crucial role in preserving and circulating tribal oral traditions. Verrier Elwin, a pioneering anthropologist and writer, devoted much of his life to documenting tribal life in central India. His work *Tribal Myths and Legends of India* brings to light the vibrant world of Adivasi imagination. For instance, the Gondi myths collected by Elwin reflect the tribal worldview where the forest is not merely a resource but a sacred space, embodying both livelihood and spiritual identity (Elwin 18). By recording and translating these oral traditions into English, Elwin ensured their transmission beyond regional boundaries, introducing global readers to indigenous worldviews.

Similarly, G. N. Devy's anthology *Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature* underscores the significance of tribal storytelling as a living tradition. Devy emphasizes that tribal oral narratives should not be dismissed as "folklore" but understood

as "literature in its own right" (Devy 12). The anthology, which includes stories, songs, and poems from different tribal groups across India, demonstrates how English can serve as a bridge between indigenous voices and international readership.

The importance of these translations lies not merely in the act of preservation but also in challenging the hierarchy of literatures. For centuries, tribal voices were considered "primitive" or "pre-literate" by colonial scholars. English translations, however, reposition them as valid cultural texts that contribute to the collective heritage of India.

Moreover, tribal oral traditions often contain alternative histories. While mainstream historical texts often erase tribal contributions, oral narratives celebrate tribal heroes and resistance movements. For instance, songs about Birsa Munda, still sung in parts of Jharkhand, highlight his leadership against colonial and landlord oppression. When these songs are translated into English, they offer a counter-historical record that supplements and even contests mainstream historiography.

Thus, English writings that document tribal folklore and oral traditions not only preserve indigenous heritage but also question dominant literary and historical paradigms. They reassert that Indian history is incomplete without acknowledging the voices of its tribal communities.

Marginalization and Resistance in Indian English Literature:

A central theme in the representation of tribal communities in Indian English literature is the tension between marginalization and resistance. Tribals have historically faced exploitation at the hands of colonial rulers, landlords, and industrial capitalists. Their voices were often muted in

historical records but have been revived in literature.

Mahasweta Devi stands as one of the most powerful chroniclers of tribal struggles. Her novel *Aranyer Adhikar* (Right to the Forest) narrates the story of Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who organized resistance against the British and local landlords in the late nineteenth century. Devi portrays Birsa not merely as a revolutionary figure but as the embodiment of tribal consciousness, whose fight was rooted in both ecological and cultural survival (Devi 65). By foregrounding Birsa's resistance, Devi reclaims tribal participation in India's history of freedom struggles.

Similarly, her short stories such as "Draupadi" highlight the double exploitation faced by tribal women—both as members of marginalized communities and as women in patriarchal structures. The violent treatment of Draupadi in the story becomes symbolic of how the state and dominant society often suppress tribal identities (Devi 112).

Another significant representation of resistance appears in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. The collection highlights the dilemmas of Santhal communities in contemporary India, especially their struggles against displacement caused by mining and industrialization. The refusal to "dance" in the title story becomes a metaphor for rejecting cultural commodification and asserting tribal dignity (Shekhar 83).

These literary works depict tribals not as passive victims but as active agents of resistance. By narrating their struggles in English, writers ensure that these stories reach a global audience, thereby situating tribal struggles within wider postcolonial and human rights discourses.

Tribal Voices in Contemporary Indian English Literature:

In addition to Mahasweta Devi and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, other contemporary writers have brought tribal voices into English literary discourse. Easterine Kire, a Naga writer, has written extensively in English about the history and culture of Nagaland. Her novel *When the River Sleeps* reflects tribal spirituality, oral traditions, and the conflicts faced by indigenous communities in the Northeast.

Similarly, G. N. Devy's *Painted Words* project has expanded the scope of tribal representation by including translations of oral stories, poems, and narratives from across India. By doing so, Devy seeks to place tribal literature within the larger framework of Indian literary studies and to challenge the notion of mainstream versus marginal literature.

Such works are important because they demonstrate that tribal narratives are not confined to the past but continue to shape the contemporary Indian literary landscape. They highlight issues such as land rights, displacement, gender inequality, and cultural identity, which remain central to the lived experiences of tribal communities today.

Environmental Consciousness and Tribal Identity:

Another striking feature of tribal representation in Indian English literature is the strong emphasis on ecological wisdom. Tribal communities have traditionally maintained a symbiotic relationship with nature, viewing forests, rivers, and land as sacred entities rather than resources for exploitation.

This ecological perspective is reflected in several literary works. In *Right to the Forest*, Mahasweta Devi highlights how the

British forest laws disrupted tribal life by restricting their traditional access to forests (Devi 74). The struggle for forest rights is not merely economic but also cultural, since forests are central to tribal identity.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar also illustrates this tension in his stories, where mining and industrialization threaten to erase Santhal ways of life. The ecological wisdom of tribal communities, when expressed in English literature, functions as a critique of modern development that disregards environmental sustainability.

Through these narratives, tribal literature in English contributes to the broader field of eco-criticism. It suggests that any attempt to reconstruct Indian history must recognize the ecological contributions of tribal communities, who have long advocated for sustainable coexistence with nature.

Contribution of Tribal Narratives to Indian History:

The inclusion of tribal voices in Indian English literature fundamentally reshapes how Indian history is written and understood. While mainstream accounts often glorify nationalist leaders, tribal literature brings attention to local heroes such as Birsa Munda, Tilka Manjhi, and the Santhal leaders Sidhu and Kanhu. Their revolts against colonial oppression were not isolated incidents but part of a larger tradition of indigenous resistance.

By narrating these struggles in English, writers ensure that tribal contributions are acknowledged not only nationally but also globally. Literature becomes a vehicle for alternative historiography, where the margins speak back to the center. This reconstruction of history is inclusive, plural, and sensitive to cultural diversity.

Furthermore, the representation of tribal communities in literature highlights the

importance of gender, ecology, and cultural identity in shaping historical narratives. It challenges the idea that history is a linear record of political events and instead presents it as a tapestry woven from diverse voices and experiences.

Conclusion:

The study of tribal representation in Indian English literature reveals the indispensable contribution of tribal communities to Indian history and culture. Through the preservation of oral traditions, the depiction of resistance movements, and the articulation of ecological wisdom, literature functions as an archive of tribal memory.

By situating tribal struggles and cultural practices within the framework of English literature, writers such as Mahasweta Devi, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, Verrier Elwin, G. N. Devy, and Easterine Kire ensure that tribal voices are heard in both national and international contexts. Their works not only enrich the literary canon but also reconstruct Indian history to be more inclusive and representative.

Ultimately, Indian English literature plays a transformative role in restoring dignity to tribal communities by acknowledging their contributions to history, culture, and ecological thought. In doing so, it challenges dominant narratives and reaffirms the significance of indigenous perspectives in shaping the story of India.

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