

## **Gopinath Mohanty: The Asian 'Achebe'**

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### **Abstract**

The entire nineteenth-century, especially the second half of it, was a period of cultural and religious ferment in India under the influence of western culture and missions. Believing that the civilization of India is barbaric and superstitious, the Colonisers think Western epistemological structure — culture, political ideology and philosophy, forms of government, educational and social infrastructure — are needed to be implied to civilize their colonies which according to them were inhabited by humanist subclasses. But the Missionaries had different missions. They bring along with them a new world of Christendom who intervene into the interests - livelihood, work, cultural practices, life style, food habit, social behaviour, social infrastructure — of the bulk of the rural population — landless labour, small and marginal farmers,

artisans, nomads and various aboriginal without caring to understand the social peculiarities of the place; ignoring the religio-cultural sensitivity of people. Their moral superiority and doctrine of monopoly miserably fails to understand the social solidarity, social cohesion and social integration of the wretched of earth. Moreover, with their aggressive imperialism, the Christian missionaries are perpetrating in nature who cannot recognise the dalits, marginalized, downtrodden and subaltern. And the indigenous people who is not a part or choose not to be a part of the course of Christianisation, fall victims to the seductive ideology of the missionaries. It is because their foundational principles and doctrines are alien, unreasonable and uncalled for and have been called into questions. They have been challenging and harmful to their sustainable living. In brief, the worst sufferers are the primitive people who live in isolation and are forgotten. Their liberty and equality and rights and justice are at stake. Those facilities are denied and gasping for breath. Needless to say, there has been a radical change in their ideas, value systems, beliefs, cultural practices and so on and so forth. And its abuses have been examined by the writers from varied backgrounds. One of the first authors to address such issues in literary works is Gopinath Mohanty.

This is what Frantz Fanon says in his *In Beginning Theory* about the British Coloniser' s "European practices" and cultural domination. To quote Fanon:

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*The European colonising power will have devalued the nation's past, seeing its pre-colonial era as pre-civilised limbo, or even as a historical void; the process of civilising the tribal or native people was also a part of their policy of imposing their own perceptions and trained them to think from their point of view and look their own culture, tradition as the colonisers have defined (193).*

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Echoing Fanon, Edward Said in *Orientalism* comments that the British colonisers' agenda to educate the tribals in the name of civilizing them was a part of their cultural colonization, to which Said termed "Orientalism". Through this "Oriental" policy, the Westerns (the British Colonizers) establish their superiority over Easterns, identified as the "Other". They depicted to the Easterns as uncivilized, lazy and stupid (11).

Keywords: Colonisers, British Colonizers, Christendom, Orientalism, Edward Said

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## **Introduction**

In his portrayal of tribal life, Gopinath Mohanty invites comparison with the Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe. At one level, their visions are almost identical. Their views, thoughts and perceptions are identical in tone and temper; intertwined and inextricably interwoven. They share a general purpose and perspective; they advocate basic idea and concept about the subalterns. They visualize the disintegration of a primitive community under the impact of a new faith or an alien value-system.

Both of them lament the invasion of the external forces, which leads to the miserable plights of the tribals. Though Achebe and Mohanty are geographically separated, they stand for a common cause and concern that is the emancipation of aboriginals from the clutches of the colonizers. With a common and universal approach, they cry at the disappearance of the age-old society in the advent of the colonial modernity. With this identical vision, they depict the vicious circle and dehumanised aspects of external influences that wrought havoc on tribal society. Revolving around a universal credo, they show how the monstrous and rapacious missionaries devour and engulf the right, justice and equality and the innocent are pushed away by the mainstream and elite class people. Moreover, their perspective on tribals is one of recognition of their way of life, charm and problems. Championing the cause of liberty, they are critical of the capitalist economy interfering with the tribal way of life that destabilises and disintegrate tribal community. However, Mohanty could not be compared with Chinua Achebe in a complete sense but up to some extent. While Achebe belongs to the Ibo community and an insider wishing good for his own society, Mohanty is an outsider writing about tribal life.

To posit Gopinath Mohanty as the Asian Achebe, it is necessary to focus on the early life of Mohanty. He spent his childhood and started schooling at Sonapur where his father Suryamani Mohanty worked for the Maharaja of Sonapur. This is his first exposure to the Western and Southern parts of Orissa (now called Odisha) – infested with tribals. Moreover, he as a Deputy Magistrate in the

State Administrative Service, gets an opportunity to work in the Koraput district, predominated with the tribal population. From his personal interactions, there he observes from close quarters the culture of the neglected people and the way they are exploited. In an interview he admits:

*The special advantage in my life was I had travelled and had been travelling. Big mountains, thick forests, tigers, snakes, elephants, rivers, forest malaria, dead bodies, death caused by accidents ..... all these I could acquire not from books, not by hearing but from my living experience of life. I have experienced by travelling and added to my life. (Mohanty, Pragana - 35).*

Somewhere else in the interview, he, too, points out his interest in tribal life. He states:

*The plight of the simple, innocent but exploited poor tribals moved me deeply. At the same time I felt a compelling curiosity to study them and their culture as they seemed to represent for me an ancient stage of human civilization ..... I picked up their dialects.*

Besides this, the call of the times and social consciousness inspired his expression and appreciation towards the ethnic people. Various global political movements undeniably influenced the formative years of his life. Epoch-making movements like French Revolution in 1789, Russian Revolution in 1917 and particularly the South African Independence Movement to overthrow colonial rule are prelude to his factionalist career. Notably,

Mohanty was born on 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1914. In addition to those historical movements, the monumental works of Fakir Mohan Senapati, Premchand, K A Abbas and Mulk Raj Anand sow the seeds of love of the ordinary common people; of the neglected and marginalized one from literary front.

Gopinath Mohanty's concern for the tribal is expressed in his first novel *Dadi Budha*. Published in 1944, the novel has been translated into English as *The Ancestor* by Arun Kumar Mohanty. Set in the village of Lulla, it tells the poignant story of struggle for survival of Paraja tribe, facing decadence with the invasion of intruders. The natural landscape – the rustling and murmuring “Muran river”, “yellow *alasi* fields”, “bluish green *ragi* fields”, “the sluggish stream”, “the sweet and warm sun”, the sweet and cooling breeze (Mohanty: 10-15) – with its idyllic flora and fauna, provides a perfect home to the villagers to live in where cares, chaos, anxiety and stress and strain can not touch them. Poverty, scarcity and want are misnomer in the utopian settlement. Moreover, having been settled far from the madding crowd, neither artificiality nor falsehood nor hypocrisy can devour the gullible sons of soil. With its esemplastic powers and elemental simplicities, the rural solitude and pastoralism makes them simple, agile and meek. The simplicity of the settlers is multiplied with their innocent belief at the presence of Dadi Budha — the “ancestral spirit” (Mohanty 6) in the sublime and serene sylvan surroundings.

Embodied by the date palm tree, Dadi Budha is believed to be the ultimate “primal ancestor” and a “benign deity” (Mohanty 6) who is having a vigilant eye on the tribal world. It is also believed that “everything is his creation and play. Being their supreme soul, he is the preserver and destroyer of all phenomena and “responsible for the prosperity and misery of everyone” (43).

All is well with the Lulla inhabitants. However, a turning point comes when Thenga Jani flees with a Christian girl Santosh Kumari. Thenga Jani, the only son of Ramchandra Muduli, the headman of Lulla village, is betrothed to Saria Dann, the only daughter of Hari Jani, a respectable elder of the community. But Thenga falls in love with Santosh Kumari, a Christian Domb girl and violates the tribal codes. They decide to run away to Assam to work on tea estates and plan to build their dream home in a town where the rules of the tribal society do not prevail. Thenga Jani and Santosh Kumari’s elopement could be seen as an act of dishonouring and disregarding tribal values and ethics. For Mohanty, the decadence, degradation and downfall of the tribal ethos are due to the invasion of the alien rulers, outside influences and particularly the Christian missionaries who allegedly interfere in the matrix of their society. Evangelic, they defy tribal gods. The example of a church supervised by the priest Reverend Solomon at Pindapadar village in Koraput is the telling testimony of the gradual decadence of the tribal citadel. To quote Mohanty:

*In the scorching heat the missionaries in black coats moved from one village to another preaching the message of Christianity. They sweated profusely and their feet were blistered. Whenever they came across someone they would preach to him the message of their religion. Have faith in God, the Almighty who sent his favourite son to wipe out the evil from the earth: have faith in Him alone. (Mohanty, Ancestor 32).*

As a socialist, he saw some evil intention and conspiracy in their preaching and adds:

*The formless heavenly God carried the burden of all our sins – that's fine. That was a piece of good news. He could forgive all of us. He would bear the burden on his shoulders. However one led one's life, all sins could be wiped off in his blood some day or other. (Mohanty, Ancestor – 32). This novel has been compared with Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In both cases personal tragedy is interfaced with public tragedy. The Ibo community in *Things Fall Apart* and the tribals of Lulla village in *The Ancestor* are affected by outside influences.*

*Paraja*, a text of ethnic exploitation, was published in 1946 by Gopinath Mohanty. Translated into English with the same title by Bikram Kumar Das, this Sahitya Akademy Award winning novel vividly portrays the sad tale of the Paraja tribe crushed under the oppression and exploitation of outsiders — government officials and moneylenders — in context of the colonial Orissa. The setting of *Paraja* is a small village inhabited by the Paraja tribe. Sukrujani, the resident of Sarsupadar of Koraput, is



an old paraja with two sons and two daughters. The local forest guard-cum-revenue officer Garaja Sundra asks Sukru Jani via Kau Paraja and Madhu Ghasi to send one of his daughters to him for a night. When Sukru Jani refuses to do so, the forest guard, out of anger, imposes a heavy fine on him and his sons, Tikra and Mandia, framing charges of felling trees and brewing illicit liquor respectively. To pay the fine, Sukru Jani, borrows rupees three hundred from the local moneylender Rama Chandra Bisoi and work as bonded labourers for some years. The moneylender dupes the poor tribals, appropriates their land and keeps Sukru Jani's daughter Jilli as his concubine. When Sukru Jani and his sons discover the evil acts and motives of the moneylender, they kill him and surrender themselves to the local police. *Paraja* thus ends with a tragic note. Though, this murder is a crime in the eyes of the law, but Gopinath Mohanty does not categorize to Sukru Jani and his sons. He leaves it for the judgement, as the murder of Rama Chandra Bisoi is a kind of revolt against the exploitation caused by the local money lenders-landlords. It is also a reaction against the lame law that could not protect the tribals from the local colonial powers that constantly rob the tribal's natural resources transforming them into bonded labour in exchange of one time meal.

B.K. Das (1997), the translator, points out Mohanty's concern about the outsiders' disintegration in peaceful life of the tribals as he writes in "Translator's Introduction":

We know then that the disapproving eyes are dangerously near; the end is at hand. The gradual corrosion of innocence by a creeping, crawling, lurking evil is as maddening as any modern method of torture: it does not only destroy but debases and humiliates. The contrast between natural and man-made calamity is glaring. Sukru Jani's wife, Sombari, we are told, was dragged away one day by a man — eating tiger as she collected dry twigs in the forest. Sukru Jani suffers, but for him this event is comprehensible: it is the infinitely convoluted process by which he and his children are transformed from free men into "gotis" or serfs, bound to the Sahukar (moneylender) forever. He cannot comprehend why a man should be arrested and fined for cutting down trees in the jungle.

That the government officers, instrumental to the local moneylender — landlords, are exploitative, this is evident from Kau Paraja, the Goti of Paraja's head man, who exposes the dark desires of the revenue inspector. He says,

*Yes! Yes! He muttered in broken phrases for Jili . . . Believe me, that's what he . . . I swear by my eyes, I am not . . . Its she that he . . . your daughter, Jili . . . The forest guard . . . I am only here on the Forest Guard's orders. And you know very well what would happen if I disobeyed him! It can happen to you too, brother! It can happen to all of us. We just can't afford to displease our officials. When they ask us for something, it has to be produced even if it is our wives and daughters . . . (Paraja 30)*

To Mohanty, the mortgaging of land of Shukru Jani via loan and snatching of his daughter Jilli is the beginning of Sahukar's (money-lender) practice of displacement and colonization in the tribal region. Being a capitalist, the mainstream elite class people like Rama Chandra Bisoi sets his eye on the tribal land and secondly, he tries to establish an interaction with the tribal girls; persuade, lure and seduce them with the false promise of marriage. To his utter colonising desire, he wants to grab tribal lands and extend his possession, and he goes about the village asking: Does anyone have any land for sale? (253). Describing the capitalist desire of the money lender, Mohanty says:

*From every hill the red tracks came down and converged at the Sahukar's house like the threads in a spider's web, and along these tracks came many a tribesman from the remotest hills. Some brought their wives' ornaments to the Sahukar, wrapped in bits of rag. Others brought the produce from their fields. Others again had nothing to pledge but their own bodies. And the Sahukar's house swallowed everything up, and nothing that entered ever came out again; and the house grew and bulged.*

Mohanty, the messiah of Dalit, has shown love for the ideal tribal world in his novel *Amrutara Santana* (1949). Rendered in English as *The Sons of the Immortal*, this epic-novel deals with the moving tale of deprivation and dreams of Kondh tribe. Its complex plot encompasses subtle perceptions of human desire in terms of sensuality and greed, while at the same time it laments the loss of

cohesion and happiness in conjugal and filial relationships. This is what Mohanty, in an interview with Sitakanta Mohapatra, expresses his agony and anxiety and says:

*"Amrutara Santana deals with the life, culture, problems and changes of the primitive Kondhs. It also deals with exploitation and with decay of values particularly the havoc wrought by civilization".*

Unlike *Paraja*, *Amrutara Santana* deals with the story of the explorations of the mind of the Kandhas living in the wilderness of the forest with their own faiths and social institutions. As the novel proceeds, it unravels the story of the Sarabu Saonta family with major characters like Diyudu, Puyu, Pubuli and Sonadei. Pubuli, daughter of the patriarch Sarabu Saonta like Thenga Jani of *Paraja*, is betrothed to Harguna but she develops an intimacy with Besu Kandha and marries him without social rites. In another act of violation of tribal codes, Diyudu, the son of Sarabu, is no more attracted to his wife Puyu as she has lost her youth, freshness and charm after giving birth to Hakina. Married and sensual, Diyudu is attracted to Piyoti, a young and beautiful girl of another village called Bandikar. One night, leaving behind his faithful and devoted wife, he goes to that village and marries Piyoti. The story ends with Piyu leaving her husband's house for her paternal village. Moreover, he visits Sonadei, a woman turned into a whore after being disgusted with an impotent husband. This sort of decadence of tribal culture is due to the influence of alien culture, according to Mohanty.

Harijana deals with the problems of harijans or the untouchables who live in dirty hovels in slums with unclean surroundings. They are contrasted with the rich and privileged sections of the Cuttack town that exploit them and drive them out of the city limits. Published during the forties, the novel is not only among his best works, but also a forerunner of his later novels which continue to articulate his preoccupations with tribal life, the predicament of the downtrodden and the anguish of human existence torn between freedom and social restraint, nature and culture.

A sympathiser of the tribal life, Mohanty exposes how the educated tribals, instead of serving their own people, forget and ignore them and dupe and exploit for their selfish ends. *Apahancha* (Unreachable), published in 1961, is a case in point. As a last novel on the tribals, it is critique of the youth who are attracted towards urban and modern life. It narrates the story of K. Timaya alias K.T. Dora, who takes advantage of his status as an educated tribal to get elected to the assembly and exploit the poor tribals and amass huge wealth. The villagers see through his evil designs and throw him out of political power in the next elections. Timaya repents and transforms himself into a selfless and dedicated social activist. Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* can be taken into consideration in this regard. As the story goes, Nanga has risen to the post of Minister of Culture in his West African homeland. Having remained in the corridor of power, he abuses power. Eventually, along with the rest of the government, is ousted by a coup.

## Conclusion

Tribals are the mainstay and important form of the total population. Constituting 22.85\* percent, they represent an element in the Odishan society which is integrated with the culture mosaic of our civilisation. With limited hopes and limited desires, they lead a simple, sublime and subtle life. Innocency, meekness and agility are the hallmark of their life. Ordinariness and commonness is another feature of this son's of the soil. But their elemental simplicities have been threatened in the face of stiff Colonisation. Considered a major voice in the twentieth century Indian literary scene, Gopinath Mohanty, the friend, philosopher and guide of the dalits, realistically exhibits the tribal's displacement from their natural resources under the colonial practices. As a writer of subalterns and underprivileged, he perceived the life and reality of the sub-humans in terms of multiple dimensions. Thus, his novels have a wide range of themes and characters, which are preoccupied with profound and basic concern of existential anxiety. His characters like Thenga and Sukru Jani, K T Dora and Sarabu Saonta are telling testimonies of colonial oppression. They have been deceived and cheated by the civilised Forest Guard, the revenue officer and money lender — the representatives of the modern machinery. For example, it is the corrupted legal system that betrays Sukru Jani in *Paraja* for which he yokes serfdom. For the Paraja tribes, they do not recognise another's lordship. They solve their matters among themselves. It is for that, every tribal village has institutions like Saonta, the Jani (head) and Bejuni (Priest)

to guide the society. Notably, the priest is not a person but an institution. In the traditional political setting, the village chief (Naik) was the only central figure thus reducing the village into a semi-independent community, maintaining its own internal order and internal administration. Traditionally, the village chief and his councilors and experienced elders with gift of gab constituted the leadership structure in the village.

Again, the elopement episode of Thenga Jani — Santosh Kumari, the Christian Domb girl, indicates the unbroken continuity of tribal life. For Mohanty, the Dombs are cunning, deceptive and crafty people. For instance, Charmu Domb deals in illicit liquor by bribing the excise officials. Madhu Ghasi having “thick lips and pink eyes” gets Domb and tribal women for the money-lender. But attributing it to the influence of modern civilization, Mohanty says that the marriage is settled through the custom of “dormitory” which plays an important role to bring close young boys and girls. It provides full liberty for courtship, interaction and romance; a crucial role in socialization; an opportunity to know personally about their would-be life partners.

In yet another incident of corrosion of tribal culture, the act of prostitution and flesh trade adopted by Sunadei in Amrutara Santana depicts the so-called civilised man's lusty and cannibalistic desire and deceptive nature.

And how the impact of modern civilisation in *Apahancha* lures the protagonist K T Dora who ignores his clan and

community and repents for his follies and misdeeds speaks a lot about seamy side of Christianisation.

Gopinath Mohanty achieved this time-transcending feat despite setting his fictions in villages, small towns and the tribal hinterland of Orissa. His novels have a unique style comprising of lyrical intensity and lucidity as well as a variety of linguistic resources and rhetorical device.

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