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Portrayal of tribal in the story Tadapa

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Abstract

In his short fiction Tadpa, Gopinath Mohanty exposes the fundamental fault in modern society's perception of the tribal as someone who is uncultured and helpless. In this critical examination, we examine how the development paradigms proposed for the tribals are both irrelevant and violent. Considering that Tadpa, the tribe, stands for a simple, organic, and self-sufficient way of life, it follows that Western society is not qualified to judge Tadpa.

Keywords: Uncultured, paradigms, irrelevant, organic

Introduction

Traditional cultures, especially adivasi ones, have suffered greatly as a result of the modernist celebration of progress and development. These ideas, which have their roots in Europe, are intolerant of and dismissive of tradition, community, and the natural world because they are fed by rationalism, individualism, enterprise, material progress, and prosperity, all of which are propelled by private capital and the exploitation of labour and the natural world. By misrepresenting scientific knowledge, these ideas attacked the supposed "backwardness" of ancient societies, writing them off as the product of "irrational" beliefs and actions. Mechanistic modernity's unleashing of the forces of industry, urbanisation, and unfettered exploitation of nature pushed whole communities to the brink of obsolescence and doomed indigenous peoples to extinction or a place in a museum.

The type of development that the mainstream imagines for the tribals—industry, progress, modernity, and Western education—may seem innocuous and desirable at first glance, but it really unleashes severe social, economic, and cultural repercussions. As an example of the damage that modern shortsighted developmental paradigms can inflict on the tribal way of life, consider the Niyamgiri agitation by the Dongria Kondhs against Vedanta Mining Company's atrocious plans to dig up their sacred hills for bauxite, destroying their means of livelihood and hurting their religious sentiments. The social critic Shiv Visvanathan writes insightfully on this topic in his piece "Listening to the Pterodactyl":

"Unless one realizes that every factory is a rape of nature and a theft of water, one cannot sense modernity. A factory devastates the countryside and yet is immune to all the progressive laws India creates in abundance. If the factory rapes nature, the city becomes a collection of touts, middlemen and forest contractors. Factory and city destroy the forest as commons". (Pp. 9)

Gandhi cautioned against the technologically-blind cultural naveté of today's innovators.

The hidden hazards of such Eurocentric approaches are highlighted in the book *Encountering Development* by Columbian Scholar Arturo Escobar. According to him, conventional economic thinking on development is just another means for the West to control the developing world for its own benefit, guaranteeing the poor a future only the wealthy could dream up. It lays the stage for how the poor may be able to live in a really firm way. The destitute are transformed into objects of development and are given rules to follow. Escobar proposes a shift away from the dominant paradigm of development by supporting the emergence of "local agency," or the empowerment of communities and traditions based on shared identities to find and implement solutions to their own challenges. De-growth politics, he argues, may help correct the economic and political biases that hold back progress for so many.

Famous authors who dabbled in the fantastic, like as Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Devi, were captivated by tribal life but were adamantly opposed to imposing contemporary economic patterns on the indigenous peoples.

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In his short novella *Tadpa*, Gopinath Mohanty gently displays his doubt or dissent about the mainstream society's ideals about development and its well-meaning efforts to "assist" the tribals by way of a cultural encounter. The key, he says, is to proceed with prudence and reflection in such efforts. He argues that the mainstream society would fail in its efforts to help the tribals until it abandons its own preconceived notions of how development should occur, learns to relate with and trust the tribals. It will continue to have no use for them so long as it sees their world as foreign and alien. In order to communicate with and help them, it will need to put itself in their shoes. Anything it tries to accomplish for them should need the expertise of that insider.

Award-winning Odia author Gopinath Mohanty (1914-1991) received the Padma Bhushan and the Jnanapith, among others, for his work. For forty years, he was without equal as an Odia writer, and he remains the language's best-known novelist after Fakir Mohan Senapati's time. Celebrating the majesty and splendour of life, his works *Amrutara Santana* (1949), *The Ancestor, or Dadi Budha* (1944), and *Paraja* (1945) portray the everyday experiences of indigenous people.

Based on his time as Sub-Deputy Magistrate in Jaipur District and his personal knowledge of the tribal people, Mohanty was able to identify the fundamental flaw in the mainstream's approach to the tribal people: the 'we and they' attitude, cultural insensitivity, and its failure to identify with them and see the world from their point of view. He is certain that until the general public trusts them, scholarly curiosity will not be enough to bring them into the mainstream. Truth about tribal lifestyle and culture cannot be gleaned from the 'objective,' unbiased perspective of an anthropologist or intellectual. The majority culture can never understand the tribal people or their worldview until they are allowed a glimpse into tribal life. Unconscious biases and preconceptions that form its views will render its efforts to aid them futile. Mainstream civilization cannot perceive how it is subconsciously using its own values and modes of action in its approach to the tribals, or the hazards of doing so, unless it engages in significant self-examination.

Seven "outsiders," including two well-intentioned officials and a researcher, have just returned from a week spent on Niyamgiri, a forest tract and hill located at an elevation of 5,000 feet in the Indian state of Odisha. They had a serious conversation about the issues facing Dongria Kondhs and how to address them. After meeting *Tadpa*, a young Dongria Kondh guy, they learn a great deal about the people and culture of this group. They are both perplexed after the encounter. But they take nothing away from the experience and continue plotting.

“TADPA”: Portrayal of Tribal

Tadpa plans on meeting up with a dhangdi in the evening and taking part in the village of Penubali's dance and song festivities. There are a total of seven persons in the group: Haripani, a local official at the base of the hill; Madhusudhan, the forest guard, aged fifty-eight, the guide of the group, who knows about Niyamgiri; and Parashuram, the Development Officer, a lean, tall, and experienced man who has been to many hill sites while planning welfare schemes.

Mohanty uses a slyly satirical tone, casting doubt not on the officers' motive but on their attitude; the officers' haughtiness in portraying the tribals as stupid and uncivilised is a product of modernity.

The Niyamgirl hills are in a fairly isolated area. There are no wide, straight highways here, just winding, zigzagging trails with abrupt turns, ascents, and descents that will make you dizzy. It's a 45-mile hike across the hills to the closest train station at Muniguda. No infrastructure exists to provide 'clean' water for human use. No water storage facilities such as wells or tanks exist. Hill-streams, "which transported the filth and washing from the hamlets upwards, including that of buffalo flesh," are the sole source of potable water. For these reasons, the three policemen conclude that they are quite distant from "civilization." The frequent routes and interaction with foreigners, especially Hari Pani, are what will civilise them, in his opinion. He thinks that "civilization arrives" when "forests open up."

Both Professor Bharata and Parashuram are well educated, and Professor Bharata in particular has a reputation in their community for undertaking ambitious undertakings such as this one. They have a firm grasp of the subject matter and a comfortable familiarity with information pertaining to persons of diverse cultural backgrounds. They learned that the Dongria Kondhs are savages and that the Dombs allied with them because of commerce. They are aware of the Dombs' deceptive practise of trading booze for fruit trees including orange and jackfruit trees, pineapple and banana plants, and have made plans to replicate this scam. Through conversations with the tribals mediated by Madhusudhan, they have gained a wealth of knowledge on the tribes' dwellings, diets, clothing, and accessories, as well as a general understanding of their way of life.

This idea that a week spent in tribal villages and gathering 'information' about the tribals through an interpreter is sufficient to design tribal welfare plans is not only naive, but also reveals the arrogance with which mainstream society judges its ability to assess the social, economic, and emotional worlds of the tribals. These people don't stop to consider whether or not they have the skills necessary to handle something so delicate. They have no notion how, if at all, to aid the indigenous people or what they desire. Bharata, a representative from the mainstream, stands as a symbol for the ignorance of the mainstream about tribal people and their culture via his anthropological works. Books produced from an anthropologist's perspective are written from the perspective of mainstream culture, which has its own set of interests and values that unknowingly colour its views. According to McGrane's *Beyond Anthropology* (1989), anthropology's past may be summed up as

“an extremely subtle and spiritual kind of cognitive imperialism, a power-based monologue, a monologue about alien cultures rather than, and in active avoidance of, a dialogue with them...Anthropology is interested in the Other and at the same time remains altogether alien to the Other; ...Anthropology never listened to the voices of 'alien cultures', it never learned from them; in fact studying them, making sense out of them, making a 'science' about them, has been the modern method of not listening, of avoiding listening to them. The Other's empirical presence as the field and subject matter of anthropological discourse is grounded upon his theoretical absence as interlocutor, as dialogic colleague, as audience.” (Pp. 127-8)

The Dongria Kondhs dominate the conversation for the whole journey. They return after their journey certain that “the problems were known; what remained was a search for solutions.” (Pp. 61)

They do not seem to hesitate to judge the tribals from their own point of view. Parasuram observes that the tribals are “poor, illiterate, ... almost like animals” (Pp. 62)

His concern is evident in his observation, but there is also an air of superiority and self-satisfaction to his assessment, as well as a clear deficiency in his grasp of the tribals' inner world.

He has a healthy dose of scepticism when it comes to the tribals' knowledge structures. People who label indigenous people as “illiterate” do so because they believe that only conventional forms of education and information are valid means of knowing. However, conventional wisdom views the world in pieces because it is primarily logical, utilitarian, and politically focused. Contrarily, the intuitive and holistic quality of tribal people's knowledge and wisdom allowed them to coexist peacefully with the natural world without disrupting it. Mohanty identifies the “unintentional” blunder made by mainstream persons while trying to comprehend and construct improvement programmes for the tribals.

The team is well aware of the need of innovation but has no idea how it would affect the tribal people. Road construction in the tribal hinterlands is their own solution to the problem of economic growth. When there are roads, there is both “assistance” and the person who will take use of it. The shark-like exploiter will be brought along with them as they try to rescue the Kondhs from their “misery” and the Domb's exploitation. Sadder even, Hari Pani hopes for the discovery of mineral riches so that large industries like Rorukela may be built and the “backward” tribal people can be modernised. The Vedanta refinery, foretold by Mohanty, sits atop the Niyangiri hills. Hari Pani overlooks the fact that the tribal way of life would eventually be infiltrated by the evils of civilization, changing its entire nature and ultimately leading to dissolution, as was seen under British administration. When industries moved into tribal areas to take use of the area's natural riches, the local tribespeople were displaced, sometimes to the point of extinction, and their land was inevitably poisoned. This is a great example of why Vincent Tucker, a post-development critic, has such a perceptive comment to make. He busts the illusion of progress, showing how it has led to the systematic destruction of indigenous cultures and the loss of many ecologically and psychologically beneficial ways of living. Tucker, in his piece “The Myth of Development,” condemns progress as

a process whereby the lives of some people, their plans, their hopes, their imaginations, are shaped by others who frequently share neither their lifestyle, nor their hopes nor their values. The real nature of this process is disguised by a discourse that portrays development as a necessary and desirable process, as human destiny itself. (Pp. 1)

Even while Professor Bharta correctly identifies exploitation as the source of the tribals' issue, he incorrectly links it to the tribals' worldview and claims that the problem would be remedied if the tribals cease propitiating their gods via booze and buffalo flesh. He merely sees the surface of things. He thinks the people there consume too much booze due to the cold and the lack of entertainment, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation. They continue to argue and counterpoint with lofty arguments and

illustrations. If given the opportunity to learn about the tribal world, they still won't understand it. They only witness the Dongrias drinking, eating buffalo, and appeasing their gods. Tribal women are given due respect and the land is revered in this society that others regard as primitive, but they don't seem to notice it.

With a hint of sly humour or pure academic curiosity, Professor Bharata asks Tadpa whether a Dongria Kondh dhangda sits on his dhangdi's lap during the wedding ceremony. Tadpa asks in shock if they do not comply. The gang still laughs softly despite Bharata's warning. Tadpa's response is characteristically uncomplicated:

“Yes, son sits in the lap of the mother. But is not the dhangdi a mother? Say, are you and I, mothers? We are sons. Dhangdi is the mother. When a child, we sit in the mother's lap. When we grow up, we sit in the lap of the dhangdi who chooses us” (66) Hari Pani asks almost in a tone of finality, “In whose lap do you sit when old?” (Pp. 66)

Without even noticing his tone and with the same seriousness and conviction, Tadpa answers,

“When too old and I drop dead I will sleep in the lap of another mother.... This Dhartani, Basumati; she is the mother of all of us, who else? And she is inside the mother who gave us birth and also in the dhangdi.” (Pp. 66)

The company is unable to understand such poetic intuition. They don't understand the deep respect that tribal people have for their women and the natural world, so they write it off as weird and complicated. Parashuram continues the conversation by saying,

“poor, illiterate, exploited, vulnerable, almost like animals? What then was the use of all our knowledge about them? Was ours merely an intellectual curiosity?” (Pp. 62)

This introspective inquiry seems sincere; nonetheless, the remedy one proposes to the concerns of the tribals might be harmful if one is not conscious of one's own attitude of cultural superiority. Parashuram's proposal to improve the tribal people's economic situation may seem sincere and well-informed, given his familiarity with the tribal people's plight. In actuality, though, he treats them as if they had a separate worldview and identity. He makes it seem like conventional people are better than everyone else because they have nicer things and live in more aesthetically pleasing environments. Tadpa's people have a well-developed tradition of honouring men and women in their own society and treating strangers with unreserved love and humility, but this group of educated and civilised males has failed to see this. Parashuram has just heard stories about their life and hasn't really seen them. If he had, he would understand the significance of the Kondh marriage ceremony. After hearing Tadpa's perspective that a couple should know each other before marriage, which is only achievable via song and dance, no one in the group says anything about the ceremony of the tribals' marriage. They just don't get it. Upon learning that not all policemen share his or her cultural norms, Tadpa exclaims,

“(i) n an area where there is no dhangdi-bent the people must be animals or are they human?” (Pp. 65)

He adds that only through song and dance people come to know each other,

“laughter and play, that they could build a proper relationship. ... No acquaintance, no love and yet set up a house ...?” (Pp. 66)

This is a pivotal point in the narrative. Parashuram and the others in the group are stumped when Tadpa poses the question above. They look down on this "primitive" tribe because they live in a remote area far from any signs of civilization, but they fail to realise that they have made the same assumptions about the superiority of the mainstream culture that takes pride in having such "advanced" ideas as individual freedom, romantic love, and marriage of love. The group suddenly stops talking. They are not prepared to admit that such notions abound naturally in 'primitive' societies. This comes as quite a surprise to them.

Professor Bharata believes that the tribals might grow hooked to alcohol if they had access to money, and that the exploiter would use this to his advantage. The tribal member may turn into an opportunist if he or she is given easy access to government funds.

"(H) is present simplicity and honesty were perhaps due only to ignorance and superstition and not born out of any conviction or any ingrained idealism." (Pp. 63)

The traditional portrayal of the tribals in the media is one of distrust. He thinks that the most defining characteristics of civilization—knowledge, rational belief, progress, and personal integrity—are beyond the reach of the tribals. This claim is, ironically, a mirror image of what mainstream culture looks like. Knowledge and rational belief have been questioned by postmodern philosophers and social scientists. These ideas incorporate hierarchical systems of command and control. Second, there is no basis in fact for Professor Bharata's scepticism. The simplicity and honesty of the tribal people does not stem from their lack of education or their adherence to superstition, but rather from their culture and social norms. Private property, the foundation of a free market and the root of both healthy competition and dishonesty, is unknown in the tribal group. Additionally, their lack of complexity stems from their independence from the alienated and stratified majority culture and their lack of dependence on the value placed on money to meet their requirements.

Professor Bharata thinks poorly of Kondh culture and values. In reality, the group members are unanimous in their beliefs. The Kondhs are uneasy and afraid of their new home because of its isolation and unfamiliarity; to their urbanised brains, such places are equivalent to the wild. Everywhere they see, they anticipate danger. At nine o'clock on a winter night, the temperature is exceedingly low, but the gang rarely feels it since they are so anxious and scared of the unknown trail. Mohanty elaborates on their impressions of the rocky road they're on:

"a footpath which looked like a small tunnel meandering down it curves through stones. hidden by tall dense trees ... a stream deep down the hills A little carelessness and one could stumble and plunge into its waters. ... There was always the fear of a tiger suddenly springing from the dense forest ... a hidden fear lurking inside all the while as to when the journey might suddenly meet its end. Wild animals, accidental fall, unknown dangers." (Pp. 58)

Tadpa, on the other hand, is completely at ease here. Tadpa compares their nervous inquiries about local tigers to those of a little child. He responds humorously,

"You could as well ask if there was fish in the water or stars in the sky. Of course tigers are here. Where else could they go?"(Pp. 64)

"Don't you eat when hungry? It has eaten many and it live near that waterfall." (Pp. 65)

Tadpa's answer, despite its seeming simplicity, exemplifies the pride and honour of a tribal person. Tadpa seems to these civilised people, who are so terrified for their life, as a yogi, with an innate awareness of and acceptance of nature and its workings. Simply put, he sees the natural world in a mystical light. When asked if he is scared being all by himself in the bush, he responds,

"Are you afraid when you go on the road? Don't people die, run over by car? That is your road, this is ours. I'm not afraid" (Pp. 65)

When he can't avoid going a different direction, he leads the way and reassures them there's no threat. Parashuram expresses his appreciation, and Bharata wishes to pay him back. Then Tadpa approaches them and demands 25 paise. He accepts the donation, expresses his gratitude, and continues on his journey while singing. They see the coins they gave to Tadpa lying on the ground ahead of them. They are terrified that he has abandoned them at first. Madhusudhan, however, explains that the tribals place no value on money and instead view it as equivalent to pebbles. Asking for financial assistance is akin to demonstrating affection in a childlike way. The group is confused by Tadpa's behaviour. The final words from Mohanty are,

"They look back. Wrapped in hazy moonlight Niyamgiri hill seemed to have fallen asleep, as if it was a dream and not a reality. The road lay ahead of them. Parashuram suggested that they discuss a little more the strategy for the development of the Dongria Kondh. The discussion continued." (Pp. 68)

None of them will ever comprehend Tadpa or his people. For those who live in the city, these folks either exist in a sylvan setting adorned with brightly coloured clothing and trinkets or are simply primitive slobs who don't bother to keep their homes tidy. They can't be bothered with how they feel or how they act. Anyone can go to a museum, look about at the exhibits with a sense of wonder, and feel satisfied afterward.

Tadpa's behaviour is natural and carefree. His demeanour is uncomplicated and relaxed. There is no trace of humility or grovelling in the manner he asks for a bidi or cash. He comes across as honest. Members of the group display a wide variety of emotions and reactions towards Tadpa and their world, including condescension, mistrust, incomprehension, contempt, avoidance, anxiety, confusion, curiosity, bemusement, and defensiveness. They have zero feelings for or regard for the indigenous people. They view themselves as generous benefactors who are constantly helping the impoverished tribespeople. But Tadpa shows, in his own unassuming way, much to their chagrin, that he does not easily fit into any of their categories or classifications. They still don't know much about him.

Conclusion

The story demonstrates that, despite well intentions, modern society lacks the tools to comprehend the worldview of indigenous peoples until it discards many of its long-held beliefs and practises. Tadpa, the tribal, stands for a simple, natural, and self-sufficient culture that can remind the dominant culture of the things it has forgotten or lost along the route to "civilization" and "development" — namely, contact with nature and the psyche.

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