

Tribal History: Living Word or Dead Letter?

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## Tribal History

### Living Word or Dead Letter?

*If India's tribals are to regain their true identity, it is necessary that their oral history, which was suppressed by the history written by outsiders, is reconstructed.*

RUDOLF C HEREDIA

When the colonialists first discovered oral cultures, they rather patronisingly assumed that if language distinguished men from beasts, it was writing that distinguished the civilised from the savages. In the ultimate analysis writing as a representational technology was a decided advantage in such an encounter. And when these pre-literate people did begin writing it was often the 'others' who wrote about them and seldom in their own language. This could not but alienate them further from an authentic self-representation.

The underlying ethnocentrism and chauvinism of such a presumption served the political purposes of the dominant colonisers to the point where their treatment of such pre-literate peoples, mostly tribals, would make one wonder, as Montaigne did in his *Essays*, who really are the more barbarous, the colonised or the colonisers. But what is more significant is why writing gave such an overwhelming advantage in this clash of cultures. Why could not an oral tradition cope with this encounter as effectively as the literate one did? This is surely a pertinent question for any venture in oral history.

Writing has always marked a quantum jump in the history of a human community. Tzvetan Todorov commenting on the clash of cultures in the New World concludes that "the absence of writing is an important element of the situation, perhaps the most important" (1984:80). Interestingly the absence of writing did not lead so much to "a loss of the past", for the formal discourse in an oral culture was in fact dominated by memory. It was "rather a fatal loss of manipulative power in the present...The culture that possessed writing could accurately represent to itself

(and hence strategically manipulate) the culture without writing, but the reverse was not true" [Greenblatt 1991:11].

#### Oral Traditions

Too easily have tribal societies been considered as societies without a history. Such recollections as they do have of their past are recorded in their oral traditions, grouped together under the overriding rubric of myth and legend. What would qualify as their history is by and large what has been recorded by other communities and that in relation to the others, i.e., these historians' own past. This yields only a reflected history, constructed through the perspective of others, and for these others. Certainly this is a great cultural deprivation since we know how important historical memories are in the construction of community identities, certainly no less important than personal memories are for personal identities. Such an understanding of history deprives tribal societies of an important cultural resource, namely, the mobilisation of their past to cope with the present.

Recording the oral history of such people, where they will speak for themselves, is but a small attempt to redress this huge disadvantage. For tribal societies do have a rich oral tradition in which their collective memories are recorded. It is a living tradition and a changing one precisely because it is still alive today. However, if historical constructions are to privilege written documents and dismiss oral history, then these oral traditions stand devalued.

And yet we know that every 'text' whether written or oral, must be read in its 'context'. And it is precisely this dialectic between text and context that can authenticate an oral historical tradition. A narrow positivist understanding of history in search of 'objective facts' does not recognise this. In such a perspective, oral

traditions can yield merely a 'mythic history' with only a tenuous grounding in objective fact. This perspective obviously privileges literate society over oral ones, and all too readily condemns the latter to the eternal return of the seasonal cycle, without a chance of development and progress through time.

Once such a self-understanding is internalised by a community, it cannot but lead to its progressive marginalisation in the larger society in which it is placed, left behind by the progress and development of other communities around. However, if we contextualise oral traditions within the tribal societies that have given rise to them, then we can use them to make an authentic reconstruction of their past. In distancing ourselves from the positivist prejudice that privileges the objectivity of written documentation, we do not want to fall into the opposite extreme of the subjectivism of an oral tradition. Rather, the more sources we can use to set the context, the richer will be the interpretation and understanding of the text, whether this be oral or written.

#### Traditional Sources

The term 'adivasi' meaning 'original inhabitants' was first used in the Chhotanagpur region of Bihar in an 1930s and was extended to other regions in the 1940s by A V Thakkar, who worked among the tribals. The Gandhians popularised other polite equivalents such as 'ranipaja', 'vanyajati' and 'girijan'. In the historical Indian context now 'adivasi' refers to a wide variety of communities which earlier had remained relatively free from the controls of outside states, but were eventually subjugated during the colonial period and brought under the control of the state. Today they are classified as 'scheduled tribes' by the Indian Constitution, and more generally they are known as tribal and indigenous peoples.

What these peoples do have in common is a vibrant oral culture expressed in their language and symbols, their myths and rituals, their legends and sagas. However, given the scarcity of written source material on these peoples, one may be tempted to discount their unwritten history, or worse to consider them to be an a-historical people. Certainly no history in the positivist sense of objective history can be

effectively put together for the pre-colonial period of tribal history, since there are few historical records that would meet the test of positivist criteria. However, to conclude from this that the tribals had no history until it was recorded by others, is totally unwarranted. It is tantamount to assuming that a people do not exist until others 'discover' them. In fact many tribal peoples have evolved a complex cultural heritage of their own. Writing about the Warlis in coastal Maharashtra, Hardiman rightly concludes:

The fact that they practised so many different methods of cultivation, that they are known to have migrated from one area to another, and that they were in some cases a regionally dominant power – all indicate that their history was every bit as full and complex as that of the rulers whose deeds fill medieval ballads and chronicles [Hardiman 1987:13].

This is true of many large tribes in other geographic areas. The way they recorded their own history and preserved their culture was quite different from that of their colonial 'discoverers'.

Indeed, the experience of time is universal, but the human response to, and interpretation of it may differ vastly. At one level the tribal experience of time has been recorded mostly in religious myth. Here time is experienced as cyclical, and in this sense one might conclude that it is a-historical. The purpose of such religious myths was more to interpret and rationalise their experience of this cycle of time, the sequence of the seasons, etc, in terms of some ultimate meaning. Religious myths do not directly refer to and are much less concerned with various temporal contingencies.

However, there are other oral sources of tradition in these societies that are not strictly religious or even mythic. These are the legends and songs and sagas that are part of collective memory of the tribals. It is here that their experience of change in time is recorded, as one can see from the way in which these stories evolve and develop over time. These two types of traditions are not entirely separate for they do indeed overlap, however, they are distinct both in the purposes they serve as also the object they refer to.

Thus we have legends of origin, and also narration of encounters with the environment as well as with outsiders. These give us an understanding of the identity and self-perception of these people, how they position themselves both with regard to

their natural environment, and how they respond to the encroachment of outsiders into their geographical and social space.

Mythometaurs among these people are scant and sketchy. They may have felt no strong need to identify themselves thus as long as they were isolated from outsiders and secure within their forest dwelling. Most of these outsider intruders became landowners, cultivators, timber merchants, in short people who lived off the forest and not in it. Even as outsiders penetrated into their territory, settling in small habitations and opening up the forests, the tribals tended to withdraw more and more into the interior, until the limits of their forest habitat were reached. The inevitable cultural clash was disastrous for the tribals, and this is reflected in their collective memory, which must be a critical source for a reconstruction of this encounter. For too long has this been recorded only through the perceptions of the outsider. A subaltern sensitivity is required to remedy this. But this will demand a deconstruction of the earlier perspectives, their pre-judgments and presumptions, particularly, the ones from the colonial past that still impinge on our perception of tribals, as also their own self-perceptions.

### Colonial Penetration

Earlier rulers had given the tribals usufructs rights which provided all the produce they required for domestic and agricultural purposes from the forests. This provided a crucial safety net allowing the forest dwellers to subsist off the commons when their survival was threatened in times of scarcity. However, the colonial penetration into tribal society was much more acute and comprehensive than the earlier ones. For, the exigencies of the colonial state dictated the policies, and in this cruel venture the government had more than eager collaborators in the region.

Moreover, the strong negative perceptions of these peoples by the outsiders only served to strengthen and legitimise government policies that adversely affected these tribals. They became the 'other' whose economic non-conformity was more than just a nuisance, it came in the way of the exploitation of natural resources on which their way of life so intimately depended. As they were increasingly alienated from their life supporting environment, they become destitute, reduced to a lumpen and criminalised proletariat.

The colonial period thus witnesses a progressive and aggressive monetisation

of the economy of the tribal region for revenue generation, making dependence on the forest ever more precarious and thus destroying tribal self-reliance. Moreover, as the forests are taken over by government agencies and commercial interests, the tribals were forced more and more to live from farming the land, where they were progressively forced into bonded labour by exploitative landlords, moneylenders, government officials and other outsiders.

The creation of private property rights in land was an equally disastrous break with tribal tradition in which land was always held by the community even when it was assigned to private use. The unrestricted freedom to use and transfer land was intended to create an independent class of proprietors who would work the land productively. The upper castes, forest contractors and others were the first to be advantaged by this. They already possessed large landholdings which now became the base for expropriating the tribals further.

But this had devastating effects on the tribal population who now were progressively dispossessed. For across the land,

the adivasi peasant proprietor was soon turned into a tenant. He depended on the new settlers for his requirements of seed, consumption loan, money to pay the state revenue and for drink; the last becoming an instrument of exploitation for the settler and a form of escape for the adivasi, whereas it was earlier an expression of the solidarity and freedom of the adivasi collective [Saldanha 1984:175].

The squeeze on the adivasis between the 'zamindar', the 'saukar' (moneylender) and the 'sarkar' (government), could not have happened without a collusion between these actors, each with his own agenda. The exigencies of revenue generation and commercialisation of the regional economy needed an intermediary class owing allegiance to the colonial state, whose land and forest policies were so successful precisely in facilitating this. The result was the expropriation and pauperisation of the adivasis by a class of expropriators, who outlasted the colonial government, reducing the adivasi homeland, here as elsewhere, to "a world where only unimaginable misery, poverty, destitution, degradation, disease, death and exploitation flourish" [Parulekar 1947:4].

### Resistance and Response

The tribals' resistance to their oppression and their response to their changing situation has been recorded at length: from

the earlier 'Rebellious Prophets' and their religious-political movements to the later paternalistic Gandhian 'Seva Mandals'; from the revolutionary communist 'Kisan Sabhas', to the reformist NGOs and alternative political activism of various leftist groups; from Christian missionaries to hindutvawadis. But almost always it was the outsiders' gaze that prevailed. The tribals seemed to get lost in their dominant perspective. And they remain voiceless still.

For the post-colonial government is still much more in continuity than discontinuity with the earlier colonial state. Tribal resistance is all too often treated as a law and order problem and suppressed as ruthlessly as before. These would be dangerous consequences if such struggles succeed even on a small scale in an isolated area, because the demonstration effect would be electrifying. Tribal development adds up to an extension of the state into their domain, and extends an internal colonialism that is no less oppressive than before. The government is more concerned with a larger agenda of competitive electoral politics and the liberation of the tribals has no priority here.

Hence the unfinished struggles for the still marginalised had to be carried forward by other agencies. These new agencies in the field focus on the issues of land, debt and gender, ones that political parties in the area had ignored as not perhaps the most remunerative in terms of electoral politics in their constituencies. What had been achieved by these actors may not be the resolution of the issues they fought for, but rather a politicisation of the more marginalised, drawing them into the democratic process as active citizens not passive vote banks. However, there are inherent limitations to such non-party political formations in the competitive party politics that dominate state governance.

For too long left oriented movements have been very much based on a class analysis, and were not really sensitive to the cultural dimension of the identity crises that the tribals were undergoing. In fact the neglect of the cultural dimension, in particular education, seems to have left the tribals still very backward and dependent on outsiders. Tribal self-reliance was undermined not just by the expropriation and degradation of their material resources but further by the negation and denigration of their cultural heritage as well. A reconstructed

history transmitted through an appropriate pedagogy could have gone a long way towards a positive self-affirmation and on adaptive group identity. But no such 'cultural action for freedom' [Freire 1972] was put in place by educational or other agencies.

What education came to the tribals was first under the inspiration of the Christian missionaries, later a more Gandhian motivation made inroads into the area, and eventually a more nationalist kind found its way there with the various education societies. More recently the

Sangh parivar have ventured among the tribals, with boarding for students, and now even the left oriented parties have followed suit. But none of these educationists have really challenged the formal system of education with an alternative more suited to the tribals. No wonder the tribals are still considered an educationally backward people because they have not really taken to the system as yet. Or rather the system has not completely taken them in as yet. There is still resistance to the implicit acculturation that goes with this education.



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## Identity Construction

Various tribal movements have attempted to address these acculturation processes by integrating cultural action into their struggle against social oppression and injustice. However, a crucial difficulty on these peoples' movements, whether inspired by ideology or interest, has been to overcome and extend beyond the boundaries of caste and class, of religion and community, etc. The failure to broad base their appeal has severely restricted their effectiveness. For vertical segmentation has

ensured that peasant classes found a developed class awareness hard to come by. Thus, the coexistence of agrarian classes and the status-groups of a non-economic nature is the most fundamental fact about the Indian agrarian social structure to be reckoned with [Dhanagare 1983:18].

One does not have to give a 'primordial' status to such group identities, they are after all constructed out of historical experiences and by human agencies. However, one needs to be sensitive to the social cultural dimension involved in the interactions of these people and not reduce this to an economic political one [Heredia 1997].

Certainly there are role models to be constructed for the tribals from among the heroes and heroines in the legends and sagas of their oral traditions, as also stories and tales from their contemporary history. Moreover, such collective memories do reflect the stresses and strains, the constraints and contradictions that the tribals underwent during the 'epic' events of their history. We feel it is important to record all this and to present it in a form accessible to these tribals both as an effort at self-affirmation, and a critical search for their own identity. This is precisely what a collection of oral texts could do. For what has been constructed once can be reconstructed again. Thus if such collections specific to a particular people are turned into pedagogic material for children, neo-literates and others among them, a new generation can reconstruct their past and find a new identity and dignity for themselves. This we believe is a necessary precondition for any effective involvement on their part as subjects rather than objects of their own history. This brief note hopes to set such a context for the collection of oral texts.

However, the actual work of making these stories into practical pedagogic

material, whether in illustrated text, dramatic dialogue, or straightforward narratives, would depend on those who have the skills and competence for such a project, drawing out the significant and common features of these stories to indicate the ways in which they can be used for the overall purposes of a pedagogic text. However, what is crucial in such a venture is not to freeze the oral text into a written record, or some other fixed medium. This would be to convert a living, growing tradition into a stagnant, dead one. The pedagogic imperative must be open-ended and innovative, creative and critical, so as to speak to new and continually changing contemporary contexts.

## The Tribal Future

If there is one overall theme that stretches across tribal history, it is that of the outsider as exploiter: whether this be in the pre-colonial period of the dominant society intruding into the tribal area; or the colonial government getting a stranglehold on the forests and the habitat of these tribals, forcing them into a monetary and revenue system that was completely beyond their comprehension and leaving them to the mercies of the landlord, the forest contractor and the moneylender, or eventually the post-colonial state government that supposedly was to liberate them from colonial rule but in fact established more continuity with than disjunction from the old regime, to perpetuate once again an internal colonisation. There have been persons of goodwill too, who have sided with the tribals and even at times staked their lives for them. Such allies can have some liberative role, and they have indeed done some good. But they have all remained outsiders, and as such, have eventually also divided and fractured tribal society, whether these be the communists or the naxalites, the missionaries or the Sangh parivar, governmental or non-government agencies.

Now with the promise of tribal self-rule, there seems to be a new opportunity for these people to take responsibility for themselves, to claim their rights, to affirm their identity in a new context and to find their place in the sun. But it is important for a people to have an history if they are to rule themselves with self-reliance and self-confidence. Self-rule would be meaningless without this. If self-rule is understood in terms of 'swaraj' in the Gandhian sense, then it must start with the self, and

in the self it must start with identity and dignity. To an oppressed and marginalised people a reconstruction of their history is essential for this. And with tribals, as with other non-literate cultures, this must begin with their oral tradition. A small contribution in this direction would be to record these oral traditions, not to capture and freeze the texts but to disperse and communicate them as living words and not dead letters. For our project must be to facilitate an emic view of the tribal 'weltanschauung' and not to perpetuate our own etic one.

An outsider encountering this strange new world of tribal culture often produced a response of 'wonder' that was ambiguous: amazement and fear, repulsion and attraction, condemnation and appreciation. But the ambiguity was at least open-ended. For "the experience of wonder continually reminds us that our grasp of the world is incomplete" [Greenblatt 1991:25]. It is precisely this ambiguity of wonder, that remains "available for decency as well as domination" [Greenblatt 1991:25]. And so there is still a human way available to cope with the otherness of the other and to recognise oneself in the other, and the other in oneself. May we always be able to wonder because the other is always beyond our reach, our grasp always partial, and open to learning. Perhaps this capacity to 'wonder', the beginning of all philosophy as Plato speculated in ancient Greece, is what our tribals can restore to us today. **EW**

[This essay is part of a larger project on Warli social history with Ajay Dandekar and others.]

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