



Question Of Identity In The Poems Of Adivasi Poets

A Select Study

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Abstract: Every utterance of human beings is a part of some narratives. The human existence itself is a narrative that hides many stories. The identity of each person is a narrative. For instance, the gender of any person contains a narrative that includes so many facets of that particular narrative created over a while. However, narrative creation is not an innocent practice. The creation of any narrative depends on who creates the narrative. Thinking and rethinking narratives is a never-ending practice. As long as man lives on the earth and can think, he will come up with different narratives. The historical renderings of various events come to us through stories. The historian cooks the raw factual details and converts them into the recipe of a story. He weaves them into the background of his social, political, and cultural lineage. In recent years different subaltern groups have emerged with narratives and discourses that challenge the dominant narratives. Adivasis of India are one among them. The oral narratives of the Adivasis were never regarded as of any worth. However, in the previous few decades, Adivasi intellectuals have emerged and are making their stories heard not only in India but throughout the world. Their worldwide recognition as representatives of Indigenous communities is testimony to their strong resisting voices that challenge the mainstream narratives. They are re(thinking) narratives regarding them which the mainstream narratives have distorted. Thinking and rethinking of Adivasi discourse is both destructive and constructive. This paper attempts to understand Adivasi identity narratives in the light of poems written by Adivasi poets and how they challenge the hegemony of mainstream narratives.

Index Terms - Rethinking, Identity, Adivasi, Discourse, Narrative, subaltern.

I. INTRODUCTION

The question 'Who are you?' is considered the question of the answer to the identity, but answering the question 'who are you?' is not easy. Identity is perhaps one of the most complicated terms to define. It falls under various disciplines like sociology, psychology, and political science. It can be defined only by associating with other choices that reflect the identity. On a broader level, identity can be individual or social, depending on how we see ourselves and how society defines us. The individual identity is defined based on the choices we make in our day-to-day lives whereas the social background more or less determines our social identity. So, identity is one of the topics mostly discussed. Generally, psychologists mark four types of identity: personal identity, role identity, social identity, and collective identity. Identity is a fluid phenomenon and has infinite scope to define it. Despite its ambiguous nature, theorists define identity on two levels. Identity either refers to the individual self-conception about themselves as unique in terms of their choices or to the social category as society perceives them and the identification with the outer social groups based on caste, class, gender, or race (Buckingham 1; Fearon, abstract). It is believed that the discussion on the formation of

identity started with psychologist Eric Erikson in the 1950s. It has various branches like personal identity, social identity, cultural identity, political identity, etc. Ethnic identity is an important aspect of cultural identity. Ethnic identity is defined based on the differentiation in colour, language, and religion which covers 'tribes,' 'races,' 'nationalities,' and castes (Chandra 397). Indian Adivasis fell easily into the ambit of ethnic groups seeing the qualities required for ethnicity. The cultural and ethnic identity depends more on collective identity than on personal identity, though the collective narrative for the whole community indirectly shapes personal identity. Although the realization starts on a personal level, soon, it turns out to be representing the whole community.

Literature in general and Poetry in particular have always been powerful tools to explore and express one's identity. The genre of confessional poetry is one such example that deals with personal identity in terms of wider social and moral contexts. Marginalized communities around the world have used literature as a medium to express the anguish and exploitation done to them and their communities. Two forms of exploitation have been discussed by these writers, the external and the internal. External means the injustice done by colonizers and internal means the injustice done by one dominant group on the other marginalized group of the same country. Sally Morgan of Australia, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Africa, writers from the Caribbean Islands have written extensively against exploitation by colonizers. In India, writers have written extensively on internal and external exploitations. Indian marginalized groups like Dalits and Adivasis have been victims of both external and internal exploitation.

In the growing tendency of assertion by Adivasi activists and writers, the field of 'Adivasi Studies', centered on the subject of the Adivasi, becomes increasingly significant and relevant. Adivasi poetry emerges from their life experiences which include alienation, exploitation, injustice, and stereotyping by the mainstream groups. Poets like Mahadev Toppo, Anuj Lugun, Nirmala Putul, Jacinta Kerketta, Ushakiran Atram, Waharu Sonavane, and many others deal with such issues. Environmental deterioration is a serious problem faced by the indigenous community in India. (Khakhlari 2020; Mishra 2022; Bhattacharji and Singh 2023). Other forms of exploitation, like alienation and displacement from their *jal jungle and jameen*, stereotyping them as primitive and barbarous, and portraying them as anti-development, have been widely discussed by these poets in their works. Many researchers have explored the Adivasi predicament in Indian society but their research has largely focused on prose fiction like novels and short stories. The question of Adivasis identity as explored in poetry has either not got any place or has been very scant. Considering this lack of research, this paper attempts to study a few famous poems by Adivasi poets that challenge the mainstream portrayal of their identity and try to reconstruct it from their perspective.

This study aims to examine themes of resistance and self-expression in Adivasi poetry either written in English or which has been translated into English from regional languages. This research employs a qualitative and interpretive approach drawing primarily on the postcolonial subaltern theory. The literature of purpose can never be aloof from the societal issues and all the Adivasi poetry belong to the literature of purpose.

The primary texts selected for this study include published poems of prominent Adivasi poets such as Anuj Lugun, Waharu Sonavane, and Mahadev Toppo who explicitly address themes of identity resistance and cultural pride and hence provide their own life perspectives in their works. The texts have been chosen based on the thematic relevance to identity formation and their critical perspectives on marginalization and cultural expression.

This study applies the postcolonial theory of subaltern studies and draws on the subaltern theories of Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak and Ranajit Guha. The oral tradition of Adivasis plays an important role in the life and history of Adivasis. The technique of close reading of texts keeping in mind the central themes, has been used to identify different aspects of the formulation of identity and narratives. Various critical essays, scholarly articles, and theoretical works have been referred to contextualize these texts and provide a theoretical understanding of the topic.

The study is limited to Adivasi works in English, works which have been translated into English, and poems written in Hindi. Some of the works which have not been translated into English but are written in Hindi have been translated by me. The focus on reframing identity and history may leave out other significant aspects of Adivasi writings like the environmental concern or the writings on the social issues within the community.

For this study, secondary data has been collected. From the website of KSE the monthly stock prices for the sample firms are obtained from Jan 2010 to Dec 2014. And from the website of SBP the data for the macroeconomic variables are collected for the period of five years. The time series monthly data is collected on stock prices for sample firms and relative macroeconomic variables for the period of 5 years. The data collection period is ranging from January 2010 to Dec 2014. Monthly prices of KSE -100 Index is taken from yahoo finance.

II. ADIVASI APPROACH TO IDENTITY

Adivasis' rethinking of their identity consists of two approaches. Firstly, the destructive and secondly a constructive approach. Historiography has always been dominated by some or the other dominant sections of society. Indian historiography, too, is not an exception. A small number of elite historiographers have dominated the field of historiography for a long time. In such histories, the common masses, which include different sections of society, like Dalits and Adivasis, have been sidelined. Their achievements have been ignored or negatively portrayed. In the destructive approach, the subaltern historiography tries to dismantle the negative portrayal of the Adivasi community as presented in the mainstream, in Ranajit Guha's terms, "un-historic historiography." Without the destruction of such lies about the Adivasi community, a new and true picture of them cannot be projected. In recent years, it is in this direction that many Adivasi poets have worked to bring out their version of history and identity by exposing the shortcomings of elite historiography.

As has been mentioned earlier, the restructuring of identity employs the destruction of the identity narrative made common by the mainstream intellectuals and reshaping their version of identity narrative. To a large extent, the identity narrative is shaped by its history, which has always been under the dominant group who 'wrote' history ignoring the 'oral' history of the marginalized groups. However, the subaltern historiography came as a challenge to this. The poetical expressions of these poets are also a form of historiography that challenges the dominant attitude. In other words, they resist the epistemic injustice done to them by the elitists. Epistemic Injustice is defined by British philosopher Miranda Fricker in her widely acknowledged book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007) as "distributive unfairness in respect of epistemic goods such as information or education" (1). Gayatri Spivak Chakraborty uses the stronger term "epistemic violence" to reflect the extremity of the injustice.

III. DESTRUCTING THE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTED BY THE ELITE

Waharu Sonavane, a Bhil Adivasi activist and poet, wrote the poem "Stage" which "caused an important debate when he was also questioning the leadership of one of India's best-known mass social movements, Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), about Adivasi representation in its early years" (Patankar 2012 para.5). The poem reflects on the ongoing epistemic injustice in representing them. Sonavane writes:

We didn't go to the stage,
nor were we called.
With a wave of the hand
we were shown our place.
There we sat
and were congratulated,
and "they", standing on the stage,
kept on telling us of our sorrows.
Our sorrows remained ours,
they never became theirs.
When we whispered out doubts
they perked their ears to listen,
and sighing,
tweaking our ears,
told us to shut up,
apologize; or else... (translated into English by Bharat Patankar, Gail Omvedt, and Suhas Paranjape).

The 'stage' is a metaphor for the power that has been denied to Adivasis throughout history and the powerful have interpreted them as they wanted them to be known by the world. In this, they never got the opportunity to represent themselves. This stage functions as a divide between the real condition of Adivasis and the act of representation of their condition which lacks true empathy and understanding. Apart from the thematical understanding of the poem this disconnect is further emphasized with the words 'they' and 'us'. Both are not the same and fall under different categories in oppositional binary. The binary opposition of us/they is one of the grounding concepts in postcolonial studies where the quality of 'us' is positively emphasized by antagonizing another group as 'they'. In this binary, the dominant 'us' defines the marginalized group as 'they' in negative terms, here, however, the binary has been reversed. Here, 'they', the people of the mainstream are dominant, and 'us', the poor Adivasi and common people, are dominated. 'They' the dominant society of mainstream shut them from raising their voices as is clear in the line "when we whispered out doubts/ they perked their ears to listen,/ and sighing,/ tweaking our ears,/ told us to shut up,/ apologize..." (Stage). So, Sonavane's work here can be seen as an act of epistemological resistance.

Mahadev Toppo reflects the same resistance in many of his poems. Toppo has been a strong voice in resisting the so-called capitalist 'civilization', which is a constant threat to the Adivasi life and worldview. He resists the stereotyping of Adivasis and their commodification. He questions the turning of Adivasis into mere objects to be shown in museums. He also questions the so-called 'civilization' of mainstream society, which lacks courtesy, holiness, solidarity, truthfulness, honesty, empathy, and mercy, which are hallmarks of Adivasi life. Cautioning his son while going on a job in his poem "For the Son Travelling on Kalahandir Road to Join his Job," Toppo writes:

It is easier to find out some other path
Having been lost in the dense forest
But it is not easy
To deal with these civilized men of the cities (*Lessons from Forest and Mountain*, 147).

The strong assertion of his identity is fully reflected in his poem "Question of Identity", in which he denies accepting the mainstream nomenclature by selecting "a name for my (his) people", which he has never been allowed to use. But when he decided to do that, the elitists questioned, "How can you do this?" and that this hurt their self-esteem (*Lessons from Forest and Mountain* 115). In the next part, he resists to submit before the mainstream power and denies to accept the dominant nomenclature in these words:

Whichever word they addressed us with,
I denied to accept
Because that word hurt my self-respect.
Why should I be called at all,
What I don't want to? (*Lessons from Forest and Mountain* 115-16)

In his poem "Your Habit of Working like a Horse", he exposes the exploitation perpetuated on Adivasis by those in power. In this, he shows how their position in society remains that of a manual laborer and many times even below it, no matter how hard they work. The pain of dehumanization of Adivasis resonates in Toppo's poem as:

... your status remains
Only that of a horse in a chariot?
Then, you are neither a driver of the chariot,
Nor a passenger on it.
If your habit of
Turning into a horse from a man
Running since last eight thousand years
Has not been discarded by you
Even in the twenty-first century,
Worthless it is to hope that you ever will progress (*Lessons from Forest and Mountain* 118).

One of the most assertive voices in the adivasi studies is of Flavian Xaxa. He was a prominent Adivasi scholar, poet, and activist who was known for his advocacy for tribal rights in India. One of his most famous poems, "I Am Not Your Data" reflects this strong assertive voice of Adivasis. It has now become a slogan of Adivasi resistance against their commodification, making stereotypes, showing them as inferior, and other forms of exploitation.

I am not your data nor am I your vote bank,
 I am not your project or any exotic museum object,
 I'm not the soul waiting to be harvested,

 I am not your field, your crowd, your history,
 your help, your guilt, medallions of your victory,
 I refuse, reject, register your labels (Being Adivasi xii).

The Adivasi assertion of its historical identity never got any place in the mainstream history books. There are many examples of Adivasi rebellions and sacrifices that have been neglected. The great Hul of 1855, Ulgulan, Mangarh, killing of 1200 adivasis in Palchitariya village in Gujarat and many more have never been placed side by side of the 1857 revolt and Jallianwala Baag massacre. These rebellions were not just momentary burst of their emotions rather they were organized attempts to assert their identity which both the colonial regime and the internal powers were trying to overshadow. It is on such issues that these poets have raised their pen. It is in the backdrop of this antagonizing and neglection that Anuj Lugun started writing.

Patalgarhi was an Adivasi movement during the colonial period against exploitation. When, in the lack of written records, the British government tried to disown them from the ancestral land they appeared in courts with rocks which they would put on the heads of their ancestors while burying them and showed it as proofs of their ancestral rights over *jal, jungle and jameen*. In 2016, the central government introduced two ordinances that "enabled transfer of tribal land to the government as well as for commercial purposes" (Wikipedia). In 2016-17 Jharkhand government also tried to amend the Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act 1908, and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act 1949. Against all these anti-Adivasi developments tribals of the Khunti district protested by carving provisions of the constitution protecting tribal rights. Taking ideas from such struggles and feeling the need for a constant struggle for their rights, Anuj Lugun wrote poems that came in the collection entitled Pathalgarhi. Poems in the collection deal with various historical and contemporary themes.

IV. CONSTRUCTING THE SUBALTERN IDENTITY NARRATIVES

The assertion of *adivasiyat* is one of the important themes in the works of these poets. The *adivasiyat* in English means the essence of being an Adivasi. It contains a unique way of life, tradition, culture, and way of living. They are known for their symbiotic relationship with nature. Another feature that is often included as the essence of being an Adivasi is their solidarity among themselves. Adivasis are known for their peaceful nature. The conflicts between them are often resolved through peaceful means. The traditional institutions of their society like *parha, ghotul, dhumkuria*, etc. play important roles in maintaining social order. These institutions not only work as a justice system but also as traditional schools for women and men. These democratic institutions and practices of Adivasis never got highlighted in the mainstream narratives. These poets however have attempted to bring back the age-old traditions of these institutions and have now been demanding their sovereignty. The Pathalgarhi is one of the cultural activities of Adivasis. According to Anuj Lugun, a prominent figure in Adivasi literature, the rocks too have life, and Adivasis respect and worship these rocks as part of their existence. They organize *Jatra* (a festival of Adivasis celebrated mostly in Jharkhand). For them, these rocks have stood in support as historical evidence in courts when summoned by the colonial regime to give them evidence of their rights over lands. So, the act of Pathalgarhi has become a symbol of their resistance and struggle.

The constructing part of the Adivasi narrative asserts their different and unique identity. They try to cast out the stereotype and inferiority created by the mainstream narratives. Toppo's "Question of Identity" strongly critiques the mainstream nomenclature and asserts his identity:

I said Himalaya to the Himalaya,
 Ganga to the Ganga,
 Yamuna to the Yamuna,
 Koel to Koel,
 Sal tree to Sal tree,
 Mahua to Mahua,
 Banyan to Banyan
 Gandhi to Gandhi then nobody raised any objection
 When I myself selected a name for my people
 They questioned
 how can you do this
 stop it
 it hurts my self-esteem
 whichever word they addressed us with
 I denied to accept
 because that word hurt my self-respect
 why should I be called at all
 what I don't want to? (115-16)

The mention of the whole poem is needed to analyze all the aspects of the poem. This poem on the one hand critiques the dominant attitude of the mainstream. He reflects how the prevailing nomenclature arouses no issue until the Adivasis question them. Toppo mentions these attitudes towards as it is but as soon as he tries to govern his life according to his own choices, things become problematic. Even then Toppo shows his firmness in resisting the dominant ideology.

Anuj Lugun believes that the subaltern voices will not only be heard but will become victorious as well. Adivasis' voices who fought for their rights can be heard in his poetry. He writes:

Powerful can be defeated
 Weak can rise to power

 Those who opposed and rebelled
 Against rulers
 Too etched their marks

 That the powerful, too, become fearful—
 --Powerful, too, can be defeated (*Selected Poems of Anuj Lugun* 17).

Despite mainstream historiographers' biased writings throughout centuries, the marks of those on the periphery remained etched. It was always there but nobody ever tried to represent it to the world. But truth can not be denied and ignored for long. The poetic voice of Anuj Lugun has emerged as a beacon call for Adivasi rights.

We all know the story of Eklavya and Dronacharya as described in the epic *The Mahabharata*. Eklavya was a forest dweller and is considered the greatest archer of all time. After offering his thumb to Dronacharya as the fee for his education, which he never took from him, what happened to him, is unknown. Did he stop doing archery or continue doing it in another way is unknown. Nobody ever tried to know or write about him. But for Anuj Lugun the curiosity to know was always alighted. The reason for this is Munda people do archery without using thumbs. He thinks that maybe after losing his thumb he started training with his other fingers for archery as today's Mundas in Jharkhand do. In his poem *Eklavya se Samvad* (In dialogue with Eklavya), he tries to discover him in his own people. He writes:

Yes, Eklavya!
Such was the talent
Such was the talent
As you must have shot your arrows
After your thumb was snatched,
By holding a bow and arrow
between two fingers,
the Index and middle finger (*Aghoshit Ulgulaan* 23-24, Translated by me from Hindi).

V. Conclusion

The exploration of identity in Adivasi poetry reveals a rich tapestry of resistance, assertion, and cultural reclamation. Through their works, poets like Waharu Sonavane, Mahadev Toppo, Anuj Lugun, and others challenge the mainstream narratives that have historically marginalized and stereotyped Adivasi communities. By employing metaphors, oral traditions, and postcolonial frameworks, these poets create a space for their voices to be heard, emphasizing themes of epistemological resistance, self-respect, and the reclamation of cultural heritage. The study underscores the dual approach in Adivasi literature—deconstructing imposed identities and reconstructing their narratives rooted in their traditions, histories, and lived experiences. These efforts not only critique the dominant power structures but also celebrate the essence of *adivasiyat*—the unique way of life and symbiotic relationship with nature that defines their identity.

Adivasi poetry, thus, becomes more than a literary expression; it is a political act, a historiographical endeavor, and a call for recognition and justice. By focusing on their identity and collective memory, these poets bridge the gap between personal and collective histories, offering a profound critique of societal injustices while asserting the dignity and sovereignty of their communities. In doing so, they not only reshape how Adivasis is perceived but also inspire broader conversations about identity, representation, and resistance in the modern world.

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