

An Insider's Resistance of the Hierarchy of Oppression in Anil

Gharai's *Reincarnation of Parashuram*

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Abstract

Indian tribal literature primarily presents tribal society as an ideal society where the tribals lead a communal life with Arcadian simplicity. The ills of tribal life like drunkenness, sexual debauchery, greed for power and meaningless practice of several superstitions that plague the life of the tribals are generally rendered invisible, even unmentionable in tribal literature. But at present Indian tribal writers like Nirmala Putul have exposed these pitfalls of tribal life in her writing.

This paper using Bengali writer Anil Gharai's short story, *Reincarnation of Parshuram* as a case study will show how the tribal society is mired in meaningless superstitious practices – witchcraft, *dains* and others—that often create rifts even within the family members and shake the basic bonds of life alarmingly. This paper will also try to review and reassess how even in the so-called utopian tribal society, greed for power within the grid of power is the dominant controlling factor. How epistemological shifts in education and health consciousness can bring about radical changes in the Indian tribal cultural space is also the focus of my paper.

Keywords: Tribal Society, Superstitious Practices, Education, Witchcraft.

In Anthropology, the term tribe denotes a social group having a territorial affiliation, a common dialect and a common culture. In the words of Andre Beteille, “The tribe was somewhat vaguely assumed to be a more or less homogenous society having a common government, a common dialect, and a common culture” (Beteille 117). The British colonizers and missionaries used this term to denote the indigenous people of the Indian subcontinent, Africa, Australia and other parts of the new world. They used this term to mark the difference between civilized whites and the primitive indigenous people who lived in jungles and hills.

And tribal literature though in its written form is a relatively new product yet it is not a new phenomenon as it has been surviving over the past 5,000 years in its oral tradition. But tribal literature either in written form or in oral form presents a wide spectrum of experiences and sensibilities. Stated briefly it is nothing but a chronicle of tribal life, a documentary of their claims, creeds, faiths, beliefs, agonies, culture etc. It is “literature of life and not entertainment or fantasy” (Gupta 193). It is about self-assertion, self-determination, self-preservation and self-protection of tribal culture. Moreover, how the indigenous people who are recognized “as Tribes’ in anthropology” (Devi xi) and “as “Adivasis” in the terminology of Asian activists” (Devi xi) are exploited and humiliated by the non-tribal people or *dikus*, have often been the primary concern among the several tribal writers and the ills of tribal society are generally rendered invisible, even unmentionable by the writers of tribal literature.

But there are also some writers like the Santali poet Nirmala Putul who have shown that the representation of the tribal/non-tribal binary is often a partial representation of the whole truth as this representation carefully suppresses various ills of tribal society like drunkenness, sexual debauchery and the irresponsible acts for earning money that plague tribal life to a great extent and turn their life into a vale of tears and suffering. The tribal societies are also mired in numberless meaningless superstitious practices like *gunin*, *dains* and others. Even

in the hierarchical adivasi social order, the economically privileged social groups and powerful religious heads regularly exploit the disadvantaged ones. Actually several writers have been using literature as a tool of self-criticism of their society, like a mirror that reflects the faults of their community vividly. In fact, “tribal societies have been much more complex than we generally assume and inequalities do exist among the tribals in terms of control of resources” (Chakraborty and Chatterjee 11). Actually the romantic notion of the tribal “community life with Arcadian simplicity” has been interrogated by several writers (Das Gupta 177). Criticizing the pitfalls of their society, these writers “want to rid their society of its aberrations so that its people can stand tall in contemporary society” (Gupta 195). In this way, tribal literature aims at self-correction of the society.

However, in the field of tribal literature, authenticity on the part of the writer is one of the chief concerns as it is often argued that a non-tribal cannot produce tribal experience properly in their writings. However, to insist that without being an insider to the tribal society, one has no right to represent it as one’s close association with the tribals can also provide him deep insight into the tribal cultural [space|U1]. Anil Gharai, one of the popular dalit writers of Bengal, is a non-tribal writer by origin and he was born in Midnapore. But as a telecommunication engineer of South Eastern Railway, he was posted in Chakradharpur and watched the life-style of the poverty-stricken tribals of the Singbhum district from close quarters. He witnessed intra-tribal as well as inter-tribal network of exploitation that plague the tribal life. Watching the intra-tribal and inter-tribal network of domination and exploitation he realised, “Exploitation is a double-edged sword-it comes as much from outside as from within the tribal society” (Jana and Majhi 457). He became well aware of the pitfalls of the tribal society that he vehemently lashed in his writings.

In this paper, using Anil Gharai’s *Reincarnation of Parashuram* that was actually written by the writer in Bengali under the title *Punascha Parashuram*, I shall explore how here

Gharai has carefully and closely represented the intra-tribal network of exploitation and demanded the necessity of revolt against this meaningless exploitative intra-tribal power structure. The original Bengali short story *Punascha Parashuram* was published in the volume of short stories, *Kak O Anyanyo Galpo*. Like most of the works of tribal life in English, this Bengali short story is also translated into English by Prof. Shankar Prasad Singha and it is included in an edited volume of short stories entitled as *Survival and Other Stories*.

Anil Gharai has set the plot of this story in a tribal village, situated by the side of a river and covered with jungles. The action of this short story revolves around the Balwar family. In tribal narratives, the predicament of an individual reflects the condition of his community and the story of an individual family is exemplary of the situation of the whole community. Similarly here through the condition of Balwar family, the author has presented the case of numerous tribals living in India. As the story begins, we enter into the poverty-stricken Balwar family where Madho, a little boy of two or two and a half year, has been suffering from fever for a few days. And Bhishnath Balwar, his father, though anxious for his son, still feels interested in drinking *hadya* and participating in the cockfights and gambling. Actually, to Madho's father participation in cockfights and gambling is still interesting and necessary than taking proper care of the health of his only son. There is extreme scarcity of food and other daily items in this family but the only male member of this family, Bhishnath is least affected by this family condition:

They could not light any lamp even after the previous night's rain and storm for want of kerosene. Not only kerosene, everything in this village was scarce—rice, dal, Makai atta, even edible wild roots and dried mahua. (41)

The above description of the poverty-stricken condition of the Balwar family is emblematic of the general picture of the Indian tribal villages where hunger and scarcity reign rampant. Like the typical tribal families that live in jungles the chief source of income of this family is by

gathering *saal* leaves and firewood from the jungles and selling those *saal* leaves in the local markets. This job of gathering and selling *saal* leaves is executed by the mother of Madho, Sunar. But this regular cycle of earning livelihood of this tribal family has been disrupted due to the ailment of Madho. As Sunar, Madho's mother has to attend her ailing son, she has not been able to attend *haats* to sell *saal* leaves. Actually, the writer at the very beginning of the story provides an authentic picture of acute poverty that reigns in the Indian tribal villages.

As the narrative paces forward, poor tribals are found to be illiterate and mired in superstitions. Their belief in witchcraft and *gunins* is rock-solid and they have no faith in modern medical science. In the course of narration, we come to know that when Bhishnath's father had a severe heart attack, the poor tribals, as well as Bhishnath's father himself at once, believed that someone has cast spell on him and due to lack of proper health consciousness, he refused to go to the hospital and opted for the herbal medicine:

Oh, my dear, I have a terrible chest pain! I can't bear it. My whole body seems to be burning. Some rogue has cast spell on me. I shall take revenge if I get better. Come close to me, dear. Hold me and carry me to the bushes. I know the herbs and plants, you just grind the roots of herbs I identify and feed me the paste. (44)

But in this course of bringing Bhishnath's father to the bushes, time elapsed and he died. The same tale is repeated when Bhishnath's son suffers from severe fever. His wife, Sunar guesses that perhaps her old mother-in-law has cast evil spell on her own grandson. But unlike her father-in-law, she asks her husband time and again to admit the son in the hospital, but he repeatedly refuses as he has his strong ethnic belief in the magical power of *Gunins*. He argues,

'There'll be no remission of this fever in a hospital. Tell me, which disease has been cured in the hospital as yet', Bhishnath fumed in resentment. Doctors, hospitals- these had never left any mark in Bhishnath's life. Not to speak of an

injection, not even a white tablet had ever been swallowed by him. Why would he subject his son to something which he had never undergone in his life? (46)

Actually, he leads a kind of insulated life, a life which is marooned in the traditional tribal culture that gives priority to the power of *gunins* and herbal medicine. In fact, he has an extremely keen sense of identity, based on his own indigenous beliefs, customs and norms. Again due to illiteracy his mind has not been widened and he lacks proper health consciousness. So, sharing a strong ethnic belief in the wondrous power of the *gunins*, sorcerers or witch doctors, he assures his wife,

Mangala, the sorcerer of the village, had to be called for. Mangala could cure any disease with his incantations. If Mangala could be brought to his house, he could drive away the evil spirit with religious rites and the chant of incantations. (46)

These *gunins* are also an agency of the exploitative power-structure of the tribal society. Taking advantage of the illiterate condition of the superstitious tribals, they often trap and exploit the poor and illiterate tribals in the name of gods, demons and witches. Playing on the emotions, sentiments and beliefs of the poor tribals, these *gunins* exploit them economically. Here Bhishnath has not enough cash to make both ends meet and they have to starve. Even though Bhishnath lacks cash and has to endure starvation, he has not thought of selling silver necklace that is the only available treasure of his wife, Sunar. But he sells that treasure for making proper arrangements of the rituals that will be performed by the sorcerer, Mangala to cure Madho of fever. Mangala performs the rituals and assures Bhishnath in his own emphatic way that his son, Madho will be cured in time:

This boy henceforth will never fall sick of any disease by the grace of Singbonga. Bring the boy to me; I shall mark his forehead red with the blood.

The boy will start laughing and playing from the day the red mark gets automatically wiped out. (46)

But even after three days of the performance of the ritual, Madho's suffering from fever continues and his condition deteriorates badly. At that time Sunar and Bhishnath's mother fervently appeal him to bring Madho to the hospital. But he remains stuck to his ethnic belief in the power of the sorcerers and calls Mangala, the sorcerer, again to his house to cure his son. This time Mangala *gunin* realizes that the situation is beyond his grasp. In order to preserve his own image as a saviour, he now plays on the illiterate tribal people's belief in the witchcraft. He fabricates a story that dubs the old grandmother of Madho as a witch. He confides to the illiterate Bhishnath,

Your old mother climbs up the tall palm tree at the dead of night every day. She has no clothes on her then. All the witches of the village assemble there each night on the top of the palm tree. They sing and dance, make hullabaloo at midnight. But with the break of dawn they come down, wear the clothes to go back home. (51)

He fabricates the situations in such a way that even Bhishnath believes that his own mother is a witch and her death is essential for the life of his son. Then in a frenzied mood in an inebriated state under the impact of *hadya*, he hacks his own mother to death. In this context Sankar Prasad Singha and Indranil Acharya observe, "Unable to find a cure for the child, the *gunin* puts the blame squarely on the grandmother of the child. She is an old, infirm and woebegone tribal widow. She is dubbed a 'witch' and hacked to death by her [own] son." (xxxviii). Mangala does all these things in calm and calculating way as he after the death of Bhishnath's mother makes him conscious of the fact that he has done a criminal offence for which he will be legally punished:

Mangala *gunin* spoke in a hushed voice, ‘Lift up the dead body. Let’s go and throw it in the jungle by the river. If the neighbours come to know it, you will be put in handcuffs.’(53)

But when in spite of the words of assurance of Mangala Bhishnath finds that the death of the witch has not been able to save his ailing son, he becomes petrified in disbelief and grief. All on a sudden he realizes the futility of the words and incantations of Mangala *gunin*. He is torn asunder by the realization that he has killed his own mother who had “carried you in my womb for ten months and ten days” (53). He becomes conscious of the fact that these *gunins* exercising their privileged position create rifts among the poor tribals and are a part of the hierarchical power structure of the tribal life. He also becomes aware of the fact that Mangala has played upon his ethnic belief in witchcraft and instigated him to mayhem. In fact, he realizes to some extent the insecure condition of the tribal women, especially tribal widows in the superstitious tribal societies, dominated and controlled by the *gunins* who playing upon the tribals’ ethnic belief in witches whimsically and intentionally dub the helpless tribal women as witches and create rifts within tribal families and societies. Then in order to expiate himself from the sin of matricide and to teach Mangala a lesson he kills him. To quote his words, “Oh my wife, I have expiated for my sin. I have killed the man who kills other men” (54). Just like mythical Parashuram, who killed the Khatriyas who abused their power and deviated from their duties, Bhishnath also kills Mangala who deviated from his benevolent duty of keeping the lives of the tribals happy and blessed. He probably becomes aware of the greed of power within the grids of power and to break through this grid of power, being fully aware of the legal consequences of his action, he goes against the prescriptive norms of his society that regards the *gunins* or witch doctors as supreme beings and kills Mangala in a calculating manner.

In fact, he becomes to some extent aware of the intra-tribal power dynamics and his killing of Mangala can be viewed as his attempt to liberate himself from this exploitative power

structure. This can also be considered as his attempt to resist the intra-tribal network of power dynamics in his own unique manner by asserting his own self over the exploitative community structure. Moreover, this story enlightens the problems of the tribal society not only to the readers of other communities but also to the tribals and herein rests the uniqueness of this story. This story also hints that under this type of situation education is the only panacea for the tribals as the spread of the luminous light of education can also save the tribals from these *gunins* and uplift their condition. In this respect, the observation of Nabhendu Hota is worth-quoting:

If the tribals are to make progress, spread of education should be the primary pre-requisite and this education must have a proper understanding of the tribal culture....Spread of education can only eliminate the *meaningless* and superstitious customs prevalent in the tribal societies (93; italics mine).

In fact, here the author “understands the importance of literacy and education” as the principal requisites for bringing equality in the tribal societies (Gupta 202). Again, in order to resist the dynamics of the intra-tribal network of power and to survive, tribals should cross their bordered cultural space and come in contact with the culture of the mainstream society. They should also acculturate from mainstream life those cultural norms that can help them survive in life. In this way, here the author implies that ethnic-cultural purity cannot be maintained in this “age of collapsing boundaries” by any community (Gikandi 229). Actually, an awareness of transculturality can only offer the requisite space for the realization of freedom and equality on the part of the tribals.

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