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## Critical commentary on Tribal Life, Displacement, Development and Tribal Literature

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Gopika Nair UI

Passed MA in Comparative Literature from English and Foreign Languages  
University, Hyderabad.

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**Abstract:** The focus of the paper is to write a critical commentary on the tribal lives, their displacement, development and the literature associated with tribals. For my purpose here, I have used the following works: “The Displaced Voice” by Sneha Tresa Ekka, *Multiple Poems* by Jacinta Kerketta, First Citizens by Meena Radhakrishna, *Savage Attack* by Alpa Shah and the documentary titled ‘The Hunt’ directed by Biju Toppo.

**Keywords:** Development, Displacement, *Multiple Poems*, “The Displaced Voice”, ‘The Hunt’, Tribal life, Tribal Literature.

### 1.Introduction : Colonial Rule and Tribal Life

*On the earth I shall draw a dividing line,*

*One side may be yours,*

*The other shall be mine. (Kerketta)*

“Tribes in India have come to be conceptualized primarily in relation to their geographical and social isolation from the larger Indian society and not in relation to the stage of their social formation” (Xaxa). This is why a wide range of groups and communities at different levels of the social formation have all come to be categorized as tribes. Further, it is by virtue of the fact that tribes lived in isolation from the larger Indian society, they enjoyed autonomy of governance over the territory they inhabited. They held control over the land, laws, customs and natural resources available in their region. However, with the advent of colonial rule in India, tribes and non-tribes were brought under a single administrative rule and thus the tribes were asked to follow a uniform system of governance to which they were unfamiliar.

Alpa Shah through his work *Savage Attack: Adivasis and Insurgency in India* tries to raise questions about whether there is anything particularly ‘adivasi’ about the forms of resistance that have been labelled as adivasi movements. He further reflects on

a pertinent question as to what is it like to speak about adivasi as opposed to peasant movements and whether adivasi resistance be differentiated from the lower castes such as dalits. He explains that it was not until the 1860s that the distinction between caste and tribes had been crystallised. European modernity was built on the foundational domain of distinction between the castes of the plains and the tribes of the forests and hills. The ideological construction of the savage and the civilised played a great role in defining English modernity. Moreover, during the initial days of colonial rule, Hindus were seen as effeminate and tribals were seen as noble savages. This was mainly in accordance with stadial theory of social evolution, popularised by legal scholars such as Henry Sumner Maine and Lewis Henry Morgan who were deeply interested in using anthropological accounts of tribals to show that they were not merely impoverished groups but rather arose from an earlier stage in the evolution of human civilisation. In fact, it is this treatment of tribals as “noble savages” that facilitated a certain kind of paternalistic desire to protect them against others and from themselves as well as a desire to master them.

The rise of protests among the poor peasants from the plains and people who inhabited forests and mountain terrains who later came to be called tribals was suppressed by the British officials in two different ways. They took into consideration the geographical location of the people before settling the issues. While in the commercial, cash cropping plains of late colonial India, peasant protests would be met with remissions of rent or revenue and debt conciliation, in the marginal areas occupied by those who were labelled tribals later, in which chiefs often paid tribute rather than land tax and which were generally less profitable to the colonial state, the main response to agitation and unrest was punitive police action. Thus a divergently marked distinction arose between the peasants of the plains as people with politics, and those on the margins of civil society in the forests and the hills as “dangerous savages”. Alpa Shah further observes that “the brahmanical prejudices dovetailed with Victorian theories of race to conceptualise Indian tribals as eccentric, noble but potentially dangerous savages”.

By the late nineteenth century, determined efforts were made to find mechanisms to earn revenue from the vast tracts of forested tribal lands and the culmination of this effort was the Forest Act of 1878 which sought to consolidate and reserve forested areas so that duties might be levied on the timber and other forest produce. It also created provision for the protected forests from which the local populations would be entirely excluded or permitted to remain only in forest villages for the purpose of providing labour to the newly created provincial forest departments. These measures further led to the loss of livelihoods among tribals and this in turn led

to migration and displacement. The social problems which resulted as part of loss of livelihoods were addressed by the 'Criminal Tribes' legislation which labelled tribal and nomadic communities as 'habitually criminal'.

By the early twentieth century, the distinction between tribes and castes was clearly demarcated in the colonial imagination, investigation and legislation. The century also saw the shift from "dangerous salvages" to "protected salvages" in colonial narratives. The rise of Adivasi Mahasabha from which the Jharkhand Party descended gained dominance in the period further highlighting the rise of newly educated tribal generations. By the 1970s renewed anthropological inquiry into India's tribal communities, inspired by the government's concerns for national integration came into prominence. The studies of this era did not seek to depict tribal societies as static exemplars of ancient tradition, but began to recognise that they were affected by many social and economic changes. The period further saw the rise of scholarly texts that were originally thought of in terms of peasant resistance like Ramachandra Guha's *Unquiet Woods*, which was actually subtitled *Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya*. It is worth noting that the book was titled peasant resistance and not tribal resistance.

However, there has been no demise of class struggle in lieu of indigenous and at the end of the first decade of the twenty first century, national and international interest in India's indigenous resistance and assertion has focused on the underground armed Maoist revolutionary movements. What once acted as a severe threat to the government has now become a threat to the innocent tribal societies itself; the rise of Naxalism.

### **1. Rise Of Naxalism**

Naxalism was prevalent in the areas of Jharkhand even before the rise of Bihar. Earlier, there were a lot of fruitful reasons for Naxalism to flourish. Political issues like support of CPI, influence of Chinese Communist Party and Mao Zedong, arms oriented movement; insensitive political system and poor governance are some of the main reasons for the emergence of Naxalism. Other social factors that add to the rise of Naxalism include poverty and economic inequality, negative impacts of MNC's in tribal lives, slow implementation of land reforms and consequences of liberalization of the Indian economy. The emergence of differences between perceptions and expectations of the past or the future situation of individuals has led to dissatisfaction and frustration within the society. And thus, violence emerges as a result of this frustration. The social structure of the society, lack of adequate facilities, poor awareness and lack of education has led certain sections of tribal areas to join Naxal movements in the hope that violence

will help them overthrow the mighty ones in power.

However, during the course of years, all the developments that were done in the name of social progress led to large scale alienation of land from tribes to non tribes and thus the Government keeping in mind the view that the tribes need special provisions in the constitution to be protected introduced laws that extends civil, political and social rights in equal measure to the tribes as others. However, despite these provisions the tribes suffer at the hands of the corporate as well as government officials. Moreover, they are torn into fragments in the tussle between the government officials and naxalites. It is not only that effective social and economic rights were not evolved and extended to tribes, but even rights that they enjoyed such as their hold over land and natural resources to which they solely depend for their livelihood has been taken away from them by the colonial state to begin with and later by the post independent Indian state.

## **II. 'DEVELOPMENT' AS A CONTRONYM**

Development is defined as a process that is aimed at creating positive changes or progress in the society taking into account various environmental, economic, social and demographic components. However, the word development has become a contronym in the present scenario, particularly considering the tribal lands of our country. Despite being a natural pool of resources like minerals and oil, the tribes who inhabit forests, their lands, are denied even the fundamental living conditions or are forced to vacate from their own lands. Atrocities faced by tribes are either ignored or are considered false allegations set by them for better living conditions by the government. The main drawback behind the national objective to integrate the tribal society is that the governments at both the state and the central levels weighed the need for a productive structure for future growth and resource mobilization more than the issues concerning the welfare and interest of the tribes.

Felix Padel states in his essay "In the name of sustainable development" that "One aspect of adivasi's identity is that their cultures are highly developed on the principle of sustainability, meaning systems of cultivation and an economy or mode of production that does not destroy by over exploiting a community's natural environment. Restraint is built into the culture and religion, with conscious taboos on collecting bamboo and other seeds too early so as to allow a large proportion to regenerate, and sacred groves or forests on mountains being left undisturbed." He further explains that "Deep ecology" is inherent and embedded into adivasi consciousness and that "adivasi society is radically egalitarian and communist in the original sense of emphasizing community based land ownership".

Adivasi communities are rooted to the land in which they are born. Thus

displacement for them is like a “severing of the umbilical cord” that connects them to nature. Felix Padel says in his essay that displacing tribal people from their own lands by constructing dams and factories is a form of genocide as it disrupts every form of the social structure of the tribal society. In fact, this is the reason why development projects are said to constitute the opposite of development in tribal areas. “When adivasi communities are displaced, they undergo a process that is the polar opposite of real development, especially because of a gulf between what is supposed to happen and what actually happens, which regularly includes violent repression, exposure to goondas and corruption, illegal liquor shops, and a rise in rapes and prostitution.” (Padel)

Meena Radhakrishna in her work ‘First Citizens’ defines development as “the scourge of adivasi lives”. She further states that “not only have the populations of these resource rich regions not flourished with mining activities and other development projects which have been in operation for years, much worse has happened. Literally hundreds of thousands of adivasis have been displaced, losing their land, livelihood, culture and identity because of these measures to develop the region, without deriving any benefit out of the projects or industries.” Tribal communities are the worst affected by development projects when their religion and moral values receive a shock at the disrespect shown by the company and Govt. people towards their mountains, forest and water sources as well as to themselves. In fact, they are torn apart when resettled due to the variable, divisive treatment that they receive at the hands of the company.

In the following course of the paper, the plight of tribal people is detailed, by taking cues from the poems: “The Displaced voice” by Sneha Tresa Ekka, *Multiple poems* by Jacinta Kerketta and the documentary titled ‘The Hunt’ directed by Biju Toppo.

#### **IV. VOICE OF THE TRIBALS IN “THE DISPLACED VOICE”**

The poem “The Displaced Voice” begins thus,

*I am the displaced voice,*

*I am the present who is struggling to make herself heard;*

*A voice who does not understand what her articulation means*

*A voice that is displaced from its roots.*

*Whose cries are unheard, unheeded and unborn;*

*Killed and erased from scripts, books for centuries,*

*A voice with no history,*

*An echo with no source. (Ekka)*

“The Displaced Voice”, is a title that ideally represents the plight of thousands of tribals living in India. Treated as second class citizens by the non tribes, tribal people

suffer at the hands of those who rule them. Corporates and government officials tie hands with each other with the sole aim of looting and exploiting the tribal society. They find themselves oppressed and find it hard to find their own voices against the mainstream society who is keen to civilize them citing that they are less developed in the socio-economic sphere. However, the statement posits some pertinent questions; what is meant by the term civilization? Who determines the range of civilization so as to keep a particular community in the pedestal and other communities as inferior ones? Can every type of development be associated with civilization?

The poem further hints light on the “stripped and scrapped” identity of tribals who had to “uproot” themselves from their own lands and were forcibly kept “in glass box” just like artefacts being kept “for display in museums”. The poet explains that the tribal society is discriminated against and oppressed by the mainstream society by “romanticising” their “strains and struggles”. Tribal sufferings have been reduced to the status of theories that are meant to be glossed over and polished by the elite society. Tribals are forcibly deprived of their history and roots. They are deprived of the resources to which they belong and further exploited for capital gains that can be obtained through mining and other industry related activities.

#### V. ANALYSING *MULTIPLE POEMS* AND ‘THE HUNT’

Jacinta Kerketta's *Multiple Poems* also deals with similar themes of tribal exploitation. Some of the poems that will be dealt with include “An Adivasi Village”, “The Blossoms of Saranda”, “The Dust of Development” and “Why is the earth on fire?” from the same collection.

The poem “An Adivasi Village” details the musings of an educated Adivasi boy who returns to his village after pursuing his studies from the city to participate in the ‘Karan’ festival. *Karan* festival is a harvest festival celebrated in Jharkhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Odisha and West Bengal. It is dedicated to the worship of Karan Devi, the God of youthfulness and power.

The poem pictures the boy's helplessness as exhibited while the villagers question him regarding his future prospects. They enquire whether he will settle in the city or in the village. This leads the boy to contemplate about his future and he asks these self reflective questions to himself and realizes that “his existence” is totally linked to “his essence”. He further realizes that “to preserve nature” is “his essence”. Finally, he comes to the conclusion that he is the one who is solely responsible to “secure his entity and existence”.

The concluding part of the poem features the “floodwaters drifting” which shows the heavy shift of urban elements like industrialization into the rural village. The

poem ends with an optimistic note whereby the boy is seen catching hold of a “jawa” blossom and a “bough of karan” which is indicative of spring or harvest season in the tribal regions and is seen imagining the rise of “An Adivasi Village” amidst the deluge of urbanization. The poet reflects on the need and necessity to base oneself to one’s own roots and thereby preserve the essence of nature and their existence. The poet leaves a ray of hope towards the end of the poem;

*As a sign of a new beginning*

*Flow by a jawa blossom*

*And a bough of karan,*

*Holding on to which he shall reach*

*The abode of his existence. (Kerketta)*

The poem “The Blossoms of Saranda” details the oppression meted out to the adivasi men and women by the corporate industrialists who rob the natives of their “blissful slumber” and leaves out “splitting pain”. The poem begins with the description of the peaceful existence that the inhabitants of the Saranda forest once had. The poet describes it using,

*Deep in peaceful slumber*

*The flower’s perfume. (Kerketta)*

These lines find echoes in the documentary titled ‘The Hunt’ directed by Biju Toppo, where he begins the film with the lines,

*This is the time for blossoming of palash flowers...*

*In the banks of river from Niyamgiri,*

*Tendu fruits are ripe and red*

*Cobwebs have been torn apart*

*And caves are aware of it. (The Hunt)*

Both the poems deal with the life of tribals from the Saranda forest. Saranda, which means 'a forest of 700 hills' is the largest forest of Sal trees in Asia, located in West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand in India. The Saranda is the abode of Ho and Munda tribes whose population is approximately 125 thousand. The tribals directly depend on the forest products for their livelihood. They sell herbs obtained from trees for their livelihood. With an area of 847 sq.km, the Saranda forest was once a natural habitat to various tribes and several wild species of plants and animals and was famed for its abundant green cover. The place was also famed for being an important elephant corridor till the early 1990s.

The forest covers 847 sq.km where 25% of Iron ore deposits in India is found. Currently, 50 mines are operational and 19 new mining leases have been sanctioned to



national and multinational corporations. According to an Indian Bureau of Mines report, West Singhbhum is the most mined district in Jharkhand. The mass deforestation of the area has turned it into a major industrial zone where nature is being totally destroyed for meeting selfish ends. Saranda forests can be metaphorically called a forest, illegally killed for extracting iron ores. The place which has once been an abode of elephants has now turned into a zero elephant area.

The place which was once the abode of 'Palash blossoms' has now turned to a toxic mechanized land with just a "corpse of rain" dangling in the tree. Moreover, the poem details that the withered remains of their "roots" have been "blown up into fragments/ by exploding dynamites". The traditional means of tribal life is being shattered and people who were directly dependent on the forest products are now made to starve out of poverty and unemployment. Deforestation has not only resulted in the unbalanced ecological system but has also become a major reason for the disappearance of many tribal communities.

*Nobody of my own can be seen.*

*From here everybody is turned towards the city*

*Yesterday, I saw a mountain going in a truck.*

*Before it river went and the news is*

*My village will also go away!*

...

*This season of blossoming Palash flowers...*

*Smoke is rising from children's sand castles,*

*There is the scent of gunpowder in the wind*

*The sun is shining red*

*On dripping water from the rocks. (The Hunt)*

The grief expressed in the poem "The Blossoms of Saranda" is also the same. The poet details the outcomes of urbanization and the way it inflicts pain upon tribals and on nature is beautifully described.

*The corpse of rain*

*Hung by the neck*

*Dangles on a tree.*

*Right above the forest*

*In the oval sky,*

*Vultures gather on a feasting spree,*

*And streams of bloody tears*

*Run down the cheeks of rivers. (Kerketta)*



Similarly, Kerketta details the changes in the tribal environment owing to too much influence of urbanization, in her poem "The Dust of Development". Tribals who were directly dependent on trees and plants have been replaced by industrialists who make products out of the raw goods from nature. Moreover, the over exploitation of forests have led people to starve due to lack of available resources. Other activities like mining and coal drilling have further deteriorated the plight of tribes living in forests. Neither are they provided with adequate compensation or land. They are made to suffer at the hands of corporates. Kerketta and Biju Toppo details the agony of tribal people through their lines;

*No footsteps more are heard,  
Plodding along towards the field  
For addicted now are those feet*

*To chase the trucks laden with coal. (Kettekarkar)*

Similar situation is pictured in the documentary as well. The documentary further highlights the rise of Naxalism and its after effects on the poor helpless tribal people.

*In our forests,  
flowers of iron have bloomed...  
Bouquets of bauxite  
have been decorated...  
Mica and Coal is sold in wholesale  
and retail prices in daily markets.  
To sell them military  
schools have been opened.  
Schools here teach 12 kinds of Guerilla warfare  
Instead of 12 syllables. (The Hunt)*

The greed and selfish attitude of both corporates and the government has led to the rise of Naxalism. They believe that for the creation of an alternative state and system, Marxist and Leninist ideas have to be used. Earlier this was the case. They pretended as if they were working for poor people. But during the course of time, they have splintered and changed their outlook. Now they resort to the use of violence and vandalism to get an upper hand in the society by overthrowing the government officials. They destroyed many schools and anganwadis in the area. Now the innocent tribal people are torn apart between the clutches of both the government and the naxalites. While the government doesn't provide them with fundamental facilities like clean drinking water and food, schools and nutrient rich food for children and other people, naxalites destroy the already existing schools and loot the tribal people for money and food. However,

considering the real scenario it has to be understood that the political corruption done by government officials is the real sabotage of democracy and not the violence of the guns. People take up arms in the hope of setting up a better society. Thereby it shows the negligence and ignorance exhibited by the government.

According to the Superintendent of Police, Jharkhand, innocent tribals will have to sacrifice their life if they get caught in between the police and the naxalites and that they can have no say in it. Moreover, the police say, they give compensation to the deceased family. Further irony comes into light when we realize that the police men are free of accusations in any encounter. They are not tried or questioned for their act. Thus, it's clear that the government and the mighty ones in power, in greed of exploiting the natural resources, are determined enough to get rid of the people from their own land and leave them in poverty and unemployment for the rest of their life.

*Biddars and auctioneers*

*To put the price tags on lines lost,*

*And in all this much ado*

*Many lives are left to gather dust.*

*When asked by Truth,*

*What was as compensation paid? (Kettekhar)*

However, with continuous intervention from Human Rights Activists, the government has initiated several operations for understanding the real scenario in the tribal areas. Activists help the government in compiling facts and records and send them to concerned Human Rights Commission and Women's Commission for taking appropriate actions. The area has started witnessing positive changes where compensations have considerably increased and government jobs are being provided to at least some of the victims of fake encounters.

In the poem "Why is the Earth on Fire?" Kerketta pictures a farmer who stands in the village "witnessing the nearing storms/of progress and development". The poet then gives a ray of hope by trying to fix a condition saying,

*On the earth I shall draw*

*A dividing line,*

*One side may be yours,*

*The others shall be mine. (Kerketta)*

The poet also reflects on the reason for the earth to be "on fire". Man destroys nature and the ecosystem for their selfish needs. In the name of progress and development, man exploits the natural resources of the universe without thinking about the future generation. The poet says that,

*The other side he saw*

*Was engaged in constant war*

*In the name of progress*

*In flames was the earth. (Kerketta)*

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Considering the social, political and economic output of the tribal society, they are now labelled the least productive and are considered second class citizens by the so called 'civilized society'. However, what is to be taken into consideration is the fact that tribals inhabit the resource pool of the world and if they are still deemed to live a life of poverty in the socio-economic sphere, then it's clear that the fault lies in the greedy selfish corrupt politicians and corporates who rule them. Tribals have been at the receiving end of unrelenting violence and racism with the non tribes trying to civilize them. However, the real civilizing power is to be entrusted with tribals themselves. The tribal development needs to be in the hands of tribals by providing them with the provision of self government which will be possible only if there is conscious community mobilisation at the grassroots level in support of this.

It is high time we realise the importance of practising 'sustainable development'. Sustainable development is the idea that human societies must live and meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The three pillars of sustainable development, as defined by the Brundtland Report and the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development at Johannesburg (2002) are economy, society and environment. However, a major drawback in their goals is clearly visible in terms of the order of ascribing more importance to the economy rather than environment. The real sustainability is the essence of tribal societies who have been living in close association with the forests without altering the balance of nature. "If humans are to survive, we may need to turn our back on capitalist models of growth, and relearn from tribals the art of living with nature without over-exploiting it, and sharing what we have on a far more equal basis." (Padel).

According to Alpa Shah, "the suggested way forward in reconciling the class and tribe debate is for scholarly analysis to treat tribal movements as ethnographic objects that are socially differentiated in character". He further states that this approach would result in the exploration of a range of intended and unintended consequences and most importantly lead us to ask questions such as who is representing whom and who is left out etc.

The ultimate panacea would be to consider and acknowledge the plurality of existence by which the 'othering' is to be consciously stopped. Humanity exists in plural

forms and we are born and brought up in different locations at different time and space purely by accident. It's time to stop harassing the tribals just because of the fate of being born as 'the sons of forest'. Thus, it's time for us to question the biased attitude in us that sees everything that is different from us as abnormal. It's time to acknowledge the difference. Once we are blind to the plurality that surrounds us, the world is going to be blind.

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