**RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)**
www.rjoe.org.in | **Oray's Publications** | ISSN: **2456-2696**
*An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal*
**Impact Factor:** *8.373 (SJIF)* | **Vol. 10, Issue 2 (April -June; 2025)**

# *A Sense of Home*: Passage through the Adivasi and Rural Landscapes

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Paper Received on 09-05-2025, Accepted on 11-06-2025
Published on 12-06-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.2.538

**Abstract**

Writer Narendra's book A Sense of Home Abujhmad and a Childhood Village is a distinctive chronicle of his real-life experience in Adivasi heartland, Abujhmad, and his native village, Ramala. It is a prose account by a withdrawn author who is a participant-onlooker surrendering himself to a milieu, a forest region in Chhattisgarh and his local place in west Uttar Pradesh. The course of Narendra's aimless wanderings ends up in Abujhmad that becomes his place of stay for over three decades lending him an understanding of the things as place-made rather than man-made. The wild and mysterious Adivasi landscape makes its things- 'the villages, huts, humans, trails' and everything else- a reflection of its own image of stillness and emptiness in keeping with the rhythms of its cadence; and so is the case, even with the non-Adivasi land like his native village. It is with this shared 'self-neglect', 'seeming inertia' and 'meaninglessness' that the Adivasi and folk associate life as opposed to the "meaningful, purposeful, and efficient ways of the modern world". This goes in to accord the writer with a sense of home in Abujhmad radiating with the same native grace as in his childhood village. Such intangible convergences between the two spaces add a spiritual dimension to the narrative. He recognizes contentment of the Adivasis and the villagers in the face of want, as a utopia in itself and defies every surge of change and progress in the name of modernity. In the context of present work, the paper understudy seeks to examine if the idea of development can go consistent with the grace and charm of pre-modern modes of life.

"Places germinate writings as much as they do the winds, clouds, rivers and economies. It is the landscape that writes," (5) asserts the writer, Narendra in his book, *A Sense of Home Abujhmad and a Childhood Village* encompassing his real-life experience in Chhattisgarh's Adivasi heartland, Abujhmad and his native place Ramala, Uttar Pradesh. His association with the tribal communities commenced when his wanderings under a field research program ended up in Abujhmad and the contiguous parts of Bastar became his place of stay for over three decades. He

attempts to pen down his observations from the perspective of a withdrawn author, a participant-onlooker giving in to a milieu of an Adivasi and a nonAdivasi community. He realizes that the "places have their own personae and attributes" and "Abujhmad may not be written about in ways other than its own" (2). In seeking to narrate the place as having its own signification, the writer looks through the 'tentative', 'nebulous', 'slippery' ways of Abujhmad to capture the 'tempo', 'pitch' and 'cadence' born of its landscape. He identifies these as the aspects that governed its perspectives in addition to its institutional, social, political and economic fabric that lent him an understanding of the things as place-made rather than man-made. The inscrutable landscape of Abujhmad unfolded its things- its settlements, inhabitants, shelters, trails and everything else as reflecting its characteristic image of desolation and quietude. This conformed with the 'rhythms' of its languorous 'cadence' that enriched and sustained its daily living.

Writer Narendra's five years stint in the pristine environs of Abujhmad permeates his being and 'churns' his sensibilities so much so that it becomes a veritable referent to numerous aspects of prevailing 'life, times and society'. He is overtaken by a growing urge to perceive how the milieu of fields, rivers, trees, trails, birds, animals, ancestors, deities, spaces and skies form the basis of existence of the contemporary world. The writer discovered that the non-Adivasi folk communities of rural lands were as unassuming and contented as the self-effacing milieu they inhabited. On perceiving the native rural spaces of Ramala against his tribal dwellings of Abujhmad, he found them both radiating with the same domestic grace. Separated by thousands of kilometers and with dissimilar farming practices they shared boundaries that converged into each other. People of both the places had similar pace of day to day living with identical lack of haste and aspiration that helped them relish life precisely for its marked slowness. It was with this shared sense of 'self-neglect',

'seeming inertia' and 'meaninglessness' that the Adivasi and rural folk associated life as opposed to the "meaningful, purposeful, and efficient ways of the modern world" (xviii). This went on to accord the author with a sense of home in Abujhmad resonating with a similar notion of emptiness and nothingness that suffuses across all Indian landscape and binds it together. His homelike stay at Abujhmad and Bastar helped him evolve with a new insight into comprehending his village as one taking on a distinct meaning for him. With the passage of time, this 'village' imagery became more and more predominant with 'powerful echoes' invoking greater affinity

for the place in him. He honestly remarks, "Bastar and Abujhmad helped me begin my journey back to my village and childhood" (xix).

Compiled into thirty-one small chapters the book, *A Sense of Home Abujhmad and a*
*Childhood Village* oscillates between the writer's journey through Bastar's Adivasi community and his simultaneous exploration of the non-Adivasi rural folk society with respect to his childhood village in north India. A close examination of Narendra's major involvement with the tribal sections vis-à-vis village folk groups is suggestive of his adherence to the concept of cultural relativism. This advocates that ethics, morals, values, norms, beliefs and behaviors must be understood within the framework of the culture from which they arise. It implies that all cultures have their own beliefs systems and there is no 'universal or absolute standard' to judge those cultural norms. The writer seemingly subscribes to the very spirit of this notion and focuses on narrating the nuances of Adivasi life and practices without attempting to impose his own biases and judgements upon them. He puts into perspective the mundane aspects of tribal and village folk life that were remarkably small, including their gods and goddesses who dwelled along with them in their homes, fields, ponds, rivers, cattle sheds and deserted spaces, their so called, '*veerans*.' They were invoked at the time of need, and for the rest of the time, they were left to themselves. The sky gods got replaced by the local goddess, their Danteshwari Mai, the presiding deity of Bastar. The festivals of Eid and Diwali, merely observed as annual events, were overshadowed by the Madai melas that were large and all over the Adivasi landscape. The villagers regarded 'dharma' more in terms of their daily conduct that called for a virtuous way of living rather than as pure religion. They didn't involve themselves in too many details and preferred to do away with trivialities like using surnames for which the village name did the needful; or remembering the date of birth that could be conveniently taken care of by the teacher

concerned during school admissions. Even the dialects spoken in both Abujhmad and author's childhood village had fewer words and had not developed 'beyond the minimal necessary' for day-to-day communications. Like their forlorn, deserted spaces these 'incompletes' added up to the quintessential 'nebulous' and 'ambiguous' state of the rural and tribal spaces resonating with each other like twins.

The treatment of the subject of *ghotul*, a tribal youth dormitory, asserts author's conformance to the norms of absolute cultural relativism which proposes that "outsiders should not criticize or question the practices of other societies, no matter what they might involve". *Ghotul*, a sacred place that "condenses and extends the

wild's primal poetry and mysticism" (28), was indispensable to the fabric of Adivasi life and village.

It was permissible only to the young and unmarried boys, called *Cheliks,* and girls, called *Motiyaris,* who were supposed to stay there from sunset to sunrise after attaining their adolescence and quit its membership upon marriage. *Ghotul* was founded by the 'most loved ancestor-god' Lingo when he escaped the seduction by his sisters-in-law and fled from home making a hut of fish scales, snake beams and soft bird feathers by the riverside at village Semargaon, near Kanker. Deft in artistic skills, he played the musical instruments, sang and danced each night attracting young boys and girls who flocked to his glistening hut to sing, dance and 'celebrate primal abandon'. In the course of time, Lingo's hut acquired the status of a shrine giving way to the present day *ghotul.* Its vivid description by the author lends an insight into its functioning where the *Cheliks* and the *Motiyaris* conducted themselves under a new *ghotul*-identity limited only to its premises, as they sat around the bonfire, chatted and shared stories, myths, jokes and riddles or sang their long one-line songs. A source of revitalization of the spirit of the wild in the primal dark, the *ghotul* "lies at the very core of the Adivasi life of non-possessiveness, non-envy and non-competitiveness" (31) as it encouraged the practice of changing one's *Motiyari* or *Chelik* to check long-drawn excessive attachments. Nevertheless, various allegations were levied by the outside world to denounce this practice as "youth dormitories, sex centres or places for orgies" (4). The author responds against this vulgarization of the concept of *ghotul* and defends it as "a place of sacred intimacies, warmth and conviviality" (4). He recognizes it as a space with "exceptional fragility and genteelness" (4) that promoted gender equality as both boys and girls participated equally in all activities and decision-making processes, fostering mutual respect

and understanding. The atmosphere of parity empowered young girls to express themselves freely and challenge traditional gender roles prevalent in society. This leads the author to draw upon his experiences of life in joint families from his native village where men and women lived in separate houses called *Zenana* (women's) and *Mardana* (men's) and reflect on the status of women through the instance of his aunt. He narrates how his aunt when subjected to hitting by his uncle, called for a mini panchayat and made his uncle eventually apologize for his misdeed. This validates and supports the custom in the rural society where a father is never allowed to raise his hand on his daughter from her infancy to old age and received much social reproach if he did so.

Author's adherence to the notion of cultural relativism makes him particularly appreciative of the characteristic distancing of the Adivasi from himself. It was a certain form of self-neglect, a trait shared even by the people of his native village. He observes that "the seeming inertia existed at both places whereby neither laid much store by the world or its goods. None had a cause, purpose, a driving force or other accoutrements attached to a predominantly worldly living" (xv). Even the practice of visiting the doctor was uncommon as there was "little or no awareness of medical well-being" (18). The writer illustrates the cases of his uncles, one of whom named, Bairam Singh was a qualified doctor, but as this was beyond the villagers' immediate consciousness and concern, and for that matter, even his own, spent his time in cultivating fields. His elder uncle Charan Singh disregarded his need for wearing eyeglasses as he did not consider them important for good living. Interestingly, he did not hesitate wearing randomly found glasses saying, "I picked it up because in any case I needed one" (22). When told to consult a doctor as, "Glasses should be of the specific power needed for the eyes" (22), he refuted with a remark that even if showing a doctor did him any good, he did not need so much. The author recognizes this as,

> "The ability to keep a discreet distance from the surroundings and even oneself; to be having neither a deep, abiding interest nor a felt need. Not expecting too much for, or from, oneself in one lifetime was not an individual trait but of entire societies and communities – be they the peasantry, tribals, artisans, fisherfolk or others." (23)

Living in their own small measures with lesser aspirations in life, even the Adivasis of Abujhmad and Bastar were quite unknown to the regular practice of bathing, washing or

cleaning teeth. The clipping of nails was done with fingers or knives. Scissors were largely unheard of in interior villages and there were no barbers, so the custom of haircut, as such, was also unknown. It was, however, carried out in a quintessential Abujhmadia way when called for during the time of need. The writer dwells on one such incidence when, having given up the use of soap to maintain the sanctity of the pristine tribal waters, he got perturbed by his long foul-smelling hair. Desperate to get rid of them, he had to rely upon the expertise of his Adivasi friend, Pilsu, who gently burnt his hair from below in upward direction with the help of few aflame twigs, though, much to the shuddering, searing and discomfort of the author.

A participant-onlooker of Abujhmad's tribal surroundings and the rural spaces of his native village in Uttar Pradesh, the writer submits that, "Just as the fields, trees,

rivers, hills, trails, cattle, day and night, humans too did not need many things. In absence as such occurs a deep richness." (10). He narrates an example of a bamboo-basket weaver from the Pardhi community in Bastar who sold her baskets at the village weekly *haat* incurring a recurrent loss of one rupee due to higher bamboo cost and lower basket price. The author is given to realize her unusual demeanor as "Pardhis' understanding of economics" (89) that was premised on doing unconditionally what one was good at, and found joy in. He takes a corresponding case of Bhullan Baniya, a small trader owning a tiny shop of daily provisions from his village. Devoid of all material possessions, Bhullan was free from want and worry and used his palms as his scale amidst the natives who did not need more than a palmful. The ensuing contentment of the villagers at the face of want underlined their economy of the palmful sustained by the palmful measures of life. Their simplicity "kept their awareness limited and distant from the pressing times" (23) thereby endowing the tribal and the folk to live innately at ease with themselves. Whereas, it was the world outside that was terribly uneasy and devastative of both itself and others and was always in search of some utopia. Abujhmad and the writer's native village, on the contrary, had never lost themselves and were never in search of any utopia. However, the contemporary invasive times had coerced them to change, leading to the distortion of their spaces and rhythms of life.

With the advent of well-built roads, luxury motors, huge markets, private schools, medical colleges, drug stores, STD/ISD booths, Krishi Upaj Mandis, FCI godowns and the like, the Adivasi or folk found himself in a weird situation where he was made to see himself

through the eyes of others. The tribals, in particular, were compelled to ascertain themselves from the ascertainment of the outer world and learn to conduct themselves without the wild trees 'waterways, animals, open spaces, spirits and the sky', the defining attributes of their indigenous culture. The self-effacing nature and lack of conviction of the Adivasis kept them from laying claims to the forests, comprising more than 70 percent of the total land area, thereby letting it become an extension of the state, simply to be run by the forest department and utilized by the corporate and business hubs. The abundance of mineral wealth in Bastar featuring, iron ore, limestone, bauxite, dolomite and diamonds was taken over by National Minerals Development Corporation for quarrying or leasing out to government or private companies. The state ensured secured land rights, easy processing of lease applications and quick government approvals to facilitate the investors in their mining projects. The tribal lands that were earlier usurped by the forest or revenue

departments were further taken away for the rich minerals under them. In view of rampant industrialization and resulting displacement of Adivasis, none of the government schemes introduced for them were Adivasi in spirit thereby inducing low self-esteem in them. They were denied the right to construction of their houses in traditional way in which a space had to be secured for the ancestors. Instead, creating of wet toilets was made mandatory for availing housing subsidy under Poverty Alleviation Program. To add to it, toilet-making was also compulsory in order to qualify for panchayat elections. The tribal households were required to have the facility of piped water, without a proper outlet. In the absence of essential provision of water, the families or villages were not considered desirable for the purpose of marriage. Declining access to water had caused concern even in the rural non-Adivasi areas where the contractors owned the waterbodies and did not easily allow the villagers to use it, given the fact, that the government had allocated 75 percent water for irrigation plans. In the changing scenario, the conventional Adivasi fishermen, rendered jobless, started serving the contractors who had taken to rearing hybrid Chinese fish. It fetched more profit for its rapid growth, not to mention, its diet of mutton and chicken remains that had deprived the domestic animals of their food and further its need of excessive salt and urea that had contaminated the waters. However, the onslaught of commerce and industries had been foiled by the increasingly powerful Maoist incursions that subsequently trapped the Adivasis between the 'blind market forces' and equally blind retaliatory and revengeful Naxal forces. The writer observes that over a period of time, the tribals "had become more apprehensive of coming across a Maoist

with questions than a tiger without questions" (37). They were subjected to dislocation caused by government policies or Maoist violence which amounted to their excommunication or dismemberment from the community, a condition worse than death, when the entire support of the communion was withdrawn and they were left to themselves. Though the fear of excommunication never remained specific to merely the Adivasi land, but was also dreaded, for similar reasons, by all rural spaces across India.

Through the exhaustive narrative of his book, *A Sense of Home Abujhmad and a Childhood Village,* the writer, Narendra takes into consideration all the aspects of tribal and rural spaces and discovers that the shared 'mellowness and abeyance' of the Adivasi and non-Adivasi had kept them together and made them appear as one and the same. Though with the surge of modernity, they had developed and changed considerably. However, they still carry, "a helpless longing for the simpler and native

ways, their unburdened transactions, earthy practices, and living freely rather than living in a political system" (166). They had assimilated each other over the centuries and are still not willing to give away what they retain.

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