



**Poetry, Drama and
Short Fiction**

8

Block

8

POETRY, DRAMA AND SHORT FICTION

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EXPERT COMMITTEE

Prof. Shyamla Narayan (Retired)
Jamia Millia Islamia

Dr. Anand Prakash (Retired)
Delhi University

Dr. Payal Nagpal
Janki Devi College
Delhi University

Dr. Ivy Hansdak
Jamia Millia Islamia

Dr. Richa Bajaj
Hindu College
Delhi University

Prof. Satyakam
Director (SOH).

English Faculty, SOH

Prof. Anju Sahgal Gupta

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Prof. Nandini Sahu

Dr. Pema E Samdup

Ms. Mridula Rashmi Kindo

Dr. Parmod Kumar

Dr. Malthy A.

COURSE COORDINATION AND EDITING

Ms. Mridula Rashmi Kindo
IGNOU

Dr. Anand Prakash (Retd. D.U.)

Ms. Mridula Rashmi Kindo

COURSE PREPARATION

Dr. Ivy Hansdak (Unit 1)
and
Ms. Vasundhara Gautam
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Ms. Mridula Rashmi Kindo (Unit 2)
School of Humanities, IGNOU

Dr. Payal Nagpal (Unit 3 & 4)
Janki Devi College, Delhi University

Dr. Anand Prakash (Retired) (Unit 5)
Delhi University

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C. N. Pandey
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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Unit 1 will give you an overview of tribal poetry. The Unit will introduce you to two Santhali poets Nirmala Putul and Marshal Hembram while giving you critical reflections of their poems.

Unit 2 introduces you to the Oraon or Kurukh poem “Song of Netarhat: Victory Trumpets Sounding” composed while the Oraon tribes were protesting against the field firing project that would displace them from their land if this development work did not stop.

Unit 3 familiarises you with the criminal tribes and Denotified Tribes of India. It also gives you a brief introduction of the play *Budhan*.

Unit 4, Comments on the Authorship and the Structure of the play “Budhan”, Denotified Chharas. The Unit also gives a summary of the play followed by a critical reflection.

Unit 5 deals with two short fiction writers Temsula Ao and Lummer Dai from Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh respectively. The unit discusses the distinct aspects of Temsula Ao’s “The Last Song”. It also elaborates the important features of Lummer Dai’s “The Price of a Bride”.



UNIT 1 MARSHAL HEMBRAM: “I MUST PICK UP THE BOW” NIRMALA PUTUL: “IF YOU WERE IN MY PLACE”

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 An Overview of Tribal Poetry
- 1.2 Nirmala Putul: A Brief Life Sketch
 - 1.2.1 An Overview of Nirmala Putul’s Poetry
 - 1.2.2 “If You Were in My Place”: Text
 - 1.2.3 Critical Reflections on the Poem
- 1.3 Marshal Hembram: A Brief Life Sketch
 - 1.3.1 An Overview of Marshal Hembram’s Writings
 - 1.3.2 “I Must Pick up the Bow”: Text
 - 1.3.3 Critical Reflections on the Poem
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 Glossary
- 1.6 Questions
- 1.7 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this unit are to:

- Provide a broader view of Tribal Literature
- Familiarize you with different protest narratives of recent times
- Make you understand the importance of the unheard voices from the margins

1.1 AN OVERVIEW OF TRIBAL POETRY

Tribal literature was originally oral in nature. Tribals have poems/songs for every socio-religious occasion, performed as part of their community activity. Their poetry is rich in symbols and mostly reflects specific aspects of their community. Tribal poems/songs act as a store - house of myths, stories, symbols, customs and rituals, specific only to the particular social group they belong to. Sitakant Mahapatra observes that “Oral poems are highly concrete in their treatment of theme and generally refer to some specific aspects of community life, its myth or symbolic structure” (Mahapatra, Sitakant. “Adivasi Poetry”, *Our Adivasi Heritage: The National Adivasi Festival October 1989, Ranchi*. K.S Singh. Ed. Ranchi: Pauls Press. 1989. Print.p.67).

If it is a daughter, she will at least put out a
Bucket of water
To wash your tired feet.

If a son, he will perform all the funerary rites

And carry the bones to Damodar. (Devy, G.N. *A Nomad Called Thief: Reflection on Adivasi Silence*. New Delhi: OrientBlackswan, 2011. Print.2002: p.153)

Tribal poetry depicts the community life of the tribals. The above-mentioned Santhali song celebrates life and birth. "Daughter" is a symbol of life, she is the one who assists the family and a son symbolizes responsibility of the home, the one who would fulfil all his duties. Both the children are welcomed to the world that the family inhabits. Tribals celebrate an important occasion with their community as it is *their* family. Individualism is less popular among tribals.

The oral texts of the tribals need to be preserved for future generations as the popularity of these may decline with time. There are very few poems/songs documented till date, and there are thousands of poems/songs yet to be documented. Tribal poetry is of great value, it is not just old poems/songs handed down from one generation to another orally but also those written pieces that deal with contemporary issues. Tribal literature is not stagnant or stale but is a product of imagination of the tribe to which the writer belongs. It is an amalgam of their imagination and the harsh reality they confront. Tribals not only sing about their forests and rivers but also about their glorious past (about the contribution of heroes such as Sidhu, Kanhu and Birsa Munda who took part in the freedom struggle. The songs, however, still remain unacknowledged and get overlooked by the non-tribals).

The unknown tribal heroes are depicted in the poems sung by groups or individuals on different occasions. With more importance given to the written poems, oral culture started losing popularity gradually. Ganesh Devy observes that

While the literary tradition in India is about 3500 years old, the practice of putting literary texts in the medium of print is barely 200 years old. India learnt about printing from the Portuguese in the seventeenth century; but it was not until the British started using the printing machine for the production of texts during the nineteenth century in India (Devy, G.N. *A Nomad Called Thief: Reflection on Adivasi Silence*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011. Print.p. 75)

The advent of print media triggered the decline of literary tradition that was thousands of years old. Tribal languages, except a few, did not have a script of their own. In fact the script of the Santhals (*Santhal is the largest Adivasi community in India. They are mostly settled in the eastern states of India like Odisha, West-Bengal, and Jharkhand*), *Ol'Chiki* emerged only recently with efforts of scholars such as Pandit Raghunath Murmu in 1925. Absence of script was one of the main reasons behind the diminishing oral narratives. It is a very recent phenomenon that tribals have started using the script of the dominant language in their region to express their concerns. For example, almost all the tribal communities in Kerala do not have any script and they use Malayalam for the purpose of reaching out to the readers. Similarly in Odisha most of the Adivasi communities use Odia script. With the spread of education many tribal writers have chosen to write in English or Hindi. These include, Gladston Dungdung, Rose Kerketta, Shankar Lal Meena and many other writers. Writers choose to write in other languages because till date Adivasi languages are not taught in schools. Lack of focus on Adivasi language have made tribal writers move away from it. They have also become more comfortable learning other languages (Out of 22 languages listed in the 8th schedule in the constitution only 2 of them are Adivasi languages namely Bodo and Santhali). Though there are provisions in the constitution to conserve the Adivasi languages but they are fading

out. As published in one news report in *The Daily Star* (In an article "30 Adivasi Languages at the Verge of Extinction" by Hossain, Emran. Published in *The Daily Star*, 18 October, 2009. Web) there are around thirty languages at the verge of extinction like Ho, Malto, Kharia, Mundari among others. Languages like Khumi are fading away because it has less than 2,000 users left and the language Ahom is already extinct. Another language Bo gradually lost existence. These languages are on the verge of extinction because of two important reasons absence of any script and the thinning population of the speakers. Also, the younger generations do not wish to learn their own language because they find it has no use in the outside world. The tribal languages have fallen into disrepute because of this. It is important to conserve these languages as they are part of our diverse linguistic culture. By writing in different languages tribals are documenting their experiences but it does not lessen the need to save their own languages.

It is worth noting that, in recent years, many tribals have started writing their narratives in new genres such as poetry, short story, novel, autobiography and drama. Here, they express their concerns regarding exploitation of their resources, displacement, human trafficking, etc. Many contemporary Santhali writers prefer to use the Roman and Devanagari scripts to give vent to their anxieties. In this Unit, we will learn about two poems written by the Santhali poets, Nirmala Putul and Marshal Hembram.

1.2 NIRMALA PUTUL - A BRIEF LIFE SKETCH



Nirmala Putul (Murmu) was born in Kurwa village, Dumka, Jharkhand, in the year 1972. She got married at a young age but soon separated from her husband. Thereafter, she did Matriculation from a government school, got a Diploma in Nursing at Dumka and worked as a nurse there for two years. During these years, she came in contact with many victims of sexual abuse and human trafficking. Later, she passed B.A. in distant mode from IGNOU, New Delhi, and worked for four years in the NGO, Badlao Foundation.

Nirmala Putul gained recognition as a major tribal poet in the 1990s but shot into literary fame after her two poetry collections were published in Hindi translation in 2004, *Nagare Ki Tarah Bajte Shabd* (A Voice like the Thundering of Drums) and *Apne Ghar Ki Talash Mein* (In Search of One's Own House). Besides Hindi, her poetry has been translated into English, Marathi, Urdu, Russian and Korean. She has been honored with the Sahitya Samaan in 2001, the Rajya-keeya Samaan in 2006, the Bharat Adivasi Samaan in 2006 and the Vinoba Bhave Samaan in 2006, among others.

At present, she lives in Dumka and is involved in managing her own NGO, Jeevan Rekha. Her third book of poetry is due for publication.

1.2.1 An Overview of Nirmala Putul's Poetry

Nirmala Putul's poetry encompasses a number of important aspects of tribal life. Apart from celebrating the positive aspects of her society, her writings bring into question, the misrepresentation of tribal by non-tribals, exploitation of the natural resources, displacement due to developmental projects, hypocrisy of the self-proclaimed feminists, and narrow – mindedness of her own community. A major part of her poetry is devoted to the problems faced by tribal women at home, and in the workplace. In her poetry, we can also see a large amount of inner conflict. She has a keen and observant eye that notes the many details of tribal women's impoverished existence. Her poems empathize with their plight in many rural areas of Jharkhand – focusing on how they lead lives of drudgery and hardship, suffer abuse at the hands of their alcoholic husbands, are routinely humiliated by their Diku (non-tribal) employers and occupy an invisible space in the big cities where they are often employed as menial workers. Bitiya Murmu in her essay 'Adivasi Sanskriti aur Stri' (Tribal culture and Woman) argues that as against the commonly held belief, women are not treated equally in the tribal society and the gender discrimination starts from birth itself...some of the malpractices are adopted from the Hindus also. One of Nirmala Putul's poem 'Bitiya Murmu ke Liye' (For Bitiya Murmu) is addressed to her. Some of her poems are autobiographical with a highly personal tone where she speaks to either a close friend or an acquaintance, whom she cautions against an impending danger.

Some of her poems also project the tribal way of life, its musicality, playfulness and innocence – in other words, the primitive world of the tribal people becomes a primeval paradise similar to the Utopian world that many Primitivist poets and artists have evoked as an alternative to civilization. Here, the figure of the tribal man represents the Noble Savage who bears the burden of a disintegrating natural world. In the poem "Mountain Man", she writes:

Mountain-like body
Mountain-like chest
Mountain-like complexion

Sitting brooding on the mountain
The face of the mountain man shows
The geography of the mountain
Within him hushed sits
The history of the mountain

When there's a fire on the mountain
Then, from his flute springs
The pain of the mountains.

When a mountain somewhere is torn apart
His mountain-like chest shudders
He speaks to the mountain in mountain language....

(Translated by Aruna Sitiesh and Arlene Zide in consultation with Nirmala Putul and PK Tiwari)

The poem can also be read in context of the present times. It reflects on the relationship of tribals with nature around them. The tribals and nature are so interdependent that the poet uses even mountains as a metaphor for human feelings. The poet here imagines the mountains to suffer just as human beings. The mountains carry within themselves the 'history' and 'geography' of the tribals. Unlike non-tribal history which is well scripted and existent, tribal history is present in nature around them and also in their folk songs and narratives. Nature and its resources have always been a source of life and succor for the tribals. That in turn has been the reason why tribals have always tried to protect nature, in this case the mountains, from external encroachment in any form.

The representation of tribals in Nirmala Putul's poetry tries to deconstruct the existing stereotypes which emerged from misleading dissemination and construct a more convincing depiction of tribal people. Her poem, 'Adivasi Ladkiyon ke Baare mein' (About the Adivasi girls) is a comment on the existing stereotypes about the tribal girls outside their community which has been propagated by non-tribal writers and also by some of her own people for some money. She writes:

Dark from outside
their sparkling teeth inside
they are silent white like them" (translation Ivy Hansdak)

Such writings could lead to reinforcing the already dominant traits. Such writings end up commercializing the figure so as to cater to the demands of the market. Nirmala Putul is trying to visualize a more authentic portrayal of her own community alongside giving voice to their concerns. In another poem by her, 'Kuch Mat Kaho Sajoni Kisku!' (Don't say anything Sajoni Kisku), she comments on the cruelty of the tribal men against their own women. She writes on the relevant tribal problems like marital rape, the status of women in tribal society, and the dehumanized treatment of woman. In her own words:

They tied you like a bull with the cart
Those merciless people
Tied you and forced you to eat fodder (translation Ivy Hansdak)

Behaviour like this is a comment on the status of women in their community. In another poem 'Ek Baar Phir- anterr ashtriya mahila divas samaroh ka aamantran-patra paakar' (Once Again after receiving a letter on the occasion of International Women's Day), she writes about the hypocrisy of the non-tribal women. Nirmala Putul is critical of the self-proclaimed feminists too. She writes

Once again
Women wearing cut sleeves blouse and with nose in the air
Will lead our procession
And in the name of representation
Will sit on the stage (translation Ivy Hansdak)

The hypocrisy of the non-tribal women is quite apparent here, where once a year they will gather on International Women's Day and give speeches about the condition of the tribal women. On the occasion, the non-tribal women will occupy the stage and give speeches about tribal women instead of giving them space to speak. On their part, tribal women will be gathered around the stage to applaud their speeches

and then they will forget about them until next year. This is a process that the poet finds humiliating.

In the poems discussed so far Nirmala Putul is raising her voice against misrepresentation and exploitation by tribal men, non-tribal men and women. Her work is revolutionary in nature because she becomes the voice of 'tribal feminism' from Jharkhand. Pramod K Nayar in *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* has observed "Feminist cultural theory analyses prevalent gender roles as they are represented in cultural forms like literature, cinema and advertisement (83)". In society, there has been a tendency to show women as meek, docile, and subservient to the males. Feminist theories rightly formulate a new world for women where men cannot give them a secondary status. Nirmala Putul's poetry tries to imagine a world where tribal women are on an equal footing with tribal men. Through poems, she tries to give an alternative theoretical space like 'tribal feminism' and showcases the shortcomings of feminist theories in case of tribal women. In this sense, tribal feminism is an alternative analytical mode where roles of tribal women are discussed using parameters of the tribal world.

In the poem titled "Sugiya", Putul speaks of a woman's need for respect in the world of men and wants to imagine a world, where women are not an object of wish fulfilment but individuals with feelings and emotions, where they are not just bodies that work as sites of exploitation. She writes,

...She heard and became very sad, Sugiya
turned silent, still.
Forgot laughing singing and dancing.

From morning to evening
the whole day, murderous work, Sugiya
often thought –

Here why can every fifth man
only speak in the language of my body,
How I wish
someone would say
you're such a hard worker, Sugiya
and so innocent and honest.
If only someone would say that!

(Translated by Arlene Zide with Pramod Kumar Tiwari and the poet)

Finally, Nirmala Putul's poetic voice is indisputably that of the gendered subaltern, who is doubly marginalized – as a woman and as a tribal. By speaking for this invisible and silent group, she has earned a place for herself as one of the foremost poets of modern Indian literature.

1.2.2 "If You Were In My Place": Text

(Published in The Little Magazine, Volume VI: Issue 4 & 5, p. 116-117)

By Nirmala Putul

Just think
if you were in my place
and I in yours
how would you feel? - 4

How would you feel
if your village stood in the lowlands of distant hills
and you lived in huts of grass and straw
right next to oxen, cows, goats and chickens and pigs
the anxious light of lamps about to flicker out?
Forced to see the faces of
children whimpering from hunger
how would you feel? - 12

How would you feel
if you had to bring your children
mouthfuls of water
from a spring
flowing miles away
or your wife, to light the house-stove-18
was forced to gather firewood
and bring it from the jungle
and you, to keep house and home
had to break rocks
or spread coal-tar on the road? - 23
Or even, early in the morning
had to haul bundles of firewood on your rickety wreck of a bicycle?
just to manage to get basics like salt or oil? -26

What would you feel
if you saw your child running behind
herds of cows and goats,
and some other kid,
book-bag on his shoulder,
going off to school? - 32

Just think, what would you feel
if I sat there squarely on a chair, instead of you
sipping tea with a couple of friends
and you stood by yourself in front of me, - 36
your hands clutched politely
begging for some work,

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Place"**

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wheedling and whining
in your sick little language? - 40

So tell me how you'd feel
when someone's hand pats your back
and suddenly starts measuring the flesh on your body
or the focus of a camera that wants to take your picture
ignoring your starved lips, centres on the fullness of your breasts? - 45

Just think
even a little while, but think
that if in a line, you were the very last
and I stood at the front of the line,
then how would you feel? - 50

And something else –
how would you feel
if you were black and your nose was flat,
the soles of your feet full of cracks? - 54
and because of this
someone cracked a joke and burst out laughing
then how would you feel? - 57

Translated by Arlene Zide with Pramod Kumar Tiwari and the poet

1.2.3 Critical Reflections on the Poem

It should have been clear by now that the main focus of Nirmala Putul's poetry is the plight of the tribal woman who is doubly marginalized. In the above poem, she uses multiple narrative voices that belong to many tribal women. These voices ask the same question over and over again: "How would you feel if you were in my place?" The question is repeated time and again to show the gravity of tribal women's sufferings.

(Lines 1-12): The first narrative voice is that of a poor tribal woman in a remote village living in dehumanized conditions. Her life is filled with hardships, beginning from the place she lives in to see her children headed towards a similar kind of fate. She is forced to live in a hut in the company of the animals and lacks basic facilities which are available to others easily. Due to utter poverty and shortage of food her children are forced to spend hungry nights.

(Lines 13-26): Tribals were dependent on nature for food, shelter and other necessities. The exploitation of resources accelerated in the colonial period and the practice carried forward unchanged in post-independence India. The depletion of natural resources became severe with over exploitation, which impacted lives of the tribals to a great extent. The deplorable day-to-day lives of tribal women, mentioned in the poem, are due to the unavailability of basic necessities of life. For basic amenities like water, firewood, and salt tribal women have to undergo hard labour like breaking rocks and spreading coal-tar on the road.

(Lines 27-32)- The next section, touches upon a very important aspect that of education. The voice in this section describes how tribal children are deprived of education as they are forced to spend their childhood 'running behind herds of cows and goats'. The non-tribal children on the other hand get the privilege of education with 'book bag on his shoulder'. By an intense juxtaposition of these two images, the poet tries to bring out the sad lives of the tribal children.

(Lines 32-45): The narrative voice then shifts to another woman who lives in a small town and is unemployed. She is often humiliated while searching for jobs among Dikus, whose supercilious attitude makes fun of her lack of proficiency in the Diku language. The narrative voice then moves to another woman who is made the subject of attention by social workers active among them, who seem more interested in the contours of her semi-nude body than her hungry lips; so the man who seems to pat her reassuringly on the back actually touches her intrusively while the camera that photographs her focuses on her breasts, rather than her face. The humiliation faced by tribal women in town is unspeakable since the people who pose to be sympathizers treat them as bodies and are not concerned about their plight.

(Lines 46-57): This is similar to the way in which native Tahitian women were represented/ eroticized by the Primitivist artist Paul Gauguin, who found an innocent but unrestrained sexuality in them. Finally, it ends with the narrative voice of a dark-skinned tribal woman who is ignored by others and always pushed to the end of the line, a woman who is taunted cruelly for her colour and her unattractive appearance.

This poem is a comment on the hardships faced by tribal women in their lives. By voicing such concerns, Putul is trying to register the tribals' protest with the outside world and the government. It is also an attempt by the writer to unite women against the exploitation that they are subjected to.

1.3 MARSHAL HEMBRAM: A BRIEF LIFE SKETCH

Parimal Hembram, also known as 'Marshal', was born in Bankura district, West Bengal, in the year 1957. He passed the Higher Secondary Exam in 1975 and graduated in 1978 from Uluberia College, Howrah, under the University of Calcutta. He obtained M.A. degree in Bengali from Calcutta University in 1980. He worked as a bank clerk and a school teacher for short periods of time before joining the All India Radio as Programme Executive in 1989. He wrote many essays on tribals particularly on Santhals and their language and literature. His lectures were organized by renowned institutions in West Bengal.

Parimal Hembram started writing in his mother-tongue, Santali, under the pen-name of 'Marshal' (literal meaning "the light"). He is a prolific writer, with over twenty books to his credit. Though writing mainly in Santali, he is equally at ease in Bengali. Among his works are two history books in Bengali, *Jharkhander Sankshipto Itihas* (2001) and *Santali Sahityer Itihas* (2007), two Santali novels, *Tiri-Sipahi* and *Kashdungri* (published in one book, *Jor Jeleng Kahani*: 2011), a collection of one-act plays in Santali, *Aakhara* (1985), a collection of Santali short stories, *Rimil* (2007) and several collections of Santali poetry such as *Aakaal* (1988) and *Manowa-Ho-Manowa* (1996), *Nakosi-Sikende* (2002) and *Akto Reyak Dalil* (2012). He has

also translated his own poems into Bengali in collections such as *Jion* (2002) and *Hei Samalo* (2009). As a literary critic, he has published the book titled, *Saontali Bhasha Charcha-o-Bikasher Itibritta* (2010).

Apart from being a writer, he is a performing artist who recites poems in both Bengali and Santali. He has been attached as an actor to a folk theatre group and has acted in stage dramas and films. He has also produced a radio-play in Santali, *Radio-Gayan* (2000). Presently, he is the President of the Santali Sahitya Parishad, West Bengal.

He has won several awards and recognitions as the Gunijan Award conferred by the Government of West Bengal and Sadhu Ramchand Murmu Award by All India Santhali Writers Association. For his book *Jharkhander Sanshipto Itihashe* he was given an award, by the Adivasi Youth Association, Kolkata, West Bengal. Durgapur Diosis has honoured him with Life Time Achievement Award for contribution and promotion of Santhali language.

1.3.1 An Overview of Marshal Hembram's Writings

As noted earlier, Marshal Hembram is a prolific writer in both Santhali and Bengali. As a scholar and literary critic, he has written on Santhali literature and linguistics. However, most of his writings are in the fictional and poetic mode; in them he has dealt with the social problems faced by the tribal people, with special focus on their exploitation by Dikus (non-tribals). Like many tribal writers, his works are based on the experiential knowledge gained by an entire community. His main characters are tribals living in rural areas, who suffer exploitation routinely at the hands of Dikus. His works also combine history and legend, especially when he writes about the great *Santhal Hul* or Insurrection of 1855-56. Some of his latest plays are satirical in tone, though the corpus of his creative writings may be seen as a tragic representation of the sufferings of the tribal people of Eastern India. Finally, he may be said to belong to a group of writers who have produced a new genre termed Protest Narrative or Resistance Narrative. The award-winning Bengali writer, Mahasweta Devi, has also written some works in this genre, though her ideological position is that of the 'sympathetic outsider'. For the first time, the voice of a subaltern 'insider' is heard in Marshal Hembram's writings.

A similar kind of Protest Narrative or Resistance Narrative are present in the writings of other tribal writers also. Writings of Mahadev Toppo, a tribal voice from the Oraon tribe, give voice to concerns that we find in Hembram's writings. He writes in the poem 'Jungle Ka Kavi' (poet of the Forest):

He will pick his bow
On the bow-string he will put a pen
With that flute and drum too
He will pick
To save
Greenery of the forest
The poet of the forest
Will beat the drum
Play the flute
After putting a pen on the bow string (Translation Ivy Hansdak)

In these lines, the poet is registering his protest to save his home. Bow and arrow symbolize their traditional way of fighting and the pen represents education as a weapon to mark his presence. Instead of an arrow, the poet will pick up his pen to convey his anger. He will pick the bow but only to write about his anguish. Instead of an arrow he will use a pen to register his complaint, to register his protest. Similar expressions can be found in the writings of Anuj Lugun, born in Jharkhand in a Mundari family. In his poems, we come across perceptions such as the following:

In the announced *ulgulan* (*Ulgulan* was the movement started by Birsa Munda against the corrupt practices of British and Dikhus).

Trees are falling down

With the axes of the mafia (traders)

And as a result forest of concrete is increasing (Translation Ivy Hansdak)

Land, forest and other natural resources play a vital role in tribal lives. Relationship of the tribals with nature is based on the principle of reciprocity; nature nourishes them and in return tribals take adequate care of it without damaging it. The aforementioned poem “*Udghoshit Ulgulan*” by Anuj Lugun uses the concept of development by connecting urban expansion with the tragic fate of the tribals. At present, the gradual disappearance of the natural forest is giving birth to a concretized forest. The destruction of the life force is giving way to lifeless structures. Nature is very strategically eliminated by the government to carry on adding to the structures of development.

All these narratives have an expression of protest in them. They convey their feeling of anger, agitation and protectiveness in their writings, for which reason, the narratives are called Protest Narrative or Resistance Narrative. Writers of these narratives, belong to different regions, different tribes and write in different languages but protest against the exploitation of natural resources, displacement, economic disparity and many other such issues unite their voice under the genre. These protest narratives can also be read as an outcome of different social movements. From the colonial times onwards, there have been rebellions movements against the authorities to protect their ‘*Jal, Jameen aur Jungle*’ (water, land and forest).

1.3.2 “Then I Must Pick Up The Bow”: Text

(Published in *The Little Magazine*, Volume VII: Issue 3 & 4, p. 179)

By Marshal Hembram

You tell me, screaming,

That this nurtured plot of land,

this pond, this farmhouse

you tell me, these are not mine? - 4

You order me, with blazing eyes,

to leave all this

and go away

wherever – anywhere at all. - 8

But this was the land of legends.

The land of thick jungles,
a desolate land of trees and vines.
We worked hard to clean it up
to make it liveable
and lived happily. - 14

Now if you claim
that this nurtured plot of land,
this pond, this farmhouse
these are not mine
then, well,
I must reach for my bow and arrow. - 20

Translated by Antara Dev Sen and the poet.

1.3.3 Critical Reflections on the Poem

Land is central to tribal economy and religious beliefs. In the post-independence period land deprivation increased considerably due to developmental projects. Amita Baviskar explains the deprivation as an unnatural state and says that “Deprivation is not a natural state for the Adivasis; it is produced and reproduced by the policies and practices that characterize India’s post-colonial development” (5106).

(Lines 1-8)- In this short but poignant poem, Marshal Hembram uses the narrative voice of a tribal farmer who is being evicted from his land. The poem describes the oppressor/ exploiter as a symbol of the oppressors with “blazing eyes” and “screaming” voice, who order the farmer to leave their land and go “wherever – anywhere at all”. The idea of being away from his land created an uproar in the mind of the poet. The phenomena of displacement increased manifolds in the post-independence period against which the tribals are fighting.

(Lines 9-14)- In reply to this, the farmer argues that the land had been cleared and made “liveable” by his family, and that they had lived there happily for a long, long time. The height of exploitation reaches its climax when the labour done by the farmer and his family was ignored by the oppressor’s claim of the land.

(Lines 15-20)- This argument is made in a calm manner that tries to appeal to the oppressor’s sense of justice. A powerful image of thick forest land being cleared for agriculture is also built up; in it, the small farmer or *ryot* plays a heroic role by venturing into “a desolate land of trees and vines” and working tirelessly to prepare it for farming. But after the farmland blossoms, the figure of the evil oppressor intrudes. No explanation is given for why the farmer is being evicted – it could be because he could pay off his debts to a moneylender or it could be because a multinational company is acquiring the land to build a factory. Whatever the reason, the farmer refuses to leave his land. At the end of the poem, he decides to fight the oppressor with his primitive weapons. This decision is expressed in a tone of calm determination, in the last two lines: “...then, well, I must reach for my bow and arrow.” Bow and arrow symbolize their traditional means of fighting, and the stubborn behaviour of the oppressor might not leave him a choice but to fight for his survival.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

This unit helped us to understand the divide between the tribal and non-tribal world. On the one hand tribals are still trying to protect the natural resources which are the essence of their lives, whereas on the other, non-tribals in the blind race of development are moving towards an artificial world away from nature. Nirmala Putul's poetry helps us to understand the plight of the tribal women, who is doubly marginalized as a tribal and as a woman. She emerges as a voice of tribal feminism from Jharkhand. Marshal Hembram's poetry helps us to understand the meaning of protest narratives. His poetry also depicts the authenticity of tribal life by describing the exploitation of the tribals at the hands of the oppressor.

1.5 GLOSSARY

Amalgam	:	A combination of two different things
Diku	:	non-tribal
Dissemination	:	To open up a subject for wider discussion and analysis
Impoverished	:	Have been made poor enough to need help from others. Used in relation to the existence of tribal women
Prevalent	:	commonly present.
Primitivist	:	Related to early/primary
Subservient	:	To be submissive.

1.6 QUESTIONS

- 1) How are oral narratives different from the written ones?
- 2) What is Nirmala Putul's poetry about?
- 3) What is tribal feminism?
- 4) How are tribal narratives different from other non-tribal narratives? Explain.
- 5) What is Marshal Hembram's poetry about?
- 6) What do you understand by protest or resistance narratives?
- 7) Are the voices from the margins different from those of the mainstream?
- 8) Discuss the 'term development' in the tribal context.

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UNIT 2 POEM: “SONG OF NETARHAAT: VICTORY TRUMPET IS SOUNDING”

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Tribals and the Land
- 2.3 Text of the Poem : “Song of Netarhat: Victory Trumpet is Sounding”
- 2.4 “Song of Netarhaat: Victory Trumpet is Sounding”: A Detailed Analysis
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to give you an idea of one of the powerful protest poems of Jharkhand “Song of Netarhaat: Victory Trumpet is Sounding”. This poem is a response to the tribal’s discontent as a result of the socio-political actions taken by the authorities which could result in their displacement.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Protest literature has been specifically written to bring change in society or individual. It focuses on revealing the evils existing in society. It either publically supports or opposes social or political reforms. Protest literature has existed in different forms throughout literary history. The protest writers have written different genres to awaken the public to the injustices and discrimination meted to them both locally and worldwide.

Poetry as a genre is a powerful form of social protest. The fundamental theme of protest poetry is to oppose the social ills. It reflects the historical and political climate in which it is written. It gives voice to those who may not be heard otherwise.

The poem “Song of Netarhaat: Victory Trumpet is Sounding” emerged as a form of social protest against one of the development projects in Jharkhand. It emphasizes the details of everyday and also underlines the need to use one’s voice to be heard. Such poems are very powerful as they bring out the social discontent and influence the social and political action.

The poem “Song of Netarhaat: Victory Trumpet is Sounding” was composed in Oraon or Kurukh language in April 1994 by a group of tribals including activists and journalists Sunil Minj, Bijju Toppo, Kordula Kujur, Xavier Kujur and Ajay Tirkey who led the protest demanding the closure of the field firing range in Netarhaat, a tribal dominated area of Jharkhand. The Oraons or Kurukhs are one of the largest ethnic groups among the tribal people of Jharkhand. The local tribals – ‘the Oraons, Birijia and Asurs of Mahwadarn Block in Palamau District of Jharkhand

and the blocks of Bishunpur, Chainpur, Dumri, Ghaghra in Gumla district Jharkhand' (<http://www.epw.m/journal/1994/8/commentary/netarhat-field-firing-range>) – took part in the protest.

2.2 TRIBALS AND THE LAND

The indigenous people have a special relationship with the land. Their socio-cultural and religious identity and their very existence are intimately linked to the land they hold. The land is not only a source of production but it holds symbolic and emotional meaning for them. It is a place to bury in the ancestral remains and at the same time it has other sacred functions linked to their religious beliefs.

As an aboriginal leader from Australia said:

My land is my backbone... I only stand straight, happy, proud and not ashamed about my colour because I still have land. I can dance, paint, create and sing as my ancestors did before me... My land is my foundation. I stand, live and perform as long as I have something firm and hard to stand on. Without land... we will be the lowest people in the world, because you have broken down our backbone, took away my arts, history and foundation. You have left us with nothing (quoted in Roberts, Jane. *Massacre to Mining: The Colonization of Aboriginal Australia* London: CIMRA, 1978)

[http://onlineministries.ereighton.edu\(collaborativeMinistry/NESRC/Gita/](http://onlineministries.ereighton.edu(collaborativeMinistry/NESRC/Gita/)

To separate the tribals from their land is as good as tearing them apart from their life giving source. A large number of them have been illegally dispossessed of their land in Jharkhand. Many have been forced to leave their homes to work as contract or bonded labourers in farms, brick kilns, stone quarries etc... in Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and other states.

- In India in the period 1951-90 over 21.6 million people suffered displacement by just dams and canals alone. Mines displaced another 2.1 million people. Further industries, thermal plants, sanctuaries and defence installations have thrown at least 2.4 million other human beings out of their homes. That's around twenty-six million Indians. (P. Sainath Sainath, P. 'And the Meek Shall Inherit the Earth' in *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996.p.71)

Walter Fernandes of the Indian Social Institute points out, 'Tribals make up just 8 percent of our population. They account for 'more than 40 percent of the displaced persons of all projects.' (Pg. 73 Sainath) According to P. Sainath,

Roughly one in every ten Indian tribals is a displaced person. Dam projects alone have displaced close to million adivasis. Jaganath Pathy of the South Gujarat University points out that of 1.7 million oustees from just nineteen public sector projects, a staggering 0.8 million of them belonged to the scheduled tribes. In some projects like Koel Karo, Lalpur, etc. tribals accounted for among 80 to 100 percent of the displaced. 'P. Sainath says that 'the last fifteen years have seen a big entry into tribal areas of projects that cause displacement.' (Pg 73)

Further, dispossession of tribal people of Jharkhand started during colonization when the Britishers began to look for resources and penetrated their areas. But the process of colonial exploitation of these people did not stop with independence. In the name of 'development' for 'national interest' these tribals were exploited by the ruling classes of our country. According to P. Sainath

- 'Acquisitions of land are made in the "national interest." That at once, places them beyond question. Thousands of terrified tribals are hounded out of their homes and live on the jungle's edge when the army practices firing in Palamau. That too is in the national interest.' (Sainath, P. 'And the Meek Shall Inherit the Earth' in *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996.P.77)

In order to speed up the economic growth in the country, project oriented development approach was intensified after Independence. Like other resource-rich tribal regions of the country, Jharkhand also witnessed a rapid pace of land alienation for the development projects. The establishments of industries and mines in the state resulted in large scale influx of outsiders to the region which in turn increased land alienation and displacement of the tribals. The tribals migrated to other regions in search of livelihood. In the words of Sainath. In official theology, this is 'the price of development.' You want to make progress, you have to sacrifice." (P. Sainath) For the country's progress the tribals have to sacrifice their land, forests and other natural resources that have been a source of sustenance and migrate to other regions where they have to struggle for a decent livelihood.

Displacement is the keyword across the Chhotanagpur region. Major projects affect millions of people here adversely. This goes with land-grab, the fudging of records, dam construction, some types of mining and, of course, "development". (P. Sainath P.79)

Dr. Michael M. Cernea, Senior Adviser to the World Bank states that sufferings involved during displacement. They include landlessness, unemployment and loneliness. Their food security gets affected increasing the rates of illness and disease. Their community life that had been a great strength to them gets dismantled. Their common property such as the natural surroundings that has been a significant source from which they draw their resources is snatched away from them. The land was taken without their consent. With the land grazing grounds, forest produce, fodder and community labour is also lost. Acquisition of land are made in the national interest hence it is unquestionable. The marginalized tribals are terrified and leave their homes to live in the jungle when the army practices 'firing' in Palamau. The question often asked is who constitutes the nation. Is it only the elite or also the marginalized tribals. Then why are their interests never identified with the national interest?

The local tribals the Oraons, Birijiyas and Asurs of 'the block of Mahuaadarn in Palamaau district and the blocks of Bishunpur, Chainpur, Dumri, Ghaghra in Gumla district Jharkhand' (<http://www.epw.in/journal/1994/8/commentary/netarhat-field-firing-range-tribals-danger.html>) were demanding the closure of the field firing Range at Netarhaat, a tribal dominated area of Jharkhand. These tribals had been staging a non-violent protest against the project from 1993, the time since the government had declared to set up a permanent military base there. The army had been conducting periodic firing practices in the Netarhaat region since 1964. The proposed firing range project was spread across 245 villages of Latehar and Gumla

districts.(Santosh Kiro “Gandhgiri to foil Netarhat field firing range” in The Telegraph September 6, 2008) In 1938 ‘Manoeuvres, Field Firing and Artillery Practice Act, was promulgated by the British Raj.

The first heavy artillery firing practice in the region was conducted in 1965. The drill goes on for 10 days, during which people have either to flee into the jungle or look for alternative shelter while the army bombards the region with shells, often wounding several people. The drill also causes damage to standing crops, fields, houses, trees and livestock. According to the local population, the army compensates them with Re. 1 per day for the “inconvenience” caused! (‘Maoists gain upper hand as operation hits a new low’ The Pioneer Sunday 02 October 2011 21:49 DP Sharan Ranchi)

Under the existence of the same Act these fire practices continued. The nearby village had to be vacated for the practice.

‘With Post China war justification, the firing range was expanded to include 7 villages. In October 1993, for the first time people got to know about the proposed pilot project. On 23 March 1994, more than a lakh people of the affected area sat on a week long dharna at Netarhaat’s Jokiphokhar— Tutwapani (confluence of Gumla and Palamau districts and the location of firing practice) to protest against the firing practice that was scheduled to begin on the same day. “Jaan denge, Zameen nahin denge!” (We will lay down our lives, but not part with our land) was the slogan that reverberated on the 3622 feet high Netarhaat Plateau. The firing range was not only a threat to the livelihood and right to existence of these tribals but also to the wildlife that were leaving the area in search of safer habitations.

This poem below addresses an important socio-political issue and expresses objection against the field firing project. This poem was composed to influence the authorities’ socio-political action.

2.3 TEXT OF THE POEM: “SONG OF NETARHAAT: VICTORY TRUMPET IS SOUNDING”

Text of the poem Song of Netarhaat :Victory Trumpet is Sounding

1

Come, brothers! Let’s all go to Jokipokhar.
Brothers. the flame is burning,
The trumpet of victory is blowing, brothers!
The trumpet of victory is blowing, brothers!
Young and old, we all go together
Brothers, let’s all go to Jokhipokhar.
The flame.....is burning.

With leaf plates,
carrying rice and daal
carrying rice and daal
we will go to Tutwapani, friends!
The flame.....is burning,
The flame.....is burning.

2

In our region why this struggle
has commenced, why this protest?
We will be massacred, blood will flow
In this struggle, in this protest,
In Netarhaat region against the firing range.
The fight is begun, the struggle has commenced.
Our lives will be lost, there will be bloodshed
In this struggle, in this protest.

This region's Korwas, Birijiyas, Asurs
will go away.
The region's relatives and acquaintances
All the Kurukhs will all be lost.
Save them all.
our lives will be lost, blood will flow
in the struggle, in this protest.

The land and fields in this region
will be lost, they will be gone,
the forest and trees of this region
will be grabbed,
They will disappear.
In order to save them, lives will be lost,
Our blood will flow, in this struggle
In this fight.

3

O our Chhotanagpur plateau!
In the Netarhaat region a massive protest
has commenced, friends!
In Netarhaat struggle has begun.
A war is being waged.
The army has come to practice firing
to contain the huge protest
That is why our movement commenced,
The war is being waged

Aliens have arrived
They have come to displace us,
That is why we protest
That is why we protest
That is why we protest.



Be alert brothers, be brave sisters,
that is how we will save our region
that is how we will protect our country, friends.
O our Chotanagpur.
Let us unite and fight together
And end this war forever.
O our Chotanagpur plateau !

4

Brothers, let us go fight
Sisters, let us go protest

In the moonlit night
In the starlit night
Guided by the moon, guided by the sun
We will go to Tudwadippa
We will go to Tudwadippa.
Let us go, brother
Come brother, let us go protest.

Rain will be pouring
It will be cold, it will be sunny
It will be cold, it will be sunny
We will take shelter on the hills,
under a tree we will wait
Let us go, brother
Let us go fight!

Carrying cooking vessels,
taking clothes, blankets.
Gather every child, infant
we would all sit on Satyagraha
brothers, let us all go protest

5

O brothers look at our beautiful region
O sisters look at our magnificent land
The hills, forests, hillocks, waterfalls
rivers, fields, farmlands and meadows they seem exquisite!

Look at the cattle, watch the goats and the sheep
grazing all around,
The birds singing in the hills

they create melody of the flute.

Brothers look at them

Brothers listen to them

Close to the house is the path
to the village cluster and the
way to the well and the pond, friends
way to the well and the pond.
nearby, lies the village dance arena
where flow melodious songs
and the rhythmic drum beats.

The courtyard filled with slush
like muddy fields
ready for planting rice shoots.
Incessant rain, Continuous drizzle
biting cold, summer heat, shade
so many climates!

Our ancestors have prepared this land
For our survival, our growth
For our survival, our growth
With God's grace we will work for a living

Life after life, after life
Life after life, after life.
Army comes to destroy this region
Do not abandon our land, friends
Do not abandon our land, friends.
Towns and cities not meant for you
Will you ever find such a beautiful land?
Will you ever find such a beautiful land?
Brothers, look at unhappiness around.

6

This is our motherland, our precious land
This is our beloved land, our land of Gold
Brothers do not sell it to the looters
Sisters do not sell it to the looters

Our land on all sides
is surrounded by hills and forests
Brothers don't sell our land to the looters.

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This land of ours, on all sides
covered with hills and forests
Brothers we will not sell the land
We will not sell the hills,
We will not sell the forest to the looters.
Our land is rich with minerals
Our region is filled with
gold, filled with silver.
Sisters, we will not sell it to the looters.

In our region flowers smile
In our region flowers laugh
All manner of flowers
Brother our land is heavy with
fruits big and ripe
Brother, we will not sell our land to the looters.

This our motherland, our beloved land
This our beloved land, our blessed land
Happy with God's blessings
filled with God's love, care.

7

O folks of Nagpur,
Where are you going?
Why do you abandon the region, folks?
Why does the region look deserted?
Why does it look sad?
Come back, return O brothers,
O folks of Nagpur!

Why are you disheartened?
Why disturbed?
Why feel let down, what was snatched?
Come back, return O brother
O folks of Nagpur!

Huge mountains, hills, waterfalls
Call you back, brothers,
So do forests, trees and villages
Come back, return O brothers,
O folks of Nagpur!

Weeping all day, sleeping empty stomach
Whose courtyard will you go to beg
for clothes enough to cover your body
Whose doorstep will you go to call
For a mouthful of rice?
Come back, return O brothers,
O folks of Nagpur!

Our Parents brothers sisters
Our ancestors
met with unbearable miseries,
staked all.
do not go away brothers and sisters,
Stay for our beloved region's sake.
Come back, return O brothers
Come back, return o brothers,
O folks of Nagpur!

(Translated by Mridula Rashmi Kindo)

2.4 "SONG OF NETARHAAT: VICTORY TRUMPET IS SOUNDING": A DETAILED ANALYSIS

The Netarhat field firing range was not only a threat to the livelihood and right to existence of these tribals but also to the wildlife that were leaving the area in search of safer habitations. 'Such exercises have caused livelihood losses, threats to life and physical and mental suffering among the local population which, such times, is expected to vacate the area.' (Maoists gain upper hand as operation hits a new low' The Pioneer Sunday 02 October 2011 21:49 DP Sharan Ranchi) This poem addresses an important socio-political issue and expresses objection against the field firing project. This poem was composed to influence the authorities' socio-political action.

The first stanza of the poem depicts a lively picture of the people full of vitality and determination. The tribals resolve to march forward to save their land rich with forests from being developed into a permanent firing range. These tribal agitators are restless and aware that if the dikus or non-tribals are not stopped from entering their territories they will be unable to protect the rights of 2.35 lakhs of tribals of Palamau and Gumla districts of Jharkhand.

The adivasis of the area mentioned above fear that the firing range project will disintegrate their community and social life. Their peasant life will receive a fatal blow due to the land dispossession. The loss of the means of livelihood will lead to perennial poverty and begging. There will be an enormous loss of tribal culture and values. (Ranjit, Tigga. 'Netarhat Field Firing Range: Tribals in Danger' Economic and Political Weekly Feb 19 1994)

Being determined and having firm resolve in mind these tribals can hear victory trumpets blowing in their imagination. The flame inside them is burning and brightening with rekindled hopes. There is a call by these tribals to the youth and

their elders to unite and come together and march to Tutwapani. The very first stanza speaks about their firm resolution to unite and march together to save their land. They will sit on a dharna in Tutwapani till they are successful in getting back their land and return home to celebrate with the torch of victory.

1

Come, brothers! Let's all go to Jokipokhar.
Brothers. the flame is burning,
The trumpet of victory is blowing, brothers!
The trumpet of victory is blowing, brothers!
Young and old, we all go together
Brothers, let's all go to Jokhipokhar.
The flame.....is burning.

With leaf plates,
carrying rice and daal
carrying rice and daal
we will go to Tutwapani, friends!
The flame.....is burning,
The flame.....is burning.

2

In our region why this struggle
has commenced, why this protest?
We will be massacred, blood will flow
In this struggle, in this protest,
In Netarhat region against the firing range.
The fight is begun, the struggle has commenced.
Our lives will be lost, there will be bloodshed
In this struggle, in this protest.

This region's Korwas, Birijiyas, Asurs
will go away.
The region's relatives and acquaintances
All the Kurukhs will all be lost.
Save them all.
our lives will be lost, blood will flow
in the struggle, in this protest.

The land and fields in this region
will be lost, they will be gone,
the forest and trees of this region
will be grabbed,
They will disappear.
In order to save them, lives will be lost,
Our blood will flow, in this struggle
In this fight.

The tribals have firmly resolved to save their land that was proposed to be made into a permanent Pilot Project covering 1659 sq km of the tribal land. As the poem moves forward the positive tone gives way to apprehension and anxiety. The tribals are worried about bloodshed and the lives that can be lost if their peaceful fight turns violent. They do not deny the possibility of the dikus or outsiders killing their people to stop them from protesting against the firing range. The tribals are worried because of their land being seized forcefully along with trees and the forest, the source of their existence.

Dikus have arrived
They have come to displace us,
That is why we protest
That is why we protest
That is why we protest.
Be alert brothers, be brave sisters,
that is how we will save our region
that is how we will protect our country, friends.
O our Chotanagpur.
Let us unite and fight together
And end this war forever.
O our Chotanagpur plateau !

To protect their interests, the tribals are ready to wage a war against the dikus coming to snatch their land from them. They demand the government to close down the field Firing Range at Netaarhat in Jharkhand. They are determined to protect their land and the wildlife that are leaving the area in search of safer habitations. The poem then talks about the army coming to practice firing against their demands. Fearing that their demands will remain unfulfilled, these local tribals want to wage a war against them. They alert their fellow tribals to be cautious and alert and leave no stone unturned to save the land. The tribals lay emphasis that the dikus or outsiders have brought unrest to their part of the world that was otherwise peaceful. The tribals of Chotanagpur have been subjected to outside invasions repeatedly by the Mughals, the Britishers followed by zamindars, and traders moving into their territory, devising modern laws and administration in order to marginalize them. The landlords took over their villages and expropriated the tribals. Several such attempts of dispossession and displacement forced them to take up armed resistance in the past.

The tribals want to agitate peacefully without getting violent unless the army refuses to go back. They would take up arms only if the army compels them and this could lead to a violent bloody war where the tribals are willing to lay their lives to save their land. The army is the cause of disruption to their peaceful lives. They have been subjected repeatedly to outside invasions and exploitation. They want to end all such miseries once and for all by coming together in this agitation. The tribals find their way under moonlit and starlit sky. As the poem moves forward we see repetition in lines,

In the moonlit night
In the starlit night
Guided by the moon, guided by the sun
We will go to Tudwadippa

We will go to Tudwadippa.
Let us go, brother
Come brother, let us go protest.

This literary device of repetition lays emphasis on the social context and brings in urgency to their purpose. Despite the extreme climate such as the heat, cold, rain will not deter them from marching forward. They will find shelter under a tree or on a foot of a hill. The poet calls the tribals to gather their family members and equip themselves with basic amenities such as utensils, clothes and food before leaving for Tutwadippa where they will sit on a Satyagraha.

Rain will be pouring
It will be cold, it will be sunny
It will be cold, it will be sunny
We will take shelter on the hills,
under a tree we will wait
Let us go, brother
Let us go fight!

Carrying cooking vessels,
taking clothes, blankets.
Gather every child, infant
we would all sit on Satyagraha
brothers, let us all go protest

We note that land, forest and life are inseparable entities for the tribals. If you take away our land you take away our life is a common saying. This underlines that they are totally dependent on resources of the land. The proposed field firing would cause large-scale deforestation, displacement, exploitation and impoverishment among the tribals.

The second half of the poem has juxtaposed the tribal's protest against land acquisition and their appreciation for their beautiful land and their love for their region.

O brothers look at our beautiful region
O sisters look at our magnificent land
The hills, forests, hillocks, waterfalls
rivers, fields, farmlands and meadows
they seem exquisite!

Look at the cattle, watch the goats and the sheep
grazing all around,
The birds singing in the hills
they create melody of the flute.
Brothers look at them
Brothers listen to them

Close to the house is the path
to the village cluster and the
way to the well and the pond, friends
way to the well and the pond.
nearby, lies the village dance arena
where flow melodious songs
and the rhythmic drum beats.

The courtyard filled with slush
like muddy fields
ready for planting rice shoots.
Incessant rain, Continuous drizzle
biting cold, summer heat, shade
so many climates!

Our ancestors have prepared this land
For our survival, our growth
For our survival, our growth
With God's grace we will work for a living

The next stanza talks about the magnificent land with which they have a close association. Their hard work has made it green and fertile. Their hills, rivers, lakes and spring are breathtakingly beautiful. The poet appreciates the charming sylvan landscape with cattle, sheep and goats grazing and the bird's melodious song enhancing the beauty of the land. The Nagara (drum) beat and the rhythm of the mandar (cylindrical drum) echoes in the villages.

The tribals see the enchanting beauty in every season. Despite the biting cold, the scorching heat there is serenity and placidity throughout the year.

Incessant rain, Continuous drizzle
biting cold, summer heat, shade
so many climates

It is clear in these lines that for tribals, the land is their life. The ancestors lived and prospered on this land, and gifted it to their children to make a living till ages to come. The Poet cautions the tribals, simultaneously asking them to resist the army coming to displace them from their land. They call back those who have left the land and migrated to towns and cities. They want them to return and fight the army instead of abandoning and running away.

The poet further pleads with his fellow tribals not to sell their beautiful and prosperous land to dikus. Their earth is filled with rich minerals, precious stones and the land is laden with various fruits and vegetables. Their land, their source of living enables them to make a prosperous peaceful living. Above all it is God's affection and mercy that has blessed their motherland to become a rich and precious land.

The poet prays to all the people of Nagpur to return to their beautiful and vibrant land. Without them the land seems dead and lifeless. In the poem the love for their

land is juxtaposed with their resistance to land acquisition. The tribals make an earnest appeal to the fellow tribals who are abandoning their rich land to look for livelihood outside with little or nothing to eat. While struggling for survival outside, these tribals are exploited and marginalized.

Women and children are the most adversely affected by migration. Women and children are the most adversely affected by migration. Women bear the brunt of physical, mental and sexual exploitation. Tribal girls are 'forced to leave their hearth and home for work elsewhere under great physical, sexual moral and social insecurity. The children are deprived of the good future due to lack of economic and social security. (Ranjit, Tigga. 'Netarhat Field Firing Range: Tribals in Danger' Economic and Political Weekly Feb 19 1994) They are pleading with these fellow tribals to unite and fight the dikus or non-tribals.

Life after life, after life
Life after life, after life.
Army comes to destroy this region
Do not abandon our land, friends
Do not abandon our land, friends.
Towns and cities not meant for you
Will you ever find such a beautiful land?
Will you ever find such a beautiful land?
Brothers, look at unhappiness around.

6

This is our motherland, our precious land
This is our beloved land, our land of Gold
Brothers do not sell it to the looters
Sisters do not sell it to the looters

Our land on all sides
is surrounded by hills and forests
Brothers don't sell our land to the looters.
This land of ours, on all sides
covered with hills and forests
Brothers we will not sell the land
We will not sell the hills,
We will not sell the forest to the looters.
Our land is rich with minerals
Our region is filled with
gold, filled with silver.
Sisters, we will not sell it to the looters.

The poet again requests the tribals to return to their beloved land that was saved for them by their forefathers from invaders several times. They had to take up arms several times and also lost lives. The poet asks them not to disown such a precious land gifted by their ancestors instead unite to protect it from the dikus.

This poem has a purpose, in giving information about the context. It is not a poem of high quality but is certainly a specimen of a powerful poetry. It has unrhymed verse. It is a poem that has the impact on larger issues. It inspired people to join the protest, to break their silence and speak out. It was composed to address an important issue. The poet calls the people to voice their feelings. They are loud disapprovals of existing ills. They are criticizing oppression, condemning lawlessness and asking people to be daring in articulating discontent.

We note that reference to made to agents of oppression who want to trick and rob the local tribals of their land and political power. They call the people to struggle to liberate. The land provides them with the basic necessities of life – food, shelter, and economic livelihood. The earth has lot of wealth inside it in the form of natural resources. The song was the voice of local tribals hence it was in Oraon emphasizing their great love for their land. They have compiled the song together. The song repeatedly expresses hope, glorification of the land, pride and love of land. It is a statement of rebellion expressing their reluctance to lose the land. The tribals resisted by singing this song of protest.

The lines in the song do not merely express feelings of love and pride, they also require action as seen in the next stanza where there is the resistance to the destruction of natural beauty of the land. They have been wronged cruelly and now they ask that they be given back what was theirs that is their self-respect, the right to be themselves, the right to win back their land. They have devoted themselves to the preservation of heritage as it relates to their land. They want to prevent their rivers, lakes, hills, mountains from being ravaged and their valleys to be unspoiled.

The land and fields in this region
will be lost, they will be gone,
the forest and trees of this region
will be grabbed,
They will disappear.
In order to save them, lives will be lost,
Our blood will flow, in this struggle
In this fight.

Here, we confront the situation in which the tribals show a pervasive concern for their earth. They know that the government has vested interests in further despoliation of ancestral lands. The poet's intention is to express their feelings and thoughts about the disapproval of the government policies leading to their displacement.

The poem formed an important place in the agitation of the tribals. As a powerful weapon of protest it motivated the tribals and kept their enthusiasm alive. The poem formed a significant part of their slogans that reverberated, underscored the need to use their voice to be heard. It gave voice to the tribals who may not be heard otherwise. The protest poem gave expression to the voice of these marginalized tribals in successfully opposing to the injustices and discrimination meted to them by the government authorities.

On 26th January 2004, the army arrived in Netarhaat to carry its firing drill without prior notice to the people violating the Maneuvers Field Firing and Artillery Practice Act 1938. But it had to return in the face of a determined and fierce opposition of the local tribals. (<http://www.ranjesu.org/PrintNewsItem2.php/newside-617>)

They had a peaceful demonstration under the banner of Jan Sangarsh Samiti not letting the army from entering their region. The army resorted to violence but the people continued their Satyagraha till the army was forced to go back on January 30, 2004.

In the tripartite discussion in 1997, between the people, the state administration and the army, the government gave its word that no army acquisition project would come up and no firing would take place in the region against the wishes of the people. Despite the widespread protest and the word given to the people, the government of Bihar renewed the notification of the area for routine field firing for another twenty years commencing from 2002 up to 2022.

The people's movement has been active for more than twenty years now. The movement continues. Of late on March 22-23 people under the banner of Jan Sangarsh Samiti continue to gather at the site (Jokipokhar) to observe Virodh Diwas and keep alive their protest movement. (<http://www.ranjesu.org/PrintNewsItem2.php?newsid=617>)

The song sung during the dharna played a significant role in revealing a pervasive concern for their land. It is their pain, anger, hurt that is depicted in the poem because the government was taking control over the resources that provides for the welfare of our people. Their struggle and resistance eventually bore fruit and their demands that were blindly ignored till now helped them to attain control. The song helped them to win control over the land that had almost slipped from their possession.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit is presented an elaborate study of a protest poem of the tribals that addresses socio-political issues and the objections raised by the tribals. The poem expresses the pain of the tribals who are on the verge of forcible displacement to make way for a development project.

2.6 QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the theme of the poem.
- 2) Describe how nature is depicted in the poem.
- 3) Does the poem have a purpose? Elaborate.
- 4) Why do the poets call the tribals to protest?

2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Sainath, P. 'And the Meek Shall Inherit the Earth' in *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996.

Gupta, Ramneeka. *Yudhrat Aam Aadeni: Adivasi Swar aur Nayi Shatabdi*. Hazaribagh: Ramneeka Foundation, 2001.

Keshari, B.P. *Cultural Jharkhand (Problems and Prospects)* Ranchi: Vinay Prakashan 2003.

Toppo, Ranjit. *Dynamics of Tribal Migration in India*. Ranchi: Catholic Press. 2007.

Roberts, Jane. *From Massacre to Mining: The Colonization of Aboriginal Australia* London: CIMRA, 1978.

UNIT 3 CONTEXTUALISING TRIBAL LITERATURE

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction: The Socio-historical Context of the Tribes in India
- 3.2 What is a Tribe?
- 3.3 Criminal Tribes in India
- 3.4 Denotified Tribes
- 3.5 The Independence Era
- 3.6 Tribal Literature
- 3.7 *Budhan*: An Introduction
- 3.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.9 Glossary
- 3.10 Questions
- 3.11 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will familiarize you with the meaning and contexts of tribal literature. We will first discuss the term “tribe” and its implications. Thereafter this unit will present some general ideas and assumptions about the lives of the tribals. This will be followed by a discussion of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) and its transition to the term Denotified tribes. The last section will be a brief account of the play *Budhan* by the Denotified Chharas tribe.

3.1 INTRODUCTION: THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF TRIBES IN INDIA

In normal day-to-day conversation our understanding of the term tribe signifies a group of people that are not ‘civilized.’ We generally believe that they are uncultured, lack sophistication and are in a sense raw. The alternative description for this is that they are closer to nature. We pay little attention to the real context of the tribes. Their culture is a myth for the civilized groups in the cities. We have little inclination to comprehend the diverse cultural practices of the tribes in India. Nadeem Hasnain in his research work *Tribal India Today* states that tribes are known by names such as, “primitive, tribal, indigenous, aboriginal, native and so on.” (3) He further argues that:

To brand the tribal economic system, in an ethnocentric fury, as backward and wasteful, customs and traditions as crude and tribal people steeped in primitive ignorance, is one thing and to prove it is altogether another. (Hasnain, Nadeem. *Tribal India*. New Delhi: Harnam P, 1983.P. 3)

Clearly we have spent more time in rejecting and usurping their way of life without even attempting to understand the intricacies of their cultural system. It is therefore important that we explore the varied cultural life styles of the tribal people. This

will help us arrive at a sympathetic understanding of the term tribe. At the same time it will enhance our own knowledge of the society.

In this unit, I shall define the term tribe to begin with. Sociologists have pointed out the difficulties of arriving at a single definition of a tribe. Nadeem Hasnain grapples with this problem by posing the question—“What is a tribe? What exactly are the criteria for considering a human group, a tribe? What are the indices of tribal life?” We will try and answer some of these questions in the course of this lesson.

3.2 WHAT IS A TRIBE?

The tribes were referred to as the “aboriginals” or the “depressed classes” in the pre-Independence census. By 1941 they were referred to as the Scheduled tribes or the “adivasis.” Researchers associated with a study of the tribes and their ways of life have come up with various definitions of a tribe that may be contradictory. Some of the ideas used to link the members of a tribe are as follows:

- Common name
- Common dialect
- Common territory
- Common ancestor
- Common culture

Presented above is a list of some of the features that the researchers depend on to arrive at a general view of a tribe. Let us look at some of these definitions:

- “A tribe is a collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous, though originally it might have been so.” (Imperial Gazetteer of India.)
- “A tribe is a group of people in a primitive... stage of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding themselves as having a common ancestor.” (Oxford Dictionary in Hasnain)
- “A tribe is a social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous, with no specialization of functions, ruled by tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise united in language or dialect, recognizing social distance with other tribes or castes, without any social obloquy attached to them, as it does in the caste structure, following tribal traditions, beliefs and customs, illiberal of naturalization of ideas from alien sources, above all conscious of homogeneity of ethnic and territorial disintegration.” (D.N.Majumdar in Hasnain) (Hasnain 14)

It is clear from these definitions that there is no one way of defining a tribe. Some scholars insist on certain territorial markers whereas the others do not take area into consideration. Hasnain resolves these contradictions by using Majumdar’s definition of a tribe as put forth in 1967. But especially for the tribes in India, Hasnain suggests T.B.Naik’s definition that foregrounds “least functional interdependence within the community,” economically backward groups using the primitive means of exploiting natural resources, a comparative geographical isolation, common dialect and organization to name a few of the characteristics of tribes in India. In the context of this definition one must remember that words like “economically backward” are relative and point towards a comparison with the

modern industrial methods used in the cities. The contrast evolves from the “developed” urban perspective that tends to render the modes of the tribes as primitive. As G.N.Devy is quick to warn us:

It is true that most tribals are underprivileged, but they can be called ‘underdeveloped only if development is understood in the inappropriate terms dictated by international development agencies, terms by which the rest of India looks equally underdeveloped. (Devy, G.N. *Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature*. India: Penguin, 2002. P.ix)

Devy has emphasized that it would be a fallacy to understand the culture and the economic life of the tribals through parameters that belong to the conventionally developed space. Their rituals, customs and ways of life are to be judged in terms of their context and not that of the other communities. Scientifically speaking they might be more progressive as they do not amass wealth and their resources are generally shared equitably by the members of a tribe. But the acquisitive dispensation of the developed societies is quick to relegate them as underdeveloped. Andre Beteille, a renowned anthropologist discusses the relation between the tribes and the peasants. In *Anti-Utopia* Beteille has stated:

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, Andre. *Anti-Utopia: Essential Writings of Andre Beteille*. Ed. Dipankar Gupta. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2011 P.117)

This is a general way of defining a tribe. Beteille examines the definitions proposed by various researchers and scholars and finally arrives at the conclusion that—”There is thus no one way of defining tribal society.” He draws attention to the list of the Scheduled Tribes prepared in 1930s onwards and its insufficiency that might lead to a group being treated as a “tribe in one state and not another.” Further, whether a group follows the structure of a band, chiefdom or a segmentary system they are all referred to as a tribe. He elaborates the important features of tribes in India as follows:

The distinctive feature of the tribe in India has been its isolation, mainly in the interior hills and forests, but also in the frontier regions. By and large the tribal communities are those which were either left behind in these ecological niches or pushed back into them in course of the expansion into state and civilization. Their material culture and their social organization have largely been related to the ecological niches in which they have lived their isolated lives. (Beteille, Andre. *Anti-Utopia: Essential Writings of Andre Beteille*. Ed. Dipankar Gupta. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2011.p. 133)

These attempts at defining a tribe range from arriving at a common minimum denominator like a common system, language or area. But having said this, the idea is substituted with a new one—the difficulty of stating any common factor for a tribe. Beteille’s idea points towards the isolation of the tribes from the state and civilization and their proximity with “ecological niches.” Devy too states about the tribals:

The tribals are not necessarily racially distinct, nor are they necessarily the original inhabitants of the area they inhabit...the tribals have not been

completely cut-off from the non-tribals...Since it is impossible to characterize the tribals by any single distinguishing feature, it can be tempting to argue that in the present-day context, tribals are simply the most underprivileged or underdeveloped groups in the country. (*Painted Words* Devy ix)

Devy's assessment of tribes in the present scenario corroborates Beteille's theory of the isolation of the tribes as a significant identity marker. This makes it imperative to analyze the complexities in understanding tribal societies. The tribes have a material culture of their own which is distinct from the manifestation of culture in a so-called developed society. Where the tribes may be marked by isolation, there is significant research going on to understand their unique structures. It is a challenge to understand tribes and form our own assumptions of development with respect to their life. The attempt has to be rooted in a historical setting. The tribals are to be looked at from within their own perspective and not judged by the binary imposed on them by a world that considers itself civilized as compared with a primitive tribe.

In this regard Devy in an introduction to Verrier Elwin's *Selected Writings* discusses how the colonial government created a "Forest Department" in the nineteenth century. They wanted to annex the forest land of the tribals to use timber for building railways and other developmental purposes. Unable to "forge treaties" with resisting groups, the British government classified them as tribe. The need to understand tribal groups coupled with the rise of Orientalist studies led to an understanding of the term tribe from the perspective of "savageology" and "tribes came to be seen as necessarily primitive" (Elwin xvi).

To therefore sum it up we arrive at the following premises:

- It is difficult to define a tribe in any one given manner.
- Historically, researchers have tried to define a tribe through a minimum common factor—territory, language or culture.
- According to Beteille, tribes are characterized by isolation and a deep-seated connection with the environment.
- According to Devy the idea of a tribe as primitive originates from the assumption of the city as a mainstream perspective.
- Further, not enough attention has been paid to the location, context and practices of tribes in India

3.3 CRIMINAL TRIBES IN INDIA

We find it difficult to define a tribe but we seemed to have paid hardly any attention to what are understood as denotified tribes. We are unaware of the implications of a tribe but we are in a state of complete ignorance when it comes to what were known as the "criminal tribes." Most researchers engage with the scheduled tribes that are recognized by the state, whereas little attention is paid to what are referred to as the DNTs or the denotified tribes of India. In this section we will study the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) and the formulation of the category DNTs.

In 1871 an act was passed for the registration of the Criminal Tribes and the Eunuchs in India. According to Act XXVII for the registration of Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs, it is expedient to provide for the "registration, surveillance and control of certain

criminal tribes.” This was called “The Criminal Tribes” Act (CTA). The CTA equated crime with the profession they pursued.

According to Milind Bokil

One of the influential members of the Law and Order Commission, T V Stephens equated caste with profession and believed that certain communities were professionally criminal and crime was their caste, occupation as well as religion [Mane 1997:120]. These ideas were conveniently used to formulate the act, which notified certain communities as criminal tribes. (Bokil 149)

This created a situation where people could be picked up for any crime in the district. Further, according to this act if the “Local Government has any reason to believe that any ‘tribe, gang or class’ of persons is addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences, it may report the case to the Governor-General in Council, and may request his permission to declare such tribe, gang or class to be a criminal tribe” (Simhadri 121) The second clause deals with the reasons for an “addiction” to non-bailable offences. The Act also deals with the issue of how such tribes will earn their living in future. In this regard, the Act mentions that it must be specified whether the tribe in question has a “fixed place of residence” and also if their occupation is “lawful.” In case the authorities are convinced, they can declare an entire tribe as a “criminal tribe.” After the publication of the notification regarding the criminal tribe “no Court of Justice shall question the validity of any such notification.” Subsequent to this declaration a register of the members is to be maintained. In case any person fails to appear after the declaration, he shall be “deemed guilty.”

As mentioned in the previous section, G.N.Devy draws attention to the relation between a colonial government and unorganized groups of people that led to the formulation of the term tribe. But what was the historical context of the criminal tribes? The tribes referred to as criminal lacked a fixed structure that set these groups out of the reach of the governing powers. These clusters were nomadic and, therefore, highly mobile. This aggravated the situation thereby increasing the desirability of controlling such groups as they opposed the workings of the system. The controlling powers equated such nomadic groups with the prevalence of the thugs. As a result, the forces of imperialism tried to control thuggee by including certain nomadic groups under the CTA as they saw them connected with what they classified as the criminal tribes. According to Devy:

... throughout the nineteenth century, thugs and thuggee became a consuming obsession for the colonial imagination, ultimately leading to a legislation formulated in order to isolate and reform the communities imagined to be associated with thuggee. This profoundly misguided piece of legislation was called the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. It covered itinerant singers, entertainers, performers, coin-makers, snake charmers, acrobats, and such other wandering groups that were semi-peasant and given to seasonal migration. (*Elwin Devy xv*)

All these were primarily performing groups and they generally moved from one village to another. These were soon subsumed and controlled through the CTA. Ajay Dandekar, too, connects the CT Act with the origin of the thugs in India through the colonial records of J. Sleeman’s diaries and Colonel Philip Taylor. The thuggee act was the progenitor of the CT Act that allowed the British control over these mobile people with a culture they found difficult to fathom. He specifies how in

1911 “a rule was introduced which resonates with current-day approaches to suspected societal deviants or criminals. This was the injunction that all members of declared criminal tribes would have to be finger-printed at the nearest police station, so that they could be more easily monitored and tracked down if they tried to escape from a particular settlement.” (8)

In the earlier section we have read how some tribes had come into conflict with the Britishers for a take-over of their forest land. The colonial forces were unable to enter into a treaty with them and then started a cult of ‘savagology’. This imposed on the tribes the idea that they were savage and therefore primitive. As a result, educated Indians too started accepting such misplaced perceptions. Everyone, therefore, conveniently accepted the inclusion of some more tribes to this list in 1891. On the one hand is the issue of the location of the tribes in their natural habitat far away from the so-called developed belt, on the other hand are the perceptions of the tribe by these apparently civilized societies.

Let us now analyze the implications of such an act that continued to function for a long time. The act alienated and stigmatized an entire group of people. As mentioned above, tribes are generally marked by “isolation”. Tribes declared as criminal are then prone to greater marginalization. As per the Act, the members of an entire tribe were seen as criminal. This meant that any criminal activity in the area would be attributed to an individual or an entire group of people. The CTA puts together the “criminal tribes” and the Eunuchs. It ignores the fact that the social considerations of a Eunuch are largely different from those of a tribe. But in trying to gain control over the marginalized sectors the act is a hurried attempt at documenting the criminal tribes and the eunuchs. This results in great injustice being done to both the tribe and the eunuchs.

The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) looked at rehabilitating the criminal tribe in terms of a “reformatory settlement.” The nature of this reformatory settlement was even more oppressive. According to the provisions in the Act, there would be restrictions on the mobility of the members of this tribe. They would be under the continuous scrutiny of the state. As pointed out, it is the nomadic and mobile nature of some of these tribes that made them a potent threat to the system. Therefore, the Act understood rehabilitation in terms of blocking mobility. In this bleak scenario the coming up of an act made survival more difficult. Take a look at two of the clauses pertaining to reformatory settlements for these tribes:

(xii) the work on which and hours during which, persons placed in a reformatory settlement shall be employed, the rates at which they shall be paid, and the disposal, for the benefit of such persons, of the surplus proceeds of their labour after defraying the whole or such part of the expenses of their supervision and control as to what Local Government shall seem fit;

(xii) the discipline to which persons endeavouring to escape from any such settlement, or otherwise offending against the rules for the time being in force, shall be submitted; the periodical visitation of such settlement, and the removal from it of such persons as it shall seem expedient to remove;

(Simhadri, Y.C. Denotified Tribes: A Sociological Analysis. New Delhi: Classical P, 1991. p.125)

The reformatory settlement became a panoptic structure controlled by the governing powers. The members of this settlement were under the continuous surveillance and could be penalized by the local government with what they deemed fit. These are a clear indicator that the members of the tribes deemed as criminals were at the mercy of the state. Nadeem Hasnain who has devoted a full chapter to the criminal tribes writes:

Criminality cannot go by groups. It is an individual phenomenon. But with a single stroke the British authorities, through the enactment of Criminal Tribes Act in 1871, branded some whole castes and tribes as criminals. (Hasnain, Nadeem. *Tribal India*. New Delhi: Harnam 1983.p.159)

Hasnain further mentions how some of these tribes were led into crime because of being brandished as criminal. Due to the harsh nature of this act that completely restricted the movement of the members of the tribe declared as criminal, they were left with no means for survival. Susan Abraham in “Steal or I’ll Call You a Thief: ‘Criminal’ Tribes of India” states:

The British colonialists thus ensured that sections of the Indian population were permanently linked to the world of crime, thereby actually forcing many to engage in criminal activities. Aboriginal tribes, backward castes and nomadic communities were arbitrarily brought under the purview of the CTA. By the time this dastardly law was repealed in 1952, altogether 153 communities were brought under its stranglehold. All districts had to register each member of a ‘criminal’ tribe within its jurisdiction. Their finger impressions had to be taken in the CT Act register. Passes had to be obtained from the police if anyone wished to leave the village. Daily ‘hazri’ (reporting to the police) had to be recorded with the police. First imprisonment would be for one year, second for several years and a third would mean transportation for life – no matter if the crime was something as minor as petty theft. (Hasnain, Nadeem. *Tribal India*. New Delhi: Harnam P, 1983.p.3)

The fact that 153 communities were castigated as criminal meant that this populace was totally left at the mercy of the local government. This also meant that any criminal activity taking place in the district could be easily attributed to the tribe. Ratified by the concerned department this would only multiply the problems of the tribe brandished as criminal.

Susan Abraham further criticizes the reformatory settlements. As per the Act any family or a group of families could be forced to settle down in a certain area under the scrutiny of the state authorities. She gives the example of the Sholapur settlement:

The Sholapur settlement can be seen even today as a chilly reminder of what these settlements were like. Hewn in rock by the Woddars a century ago, these massive stone structures stand deserted in Auschwitz-like gloom. The entire settlement was fenced off by barbed wire. The ‘settlers’ were used as indentured labour kept in shackles, and made to run the textile mills of Sholapur. There are 72 other such settlements in different parts of the country. These communities were forced into slavery, not to free them from a life of crime, but to provide free labour to the mines, mills and firms of the British in India. Some were transported to distant lands where

their craftsmanship was used for sculptures and carvings. (Abraham, Susan. "Steal or I'll Call You a Thief: Criminal Tribes of India." *Economic and Political Weekly* (1999): 1751-1753.p. 3)

The tribes referred to as criminal provided an easy solution to crime in a district. They also provided cheap labour that could be easily exploited as the fear of culpability loomed large on their minds. As the movement of these people was restricted, they had no freedom. Not only were these groups of people marred for their lives but the collective talent of the tribe was contained and blocked. They could no longer move from one place to another spreading and developing their skills. Transformed into labour, they were restricted to reformatory settlements. According to Ajay Dandekar:

In the 19th century, the colonial government concluded that the pastoral nomads, the itinerant traders and other unsettled communities were different from the settled agriculturists fixed within domiciles. These wandering communities could not be situated within preconceived slots —administrative, economic and social. They were, therefore, located as aberrant factors within a predictable and tractable human landscape, and had to be controlled through the colonial legal and penal institutions for the maintenance of law and order. (Dandekar, Ajay. "The Issue of Denotified Tribes in Independent India." www.rgics.org p.1)

The Scene Today at the present time, some of these issues have been reiterated by activists and political groups. According to a recently formed working group of the National Advisory Council on denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic tribe headed by Narendra Jadhav and comprising Madhav Gadgil, Harsh Mander and Aruna Roy on board have stated:

The rationale behind the Act was the European view that all gypsies are criminals, and following that logic, all Indian nomadic communities were also believed to be potential criminals. For this reason, there is a large overlap between communities that were declared criminal tribes and those that were nomadic. The Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 identified the following six categories as belonging to criminal tribes:

- i) Petty traders who used to carry their merchandise on the back of animals and supplied villages with varied items like salt, forest produce, etc.
- ii) Communities that entertained the public through performing arts. Among these were musicians, dancers, singers, storytellers, acrobats, gymnasts, puppeteers and tightrope walkers.
- iii) Communities that entertained the public with the help of performing animals such as bears, monkeys, snakes, owls, birds, etc.
- iv) Pastoral groups, and the hunting, gathering, shifting cultivator communities within forests that traded not just in forest produce, but in animals as well. They were also herders, and traded in meat or milk products with people of the outlying villages.
- v) Artisan communities that worked with bamboo, iron, clay etc. and made and repaired a variety of useful articles, implements and artifacts. They traded or sold them to settled villagers.
- vi) Nomadic individuals who subsisted on charity, or were paid in kind for "spiritual" services rendered to traditional Indian society. Such sadhus, fakirs,

religious mendicants, fortune tellers, genealogists and traditional faith healers had a low but legitimate place in the social hierarchy of settled people. Some carried medicinal herbs and provided healing services as well. (National Advisory Council: Working Group on Denotified and Nomadic Tribes, Draft Recommendations of the Working Group. nac.nic.in. p.1)

The list primarily covers the nomadic communities. It appears that the CT Act allowed the British authorities to exercise greater control over people who were on the move. This became a way of consolidating power for the colonial forces. In 1924 they were given the tag of “Ex-Criminal Tribe.” This was coupled with the “Restriction of Habitual Offenders Act, 1918”. In the pre-Independence period such Acts served the interests of the authorities and completely ostracized the people leaving little space for their rehabilitation. The one idea that has been emphasized by all researchers is that it is the freely moving groups that were placed under the scanner. They were seen as inhibiting the state network by their flexible movements considered to be anarchic.

3.4 DENOTIFIED TRIBES

The CTA was followed by a settlement act called the Criminal Tribes Settlement Act of 1908. The idea was:

To form settlements of these communities so that they could be reformed. Following this act, a number of industrial and farming settlements were formed all over the Bombay Province. Though the settlements were meant for reformation, for all practical purposes, they were jails. They were surrounded by barbed wire compounds and the inmates did not even have the freedom to answer nature’s call at night. (Bokil, Milind. “De-notified and Nomadic Tribes: A Perspective.” *Economic and Political Weekly* (2002): 148-154.p. 149)

The settlement Act continued surveillance and exploited the people as criminals and labour. The Act was modified in 1937 when the Governor of Bombay appointed a committee under K.M.Munshi to define terms such as “tribe, gang, class, habitual offender, criminal.” Following resistance the Act was repealed in Madras in 1948 and in Maharashtra in 1949. This was followed by the formulation of the term Denotified Tribe in 1952.

3.5 THE INDEPENDENCE ERA

After independence there was great confusion about the manner in which the tribes were to be integrated into the Indian nation state. At the time, the proponents of the nation state theory were seeking some sort of homogeneity that would allow smooth functioning of the state. In this context, the caste and tribe issues were apparently resolved through the formation of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes list. This list sought to harmonize and universalize the issues related to caste and tribe. Many that did not fit into the parameters were deprived of the benefits of the Scheduled status. The NAC states:

Describing the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 as a blot on the law book of free India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru annulled it after Independence. As a consequence, these communities were denotified, and hence are now referred to as denotified tribes. (National Advisory Council: Working

In the year 1952, these tribes were de-notified and were no longer considered as the criminal tribes. At the same time, the reference to them as DNTs was a tacit reminder of their past perception. They were not absorbed into the other acceptable classification. This was also replaced with the Habitual Offender's Act that criminalized individuals and not the group. The people belonging to the DNTs continued to be easy victims. Much like the CTA, this act too imposed restrictions on people who were considered as habitual offenders. Milind Bokil emphasizes the need to address the special problems of the DNTs. He states:

The DNTs are not just a neglected section but a complex one as well. Their problems are not only grounded in contemporary reality, but also deeply rooted in history. They have suffered injustices at the hands of both polity and society but the same are not sufficiently redressed. (Bokil, Milind. "De-notified and Nomadic Tribes: A Perspective." *Economic and Political Weekly* 2002 p.148)

Bokil based on his study of the DNTs (1999) establishes the points made by Devy and Beteille. Discussing the DNTs he mentions their relationship to the environment, use of domestic animals and most importantly "lack of domicile." It is interesting to mark that the DNTs are not "covered under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989), under which the SCs and STs are protected. (Bokil 149) This makes it difficult to protect the rights of the DNTs under established parameters. This clearly means that there is a need to address the rights of the DNTs under a system that is created especially keeping their oppressive historical context in mind.

The questions we confront are as follows:

- Is the transition from the term "Criminal Tribes" to "Denotified Tribes" productive?
- Will the term DNT allow the concerned tribe to get over the stigma of being brandished criminal?
- Further, how will they be able to overcome the years spent in the reformatory settlement?
- Is there any programme that allows the tribes to develop according to their own lives?

Jawaharlal Nehru pointed out a median solution to the problems by suggesting that we cannot abandon control over the tribal belts and at the same time we must not "over-administer" these areas. He also advocated that tribals be allowed to develop according to their own methodologies. At our end we must respect their land, traditional arts and cultures. (*Selected Writings* Devy xix). Where the constitution makes its own case for the tribals it is important that we engage with the concerns of the tribals. One of the ways of doing this is by acquainting with tribal literature that will enable a broader understanding of their lives and literature.

3.6 TRIBAL LITERATURE

In this unit, you must have already encountered several examples of Tribal writings. To use G.N.Devy's understanding of this aspect, let us look at some of the features

of tribal literature. The literature produced by the tribes was primarily oral. Having understood the nomadic nature of some of the tribes we must acknowledge the centrality of the oral tradition. The movement from one village to another meant a continuous change of form and content. This could not always be recorded but was passed on in some form from one generation to the next one. In the past, little attention has been given to the recovery of tribal literature. Recent attempts at recovering and archiving their literature have helped document and translate some tribal works. This is a step in the right direction. This is one of the ways in which readers across the globe can be acquainted with tribal literature. It also broadens our understanding of what we mean by literature. For instance, a poem or a short story for us has certain well-defined parameters. The literature from the tribes helps us imagine that there are many other newer ways of writing and using literature as a platform for expression of diverse tribal cultures. Improvisation takes place continuously at the level of structure and content. We might align their works with available forms but one must recognize the originality and creative output of an altogether different category.

Tribal literature does not follow the patterns of what we refer to as developed society. They understand time not in linear patterns but like a weave that allows them to jump back and forth in time. They make use of stories that they have been passing from one generation to the next, as well as rituals and beliefs. They interact as much with the dead as with the living. This means that the frontiers of existence for them are all inclusive. For instance “A Kondh Song” is a song for the dead. It is a plea to the dead spirits to go away and remain at peace so that they do not trouble the ones alive. An offering is made to ensure their peaceful departure.

Take this and go away
Whichever way you came.
Go back, return.
Don't inflict pain on us
After your departure.

(Kumkar, Sukrita Paul. Ed. *Cultural Diversity Linguistic Plurality and Literary Traditions in India*. Delhi: Macmillan India P, 2005. p. 78)

There are Adi Songs sung by the tribe for birth and for recovery from illness. In it, the spirit of good health is taken back to the body—“Come, come with me to your home/Follow the footprints of this cock” (Paul 80)

These examples illustrate how the cultural practices of the tribals are vastly different from those of other communities. The idea is to understand and establish links with tribal cultures through their songs and stories passed on from one generation to another. Some examples of literature by the DNT activists are *Upara* by Laxman Mane (1984), autobiographies such as *Gabal* (More, 1983), *Uchalya* (Gaikwad, 1987), *Berad* (Gasti, 1987) and *Kolhatyache Por* (Kale, 1994) depicting the life of stone-dressers, pickpockets, village-watchmen and danseuses. (Bokil 153).

3.7 BUDHAN: AN INTRODUCTION

Moving on from tribal literature, we come specifically to a discussion of literature by Denotified Tribes (DNTs). The work under discussion is the play *Budhan*, written by a group called the Denotified Chharas. The play foregrounds the real case of Budhan, a member of the Sabar community of West Bengal who was killed in

police custody. This was revealed only after the interference of activists like Mahasweta Devi who arranged a post-mortem. This also materialized in the formation of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group. The play situated in real time allows us to use the creative form of the play to raise pertinent questions about this case. The play acquaints us with the plight of the DNTs who fall easy victim to the state forces. Their earlier status as a criminal tribe provides the state with a convenient way out to decide on unresolved cases. Members of the DNT can be easily blamed for everything. Their needs are constantly ignored by the privileged groups who continue to judge them from the perspective of “savageology.” The play provides a medium to the DNT to reach out to the people of mainstream society. In this case, we watch in horror as the play presents the real event of the Budhan case. It is therefore an effective instance of counter-information.

3.8 LET US SUM UP

This unit helped us understand the difficulty in arriving at any final definition of the term tribe. It helped us analyze critically some of the assumptions of what a tribe is and also suggested new methods of understanding a tribe. This unit, then, presented a historical analysis of the term tribe, the establishment of the Criminal Tribes Act and its succession by the Denotified tribes (DNT). Finally, a very brief summary of the play was presented.

3.9 GLOSSARY

- Criminal*** : A person who is considered to work against the interests of society.
- Orientalists*** : The Europeans studying the culture of the people in the colonies; in this case India.
- Savageology*** : The term implies understanding a group as savage or uncivilized.
- Culture*** : A set of customs, traditions, beliefs and practices of a particular community.
- Primitive*** : Old and uncivilized.
- Panoptic*** : The panopticon is a term used by Michele Foucault to draw attention towards the prison practices. The panoptic structure subjects the prisoners to the constant surveillance of the prison authorities from a higher point.
- Counter-Information*** : In the context of the Budhan case, the play reveals the real course of events. These go against the information otherwise circulated.
- Adi Tribe*** : Hill tribes around the Brahmaputra valley (Kumar 80).
- Kondh Tribe*** : Distributed over Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Orissa (Kumar 79).

3.10 QUESTIONS

- 1) What do you understand by a tribe?
- 2) Explain the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA).

- 3) What were the causes and the implications of this Act?
- 4) Enumerate some of the groups included under the CTA.
- 5) Explain the term Denotified Tribe.
- 6) What is the play *Budhan* about?

3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 4 *BUDHAN: AN ANALYSIS*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction: A Comment on Authorship
- 4.2 Life of the Marginalised
- 4.3 Structure
- 4.4 Narrator: A Dramaturgic Device
- 4.5 *Budhan*: A Summary
- 4.6 Critical Reflections
- 4.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.8 Glossary
- 4.9 Questions
- 4.10 References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous unit you have studied the meaning and implications of the criminal tribes and denotified tribes. Having analyzed the socio-political nuances of DNTs, we shall now examine the play *Budhan*. This unit will help you understand the commonly held perceptions about DNTs and the treatment meted out to them. This discussion of the play *Budhan* presents for scrutiny the relationship between the DNTs and the state.

4.1 INTRODUCTION: A COMMENT ON AUTHORSHIP

The authorship of the play is credited to the denotified Chharas tribe of Chharranagar, Ahmedabad. This indicates that there is no one person who has authored the play. The play is a collective effort that expresses the anxieties of the DNTs. This makes the intention of the play clear; it represents the interests of the denotified tribes through the specific case of an individual, Budhan; a member of the Sabar community of the Purulia district, West Bengal, a man who died after torture in police custody. The play tells us about many such Budhans in the country who are subjected to persecution by the state forces.

Let us recall that a follow up of Budhan's case by activists led to the formation of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group with Mahasveta Devi and Laxman Gaikwad. These efforts took the members to Chharranagar in Ahmedabad. A number of individuals from the Chhara tribe produced plays to convey the concerns of the denotified tribes. *Budhan* was a result of these efforts and the play was performed at the first national conference of the group. The introduction aptly states that:

It is not an imaginary perception of suffering; it is based on the lived, traumatic experience of being branded a criminal. (*Budhan* p.259)

4.2 LIFE OF THE MARGINALISED

Having understood in the previous unit the historical and legal underpinnings of the term “criminal tribe” we will study here how these ideas are imposed on the marginalized people on a day-to-day basis. The replacement of the CTA with the term DNT did little to alleviate the condition of the people of these tribes. They could still be picked up easily by the police to solve a case and to display that the culprit had been caught. And who could be a better guinea pig for this than a DNT; someone the state had labeled at a certain stage as part of a criminal tribe.

The introduction to *Budhan* begins with the statement that “Denotified tribals are often tortured and killed in police custody.” This simple but hard-hitting statement sets the tone for what is to follow in the play. The declaration is not subject to any doubt and the play bears out the truth in its course. The details of the person in question, Budhan, are provided—he is a member of a denotified tribe; the specific tribe being the Sabar. Budhan was killed in February 1998. But it was only with the intervention of the Kheria Sabar Welfare Samiti and the writer and activist Mahasveta Devi that a postmortem took place. It was revealed that Budhan had indeed died in police custody. This was in contrast to the report submitted earlier by the state representatives. These facts point towards the fragility of the lives led by the DNTs. The state has an easy way out in the DNTs; in case of any crime they can be easily picked up and tortured.

4.3 STRUCTURE

The play consists of 15 scenes which are brief and make the point emphatically. The play has close parallels with Bertolt Brecht’s idea of Epic theatre and the Nukkad natak tradition in India. Brecht’s idea of Epic theatre makes use of direct and simple language to make the audience think about the events presented on stage. This stands in contrast to the idea of dramatic theatre that entangles the viewer in an emotional bind, thus preventing her/him to respond to the play in an alert and intelligent manner. This is an important point of difference—in the case of dramatic theatre the emphasis is on emotional involvement on the part of the audience but in epic theatre the audiences’ nerves are kept relaxed so that s/he can think and act in response to the issues raised in the play. Their attention is not diverted from the issue raised on the stage. In this context Brecht advocates the use of “alienation techniques” that allow the actors and audience to interact and comment on questions of social interest. The language used in the play is kept simple and stark. This is again a significant aspect of epic theatre. The mode of communication is basic as the aesthetics lie in the expression and communication of the problem under discussion. The audience is not taken through any verbal gymnastics that distract the viewer’s attention from the issue to the aesthetics of drama. Mostly each dialogue carries the length of a brief crisp sentence. As Bertolt Brecht states in *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1948):

A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar. . . the new alienations are only designed to free socially conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today. (Brecht, Bertolt. “A Short Organum for the Theatre.” *Marxism*. Ed. Anand Prakash. New Delhi: World View P, 2004.P.87)

Such dramaturgic devices remove the “stamp of familiarity” and enable us to see things as they really are in society. But what is the use of these strategies? In the case of *Budhan* most people would be unaware of the socio-political implications of the DNTs and the manner in which atrocities are inflicted on them. In the context of dramatic theatre there would be an effort at catharsis. The audience will be expected to vent out their emotions. But will this change the attitude towards the case? Will it in any way prompt the viewer into thinking about what could have been the real event in this case? Perhaps not. But the Brechtian theatre with its emphasis on alienation will relax the audience making them counter the version of the state. The design of the play makes it imperative that the performance is in the Brechtian style.

In terms of form and structure the parallel to epic theatre is the nukkad natak tradition in India. The nukkad natak presentations are meant to be performed anywhere by drawing the people through the use of songs and music. The stage space is nebulous and very experimental. Any actor can play any role. The actors are not attached to a specific role that they might enact. Instead, one actor can even perform multiple roles depending on the number of actors present or the intention of the production. The actors are attached to the ideas that they present. Safdar Hashmi has documented the history of street theatre in India and traces its genesis to the Russian Revolution. He explains how it spread from there to China, and in India it took the form of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). Hashmi discusses the limitations of proscenium theatre and its association with “the finer and subtler aspects of life.” He identifies a potential in street theatre to address social problems. Street theatre provides the apt structure and space to discuss the issues of the DNTs and more specifically the Budhan case.

Another playwright who comes to mind in this context is the Italian playwright, Dario Fo. In the play, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970), the protagonist is a mad man who uses the anarchic structure of madness to argue cogently with the forces of the state. Like *Budhan*, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is based on a real case where a person dies in police custody and the facts are distorted to make it seem an accident. In 1969 Guisepppe Pinelli was arrested after a bomb explosion in the Bank of Agriculture in Piazza Fontana in Milan. “Pinelli was killed when he ‘fell’ from the fourth-floor window of the police interrogation room.” (Cairns xv). The left-wing newspaper *Lotta continua* accused Calabresi, the police inspector in charge of the case. Performances based on the information collected by “journalists and lawyers” continued while the trials of the case were on and finally shifted the blame from “anarchists” to “fascists.” The play functions as an exercise in counter-information. Here, too, the nebulous and flexible structure of the play allows for a performance that is a scathing indictment of state verdicts. In the play the madman states:

About sixteen years ago, in the south east of England, three women and one man were physically abused and threatened into confessing into an appalling bombing of which they were not guilty. In their haste to secure convictions, the police force and the establishment had colluded in a campaign of fraud and perjury. (Fo, Dario. *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. London: Methuen, 1991.p.73)

The play becomes a way of drawing the attention of the people towards loopholes in the case that hitherto escaped their attention. Relegated to a small section in the newspaper, such information is effectively suppressed. The purpose of these plays

is to make a familiar case seem unfamiliar so that the viewers are compelled to think of other sides to the case. Like the *Accidental Death*, this play by the DNTs, draws attention to information that goes against the notions of justice spread by the state. Counter-information in the play runs in opposition to the information of social justice that people are made to believe. The use of theatre for providing counter-information is effective.

4.4 NARRATOR: A DRAMATURGIC DEVICE

Budhan opens with a narrator who functions as a dramaturgic device to keep the audience in the loop. As said above, this idea is present both in the nukkad natak form and the Brechtian tradition. The sutradhar or the narrator gives a kind of framing to the audience to contend with. The narrator outlines the population of the DNTs and draws attention to the singularity of their peculiar social context. He states:

For reasons unknown to anybody, we are singled out for bearing a burden. We are the DNTs or the Adivasis, the people belonging to ancient times. We have witnessed the changes taking place on earth for millennia. We live amidst nature. We are born in the womb of nature, and we die in the lap of nature. Or we are killed. We once lived in the jungles, but today we have to fight for our rights in the same forests. For centuries the DNTs have been killed. Earlier, when a DNT passed through a village, his body was cut into pieces. (*Budhan* p.261)

The narrator has informed the audience of certain objective facts—the first being the presence of the Adivasis as a tangible group. This is new information for an audience who has just emerged from their very secure cocoons to get some entertainment. As discussed in the previous unit for an audience from the developed world the DNT is like any other tribal—primitive and uncivilized. The narrator mentions a “burden” and it is up to the audience to figure out the nature of this baggage. Significant information is given about the DNT’s relationship with nature. They are integrally related to nature as they are born in it and wish to remain ensconced in it. This is also a very tangible concept as the Adivasi group believes in the materiality of nature. There are no unknown forces that they relate to but die like all other beings. However, there is a noteworthy departure—the adivasis are “killed”. The last statement specifies that the DNTs were hacked because of which the viewer is alerted about suppressed facts. The atrocities inflicted on DNTs are so heinous that the mere presence of an adivasi leads to violence and anger. In a nutshell, the Narrator gives an outline of the social context and population of the DNTs and the violence inflicted on them by the powerful sections of society.

As the play begins there is a mime about the butchering of the tribals.

A few tribals pass through the rear part of the stage, carrying wood. A few persons hiding in the forest attack them. Their terrifying, painstricken calls of help fill the stage. The tribals are butchered. All characters stand still. (*Budhan* p.261)

The mime continues as the narrator objectively charts the atrocities perpetrated on the DNTs. The narrator mentions 1979—the torture of the Lodha community (Lodha or Kheria; Hasnain 271) in which people were “tormented and drowned.” This is once again displayed in a mime in which the villagers kill the DNTs. The mime

confronts the audience with the plight of the DNTs. But at the same time it also helps document some of these tribes such as the Lodha tribe. This graphs hitherto ignored alternative histories.

In this context, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) comes to mind with respect to the use of mime. The play deals with the Mau Mau rebellion. The different scenes are called movements extending the idea of the mime to the entire structure of the play. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o uses mime to present to the audience the history of the blacks in Africa; the mime is in four phases. The first phase is the transaction of black slaves between a "rich-looking black chief" and a "hungry-looking slave trader." In the second phase, a chain of exhausted slaves are seen carrying "heavy burden on their back." In the third phase the slaves are transformed into labour force on the plantations. The overseer is black and the "master" is white. In the fourth phase the slaves rebel and shout "anti-imperialist" slogans. This is very similar to the beginning of *Budhan*. In both contexts that are geographically and historically apart, the mime documents the history from the perspective of the marginalized. At the same time the mime also becomes a significant way of articulating resistance.

In *Budhan* as the mime ends, the Narrator comments on what has just been shown to the audience. S/he draws attention to the fact that most such deaths are unaccounted and people who are a part of the country are treated as outsiders. Structurally, an objective distance is created as the play has not yet begun in terms of plot but the import of the play has been spelled out by the Narrator. The narrator also informs us of what will happen at the end—

We present to you the story of one such community, the Sabars. This is the story of Budhan Sabar, a young man belonging to the Sabar community who was killed by a police atrocity. We want change! We want a revolution!
(*Budhan* p.261)

The play is clearly change-oriented. The purpose and the end of the plot have been stated clearly. The sentence structure is basic and the meaning is direct. This has a bearing on the content of the play which is then easily transmitted to the audience. The straight-forwardness of the structure of the play is related to an agenda to be fulfilled. The issue introduced by the narrator is taken up by the actors in the same scene. The actors on stage stand in a single file and speak to the audience not as specific characters but as actors. This distinction between actors and the role that they are about to perform is important. It engages the audience as in a discussion. The actors playing the role of the constable are also present on stage and they raise an important question—

A horrifying act that will force you to ask: are we really free after half a century of independence? Even after more than fifty years, the British stigma of criminality of birth continues to stick to the DNTs. (*Budhan* p.262)

For the audience, this is a new experience as they are used to seeing only characters and not the actors behind them. In this case the actors are present before the characters are introduced. This scene introduces the locale of the play as "Akarbaid, a small village in West Bengal." The focus will be on the Sabar community considered to be a group of thieves by the powerful people, especially the police. The specific case of Budhan is introduced by the actor playing the role of the Inspector. He

comments on his own role as an Inspector “who was used to taking the law in his own hands.” The actors playing the role of the Constables ask the audience to think if we are really free even after many years of independence. In the play the Inspector and the Constables are the perpetrators but they begin the play by analyzing their roles critically. This is part of what Bertolt Brecht has called the “alienation technique”. It allows the actors and the audience to study roles in a detached manner. This is a realistic approach to theatre and life as it allows us to use drama as a cultural medium to understand the problems in society and suggest the necessity of change.

4.5 BUDHAN: A SUMMARY

In Scene II the play begins as Budhan and Shyamali are shown to be an ordinary couple stopping by at a paan shop. Shyamali is seen as shy and Budhan as considerate. Just as he is about to pay the shopkeeper, his hand with the money is held by Inspector Ashok Roy who is on the lookout for a Sabar whom he can penalize. When Budhan asks about the nature of his crime, Ashok Roy responds:

You bloody rascal, your greatest crime is that you dared to question the law...Come to the station without any arguments or I shall parade you naked through the market. (*Budhan* p.263-264)

This is not an empty threat as the Sabars can be treated in the most inhuman manner by the powerful forces. According to Hashmi,

The two characters most often ridiculed in our folk theatre are the pundit (religious priest) and the kotwal (policeman or officer of the law)...As such, it is a twentieth century phenomenon, born of the specific needs of the working people living under capitalist and feudal exploitation. (Hashmi, Safdar. “The First Ten Years of Street Theatre: October 1978-November 1988.” *Theatre of the Streets*. Ed. Sudhanva Deshpande. New Delhi: Janam, 2007. p. 13)

But in this play this is not only a satire targeting the state functionaries, but displays the ruthless impact of unrestrained power on these people particularly the way it devastates the lives of the DNTs. In Scene III Shyamali and Budhan remark on the propensity of the characters they play. The actor playing Shyamali states that she is an “innocent woman” and the one playing Budhan comments on the sheer lawlessness of the act—“Budhan was not even told his crime before he was arrested.” The actor playing the role of Inspector Ashok Roy, too, states, “Killing Sabars was just an enjoyable game for Officer Roy.” What is the purpose of this strategy? What does the playwright achieve by breaking the sequence of the plot through the comments of the actors on the various characters? Bertolt Brecht states:

In order to produce A-effects the actor has to discard whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify itself with the characters which he plays. Aiming not to put his audience into a trance, he must not go into a trance himself. (Brecht, Bertolt. “A Short Organum for the Theatre.” *Marxism*. Ed. Anand Prakash. New Delhi: World View P, 2004.p.89)

In *Budhan* the alienation technique allows the audience to think freely about the characters and the performance. The audience is not expected to wallow in emotion

and get swayed in a direction that is not change-oriented. Instead their fierce emotions are stalled as they get a breather to think objectively and absorb the actors' comments on the play. The actors, too, are not expected to fall into a trance by getting into the skin of the character. They are expected to present objectively the roles in the play. This promotes a freer interaction between the actors and the audience. It is the actors who form a "police station." This goes against the tenets of naturalistic theatre that would present a real set for the police station on stage. In this more experimental style the actors can form a police station or just refer to a space that can be called the police station by using a placard. This indicates that there is no need to stress on the authenticity of the view but on an objective interaction to think of the real causes of the problems around us. In the present case we are not even aware of the issues related to the denotified communities.

The plot sequence is resumed in scene IV. The actors who had earlier commented on the Inspector now resume their roles. The Inspector and Constable compel Budhan to accept responsibility for the seventeen thefts in the area. However, the latter pleads that he is a simple basket maker who sells them to the "co-operative". As discussed in the previous unit, even as the DNTs try to rehabilitate themselves, they are under constant surveillance and are made a scapegoat for quick paperwork by the police. Shyamali continues to plead to the police but her requests fall on deaf ears. This scene comes to an end and the actors on stage become the chorus. They state:

The police are thirsty for the blood of the Sabars. Who will make them understand that we, too, are Indians? (*Budhan* p.267)

This is a crucial issue that the play highlights time and again—the DNTs, too, are Indians and have been treated as criminals by their very own world. Scene VIII begins by giving the audience the exact date of the Budhan incident and use drama to connect the audience to the real world. The date is 11th February, 1998. Budhan Sabar's date of arrest is botched up and mentioned as 11th February and not 10th February and the serial number is "not the regular one." The Inspector tutors his Constable by telling him that their job is to distort facts by turning "facts into fiction and fiction into facts." Intensifying the torture in custody, the thirsty Budhan is forced to consume liquor. The scene ends with the helpless cries of Budhan and Shyamali.

Modifying the structure of the scenes, Scene VI begins with the actors' comments on the stage events. The actor playing the Constable conveys information about Budhan's torture in the cell, while the actor playing Shyamali informs the audience how another Sabar youth, Sridhar Sabar was brought to the "Barabazaar police station." As Sridhar Sabar is put into jail in the next scene (Scene VII), the police gears up to inflict "third degree" torture on Budhan. He is subjected to severe electric shock and Sridhar feels helpless on seeing Budhan's condition.

Scene VIII is again in the commentary mode. The actors point out the discrepancy between the police and the legal system. The court orders that Budhan be taken into remand but the viewers know that he was already in remand. Where Sridhar was released on bail and taken to the Purulia jail, Budhan was punished and sent to the same place. He is shifted "to Purulia jail after sunset, which is against the set procedures." As the actors form the Purulia jail the audience realizes that this new aesthetics in drama lays greater emphasis on the purpose of events rather than the depiction of naturalness on stage.

Scene IX again takes us through the stigma that is attached to the Sabars. The Assistant Superintendent has little sympathy for Budhan's condition and is filled with hatred at the mention of the word Sabar. Even in his pathetic physical state Budhan is given charge of cleaning the "entire prison." On seeing his inability to work, the Assistant Superintendent and the Guard beat him mercilessly so that he can't even move. He is to "realize the value of hard work" in a dark cell "where not even a ray of light can enter."

Budhan's fear and Sridhar's efforts at helping him are the highlights of Scene X. In the dark cell, Sridhar's consoling words have a soothing effect on Budhan but only for a moment. As he leaves, Budhan is left feeling scared and lonely. In this situation he thinks about his children. Thoughts of his family pull him on and provide succour. But haunted by the atrocities he has to suffer, he cannot remain calm. This is the darkest scene in the play. Its impact is effectively intensified by the Chorus that haunts Budhan.

Budhan is a thief.

Accept your crime.

Beat the scoundrel.

Give him electric shocks.

Drive him mad.

The dark cell. (*Budhan* p.278)

Here the Chorus represents the oppressive forces that succeed in breaking Budhan's spirit. He has lost all hope and his movement in a dark cell indicates his proximity to death. The "total silence" on stage indicates Budhan's death.

The plot continues as in scene XI the Assistant Superintendent comes with a Medical Superintendent to check Budhan who is found to be dead. The Superintendent conveys this information to Inspector Roy stating how both of them could be in trouble. They decide to call it an act of "suicide." Shyamali is shocked and inconsolable in the next scene. She knows that the police have killed her husband. They decide to prepare for an immediate cremation. Shyamali continues to curse them but to no avail. Ashish, a member of the Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti, conveys Mahasweta Devi's message that "Budhan's body should not be cremated at any cost. Bury Budhan's body so that nobody comes to know about this. To fool the police, burn Budhan's effigy...all of us, the Samiti and the villagers along with Mahasweta Devi will avenge Budhan's death." (*Budhan* p.283)

Scene XIII expresses the anxieties of the village men who demand a probe into the Budhan case. They firmly believe that he was killed in police custody. As the actors form a courtroom they indicate that justice will be met. The date is now 21st July, 1998. Scene XIV carries the court verdict which suspended all the police officers involved. The scene ends with Budhan demanding to know his crime; he had only gone to eat a paan and eventually lost his life.

Scene XV is the last one in the play. It is a scene in which the actors pose simple questions to the audience. Some of these are as follows:

If a DNT commits a crime, is the punishment death?

No Bhansali was born amongst the DNTs.

No Harshad Mehta was born amongst the DNTs.

No DNT is involved in the Bofors scandal.

Are we second-class citizens? (*Budhan* p.285)

By citing incidents that indicate the political turmoil in the country, the actors and the group that has authored the play project the level of disparity prevalent in society. No DNT was part of any scandal. But they have been penalized for their very existence. All the actors get together on stage and say—"We need respect." The play ends with a human chain raising their hands.

4.6 CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

The play is sharp in tone and uses the direct style to reach out and inform people of the truth regarding the Budhan case which has to be looked at various levels. First and foremost, it is a real case about a man Budhan from the Sabar community. The play in a style parallel to Dario Fo's provides us with counter-information of the actual events regarding the case. These have been hushed up and the death of this man is silenced. But the play allows this suppressed voice to surface and make a claim for justice. Secondly, the play is a reflection on the cruel practices of the state that criminalizes the DNTs and tortures them. They are not given a chance to even present their side of the case. Finally, the play has to be looked at from the point of view of the structure of the play. Milind Bokil in his discussion of the DNTs mentions the obduracy of the state functionaries who continue to see groups of people as criminal. But what about the larger state of things? In a world where crime acquires new forms every day, the political system ignores all these and seems to convert the DNTs into scapegoats who will answer for the crimes of other people. The end of the play with its reference to political scandals states how the DNTs have never been involved in any such matter. But the DNTs have never been accepted on their own terms. The appeal for respect at the end of the play is a plea to understand the denotified tribes on their own grounds.

This play also introduces us to an aesthetic in theatre that has largely been dubbed amateurish and therefore ignored. But the use of the Brechtian style of theatre allows the audience to confront the contradictions present in reality and to pose questions regarding this world. This approach presents the realities of the Budhan case from the perspective of the DNTs while highlighting the atrocities inflicted on them. At the same time it also helps us perceive reality from the forgotten perspective of the DNTs. The real world is not merely one to which the average audience belongs; it also belongs to the people once branded as criminal and then "denotified."

4.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit presented a critical summary of *Budhan*. It provided the counter information regarding a real case. The unit studied the intricacies of the structure of the play. It looked at the structural and thematic parallels the play shared with some of the plays and writers from other countries. It underlines the need to suggest a positive answer to emphasize the rights of the DNTs.

4.8 GLOSSARY

Epic theatre : A term coined by Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright of the twentieth century. This was in contrast to the established naturalistic theatre.

- Naturalistic theatre** : The late nineteenth century idea that the stage can be used to present the real life. The stage space was used to replicate life and give the audience the illusion that they were peeping into the drawing room of a household.
- Dramatic Theatre** : Bertolt Brecht's Epic theatre is in opposition to dramatic theatre. It foregrounds Aristotle's idea of catharsis whereby the audience is expected to regain balance at the end of the play.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o** : A Kenyan playwright who largely wrote plays concerning the conditions of the oppressed Kenyans.
- Mau-Mau rebellion** : A rebellion of the 1950s against the white British colonial government in Kenya.
- Dario Fo** : an Italian playwright of the twentieth century who wrote plays that questioned and subverted the established institutions.

4.9 QUESTIONS

- 1) Comment on the authorship of the play *Budhan*.
- 2) What is the significance of the Narrator in *Budhan*.
- 3) Analyse the plot of the play.
- 4) Discuss Shyamali's role in the play.
- 5) Examine the last scene of the play and give your comments.
- 6) How are facts distorted to cover up the death of Budhan in police custody?
- 7) Discuss the ending of the play.

4.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 5 WRITERS OF SHORT FICTION: TEMSULA AO AND LUMMER DAI

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Features of Short Fiction as a Literary Form
- 5.2 Temsula Ao as a Writer From Nagaland
- 5.3 A Brief View of Temsula Ao's Concerns
- 5.4 "The Last Song" Has Two Distinct Aspects
- 5.5 TemsulaAo and the Strategy of Narration
- 5.6 Lummer Dai as a Writer from Arunachal Pradesh
- 5.7 A View of "The Price of a Bride"
- 5.8 Wider Scope of the Story with Gumba as its Central Character
- 5.9 "The Price of a Bride" in the Realistic Mode
- 5.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.11 Questions
- 5.12 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims to emphasize the role of short stories written in the contemporary period. It will identify areas of culture and society reflected in Indian short stories and acquaint you with the standpoint of the sensitive writers in our midst. Particularly, it will discuss two short stories from the northeast region, one from Nagaland and the other from Arunachal Pradesh. You will learn from the discussion the points of appeal in a woman writer Temsula Ao and concerns that find place in the stories of the committed writer Lummer Dai. In the beginning, some light will be shed on the general nature of the short story as a distinct form of literary writing.

5.1 FEATURES OF SHORT FICTION AS A LITERARY FORM

By now in the study of this course, we have known that the reference point of fiction, whether the long one called the novel or the short one called the short story, is social reality in the graphic mode. In this mode, details of life remain the governing idea, unlike poetry where imagination plays a vital part with words much more than what they ordinarily denote. A major part of the poetic expression is suggestion; it contains the writer's intent couched in words that do not pinpoint questions, but connect with other words using large gaps and distances. Sometimes, a whole experience is concentrated in a symbol that is enlarged in the mind of the reader or through indications in the words used for representing the experience. In the fiction mode, on the other hand, we confront words that are a staple of ordinary day-to-day living. The writer freely uses statement, observation, reference, dialogue, or comment. For this reason, fiction, long or short, relies on narration that communicates

to the reader information, reasoning or interpretation with a view to capturing a shared experience of a social section in the precise time when they lived.

In this context, we should pay attention specifically to the sub-division called the short story. In comparison with the novel, the short story focus upon a smaller zone of life and picks up a limited experience for depiction. This will be illustrated in the course of discussing the short story “The Last Song” by TemsulaAo. We shall realize, for instance, that Ao’s account relates to the specific happenings in mid-twentieth century India.

5.2 TEMSULA AO AS A WRITER FROM NAGALAND

Temsula Ao was born in 1945 in Jorhat. She has taken keen interest in the study of life in Nagaland to which she belongs. A scholar of great merit, she is known as an ethnographer, a poet and fiction writer. She taught English literature in North Eastern Hill University, Shillong as Professor, and has won many awards including the Sahitya Akademi award. She has drawn attention for her fearless appraisal of developments in Nagaland. Her writing bears the indelible mark of painful engagement with excesses committed by the state in her homeland. The books she wrote include *Once Upon a Life*, *Laburnum*, apart from the short story collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories From A War Zone* of which “The Last Song” forms a part.

These Hills Called Home covers a troubled area of modern India marked by oppression, cruelty and insensitive handling of political issues. At the centre of accounts met present the book is the significant case of identity in contemporary conditions. As comes out clearly in the representation, India of the mid-twentieth century faces conditions of inequality accompanied by underdevelopment and economic scarcities. These did not allow communities in the country to evolve a character of their own, and enabling the concerned people to enjoy benefits of security and welfare. In her statement preceding the short stories, Ao observes with a sense of pain:

Many of the stories in this collection have their genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears that make up the history of the Nagas from the early fifties of the last century, and their demand for independence from the Indian State. But while the actual struggle remains a backdrop, the thrust of the narratives is to probe how the events of that era have re-structured or even ‘revolutionized’ the Naga psyche. It was as though a great cataclysmic upheaval threw up many realities for the Nagas within which they are still struggling to settle for legitimate identity. It was almost like a birth of fire. (Ao, Temsula. *These Hills Called Home: Stories From A War Zone*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2006.p. x)

This quotation tells a great deal about the standpoint of the author—her sympathies with the people who live in the village in Nagaland, her critical view of the state, the callousness shown by the army to impose order in the country’s population and the heroism and tenacity of the women in situations of intolerance and oppression. Look at the title that tells us about the hills that are indeed home, and the war zone the area has been turned into by the powers that be. Then, think about “The turbulent years of bloodshed and tears.” What does the putting together of the opposites

signify except that violence comes always with pain and the writer in such a situation would naturally be on the side of the oppressed? In the quotation, there is a politically loaded expression, “their (of the people of Nagaland) demand for independence from the Indian state.”

5.3 A BRIEF VIEW OF TEMSULAAO’S CONCERNS

This means that the writer is taking up the subject of defiance against the state. Immediately, we begin going into the implications of the state not being owned up and accepted by the citizens. The two words, “psyche” and “legitimate identity” are to be noted also. These denote a different angle from which citizen-related problems may be viewed. The question may indeed be asked: “Are nationalism and identity not the same thing?” Ordinarily, a country as nation is supposed to look after the economic as well as political and cultural interests of the people. On considering this quotation, we might wonder whether identity has certain features that are not observed by those who run the state, and that there persists a gap between the two. Thus, we anticipate that Temsula Ao intends to raise the issue of such a gap between the state and the masses. We shall keep this idea in mind as we interpret the story “The Last Song” in this unit.

5.4 “THE LAST SONG” HAS TWO DISTINCT ASPECTS

There is a girl child in the story. It occupies the centre of the narrative. As an infant, she makes sweet noise that follows any song she hears from others. It generally happens when the mother goes to a function in the neighbourhood and someone sings a song there. The child’s strange act amuses people but also annoys. Because of it, the mother feels embarrassed and is forced to leave the function. With respect to the child, is it not a miracle that she sends out sounds conforming the song she hears? Yes, it is a miracle. Later, it would become a talent and the girl would be an exclusive carrier of this quality. Look at the story structurally and see that the song referred to in the title as “The Last Song” belongs to the girl. In fact, the whole narrative is contained within the singing that started with the noise we have talked about in the beginning and the one with which the story ended. This is one part.

The other aspect is that the story is accounted in the tone of the omniscient narrator, resembling the author herself. Clearly, the author has given her wholesome support to the girl who ends up as an idealist young woman. She is the reigning voice and the soul of the piece. Why do we see the author as extending full sympathy to the central character? The reason is that Temsula Ao lives her own life in the behavior of the central character. The idealism characterizing the young woman is the idealism that the author pursues in her own case—the mission of becoming aware of a challenge and then taking it head on. We consider it a committed story, committed to the cause of fighting repression and violence.

5.5 TEMSULAAO AND THE STRATEGY OF NARRATION

The last song in the story symbolizes the choice of death over individual safety. Perhaps the girl would have lived, as a few do in the story, if she ran away from the scene when an armed wing of the state unleashed terror in the village. The writer

does not go entirely into the reasons behind the violence except that the state through its individual functionary decided to teach the village population a lesson. The logic is only described briefly. But Temsula Ao valorizes the young woman, presents her as a hero, indeed says through her behaviour that she represented in full the anguish of the population and others democratically and peacefully inclined. Think about this aspect of the story.

Temsula Ao is also aware of her position as an intellectual of the life in the northeast, particularly the community of the Nagas. As an intellectual of community, it is her job to raise and problematize issues. This she has done sufficiently well. For instance, she does not side with the rebels who have taken to violent ways and oppress the community in their own way. Nor is the author with the country's state that has a policy of isolating and containing the positive creative energy of the community. The people of the region are peace-loving and wish to remain good neighbours, citizens and observing principles of harmonious social existence. Possibly, the larger state has also the same ideal to pursue but there appear different political stands in the country that sidestep such an ideal and adopt a course suiting their narrow goals. All these considerations are in-built in the narrative.

A core issue of "The Last Song" is religion as a segment of social living. In conditions of democracy, faith in one or other religion is granted and the followers are allowed adherence to it if that does not hinder the normal working of social life. This is the stand-point of Temsula Ao. But it does not fit in with the larger contending interests that carry economic and political orientation. The leaving of old church building and constructing the new church building are matters centrally of those who have decided to shift from one to other. However, the state does not think so, nor those who are ranged against it, the rebels. Ao projects it categorically that the question should rest for resolution with the people themselves. Since this is not observed in the region and fight has continued between the country's state and the rebels, the untold violence had resulted (Ao Temsula, *These Hills called Home: Stories From a War Zone*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2006). The conduct of army officers, particularly the one in command, is brutal and inhuman. The rape of the young woman at the end is a sad happening that should have never happened.

Temsula Ao comes out in the story as a humanist, believing in dignity and courage that lie hidden most of the time and come out into the open in crucial moments. It is an act of daring that Ao adopted this writerly stance and brought to the notice of the readers that democracy is to be the article of faith for all the people of India.

The writer-narrator assumes two roles, that of a chronicler who will present a specific sequence of events in the manner of an eye witness. The other role is that of presenting a different narrator from the ordinary masses who did not see the happening herself but is constructing the sequence basing on hearsay. In this manner, the story consists of two parts. The initial narration is a major chunk of the story in which women's rape and violent killing of many men and women is captured. The narration goes on to include setting fire to the church buildings and village huts. The second narration is mythical and tell-tale. It relies on the memory of the old woman who has collected young people so they heard the account of an event that took place long ago. Whereas the first part is graphic and concrete, the second part has evoked imagination. The important instance is of the old narrator asking the young listeners to hear the song with effort and believe that the tune is playing at a distance but it will soon come near them and become louder. One thing emerges unmistakably. In the words of K.B. Veio Pou, "By telling these stories, the plight of women is brought to the fore

and their voices heard. Writings, therefore, have definitely created space for women in addressing their various struggles wherein they find themselves encountering different ideas and forms.” (Veio Pou, K.B. *Literary Cultures of India’s North East: Naga Writings in English*. Duncan, Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2015.p.190)

5.6 LUMMER DAI AS A WRITER FROM ARUNACHAL PRADESH

In this unit, let us take the second short story for discussion. Its title is “The Price of a Bride” and it is written by Lummer Dai, a writer from Arunachal Pradesh. He was born in 1940 and made a name for himself in the world of Assamese literature. He is mainly known for his novels and short stories. His fiction is marked by important details of economic and social life and the vision of modernity that is shown to be struggling to emerge through them. He belonged to Adi community in Arunachal Pradesh. A writer in the realistic mode, Lummer Dai pinpoints the suffering of characters he picks up for projection. The novels written by him include *Paharar Shile Shile* and *Prithibir Hanhi*. His figure as a literary luminary has loomed large in the creative landscape of the northeast. He died in 2004.

5.7 A VIEW OF “THE PRICE OF A BRIDE”

The short story “The Price of a Bride” begins on a powerful note and the idea in the form of social conflict keeps intensifying till it reaches a climax where the story ends. The story gives us psychological insights into the working of women’s mind. The episode is of conversation among girls of the same age—young Gumba, the protagonist, in conversation with other young women can be cited as an illustration. In this part of the story, simplicity of perception is focused. Women are generally guided by tradition. At the same time, there may be a few who are particularly informed and think differently than others. Through the character of Gumba, we get to know how a woman responds sentimentally to certain situations. However, she assumes an altogether different intellectual angle to assert herself. In this manner, she achieves clarity about her choice. This becomes immensely appealing.

Gumba is in her late teens. She is a senior student in the school and has reached the twelfth standard. Learning is her main interest. Even as she is from a small village, she has been lucky enough to go to school in the nearby town and has stayed there all along. Meanwhile, her parents live in the village and are waiting for her to come back so she could be sent to her husband’s home. Husband’s home? Yes, this is the catch. She was married when she was only three or four years. This is the burden of the past she carries, and about it she does not know. The secret visits her one day suddenly as message from the father reaches her asking her to return home immediately. “Asking” is a softer word to describe the message. It is a mandate. The interesting part is that being in the school, she is incapable to understand implications of mandate. On one reason, this has kept her away from the fate of accepting the father’s word. On another reason, it has the possibility to shake up her composure entirely. First, let us see the background of the catastrophe she is to face soon after arriving in the village on urgent call from the father. Gumba exchanges views with other girls in the village who are her age but unlike her, they have been married. She has a brief conversation with her father.

Soon afterwards, the village girls who were of Gumba’s age came in to see her. One of them, called Yeter, was carrying her child on her back, Gumba stood up eagerly

and greeted them, ‘come and sit down, girls,’ she said. She turned to Yeter and asked, ‘How many children do you have Yeter?’

‘This girl is my second,’ said Yeter.

‘And, what about you, Jamay?’ Gumba asked.

‘I have two, but if you count the one in my stomach, then three.’ Jamay laughed and everyone joined her.

‘Yabam, how many do you have?’

‘I have a two-and-a-half-year old son.’

Jamay turned to Gumba and asked, ‘Which class are you in, Gumba?’

‘Class twelve,’ she answered.

‘You are now qualified to be a babu, aren’t you, Gumba?’ Yeter said.

Gumba smiled, ‘I need to study a lot more to be fit for that.’

Yabam sighed deeply and said, ‘We are rotting here in the village.’

‘Don’t say such things,’ Gumba protested, ‘Everyone has his or her own duties, whether one is educated or not.’ (‘The Price of Bride’ P. 6)

Note how the writer has set up a backdrop for the disastrous turn that is to follow. We know that conditions are pitched seriously against the girls in the village. They face rigid authority that they cannot protest. Even as the girls recount their fate, they clearly see the distance between them and Gumba. But the village being the same and Gumba’s family enjoying no special privilege, economic or social, Gumba cannot possibly have a different future than her married friends. The irony have already been structured into the narrative through Gumba’s father messaging to his daughter that she come back since something serious is to be announced for her. On the other hand, we also come across the pointer that Gumba is alone in the village bearing a mark of protest—it is indeed present in a strong form in all the girls in the village. Gumba’s remark that “Everyone has his or her own duties, whether one is educated or not” is met with the following response from Jamay:

‘I get angry with people like my father when I think of all these things. If my father had not sold me in my childhood, I too could have gone to school like you,’ Jamay burst out in anger. Yeter supported her views. Libam too spoke out in a similar tone, ‘Although I haven’t been sold in my childhood, still I can’t accept this custom’.

‘But you could have continued with your studies even if you had been sold,’ said Gumba.

‘Don’t you know my story, Gumba?’ said Jamay. ‘I had just finished my class eight exams when my father and the elders asked me to go to my husband’s house. When I refused, they reported the matter to my husband’s family and they in turn brought the matter to the people’s court. It was decided there that I should be dragged by force to my husband’s house and made to sleep with him. I ran away from my husband the next day. But, once more they caught me and did the same thing over again. They locked me up in a separate room after that.’ (‘The Price of Bride’ P. 6)

Mark that these comments refer to the general malaise existing in society. The author uses them to expand the scope and spread of the view of orthodoxy and its cruel nature. The characters who utter these words talk of a pain whose roots lie in

the environment that the mighty in our midst have formed to perpetuate the hold of their power. The two dialogues have a similar point to make. For this reason, they become pointers of what happens to the protagonist later in the story. This creates a sense of deep irony. At the time these observations are made in the story, the protagonist Gumba does not know that she is to meet the same fate the mention of which is made here. Gumba was an epitome of success her life seemed to have become. Meaningfully, the writer had given in the beginning the episode of Gumba's father selling his daughter for a price when she was very young, and not able to understand the enormity of the situation caused by her father's decision.

5.8 WIDER SCOPE OF THE STORY WITH GUMBA AS ITS CENTRAL CHARACTER

Yet, we should not lose sight of the deeper layer of reality the story hides. This layer informs all the details the story carries. The sequence of Gumba being in the town, away from her village, the father struggling to get the feel of normalcy in a world that has its own principles of governance gripping the life of ordinary masses in India's north-eastern region. Thus, we note that the story acquaints us with the family structure that operates in it and the place of women in it. Women perform the function of running the institution through hard labour and effort. In this manner, we get a perspective on the institution of marriage from the point of view of the dissenting girl and her parents who have uncritically accepted the orthodox approach. Yet, it is the same women caught in the clutches of matrimony who get at the truth of their life. Gumba's father remains blind to what ails him and the world he inhabits. He is insensitive to the aspirations of his daughter. His tyranny is of a piece with the oppressive authority that the system adopted by the place carries within it. For instance, does it not signify that the younger generation might look at social aspects in a new way? Is it any wonder, then, that all young people in the story are girls? And they are able to join at the end with Gumba's mother who agrees perforce with her husband but is entirely with her suffering daughter in her helplessness. So far as the author is concerned, change in society would be brought in when this new way is pursued with diligence and force. To us, the story brings out the falsity of tradition. It is ranged against the urges and genuine requirements of the active working women. One is touched by the way in which descriptions and dialogues have been woven to signify the necessity of change.

Let us consider, too, that the father does not represent through his character absolute patriarchy—there being some twist there. This is subtle and should be given extra attention by the reader. We may keep in mind the fact that in the story, patriarchy appears to be tempered by the pressure of economic circumstance of which Gumba's father is a victim. His standpoint comes out into the open when he delays saying all that he wants to. When Gumba asks him squarely whether he sold her at a time when she was not able to understand the justice being done to her, "Kargum did not reply at once but lifting his mug of apong to his lips he took several quick gulps." Later, Gumba emphatically makes the query regarding the decision to sell her and says, "Why don't you tell me the truth? Why did you bring me to this world if it was only to sell me? Why don't you kill me now?" In the context, the author-narrator brings in two important things:

Gumba's mother had misery written large on her face. Her heart seemed to break into a thousand pieces and tears rolled down her cheeks.

‘What’s the use of all this crying?’ Kargum said in a sombre tone with his face towards the wall. ‘You have no other choice but to go to your husband’s, and you better do that soon,’ he said. (‘The Price of Bride’ P. 8)

He loves his daughter and respects her point of view, since he is not a tyrant—this complicates his position as a father as well as a patriarch. These two roles coincide at one time and clash at another. It is fascinating to watch such a spectacle. The writer is able to notice a complex working of interest in social behavior.

The mother’s position is not as defined as that of the father. At times we see her siding with her husband and at other times she questions him.

In the story, traditionally the mother would have referred to her own experience of marriage for convincing her daughter. This does not happen. She does not argue like her husband. Here we may read that she knows what her daughter is getting into if she agreed with her father. As a mother she does not want her daughter to be faced with challenges of marriage that she herself faced. This goes against the social norms that work on her mind.

In the story the school comes out as a place of liberation, assertiveness and enlightened thought. The school is a door to a new world. The world of home and the world of the school are in conflict. The authorial sympathy is entirely with the new world and in this light the home and the family structure appear outdated.

The question that the father sent his daughter to school following her sale should not be overlooked. This shows that if conditions allowed he would have planned things the way the daughter wished to live her life. What compels the father to leave this path and stick to the custom of selling the girl which is dictated by what is supposed to be the norm. Such issues can be raised as we critically look into the structure of the story.

5.9 “THE PRICE OF A BRIDE” IN THE REALISTIC MODE

The question can be asked if the story is in the realistic mode. For the writing to be so, it should show deep interest in the social backdrop of the characters picked up for depiction. Gumba’s father follows a convention established by long practice. The rationale for selling a young girl is provided in detail. It is said that a girl does many things useful for the upkeep of the family inside the home and outside. For this reason, she is more productive than her male counterpart, the boy who is supposed to perform some function in the running of his society. Since the girl holds greater value, she is ensured as a possession by households in the region. Gumba ‘fetched’ more money in cash and kind as a girl child. The economics of the enterprise is clearly laid out, giving Gumba’s father Kargum a neat one thousand five hundred rupees. “In addition to that (the exchange of gifts in the deal), he had also received three thousand rupees in cash. Half of that money he had distributed amongst his brothers and other kinsmen. The rest was his.” The items of the deal and the ideas behind them had been given graphically. This makes the short story a truly sociological document. This is what we mean by “the realistic mode.”

Further, the social sanction resting behind selling a girl in marriage is strongly entrenched in the social structure. The writer has marshalled as evidence many characters from the village to authenticate the tradition of selling a girl—one

prominent example being that of Minjum who lives in the village and helps ordinary people in writing letters on their behalf. See his description in the writer's words as follows:

Minjum was a B.A. He had worked as a teacher for four years, but then had given up his job and turned to farming. Occasionally he tried his hand at some small business. People say that he would contest in the next Legislative Assembly polls. ('The Price of Bride' P. 3)

Men such as Minjum and controlling patterns of economic gain lead to an ending that shows Gumba without any chance of escape. She cannot break free from traditional codes. But hidden behind this apparent control over women is present the tension—this is felt by all the young girls as well as Gumba's mother. The title "The Price of Bride" introduces for the reader a paradigm rejection. None can be happy when shackles of economy, block progress of a whole section of society. Lummer Dai has created with required sensitivity an ethos of critical awareness. It will ensure sympathy in the heart of the reader for the womenfolk. They work hard but only to fit into the existing exploitation working to preserve orthodoxy.

5.10 LET US SUM UP

We have seen in this unit that short stories in the contemporary period perform the serious function of mirroring the reality of society. They work not merely in the aesthetic frame but also tell the reader about the issues confronting us. By drawing attention to important characters and situations that point towards anomalies in our system, they add to the reader's sensitivity. This results in raising issues concerning ideology and life's values in our time. We realize that fiction in an ex-colony such as India assumes the nature of a social document that touches aspects of social change in a crucial sense.

Notes:

1 K.B. Veio Pou has observed: "Writings of various Naga writers resonate with the chronicle of a land that is robbed of its fertility. The trauma of having to live through one of modern day's longest armed conflicts if faithfully reflected in the narratives. ... The world of the Nagas at present is a blend of the violent and the idyllic; though the present may be bleak and turbulent the people do not give up hope for a brighter and peaceful tomorrow. Whether in poetry or stories, the Naga writers bring to fore the social reality of living in a land where 'uncertainty' prevails. ... Having suffered afflictions during armed campaigns by the opposing forces, women were subjected to live with deep psychological traumas which often take the entire joy out of their lives." (x-xi)

5.11 QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss briefly the distinctive features of the short story.
- 2) What does the song of the girl signify in Temsula Ao's short story "The Last Song"? Explain.
- 3) Comment on the predicament of Gumba in Lummer Dai's short story "The Price of a Bride."

5.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

Writers of Short Fiction:
Temsula Ao and Lummer Dai

Ao, Temsula. *These Hills Called Home: Stories From A War Zone*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2006.

Misra, Tilottoma. Ed., *The Oxford Anthology Of Writings from North-East India*. New Delhi: Oxford, 2011.

Veio Pou, K.B. *Literary Cultures of India's North East: Naga Writings in English*. Duncan, Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2015.

