
UNIT 2 PARAJA: SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

On reading this Unit carefully you will be able to:

- Understand the socio-economic condition of the tribals
- Place the tribals in a social and political hierarchy
- Visualise the life of the tribals
- And evaluate, whether or not a tribal has any voice or any say in the socio-cultural context.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, you will go through a discussion that aims to highlight a few important factors about tribal life in general and about the Paraja community especially the protagonist and his family in particular. Fiction is considered to be a mirror of society, as it depicts the political, economic, socio - cultural, ethical and religious perspectives of society. This form of writing is used as a medium for the dissemination of ideas and thoughts. A socio –cultural novel is an interaction between socio -economic and political implications, and moral and cultural values. The Frenchman **Taine** said, ‘literature is the consequence of the moment, race and milieu.’ Thus, the geographical conditions, the historical moment and the social milieu influence creative writing.

Mohanty’s *Paraja* is one such text where the local geographical details, the feudal background, the economic and material resources and the unremarkable bond between man and nature are manifest in its social custom, rituals and rites and are fore - grounded effectively. The cultural phenomenon thrives on the politics, economic power structures and socio-cultural practices that give meaning to a particular society. An in-depth analysis and interpretation reveals the meaning, embedded in this phenomenon, which is the product of social forces and conventions. Culture is alive and changing rather than static and monolithic. Hence, culture is the ‘practice of everyday life’.

This unit as a whole and the block overall will help you in understanding *Paraja* as a novel on tribal life and you’ll be able to understand the text in its cultural

context. In the following section, we shall examine the economic plight of the tribals as reflected in *Paraja*.

2.2 ECONOMIC PLIGHT OF THE TRIBALS

The novel *Paraja* gives ethnographic details about poverty in the Koraput district of Odisha, especially amongst the tribals of Sarsupadar. At the onset of the story, on the very first page itself - we have a description of the hamlet – ‘thatched huts’; ‘patches of green ... sown with maize, chillies or tobacco’; ‘mandia, olsi and kandula ... staple food of these tribes.’ The description is a tell-tale narrative about the poor living conditions of the Paraja folk: single room divided into compartments with not many accessories, containers made of leaves, clothes that hang on the walls are just the loin cloths of men and cotton saris of the girls; dried bottle gourds to carry mandia gruel to the fields; and umbrellas made of dried palm leaves. They earn their living by working on their small ‘patches of green’ or as labour/*gotis* for someone/ especially the money - lender. Neither do they have high ambitions nor do they have too many desires. They are basically God-fearing people and believe in Gods and Goddesses associated with nature. They have firm faith in their own efforts. Women bathe, and wash at the stream and carry water for their homes. Their dress is mainly a sari and their jewellery consists of bead necklaces, bangles, etc.

And thus it was that in this land of hills and forests in an unmapped corner of the wide world, luckless men and women who lived on castaway mango stones and hid their nakedness in bits of rag huddled together under the torrent of misery pouring down on their heads, and wept. (p 37)

But who listens to the cries of these people or sees the tears that roll down their cheeks? To raise a loan of fifty rupees, a tribal has to become a *goti* (bonded labourer) for a life - time. It is evident that uneducated, economically poor tribals are thoroughly exploited. Chapter 32 brings up the various, horrifying aspects of bonded labour. The *gotis* live in ragged and tattered huts and men, women, children, chickens, dogs and swine grovel in the same dust. Women are exploited constantly as a result of the economic instability of the Paraja menfolk. For the *goti* it is fruitless labour as he earns no wages, is paid no salary, but has to sweat his life away in trying to work off the loan.

A clear comparison has been made between the rich and poor in Chapter 32. The chapter defines distinctly the differences between the residential palace like house of the money - lender and the miserable huts of the *gotis*. This chapter lays bare the story of how the money - lender becomes the feudal lord and master. Chapter 79 highlights the callousness of these money-minded people. When Dasru Paraja wails that his brother Sania has been carried off by the tiger, the *Sahukar* immediately thinks of his money and tells Dasru Paraja to repay the debt of his brother or he'll take him to the court and confiscate his land and ox.

Poverty is horrifying and more so when it leads to exploitation and the exploited do not feel or even realise that they are being used, exploited. Thus, Chapters 60 and 61 are a description of the life of the people living on the highway. The labourers on the highway are better off in comparison to the *gotis* and the supervisor is better off in comparison to the *Sahukar*. At least the workers are paid for their hard work and the poor people can get their daughters married into families that can pay a good bride price.

Poverty has been portrayed very clearly by Mohanty:

An entity not seen but actually felt, for everywhere he is a part of human existence. He lives in derelict houses, empty cooking pots, in heaps of tattered clothing; he lurks in the dark of the evening. He fills the minds of men with dreams, wave upon wave; he shows them new paths to follow, pricking them into wakefulness as they lie curled up in sleep by the fireside. He pushes them out of doors and slams the door shut after them. He guides men to the prison-cell or to the gallows. He inspires women to sell themselves in the market place. In him, all want and hunger are incarnated. (pp 207-08)

Poverty makes people shun all notions of morality. The demarcating line and the parameters between right and wrong vanish. For Jili, sex has no meaning as she has been forced unwillingly into it; Mandia does not want to axe the *Sahukar* but is forced to perform the heinous act of hacking him because of the illegal methods that the vile *Sahukar* has employed in refusing to return the land; the tribal villagers who betray Sukru Jani unknowingly, have been conditioned to live in terror of the officials and therefore, they do not have the strength to stand up for Sukru Jani. The journey to the courts is also an exploitative venture. The witnesses demand money, meat, liquor, tobacco etc. and all this weighs heavily on Sukru Jani. Their offerings to high officials are mainly hens, eggs, jackfruits or bananas. If on the one hand, the novel reflects the miserable condition of the tribals in the village then on the other it highlights the equally gloomy state of affairs at the road construction site. While they earn money, they (particularly the women), also fall prey to other forms of exploitation. Isolation, ignorance and a one-day-at-a-time attitude makes the migrant labourers victims of vicious romances and a materialistic life.

Thus, we see that at every step, poverty, poor economic conditions, and a lack of awareness and understanding of legal matters makes the life of these Parajas miserable. On reading the novel carefully we get the impression that we need to empower the Parajas, alleviate their poverty, and provide education, better health facilities and more job opportunities. This will gradually reduce the feudal structure and we may be in a position to change the mental attitude of the people. The socio-political structure of the novel *Paraja* will be taken up in the next section.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How would you describe the economic conditions of the tribals?

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- 2) Do you think local geography has any impact on the people?

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3) Explain the political structure existing in Sarsupadar.

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4) What is the end result of any social structure? (Hint: Growth of a human being.)

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5) Do you agree that contentment within the tribals crumbles with the intrusion of non-tribal people?

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2.3 THE SOCIO-POLITICAL STRUCTURE IN THE NOVEL

The social and political structure is well defined both in the text and the Paraja community. The nexus between the village officials, the feudal masters (the moneylenders) and the government officials are well established. The only people who remain on the outer margins or the people who benefit the least are the Paraja tribesmen. They neither know the law nor are they educated enough to understand the complexities of pen and paper. They are unaware of their rights and duties. The fear of officials, paper work, prison, court is such that they shirk away on mention of any of these and are ready to undergo any punishment, any suffering rather than to hear these words. Little do they realise that their own people are a part of the nexus. The rich and clever of the village are a party to the exploitative system that operates within the larger socio-economic and socio-political structures. The *Naika* collects the rent on behalf of the Raja, delivers it to *Ribini*/ the Revenue Inspector. Every villager has to pay a plough tax to the Forest Guard who collects the tax and is the only man of law that they see or know. Then there are feudal masters like the *Sahukar* who lend money and in return ask for the services of tribal folk as bonded labourers and even usurp their

lands. For any religious matter the priests are there and for all social matters the elders of the village sit together to sort out all the problems.

The manner in which each one dresses too displays the importance of the individual's status. The *Naika* wears only a loin - cloth below the waist but in addition to that he also wears a coat, and a *puggaree*. The Forest Guard is dressed in a shirt and shorts and carries a shot -gun on his shoulders. He is known as the *Guard* or *Jaman*. Whereas, poor people like Sukru Jani spend their entire lives in a strip of cloth four fingers wide used as a loin - cloth and the women are draped in cotton saris, bead necklaces and bangles, and they oil their hair at times especially on festive occasions.

The social life of the people is the usual routine agricultural life. Most of the men work in the fields and the women take care of the household chores. On market days the women go and sell their produce like chillies etc. There is nothing like inhibition or pretence in these tribesmen and women. They all lead simple lives. Their dreams and ambitions are to lead a happy life with two square meals a day, a small piece of land to cultivate and a small thatched hut over their heads. They do not aspire for too much. Their lives are full of songs, dances and festivity. Even while they work, they sing songs in a chorus. Every evening the men play on their *dungudungas* and the women dance. Their songs are of all kinds. Religious festivals such as the Harvest festival or the Spring festival are celebrated as community festivals and each one participates reverently in it. For, it is not in the blood of these tribal people to annoy their Gods by being disrespectful in any way.

A sense of helping, sharing and caring as well as reciprocation is a reflection of the expression of their human emotions. The concern they have for each other is only restricted by the fact that each one wants his/her share of material wealth and that is the only limitation. It is Jili's neighbour Diptimoni who comes to borrow embers from the former's fire and who apprises Jili about the information divulged by Mathia the Christian preacher, that many people are migrating to Assam as a new road is being built there and that the contractor's agent is looking for labourers to hire and that the labourers will be paid advance wages. The men are to be paid three annas and women two annas. This information is like a life saving drug for the two sisters because by then their share of misery has grown considerably, as the food has all gone and their clothes have turned to rags. The only deciding factor as to whether they should join or not join the contractor's bandwagon of labourers is their own mind and behind it, now is their poverty.

Thus, we see how the economic plight of the tribals intervenes into their social set-up as well. A Paraja 'never sells his labour for wages', but here, the forced economic hardships compel him/her to sell his/her labour for wages, for loans etc. This erodes the ideas of brother-hood and camaraderie and there is decay and degeneration in tribal attitudes and values. One of the main reasons behind this phenomenon is tribal migration due to various socio-economic factors such as misfortunes and non-tribal intervention into tribal territories. The Forest Guard and the *Sahukar* are examples of the latter and Jili and Billi's shift to the highway an illustration of the former. Tribal manpower is treated as mechanical with no mind or heart, either to think or to feel. Contrarily, the tribals are deeply rooted to the socio-cultural and geographical background and it is painful and humiliating for them to be uprooted. For them their land is their life - the only means to live.

Socio-cultural, economic and political problems of tribal territories cannot be understood in isolation. These problems are interrelated and the environment also makes another undeniable contribution to this dilemma. Nature in the life of the tribals assures its true significance in worship, rituals, customs and day-to-day lives. The novel is about jungles, forests, mountains, land and crops; flora - mahua, sowing and reaping, hunting and distilling country liquor; marriage and rituals all enveloped by pastoral, idyllic, picturesque surroundings. There is not just a physical presence of the above but a spiritual bonding to it and an emotional support to the inhabitants residing in these panoramic surroundings. Thus, local geography merges with the emotional geography of the people and this helps in building the social structure of any place, any tribe, and any community. Let us look at the tribals as the subaltern in the next section.

2.4 THE SUBALTERN VOICE

The term *Subaltern* means 'of inferior rank', a term adopted from **Antonio Gramsci** to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Hegemonic notions help the ruling forces to dominate the suppressed classes by couching and cushioning their imperial power in words like social order, stability and advancement. Some of the hegemonic central methods are social discrimination, racial prejudice, gender bias, cultural differences and a split in humanistic values. Subaltern groups are fragmented and marginalised because they have either little or no access to the means of control both in social and cultural institutions. Their dissent or resistance is crushed and their voice remains unheard. The subaltern is a standard term designating a subject that has been constructed, colonised and internalised by the authoritative forces. The marginalised person does try to resist and rebel, but to what extent, is questionable and debatable.

In the novel *Paraja* we witness the Paraja or the tribals as the subalterns who are manipulated by the ruling feudal forces operating in that area. They are the marginalised people who are unable to raise their fist or voice and even if they try, their fate is as of Sukru Jani. They are doomed forever. Their resistance is meaningless. They are devoid of the basic facilities required by human beings. Sukru Jani an illiterate is roped into the nexus of moneylenders and officials for no fault of his. He asks for permission from the Forest Guard to clear a patch of land in the forest for agricultural purposes, which is duly given, but verbally. Let us not forget that in tribal cultures the oral word carries more weight. Oral tradition and orature is part and parcel of their lives. Later when Sukru Jani's daughter Jili refuses the advances of the Forest Guard, he (Sukru Jani) is harassed and persecuted by the nexus of officials including the people of the village. He and one of his sons become bonded labourers; his other son is caught brewing liquor illegally and to pay off his fine he too has to surrender his services to the money-lender. The suffering does not end here. Jili is sexually exploited by the money-lender. Whenever Sukru Jani raises his voice in protest either for land or money, it is suppressed and with the passage of time he neither has land, nor money nor a family, Sukru Jani is, a representative of many such people who are faced with similar problems and those who, at times suffer more than him. When Sukru Jani knocks on the doors of the court, here too, because of his being uneducated and unaware of the law, is at the losing end. Money changes hands and once again he is defeated and feels horribly cheated. The constant oppression and enslavement enforced by the rich and the socially higher ups results in the apparent

action of his sons when they hack the money – lender to pieces. And at a sub-conscious level they make people hear their voices. **Lenin** had said that ‘the proletariat has nothing to lose and nothing to gain’. Sukru Jani is a figure in the novel who, does not have anything to lose in life and is aware that there is nothing much that he can achieve or gain either. So, he becomes a rebel. The voice of the subaltern is in rebellion. The speech of the marginalised is in his/her actions. The fighting spirit of these peripheral people of society is their stand against oppression.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Define the term Subaltern.

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- 2) Can the tribals be categorised as the Subaltern? Support your answers.

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- 3) How does Sukru Jani, our protagonist, represent the marginalised?

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- 4) What do you understand by ‘Voice of the Subaltern’?

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- 5) Write an elaborate account of the socio-cultural conditions existing in Sarsupadar, Koraput (Odisha).

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- 6) Examine the economic structure, as discussed by Mohanty, in any feudal system.

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- 7) List out the tribal issues that need to be taken care of even today.

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- 8) The Subaltern voice is in rebellion /revolution /reform? Elucidate your point of view.

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- 9) 'The novel Paraja is about human existence.' Explain.

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2.5 LET US SUM UP

The novel when categorised in the cultural context impels the reader to classify it as a novel about class struggle. It paints a clear picture of the economic organisation in a tribal society where the tribal man is on the lowest rung because he is uneducated, poor and powerless, and therefore, not only suffers but also is the most exploited person. Actually, he is a step higher than the tribal woman who is exploited more than even the tribal man. The interests of the dominant, rich and powerful groups are safeguarded and the marginalised suffer perpetually. Culture is a partial reflection of the economic paraphernalia because hegemony penetrates so deeply that the subordinate classes unquestioningly accept their own oppression.

The novel under study is the story of a marginalised, tribal man Sukru Jani who has lost everything - land, family, money – to the rich, powerful class and is left with a sad tale of suffering.

In this unit, an attempt has been made to define culture and along with that one needs to understand the economic pyramidal structure that exist in society. The social and political structures are interlinked to the economic organisation, and all are interactive except the peripheral being -the tribal. S/he remains at the receiving end. The novel also hints at the fact that the tyrants cannot suppress and exploit people for long and ultimately the only answer to this is rebellion and sometimes rebellion can take a gruesome turn as in the case of Sukru Jani. If his/her pleas cannot be heard then, the pleas would translate into action that would be seen by all and which would appear frightening and often very violent. Sukru Jani and his family suffer for a long time but, in the end the act of killing becomes an external manifestation of their anger, hatred, agony and the plea is now a stronger voice that says: ‘Stop Exploiting!’ ‘Stop Harassing!’ The novel is not only a tale of human emotions, struggles and suffering but is also an account of a tribal family’s helplessness. A multifaceted observation of socio-cultural network reveals that tribal identity is closely related to ignorance, innocence and isolation. Poverty, deprivation and exploitation by non-tribals have sapped tribal strength and solidarity.

2.6 GLOSSARY

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| Culture | : | The arts, customs and institutions of a nation, people or group |
| Feudalism | : | The dominant social system in which the nobility held lands for military services and the lower orders of society worked for the nobles. |
| Gramsci Antonio (1891-1937) | : | Italian Marxist thinker and one of the representatives of Western Marxism. His major contribution to theory is the ground-breaking work he has done on hegemony. |
| Hierarchy | : | A system in which people are ranked one above the other according to status or authority. |

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| Hegemony | : | Is the power of the ruling class to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all. Domination is exercised not by force but in a more subtle way. |
| Proletariat | : | Workers or Working-class people. |
| Lenin | : | (1870-1924) the chief figure in the Russian Revolution who introduced policies based on Marxist principle. |
| Marginal | : | On the periphery, with respect to and access to power. |

2.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOYR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read section 2.2.
They are poor, illiterate, exploited, and caught in the vicious circle of poverty.
- 2) They live close to nature – draw sustenance from the local flora and fauna.
- 3) Raja, Ribbi, Saltu, Jaman, Sahukar, tribals and the *gotis*. Power nexus between the rich and the powerful, while the poor are exploited.
- 4) Social structures are meant to empower people with education, better health facilities, job opportunities, but these rarely happen.
- 5) Yes, tribals as shown in *Paraja*, appear to be simple people with very few desires and hopes, and are hence, quite contented but, with the infusion of non-tribals such as the antagonists in the novel, they to have needs that can be fulfilled only with the aid of the former and that is their undoing.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The term subaltern means ‘of inferior rank’. (Read section 2.4)
- 2) Yes. They have often been suppressed and dominated by the non-tribals through the ages.
- 3) Read paragraph 2, section 2.4
- 4) The subaltern were/are marginalised people, implying that they are voiceless/ that they are unheard. The ‘voice of the subaltern’ refers to the resistance by these hitherto marginalised people.
- 5) Read section 2.4 carefully and then answer.
- 6) Read section 2.4 carefully and then answer.
- 7) Read section 2.4 carefully and then answer.
- 8) Read section 2.4 carefully and then answer.