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## **THE POETRY OF THE INDIAN TRIBALS**

### **Introduction**

The primitive poem or song is part of a complex of communal activity which includes singing, dancing, religious activity and celebration on social occasion. The songs, the dances and the relevant festivities are intimately and integrally related. For celebrating each important religious festival or socio religious ceremony the tribals have got an appropriate set of songs and dances. It is necessary to view these poem-songs as part of such a communal activity which is not true of modern poetry. In other words tribal poems are nothing but the 'un-written record' of tribal life. They are also highly musical. Most of the songs circulate by the process of oral transmission and their roots lie buried deep in the group life of the tribes. Most of the songs have come down from generations and the performers learn them from their elders. Thus the continuity of the old generation is well maintained.

### **Dance, Integral Part of Primitive Poems**

The poems or songs often accompany dances. The recitation of the words and the movement of the body are the two coordinates of the graph of socio religious and ritual action which they define and describe. According to Curtsachs, the noted authority on primitive dance, for primitive man dance was a means of control over the surroundings. This endeavour to gain control over nature expressed itself through a psychological process of sympathetic transcreation. And the transcreation was a combination of bodily gestures, verbal symbolism and prescribed ritual action. For example the Sarhul festival of the Mundas is partly a vegetation ceremony and also partly a fecundity ceremony. The ceremonial bath, the gathering of rice in baskets and the offering of rice-beer to the village ancestors, and using some of these rice for sowing is associated with fertility. It is thus an invocation for good and abundant crops and at the same time an invocation for more members in the tribe.

The Bison horn Madias of Bastar envisage dance as a bridge that joints both the earthly and heavenly bodies together. In that world *Rakshasas*, evil spirits and the benevolent gods and goddesses live together in harmony. So they consider dance as the music of the soul. Thus in and through that music man attains the supernatural powers which are otherwise beyond his reach.

### **Anonymity, A Blessing in Disguise**

The anonymity of the song makers is a notable phenomenon in primitive society. According to Robert Graves anonymity in the primitive structure of the society implies that the author is ashamed of his authorship or afraid of the consequences if he reveals himself; but in the primitive society it is due to just the carelessness about the author's name. This kind of carelessness is inherent in the primitive mind for what is important for him is the song and not the song maker. On the other hand the lack of personal aspiration and ambition for name and fame makes their songs so much more genuine and authentic. The songs remain; the emotions they convey remain for the creator's sons and daughters and their offspring after them.

### **Illustrious Authors**

The world of oral poetry of the Indian primitive tribes is an almost unexplored but vanishing world. Archer, Elwin and perhaps another handful of authors have gathered and presented some of the vast body of poetry. But theirs is only an initial attempt. Hundreds and thousands of songs remain undocumented; they run the risk of dying out or distortion beyond recognition.

I may point out here the names of some of the illustrious authors who have contributed generously to bring to light the precious collection of primitive poetry. As regards Indian tribal poetry Verrier Elwin's *Folk songs of Chattisgarh*, '*Folk songs of Maikal Hills*', *Songs of the forest*, and W. G. Archer's '*the Blue Grove*', '*The Dove and the Leopard*' and *Hill of Flutes*, have made significant contributions towards the understanding and appreciation of these folk songs and poems. The names of Hem Barua and Gopinath Mehanty are also worth mentioning in this regard.

### **'Primitive Poem', A Network of Various Elements**

As it was already referred to in all primitive songs words are only part of a complex grouping of communal activities, namely religious or

social activities and dances. The accompaniment of dance with regular patterns of body movements or mimetic gestures with supporting actions like clapping or stamping of feet influence the patterns of the words. To this extent the songs which are the word-patterns lose something in standing alone, without the music and the movement. Here the words of C.M. Bowra is worth mentioning: "The pleasure is not so complete as it might be if we enjoyed the whole proper performance but in isolation the words give the intellectual content of the composite unity. They take us into the consciousness of primitive man at its most excited or exalted or concentrated moments, and they throw a light, which almost nothing else does, on the movements of his mind.

There is a beautiful proverb among Bhil tribesmen: "*Bhookla tho bhookla, sookhla khari*" – Poor ofcourse we are, but are we not contented and satisfied-?. This is really a challenge to the so called sophisticated society of our modern world. In the tribal world tragedies abound, but there is no disgust for life, no turning back on it. There is no fashionable pessimism. Commenting on the Munda songs 'The Wooden Sword' professor Edmund Leach writes; "They do not seek consolation for the inevitability of decay by looking forward to a blissful rebirth in an imaginary "other world". Renewal is here and now in this world in quickly fading blossom of the jungles and the adolescence of our own children. Thus life for the primitive tribes may be cruel and hard. Occasions of festival and joy only briefly punctuate a life otherwise burdened with poverty, undernourishment and exploitation. But still life is looked upon as an opportunity, and all activity as a thanksgiving for all the beauty and sacredness of nature, the hills and the valley, the rivers and the rivulets. Many tribal songs have, no doubt, no purpose other than enjoyment, but the largest number are concerned with the quest of beauty and holiness, of dreams and fantasies which transforms the sordid ordinaries of daily existence into something rich and strange. Thus the poetry of our Indian tribes agrees with their life style and world vision.

### **Types of Primitive Poems**

1. Songs connected with ceremonies or 'rites of passage'
2. Songs related to the activities of social life: hunting, fishing etc.
3. Religious songs sung on festivals or in religious gatherings.
4. Songs sung in connection with the agricultural cycles: sowing weeding, reaping and so on.

5. Songs sung by nomads and beggars.
6. Songs at fairs and feasts related to gods and goddesses.
7. Songs of different tribes according to their peculiar social and environmental backgrounds.
8. Folk songs based on stories connected with folklores.
9. Moral songs containing advices for a virtuous life.
10. Songs related to magical rites.

### **Symbolism, the Core of Primitive Poems**

The most fascinating aspect of tribal poems is symbolism. As Owen Barfield puts it, Poetic diction is nothing but the primitive, undifferentiated state of language, when objects are identical with and non-distinct from, the bundle of associations they give rise to. But the world we live in is not the symbolic world of the primitive. It has lost the sense of wonder and awe which the tribals do cherish. For the ordinary tribesman however social communication is itself part of the vast symbolic milieu in which he swims as a fish. In a way his whole linguistic structure is a big symbol in itself.

Here is an example from a Munda poem: 1

The Mahul tree  
Full of branches and leaves  
How it made the paddy field look lovely!  
They are cutting away the Mahul tree.  
You five brothers, save it, save it.

In this poem the subject matter is not at all the Mahul tree; it is the girl who has been given away in marriage. The village will look desolate when she is gone. And "they" are the members of the bridegroom's party. All this is never stated but always understood. The protest the "brothers" have to make is only a mock protest. This refers to the brothers role as the sisters defender in that society.

Here is still another Mundari Poem:

How nicely they bend down  
The Ludams of Diuri  
How nicely they wave in the breeze  
The Champaks of Surmali.

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1. *Sitakant*, Mahapatra: *The Awakend Wind*, Lucknow: Vikas publishing private Ltd., U.P. p. 17.

When moving in a line or running in a curve  
What necklace do they weave.<sup>2</sup>

Again in this poem the composer compares the girls of Diuri and Surmali villages to the sweet smelling flowers, the Ludam and Champak flowers.

In the use of symbols they often use two techniques:

In the first, the comparison is put side by side with the statement of the song. The following Oraon poem is a typical example:

When the paddy stalks are full of sap  
The grains mature are ripen,  
The pigeons come crowding.  
I have a grown up daughter  
And friend and relatives  
Even from distant villages  
Come crowding to my house.<sup>3</sup>

In the second technique the entire statement is through symbol, without any clue at all. It is at the end of the poem that one or two lines occur that suggest what the symbol stands for.

The glistening Mallika flowers  
Blossoming in your garden invite the mad dark bees;  
When the flowers fade  
And the aroma is no more  
The bees will vanish;  
If they are caught send them  
to the Keonjhar catchery.<sup>4</sup>

Here in this Mundari poem "the mad dark bees" are none other than the love lorn young men.

From all that we have seen one thing is very clear, since tribal society is much more of a symbolic milieu than ours is, there is no gap between poetic symbolism and social communication.

Verrier Elwin has rightly observed:

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2. *Op. cit.*, p. 18.

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

4. *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

A symbol is the readiest cure for embarrassment, and can smooth over a business transaction or a hitch in one's love making with equal facility. So when emissaries go on the delicate business of arranging a girl's betrothal they do not state their purpose directly, but say they have come for merchandise, or to quench their thirst or seek a gourd in which to put their seed.

For example here is a Parja love song. The parja mind sees in it love and death as intimate neighbours:

You are eternal as death  
The fear of death and your love  
As intimate neighbours  
They inhabit my dream  
And so I play with life.<sup>5</sup>

Life for the tribals is not all dance and song. They do punctuate their life, but tears lurk not very far behind those joyful faces:

The pumpkin plant's tragedy is from the day  
Two leaves shoot from the seed;  
Men pluck them out.  
Man's tragedy is alike  
From childhood  
Useless iron is thrown into corners  
The poor man enters the forest  
Crowbar on the shoulders  
Basket on the head  
And life, only a tragic song.<sup>6</sup>

But tragedy often is endured with a smile. It is even scoffed at. The primitive man can laugh at practically everything including himself.

The co-fathers in law came  
Like a pair of bullocks  
They have drunk at the hat (market)  
And came back together  
Like a pair of bullocks.<sup>7</sup>

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5. *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

6. *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

7. *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

The two drunken old men, depicted in these lines are of course hilarious.

### Poetic Symbolism Expressed in some of the Major Tribe's Poems

#### 1. *The Murias*

The nostalgia for singing and dancing is inborn in every tribesman. It is all the more true about the Murias of Bastar, a sub tribe of the Gond family. Most of their songs are centred around Ghotul, the bachelor's dormitory. The farewell song of a 'motiar; (girl) is replete with devotion, tenderness, and sincere love towards her parents and ghotul friends.

The following song is sung in a dialogue between the girl Motiari- and her boy friends-the Chelik-

#### *Motiari*

Father, my own father, come to me  
 For I am going away to a stranger's house  
 Mother, my own mother, come to me  
 Now I am going away to a stranger's house, and who will  
 care for you?

How lovingly you looked after me!  
 But in this new house shall I find Joy or Sorrow?  
 O Dulosa, Tilosa, Alosa, Jhankai! (girl friends)  
 I used to bid you sweep and clean, go here and there  
 Comb this boy's hair, rub that boy's limb  
 With you I played all kinds of games  
 Now who will go to dance or play with you?

#### *Chelik*

Only yesterday you came to our ghotul  
 to press our hands and arms

But now who will comfort us?  
 Now you will never do that again

\* \* \* \* \*

But live happily there as you lived with us  
 Love your husband and comfort him  
 as you loved and comforted us

We will never forget you  
Without you our ghotul is empty and deserted.<sup>8</sup>

Their strong faith in the almighty, the Mahapurab, as the creator and the protector of the universe, and their firm conviction of the transitory nature of human beings is well brought out in the following funeral song:

An earth of sixteen feet  
A sky of nine bits  
This is the abode of man  
Here every body is mortal.

Everything is here on earth  
Man, animals, insects and ants  
God himself has created all  
Look with your eyes open  
Yes, God himself has created all.

The foot is for walking around  
And the hands for doing work;  
The tongue makes you sing His praise  
God himself has created all;  
Yes, God himself has created all.<sup>9</sup>

In another piece of poem Mr. Niranjana Mahavar (from the collection of Muria poems) tells us about the reality of death, a path every man has to tread. Yes man has to enter that world, that unknown world, but alone, where nobody can follow him.

Are not we equal, small and great  
There is no barrier, high and low.  
Don't you know it's the same blood  
Running along our human veins  
Neither it is more water cold  
Nor is it milk, yes, blood and blood.  
No man can follow the people, dead  
Neither our wealth nor kith and kin.<sup>10</sup>

8. Elwin, Verrier; *The Kingdom of the Young*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, London, p. 191, 192.

9. Harilal Shukla, *Adivasee Sangeet*, p. 109, the funeral songs of the Murias-Pen Pata-1.

10. *Madhya Pradesh Adivasee Parishad*, "Sooraj" - p. 6, A Bhadri Song; A collection of the patriotic and other related songs of the tribals.



## 2. *Bhils*

The Bhils are an ancient and virile tribe. All their symbols are taken from nature itself. Their songs express both the joys and sorrows of every day life. But in general they try to keep up their hidden optimism in and through their songs and dance.

The birth of a child for any Bhil is an occasion of immense happiness and joy.

In this 'birth song' the Bhil mother bursts out in joy singing "I have given birth to a son":

Dear sweet sparrow, deliver this message for me:  
 Tell my father that I have given birth to a son;  
 Tell my mother that I have given birth to a son;  
 Ask my father to give me a new Saree;  
 Ask my mother for a Blouse of many colours.  
 Tell my brother that I have a son;  
 Ask him to give me a Saree too  
 Tell my uncle that I have given birth to a son  
 Ask him to bring me a blouse of many colours.<sup>11</sup>

## 3. *Khonds (Gonds)*

The Khonds are a colourful and vigorous tribe. Their general motto is "to eat by sharing". This actually sums up the whole philosophy of the Khond and his approach to life. The entire village behaves as an integral unit. In joy and sorrow, in festivities and calamities, in privation and pleasure and in the celebration of the rituals the village acts as one. This togetherness is the very secret of the success of the Khond tribe.

The following is a marriage song of the Khonds. The Pio and Gang birds are the symbolic expressions of the bride and bridegroom. The householder is inviting everybody for the solemn marriage feast.

Never heard before,  
 Never known before.  
 It was where the roads meet,  
 And there they were-  
 The Pio and Gang birds-

11. *Mahipal, Bhuria: Folk Songs of the Bhils, p. 77.*

And why do they call me  
And make me pine?  
Come, brothers, come; uncle, I call,  
We will go to the village, that house  
And they will come,  
Laughing and happy,  
Those lusty young men.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. *Santals*

The Santals' songs generally allude to birds and flowers; and unlike the lyrics of their neighbours they are remarkably free from obscenity. As a whole rhyme is not important in their songs; often it is the tune, the melody that determines not merely the structure, but even the length of the song.

A good number of their songs are invocational. The blessings of the spirits are invoked by the community for personal and communal welfare: for the rich harvest, peace and plenty and for cows and goats which will yield milk in abundance.

An invocational song in honour of the gods of cattle—"Sohrae Got Bonga:"

Salutation to Jaher Era

On the occasion of the Got festival we offer you young fowls  
and freshly husked rice.

Kindly accept them with pleasure.

To you our prayer is :

Let our animals graze around in peace

And let them return safe to our homes.

Let no evil befall

Let no disease and pestilence enter the herds of our cattle or  
the cattle sheds.

When we go about in the darkness of the night or go to see

The plays and thamashas, let no evil befall us.

Let not snakes bite us.

Let new strength and vitality rise

In our minds and body at all times.<sup>13</sup>

12. *Op. cit.*, p. 78. - Sitakant Mahapatra

13. *Op. cit.*, p. 152.

### 5. *The Oraons*

The Oraon songs are very excellent in their symbolic expressions. Their symbols are generally drawn from the events or objects of daily life.

In certain Oraon songs the symbolism consists in putting the comparison side by side with the statement of the songs.

Here are a few examples :

- i. In the courtyard the bitter gourd creepers  
Spread on the roof.  
Bitter are also the Neem leaves  
More bitter still the co-wife in the house<sup>14</sup>
- ii. When the hills are on fire  
Everybody sees  
When the heart burns away  
None sees, not even father and mother.<sup>15</sup>

### 6. *The Koyas*

The Koyas have an almost super human capacity for improvising songs. The lines are harmoniously blended with metaphors and elegant words that produce an exquisite melody that appeals to the ear of a casual listener. The songs have got also a strange visual flavour.

The following is a song sung during their ceremonial hunt, invoking the spirit of the hills:

O spirit of the hills  
Bring out herd of deer before them  
Bring the herds of deer.  
O spirit of hills  
Bring out herds of wild pigs  
Bring out herds of Sambar  
Bring out herds of wild buffaloes  
Herd of rabbits  
Herd of wild goats.<sup>16</sup>

Spontaneity is a unique characteristics of our Indian tribes. It is actually the capacity to compose, adapt and adjust new phrases and lyrics to the already existing songs and tunes.

14. *Op. cit.*, p. 236.

15. *Op. cit.*, p. 237.

16. *Op. cit.*, p. 266.

Here is an example: When Elwin Verrier went first to the wanchoo area of the NEFA division he was received by the tribals of Pomau by singing this beautiful song which suits exactly to the occasion:

The Sahib who lives in Shillong  
Has flown like a Maina bird to these hills  
And has perched on a tree in our village.  
Our minds are full of happiness.  
As the fish swim up the little streams from a great river,  
The Sahib has come from the plains to our hills,  
And our minds are full of happiness.<sup>17</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion let me say that the song poems of Indian tribals are nothing but simple and ordinary facts of life put in a symbolic frame, in a tune and tempo that simply attract the mind of a real lover of music and dance. The language of the rural songs is simple and plain. It is the very language of the people put in poetic frame. The emotional content of these songs is far greater than that of any other branch of poetry. They are an unblemished and pure reflection of the joys and aspirations of men. As Narsi Rustomji, an admirer of the tribals, expresses it, much of the beauty of living still survives in these remote and distant hills, where dance and songs are a vital part of everyday living, where people think and feel freely without fear of restraint. The hill man has essentially a clean, direct and healthy outlook; he is free, happy from the morbid complexes induced by the unnatural life of the city folk. It is this outlook that makes him pour out his heart in singing and dancing.

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17. *Elwin, Verrier, The Tribal World of Elwin Verrier, p. 279.*