4 Tribal Verse

G.N. Devy

☛ *Look for these expressions in the text and guess the meaning from the context*

marginalisation of communities	accelerated pace
canonized written texts	rich repository of folk songs
tribal vision of life	cohesive and organically unified
itinerant street singers	

Introduction

The roots of India's literary traditions can be traced to the rich oral literatures of the tribes/adivasis. Usually in the form of songs or chanting, these verses are expressions of the close contact between the world of nature and the world of tribal existence. They have been orally transmitted from generation to generation and have survived for several ages. However, a large number of these are already lost due to the very fact of their orality. The forces of urbanisation, print culture and commerce have resulted in not just the marginalisation of these communities but also of their languages and literary cultures. Though some attempts have been made for the collection and conservation of tribal languages and their literatures, without more concerted efforts at an acelerated pace, we are in danger of losing an invaluable part of our history and rich literary heritage.

This section is a small attempt to familiarise students with some aspects of the enormous wealth of oral tribal literature. It begins with an extract from an essay by G.N. Devy in which he discusses the need to create a space for the study of tribal literature within the framework of canonized written texts. What he argues for is the need for a

new method to identify and read literature in which orality is not dismissed as casual utterances in different dialects.

This is followed by two songs—one sung on the occasion of childbirth by the Munda tribals and the other on the occasion of death by the Kondh tribals. The third verse is a chanting in the ritualistic religious language of the Adi tribe, not the same as their language of conversation. Even though this is merely a small representation of a treasure of tribal/adivasi songs, it indicates the immense diversity that exists amongst tribal groups. Inevitably influenced by their very specific historical, cultural and geographical locations, tribal societies continue to retain and reproduce their distinctive traditions which usually find expression through their different languages. However, it is equally true that though possessing their very specific languages, most tribal societies such as Munda, Kondh, Adi and Bondo are bilingual. Moreover, while tribal groups like the Santhal become important subjects in dominant literary streams such as Bangla literature, there is a fairly well developed Santhali literature too. Besides this, tribes like Santhal and Munda have also played a prominent role in the socio-political movements of their regions. [Birsa Munda (1874–1901) spent his whole life fighting against colonialism and the exploitation of labourers]. The Santhals have emerged as a prominent group at the regional and state levels through their participation in the Jharkhand Movement.

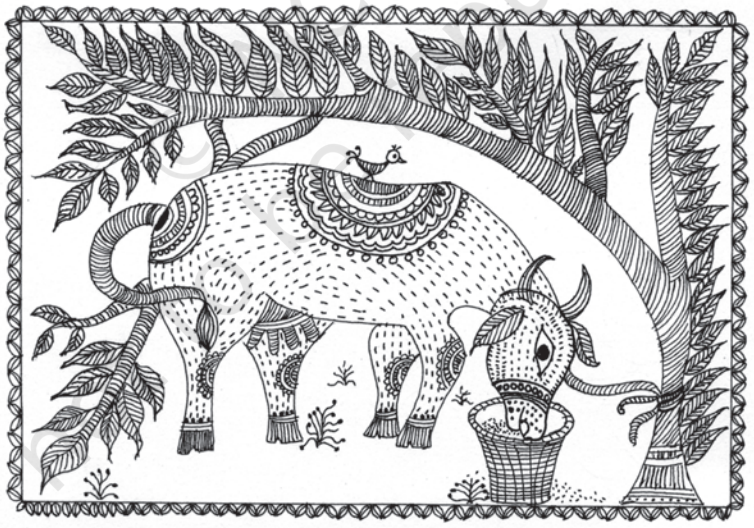
The three selected songs give us a small glimpse into the rich repository of folk songs that is an expression of the tribal vision of life. Their close connection with nature is evident from their belief in the interdependence between human beings and nature. Nature for them is living and responsive to human existence and human actions, demanding respect essential for any kind of coexistence.

The songs exist originally in the native languages of the tribals and are sung or chanted. The effort to bring them to students in English naturally involves some loss of the original flavour and spirit but that is a problem of all translation and constant attempts need to be made to minimise this loss. But for some conscious effort being

made to first preserve these songs, these pieces of literature would have been lost to us completely. However limitedly, it is only through translation that we are able to even access these works.

'Introduction' to Painted Words

...Most tribal communities in India are culturally similar to tribal communities elsewhere in the world. They live in groups that are cohesive and organically unified. They show very little interest in accumulating wealth or in using labour as a device to gather interest and capital. They accept a world-view in which nature, human beings and God are intimately linked and they believe in the human ability to spell and interpret truth. They live more by intution than reason, they consider the space around them more sacred than secular, and their sense of time is personal rather than objective. The world of the tribal imagination, therefore, is radically different from that of modern Indian society.



Once a society accepts a secular mode of creativity within which the creator replaces God, imaginative transactions assume a self-conscious form. The tribal imagination, on the other hand, is still, to a large extent,

dreamlike and hallucinatory. It admits fusion between various planes of existence and levels of time in a natural way. In tribal stories, oceans fly in the sky as birds, mountains swim in the water as fish, animals speak as humans and stars grow like plants. Spatial order and temporal sequence do not restrict the narrative. This is not to say that tribal creations have no conventions or rules but simply that they admit the principle of association between emotion and the narrative motif. Thus stars, seas, mountains, trees, men and animals, can be angry, sad or happy.

It might be said that tribal artists work more on the basis of their racial and sensory memory than on the basis of a cultivated imagination. In order to understand this distinction, we must understand the difference between imagination and memory. In the animate world, consciousness meets two immediate material realities: space and time. We put meaning into space by perceiving it in terms of images. The image making faculty is a genetic gift to the human mind—this power of imagination helps us understand the space that envelops us. In the case of time, we make connections with the help of memory; one remembers being the same person as one was yesterday.

The tribal mind has a more acute sense of time than sense of space. Somewhere along the history of human civilization, tribal communities seem to have realised that domination over territorial space was not their lot. Thus, they seem to have turned almost obsessively to gaining domination over time. This urge is substantiated in their ritual of conversing with their dead ancestors: year after year, tribals in many parts of India worship terracotta, or carved-wood objects, representing their ancestors, aspiring to enter a trance in which they can converse with the dead. Over the centuries, an amazingly sharp memory has helped tribals classify material and natural objects into a highly complex system of knowledge. The importance of memory in tribal systems of knowledge has not yet been sufficiently recognised but the aesthetic proportions of the houses that tribals build, the objects they make and the rituals they perform fascinate the curious onlooker. It can be hard to understand how, without any institutional training or

tutoring, tribals are able to dance, sing, craft, build and speak so well ...

A vast number of Indian languages have yet remained only spoken, with the result that literary compositions in these languages are not considered 'literature'. They are a feast for the folklorist, anthropologist and linguist but, to a literary critic, they generally mean nothing. Similarly, several nomadic Indian communities are broken up and spread over long distances but survive as communities because they are bound by their oral epics. The wealth and variety of these works is so enormous that one discovers their neglect with a sense of pure shame. Some of the songs and stories I heard from itinerant street singers in my childhood are no longer available anywhere. For some years now I have been collecting songs and stories that circulate in India's tribal languages, and I am continually overwhelmed by their number and their profound influence on the tribal communities.

The result is that I, for one, can no longer think of literature as something written. Of course I do not dispute the claim of written compositions and texts to the status of literature; but surely it is time we realise that unless we modify the established notion of literature as something written, we will silently witness the decline of various Indian oral traditions. That literature is a lot more than writing is a reminder necessary for our times.

One of the main characteristics of tribal arts is their distinct manner of constructing space and imagery, which might be described as 'hallucinatory'. In both oral and visual forms of representation, tribal artists seem to interpret verbal or pictorial space as demarcated by an extremely flexible 'frame'. The boundaries between art and non-art become almost invisible. A tribal epic can begin its narration from a trivial everyday event; tribal paintings merge with living space as if the two were one and the same. And within the narrative itself, or within the painted imagery, there is no deliberate attempt to follow a sequence. The episodes retold and the images created take on the apparently chaotic shapes of dreams. In a tribal *Ramayan*, an episode from the *Mahabharat* makes a sudden and

surprising appearance; tribal paintings contain a curious mixture of traditional and modern imagery. In a way, the syntax of language and the grammar of painting are the same, as if literature were painted words and painting were a song of images.

Yet it is not safe to assume that the tribal arts do not employ any ordering principles. On the contrary, the ordering principles are very strict. The most important among these is convention. Though the casual spectator may not notice, every tribal performance and creation has, at its back, another such performance or creation belonging to a previous occasion. The creativity of the tribal artist lies in adhering to the past while, at the same time, slightly subverting it. The subversions are more playful than ironic.

Indeed, playfulness is the soul of tribal arts. Though oral and pictorial tribal art creations are intimately related to rituals—the sacred can never be left out—the tribal arts rarely assume a serious or pretentious tone. The artist rarely plays the role of the Creator. Listening to tribal epics can be great fun as even the heroes are not spared the occasional shock of the artist's humour. One reason for this unique mixture of the sacred and the ordinary may be that tribal works of art are not created specifically for sale. Artists do expect a certain amount of patronage from the community, like artists in any other context; but, since those performing rituals are very often artists themselves, there is no element of competition in the patron-artist relationship. The tribal arts are, therefore, relaxed, never tense... One question invariably asked about the tribal arts is whether they are static—frozen in tradition— or dynamic. A general misconception is that the orally transmitted arts are entirely tradition-bound, with little scope for individual experimentation beyond the small freedom to distort the previously created text. This misconception arises from the habit of seeing art only with reference to the text but the tribal arts involve not just text but performance and audience reception. Experimentation in the tribal arts can be understood only when they are approached as performing arts.

Non-tribals usually fail to notice that all of India's tribal communities are basically bilingual. All bilingual

communities have an innate capacity to assimilate outside influences and, in this case, a highly evolved mechanism for responding to the non-tribal world. The tribal oral stories and songs employ bilingualism in such a complex manner that a linguist who is not alert to this complexity is in danger of dismissing the tribal languages altogether as dialects of India's major tongues...

The language into which the works have been translated, English, carries massive colonial baggage. When the works of contemporary Indian writers—who inherit a multilingual tradition several thousand years old—were classified as 'new literature', Western academics had no idea how comical this classification looked to the literary community in India. Hence it is neccessary to assert that the literature of the adivasis is not a new 'movement' or a fresh 'trend' in the field of literature; most people have simply been unaware of its existence and that is not the fault of the tribals themselves. What might be new is the present attempt to see imaginative expression in tribal language not as 'folklore' but as literature and to hear tribal speech not as a dialect but as a language. This attitude may be somewhat unconventional but only until we recall that scripts themselves are relatively new, and that the printing of literary text goes no further back than a few centuries—in comparison with creative experiments with the human ability to produce speech in such a way that it

transcends time. In fact, every written piece of literature contains substantial layers of orality. This is particularly true for poetry and drama but, even in prose fiction, the elements of orality need to be significant if the work is to be effective.

1. A Munda Song: Song of Birth and Death

My mother, the sun rose
A son was born.
My mother, the moon rose
A daughter was born.
A son was born
The cowshed was depleted;
A daughter was born
The cowshed filled up.
(Translated from the original Mundari)

Note on the Munda Tribe

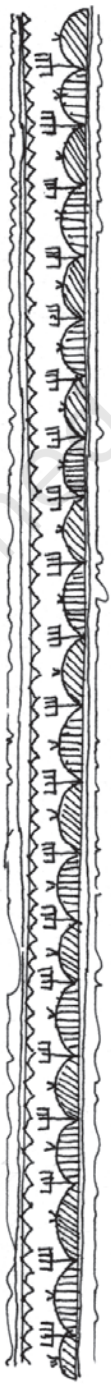
The Munda tribals live in parts of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. They are also known as *Horohon* or *Mura*, meaning headman of a village. One of the most studied tribal communities of India, they also have an encyclopaedia on them, *Encyclopaedia Mundarica* (16 Volumes) by Reverend John Baptist Hoffman (1857–1928) and other Jesuit scholars.

The Munda are probably the first of the adivasis to resist colonialism and they revolted repeatedly over agrarian issues. The Tamar insurrection of 1819–20 protested against the break-up of their agrarian system. In their quest to establish Munda Raj and reform their society to enable it to cope with the challenges of time, they organised the famous millennial movement under Birsa Munda (1874–1901) where their leaders used 'both Hindu and Christian idioms to create a Munda ideology and worldview'. However, the uprising was quelled by the British.

Note on the Munda Song

Many ceremonies and rituals of the Munda are associated with birth, death and marriage. Living in close

harmony with nature, their lives are synchronised with the changing rhythms of nature, the seasons, the rising and setting of the sun and so on, and not by clock time. The selected Munda song is sung to rhythmic folk tunes at the birth of a son or daughter and invariably communicates their close association with nature. Cattle set off to the pastures in the morning and return to their sheds at sundown. The birth of a daughter is associated with a cowshed full of cows and that of the son with its depletion. Clearly the daughter is considered to be a more precious asset than the son. This is probably because, in Munda society, the women have a dominant role to play in the various economic, social and ritual activities.



2. A KONDH SONG

This we offer to you.
We can,
Because we are still alive;
If not,
How could we offer at all,
And what ?
We give a small baby fowl.
Take this and go away
Whichever way you came.
Go back, return.
Don't inflict pain on us
After your departure.
(Translated from the original Kondh)

A note on the Kondh Tribe

The term 'Kondh' is most probably derived from the Dravidian word, *konda*, meaning hill. Divided into several segments and distributed over the districts of Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Orissa, these hill people speak the Kondh language though

most of them are bilingual and so conversant with the major language of the state to which they belong.

The Kondh religion is a mixture of the traditional faith of the adivasis and Hinduism. They do not have any dowry system but they do fix a bride price that the groom pays to the bride either in cash or in kind.

A Note on the Kondh Song

The Kondhs observe a number of rituals in connection with birth, puberty, marriage and death, with specific folk dances and songs for each occasion. They believe in the existence of gods and spirits, both benevolent and malevolent.

The song here is sung at the death of a person beseeching the spirit of the dead to stop troubling the living. It is based on the Kondh belief that people love their homes so much that their souls are reluctant to leave the hearth even after death. These spirits, though generally kind, can become harmful at times since they are now unable to participate in earthly life. It is, therefore, customary to make generous offerings to the spirit. The song begins by saying that the dead spirit will be able to receive offerings only if the others in the family continue to live and prosper. They reveal their willingness to do anything to make the spirit happy but, in return, the spirit must also promise not to trouble them with its visits.

3. Adi Song for the Recovery of Lost Health

Oh my beloved one
If you lost your health due to ill luck
I come forward here to save you
With this Emul
To call back your lost health.
Listen to the sound of this sweet ornament

And follow me to your sweet home.
I tie this Ridin creeper
To fasten your soul to your body.
Follow the footprint of this cock
Come, come with me to your home.
(Translated from the original Miri Agom)

A Note on the Adi Tribe

Adi is a generic term denoting hill people and it includes a number of groups. It may be applied to all the hill tribes around the Brahmaputra valley. The Adi are, however, concentrated in the East and West Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. They belive that every object in the universe, be it human beings, animals, trees or birds, have a spirit that needs to be nourished and propitiated. Dependent on nature for many of their needs, they believe that equilibrium in nature must always be maintained. Even though hunting is considered not just a means of procuring food but also an expression of courage and skill, they still believe that human beings must hunt for survival and not for greed.

The Adi have two major languages that they use for two different purposes. The language for routine conversation is called *Adi Agom*. The second major language still in use is *Miri Agom*, a highly rhythmic language used for chanting during their rituals. The headman of the village is generally the best hunter as well as an expert in *Miri Agom*. Both languages are living languages and rituals and ceremonies provide the occasion for the teaching of *Miri Agom* to the younger generation.

A Note on the Adi Song

The song selected here is actually a mantra that is chanted in *Miri Agom* to lure the spirit of good health back to the body of a sick person. The Adi believe that a person falls ill when the spirit of good health abandons the body due to some shock it may suffer. The above lines are chanted in a ritual performed by the maternal uncle of the sick person.

Notes

Beloved one: the loved nephew or niece who is ill.

I come forward here to save you: the maternal uncle of the sick person comes forward to perform the ritual for the return of the spirit of good health.

Emul: amulet, here a healing ornament.

Listen to the sound of this ornament: this line and the ones that follow are addressed to the spirit of good health to request it to return to the ill body.

Your sweet home: the ill body which is the real home of the spirit of good health.

Ridin: a creeper that is supposed to have special medicinal qualities.

Fasten your soul to your body: the Ridin creeper will tie the spirit of good health to the body to ensure its continued presence.

Follow the footprints of this cock: usually an offering like a cock or a hen is made to propitiate the spirit of good health and presuade it to return to the ill body.

About the Author

G.N. Devy, (born 1950) formerly professor of English at Maharaja Sayaji Rao University of Baroda, is the Founder Director of the Tribal Academy at Tejgarh, Gujarat. He is the Director of Sahitya Akademi's Project on Literature in Tribal Languages and Oral Traditions. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award for his book *After Amnesia* and the SAARC Writer's Foundation Award for his work on the 'denotified tribes'.

Understanding the Text

1. Identify the common characteristics shared by tribal communities all over the world.
2. What distinguishes the tribal imagination from the secular imagination?
3. How does G.N. Devy bring out the importance of the oral literary tradition?
4. List the distinctive features of the tribal arts.
5. 'New literature' is a misnomer for the wealth of the Indian literary tradition. How does G.N. Devy explain this?

Talking About the Text

Discuss the following in pairs or in groups of four

1. 'It is time to realise that unless we modify the established notion of literature as something written, we will silently witness the decline of various Indian oral traditions.'
2. 'Tribal arts are not specificlly meant for sale.' Does this help or hamper their growth and preservation?
3. Because India's tribal communities are basically bilingual there is a danger of dismissing their languages as dialects of India's major tongues.
4. While tribal communities may not seem to possess the scientific temper, there are many ideas from tribal conventions that could enrich modern societies.

Appreciation

1. How does 'A Munda Song' show that the perspective of the tribal mind towards the girl child is different from that of (other) mainstream communities?
2. How does 'A Kondh Song' substantiate the tribal urge to gain domination over time by conversing with their dead ancestors?
3. 'Adi Song for the Recovery of Lost Health' is in *Miri Agom* while *Adi Agom* is the Adi community's language for routine conversation. How does this reflect upon the high level of language sensitivity of the Adi? Can you think of other parallels in modern languages between the literary variety and the colloquial variety?

Language Work

1. Comment on the symbols used in 'A Munda Song'. What aspect of the tribal worldview do they reflect?
2. Explain the significance of the lines

   'I tie this Ridin creeper
   To fasten your soul to your body.'
3. What is the central argument of the speaker?

Suggested Reading

1. *Cultural Diversity, Linguistic Plurality and Literary Traditions in India,* ed. Sukinta Paul Kumar, for University of Delhi.