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## **Cosmo- Vision of the Odishan Tribal: A Study of Gopinath Mohanty's *The Ancestor***

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to highlight the importance of the traditional beliefs, practices and specific system of knowledge in the life of the tribal community as presented in Gopinath Mohanty's *The Ancestor*. These practices constitute their cultural self identity as well as render them with joy. Any rupture in such system may bring about disintegration in their socio-cultural life in a large scale because their life is deeply rooted in those systems and practices. The paper also focuses on the idea of continuity of such beliefs, practices and traditional Eco-spiritual knowledge in spite of the intervention of colonial modernity in the tribal villages of Odisha.

**(Key Words:** Tribal Cosmo-vision, Eco-cultural Practice, Eco-spiritual Knowledge, Modernity)

### **Introduction:**

This paper offers a study of *The Ancestor*, Gopinath Mohanty's first novel, which canvases tribal life, to examine the importance of traditional knowledge and Eco-cultural practices for bringing forth unity and integrity in the tribal world. It is true that the indigenous eco-ethics came under attack as 'unscientific' and 'regressive' during the expansionist mission of colonial modernity, yet such act of disparagement and devaluation of the native system has not impoverished it. Rather deep proximity and continuity with tradition by repudiating the modern ideas, that attempt to overshadow the native world-view and practices etc. in a certain sense suggests their antipathy to modernity. Although the impact of Modernity has influenced their culture to some extent, the central tenets of their tradition remain unaffected. Mohanty happens to be the first writer in India, even before Meheswata Devi, to represent the voice of the tribal and their conditions during colonization, has interpreted the living story of the tribal community and the way of its disintegration in the civilizing mission of colonial modernity in Odisha. This novel presents his vision of life in the mountain against the background proposed by modernity. The present paper underscores the idea that the tribal life in Odisha is deeply rooted in their cultural past, and their history is implicated in the history of the natural world. In other words, the life is

predominated by certain beliefs and practices concerning nature, tradition and culture, and oriented by the age old traditional values and indigenous knowledge system. Such beliefs and practices render them with contentment, joy and strength, reinforce unity and community of life at one level and constitute their cultural identity on the other. Celebration, festivities and practices concerning nature and culture, as the part of their belief system, seem to be the central aspects of the traditional paradigm of the tribal life.

Again simplicity and innocence are the hallmarks of this life, where the meaning of happiness is not taken in a modern mechanical sense; rather it is an intense realization, derived from their traditional practices, belief in divine providence, co-existence with nature etc. Such practices and belief systems influence and determine their knowledge and vision of life and the world. Thus, the introduction of any idea or practice, pronounced by an alien culture, may not easily be accepted as it certainly disturbs the continuity of their ideas and values concerning their existence, ability and practices. However, it does not present the romanticizing or glorifying view of the traditional paradigm of tribal life, nor does it attempt to justify the validity and superiority of tribal practices over the scientific prudence and instrumental approach of modernity. Rather it presents the study of the significance of such beliefs and tradition along with the natural environment in tribal life and identity. Here the study focuses largely in the relationship between these two worlds-the natural world and the human world.

#### **Natural Environment and the Tribal World in Odisha:**

The tribal world, surrounded by chains of hills, stretches of wilder forest and bountiful natural resources, has a distinctive idyllic flavour which influences the tribal people to be essentially, the part of it for thousands of years. This world may be characterized by its fair remoteness, peaceful ambiance, natural order and integrity of life. In *The Ancestor* Gopinath Mohanty has given a splendid description of the tribal world in the hills and forests of the Eastern Ghats of Odisha, more particularly of the village Lulla. "The distant horizon is not so distant here" perhaps because of the familiarity of the people with every part of the land, which is mostly trodden and the gap between the horizons are bridged by the beautiful things that inspire joy. Here "hills stand one piled on other creating an illusion of innumerable vimans. The peaks of the hills, small and large, incline towards a valley at their centre. The valley is covered by the green forest. The river Muran, flows through this beautiful valley, from one end of the highland to the other" (Mohanty 1). In this regard mention may be made of Charles Bucke, the early nineteenth century philosopher of nature, when he posits that "rocks or mountains" add immense sublimity to a country and water makes a landscape beautiful (*The Philosophy of Nature* 6). Thus, the tribal world is both sublime and beautiful with the presence of mountain, fountain and rivers, which may be perceived and behold, to quote Bucke, by "cultivated mind" (14). By "cultivated mind" Bucke means, the mind that is sensible to receive the effects of natural processes, to Wordsworth it is the mind having imaginative sensibility and to Eliot it is the mind that carries the values of the tradition to produce new knowledge. In addition to this, the wild flora splashed with multitude colours redoubles the beauty and thickens the ambiance with wild aroma. As Father Cashel has conceived "colours had the harmonies as well as music" (99), in the natural land of the tribal world 'colours are combined with music' perhaps to intensify the sublimity and beauty and inspire the tribal folk to celebrate every moment in the lap of nature. Here it is found that all people including Ram Muduli, the village Head man, Hari Jani, Thenga Jani, Saria Dan, even the Christian old man Eleo and others are always in festive mood, even at the time of working in the field, rearing cattle, fishing etc, throughout the year.

The transparent water of river Muran glitters in the rays of sun (Mohanty 13), the undulating “yellow *alasi* fields”, “bluish green *ragi* fields”, maize fields, moreover the stretched cultivating land along with the dense forest presents the view that both soil and water are productive and pristine (Mohanty 10-11). It is true, as they are remote from the urban world; they are free from squalors and industrial waste that cause enormous pollution. The “sluggish stream” that flows in the valley undoubtedly, makes it fascinating and rich in productivity (15). This fascinating and fertile land inspires the tribal people to engage themselves in toil, to enrich the productivity of the land, from which they may derive good health, “tranquil happiness” and “peaceful enjoyment” along with their provision for rural comfort (Bucke 56). In other words by harvesting “rice, *alsi*, *suan*, *ragi* and *caster*”(Mohanty 15), collecting valuable products from the jungle, hunting, fishing, rearing animals, the tribal people lead the life of sufficiency and where the amenities of the modern world may not find space in their life. If the modern amenities are the only criteria of happiness in the urban world, the tribal world seems to be in the opposite hemisphere of that world because the “sweet and warm” sun, the delicate moon and stellar constellation of night, sweet breeze, “the green paddy fields” the hills and rivers, “surrounded by trees and creepers” etc. (15-16) give them the joy required. Instead of being busy in satisfying unlimited desires and hoarding for future luxury as done by the so called modern man, they live in the present and a stomach full of rice and *ragi* gruel, barrel of home-brewed wine may bring about immense amount of joy and celebration. It does not necessarily mean that they are complacent and incapable, rather their limited desires to acquire or achieve make them happy without causing harm to others (both human and nature). The people of Lulla have the only desire and drive to enrich the land and the community life, of which the individual life is regarded as a part.

Again Bucke has observed the influence of the natural world on human being. To him the objects of nature “add to the repose of the mind, tend to the restoration and preservation of health” (*The Philosophy of Nature* 65). In the Romantic sense nature soothes the tormented mind and wearied body and its elements inspire the sensual faculty in human beings. At the time of wandering in the low-lying mountain valley Thenga Jani, the son of village head man Ram, felt the Autumnal midday sun sweet and warm and “it intoxicated him and made his mind swing” (Mohanty 15). The cool breeze blows through the corn fields, shadow of the hill- forest, water of the river Muran, starry night etc. give strength and replenishment to the tired body of the farmers of the village Lulla, including the head man. The harvest celebration in the Spring brings new promise and vigour for hard labour in the next season. The freshness of food, water, home-brewed *mahula* wine, rice water, *ragi* gruel etc. support for good physique and the natural world is the repository of medicine for them.

It is acknowledged that time and nature metamorphose anything and everything. With the passing of days and seasons the headman's mental anguish, which he gathered after his son absconded with the Dom girl Santosh Kumari, gradually dissolved and he “slowly returned to normal life”. With the approach of the full-moon night “waves of happiness sprang from the peaks of the hills and spread over the whole area” by defeating the agony of the bygone days, “the water of Muran swept away memories” of their lover from Saria Dan and Saria Phoola (50). The delightful dance of the night gave Ram Muduli “some solace, some comfort” and he “tried to muster the courage to enable him to live the rest of his life” (51). So, for them life moves, the events and happenings are the inevitable chapters, go to constitute the life as a whole.

Every phenomenon including day and night brings forth joy. Night is not the constellation of fearful hours rather a time for celebration, discussion of different topics and communication with the natural and ancestral spirit, moreover to foster community life. Joy is not limited within a specific space or material, rather it is organic, comes directly from the harmony of nature. The day ends with working in the field; that may be the act of celebration because through it they are bestowed with blessings of the mother earth in the form of different crops. The natural world is dynamic, and its elements are in motion. The waving of woods and crop fields, the gliding stream of Muran, the flight of the birds, herd of cows grazing along the valley, fishes in the stream, “the majestic movement of the clouds” (Bucke 109) along with the dance of the beautiful tribal girls add life to the valley and meaning to life (10). It is evident that the tribal people live in this world as an essential part of the holistic system of nature. They may be called “the children of nature” (Panigrahi 33) due to their co-existence with nature and love and reverence for it.

Their love for the natural world around them is translated into their concern for the enrichment of that world. Their village is like “the soiled *anchal* of an old mother” (3), the place that provides life sustaining conditions as well as cultural identity. They forget their existence and work hard being one with the natural world to realize the nature's bounty. They are the eco-people, being in the world as the natural elements like mountain, fountain, trees do. As Mohanty has presented: “Throughout the day they worked in the mud, stones and pebbles. They were utterly indifferent to everything: joys and sorrows, pain and pleasure. They were creatures of the earth; they had no complaints” (56). They find the crops fields, the green valley, the circle of hills, the cyclorama of seasons as their friends and the crops are the “fruits of their labor” given by the natural and ancestral spirit; and “gazing at this beauty of creation a man could rid himself of his despair and desolation” and man gets pristine and pure energy of nature “to be ever young in his own creation” (56).

### **Tribal Religion, beliefs and practices in the Eastern Ghats of Odisha:**

The tribal world is foregrounded on the physical domain of nature and the epistemological world of their religion and culture. Their knowledge system and Cosmo-vision are derived from their traditional beliefs and practices related to nature. Moreover, their religion is based on nature-worship, animism, anthropomorphism, ancestor-worship etc. Such religion is regarded as thousands of years old, as Ram Muduli says it is “as old as the hill, as old as the darkness” (Mohanty 3) and other religions like christianity, that makes the avenue into the tribal world for conversion during colonization (23), is thought to be childish and “new”, lacks vigour to inspire credibility in tribal mind and to help the world during odds. In spite of being converted Christians and having Christian faith, Elio, John, Alihander, Peter, Simon, Paul, Michael and other converted tribals of Lulla “led their lives in their own way” and when they think of the form of a God they become “oblivious to the pastor and looked up to Dadi Budha” (32) perhaps because of the tribal belief in idolatry. Even the Christian Domb girl Santosh Kumari, presented in the novel as the symbol of modernity in the tribal world, during the course of her attempt to go for inter-caste marriage with Thenga by subverting the customary norms of their community silently prays the ancestral spirit (Dadi Budha). It is undoubtedly because of her base in the world where people are Christian in religion but practice their tradition; and in “the privacy of their homes, in the lonely places” (33) offer their devotion to Dadi Budha for security, happiness,

well-being etc. They become the part of ritualistic observations in the tribal world before the ancient deity (52) and they pray to “the almighty father” (58) singing devotional songs to overcome the odds and crisis.

Dadi Budha, embodied by the Date palm tree, is believed to be the representative of both the Ancestor's spirit and the natural spirit. Undoubtedly the innocent belief of the tribal people of village Lulla gives the status of supreme spirit and the presiding deity of the community to the palm tree. So the palm tree along with the termite mound are not the mere natural agents rather they are the spiritual beings in the world of tribal faith. They have the belief that nature, mankind, the spiritual and ancestral worlds are interrelated. Dadi Budha is the God, “a benign deity”, “the eternal ancestor” (Mohanty 6) who is having the vigilant eyes on the tribal world including the village, valley and the crop fields etc. (43); “everything was his creation, his play” (6). To them God is calm, steadfast and devoid of “all kind of feelings”, so is Dadi Budha (10). “The scorching heat of Baisakh and the down pour of the month of Jyestha” (7) can never disturb him, “nothing could hurt him, nothing could delight him Never did he get fatigued” (10). It may be acknowledged that such qualities may be attributed to the nature and to the God. He is the mightiest spirit, the cause and creator of all phenomena and “responsible for the prosperity and misery of everyone” (43). The act of propitiation through rituals and celebrations, that is to appease the ancestral and natural spirit, may bring forth stability and order, good health and harvest and the failure of which causes discord in a large scale.

The tribal people worship the ancestral spirit with unflinching faith that “no one was ever disappointed” by the supreme soul (Mohanty 10). They worship to get their wishes fulfilled. Ram, the head man and Hari Jani pray before the deity to get free from the parental responsibilities by finishing the marriage of their children. Thenga Jani sits silently before the deity with devotion to get his dream of marriage with Santosh Kumari come true and Santosh Kumari bows down her head before the deity to be successful in her mission to Assam with Thenga. The head man after his son's secret elopement, makes silent communication by “silencing all his thoughts” (52), seeks solace from the deity, in the silent hour of the night. Other people worship and perform rituals to overcome personal and group crisis, for good harvest and pink health of cattle and chicken. Such as the occult practices in the form of festivals and rituals suggest their strong belief in the power of supernatural elements and faith in idolatry, that constitute the integral part of their social life and world view.

Hailing from the eco-world, they do not forget the gift of their mother earth and the importance of nature in their lives. Even they see their beings inherited not only from the biological mothers, fathers, etc. but also from the ancestors that are the rivers, mountain, trees, the changing seasons. Their existence as the part of the natural process makes it holocoenautic. They believe that the crops, used as the food for the tribals are the sacred gift of nature. So, the worship of mother nature's deity as the part of their tradition is believed to bring nature's bounty into human world. The Parajas of Lulla not only worships the date palm tree as the embodiment of ancestral spirit but also believe in every natural object- animals, birds, the river Muran, the hill etc. - as the embodiment of divine spirit, even the termite mound is the “heavenly spirit” summoned by the ancestral spirit (Mohanty 8). To them, the world is a living system and the life force works as the cause behind every movement in the world. As we study Ram Muduli realizes “life everywhere” (56). So creating any harm to any natural agents is against the norms of their

tradition, for it directly or indirectly causes crisis in physical, mental and spiritual level by destroying the natural order. Such as the ethical idea finds expression in Spinoza's ethics. It may be mentioned that perhaps the tribal people were aware of the idea of eco-systemic web, of which human as a part- that is proclaimed by the modern environmental scientists and philosophers. They deal with the system with spiritualistic approach; rituals and ceremonies are the sole aspects of such approach.

Here festivals and seasons go hand in hand. Celebrations as the essential part of the tribal festivals or rituals are perhaps the metaphorical extension or the enactment of the festivities in nature. Rituals with rigorous penance were meant to eliminate evil spirits and to overcome hard times where as the festivals were meant to celebrate joy of good time. Most of the festivals are pertinent to various agricultural moreover ecological, conventional and spiritual practices. The ritualistic celebration includes worship and sacrifice before the deity, dance, drinking of home-brewed wine, feasting etc. It indicates triumph or the restoration of new energy as well as the supplication of the spiritual force to restore source of positive energies to the world. These are also the act of propitiation to appease the divine beings and the evil spirits for happy and prosperous life and good fortune. In the course of time Ram Muduli, the head man performs certain ritual before the deity to drive out the "ominous shadow"(47) of the evil spirit (*duma*), as a result he will be able to come out of his mental agony and the village will be free from the affliction and diseases. And such elimination of evil *duma* is believed to bring good time for his family as well as the village. For Paraja people, every celebration is directed to the ancestral deity (Dadi Budha) as marks of their reverence to Him. As He is the soul creator and preserver of everything "many festivals were celebrated in his honour; trumpets were blown on the mound to proclaim his glory" (*The Ancestor* 43).

Dance and song in every night is to refresh the body and mind after a long day's toil. It suggests that Parajas believe in happiness as the right of human life. So, in spite of all complexities in their world they do not keep themselves remote from celebration; rather try to trace their rights in every opportunity in every minute. It is true that hard working being one with the soil is a kind of celebration for the parajas firstly, because it brings prosperity moreover nature's blessings in the form of crops. And other festivals follow the harvest. Secondly, through agricultural work they come directly in contact with mother earth and become able to understand and experience the complex phenomena of nature and can determine the propitious conditions (soil, seed, time, and manner) for good harvest of multiple crops.

The tribal people not only have unflinching faith on the ancestral and natural spirits but also believe in the eternity and oneness of the Soul. There is no difference between human being, animal, trees or any other natural agents because the supreme soul expresses itself in every natural form. They have developed the idea; although the forms are manifold the soul cannot be compartmentalized. It seems to be synonymous with the Platonic concept of "unity of being". And it is true, when the whole gamut of western philosophy deals with the problem of "being" and its ontology, the tribal beliefs and practices-these are the philosophy of their life as they do not doubt their beliefs, rather their life revolves round such beliefs and practices- serve some possible answers to it, although not necessarily in a philosophical way.

The Prajas of Lulla believe in the union of the eternal soul after death. To them body is

temporary and ethereal in which the heart is circumscribed till the end of the body (Mohanty 27). As the soul is eternal and the body is subject to death, the soul expresses itself in a different body after the end of one body; thus rebirth is the inevitable reality in the world. Such idea is the central concern of Hindu philosophy finds reiteration in “The Eternal Reality of Soul's Immortality”, Chapter-II of *The Bhagvat Gita*, where Lord Krishna has posited before Arjuna that the soul never takes birth, nor does it die, nor does it come in to being again at the time the creation of a body, no force can perish the soul; it is timeless and is not destroyed with the annihilation of the body. The soul transmigrates from one body to another, when the body is withered. In Paraja belief the world is a place where every being gets purified through rigors and penance; complexities and sufferings are the preconditions for purgation. As they mention “this world is like a washer man's ghat” and “we come to this world as cloths are brought to the ghat. We come here to be beaten, cleansed, to come and go” (27). In this way the tribal s give equal importance on the ideal or the spiritual and the physical because the physical world as the cause works with every consequence and realization.

### **Knowledge systems of Tribal Odisha:**

The tribal knowledge system that the tribal people have retained with them for centuries, frame certain guiding principles for tribal existence in harmony with the universal order. Their knowledge is primarily concerned with time, space, health, medicine, scriptures etc, those play vital role in human life. *The Ancestor* firstly, presents the paraja people's knowledge about time on which all performance practices (including agriculture, worship etc.) of the people are based. To them time is abstract or metaphysical which can only be felt or realized but not seen. The day may be divided in to *praharas*, *danda*, *lita* etc. according to the response of senses to the natural phenomena, places of sun, stars, moon, sounds of different animals and so forth. Such concepts are different from hours, minutes and seconds etc presented by the mechanical system of clock. In this way the calendar- time which is based on clock time is wrong to them and their division of months like Baisakha, Jyestha, Asadha etc. are not similar to the Eurocentric name of January, February etc. And it is painstaking and needs intellectual and spiritual rigour to understand the temporal system of nature.

The parajas divide time in two categories- good or auspicious time and bad time; good times are those when the stars and planets are in right places, and bad time is when the planets are not in harmony with the universal system. By the help of *dishari*, the paraja people determine the auspicious time for their rituals, beginning of cultivation, harvest, festivals etc. They also predict the approach of various seasons and weather, machination of evil spirits (*dumas*) by studying the planets that helps them in getting good harvest (Mohanty 3). They are of the belief that prosperity depends on proper astrological calculation and meticulous study of nature's calendar; miscalculation leads to chaos, scarcity, disease, death etc. (59-62).

Again the idea of abstract time further leads to the absence of written history because the past cannot be presented within a mechanical system. As mentioned, “no one had written their history... the pointed and flat stones remained as their only memorials” (27). It is conspicuous that memory is the only mode to immortalize a person and the events by storing them in a systematic pattern according to their occurrence. A physical body which is placed in the world to commemorate the particular person or event boosts tribal memory for centuries. It is true that *Shruti*, an age old practice has been made possible by the indigenous Indian people. The great sages unmistakably remember the whole of the Vedas and pass them to the next generations to



immortalize the divine words. In the world of *shruti* there is nothing to legitimate but to realize and understand for existence in the world with order.

Shruti or memory is the part of the phenomena of human body. If the body is in order, the memory will be unmistakable. So there is the need of good physique for flawless memory. For parajas good physique is not only necessary for retaining memory but also for their being in the natural world. In relation to the idea of the health in harmony they have ascribed certain knowledge concerning eco-spiritual practices. Towards the end of the novel we find the outrage of death, perishing of the cattle and chicken and, even the death of the village priest. To the parajas it is nothing but the curse of the evil spirit, and the prevalence of bad time. In the view of the parajas good health means the harmonious relation with the natural environment; sickness indicates isolation where as recovery signifies the restoration of the unity and integrity. And Indian conventional medicinal system of Ayurveda is perhaps based on such principles. In it the sole idea is to keep the planets and humours and the spirits in propitious order by undertaking certain rigorous ritualistic practices, ancestor rites and eco-friendly practices because the planets, the five elements (fire, earth, water, air, space) along with the spirits have their direct influence and control on the biological system of the world. So keeping them in order results in the harmony in the body. They prefer the practice of preventing diseases to curing them. To prevent diseases, the whole natural wilderness is the repository of medicinal plants, which may procure good health. So they follow traditional, religious, magical and herbal practices for human health as well as the health of the animals and plants.

### **Conclusion**

The world in which tribal people live is self sufficient in its own way. If scientific and practical knowledge is the only criterion to judge the world, then it is difficult to plunge into the tribal world, for their world is based on certain systems that science may not be able to explore (beyond the prudence of science). Their mythological history, religious culture, spiritual practices, eco-agricultural values, Knowledge of natural phenomena, of health and medicine inspire them to stay in the world with contentment and pride and being the essential part of the natural world. In other words, their eco-cultural practices are the modalities to preserve their nature and culture, in which the tribal life is implicated.

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