

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

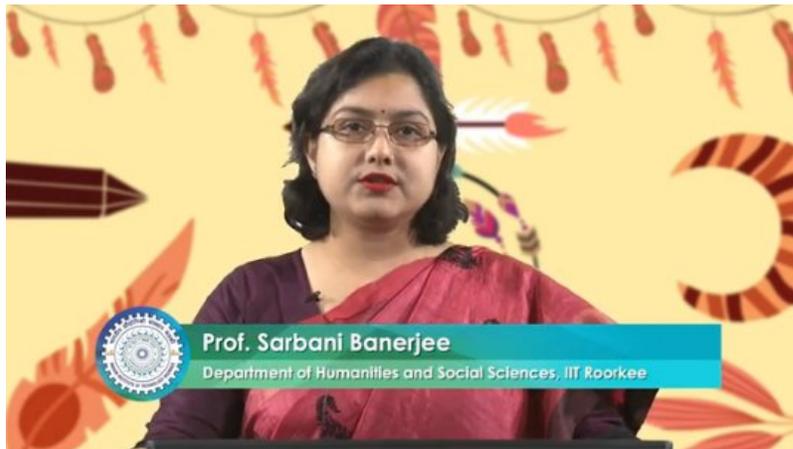
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, English

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture47

Lecture 47: Tribal Narratives

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on tribal studies in India: interdisciplinary approaches and perspectives. So, today we are going to talk about tribal narratives and tribal literature. Now, the art and literature of the Adivasi communities in India possess a distinct identity. They are not created with the



standard, you know, using the standard literary devices that we associate with Western forms of writing or Western artworks. Because of the post-colonial history that we have, the post-colonial legacy that India has, our literature has also evolved in many ways in tune with the literary expectations, the literary tastes, and the forms and genres that are similar to Western forms of writing, especially European literature. Indian writings in English or even in vernacular languages, in regional languages, have followed the different literary and cultural trends and movements that Europe has seen by and large.

And so there is a parity, there is a parallelism in the way European literature, especially British literature, has developed, has evolved, and the way Indian literature has evolved.

So when we bring those literary expectations to the table and look at the tribal literature, the Adivasi community's literature and artworks, we might be slightly unsettled and unprepared. We cannot bring the same yardsticks, the same expectations to the table when trying to understand the Adivasi communities' arts and literature. So viewing these works produced by the Adivasi communities from an outsider's perspective often leads to interpretations that are confined by quasi-anthropological frameworks.

Introduction

- The art and literature of Adivasi communities in India possess a distinct identity. However, viewing them from an outsider's perspective often leads to interpretations confined by quasi-anthropological frameworks.
- G. N. Devy (2006) highlights that lacking the patience and desire to understand the tribal artistic expressions in their own terms, we hastily conclude that they are merely remnants of communities detached from mainstream Indian society, frozen in a distant past.
- He mentions that a careful examination of Adivasi arts and literature reveals such interpretation as inaccurate.



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And as we have earlier discussed, these anthropological frameworks, these lens frameworks, lenses have been provided to us by the British, by the colonizers, because they were the ones, the pioneers who started documenting the tribal life, the tribal people, and their lifestyle. And there is a lot of baggage, a lot of bias, a lot of their own cultural barriers in forming those pioneer white men's literature on the tribals from India. So anthropological frameworks have their own difficulties.

They have to kind of deal or they have to reckon with their own problematics, their own baggage. In this regard, Ganesh Devi highlights that lacking the patience as well as the desire to understand the different kinds of artistic expressions that tribal literature and artworks have to offer, and even not trying to see these works on their own terms—not in comparison with non-tribal works, not in comparison with any other Western form of literature and artworks—could have its own set of problems. So we generally tend to hastily conclude that tribal arts and artworks are merely remnants of community works and products coming from communities that are detached from mainstream Indian society and that are frozen in a distant past.

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So that's once again the anthropological gaze, the legacy that we have inherited as a post-colony, as a place that was inhabited by British colonialists. For a long time, we have seen these people as ancient, archaic lives that are detached from the way the rest of India has developed. But on the contrary, if we look at history, we would see that from time to time, they have taken part, very vociferously and very strongly, in anti-colonial struggles. Even before mainstream Indians actually gathered against the British, the tribals did so.

So they have engaged with mainstream politics, anti-colonial movements in very strong ways from time to time. It would be wrong to say that the tribals and the artworks are completely existing in ghettos. It's just that we may need to bring forth, we may need to bring to the fore a different set of understandings, a different set of standards to understand these works best rather than compare them with any other forms of artwork, right. So Devi additionally mentions that a careful examination of the Adivasi arts and literature reveals

that our quick interpretation about, you know, tribal arts, our quick judgment about tribal literature may a lot of times be inaccurate and fallacious. So there has to be a training, a training that enables us to to include ourselves in the process of tribal art making. Right. In other words, there ought to be an effort on the part of the outsider to decode tribal art and literature. in their own terms, not through the lens of the non-tribal.

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That threshold needs to be understood and respected. Devi writes that because a significant number of Indian languages have not been written down, have not been documented, but they exist majorly in an oral form, their rich literary creations are not categorized as literature. So this is once again a very profound observation. The tribal life itself is very discursive. So until recently, there has not been much recognition regarding their literature as well as their religion.

Because they don't document their works. They haven't till a long time institutionalized their religion. They don't have shrines just like they don't have books. So scattered things go unnoticed. But it does not really mean that they are not there.

Introduction

- Devi (2002) writes that because a significant number of Indian languages have not been written down, their rich literary creations are not categorized as 'literature'.
- The sheer diversity within Indian Adivasi art alone defies any singular definition or descriptive system.
- The oral epics of several nomadic Indian communities act as a powerful force, allowing them to maintain their identity and survive as communities despite being broken up and dispersed across long distances.



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So they realize their deities and their spirituality through preservation of religion. the nature. That is religion for them. Their performances are religion. Their invocations are their religion.

It's just that they are not existent in very structured, documented form. Their oral forms of storytelling, telling of myths, especially the myth of origin, as well as a plethora of songs,

poems, folklores, parables associated with the rituals of birth, marriage, death, hunting, all these things together actually comprise, constitute what we understand as tribal literature. There has just not been much desire or need to pen them down.

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And so the general understanding, which is a fallacious understanding once again, is that the tribal people, the tribal communities lack literature. However, they have a very rich tradition that is thriving. It's not decadent at all. It is thriving in oral form, in the way they speak, their being even, the way they live, the way they speak. In the way they live their lives, their day-to-day lives, they are actually keeping their literature and their arts alive.

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Even through the wall paintings, even through the paintings in front of their houses, they are keeping their traditions and culture alive. The sheer diversity within Indian Adivasi art alone defies any form of singular definition or descriptive system. The oral epics of several nomadic Indian communities act as a powerful force, enabling them to maintain their identity and survive as communities despite being broken up and dispersed across long distances. So oral tradition also enables, you know, facilitates and strengthens

community formation, identity building, right, to identify with a group through telling stories. Listening, memorizing, and retelling stories enables the survival of a group, enables redefinition or rediscovery of one's identity across generations.

Devi asserts that a thorough understanding of the tribal imagination can contribute significantly to the growth of Indian literature and art. For the past two centuries, Indian literature has operated under the considerable influence of a perspective imagination. And this whole question of perspective imagination is deeply fed by, it is deeply influenced by Western traditions. So this is something I was telling at the beginning of today's lecture: the development of Indian art forms and literature goes quite parallel with the movements we see in Europe, the artistic movements happening in Europe.

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- Given the extensive adoption of Western knowledge frameworks, tribal communities in India remain distinct in their relative lack of colonial consciousness. Therefore, revisiting the theme of memory could be a crucial step in the resurgence of our culture.



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And because of its post-colonial reality, those have gone on to become the standard yardsticks, the benchmarks that inform and that shape Indian literature in a great way. that does not meet those marks or that is different from those standards is very easily and very problematically considered as aberrant as something that we don't take enough effort to understand. Right. So given extensive adoption of Western knowledge frameworks, tribal communities in India remain distinct and unique in their relative lack of colonial consciousness. So it has been a wound in disguise that the tribal communities have not had much contact with the colonial consciousness.

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and their own arts have survived, albeit in oral form majorly, they have survived in isolation from the Western artistic trajectory that we see. So, therefore, revisiting the theme of memory could be a crucial step towards a resurgence of the Indian culture, right. In this regard, we see scholar and critic Deepika Gupta notes that each tribe in India exhibits a distinct way of life and encompass distinct patterns of behavior, thoughts, emotions, actions, customs, traditions, morals, values and culture. And tribal literary works, tribal artworks frustrate or defy or kind of violate the preconceived notions of genres, literary genres. We need to revisit each of these genres when looking at tribal literature, because maybe communities are producing oral forms of art, which could be at the same time a number of genres simultaneously.

So they are more fluid than one genre, one watertight genre, genre in the Western sense. So tribal literary work voices their struggles and captures the essence of their unique cultural celebrations. So just like we have a term Dalit aesthetics, we also have tribal aesthetics. Tribal aesthetics is informed by tribal way of living, tribal understanding of the world and the tribal philosophy and outlook. So because the experiences are very different from any other group in India, the struggles, the pains, the tribulations, the history all are very different from the non-tribals.

The aesthetics are informed; they are fed by all these day-to-day, you know, emotions. And if we bring to the table our perceptions, our experiences, we might feel, you know, inadequate. As non-tribal scholars, readers, and audience, we might feel inadequate about and not prepared to decipher what all these rich repertoires of tribal arts and literature have to offer. So the lens needs to be shifted.

Introduction

- Deepika Gupta (2024) notes that each tribe in India exhibits a distinct way of life, encompassing distinct patterns of behaviour, thoughts, emotions, actions, customs, traditions, morals, values, and culture.
- Unconfined by genre, each tribal literary work voices their struggles and captures the essence of their unique cultural celebrations.



We need to be trained to feel included among the tribal artists, among the tribal everyday realities. We have to immerse ourselves into these realities and only then will the literature make sense. The threshold, like I said before and I'm repeating, needs to be respected. It needs to be acknowledged and respected.

The tribes have found their canvas in various mediums of expression. The definition of tribal literature does not restrict itself to the boundaries of paper. So, like I have already explained, tribals do not consider only the documented forms of writing or documented forms of art as the only art. Art, according to them, is something more discursive, something that is more scattered.

The nature could be a canvas, the nature could be a text. So there is this rich cultivation of oral written as well as visual storytelling with recurring themes of resistance, struggle, nature, spirituality and cultural, natural preservation coming back again and again in their artworks. The tribal communities have cultivated literature and diverse art forms orally long before the advent of writing among the non-tribal societies. These traditions transmitted across generations encompass and encapsulate the very essence of tribal cultural distinctiveness. Critic and scholars Nehal Gaikwad as well as other critics observe that oral traditions serve as a critical method for tribal communities to maintain their cultural memory, their collective cultural memory, encompassing storytelling, songs, dances and oral history.

Introduction

- The tribes have found their canvas in various mediums of expression. The definition of tribal literature does not restrict itself to the boundaries of paper, rather there is a cultivation of oral, written and visual storytelling with recurring themes of resistance, nature, spirituality and cultural preservation.
- Tribal communities have cultivated literature and diverse art forms orally long before the advent of writing.
- These traditions, transmitted across generations, encapsulate the very essence of tribal cultural distinctiveness.



These practices are fundamental to the endurance and maintenance of the tribal identity. So here I'll give some specific example from the Santal community that I have been researching on how certain spaces in the village are meant for gathering like the Akhara. The Akhara is the place where the villages, the Santhali villages gather for song, dance, merrymaking during a festival. It's a community coming together, the coming together of a community.

The gathering, you know, it has a social purpose and the entire village is known as a family, a larger family. Whenever there is a wedding, whenever there is a celebration, it is celebrated here. As the entire village treated as one unit. With the idea of the entire village as one unit. As one large family.

So Akhara becomes central or crucial to the concept of community building. A feeling of unitariness. A feeling of unity. More so, given that the next generation now has to travel. There is an urban-bound drive.

To find jobs in urban centers, and a lot of the younger population do not tend to come back to their villages of origin, their ancestral villages. To that effect, the Akhara plays a very important role in telling the Santal, reminding the Santal who he or she is. Right. Similarly, we see that during the Karam Puja, the Jomsin Binti, which is the spiritual text of the Santals, is read aloud in front of the community members. The older members from the village, who are more knowledgeable, read out the myths of origin.

To the younger generations. It's a way of binding the community together, bringing the people together through their myths, through their stories of origin. The ongoing dissemination of oral narratives has ensured the vitality of tribal cultural practices and their history. In India, literature provides tribes with a means of self-expression or rather

the propping up of one's identity, And thereby, it further enhances the question of empowerment and unity.

According to Nandini Sahu, collective memory in tribal communities is sustained through various literary genres, such as folk tales, epics, songs, proverbs, riddles, as well as ritual chants. These are not simply art forms, but they embody lineage. They embody the ancestry that one has come from. It talks about one's pedigree, one's forefathers, one's totem, one's clan. So songs and poems are basically about the family tree.

It defines one's identity, where one came from. So, they hold together the comprehensive tribal knowledge systems as well as cosmologies that give rise to complete philosophies and offer a significant departure from the western concepts of what literature is and what literature constitutes. Just to repeat what I have said again and again, we cannot bring the expectations that we have learned from Western literature, Western art forms to understand, to decode the oral traditions that the tribal communities celebrate, that the tribal communities practice. We have to have a different lens. We have to have a different training in order to appreciate tribal art and literature.

Oral Traditions

- According to Nandini Sahu (2024), **collective memory in tribal communities is sustained through various literary genres such as folktales, epics, songs, proverbs, riddles, and ritual chants.**
- These are not simply art forms; **they embody lineage, comprehensive tribal knowledge systems, and cosmologies that give rise to complete philosophies, offering a significant departure from Western concepts of literature.**



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Mainstream non tribal literary criticism has long neglected these oral traditions of the tribal people, frequently dismissing them as too primitive, too ancient or unsophisticated to warrant any kind of serious attention. So in this regard, J.N. Devi's repartee or rebuttal is, I quote Devi here, that literature is a lot more than writing, is a reminder necessary for our times. So literature is not only something that is documented. When we talk about literature, when we talk about what a text is, it could surpass, it could...

Oral Traditions

- Mainstream literary criticism has long neglected these oral traditions, frequently dismissing them as too primitive or unsophisticated to warrant serious attention.
- "That **literature is a lot more than writing** is a reminder necessary for our times" (Devy, 2002).
- This undervaluation tends to ignore the intricate narrative structures, profound philosophical perspectives, and insightful socio-political critiques that tribal literature can offer.



Even outflow or overflow, the idea of merely documented text. It could be something much more than documented written works. So when we undervalue the tribal oral traditions that have existed since time immemorial, we tend to ignore the intricate narrative structures, profound philosophical perspectives, as well as the insightful socio-political critiques that tribal literature can offer. Coming to the paintings, especially the wall paintings in tribal villages, in tribal areas, the tribal voices find artistic expression through the medium of cave architecture, paintings, and poetry.

For example, the Sohrai and Kovar paintings are very prominent works found in Jharkhand. The Kovar paintings depict the marriage rituals among the tribes, whereas the art in Sohrai paintings, which is practiced mainly by the Santhals, is matriarchal in its depiction and offers insight into the social fabric of the tribes. So, talking about documentation, the wall art could very much be seen as documentation. It documents the everyday lives of the tribals, their day-to-day existence. It's just like the tribal consciousness.

Such documentation is not, you know, forever. It's not like a book, which is a whole and permanent product. These wall paintings fade away. They are tarnished by rains, by the monsoon season. So, there is a cyclic process of documentation, one could say.

With every major festival, such as Sohrai or Baha, the walls are repainted with another narrative, another story about tribal life. So walls are like palimpsests, where one painting is layered onto another. These paintings slowly vanish with time, effacing gradually. It's very interesting that there is hardly such a thing as a permanent book, hardly a permanent book form among tribal communities. Devi observes that for Adivasi communities, the future poses a threat to their past as modernization rapidly erodes and eats into their cultural traditions.

Their economic marginalization is often wrongly attributed to inherent flaws in their traditions and social structures. Such interpretations of tribal people overlook the fact that they have been very negatively influenced. They have been historically disadvantaged through interventions stemming from colonialism. So whenever non-tribals blame tribal traditions and social structures that have purportedly, that have apparently influenced led to their marginalization, we tend to forget that these same people have been historically violated by colonizers, by deforestation, land occupation, displacement, and forced displacement, and so forth.

A pervasive ignorance surrounds Adivasi social structures, worldviews, and cultural practices. So this is something that mainstream society would like to believe. We have made minimal progress, however, in understanding Adivasi art and literature in India, with most literary critics and art historians remaining unaware of tribal contributions in these fields. This remains a richly under-researched area, and there is much scope to further explore Adivasi arts, narratives, and literature. As a way of concluding, the art and literature of Adivasi communities in India possess a distinct identity, and approaching them as unfamiliar entities leads to interpretations mainly confined by quasi-anthropological frameworks.

Conclusion

- However, the art and literature of Adivasi communities in India possess a distinct identity. Approaching them as unfamiliar entities leads to interpretations confined by quasi-anthropological frameworks.
- Lacking the patience and willingness to understand them on their own terms, we hastily conclude that these are remnants of communities detached from mainstream Indian society, frozen in a distant past.
- Yet, careful study reveals that such understanding is inaccurate. The immense diversity within Indian Adivasi art alone defies any singular definition or descriptive system.

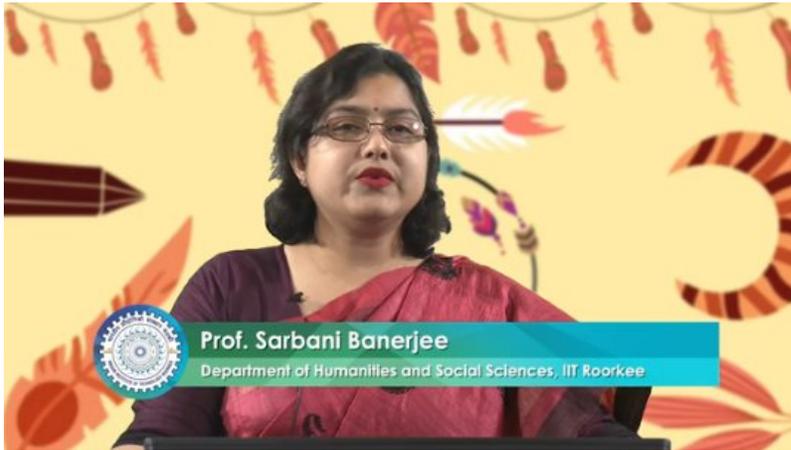


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Lacking the patience and willingness to understand tribal art and literature on their own terms, the non-Adivasi people, the non-tribal people, hastily and very quickly jump to the conclusion that that these works, these arts and literature, are remnants of certain communities that are detached from mainstream Indian society and frozen in a distant past. However, a careful study would reveal that such understanding, such interpretation, is inaccurate. The immense diversity within Indian Adivasi art alone defies any singular

definition, descriptive system, or even a formula or mantra to decode them. They need to be seen through the eyes of a child with a fresh perspective that is not informed or

or burdened with any pre-given expectations or pre-given knowledge. Despite the transformative effects of modernity and globalization on their original organic way of life, tribal communities continue to demonstrate a strong commitment to their traditions, particularly in their belief systems, rituals, ceremonies, and art forms. So their literature, their arts become a testimony to their resilience, their strength, and their unity. With this, we come to the end of our lecture today.



Let us meet for another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.