

**TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND
APPROACHES**

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Lecture50

Lecture 50: Tribal Literature in India: Part-I

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Approaches and Perspectives. Today, we are going to discuss tribal literature, and we will take up two important texts on the issues of the tribals. These texts are written by two major artists, two major writers who have significantly contributed to the field of tribal scholarship. Just as tribal societies have evolved, so has their literature.



Contemporary tribal literature has undergone significant transformation in recent years, driven by factors such as globalization, environmental shifts, and socio-political changes. Such development or evolution has led to the inclusion of newer voices, perspectives, possibilities, and experimentation with new literary forms. A key feature of contemporary tribal literature is the rise of transformative narratives. Such narratives offer compelling insights into how tribal communities are adapting to modern influences, exploring themes

of adaptability, resilience, and identity. However, we also talk about the suffering, the trials and tribulations, the deprivation, and the exploitation,

Introduction

- Just as tribal societies have evolved, so too have their literature. Contemporary tribal literature has undergone significant transformation in recent years, driven by factors like globalization, environmental shifts, and socio-political changes.
- This has led to the inclusion of new voices, perspectives, and literary forms. A key feature of contemporary tribal literature is the rise of transformative narratives. These narratives offer compelling insights into how tribal communities are adapting to modern influences, exploring themes of adaptability, resilience, and identity.



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and how their natural, organic habits and habitats have been deeply influenced by external factors, including colonization by the British and then by non-tribals, the natives in India. We also discuss how they have been dislocated from their own environments and the repercussions of such larger changes provoked or triggered by modernization, globalization, and environmental changes. Tribal literature is a powerful reflection of the rich and varied cultural heritage of the often marginalized, often peripheral tribal communities through their oral traditions, folktales, and literary expressions. Tribal literature provides distinctive insights into the tribal people's history, belief systems, spirituality, as well as their day-to-day struggles. According to G. N. Devi, the adaptation of scripts by numerous tribal languages has led to the emergence of written artworks.

Especially written poetry, which, however, in some cases—notably in the cases of Santhali, Mizo, and Devali languages—has significantly diminished or even surpassed the traditional oral form of tribal songs. So that is the kind of transition, the kind of transition in terms of medium that the knowledge system uses. It is undergoing, has recently undergone, and is still undergoing, and how it loses a lot of its inherent quality that cannot be transcribed into writing. So once we shift the medium from orality, from oral tradition to something written—the written form—there is some form of dilution also taking place. It is somewhat difficult to capture everything from the oral tradition.

Introduction

- Tribal literature is a powerful reflection of the rich and varied cultural heritage of the often marginalized tribal communities. Through their oral traditions, myths, folktales, and literary expressions, tribal literature provides distinctive insights into the tribal people's history, belief systems, and struggles.
- According to G. N. Devy (2002), the adaption of scripts by numerous tribal languages has led to the emergence of written poetry, which in some cases, notably Santhali, Mizo, and Dehwali, has significantly diminished or even surpassed the traditional oral form of tribal songs.



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By the time it travels to pen and paper, some parts get effaced, some parts get diluted, even beyond recognition at times. Right. So the written version can only approximately try to touch the original oral version. It cannot be exactly the same. Now, tribal narratives in Indian English literature offer a distinct voice that challenges the dominant views, the dominant expectations, and standards of writing or even arts and aesthetics.

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They often depict the dual oppression by both the colonial and the post-colonial systems. Scholar and critic Deepak Gupta points out that despite cultural exchange among different Indian tribal communities, the specificities of each group underscore its inherent distinctiveness. As literature acts as a record of history and a means of solidifying cultural identity, tribal literature becomes a crucial vehicle in propping up tribal self-definition. Talking about tribal literature, writers such as Mahashweta Devi, Gopinath Mohanty, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, as well as Mamang Dai, among others, have vividly depicted through their plethora of writings how environmental and gender exploitations intersect under colonialism, and they highlight the systemic oppression and marginalization of tribal people by different non-tribal groups.

Introduction

- Writers like Mahasweta Devi, Gopinath Mohanty, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, and Mamang Dai, among others, have vividly depicted through their writings how environmental and gender exploitation intersect under colonialism, highlighting the systemic marginalization of tribal people.



Coming to Mahashweta Devi, Mahashweta Devi, who lived between 1926 and 2016, was an influential Indian writer in Bengali and a committed tribal activist, or rather, a subaltern activist. She tirelessly worked for the rights and empowerment of tribal communities, especially with the Lodha, Munda, and Sabar communities across several Indian states. Mahashweta Devi's significant literary contributions include 'Aranyer Adhikar' or 'The Rites of the Forest,' which came out in 1977, 'Draupadi,' published in 1978, 'Hajar Churashir Ma' in 1974, 'Rudali' in 1993, and 'Pterodactyl,' 'Puranshahai,' and 'Pirtha' in 2001. Her impactful work has been widely recognized with awards such as the Sahitya Akademi Award, Gyanpeeth Award, Ramon Magsaysay Award, Padma Shri, as well as Padma Vibhushan. Despite the fact that Mahashweta Devi's stories are not written in a tribal language and that she is not a tribal author herself, her evocative portrayal of tribal life remains unmatched by any other Indian writer till recent times.

Mahasweta Devi

- Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was an influential Indian writer in Bengali and a committed tribal activist. She tirelessly worked for the rights and empowerment of tribal communities (especially the Lodha, Munda and Shabar) across several Indian states. Her significant literary contributions include *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977), "Draupadi" (1978), *Hajar Churashir Maa* (1974), *Rudali* (1993), and "Pterodactyl, Pura Sahay and Pirtha" (2001).
- Her impactful work have been widely recognized with awards, such as the Sahitya Akademi Award, Jnanpith Award, Ramon Magsaysay Award, Padma Shri, and Padma Vibhushan.



Source: nytimes.com



Aranyer Adhikar

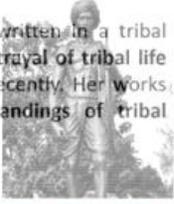
- Despite the fact that Mahasweta Devi's stories are not written in a tribal language and she is not a tribal author, her **evocative portrayal of tribal life** has remained unmatched by any other Indian writer till recently. Her works stand as **deeply sympathetic and imaginative understandings of tribal existence**.
- **Aranyer Adhikar** is a remarkable novel that provides a deeply moving account of the tragic situation that the subaltern tribals faced, as they were displaced and dispossessed of the forests that sustained, nourished, and protected them like a mother.



They stand as deeply sympathetic and imaginative understandings of tribal existence. So, 'Aranyer Adhikar' is a major contribution to tribal scholarship. It is a remarkable novel by Devi, which provides a deeply moving account of the tragic situation that the subaltern tribal people faced as they were displaced and dispossessed of the forest lands that had historically, ancestrally sustained, nourished, and protected them like a mother. Through this novel, Devi offers a profound understanding of the tribal agitation that stretched from the mid to the late 19th century, focusing on the Munda uprising. As a social activist and novelist, Mahasweta Devi goes beyond historical accounts to explore the true nature of Birsa Munda's leadership and the rebellion's character.

Aranyer Adhikar

- Despite the fact that Mahasweta Devi's stories are not written in a tribal language and she is not a tribal author, her evocative portrayal of tribal life from the mid to the late nineteenth century, focusing on the Munda uprising. As a social activist and novelist, she goes beyond historical accounts to explore the true nature of Birsa Munda's leadership and the rebellion's
- **Aranyer Adhikar** is a remarkable novel that provides a deeply moving account of the tragic situation that the
- ~~The novel reveals how the intrusion of feudal lords, zamindars, police, and labor contractors destroyed the tribals' peaceful lives and their natural habitat, effectively enslaving them in their own territory.~~




The novel reveals how the intrusion of feudal lords, zamindars, police, and labor contractors destroyed the tribals' peaceful lives and their natural habitat, effectively enslaving them in their own territory. Further, 'Aranyer Adhikar' shows how the British land revenue system facilitated the entry of numerous non-tribals, often people who posed as anti-tribals, individuals who started occupying the tribal areas, the tribal domains, and this novel emphasizes the complicity of colonialism and the feudal system in India in exploiting and further worsening the conditions of the tribal population. According to Don G. Vijayan and S. Uma Maheshwari, by mythically depicting Birsa Munda and Dhani Munda, Mahasweta Devi establishes a context for Choti Munda to flourish as a mythological figure. Written originally in Bangla in the year 1900,

Aranyer Adhikar

- Moreover, it shows how the British land revenue system facilitated the entry of numerous non-tribal, often anti-tribal, individuals in the tribal domains, and emphasizes the complicity of colonialism and the feudal system in India in exploiting the tribal population.
- According to Don G. Vijayan and S. Umamaheshwari (2022), by mythically depicting Birsa Munda and Dhani Munda, Mahasweta Devi establishes a context for Chotti Munda to flourish as a mythological figure.

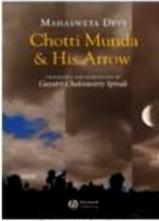


This work was translated by Gayatri Spivak in 2002. Chotimunda and his arrow is what the English translation has been popularly known as. So Choti Munda is the novel's protagonist, who had his initial understanding of the center-margin dynamic in his early years when he stayed with his sister Parmi during a famine. Chhoti Munda observed Parmi's in-laws and husband being compelled into bonded labor by a nearby landlord.

This experience showed him that bonded labor was not unique to the Munda people but affected other subaltern communities as well.

Chotti Munda and His Arrow

- Written in Bangla in 1980, the work was translated by Gayatri C. Spivak in 2002
- Chotti Munda, the novel's protagonist, had his initial understanding of the center-margin dynamic in his early years when he stayed with his sister Permi due to famine.
- He observed Permi's in-laws and husband being compelled into bonded labour by a nearby landlord. This experience showed him that bonded labour was not unique to the Munda people, but affected other subaltern communities as well.



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The novel begins with Choti's ancestor, Purtimunda, repeatedly losing his land to outsiders, especially the whites, as well as the local Bengalis and Biharis, due to the discovery of valuable resources. The area is discovered as rich in minerals, rich in coal. The outsiders come and settle, start extracting the land, and dislocating the tribal people. At the age of 14, Choti Munda is sent to Dhani Munda, a comrade of Birsa Munda, to learn archery and also about the Munda community's perpetual bondage to landowners and moneylenders. Dhani Munda instills the spirit of Birsa's struggle and the essence of the Ulgulan movement in Choti, also teaching him about ecological sustainability, which is at the heart of all tribal resistance, rebellions, and movements, and even informs tribal spirituality and philosophy.

Chotti Munda and His Arrow

- The novel begins with Chotti's ancestor, Purti Munda, repeatedly losing his land to outsiders (whites, Bengalis, and Biharis) due to the discovery of valuable resources.
- At fourteen, Chotti is sent to Dhani Munda, a comrade of Birsa Munda, to learn archery and also about the Munda community's perpetual bondage to landowners and moneylenders. Dhani Munda instills the spirit of Birsa's struggle and the Ulgulan movement in Chotti, also teaching him about ecological sustainability.
- Chotti's father tragically dies by suicide after being humiliated by a landowner, Lala Baijnath. Ironically, Lala Baijnath's son, Tirathnath, is later honoured with the title "Raisaheb" for saving villagers during a natural calamity.



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Choti's father tragically dies by suicide, taking his own life after being humiliated by a landlord, a landowner named Lala Baijanath. Ironically, Lala Baijanath's son Tirathanath

is later honored with the title of Rai Sahib for saving the villages during a natural calamity. The arrival of a brick kiln and contractors transforms the Mundas from hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists to daily wage laborers. They become beggars and laborers in their own lands. Narsingar's king becomes the new forest king.

According to the remodeling of the tribal domain and the tribal society with Narsingar's agent Tasildar Singh controlling the bonded laborers, the tribal bonded laborers until his death by a poisoned arrow. So this entire tribal domain is hijacked by Narsingar and Tasildar Singh, and they are controlling the tribal bonded laborers with poisoned arrows. So through coercion, through forceful, you know, governance and dominance. A new form of exploitation emerges with Romeo and his youth league party.

However, the Mundas, having endured enough, thoughtfully orchestrate the murder of all the party members from this league party. Next, we will briefly mention Devi's other short story, or rather novella, Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha. In this work, Devi has effectively employed the myth of the extinct Pterodactyl to portray the suffering of the Nagesia tribals in the Pirtha region. It was added to the collection named Imaginary Maps that came out in 1995, and it was translated into English by Gayatri Spivak. And it owes its depiction of the pterodactyl to Devi's experience, Devi's real-life experience with rock art, as well as the Pithora paintings by her Adivasi friend from Tejgarh.

Chotti Munda and His Arrow

- The arrival of a brick kiln and contractors transforms Mundas into daily wage labourers. Narsingar's king becomes the new "forest king," with his agent Tasildar Singh controlling the bonded labours until his death by a poisoned arrow.
- A new form of exploitation emerges with Romeo and his Youth League Party, but the Mundas, having endured enough, thoughtfully orchestrate the murder of all the party members.



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Through the reflections of Shankar, a literate tribal, the story portrays the erosion of the Nageshya tribals' culture and history. So Shankar contrasts their current transformed lives with a past of harmonious coexistence with nature and deep respect for Mother Earth, highlighting the disruption, the violation of their peaceful pastoral existence, and the way their environment has been eroded, wasted, and exploited by outsiders. All in the name of development. These artistic representations resonate with tribal memory, rebuilding a

timeless voice that embodies tribal history. Unfortunately, modernity's influence has led to the devastation of these pterodactyl paintings, which symbolize the ancestral spirit, the collective ancestral spirit of the tribal community.

Pterodactyl

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- These artistic representations resonate with tribal memory, rebuilding a timeless voice that embodies tribal history. Sadly, modernity's influence has led to the devastation of these pterodactyl paintings, which symbolize the ancestral spirit of the tribal community.



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Moving on to the next author in our discussion in today's lecture, Gopinath Mohanty was a prominent and prolific Odia writer of the mid-20th century, recognized with the Jnanpith Award as well as the first recipient of the National Sahitya Akademi Award in 1955 for his novel *Amrutara Santana*, which came out in 1947. Mohanty lived between 1914 and 1991. Among his works, which include *Dadi Buddha* that came out in 1944 and *Paraja* in 1945, his magnum opus *Amrutara Santana* is something that he is best known for. So *Amrutara Santana* stands out for his dedication to the lives and traditions of Odisha's tribal community. Providing a realistic glimpse into their everyday lives.

Gopinath Mohanty

- Gopinath Mohanty (1914–1991) was a prominent and prolific Odia writer of the mid-twentieth century, recognized with the Jnanpith award and as the first recipient of the National Sahitya Akademi Award in 1955 for his novel, *Amrutara Santana* (1947).
- Among his works, which include *Dadi Budha* (1944), *Paraja* (1945), his magnum opus, *Amrutara Santana* stands out for its dedication to the life and traditions of Odisha's tribal community, providing a realistic glimpse into their everyday lives.



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Set among the Paraja clan in Odisha's Koraput region, Mohanty's novel *Paraja*, which came out in 1945 and was translated by B.K. Das, reveals the exploitation of the tribals by the moneylender, landowners, and one figure that becomes very prominent in this

story. The narrative of exploitation is that of Ramachandra Bisoi, and the narrative thereby highlights a form of feudal binarism and maltreatment of the tribals at the hands of the non-tribals. The protagonist, the tribal protagonist Sukru Jani, lives peacefully in the Sarsupadar region with his two sons and two daughters, eight years after his wife's death.

Paraja

- Set among the Paraja clan in Orissa's Koraput region (Patangi and Jaypur Taluks), Mohanty's novel *Paraja* (1997), translated by B. K. Das, reveals the exploitation by moneylender-landowners like Ramachandran Bisoi, highlighting a form of focal edge binarism and maltreatment of the tribals at the hands of the non-tribals.
- The protagonist, Sukru Jani, lives peacefully in Sarsupadar with his two sons and two daughters, eight years after his wife's death. He dreams of happy marriages for his children within the Paraja community.



source: [instagram.com/readingbookshs](https://www.instagram.com/readingbookshs)

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He dreams of happy marriages for his children within the Paraja community. So his life does not have a lot of aspirations. He's not asking for a lot of material pleasures. All he wants is to see his children well settled through marriage and to have a square meal. And that's precisely what most of the tribal people want.

Paraja

- Set among the Paraja clan in Orissa's Koraput region (Patangi and Jaypur Taluks), Mohanty's novel *Paraja* (1997), translated by B. K. Das, reveals the exploitation by moneylender-landowners like Ramachandran Bisoi, highlighting a form of focal edge binarism and maltreatment of the tribals at the hands of the non-tribals.
- The protagonist, Sukru Jani, lives peacefully in Sarsupadar with his two sons and two daughters, eight years after his wife's death. He dreams of happy marriages for his children within the Paraja community.



source: [instagram.com/readingbookshs](https://www.instagram.com/readingbookshs)

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They don't have You know, a lot of materialistic desires, but even the minimum required for the maintenance of life and sustenance is often denied to them. So, in the case of the novel *Paraja*, the arrival of a forest guard with a lustful obsession for his daughter Jili shatters Sukrujani's peace as the guard demands his daughter through the Paraja leader. Here, author Mohanty portrays a seemingly civilized tax inspector from the mainstream,

non-tribal background, exploiting the tribal area, seeking both sexual and financial gains from the indigenous people, especially the women—a scheme exposed by a bonded laborer named Kau Paraja to the Paraja leader.

Paraja

- However, the arrival of a forest guard with a lustful obsession for his daughter Jili shatters his peace, as the guard demands her from the Paraja leader.
- Mohanty portrays a seemingly civilized tax inspector from the mainstream exploiting the tribal area, seeking both sexual and financial gains from indigenous women, a scheme exposed by Kau Paraja, a bonded laborer of the Paraja leader.
- Sukru Jani's fury erupts, stating firmly to Kau Paraja that their women are not for sale. This marks the onset of displacement and colonialism by the dominant culture in their ancestral lands.



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Sukrujani's fury erupts. He states firmly to Kauparaja that their women, the tribal women, are not for sale. They are not for sale and won't be sent to outsiders to satiate their lust. This marks the onset of displacement and colonialism by the dominant culture in their ancestral lands. The exploitative forest guard acts as a colonist, helping the moneylender evict the Paraja.

Paraja

- The exploitative forest guard acts as a colonist, helping the moneylender evict the Paraja. Failing his initial aim, the guard falsely accuses Sukru of illegal deforestation, leading to Sukru's first displacement.
- The eighty-rupee fine forces Sukru into bonded labour for the moneylender, borrowing 300 rupees from Ramachandra Bisoi to pay it, thus losing his freedom and becoming a bonded labourer due to government actions.



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Failing his initial aim, the guard falsely accuses Sukrujani of illegal deforestation, leading to Sukru's first displacement. An 80-rupee fine is enforced on Sukru, converting him into bonded labor for the moneylender. He borrows 300 rupees from the moneylender, Ramchandra Bisoyi, to pay off his fine, thus losing his freedom and becoming a bonded laborer due to government actions. To pay off the 80-rupee fine, he borrows 300 rupees

from the moneylender Ramchandra and henceforth becomes a bonded laborer on his own lands.

The novel also exposes the court system's prejudice against the tribals. It emphasizes the brutal feudal system and the Paraja tribe's marginalization, thereby depicting their severe exploitation at the hands of Ramchandra Bisoi and the corrupt government official and forest watchman named Garaja Sundara, who as the landlord's agent prevents their traditional means of survival, destroys their traditional means of survival. As a way of concluding, we see that Gopinath Mohanty Like Mahashweta Devi has exposed the economic exploitation and displacement of the tribals by the non-tribal elites.

Paraja

- The novel also exposes the court system's prejudice against the tribals. It emphasizes the brutal feudal system and the 'Paraja' tribe's marginalization, depicting their severe exploitation at the hands of Ramchandra Bisoi and the corrupt government official and forest watchman Garaja Sundra, who, as the landlord's agent, prevents their traditional means of survival.



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Conclusion

- Gopinath Mohanty, like Mahasweta Devi, exposed the economic exploitation and displacement of the tribals by the non-tribal elite. Mohanty, while also depicting horrific mainstream practices like bonded labour and torture of the subalterns, presents tribal difficulties with less force than Mahasweta Devi and in a less confrontational way, perhaps owing to the fact that the latter has been an activist, learning, living, and working among the tribals for a major part of her life.
- However, both Mohanty and Mahasweta share the underlying goal of bridging the gap between tribal and mainstream cultures (Vijayan and Maheswari, 2022).



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Mohanty, while also depicting horrific mainstream practices such as bonded labor and torture of these subalterns, presents the tribal difficulties, however, with some degree of less force as compared to Mahashweta Devi and in a less confrontational manner. And this could perhaps be owing to the fact that Mahashweta Devi has been an activist who

has for decades together lived with and learned from and worked among the tribals and she has invested a major part of her life trying to live with and learn from and understand the tribal way of life. However, what is common to both Mohanty and Mahashwita Devi is that both these prolific authors share the underlying goal of bridging the gap between

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the tribal and the mainstream cultures, both of them have invested their authorial faculty, their creative faculty, as well as their humanitarian faculty to, you know, try and understand the tribal society, how it works, how these people, you know, have rebuilt, how they have prepared themselves for the rebellions, why they have rebuilt, how they were stripped of their basic dignity to live with respect, to live in an organic way, the way their ancestors have time immemorially lived. how they have been deprived and how that has provoked them to take up arms time and again. So this effort to understand a people that are vastly different, whose cultures are vastly different from the non-tribals, has been present through a number of writings produced by both Mohanty and Mahashweta Devi. With this, we come to the end of our lecture today.

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



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