



Connecting the Tribals : Through the Toils and Translations of Sitakant Mohapatra's *The Awakened Wind: The Oral Poetry of the Indian Tribes*

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Abstract: The oral poetry mirrors the socio-cultural, religious and economic life patterns of the communities. Its documentation is an authentic source of knowledge. SitakantMohapatra, a true son of the soil, an administrator, and a poet from Odisha, has travelled and dived deep into the language, culture and tradition of the various tribal communities like the Santhals, the Kandhas, the Mundas, the Parajas, the Hos, the Oraons etc. and collected and translated their oral poetry. These oral songs depict the life, the way of the world of the various tribes, like birth, death, love, sex, marriage, fate, god, eternity, spirituality, rites, rituals and celebrations that are different from clan to clan, village to village. The poet has toil hard to understand the wisdom of the different tribal communities and the nuances and layers in their oral songs. The poet has also showed great reverence and appreciated their immense perseverance.

This paper will reflect Mohapatra's efforts to make tribal oral poetry open to the world and a sturdy commitment towards authentic documentation.

Key words- tribal communities, oral poetry, translation studies, folklores

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of literature dates back to the earliest human society. Right from the early days, people created stories, mainly to entertain themselves, sometimes to educate others, and for several other purposes. Even before the introduction of the writing system, such stories were transmitted orally from generation to generation. The term "oral literature" originates from here; at the early stage of human history, all literary works were preserved by oral tradition. As writing systems were invented and literacy replaced orality, oral literature was also written down as fixed texts. The codification of oral literature, however, is not a simple event in which a work of literature merely changed its form from one to another.

SitakantMahapatra, the eminent poet from Odisha, has, over the years, collected a vast array of oral poems from various tribal communities. He had travelled extensively to different parts of Odisha in his capacity as an administrator, and during his journeys, he collected oral poetry from various tribal communities like the Kondhs, the Mundas, the Santals, the Parajas, the Hos, the Oraons and the Koyas.

His training and research in anthropology, his education at Cambridge and Harvard and the consequent familiarity with Western modern poetry equipped him with a sensibility that could magically transform the native tradition, bringing modern experience to bear on his reading of the epics. His native village, the tribal people of Odisha are a regular presence in Sitakant's poetry. He once said;

"I hear...the voice of the rain, of numerous deaths, of remembered loves and the passing of the seasons punctuating births, sickness and death....." Sura P. Rath, who has been a close student of Sitakant's poetry, finds some keywords that recur in his poetry: Time, Destiny, History, Tradition, Death/Life.

The oral songs that he collected are on wide-ranging themes like birth, death, love, sex marriage, misery and tragedy of human life, the concept of time, eternity, spirituality, various rites, rituals, and celebrations that are different from clan to clan, village to village.

The oral poetry reflects the socio-cultural, religious and economic life patterns of the communities and thus its documentation is an authentic source of knowledge. Oral poetry, as is obvious from the nomenclature, is passed from generation to generation vocally and is rich in meanings, allusions, references, images, symbols and metaphors.

The composition of songs differs from tribe to tribe. It has been noticed that the songs of the Kondh and the Koya are longer in nature. The rituals of their everyday life have an artistic aspect. The singers decide the emotive aspect of each song. The songs emanating from the Kondh community reveal a greater tragic sense of life compared to Santali, Munda and Oraon songs. Sitakant Mahapatra is highly moved by the tribal communities – their poise and simplicity, naturalness and elegance that get reflected in their songs. He says: "I have sought to present the poems as poems of today, living, vital and warm, and not as dry ethnological data of a complex and strange "primitive" world..."

II. THE KONDHS

The Kondhs are the largest tribal community in Odisha, inhabiting in the districts of Phulbani, Koraput and Kalahandi. In writing about the poetry of the Kondhs, Mahapatra begins his first chapter with the scenery of the golden sunshine of *Pausa*, the ninth Odia month that usually falls in the end of December. The Kondhs celebrate the worship of *Dhartani*, the earth Goddess, in this month.

Song of Sacrifice

Meriah sacrifice offered to gods and goddesses is considered auspicious and the Kondhs try to appease God by sacrificing in order to live in peace and prosperity. The villagers later sing in chorus before the first stab is inflicted on the object of sacrifice or meriah:

The gods need so many bribes,
So many offerings.
Let there be no dark forests,
No calamity
Let all be happy
Let all live in peace (51-52)

Songs of Death

They believe that the spirit of the ancestors, the Duma, can see everything and hear everybody though they possess no body. Even the dead animal's spirit is considered a Duma. For the health and happiness of the family, the Kondhs pray and worship the dead ancestors and offer them food on several occasions during the Chaitra festival:

In all the festivals
 During Chaitra
 O our ancestors,
 Please come
 And take what we offer to you
 With love.

Song of Love

The love songs are ceremonial and have the element humor. They are conversational, argumentative, symbolical, metaphorical and heartwarming. The songs contain messages about how to strengthen family and social life, and talk of the values of oath, promises and the need for strong determination.

Life is fleeting;
 Old age exhausts everything
 As crops do not thrive well
 On lands once cultivated
 And again dug up,
 In an old man's life
 Joy withers;
 So long as life lasts
 And hearts beat
 Come, let us rejoice,
 Let us play. (63)

Marriage Songs

Love is described as a powerful force, one that spreads like the sunshine in the hearts of the lover and the beloved, who latter decide to live a spousal life. They usually meet near the hills, fountains and the mango grove. The marriage songs of the Kondhs sing are sung against the background of natural landscapes which are spectators as well as silent witnesses to them.

You have stolen our bride,
 We have seen her in your house,
 We have enquired about your name,
 And then come
 Leaping over the hills and mountains,
 Running through forests and bushes. (73)

III. THE SANTALS

The Santals are one of the major tribes of India, Mayurbhanj district of Odisha are richly populated with the Santals. Like the Kondhs and the Mundas, they are also fond of songs and dances who usually love fun and frolic, good food and good drink. It is the pleasure principle of the Santals that has probably prompted them to try to adopt modern social values and changes. The Santals are also known as the Kolean. They believe that their earliest name was not Santals but Kherwar. In an unpublished manuscript called *Hital*, Raghunath Murmu, the spiritual guru or Guru Gomke of the Santals, traces the origin of the tribe. The myths and legends of the Santals establish them as innocent and industrious like other tribes.

There have been a fair number of collections of Santal songs, both in original Santali and in English translation. Sometimes the songs are essential parts of ceremonies such as the *karamor* the *Bahaw* which the Santals share with the Mundas. Apart from the *binti* (songs describing Santal cosmology and recited during a marriage), the *bakhens* (invocation songs) and the *kudums* (Santali riddles), a selection of Santali love songs, marriage songs, *Bahas* songs and miscellaneous songs (comprising some songs on death and some associated with funeral rites and social customs) are also observed.

The world of the tribal supernatural is inhabited by Gods and Goddesses, both benevolent and malevolent. This supernatural world is always in an intimate, yet ambivalent love-hate relationship with the world of the living. The blessings of the spirits are invoked by the community for personal and communal welfare such as for rich harvests, for peace and plenty, for cows to yield sufficient milk, etc.

Let them be happy to take your left-over food and drinks.
 Let them have no headache or stomach-ache.
 Let no evil eyes haunt them.
 Have mercy on them and on us.
 Let not our kinsmen quarrel with us.
 Let them always be happy.
 Let them and let us be strong in body and mind. (“Giditara”)

The love songs of the Santalis are quite ornamental. These are also often metaphorical. The lover finds his beloved’s lips blossoming like a lotus flower. Similarly, the marriage songs of the Santalis delineate that a girl is meant for another house. They sing that girl is born for another family; parents cannot keep them forever:

A girl is meant for another house
 Parents cannot keep her forever. (“Marriage Songs: 5”)

The Santals also sing songs about how the love and affection of parents is like sugarcane and the love of a step mother is like bitter neem leaves:

Sweet is the Sugarcane
 And the love of the parents
 Bitter the neem leaves
 Bitter its Flower
 And yet more bitter a co-wife in the house. (“Miscellaneous Songs”)

The Santali song also depicts that there is an end to a life. In their lifetime, the Santalis have conquered the east, west, north and south. It means life for them has passed in the four directions of their village, particularly in the vast forests all around them. Death is the time and call of Maran Buru, the creator the God of life and death:

I have looked East, West, North and South
 No witch, no Magic killed me
 My life ended, my allotted time was over
 Maran Buru wanted me to return. ("Miscellaneous Songs: 12")

IV. CONCLUSION

Oral poetry thus gains its own beauty and charm that needs to be examined and researched extensively. Nature has given ample space to the tribes not only to grow but to create their own voice, language and poetry. Though agriculture retains its value as the base of each tribal existence in India, yet oral poetry is the evidence that mere food cannot fulfill all the human needs. People cannot live without song, dance, love and marriage. In their own tastes and flavours, the tribes have attempted to embellish their life by singing and dancing. One can often discern that almost all these tribes follow their own folk, myth, tradition and culture in order to systematize their living. Another aspect leaves an indelible mark on the mind of readers is that even in their illiteracy and difficult circumstances, these tribes exemplify their own progress and development with much faith on God, especially 'Nature God'. Through phases of hardships and through times of exploitation by outsiders to their land, faith and culture, they have always tried to keep themselves happy and festive with their songs, folks and dances. It is the tribes in different parts of the country that have enlivened and contributed to literature to a great extent. Their poetry – oral, mnemonic, mythical, traditional – can be termed as place-bound, space-bound, location-bound, time-bound and relationship-bound in a multi-cultural country like India. In this regard, kudos to Sitakant Mahapatra for his tireless efforts to make tribal oral poetry open to the world through translation with a sturdy commitment towards authentic documentation.

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