The Paraja in Gopinath Mohanty’s *Paraja*

**Abstract**

This paper attempts to examine the English version of Gopinath Mohanty’s Oriya novel *Paraja* as a novel portraying the culture and heritage as well as the struggle for survival of the Paraja as a tribe in Orissa. The Paraja also become in the novel representatives of the down-trodden and oppressed milieu: the voice of the subaltern. The novel sensitises the reader to millions of tortured indigenous people all over the world.

Gopinath Mohanty’s award winning Oriya novel *Paraja* (1945), translated by Bikram. K. Das into English has documented the life, customs, the culture, the festivals and the songs and dances of the Paraja tribe of the Koraput region of Orissa as well as their poverty, struggles, deprivation and exploitation by the non-tribals. In the Introduction to the English translation of the novel, the translator Bikram.K. Das says, Gopinath Mohanty ‘spent a life time trying to understand these tribals of the mountains and forests,’ and attempts to tell their story in several of his novels. The novel *Paraja* is about the unwritten tribal history, experiences and culture which are fast vanishing. The Paraja as well as the other tribes are being evicted from their land and a cultural and economic invasion is taking place. Gopinath Mohanty has gone back in history, to the oral tradition of the Paraja and has created a novel which sheds light on their way of life and their thinking which is being corrupted by forces of a materialistic society.

The Paroja are one of the well known tribes of Orissa. Their main concentration is in the districts of Koraput and Kalahandi. According to the 1991 census, the total population of the tribe was 3,53,336. Their growth rate was 32.24 per cent during the period 1981 -91. The term Paroja is a local Oriya term sometimes pronounced as Paraja, Parja or Poroja. It appears to be derived from the Sanskrit word Praja, which literally means the common people, i.e. subjects as distinct from the rulers called the Raja. The term Paraja also has another meaning in the Oriya language, namely the tenant (peasant) or Royat. In Koraput, the Paroja live with other communities like the Rana, Paika, Mali, Domb, Gadaba and Kondh. The Paroja in general are strong, stout and hard working. They are simple, friendly and hospitable but they like to remain aloof from people of other communities as they feel shy of them (S.C.Mohanty: 2004: 249-250).

In the novel *Paraja*, Sukru Jani and his family can be taken as representative of the Paraja tribe. The novel begins by situating Sukru Jani and his family in a village inhabited by the Paraja who live in thatched huts on Paraja street, while in the next street live the Dombs. Their needs are
simple and their desires limited: a bowl of mandia gruel every morning and again in the evening, a piece of land to cultivate, and a few pieces of cloth to cover their body. Sukru Jani’s wife Sombari is dead, killed by a man-eating tiger and since then he has lived with his sons Mandia and Tikra, and his daughters Jili and Bili. He has in his dreams a future, when he will play with his grandchildren and great grandchildren, and he has a deep faith in the ‘kind and benevolent’ spirits which have endowed his life with a sense of peace and repose. He plans to build separate houses for his sons when they get married as according to Paraja custom, married sons cannot live with their parents.

**Courtship and Marriage customs:** In traditional Paraja society, the institution of the youth dormitory functioned in every village. The unmarried boys and girls spend the night in their respective dormitories and enjoy the liberty of knowing one another more and more intimately. The boys and girls communicate their ideas and feelings through romantic love songs. In the novel, Jili and her friend Kajodi are courted by Bagala Paraja and Mandia through songs to the accompaniment of a single-stringed instrument called dungudunga. The string is twanged and the gourd-shell base of the instrument is beaten with fingers covered with rings to produce a harmonious music. To the accompaniment of the dungudunga, Bagala Paraja courted Jili by singing an ancient ballad:

```
To the rhyme of the maize that is fried
Or the maize that is boiled,
I fashion my song;
Oh my darling who keeps her word,
Lovely is your nose-ring of gold.
My dungudunga wears only a brass string
But it makes exquisite music.
Like a daughter crying out her heart
When her widowed mother is taken away
By another husband,
I pine and weep for you.
Oh my darling, do keep your word,
Save me, for I die with your name on my lips,
Oh Jili! (18)
```

As soon as the song is heard the girls leave the dormitories to meet their lovers. Jili’s Bagala is not in a hurry to marry Jili as he cannot pay the bride price. Bride price is the money or cash given to the girl’s family by the groom at the time of marriage - some kind of inversion of the dowry. The Paraja tribe may marry only in the months of February, March, April and May. The other types of marriage are marriage by capture and marriage by elopement. The huge bride price
practically makes the groom’s family bankrupt. Gopinath Mohanty explains that it is quite an accepted thing for a young man, unable to pay ‘bride price,’ to become a goti (bonded labourer) of his would-be father-in-law for a particular span of time. After he has paid off the bride price through his work, he is permitted to marry the girl. Bagala wishes to borrow money and become a goti but Jili does not want him to do so. Nandibali, the strong but penniless man in the novel agrees to become the goti of Sukru Jani in order to marry Bili, Sukru Jani’s younger daughter. This practice within the tribe causes no undue worry, but it is a matter of great concern when a man becomes a goti of a moneylender. Bagala does not marry Jili as her father and brothers become gotis of the Sahukar. He captures Kajodi and marries her, breaking the hearts of Jili and Mandia. The marriage rituals are described in great detail by Gopinath Mohanty in Chapter 49. “Bagala pressed Kajodi’s left foot with his right foot and spat three times in her face, and Kajodi did the same. Their necklaces and rings were exchanged; the ends of their clothes were knotted together and each took a ritual dip in the stream. The priest offered some eggs in sacrifice to the planet Rahu.” (189)

**Religion and Rituals:** According to S C Mohanty, ‘The Paroja worship a number of gods and deities for their well-being. ... Dead ancestors ...receive routine worship and sacrifices at festive occasions. The Paroja observe many seasonal festivals with pomp and ceremony around the year in order to propitiate their deities and ancestors as well as for their own enjoyment....The Dishari, the village astrologer, determines auspicious dates and moments for holding marriage ceremonies, communal festivals and rituals, and so on.’(S.C. Mohanty: 2004: 257) In chapter 38 of the novel the writer gives a detailed description of the functions of the Dishari. The Jani is the village head priest. Dishari acts as the astrologer. ‘To help him in his divination’, says the novelist, ‘the Dishari uses a medium known as Beju (or a Bejuni, if it is a woman), who is possessed by some ancestral spirit or tribal god or goddess, and temporarily acquires supernatural powers of prophecy.’(143) The Paraja tribe worship nature in the form of gods and goddesses. Dharmu is the chief god and others are ‘Basumati, Earth goddess, Jhakar, the god for all seasons and Bagh-Debita, the tiger god’. (144) During the harvest festival celebrated in December, Earth goddess is propitiated with the blood of a black rooster. For the spring festival, the god of spring had to be invoked with the sacrifice of a chicken when the barking deer called. Just about that time a pigeon would be sacrificed on the appearance of two stars on Elephant Hill. The ‘shrine’ of the god of spring was an ancient and enormous mango tree deep in the jungle (148), where the villagers worshipped with song and dance to the beating of drums. The priest chants a long incantation to the god of Spring, the first stanza of which is quoted below:

\[O \text{ mighty god of Spring} \]
\[Awake!\]
\[Shake off your sleep.\]
\[See, the trees are heavy with flowers;\]
The Chaitra moon is in the sky.
We are all dressed up for the dance
In your honour,
And the young men and girls are waiting,
Wake up, and come! (146-147)

In the month of Aswina came the Durga Puja which is presented colourfully by the novelist: ‘The spirit of the goddess was abroad, and the soothsayers and witch-doctors, the kalis and shamans and begumis, possessed by the deity, danced wildly; buffaloes were sacrificed, their blood spurting out in lurid jets to mingle with the mud; drums throbbed…trumpets shrilled… There were flags and processions, displays of swords, battle-axes and spears, and always the shouting and roaring and grunting for blood, more blood.’(322-323). The novelist also describes the Dasahara festival at Jeypore but the ‘king’, had become a mere ‘rent-collector’ but he held court at Dasahara with games and a fireworks display.

The novel Paraja is rich in ethnographic detail as Gopinath Mohanty minutely records the rituals, beliefs, ceremonies and tribal wisdom regarding the eco-system and the landscape. The novelist presents a pictorial and informative account of the mountains and forests of Koraput, a comprehensive account of the numerous activities of the Paraja starting from one winter to another winter spanning a full year. An important event in the novel is the hunt during the spring festival. All the able-bodied men of the village proceed on a hunting expedition which continues for two or three days. ‘The men would go out into the jungle, prepared to face the taunts of their women if they should return empty-handed. The women would tie their clothes together and hang them up on a rope, and anyone who failed to kill something would be made to crawl under the garments; he would be pelted with dung-balls and other filth…but success was greeted with garlands and dancing and rejoicing.’(159) The hunting expedition is metaphoric too as Mandia and Bagala set out not just to hunt an animal but also their mate. It is Bagala who captures Kajodi and runs away into the jungle and exercises the ancient Paraja right of marriage by capture.

Every festival is accompanied with singing, dancing and drinking. The men had ‘mahua wine and the women pendum- strong mandia beer – or landha, which is only slightly less potent.’(171) The mahua wine is brewed from the flowers of the mahua tree, with clay pots to ferment and boil and the flowing stream water is used to cool it. Gopinath Mohanty describes the process of distillation very elaborately. ‘The tribesman needed liquor not only to propitiate his gods but also to drown his hunger and his misery.’ (98) The Paraja commemorate their dead by planting a stone vertically for a man and laid flat for a woman, in the open space in the centre of the village. It is here that the bonfire is lit and the young men and women dance during the spring festival. ‘The dead and the living came together to worship the joy of spring.’ (149)
**Bonded Labour:** The forest guard is the first outsider to whom we are introduced in chapter 2. He has his eye on Jili but after being spurned by her and insulted by her father, he takes his vengeance on the family by implicating Sukru Jani for the illegal felling of trees. To escape imprisonment he borrows from Sahukar Bisoi to pay the fine and in exchange becomes a debt bound goti or a bonded labourer.

Nityananda Das in his essay on ‘The Tribal situation in Orissa’ says that indebtedness among the tribals is a chronic malady and is not controlled. The moneylenders and traders from plains broke down the traditional pattern of economic life (Nityananda Das: 2002:177). ‘The practice of goti among the Parajas implies a fixed arrangement by which a man has to work instead of making cash payment for benefits received.’(KumKum Yadav:; 2003:148)

In chapter10, Gopinath Mohanty describes how the tribesmen seek loans from the Sahukar for marriages or bride price, and for grains during the lean months of the rainy season. The ‘interest far exceeded the principal and the debt went on increasing from year to year.’(49) The poor tribals would mortgage their land and the Sahukar became master of their land, their bodies and souls too.

According to the agreement on which Sukru Jani and his illiterate son, Tikra Jani put their thumb impression, the Sahukar charges compound interest at fifty percent per annum and only rupees five a year for the services rendered by Sukru Jani and Tikra. Not only does Sukru Jani and Tikra become gotis but his son, Mandia also become the Sahukar’s goti. Mandia is caught trying to make money by selling liquor which is illegal.

Gopinath Mohanty points out that the mercenary interest of the non-tribals destroys the relationship between the Paraja and his land. Sukru and his sons lament that they can not till their land while they work on the land of the Sahukar. Chapter 32 brings up the horrific practice of bonded labour. The gotis live in ‘ragged mud-walled huts drooped as if they were too tired to stay up; the thatches had grown bald from the wind and the rain; tattered rags hung from the rafters, and men, women, children, chickens, dogs and swine groveled in the same dust.’(120) At times the tribesmen are cheated by the Sahukar by entering the amount loaned to the tribesman in four different ledgers and charged interest at fifty percent four times over. The Sahukar puts down all mutinies by mercilessly beating them and handing them over to the police who are kept happy by the Sahukar with many favours. It may be argued that though bonded labour is abolished now, their lot has not improved as expected. According to Kundan Kumar 87% of Scheduled Tribes in South Orissa live below poverty line. (Co-Acting; Vol. I, 1; 2006; p.3)

**The Migrant Labourers:** The erosion and exploitation of the Paraja by the outsiders is
evident in the migration of Jili and Bili as labourers at a road construction site. Left alone to fend for themselves they are led away by recruiting agents. While they earn more money than they ever imagined, they also fall easy victims to another form of exploitation by the men on the construction site. Gopinath Mohanty points out that, ‘Jili and Bili grew more lonely each day… Each looked at the other for restraint that no one else would supply…’\(^{(222)}\) Sukru Jani brings them home once he frees himself from the Sahukar after mortgaging his land to the Sahukar. According to him, ‘A paraja girl works only for her father or her husband.’\(^{(239)}\) The young men also dream of escaping to the tea plantation of Assam for better wages but as the Sahukar’s ‘gotis’ they are unable to do so.

**Paraja and the Law:** All the tribesmen as well as the protagonist of the novel, Sukru Jani, live in fear of the law. According to Nityananda Das, ‘the literacy rate among the tribals is low’ (Nityananda Das: 2002:172) and this leads to the Paraja’s terror of the law and officials and the police. The novelist says, ‘For the tribals live under the constant threat of official persecution, and no existence in the jungle is possible unless one learns to play hide-and-seek with the law. Everyone wanted to save his own skin, and lies were spoken with great moral conviction. Their natural simplicity and honesty had been corroded by a lifetime of fear and insecurity.’ \(^{(35)}\) Sukru Jani never felt that felling trees was a crime in the eyes of the law; nor did the tribe find anything wrong in secretly making liquor instead of buying from licensed shops. Sukru Jani and his tribe felt that everything that grew on the hills and in the forests were free like the rain, sunlight, and air. According to Gopinath Mohanty, ‘their heads were like stone.’\(^{(33)}\) This is one reason why the tribals are trapped by the moneylenders. The tribesman has a natural horror of the law as he has no idea of the terms of the contract between the Sahukar and the goti. Gopinath Mohanty explains, ‘He has his own rough-and-ready system of accounting a length of rope in which he ties a knot for every year of goti-hood completed by him.’\(^{(123)}\)

The tribals are also horrified of the prison and the novelist says, ‘it is altogether beyond his comprehension for it belongs to a system in which he has no part, though he lives on its fringes.’\(^{(104)}\) Once a paraja goes to jail he is ostracized, crippling him socially as well as economically. Hence Mandia decides to raise a loan of fifty rupees from the money lender and become a goti instead of imprisonment after getting caught for distilling illicit liquor. Gopinath Mohanty mentions, ‘The law forbade anyone who is not himself a tribal to buy tribal land.’\(^{(194)}\) But the moneylenders discover loopholes in order to possess the lands of the tribals. In chapter 52 we see how the non-tribals usurp tribal land through unscrupulous means. The Sahukar’s cordial relationship with the headsman and other officials earns him the ownership of the tribal lands. Gopinath Mohanty says, ‘The revenue records were doctored to show that the lands in question really belonged to the Sahukar …’ \(^{(197)}\) Nityananda Das points out that the tribals surreptitiously mortgage land by oral agreement. (Nityananda Das: 2002:176) The novelist explains how Sukru Jani mortgaged his land to the Sahukar without any written agreement, ‘it was all done by word of
mouth, tribal fashion. There were no witnesses either... And, by tribal custom, Sukru Jani ceased to be a goti from the very moment that the agreement was made; ... and the land passed into the Sahukar’s hands.’(233) For the Paraja land ownership is communal and not individual as for the non-tribal but the novelist shows that commercial priorities and materialistic concerns erode traditional tribal patterns and values. The other Paraja watch dispassionately as Sukru Jani mortgages his fields and they even feel that one day they will possess the land.

**Paraja and Justice:** In *Paraja* Gopinath Mohanty also portrays the tribesman in the court seeking justice for displacing them from their land. When Sukru Jani and his sons try to free their land from the Sahukar by paying for it, he cheats them by referring to the oral agreement according to which the land had been mortgaged to the Sahukar for 30 years. When Sukru Jani and his sons decide to appeal to the court of law, they are faced with the world of ‘clerks, peons, policemen and lawyers carrying thick books... The tribesmen lived in terror of the court.’(339) The Sahukar wins the case by bribing and threatening the Paraja tribesmen. Sukru Jani is duped again. It is sad that while the tribe sing and dance together and unite at festivals, hunts and bazaars, they do not stand by Sukru in his hour of need. The fear of the Sahukar, poverty, deprivation and materialistic concerns has eroded their solidarity and strength. As a last resort Sukru, Mandia, Tikra and Nandibali try to talk to the Sahukar but the Sahukar kicks them out. In a state of anger Mandia axes the Sahukar and the three surrender before the police. The violence at the end of the novel explodes out of silent suffering and anger, which is like ‘a fire that feeds on itself and waits’ (127) till it cannot be contained any more. According to Mahasweta Devi violence is justified when tribals are oppressed. ‘When the system fails in justice, violence is justified.... The individual cannot go on suffering in silence.’(Mahasweta Devi: 2001: xii) As a writer Gopinath Mohanty shows the vulnerability and ignorance of the tribal and how ill-equipped he is to tackle new situations. The novelist’s agenda is to create social awareness about the oppression and abuse of the Paraja and not offer any solutions and alternatives.

The novel *Paraja* communicates the agony of the tribals, of marginalized people all over the world. Thus the novel is more than a sociological and anthropological document because its characters are not merely primitive tribesmen ensnared by a predatory moneylender. Gopinath Mohanty’s protagonists are also quintessentially men and women waging a heroic but futile war against a hostile universe.

**References:**


Dr Elizabeth Susan Paul is the Reader in Department of English of Gokhale Memorial Girls’ College, Kolkata, India