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Eco-critical Reading of *The Tribal World of Dangaan*

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Abstract

*The inception of the Industrial Revolution boosted and accelerated the speed of development under the auspices of Capitalism. Humans moved away from nature and started to exploit natural resources for their benefit. Since ancient times, tribal communities have lived close to nature. The early literature by tribal communities was oral but thematically expressive of the environment. In the age of late capitalism, they still maintain a primitive lifestyle. The educated indigenous authors' literary oeuvres are replete with a plethora of references to tribal myths which reveal the eco-centric approach of the tribal. In the present paper, *The Tribal world of Dangaan* is studied to understand the ideology of the MahadeoKoli community regarding the environment. Exploitation of the rich forest life for economic gains, the true owners: who depend on the forest for subsistence, of the forest wealth are deprived by the arbitrary laws, victimization of innocent tribals by the rapacity of modern urban so-called civilized communities, issues like these are dealt with at thematic level.*

Key Words: Tribal, Environment, Ecology, Development, Eco centric.

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The adivasis know much more than the non- adivasis

G. N. Devy

Many changes have been and are happening in the environment especially in our approaches towards environmental issues since civilization began to grow. We have come so far, and time has changed tremendously. Along with time we and our surroundings have also changed. Throughout all these transpositions many of the experts ruminate over the concept theDevelopment. Many scholars are particularly concerned about the changes we have made in nature by overusing or exploiting it. Nowadays we are seeing people talking about ‘going back to nature’, here nature means not human nature but nature as a whole of which we are one part. But the primary question is why we felt the need to think this way at this stage of civilization. Why did we feel the need to trace back the history of human transformation and stress on the natural environment that was prevalent in pre-Enlightenment Western Christianity?

Poststructuralists point out the discursivity of everything. The *Tribal World of Dangaanis* about such a nature discourse wherein the nonhuman world is at the centre. Tribal literature in general and *The Tribal World of Dangaanin* particular are fertile fields for ecocritical inquiry. The Eco critical reading of texts like *The Tribal World of Dangaan* will help us justify our excavation into the human developmental process. G. N. Devy in his book *A Nomad Called Thief* has talked about the knowledge system of Adivasis. He thinks that talkingto Adivasis we might get the feeling that they do not have any knowledge systems worth the name, but then, looking at the way they live, the way they build their hours, and their understanding of nature, we cannot help concluding that they have a deep knowledge of things (95). But before that let us trace human history a little.

Once upon a time when civilization was at its juvenile stage, nature and humans were connected. A man was still seeking wonders in nature, considering himself as a part of it just as other species on the earth. Nature also fulfilled all his desires with its wonderful

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repository. After some time when Man's reasoning power discloses him as the most powerful animal in the universe, he starts considering himself as the centre of the universe. After the Enlightenment, man started denying the supreme power of God and treated himself as the supreme. Michelangelo's painting *Creation of Man* explains this attitude of man. Later on, when industrialization commenced, man started using and exploiting everything that was in nature for his use. The industrial revolution rests upon the principle that nature is replete with all the resources and man should use those sources to fulfill his desires. Because everything around him exists for his service, to make his life more comfortable. The Industrial Revolution gave rise to Capitalism which replaced feudalism. When Capitalism spread all over the world it started overusing natural resources. By and by human beings he started realizing the bad effects of his exploitative conduct towards nature. Because all the oppressive apparatuses that he used on nature ultimately affected his very life.

Now the question is how *The Tribal World of Dangaan* helps us to heal the damage we made to nature and us eventually. It is a book of ten short stories that narrates the lives of the tribal community: the *MahadeoKoli* community, sprawling in the Northern regions of Maharashtra and the Southern regions of Gujarat. It is a book originally a translation of the Dangaan language book *Raab* by Sanjay Lohakare, one of the members of this community. In *Raab*, there are fifteen short stories in all out of which only ten stories have been translated by DurgeshBorse into English, the title of the translated work is *The Tribal World of Dangaan*. The title of the English translation has been changed since these stories in the book familiarize readers with the cultural and social aspects of the community. At the same time, stories like *Raab*, *Avanee*, *Kaansari*, *Rankanda*, and *Jeetrab* inspire us to rethink our ways towards nature. The scenes that are unfolded in the series of stories in this anthology are relentlessly addressing environmental concerns.

The stories of the *Tribal World of Daangan* explain the ways tribes construct nature. These tribal people know the science of ecology. For making *raab* they do not cut the trees which bear fruits. Neither do they catch crabs during a particular month of the year. Their life

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is a life of hardship and labour but happy and satisfied they do not have any rapacity. They help all creatures to live. Adivasis have been living in these regions for thousands of years. They know the phenomenon of natural crises, and they know how to cope with situations. These stories are representatives of all Adivasis. They are true protectors of nature. This ideology is so entrenched in their way of life that they cannot even think of transgressing it. These stories describe the country with an implicit and explicit contrast to the urban (....) nature like Adivasis is malleable to political ideology. The ubiquitous presence of capitalist politics takes Adivasis from nature and there is no retreat. At the end of the story, RaabHanmya is sad about being punished for his gullibility, and Hanmya feels like Adam for losing paradise. The saddest heart of Hanmya cries like Adam, *O unexpected stroke, worse than of death, must I leave the paradise (Paradise Lost, 87)*. These stories are interventions in the political ideologies that are against the penchant for inhibiting the natural world and providing to worship holistic ecological ideologies and serious ripostes to unhealthy expanding options offered by newfangled ideas of progress in the modern capitalist movement since they cohere into the convincing environmentalism.

These stories ask various questions about the Capitalist system. They question our definitions of development. It is widely accepted that the Capitalist system depends on the principle of exploitation. It has created a hierarchy in society. These stories question the hierarchy created by Capitalism. Tribal people live sequestered life in the lap of nature. Their life is so much part of it that they know how to use nature for various purposes. Even Capitalists know how to use nature, but their approach is exploitative whereas tribal people are very delicate and respectful.

They work in nature. Their knowledge system is born out of the philosophy of nature. They know their existence depends on nature. For thousands of years, they have taken care of nature. They adorn nature. We see tribal use of natural products as medicine in the story *Rankada*. The tribal community does not seem to support modern medicine. An undernourished child of the tribal family is shown in the story and Thamyaa, an assistant at

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Balwadi comes to their home with a nurse to advise them to take the child to the nearest government hospital where he would be given treatment. The grandfather of the child tells his son that earlier when food was scarce, people used to live on jungle produce and fruits like *Khurpudya*, *Chav*, *Haminda*, *Aaina*, *Rankanda*, and Paddy and even sometimes they used to eat bitter beans using a particular natural purification process so that bitterness would vanish and used to fill their bellies. He also tells him about fruits like *KaduKand* which is a potential energy source and satisfies hunger for a week. Adivasis have their rich science of natural medicine to make their life happier and healthier. But nowadays various rules and restrictions by Governments deny them accessibility to forest products. They have to seek permission from government officials and many times they fall prey to the inhuman treatment given by forest officials who ask for bribes. The grandfather in the story experiences the same thing. To let him get Rankada to treat the malnutrition of his grandson he is asked to grease the palms of the officers. Failing to fulfil the demands of officers he is treated badly and cannot reach on time. The child was taken to the government hospital and after a day of treatment, the child was declared dead due to malnutrition. It created an attitude of enmity among the people toward the government and administration.

Story *Rankada* simply says that we should listen to the Adivasis' voice, their way of treatment is natural and may not look advanced like our modern medicine but genuine. The dichotomy between man and nature is not observed in many tribal communities across the globe, theirs is a symbiotic relation, and harm to nature is a threat to human existence is articulated in these short stories. Non-humans are more respected, and venerated by the noble savage. Maruti Chitampalli, a renowned Marathi writer and naturalist says the same thing in his story *Arani* in his book *Ranvat* that the knowledge of Adivasis about natural medicine could help us to make our life healthy. They don't support modern medicine because they have a rich system of traditional medicine. Thiers is an eco-medical system.

This legacy they have inherited from their intimacy with nature. The same is seen in the story *Jeevaba* which tells about the painting skills of tribal people using natural colours

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made from rice flour's batter and even paintings painted by those Adivasis decorated with natural sceneries. It indicates their culture is ingrained in nature. The art of Adivasis is natural. They have not mechanized it yet. In today's world, we see nature-culture binary opposition we don't find this in them. The festivals they celebrate are also according to the changes that happen in nature. Through festivals, they celebrate and welcome new whims of nature. For example, *Holi* is celebrated and the sound of Dhol fills the Dangaan region and people dance forgetting class and caste differences. They offer coconut to *Holipuja* and sing songs worshipping nature, call earth a Goddess and pay obeisance to her through their songs.

We find them giving importance to connections whether it is human to human or human to nature which we are forgetting in the Capitalist world. They are connected with nature. The bond is never broken. If we look at their ways of working on the farm, they always work together and help others to get their work done. *Irjuk* (all the villagers help a farmer in farming work and they are given a feast after the work) and *Savad* (two families help each other to do farming work) are still seen in the community. The burden of loneliness is lessened in this way. And the connection between human beings and nature is firm due to their dependency on nature for their livelihood and that's why their lifestyle is very much natural and one with nature. They try to preserve nature and take proper care of it. Even they have myths that tell us their concerns for nature. In the story *Kaansari* when an old farmer gets a good crop of *nagali*, youngsters advise him to sell it and get a good amount out of it. His answer tells us that they do not have the Capitalist approach of making money out of everything they produce. He says, "The *nagali* crop is the gift given by God to us.... People worshipped it as a goddess. She must be kept in-house and preserved. The grain is not to be sold. You can sell other crops but not this. One *bhakar* of this grain is enough for the whole day" (*Kaansari* 63-64). Because it is nutritious and helps to regain one's strength scaled down due to infirmity. It is also preservable as it does not get damaged due to long sojourn in the granary.

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Their end objective is not to gain profit as we see it in the present world. In another story titled *Jeetrab*, it is said that during the month of Shraavan, people of this community prohibit non-veg food and abstain from liquor. Nobody kills animals and chickens and catches fish and frogs. Strict Vegetarianism is kept for the whole month. Instead of prohibition when the children in the story eat crabs, grandfather catches them and when the children ask him, *how is catching crab in the Shraavan sinful?* his answer them, "Who says it is an act of sin? It is all superstition. Nothing happens to you if you eat crabs during Shraavan. The truth is that in Shraavan, crabs give birth to many crabs. These small crabs grow into big ones. From the month of *Bhadrapad*, we never experience a scarcity of crabs for the whole year" (*Jeetrab*127). Like us, they too are part of this ecosystem. "Ours is a life of dependence. We depend on them. They depend on us. We respect this life of dependency. We can survive only if they survive. Otherwise, there will be no crabs, and we shall famish" (*Jeetrab*127). Tribal people know the nature-human dependency cycle and they care for it as they care for their own lives. "Deep ecology foregrounds the value of nature in itself, the equal rights of other species and the importance of small communities," (Heise 512) this philosophy resonates in every story of this anthology. There are no minted ideas about nature in those stories and the insights about nature that we learn through these stories are an inseparable part of tribal life. There is an increasing urgency to take ecology seriously since ecological problems are interconnected with the existence of life on the earth. Conclusively, though the ecological views occurring in the stories can be legitimately called ideologies of tribal communities, but they address issues concerning human existence in general and pragmatically.

And they are also very possessive and protective of their style of living. Therefore, they stood against the British when they tried to intrude and plunder the Adivasi way of living. The same is true even after independence. When in the story *Raab*, the government plans to construct a dam in their region they ferociously resist the project. As a result of the dam construction, hectares of fertile land are lost. It also displaces the natives. As we have

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seen earlier, tribal kinships are strong, therefore the whole village turns against this decision of the government. Because of their agitation government did not take any action, for a while there was no movement but then the place of dam construction changed. This time, it is being built on poor landholders, and officials force them to leave. The government launched various projects in the name of tribal development, but do they are beneficial for them? Such types of projects are mostly proposed without ascertaining tribals' genuine and essential requirements. P. Sainath, an active rural journalist while referring to one of the road construction projects by the government in the name of a tribal man in the Surguja district of Madhya Pradesh mentioned in his book *Everyone Loves a Good Draught* the opinion of a local NGO activist who says *a lot of projects have to be justified as being beneficial to tribals. That's the way to get the funds released* (23). If those projects are meant for tribal development, they should hit the target not hurt the target which is done by most such schemes. Hence, there is a consensus contention among tribal communities about the shortcomings of successive governments to deal appropriately with the problem of rehabilitating tribal communities then their lands are parcel out, obviously through some arbitrary reasons.

Raab is a procedure in which the farmer of the community cuts the branches and leaves of particular trees burns them to ashes and uses them as organic manure. The trees which are used for *raab* are selected very carefully. Only those trees are chosen which yield no fruits and those are also not eaten by cattle and even birds don't sit upon them. Adivasi people question the action of dam construction, treating them like the *Raab* (a useless part of society).

When we go for *rabbini*, we cut down useless trees and leaves.... We are also like useless trees. We are not important in society. The government cut us down forming *Raab*. This *Raab* makes them rich. They will have a good harvest of politics out of our *Raab*. The people like us are born to become *Raab*. (*Raab*19-20)

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Why should they leave their homes and villages? We are stealing their harmonious life close to nature under the name of development. According to the story, one reason for this could be that some people from the community fall prey to the lure of capitalism. To get more produce, they now use some modern techniques in their farming, like using chemical fertilizers such as urea. Mostly the younger generation is inclined towards modernism whereas the older generation is very close to nature and concerned about the loss of harmony in nature.

The use of urea in the story *Avanee* increases the yield, but it kills the friendly insects on the farm. Rachel Carson indicated the same in *The Silent Spring*. The grandfather in the story is startled by the absence of grasshoppers, frogs, and crabs on the farm. He tells his son that in his childhood they used to keep some sticks of rice at the time of *Avanee* and he says that they do not produce only for themselves. The "insects," which "bring liveliness to the farm" are also living along with us. *We must protect these insects. We should not be selfish in our dealings. Human life is insignificant without them*(35).

But now he is disturbed because urea has destroyed these insects. "The farms had become childless mothers." The adverse effects of urea are apparent very soon. It weakens the fertility of the land, and the low production of rice, and families suffer from starvation. *The use of urea increased the production of rice. After a short period, adverse effects were seen. Too much use of urea weakened the fertility of the land. Production decreased, and addiction increased. Consequently, there was low production of rice. (Avanee36).*

Thus, we see the new generation of tribal is attracted by the profit-making tactics of the modern world and eventually face the bad effects but are left with no option. The old generation understands the symbiotic relationship between nature and human beings. The father in the story is punished for a tangential act against nature. They used to follow the principle of live and let live. This is the idealization of tribal life. People's happiness does not come from money but from good harvests. Their assiduous naturalism prevents them from moving away from primitive pagan practices. They do not have institutional gods, they

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worship nature. Before starting *Raab* work Hanmya paid offerings to the tree god. On the day of Holi, they worshipped the sun god. The goddess Kansari is the cornucopian source of grain. Hanmys, the grandfather, and other tribal people are annoyed at the indiscriminate appropriation of nature.

Thus, we see the duality between these two generations but still, there is a third generation of grandchildren whose neutrality in these stories teases sometimes. What would be their stance is important as they have two different models before them. When we see the development of civilization as discussed above the present generation is also in the same state as the third generation in these stories. We too have two models before us – 1) pre-Enlightenment & 2) Industrial Revolution (Capitalism). Now our approach towards these models would be the determiner of our future.

One thing is certain, the third generation in the story can't continue with their father's way of living so far. They have to think over the grandfather's generosity towards nature and they will have to find a golden means and form a new system that helps to balance between humans and nature. In the same way, Capitalism is at the full-fledged stage and its bad effects are forcing us to bring certain decisive changes in our ways towards nature. The present generation should be careful about nature. Otherwise, as natural resources are limited once they are exhausted, we would leave with no option. These stories foretell the end of natural resources due to overuse. Arguably, the stories in the anthology are emphatic narratives of the transformation, and hybridization caused by modernization and globalization, giving a call for ecologically attuned ways of life.

Nowadays we can see some of the new ideas reflecting on Capitalism and giving counter-discourses like the *counter-culture movement of the 1960s in the Western societies, which as a part of its alternative to modern life in industrialized, urban societies, advocated a rural, agricultural setting, living communally, frugally and in 'tune with nature*(J. Barry 25). Even we see there is an increased demand for organic things. The pandemic, we have just suffered, has taught us, through many of the natural beautiful sceneries we witnessed during the

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lockdown, that nature is rejuvenating and can bring its liveliness back if we bridle our over-ambitiousness.

If we are to prepare a syllabus to study environmental philosophy, cultural environmentalism, and environmental history; incorporating cultural attitudes towards the environment, these stories will, satisfactorily, be proven unavoidable. Tribal culture teaches us how to protect nature. To stop environmental devastation and to go for the preservation of it, a tribal lifestyle is the only possible, free, and easy solution that eschews too much human intervention and androcentric ideologies since the tribal adhere to traditional notions of life and their ideas, though culturally shaped, deeply entrenched in a discourse that determines quotidian activities of tribal people.

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