



Oral Tradition and Tribal Identity in the Novel “*Tuhilu ker Sapna*” by Livnus Kindo

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The term Indigenous People, though of recent coinage at the international level, has been in use in India for a long time. In fact, social workers, missionaries, and political activists have been using the term ‘Adivasi’ in India for the indigenous people for a long. Some suggest that the term “Adivasi” may have originated in Chotanagpur in the 1930’s. A.V. Thakkar, a prominent social worker widely popularized the term in the 1940s, and it created an identity for certain communities and also provided strong political impetus to certain issues. Addressing the constituent Assembly on September 5, 1949, Jaypal Singh Munda unequivocally and strongly demanded that “Scheduled Tribes” identity be translated as “Adivasi.”

Tribal people have a very close interaction with the environment and nature. I will be attempting to understand the interplay between religion and environment in one of the major tribal groups of the country viz. the Oraons. According to Livnus Kindo, Oraons, Mundas, Kharias and Kisans are forgetting their religious tradition and culture today. So, in his book “*Tuhilu ker Sapna*” he tried to show what customs and rituals are being followed during festivals, jattras and marriages. The tribal orientation to the environment is shaped by their religious beliefs and customs. The Oraons call themselves Kurukh, as a group and a language; they are identified as belonging to Dravidian groups along with the Telugus, Tamils, Kannadigas etc. However, the Oraons have remained ‘undeveloped,’ and they do not have a script and literature of their own and whatever literature they have is only in the oral form. They inhabit the territory comprising the adjoining districts of Bihar (undivided), Madhya Pradesh (undivided) and Odisha which constitute the segment of the Jharkhand State proposed by the tribal leadership. Tribal people believe in the existence of spiritual beings as well as in the hierarchy of beings. For them, *Dharmes* is the supreme spiritual being. He is followed by the ancestors and then the other spiritual beings. *Dharmes* is referred to as *Biri Belas* or the Sun King. The ‘Sun’ here is conceived only as a symbol, not as a personification of nature. The next in the order of hierarchy are

ancestors or forefathers who are concerned with the welfare of the living. In return, the living members discharge their filial duty towards them by offering food and sacrifices on various occasions. Spirits are mysterious beings who operate in the supernatural realm of reality; they basically act as guardians of nature. They have to be placated by offerings and sacrifices lest they destroy crops, forests, vegetation, and natural resources. Spirits are good or bad depending on how people maintain the relationship with them as enjoined by God.

According to the Oraon story of creation, initially, the earth was covered with water and later clay was obtained from under the water and with the help of the earthworm of Kilkila bird, and God furnished the land. Men and animals were made of clay and were provided with food according to their needs. According to one story, God found the world infested with undesirable elements as a result of human excrement. According to another story, the world was filled with foul smells from the corpse of a man-eating beast. God rained fire day and night to destroy the infection and to purify the earth. God instructed the monkey to beat on a drum when half of the world was destroyed but the monkey was busy eating the *tela* fruits and forgot to beat the drum. So, the result was that the whole world was destroyed and two human beings (*bhaiya-bahin*) escaped by hiding themselves in a crab hole.

Sacred groves, or small patches of forest, dedicated to deities and ancestral spirits are classic examples of culturally sensitive community-based natural resource management. Sacred groves have cultural and spiritual significance for the indigenous communities that care for them, exhibit rich biodiversity, and provide ecosystem services to the local communities that have protected them over the centuries throughout the world. Indigenous communities across India have protected forest patches as sacred groves in the vicinity of their village for generations.

For a tribe, the space is filled with spiritual beings, there are two types of space – cosmic and physical. Only God lives in the cosmic space, and other spirits are believed to dwell in specific parts of the land – like hills and hillocks, dense trees and vegetation, water resources such as rivers, tanks, wells etc. The spirits of ancestors are believed to reside in *kundi* (a pool of water or stream marked by a long stone slab) of *bhunihari* (*native*) village i.e. a village founded by ancestors. The *Khunt* spirits are those who inhabited their forest before it was brought under settlement by the founders of the village. A plot of land is generally kept fallow in their honour. In contrast to the ancestor spirits, who dwell in a limited place, other spirits are scattered over various parts of the village. The village tutelary spirits are located in different areas within the village boundaries – a pond, a grove of bamboo, a ravine etc. and they are named after their location.

There are some important spirits like *Chala pachcho*, *Darha*, *Chandi*, *Baranda*, etc. *Chala pachcho* (sacred grove or Sal trees) is regarded as the spirit of the village. *Darha* spirit is regarded as the guardian of the village, *Chandi* is the spirit of war and hunting and assists in hunting expeditions, and it is represented by round stones. *Barahda* is a household spirit and is the guardian of each household and keeps a watch over the threshing floor when the harvest is gathered. The mischievous spirit *Churael*, is the spirit of a woman who dies in pregnancy or childbirth and is believed to dwell near river banks.

The rituals, music, and dance show nature's signal i.e. the blossoming plants and trees on the position of the sun and moon, on the cycle of seasons. Nature and natural phenomena occupy a central place in tribal rituals, festivals, and customs. *Sarhul* is one of the festivals that is celebrated when trees are in full blossom and branches of white flowers dominate the rural landscape. It is a symbolic marriage of the sun and earth to ensure the fertility of Mother Earth. A cluster of *Sal* trees is a sacred grove that acts as a place of worship. It's a thanksgiving festival to Mother Earth, and it also marks the beginning of the agricultural season. *Karma* festival depends on the position of the moon which is held on the *ekadasi* or the 11th day in the month of August-September. Girls fast throughout the day, people go to the jungle to cut the branches of *Karam* tree and are carried by girls who sing the praise of the deity. A village priest offers germinated grains and liquor in propitiation to the deity who grants wealth and children. There is a tradition of story-telling about *Karam Raja* by the priest. Girls put their flowers at the foot of the *Karam* branches and dance the whole night. The next day branches are immersed in a pond or a stream. There are stories closely connected with nature, and punishment being meted out to the people who disrespect the *karam* branch.

In *jatra*, marriage or burial, trees occupy a very significant place. *Jatra* takes place under the big shady tree of the village, in a *marwa* that entails planting of 9 *sal* branches in three lines. The middle of the second row differs in its height and is planted with branches of bamboo, *sidha*, *bhelwa*, mango and *mahua* trees. Mangos suggest perpetuity of descendants, bamboo symbolizes progeny, *bhelwa* – protection, the *mahua* – love between husband and wife, and *Sidha* represents fertility.

Sacred natural sites, including sacred groves, are maintained through traditional methods of community-based conservation and no government agencies are involved. The religious practices and customs such as *phaggu*, *sarhul*, *karma* etc., which were associated with various phases of economy, were given up in some places. Though people converted to Christianity, they gave the same importance to their oral traditions, customs, and culture. The interaction with nature and the

environment is maintained in their day-to-day life and also is expressed in collective forms as had been in practice in the previous generation.

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