Chapter 8

Conclusion

From the Tribals’ Own Point of View

In the previous chapters we discussed representations of Tribal India by outsiders, starting from the colonial narratives of Anglo-Indian writers to those written by Indian writers in English and in Indian languages. In the former, we observed that tribals were either represented as savages who had to be civilized or were glorified as noble savages. Kipling’s short story “The Tomb of His Ancestors” is a good example of this tendency. Here the tribals are treated as savages and immature people who can easily be tamed. The story also projects the imperial attitudes of the writer who was “certain that to be ruled by the British was India’s right; to rule India was Britain’s duty” (Nandy 64). Elwin’s accounts on the other hand celebrate tribal culture and appreciate many aspects of tribal life, which his own society in the West lacked. The community-based life of the tribals, the participation of women in all aspects of social life, and living in harmony with Nature, were a few aspects which he finds unique in tribal society. Elwin celebrates tribal woman and her beauty in his writings. Some of these Anglo-Indian writers relied on anthropological ideas, and highlighted the aspects which they found strange and interesting. For instance, we find ethnographical details about their food, dress, and height in John Masters’ narratives, reinforcing stereotypical images. Mary Louis Pratt in her study of colonial
representation sums up how all these help in reinforcing stereotypical images. She rightly points out: “Manners-and-customs description could serve as a paradigmatic case of the ways in which ideology normalizes, codifies and reifies. Such reductive normalizing is sometimes seen as the primary or redefining characteristic of ideology” (Pratt 121). By highlighting the manners, customs and other sociological and anthropological details, these writers reify the image of the tribals as people strange and different from themselves. Some narratives of this period described the tribals as barbarians and deceivers. Administrative reports and legal documents of the British period gave evidence of this kind of attitude of the British towards the tribals.

For the Indian English writers we discussed too, the tribals were ‘the Others.’ Coming from an urban and middle-class background, these writers perceived tribal society as primitive in relation to their own. Tribal India was seen as a primitive world untouched by modernity, materialism and corruption. Arun Joshi’s novel The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is a fine example of this kind of depiction. Moreover, in these narratives, the tribals acquire stereotypical characterizations as brave and loyal people. Markandaya’s Coffer Dams and Malgonkar’s The Princes reify these stereotypes.

Writers who wrote in Indian languages (though they are not a homogenous lot) have a better understanding of Tribal India than the Indian English writers discussed so far have, because of their social interaction with the tribals. However, they too remain outsiders. They normally come from towns to study and write about
the tribals as they are concerned with the tribal population and their problems. For instance, Gopinath Mohanty and K. Shivarama Karanth find a number of good things in tribal culture and want the tribals to keep these intact. They are concerned with the degradation and disintegration of tribal culture. Hence they campaign for the preservation of tribal culture through their fiction. In their attempt to appreciate tribal people they depict the tribal men as handsome, muscular, strong and sincere, and tribal women as beautiful, sensuous and innocent. On the other hand the men and women from dominant and non-tribal classes are shown as cunning, vulgar and corrupt. Even the so-called low-caste communities who have close contact with the tribals for centuries are portrayed in negative terms. Because of the writers’ preference for the tribals, people from the other communities are presented in a bad light. These writers celebrate the tribal woman’s body by describing her physique and by depicting her in sensuous scenes. According to these writers, the advent of modernity in any form is a sign of degradation of tribal culture. They are critical of the aliens including the missionaries and fail to see the merits of their work for social uplift. Also, they are afraid that the new religion may disturb the indigenous belief system of the tribals and their culture as a whole. Mahasweta Devi however, recognizes the contribution of the missionaries for the upliftment of the tribals. She never makes fun of them in her writings.

Mahasweta Devi’s engagement with the tribals is more sustained and hence more fruitful. Her representation of the tribals differs from that of Mohanty and Karanth. In her fiction one sees the tribals as humans and not as idealized
characters. As mentioned in Chapter 7, instead, the author portrays the poverty-stricken, insecure lives in the tribal areas where rice remains an eternal dream, where life means wandering from one village to another due to their ceaseless eviction by the ‘dikus’ (outsiders), where the land and the forest has been the basis of tribal life, where the forest holds the tribal economy, and where the issue of rights of the forest raises a tempest and causes a blood-spilling fight. Her mission has been to help the tribals realize their rich and significant history. She also urges the mainstream to recognize the rich cultural heritage of Tribal India. That has been a significant theme of her fiction. As a social reformer and activist she wants to do away with the injustice and oppression inflicted on the tribals by the dominant class. In her fiction she lays bare the oppression suffered by the tribals, especially the atrocities against tribal women. She also exposes the exploitative behaviour of the dominant class on the tribals in general. Her short stories such as “Shishu,” “Salt,” and “Arjun” express these concerns. However, one notes that in her fiction the tribals always are a struggling lot. Their songs, dances, merrymaking and other forms of cultural practices hardly find a place in Mahasweta Devi’s fiction. In other words, for Mahasweta Devi, a tribal is always struggling for food, clothes, shelter and justice. He is hardly found depicted in delighted and happy mood. It is true that tribal life as such is difficult and not so easy-going. However, one feels that some aspects of tribal life such as their delightful nature, sense of contentment and other values are overlooked in Mahasweta Devi’s fiction. The writer’s ideology, activism and reforming zeal perhaps prompt her to view tribal people as a struggling lot. She also wants the attention of the mainstream to be focused on the injustice and
suffering of the tribal people. This kind of representation gives us only a partial view of tribal society and certainly not its totality. However, the tribals are not romanticized and exoticized by her as done by Mohanty and Karanth in their fiction, but are depicted as humans. Mahasweta Devi’s involvement with the tribals and her painstaking efforts to document tribal reality makes her fiction more realistic than that of Mohanty and Karanth. She also gathers a lot of facts about tribal life from different sources such as government records, historical documents, oral narratives, laws, and medicine, and makes creative use of all these. Lars Ole Sauerberg in his work *Fact into Fiction* (1991) calls this mode of representation “documentary realism” and Mahasweta Devi’s work fits this description. Thus, it will be seen that all these writers project the limited aspects of tribal life in accordance with their own concerns and choices, though in Mahasweta Devi we can see a greater authenticity. But it is necessary to complete the picture ever so slightly by concluding with a consideration of a select number of narratives written by the tribals themselves in order to understand their own modes of representation. This is by no means exhaustive, and clearly a lot more needs to be done, but it will hopefully give hints of the lie of the tribal land and provide pointers to further and more detailed and sophisticated work in this respect.
In the remainder of this chapter we shall discuss the works of a few tribal writers from different parts of India. One must again emphasize that this is not an exhaustive survey, but only a small glimpse into a vast terrain of literature and experience. Tribal writings can be divided into two forms: Oral Literature and Written Literature.

The tribals have a rich oral literature in the forms of songs, tales, riddles, etc. Though these are older than the written literature of mainstream tradition, they have been given a lower status than the written word. Now-a-days they come to us in the form of translation. A number of anthropologists and writers have gathered these oral forms and translated them into Indian languages and into English. The efforts made in this regard by Verrier Elwin, A. K. Ramanujan, Sitakant Mahapatra, Temsula Ao, G. N. Devy, and B. K. Tripathy, to mention a few, are noteworthy. Apart from the theme of protest, other aspects of their life too are reflected in their literature. Their unwritten literature has songs about love, ritual, joy and sorrow. They are sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments. They also show that tribal life is vibrant.

Modern tribal literature is not narrow but its horizon is large. It aims at self-representation, and the search for tribal identity or ‘adivasisn.’ Through this writing the tribals try to demolish the perception of the non-tribal writer that *adivasi* culture is backward and superstitious. Written tribal literature is the result of modern education.
and social consciousness. Unlike Dalit literature, tribal writing is yet to establish itself as a normative form. Nevertheless, both of them have a number of affinities. Both are for social awakening. Like Dalit literature, Tribal literature is also alive to reality and calls for social change. Waharu Sonawane, the noted tribal literary activist outlined the characteristics of tribal literature in his Presidential Address to the Fifth Adivasi Sahitya Sammelan held at Palghar in Maharastra in December 1990. He declared that tribal literature has a “sense of movement and is a step towards social action. It has grown out of consciousness and awareness, and it critiques society” (20).

It must be stated that these texts come to us through translations. In this sense, the representation of tribal life though depicted by the tribals themselves, may not be as authentic as the original. The translation process may have hampered the authenticity of the representation. However one can argue that though the translation process may distort the style, structure, syntax, etc of the text, it will at least retain the meaning and the thematic content which would enable us to examine how tribals have been depicted in these works. Hence these texts, which feature under the rubric called Tribal Literature, even if they are in translation are taken for discussion. In any case, our objective, as mentioned in the introduction, is not to question the authenticity of the representation depicted in these narratives, but to understand how Tribal India has been depicted over a period of time; and how the socio-political situations, and the ideology of the writers are responsible for the representation of the tribals in such representations.
Apart from the writings of educated tribal writers who have started writing about their own experiences in the form of stories, novels, autobiographies, and poems, there are magazines in different tribal as well as recognized Indian languages which provide tribal writers a platform to express themselves. Magazines like Budhan, Dhol (Drum), Sirjan (Creativity), Haryar Sakam (Green Leaf), and Alari (Divine Light) are a few examples. Tribal writers who have made a name for themselves and committed themselves to writing are—Laxman Gaikwad, Laxman Mane, Kishore Shantabai Kale (from Maharastra), Mangal Ch. Soren, Sarada Prasad Kisku, Ramdas Majhi Tudu, (from Chotanagpur), Lummer Dai, Rongbong Terang, Easterine Iralu (from the North-East), and others. In order to include the writings of tribal writers, Ramanika Gupta the editor of Yudh Rat Aam Admi (The Ever-Struggling Common-man) has recently brought out a special issue of the journal on the tribal theme in two volumes. These volumes, titled Adivasi Swar Aur Nai Satabdi (Adivasi Voice and the New Century) contain poems, folklore, short stories, and plays. The volumes have fourteen short stories and the abstracts of two novels written in different Indian languages and translated into Hindi. These writers respond to the social order which has been exploitative in nature. Their writings deal with social awakening and social consciousness. The focus is intimately related to social reality, and is not imaginary or entertainment-oriented. It deals with the struggle for survival, daily problems, and the hopes and aspirations of the tribal people. However, it has
adopted the styles of folktales and folk narratives. These writings are attuned to what Sonawane looks forward to:

Our responsibility henceforward should be to create a literature that will give us historical justice. Dramas, stories, povadas, rodalya songs must be written on such adivasi heroes as Tantya Bhil, Bhagoji Naik, Birsa Munda, Rani Durgavati, Ramdas Maharaj, Ambarsing Mahara, and others. Literature must be created to bring about a new dawn for the adivasi. [...] If we can create such literature for a liberated human society we all want, the first reward is sure to come from our own society.

(Sonawane 20)

Most of the narratives that we shall be discussing in the following pages fulfill these criteria. In the field of written Tribal Literature, the tribal writers in Marathi have done pioneering work. In order to discuss some aspects which are distinct in self-representation, I shall analyse three texts which are representative of a pattern in tribal writing. These are Laxman Gaikwad’s autobiographical novel in Marathi, Uchalya (1987) translated as The Branded (1997), Laxman Mane’s Upara (1980) translated as An Outsider (1997), and Kishore Shantabai Kale’s Kolhatyache Por (1994), which literally means A Kolhati’s Child, but was translated as Against All Odds (2000). The above texts were originally in Marathi and translated into English. It is to be pointed out that these three texts can narrowly be seen as autobiographies. However, they could also be largely called fiction. As J.A. Cuddon aptly points out, “an autobiography may be largely fictional” (63). As in fiction, the writer of
autobiography also selects what s/he wants to focus on. Here too, there is scope for
the writer's intervention and manipulation. Also, like the fiction writer, the writer of
an autobiography too has a point of view. After much debate, the Sahitya Akademi
which published the English translations of Uchalya (The Branded) and Upara (The
Outsider) called them autobiographical novels. I would like to discuss The Branded
first, though it was published later than An Outsider, as the former deals with an
important subject—the issue of Denotified Tribes.

Laxman Gaikwad comes from a tribal community called Uchalya which
literally means 'pilferer.' The novel is about his experience in life as an individual
from a branded community. The Uchalya tribe was branded as a criminal tribe by the
colonial rulers. A brief narration at this point of how several tribes in India were
categorized as criminal tribes would be helpful in understanding the novel.
Anthropologists and historians argue that the British were responsible for
categorizing certain groups in relation to their caste characteristics. Ronald Inden and
Bernard Cohen argue that "reducing whole demographic groups to their caste
characteristics was especially attractive to the colonial administrators as it gave them
the illusion of knowing the caste system" (qtd. in Nigam 134). They further state that
the category of 'criminal tribes' also bears the imprint of the colonial attitude. Thugi
was mentioned as an Indian practice sanctioned and sustained by Hinduism. Philip
Meadows Taylor's Confessions of a Thug and John Masters' The Deceivers highlight
the religious dimension of the practice. Macleod and Hutchinson trace the genealogy
of the criminal tribes to the thugs. However, they do not provide any details of these
people springing from the same stock.
On the assumption that some tribes have a criminal nature inherent in them, the administrators and police officials submitted their reports and recommended that they should be branded as criminals. Nembhard, the Commissioner of East Berar argued in his report: “Para:3. Now every one of the tribals I have mentioned (the Banjara, the Kolatees, the Badhuks, the Kunjars and the Nuths) [...] are professional criminals [...], crime is their trade and they are born to it and must commit it” (qtd. in Nigam 134).

In recent years, scholars who have studied the history of certain ex-criminal tribes argue that the colonial belief that criminal nature is inherent in any tribe is a myth. Sanjay Nigam (1990), V. Lalitha (1995) and Malli Gandhi (1996) in their respective works specify the reasons that were responsible for the tribes to turn to criminal activities. One of these reasons was the colonial forest policy which denied the tribals their means of livelihood. Malli Gandhi in his unpublished dissertation titled A Historical Survey of Ex-Criminal Tribes Settlements in Andhra studies the Yerukula, Yanadhi, Lambadi, and Dommanna tribes that were notified as criminal tribes. He points out that there was no criminal behaviour during their life in the forest. They depended on the forest products. However, with the intrusion of the British government, their life patterns changed. Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil point out that as a consequence of encroachment, tribes devoted to hunting and collection of jungle produce led a nomadic life, and were not allowed to sell forest produce in accordance with the Criminal Tribes Act of 1878. They lost their
legitimate means of livelihood. The railways and roadways destroyed the business of the tribals. There was also encroachment by the outsiders. So the only alternative left to them for their survival on earth was thieving and looting. As a consequence of the Criminal Tribes Act, the tribes which were notified as criminal tribes were required to register themselves, with details of their family and means of livelihood. No registered person was allowed to leave his village without a licence issued by the officer in charge of the police station. It was in 1952 that Prime Minister Nehru repealed this Act. However, the police still retain arbitrary power under the existing law. The police can examine cases of individuals from time to time. Every registered offender is given a certificate and can be subjected to police enquiry at any point of time, and this means harassment and exploitation.

Laxman Gaikwad’s novel deals with such a tribal community. Through his personal experience, Gaikwad talks about the whole Uchalya community which was described as a criminal tribe in 1871. Gaikwad himself has experienced poverty and misery as a member of the Uchalya community. He has suffered because of the stigma attached to his community. It is a fact that the British declared the community as criminals, but at present, the real perpetrators of this kind of stigma are the upper caste people. They have a parochial attitude towards the tribals, and look at them with contempt. A child from a higher caste can make fun of a grown-up person belonging
to this community. Gaikwad narrates how children in school used to tease him when he started going to school:

I had just started going to school. It was all novel and strange to me. All the urchins started harassing me, as if a poor lamb had entered a pack of wolves. They threw stones at me because an Uchalya’s child had dared come to school. They would taunt mockingly: Lachiman Tata khekdyacha curry khata. ['Lachman Tata eats crabs’ curry.'] (Gaikwad 16)

He relates how he was ridiculed in the school when he made attempts to learn. He was discouraged at home as well. He was given a ‘Bharat blade’ instead of study materials. His father beat him up when Laxman wrote on the copy thinking that Laxman was spoiling it instead of keeping it blank. Laxman’s sisters-in-law said that his going to school was a waste; instead, he should learn the craft of thieving. He was told: “What is there in school, learn thieving” (13). He was not given a house on rent because of his caste. In spite of his commitment to do something for the people he was defeated in the election as he did not have enough money and also because of caste hegemony. As a grown-up man without a decent profession and means to feed himself and his family he was worried about his fate. He felt that “a beggar’s lot was far better than mine” (78).

The novel reflects the general attitude of the upper caste people towards tribals. When they see Laxman wearing good clothes, they cannot tolerate it:
‘[...] hell! This Pathrut’s boy now moves about dressed like a saheb.’

Others said: ‘How poor he used to be.’ God has blessed him. Now he works.’ Some boys from rich families remarked: ‘What works! [...] in hell! He is from the Uchalya community, will it ever mend itself!

Lakshya must be in some thieves’ gang, we’re so educated and yet we cannot obtain jobs. How will this Pathrut’s boy ever get a job?’ (115)

Gaikwad’s account also lays bare the corrupt practices of the police officials who instead of reforming and rehabilitating these people, add to their misery and encourage them to steal. Gaikwad mentions that the police can come to their house any time for inquiry. He recalls an example of the immoral behaviour of the police:

The police caught our grandfather and dragged him to our hut, beating him severely all the way. They wanted to search our hut for stolen goods. [...] Grandfather was handcuffed and the police kept asking him:

‘Tell us where you’ve hidden the stolen money and gold. Show or we’ll smash your bones.’

Grandfather wailed piteously: ‘See Saab, see for yourself, there’s nothing in the hut.’

‘Your whore will know,’ cried the police and grabbed our grandmother by the hair and thrashed her all over. [...] They squeezed grandmother’s breasts, asking her to show the stolen goods.
Then they left, taking grandfather with them. He was jailed for
some months. (1-2)

The police would demand money. The family would borrow from the moneylender to
give to the police. Then, they would have to resort to thieving to pay off the debts.
Some members of the community are used as informers and are paid for the job.
Gaikwad's narrative also attacks the State for its indifference and apathy towards
their problems. He points out that India got Independence in 1947, but his community
achieved it only five years later. He says: "It was when Prime Minister Jawaharlal
Nehru 'denotified' the 'notified criminal tribes' on August 30, 1952, exactly five
years and 16 days after the rest of India was officially declared 'free' that the
Denotified Tribes could call themselves independent" (Gaikwad, "For the
Chharas" 3).

Gaikwad attempts to organize his people in the factory and later to gain
support from enlightened people such as Professor B.L. Gaikwad and his brother-in-
law, D.S. Gaikwad. The fact that he has written a book on tribal issues exposing the
cruelty of the upper class/caste society and depicting the misery of his own people is
an act of assertion. Gaikwad's representation of his people/tribe is different from that
of the colonizers who either perceived the tribals as noble savages or barbarians. This
kind of writing is different from that of Gopinath Mohanty, Arun Joshi, Shivarama
Karanth and indeed Mahasweta Devi. Though they are the early writers who have
highlighted tribal culture and the problems faced by tribals, they remain as outsiders
in spite of their involvement in and knowledge about the life and culture of the tribals.
Gaikwad's account is not based on curiosity and passion, but comes out of his own lived experience. He is open and clear in his narrative style. He does not try to defend his community by concealing facts, but is sincere in stating the realities of tribal life, and invites his readers to form their own judgement. His autobiographical narrative strategy makes the novel more forceful. The novel gives a fierce jolt to the established refined language, which is used by other narratives on the tribals, with its rustic dialect.

In the novel, the author plainly says that the tribals have indeed been engaged in these activities. However, one gets the feeling that the socio-economic factors and the arbitrary colonial rule are responsible for this situation. Through this novel the writer expresses the cruelty of the so-called civilized society, and draws the attention of mainstream society to the mores of his tribe. He is also asserting his own identity in the process.

Laxman Mane's Marathi novel *Upara* (1980) rendered in English as *An Outsider* (1997) is another work with this tendency. Mane gives a comprehensive but disturbing account of the life of another nomadic tribe called 'Kaikadi.' Born in 1949 Mane came up the hard way in life. Unlike Laxman Gaikwad, he was exposed to University education, and to the discourse of social justice in his college days. However, he suffered equally in his life as Laxman Gaikwad did. In his book, Mane gives us a glimpse of the life of the Kaikadi community. They are nomads. They settle down near a village for some days and then move on to another place. They
earn their living by collecting canes and by weaving baskets out of them. Some of them also sell metal ware. In the process of collecting canes, they confront a number of problems. Mane narrates how his father had a narrow escape from a king cobra while collecting canes. He also says that they are always suspected by the villagers and are subjected to severe punishment. They live in the outskirts of the village in filthy conditions:

Leaving the donkeys on the outskirts of the hamlet, we would play, loitering behind these poor animals grazing on fresh human excrement and brandishing our sticks in the air. We played mostly with marbles or flat pebbles piling them on top of the other and smashing them with a ball from a certain distance. A shirt, someone's charity, covered my body. Mended in several places, it was full of wrinkles. Shorts were a luxury. (17)

The women are very often ill-treated by the villagers. Laxman narrates an incident where his aunt is picked up by the villagers while asleep and is raped by three or four people. Against all these odds, Laxman Mane tries to come up in life from his childhood. He has a strong desire to study and become a teacher. His parents are supportive in spite of their poverty and misery. He is subjected to the same kind of humiliation as Laxman Gaikwad when he joins a school. Mane says: “All the pupils started teasing me in the way the hens do when a strange chick intrudes upon their privacy” (20). Even the teacher would not take it easy. He would say: “You
funny guy! Do nomadic beggars go to school? [...] If they study, who will weave our baskets? Nothing doing!” (36). Another problem is that since his family moves from one place to other he has to change schools frequently. He comments: “My school was moving on the donkey’s back” (69). But he never gives up. He does different odd jobs such as selling bread or cleaning dishes and continues his studies. He is also supported by some of his friends and teachers. Thus he manages to complete his school and join college. While in college, he works in the library as a part time employee. His services are terminated because he joins a protest rally. To add to his problem, he is in love with the daughter of his house owner. He and Shashi (the house owner’s daughter) want to marry and plan to move to some other place. Since the girl is from a higher caste and higher in economic status, her parents are dead against the match when they come to know about it. However, the couple manage to escape and get married. Without a job they go through a lot of problems. His parents are also unhappy about the marriage and disown him forever. Mane wonders at the remarkable way that the same caste system against which he wants to fight is so embedded in the minds of the people of his own caste.

The book is a revealing account of the Kaikadi community. It reflects the misery and impoverishment of the people living in the twentieth century. They do not have a permanent roof over their heads, no permanent source of income to meet their basic needs, no education to assert themselves. They live in inhuman conditions. Laxman’s mother laments: “Even a dog’s life has a certain dignity, but not ours”(67).
However, amidst poverty and illiteracy, the tribe adheres to their customs and cultural practices. They bathe their gods and worship them regularly (85). They observe the rituals pertaining to marriages and other social customs. The tribes such as Kaikadi, Vaids, and Makadwale meet at Jejuri in the month of Kartik (close to November). During this period, marriages are fixed.

It is generally thought that these people have no social customs or notions of culture. From the illustration of social activities the prevalent idea is proved wrong. However, the social conventions are so rigid that the individual has to pay a heavy price for any violation, even to the extent of being excommunicated. If anyone violates any of them he/she will be excommunicated. Mane’s parents are not only excommunicated because he marries someone outside his community, but are also forced to disown him. *Upara* in this sense is not only the life story of an individual but a socio-cultural testimony of the entire tribe. When one compares *Upara* with *Uchalya* one gets the feeling that *Upara* is more comprehensive in terms of providing a socio-cultural account of the community. *Uchalya* on the other hand, makes us think of the question of criminal tribes and their problems and less on cultural matters. However, both are significant in their own way.

The third piece *Against All Odds* written by Kishore Shantabai Kale narrates the plight of Tamasha women dancers from the Kolhati community. Kale himself belongs to this community. The book was written in Marathi as *Kolhatyache Por* (*Son of a Kolhati*) and published in 1994. This is a dramatic account of Kolhati women
who earn their living by performing dances and by entertaining men. In this process they are exploited by the dominant class. A girl child is sold after her puberty. After becoming a mother, she is abandoned. Then it becomes her responsibility to rear the child. The child does not know its father. So children generally retain their mother’s name as their middle name. The narrative presents the shocking reality of this community which lives under a social stigma and are victims of atrocities. It highlights the poverty, illiteracy and inhuman living conditions of this community, and the author attempts to reform it so that his people can have a dignified place in society.

One could argue that even this narrative is qualified to be called a fiction as one can see here the same captivating narrative style that we find in Mane’s Upara. The publisher of the book rightly claims in the blurb that “There is vigour of expression everywhere befitting a folk artist.”

Going back again to Mane’s Upara, one can observe so many stories within the narrative. Mane’s father’s narration about how he encounters the king cobra, his aunt’s tragic story after she had been gang-raped, the narration regarding the ill-treatment of Mane’s parents by the villagers are but a few examples. It is worth describing one of these:

What once happened was the worst they feared. One day early in the morning, Mother and Father had gone to the neighbouring village to sell their wares. We children were at home. It was terribly hot and we lacked the courage to go out of the house. The village
appeared to be dead as no living creature was moving about. Not even a bird was seen flying. I had kept the stale hard pieces of Bhakri in some tamarind water. My stomach burned with hunger and it was very hot outside too. Tears rolled down my cheeks. There was nothing to eat in the house. Our patience was exhausted. We were eagerly waiting for our parents to return, hoping that either of them would return any moment with some pieces of bhakri [sic]. But they were nowhere in sight. Kisnya, the youngest of us, started crying. He would not calm down. Sami was making him drink water. But Kisnya had become pale with hunger. In my mind, I was cursing my parents. And just then I heard some pandemonium outside. Father was being pushed ahead by a small crowd. Mother was behind him. She had no blouse on. She was wearing father’s shirt. Her sari was torn. Father had only his dhoti on. One could see black and blue lashes over his body. He was followed by four or five rough fellows. Mother was wailing loudly and father was consoling her.

We children were terrified. Crying, we ran to them. Mother lifted Kisnya and held him close to her and passed her hand through his hair. I went near her. Both her hands were stained with blood. Her face was swollen. My terrible cries created a din. Father’s hands were tied, his head hung low in shame. Both of them were not brought home. Instead, they were taken to the village chief. In the meantime, the number of spectators began swelling. My mother’s modesty... was
covered with father's shirt. I was burning with inner anger. Even at my age, I could understand the situation. Mother was falling at the feet of her captors begging them to let her go home. However, one of them said: "Why the hell did you go in there? You deserve a good kick in your [...]'.

I wanted to do something... but I couldn't think of anything.

(Mane 61-62)

We find a number of small narratives told in a folk narrative style and woven into the larger narrative. This is a unique feature in all these three narratives.

Tribal writers from the North East also employ folklore mode of presentation in their writings. Many short stories of the Nagamese writer Easterine Iralu's *The Windover Collection* (2000) show this trend. These stories express tribal beliefs, traditions, social attitudes and aspirations in simple and lucid language. But she is not alone in this. In the North East tribal writers such as Lummer Dai, Yese Dorje, Thongsii, Rongbong Terang, Bhaben Pegu, Rajen Pame, and Jatin Mipun have been writing in different languages. The works of some of these writers (Estherine Iralu's, for instance) are available in English and they prove that these writers present their society and culture from the angle of vision of someone who is an integral part of the culture.

It is pertinent here to discuss these writings, particularly the fiction, which appear in the special issue of *Yudh Rat Aam Admi* (*The Ever-Struggling Common People*) edited by Ramanika Gupta. The writers of these stories come from different
tribal communities. As writers, they are not much discussed, nor is their fiction well-known. Replying to a query on television, Mahasweta Devi once pointed out that the fact that they are writing is enough. It may sound unjust to compare them with the established canonical writers and their masterpieces. Nevertheless, these fictional works are the result of the experience of the tribals and the issues confronted by them. It is their literature. Moreover, this act of relating the fiction written by the tribals to the fiction written by the non-tribal writer is done not with an intention to question the authenticity of their work but to understand the question of representations of Tribal India in these works.

Through these works, the tribals attempt to assert their identity. The exploitation of tribals by the contractors, police personnel and politicians are some of the recurring themes in these works. They also try to invoke the past in order to inculcate the spirit of courage and commitment among the tribal youth. Peter Paul Ekka’s novel Jungle Ke Geet or The Song of the Forest is based on Birsa’s revolution. It is meant to evoke enthusiasm and commitment among tribal youth to work for their own people just as Birsa gave his life for his own people. Ekka in another story called “Raj Kumar Ke Desh Mein” (“In the Land of the Prince”) highlights the exploitation of tribal people by village heads, sarpanches, contractors and police. Narayan’s Malayalam novel Kochereti (Dear Sister) on the other hand highlights a unique social system that is prevalent among the Wynad tribe in Kerala. In this community one has the right to marry his/her cousin. But in the novel the young people make attempts to break the social conventions. Shankar Lal Meena’s novel Sapnowali Wohi Dubli
Ladki (*The Slim Girl of the Dream*) is about a girl who has been an inspiring figure for the educated youth. In Dinanath Manohar’s story “Sthitiantar” or “The Situation After” the police, the landlord and the administrative officials exploit the villagers in front of the headman, Bhunya Baba. Bhunya Baba had once cut off the hand of Giridhari’s son. He becomes a hero in the village, but a criminal according to the law. He is taken to prison. But the whole village waits for him. But later, the system has changed. The mode of exploitation also has changed. In the name of democracy the rulers exploit the people. The administration does not try to understand the social system and social hierarchy prevalent there. Inspector Jadhav comes and beats up the Bhils. Sunya Naik, a member from the community, alleged to have cut off the Patil’s son’s hand is arrested in front of Bhunya Baba, but the latter, as a headman is not able to do anything. Bhunya Baba feels helpless. He could get the support of his villagers five years back when he was punished for cutting off the landlord’s son’s elbow. The villagers were waiting to receive him when he came back from jail. But this time he feels totally helpless. The villagers do not come to his rescue. As the writer says: “Bhunya Baba came back to Bhillari [the dwelling place of the Bhils]. Even though he had strength in his shoulders and his weapon was sharp, he became weak. He could not help people who came running to him for help.” (Gupta 207; translation mine). “Aur Jungle Shant Hua” (“And the Jungle Calmed Down”) is a story about the change that has been taking place within tribal society. It also deals with the question of keeping one’s tradition alive. Banka Baba is good at playing the Dhol or ‘drum.’ Whenever he beats his drum, the entire village comes together and everyone appreciates his art. But later, the Dhol is replaced by the Band. On the occasion of his
own grandson’s marriage, Banka Baba’s own son would not ask him to play the
drum. Instead, he gets a Band to perform. Baba is very sad. He repairs his Dhol two
days before the marriage. The procession comes and the band is being played. When
he is not called, he takes his Dhol to the jungle and plays: the whole village assembles
there to listen. The jungle vibrates with the sound of his Dhol and calms him down.
This story is a fine instance of the writer’s social concerns. His aim is to spread
awareness among the tribal people on the need to keep their traditions alive. In
Shankar Lal Meena’s story “Aghoshit” (“Unannounced”), the protagonist Rajulal is
bent before the system. Rajulal had paid the tax, but has not preserved the receipt.
Later, even though he finds it out and takes it to show it in time, he is not sanctioned a
loan. As a result he is not able to sow seeds in the field. Unable to face the problem in
the village, he leaves the village. His son who has been watching all this also leaves
the village. Later three people in the village—the Patwari and his two associates—are
killed. This shows that the new generation does not believe in the traditional way of
settling problems through village Panchayats and so on, but resorts to radical
measures. Unlike Pritam, Jatru, the protagonist of Walter Bhengra’s story “Khakhara
Ka Jatru” is a humble and understanding person. He comes back to serve his village
after completing his research, even though he is offered better jobs abroad. This
shows that the writer has a clear purpose behind writing this story i.e., to urge the
educated youth to come back to their soil instead of migrating to the cities. This story
also shows the jubilant and fun-loving nature of the tribal people, which is ignored by
an otherwise sympathetic writer like Mahasweta Devi in her writings. Word of the
work of Jatru among the villagers reaches far and wide, and the media persons also
come to know about it and come to the village to interview Jatru. On the arrival of the media persons the entire village is jubilant:

The entire village is talking about Jatru: old, young, men, women, all are talking about Jatru. The news can even sway the crops of the fields. Everybody is talking about Jatru. Young girls are talking about it near the village well. Women are talking about it in front of somebody's courtyard. The entire village is linked to Jatru's life. The entire village is talking about Jatru. (Bhengra 150)

If we want an example of jubilation, tribal songs give ample testimony to the joyous life of the tribals. For instance, take the case of a Bhil song sung on the occasion of the birth of a child. The song expresses the happiness of the tribal people:

Listen, my home is singing,
Echoing with pangs of birth,
Listen, my heart is beating
Throbbing with the hurt of birth

Listen to the new-birth rhythms
Rustling in my naked arms
Listen to the sounds of sucking
As new lips cling to my breast
A similar jubilant ambience is hardly found in Mahasweta Devi’s fiction, but as I indicated above, this is because her forms and concerns are different.

Krushna Chandra Tudu’s “Ek Bitta Jamin” and Rose Kerketta’s “Bhanwar” talk about the rights of women to parental property. It is to be noted that tribal writers are sensitive to women’s issues. However, they do not exoticise or romanticize tribal women. Pyare Kerketta’s story “Beratha Biha” suggests that Adivasis keep their indigenous traditions intact even if they convert themselves to Christianity. They do practice their rituals and perform rites while being Christians at the same time. Manju Jyotsna’s story “Prayaschit” gives an instance of the simplicity of the tribal mind. The protagonist is a rickshaw puller. He is also good at beating drums. The whole family is immersed in singing and dancing. Later, they get a daughter-in-law who is not only bad looking, but also has a harsh voice. But she is very good at housework. She earns and brings home money. But she is sterile. She is criticized by her mother-in-law and neighbours. Unable to cope with this ill treatment, she goes to her mother’s house and commits suicide. With the death of his wife, the protagonist takes to drinking. One day he comes home with a bad-looking woman. The woman sells liquor. In the
meantime some customer leaves his seed in her womb. The protagonist mistakes it for his own seed and marries the woman and brings her home.

III

We observe from this brief analysis of the select writings of the tribals, that the tribal writers talk about their daily problems—food, clothing and wandering life—and not in addition to describing the idyllic beauty of the forest and depicting tribal women. They are sensitive when they represent their women. Their writings do not portray tribal women as wild, sensuous and seamy, but depict them as human beings taking part in every aspect of the family and society. We also see interaction between the tribals and mainstream society—government officials coming to their villages and tribal people interacting with officials of their locality. In contrast, non-tribal writers (for instance, Arun Joshi) find the tribals in the deep forest living in peace and tranquility in isolation, far away from the mainstream—dancing, drinking, merrymaking, and leading a savage life, Tribal writers are socially conscious and feel that it is their responsibility to make people aware of the socio-cultural reality. They write stories, novels and other forms of literature for these purposes. Tribal writers are different from the earlier writers in their representations of Tribal India. They don’t give a romantic picture of tribal life and culture, nor do they present tribals as people rebelling against the system all the time, as Mahasweta Devi tends to do. They also do not give priority or patronage to the tribals over other communities, but present tribals as part of the larger society. The tribes are shown as marginalized but
having a distinct way of life. They seem quite comprehensive in their representation of themselves. These narratives are usually in a folk narrative style. They use idioms, proverbs, even slang which is also part of their culture. Unlike the earlier writers, these writers do not make special efforts to highlight some specific and strange aspects of their culture. Tilottoma Misra, who has studied the fiction of the tribals of the North-East, shows how the outsider is selective in highlighting certain aspects. She says an outsider fails to integrate the cultural aspects with the storyline “because his vision is always that of an outsider shifting his camera from one shot to other, never succeeding in entering into the silent spaces behind the colourful portraits” (34). These writers do not make any special efforts to highlight their culture. They have interiority and inwardness, and are natural in their writing. The cultural practices are described as the narratives progresses. Also, women in these narratives are not romanticized. There is no vivid description of their bodies to make these narratives sensual, but they are presented as members of society. They also show in their writing that even if the tribals choose another faith, they keep their indigenous traditions intact. These writers do not ridicule the tribals who embrace another faith, but leave it to the tribals to decide for themselves. These writers do not highlight certain limited aspects as a curious ethnographer does, but present their societies and cultures from the point of view of a person who is an integral part of the culture. Having gone through the experience of an average tribal, they are able to read the silent spaces and can portray their societies in an inimitably realistic manner.
In recent years the insider’s point of view has been given preference. Clifford Geertz, a cultural anthropologist ponders on how best to describe native cultures from the outsiders’ point of view and argues for a native point of view. The same thesis can be applied to Tribal literature. David Rabkin rightly points out that “a writer from the outside will never see, however great his sympathetic powers, exactly as the artist who is part of that society will see”(32). The non-tribal writers’ contribution and commitment in bringing tribal culture to the forefront is well recognized. However, the fact remains that they can only perceive tribal life and cannot experience it as a tribal writer can. So they will always be fellow travellers. One cannot be so sure about the authenticity of tribal narratives by outsiders. Indeed it is not so easy to examine even the authenticity of tribal writing. However, we must be thankful for what we do have. These writers have written about tribals as they find them or as they like to see them. It is for the reader to choose which kinds of story he/she prefers to like and some of those writers’ insights are valuable. As a reader, I like to see tribals as they represent themselves so that I can get a more complete view. For centuries tribals have been represented by ‘others.’ It is time for them to speak for themselves. Since they are enlightened and capable of speaking for themselves, their efforts should be appreciated. Tribal literature is a literature of their own with a mission and a vision. Even if tribal representations reach us only through translations, we do get some benefit—the benefit of a comprehensive and complex picture, the sum total of what the Tribes of India are all about.
Appendix-I

"Racial Divisions of Tribal Population"

"Tribal India: Community and Commonality"

"The Exotically Tribal Women"

"The so-called Happy Go Lucky Tribal Girl"

From: Janah, Sunil. The Tribes of India: Through the Lens of Sunil Janah