Chapter 4

Tribal India in Indian English Fiction:
The Tribal as Primitive, Loyal and Brave

As mentioned in the introduction, Indian English writers generally come from the elite section of the society and deal with general themes confronting the nation and society. Tribal India is the ‘other world’ for them. We hardly find Indian English novels based on this theme. Nevertheless, a few Indian English writers have dealt with the theme of Tribal India in their writings. Arun Joshi’s *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), Kamala Markandaya’s *The Coffer Dams* (1969) Manohar Malgonkar’s *The Princes* (1963) Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* (1993) and Ruskin Bond’s short stories are a few examples of work that deals with different aspects of Tribal India. This chapter makes a study of these narratives in order to understand their representations of Tribal India.

Arun Joshi has produced a few novels that are highly valued. Because of the quality of his work he occupies an important position as an Indian English novelist. Joshi comes from a distinguished family. He was born at Benaras on July 7, 1939. His father Professor A.C. Joshi was the Vice-Chancellor of Panjab University and later became the Vice-Chancellor of Benaras Hindu University. Arun Joshi passed his B.S. from Kansas University, USA in 1959 and M.S from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA in 1960. After his studies, Joshi joined the Delhi Cloth & General Mills Company as Chief of its Recruitment and Training Department in 1961. He
simultaneously held the positions of the Head of the DCM Corporate Performance Assessment Cell, that of the Secretary of DCM Board of Management, and that of the Executive Director, Shri Ram Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources. He resigned from DCM in 1965 but he continued to be the Executive Director of Sri Ram Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources. He was also associated with Sri Ram Centre for Art and Culture and Hindu College, Delhi as Member of their Governing Bodies. After 1965, he set up his own industries. In 1979, at the invitation of the East-West Centre, he participated in the World Writers’ Conference held at Honolulu, Hawaii, USA. In 1988, he won the Sahitya Akademi award.

As a writer he has made a significant contribution to the world of Indian English Fiction. He has written four important novels and a dozen short stories. *The Foreigner* (1968) is Joshi’s first novel. It received both critical acclaim and disapprobation in India and abroad, but ultimately established Joshi in the front rank of Indian English fiction writers. The novel relates how Sindi (Surinder) Oberoi, an immigrant Indian, suffers in his quest for the meaning and purpose in his life. His novel *The Apprentice* (1974) is a stark exposure of the sordid social corruption, and a powerful indictment of the tyranny of bureaucratic organization that depersonalizes man and stifles his humanity. It is also a cry of the human conscience in the sick Indian social microcosm. Joshi’s *The Last Labyrinth* (1982) illumines with a fresher perspective on some aspects of the earlier novels. It explores the dilemma of existence with greater intensity and against a wider backdrop of experiences and relationships. All of Joshi’s novels deal with the theme of alienation.
The novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) revolves around Bimal (Billy) Biswas and his encounter with the tribals. The story has been narrated by Billy’s friend Romesh Sahai. Billy Biswas is the son of a Supreme Court judge. He is sent by his father to the United States to study Engineering. However, he studies anthropology there. He reads books on tribal attitudes and customs and gets immensely interested in the tribes described in them. Billy’s interest in the tribals goes back to his youth. At the age of fourteen, he had a strange experience at Bhubaneswar. When he watched a tribal dance he felt that he belonged to that tribe, and became obsessed with the culture of the tribal people.

In America, Billy comes across a Swedish girl called Tuula. Billy and Tuula are very good friends and share many intimate moments together. Tuula understands that Billy is interested in the primitive world. After some years, Billy comes back to India and joins Delhi University as a Professor of Anthropology. During this period, he undertakes a number of expeditions to investigate primitive communities. Sometime later, he decides to marry Meena, a sophisticated and very beautiful girl from his Bengali community, but this marriage turns out to be unsuccessful.

On one of the expeditions to a hilly region of Madhya Pradesh, Billy mysteriously vanishes, leaving his wife, his beautiful child and his parents behind. A great search is launched by the police, but they fail to locate him. The police declare that Billy has been killed by a tiger in the deep forests. Ten years after his
disappearance, Billy meets Romesh Sahai, who is a District Collector now and who is on a tour of the Maikala Range. Romi sees Billy wearing a loincloth and nothing else. At this point, Billy discloses some of his experiences during these ten years to Romi, and tells him how he hates the so-called civilized world.

Billy’s wife and father come to know about Billy being alive through Romi’s conversation with Situ, and move the police force to locate Billy in the forests, despite Romi’s efforts to save Billy from the police. In the confusion that follows the search, Billy is shot down by a policeman.

The novel has attracted the attention of a number of critics. Notable among them are D. Prempati, Hari Mohan Prasad, R. K. Dhawan and O.P. Bhatnagar. In an essay “The Art and Vision of Arun Joshi,” O.P. Bhatnagar says that Billy is a new type of character in the whole range of Indo-English fiction. He is not the stereotype of a traditional Indian hero spouting wisdom through philosophical speculations, but a character with metaphysical dimensions. He makes no cowardly compromises nor has pity for himself. He has a strong will and determination. He feels a passionate resentment against modern Indian society. He is a man of conviction, capable of turning his vision into reality. R. K Dhawan in his essay “The Fictional World of Arun Joshi” points out that Joshi’s novel is a revelation of a world where man is confronted by the self and the question of his existence. Dhawan adds that “Joshi seeks a process of the apprehension of reality which may lead him to the world of the core of the truth of man’s life. He realizes man’s uniqueness and loneliness in an
indifferent and inscrutable universe"(17). D. Prempati in his essay "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas: A Serious Response to a Big Challenge" says that in the novel Joshi seems to be mediating between New Delhi and the Satpura Hills, between two different cultures. Hari Mohan Prasad in his essay "The Primitive Pilgrim" says that the novel is important in two ways: (1) It is explicated as an indictment of the phoney, hot-shot, sordid, modern culture; and (2) it is an embodiment of Purush-Prakriti unification. It will be apparent from a consideration of these views that all of them are focused on the existential themes in the novel. The issue of the representation of the tribals has been largely ignored by these critics. Here, our attempt will be to concentrate on the representation of the primitive or the tribal people.

It is imperative at this point to dwell upon the notion of primitiveness in brief. Billy Biswas is obsessed with primitiveness. His obsession is a result of his dislike for modern civilization. Primitivity is something that is considered the opposite of modernity or as something which is pre-modern. In this context what Michael Bell says provides a context for an understanding of Billy's attitudes. As Bell points out: "primitivity is dauntingly ancient and characterized with a correspondingly wide range of manifestations"(1). It refers to the classical concept of the golden age: the first state of innocence, before man knew how to sin. If we look at the development of this concept we find that primitivism and the popular fashion of admiration for the 'noble savage' began in the Eighteenth century. As mentioned in the third chapter, Rousseau preferred the natural man to his civilized counterpart. Some of Rousseau's ideas are present in the poems by Goldsmith in which he evokes the idyllic and the
pastoral world. The poet laments the growth of trade, the demand for luxuries and the mercantile spirit. As we see in the novel, Billy’s idea of primitiveness is that it is opposed to civilization. He studies anthropology to explore the world of primitivism. Anthropology, in principle, advocates an equal interest in societies of all types. But here it has been reduced to the study of primitive society. In addition to anthropology, Billy reads the *National Geographic Magazine*, which has a coverage of the tribal treatises on black magic, witchcraft and so on. It should be noted here that anthropology as a discipline is itself the product of colonialism, and was set up with the aim of studying primitive society for better administration and has a record of describing them as exotic and as the ‘Other.’ In the same manner, *The National Geographic Magazine* also has negative things to say about the tribals. In their book *Reading National Geographic* (1930), Lutz and Collins have commented that this magazine portrays the tribals as “‘exotic,’ ‘idealized,’ ‘naturalized,’ and ‘sexualized’” (qtd. in Manganaro 207).

Influenced by his strong obsession, Billy goes into the tribal society. Before he disappears he writes to Tuula mentioning the strange obsession that he has about the tribal woman who appears in his dreams. The concrete form of the tribal woman is Bilasia, whom he meets in the Maikal region. As a part of his search for primitive culture and his desire to be with them, Billy marries Bilasia. Billy’s action reminds one of Verrier Elwin, who in a similar way went into the tribal society and married twice into the tribal community. The first marriage to a Gond woman was unsuccessful, but later he married a Pardhan woman by whom he had two sons. This
was part of Elwin’s attempt to be one with the tribals and to participate in their life.

About his obsession Billy writes:

A strange woman keeps crossing my dreams. I have seen her on the streets of Delhi, nursing a child in the shade of a tree or hauling stone for a rich man’s house. I have seen her buying bangles at a fair. I have seen her shadow at a tribal dance, and I have seen her, pensive and inviolable, her clothes clinging to her wet body, beside a tank in Benaras. And once I saw her, her face strangely luminous in the twilight, loading a freight train with sulphur on a siding in one of our eastern ports. Yes, this woman keeps crossing my dreams causing in me a fearful disturbance, the full meaning of which I have yet to understand. (Joshi 93)

As mentioned earlier, Bilasia could be viewed as the concrete form of the strange woman Billy used to be obsessed with. Billy penetrates tribal society as an outsider and a benefactor. He cures Bilasia, Dhunia’s niece, strikes up a friendship with Dhunia and marries his niece. He forgets his first wife and his son. After marrying Bilasia too he takes her for granted. Billy as a man can choose women but the latter have no freedom to do likewise. After Bilasia has become a good wife Billy wants to go to the next world. Billy sees the tribal woman as exotic, voluptuous and in tune with nature. His celebration of tribal beauty is exemplified in the passage where he describes Bilasia as follows: “I remember the shadows inside and Bilasia in her rust coloured lugra, her black hair tied behind her neck, her firm shoulders golden
and bare, the play of the oil lamp lending a voluptuousness to her full figure until the whole hut seemed to be full of her, and only of her” (114). Romi also shares the same perception with Billy about the tribal woman. About Bilasia he says:

It was three months after I rediscovered Billy and nearly ten years from the night of which Billy was speaking when I first set my eyes on Bilasia. And looking at her I had thought then, as I think now, that it was quite possible that a woman like her could have affected a person of Billy’s sensibilities in the manner that she did [...]. She had that untamed beauty that comes to flower only in our primitive people.

(140-41)

The popular perception that the tribal woman is beautiful and sensuous is upheld by both Romi and Billy. The tribal woman has been essentialized as a primitive force (138-9). This kind of representation is found in Sunil Janah’s photographic book *The Tribals of India: Through the Lens of Sunil Janah* (1993) where the tribal woman’s body is celebrated. I have attached a sample in Appendix III. When Billy romanticizes the figure of Bilasia he hardly takes interest in Meena, his married wife. His perception about Meena is quite opposite to the one he has of Bilasia. At this point it is worth noting that Mahasweta Devi’s representation of the tribal woman is not romanticized but realistic. We never find them as symbols of sex. We may hardly find the difference in terms of sex between a tribal girl and an urban girl as depicted in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, between the tribal Bilasia and the urban woman Meena. However, novelists generally essentialize the tribal and non-tribal women in different ways: the manner in which their qualities are contrasted. An essay: “Figures
for the Unconscious” by Kumkum Sangari is instructive in this regard. Sangari studies the manner in which a tribal woman and a woman from the mainstream society are depicted in relation to each other. She makes a study of two women characters depicted in R.C. Dutt’s Bangla novel *Rajput Jiban Sandhya* (1879) translated as *The Last of the Rajputs*. Sangari mentions that in the novel, both Rajput and Bhil women are bound by the spirit of Nationalism, and are presented as equable and uniform. However, when the subject of cultural practice comes up, a strong contrast is built between the tamed and untamed natures of women. Rajput women are particular in guarding their high civilization. They practise *Sati Jauhar*. *Jauhar* comes to be described in colonial anthropology as a developed, reified ancient Rajput ritual. Rajput women form a collectivity typified through the rituals of wifely fidelity and valour and Bhil women are typified through common dress and appearance, and are loosely aggregated and form a collectivity through the performance of manual labour. Where Rajput women are ruled by strong behavioural codes emanating from the sanctity of marriage, Bhil women are subject to more flexible, less confining, but also less highly evolved patriarchal arrangements:

The women are a little less dark and they are good-looking: for clothing they have a piece of cloth that covers their loins and a single breast; *churis* and anklets made of lac decorate their arms and legs. Their marriage ceremony is very simple. On a fixed day the young men and women of a village meet together; the men pick out the girls they like and retire into the woods where they spend a few days; they then return to the village. (qtd. in Sangari 77)
This contrast becomes more obvious in the choice Tej Singh makes between two women. One is called Pushpa, the garden flower (the name is individualized, but is an embodiment of the wifely fidelity of the Rajput ‘race’), and the Bhil girl is called the wild flower (the unnamed type of enigmatic tribal woman). Both are childwomen. Pushpa’s marriage is fixed with Tej Singh at a very young age, at the age of seven. But Tej Singh disappears and people believe that he is dead. Pushpa as a Rajput woman takes voluntary widowhood. She assumes the garb of a widow in order to ward off other suitors. She takes patriarchal values innocently on faith, without reasoning. On the other hand, the Bhil girl is presented as both a type of the ‘dark’ romantic heroine and of a child woman filled with mystery, wisdom, intuition, and gravity. Her sexual attraction is translated into the sportiveness of the child, playing with flowers, watching clouds and lightning, singing in the moonlight. She is also presented as scheming, but the high caste Hindu woman retains her moral ascendancy.

In the same manner, one can examine the way Joshi juxtaposes the tribal girl—Bilasia and Billy’s legitimate wife Meena. Meena (Banerjee) comes from a middle class family and shows all the traits of the middle class. She follows a strong behavioural code, and is devoted to her husband. As Sangari points out: “Her repressed kind of sexuality does not have any attraction for Billy. On the other hand, Bilasia the tribal woman is dark, inscrutable, a kind of repository of unrepressed, orgiastic, magical sexuality with therapeutic powers and the ‘unconscious’ and such a
solution for the urban malaise" (79). It is to be mentioned here that “the tribal women
respect their elders and are respected by members of their community and they are
not as Joshi perceives them” (Hansdak 43). Billy’s vision of the tribal dance is that it
is a way out for sexual orgies. He says: “Well, these dances are an orgy of
sorts”(138). He thinks that their drums have a magnetic and mysterious ‘pull.’ In
contrast, a writer like Mahasweta Devi, who has been involved in tribal culture for a
long time, looks at tribal dances differently. She mentions that the tribals dance in
order to celebrate and to pray for prosperity in their agriculture. They drink, but not to
arouse beastly lust and voluptuousness. In an interesting book for children called Etoa
Munda Won the Battle (1989), she mentions that the Adivasis of Hathigarh drink
because they need a kind of lull after their long irksome work in the fields of Moti
Babu.

Billy says that the tribal world is not an organized one. According to him the
tribals have no ambition. He comments: “What kept us happy, I suppose, were the
same things that have kept all primitives happy through the ages: the earth, the forest,
the rainbows, the liquor from the mahua, an occasional feast, a lot of dancing and
lovemaking, and, more than anything else, no ambition, none at all” (146). It is
surprising that a novelist writing about the tribals in the nineteen sixties fails to see
any movements or struggles active in the region and portrays the tribals as a quiet and
peaceful lot. One also gets the sense that the tribal world as described in the novel is
an isolated one, and that there is no connection between the tribals and ‘civilized’
society. Billy gets into it and appointments himself its saviour—as if the tribals were in
need of Billy's intervention for their well-being. The tribals of the sixties were not isolated totally from the mainstream. They were educated and mobile. They were in different professions such as teaching, law, engineering, etc. They aspired to come out of the clutches of slavery. The tribal youth organized tournaments. They were not without ambitions. Joshi fails to notice all these aspects in their life, and provides only a partial view of tribal life. In sum, as Hansdak points out, the novel fails to portray larger issues, and remains romantic in essence, and "the tribal society is reduced to a picturesque backdrop against which Billy Biswas's tragic destiny is enacted" (67).

Kamala Markandaya's novel *The Coffer Dams* (1969) appeared two years before Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* was published. For Markandaya the tribals are not as primitive as in Joshi's novel. They take part in the construction of a dam. One of the tribals is an engineer. It is necessary to provide here a profile of Markandaya in order to understand her perceptions about tribal people. Kamala Markandaya's domain as a novelist has been both urban and rural India. She has written novels concerning social issues confronting rural India. She has also written on urban life. Her novels help us to look at issues from a woman's point of view.

Kamala Markandaya was born in 1924 in the Mysore State in Southern India. She was educated at various schools in different parts of India since her father was in the Indian Railways. This enabled her to travel widely in India. She joined Madras University and chose History as her major. Then she gave up college studies and
joined a weekly newspaper. Later she joined liaison work for the army. She also spent some time in a village, and that experience inspired her to write the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). She went to London in 1948. It was in this year that she got married to an Englishman called Mr. Taylor. She lives in London with her husband and their daughter, and makes frequent visits to India.


The novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is the story of a peasant woman, Rukmani, whose rustic life is shattered by the intrusion of industrialization. Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury*, which is set in British India, is the story of a Westernized upper class family torn by a conflict of loyalties. Mira falls in love with an Englishman. Her brother Kitsamy upholds the authority of the British Raj, but another one of her brothers, Govind, seeks to overthrow the Raj through terrorist activities. *A Silence of Desire* expresses the life of the most inarticulate social stratum, the middle class, caught between different values—old and new, Eastern and Western, religious and agnostic. Her novel *Possession* is set in two countries. The protagonist is an artist who is caught in the conflict between his spiritual guru and his worldly benefactress. Lady
Caroline Bell, during one of her visits to India, finds a goatherd called Valmiki, who shows great talent with home-made paints, and whose spiritual mentor is a Swami who lives outside Valmiki’s village, in a cave; Caroline whisks Valmiki off to England to nurture his art and brings him, and herself, recognition and fame. She operates with the same dedication and ruthlessness with which the British subjugated India. She moulds him into a man, an artist, and a lover, after the image she has in mind, and in the process ruins him, depleting him of independence and spiritual strength, though in her opinion he gains more than he loses. Markandaya’s *A Handful of Rice* is set in rural India. It is about Ravi, a young man who has left the village and come to the city; a drifter by nature, he is made into a traditional householder by his love for a tailor’s daughter. *The Nowhere Man* is the story of Srinivas, who acts on his youthful idealism in India’s struggle for Independence and pays a heavy price by being expatriated. *Two Virgins* is about Lalitha and her sister Saroja. Lalitha trades away her soul, lured by city splendours, and Saroja watches, learns her lesson and returns to the bosom of Mother Nature. *The Golden Honeycomb* is a historical romance. It is the story of a family of Maharajas who ruled a Native state for three generations; and with the instrument of accession, had to confront the merger of the Princely State with the Indian Union. Markandaya’s last novel *Pleasure City* is about a love story between Tully, an English girl and Rikki, an Indian boy. Their relationship fails as Tully leaves for England and Rikki is left alone on the threshold of manhood, and there is no suggestion that he will survive.
A close look at these works reflects a number of common themes in Markandaya’s novels. The recurring ones are: social issues, the racial encounter, and the problems of women. Though the novel *The Coffer Dams* deals with all these issues, the theme of tribal people is also significant. As the story of the novel unfolds, we find that Clinton, the head of a large British engineering firm, begins the construction, aided by Indian technicians and tribal labour. The area selected is called Malnad. Clinton’s young wife Helen has boundless curiosity about the country and its people, and her rapport with them puzzles, and then irritates her husband. He is conditioned by memories of the colonial past, while she has no such inhibitions. Bashiam, a tribal engineer, introduces Helen to the fascinations of the jungle, to his own simple tribe, and to his own capacity to attract her. He becomes her lover. Helen also meets the tribal chief, who becomes angry at the exploitation of his people the construction company, and criticizes their easy surrender to materialism. While all those involved in the work ought to be united in the common goal of harnessing a river, the irony is that racial tension, born of the years of imperialism, simmers just below the surface, and sometimes boils over into open conflict.

Clinton is determined to finish the work on time and despite pleas for caution, he steps up the pace. The Coffer Dams are almost completed, but unless they are fully completed, the monsoon would destroy a whole year’s work and carry away a slice of the reputation of Clinton’s Mackendrick Company. The rains have already started in the upper reaches of the mountain range, leaving them four days in which to pour the last pillar of cement. Four days of round-the-clock work would complete it. At this
juncture there is an accident in which about forty workers are killed, two of them by being jammed between boulders. The workers, led by Krishnan, demand that the bodies be retrieved, defying Clinton, who had decided on incorporating bodies and boulders into the last span of the coffer dams, rather than spend or 'waste' time blasting underwater so as to release the bodies. The workers are adamant, because they have a precedent. In an earlier accident, the fatalities had been British, and the bodies had been rescued at the risk of sinking the boat. Clinton chafes at the delay caused by the rescue. At this point Mackendrick brings the news that Bashiam has volunteered to try to lift the boulder and release the corpses. Clinton turns off the safety load indicator and releases the bodies by making the crane lift weight beyond its limits. The jib breaks and Bashiam is crushed hip down in his driver's cage. Clinton writes his report with no mention of the faulty lugs. But his conscience tears him apart. There is a rift between Clinton and Helen. She drifts away from him because he lacks certain qualities she thinks essential in a human being.

The novel can be read at various levels—as a text showing the life of the tribal people with the advent of modernization, or as a story of racial encounter, as a text of conflict between nature and industrialization, or as a text based on feminist ideas. However, our focus will be on the portrayal of the tribal people ('aboriginal people' as Kamala Markandaya calls them) in the novel. If for Arun Joshi the jungle inhabited by the tribal people is calm and quiet, it is not the same for Markandaya. Writing about the tribals around the same time, she finds them resisting the construction of the dams. However, the tribals are not in the forefront. Their voice has
been articulated by the non-tribal leaders. An important tribal character in the novel is Bashiam. He is an engineer by profession, assisting Clinton in the construction project. Though born as a tribal, he is different from his fellow men. Markandaya describes him as follows:

He was not like the others.... He had been born in these hills, had followed the traditional craft of woodcutting until they began building the hydro-electric station, further up the river, uprooting his family, indeed his whole village, to do so. Bashiam had gone back out of curiosity, and stayed, spellbound by the workings of the strange powerful turbines. A discerning foreman had given him employment, and in the course of it he had learnt about electricity and machines, about building and repairing and dismantling, welding his new learning on to an older, part-inherited knowledge of forest and river and hill-country seasons. It was this older knowledge that inhibited him, prevented him falling in line with the others. (23)

The fact that Bashiam studies engineering, becomes an engineer and takes part in the process of building the dam is significant. In spite of his tribal origins (usually thought of as being far from modernity), he takes active part in the progress and modernization of his region. Through this Markandaya perhaps indicates that the tribal people should embrace the change and modernization which was initiated by Nehru soon after Independence. Markandaya’s message for the tribals is not to resist, but to be part of the modernization process. In the novel one notes that the tribals are not vehement in opposing the construction of the dam though there is some kind of
dissatisfaction among them against the construction. Bashiam as an employee is loyal to Clinton, but he is not subservient. Here, for Markandaya, Bashiam is a loyal servant and a devoted learner. He takes interest in his work and picks up a lot of things about technology which his own people are ignorant of. Acquiring the knowledge of technology is something that the author finds unique in a tribal, and she is eager to highlight this aspect. Because of this exposure, Bashiam is able to mingle with the ‘high class’ people.

The relationship between Bashiam and Helen is an interesting subject for analysis. Helen wants somebody to interpret the culture and people to her. Bashiam comes to her mind. As Markandaya puts it:

Bashiam, the hill-man whom they called jungly wallah, or even more disparagingly the civilised jungly wallah. He became her link-man, providing the information she sought of a country and a people who intrigued her, whetting a curiosity with which she had always been liberally endowed. The curiosity grew with each encounter: no longer satisfied with watching, but wanting to know: entry achieved, now seeking performance. (44)

Gradually Helen is attracted towards Bashiam and that relationship turns into intimacy. Part of Helen’s attraction for Bashiam is his ‘exotic’ nature. Markandaya perhaps wants to set up a different kind of relationship between the outsider and the tribal. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, it is Billy who comes as an outsider to the tribal society and falls in love with Bilasia, a tribal girl. In Markandaya’s novel by
contrast, it is the woman who initiates the relationship. In both cases, however, the outsiders enter the tribal world to serve their own purpose. Thus, Helen moves gradually into the tribals’ lives; she is sincere about her curiosity, sometimes a little impatient with them. Because of this relationship Bashiam invites Clinton’s anger, contempt and irritation. As the novelist points out:

Bashiam seemed to him to be riddled with fears, in thrall to the spirits of forest and rain like the hill-tribesman he still was at heart. Even the other Indians kept him apart, a stranger in their midst, calling him jungly wallah as he had taken to doing. Jungly wallah: a man of the jungle. A primitive just come down off the trees. Englishman and Hindu alike looked down their fine aryan noses and covertly spurned the aborigine. (23-24)

Bashiam is also an outsider in his own tribal society—he hears his own people describe him as being de-tribalized. Sometimes, without undue agonizing he acknowledges the truth of it. He also knows in his bones that however de-tribalized he might be, birth and upbringing within the tribe gave him race knowledge and instincts that could never have been acquired by any one else. That is why they come to him, the delvers after knowledge, accessible as he is because of his English, asking him questions and recording his answers in notebooks or on tape. Bashiam is also uprooted from his own people and culture. His people do not consider him to be one of them. As Markandaya puts it:
To his tribe he was a man who walked alone, sprung from them but no longer belonging, a man who put shoes on his feet and worked machines, whose feelings and desires they could not fathom. Until one day the headman saw him at the edge of the encampment looking like a strayed animal, and ordered a hut to be built for him, believing he would not know how to do it for himself. They planned it a little apart from theirs, out of consideration, straining their minds to think as he might. (131)

Thus, making Bashiam content with his origins, Markandaya reinforces his tribal identity and shows Bashiam his own place. This also shows the writer's own attitude towards the tribal people. As a writer with progressive attitudes, perhaps Markandaya expects Bashiam not to forget his own people and tribal identity, and yet work for the progress of his region and people. But one is disappointed to see the way Bashiam acts. All that Bashiam gets is the status of a loyal servant. It is to be noted that Bashiam does not assume leadership. He feels happy that he is able to love Helen, a white who is his boss's wife. He volunteers to lift the boulder because he feels for Clinton whose wife he has been courting. This shows that Bashiam is loyal but not subservient, and this loyalty results in his destruction.

The third novelist I have chosen is Manohar Malgonkar. He depicts a different picture of the tribals in his novel *The Princes* (1963). Set Central India, the novel shows power relations between the erstwhile Maharaja and the tribals. Manohar
Malgonkar, like Arun Joshi, is not involved with tribal activism. In this respect, he and Joshi are different from Mahasweta Devi who is deeply involved. However, for Malgonkar tribals are not alien. As a hunter and politician he has observed them and mingled with them. As a writer Malgonkar has an important place in Indian literature in English, with more than ten novels, three collections of short stories, three histories, three works of non-fiction, and a play. He has been well appreciated by a number of reputed critics and creative writers. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar compliments Malgonkar for “his sound historical sense” (434). Speaking about Malgonkar’s novels, M.K.Naik in his celebrated work A History of Indian English Literature (1982) comments that “Malgonkar’s novels are neatly constructed and entertainingly told” (217). Malgonkar’s novels are conceived on a large scale, they are full of action. They are exciting stories. They are also valuable documents for our purpose.

Of his ten novels, the novels that merit serious literary consideration are:


Manohar Malgonkar was born in Bombay on July 12, 1913. His family comes from a village called Jabalpet in Belgaum district of Karnataka where they had lived
for generations. They were Marathi-speaking and land-holding Brahmins. He went to school between 1919 and 1931. Then he joined Bombay University and studied English and Sanskrit as Honours subjects from 1931 to 1935. Malgonkar dabbled in various professions and activities like hunting, tea plantation, politics, and the military before he joined the ranks of professional writers. He joined the British Indian Army and left it before long. He turned to politics and contested elections to the Indian Parliament twice—in 1957 and 1962—as a Swatantra Party candidate, but lost both times. Malgonkar’s fiction reveals a sound historical sense and an involvement in social and political problems.

In his first novel, *Distant Drum*, Malgonkar presents aspects of army life in India during the period of transition, from the last years of the British regime to the first years of Congress rule. His second novel, *Combat of Shadows* is set in a tea estate in Assam, and presents a picture of the life of the British officials, the Eurasians and the labourers in the tea estate. The novel *A Bend in the Ganges* highlights the issues which breed conflict between Indian Nationalism and British colonialism. It deals with the conflict between Hindus and Muslims, which supersedes the fight for freedom from British rule. The ultimate outcome of the double conflict is both freedom and division of the country. The scenes of violence, killings in cities, villages and streets, the shame and defeat at the hour of freedom, all feature in the novel.
The Devil's Wind represents the complex theme of the national experience of the Revolt of 1857. Projecting Nana Saheb, the historical figure, as the protagonist, the novel is a response and a counter to the colonial portrait of Nana Saheb. Malgonkar’s most recent novel The Garland Keepers (1986) is based on the Emergency (1975-77). It depicts the violation of human rights and the gross abuse of power by the Government. Though designed on a political theme, it acquires distinction on account of the author’s quest for truth, individual liberty and social justice. Thus, Malgonkar’s novels largely deal with historical and political dynamics in India. The tribal issue figures in only one of his novels, The Princes.

The Princes depicts the dilemma and anxieties of the Maharaja of Begwad around the time of Independence. When the proposal for the merger of the Princely State comes, the ruler is reluctant to accept the proposal. On the other hand, the Congress is insistent on this issue. The Congress as well as the Maharaja seek the support of the tribals, the Maharaja appealing to their traditional loyalty. The Congress, however, fails to get tribal support in spite of its attempt to lure the tribals with its attractive plans of building dams and other modernizing programmes. The tribals show their loyalty to the Maharaja. However, in the end the Maharaja has to succumb to the pressure of the Government and ultimately the State is merged into the Indian Union.

The relationship between the Maharaja and the tribals is very peculiar. Abhay, the Maharaja’s son and narrator, feels that the tribals have been kept in the dark to
prove the Maharaja’s supremacy. They are not allowed to get the benefits of civilization or be assertive. As he points out, the relationship between the ruler and the people is a kind of “mystic [or] ritualistic bond” (92). It is the only influence that holds the turbulent people together.

It is true that the king’s treasury is in Bulwara where the tribals live, but ironically the tribals living around the treasury have no light of civilization. Abhay rightly points out: “As we approached, we passed small groups of men and women going towards the camp, all almost naked except for little wisps of cloth around their middles, the men wearing twists of coloured rope for turbans and the women chains of flowers on their heads” (95).

The tribals, in spite of their poverty and illiteracy, support the Maharaja. They do not want an ordinary person like Gour Babu to rule them in spite of the fact that he promises to do a lot of things for them. The Maharaja however enjoys their support and recognizes them as his great weapon against the nationalists led by the Congress. Abhay comments:

this was the first time I became aware of them [tribals] as a force, as a race of hunters who had barely settled down as farmers and who live by instincts and emotions and a few tribal laws and closer to the bronze age than to ours. And it was at this time too that I began to understand why my father had always regarded them as his special responsibility. (Malgonkar 96)
The Maharaja perceives the tribals as emotional and innocent and takes advantage of their loyalty. The view that tribals are emotional people and can be easily won over is a popular notion in mainstream society. A number of films also reinforce this image in the portrayal of the tribals. For instance in a Hindi film *Daulat Ki Jung* or *Battle for Wealth*, the hero and heroine are captured by a cannibalistic tribe who sing and dance as a preparation for human sacrifice. However, the clever city people deceive the tribals and escape. In actual fact, the tribals are not innocent and meek followers. They had a history of leading important struggles, and they had a number of leaders among them such as Birsa Munda led the tribals with a sense of independence and dignity. However, the stereotypical common perception about the tribals is what the Maharaja carries with him. He greets the tribals and declares his support, service and solidarity, and tries to be one with them. In a symbolic gesture he wears their rope turban, removing his own, and greets them with the expression "Julay" which means both 'greetings' and 'farewell' as well as 'all right' and 'thank you' and 'well done' (96). This practice is carried on even by our politicians today. They go to the tribal regions once in five years and wear tribal headgears and tribal costumes, and make false attempts to greet them in their dialects in order to lure them for their votes. Malgonkar who has an uncanny sense of history and social attitudes, alludes to this in his portrayal of the Maharaja and his attitude towards the tribals.
The Maharaja patronizes the tribals and takes their side when he is in need. He speaks for the tribals. He likes them because they are loyal. They support him in his fight against the ‘nationalists.’ Therefore they are ‘‘un-spoilt’ and ‘magnificent people’’ (96). The Maharaja’s patronizing attitude is best expressed in the following words:

Wonderful people, loyal and brave […]. And they are fighting men. And this is their country, almost as it was since time began. We don’t want to take it away from them for the sake of putting up factories and mills somewhere, generating electricity. They would have felt uprooted, sold like slaves—six hundred rupees per head or a patch of irrigated land. I left it to them. The choice was theirs. (101)

However, according to Abhay, the choice was not theirs, but it was the Maharaja’s. As Abhay narrates: “They were swayed by sentiment alone, sentiment such as a man like my father was capable of evoking in them” (101). This shows that the Maharaja is not sincere in his relationship with the tribals.

The issue of deciding and speaking for the tribals is relevant even today as we come across different agencies speaking on behalf of the tribals and making attempts to bring them to their fold. The conversion programme of the Christian missionaries, the Hinduisation process of the right wing political workers, and the radical left’s attempt to brainwash the tribal youth into taking up arms, are a few cases in point. All of them, including political parties, are busy in bringing them into their fold, but they don’t bother to find out what the tribals really need. The tribals’ point of view is
largely ignored by these agencies. That the tribals ought to be given freedom to decide for themselves instead of somebody from outside deciding for them, is Malgonkar’s implication.

Whereas Billy’s relationship with the tribals in The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is seen as an act of intervention and advantageous to him, in Gita Mehta’s novel A River Sutra we see the tribal initiative in a similar kind of relationship. Like the above mentioned novelists, Gita Mehta also comes from an elite family. She was born in Delhi in 1943. She is the daughter of Biju Patnaik, a famous freedom fighter who later became the major political leader of the Eastern state of Orissa. Mehta was educated in India and the United Kingdom. While attending Cambridge University, she met a fellow student Aajai Singh whom she married. Currently they maintain their residences in New York, London and Delhi, spending at least three months every year in India.

Mehta has two important novels—Raj (1989) and A River Sutra (1993)—and a few prose works to her credit. Among these, Karma Cola (1980) is very popular. It is a series of interconnected essays, weaving Mehta’s own impressions of India’s mysticism with the impressions she gathers through other people. Ultimately it becomes a satire on the major wave of foreigners who began swarming into India in the 60s in search of India’s Karmic powers. Gita Mehta blends humour with witty observations, constructing a book that presents her own impressions interwoven with the experiences of many others. Raj (1989) is a thorough and colourful historical
story that follows the progression of a young woman born into Indian nobility under the British Raj. Through young Jaya Singh's story, Mehta's readers are shown a glimpse of the passage of Princely India's early struggle for independence as it affected a small segment of high-culture society. *Snakes and Ladders* is another collection of essays about India since independence. It is her most widely read work. Her purpose is to make modern India accessible to Westerners and to a whole generation of Indians who have no idea what happened 25 years ago, before they were born. In addition to writing, Mehta has also spent time as a journalist and directed several documentaries on India for BBC and NBC. She has made four films on Bangladesh. She has also made films on elections in the former Indian princely states. Because of this journalistic background, all her books feature keen political insight founded in thorough investigation. Her novels largely depict the hollowness of the spiritual and political mode of life of the modern man. Her novel *A River Sutra* (1993) is set on the banks of the river Narmada. The narrator, a retired bureaucrat, decides to spend the rest of his life on the banks of the river. He takes up the job of a Manager of the Government rest house and lives a life in search of tranquility. Here he meets several people—a girl fleeing her kidnapper, a naked ascetic and a child who is rescued from prostitution, a teacher who confesses to murder, a millionaire monk, and a musician silenced by desire. There are small tribal villages near the rest house. The narrator describes the village and its villagers thus:

> Our bungalow guards are hired from Vano village and enjoy a reputation for fierceness as descendants of the tribal races that held the Aryan invasion of India at bay for centuries in these hills. Indeed, the
Vano village deity is a stone image of a half-woman with the full breasts of a fertility symbol but the torso of a coiled snake, because the tribals believe they once ruled a great snake kingdom until they were defeated by the gods of the Aryans. (Mehta 6)

One particular day a constable comes and asks the narrator to come to the Police Station and meet a young boy (Nitin Bose) who carries the narrator's address. The boy is possessed and has attempted suicide in the river. The narrator goes and meets the boy who happens to be his ex-colleague's nephew. The narrator reads his diary, and one section of the book titled the "Executive's Story" is based on the life of an executive and his encounter with the tribals.

From Nitin's diary, the narrator learns about his encounter with the tribals. From the diary one learns that Nitin Bose is a young executive who had been appointed in the tea estate. He falls in love with a tribal woman during his stay at the estate. Later, his company calls him back to Calcutta. However, he finds it difficult to live without the woman. He becomes insane and wants to take refuge in the Narmada.

Nitin Bose, like Billy Biswas, is disgusted with urban life. He dislikes the monotony and artificiality of modern life. He seeks an alternative way of life. So he goes to the tea estate in Assam. He is unlike Billy who wants to mingle with the tribals, giving up his civilized costumes. Nitin goes with power and authority to administer them. The tribal woman Rima is attracted to Nitin who has all the
attributes of power. Nitin, without enquiring about her marital status and social background, seduces her. According to Nitin: “Her body encircled mine like a flowering creeper grips a tree […] then a lower voice asked, ‘why did you not send for me earlier’” (124). The last sentence reveals that it is not Nitin who falls in love but that the tribal woman has been brought to Nitin, the Manager. However, Nitin points out that “she seduces me with tribal songs” (126). The urban educated Nitin has the ability to write down his diary and articulate himself, whereas the tribal woman cannot. Later, after coming to know that the woman with whom he has made love is a Coolie’s wife, he feels disgusted. He wants to compensate her loss. One needs to note the power configurations in this relationship. Because Nitin has power and possession, he can use them to woo Rima and he can give her up when he feels like doing so, whereas the tribal woman has no say in her own life. She has to just obey her master, that is, Nitin Bose the manager. Here the tribal woman has been portrayed as a seductress. Her voluptuous sexual behaviour has been highlighted by the writer. The writer also reinforces the stereotype ascribed to the people of this region. She intends to say through Nitin’s diary that women of this region have no inhibition about sex. Nitin says this about Rima: “Like a magician she drew me into a subterranean world of dream, her body teaching mine the passing of the seasons, the secret rhythms of nature, until I understood why my grandfather’s books called these hills ‘Kamarupa,’ the Kingdom of the God of Love” (128-128).

Ruskin Bond, who could be included in the list of Indian writers in English, has an interesting story depicting the tribals. Bond is generally not included in the
class of above-mentioned writers as he has an Anglo-Indian origin, and as he lives a quiet life in the Himalayan Hills. Unlike them he does not go out of his way to rub shoulders with the literary elite. However, he is very popular among the young readers and is classed with Indian English writers like R K Narayan, Manoj Das and others. Ruskin Bond was born in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh, in 1934, and grew up in Jamnagar, Dehradun and Shimla. In the course of a writing career spanning more than thirty-five years, he has written over a hundred short stories, essays, novels and thirty odd novels for children. *The Room on the Roof* (1951) was Bond’s first novel, written when he was seventeen. The book received the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957. *Vagrants in the Valley* was also written by him when he was in his teens. This novel was a sequel to the *Room on the Roof*. Bond’s novel *The Flight of Pigeons* was made into a film called *Junoon*. Three of Bond’s short story collections have been particularly popular among readers: *The Night Train at Deoli*, *Time Stops at Shamli* and *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* and many of his short stories from these collections have been included in school text books.

The story “The Tiger in the Tunnel” is a story generally included in school textbooks. It is about a tribal family in the hilly regions of Uttar Pradesh. Baldeo, the protagonist of the story is a tribal watchman. He works in a small railway station and lives in a hut near it leaving behind his family in his village. His son Tembu who is twelve years old looks after the family and visits his father occasionally. Baldeo’s work is to give the signal to the night mail train. One night, after lighting the lamp, Baldeo is waiting for the train near the tunnel when he encounters a tiger. Baldeo
fights the tiger very bravely with his axe and is killed in the process. The tiger is wounded. Later, the wounded tiger is cut down by the incoming mail and the villagers happily feast on the tiger’s flesh. After two days of mourning, Tembu takes up the job of his father and shoulders the responsibility of the family.

Baldeao and Tembu have been presented as real human beings and not as exotic characters or as figures of fun. Their commitment to their work is emphasized, and their bravery and loyalty is stressed. However, while it is true that the novelist does not portray them as figures of fun, he nevertheless depicts them in ideal terms, and perhaps romanticizes them.

Indian English novelists are perhaps blighted by their very use of English and an air of inauthenticity often affects their writings, and this could be said of the novelists considered in this chapter. The novelists discussed above are all talented and the novels themselves are aesthetically pleasing, but from a political or ideological perspective one notices that they seem to repeat with some variations the stereotyping indulged in by the Anglo-Indian novelists discussed in Chapter 3. We shall now move on to a consideration of Indian novelists who treat of the tribal question in Indian languages, available to us in English translation, where presumably the fact that these are novelists who use Indian languages might just possibly lead to greater authenticity.