

# Traumatic Testaments and Testimonials of the Indian Tribals: A Select Study from the Narratives of Indian Writers

**Smita Daimari**

Part-Time Lecturer, Baksa Polytechnic, Assam  
[smitadaimari19930@gmail.com](mailto:smitadaimari19930@gmail.com)

## **Abstract:**

This paper deals with trauma studies and tribes. The paper talks about the traumas experienced by the characters in selected Indian writings. It discusses about the turmoil faced by the tribals of India, depicted by the authors through their writings. In all the novels for this paper, the translated version of the original into English language is taken into account. The first novel "The Araya Woman" describes the sufferings and plight undergone by the tribal community 'Araya'. The novel depicts how the tribals were cheated and how they were treated by the upper caste and others. The second novel "The Branded" by Laxman Gaikwad talks about the treatment they received from upper class, police and government in every aspects and areas of their life. The third novel titled "Paraja" also talks about how the rich officials and money-lenders took advantage of the illiterate tribal folks and robbed their money. The fourth novel 'When the Kurinji Blooms' talks about the three generations of Badaga tribe.

**Keywords:** trauma, tribal life, upper class, suffering

## **Introduction**

### **Trauma Studies:**

Trauma studies emerged during the mid 1990s. The study covers many fields. It explores the impact of the disruptive experience of trauma on individuals and societies. It analyses the psychological, cultural and literary significance. Freud's 'Studies of Hysteria' had big impact on the studies of trauma. It helps trauma studies to develop an understanding of extreme trauma that lies beyond limits of language, fragments and break downs meaning. In his early work, Freud argues that traumatic history develops from a repressed, earlier experience of sexual assault. According to Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, in *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) states that only the remembrance of the event is traumatic and not the original event. Trauma Studies later joined hands with post structuralism, post colonialism and other socio-cultural theories.

Some of the well known personalities related with trauma are Jean Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, Hermann Oppenheim, Abram Kardiner, Morton Prince. Trauma can be classified into two - Psychological Trauma and Cultural and Collective Trauma.

Psychological trauma also known as Mental Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event or series of events such as accidents or rapes or natural disasters. Reactions such as psychological shock and psychological denial are typical. According to American Psychological Association "Long-term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, difficulties with interpersonal relationships and sometimes physical symptoms including headache and nausea."

According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their

Smita Daimari

group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. eg- genocide, colonization crimes.

Cathy Caruth writes in "Unclaimed experience: Trauma, Narrative and History" (1996) "In its general definition, Trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasp as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks and nightmares and other repetitive phenomena."

Other writings in Trauma Literature includes Kali Tal's 'World of Hurt: Reading the Literature's of Trauma' (1995), Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing a Literature, Psychoanalysis and History by Shoshana Felman and Dory Laub, Trauma Question by Roger Luckhurst, Trauma: Explorations in Memory by Cathy Caruth, On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary studies by Geoffrey Hartman.

### **Tribe:**

A group of people sharing common beliefs, ancestors, languages, religions, cultures, customs and traditions is known as tribe. India is a place, very diverse in nature. The inhabitants of the country can be classified into tribals and non-tribals. Tribal people can be found across the country. They are governed by their own sets of rules and regulations, customs and traditions which are quite different from the mainstream thereby making them unique. They are dependent on flora and fauna for livelihood. They live close to hills and mountains, rivers and streams. They are self sufficient and are known to live in close contact with nature. Some of the tribes are mentioned in this paper.

Toda tribe lives in the Nilgiri Mountains of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. They belong to Dravidian ethnic group. Their occupations include cattle herding and dairy work. They

speak Toda language which originated from Toda-Kota sub group of South Dravidian.

Badagas lives in the Nilgiri district of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. They are an ethnic linguistic community and speak Badaga language (a Southern Dravidian language). Occupation of Badaga includes gardeners, tailors, barbers, washermans, scavengers, schoolmasters, clerks, carpenters, etc.

Kotagiri are an indigenous tribe to the Nilgiri Mountain range of the Indian state, Tamil Nadu. They speak Kota and Tamil language. They are related to Toda people and other Indo- Australian people. They follow Kota religion, Hinduism and Christianity.

Kurumba can be found in the Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. They are shepherds and also weave coarse woollen blankets. They follow Hinduism (Lord Shiva). The Munda tribe can be found mainly in the Chota Nagpur Plateau region of Jharkhand. They are also found in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Tripura and some in Bangladesh. They speak languages like Mundari, Ho, Hindi, Nagpuri and Bengali. They are also said to be austro-asiatic speaking. They follow Sarnaism, Hinduism and Christianity.

Kond tribe is found in the Indian state of Orissa. They practice hunting, gathering and slash-and-burn agriculture in the forest. They refer this act to be a symbol of their connection and ownership of the forest. They speak Kui and Kuvi languages. They follow Kond religion traditionally but currently they mostly follow Hinduism and Christianity.

Muria tribe is found in Bastar district of Chhattisgarh, India (Kondagon and Narayanpur Tehsil). They worship their folk religion. Worshipping village and clan deities which is similar to Sarnaism is followed. They are part of Gond Tribe. Dowry is non existent in this community.

Smita Daimari

Toto tribe is a small group of tribals who resides in Totopara of Alipurduar District, West Bengal, India. They worship nature. Some of them are converted to Christianity.

Adiyas, Irulas, Paniyans, Malappandaran and others are a few groups of tribals who reside in the South Indian state of Kerala mainly located in Wayanad, Palakkad, Kannur, Malappuram, Kollam, etc. Uralis are found in Idukki Hills. They are also known as Urli, Uraly and Oorali. Ulladan is an adivasi group residing in Idukki district of Kerala.

Tribes like Bodo- Kachari, Deori, Sonowal, Mising, Karbi, Dimasa, Garo, Lushai, Mikir, etc are found in Assam. They differ in languages and festivals. Like the Bodos speak Bodo language and likewise other tribes speak their own respective dialect. They celebrate different festivals but the common in them is that they depend on agriculture and farming. They follow Hinduism and Christianity.

Some of the tribes of Nagaland are: Chakhesang also known as Eastern Angamis previously. They celebrate Sühkrühnye festival. Lothas are found in the Wokha district of Nagaland. Lothas celebrate colourful dances and Folk songs. Chang tribe speaks Chang language. They were known as Mazung in British India. Pochury are natives of eastern part of Phek district. They are known to speak Pochury language. Angami are predominantly settled in Kohima district. Rengma tribe resides in Assam and Nagaland. They celebrate eight days of Ngadah festival. Konyak tribe is found in Mon district. They all follow Jhum cultivation since they are situated in hilly regions of the country.

Kuki tribe are natives of Mizo hills. The name 'Kuki' is given to the community by the Bengalis. Apatani is a tribe found in Ziro Valley of Arunachal Pradesh, India. They

speak Apatani, English and Hindi. They follow Christianity and Donyi Polo.

### **Phase of turmoil of the Arayas in " The Araya Woman "**

In an interview with Catherine Thankamma, the translator of the novel, Narayan expressed his expectation as "We wanted to tell the world that we have our own distinctive way of life, our own value system. We are not demons lacking in humanity but a strong, hardworking and self-reliant community....the tribal who lived a difficult life but retained a definite identity— is as glaring as day and night....we Araya are children of the hills. We are a hardworking, close knit community. We are not parasites. Therefore we do not ask for favours but for the right to live with dignity." (TAW 209-216)

'The Araya Woman' is firstly written by Narayan (one of the first adivasi novelist from Kerala) as 'Kocharethi'. 'Kocharethi' is translated by Catherine Thankamma as 'The Araya Woman'. The novel consists of nineteen chapters. The chapters describe the lifestyles and beliefs of the Malayarayas through its characters. The turmoils faced by the Arayas during the pre and post colonial period are talked about in the novel. The themes of the novel include cultural change, prosperity and disputes of land and internal conflicts.

The commotion of the Malayaraya community is unfolded with the life of the characters in the novel. The novel was set in the Western Ghats (pepper belt along the Kerala- Tamil Nadu border) in the first half of the 20th century. The turmoil is portrayed through the characters of the novel.

The key theme of the novel is cultural change. The theme is inaugurated with Kunjipennu's refusal to marry Narayanan, her maternal uncle's son and customary groom of her. She

Smita Daimari

falls in love with Kochuraman, an orphan (who possesses knowledge of medicinal herbs) and marries him. In the novel it is depicted that they escaped small pox and a bad harvest of crops mainly pepper, tapioca, coconut, yams, and areca nuts. They continued living when the Arayas were hit by severe droughts. Since they lack techniques, their crops were dry and land was parched. Due to extreme heat, a disaster of forest fire took place where the couple lost their first child Kunjikuttan and their newly built house was burnt down. They had to move back with Paapi and Kunjadichan. They were torn down with their child's death and dire poverty.

The poverty of the Arayas were exploited ruthlessly by the money-lenders, landlords, police and businessmen. Many Arayas started to buy rice and other items from the shops in the valley in credit. In return of the credit they will have to pay back with their pepper in the next season.

Since they do not know reading, writing and calculation, they were cheated by the money-lenders who demanded more money and pepper than they actually owed to them. Arayas started to drink Toddy, a local alcohol to forget their debts and struggles. Alcoholism hits the Araya community and Kochuraman was no exception. He too started drinking heavily. Kochuraman was also not free from the extortion by the upper class and the village goons like Ottathengam Devasia for which he had to keep a young boy who knows martial arts named Kunjerukkan.

Kunjipennu and Kochuraman welcomes their second child Parvati, later a third child Shekaran. Social transformation took place in the community with the establishment of school and an arrival of a teacher. Parvati after finishing college finds a job at Kochi as a clerk. She married against her parents wishes and distant herself from the Arayas.

Kochuraman, due to his drinking habits was hospitalized in the city where they learned that he requires a surgery to survive. But due to the rumors about the surgery, mortified, they(Kunjipennu and Kochuraman) escaped from the hospital.

The novel talks about Kunjipennu's breaking gender roles by marrying person of her choice. The novel depicts changes of life of Parvati through education. It also talks about arrival of Christianity and altering lives of Arayas. And with independence also came democracy breaking all the existing rules and powers.

### **Political injustice towards the Uchalyas in 'The Branded '**

P. A. Kolharkar is the English translator of the novel 'Uchalya 'by Laxman Gaikwad. The English title is 'The Branded'. Uchalya is an autobiographical novel about how Laxman Gaikwad took birth in the family of Uchalya tribe, who are branded as criminals, residing in the Indian states of Orissa and Maharashtra. The Uchalyas were called and referred to as criminal tribe by the British, under the Tribal Act of India. They were referred to be so because of their occupations of theft and robbery.

The novel talks about how the Uchalyas do not have a permanent place to live and are constantly moving. Also how excluded and unidentified position they hold as per the mainstream Hindu social order. They are deprived of education and ignored by economics, politics and religion. They have no identity except as criminals. Laxman was the only child to go to school from his community. They were scolded by the members of their community for sending him to school and breaking the rules of never sending their childrens to school. Uchalyas are considered to be an integral part of India but are denied of basic human rights. Their livelihood depends

Smita Daimari

upon the upper class. They are to carry police certificates to visit places. If they fail to carry certificates they had to undergo police atrocities. This is because of the colonial legacy and stigma attached to their community name.

"Sometimes the police visited our house in search of thieves or stolen goods. On such occasions local money-lenders and the village Patil bribed the police from our grandmother's deposit with them. If anyone from our household or tribe wished to leave the place, he had to obtain a permit from the police-patil, a bribe for the purpose. We were reduced to the level of animals; for just as permits are needed for cattle to be moved to other places or to be sold in the market, we had to have passes to move about. We had to show them to the police-patil and tell him where we were going to, and even then, we could not stay there for more than three days. If we ever travelled without a pass we were invariably arrested on trumped-up charges, beaten up, and set free only after exorbitant amounts had been extracted from us. My grandfather, tormented and tortured insufferably by the police, was forced to work as State Informer and help to the police in apprehending culprits from our own community by disclosing their names and whereabouts."(p 2-3).

Because of the branding of the Uchalyas as thieves and robbers they were often visited by the police in search of gold, money and other valuable items. Since they were deprived of school facilities, from very early age they were taught by the elders to steal for their means of livelihood, as there were no means left. They were trained rigorously and very strictly by the elders about the art of stealing and robbing. The tribe has no cleaning mechanisms and structured homes. They utilized their open spaces for multitasking at the same time. For instance, a space used for

cooking food is also used for wasteful activities. They washed their clothes once in a month or months until they get the chance to go near a river or streams. Till date, they are neglected by the society as well as the government.

### **Plight of the poor in 'Paraja'**

'Paraja' is a novel by Gopinath Mohanty published in the year 1946. It was translated into English in the year 1980's. The novel is about Paraja tribe who are found in Odisha and speaks Odia language. The story is about Sukru Jani, a widower and his family ( sons- Mandia and Tikra, daughters- Jili and Bili). The novel depicts how they are treated and what were their struggles.

After Sukru Jani's daughter Jili refuses the advances of Forest Guard, he took his revenge on Sukru Jani. He denies all the permissions he has granted to Sukru Jani to clear the forest and fallen trees on the Mali Damaka Hill, when the officials came. According to the verdict Sukru Jani was pleaded guilty. In order to escape going to jail, he borrowed money from Sahukar Ramchandra Bisnoi and with heavy heart decided to be a goti (bonded labourer). The pain can be clearly seen in the following words of him : "From today we are gotis, my son; we have signed the agreement and from today we are gotis! 'His eyes filled with tears and his chest heaved with great sighs. The ageing father threw his arms round his son, broke into sobs and said: 'Gotis, Tikra! From today we are gotis, slaves!' (Chapter 11). This shows the exploitation of the poor, illiterate, ignorant in the hands of the civilized. The civilized took advantage of the illiterate tribals. Because of the decisions of the civilized section corrupt officials, Sukru Jani and his son Tikra, worked as a bonded labourer in the house of Sahukar.

Smita Daimari

Mandia, son of Sukru Jani also became a goti later on in order to pay for his illicit brewing of liquor in order to get/collect money for bride price. Later on, Jili and Bili went to work as labourers. Jili also went to live with Sahukar which her father Sukru Jani was against of but later she was left by Sahukar too. Sahukar also mortgaged their lands for thirty years after learning about how much he could benefit from it. Because of this particular reason Sahukar was later killed by Mandia in the presence of Tikra and Sukru Jani. They then went to the police station in order to surrender themselves.

The novel talked about how one decision of Sukru Jani's led to misfortune of the entire family. The house which was once happy and living a life turned completely opposite where they were seen struggling to survive. The rich taking advantage of the illiterate and capitalization is portrayed clearly throughout the novel.

### **Thematical representation of tribal religion in 'When the Kurinji Blooms'**

'Kurinjithen' written by Rajam Krishnan in Tamil, is translated into English by Uma Narayanan and Prema Seetharaman as 'When the Kurinji Blooms'. Nilgiri is considered as the hills of the tribal people. This novel talks about Badaga tribe living in Nilgiri Hills.

'When the Kurinji Blooms' traces its varying fortunes and misfortunes. The Badaga tribes have their own style of architecture, customs related to birth, marriages, and death. Their deity whom they revere and their own ways of settling disputes. With urbanization, a number of Badagas have moved to cities in search of jobs. This means that there are very few Badagas living in the Nilgiri. At the same time, with the growing numbers of factories and townships, the Nilgiri hills are also changing. The Badagas find that their place is no longer

the kind of place where they could follow their own practices and live in peace. The interference of tea-plantation is a historical and ecological problem to the tribes of Nilgiri hills. Tea is a cash-crop. It brings them lot of money. This allows the Badagas to make their position better and to have a standard life. But it also means that larger part of the land traditionally belonging to the Badagas have been sold and that many traditional kinds of trade have become obsolete. At the same time, all human beings are striving to live in greater comfort and in a better way.

Jogi represents a mind that insists that, any change is necessary. However, his God fearing nature and the wisdom that has been passed on from his father makes him a positive character. On the other hand, Rangan is naturally selfish and greedy. His actions are direct results of his mindset. Though it is tempting to see Jogi and Rangan as sharp opposites, it is important to see the background against which they are brought up. Rangan has little love or care from his father. His stepmother also doesn't show any concern to him. But, Jogi's father loves his childrens and teaches them the morals to lead an honest life. This obviously means that he sees his uncle as a man forcing himself upon them. The reason for Jogi's tragedy is that he tries to restrict the growing technology and the reason for Rangan's tragedy is that he has completely given himself to the new technology. It is only Krishnan and Jogi's son Nanjan who have managed to build a bridge between the two, old and new.

Rajam Krishnan has often criticized the Government for its development programmes for the welfare of the tribal people. According to her, the Government should create awareness among the tribal people about the development programmes, otherwise it will only create troubles for both of them. The portrait of woman by Rajam Krishnan is

Smita Daimari

unique. Paru is one of the strong women in the novel. The way in which the tribe treats a woman is shown very clearly by the way Paru has got married. Paru has absolutely no chance in her love matters whereas Vijaya decides her marriage with Nanjan. Education is shown as the only tool of courage for the new generation women to take decisions boldly like Vijaya.

The Badaga tribe is not yet added in the Central List of Scheduled Tribes. Recently, they have given a requisition to the Tamil Nadu Government to register their tribe into the Central List. The State Government has also written to the Prime Minister regarding the requisition to consider the request of the inclusion of Badaga community of the Nilgiris in the Scheduled Tribes list at the earliest by mentioning how the people are still following their customs and culture without losing its colour. Many tribal and indigenous community people are treated like a refugee in their own land. They are treated differently by the government. One of the messages that comes across in the novel is the permanence of change. The world changes constantly yet some values remains the same. This is something that the Kuringi flower symbolizes. It blossoms once in twelve years. When it blossoms the next time, there will be a lot of changes. Things and people will be different. Yet the Kuringi flower itself will bloom and make its blue carpet in the Nilgiri hills. Therefore, the mainstream or the society needs to accept the changes without changing the basic human values.

### Conclusion

Tribal Literature is all about life. It explores the relationships of Man and Nature. The writings acts as testaments of the traumas, pains, sufferings, trials and tribulations and how they emerged out of their sufferings and

problems. Tribal people are known for their honesty and truthfulness. Their literature, religions, folk songs, stories, languages, festivals are very vibrant and colorful in nature and very different from the mainstream. Government have introduced various schemes and formed various organizations to look into the development of the tribals who are spread across the country. The areas focused by the government are education, health and welfare, housing and other socio economic areas. The love for nature by the tribals are reflected in their folk songs and folktales with the mention of streams and rivers, hills and mountains and lushful greeneries of the forests. Their unique cultures are full of characters. The government have taken steps to preserve the languages and cultures of the tribals.

### Works Cited:

1. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/204643>
2. Venugopal , Rajitha, et al. What About Theory? Edited by Kalyani Vallath, Bodhi Tree Publication .
3. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/>
4. Narayan. The Araya Woman. Trans. Catherine Thankamma. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.
5. Gaikwad, Laxman. The Branded. Trans. P. A. Kolharkar. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1998. Print.
6. Laxman Gaikwad, The Branded. Trans. P. A. Kolharkar, New Delhi: S. A., 2005 (reprinted)
7. Mohanty, Gopinath. Paraja. Trans. Bikram K. Das. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987. Print.
7. Krishnan, Rajam. When the Kuringi Blooms. Trans. Uma Narayanan & Prema Seetharam. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2009. Print.