

Do Beliefs Guarantee Existence? Understanding Social and Cultural Erosion in Pratibha Ray's *The Primal Land*

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“For the ‘true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual’s solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject’s itinerary has not been traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual. In the slightly dated language of the Indian group, the question becomes, how can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice consciousness can the subaltern speak?”

– Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Whose history is it to be read when one begins reading history? Which history—that of the oppressed or that of the superior—is considered ‘official’? The field of Subaltern Studies began re-writing history. Spivak states that history consents to include the ordinary people who have been disregarded, ignored, and given cold shoulder. In this regard, Sumit Sarkar states, “History from Below being by concentrating on local and regional developments, encompassing various groups in the world popular—tribal, peasant, artisan, labour protests and in the middle class, a class which started asserting some kind of regional on national leadership and which had a totally different composition from Princes and Zamindars” (Sarkar).

The British left their documents behind through which they shared their perspectives with historians when they departed India. On the other hand, nothing that could be regarded as original or authentic was left behind for the Indian labourers, workers, and rural populations, the tribal

communities, therefore, Subaltern Studies needed to be produced on the basis of Census Reports, Government records, Indigenous narratives, records from the Judiciary and Police Department, and other sources. The early nineteenth century saw the beginning of the tribal narratives. Sengupta enumerated the literary works, folklore, practices, and mythology that comprise the tribal culture. “The Anthropological Survey of India” and “Man of India” were two literary publications that documented these, offering a methodical literary framework for the analysis of tribal communities, their customs, and culture. In an effort to portray the rich life and indigenous culture of the indigenous people, a growing number of works on tribal studies were published in the form of novels after India’s freedom and were adapted into all of the principal languages of other civilizations. Analysing from this framework, Pratibha Ray’s father served as an influence for her literary profession from a young age. Her career took off after the publication of her debut novel, *The Rain Spring Summer*, which brought her great fame initially published as Barsa Basanta Baisakha. The story of the beleaguered Bonda tribe, which has roamed freely among the mountains of Koraput (Odisha) since the beginning of time but is currently endangered, is discussed in her ethnographic novel *The Primal Land* (translated from the Oriya original, *Adibhumi*), which was published in 1993 in accord to her personal experience with this indigenous land. The little-known Bonda tribe, who live in the highlands of the Malkangiri region, previously a part of the Koraput district in the southwest corner of Odisha, are the subject as Ray accounts in her *Adibhumi*. Since prehistoric times, sixty-two “Scheduled Tribes” have called Odisha their home. The Bonda (or Bondo) tribe is arguably the most ape-like of these. As per the 1981 Census, there were approximately 6000 Bonda people in the entire population. Their pace of growth was significantly slower than that of other native tribes, indicating that they may be an endangered species. Originating from Austro-Asia, the Bondas occupy an area of around 200 square kilometers, primarily consisting of mountains that are impassable. In this land, which the Bondas hold to be their own, not many outsiders have gone and not much has changed since the Stone Age.

The three hundred pages, broken up into thirty parts, tell the narrative of the Bonda land's origins and the tribe's strong relationship with 'mother' nature. The first eighty pages describe the strong relationship between the Bonda tribe and the myths and stories that guide their daily live and derive from the surrounding natural components. The majority of the novel is told from the perspective of the 'ancient' Soma Muduli, who is much respected as the head of the twelve Bonda villages and has evolved into a 'dokra' (old). The text raises certain important questions about how the Bonda people have been exploited since outsiders invaded their nation in the 1970s and 1980s. Later in the text, the author shows how the tribe's traditional beliefs have been destroyed by outside influences, leaving elderly people such as Soma Muduli to look at desperately in defeat while harbouring the much-feared question, "Can the Bondas manage to keep their culture alive?" The book demonstrates how corrupt government officials and insiders, like moneylenders (sahukars) and outsiders like the Dombs, who are a mixed tribe that has settled in Bonda land, greatly abuse the tribes in the post-independence age. The translator, Bikram K. Das, correctly notes in the book's introduction that the Bonda people are endangered due to attacks by dominating civilizations, and that this novel "could well serve as their obituary" (Ray viii).

In the hands of avaricious political powers, modernization and advancement have become instruments that not only steal the tribals' land but even drive them away from their ancient cultural identity and customs. In the name of progress, the ties that bind them to the natural world are broken. Patriarchal culture has contributed to gender inequality, but same hegemonic forces have also severely split mainstream society from its marginalized groups. This is the reason that the long-standing social position that makes up their shared ethnicity is in danger due to their physical landscape displacement and changing socio-ethnic roles. Furthermore, women of the Bonda tribe maintain exceptionally intricate interactions with nature since they perform routine home tasks to tend to their families and spouses. Women are the most vulnerable demographic in *The Primal Land*. Based on their general health and

strength, Bonda women are chosen by their tribe to take care of grooms while being half of their groom's age. Vandana Shiva critiques the encroachment of the West on the customs of traditional Indian agriculture and lifestyle. She discusses the patriarchal, western developmental paradigms, colonial practices, and the degradation of culture that results from the subjection of women and environment happen to be on the basis of gender roles. She maintains that in order to establish a sustainable life, it is necessary to adjust to the ingrained customs. She also hates how women are biologically controlled by science and technology, and how contemporary farming methods degrade the quality of agriculture by damaging the environment. In her point of view, modernization and growth of this kind lead to a departure from long-standing customs that regard nature (Prakruti) as a living, creative process (feminine norm) that provides spiritual comfort and nourishment. "All life forms shoot through nature, or Prakriti" (Shiva). With the introduction of western ideas, nature is now seen in India as merely a resource to be exploited, much like women are. Modern methods undervalue and hinder women's traditional wisdom and their reliance on nature for a life. Shiva highlights the efforts of women that emphasize the special relationship that exists between nature, women, and the oppressed who look for spirituality, unity in variety, and closeness to replenish their energy, with particular reference to the Third World Women (Shiva). Shiva additionally points out the disjointing and dissecting hegemonic forces. Within this type of contextual framework, both nature and women lose their inherent originality in order to satisfy the wants of others; they become less unique and autonomous.

The novel describes how governmental power systems abuse indigenous people and plunder the natural world, but it also highlights how everyday struggles faced by women are comparable to the mistreatment of forestland and ethnic communities as a whole. Ray employs an interpretative lens that focuses on how nature has been commercialized by the patriarchal culture and external politics of the western worldview. Similarly, women within the tribe experience internal and external forms of oppression. They are married to a man who is half their age, and

they are constantly working in the fields to complete everyday duties. Anthropologists have been particularly fascinated by certain ethnic and cultural characteristics of the Bonda people. For example, the Bonda tribe avoids the practice of women being cared for by their husbands during marriage, as only healthy and fit women are selected for marriage in order to care of the groom and the family and equally share the workload in the fields. Meanwhile, the intrusion of the outsiders into the inner regions of the forest exposes the women to even worse forms of exploitation. For instance, the story of Budei Toki, who maintains her virginity while waiting fourteen long years for her husband to be released from prison. However, as Budei ages and gets warped, her husband Bhaga Bindu, who is ecstatic to have returned home from prison, asks for a 'longsi' or divorce. She has had trauma all her life, and all her sacrifices for her family have been in vain, just as the forests of Koraput, which formerly supported mankind and the Bondas in various ways, are now being destroyed for the purpose of development. Furthermore, Bhaga Bindu brings home a second wife, which is customary in Bondas, and he crosses the limits by staring at her expectant daughter-in-law. All of this left Budei shattered, and without hope. She is in excruciating pain and laments that, simply by virtue of her gender, she has no human rights; in fact, the conventions of Bonda culture deny women any rights at all. Ultimately, she breaks and departs from her venerable home and husband in search of an uncertain and dangerous future. Ironically, the father and the other men in the group kill Bhaga Bindu's animals and feast over it, all while causing turmoil and refusing to take her home. This gives readers a clear picture of how women and animals have been treated within the text. Ray paints a vivid picture of the appalling conditions under which women in indigenous communities endure a double form of oppression. The reason is that they are neither granted any rights within the tribe nor are they able to assert their autonomy outside of it because as widows they do not qualify for any form of government aids. Lastly, the goal of the Bondas marriage system is to limit women within socially acceptable bounds. Because of traditional myths, women are not permitted to grow long hair or wear sarees to enhance their inherent attractiveness. The story passed down through

the generations prohibits women in the Bonda tribe from dressing fully, stating, "Not a blade of grass will grow on these mountains if you try to cover up your nakedness or grow hair on your scalps! There will be no more Bonda people!" (25). The Bondas dismiss a Bonduni's wish to wear 'rinda' (a necklace made of beads) because of concern that the myth of Goddess Sita's curse will kill the Bonda community. Men are relatively indolent and get drunk with sapung juice, while women are saddled with the duties of caring for their husbands, children, and working in the fields. 'Sapung juice' serves as a representation of the hunger and poverty that exist in indigenous groups. In the same manner as outside political forces abuse and destroy nature, so does their community's social structure exhibit gender bias and injustice. Premarital sex is acceptable, although not promoted. The young ladies live in communal dormitories called 'selani dingos', where men from nearby villages occasionally visit (but hardly from the same community). Despite the lack of a main character, the author's passion is evident for Budei, who ends up serving as a depiction of female patience and suffering. Objectification and commodification of women, the environment, and marginalised populations become the primary targets of patriarchy/ the dominant outside world. The story places a strong emphasis on subjects including sexual exploitation, the issue of bonded labour, women's struggles, relocation, and other socio-political problems that affect women, and the indigenous people who are voiceless. As Gnanadson opines ". . . shows how the Dalit and indigenous women, the lowest castes of the Indian caste system, bear the greatest impact of the destruction of creation and have the least access to resources . . ." (73).

Though it came gradually, Verrier Elwin had anticipated that integration would be necessary for the Bondas. The Bonda people grow increasingly wary of outsiders, including missionaries and reformers, believing that their arrival will destroy Bonda civilization in the process of bringing about change. That's where the assimilation issues reside, which also highlight the ideological divide. Moreover, the Christian missionaries' description of their 'Mahaprabhu' as a false divinity infuriated the tribal

people. When the guests from other religion advise them to have just one God and follow a different diet, they find themselves in a difficult situation. They believe that all of the gods will curse the tribe if they do not make sincere offerings, or ‘biru’ (a ritual sacrifice made to a deity). The author puts it this way: “The Bonda were convinced of a plot to destroy the tribe, as every visitor to the country had tried to change.” This is the reason, they held on to their beliefs even more tenaciously: “All windows and doors were closed against the winds of civilization” (91).

Even with their strict tribal culture and traditions, the tribes are compelled to embrace change as a result of modernity. Ironically, the two times the Bonda communicate with the outside world are also the times they are able to get some degree of knowledge. In one case, a Bonda is imprisoned for committing murder, and in another, he is employed in Assamese tea gardens. A Bonda meets severe criminals in prison and picks up their language as well as counting, a few alphabetic letters, Odia, and a smattering of Hindi and English. Some people come back carrying umbrellas, which they use in place of the ‘tarla’ or local shade, and a torch long after the battery runs out. In addition, he learns how to “drink hot cha (tea)”, “wear a shirt over his chest”, and “smoke bidi instead of dhungias”. His handshake technique improves, and he develops an understanding regarding the western-educated men that “these were the pioneers, the forerunners; they knew the world!” (120). A scenario comparable to this involves someone returning from Assamese tea gardens. Sukra Madra declared, “The townspeople are always fighting over different gods – killing each other”, after his return from Assam. “Now, we shall experience the same thing!” (120). He was unaware that, in addition to the changes the missionaries are attempting to bring to the Bonda territory, the Bondas themselves are bringing about the change. It is just like the case of Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* where he is taught language and now he knows how to curse. In *Ancient Odisha Tribe Faces Extinction*, Jitendra writes in a worried tone, “Until a few years ago, spotting a member of this elusive tribe was rare.” However, as “interactions with

the outside world have also come to an expanse” (par. 3), Bondas have begun to cross the ‘runukbore’, and are now visible not only in bordering states like Andhra Pradesh but also in other districts of Odisha. The ancestral identity and the ways of the living of the Bondas are lost in the process of blending of the new culture with the ancient.

Therefore, the novel is more than just a chronicle of a strange society; it also serves as a live account of the political and social crisis that India is currently experiencing. Already, one of the most violent areas of the nation is the area where tribal populations live on both ends of the Odisha–Andhra border. Years of abuse and disregard are starting to backfire. Odisha’s tribal groups have a history of rebellions and demonstrations against exploitation and repressive land laws. These movements have played a key role in drawing attention to the problems encountered by native communities and championing their entitlements. Tribal politics has included the fight for power and autonomy as a major component. Tribal issues have been handled by a number of political parties and individuals, but the results of these efforts have varied. The Indian government has executed a number of laws and policies that are intended to secure the rights of tribal communities and deal with their socio-economic problems. The goal of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, was to provide rights to the indigenous people over the forest land which they had historically inhabited. Its execution has, meanwhile, run into difficulties and criticism. This further problematizes the idea of existence within one’s native land. The people from the outside (the dominant force) decide upon the functions of the native within their own spaces. The purpose of the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996 was to provide tribal areas more autonomy and to strengthen local self-governance through the use of panchayats, or local councils. It aimed to improve tribal participation and governance in decision-making. Substantial political and social developments that took place in India after independence had an impact on tribal communities. In order to meet the demands and defend the rights of its indigenous inhabitants, Odisha, as a state in independent India, had unique difficulties. Land

reforms were put into place after independence with the intention of redistributing land and raising agricultural output. Tribal groups were, however, occasionally uprooted as a result of these reforms, and they were frequently left behind or poorly absorbed into the new economic structures. Numerous initiatives for development involving large-scale industrial and infrastructure projects that frequently encroached into tribal territories were started during the post-independence era. For the native tribes, these projects frequently resulted in additional relocation and socio-economic instability.

The story centers on the unusual customs and cultures of the Bonda community, prompting the readers to consider whether or not their beliefs guarantee their existence. The Bondas' distinct social and cultural identity gives them a sense of security and well-being, but the cultural practices that are part of their identity are inherently strange because they are based on a different belief system. As a result, there are ongoing internal conflicts between the Bondas of the plains and the mountains, as well as between the Bondas themselves. However, rather than enhancing their quality of life, the government's encroachment on their territory through development plans has resulted in socio-ethnic conflict, exploitation, and cultural dilution. The tribes are not exempted from outside influences, and they run the risk of losing their tribal identity in order to comply with mainstream society's expectations for survival. "Identity relies in part on the various inter-subjective meanings through which a group of people perceive the self and the other", in Sharma's point of view in his 1994 book *Tribal Identity and the Modern World* (14). Any tribal community's cultural identity includes marriage. It's interesting to learn about the peculiar Bondas marriage system. The novelist has drawn a connection between this peculiar ritual and the myths and legends that the Bonda people pass down through the generations. Understanding people and their culture requires an understanding of their legends and folklore, which are derived from the oral tradition that connects the past to the present. But in *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes defines a "myth" as any invented, "illusory thing", "false representations", and "invalid beliefs" that are part of the collective

consciousness and that we take for granted as “natural” (Leak 1994). The woman feels that under the strange tribal marriage system, she will have someone to take care of her, particularly when she becomes older. It is not, however, materialized in the community’s perspective. Displeased with the circumstances “Do you think I have no rights just because I am old?” yells Budei Toki (181), but paradoxically, because tribal rules do not protect women’s rights, she was unable to object or claim it “as a matter of her right”. Ray states, “The Bonduni’s only asset is her youth; once it’s gone, she’s not welcome anywhere.” Her husband, father, brother, or son is not in need of her (183). A Bonduni’s decision to wed a young Bonda in order to ensure her old age is based solely on the hypocritical belief that no ‘dokri’ or elderly lady has ever had her husband provide for her needs in her later years. The tribal men turn a Bonduni’s youth and hard work into a target and an asset to be exploited. At the end, Bondunis’ existence is imprisoned by this marriage ritual, which they self-imposed. In Pratibha Ray’s fiction, female protagonists are nearly always the major characters. Nonetheless, Pratibha Ray vehemently opposes the term “feminist” that is frequently applied to her writing, choosing instead to refer to herself as a “humanist”. Her work exposes the aberrations that still afflict our society in large part, but she is particularly sharp when addressing the pain of a wife, mother, or daughter-in-law who is fighting for a life of dignity and self-expression.

The Primal Land is an anthropological novel that tells the story of the endangered Bonda tribe of India, who live in the isolated highlands of Koraput, Odisha. The demands of modernity created an oppressive internal and external environment that led to this complex situation and their conflict between existence and identity, an inter-subjective reality. The paper has therefore tried to attempt on how their ingrained cultural customs contribute to ongoing disputes within the group and how government intervention in development plans results in the social and cultural erosion of their indigenous identity which they are unaware of. It epistemologically questions their existence which stands on the foundation of their belief system. The research therefore, deciphers the

challenges faced by the Bondas and their existence which could likely be inflected by issues of assimilation, erosion of spaces and values resulting in an uncertain future.

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