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An Enquiry into the Metaphysics of Indigenous Tribal Life as Portrayed in Hari Ram Meena's *When Arrows were Heated Up*

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Tribal life is something of a curio in the contemporary exotic-obsessed society. While on the one hand the term tribe makes one think of people living nestled in hills and forests; on the other, it also evokes images of poverty, malnutrition, backwardness and deplorable human misery. Variously branded as the aborigines, the aboriginals, the *adivasis*, the indigenous people, or even the first settlers, these human groups have largely remained obscure, neglected, and under- or mis-represented in the mainstream world-view. In fact, the very metaphysics of their existence has largely evaded any definitive understanding on the part of mainstream society. Therefore, most of the anthropological, ethnographic, demographic, and political attempts (which have tended to forge a one-size-fits-all understanding) have met with limited success so far. An emphatic admission of this difficulty has been made by G.N Devy in his anthology *Painted Words*as he confesses, "It is almost impossible to characterize all of India's tribals in a single ethnographic or historic framework" (ix Introduction). Similar claims have been made by other scholars as well, highlighting the *sui generis* character of each tribal group and its axiological moorings.

In this light, the paper is an attempt to outline a broad-stroke picture of the metaphysics of indigenous tribal life in southern Rajasthan under the colonial rule as depicted in the celebrated tribal writer Hari Ram Meena's novel *When Arrows were Heated Up*. So, while this account of tribal life is admittedly based on a work of fiction, its roots arguably go deep into the reality of tribes that have historically lived and fought for their existence in the southern regions of Rajasthan. The idea is to

build up a vignette of the Bhil community and its moral transformation during the run-up to the famous *Mangarh* massacre (also known now as the *Jallianwala Bagh* of *Vagad*) in which hundreds of tribal people fell martyrs under the leadership of Govind Guru (a sobriquet for Govind Banjara) at the cruel hands of the British Raj and the local princely states.

Notwithstanding the definitional complexities of what a tribe is, it is a widely accepted fact that these are the segments of population that have lived far-off in less trodden, hard-to-access areas since antiquity. Even in mythologies, their presence has been registered. The *Nishadraj,* for instance, in the *Ramayan* is often credited to have taken Lord *Ram, Laxman* and Mother *Seeta* across the river while in *Vanvas* or exile. Such episodes of their presence are recorded almost everywhere across the country. Rajasthan being a large region with varied land-forms has also had its own share of such population since ancient times.

Of the tribal population in Rajasthan, a major portion is found in the southern hilly regions along the Aravali range and further south towards the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh and Kantha region of Gujarat. The major tribes are *Garasiya, Bhil, Meena*, and *Damor*. While these people had lived largely *uninterferred with* for centuries tucked up in their rugged territories, the advent of the British changed the course of their life once and for all. This, sort of, upset the tacit understanding between the rulers and the tribes.

The *Bhil* are spread over a large territory of western India and are concentratedin southern Rajasthan, western Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and northern Maharashtra.Asmigrant laborers in the tea gardens, the *Bhil* also live in Tripura. By some accounts, they form the second largest scheduled tribe of India. Though they speak the *Bhil* dialect, they are also well versed in various regional languages such as Rajasthani, Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi etc. It is the life and struggles of these people that find a poignant portrayal in the novel*When Arrows were Heated Up.* The saga covers a span of about three-fourths of a century from 1857 to about 1920s when eventually the tribal people's resentment

against inhuman oppression burst out into the open and shook up the pillars of the colonial empire in Rajasthan and the contiguous territories.

What is of enduring interest and value, however, is the power of ideas that Govind Guru, the voice of reason and the spirit of change amongst the tribal community, was able to wield in the entire episode of *Mangarh* massacre. The novel vividly records the circumstances that led to the rise of this tribal uprising and seems to point out that it was a social reform movement that first began at the level of ideas in the creative and freedom-loving mind of Govind Guru and then culminated into a full-blown protest by the indigenous tribe against the atrocities of the British Raj. While it is this socio-political dimension of the movement that is often talked about, there is also a subtle thread of metaphysical concerns running through the entire tale. The very metaphor of fire as the manifestation of inner strength and energy is the pivot around which the outer action of Govind Guru and his associates turns. In fact, the story opens with Kuriya, a close companion of Govind Guru, conjuring up flames of fire by striking pieces of flint. At this Govind's reaction is: "Yes, Poonja. Now I have got it. Can you see how the flint hides the fire within? Rub a little and sparks fly out. The sparks with fire…"(11).

Explaining it further, Govind Guru observes thoughtfully:

> Kuriya produced a spark from the flint. The spark turned into a fire. It means there is fire in stones. If there is fire in stones then the hills have fire in them. Andif the hills have fire in them, then the adivasis who live in those hills must have fire inside them, too. I want to light that fire….This is the fire that gives people the power to fight evil" (12).

Similarly, on another occasion, when Govind was only about 11 years old and was trying to talk other children into a life of righteousness and self-esteem, the Mukhiya of his village expressed helplessness and a sense of resignation to fate by saying, "When do we get to listen to such sound discourse? In any case, what do we do after listening to these wise words? We have led the same life our ancestors did"(14).At this, Govind responds with a revolutionary and reformatory zeal and says:

> No, Kaka! Don't think like that. It is good to learn to live within one's means. But these rulers commit various atrocities on us and the *jagirdar* asks us to offer him free labour. Instead of thinking about these things, our people get drunk and abuse their mind and body. They also harass their women and children every day. This is a bad habit. Shouldn't we oppose it? (14).

Yet another testament to Govind's robust sense of morality is his response to Kuriya's unnecessary killing of a scorpion, which was simply "going its way" (15). While all his friends found it difficult to figure out how it was wrong, Govind reminds them of the tribal people's reverence for the wildlife as they had originally seen animals, birds and all other creatures as co-sharers in the resources of the forest life. He also opposes the building of hunting platforms in the Fawata jungle at the behest of the Darbar of Udaipur. In a way, it was his success at thwarting the hunting plans of Thakur Dilip Singh that gave a fillip to his efforts at socio-political awakening amongst the tribal people of southern Rajasthan. But for this transformative purging of the Bhil community's whole way of life, the socio-political enlightenment would not have come about.

Prof. V.K. Vashistha has referred to this dimension of the Bhil uprising (whereof Govind Guru was the driving force) while describing Govind Giri's work. He writes, "… he engaged himself between 1908 and 1913 in the laudable task of improving the moral character, habits and religious practices of the backward community of Bhils of Dungarpur, Banswara, Idar and Sunth States" (523). Govind Giri does shine the light of reason on the despairing people of the Bhukiya village too when they are inflicted with heavy rainfall and hailstorm that devastated their crops. He exhorts the villagers saying, "It's no use being crestfallen. If God gives a lot, he also has the right to take something from us…Have patience….The jungle is full of grass and there is no dearth of leaves on the trees…Work hard to feed you children" (27).

Likewise, in the Garhi village, he holds a panchayat to have a dialogue with the community on the issue of intoxication (*mahoodi*, the country-made liquor)and *begaar* or forced labor. Typically, most of his responses to the villagers' counter-questions end with, "we should oppose it" (34).

It is this ability to pin-point the wrongs and then to appeal for resistance that makes Govind Guru the voice of the masses. In a way, this comes across as a way of breaking the centuries-old mold of thinking among the tribal people. It also strikes as a reminder of the old power relations according to which the tribes had enjoyed unchallenged rights over their immediate surroundings and the resources found therein. Also, they had lived by a moral code of their own making, which had lately fallen away in the wake of exploitative subjugation by the twin force of local princely states and the colonial power.

Their relationship with the feudal lords had originally been of mutual support. The kings let them live *uninterferred* with as long as they did not come in the way of royal affairs and, in return, the tribal people did not shrink from rendering military services whenever needed and also did the *begaar* under royal orders. This had continued up until the British began encroaching upon the tribal territories for more resources—timber, land, water etc. Next, the advent of technology like the running of trains in the tribal areas, the mining operations, metaled road construction also disturbed the centuries-old socio-ecological balance of the region.

The European colonisers' motives of resource extraction and military control were bound to get on collision path with these people, who had for centuries lived relatively freely and had regarded their territories with all their resources as their own. Any curtailment or denial of these rights was simply unimaginable for them. At Garhi, Govind Guru said, "Listen! More woes are in store. What grows in the jungles has been ours for generations. What grows there is for our use, but why does the Raj let contractors take that produce?" (34).He forewarns his fellow tribesmen of the dangers that loom large over their communitarian existence. This, though, he does in a coolly dispassionate way so that the tribal masses may rejuvenate from within. He aims at internal transformation in parallel with external situation. In this too, there comes to fore the idea of inner fire as the source of purging off all spiritual as well as material dross.

At Suranta village, Govind extols the virtue of honesty among the tribal people. He appeals to them, "… Do farming and earn an honest living

for your families. Learn to live a life of honesty. Only thus will the Adivasi society improve…Don't do *begaar* for the *raja, jagirdar or hakim*. Don't suffer injustice. Stand up to injustice bravely" (62). He also exhorts them to observe cleanliness and temperance in their routine life, and to wear fortitude in demeanor.

As a result, there evolved a large following of Govind and it, sort of, turned into a sect. The adherents began establishing *Dhunis* as places of worship and collective gatherings. They had found a new metaphysics—a life of dignity to be achieved through application of reason and if it be reasonable, even that of force. Naturally, this development raised the hackles of the princely states of Dungarpur, Udaipur, and Banswara as they saw these *Dhunis* as symbols of potential rebellion. Their suppressive tactics got afoot and soon Govind Giri and his associates found themselves running from one village to another until they finally built up a defensive front on the hillock of Mangarh in October, 1913. In a matter of a fortnight, there ensued a gory confrontation between the faith-emboldened *Bhils* and the heavily armed joint forces of the feudal lords and the Raj. What exactly transpired on the fatal day of 17th November, 1913 is still largely shrouded in mystery. However, there is a considerable degree of consensus amongst scholars that scores of hundreds of adivasis laid down their lives in the cause of the community rights and their supreme sacrifice still continues to inspire the fire of freedom and the indomitable pride in indigeneity. And, the fountainhead of this all was the progenitor of Dhuni sect, Govindgiri Banjara. The impact of his preachings was subsequently recorded even by Sir Eliot Calvin, the Agent to the Governor-General in Rajputana, as he observed, "Large numbers of them have forsaken their old habits of strife, crime and plunder and have taken to regular agriculture and the cult of peaceful pursuits" (quoted in V.K. Vashistha, 525).

Restoring the true pride of indigeneity among the tribes was the noble task that GovindGiri was able to accomplish. Besides, his socio-religious reforms brought about a radical change in their whole way of life. It included a newly-found confidence in being the rightful owners of the forests, being even better than the so-called high castes (which, by

contrast, surreptitiously committed female infanticide and caged women behind the veil), and , most importantly, being the freedom-loving humans who could, if the need arose, lock horns with even the mightiest of the colonial powers and take it down. In the wake of Mangarh massacre, both the British Raj and the princely States had to re-calibrate their treatment of the *Bhil* community, showing due respect for their indigeneity, their socio-cultural pride, their religious leanings, and for their right to self-determination.

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