

Digitizing Adivasidom: Prejudices and Performances

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(Translated by Kanu Priya)

Documentation of the Adivasi culture had begun during the colonial period itself, but the proper curation of the life and culture of the Adivasis in the digital mode is quite a recent phenomenon. My speech will revolve around the prejudices that the mainstream society harness against the Adivasis and the performances of the Adivasis in the digital era.

Before the colonial period, the Adivasis were termed as “asur”, “rakshas”, “dait”, “kol” in the ancient mythological literatures. The Mughals used the term ‘kol’ for the Adivasis. In the colonial period, the terminologies used were “tribal”, “aboriginal”, “primitive”. After the 1950s, when we adopted the Constitution, the Adivasis were termed as “Scheduled Tribes” in English and “Anusuchit Janajati” in Hindi. From the early 20th century onwards, they were termed as “jungli”, “barbar”, “kol”, “asabhya”. Thus, Adivasis have been represented through various terms right from the ancient period to the contemporary period.

What do Adivasis call themselves? The Austro-Asiatic languages in India like Mundari, Oraon, Santhali, Bhili, Ho, Kharia use the word “ho”, “hor”, and “horo” for themselves, which means “a human being”. This seems to be a paradox. On the one hand, the other mainstream communities are terming the Adivasis as animalistic, demonic, uncivilized’ and so on, while the other hand the Adivasis are asserting their identity as humans.

Now, we need to understand how the Adivasis are being represented on the digital platforms. If we search Google or YouTube (the two largest search engines) with the keyword “tribal” or “adivasi”, we will get images and videos that are mere misrepresentation of the Adivasi culture and identity. Those beginners, who search these terms on the internet, will be misled with incorrect information. It is clear from this that the prejudices against the Adivasis have continued even in the digital era. It has remained frozen right from the ancient Sanskrit texts to the present times. These stereotypical images of the Adivasis on the digital platform shows how the world wishes to see them. They do not wish to see them beyond the stereotypical frame that has been created in the past 5000 years.

A previous speaker had said that Tribal Literatures were being introduced across various Indian universities. But my question is: Even in a tribal university like Amarkantak, is tribal philosophy or “Adivasidom” a part of the pedagogy like other philosophies such as Jainism, Buddhism, Marxism, Gandhian philosophy?

Even today we teach about the tribals with a similar ethnographic approach, which was introduced to us by the colonial masters. We only teach about their culture, language, dance etc. The first tribal department in India was opened in Ranchi University. The Department was called ‘Tribal and Regional Languages Department’. Mridula Ma’am said that they are including translated texts in the syllabi of Tribal Literature. However, while including these translation, we also need to take into consideration the politics of translation. Even the references she gave in her talk were of non-tribal people like Kancha Iliah and Appadurai. Hence, this academic space incorporates translations and intellectual references by scholars who do talk about the Adivasis but they do not belong to them. The academic study of Adivasis does not quote a Xaxa, a Tete, a Hembrom, or a Tudu.

Even in the digital era, the discourse on tribals is based on secondary sources. Sunder Manoj Hembrom talked about collective memory and Adivasi narratives – but I am very sorry to say that I do not find these narratives anywhere. The entire Adivasi discourse is based on secondary sources and not on tribal narratives and references. Anvita Abbi Ma’am has done a commendable work to preserve and document the language of the Great Andamanese tribe. But my question is, despite all the efforts made to preserve Adivasi language and culture, how many of them have been actually preserved? The last speaker of the Great Andamanese language passed away recently and along with her, their language has also died.

The first Adivasi grammar in India was published in the 1840s by S.R. Tickell. He wrote on the grammar of the Ho language. It was only after its publication that efforts were made to document the grammar of other Adivasi languages by the missionaries. In his Preface, S.R. Tickell has mentioned that he does not have knowledge of the language. He had written it with the help of the people of the community. He also mentioned that he had followed the English grammar to compile the Ho grammar. Later, the grammar books of various tribal languages were also written based on the model of S.R Tickell’s Ho grammar. In this process, the entire language and its grammar has been corrupted.

We should be happy that Tribal Studies is being introduced in Indian universities, but one cannot overlook the contents included in the syllabi. If the indigenous narratives and their collective memories are not included as primary sources, then the stereotype of the Adivasis will prevail. It is sad that there is no Tribal Academic Council in our country that can guide what should be taught in such courses. The content on the digital platform is also biased and in no way represents the true wisdom of the Adivasis.

I come to the next part of my speech, that is, performances. If we search for the word ‘Santali’ or ‘Adivasi’ on YouTube, we get demeaning visuals that do not represent the Santal community. Technology is powerful and should be used, but the question arises: Is Adivasi philosophy or “Adivasidom” being digitalized? Adivasi identity is not possible without “Adivasidom”. If you are not reflecting and preserving Adivasi wisdom, their collective memory and symbols, then the advent of technology will be of no use to the Adivasi community. The general public will form an image of the Adivasi in their psyche based on the representations on the digital platforms. Thus, we need to promote “Adivasidom”. We cannot use the word “folklore” and “folktale” for the Adivasi narratives as their worldview is different.

In the present times, the Adivasis use three terms to represent themselves. The North-Eastern tribes call themselves “indigenous”. In Central India, they call themselves “Adivasi”. They have struggled to establish these terms for themselves. The forum of Adivasi Matters of UNO has accepted these terms. Apart from this, in the international scene, the Adivasis call themselves “First People” or “First Nation”. They do not use the words “aboriginal”, “tribal” or “primitive” as they think that these colonial terms have been used to demean their identity.

The British administrators termed the Adivasi regions as “Country”, i.e., Bhil Country, Ho Country, Munda Country, Kharia Country. The non-tribal regions were considered as “Presidencies”, i.e., Bengal Presidency, Madras Presidency, Bombay Presidency. They used the term “Country” for tribal regions because they accepted the sovereignty of the tribals. Even the famous monograph written by S.C. Roy, the internationally-acclaimed anthropologist, was titled “The Mundas and their Country”. Thus, there is a philosophical, socio-cultural, political and economic basis of the terminologies used by the tribals. No word can exist in isolation, without a socio-cultural, political base. Thus, if we accept the words like “tribe”, “Scheduled Tribe”, “janajati”, this will mean that we are trying to look at the tribes from a non-tribal gaze.

Even in the digital era, we need to bring the Adivasi wisdom and philosophy into practice. It will be of no use if it remains only in the academic and intellectual discourse. In the past 200 years, a lot of study has been conducted on the Adivasis; still there is an identity crisis. Scholars are concerned about the endangered Adivasi languages but they do not talk about the other mainstream languages like Bhojpuri and Bengali whose speakers have also been reducing. This is the politics that we need to understand.

In the end, I would like to lay stress on the fact that if we do not propagate “Adivasidom” (a word that was coined by Jaipal Singh Munda in 1940) in our pedagogy, design, art, words, graphics, images, visuals, cinema, then the culture, language and identity of the Adivasis will be diminished. We have to preserve the wisdom of the Adivasis in different modes like digital, cinema and literature, in order to preserve the Adivasi identity and their indigeneity.