

Preserving Tribal Memory through New Forms of Orality in the Digital Era

Mr. Sunder Manoj Hembrom

(Translated by Vasundhara Gautam)

In today's session, I will be sharing my personal understanding and experiences of the tribal worldview. I will be presenting my views from the standpoint of a creative writer and a translator. The topic of my presentation is "Preserving Tribal Memory through New Forms of Orality in the Digital Era", which mainly revolves around collective memory and indigenous narratives as the central points of my talk.

Introduction:

Oral/tribal narratives lost their credibility among people with the increasing popularity of the written texts, creating a clear disparity that further pushed the tribal narratives to the margins. We, the tribal writers, had been trying to bridge the gap between the tribal communities (oral narratives) and mainstream writings (written texts) by producing written tribal narratives as early as the end of the nineteenth century, but our writings never found in place in the mainstream. The emergence of digital platforms in recent years has created a level playing field and today we are able to reach a wide-ranging audience in the digital era. Digital platforms have created a space for tribal narrators to recount their stories from the insider's standpoint. By doing so, tribal stories are coming out in the open and tribal writers are not entirely dependent on non-tribal scholars to reach their audience, and they coming out in the public domain. We, the people of the community, are able to create our own narratives.

Since the advent of the digital era, tribals are asserting themselves not only through oral narratives but in written and visual mediums as well. Here I would like to give three examples to show how tribals are judiciously using digital platforms to reach out. The examples are as follows:

1. *The Johar Journal*: Dr Ivy Imogene Hansdak has started *The Johar Journal*, so that the stories, poems and essays from tribal/ Adivasi communities can be brought in translated form to the English-speaking world, which will inevitably increase the expanse of the readers. This journal is no less than any mainstream journal. It is imperative that we get more of our own narratives translated. In her inaugural speech, Prof. Anvita Abbi had laid emphasis on inter-linear translation from tribal languages, and I too think this will play a very important part in understanding the language,

culture and rituals of the tribal community. Until and unless we provide such interlinear translation, people will not know the worth of tribal society. We are grateful to Dr Ivy Hansdak for this crucial attempt.

2. *Jharkhandi Bhasha Sahitya Sanskriti Akhra*: This is a multilingual quarterly magazine that provides space to tribal people to assert their identity through their narratives. Here are some efforts by the *Akhra* that have contributed to strengthen the Adivasi people's position in society.

a. Community radio for the *Asur* tribe: The major tribal communities are not on the verge of extinction but they should safeguard the interests of other endangered tribes. The *Akhra* has promoted the cause of these endangered tribes and is doing valuable work for them. These efforts should be recognized and the government should also promote such work.

b. Adivasi workshop series: It is imperative to know other tribal communities in order to connect and be united at a national level, so the *Akhra* team has been going to different parts of the country to connect with various tribal communities. These workshops give us the chance to understand the diverse cultures, rituals and languages found among the tribal communities spread across India. These efforts will also give us a better chance to get our voices heard.

c. Interviews with Adivasi personalities: Mr. A.K. Pankaj has interviewed many Adivasi personalities in the last few months on digital platforms. These interviews have been live-streamed on YouTube, Facebook and other digital spaces. They have introduced us to the lives of these personalities and informed us about their achievements. Such efforts by *Akhra* will bring their hidden narratives into the public domain.

d. Adivasi story-telling program: Another important program started by *Akhra* is the *Bakhdi Gamna*, where a narrator reads out the stories of tribal writers from different languages, in Hindi translation. This program has become very popular among the Adivasi people of Jharkhand. Orality has always been our strength and programs like *Bakhdi Gamna* give strength to the tradition of orality. These stories are from tribal communities and even mainstream listeners might like them, since it brings diverse colours and freshness to the existing body of Indian literature and culture. Tribal communities across India are diverse in themselves, and if you add

them to the existing diverse fabric of Indian culture, it will become even more colourful.

3. Documentation of folksongs: I am personally involved in the third project titled *Santal Nostalgia* with a friend, Dr Boro Baski, who lives in Bolpur, West Bengal. Dr. Boro Baski has done commendable work in the field of developmental education and is also a popular composer of Santali folksongs. The *Santal Nostalgia* project is aimed at documenting his collection of Santali folksongs and this is done in two major stages. In the first stage, we upload the video/audio of the Santali folksong on YouTube, with the lyrics in English translation for the scholars or non-tribal people to read. In the second stage, we recount the story behind every song to preserve the memories and thoughts that inspired the composer. We also hope to bring out a book after the project is complete.

These are a few attempts being made by the Adivasi people to preserve their culture and heritage through the use of digital media. With this, I end my presentation.