

Singling out from the Many:

Tribal Autobiography and the Appropriation of the Self

A.C. Sreehari

Texts from marginal cultures are widely being co-opted to dominant cultures with our own consent, simply to float effortlessly through a supermarket of packaged and commodified cultures ready to be consumed. Works of even oppositional values from peripheral cultures have been appropriated to suit the global trade. Attempts to resist this and to recover the memories that survive in diverse forms are being made at the same time by both critical and creative writers alike. In “Literature as supermarket: Mapping World Literature Today”, P.P. Raveendran shares his concerns about this in these terms. Auto/biographies that are sold out in the book markets in Kerala could be analyzed in the light of the above.

Autobiography is conceived to be a narrative of an individual. So, it will be significant to analyse the autobiography of a tribal man who is singled out from the many as a modern individual when tribal people basically manifest the energy of living as a group and not as an individual who would not have a story of one’s own but of a community at large. A plural orientation of the self would be there among the tribal people who resist being modern single individuals. Objectifying a tribal as an individual and subjectifying one as an author of one’s own experiences is that has happened in the case of *Bethimaran*, the autobiography of Sukumaran Chaligatha, who hails from North Wayanad, a representative of the tribal poets of Kerala.

Autobiography as a genre carries markers of colonialism when it is concerned only with issues of self-formation, argues E.V. Ramakrishnan. Most of the recent autobiographies narrate the violence of everyday existence and prevalent historical discourses by showing how social systems are constructed, he says. They provide an alternative epistemology and cosmology that

can critique the world views articulated by mainstream literary works (Ramakrishnan 2011, 63). Unlike these, there is self assertion in *Bethimaran*, an attempt to reconstruct a coherent self out of the disintegrated, 'fragile and vulnerable' ones.

There are tribal autobiographies coming out in India like *The Rise of a Tribal* that relates to the life history presented as 'An Autobiography' of a Tribal, cast in the majoritarian mould and also in the 'rags to riches' story of the traditional type. The Autobiography is the life journey of a first generation learner, a highly educated and member of a scheduled tribe that traces his childhood spent in utter poverty, subjected to social discrimination and humiliation. He achieved upward mobility using the provisions of the Indian Constitution as a stepping ladder. Ambedkar as a source of inspiration, he could pursue higher education in England and obtained his PhD from the University of Liverpool. This hard earned degree worked as a spring board for him to become the Additional Secretary of University Grants Commission, to mention one out of many positions he held.

Tribal writings generally embody the politics of survival and recovery. Pramod K. Nayar speaks about a tribal narrative, a *testimonio*, in one of his draft papers on a book titled *I, the Aboriginal*, and he says that like all such narratives, is a collective document. It is less about a person than about a community. The narrator stands as not as an individual but as a metonym for an entire tribe. Indeed, he stands for an entire way of life (Nayar 5).

Autobiographies in Malayalam have recently obtained a considerable readership as they provide some of the most severe critiques in contemporary cultures. But the central problem of tribal stories is that there is no narrative that is unmediated by the mainstream and its epistemology, politics and frameworks. In a sense such attempts are ethnographic accounts cast as

autobiographies that appropriate the narrator as a native informant. Can the 'protagonist' become the 'author' of his or her autobiography; or is s/he simply the supplier of information for the privileged reader to cast an 'authentic' document is a question that is to be addressed.

The recently out *Oru Ravulante Jeevithapusthakam*, the autobiography of P.K. Kariyan, the adivasi-naxalite activist who is the nephew of the former Kerala Folklore Academy Chairman and Gaddika artist P. K. Kalan has an appropriation inherent in its making even when it critiques *Keralathile Africa* by K. Panoor. As told to Fazeela Mehar, a postgraduate in both Malayalam and Anthropology, the book, instead of being a document on the eventful life of the tribal people in North Wayanad in the 1970s is spun and woven around a single individual. To read tribal writing as mere autobiographies is to take away its location from the larger frames of struggles of a people for resistance and survival. To reduce it to an individual's life story is to blunt its political edge as the document about a community. To delink it from other similar texts about indigenous rights and historical wrongs is to isolate it as a unique genre, says Nayar (9-10).

Sukumaran Chaligatha who hails from the same Ravula tribe and writes poems and songs in both Malayalam and Ravula tongue is now a member of Kerala Sahithya Akademi and the author of an autobiography titled *Bethimaran*, a 'testimonio', a novella-length narrative told in first person who is also the real protagonist of the events he recounts. Tribal writings, like the tribals, exist at the margins of representation. In most cases, they are records of the atrocities perpetrated upon the communities. Issues of cultural identity are central to tribal cultures that have been assimilated into mainstream cultures. They have been forced into assimilation into mainstream cultures.

Sukumaran alias Bethimaran was born into a tribal community where the name of the grandfather would go to the grandson. He was christened by the family as Bethimaran but the authorities at school changed it to Sukumaran, after a popular actor in Malayalam, taking his original name unfit for a young one. His father was Jaachan. It was the election id card makers who seem to have changed it to Rajan, says Sukumaran. Sukaumaran in the hajar book got the initial as C.R., that is, Chaligatha Rajan, an act of the educational system that transformed the Malayali family systems to the father-centred nuclear family. The name of his mother Maachi who was named after their mother goddess was changed to Santha by people from the outside (Chaligatha 18-19).

The forward to the autobiography carries an analogy of himself to a lone elephant who returned to the forest to the loss of his self. This also expresses an anxiety about the loss of cultural specificity as more people move into cities and cosmopolitan cultures for various gains. This relocation is causes break with roots and tribal ways of living. Average Malayali middle class readers will carry the memory of Vyloppilli's "Sahyante Makan" in them while reading it. The cover page also carries a picture of a single being, and not a group as elephants would be found in the inner woods. He talks about the adivasi community on the verge of extinction. So is his tongue too. Malayalis deplore on the onslaught of English over Malayalam. Same is the suffocation of many tribal tongues due to the pressures of majoritorean tongues like Malayalam, Kannada and Tamil. He quarrels to the commonsense of taking the Adivasis for museum pieces for fixing his foot firm on the eroding soil. He was not attempting all these days to tell through his poems and through this book the poverty of tribal life but the inner views of the richness of culture and resistance; he says (5-6).

Sukumaran says that his tribal tongue has become a hybrid one as there were transactions among Malayalam and English. The people had reading habit. They could learn letters from the Literacy Mission though they did not join schools or even if dropped out (22). His Ravula community had their own language. It clashed with those who speak official Malayalam in schools. English is easier than Malayalam to him, he says.

The tribal is faced with discriminatory laws, social codes and are often criminalized for not conforming to mainstream cultural codes. There were discriminations at school. He was black in complexion. While in hostel when he was in the seventh standard he was taken for a thief and that stigma and the trauma of undergoing severe stress and strain remained for long, till he stopped studying past pre-degree.

Sukumaran was then taken to Kodagu district of Karnataka for farming ginger. The Kodagu experiences he shares are totally different from that the Malayalis had while reading the travelogue *Kudaku Kurippukal* by N. Prabhakaran or the short story, "Pulliman" by S.K. Pottekkad. He wrote a poem on Kodagu titled "A Silent Tata" (35-37). The tribal people used to sing songs to alleviate their hardships in Kodagu (61). People began to go in search of jobs to cities, for all jobs, to hotel jobs in Kozhikode, and 'for salary,' as parents of girl children would proudly put it. He went to Bangalore, for learning photography. Worked in F.M. Radio, then in film as assistants in script writing, he narrates a wide variety of jobs that he had done during the last decade.

The songs they sang are not 'folk songs' (63). They are stored in memories. There are people who make it theirs by collecting and printing. There is a pleasant life lead by the tribal people

that the outside world cannot easily understand. Growing up, marriage, begetting children, death rites, gods are all described in the small book.

The tribal people never starved as they survived on the provisions of the forest. The real robbers were the migrants who conquered the land and began slave trade. He speaks of the wisdom that they never had from any books. The honey that the merchants sell in markets are not real ones as it is not possible to collect that amount from the forests.

The mainstream Malayali middle class gender norms and food cultures are alien to him and the tribal people in general. Now they have begun to imitate the people from the outside. His first experience of tasting shavarma is described when he went assisting somebody in film (56).

He began to understand Malayalam poetry by reading poets like Sugathakumari, he says. He began to publish first in newspapers and magazines. He takes P. Raman for one who cuts paths for tribal poets. Sukumaran Chaligatha, Asokan Marayur and Anilkumar David thus formed a 'triumvirate' (57-59).

The trajectory of becoming a strong individual could be seen in *Bethimaran*. The "Introduction" to the book by P. Raman ascribes a heroic dimension to Sukumaran's deeds and words. That he has become a part of the 'field' of the mainstream of Malayalam poetry is considered to be unproblematic by Raman. His focus is on the pleasurable aesthetics of tribal poems, the cool wind of the woods a tribal poet is able to make even while in the city (10). The attempt to self-critically address the issues of the paradox of Malayalam becoming a 'killer language' by the editors of the book titled *Mele Kavulu*, a collection of poems dedicated to Madhu of Attapadi, is not seen here. The interview with Joseph K. Job that Sukumaran Chaligatha had reveals how

modernity, its institutions and the agents of the mainstream have interpellated him as a poet writing in two languages, Ravula and Malayalam.

Theoretical deliberations of autobiography have been riddled with paradoxes, says Udayakumar (12). Autobiography is taken for the modern individual's medium of expression and it refers to an interior realm inaccessible to others. At the same time it is constructed in a language commonly shared. Appropriation happens in all majoritarian languages; but understanding it would liberate both the writers as well as the readers. Autobiography as a genre has, in its very inception, a tendency to discipline one by singling out from the many. The authoritarian 'I' of *Bethimaran* thus makes the 'author' conform to the mainstream. His is seen as a problem of an individual that lies in between Bethimaran and Sukumaran by Raman. The kind of 'koottaanthatha' (collectiveness), the isolation experienced by a community as a people, conceptualized by M.B. Manoj is alien to it. (themaarga.com/mb-manoj). 'Ekanthatha' (loneliness) is still reigning supreme in the text. The attempt to "shift from the Romantic idea of the self with a unique interiority to a collective self of the community" (Ramakrishnan 2017, 58) is very rare in *Bethimaran*.

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