Adivasi Writing

Urvashi Vashist

Adivasi writing is something of a contradiction in terms: the literary traditions of *adivasis* (an umbrella term that designates original inhabitants, indigenous peoples, and tribal communities in the Indian subcontinent) have largely been oral. Furthermore, the displacement and destitution-driven disappearance of adivasi communities whose lifestyle and survival were contingent upon their environment, and their increasing assimilation into mainstream agrarian or urban communities, has meant that these oral traditions have often fallen into disuse.

According to the People’s Linguistic Survey of India (2010) at least 780 languages are currently spoken in the country; as many again may have vanished since 1961. In an effort to preserve adivasi languages and literatures, scholars such as Raghunath Murmu, Ganesh Devy and and Prasanna Sree have helped formulate original or derivative scripts for over twenty adivasi languages; several communities have chosen to adopt existing scripts (in Assam, for instance, the Bodos have chosen Devnagari, the Tiwas have adopted the Asamiya script, and the Mishings are using the Roman script). There are some recent cases of recovery, e.g. the Gunjala Gondi script with which only six members of the community had remained conversant. Organizations such as the Bhasha Research Centre and the Tribal Cultural Heritage in India Foundation emphasize the crucial significance of adivasi languages having a place in institutions formal education, the importance of publication to the dynamic use of the languages, and the necessity of re-examining literature and textuality to account for the literate spoken-word narrative.

Adivasi writing has invited readings that stress the deeply fraught socio-politics of exploitation, expropriation, disenfranchisement, and marginalization. Though constitutional “provisions for the administration and control of tribal areas” were meant to safeguard the interests of socio-economically vulnerable communities, the resource-rich centre of the Indian peninsula has been bitterly by sides that pitch themselves as the vanguard of modernity and economic development, and the last bastion of social and environmental justice. Similar conflicts and contentions plague tribal communities in the North-East, in South India and through the Andaman islands. Consequently, issues of ethnic discrimination (community, plurality, and otherness), politics (the capitalist/communist divide, neoliberalism and neo-imperialism), social injustice, biodiversity, interdependent ecologies, and the environment are critical to adivasi life-writing and its variants.

Several translations and anthologies of regional folklore or folk and tribal tales have been published over the past twenty years: in 2001 Sahitya Akademi published K Keshavan Prasad’s translation of the *Male Madheshwara*, a Kannada oral epic “based on the version sung by Hebbani Madayya”; in 2010, Katha brought out an illustrated translation of Gond artist Durga Bai’s story of *Mai and Her Friends*; Sujata Miri’s 1991 transcriptions and translations of *Stories and Legends of Liangmai Nagas* were reprinted by the National Book Trust in 2006. In recent years, the forms and genres published most regularly by writers of the adivasi identity have included (auto)biography, fictional or non-fictional memoirs, travelogues, history and historiography, (bio)ethnography, and personal essays. In addition to several works by non-adivasi writers on tribal lives and livelihoods, C. K. Janu’s autobiography (2004) has been widely read, reviewed and critiqued, and Narayan’s *Kocharethi* (1998) made national headlines in 2011, when an English translation was brought out by Oxford University Press as the first novel to have been published by a South Indian adivasi. Despite the continued, endemic use of ‘adivasi’ to describe a wide range of cultures based on their ‘primitive traits,’ the reception of, and scholarship around adivasi writing is decidedly more sophisticated today than it was three or four decades ago.

Timeline

1925: Pandit Raghunath Murmu (1905–1982) creates the “Ol Chiki” or “Ol Cemet” script for the Santali language.

1950-52: The Criminal Tribes Acts of 1871-1924 (under which certain communities were defined as “addicted to” committing “non-bailable offences”) are repealed; Article 342 of the Indian Constitution delineates provisions for the President’s public notification of ‘primitive’ and economically ‘backward’ nomadic, semi-nomadic, and tribal communities to ‘schedules’ in an effort to institutionalize their welfare.

1996: The Bhasha Research and Publication Centre is established in Baroda, Gujarat.

1998: Narayan’s *Kocharethi* is published.

1998-2004: *Dhol*, a multi-format (spoken and written) magazine for and by Adivasis eleven languages is brought out by Bhasha.

2004: Kali for Women publishes C. K. Janu’s *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu*.

2010: The People’s Linguistic Survey of India is initiated.

References and Further Reading

Blackburn, S. “The formation of tribal identities.” *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, Cambridge: CUP. 2012.

Chatterjee, S. “‘Adivasi’ Literatures of India: The Uncultivated ‘Adivasi’ Languages.” *Indian Literature* 14(3). 1971. 5-42.

*Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature*. Ed. Devy, G. Delhi: Penguin. 2002.

–– *The G N Devy Reader: After Amnesia, ‘Of Many Heroes’, The Being of Bhasha, Countering Violence*. Delhi: Orient Blackswan. 2009.

*Adivasi Communities and Languages in India*. Ed. Gadhia, N. Vadodara: Bhasha Centre. 1998.

*Indigenous Voices: Mapping India’s Folk and Tribal Literature*. *An Annotated Catalogue.* Delhi: National Book Trust. 2013.

Janu, C. K. *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu*. Trans. N. Ravi Shankar. Delhi: Kali for Women. 2004.

Mahanand, A. *Lo(k)cal Knowledge: Perceptions on Dalit, Tribal and Folk Literature*, Delhi: Authorspress. 2013.

Narayan. *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman*. (First pub. 1998) Trans. Catherine Thankamma. Delhi: OUP. 2011.

Rycroft, D., and S. Dasgupta. “Indigenous pasts and the politics of belonging.” *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi*, London & Delhi: Routledge. 2011.

Shah, G. *Social Movements: A Review of Literature*. 2nd ed. Delhi & London: Sage Publications. 2004.

Singh, K. *Tribal Society in India: An Anthropo-historical Perspective*. Delhi: Manohar. 1985.