Negative Externalities of Modern Development: The Continuing Relevance of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*

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"Nature is born under the sign of birth, fertility, song, vibration, proximity, and an absence of symbolic language that separates subject from object. Nature consists of flora and fauna; it is a discursive herbarium and a bestiary, part of an archaic, unchanging world of immanence" (Conley 110). Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* envisages nature as an animate extension of the tribal ethos which challenges the dichotomy between the real and the symbolic, the material and the cultural, the sensual and the spiritual. As such the teleological progressivism of a modern nation state seems incongruous with respect to the native scheme of things. For the tribal communities which had inhabited their lands since time immemorial, landscape also becomes a site of contestation to preserve their lifestyle increasingly under threat in an age of industrialisation. If the Romantic Movement was a response to eighteenth century industrialisation in Europe, recent and present ecological mobilisations seem to contend against an anthropocentric theory of development. *Paraja* can be considered an early entry point into issues like demographic categorisation of indigenous populations, Adivasi rights, ecological nationalism and an autochthonous worldview not premised on modalities of exclusion.

Nomenclature, Legislative Classification, and Indigeneity

There have been numerous debates over the nomenclature used by anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers and historians to depict indigenous populations. The bone of contention seems to be whether to define the category along racial or ethnic lines and if such clear-cut demarcations are at all possible. Western anthropology makes a distinction between ethnicity and race relations, though both impinge upon collective or group identities and questions of classificatory demographics. The most facile distinction that sociologists routinely make is to consider race as a social fact as opposed to ethnicity, which is a classification on the basis of distinct cultural mores, spiritual beliefs and cosmological worldviews. While some social anthropologists such as Pierre van den Berghe regard race as a sub-category of ethnicity, others like Michael Banton identify race as 'a negative term of exclusion' and ethnicity 'as a term of positive inclusion' (Eriksen 137). Thomas Eriksen maintains that "majority and dominant populations are no less 'ethnic' than minorities" (Eriksen 136). Moreover, an apparently cross-continental label like the Fourth World peoples, giving an impression of having the capacity to foster solidarity among indigenous populations on a global scale, has been increasingly taken recourse to by postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and James Clifford.

In case of India, the caste system further complicates the classification of the tribes. The heightened inter-caste contestations in the wake of the Mandal Commission did not witness a similar political visibility among the tribals. Vibha S. Chauhan conjectures that deepening democracy premised upon a stress on numbers may have been the reason behind the silence which surrounds their socio-political organization on the national front as opposed to the Scheduled Castes. The high region-specific variations that inform the lives of the tribal populations show have also been cited by Chauhan as being a hindrance in the formation of a cross-regional solidarity. However, similar narratives of displacement, coerced eviction from their native lands and repressive actions by authorities foster a historical affinity in the experiences of the indigenous groups. Prior to independence, the communities bore the brunt of the developmental agendas spelt out by the colonial government and the capitalist agencies. Post-independence nation-building also largely exempted indigenous claims over the development process often proving to be counter-productive to their rights. Though forming only around 8.6% of the entire population (according to the 2011 population census), 34% of those displaced due to development projects are tribals. (Salve, n.p.). Sporadic incidents of tribal uprisings centred on regional or local issues have failed to evolve into persistent movements. They have failed to congeal into a sustained mass struggle for socio-economic justice. Chauhan ascribes this to the lack of a "platform of common protest" (Chauhan 57). She also voices the interchangeable usage of the terms Adivasi and tribal, preferring to use the former herself because

of the pejorative connotations of the term ‘tribal’. Ramachandra Guha pointed out that the term Adivasi is a recent coinage as he objected to its synonymous use with the word tribal. The former in his opinion signals a politico-legal identity while the latter denotes the original residents of a place, present from the beginning or, literally speaking, ‘of the sunrise’ (Guha n.p.).

In the Indian context the two words remain complexly intertwined and often form the premise for discriminatory, sometimes violently so, practices against these peoples. Though the term ‘Scheduled Tribes’ entails a homogenous category serving administrative and legalistic convenience, their geographic dispersedness and diversified mores and customs prevent such single inclusive description. G. N. Devy argues that “it would be simplistic to perceive them as divergent victim groups of any shared epochal phenomenon such as colonialism, imperialism, modernity or globalization” (Devy xi-xvi). The Dhebar Commission set up in 1960-61 was vociferous in its criticism of state policy vis-à-vis tribal rights. However in classifying the 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), it took recourse to the negative criteria of low literacy, stagnant or declining population, primitive modes of livelihood like hunting and gathering, etc. This categorisation did not take into account their alternative epistemic systems and sustainable ways of living. Their vulnerability to a myopic model of development was not acknowledged.

Ecological Nationalism, Bioregionalism, and Adivasi Voices

The critical-discursive field of nature studies has hardly gone beyond addressing the anthropocentric bias underlying the value hierarchies that sustain the logic behind modern development projects. Green theory seems to have given rise to a grand narrative of ecological discipline that towers as an epistemic mammoth in Western academia and pales into relative marginalisation of Indian writings on environmental concerns. Western green theory hardly offers any discursive tool to investigate the adverse repercussions of a mixed economic model that India adopted post-independence for tribal life-worlds. The derivative critical traditions of such theory adopted in the Indian context seem to prove inadequate to represent the struggles for survival of local communities. The attendant dynamics of class and caste-based subjectivities that inform indigenous identities in India cannot be adequately addressed by these critical traditions.

The green political concept of bioregionalism provides a workable model to understand native epistemic systems across the world. David Haenke describes bioregionalism as representing practical day-to-day life skills and knowledge of native peoples; “it really has to do with living in spiritual and physical harmony with all aspects of the lives of the ecosystems in which we make our homes. Some native peoples, when they and the lands where they live are left alone, still do this” (Haenke 3). Thus to conceptualise the modalities by which native populations belong or (un)belong to the nation state warrants reimagining the idea of nationalism. K. Sivaramakrishnan conceives his theory of ecological nationalism as middle ground between civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism. He identifies the nuances in either’s relationship with ecology, allowing for competing claims of nationalism with their equally fraught assertions of rights over land and its resources. While civic nationalism skips addressing the complex web of relationships, rights and identities to favour a unitary idea of nationhood, ethnic nationalism provides for a space wherein place-based identities are combined with rights over nature and nature-based livelihoods (Sivaramakrishnan 10). The success of protest movements like the one carried out by the Niyamgiri Kandhas has served as a crucial reminder to one such strand of ecological nationalism that is predicated on the humble wish of a tribal community to maintain its historically legitimate sovereignty over their land. It has also served as an inaugural moment in the history of environmental activism involving the voices of Adivasis in Odisha. In this regard Mohanty's *Paraja* can be said to be one of the pioneering attempts at giving literary expression to an Adivasi community's worldview and ontological struggles in a modern nation state.

The Paraja worldview

The Jnanipith Award-winning novel *Paraja* by Gopinath Mohanty, eponymously titled after the Paraja tribe, was one of the earliest fictional representations of an indigenous community from Odisha. The very opening lines infuse the topography with the warrior-spirit of tribal folk from their

days of glory under monarchy. The soul of the tribe permeates the life force of the forests, hills and croplands.. There are numerous instances of pathetic fallacy, and nature is invested with vitality, rage or lethargy, often in a deeply sympathetic affiliation with the characters' moods. *Paraja's* depiction of the hills coalesces into an affective representation of the Adivasi ethos. In his review of Mohanty's latest novel *The Dynasty of the Immortals*, Chandrahas Choudhury writes, "for Mohanty's characters, the link to the past is not a matter of historical record but rather, an imaginative one rooted in a feeling for nature and the cosmos" (Choudhury n.p.). The land the Parajas inhabit is a palimpsest of their community's spatial-temporal continuum. Besides nourishing them, it serves as repository of the spirits of the departed which are symbolised by the stones erected vertically for men and laid flat for women in an open space at the heart of the village. The Parajas do not consider the visible markers of the dead amidst them as taboo. "The dead and the living came together to worship the joy of spring" (Mohanty 149).

The novel brings forth moments of private recollections after the tradition of romantic ecological poetry as when Jili is preoccupied with the thoughts of Bagla and the images rushing back in a steady flow register a synesthetic intimacy with the landscape. The Keatsian ideal of beauty and truth is expressed in one of Bagla's songs wherein he is professing his adulation for Kajori: "There are only two things I know to be true-\Your love and the fear of death" (Mohanty 135). Pastoral romance is invoked in scenes between the young folk who sing love songs to the tune of the dungudunga (a single-stringed musical instrument with a gourd base, similar to the Iktara, or the Brazilian Berimbau) that is conveyed across to their beloved by the wind eliciting reciprocal songs:

> I play each day with death
> And so I know that you will come -
> Mingling your black hair with the dark clouds;
> For the rains have come (Mohanty 135-136)

In many of these sensuous rhythms of courtship the woman's body is pictured through topographical signifiers. The ritualistic dance of the women at the Spring Festival is likened to the onset of monsoons and projected onto the swaying, bending, pirouetting bodies of the dancers. The female bodies become the microcosmic topos onto which the contours of meteorological change are symbolically mapped. The accumulating clouds and thunder find expression in the orgiastic rhythms of the women's movements in their progression from ecstatic frenzy, its pace gradually dwindling to a steady motion before stopping with the rain turning to a drizzle. These dances also become a means of evoking ancestral spirits and re-animating the past which they inhabited; a past which always entailed a time of relative abundance and tranquillity in the Adivasi imaginary. The narrative gaze on the sweaty bodies of the dancers is predominantly masculinist in keeping with the patrilineal structuring of the Paraja community.

The women's song while they worked in the fields could be read as a subversive counterpoint against the kinship structuring of the Parajas in that they posit both avunculate (a matrilineal society with primacy given to the relationship with the maternal uncle) and a patrilineal claim on the village by asserting that it belongs to their "mother's brother" and their "father's brother". Levi-Strauss commented on aboriginal kinship systems to be so complex that they mandated a new branch of mathematics. The man-nature divide thaws into one another as the characters become part of the landscape. There is something permanent in the soul of the land upon which transient human lives roll on like waves. Levi-Strauss argues that the so-called primitive cultures encourage rejection of the divorce between the 'intelligible' and the 'sensible'. He recommends structuralism as an apt conduit for comprehending the world of such peoples. "Structuralism teaches us better to love and respect nature and the living beings who people it, by understanding that vegetables and animals, however humble they may be, did not supply man with sustenance only but were, from the very beginning, the source of his most intense aesthetic feelings and, in the intellectual and moral order, of his first and even then profound speculations" (Levi-Strauss 171). The relations and interactions between the two sexes as depicted in *Paraja* are one of playful candidness. There were separate dormitories where the boys and girls slept during nights away from the supervision of their parents. They were allowed to

mingle freely, and the women enjoyed the liberty to choose their own marital partners. As opposed to the Hindu custom of dowry, the Parajas had the system of taking a bride-price from the groom for the daughters given in marriage. This instituted a homosocial bond between a groom and a father-in-law where the woman was the 'gift' in the economy of exchange. In case the groom did not have the money to pay the bride price, he could work under the bride's father substituting the money with his labour. Nandibali thereby has to work for Sukru in order to marry his younger daughter Bili as he has no money to pay the bride price.

Intimacy with the Land and the Mythical Universe of the Novel

Land on which the Parajas live and subsist on forms an organic extension of their physical beings. Numerous instances in the novel refer to nourishment of the land provided by the body of the Adivasi. The blood and sweat of their ancestors is said to have nourished the soil that their sustenance was reliant on. It is used to grow crops on a subsistence scale and ensures the sustainability of the community from generation to generation. With a view to securing his descendants' futures, Sukru Jani clears a patch of the forest for cultivation, and at the conclusion of the much awaited annual Spring Festival the earmarked strips of land are cleared and trees burnt at the peripheries. Sukru Jani in solitary contemplation ruminates on how "the land to him was not merely a patch of earth-it was part of his body. He knew every contour and depression in the land; every thorn, every ant-hill had a history. He had watered the land with his sweat and nursed the seedlings with the warmth of his own body" (Mohanty 63). His son Mandia resonates his beliefs when he gazes upon the swathes of paddy across the rivulet and ponders upon the land being a legacy bequeathed by his ancestors; their ashes feeding into the seeds that would engender the forthcoming generations. The physical world remains inextricably associated with the Paraja's collective history, moral sense, and biological existence. Barry Lopez ascribes this proximity to insights of indigenous peoples:

> As a rule, indigenous people pay much closer attention to nuance in the physical world. They see more. And from a handful of evidence, thoroughly observed, they can deduce more. Second, their history in a place, a combination of tribal and personal history, is typically deep. This history creates a temporal dimension in what is otherwise only a spatial landscape. Third, indigenous people tend to occupy the same moral landscape as the land they sense. Their bonds with the earth are as much moral as biological (Lopez 24-25).

The novel mentions certain myths of the Parajas associated with life in the jungle. For instance how the tiger could increase or shrink in size as it lay in wait for its prey or that Kandhas were more likely to be attacked by man-eaters than Parajas as the former were monkey-eaters while the latter ate snakes. Launching forth into a discussion on the tribal art and practice of storytelling, Sitakant Mahapatra tells how stories that are sourced from the quotidian life of the community become symbols of an existence that spans centuries carrying in them the deeply entrenched value-systems of the group. While it is not right to relegate myths to the domain of fiction which would have refuting counterparts in reality or reason, it is important to consider myths as involving both fact and fancy. Arun de Souza invests myths as having more power than stories in that the latter "merely provide an interpretative schema" while myths bear the potential for motivating collective action. In deciphering the socio-cultural traditions of indigenous groups through myths circulating within them, the important question appears to be not whether they are true but rather whose truth they represent. The constant evolution of myths makes it identical in Levi-Strauss's opinion with language. "Myth is language; to be known myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech" (Levi-Strauss 209). Gary Snyder locates the origins of language in nature, "the grammar not only of language, but of culture and civilization itself, comes from this vast mother of ours, nature" (Snyder 129). This idea can be said to form the philosophical subtext of Mohanty's novel wherein both the mythical and moral universe of the Paraja is moored in nature. Though there runs certain parity among the hill tribes of these regions with regards to their worldviews, Mohanty is very sensitive in parsing out the fine nuances of dissimilarities between tribal groups. It testifies to the deep compassion and respect he harboured for the forest and hill tribes, spending as he did a good part of his life amidst them. It enables him to skirt the ethnocentric essentialism that often impinges upon indigenous fiction by a participant observer. This is most evident in his delineation of the systems by which the Parajas and

the Kandhas communicate with the supernatural. If the Kandhas have their astrologer who prophesies the weather and forebodes evil days, the Parajas have the Disari who intercepts, interprets and intimates the community of the messages that the media Beju or Bejuni receives when temporarily possessed by the spirits of the ancestors or tribal gods and goddesses who speak through him or her. The time for the beginning of the Spring Festival is arrived at by the Kandha astrologer and the Paraja Disari independently which however coincide. There's a slight dissonance with respect to the propitious timings for the commencement of the festival. While the Kandhas want the rites to be performed when two stars appeared over Elephant Hill, the call of three barking deer in the forest would be the signal for the auspicious moment in the case of the Parajas. The village priest, or Jani, works out a compromise by allotting the time of the deer barking as that for the sacrifice of the chicken while a pigeon would be sacrificed when the two stars appear.

The State, its Institutional Paraphernalia, and Indigenous Rights

The twentieth century witnessed independence of several African and Asian colonies. The second half of this century was marked by policies of nation-building and economic reconstruction. Post-independent development in India marked a gradual shift in economic planning from a Nehruvian socialist model to an industry-oriented one with the state supporting growth of capital goods and heavy industries. Privatisation of the industrial sector bore the trappings of rigid state surveillance and intervention. With a view to promote industries in the backward regions, licenses were easily given to units established in remote areas with added benefits of tax and power concessions in tow. This agenda, aimed at a regionally equitable industrial growth, however, proved detrimental to indigenous populations inhabiting far flung terrains as national and multinational corporations started vying for their rich reserves. Activities like mining coupled with failure of the land reforms heaped miseries on these communities who were often oblivious of their rights. Faulty documentation and record-keeping were one of the significant factors behind the exploitation of innocent tribal people at the hands of wily money-lenders or landowners. In *Paraja* the Sahukar's stranglehold on tribal lives is imaged in the description of his house as a spider web that traps the poor in its inexorable yet invisible threads.

> From every hill the red tracks came down and converged at the Sahukar's house like the threads in a spider's web, and along these tracks came many a tribesman from the remotest hills. Some brought their wives' ornaments to the Sahukar, wrapped in bits of rag. Others brought the produce from their fields. Others again had nothing to pledge but their own bodies. And the Sahukar's house swallowed everything up, and nothing that entered ever came out again; and the house grew and bulged (Mohanty 253).

In Mohanty's novel, the representatives of a few state apparatuses and institutions, in conjunction with private actors like the moneylender create an economy of exploitation for Sukru Jani's family. The corrupt forest guard extorts a 'plough tax' from tribesmen for collecting honey from the forest and also harasses them if they slashed and burnt down trees to grow crops on strips of forest land. He also takes a sexually predatory interest in Jili which infuriates Sukru. The guard then turns on Sukru and slaps a hefty fine on him. The law is on his side and the oral assurance that he had given Sukru Jani on the latter's plea for a tract of land does not stand legal scrutiny. Shiv Visvanathan in writing about the deceiving influence of modernity contends that it begins with the corruption of the spoken word. For the unlettered tribal his word is his promise. When the word as bond is replaced by the written word or contract it can enslave him for generations. It is not just injustice on an economic level that modernity unleashes but also an epistemic violence against systems of native wisdom and knowledge that circulated orally in the form of stories. The coming of the printed text abraded the potency of orality. In Visvanathan's words, "text, printed text, privatizes the word that one utters between silences, but word, the spoken word, demands the presence of community" (Visvanathan n.p.). Sukru and his younger son Tikra are reduced to 'gotis' or bonded labourers of the Sahukar in order to be able to pay the fine imposed by the forest authorities. Even Mandia finds himself on the wrong side of law when he is caught brewing liquor, an age old practice among the forest-dwelling tribes, without an official licence. He too joins his father and brother in working for the Sahukar. When Sukru tries to wage a legal battle against the moneylender, he is defeated once again. The moneylender uses his influence and money to wriggle out of the hands of law. The novel ends on a

highly tragic note Sukru and his sons, pushed to unremitting despair, kill the Sahukar and surrender themselves to the police.

Berch Berberoglu in examining the rise of nation-states and capitalism writes how the class forces active in control of the capitalist state in the Third World are the local bourgeoisie, the large landowners, and the transnational corporations and their imperial states. "The bureaucratic political-military apparatuses of the peripheral capitalist states have always operated within the framework of control of the state by one or a combination of these class forces whose class interests are implemented by the state's authoritarian, repressive bureaucratic machine" (Berberoglu 98). The matrix of capitalist formations with decentralised power centres is no longer only restricted to the affluent first world in the Asian century. It creates fissures in the nation state and has repercussions for the indigenous and forest dwelling communities. Dr. S. Parsuraman in an interview opines that when natural resources are competitive advantages for an economy, which is true in the case of India, tribal and forest land become lucrative means for capitalising on the same. Hence in the wake of an economy trying to find its feet in newly independent India, the resource-rich hills and forests became a battleground for the pecuniary interests of a state eager to project a 'technocrat' image of itself. Dr. G.N Devy talks of an intra-nation partition that freedom wrought; that which divided its lands into the two distinct categories of forest and revenue land. It laid the foundation of a highly inequitable development model that was predicated on the quantifiable. Economists have termed the sharp disparities congealing a north-south or poor-affluent divide among nations when it comes to bearing environmental costs as 'environmental cost shifting'. This has been used by them to account for the impacts of natural resource depletion and ecological degradation concentrating in certain locations. Within the nation, this can be employed to comprehend the relative impoverishment of tribal communities.

A Continuing Narrative of Marginalisation

The Constitution of India has two schedules for making provisions for scheduled areas, scheduled tribes and tribal areas. While scheduled areas are demarcated in ten states, four north-eastern states have tribal areas. Odisha with a sizeable tribal population is one among the former ten states. Being the richest in terms of mineral deposits, the forests and hilly regions of Odisha have often been coveted by mining companies. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 was a watershed moment in the ecological history of the nation. It sought to redress the historical injustice that was meted out to forest and tribal communities by the colonial and post-independent governments. When it came to ground implementation however, mega-projects like dams, industry and mines have dispossessed Adivasis of their rightful land. It has been found that development displacement population is the largest category among internally displaced populations in India (Salve n.p.). In contemporary times, displacement of tribals has also been a fallout of conservation policies of the state. Guha observed, "Often, the Adivasis are displaced because of the pressures and imperatives of development's equally modern Other: namely, 'conservation'" (Guha n.p.). From a modern conservationist, the shifting cultivation that the Parajas practise is often looked down upon as being detrimental to the soil but the scale on which the Parajas and the nearby hill communities carry it out is ecologically sustainable. At one juncture in the novel, the narrator describes the relationship between Sukru Jani and the soil as one of mutual enrichment. He and his community give back to the soil as much they take from it. Moreover, for the tribals who have lived in mutual harmony with nature for centuries, find the concept of conservation to be an alien imposition. This comes to fore in Sukru Jani's rapturous exclamation upon seeing the vast landscape of forests:

> How vast the Forest is! And how nice it would be if all these trees could be cut down and the ground completely cleared and made ready to raise our crops. Land! That is what we want ...What beautiful lands they are! And all these forest lands can be reclaimed and crops raised on them! Why there should be forests when they mean nothing to us, and not crops?... Sukru Jani knew nothing of soil conservation or the dangers of destroying forests ... He was concerned with the present and with his small personal interests (Mohanty 22-23).

Paraja, written in 1945, almost on the verge of India's independence, portrays a tribal community's trials and tribulations under a colonial administration. However even in an independent nation, the patterns of deprivation and exclusion remain similar. The exacting intermediary who had worked for the colonial administration, now works under a national government. Indebtedness of the tribes continues with economic exploitation occasioned by developmental and later conservationist exigencies of a modern nation state. In the novel, Sukru Jani's family had fallen into the vicious debt trap laid by the Sahukar; he and his sons become the moneylender's bonded labourers. In free India, bonded labour is outlawed but the ramifications of historical exploitation keep most of the tribal populace disadvantaged. Their representation in policies and discourse of development remains tokenistic at best. This has largely been a result of the severance of their ties with land. Constitutional and statutory safeguards available to our indigenous populations have been hollow rhetorical assurances in the absence of concomitant affirmative actions. To conclude with Shiv Visvanathan's words, "The ecological embedding of the Constitution needs not only an embedding in time, but in the life-worlds of its people. A Constitution can't only deal with life in the abstract as a system. It has to connect life, life world, life cycle, livelihood, lifestyle to the life chances of the people" (Visvanathan n. p.).

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