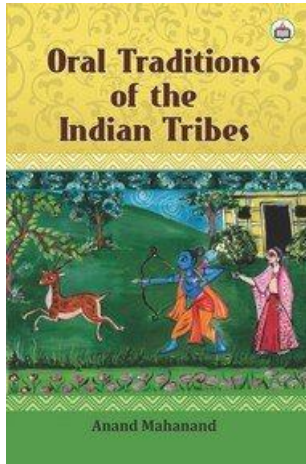


Review Article:

## **A Review of Anand Mahanand's *Oral Traditions of the Indian Tribes***

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*Oral Traditions of the Indian Tribes.*

Author: Anand Mahanand.

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A systematic study of orality and folk cultures has remained an area of interest for anthropologists and scholars. Oral traditions catered to the needs of people from the beginning of the earth. Human beings largely found solace and respite in these oral forms after their day's drudging work. While some oral traditions simply narrated day to day events, others came to be imbued with cultural signifiers. In the absence of written word and also other means of new media communication, oral cultural forms largely supplied both entertainment as well as education. As living, walking and talking artefacts of tribal sensibility, the oral folk forms represent a continuum in the lives of the bush people.

In fact, in colonial societies, tribal oral folk forms emerged in response to a plethora of attacks on the oral-cum-cultural narratives of the native tribes. With the advent of the disruptive force of the colonizers, writing got primacy over orality as the former was considered a sign of being civilized and having been closely "associated with preemptive imperialist activity" (Mahanand 24). Stephen Muecke observes in his article "Aboriginal Literature—Oral":

Aboriginal 'Oral Literature' is alive and well...its response to colonialism was not one of acquiescence, but one of fighting back with words, making stories in order to come to terms with the structure of colonial economy, law and the place Aborigines were supposed to occupy in it (qtd. in Rani 13).

In countries such as Australia, Canada, Africa and New Zealand, for example, these folk and cultural forms were seen as signs of backwardness or superstitions. With the onset of democracies however, the tribal communities got primacy and the written accounts began to have a genesis, largely, in the oral ones.

In India, tribal literatures have emerged as a significant field of scholarly analysis. It is these tribal oral forms which have been intensively studied by Anand Mahanand in his new book *Oral*

*Traditions of the Indian Tribes* (2018). The book has nine chapters devoted to the study of tribal and folk traditions. The writer maintains that what we have today in the form of printed or written literature has its basis in the oral traditions. Be it the Vedas or the Puranas, *The Mahabharata* or *The Ramayana*, all of these sacred texts earlier existed in oral form and even now we depend on not the original printed texts to know them, but through their oral and visual renderings. Oral forms thus largely feed the written word, i.e. literature.

The writer deeply explores certain features of orality as being aggregative, additive, conservative, agonistically toned, homeostatic, situational, and, participatory with beautiful examples. In fact, one important aspect of oral narratives, in the words of the writer himself, is that “unlike a writer, who can stay in a far off land and write about his country and other country detaching himself/herself from the environment using their imagination, a story teller tells stories which are familiar to the audiences and are largely drawn from their milieu” (Mahanand 16). Oral traditions are usually collective and communal and cannot be traced to a single author whereas written literature usually has a single author. Orality has more to do with auditory senses while the written word takes time for decoding. Oral traditions usually celebrate an occasion, ritual or event which may involve invoking their gods and goddess and painting themselves, as the Australian Aborigines do in the ritual performance of corroboree.

Folk traditions of major Indian tribes such as the Santhal, the Gonds, the Oraons, and the Bhils find ample space in the book. Discussing a popular tale of the Santhals, Mahanand points out their veneration of nature where animals would flock to the tune of the shepherd boy. He further reveals how the boy would not leave even one hair of his in the stream, as it could have killed a fish, or even on land, where it could have strangled a bird. Another story of the Gonds is concerned with the myth of creation. Like Australian Aborigines who believe in the Dreaming, i.e. a time when the whole of flora and fauna came into existence, the Gonds also believe in their mini creation stories.

Apart from discussing Pithoda paintings and Ghemsa dance of the tribals, the writer also dwells on the dance drama of this tribe. Two popular plays on the tribals, i.e. *Family* and *Buddhan* bring to the fore their various day to day lived experiences. *Buddhan* is especially critical of tribal deaths in custody, as it exposes the killing of a real tribal Buddhan in jail. This incarceration experience is again akin to the depiction of the murders of Aborigines in police custody, especially Jack Davis’ *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* which is based on the death of John Pat in police custody. These parallels across cultures speak volumes about the vulnerability of the tribals all around the world, as they largely stand prone to discrimination, deprivation, and injustice.

Songs are important cultural markers of any community. Pertaining to various rituals or occasions, they express varied emotions related to sorrow, happiness, religious exuberance, and so on. Death, Marriage and Birth remain important events for tribals as well and their songs aptly suit the occasion. Mahanand has collected and illustrated many songs of major Indian tribes. Talking about Mizo songs, the writer brings in the Mizo historian K. Zawla who highlights the importance of the Mizo songs who says, “that among the pre-literate people of the world, the Mizos are likely to be the richest in songs” (qtd. in Mahanand 42). The Khasi, the Bhil, and the Saroa folk songs find ample discussion in the book. Apart from the tribal folk songs, local tribal epics also occupy a central place in the book. Though the author discusses in detail only the Kondh epic of the Kondh tribe of Odisha, there have also been other tribal epics of Gonds, Bhujja, Gaur, Banjara, Paharia, Pargharia and Devgunia and are usually based on “sacred narratives and social narratives” (Mahanand 48).

A chapter devoted to tribal folk performances discusses three tribal dances namely Karma dance, Humo dance and Storytelling. Celebrated to honour the goddess of fate, Karamsani, this dance is popular among the Binjahal, Kharia, Oraon, Kisan and Kol tribes of Orissa, Chhattisgarh and

Madhya Pradesh. Apart from it, the tree is also worshipped during this festival through a dance that lasts the whole night. Humo Dance is also celebrated by young Binjhal and Kol young tribal girls, standing in two rows facing each other, thereby lending it an ambience of a dialogue as well. The author has also collected and translated some songs such as the following one:

*Jaa-bha bhai kunja banaku-2*

*Anibu jeebo dhanaku re*

*Jeebara dhana bhai katha putuli*

*Sarbe debe hulahuli*

Go my dear brother to the kunjabana

And fetch the wealth of my life

The wealth of life is a wooden doll

We will all give him a welcome. (English Version; Mahanand 67).

Mahanand shows that the advent of technology and digitization has become both a bane and a blessing. While the tribal folk performances have got wider publicity and popularity, their original flavour or spirit has also been tampered with. He says that while as a form of ritual there cannot be any audience without participation, and no criticism; in performance, there is audience and hence also criticism. Thus, this leads to self-consciousness of actors on the stage while in original performances the performers remain possessed. Mahanand further elaborates: "A ritual is connected socially. The community feels obliged to perform the ritual but a theatre may not have social obligation. Because a ritual is a community event, ethos of the society are embodied in it but in a theatre performance of selfhood is associated in it" (78-79).

The writer makes an original attempt to bring to the fore the tribal folk tales, songs, performances, rituals and dance dramas. With a rich collection of tales and songs and their cultural and social significance, the book is a significant resource for those interested in Tribal folkloric traditions. Mahanand valorises the tribals who despite being in touch with modern ways of living, have kept their oral folk traditions alive. Being repositories of various Indian tribal traditions, these folk forms need to be given attention to and Anand Mahanand's attempt is praiseworthy in this direction.

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