

Under the mahuda tree

HAVE you ever visited a tribal settlement or listened to their lore?"

When I said I had not, G.N. Devy of the Bhasha Research Centre for Tribal Welfare in Vadodara said that we were going to Tejgadh the next day to attend a talk on the *Kukana Ramayana*. The Kukanas are a tribe of the Dang district of the Gujarat-Maharashtra border.

"Isn't tomorrow a Sunday?" I asked wearily. The nine-hour consultation to which I had been invited had just ended.

"Yes," said GND.

"So ... a lecture-meeting on a Sunday?" I asked feebly.

"Yes," said GND matter-of-factly.

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That was a day spent glimpsing a way of life that made me certain that I was living in a dream world which had very little connection with the realities of our land. It began when GND folded his tall form into a small car and said, "I really cannot think of literature as only something written down." I told him about the belief that three substances were supposed to have magical powers. The herbal, the mineral and the verbal. And what was a mix of all the three? Books. Pages from plant fibre, inks from various chemicals and words.

But what of peoples who did not traditionally write things down? The

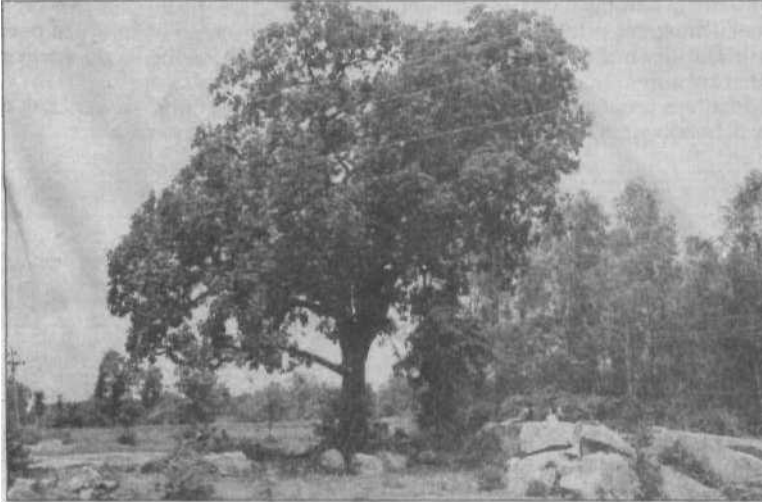
discussion went on. These are the 90 million tribals of India, the oldest occupants of our subcontinent over whom the "civilising" migrations prevailed. Rich in a vibrant tradition but impoverished and marginalised by a combination of "modern" culture and politics that cannot accommodate them, tribal society is distinguished by absence of obesity and absence of the caste system. Tribals do not exploit other people's labour, they do not ignore their widows, stigmatise raped women or leave their orphans to beg. Nor do they destroy nature to build edifices to human pride.

I had only heard of our most underprivileged fellow Indians. Notified in the 19th Century as Criminal Tribes (how can anyone be born a criminal?) and "denotified" after Independence and listed in the schedule of tribes, castes and "other backward castes", it soon became clear that "underprivileged" did not mean underdeveloped culturally. If the most useful symbol of tribal identity is language, then we must be alerted that these languages are fast perishing because they are from the margins and from communities that have remained outside the caste fold of Indian society.

Never having heard a talk or lecture outside a room fitted with mikes and light, it felt strange to take my place on the ground under the mahuda tree. A tree that would stand for

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400 years and from whose flowers the only floral liquor in the world is made. It seemed entirely appropriate to sit at the foot of such a being. With a minimum of preliminaries, the speaker was introduced to the researchers, students, a psychologist from Japan, health and agricultural workers and guests such as myself. Our race had built highly complex knowledge systems to understand the givens of time and space. How did the tribal memory and imagina-



tion view the world? In his introduction to a book on selections from tribal literary outpourings, GND had said that the tribal imagination was largely dreamlike and hallucinatory.

Listening to Dahyabhai of the Kukana tribe, I saw that the world of tribal imagination was radically different from that of modern Indian

society. A feast for the folklorist and anthropologist, the literary critic shuns them. Haven't we covered ourselves with shame by neglecting those riches by which the nomadic communities are linked? But what stirred me was the fact that though I couldn't understand the details of Dahyabhai's narration and he, equal-

ly, couldn't understand a word of my language, there was something that linked us — the *Ramayana*. The sweep of the tribal past makes it impossible to distinguish between the historical and the mythical. Perhaps their primary occupation, agriculture, makes the mix of the natural and supernatural an intrinsic part of their oral tradition and myth therefore dominates their memory and gives more than it does the imagination of caste-bound, non-tribal India.

Dahyabhai continued, eyes half closed. I watched him carefully since in this crowd I was the illiterate. Before he got to a really amusing line, his eyes would snap and begin to smile. That there are so many retellings of the *Ramayana* need not surprise us because the *Ramayana* is a story of conflict between forest and city dwellers. When it is rendered in the Kukana language for instance, it takes the form of a performance which is also a sacred ritual. A single performance lasts for days.

Non-tribals will naturally see these versions as subversions of the standardised epics though there is a theory that in historical terms many of the tribal myth-plots are pre-versions. So it is difficult to apportion cultural credit and say for certain who is subverting whose worldview.

There is a marvellously humorous account of the creation of Ravana: he is an abandoned cripple who seeks to be made whole by Lord Siva. Forbid-

den to enter a particular room, he does precisely that, falls into a pool of nectar where he grows 10 heads and 18 arms. Note! Siva assures Ravana of help but was planning to withhold the nectar. Meanwhile Lord Krishna (not Mahavishnu) races up and down Kailas, thwarting every move of Ravana's as he leaves, first with the real Parvati and thereafter the "maya" Parvati. There follows a discussion between Lords Siva and Krishna.

"What about his death?"

"Hmm...who could possibly kill Ravana?"

Just as Saydeva is turning the leaves of the Great Book of Heaven to find some way of finishing Ravana off, the Demon King himself enters and says to Siva, "Oh Lord, I wish to possess the throne of death."

Lord Siva picks up his pen and writes the future. (Do note, the tribal orature says "Lord Siva wrote...")

The King of Ayodhya will have a queen named Kaikeyi. She will give birth to Rama, seven times incarnate. The whole earth will tremble on that occasion and the waters of the ocean will swirl around thrice. Rama will kill Ravana.

Luckily for us, the Bhasha Research and Publications Centre (Vadodara), a trust set up to study, conserve and empower tribal arts, has compiled some of these narrations in modern English.

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Tribals and forest: the conflict between Ravana and Ram
Vanvasis and communalism