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Book Review – Unveiling the Lost Voices

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Book Review

Unveiling the Lost Voices

Mallick, S. 2019. *Interrogating Identities: Tribals in Bengali Short Stories*. Santiniketan and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs: Centre of Excellence (CoE), Department of Odia, Visva-Bharati.

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In 2014, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi declared the Department of Odia, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan as the Centre of Excellence (CoE) and subsequently endowed this Centre financial assistance for a research project entitled 'Tribal Literature and Language'.¹

This project on Bengali short stories based on the life of Adivasis, entitled *Interrogating Identities: Tribals in Bengali Short Stories*, has been translated into English by Dr Saptarshi Mallick. Commenting on the book, Professor Bashabi Fraser stated, 'This translated volume comes as a timely intervention, bringing the marginalized to the centre of a nation's socio-economic and cultural debate.'²

In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak argues that we do not get to hear the voice of the marginalised directly (Spivak 1988). In this context, *Interrogating Identities: Tribals in Bengali Short Stories* is a remarkable book. The translator admits that book is merely the medium through which the subaltern speaks and does not claim to provide solutions. The volume

¹ The other books published by the Centre of Excellence (CoE), Department of Odia, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi are *Tribal Literature and Language I* edited by Sabita Pradhan, *Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People* translated by Jolly Das, *Tribal Literature and Language II* edited by Sabita Pradhan.

² Fraser's comment is present over the front cover inner-blurb of the book.

moves methodically, showing us censuses and data, and by looking at them, we realise the extreme poverty in which the indigenous people live. It is not a sentimental novel, but a research project, yet somehow it appeals to our emotions and by the time we have reached the conclusion we feel the urge to do something, however small it might be, to help and support the tribal people with a spirit of fellow feeling. Indeed, it has become a necessity and our moral duty to do so because 'the cultural practice of the tribal communities has played an important role towards furthering the heritage and tradition of India which believes in the spirit of 'vasudhaiva kutumbakum'' (Mallick 2019: 103).

The leading thesis of this book is to explore the number and the politics of representation that has affected the portrayal of tribal people in Bengali short stories before 1960's and post 1960's. An attentive study of the book will amaze us to examine the extensive research that has been undertaken towards making of this report. The translator, Dr Mallick, has done a commendable job and also flawlessly translated Santhali, Ho and other aboriginal words into the Roman Script. Few examples are, 'Chanu' has been translated as God of Moon, 'Chowrasi Bonga' as the God of Newborn, 'Sendora Bonga' as the God of Hunting (Mallick 2019: 40). The translated report revolves principally around Bengali short stories and thereby creates a relationship between the reader and the unheard voices in Bengali literature. Being in English language it ensures a cultural enrichment for the global reader who acquires the active role of participants in the cooperative processes of this exchange which are 'sometimes cathartic and which may symbolize or even create a community' (Bhabha 2019: 44). The narrative moves effortlessly and as a reader I can affirm that the translator has done a phenomenal job in translating and to certain extent transcreating the research report. It works as an excellent handbook for researchers and at the same time works as an informative book for bookworms who are eager to know about their pagan past.

The research report also discusses Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, the double colonized tribal woman who formed an important structure in the Naxalite Movement of the 70's which has been referred to in the book as 'marginal renaissance' (Mallick 2019: 81). The book is enriched with loads of inter-textual references and brings forth references from a number of Bengali short stories which interrogate auto-ethnographic representations (Pratt 2008: 9) where 'we read a regular matter regarding the loss of the land owned by the tribal peasants once they adopt the profession of the industrial labourer' (Mallick 2019: 66) and many more to prove it's point that the society of the so-called civilized people has been built on the pillars of exploitation of the indigenous people.

Pete Segar had once said, 'think globally but act locally' (Zapol 2014: 12). The book justifies the necessity to negotiate and appreciate the different ways of conceptualizing the world, similar to

Bakhtin's ideas on subversion and on the hybridity of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981) championing the other over the processes of constructing an all-encompassing grand narrative. The front cover of this book has the unique stamp of Santiniketan as it is designed with the Bell from the grounds of Patha Bhawan, Visva Bharati. It is further designed with tribal art which augments the aura of the thesis explored in this book.

Amidst the politics and dynamics of representation *Interrogating Identities: Tribals in Bengali Short Stories* becomes a benchmark voicing a bitter truth that we have been happily ignoring all these decades, and blatantly makes us face this truthful read.

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