

**Sukru Jani: A Legendary Protagonist In
Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja***

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Abstract

Paraja is a marvelous historiography of the tribal community known as Paraja and the people living in the deep forest area surrounded by river and ponds. It narrates the atrocities laid on the family of a tribal person by the money lender and the forest guard and exploitation of poverty-ridden Sukru Jani. Though he is illiterate he stands like a pillar against the social power systems which marginalize the people living in the backward region following the rites and ritual inherited from the tradition. The government agencies and the village landlords exploit the tribal people who surrender to their cruel plans due to the lack of knowledge and ignorance. However it is shown through Sukru Jani, the protagonist, who is a representative of the many symbolic tribal people, that though poor and illiterate, they are sensible and wise to measure the ills done by the high caste people and when the time asks for, they can take drastic action against the person responsible for their misery and ruin.

Key words: Exploitation, marginalized society, loss of identity, revenge.

Paraja is a brilliant historiography of the tribal community called Paraja and the tribal people living in the ranges of hills and mountains and ever flowing rivers in the pre-independence era. Mohanty has written this valuable document in the pre independence period which is a treasure of information recorded with sensitive imagination and creativity. After observing the condition of the many tribal, primitive and backward communities, today in the modern condition one can just imagine the plight of these people some seventy years before when these people were not connected to the civilized society. The illiteracy, poverty and exploitation had made them rootless and dependent on the government servants working in the remote area and the local landlords and the money lender who simply take advantage of them.

Mohanty centralizes the saga of a tribal family of five members, three men and two women, of the Paraja community living in a small village, Sarsupadar in Korapur district, Odisha along with other tribes such as Domb in the wild forest. The family headed by Sukru Jani is representative of other several families who depend on agriculture, hard labour and sleepless nights always thinking about tomorrow and several problems and difficulties they will have to face with the rise of the sun. India has a long history of caste and class divide and such mindset has discriminated and exploited the underprivileged people. It is not their mistake that they are born poor and subaltern and in the society they are further submitted to harassment and continuous exploitation. Those who have encroached the living habitat of the illiterate and backward tribal are the outsiders who deceive and take advantage of their innocence by piling debt on their heads which never get reduced. The poor and the economically weak are wrecked under the burden of money. Neither law nor bureaucratic agencies could rescue these hapless people any time. It has been wisely commented that “History offers evidence of these indigenous people fighting against the ‘outsiders’ and the new developments in historiography have succeeded in bringing out into the open more such struggles that had not been highlighted earlier”.(Raj Kumar 4). In *Paraja* Mohanty provides the harsh account of the sufferings of the

tribal people, their betrayal and demolition of the lives by the ruthless civilized people through Sukru Jani and his children. In *Paraja* “the exploiter who is outwardly a non tribal moneylender is in reality the entire ethos of a materialistic civilization seeking to encroach upon and engulf a primordial and elemental way of life”(Safvan 2). The history of India, since the arrival of the British rule reveals that economic disparity divided the classes into rich and poor, dominant and dominated, perpetrator and perpetrated.

It has been opined that the novel *Paraja* “communicates the agony of the tribal, of marginalized people all over the world. Thus the novel is more than a sociological and anthropological document because its characters are not merely primitive tribesmen ensnared by a predatory money-lender. Gopinath Mohanty’s protagonists are also quintessentially men and women waging a heroic but futile war against a hostile universe (Srivastava and Jaiswal 563). The protagonist, Sukru Jani, occupies the central place in the novel and the whole narrative moves around his movement and action. Physically Sukru Jani is a strong man with strong body and mind earned through the daily hard work and simple diet. The novelist writes, “his body is mass of bulging muscle; his claws are as hard as rock and his bare skin is proof against weather. He has never known sickness or lassitude” (P 6). His food habit is simple: “His needs are simple; a bowl of mandia gruel every morning and again in the evening, and a strip of cloth four fingers wide to wrap around his loins and these he had never lacked” (P 2). Being a true Paraja, Sukru Jani follows all the rites and ritual, customs and beliefs which might appear strange and unwarranted to the civilized world outside. Life for Sukru Jani is very simple and full of endless struggle for survival. His wife is killed by the wild tiger making him to play the role of a father and a mother as the time demands in the routine life. He rears them with great affection by doing all the hard work and collecting food to feed them. He knows that they are poor and for survival labour is the only alternative in his hand. His elder son

Mandia realizes the problem in the family and works to earn money so that he could help his father in running the family.

A ray of hope glitters in his life when he cultivates a piece of land with the rightful permission from the Forest Guard never anticipating that it might turn into a bane for him. His pleasure remains for a short moment The malicious intention of the forest Guard hurls him into a stormy sea of suffering where he sinks to bottom in the final reckoning. The forest Guard has lustrous eyes on Sukru Jani's elder daughter, Jili, and he demands her by sending a message to him that he would not register a case against him for felling the trees for cultivation if he sends Jili to satiate his incest. He wants her in exchange of the complain with which he threatens him with legal action. Sukru Jani does not find any reason to submit to the demand by putting up the veil of ignorance on the mind. "Sukru Jani's angry response to the forest guard's proposal has unfortunate repercussions. The message of refusal, sent through Kau Paraja, triggers off a course of ruthless vindictiveness on the part of the forest guard who brazenly reneges on the permission earlier given to Sukru Jani to cut the tree"(Raj Kumar 8). The forest guard is symbolic power holder who indulges in sexual advances towards tribal girl displaying cultural superiority.

Though a poor and illiterate tribal, Sukru Jani does not like to submit to his coarse demand by sending his daughter to satisfy the Forest Guard. He is an honest person to his culture and tribal morality and ethical practices. By keeping his tribal culture to his heart, he flatly refuses to honour his demand and is ready to face the consequences in the course of time. Young girls in the Paraja community participate in the sexual encounters before marriage and he knows the practices but being a father he does not like to send his daughter to the Forest Guard in order to please him. This upsets the Forest Guard and in order to take revenge for humiliation he records the complaint against Sukru Jani in the higher office and the case against

him is registered for trial and punishment for the crime he has not committed deliberately and on his own.

In the crisis Sukru Jani approaches the headman of the Paraja community and other members of the community to help his out by convincing the Forest Guard not to register the case against him. But his community people also refrain from doing anything against the Forest Guard thinking that the latter might go against them and register cases against them also because they have felled the trees and cultivated the land. On the contrary the head man advises his to offer his daughter to the Forest Officer to fulfill his desire. When the time comes even the people of his own community isolate him under the pressure that similar fate might befall on them like Sukru Jani if they oppose the forest guard.

As it has been mentioned in the previous discussion the Sahukar, Ramchandra Bisoi, is an opportunist indulging in selling liquor to the poor villagers mortgaging their lands and when these people fail to pay back the swell of money. He would grab the land without giving any reason or listening to any argument. In this business he has grown rich and treats other villagers as his slaves. He is a representative of the civilized materialistic world crushing down the primitive and backward natives by duping them in this way. Sukru Jani becomes his prey by falling into his trap like an innocent lamb when he borrows money to pay the fine and his ride towards ruin begins from where turning back is never possible for him.

It is rightly observed “The main character Sukru Jani is not merely the primitive tribesman ensnared by the predatory moneylender from the city he he is quintessential man, waging heroic but futile war against a hostile universe, struggling ceaselessly to accept and adjust” (Safvan 3). In place of imprisonment, slavery is opted out by Sukru Jani out of fear and ignorance. For them imprisonment is disgrace and ignominy and it lowers down the place of respect in the community:

For the ignorant tribemen, there is no terror than the terror of the prison. It is altogether beyond his comprehension for it belongs to a system in which he has no part, he lives in its fringes. Labour he understands, even unpaid labour under a tyrannical moneylender, for this he is born into but anyone who goes to jail is forever stamped a criminal and ostracized. It cripples him socially and economically, the law never relents once it has you in its toils (P 104).

Mohonthy informs us that the tribals are afraid of law and court which is for them a kind of trial and punishment and Sukru Jani is one of them. As he worships Dhammu, his God, he prays and considers court as an unknown spirit. “Sukru Jani stood like a criminal in the dock and when he saw the officials writing, he felt as if the point o knife was being dragged across his heart; for he had the tribemen’s instinctive dread of writings made on paper. He also heard them speak other in some dialect which no tribemen could understand and this added to his terror”(Raj Kumar 14)

Sukru is “ the central protagonist in the novel, fully overburdened by the suffering in the life but the person who has never lost the courage or buckled down by the atrocities. He is “a patriarch of the Paraja tribe, his story is the story of the tribe – in fact all of the tribes to whom these mountains and forests once belonged” (Srivastava and Jaiswal 561).

The robust image of Sukru Jani finds face in his son, Mandia, who is a strong built like his father and equally determined to achieve his objective. In the hope of getting married to his beloved, Kajodi, he tries all means to earn money so that he could give her father the money demanded for her. He distils local liquor on a large scale thinking that by selling the liquor he could garner larger amount of fund. In his stride for money he is caught by the police and executed. Like his father, he knows that imprisonment is a curse and taboo in his society, and in order to avoid the debased criticism, he pays the fine by borrowing money from the Sahukar

and works as a goti in the latter house, with full devotion and complete submission. But the treatment given to him by the Sahukar is unbearable as he feel harassed and humiliated. When he feels that the Sahukar has crossed the limitation, out of the rage, he axes the Sahukar's head and kills him.

Mandia is the voice of his father and is a true replica of his father's personally. But his sisters behave against his father's expectations and bring disgrace to him by displaying their freedom of choice like other young girls in the Paraja society. Sukru Jani's collective fight against the dominant class of the rich people received a devastating blow in their action and remaining strength of his mind is weakened though he does not display it openly. It is through his mute suffering that his legendary character becomes public though he is a tribal and ordinary person.

Sukru Jani is an embodiment of agony and sufferings. When he is tortured by the forest officer nobody comes forward to rescue him from the impending calamity. All the caste people feel that if they extend their help to save him the forest officer might go against them because they have occupied the land by felling the tree for agricultural cultivation. In such a drastic situation he does not lose the courage and faces all the charges with lost determination within his heart. He suffers torture and humiliated. The novel delineates "the predicament of a tribal community today and the varieties of exploitation that the tribal belonging to it have to suffer"(Raj Kumar 1). Because of the fear for their existence the whole tribal community just accepts the cultural hegemony because they are simple, state forward, docile and honest and does not stand cunningness and sleaziness practiced by the higher castes and classes.

The protest lurks in Sakru Jani's mind but it remains subdued as his voice diminishes under the cruel behavior of the forest Guard. He is duped by the vitiated and ill motivated forest administrator. Sakru Jani bribes the forest guard by offering two fat hens and three big

jackfruits to him, surrendering his self pride to him : “Great lord, have pity on me or else I die” (P 12). He does it to nurture his small growing children, thinking that they should not dies of starvation. However, taking the benefit of his poverty and frustration, the Forest Officer demand his daughter, Jili to satiate his lust. When Sukru Jani denies his expectation the Forest Guard lodges a complaint against him under the forest laws and the case is registered in the court for his guilt. It is the case of atrocity but nobody helps him out from the trial and it also demonstrates that the little educated government officers, working in the tribal area, exploit the poor illiterate as they wish.

In order to save from the total destruction of the family Sukru Jani pleads before the Hon’ Justice expressing his innocence: “I am not guilty, great lords, Sukru Jani pleaded. ‘I have committed no crime. I will swear by your book of sections that I am innocent. I will stand on a tiger’s skin and take the oath. Give me any oath you like and I will swear my innocence’ (P 36). Sukru Jani is declared guilty on the false ground and misleading forest laws. Here he is a representative of the tribal communities living in the unfathomable forest, in the lap of nature and away from the so-called civilized world of selfish people who are basically cheaters. The novelist expresses the right of the tribal people to own the land where they live and cultivate it. Mohanty pronounces the concerns:

What beautiful lands they are! And all these forest lands can be reclaimed and crops raised on them! Why should there be forests, when they mean nothing to us, and not crops? After all, no one can own the forest. Land can be owned by anyone and the owner can grow crops there. God created all these and for human beings – what a shame that man prevents his fellow men from putting them to their proper use! (P 23).

The pronouncement of the judgment by the court is like the fall of an axe on his head which shattered the life and the dream of Sukru Jani. His instant reaction is miserable: “How

can I pay such a heavy fine, great Lord? Have pity, have mercy!’ (P. 36). He is a poverty – ridden backward tribal and whatever saving he has, has been spent on the tribal course. Mohanty very sternly express the condition of the man: “... a single puff of wind can destroy what has taken a field-mouse a lifetime to amass”.

There were just two options for Sukru Jani to choose from, either to go to jail or to borrow money from the Sahukar. The village headman pressurized him to borrow money from the moneylender, though he was deadly against borrowing the money. However, as there was no alternative and he does not like to go to jail, he takes loan from the Sahukar. Moreover going to jail was considered as a sin or taboo in the community. He is forced to sign an agreement and become *goti*, a bonded labourer of the Sahukar till all the loan is paid back. He and his son, Mandia, work hard, day and night, to the utmost satisfaction of the Sahukar but the latter give their ill treatment, they are exploited regularly and under tremendous pressure, taking the opportunity of his dependency, the Sahukar grabs his hard earned land, though he is ready to pay the loan. Sukru Jani is completely shattered and prays his ancestral god :“Suddenly he was filled with self-pity. He bowed low and beat his head on the ground in deep: ‘O Dada Budha, Soul of my first ancestor; Almighty Dharmu, Dharatini, Mother Earth: and I will sacrifice as many pigeons and fowls as you wish (P. 365)

Sukru Jani is helpless and crestfallen in the absence of any cooperation from the community people and his supreme gods and goddess:

He had prayed regularly to the tribal gods, scarified pigeons and fowls and goats and fallen fall length on the ground before the altars. And the priests had praised him for his devotion and blessed him at every festival. How could he have offended the gods? But they had deserted him now, become deaf to all his cries. He was alone with his fate (P. 238)

Sukru Jani had a great faith in his sons and daughters. He hoped that they would remain with him in all conditions. But his expectation has been ruined by his daughter Jili and Bili. These daughters work at the high way construction site and refuse to come back home, rejecting his voice. He is defeated at every turn in his life. The elder daughter, Jili, develops physical relation with the supervisor as his mistress and gets married with the Sahukar and gets married to him against his wish. The Sahukar not only takes possession of his land but divides his house by marrying his daughter, an event which shatters his mind. However, he does not lose the balance of his mind, stands firm on his feet with great courage speaks out his mind: "I've always managed quite well so far, and I don't need to be taught by my own children" (P. 238). The wisdom of a man who maintains resilience in the crisis is Sukru Jani a tribal person and whose woes know no limitation in the course of life.

The assassination of the Sahukar by Mandia is not a revenge taken because both father and son were tortured, exploited and discriminated. But his action is a symbolic presentation of the system of money-lending in the villages, mostly in the tribal and backward region taking advantage of the illiteracy and backwardness of the people. By the horrific continuous exploitation and harassment the Sahukar generated the fire of anger which burnt within Mandia's heart and he hacked the head of the money lender in a fit of revenge: "a tribal roused to fury is like a beast of the jungle" (P. 31). The history of the Indian society is the real witness to exploitation of tribal by the rich persons in the villages who exert dominance and keeps the poverty ridden people at his feet.

By submitting a fellow human being like innocent Sukru Jani to such constant suffering and torture the Sahukar who has also a human heart persecutes other person mercilessly. In *Paraja* "both the exploited and exploiter emerge as human characters and in the end it remains a story of a people; of exploitation and how man tackles it for his existence" (Vandana V. 4).

Ramchandra Bisoi is more inhuman than a wild beast who sees with open eyes the sufferings of the victims and asserts his dominance in the society making it an example that the poor and illiterate people should not disobey the economically superior in the class hierarchy.

In the end it could be said that in Sukru Jani Mohanty has produced our immortal character who would remind forever the woes and suffering of the Tribal people and society who have been denied their rights and proper existence. In the post colonial period one can imagine the lives of the backward people living in the forest subsiding on the natural resource for survival and sustenance. The protagonist faces the challenges whichever come in his way thwarts the age old corrupt practices which towards the innocent people. Sukru Jani has received nothing in his life except defeat but that defeat also crumbles down in front of his confidence and courage.

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