



Research article

Postcolonial Trauma in the Lives of Indian Tribes

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Abstract

India is a country that is home to 1.4 billion people. These people are a part of wide and intricate groups, communities, castes and tribes. While close to 91.4% of the Indian population has progressed into the colonial standard of civilization, according to the Census Report 2011, about 8.6% of people are still living in their original and natural way of life. These people are the tribes of India whose way of life has been romanticized as the 'Indian Culture'. A section of tribal people continues to live in mountains, and forests and construct only mud houses or huts. They have little access to basic amenities like healthcare, education, electricity and water. While few tribes have moved out of their original ways of life by converting to other religions, certain tribes are still governed by their respective leaders, following the religions and customs that were taught to them centuries ago. It is at times difficult for the State Governments to reach the tribes since most of them resist any such advancements. European Colonization of India led to the discovery of several tribes that were until that point in time living in harmony with nature and forests. This paper will analyze through literature the pre-colonial and post-colonial lives of certain Indian tribes living in the mountains of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: tribes, trauma, assimilation, resistance, decolonization, Indian Culture.



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Introduction

Around the world, 'Indian Culture' is popular and stereotyped to be consisting of overprotective parents, large and close-knit families, religions, ancient customs and practices, heavy jewelry, intricately designed clothes and deep-rooted spirituality (Satpathy, 8). Modern Indians, despite having progressed and travelled far and wide, still carry within themselves the 'culture' that has been passed down to them from their ancestors. The custom of passing down the culture to future generations is often a practice found primarily among the tribal clans and communities. It can be argued that modern castes and communities of India are also a form of tribe. The Dictionary of Anthropology defines 'tribe' as a social group, usually with a definite area, dialect, cultural homogeneity and unifying social organization. Tribes thus share the same religion, custom and

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culture. Although there is a similarity of context, modern communities do not refer to themselves as tribes. In modern India, the term 'tribe' is assigned to scheduled groups and clans that have not progressed into modernity and have not assimilated into the mainstream culture. Despite differences, the Euro-centric idea of 'Indian Culture' is practised by all Indians in varying degrees. The life of tribal people in their natural settlements is different from that of other communities in urban regions. Migration from rural to urban areas has enhanced the quality of life of millions of people. The reach of basic amenities to rural areas has also had an impact on the economy and development of people and the nation as a whole. Tribal people in their natural settlements are often left to fend for themselves either because they refuse to seek aid offered by the Government or because of the corrupted middlemen who deprive the tribal people of their rights. These people who have been self-sufficient for hundreds of years require aid and assistance because of the encroachment on their lands and natural environment. The lives of tribal people of India are often marked by hardship, lack of basic amenities, malnutrition, poverty and illiteracy (*Executive Summary – Tribal Health Report, India*). For focused study, this paper would analyze through Literature the Kurumba and Irula tribes of Tamil Nadu and the Mala Arayan tribe of Kerala. These three tribes are mountain dwellers and are isolated from the mainstream areas due to mountainous terrain. Although geographically separated by hundreds of miles, these tribes have similarities and aspects that are common and may be found in tribes across India. This paper aims to find the common and shared aspects of trauma that is faced by the people belonging to different tribes and highlight their trials in a postcolonial nation.

Trauma is regarded as the response that an individual would psychologically or emotionally have to an event (Keels). Victimization through violence that is not addressed is often passed down through generations as trauma. Trauma, in this sense, becomes Transgenerational or Intergenerational. The concept of Transgenerational trauma is acutely found in the marginalized and colonized peoples of the world. Based on Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis, the theory of Trauma is commonly found in postcolonial writing.

"Psychological trauma, its representation in language, and the role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities are the central concerns that define the field of trauma studies" (Mambrol, 2020).

The term 'Postcolonialism' is applied to the aftermath of colonialism and imperialism (Iverson). Postcolonial writing is constructed in the language of the colonizer and emphasizes the dehumanizing treatment of the colonized under the rule of the colonizer. Tribal literature can also be classified as postcolonial writing because there is internal colonization that the tribal people are subjected to. Many tribes were discovered and identified by European settlers and explorers. Man has the thirst to dominate and reign over those who are inferior in power or state. This tendency to dominate and rule is found in all communities and classes. Tribal people are also subjected to such dominance by the people who consider their community or clan superior in comparison to others. Colonialism is thus meted out on them not only externally or by foreign powers but also internally and by people of their geography. Trauma faced by tribal people is not often recorded in literature across the entire nation. Select tribes are represented by those who are fortunate enough to have learnt the language and have had the means to express themselves. It is thus difficult to assess and identify the trials and tribulations faced by the tribal people through works of fiction alone. In such cases, works of non-fiction and documentary series help read and

analyze the tribal people. Thus, the tribal life of the indigenous people of Nilgiris is a very less researched area due to the limited availability of Literature. Since trauma is tolerated by different people in different ways, the word trauma cannot be generically applied to all the tribes that face hardship. It can carry various connotations and meanings to various tribes. Analyzing each tribe individually and also an internal comparison of their past life with their present status would give a clear account of their position and evolution.

The Nilgiri mountain range is a favourite summer holiday spot for its serene beauty and climatic conditions. The mountains were explored in 1818 and 1819, and the first road access was laid down in 1821 (*History/ The Nilgiris District, Tamilnadu*). When the White man saw this mountain range, he saw in them respite from the heat and dust of the plains. Thus, quick access was granted to colonize the area. However, the explorers did not know that they would be met by the original inhabitants of the land that they just 'discovered'.

"Until the British colonization, starting in 1823, the tribal population of the Nilgiris were by and large cut off from the Hindu India of the plains" (Bird, 1987).

They, nevertheless, marched on to 'humanize' these 'animals' of the jungle. Major William Ross King in his chapter "The Aboriginal Tribes of the Nilgiris Hills" gives a very detailed account of each of the tribes that he encountered. Major King gives vivid descriptions of the Todas, the Kotas, the Irulas, the Kurumbas, the lesser-known Niadis and Brinjarries, and the Badaga community that once migrated into the forests from the plains. The tribes are described in terms ranging from classic to wretched. The white man does not in any manner conceal the abhorrence and disgust with which he regards certain practices and people of the tribes. The remarkable aspect of this chapter is that it was published in 1870, a hundred and fifty years ago. J.A. Dubois in his book *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* explicitly comments on the tribal people stating, "less intelligent even than the natives of Africa, these savages of India do not possess bows and arrows, which they do not know how to use" (Dubois, 1897, p. 76). The technological advancement that transformed the entire world has not seemed to positively touch the tribes of Nilgiris to a great extent. However, great damage was done to the people because of having been stripped of their homes. Considering the statements recorded a century and a half ago, the assumption can be made that the lives of the tribes would have developed and advanced multifold. It is quite worth noting that the cultural practices and social stature of the tribes mentioned remain the same largely at present. The clothing, housing and adornments are also largely unaltered. There is, without a doubt, the trauma that the people face because of certain aspects of colonization. Literature published in the 21st century, documentaries and interviews, and lack of first-hand writings are proof of the unchanged status of the tribes.

The Kurumba Tribe

The Kurumba tribe, believed to be closely related to the Pallava dynasty (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 1998), is an inhabitant of the Nilgiri mountain range of Tamil Nadu. Their settlement is geographically remote and can only be reached after miles of hiking on the mountain path. The Kurumba can be distinctly identified by their facial features. Major King records that the Kurumba have "bleared eyes, a rather wide mouth, and often projecting teeth" (King, 46). They are hunters and gatherers and do not practice agriculture. Like any other tribe, the Kurumba also have their own religion and gods that they religiously have faith in. They have customs and rituals

for every important occasion of their lives. These very customs and rituals at times cloud the perception that the other tribes have of the Kurumbas. The short story collection *White as Milk and Rice: Stories of India's Isolated Tribes* written by Nidhi Dugar Kundalia is a compilation of six stories navigating through the lives of six tribes across India. The third story from this collection, "The Kurumbas of the Nilgiris" is set in Coonoor, a town on the Nilgiri mountain range of Tamil Nadu. The present-day life of the Kurumba tribe is highlighted in the story. The protagonist Mani is a young boy who lives in a mud hut with his father and stepmother. The boy often yearns to live like the Badaga, a superior and progressive community. Compared to the poor Kurumbas, the Badaga were wealthy and educated, forcing the Kurumba to be subjected and dominated by them.

"Mani wished that people did not speak to him as if he were a jungle idiot; that said, he couldn't help but gape at the women who were walking their children to school. How smooth their skin was, their hair shining with oil, decorated with jasmine and plaited neatly with ribbons; their eyes, unlike the yellowed eyes of Kurumbas, were as white as their teeth" (Kundalia, 75).

The boy Mani is mocked by the school-going boys of the Badaga community who called him a sorcerer. "It is not to be wondered at that strange and mysterious stories that should be circulated and credited of a people whose dwelling is in the recesses of an unhealthy jungle, avoided alike by natives and Europeans, haunted by wild beasts, and all but impenetrable" (King, 44). The Kurumba tribe was notorious for their magic and sorcery, although it is often contested as a false accusation. Medicine and healing is practised by the Kurumbas and they are sought out by other tribes such as the Kota, Irula and Toda, and also the upper caste Badaga for their knowledge of healing and medicinal plants. Mani watches his father, often in an inebriated state, heal people who seek his help. His father earned from his patients' produce and groceries through healing them. Alcohol had led to his decreased interest in the practice. When his patients complain to him about their ailments Mani realizes how his father, as a Kurumba healer, should have "studied his eyes, his rolling tongue, the corners of his fingers or the tightness of the head. But his father is too drunk to remember this; just as he forgets to first offer the medicine to the round black stone, called Hiriadeva, before administering it to the patient" (Kundalia, 83). His alcoholism was ruining his career and fame as a healer and was also causing them to plunge deeper into poverty. Mani is traumatized by the quality of life that he is forced to live for having been born a Kurumba. With no access to education due to discrimination in the classroom where his teacher made him sit in the back of the classroom, away from the Badaga boys as a mark of racism, and reduced chances of a better quality of life, Mani is left to his own devices for growth. His knowledge of the forests, of the mountain, of the cure for broken bones is inadequate in the postcolonial world where the norm was to have a salaried job with which, his mother says, he can "buy a bicycle and eat chicken" (Kundalia, 81), the basic amenities of urban life. The character Mani represents all the young boys and girls of the Kurumba tribe. "The combination of chronic exposure to traumatic events and limited access to coping supports describes the life contexts of many children growing up in low-income families residing in low-income neighborhoods" (Keels, 68). The pain of having to witness other children of their age enjoying school, good clothes, a proper house and a better social life added to their humiliation thus causing them to be traumatized for life. The deprivation they are forced to face as a result of their birth status would scar the young children and lead to their stunted growth.

The Irula Tribe

The Irula is a cluster of tribes with settlements dotted along the Nilgiri mountain range of Tamil Nadu. Conforming to the common description of tribes, the Irula were also primarily hunters and gatherers, popular especially for their snake-catching. The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 barred Irulas from hunting snakes. Their social stature is developed through finding jobs as daily wage labourers in the tea plantations of the upper caste tribes or of the Government. The Irula, with the aid of the Government, constructed houses made of brick and cement and also learnt to sell their produce for currency, a foreign commodity to the tribal people. Although primarily poor, the Irula uplifted their economic status through these transactions. They were also sought out for collecting venom from snakes from which antivenom was made. The Irulas used primitive methods of life and cultivation in the 1900s. Hundred years down the line, the tribe has grown multifold through the development of schools, healthcare centres and business centres. Being a progressive and 'civilized' tribe, the Irula may not seem to be facing any trauma superficially. The trauma is deeply rooted in the loss of land and culture, the primary aftermath of Postcolonialism. Although some part of the original culture remains, a large part of it is branded as savagery and abolished, either due to the intervention of the Europeans or due to their own conversion out of their ancestral practices to mainstream religions like Hinduism and Christianity, primarily for the sake of a better standard of living. The Government's tea plantations led to the loss of their ancestral land due to which the Irulas were confined to smaller settlements. Nevertheless, the Irulas received aid from the Government and built their advancement. Dr Jakka Parthasarathy, Director of the Tribal Research Centre, Ooty, in his book *Irula Women & Empowerment in Nilgiri District, Tamil Nadu*, documents how "with the spread of urbanization and the development of a few towns, a market economy had been ushered in. Irula men and women observed these changes and started to explore modern employment avenues" (Parthasarathy, 44). The women are forced to face discrimination and are also burdened by the community and their men. The problems of land alienation, alcoholism, debt, casteism, and lack of access to basic amenities are still present at the grassroots level. "The Irula women strongly felt that the reserved attitude of their men, their fear of contacting strangers derives from a sense of inferiority and helplessness in the face of exploitation" (Parthasarathy, 61). Exploitation is the leading cause of trauma and inferiority complex in the tribal people without exception.

The Mala Arayan Tribe

The Mala Arayan tribe of Idukki district in Kerala is represented in Malayalam novels and translated into English primarily because the Mala Arayan tribe chieftains welcomed the Christian missionaries to civilize and grow. Despite being a Hindu tribe who were originally the caretakers of Sabarimala, the Mala Arayans converted to Christianity and followed the ways and norms of the new religion. The Mala Arayans lost their lands not to any white colonialist, but to the King of Travancore in the 18th century. With their land they also lost their authority over Sabarimala, losing thus both land and God. The Christian missionaries in turn benefitted monetarily from the large tea plantations of Kottayam and Idukki through the Mala Arayans. The Mala Arayans were themselves a rich tribe having the resources to cultivate on their lands coffee and tea that was worth a large sum of money, and they were not oblivious to this fact. Despite the knowledge, the tribe did not deal with the outside world for monetary riches. The Mala Arayan tribe is represented in all its shades, both the civilized and also the poor by different writers. The novel *Kocharethi*

written by Narayan is set in the 1900s in the Western Ghats of Kerala. Narayan is recorded as the first tribal novelist of Kerala who wrote about the Adivasi and tribal people of Kerala. His novel *Kocharethi* gives an account of the Mala Arayan tribe residing in the Idukki district. The protagonist Kunjipennu is a young woman growing up in the scenic Western Ghats. The tribe's protocol states that Kunjipennu marry her uncle's son. Kunjipennu brings about a change in the culture and marries a man of her choice. Her trauma begins when her happy life is marred by a forest fire which destroys their house and kills her son. Alcohol plays a very crucial role in the downfall of a tribal community. The Europeans are rumoured to have supplied alcohol to their colonies as a means of eradicating them. While intoxicants were not foreign to the tribal people, alcohol in the European form would instigate them to fall prey to acute alcoholism. Kunjipennu's husband Kochuraman is also a prey of alcoholism. The trauma faced by Kunjipennu is shared by all the Mala Arayan women. The tribe further loses their land to the greedy upper castes and also the police who were supposed to protect them. Kunjipennu's daughter Parvati studies in the Government school and advances to the point of finding a job in Kochi, a city in Kerala. Parvati's trauma is in carrying her tribal identity which supposedly weighs her down. She thus distances herself from her family and marries a man in the city. At the juncture where Kochuraman's disease due to alcoholism needs to be treated, the old couple escapes from the hospital due to their fear of modern medicine. Narayan here highlights the incapacity of the tribal couple to comprehend healthcare and modernization. This very incapacity is an inability to cope with the changing times and effects of colonialism. The trauma here is unaddressed. A disease caused by Colonization can only be healed by adapting to the ways of the Colonizer, which in this context is the modern science and medicine. The tribal people are unable to bring themselves to the point where they can, in a full-fledged manner, accept and transform into postcolonial people.

Coping With Colonialism

As described by the American Physiologist Walter Cannon, the mechanism of coping with traumatic experiences is either 'fight' or 'flight' response. In trying to cope with the effects of Colonialism, the postcolonial nations apply the aforementioned responses. Both the responses would invariably lead to trauma. Assimilation and Resistance can be regarded as the derivatives of either fighting or escaping the situation. The commonwealth nations can still be found experiencing this crisis as expressed by their literature. Both Assimilation and Resistance can be equally traumatic. Trauma can thus be asserted as the inevitable consequence of Colonialism. The tribes discussed above were before European Colonialism the rulers of their lands and lives. European Colonialism presented to the tribal people the naked truth of their living conditions. Their ancestral ways of life have thus become obsolete in the present world. Major King in his account of the Kurumbas records how the Kurumba man "seldom visible, even at a distance, they fly from the approach of a civilised man with extraordinary agility, slipping over the steepest crags like the monkeys, their companions, and instantaneously disappearing into the forest-depths" (King, 44). These same people have been forced to the brink of poverty, a term they would have been unaware of if not for Colonialism, due to which they are forced to take up jobs that would give them access to money because their cultural practices would no longer serve the purpose of their life. In the case of the Irulas, the ban on snake-catching was a blow to the very fabric of their existence. The Irula thus had to struggle to find an occupation that would feed and clothe them. The Mala Arayan tribe, the most progressive and 'civilized' of the tribes discussed had to face

acute alcoholism. This would also be the case for other tribes such as Todas and Kotas. The European Colonial agenda of providing alcohol has been expressed by Major King when he comments on the Todas and Kotas and says how,

“Both tribes are, I think, naturally capable of considerable improvement, both mentally and morally, but, so far as I saw, and especially in the case of the former, their contact with the European has hitherto produced only its too common results, intoxication, licentiousness, and cupidity, threatening to add to the long list of so-called uncivilised races that the man has assisted to demoralise” (King, 51)

The Euro-centric standard of morality and civilization led to the establishment of ‘the white man’s burden’. It was considered the duty of those ‘ordained by God’ to bring to the ‘right path’ the ‘savages’ and ‘uncivilized’ peoples of the world. What Major King refers to as the development of the people “mentally and morally” would be for them to affirm the Euro-centric archetype of Civilization. Any ethnic group that does not conform to the changing dynamics would easily be facing trauma and rejection. Coping with Colonialism would thus mean coping with the trauma that they must face in response to either ‘fighting’ with or ‘fighting’ from the situation.

Conclusion

The 2011 Census states that about 8.6% of India’s population is comprised of Tribes (*Executive Summary – Tribal Health Report, India*). These tribal people are spread across the Indian subcontinent in thousands of settlements. *The Wild Tribes of India* written by Horatio Bickerstaffe Rowney gives a very detailed description of all the Indian tribes. The book was compiled in 1882. This book which is more than a hundred- and fifty years old carries details on tribes that still hold true. In the case of the Kurumba tribe of Tamil Nadu, the writer depicts them as unskilled and further states that “the occupation this chiefly follow is that of hired labourers to watch the fields against the depredations of birds and wild hogs;” (Rowney, 113). This detail into the life of the Kurumba tribe stands true even to this day as proof that the tribe as a whole has not advanced into modernity due to various pitfalls created by racism and casteism. The Irulas are also referred to as unskilled and the rumour that the women entrust their children to wild tigers is whispered around even to this day. The trauma of losing land, losing culture, and losing their individuality and identity is ever-present in the people of all tribes. Refusal to accept changes and denying assimilation can also be considered a fuel to the trauma faced by the tribal people as a whole.

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