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Vanishing Voices : The Struggle and Survival of India's Indigenous Tribes based on Nidhi Dugar's 'White as Rice and Milk' (2020)

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Abstract

*India is a country with a rich and diverse cultural landscape. This rich cultural tapestry has been significantly influenced by various indigenous tribes, each with distinct traditions, languages and ways of life, residing predominantly in different geographical zones. These tribal communities coexist harmoniously with nature and utilize the natural resources available in their surroundings. Although they contribute richly to the cultural heritage and ecological wisdom of the country, they remain socio-politically and economically marginalized. This paper explores the themes of identity, survival, and resilience as depicted in Nidhi Dugar Kundalia's *White as Milk and Rice: Stories of India's Isolated Tribes* (2020), which examines six indigenous tribes—Halakkis, Kanjars, Kurumbas, Marias, Khasis, and Konyaks. Through ethnographic narratives, the book highlights how these communities confront marginalization and rapid socio-political changes. This study further introduces unexplored dimensions such as digital exclusion, youth migration, and climate change's role in eroding indigenous culture.*

Introduction

India is a country with diverse tribal population collectively called as Adivasis represent a rich tapestry of cultural, linguistic and ecological diversity. These are the people who are constantly being marginalized and exploited due to socio political changes. Tribal literature in India not only records both the unique traditions, language & ways of diverse indigenous tribal communities and also functions as a medium of resistance against socio political erasure. Their struggle in the rapid changing modernistic world is just for the survival and also preserve their culture, language, identity but also to establish the rights in this democratic country

This paper engages with her narratives, investigates their socio-cultural significance, and sheds fresh light on how tribal identity is threatened by not just external oppression, but also transitions within the community (such as youth migration and technological alienation).

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore Kundalia’s ethnographic poetics in showcasing the cultural and existential dilemmas of six Indian tribes.
2. Purpose – To explore the interrelated themes of identity, displacement, gender, ecology and resilience.
3. To uncover missed factors driving tribal marginalization—digital disconnection, urban exodus, and climate change.
4. To propose community-oriented and policy-level interventions that work to increase tribal agency and voice.

Need for the Study

Protected by the constitution, India’s tribal communities however continue to be marginalised through forced displacement, loss of language and erasure from mainstream education and media. Academic research tends to treat them as data points or policy subjects. Kundalia’s book subverts this: they humanize the experience. This paper expands her story with newer aspects that are critical to consider in the face of our current shifting social, political and environmental landscape. It also stresses on the importance of inclusive story telling and rewriting of policy keeping ground situations in view.

Approach and Methodology

This study is a qualitative interdisciplinary study. Kundalia is the main primary text — thematic and narrative analysis is at its heart. The discussion is supported by supplementary material from indigenous studies, cultural theory, environmental criticism, and gender studies. An interpretive approach to the analysis of textual representation and socio-political implications of new areas of focus (digital marginality and intergenerational tensions) are among the highlights of the five elements of your work.

Findings

1. Loss of Language and Oral Traditions

The tribes profiled in the book each have distinct linguistic and oral traditions. Fueled also by the lack of written scripts and the youth migrating to cities, these languages are dying. Halakki women’s folk songs — vast collections of history, courtship and identity — for example, aren’t passed on much anymore.

2. Gender and Matrilineal Identity

Among the Khasi people of India, women hold the dominant position in decision-making and inheritance. But the influence of patriarchal religions, and external schooling systems have continuously eroded matrilineal strength. The book takes on the quiet anxieties of Khasi women facing cultural change.

3. Criminalized Identity of Nomadic Tribes

The Kanjars continue to bear the weight of the colonial British model of Criminal Tribes Act. And even after it was repealed, societal bias persists, denying them education, housing and a decent job. Kundalia demonstrates how being born into this identity toxifies life choice from the outset.

4. The Forest Rights Act and Climate-Induced Displacement

Like the Kurumbas or the Marias, tribes are displaced by “eco-tourism,” conservation drives or industrial projects from the forests. And ironically, the original custodians of forests are now labeled as intruders. This ecological exile carries deep psychological and spiritual consequences.

5. Cultural Commodification and the Sacrosanct Deficit

The Konyak tattoos, along with the headhunting rituals, are now nostalgic and ancient. They have turned into “tribal” experiences that can be bought and sold to tourists. While the community earns money, they now lose control over their sacred symbols. Such indiscriminate exploitation poses issues of cultural consent and integrity.

6. Youth Migration and an Identity Crisis

The most striking is the case of young tribal members migrating to cities for education or employment. They are forced to detach from community traditions during their travels. The result is that the heritage becomes inaccessible, fascinating, and alien to those who remain, while the rest become outcasts who do not belong anywhere.

7. Digital Exclusion and Inequitable Distribution of Information

While the rest of the world moves online, tribal communities are forgotten. They lack access to government programs, health services, and education. Without access to the internet, tribal members become more marginalized. Their people don’t exist in the digital world, and their narratives remain untold.

Discussion

The observational narrative is what Kundalia does best, never sensationalizing or exoticizing. The book is a testament on telling and documenting history and serves as resistance to forgetting. Every chapter is political and intimate at once catering culture and secrets along with systemic betrayals unfolding.

The paper posits that marginalization is no longer an external thing only. There are plenty of internal changes such as generational gaps and the youth’s dreams that act as just as powerful of a threat. Take language loss for example where distance is inflicted by the younger generation for the acceptance of their peers of mainstream society. This is not betrayal, but a survival strategy born from refusal of Indian institutions.

Furthermore, the study utilizes the framework of epistemic injustice where tribal ways of knowing such as health or environment or time and relationship, cannot be treated as ‘scientific’ are discarded. This erases indigenous knowledge systems that can otherwise be incorporated in discussion on sustainability at the global circuit.

Another aspect that is scarcely attended to is climate justice. With tribal dependence on natural cycles for sustenance, they are the first victim to suffer the wrath of environmental disruption such as floods, forest fires, or crop failures. However, their voices are missing in environmental policies.

Lastly, the role of women need to be focused deeper. Kundalia provides an opportunity for women elders and community leaders which demonstrates how gendered forms of knowledge continue to exist, even when modernity attempts to erase them. These women are no longer just guardians of tradition; they are active artisans of change.

Conclusion

The tribes captured in “White as Milk and Rice” are more complex than mere victims; they are adept survivors, inventors, and thinkers. Although their voices might be quieting, they resonate with strategies of survival. These communities are preserving their existence through negotiating cultural spaces and reinterpretation of oral traditions.

This paper argues that the tribal aspects of history must be incorporated into the framework of modern education, including social media and policy formulation. The trend of erasure can be

countered with the development of youth involvement initiatives, tribal digital archives, localized community schooling in mother tongues, and climate-resilient relocation frameworks. To protect indigenous peoples of India is not a privilege granted; it is an act of conscience and culture. Furthermore, the preservation of indigenous peoples does not only add to the narrative of the past, but also ensures a sustainable future.

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