JOURNAL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
Vidyasagar University, Midnapore-721102, WB
Volume 17, 2024
(http://vidyasagar.ac.in/journal) **ISSN: 0973-3671**

Towards an Indigenous Ethno-cartography: Isolated Indian Tribes and Forces of Globalisation in Nidhi Dugar Kundalia's *White as Milk and Rice: Stories of Isolated Indian Tribes*

Ujjwal Kr. Panda

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Hooghly Mohsin College, Hooghly, West Bengal

Abstract

Modernity and ensuing forces of globalisation have a marked tendency of making the whole world homogeneous with hegemonic forces of capitalism trying to ignore the essential variety and diversity of indigenous culture. While the networks of globalisation seek to destabilise boundaries, people who choose to remain outside its domain constantly face a kind of threat to their sense of place. Urbanisation and industrial economy tend to invade their territory. Keeping the age-old sense of place uncontaminated is a challenge for many isolated Indian tribes as hegemonic forces of globalisation operate on the machinery of control – over land, knowledge, culture, past, present and future. Nidhi Dugar Kundalia's *White as Milk and Rice: Stories of Isolated Indian Tribes* (2020) seeks to locate this threatened sense of place of some isolated Indian tribes dwelling across the vast geography of this subcontinent. In this work of narrative journalism based on arduous research, documentation and interviews, Kundalia lets the indigenous people speak for themselves and the result is a rich tapestry of memoirs, testimonios and oral narratives that gives an insider's view of the indigenous ethnic groups. The six communities dealt with in the book – the Halakkis of Ankola, the Kanjars of Chambal, the Kurumbas of the Nilgiris, the Marias of Bastar, the Khasis of Shillong and the Konyaks of Nagaland – live in different regions across India and have their own unique culture and settings. Pitted against the idea of globalisation and economic and environmental control, their age-old rituals, beliefs and knowledge system refer to a kind of ethno-cartography which is distinctive and resistant to the forces of assimilation.

Keywords: place, indigenous culture, globalisation, ethno-cartography

JOURNAL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
Vidyasagar University, Midnapore-721102, WB
Volume 17, 2024
(http://vidyasagar.ac.in/journal) **ISSN: 0973-3671**

Joy Hendry in his book, *Reclaiming Culture: Indigenous People and Self-Representation* (2005) writes –

> For years social scientists in various disciplines predicted the disappearance of cultural difference. They were sometimes called convergence theorists. They expected that the spread of systems that their own societies had invented would obliterate all other systems, and they devised theory to bolster that view. …They looked to philosophical ideas formed during a period in eighteenth-century Europe, that became known as the Enlightenment, literally to enlighten all people everywhere about the advantages of the social systems they saw as superior. (3)

By "they", as it is quite writ-large, Hendry refers to the Western thinkers who in their egocentric and essentially hegemonic faith in the Eurocentric idea of modernity tried to debunk all other cultures and their knowledge systems for being inferior and useless. Actually, as Anthony Giddens in his famous book, *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) maintains, the advent of modernity threatened the very idea of a pre-modern society. In the context of the 21st century which may be called a post-industrial time informed by a pro-capitalist open global trade, the revolution in telecommunication, internet, mass migration and mobility across borders have tended to project the whole world as a homogeneous place. This has resulted in the constant diffusion of commodities and ideas leading to a kind of standardization of cultural expression around the globe. Globalisation with its trend of homogeneity and narrowing down of boundaries seeks to destabilize the local cultural variety of people who still choose to stay outside its domain. The sense of place of some pre-modern indigenous groups across the world, a humanistic geographical idea related to a kind of ethno-cartography, has constantly been under this pressure of conformity. Keeping the age-old sense of place uncontaminated against this all-encompassing pressure of assimilation to a homogeneous global culture is a challenge for many isolated Indian tribes dwelling across the vast geography of this subcontinent. Rapid industrialization and expanding urban landscape in post-independence India have resulted not only in the large-scale deterritorialization of the indigenous tribes in India but the hegemonic forces of globalisation, often disguised as governmental policies of development, have also undermined their attempt to keep their cultural variety intact. Nidhi Dugar Kundalia's *White as Milk and Rice: Stories of Isolated Indian Tribes* (2020) seeks to locate this problematic sense of place through the method of narrative journalism. Significantly, in this work based on extensive research, documentation and interviews Kundalia lets the indigenous people belonging to six different isolated Indian tribes speak for themselves and their communities making the book an immense panorama of memoirs, testimonios and oral narratives which not only provides an insider's view of the ethnic groups but also refers to the necessity of preserving the essential heterogeneity of culture.

In his book, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996), Arjun Appadurai refers to the modern era as a postnational space where growing

globalisation of economic factors arising out of a kind of internationalisation of capitalist market has led to the weakening of nationalist zeal. The penchant for being a part of the large network of an internationalist and global economy has also led the governments of different nations to represent their country as a unified whole with people of identifiable culture, language and belief before the international consumers. Appadurai comments –

> In these postnational spaces, the incapacity of the nation-state to tolerate diversity (as it seeks the homogeneity of its citizens, the simultaneity of its presence, the consensuality of its narrative, and the stability of its citizens) may, perhaps, be overcome. (177)

In *White as Milk and Rice* Kundalia deals with six ancient tribes of India who have tried to stick to their roots over the years. They are the Halakkis of Ankola, the Kanjars of Chambal, the Kurumbas of the Nilgiris, the Marias of Bastar, the Khasis of Shillong and the Konyaks of Nagaland. These tribes with their distinctive worldviews, knowledge systems and cultures live the life of isolation in some remote corners of the country. Their adherence to their sense of place has made themselves traditional 'others' in relation to the dominant cultural milieu of India which is informed by the modern zeal of achieving a homogeneity informed by globalization and its liquidation of cultural boundaries.

As an idea, indigeneity is very difficult to delimit. Stephen Allen in his essay, "The Consequences of Modernity for Indigenous Peoples: An International Appraisal" (2006) refers to a definition of indigenousness by J. Martinez-Cobo which may well be considered to be a comprehensive definition –

> Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system. (Allen 316)

In *White as Milk and Rice,* we come across the life stories of different individuals belonging to the aforementioned tribes. Their stories reflect their distinctive socio-cultural fabric. Surely, these individuals do not represent the whole tribe but they are the contemporary voices from their respective territories who give vent to the anxieties and compromises that these isolated tribes have today. In her introduction to the book, Kundalia tells us a very interesting personal anecdote about her stint as a journalist in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, a tribal haven infested with the ultra-left insurgency where she chanced to meet a young woman belonging to the Maria tribe who "was quietly holding a placard at a rally outside the collector's office in Narayanpur, Chhattisgarh, the only woman in a group of

men protesting mining activity close to their village" (Kundalia xi). The image of this sole figure of female dissent led her to talk to the woman who called herself Birsu, although she found that she hid her real name to the media when Kundalia went to her village to know more about her and the problems faced by her community over there. Although in the chapter belonging to the Marias the writer has retained the false name, we later come to know that she gave her a false name out of her fear of the so-called civilized people. This chance encounter which made Kundalia acquainted with an alien way of life led her to explore the lives of such isolated Indian tribes in different remote locales of this huge country and she came to feel that for a person belonging to the dominant urban culture of contemporary India it is not very easy to come to terms with indigenous experiences. There remains a huge linguistic and cultural gap between the indigenous and that of the modern dominant subject positions which we have let to grow in length by our apathy towards their lives and ideas. As Kundalia writes in the introduction –

> I was disenchanted by the available material: it was either a record of their cultural history before independence with the focus on overly decorated dance and song, or miserable pictures of their dismal conditions. For me the intrigue lay in the life they had been leading post- Independence. How has the changing environment and economy of India affected them? How has their movement outwards from the isolated depths of the forests and remote mountains and the partial integration with the rest of the society, changed them? How do these changes affect individuals? (Kundalia xii)

What comes out as a result of Kundalia's attempt to portray the lived experience of six isolated tribes in the book is a kind of ethno-cartography which reflects their sense of place. In the discipline of Humanistic Geography, sense of place is almost a buzzword. The term may either be interpreted as the idea of a particular place in the mind of a particular person or it may be the overall impression that a certain place leaves in the mind of a person or a group. From that point of view, the sense of a particular place may be different to two different individuals given their social, cultural and religious backgrounds. Again, as the renowned Chinese-American humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan says in his book, *The Landscape of Fear* (1979), the sense of a certain place may not always be a positive one like fear of living in a place or hatred for a particular place etc. All these different senses of a place refer to the idea of place as a cultural construct and in the book a kind of drift through the varied topography of India gradually takes the shape of an ethno-cartography of different indigenous people.

White as Milk and Rice begins with the Halakkis and here we meet Sukri who represents the tribe's famous singing women. The character of Sukri is clearly based upon Tulasi Gowda, the first Halakki woman who received a Padma Shri in 2021 for her contribution to the protection of environment. Sukri's life has been seen in the context of a long history of displacement and dispossession which has marked their sense of place through the ages. An ancient tribe living in

the coastal forests of Ankola in the southern state of Karnataka, the Halakkis originally migrated from Andhra Pradesh and settled near Karwar in the Konkan Coast. According to the Halakki oral narratives, Lord Shiva created the tribe one day after he finished his task of ploughing a paddy field. As a result, they were assigned agricultural works traditionally and, according to the Halakki legends, a 'holati' or an outcast woman held control over the coastal lands of Konkan. The name, 'Halakki' is a combination of 'halu' meaning milk and 'akki' meaning rice and it refers to their farming activities in the past. To the Halakki women, singing in groups while working in the field has been a vocation from ancient times. The subject matter of their songs is varied ranging from devotional songs in praise of Thirupati Thimmappa of Tirupati, their own versions of two great Indian epics, different rituals of their community and joys and sorrows of daily life. Interestingly, although they stay close to the Arabian sea their traditional songs very often refer to the Bay of Bengal reassuring their roots in the Andhra coast. But the Halakkis, once a prosperous agricultural community, began to lose their privileged position in the society when things began to fall apart in the colonial period. The book refers to the reasons in a very succinct manner –

> When the British government debarred this slash-and-burn farming in the jungles, they gradually migrated and started living on riverbanks, the seashore and the flatlands between Honnavar and Karwar, taking up hunting, forest gathering and agriculture as their main occupations, and mixing with other communities. (Kundalia 20)

Sukri's life has been depicted in the context of utter poverty which is the current reality of the tribe. They now live on the forest and the sea and lost most of their lands to the people of Nadavaru community on whose fields they now work as daily-wage labourers. She is now the only earning member of the family who has to look after an ailing husband and a drunkard son who eventually die. Perhaps it is her natural talent for making and singing songs orally while gathering forest produce or working in the fields with other village women keeps her going. In her songs known as the *Halakki Janapadas* Sukri used to sing songs which captured various tenets of her tribe's life and culture. Interestingly –

> The Janapadas also had their own version of the epics: Mahabharat was known as *Pandavakami* and the Ramayana, they called *Seethekami*. According to the songs that Sukri sings, it was not Ram but Lakshman who won Seetha. Lakshman did not break any magical bow to win Seetha; he killed a crow that interrupted her father King Janak's meditation. (Kundalia 10)

In the Halakki Ramayana, Seetha is the glorious protagonist instead of Lord Rama and when Sukri speaks of Seetha's love for forests, animals and trees the mythical queen is transformed into one belonging to Sukri's own tribe. This love for the wildlife and nature reflected in her songs also becomes a kind of cultural resistance in the context of rapid industrialization, deforestation and urbanization

that in the name of development began to destroy the ecological balance of the Konkan region. Her songs crossed the boundary of her village and H. C. Boralingaiah, a folk expert and former vice chancellor of Kannada University at Hampi took the group of singing women to the Dharwad radio station where they recorded their songs for the first time. Sukri then gets recognition for her talent as a folk singer by the Government of Karnataka when the Chief Minister met her. Finally she takes the dream flight to New Delhi where she receives Padma Shri from the President of India.

But all these accolades and recognitions seem to be meaningless for Sukri as her adopted son dies on the day she receives the Padma Shri and her poverty remains unchanged. This kind of ironic ending of Sukri's story emphasizes the unmistakable tendency of globalisation to showcase the culture and rituals of the tribals. The pro-capitalist market economy in this way objectifies and commodifies their lived experiences.

One thing becomes increasingly evident in Kundalia's description of six different tribes in the book. It is their hope to live the way of their life freely – undisturbed by external forces. The different development policies of the government are considered by them as a kind of unwanted intrusion in their exclusive world. Kundalia writes -

> Years ago, they were surprised when government officials with tags around their necks came down to the village and forced them to take a day off for a certain 'Skill Development Programme'. They have never taken a day off from the forests and fields unless it was during the Suggi festival. One of the women, in a crisp saree and fitted blouse, stood up at the gathering, held under a wild fig tree in Ankola, and said, 'I came to teach you how to make Kokum butter. Do you know how much that thing sells for now? …Kokum butter might be quick money, but no woman in Ankola district would choose more hours at home to these morning forest visits. (12)

This natural instinct to belong to their own ways of living freely is very clearly seen in Chapter - II of the book which deals with the life of Hoonkar Sing Patel who represents a so called criminal tribe, i.e. the Kanjars from the arid ravines of Chambal. We come to know from the book that -

> Kanjar is not a caste, but a general term used for forest vagabonds (derived from the word, kan-Kachar': one who wanders in the jungle). The caste Bhatus, which we document in this story, meanwhile, of which a few people came to be known as Kanjars, was once a community of valorous Rajputs fighting for kings and their kingdoms' safety; soon, they were pushed to the fringes of the society by multiple invaders in the Indian subcontinent. (41)

Amir Khusrau, the famous historian who came to India with Alauddin Khilji, noted that more than thirty thousand Hindus were brutally killed in Rajasthan and

many Rajput soldiers fled into the jungles and hid in the immense ravines intersecting the Chambal River of Madhya Pradesh. In course of time many of them went back to their villages and who stayed back in these *bihads* turned into dreaded dacoits. In *White as Milk and Rice,* we come to know about two generations of Chambal dacoits through Hoonkar and his father Lala to whom dacoity was not only a profession but rather a vocation or a sacred ritualistic practice that continued through the generations. In the colonial period, the Kanjar Bhatus were first segregated by the Criminal Tribes Act and –

> After independence, the Indian Government, under the guidance of Nehru and Ambedkar, replaced the Criminal Tribes Act with the Habitual Offenders Act, 1952. But far from improving their lives, the New Act only re-stigmatized the marginalized tribes. Today, several variants of these 'ex-criminal' and ex-nomadic tribes, such as Padhis, Kanjars, Ramoshis and Vanjaris, continue to be seen as a threat to rooted, settled villages. They may have moved out of the jungles, but they still live in separate encampments outside the villages, hidden behind long cobs of corn fields or tall trees or a rough ravine. (Kundalia 65)

The Kanjars no longer live the life of robbers but this relegation to the margins have led them to live by making the illicit kachcha khatiya in the night and selling it to unlicensed liquor shops. In this way, criminal tribes succumbed to the pressure of assimilation sponsored by a homogeneous national culture but their proper rehabilitation still remains a distant dream.

John Zubrzycki in his famous book, *Jadoowallahs, Jugglers and Jinns: A Magical History of India* (2018) writes -

> India's pantheon of magicians - Jadoowallahs, tamashawallahs, jadugars, madaris, mayakaris, maslets, qualandars, sanpwallahs, sanperas, katputliwallahs, bahurupis, peep- showwallahs, the list goes on –ranges across creed and caste. (10)

The Alu Kurumbas of Nilgiri prove the veracity of this statement. The people belonging to this tribe living in Coonoor, Tamil Nadu are known for their sorcery and mysterious magical powers which make them feared among others. It also led to their marginal position in jungles adjacent to the Nilgiri hills. They now work in the fields of the wealthy and educated Badagas, the rich tea estate owners, who had migrated to the Nilgiris only in the early twentieth century. But -

> It was only in these last few years that his forest tribes, the Kurumbas, had started working in the fields of Badagas during the day. Until a few years ago, whenever the forest tribals came in view of a Badaga, word flashed through their village, and women and children ran for the safety of home, hiding inside till the Kurumbas had gone. (Kundalia 76)

JOURNAL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
Vidyasagar University, Midnapore-721102, WB
Volume 17, 2024
(http://vidyasagar.ac.in/journal) **ISSN: 0973-3671**

Their knowledge of sorcery earned for themselves the tag of a criminal tribe as it was believed that their ace sorcerer or an *odikara* could make openings in the fence to steal household things from village houses. They can lull a whole village to sleep by their magic spell and can even transform into bears to kill people. The third chapter dealing with the life of Mani, a Kurumba boy, refers to their extreme poverty. Their magic is gradually wearing off and the forest as the source of their livelihood is vanishing fast as a result of different human interventions. The tribes living in the forests are matters of grave concern for the owners of the tea estates because Nilgiri tea has gradually found its place in the global tea market and to meet the increasing demand they have to transform the forest land into tea plantations. The Alu Kurumbas unknowingly pose a threat to their desperate dream of expanding their business reach.

Alu Kurumbas consider themselves to be the children of the forests. Nagan, the voice of dissent among the Kurumbas, protests against the forest officials who falsely arrest the Adivasis on the slightest pretext, senses a larger conspiracy and he tries to make the people of his tribe understand the necessity of a cumulative resistance against this dominant hegemonic advances of the centre towards the periphery. From him we come to know about the singularly important position that the forests hold in the life and culture of the Kurumbas –

> Berries, herbs, honey and tubers grow everywhere like weeds. That is why our people never learnt to work; they've never had to harvest and store food to survive. We Kurumbas just want to live here, in the forests, in these ancestral homes. (Kundalia 98).

But this craving for a placid life is short-lived. Mysteriously enough, one day the forest catches fire immediately after a heavy rain turning the huts of the Kurumbas to ashes –

> 'How did a forest fire happen after the Rains? Someone asks.
> 'I could smell kerosene. It is arson,' Siva mumbles.
> Clothes and face blackened from the soot, Nagan's eyes reflect the orange flames in front of him. 'Must be those wretched tea manager's men.' (Kundalia 102)

In Chapter 4, the Marias of Bastar also live with this typical fear of being evicted from the jungles. A place which has constantly been in the news for the decade long guerrilla war between the State and the Naxals, the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh is the traditional hinterland of India. Life is hard and rough in this dry terrain. The rituals and customs of the Marias are unique in their own way. They practise premarital sex as an institution and the adolescent boys and girls are permitted to know their bodies before marriage in a community meeting place known as *ghotul*. Surely, this ritual practice is never a kind permission to get involved in unbridled sexuality. A couple, after they choose each other, are permitted to have sex not more than three times before they get married. Like

Kurumbas, Marias also live in the jungles and it is their source of livelihood. They worship forest as their god. But the mineral-rich soil of Bastar has made these sons of the soil enemies of the big companies who dream of making the most of its mineral deposits. Birsu, the Maria woman, lives in fear of being evicted –

> She is worried about the miners of the giant companies, which her husband says are not too far away. They will come up into her hills and kill the jungles, on which they depend on for everything, when they are finished in the valley. Even the police are powerless before them. (Kundalia 111-112)

To the Marias both the Naxals and the CRPF are a kind of nuisance. All that these isolated tribes want is to live their life freely in their own inimitable way.

This longing to continue a way of living without being interrupted by different forces of capitalism, globalisation and assimilation turns into a violent retaliation in case of the Khasis of Shillong about whose culture we come to know at large in Chapter 5 through the story of Syrpai and Wansuk, two elderly Khasi sisters. After Meghalaya was declared a separate state in 1972, the Khasi nationalism began to take shape. As Kundalia writes –

> Shillong had started showing xenophobic tendencies after Meghalaya was carved out of Assam as a separate state in 1972. Most of the Khasis had converted to Christianity over the last few decades; immigrants were taking over the markers and Shillong stopped being what it once used to be. (145)

The last chapter throws light on the unusual life and culture of the Konyak Nagas, a tribe protected by Article 371A of the Indian Constitution through the eyes of Pangshong, a Konyak who grew up in Delhi and then in London. Pangshong comes back to his ancestral village in the remote Mon district in Nagaland located close to the India-Myanmar border because "he hardly learnt about his Konyak roots or their way of life" (178). Koyanks are the prehistoric head-hunters whom people in Nagaland feared because of their ferocious nature. Although those days of ethnic clashes have long ceased, their status of a warring tribe remains intact. With the passing of time many Konyaks left their village in Longwa because in this forgotten territory of world's largest democracy life was too harsh to cope with. Many of them were converted to Christianity and went in search of fortune outside. They also started to dislike the opium induced drowsiness of people in their village and the notorious and gruesome history of their tribe. But it is not very easy to shirk off the deep rooted nuances of a culture -

> However much Pangshong's parents loathed, and denied, their Konyak heritage, they couldn't help retain personality traits, preserved by inheritance, and, in turn, pass them on to him. (Kundalia 179)

Pangshong is a modern man who believes that social empowerment is a necessity for this isolated tribe living on the traditional margin of this country but when he tries to persuade the angh (the tribal king) in a conversation about changing times for the Konyak tribe, he continues smoking opium without showing any interest in Pangshong's words. Pangshong comes to understand finally the doggedly tragic wish to keep an age-old sense of place unchanged of his own tribe. Lying under the night sky away from the glamour and glitter of the big and bulging cities, the global hubs of free trade, he felt the importance of preserving the diversities and differences. A man who tried to change his community, started to feel that some things are there which look beautiful when left untreated and untouched -

> Tonight, he feels like he is something that just lies under the night skies, like the hillocks outside, and nothing more. He does not want to be anything more but be a part of this land for a while. Perhaps this is what one feels like when they die and become a part of something bigger, something more wholesome. (Kundalia 206)

White as Milk and Rice: Stories of India's Isolated Tribes is an important book. It faithfully represents some people from the margins whom we have forgotten by our ignorance or whom we have tried to make a part of the dominant worldview of the centre. As a result, their existence as well as their variety is gradually wearing off being pitted against the all-encroaching forces of assimilation. The book, from that point of view, does not "bring this margin to the centre" (xviii) but "makes the margin a place of reality" (xviii).

Works Cited

Allen, Stephen. "The Consequences of Modernity for Indigenous Peoples: An International Appraisal." *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*. volume 13, no. 4, 2006. pp. 315 - 340. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24675353. Accessed 9 May 2023.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.* University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Giddens, Anthony. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Polity Press, 1990.

Hendry, Joy. *Reclaiming Culture Indigenous Peoples and Self-Representation.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Kundalia, Nidhi Dugar. *White as Milk and Rice: Stories of India's Isolated Tribes.* Penguin Ebury Press, 2020.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Landscapes of Fear*. University of Minnesota Press, 1979.

Zubrzycki, John. *Jadoowallahs, Jugglers and Jinns: A Magical History of India.* Picador India, 2018.

