

Voices of the Marginalised: Environmental and Social Struggle in Ho Tribal Poems

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Abstract

The indigenous community named Ho in Jharkhand traditionally exhibits a profound sense of responsibility towards their ancestral territories and resources, portraying themselves as guardians of their own habitats. Their association to their sacred locations, ancestral burial sites, and culturally significant areas is strong. However, the pre- and post-colonial interferences into the tribal world impacted their social bonds, communal values, and cultural traditions. Therefore, an illustration of this is the initiation of development projects purportedly for the benefit of the Ho community. One such project, the Subarnarekha Multi-purpose Project, was proposed in 1973 and aimed at constructing dams, barrages, reservoirs, and canals in Jharkhand. A dam was planned for construction at a place called Icha near Chaibasa in West Singhbhum of Jharkhand, forcing the clearance of tribal land, which, in turn, resulted in extensive deforestations in the Ho area. Surprisingly, a *Jungle Kaato Andolan* was also launched by the Government of India in 1978. This resulted in the rise of anti-government sentiments, social exclusion, displacement, detachment from their land, and an identity crisis. Hence, this paper seeks to explore the distressing encounters of the Ho community in Jharkhand during the colonial and postcolonial periods through the analysis of select Ho poetry. The study will employ Subaltern Theory to examine epistemic violence and Frantz Fanon's concept of mimetic violence. The poems under scrutiny serve as a poignant portrayal of the intersections between government policies, environmental crises, indigenous crises of livelihood and identity, on the one hand, and varied Ho literature that responds to these issues, on the other hand.

Keywords: Ho tribe, subaltern, epistemic violence, mimetic Violence, identity crisis.

Introduction

One of the districts of Jharkhand state, named Singhbhum, lies to the south east of the Chotanagpur plateau and is a living space of the Ho Adivasis with a population of 7 lakh, according to the census of 2011. Their relationship with nature is deeply interconnected, respected, and symbiotic. They see themselves as

an integral part of the natural world. They have lived in specific territories for generations, and they are connected to their roots in various ways; they have a profound cultural, physical, and spiritual bond with their land. Their deep knowledge of the environment enables them to harvest resources responsibly, ensuring the continuity of resources over time. Land is not simply an economic resource that is essential to the livelihoods of indigenous people; while most Adivasi's do derive a substantial part of their subsistence from cultivation and other land-based activities, struggles over land do not arise only from this dependence. Land is also the basis of community and identity, providing a material and symbolic substratum for social and cultural life (Sundar 30).

In the pre-colonial period, i.e., before the advent of the British in India, the forest resources were enjoyed by the inhabitants of the forest as the ruler had limited or no interest in the woodlands. As Guha has written: "The waste and forest lands... never attracted the attention of former (pre-British) governments" (1883). But the encroachment by Dikus (non-tribal individuals) during the colonial era resulted in the exploitation of forest and land to generate revenue, promote agriculture, and achieve commercial benefits. Various legislation concerning forests were enacted to delineate the boundaries of indigenous communities residing in forested regions, such as the Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, 1894, and 1927. These laws shifted the ownership of forests from the hands of local communities to the control of the government. Consequently, communal forest resources were transformed into state-owned assets, initiating the separation of village communities from the forests. The forest policy of 1952 in post-colonial India was deemed more detrimental than its colonial predecessor, specifically with regards to indigenous populations (Reddy 5). The encroachment persisted under the pretext of various projects aimed at enhancing the local community. The Subarnarekha multi-purpose project was proposed in 1973, involving the construction of dams, barrages, reservoirs, and canals in Jharkhand, and a dam was planned for construction in Icha near Chaibasa, in West Singhbhum. The construction of the dam necessitated the use of excess land, leading to extensive deforestation (Singh and Giri 282). Surprisingly, the *Jungle Kaato Andolan* was initiated by the government from 1978 onward. Their strategy involved replacing the indigenous Sal Forest with commercially viable plantations such as teak, tropical pine, and eucalyptus. Throughout the changing forest policies, the resilience exhibited by the Ho Adivasi community during the colonial and post-colonial eras serves as a testament to their flexibility, resilience, and commitment to preserving their cultural heritage and way of life. This resilience is deeply rooted in their strong sense of community and brotherhood, enabling them to withstand external pressures and uphold their unique way of life. They showcased their adaptability by adjusting their livelihood practices accordingly, transitioning from traditional hunting and gathering methods and shifting cultivation to settled agriculture, wage labour, or other economic pursuits while still maintaining elements of their traditional agricultural activities. At times, they have resisted forced displacement, unsustainable exploitation of resources, and discriminatory forest regulations

through protests and legal battles, illustrating their resistance as a response to the challenges of identity crises in the form of mimetic violence.

Literature Review

While books and articles on the Ho tribe and their culture are available in meagre numbers, predominantly in Hindi and English, only a couple of attempts have been made to portray the feeling of marginalisation, alienation, and identity crisis in the colonial and post-colonial periods. *Kolhan Dishum: Ho Durang* (2008), edited by Dobro Budu Uli, is a collection of Ho poetry related to deep interconnected relationships with their motherland and nature, and the poems also express their traditional ecological knowledge passed down through generations. However, one major drawback is that the poems lack critical explanation. To understand the Ho tribe's cultural nuances, in-depth analysis and interpretation are required for understanding the hidden meaning and historical significance. Similarly, *Ho Durang Hisir* (2013) is a collection of poetry edited by Dr. Damyunti Sinku. The poems in this collection address themes of marginalisation and the dark shadow of violence. The vivid images capture the pain and anguish of indigenous people who have been victims of exploitation, land disposition, and violence, often by those who claimed to be their protectors. The response of indigenous people in the form of mimetic violence is also expressed. However, again, the poem does not carry any critical assessment that is required for understanding the history of the Ho tribe. *Ho Kavitaon Ka Rashtriya Swar* (2014), edited by Dr. Pradeep Kumar Bodra, deals with different Ho poetry that expresses the indigenous people's patriotism, their love for motherland, and their symbiotic relationship with nature. The poems highlight the stark reality of identity loss experienced by indigenous people due to centuries of colonial oppression and forced assimilation. However, the book lacks the critical assessment of the poem; an insightful interpretation for understanding the valuable context of poems in their historical and cultural context is required. Surprisingly, there is a conspicuous absence of hermeneutics in this literature. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyse select Ho poetry to express the Ho tribe relation with their culture and surroundings, their resilience with changing circumstances, the dark shadow of epistemic violence, a sense of alienation and identity crisis, and resulting mimetic violence due to the circumstances.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Following, Fanon's examination of the psychological dynamics of colonialism in his works *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) and *Black Skin White Masks* (1967), he deals with the impact of colonialism on the psychology of both the coloniser and the native. The process whereby the native individual internalises the negative stereotypes imposed by the colonial power, leading to a loss of identity. From a cultural standpoint, the native begins to prioritise the values and norms dictated by the coloniser, further perpetuating the colonial power dynamic. This results in a belief that only white values are valuable. Fanon presents a

psychoanalytic theory where the European self is shaped in contrast to the native. The native, feeling inadequate, strives to adopt white culture and rejects their own traditions, wearing 'white masks'. Fanon argues that this sense of inferiority in the colonized leads to violence. When the native comprehends the futility of emulating the coloniser or expelling them, this realisation often culminates in violent conflicts within the native community. Violence, according to Fanon, is a form of self-assertion and can manifest in tribal wars among the colonized. The colonised view violence as a means of liberation, while the coloniser sees it as rebellious behaviour. Violence is used by both sides to either overthrow or maintain the existing order, showing the contradictory nature of its role in liberation and maintaining order. This paper intends to present the Ho tribal mimetic violence after suppression, marginalisation, and alienation (Nayar 205-06).

Similarly, a subaltern is a person of marginalised status who has no voice, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak mentions this in her famous essay, "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988). She characterises the silencing of the subaltern class as doing epistemic violence to them by removing their ability to speak for themselves (25). Epistemic violence can be understood as "slow violence," as described by theorist Rob Nixon (11). It does not appear as physical violence but can be observed in the replacement of indigenous forms of governance and natural resource tenure. This paper aims to present how colonialists silenced, oppressed, and ignored the voice of Ho indigenous people in Jharkhand.

The study is purely qualitative and uses primary and secondary sources to gather data, including books, articles, and other written works. The paper's methodology is based on a textual, descriptive, and critical analysis of a few Ho poems. It also includes an English translation of poems originally written in Ho.

An Analysis of a Few Ho Poems

The first poem titled *Buru Daru Raka* (Protect the Forest) is written by Lakshmi Biruwa to express the interconnected relationship of the indigenous people with their forests and land.

Protect the Forest

Buru na darubu parchi keda
Nimin bhugin Kolhan Dishum tanidana cha keda (2) (Budu Uli 31)
A beautiful Kolhan, now a desolate field,
Forests stripped bare, trees cut down and peeled.
Drought and famine have come, a harsh ordeal. (My Translation)

The loss of forests in post-colonial India in the name of industrialization and development, such as the Subarnarekha project in Kolhan, inflicted immeasurable pain and suffering upon the Ho indigenous communities that depended on these vital ecosystems for their survival and way of life (Singh and Giri 282). The indigenous people witnessed the destruction of their sacred lands and ancestral homes, leaving them displaced and disconnected from their cultural roots. With the

loss of forests, traditional hunting, gathering, and agricultural practices became unsustainable, deprived them of their livelihoods and driving many into poverty and destitution. The once harmonious relationship between indigenous communities and nature was shattered, replaced by a sense of desperation and despair as they grappled with the challenges of adapting to an unfamiliar and hostile world.

In the next few lines, indigenous people are addressing the importance of forests and trees and taking vows that they will not allow others to cut them anymore. Forests and trees serve as indispensable saviours for Ho indigenous people, providing a lifeline of sustenance, cultural identity, and resilience. Lines are as follows:

Buruna durubu amieyaa keyte
Buruna durubu tanidana keyte
Nabugo Dishum korena haggaaeya ringago akaal ked (2) (Budu Uli 31)

We will not cut the forest, nor the trees,
We'll let the bushes and shrubs grow as they please.
Trees and plants are life's true keepers and healers (2) (My Translation)

For generations, the Ho community has relied on the bounties of the forest to meet their basic needs, from food and medicine to building materials and fuel. Moreover, these lush green havens hold profound cultural significance, acting as sacred spaces for rituals, ceremonies, and the preservation of ancestral wisdom. The deep-rooted spiritual connection to the land fosters a sense of belonging and continuity, anchoring their cultural identity.

Burubu amiyee jumbadaa budadd
Burugo regena hagaiyee jeebon tolaakan (2)
Burubu amiyee chabanna kere
Darubu mah chaban kere
Saan sakam daru janggi sabeen ringaawoh waa (2) (Budu Uli 32)

In weeds and shrubs, in forests and trees,
Life thrives and grows, sustained by these.
If forests shrink down,
we lose leaves and wood,
We'll lack everything, nothing understood. (My Translation)

Through the process of deforestation, Ho people were filled with fear and apprehension regarding the potential loss of their primary sources of sustenance and livelihood. Their concerns revolved around the looming possibility of facing scarcity in resources ranging from leaves to timber, which formed an integral part of their daily existence. The complexity of their predicament was further exacerbated by their struggle to comprehend the most effective means of advocating against the various forms of exploitation they were subjected to. Within

this context, the actions of neo-colonial forces can be perceived as an indirect usurpation of their fundamental rights and freedoms, particularly their capacity to articulate their grievances and concerns. This form of marginalisation and suppression of their voices can be conceptualised as a manifestation of epistemic violence, a concept elucidated by the renowned scholar Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (25). The poem ends with the vow of protection of the natural world; for them, land, forests, and trees are not simply an economic resource that is essential to livelihoods; these are the basis of community and identity, providing a material and symbolic substratum for social and cultural life.

Ayar Chanab uduhketē
Ayar Chanab keyaaleketē
Burubu rakaya hagaye karebu ujaadeheya (2) (Budu Uli 32)

We'll ponder
We'll reflect, and clearly see,
Friends! Together, we'll protect every tree and forest with glee. (My Translation)

From the first to second poem that is titled *Aalom Senoh* (Don't Go Out) by James Devgam, we can observe the struggle of indigenous people from environmental to social. Under the domination of Dikus in the colonial and postcolonial worlds, they were being dominated and losing their ability to speak and fight for themselves.

Don't Go Out

Aaalom senoh adivaasi
Chilaaoo aloma diku daasi
Koya tan ko leka
Alom atang aasi (Budu Uli 20)

Don't go out, Adivasi,
Don't labor for a daily fee.
Don't live like a beggar band,
Don't go spreading out your hand (My Translation)

In the above lines, indigenous people displayed remarkable resilience in the face of losing their ancestral rights to forests and lands. Forced to relinquish their traditional territories to colonisers and powerful interests, they endured immense hardship and injustice. Here, epistemic violence denotes a subtle yet pervasive form of violence that operates at a gradual pace, distinct from overt physical violence. This phenomenon, while not immediately apparent through visible means, manifests itself conspicuously through the gradual displacement and erasure of traditional indigenous modes of governance and systems of natural resource ownership and management as conceptualised in the scholarly work of Rob Nixon (11). Yet, despite these adversities, they clung to their cultural identity and maintained their intrinsic connection to the land. With unwavering determination, they adapted to their new circumstances, even as daily wage

labourers or beggars, seeking sustenance in the midst of profound marginalization. The poet is requesting his tribal band not to choose daily wages as their profession and not to spread their hands as beggars.

Senoh tanam naalaa Dishum
Raka poysaa naalaa te (Budu Uli 20)

You've set out for the city, bright and sunny,
You've gone to earn some rupees and money. (My Translation)

The loss of rights to forests and lands had a profound impact on tribal communities, leading to the erosion of their identity and history as subaltern groups. For generations, these indigenous peoples had thrived in symbiosis with nature, drawing sustenance from the forests and cherishing their deep-rooted cultural heritage. However, as colonial and post-colonial powers encroached upon their territories, displacing and marginalising them, the very essence of their identity was under threat. Stripped of their ancestral lands and forced into unfamiliar territories, they faced a rupture in their traditional knowledge systems and ways of life.

Hitaahsaa adoo tam
Sodorii unurum muchedo tam
Susun durang danang amah
Amah susun am gey kamh (Budu Uli 21)

You are losing history,
Respected identity lost in mystery.
Dance and song define your name,
Why are you silent, where is your flame? (My Translation)

With limited access to their sacred sites and cultural practices, their history was gradually eroded. Moreover, as they were pushed to the fringes of society and subjected to discrimination, their voices were silenced, relegating them to the status of subaltern groups. Denied agency over their own destinies and histories, the tribals endured the painful process of losing not only their physical connection to the land but also their cultural memory and social standing, perpetuating a cycle of marginalisation and erasure.

Diri daaru se am gusiyaa
Redange rabang do am ge kachiyaa (Budu Uli 21)

You're the owner of mineral and wood,
Yet you remained hungry, never understood. (My Translation)

Despite being the inheritors of abundant mineral resources and timber-rich lands, Ho indigenous people continue to suffer from hunger and poverty even in the aftermath of the colonial and postcolonial periods. The exploitation of their natural resources by external forces, often driven by corporate interests and government policies, has severely affected their livelihoods and well-being. The large-scale

Subarnarekha project in Jharkhand has led to the destruction of their ancestral lands, depriving them of access to the resources they once depended upon for sustenance. Additionally, land grabs for the construction of a dam at Icha near Chaibasa disrupted their traditional agricultural practices and left them with limited options for earning a livelihood. Moreover, historical injustices, discriminatory policies, and lack of access to education and healthcare have perpetuated their socio-economic marginalization. Despite their rightful claims to the wealth of their lands, the benefits have rarely reached the Ho indigenous communities, as they are often excluded from decision-making processes and left at the mercy of external economic interests. The result is a stark contrast between the abundance of resources on the lands and the pervasive hunger and poverty they endure, highlighting the urgent need for equitable and sustainable development that respects their rights and empowers indigenous communities to thrive.

In the midst of the myriad environmental and societal challenges associated with the preservation of their ancestral territories and means of sustenance, as well as the safeguarding of their distinctive cultural heritage and collective sense of self, the Ho indigenous community found themselves confronted with various manifestations of epistemic violence, primarily in the form of systematic alterations to established norms and regulatory frameworks, resulting in the gradual erosion of their inherent rights to the forests and lands that had long been integral to their way of life. The pervasive fear of forfeiting their very essence and jeopardising their continued existence as a people prompted the Ho community to grapple with the complex dynamics of assimilation into the hegemonic cultural paradigms imposed by successive waves of colonial and neo-colonial influences, thereby engendering a palpable sense of inferiority and subjugation vis-à-vis their erstwhile colonisers, a phenomenon poignantly articulated by Fanon as a catalyst for the eventual outbreak of overt acts of aggression and resistance, commonly categorised as instances of mimetic violence (Nayar 205). A rich tapestry of such instances of mimetic violence can be discerned within the realm of Ho poetry dating back to the tumultuous epochs of British colonial rule and its subsequent neo-colonial legacies, wherein poignant expressions of dissent and defiance aimed at the oppressive forces of imperialism and neo-colonialism find poignant articulation. The historical annals chronicling the trajectory of Ho resistance movements are replete with illustrative examples of mimetic violence, notably exemplified by the momentous Kol Rebellion of 1837, the watershed Munda Rebellion of 1899-1900, the harrowing events surrounding the Kharsawan Firing incident of 1949, and a litany of similar upheavals that punctuate the annals of Ho history. A cursory examination of select excerpts from the Ho literary poem titled *Daamul Durang* (Battle of Serengsiya) written by GaneshwarTiriyaa suffices to underscore the enduring legacy of mimetic violence as a potent tool of resistance and a symbolic reaffirmation of the Ho people's unyielding spirit of defiance in the face of adversity.

Battle of Serengsiya

Dishum kusud- kushud reyo
Raiji raasu paatu reyo
Imitang seter lena saari Poto Sardar (2) (Budu Uli 24)

Now there was mourning in the country,
When the state became very cruel,
Then in such a situation, Poto Sardar came, as a brave jewel (2)
(My Translation)

Lako Bodra senyatege
Sar ah sartege
Todejaa peedil jana biritish goli (2) (Budu Uli 24)

With the power of Lako Bodra,
When the bow and arrow shot,
Even the British bullets forgot, their force was all for naught (2)
(My Translation)

Leaders such as Poto Sardar, after enduring various forms of torment and torture, demonstrated remarkable courage by stepping forward to vocally oppose the oppressive actions carried out by the British authorities. In a similar vein, Lako Bodra served as an emblem of strength and inspiration for them, imparting valuable teachings that equipped them with the necessary fortitude to engage in a resistance against the British forces, armed with nothing but their traditional tools of bows and arrows. The British troops, armed with modern weaponry including bullets and superior forces, were ultimately vanquished by the sheer determination, enthusiasm, robustness, and might exhibited by the indigenous fighters. The aforementioned lines reveal a manifestation of mimetic violence, as depicted by the poet, who illustrates the scenario where the oppressive nature of the state reached its peak, prompting the emergence of figures like Poto Sardar, who, in response, resorted to utilising traditional weapons such as bows and arrows for their defence.

Kol Dishum marbu senyaya
Kol Dishum marbu legeh begehya (Budu Uli 24)

Kol Dishum has to be protected,
Kol Dishum needs to be promoted (My Translation)

The poem culminates with a solemn pledge to safeguard and advance the interests of the Kolhan State, emphasising the imperative need to shield it from the oppressive and inhumane acts perpetrated by colonial powers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explores Ho tribe's cultural and social experiences and depicts the erosion of their identity and history as subaltern groups, shedding light on the systemic marginalisation and challenges they face. This paper not only

highlights the environmental and social injustices imposed upon them, particularly through discriminatory forest regulations, but also underscores their significant impact on the Ho tribe's way of life and cultural identity. The selected poems celebrate the resilience, flexibility, and unwavering commitment of the Ho people to preserve their cultural heritage. They reveal a community that, while grappling with the adverse effects of modern policies and practices, remains steadfast in its pursuit of cultural preservation and self-determination. The poetic narratives illustrate the tribe's proactive stance against the erosion of their identity, embodying a form of mimetic violence—where the act of poetic creation becomes a means of asserting agency and resistance. The portrayal of protests and legal battles within the poems serves as a powerful testament to the Ho tribe's determination to challenge and overcome the forces threatening their existence. These actions, rooted in a deep sense of justice and cultural pride, exemplify the tribe's active engagement in preserving their rights and traditions. The poems, therefore, function not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a potent tool for social and political activism, giving voice to the marginalised and advocating for a re-evaluation of the policies that impact their lives. In essence, this research also highlights the critical role of poetry in documenting and resisting the cultural and environmental struggles of the Ho tribe.

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