

TRIBAL LANGUAGES REQUIRE MORE THAN LITERARY MEETS TO SURVIVE

'Mother tongue a must'



The economics behind tribal literature is as poor as the people who write it. There are numerous tribes all over India and some of those tribesmen and women express themselves in words, written. It's true that most of the tribal culture and tribal creativity is in the form of song and dance, but written words are increasingly finding their place in tribal life.

The tribal writers mostly pen songs and poetry, both for adults and children. Tribal songs, especially of Jharkhand and some other places, including Maharashtra, have made their way into movies, thereby showing their acceptance and durability. But, there are tribal writers, who write thought-provoking essays, read papers in seminars and teach in schools, colleges and universities. They also write novels and short stories.

Names such as Damayanti Beshra, who chaired two sessions on both the days of the All India Tribal Writers' Meet, organised by Sahitya Akademi on the occasion of the International Day of the World's Indigenous People and as a part of the Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, in Kolkata recently; Hansda Sawendra Shekhar, who, though a Santali, writes in English and is convert educated; Wichamdinbo, who read a paper on Preservation and development of Indian indigenous language in the sixth

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session of the two-day meet and teaches in Sikkim University; or Jaincy John, a young lady from Kerala, who read a paper in the same session, are quite well-known in literary circles. You may think that they are the better-off tribals, who are privileged, but the reality is they are all grounded in tribal culture and come from tribal milieu, prevailing in different parts of the country.

They strongly believe that practising their mother tongues – Gondi, Santali, Purgi, Khast, Kokborok, etc – not only while they are writing, but also when they promote their work. They feel it is different and is the principal way of preserving and nurturing the tribal culture in India, which is as diverse and colourful as the sub-continent itself.

All of these people already mentioned and others – like Dipali Debarma, who writes in Kokborok and is a teacher by profession and poet by passion; Kumud B. Sushilappa, who writes

in Hakkipikki, a tribal language of Karnataka and is an engineer by profession, and who has won many awards for her literary works; Pushpa Gavit, who writes in Gondi, a tribal language of Maharashtra; Dhanya Vengachery, a tribal writer from Kerala; Vandana Tete, another tribal writer from Jharkhand; Usha Kiran Atram, belonging to Gond tribe in Maharashtra – feel that respective mother tongues must be the medium of instruction for children, at least till Class V. This is for better integrating the tribal children into the 'progress' of the country.

This is the only way to make sure that tribal kids do not feel either 'neglected' or 'left out'. And this is happening. In schools of Tripura, Kokborok is taught, says Debarma. "Even CBSE Board schools are teaching Kokborok," she adds. The faster more and more state governments go the Tripura way, it is better for the tribals in India.

But, is there any government patronage for practising literature in tribal languages? As it is, we know that surviving as an independent writer even in non-tribal mainstream languages, including Hindi and English, is difficult. And both Sushilappa and Debarma candidly accept it. Both the women admitted that had they not been engineer and school teacher respectively and had not got ample support from their husbands, they would have found it difficult to sustain their writing.

While the award-winning Sushilappa reveals that she had received some ₹8,000 as advance royalty (and that is one-time, mind you) from her publisher, a state government department, Debarma acknowledges that the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) of Tripura had earmarked a budget for publishing books in tribal languages. But this ₹8,000-10,000 royalty or getting one's books published in tribal languages may not be adequate patronage for the tribal writers all over the country.

The government must do more, over and above organising literary meets, to make the tribal languages survive. *

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