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Decoding the Unthinkable: Cultural Dynamics and Mythical Representations of Nature in Verrier Elwin's Select Tribal Folklores

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Abstract

The present paper aims to elucidate the representation of nature and climate, as well as the cultural and mythical dynamics, concerning verrier Elvin's tribal folklore. In a personal attempt to understand such folklore in the present context, it is established that they are competent in suggesting the 'unthinkable' as Amitav Ghosh uses this meticulous term in his book the great derangement: climate change and the unthinkable (2016). A call for the preservation of these tribal myths and folklore is implied in the paper. It is a matter of great fortune that in folk literature the presence of such tales as documented by verrier Elwin would ensure for us a culture of long-lasting and sustainable environment on this beautiful bluish-green planet.

Introduction

How pertinent is TRIBAL FOLKLORE in the context of climate change could be vividly elaborated by an instance - the folklore concerning the MYTHS OF MIDDLE INDIA which was published in 1949. The present tribal folklore is a DHULIA myth from Karondi, Madhya Pradesh that deals with trees: The wife of Mirchamal Dano, Buchki Rakasin, was a strange woman. She never bore a child; she did not even have a monthly period. The Dano got her a lot of medicine and called many medicine men, but it was no use. One day Dano went to visit his father-in-law and on his way home picked up a dead crab. He gave it to his wife and said, 'Your father has sent you this for supper.' Buchki roasted and ate it, and that very night she began to menstruate. In a week she washed her head; that night lay with her husband and conceived. And in due time a child was born. He was Bakrenda Dano. Mirchamal Dano took the placenta and cord to the Tehardongri jungle and there made a peacock trap with it. The next day there were three peacocks caught in the trap. But when the Dano went to see what had happened the following morning, he found that the trap had turned into a camel's creeper; the cord was the stem, and the placenta had turned into great broad leaves. (Elvin, 2009) Verrier Elwin's MYTHS OF MIDDLE INDIA was written in the days when anthropology was still sourced in folklore and literature. There are various tribal folklores written by Elwin concerning the Natural World such as the metals and minerals; grass, flowers, trees; arthropods; reptiles; fish; birds; and mammals.

At the very beginning of this paper one needs to note that there is an unmistakable defiance of realistic narration to be found in the tale; for the tribal folklores are most often fantastic stories. But in this tale, this defiance is not so much visible in the portrayal of human

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characters as in the depiction of nature. Taking clues from the tribal myths creates a bond between the mother and nature. Buchki Rakasin is a mature woman seeking to perform her mother's duty by giving birth to her baby. This all happened because of eating a dead crab, whereas the very use of the placenta to make a peacock trap became a futile attempt on the part of Mirchamal Dano. Thus, nature is always there to provide plenty, but one has to take care of nature as well. One of the key essences of this particular representation is that human beings are the masters of nature as well as the dependent. The tribal folklores thus consider the utter neglect of nature on the part of human beings as a sinful act. It is a well-known fact that to be a mother is observed chiefly as the greatest blessing for human wish-fulfillment. But the tale confirms strongly, that no fulfillment of human wish be allowed at the cost of the non-humans on earth.

Here one may note that tribal folklores are not given their due acclaim as literature-proper by any literary historian of reputation. Scholars in the discipline of postcolonial studies restate that the colonialists' hypothesis was to consider age-old customs, beliefs, rituals, and also folklores related to tribal myths as instances of something very primeval in the traditions of the colonized, probably best appropriate for ethnographic more willingly than literary studies. The nationalist literary historians were concerned with creating a magnificent past that could rationalize their actual apprehension of modern fictitious creations in the native languages. Neither the literary and traditional pasts nor the resultant present of the erstwhile colonized country are to be treated by them as mediocre to the colonialists. Although the current period of the nation is more vital than the past, the precedent in nationalists' thoughts is rather a way to legitimize their present which they consider either superior or at least equal to the present of their erstwhile rulers. On the other hand, the Marxists focused mainly on the struggle of ordinary human beings in literature considering that they were more progressive than their nationalist equivalence. They accepted the culture and worldview of the past docile to their archetypal historical–materialist concern. Probably, the tribal folklore for them is part of agrarian and feudalistic socio-economic formation not fit at all for the savour of the industrialized contemporary society. In this context, an Indian Scholar Dr Santanu Banerjee opines that as a result of this conflict between the narratives and the literary minds, there has been a downgrading to the margin, this very imperative corpus of narratives which is most often concerned with sustainable relation between the human and the natural world. (Banerjee 43)

The present paper tries to explicate the climate crisis along with cultural and mythical dynamics with reference to Verrier Elvin's tribal folklore. In a personal attempt to understand such folklore in the present context, it is established that they are competent in suggesting the 'unthinkable' as Amitav Ghosh uses this meticulous term in his book THE GREAT DERANGEMENT: CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE UNTHINKABLE (2016). A call for the preservation of these tribal myths and folklore is implied in the paper. It is a matter of great fortune that in Folk literature the presence of such tales as documented by Verrier Elwin would ensure for us a culture of long-lasting and sustainable environment on this beautiful bluish-green planet.

Argument I

Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) who often calls himself a 'self-made anthropologist' (Elwin, 1964), was a public intellectual-cum-reformer of his era. He was an ethically grounded and committed

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institution-builder and an iconoclast, who translated the real voices of the tribal communities to both the academic and administrative discourses in post-independent India. Later, in January 1954 he took Indian citizenship. In the same year, he was appointed as the anthropological adviser to the Indian Government, with special administrative responsibility to work on the hill tribes of the northeast frontier. Moving to Shillong for this administrative project, he served for a decade as the leading campaigner of what he liked to call 'Mr. Nehru's gospel for the tribal communities inhabiting those regions. Elwin passed away in February 1964, a greatly esteemed public anthropologist in his adopted land. He received the most prestigious Padma Bhushan and numerous other medals and awards. Here, it is important to note that Elwin accepted the forests in India as his home and treated tribal communities of those habitats like his own kin. He occupied administrative and official positions pertaining to the growth of tribal communities dispersed in different parts of India and actively contributed to the process of nation-building. This can be understood from a significant instance of his life:

> In 1932 Elwin came to a remote village of the Gond tribe where he and his friend Shamrao Hivale opened a school and a dispensary. The place had been recommended to him by the Anglican bishop of the region who added the information that of the last five Europeans to stay in that part of the country, four had died within a year. The work with tribesmen had been recommended by quite a different character. Elwin had decided that he had to be in closer contact with the people than he could be in the Order in Poona, and he consulted with one of the chiefs of the nationalist movement, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, about working among untouchables. Patel dissuaded him; it was for Hindus, he said, to make reparation to the untouchables, and many social workers and missionaries were doing so. He advised Elwin to work among tribal peoples. So he did for the rest of his life. To the religious drive to make reparation, Elwin soon added the urge to make tribal peoples known as real people, rather than tiresome savages, and their cultures as worthy of respect. This was the impetus from which flowed the rich stream of his ethnological writing (there was an earlier, not inconsiderable, output of theological and nationalist writings). As he became increasingly engrossed in his work with tribal villagers, he became less and less comfortable with his role as a clergyman and his formal faith. He came to "a dramatic conversion but in reverse." He renounced his membership in the Church of England both as a priest and as a communicant. Thenceforth he continued his work on his own, living at the simple village level of subsistence, putting most of the donations that came to him into the welfare work. (Mandelbaum 1965: 448-449)

Historian and writer, Ramachandra Guha sketches Verrier Elwin's multifarious presence in distinct arenas of public discourses in India: "This Englishman, missionary, Gandhian, social worker, activist, bureaucrat, and Indian was always and pre-eminently a writer, a man whose richness of personal experience illuminates an oeuvre of truly staggering proportions… Elwin worked in a whole range of genres. He wrote and published poetry, religious tracts, polemical pamphlets, novels, anthropological monographs, folklore collections, official reports and manuals, reviews, editorials, and travelogues. His last work, an autobiography, is generally regarded as the finest of all his books"(Guha 1998: 326).

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Moreover, as mentioned above Verrier Elwin is known for his extensive study of tribal culture and community. Some of his main writings are focused on tribal life and identity. His approach and method of research have inspired many anthropologists and sociologists. Treated strictly as literary outputs, Elwin's two most famous books are *Leaves from the Jungle* (1936) and *The tribal world of Verrier Elwin* (1964). In both these works, the author's experience is fore grounded, and he becomes a character in the narratives. On the other hand, his ethnographic accounts, representing other cultures and contexts, carry a large store of information and description, presented with less coherence and scientific temper.

Between 1936 and 1939 the London publisher, John Murray, brought out each year a book of Elwin's. *Leaves* was followed by *Phulmat of the Hills* (1937), a novel about a tribal beauty stricken by leprosy and abandoned by her lover. The narrative is replete with poems, riddles, and stories from tribal folklore, interspersed with straight dialogue. This is an early 'ethnographic novel', its plot held together by the focus on the fate of its central character. (Guha, 328) It was, as Elwin notes, an aboriginal Purana, "a compendium of tribal stories about natural and human creation, rich in expressive imagery, with stars flashing and gods appearing and disappearing, tales of magic and wonder impossible to summarize or condense" (Guha 207-8). It contains 537 myths in story form dealing with 23 large topics, which are classed into four broad divisions:

1. Man and the Universe (the creation of the world and mankind; sun, moon, and stars; air and water; fire)
2. The Natural World (metals and minerals; grass, flowers and trees; arthropods; reptiles; fish; birds; mammals)
3. Human Life (the human body; the invention of implements; food; tobacco; mahua spirit; disease; psychopathology: the vagina dentata legend; the coming of death)
4. Human Institutions (some aspects of religion; witchcraft and magic; custom and taboo; festival, dance, and song)

Argument II

Amitav Ghosh, a renowned social anthropologist and literary figure, argues that contemporary literary imagination largely fails to acknowledge the intensity and extremity of today's climate events. Climate change, he notes, is similarly oversimplified in historical narratives. Adding to this oversight, the present political discourse tends to frame the climate crisis not as a matter of urgent collective responsibility, but rather as an individual moral or ethical choice. According to Ghosh, what the Anthropocene urgently calls for is a deep and sincere quest for alternative ways of human existence. This call is rooted in the growing realization that placing human beings at the center of all thought and action is no longer tenable. What Ghosh emphasizes throughout his work is closely tied to another issue – one he does not explore in detail, but which remains significant. Scholars in literary studies are well aware that numerous texts exist that re-imagine the human-nature relationship from perspectives that do not see nature as inert, passive, or merely a resource for human exploitation. In these alternative narratives, nature resists being silenced or dominated. Perhaps the most critical shortcoming lies in the literary world itself; these alternative voices are often excluded from mainstream literary canons. Despite sharing many formal features with established literary works – as in the case of the tribal folklores – such tales are frequently relegated to a luminal space between literature and non-literature. They are categorized as para-literature. G N Devy remarks in this context, "… the distinction between

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literature and para-literature is not a distinction between two different fields, but a distinction within a single field as the one between totems and taboos within a single culture, or as between the self and the non-self within a single field of consciousness. The political dispossession of linguistic and social margin is the root cause of the creation of such categories."(Devy 150)

Thus, to understand the regime of climatic effect more deeply with reference to desirable literary representation of the relation between the human and the non-human mythical world one may easily turn towards the wealth of tribal folklore. This relation can be understood more explicitly by following some tribal folklore as given in the divisions mentioned above:

1. **Man and the Universe:**

This is an Agaria myth from Kareli, Madhya Pradesh which deals with the creation of the world and mankind:

Bhagavan initially tried to create the world by laying a great lotus leaf on the face of the water, but the sun arose and withered that leaf with its heat. He then used the leaf to make the world, but when he tried to climb on it, it broke. Then, using the dirt of his breast, Bhagavan made a crow, and allowed it to suck his milk two-and-a-half times and said: 'Now you've drunk my milk, you'll never hunger nor thirst; you and I will search for the earth together.' The crow flew further and further until it was so tired that it collapsed, and fell on the body of the great crab, Kakramal Kshattri. Kakramal also got involved in the search. He went underwater and woke up Nal Raja and Nal Rani, who had been sleeping for twelve years. Nal Raja said, 'Nizam Raja has the earth, not me.' But Kakramal squeezed Nal Raja's throat till he vomited up the earth in little balls. The crow took the earth back to Bhagavan, who then made the world.

Five years later, Nanda Baiga and Nanda Baigin were born out of a crack in the ground. Nanda Baiga asked Mother Earth, 'Mother, where is my fiddle?' She replied, 'Child you are you but a navel and a cord. What need is there of a fiddle?'

So said Mother Earth, but on that day Basin Kaniya (the Bamboo Maiden) was born, and Nanga Baiga went to cut the bamboo, in one breath, above and below. And he made his fiddle with his hair for strings, and played it, and Bhagavan's seat shook with the sound. Then Bhagavan knew that the Baiga were born, and sent to call them. But his messenger found Nanga Baiga asleep in a winnowing fan. Mother Earth said, 'Don't go, my son,' but Nanga Baiga took his fiddle and went. Bhagavan said to him, 'Drive your nails into the earth to make it steady.' But Nanga Baiga had no nails, so he cut off the little finger of his right hand and drove that into the ground. But Bhagavan was not satisfied. "I want strong pillars,' he said.

So, Nanga Baiga called Agyasur and worshipped him, and Agyasur flamed up with great flames, and from the fire, an Agaria was born. Since the Agaria were born from fire, they never fear it and can beat the slag from the glowing iron with their hands. Then Agaria made twelve pillars of virgin iron and set them at four corners of the world, and it became steady, and Bhagavan sowed seeds everywhere. (Elwin, 2009)

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Page No: 40-48, Section: Article

2. The Natural World:

This is a Bhaina myth from Kenda Zamindari that deals with birds:

At first, birds could not fly; they used to walk or hop about. One day there was a Raja's wedding. Everyone was invited. Among the guests were a Baiga Guru and a Bhaina Gunia. They tried to prove who the greater magician was. First, the Baiga turned the guests into horses and asses. But the Bhaina turned some into water, and some into fire. When they had been turned back again into men, they came to the angry magicians and fell at their feet saying, 'Trouble us no more; we have seen what great power you have.'

The Baiga was going home. He saw many birds who had been invited to the wedding following him. Across the path he set birdlime. A bird was caught in it and began to weep. The Bhaina saw it and by his magic gave the bird wings. It flew into the air and escaped the Baiga, who was very angry. But since that day birds have been able to fly.

This is a Maria myth from Lakhopal, Bastar State that deals with mammals:

Long ago, before the Rebellion, when a man died, and the soul (jiwa) left the body, it was chased by the village dogs. In those days Maria could understand dog language, and the dogs would inform the people, barking. 'It has gone to Mahapurub; we watched it go.' Then the people would not bury the body. After a while, the soul would come down to earth to see what had happened to its body, and the dogs would bark, 'The soul has come; it has gone into the corpse.' The relatives would rush to the corpse and catch the soul and the dead would return to life. In this way, Mahapurub lost all the souls from his kingdom and he was very worried, for there were not enough people to live in the Upper World. Mahapurub said, 'From today when you bark no one will understand your language.'

Yet even now when a dog barks we know why; it sees a dead man's soul going about the world. Once Mahapurub had many souls in his kingdom, he turned them into Duma and these live in their old homes and help their descendants. Should the Duma get angry and leave the house, many disasters follow. (Elwin, 2009)

3. Human Life

This is a Kahar myth from Khuria, Bilaspur district, Madhya Pradesh that deals with the human body:

At first, men had nothing inside them; when they ate any food it went straight down – bhang – onto the ground. Sankasur and his wife Sirbhang called mankind to a feast, but they found that however much food they provided it went straight out of their bodies. Sankasur thought in his mind, 'What can we do about this?' He said to his wife, 'Give me the cord round your waist.' When he got it he wound it round and round and round and stuffed it into a man's belly. For a liver, he took the seven leaves of the karowan-sok tree. For kidneys, he got leaves of the Takla tree, and with its flowers he made teeth. With a stick, he made a hollow in the middle of the man's chest fixed the ribs in place and made the backbone. He put everything right; all men and

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all animals were repaired – except the camel and the tortoise. To this day the tortoise has no liver or teeth, and the camel's back is not straight.

A man breathes because of the trembling of his liver.

Sirbhang took a bell in her hand and worshipped. But Sankasur troubled his wife. He took the bell from her and stopped her worshipping. But she made him open his mouth and tied the bell inside his throat. When the bell rings we say that a man is coughing.

This is a Chokh Agaria myth from Thanakar, Bilaspur district, Madhya Pradesh that deals with the birth of children:

From the head of the fish, Raghuman bloomed a lotus and bore two fruits. One day they broke open and from one came Mahadeo, and from the other Parvati. When Mahadeo grew up, he could not control his desire for his sister, so he turned his back on her and refused to see her face. But when Parvati became mature, she also was filled with desire and begged her brother to look at her. At last, he turned round and as he did so his seed sprang from him. Parvati caught it in her hand and held it in her clenched hand. Soon she was pregnant and after that children were born in the world. (Elwin, 2009)

4. Human Institutions:

This is a Muria myth from Palari, Bastar state that deals with the coming of death.

At the beginning of the world, men were very small; they plowed with rats and had to pull down brinjals as if they were getting mangoes. The ground was so soft that you could fall through it down to the Lower World. In those days men could remove the tops of their heads, examine them for lice, and put them back again.

When the first men died, their neighbours took them out to burial, but the corpses got up and came back and sat in front of their houses. When the neighbours came in, they asked, 'What sort of folk are you? We were just sleeping, and you carried us here and there. When we awoke we returned home.'

When Mahapurab heard of this, he wondered how he was to get lives for his kingdom. He thought, 'I must stick the tops of their heads on; then they will certainly die.' His ground floor mixed it with water into a paste and hid it. Then he went to see the first man and woman. 'What have you got inside your heads?' he asked. 'Do show me.' They removed the tops of their heads, and Mahapurab quickly smeared the edges with paste, muttering, 'Never come unstuck again.' When the first man and woman put the tops of their heads back, they stuck and soon afterward people began to die. (Elwin, 2009)

And now for fear that the dead might come back again to their houses, the neighbours burnt their bodies, and they never returned to life.

Thus, by following the given stories, one may understand the co-relation between the human and the natural world. It is always nature that comes to suffice with the human world, in this way the existence of the one depends on the other. The tribal myths play the role of a

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needle that stitches the two worlds together. However, because of the climate crisis in the present period, which has taken its course because of human self-interests and scientific venture, the relationship between the two worlds – the human and the natural - is in crisis. Moreover, Elwin never tried to represent tribal cultures only in terms of religion and ritual-- a reductionist viewpoint, which was characteristic of many of his counterparts. On the contrary, his writings exhibited an uncommon interest in representing the material culture of tribal life. This includes a detailed description of clothing, housing, utensils, agricultural tools, food materials and cuisine, hunting and fishing implements, and so on. It is important to note that it was Verrier Elwin who made women's lives visible for the first time in Indian anthropology, by studying the themes of clothing, food, and sexuality. Along with the focus on women and nature, Elwin also explored the topics of crime, disease, and art, all hitherto ignored subjects of research in Indian anthropology (Elwin, 1964; Guha 1994).

Elwin's effort to document tribal communities is based on a conceptual category used by the colonial government to classify what they considered "the primitive faction of the Indian society" (Devy xv). His unique literary proficiency in translating the life worlds of the tribal people in minuscule ethnographic details contributed towards the making of thick descriptions in the actual sense of the term. Elwin's simultaneous engagement with different worlds of experience, west and east, literature and science, religiosity and social work, modern and the pre-modern, equipped him to transcend the conventional boundaries of doing anthropology, and more precisely, practicing it in a more meaningful way.

Conclusion

Ramachandra Guha's statement that Verrier Elwin was "unquestionably the most colorful and influential non-official Englishman to live and work in twentieth-century India" (215) is no exaggeration. Elwin's most significant contribution to documenting the lives of India's tribal communities lies not in anthropological precision but in his empathetic portrayal. His work resonates with a deep, intuitive understanding, offering insights not only into tribal life but also into the challenges they face. In Myths of Middle India, Verrier Elwin presents narrative versions of hundreds of tribal myths that explore themes such as human existence, social institutions, deities, the cosmos, and natural forces. These myths reveal common narratives shared among various tribal groups, focusing on the creation of the world, as well as the origins of humans and animals. Through this collection, Elwin illustrates his belief that such stories are more than folklore – they are a "living reality vitalizing and to some extent controlling the present". (Elwin, viii, 1964) Thus, the present paper is an attempt to make the readers value the dynamics of Man, Nature, and the mythical world as presented in the tribal folklore, with a prayer to safeguard them and understand their culture.

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