



Re-Presenting the Indigenous: A Reading of Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

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Abstract

The well-known Indian writer, Arun Joshi's second novel The Strange Case of Billy Biswas has come under severe critical censure for what has been seen as a very romantic representation of the tribals and their indigenous lifestyle. These critics are of the opinion that the novel fails to adequately explain the relationship between a tribal woman and a non-tribal man and also fails to describe the active resistance among the Indian tribes. The book has also been called out for allegedly suggesting that the problems of the tribals can only be solved by the intervention of a powerful but sympathetic alien outsider. This article intends to show that these criticisms are not very valid as they stem from a decontextualized reading of the novel. This article proposes to show that by locating the context of the text in the wake of the research undertaken by a real life 'Billy Biswas', Verrier Elwin it will become very clear that the way the Indigenous people and their lifestyle is portrayed is quite realistic and thus provides a new insight. Verrier Elwin was a British anthropologist who came to India as a Christian missionary but later dedicated his whole life to studying and living among the various Indian tribes. He is regarded as one of the greatest scholars of India's tribal peoples and his ethnographic studies and popular books on tribal customs, myth, art and folklore are considered path breaking works in Indian anthropology and for creating an awareness of cultural diversity. His seminal works which include The Tribal World: An Autobiography and The Muria and their Ghotul provide a detailed first-hand account of the lifestyle and indigenous practices followed by the various tribes of Central India; the same setting where most of Arun Joshi's novel The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is situated.

Keywords/Key Phrases: - Indigenous, Intrusion, Liberated, Medical remedies, Tradition.

The idea of indigenous people has been an issue of considerable contention all over the world, particularly in India. The early British ethnographers could not clearly distinguish between caste and



tribe in India. Many 18th and 19th century British records interchanged caste and tribe. It was only in the early 20th century that the Indian Tribes were properly defined. After Independence, the government made a systematic effort towards distinguishing tribe from caste. There has been a considerable difference in the way indigenous people are represented by the colonial ethnographers and the Indian ethnographers. British anthropologists described the indigenous tribes as living in complete isolation from the rest of the population and therefore not having any interaction or relation with them. On the other hand, the post independent Indian ethnographer's main concern was to show that there was a close interaction between the tribes and the larger Indian society or civilisation. Anthropologists like Ghurye and Bose stressed the nature of interaction of the tribes with the larger Hindu society and the ways in which tribal practices are similar to Hindu practices in their works. Verrier Elwin is one of the most prominent anthropologists of British origin. He lived for almost the whole of his life among the tribes of India, whom he loved and worked for, and about whom he wrote relentlessly, intensely and extensively. During his life time and even after, he was able to create an impact on the Indian minds through his enormous corpus of publications on Indian tribes. In the post-independence era he played a major academic role in the formulation of tribal policy in independent India that is still considered as the hallmark of tribal development programmes in India.

Billy Biswas, the protagonist of Arun Joshi's second novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* has a lot of similarities with Verrier Elwin. Elwin came to India in 1927 after getting his doctorate in divinity as a priest on a mission to convert people. But he soon became disillusioned by the missionary ideologies and was instead inspired by the works of Tagore and Gandhi. On the advice of Sardar Patel, Elwin started working with the tribals. Billy is also similarly disillusioned by the superficiality of the mainstream society which makes him go to America where he pursues his doctorate in Anthropology instead of engineering, a field that was recommended by his parents. On returning to India he is unable to find solace and feels oppressed in the company of his parents and wife. The only time when he is absolutely happy is during the anthropology expeditions he undertakes with his students. During one of these expeditions to Maikala hills he decides to leave behind his life in the society and escapes to live with the indigenous Gond tribals. The lifestyle and the practices that is portrayed of the tribes can be seen in the novel through the conversations that take place between Billy and his friend Romi. This is very similar to the experiences that Elwin had with the Gonds.

One of the issues that the novel foregrounds is that the indigenous women have more freedom and choice in making their decisions especially in regard to their marital life. This can be seen by the following lines in which Bilasia is initially introduced to the reader:

“When is she going to her husband?” one of the men asked’

“She is not going back at all. She has left him” Dhunia said

“And how many lovers have you got now Bilasia?”

The speaker was obviously without teeth.

“More than you can count, but none of them is without teeth, dada” Bilasia said.

(Joshi2017:84)

The freedom to choose their own husbands or/and lovers by the tribal women was also recorded by Elwin. Elwin's marriage to Kosi, a Gond tribal girl was ‘instrumental in winning over the Muria women folk allowing Elwin a glimpse of aspects of their lives which were otherwise a closely guarded secret’. (Guha 1999:138)

In his book *The Baiga*, Elwin records that the Baiga woman ‘generally chooses her husband and changes him at will; she may dance in public; she may take her wares to the bazaar and open her shop there; she may drink and smoke in her husband's presence- freedoms all denied to the caste-Hindu woman’ (The Baiga 1939:235). In his other work *The Aborigines* he observes that in most Indian tribal societies:

‘the woman holds a high and honourable place. She goes proudly free about the countryside. In field and forest she labours in happy companionship with her husband. She is not subjected to early child-bearing; she is married when she is mature, and if her marriage is a failure (which it seldom is) she has the right to divorce. The lamentable restrictions of widowhood do



not await her: should her husband die, she is allowed, even enjoined, to remarry: and in many tribes she may inherit property.’ (quoted in Guha 1999:18-19).

Bilasia hence has almost every quality that an Indian tribeswoman had in Elwin’s era. She chooses to marry Billy on her own by ‘casting a love spell’ and bears his children. She has an equal say in all the matters during their married life and even asks him to leave in one instance when he feels like returning back. Unlike the critics who are of the opinion that Billy left Bilasia a widow without a future after his tragic death it is likely that she would have moved on and married again.

The novel also shows that the indigenous tribes have their own traditional medicine. Though Billy uses modern medicines to cure bilasia during his first trip, he later starts using traditional medicines to cure other villagers like Dhunia’s grandson who was presumed dead from a snakebite. Narrating the circumstances of the latter incident Billy tells Romi:

“Well, you know, I always had an interest in Indian medicinal herbs. During all my expeditions I had been exploring them, especially those which were meant to cure snakebite and malaria. Then this *gunia* that Dhunia sent me wasn’t such a hoax after all in spite of its hairy-fairy theories. The year I spent with him, I gleaned a few rather odds and ends about Indian herbs. Later on I came to know another person who taught me a few other things, but that is another story. What I did with the boy was to make a cut near the wound and apply an herb. It is called *chaulai* in Hindi. *Amarantus Gangeticus* is its botanical name. It so happened that it was the right antidote for that particular person.” (Arun Joshi 2017:125)

Billy also cures the narrator Romi’s wife Situ from her migraines that were bothering her from a long time. Billy shifts from using modern medicine to traditional medicine thus signalling a shift from a civilised city society to a primitive tribal society. The novel is trying to convey to the readers that traditional indigenous medicines can often be much more effective than modern medicine.

The book also talks about the resistance that the tribals put up against the government. During a severe drought Romi narrates:

“For reasons that I need not go into here, the law and order situation in my district deteriorated rapidly... I now ran about here and there, like a cock without a head as they say in Chhattisgarh, trying to quell a rash of riots that had almost overnight sprung from the withered land”. (Arun Joshi 2017:118)

It is during one such protest that has turned violent that Romi rediscovers Billy and realises that he is alive. The tribals are very reluctant throughout the novel to follow government laws and prefer their own indigenous laws. This can be seen in the incident when Dhunia comes with most of his villagers to support one of their fellow villager who has been sentenced to imprisonment by the government court for murdering his wife. In the end of the novel Billy personifies this resistance when he refuses to hand over himself to the police and his family, an act that culminates his tragic death. The above incident is symbolic of the growing conflict between the tribals and the government which is resulting in the destruction of the indigenous cultures, a conflict that has grown much worse over time since this novel was published and continues to this day.

Rituals form a large part in the narration. Billy tells Romi that he had his first experience of tribal rituals when he was 14 years old and was spending his holidays at his uncle’s house in Bhubaneshwar. He went with his uncle’s driver to witness the local indigenous tribe’s ritual that consisted of singing and dancing all night long. It was while watching this ritual that Billy has his first ‘strange’ experience and he feels a shock of erotic energy passing through him. This is also the first time when Billy realises that he belongs among the tribals and that is where his home is. It is also the ritualistic all night full moon celebration of the indigenous people at Maikala hills that finally makes Billy abandon civilisation and live with the tribes.

Thus by looking at these various aspects we can observe that the novel describes the lifestyle and their customs and their rituals in a very realistic manner and takes a lot of inspiration from Verrier Elwin’s records. The novel shows that though the tribals had a lot of problems they still lived a very content life and maintained their traditions dutifully.

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Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-06

International Conference on Indigenous Languages and Translation Studies

held on Saturday, 3rd August 2019

Venue- Seminar Hall, **School of Humanities and Social Sciences**, Jain Deemed-to-be-University, Palace Road, Bengaluru, India



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