

# Tribal Life in Arun Joshi's : The strange Case of Billy Biswas

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Reader's Digest Encyclopaedic dictionary defines the word 'tribe' as a group of primitive or barbarous clans under the recognized chiefs. The Oxford Dictionary defines the word 'tribe' as a racial group (especially in primitive and nomadic culture) united by language, religion, and custom etc. and living as a community under one or more chiefs. Chambers Dictionary defines the term 'tribe' as –

1. A division of a nation or people for political purposes.
2. A set of people theoretically of common descent.
3. An aggregate of families, forming a community, a breed, a class etc.
4. One of the divisions of ancient people.

India is remarkable for its multiplicity where people of varied level of material and intellectual prosperity co-exist. The country has approximately more than forty million tribal populations that spread over different regions. Nowadays tribe are known by different names meaning either the people of forest and hill or the original inhabitants and so on. The popular names given to them are Vanyajati (castes of forests), Vanvasi (inhabitants of forests), Pahari (hill dwellers), Adimjati (original communities or primitive people), Adivasi (first settlers), Janjati (folk people) Anusuchit Janjati (scheduled tribes) and so on. Among all these terms Adivasi is known most extensively and Anusuchit Janjati is the constitutional name covering all of them. Even after seven decades of independence, many tribal communities still able to maintain a life untouched by modern development; as they prefer to live in the lap of Mother Nature. The famous lines from the collection of poetic works by William Wordsworth highlights the role of nature in the life of human:

*The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending,  
We lay waste our powers: Little we see in Nature that is ours.*

These lines suggest how being absorbed in Nature allows one a deeper connection to humanity. The modern man with his emphasis on materialistic pleasures is gradually moving away from nature that resulted in many complications in his life. This discontentment from life, due to turning one's back to bountiful nature has found places in the writings of many writers in Indo-Anglian literature. The country or village life and life of tribal are believed to be very close to Nature. Although Novelist like R.K.Narayana, Mulk Raj Anand etc have written about village and country life in their work but Tribal life finds very rare expression in the work of any of these writers. As expressed by A.K. Chaturvedi in his work Tribals in Indian English Novels:

Although rural life has been dealt with in a number of Indian English novels, Tribals as such have rarely been depicted in them. This fact testifies to the conspiracy of silence against a large chunk of society that is doomed to remain marginalized and lead life in periphery. The reasons for this silence are not far to seek in view of the urban and westernized background of Indian English writers and their pre occupation with urban life and its problems. However, the references to tribal life are sporadically mentioned in Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, Kamala Markandaya's

The Coffers Dam, Manohar Malgaonkar's The Princes, Gita Mehta's A River Sutra and Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss.

Arun Joshi has presented the colorful mosaic of tribal life in his work, 'The strange case of Billy Biswas'. He has expressed their exotic customs and rituals, their apparel and adornment, their songs and dance, above all the simplicity and purity in their life. Besides all these aspects he has also presented the apathy of Government and people towards their concern. Romi Rai, the collector himself has voiced the indifferent attitude of authority towards these tribal people:

Beyond the gorge was a flat rocky strip of land across which I had, during the quite of a night, heard the lusty laughter of men and women and had wondered where they went at that time of night. Beyond this strip of land lay the jungle, a dark and mysterious shadow whose mystery very few Collectors had unraveled since the race of collectors began. It stretched on and on as far as the eye could see until it dissolved into what looked like a heap of storm clouds but which in reality were the low hills that formed an offshoot of the Maikala Range. I knew there were paths in the jungle although I had yet to set my foot on them and around these paths lay the widely scattered villages of India's primitive people: the baigas, the gondes, the pradhans and several others. Before coming I had read about them and talked to experts in Delhi. But sitting there I felt ignorant of them as Rama who, too, had once trekked down through these same hills from the imperial city of Ayodhya. (Joshi, 77)

Arun Joshi has touched varied aspects of the life of tribals. He keeps on looking back to nature, scriptures for the problems of present time. In *The Last Labyrinth* he asserts the importance of divine faith and belief for the salvation. An undercurrent of the preaching of Bhagwat Gita runs through all the works of Arun Joshi. Similar detachment with modern materialistic life is expressed in *The Strange case of Billy Biswas*. Billy told Romi about the topics of conversation among those tribals:

We sat around chatting. You must have noticed the conversation around here. Or, maybe, you haven't. It is not the like the conversation in the villages up north or any Hindu village for that matter. Nobody here is interested in the prices of food grains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that. We talk of the supernatural, violent death, trees, earth, rain, dust, storms, rivers, moods of the forest, animals, dance, singing. And we talk, I am afraid a lot about women and sex. (Joshi, 83)

On one of his visits to a hamlet that lay thirty miles from the district headquarters, Romi happened to meet Billy after a gap of ten years. Though surprised but he stated, "Man's capacity for absorbing surprise is enormous. A meeting with Billy was the last thing that would have crossed my mind that morning or any other morning, for that matter, for the past ten years, and, yet ten miles out of the hamlet I had accepted the reports of his death." (Joshi, 75) Billy went with the collector to his residence. Both of them chatted and Billy became the mouthpiece of the novelist to put mirror to the life of tribals. When they were conversing, a group of men and women, about thirty of them, crossed the strip of plain that lay beyond the gorge; to the curiosity of collector Billy said:

Nothing except death stops our dancing and drinking and our love-making. And death, heaven knows, comes soon enough. (Joshi, 86)

He further exposed the erotic energy of their singing and dancing:  
 Have you ever seen one of these dances, Romi? Billy asked me some time during night.  
 I imagine so. An official version of it, anyway. I have heard a lot about them, though.  
 I bet you heard all the wrong things.

These statements simply state the difference between the actual lives of tribals and how they are portrayed by the government. Billy stated:

Well, these dances are an orgy of sorts; he said slowly, 'just as walking into a rose garden or listening to twenty-four hours of jazz is an orgy. A bit of lovemaking is, of course, there, but it is what proceeds that is really orgiastic, the frenetic drumming, the constant footwork, the making and breaking of formations, the yelling, the fondling of the women. (Joshi, 101)

We find similar reflection in the lines by Thomas Gray in his elegy, where the poet speaks about the common man, their simple life :

A grateful Earnest of eternal Peace  
 No more with Reason & thyself at strife;  
 Give anxious Cares & endless Wishes room  
 But thro' the cool sequester'd Vale of Life  
 Pursue the silent Tenour of thy Doom.

The life of these simple people, away from the dust and din of modern- so called civilized life has been shown by different writers, poets, novelists. Ironically modern civilized man calls these tribals or simpleton as savage, uncivilized but a deeper study into their life will clearly show that they have fairly fine knowledge of various things and phenomenon not easily understood by so called educated elite. 'Dhunia may look dull, but he is no fool. One had to be pretty clever to understand what we were doing' (Joshi, 87)

Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly remarks, "Renunciation has always been an Indian ideal of life". The story of Billy resembles the life of Prince Siddhartha, who afterwards became famous with the name of Gautam Buddha. Like Siddhartha, Billy is born and brought up in a royal family. His mother mentions an incident from Billy's boyhood of having run away from home at the age of fourteen. He gets stranger and stranger with every passing day. Like Siddhartha, he sees that the life in the world is continuous suffering. Likewise, he makes a final renunciation of his wife and son in the pursuit of spiritual perfection from darkness to light with a view to rising up as the Buddha, the Enlightened one. If one gets rid of ignorance, one will get enlightenment. Billy's withdrawal in the forest was in fact an onward movement from darkness to light. He gets self-realization when he meets the tribal girl Bilasia. "He feels that he has suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of a million others." (joshi 142).

To quote Joy Abraham, "It is interesting to note that the union Billy and Bilasia can be taken as the human soul longing for reunion with the divine as symbolised by Krishna. The union of Jeevatma with Paramatma. Billy likes Sindi is in search of the world meaningful relatedness which he can find neither in White America nor in the upper class Indian society". (Abram 191). That was the beginning of his quest to understand himself and the nature of reality, something beyond oneself. Becoming a

primitive is the first step, a means to an end and in the second stage he is still seeking something else. This again is not an escape from order and form into reckless freedom, for, interestingly enough, in this second phase as a tribal we see order and form of a different kind." Billy renounces the world, practicing the discipline of deliverance. Like an Indian seer he has experienced godhood. He is a kind of man-god, an avatar for the tribals. He comes to have certain spiritual magic powers. Dhunia takes him to be the mythical sculpture king come alive with his queen Devi Ma and a priest who looks after them. Dhunia tells Romi, "He(Billy) is like rain on parched lands, balm on a wound. These hills have not seen the like of him since the last of our kings passed away." (Joshi 159-160). His return signifies the end of their mission as Chandtola, the white faced cliff of the village, has come to life again and has begun to glow when Billy goes there with Bilasia as predicted by Devi Ma. He is a man having great healing power as the manifestation of Kala Pahar's will. Dhunia sees him sending away who has been roaming the Jungles for a week killing cattle and bringing back his grandson to life who had been dead for two hours. Billy cures Romi's wife Situ of her agonizing chronic Migraine rod. He forecasts about rains.

Billy after leaving the civilized life and becoming one with those people earned a lot of their wisdom; he did few calculations and predicted that rain would come after twenty eight days:

'One can't be hundred per cent sure, but there is a good probability it will rain. In...'he appeared to be calculating, 'in about twenty eight days from now.'

His face was turned towards the sky .His eyes moved slowly from one set of stars to another.

'You see those three stars, the bright one in the middle, like a flare, and that two greenish ones on either side, rather like a triangle.

I followed his gaze. They looked like any three ordinary stars to me except that the two that formed the base of the triangle were a little greenish.

'Do you see them?'

'Yes'.

'Now look there.'

We turned, right around through one hundred and eighty degrees.

'Look there,' he said

It was a little while before I saw what he was pointing at. Staring me in the face was an exactly similar set of three stars; or at least my excited imagination had been led to spot them out of a mass of twinkling lights.

'Watch these two sets of stars during the next four weeks. They'll move towards each other, and then coincide at the end of twenty-eight days. That is when it will rain.'(Joshi, 80-81)

Above conversation simply state that life of these simpletons is far more advanced than the life of modern computerized people. Their beliefs, understanding, knowledge and wisdom all come in purest form bereft of any sort of manipulations.

Here I feel it is apt to quote famous lines from *The Tables Turned* by William Wordsworth:

*One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.*

In this present work of Joshi, we find various awe-inspiring aspects from the life of Dhunia, chief of the tribe and his man. On one occasion when Billy asked him to tell lie about his presence to the boys of his excursion team, he simply stated:

*'Bhaiya, kaisi bhooli bhooli baat karat ho. You talk like a mad man. How can anyone arrange that? You were, here, and you are here; that is all that I know. (Joshi, 105)*

In this novel Arun Joshi has presented tribal life in its purest form. After so many years of independence, India still has many such tribal clans. They are still untouched by modern development and in Wordsworth language, worldly dust has still not settled on them. Though in one way it is good but if we see it from another aspect than it is quite painful situation as well. Lot of awe surround the life of tribal; their life are interspersed in many literary works. A large part of *The Strange case of Billy Biswas* by Arun Joshi depicts the life of tribal in the back ground of Billy's life.

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