

## RECONNOITERING IDENTITY : READING REJINA MARANDI'S *BECOMING ME*

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### Abstract

*The term Adivasis etymologically means 'original inhabitants': 'adhi' meaning first and 'vasi' meaning dwellers. The struggles they had undergone due to different reasons have often been neglected in the annals of history. They are often considered neglected or marginalized with little attention from the government or other organizations. Adivasis of north-east India, especially in Assam consists of the Santal, Munda, Oraons, Kharias et al. They are a neglected lot who were denied their identity. Rejina Marandi's *Becoming Me* throws light on the issues that made the Adivasis a marginalized community without exploring the socioeconomic issues but through the plight of the present generation. The novel unfolds the story of a Santal girl named Liya Kisku who becomes a witness to the ethnic riots that shook Assam. The novel also explores the prejudices and discrimination faced by the Adivasis from the upper caste people and the government. The paper tries to analyze the ethnocentric attitude of society towards the suppressed community and their predicament.*

**Keywords:** *adivasis, marginalized, discrimination, ethnocentrism, identity*

Adivasi or Adivasis, a name given to the indigenous people of the Indian subcontinent, was coined in the 1930s as part of a political movement to create a sense of identity among the indigenous people. The term 'scheduled tribes' is a more preferred and constitutional term for the group but as we know the indigenous people are not a homogeneous group and they differ from state to state, the term appears to be a complicated one as it excludes some of the indigenous populace. Though heterogeneous, the Adivasis share certain features but agree to the fact that they are the oppressed group in the majority. According to the World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, the number of Adivasis as per the 2011 census constitutes "8.6 per cent of the nation's total population" (Minority Rights Group). The word Adivasi consists of two parts, 'adi' meaning 'first' and 'vasi' meaning 'residents', hence they are the first residents. But little is known about their history.

The Adivasis occupied the hill areas or near forests and remained aloof from the mainstream of society. They have a system of their own for internal governance and rigid rules from which no member is spared. Their inhabitation near the hilly areas and forest happened during the Indo-Aryan invasions. Their religious practices were akin to the Hindu religion and had established a relationship with the mainland through trade. During British

rule, widespread looting of the indigenous people happened and the government realizing the people's vulnerability established separate laws to protect them from encroachments. The efforts of the missionaries to educate them were found successful as most of the people in the northeast became educated and gained political consciousness which made them demand separate autonomy. But violence and prejudice against this community continue in the contemporary scenario. Displacement from their native habitat, economic base, lack of political support and social exclusion remain the main reasons for their minority status. "The Adivasi peoples have experienced major changes in their traditional ways of life since the mid-20th century, especially as they lost their lands as a result of population growth, the development of towns, and industrialization" (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

The tribals in the northeast of India enjoy a more privileged life when compared to their mainland counterparts. The regions that covered northeast tribal states include Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. They have their distinct tradition, culture and practices. They have a high rate of literacy, enjoy economic independence

and are low in terms of poverty, a common criterion in assessing the condition of the tribal population:

In one of the recent National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) reports (55th Round) it was found that in almost all mainland states, the poverty level was higher than in the North Eastern states. The poverty level was below 20 percent in North-Eastern states and it was higher in mainland states where in some states it was more than 50%. About literacy levels, the literacy rate of Adivasis is not above 58% in any of the mainland states; whereas in the North East, except Arunachal Pradesh (64.6%), all states have a literacy rate above 72%. These are just two important indicators to indicate how wide are the disparities between the Adivasis of the mainland and Tribals of the North East. (Rti\_Admin)

The disparity between the indigenous population in mainland and northeast India is due to a multitude of reasons. The education they received due to the effort of Christian missionaries made them voice their rights. High rates of population, the nonexistence of displacement, less interference from the majority religion and the absence of borders with other countries made them more independent and thus were able to establish an identity of their own.

The term 'Adivasis of Assam' mainly comprise the tea plantation labourers who were recruited and transported since the 1860s. It is estimated that in the period between the 1860s and 1940s about three million Adivasis were mobilized from Bihar, Bengal and Odisha to work in the tea plantations. They had to face severe discrimination in terms of caste, class, tribe and gender discrimination and were devoid of land entitlement and identity. They are always seen in the backdrop of enslavement. They were called 'Coolies' and later they were addressed as 'Saothalis' or Adivasi by the Assamese which comprised communities such as Munda, Santal, Oraon et al. when the tribals in other parts of India were given reservation in education and jobs, the Adivasis of Assam was given only the title of OBC or MOBC. This led to violence and agitations against the state of oppression and marginalization that the community faces even today. Their demand for an ST status to have more economic and educational opportunities continues even today.

Adivasi literature is used as a genre of literature whose works reflect the life and culture of the tribal life from their perspective. It is known in different parts of the world by different names. "In Europe and America, it is called Native American Literature, Colored Literature, Slave Literature and African-American Literature, Black Literature in African Countries and Aboriginal Literature in Australia, and in English Literature, First People Literature and Tribal Literature" (*Adivasi Literature | Pyara Kerketta Foundation*). In India, it is known as Adivasi Literature. The literature of the tribals mainly exists as oral literature. Language is a barrier in publishing their works as we know there are only 22 official languages but 880 dialects in India. "Unfortunately, Adivasi literature remains a highly niche category due to their unavailability to youngsters who receive education in either English or Hindi" (Matter). Hence there is a need to translate the writings of the tribals into English.

There are also books by Adivasi writers written in other vernacular languages—including Gujarati, Bengali, Odia, Malayalam and Kannada—as well as their own indigenous languages, such as Gondi, Kurukh, Santali, Ho and Bhili. Most of this writing in vernacular languages can mainly be found in jattras and annual gatherings of various Adivasi organisations. (Poyam)

*Paari Kupaar Lingo: Gondi Punem Darshan* by Motiravan Kangali, *Angor* by Jacinta Kerketta,

*Motyarin* by Usha Kiran Atram, *Adivasi Astitva aur Jharkhand Asmitake Sawal* by Ramdayal Munda, *Godhad* by Waharu Sonwane, *Chappudu* by Paddam Anasuya etc. are some of the notable literary works by the Adivasi community.

The story and struggle of the Adivasis of Assam through the perspective of a girl who belongs to the Santhal tribe form the crux of Rejina Marandi's *Becoming Me*. Marandi belongs to the Santal tribe and was born and brought up in Gossaigaon, Kokrajhar district, Assam. She completed her education, school and college, in Assam, West Bengal and Meghalaya. The novel *Becoming Me* is the debut attempt of the novelist to expose the long-negated struggle of the Adivasis of Assam to the forefront. The novel divided into different sections details the struggle of Liya Kisku, from her childhood days and the

trauma she had undergone and witnessed in her youth. The novel begins with the section titled 'Belonging' a description of the good old days of happiness and oneness in her pristine paternal village celebrating the harvest festival of Sohrai. The good days are soon replaced by the bad ones when the peaceful atmosphere turns to violence burning the houses and killing the Santals. The immediate cause was the killing of some girls of other tribes in the forest and the body was dumped in the territory of Santals. Some innocent wood collectors of the Santal tribe were blamed for the crime and the opposite tribe burned almost all houses of Santals. Many people took refuge in the relief camps but the conditions were harrowing:

It was just like animals being brought to the relief camp. There was no proper food for us for two days....There was no accurate estimation of the number of people in the relief camp....they did not allow us to even take the kids out of that environment which got so polluted with such a large number of people living together in one shelter. The kids were falling sick....there was a long queue for food. The rice was half cooked and served with watery *dal*....the quality of food was extremely low....I looked around and could see a sea of gloomy faces. There were no more leaves on the trees nearby as they were used as plates to eat food in. I saw a lady coming with food on a torn cloth....Days passed by; the unhygienic environment took so many lives. Health was deteriorating and we had no other option but to continue in the relief camp. (Marandi 31-35)

Even though the violence *prima facie* seems to arise out of the above-stated reason there were hidden agendas which are revealed in the latter part of the chapter. The motive behind the violence against the Adivasis is revealed thus, "this is the result of political imbalances. The rebels want to catch the attention of the government because they are looking for separate land for themselves" (Marandi 37). The land issue remains one of the major reasons for the clash between the Adivasis. Those who became the victims of violence are mainly the common man especially women and children, the most vulnerable in the clan. The ordinary folks have nothing to do with the violence, "our leaders make decisions and we the common people suffer the consequences" (Marandi 42). Even after

the establishment of peace, violence erupted when it was least expected. The Adivasis lived in a constant state of fear of death under a repressive government and the weapon of the rivals and the trauma it created was immeasurable.

Educational institutions also bear the repercussions of the violence. Liya Kisku rejoined school after the violence and things were not the same as before. The rehabilitation provided by the government was incoherent at the time because when the order came most of the Adivasi villages were reduced to abject poverty. They were not in a position to send their children to schools because the stomach was their priority. When the school reopened with the same pledge of unity and devotion to the country she reflected:

Oh, this makes no sense to me anymore. It remains only an ideal. Whose well-being are these lines talking about? Are we, not all brothers and sisters? Do we not love our country? Are we striving towards the country's honour or dishonour? Do we have respect and courtesy for teachers, parents, elders and each other? This pledge just remains empty lines for me. (Marandi 47)

Liya's new educational institution was very far from her village and though the institution had many teachers and students who belonged to the community of Santal their behaviour didn't reveal their identity or last name. They didn't use their local language and she had difficulty following the lessons. The Santals didn't speak to her as they were not ready to disclose their identity to others but they were always so subservient and humble before the dikus, the upper caste people. Once her relative told her the situation of Santals living among the dikus and how they created an identity of their own among the dikus: "Our family has changed our surname to a *diku* one....We speak Bengali and Assamese at home-She was cool about it" (Marandi 89). But it was the "sea of gloomy faces" and the dictum from her father "prove it or leave it" (Marandi 63) that made her pursue her education.

The issue of identity is one of the central issues in the novel. The Adivasis in Assam were called *baganias* by the dikus. But Liya was particular in identifying herself as a Santal than a *baganias*. The reason for the name was explained to her by her father:

Under the British rule, a scientific commission was constituted in 1835 to report on the Indian indigenous tea plants to advise on the most favourable localities for starting experimental tea gardens. The tea of Assam was proved to be qualitatively better than the tea of China, the British started tea plantations there and founded the Assam Tea Company. But the shortage of labour posed formidable problems to the tea plantation industry in Assam in the early years of expansion. (Marandi 104)

The identity issue was faced by Liya's father. He works in the Block Department Office, but the attitude of the senior offices is harrowing. Even for minor errors, they penalized them very severely. Adivasi names made the dikus irritable. "I don't understand what happens to him when he hears Adivasi names. These people are always neglected" (Marandi 105). The first time Liya felt a kind of pride in her tribal identity was when L Dakhar, her Political Science Professor, pronounced her name by introducing her as belonging to the largest tribes in India. He introduced her thus, "Liya Kisku, Santal, one of the largest tribes in India....The Santals are found in the middle of India, in Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and some are settled in Assam and Tripura. Santals are highly populated, so they are the largest" (Marandi 108).

Many tribal communities even today demand the Scheduled Tribe status for them, but they are denied their rights quite brutally. Even the government tried all ways to oppress them. Those who attacked or tried to suppress the tribals from getting their ST status received unconditional support from the police. One of the incidents detailed in the novel is about a rally carried out by the Adivasi people of Assam demanding their tribal status from the government. But they were beaten up and one of the girls who participated in the rally was stripped naked and beaten with sticks in public for which the police were mute spectators. All the dikus in the vicinity watched through their windows but no one offered help or even a piece of cloth to cover her body. The Santals, Munda, Oraons, Kharias etc. were known as the Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribe in Assam. This label is only for the tribal society in Assam. Their sad plight is discussed thus:

This name is used only in Assam. People may work in an industry but that does not mean that they will be

named after that profession. Yes, some people migrated or were forcefully taken to work in different industries in India and some could not return to their place and the next generations were born there. In this case, they cannot be excluded from their original identity. They will remain Santals or Mundas wherever they go. If India recognizes Santals as one of the tribes in India, it is universal to all the Santals in India irrespective of which state they belong to. A tribe is a tribe as long as it maintains its tribal identity, which is strongly upheld by the Adivasis of Assam....Even the government authorities were involved in beating up and torturing the Adivasis, instead of playing a neutral role. (Marandi 129-130)

The Adivasis of Assam were denied their ST status and were given the OBC or MOBC status while the other tribes in the rest of India were labelled as ST. During British rule there existed bonded labour and the Adivasis in Assam were exploited. "The British left India in 1947 but yet the Adivasis of Assam are slaves in the tea gardens. They are deprived of their land rights and their identity status, which they deserve being Indians" (Marandi 132).

Liya got admission for post-graduation at Central University but was not able to secure a hostel seat because of her non-ST status. The hostel seats were primarily available for the ST category. Once the seats get enough candidates from the ST category, other students will be given the remaining seats. She felt humiliated by the experience when she was denied a hostel seat even though she had the right to have it and empathized with those who demanded ST status for the Adivasis of Assam. She reflected, "I am Santal by birth, I know my language, I know my culture, then why am I called a tea Garden tribal and listed me as a MOBC? Why am I left out of Assam's tribal population?" (Marandi 139).

The novel thus throws light on the sad plight of the Santals in Assam, the largest tribe in India. Their struggle for identity which is being denied to them because of a name they got as a result of their bonded labour in the tea estates of Assam during the British rule was responsible for their plight now. The ethnocentric attitude towards this particular community is seen through this novel. Through this novel, Marandi portrays a realistic picture of the Santal tribes through the perspective of Liya Kisku. The present

generation's hope is seen in the words of Chaku Soren, general secretary of the All Assam Santal Students' Union when our honourable President Draupadi Murmu was elected as the President of India:

By electing Droupadi Murmu as the first citizen, the NDA has definitely given huge respect to the Santal community. But in Assam, our identity is at stake and are deprived from any initiative to protect and promote our culture and language. The Santals in Assam have not yet been recognised as a Scheduled Tribe for the protection of identity and culture. We hope that our demand for the ST status would fall into the ears of Murmu and the NDA government would now fulfill the same. (Karmakar)

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