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Indian tribal literature: working against the oblivion of ruthless time

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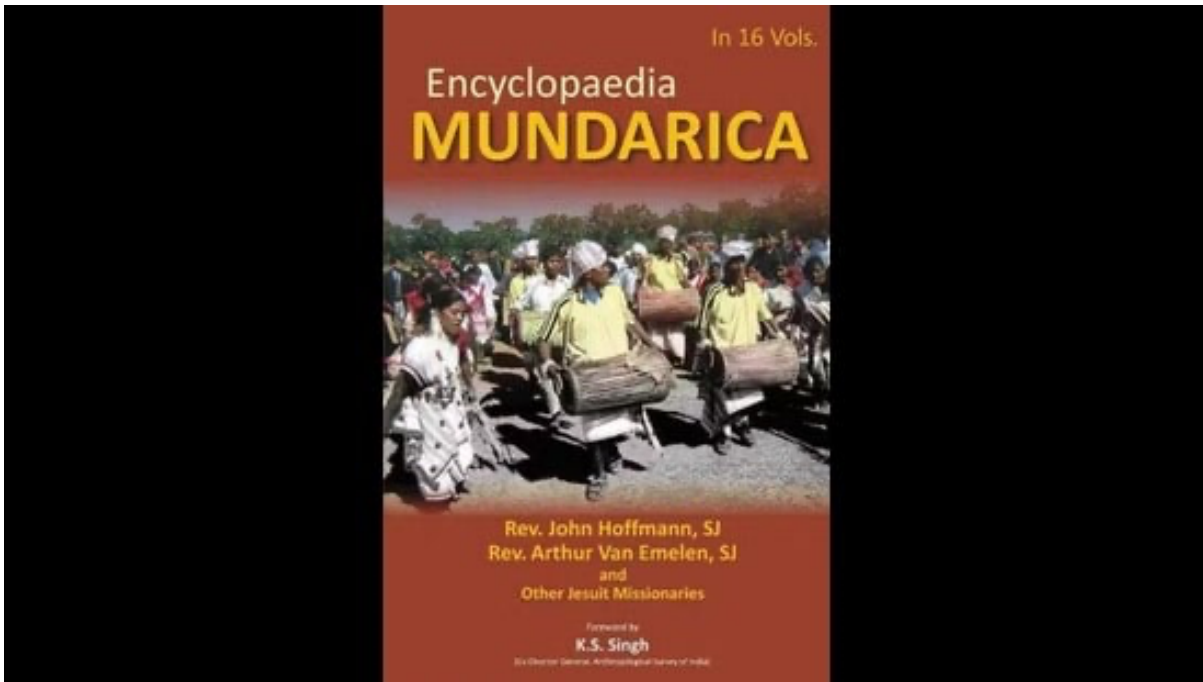
India has a long history of tribal writing. However, in general, Indian language literature has not treated Adivasi writers with the respect they deserve.

Menus Odia wrote the first “tribal novel”, *Maturaa Kahni* around 1920. Written in Mundari, the voluminous work was approximately 1,700 pages long. Interestingly, Odia was the stenographer of the German linguist and missionary Johannes Baptist Hoffman, who wrote *The Encyclopaedia Mundarica*. Writer and professor Dineshwar Prasad referred to Odia’s work as the “Mahabharata of Munda life”. It’s often been said that what is not found in the Mahabharata is not found in India; *Maturaa Kahni* holds a similar significance for those who want to understand Munda life and culture.



Tribal women of Birbhum preparing for a performance as part of the Hul Utsav to commemorate the Santhal battle against the British in 1885. While writers like Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, author, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* among other works, are prominent in the Indian English sphere, in general, Indian language literature has not been very inclusive. (Subhendu Ghosh/Hindustan Times)

India has a long history of tribal writing and today, writers like Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar are prominent in the Indian English sphere. While they are now growing in prominence in contemporary Gujarati, Hindi, Malayalam, Bengali, English, and Odia literature, there is also an upsurge in indigenous languages such as Gondi, Mundari, Kurukh, Santali, Ho, and Bhili.



Menus Odia, who wrote the first “tribal novel”, Maturaa Kahni around 1920, was stenographer to Rev John Hoffmann, co-author of The Encyclopaedia Mundarica

However, in general, Indian language literature has not treated Adivasi writers with the respect they deserve. The absence of scripts, the lack of publishing opportunities, and neglect by the mainstream has seriously impaired the growth of tribal literature. Sadly, some of the work by earlier writers has been completely lost. The extent of the crisis can be assessed by the fact that most of those who are writing in these dying languages or dialects are also attempting to salvage them. It was only after Ahlaad Tirkey wrote grammar books to standardise his native Kurukh that others began writing in it. Similarly, Karam Chandra Aheer developed the Jhaad script for the Panchpargania language. Tribal languages are also struggling because of the dwindling number of speakers.

Still, indigenous writers and scholars have been working a great deal to elevate and preserve these languages. Ram Dayal Munda, Motiravan Kangali, who writes in Gondi, and

Ot Guru Kol Lako Bodra and Kanuram Devgam, who write in Ho, have all written stories and poetry in their native tongues.

Tribal women too have been prominent. Hindi literature is well aware of the work of Subhadra Kumari Chouhan (1904–1948) and Mahadevi Verma (1907–1987).

Unfortunately, few people know of their contemporary Susheela Samad, an Adivasi poet and editor. Readers can still find some of her fine poetry online. The credit for this goes to contemporary tribal writer and poet Vandana Tete, who has preserved, documented and republished Samad's work and that of many other prominent Adivasi writers.



Poet and editor Susheela Samad (Courtesy Lehigh University)

Samad was writing at a time when Hindi poetry was in the Chayavad Yug (the Age of Romanticism), and that influenced her style, but her work also reflected elements of the Adivasi movement and identity. Like Mahadevi Verma and American poet Emily Dickinson, she wrote about personal pain. In fact, like Dickinson, she explored themes of self erasure. This is evident in her poem *Bhula Du (Want to Forget)*:

*Hota hai man mujhe bhula doon,
Kisi swapn ki smriti hi sa.
Nahi yaad kuch bhi reh jaave,
Kutil kaal ki vismriti-sa.
(My heart longs to forget myself,
Like the fading memory of a dream.
May nothing remain in my mind,
Like the oblivion of ruthless time.)*

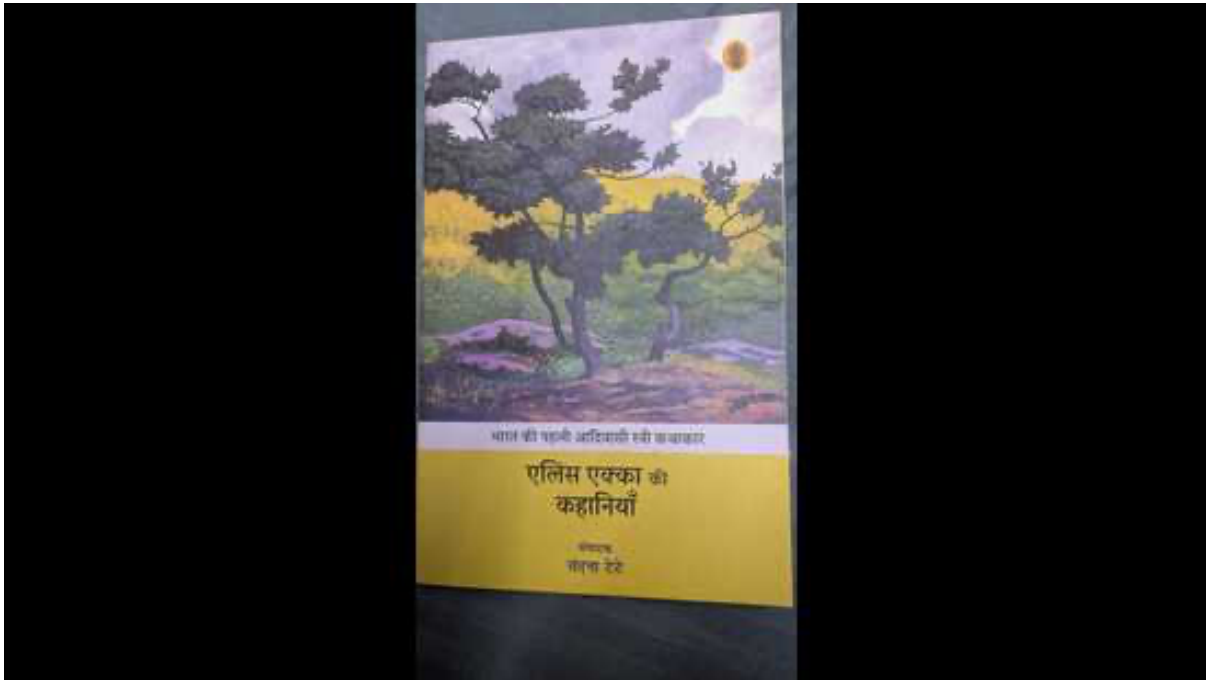
Samad wrote for the two major Adivasi publications of the 1930s, *Adivasi* and *Chandni*. She later went on to become the editor of *Chandni*. It is certain many tribal women were writing before her. Indeed, the first story on Dalit issues is believed to have been written by Alice Ekka. Published in 1962, her *Durga ke Bacche aur Elma ki Kalpanayen* serves as a reminder that tribal writers were also creating significant literary works, of which the mainstream Hindi public sphere was largely unaware. A prominent literary figure of her time, Ekka translated Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and the works of Khalil Gibran too. Sadly, her work has been largely forgotten perhaps because she was both tribal and a woman and therefore doubly marginalised.

It is now clear that tribal writers have been making noteworthy contributions to Hindi literature, which has not given them the recognition that is their due. To the contemporary world that is attempting to emerge from the narrow thinking of an earlier era, it is fascinating to see records of tribal writers in the 19th and 20th centuries.



The first story on Dalit issues is believed to have been written by Alice Ekka (pictured), who was a prominent Adivasi author. (Courtesy Lehigh University)

How were they able to write at a time when education was not widely accessible? The answer perhaps lies in the influence of Adivasi movements, such as the one led by Birsa Munda, as well as the growing consciousness of their identities. This awareness was partly shaped by the efforts of various Christian missionaries, ethnographers and linguists. Feeling the need to represent themselves, many Adivasi writers then took to writing much like Menus Odia did. In particular, the tribal regions of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and Bihar (now Jharkhand) witnessed the emergence of a special literary consciousness.



Contemporary tribal writer and poet Vandana Tete has preserved, documented and republished Samad's work and that of many other prominent Adivasi writers.

In recent years, several tribal women writers have become prominent. Poets like Sushma Asur, Jacinta Kerketta, and Ruby Hembrom have gained recognition nationally and internationally. Their writings often revolve around the themes of *jal* (water), *jangal* (forest), *zameen* (land), and identity, and offer a distinct perspective. While Western literature faces the threat of stagnation with the advent of AI and the over representation and over expression of stories, tribal sensibilities and experiences offer the hope that there is still much space for rich tales to emerge. Interestingly, as Adivasi women have historically enjoyed greater freedom, the access to modern education and the influence of various Adivasi movements has meant that Hindi literature has seen more Adivasi women writers than Dalit women writers.

Still, a lot needs to be done to promote tribal literature in all the languages of the country. Right now, one of the factors that's holding things back is the general belief among publishers that books by tribal writers are not market friendly. Perhaps they need to go beyond tokenism and give tribal literature a serious push. Readers are always looking for fresh writing that provides new insights into the human condition – something that work from historically marginalised groups always does in new and unique ways.