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CHAKMA FOLKTALES: A STUDY OF THE SUBALTERN

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Abstract:

In postcolonial studies and in critical theory, the term subaltern designates and identifies the colonial populations who are socially, politically, and geographically excluded from the hierarchy of power of an imperial colony and from the metropolitan homeland of an empire. Subaltern- 'of interior rank' termed to refer the working class who are subjected to the ruling class. To the similarity of the same, the folktales are framed by numerous ethnic societies, with a precise link with 'Chakmas', one of the largest indigenous communities of Indo- Bangladesh land strip. (ie; Tripura) 'Subaltern storytelling' is the emergence of mixed aspects i.e. prosperity and adversity. – such like is a tale of 'How a toad became ugly' the production of Chakmas. - The King is a symbol of the united force, a representative of the Subalterns which thwarts the wickedness of the toad. And also the stories like; The Race Competition between a Tiger and a Snail, The Good – for - Nothing Jackal that speaks about perseverance, positive attitude and feeling of worth, that a human ought to have in his life. Brevity and courageous attempt to express love to complimentary sex is prevalent in the story entitled 'Jamai-marani'. In 'How the moon came to an eclipse' the fabricated reason for the existence of lunar eclipse is stated which also exhibits the suppression that subalterns underwent. The relevance of the projection of the characters gives the most predominant message to the Chakma society and to the people of common class section. The suppressions that are vehemently shown brings forth Subaltern attitude of the wicked people who troll over the commoners.

Keywords: *Subalterns, Folktales, Power, Authoritarian, Sufferings, Empowerment, etc.*

Most of the communities from north-east India can pride themselves for possessing a vibrant storytelling tradition. The culture of the 'face-to face communities' which is distinguishable from the abstract nature of social relationships in the 'modern' world, is a distinguishing feature of the oral and it has continued as the dominant influence on the literary creations from the region. After the introduction of print culture into the region during the colonial times, collecting, re-telling, and printing the folklore of the different communities became an important part of the colonial ethnographic agenda of mapping the region for more effective administrative control over the bewildering variety of races that the British encountered here (Tilottoma Misraxy).

This story telling tradition is a medium through which the tribes share their tales of woe and miseries and at the same time give vent to their wishes that remain unfulfilled throughout their life in the patriarchal society. Their tales of hardships are expressed through symbols in these folklores. These folktales thus become the voice of the lower strata of the tribal society broadly termed as 'subalterns'. A key movement in postcolonial studies was the 1980 intervention of the subaltern studies group. Within 'subaltern studies,' a term first used by Ranajit Guha, the word "subaltern" stands as "aname for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of



class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha, 35). Subaltern studies analyze the ‘binary relationship’ of the subaltern and ruling classes, and thus studies the interplay of dominance and subordination in colonial systems, most notably India, though the methods of the movement have since been applied to other nations, spaces, and historical moments. The subaltern studies collective thus announced a new approach to restore agency to the subordinated, in order to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much academic work in South Asian studies (Mambol).

The thought of Subaltern views vastly lingers in any sort of folktales - be it Kokborok, Bengali, Tamil or Malayalam folktales. Folktales leave an impact on the lives of commoners who lead their normal lives. These folktales provide inestimable moral values in the minds of people. Subalterns express their feelings through folktales either in written or oral forms. These folktales project the awful reality of weaker sections that wait in the forlorn hope that the said fabricated value-based tales might result in their change of luck. But to their misfortune, this carriage of vices is seemingly being travelled over generations endlessly. That’s the hall mark of ‘Subalterns’. The subaltern does not view everyone with the same outlook. This is an undeniable fact as we read the Chakma folktales. Mentioning some of the features of the features of the Chakma folktales, Rupak Debnath comments in the preface of his book *Chakma Folk Tales*:

- Stories are simple and straightforward.
- Characters are flat, one-dimensional.
- Characters interact with humans as well as superhuman personalities and perform acts whose consequences the entire humankind bears.
- Animals’ talk and behave like human beings and provide a light on human nature.
- The power of magic is strongly felt.
- Emphasis on dreams and visions in changing the course of human destiny.
- Human characters undergo transformation into animals and vice-versa (Debnath, 9).

Even a cursory look at the features will direct us to appreciate how subaltern plays a key role in the Chakma folktales. Like a subaltern character, the Chakmas are very simple and straightforward. They don’t have much variety in their life. So their characters are more or less insignificant. They emphasize more on dreams, vision, magic and interaction with superhuman personalities as an escape from the harsh and hostile social order dominated by feudalism. A study of some of the Chakma tales will display how the subaltern Chakmas strive for survival in this inimical social structure. Their struggle for survival is expressed symbolically through interaction either between two types of animals or through an interaction between animals and human beings. Some Chakma folktales have been picked up to analyse how these tales represent the subaltern voice.

How the Toad became so Ugly depicts wickedness, which is intermingled with the colonial mindset. Toad is considered to be a wicked character in the folktale of Chakmas as it causes mishaps - one after the other. At the beginning, the atmosphere was full of boredom for the toad as it stayed for a long time at the same place. He went all the way to the city to visit a cousin who lived there, in the corner of a rich man’s house (Debnath, 103). There he learnt the manners of the city and many of their wiles and crafts. The narrator mentions two terms—‘city’ and ‘rich man’ purposefully as both are connected with the exploitation of the subalterns. The simple lifestyle of the toad has been transformed. The toad used its tricky play to be fooling the other creatures cunningly telling a lie to his friend Sudattubi, the tail or bird about the advent of a great cyclone. He said that ‘he had heard the forecast during his stay in the city’ (Debnath, 103). Putting an air of concern he told the tailor bird that he came back to inform his friend the tailor bird about the impending danger. The tailor bird was so tensed that he flew inside the mouth of a hornbill causing irritation to it. The unexpected belching



frightened the monkey who was enjoying the *sugari – gula* stolen from a *jum* field. The *sugarigula* fell from his hand on a deer who was so frightened that it began to run fast assuming that it was chased by a tiger. On the way, it hit a python. The python couldn't catch hold of the deer. So it ate the eggs of a fowl. In its turn, the fowl ate the ant eggs destroying the anthill. The ants became angry and bit the legs of a pig. The pain was so much that the pig ran through a paddy field and destroyed the ripe paddy of the widow. The widow couldn't stop the pig but 'she took her anger out on the stump of a tree and clobbered it with the cudgel in her hand' (Debnath, 107). The stump, in its turn, complained against the widow's ill-treatment to the king. Here King is not the symbol of an authoritarian force. Rather he stands for the united force of the subaltern who punishes the toad ultimately for his troubling the subaltern- life merely to get fun out of it. 'The King's men bound the toad to a jackfruit tree. They flogged him so severely with sticks that his body swelled up in many places. Also, the latex of the jackfruit tree got stuck to his body, making the skin foul and sticky. So, to this day the Chakmas associate the ugliness of the toad with the severe flogging it received from the king's men' (Debnath, 109). Thus, the plot moves on depicting how the toad played with other creatures deceitfully and how he was paid back by the united force of the subalterns. Men of considerably higher status are relatively compared to the character of toad who attempts to dupe the lower sections and savor the pleasure over someone's emotions. The firm words of king reveal its ardent representation of the subalterns.

The Cat and the Tailorbird is another tale showing how subaltern people sometimes face the authoritarian force intelligently without being snared by the colonial authority. The Tailor bird symbolizes the weaker section of society. The ambitious Cat intended to entrap the innocent bird. But the small bird was intelligent enough not to be duped by the cunning cat. As the cat scabbled for its prey, the tail or bird sensed the trap and prepared its chicks, and made them flyaway. The tailor bird understood the plan of the cat and went on misleading the cat when it asked if the tailor bird made its nest; if it had laid eggs and if it had hatched eggs. Thus, the tail or bird saved its children from the powerful cat by dint of its intelligence. This anecdote is a good example of how the poor and weak subalterns won over the powerful autocrats by their sheer use of intellect.

Another success story of the united force of the subalterns against the authoritarian force represented by the tiger as the king of the forest is narrated in *The Tiger and the Snail* (Chakma, 88) considered to be one of the finest Chakma tales. At the beginning of this tale, a tiger and a snail enter a race competition. It might sound strange, because, generally a competition is supposed to be held between equals. This race between a tiger and a snail is something difficult to believe. In the Chakma tribal community, this tale of competition between a tiger and a snail tells of the defeat of the tiger by a snail.

This folk tale is the story of a cocky tiger and a slow-moving snail that challenged each-other to a race. The stout tiger who roamed through the forest suddenly saw a snail in the stream. The slow-paced creature created a surprising excitement for the tiger so that he was staring at it for a long time. The disturbed snail enquired about the tiger's gazing. The tiger's mocking reply to this led to a race between them. The tiger was sure that he would never lose to a slow-moving creature such as the snail. So he participated with a bossy but casual attitude which resulted in his failure.

There are two factors that made the snail win. The first is the tiger's casual attitude. This arrogance and casualness led him to believe he could never lose to a weaker creature such as the snail and his careless perspective allowed him to behave that whatever it happens, he would win the race. The second factor is the snail's perseverance. He never stopped from participating in the race, even though the odds were against him. But the snail was confident of his physical power and used instead his brain wisely. This story demonstrates if there is unity among the subalterns, they can overcome any challenge posed by the dominant class. The tiger, being proud of his physical attributes, was very



much confident of his victory and this over confidence drew its fall. The tiger whose speed was superior to that of a snail thought that he could easily win the race. This ultimately allowed the snail to win.

In 'Good-for-nothing jackal' the narrator deals with the jackal who is "good for nothing". A representative of the parasites, the jackal has been portrayed as worthless and useless in his deeds. The story is about a jackal, a hen, a pig and a tiger. All the four were great friends. One day, all of them set out for a picnic in a deep forest. They unanimously decided that every day one of the friends would stay back to look after the domestic chores, especially cooking. On the first day, it was the turn of the hen, and she cooked her own egg as food. On the second day, it was the turn of pig, where he peeled off his flesh, sandwiched in layers off at and cooked it up. On the third day, it was the turn of the tiger, the surest of all hunters. Within a short while, he stalked and killed a deer and cooked a delicious meat - dish. At last, came the turn of the jackal. The clever jackal preferred his turn at the end. Initially, he was overconfident in his abilities and bragged that cooking a meal was no big deal. So, after others left, the jackal whiled away his time in idle indolence. He had no clue as to how and what to prepare for a meal. Then he decided to do what his friends had done early. The jackal started to do whatever he saw his friends do to prepare the meal. At last, he left without doing anything. He was helpless and could not prepare the feast for his friends.

The story leads to a conclusion that while the subalterns are fit to live their own life through their hard work, the ruling class proves to be a parasite as they have to depend on the subalterns even to meet their daily needs. The greatest failure of a person in life is proving himself as useless idle or dumb. As a proverb is famous with the Chakmas – a good - for – nothing fellow can neither lay eggs like a hen nor hunt like a tiger. Such a man is not even able to cut his own flesh like the pig.

The story titled "Jamai-Marani (the husband killing-cliff) is a Chakma folktale, that deals with the life of a king, his concern about his daughter, his wish to let his daughter marry a charming prince, The princess's vow to marry a man who would dare to leap from the precipice of Chitmaran into the Bargang and swim across the water to the other bank, their encounter with the handsome prince with whom the princess fell in love at the very sight, his daring enthusiasm to win the challenge, the king's advice to safeguard the prince's life, and the princess' marriage with the brave and charming prince.

A bunch of suitors began to arrive one after another in order to marry the Princess. They were young and bold to take up this adventure, but unfortunately, each one of them fell into the water and perished. Then, one day a very young prince came to the court and expressed his desire to marry the princess. The prince was so handsome that the princess fell in love with him at the very first sight, and she began to weep, inwardly saying "How luckless I am to see him come to die for my sake. I wish I hadn't made that foolish vow" (Debnath, 69). The king also felt pity and tried to dissuade him, but the prince refused to pay heed to the king's advice. That night, the worried king saw a dream in which an old woman with a moon- face came into his dream and spoke "worry not, king, verily the young man who sleeps in your house tonight shall be your son-in-law" (Debnath, 70). Then she advised him to tie four balloons around the prince, so that he might not get drowned after he falls into Bargang. Also, she asked the king to give the young man an umbrella, which will help him to go gently. And having advised the king, the old woman disappeared. The next day, the king instructed his men to firmly secure the four balloons around the prince's waist, who at first objected to doing this. But, when the princess came up to him and spoke to him in kind terms, the prince consented to prepare him exactly as the old woman had instructed the king.

Fortunately, the story had a happy ending, where the prince landed on the opposite bank safely, the king was happy to see his daughter's wish fulfilled and also to have the brave prince as his son-in-law. There was great rejoicing in the kingdom as the prince and princess tied the 'jadas' (knot in front of the elderly folks and offered their prayers to the God of Chunglang. They lived happily ever after.



The story shows the shades of braveness and courage imbibed by the subalterns. Their tenacity not to yield to the words of the authoritative groups is pointed out here in this story. There is a different dimension of love, affection, and compassion mentioned in the story. The prince's brave behaviour collectively contributes to the Subaltern's battle for their own existence.

Another story from Chakma folktales is *How the Moon came to an Eclipse*. According to the story, Chān (moon) and Bel (Sun) are the custodians of light, whom Gozen (Young God) said to go ahead to illuminate the world. They continued this for a long time. Then, one day something happened and Chān ceased to be as stout and colossal as he was when Gozen made him and he also suffered from the cyclic soreness of the eclipse.

In accordance with the belief of elderly folks of the Chakma community, this event came to pass at the time of Narasingh Vaidya, who was a prominent figure among the professionals of medicine. Narasingh Vaidya found the vine that would make man immortal. Delighted with the discovery, he screamed with joy, "From this day, man will know not death" (Debnath, 45). They planted the vine in the yard in front of the mazaghar in which he lived with his daughter his wife having died a couple of years ago. He planted the vine of immortality among similar-looking vines so that no one other than he could identify it.

At that moment, Chān was moving across the sky-sea. When he was over the Vaidya's mazaghar and heard him saying, "From this day, man will know not death". On hearing this, Chan fretted in deep amusing as the thought of human immortality disturbed him and he thought of ruining the Vaidya's plan. Chan predicted that, without the fear of death, they will also forsake their commitment to Gozen and have no faith in his all-powerfulness. As a plan, he decided to steal the plant swiftly.

As soon as Narasingh left his house, Chan ceased down slowly into the yard and made sure that nobody is watching him. The Vaidya's daughter was busy with her chores and his dog was sleeping on the 'izar' while he was sneaking to steal the vine, a sudden flash of wisdom struck his mind to take the hillock from the base and place somewhere Narasingh could never again find it. Chan carried the flattered top of the hillock to the heaven. In the meantime, Vaidya after returning home, was surprised to see not the top of the hillock and the mazaghar on it. He called out to his daughter and whistled for his dog, but he received no response from both sides. Worried, he sat down quietly to meditate and realized that Chan is the one who has done all this. Suddenly, he uttered a curse, as the result of which Chan looks like a diminutive luminary beside Bel. Vaidya's daughter after reaching Gozen's garden, where Chān had put down the hillock top started crying out of anger and when her rage was beyond her control, she shouted at the dog, "shoo!, get him now" (Debnath, 48). Chan was so terrified to see the dog barking ferociously. He started to run, but the dog chased him with a stubborn determination and finally bit him deep into his flesh. Slowly the poison from the dog's fangs started mixing with his blood and it soon made his complexion pitch dark. According to tale, this is how a lunar eclipse started to occur. This folk tale is again a good example of how the subalterns are suppressed so that they cannot occupy equal status along with their feudal lords. The subalterns can only protest as is the case with Narasingh.

The aforementioned folk-lore deal with the empowerment of the subaltern groups to fix their own point of view, firmly standing on their decisiveness. The enduring significance of these Chakma tales lies just not in the fact that they reflect the harsh social reality and mirrored contemporary semi-feudal India but the marginalized people shown in these folklores give us strong and assertive voices of the repressed. The analysis also evokes a feeling that the Subaltern should have the courage to with stand the patriarchal dominance with their intensive fear evaporated. The subalterns wrote or orated in order to give vent to their suppressed pain and the folktales are a true reflection of these agonies and sufferings. In doing so, they try to have some relief from their tiresome and monotonous life.



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To Cite the Article: Sunil, Flaviamariya & P., Sheelan, Christy, “Chakma Folktales: A Study of the Subalterns”. *Literary Cognizance*, III-2 (September, 2022): 18-23. Web.