

***Amrutara Santana* :** **The Moving Tale of Deprivation and Dreams.**

Amrutara Santana is an epic, which celebrates in fictional form the anguish and ecstasy, the joys and tragedies of the tribal world. The tribe in question is the Kondh, numerically the largest among the Odishan tribes and one of the most primitive. They live in small clusters of hamlets tucked away in the inaccessible hills and jungles of the Eastern Ghats in Odisha.

To say this is in no way to suggest that it is an ethnographic novel or the focus is on Kondh culture and society per se. No doubt, a vast wealth of cultural materials such as, rituals, celebrations, death-rites, the rite of naming a child, exorcising witches, etc., are there but they are only part of the grand design of the novel and are beautifully transmuted from dry data of ethnography to pulsating poetry through the integrative vision and superb craftsmanship of the author.

Amrutara Santana takes the reader to the heartland of the Kondh world and with a rare degree of intensity and passion reveals to him how the Knodhs live and love, suffer and die; how they celebrate the grandeur and glory of the act of living. The canvas is vast but it is an intimate world of a few villages interlinked through marital relationships. The focus is, however, on a few characters that are portrayed with vivid concreteness and complexity - a feature of Gopinath Mohanty's fiction.

The principal characters are Diudu, the young saonta or village head-man who would inherit the title on the death of his father Sarabu, and of Puyu, Diudu's wife. The first chapter, a rare piece of poetry in prose, sees the death of old Sarabu on the most important festival day of the Kondhs, the day of fullmoon of the month of *Pousa*. Then there is Pubuli, Diudu's younger sister, a constant companion of her sister-in-law, the emotionally neglected Puyu, until she runs away with Besu, a Kondh from a neighbouring village. There is Diudu's uncle Lenju, childless and a widower who never finds fulfillment in anything in life and who is ultimately driven away to a total isolation and near starvation. His life is a vast wasteland of frustrated hopes, dreams, half-burnt desires and passions. And Puyu's life is another vast unending desert of ravaged dreams, as Diudu slowly drifts away from her after her child birth, sickness and declining health, takes to another woman Piti from the neighbouring village and finally brings her home. With that Puyu's enormous patience as the tribal housewife finally snaps and she walks out of his life even though Diudu had "graciously" suggested that there was room enough in his life for both the women. The slow decline of intimacy, the growing

estrangement, the way words slowly fall silent, are beautifully brought out in the novel. The tribals are nothing if not *natural* and do not know the art of concealment, adultery and cheating. Puyu notices this in Diudu's behaviour, in his words, and nothing is kept secret. Even he offers Puyu to stay on for there is enough place for the love of two women in his life ! He is wistful and sad as he drifts away from his one-time passion, his devoted wife, the mother of his child. Quite often he muses how weak she looks and regrets her declining health. Quite often too he feels a deep sense of remorse.

Puyu, in her turn, realizes that perhaps no longer is she able to fill his life, no longer adequate for his emotional and physical needs. She recognizes the compulsive pressure of life on Diyudu as she recalls their happy days of togetherness. But staying on with another woman in his life, in his house ! That is a total impossibility for her and she firmly decides to quit, taking courage in both hands. The novel ends as she walks out of her dear home and hearth and her intimate village. She is consoled and persuaded to remain for the night in the village *Disari* (the star-gazer religious man who fixes dates and time for ritual occasions) Pandru's house and with her child in her arms leaves the village as the sun rises. She has a new determination throbbing in her weak heart as she looks at the rising sun, tears streaming into her mouth.

Thus, the novel begins with Sarabu Saonta's death and ends in the final rupture of the marital relationship between Diudu and Puyu, his son and daughter-in-law. Sarabu the absent headman's shadow falls on the entire novel.

Sarabu had lived a full life, loved its many-splendoured grandeur and stark tragedies. He was in intense love with life, like most tribals, and this despite economic privations and wants. The following long quote from the first chapter of the novel spells out beautifully his love of the habitat, the hills and jungles, his love-life, his ecstasies and agonies. It also reveals the poetic quality of the novel's language:

"It was the golden sunshine of the last days of Pousa. Eighty-year old Sarabu Saonta leaned against the sal tree at his doorstep and looked at the distance. The air was fragrant with the aroma of unknown forest flowers and mahua wine. Butterflies with multi-coloured wings floated as lamps in the golden sun. In the distance, at the end of the village street, the worship of Dhartani (Earth Mother) had started. Almost the entire village had gathered there. The houses and the village street looked empty. The rhythmic beat of the drum revived memory of his earlier days and Sarabu started reminiscing.

He remembered his youth, his songs, the mad abandon of moonlit nights, and his girl friends of yester years, whom he used to call Nilas, Talas, Lember and Dumber - those affectionate names which he had conferred on them while passing the

night in the dormitory for the unmarried boys of the village. The unmarried girls had one also. His entire youth floated past like a dream, like the morning fog slowly unfolding layer after layer of the hills.

Sarabu remembered also his endless miseries and the miseries of his tribe. He was the Saonta, the headman of the village, dressed in a loin cloth, copper-coloured hair on his head, thick and disheveled, a quid of tobacco-leaf always in his mouth. His Kondh religion told him that the King - the Authorities - happened to be the younger brother while the Kondh, the Paraja (the subject), was the elder brother. The younger brother was crafty and had snatched away the kingdom from the elder brother by dishonest means; but he did not mind. He had learnt to forgive. He was as tall as the hills, broad and expansive as the sky, somewhat uninhibited and impulsive.

Sarabu still gazed into the distance; the drums continued their rhythmic beat; the rows of houses stood vacant in the sunshine. Beyond these were the blue-green ranges of hills arranged like coloured palanquins. Range after range of hills and valleys: that was his beloved Konshistan down below, the gurgling hill-streams with their crystal-clear water; the yellow alsi flower everywhere and buzzing bees.

Sarabu was ill. His whole body ached. There was pain in his chest, the murmur of the streams, muted somewhere inside. But then he had lived so long; enough proof of the fact that in his previous life he had been a good man. For if he had been a bad man, he would have died much earlier. In his last birth, he must have done some good work and certainly in his present birth he had done no wrong to anybody. He knew his physical body would grow old and be discarded. His soul would go out and return in some other body to this beautiful land of hills, flowers and streams. Death was only another stage in the eternal process of ever-returning life. The villagers, the people he knew, the green hills - everything would still be waiting for him; the streams would still be flowing and the sap of life would be still surging ahead when he returned. Sarabu confronted death, face to face, but he had no worry. He had lived his life to the full, gone out on shikar, enjoyed his food, drink and tobacco. What did it matter if he died how? He was sure to come back to this beautiful landscape, the dozing valleys and the gurgling streams. He could not long be parted from the glory of human life.

Sarabu brought his flute from the house and, in the golden subshine of late Pousa, his flute called out the names of Nilas, Talas, Lembar and Dumbar. Sarabu danced as if he was possessed like the Kalisi or the Bejuni; as if the Nachini goddess had possessed him and he was worshipping the life-force with the last drop of his energy. Sarabu played the flute and danced. In the honey-coloured afternoon sun, the village dozed; dark shadows danced before his eyes and Sarabu dozed off finally on the most important festival day of the Kondhs. ABOVE: Dharmu the God of Justice. BELOW: Dhartani the God of Ancient Earth. “

Sarabu sums up some of the most endearing personality traits of tribal life; never surrendering to despair and ever full of zest for life; and an intense love of nature and the pleasures of life.

The relationship of Diudu and Puyu is very ably brought out as slowly Diudu gets alienated from her. Puyu grows weaker and weaker physically and her emotional hold on Diudu also seems to slacken. Diudu falls in love with Piti, a tribal girl from a village at the foot of the hills and is imperceptibly but steadily, Diudu is drawn towards her. He neglects his own work and his responsibilities towards his wife. Slowly words lose their meanings and charm. Conversation becomes rare as words are withheld and remain unspoken. Irritation on the slightest occasion becomes common. He takes more and more to *handia*, misbehaves with his uncle and finally brings Piti home whereupon Puyu decides to leave with her little son Hakina. In a masterly poetic language, Mohanty delineates the initial intimacy and passion in the relationship between Diudu and Puyu and the gradual manner in which they fade away.

The relationship between Puyu and Diudu's younger sister Pubuli is also very delicately brought out. The two women understand each other, love each other and appreciate each other's anguished expectations, failures and despairs. Diudu's drifting away from Puyu is paralleled by Pubuli waiting for Harguna, her childhood love and the saonta or headman of a neighbouring village; and finally her running away with another Dhangda, Besu. The exchange of jokes, the constant leg-pullings, the smiles and solicitations for each other slowly dry up. Instead a wall rises up imperceptibly and even Puyu does not have the faintest idea when Pubuli finally runs away from home. This happens during Diudu's absence from the village on a long *shikar* to the village where Piti lived and his estrangement from Puyu widens further as he blames everybody, and Puyu and his own uncle Lenju in particular, for his sister's running away.

The characters in the novel are painted with a stark realism and they come out alive and talking as it were. And it is not merely the major characters; even the minor ones, the village *Barik* or messenger, his young wife for whom both Lenju and Diudu have occasional weakness, the *Disari* and Harguna the first love of Pubuli - all of them are portrayed with a rare vividness and authenticity that is remarkable. And as in all Mohanty's novels the characters are never portrayed as black and white. The reader vainly looks for a villain at whom he can point an accusing finger and relieve himself of the anger arising out of a tragic situation. No, Gopinath is far too subtle for that and the characters remain so human and things seem to happen almost in spite of themselves ! Diudu, even as he drifts away from Puyu still recalls their early days, is occasionally full

of wistfulness, regrets her failing health and even finally wonders if only both Puyu and Piti could remain in his life. For genuinely he seems to need both.

The language of *Amrutara Santana* is often poetry. The novelist paints pictures in words. The changing seasons, the landscape, the rains, the spring, the autumn and winter, the sunrise and sunset, the various occasions of ritual and religious festivities, these are portrayed so beautifully that one almost gets into both the physical, social and psychic universe of Odisha's tribal world. It is indeed a remarkable work of fiction, certainly one of the finest Indian novels of all times.

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