



Can the Tribal Speak? Subaltern Agency in *The Primal Land*

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Abstract: This article explores the idea of subaltern agency in *The Primal Land* by Pratibha Ray from the perspective of Subaltern Studies and Tribal Identity in Literature. It takes inspiration from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's well-known question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), and examines how the novel presents the life and culture of the Bonda tribe of Odisha. The study looks at how Ray describes their close relationship with land, forest, and sacred spaces, and how these elements shape their identity. In the novel, tribal identity is not shown mainly through formal political protest, but through community life, shared memory, myths, and cultural practices. The Bondas express themselves through their connection to the soil, their naming practices, and their rituals. Although Ray is not from the Bonda community, her narrative challenges common stereotypes that portray tribal people as silent or backward. At the same time, the novel reminds us that their voice is still presented through a literary lens. Overall, the text suggests that the tribal can speak, often through culture, land, and tradition.

Keywords: Subalternity, Tribal identity, Indigenous ecology, Representation, Cultural memory

Pratibha Ray's *The Primal Land*, translated from her Oriya novel *Adibhumi*, goes far beyond being a simple narrative about the Bonda tribe of Odisha. The novel enters a central debate in postcolonial thought: *Can the tribal speak?* For generations, Adivasi communities have been interpreted and represented by outsiders, colonial officials, missionaries, ethnographers, bureaucrats, and the modern development machinery. They have repeatedly been described as "primitive," "savage," "criminal," or "backward," categories that reduce complex societies to stereotypes. Their customs were recorded, their bodies measured, their lands mapped, and their lives regulated; yet their own worldview was seldom allowed to frame the narrative. In Ray's work, this pattern is quietly disrupted. The Bondas are not treated as mute objects of anthropological curiosity. Their presence is articulated through everyday practices, their bond with the mountains, their myths of origin, their songs, labour, hunger, grief, and fierce sense of honour. Speech here does not depend on official language or institutional recognition. Instead, it emerges from lived experience. The novel ultimately suggests that the tribal has always spoken; the deeper issue is whether the modern state, its legal systems, and so-called "civilized society" are capable of truly listening.

Naming as the First Act of Speech



From the very beginning, Ray challenges the language of domination. The tribe does not define itself by the name “Bonda,” which outsiders have often used in a derogatory sense. Instead, they call themselves “*remo*,” which means ‘man’ (Ray, 2001, p. 2). This simple act of self-naming is deeply political. While plainspeople may see them as half-naked, savage, or uncivilized, the tribe asserts its humanity through its own word. Identity here is not granted by the state. It is not defined through census records or legal categories. It emerges from within. In saying “*remo*,” the tribal already speaks. He declares: we are human.

This act of naming becomes even more meaningful when we see how the state later controls identity through records, police registers, and legal documents. The colonial label of “criminal tribe” still haunts the Bondas: “*In the government records, the Bondas were still described as a ‘criminal tribe’*” (Ray, 2001, p. 138). To be written into such records is to be silenced even before speaking. Classification becomes control. Under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, entire communities in India were officially branded as “hereditary criminals,” forcing them into surveillance and restricting their movement (Radhakrishna, 2001). Even after the Act was repealed in 1952, stigma remained. Scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have argued that colonial discourse often speaks about the subaltern while denying them the authority to represent themselves (Spivak, 1988). Similarly, Nicholas Dirks shows how colonial classification reshaped Indian identities through bureaucratic categories (Dirks, 2001). In this context, the Bondas’ insistence on calling themselves “*remo*” is not minor. It is resistance against a long history of imposed labels.

Ray exposes how naming can become a form of violence. When starvation deaths occur, officials argue over terminology: “*Death by Starvation or Death through Natural Causes*” (Ray, 2001, p. 279). The narrator comments sharply: “*The problem is not their death; it is finding the appropriate label*” (Ray, 2001, p. 279). Here, language hides the truth rather than revealing it. The tribal speaks, but the system renames, relabels, and mistranslates. This moment reflects a wider bureaucratic tendency to reduce suffering to technical language. Instead of addressing hunger, authorities debate vocabulary, as if changing the term could erase responsibility. Scholars such as Amartya Sen have shown that famine and starvation often result not merely from food shortage but from failures of policy and public accountability (Sen, 1981). Similarly, Michel Foucault explains how modern power operates through classification and administrative language (Foucault, 1978). In this context, Ray suggests that words become tools of evasion. By renaming starvation as “natural,” the state distances itself from blame. Silence is produced not by muteness, but by official language that refuses to acknowledge reality.

Land as Voice and Identity

The strongest form of tribal speech in the novel is their connection with the land. The mountains, forests, and rivers are not background scenery; they are living participants in Bonda life. The “*runkubore-the Wall of the Bondas*” (Ray, 2001, p. 1) symbolizes protection. The mountains “*...lean against each other, arms twined...*,” almost “*dancing the dhemsa*” (Ray, 2001, p. 2). Nature is not separate from human life. For the Bondas, land is not property but presence. Soma declares that “*the soil which gave him birth was more dear to him than his offspring*” (Ray, 2001, p. 61). In the final chapter, the origin myth deepens this ecological identity: “*The remo falls from the yong’s womb into the Earth Mother’s lap clutching hunger and death in his fist*” (Ray, 2001, p. 279). Birth itself is linked to the Earth. The land is mother. This deep bond reflects what environmental scholars describe as an indigenous ecological worldview, where land is sacred, not owned (Shiva, 1988). In many Adivasi traditions, nature



is kin, not a resource (Xaxa, 1999). Displacement, therefore, is not only economic loss but spiritual rupture. When forests are taken or mountains opened to roads, identity itself is threatened. Ray suggests that to understand the Bondas, one must first understand their land, because it is through the land that they speak.

Ray makes this even clearer: “*The Bonda’s country is the Mother’s gift*” (Ray, 2001, p. 197). This spiritual worldview stands in sharp contrast to the legal-economic system where land is mortgaged and regulated. When Katu is forced to mortgage his land “*Katu mortgaged his lands to the Domb sahkars*” (Ray, 2001, p. 294), it is not only economic loss. It is identity loss. To separate the Bonda from his land is to silence him because his history, rituals, and ancestors are rooted in that soil. The language describing roads is equally powerful. They are imagined as jaws opening wide (Ray, 2001, p. 268), suggesting danger disguised as progress. We are told, “The sarkar was planning to surround them from three sides.” Watching from the hilltop, the Bondas see “the onward march of civilisation.” What they witness is not simple development but encroachment. Some scholars have shown how large development projects in India have disproportionately displaced Adivasis. Similarly, Nandini Sundar argues that state-led interventions often reconfigure tribal territories without recognizing customary rights (Sundar, 2007). In Ray’s narrative, development becomes another language of power, polite on the surface, but destructive in effect.

Memory as Resistance

The Bondas may lack written history, but they possess memory. Soma Muduli is described as “*the unwritten history of the Bondas*” (Ray, 2001, p. 6). Ray affirms that “*Whatever he has heard is history for him*” (Ray, 2001, p. 6). In a world where written documents are held to be the truth, Ray insists that oral memory is equally valid. Stories passed from elders to the young carry knowledge about origin, migration, drought, rituals, and resistance. Memory is stored not in books but in songs, myths, and shared experiences. This idea challenges the modern belief that only written archives are authentic. Jan Vansina has shown that oral traditions are reliable sources of historical understanding when read within their cultural context (Vansina, 1985). Similarly, Ranajit Guha argued that subaltern histories often survive outside official records (Guha, 1983). By presenting Soma as living history, Ray dignifies oral culture. She reminds us that forgetting tribal memory is another form of erasure.

The myth of creation begins with darkness and water: “*...there was no soil, no rock; only the waves rolled across the dark waters*” (Ray, 2001, p. 6). The wild boar brings up the soil. The Earth is formed. The first man and woman “*wore no clothes or ornaments*” (Ray, 2001, p. 7). The earth was one; there was no caste, no ownership, no division. These myths question modern definitions of civilization. They imagine a time before hierarchy and property, when human beings lived in closeness with nature. Such stories are not childish fantasies; they carry ethical meaning. Anthropologists like Verrier Elwin have shown that tribal myths often preserve values of equality and ecological balance (Elwin, 1943). Even at the end of the novel, after violence and death, renewal appears. “*Suddenly, out of the night, came the sound of an infant’s cry*” (Ray, 2001, p. 298). Soma dies, but another Soma is born. Ray concludes: “*Kings die; their subjects die, but Man lives on. His struggle continues*” (Ray, 2001, p. 298). This cyclical pattern reflects what Mircea Eliade calls the myth of eternal return, the belief that life renews itself through repetition (Eliade, 1959). Tribal identity, therefore, does not vanish with one generation. It survives through memory, birth, and continuity.

Law as Suspicion, Not Justice



The legal system in the novel does not offer justice to the tribal. It produces fear and suspicion. When Somra is arrested, there is no investigation: “Immediately, Somra Sisa was handcuffed by armed policemen” (Ray, 2001, p. 292). Suspicion becomes enough: “He and his Lower Bonda father-in-law were suspected of having conspired...” (Ray, 2001, p. 292). Evidence is replaced by assumption. This reflects a long history in which tribal communities have been treated as naturally criminal or violent. Colonial policing practices often relied on collective suspicion rather than individual proof (Radhakrishna, 2001). Even after independence, structural bias has continued in many regions (Sundar, 2007). Instead of protecting rights, the law becomes an instrument of control. Ray shows that when fear replaces fairness, justice loses its meaning for the marginalized.

The gulang khata, the police record book, becomes a powerful symbol of state surveillance. The Bondas fear that once a name is entered into this register, it can bring police attention, harassment, or even loss of land. Writing, which in modern society is seen as a sign of order and authority, appears to them as a danger. In many colonial contexts, documentation was used to monitor and control marginalized groups (Dirks, 2001). In court, Bagha Bindhu insists, “We remos never lie. Why should I swear to tell the truth?” (Ray, 2001, p. 104). His statement reflects a moral code rooted in community honour rather than legal ritual. When he confronts his lawyer, “Why do you lie? ...you made me swear to tell the truth but you speak lies yourself” (Ray, 2001, p. 104), he exposes the hypocrisy of a system that values strategy over honesty. The narrator remarks that the Bonda cannot be trained to lie; this troubles both police and lawyers. As Ray writes, “Money turned sin into virtue, made the guilty innocent” (Ray, 2001, p. 294). Legal bail becomes a matter of payment rather than justice. Scholars like Upendra Baxi argue that access to justice in India often depends on economic power (Baxi, 1982). In such a system, the tribal may speak truthfully, but his truth carries little weight in institutions shaped by hierarchy and wealth.

Prison as Cultural Erasure

Bagha’s imprisonment is not just punishment; it is exile from identity. In prison, “He was not free even to look like a Bonda” (Ray, 2001, p. 106). His hair is cut, his ornaments are taken away, and he becomes “no better than a goti” (Ray, 2001, p. 106). The body that once carried visible signs of culture is reshaped to fit a uniform rule. Clothes, haircut, routine, everything is standardized. Ray draws a sharp contrast between mountain life and prison labour: “Working on the mountains is different: there is the sky above and your own earth beneath your feet” (Ray, 2001, p. 106). On the mountain, labour is hard but free. In prison, labour is controlled and enclosed. Ironically, prison becomes a school of “civilisation.” The narrator remarks that “The Bonda considers his years in jail well spent” (Ray, 2001, p. 115). There he learns to wear shirts, drink tea, smoke bidis, and follow clock time. What is presented as reform is actually assimilation. Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), explains how prisons discipline bodies to produce obedient citizens. Similarly, Gopal Guru notes that marginalised communities are often reshaped to fit dominant norms rather than respected in their difference (Guru, 2009). Ray suggests that modernity does not gently persuade; it enters through coercion. Cultural transformation, in Bagha’s case, is not a free choice but the result of confinement.

Women as Silent Agents

Women in the novel carry immense burden. Ray writes plainly, “It was the wives that were punished” (Ray, 2001, p. 76). When men are killed or imprisoned, women hold families together. They work in fields, collect forest produce, protect the land, and care for children and



elders. Budei Toki guards the salap trees and household space while Bagha is in prison. Through her labour, memory and belonging continue. Lachhma Toki says, “*I had to protect my children. How long could I live with fear in my heart?*” (Ray, 2001, p. 63). Fear does not silence her responsibility. Ray observes, “*Bondunis speak but little*” (Ray, 2001, p. 63). Their silence is not ignorance; it is endurance shaped by hardship. At the same time, state intervention often focuses on women’s bodies. Officials argue that tribal women must “*be taught to wear clothes,*” as if clothing alone defines civilization (Ray, 2001, p. 164). Adibari Toki confesses, “*The sari had become her prison... Now she belonged neither to the mountain nor to the plains*” (Ray, 2001, p. 187). She turns into a project “*showpiece,*” displayed as proof of reform. Feminist scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty caution that development programs frequently treat Third World women as objects of rescue rather than agents of culture (Mohanty, 1988). Similarly, Nirmala Banerjee notes that tribal women’s labour sustains communities yet remains undervalued (Banarjee, 1985). Ray reveals that imposed reform may isolate women from their own world instead of empowering them.

Development as Dispossession

Government schemes appear generous but carry hidden violence. The ox subsidy sounds helpful: “*The ox would cost a thousand rupees...*” (Ray, 2001, p. 184). Yet the animal is useless in the hills: “*Now the ox sank to its knees...*” (Ray, 2001, p. 185). What looks like welfare turns into waste because planners ignore terrain and local practice. Development here travels with a standard model and little listening. Scholars such as Walter Fernandes have shown that top-down schemes often overlook tribal ecology and livelihoods (Fernandes, 2001). The Indira Awas houses, built in straight lines with cement and brick, also fail the community. One death is described starkly: “*The bone-dry earth was moist with her blood*” (Ray, 2001, p. 296). Somra realizes they were made to live in homes “*which had no place for spirits to rest in*” (Ray, 2001, p. 296). For the Bondas, a house is not just shelter; it is a space shared with ancestors and protective spirits. When that space disappears, meaning collapses. Nandini Sundar argues that state-led restructuring of tribal settlements often disrupts customary life (Sundar, 2007). Democracy too becomes a spectacle. Voting is called “*...the bhut parab-the Festival of the Vote*” (Ray, 2001, p. 206). People stamp their own bodies, participating without full awareness of policy or rights. Education similarly raises questions: “*Education? For whom?*” (Ray, 2001, p. 281). Posters speak of progress; lived change is minimal. Yet when “*They had acquired the language to dispute injustice*”, “*the police answer with a lathi charge*” (Ray, 2001, pp. 283, 285). Ray suggests that once the tribal voice turns political, it is treated as a danger rather than a dialogue.

Moral Complexity and Honour

Ray does not idealize the tribe. She admits that violence is part of their world: “*To the Bonda, the killing of a human being is neither crime nor sin*” (Ray, 2001, p. 72). This line unsettles the reader, but it also forces us to question how moral systems are formed. Tribal justice grows from custom, clan honour, and survival conditions rather than from written law. At the same time, the community asserts a strong ethical position: “*We Bondas treat all women as our own mothers*” (Ray, 2001, p. 292). This statement directly challenges stereotypes that portray Adivasis as morally backward. Ray reminds us, “*Within each man were concealed both the flames of hatred and the raindrops of love*” (Ray, 2001, p. 292). Good and evil are not divided by geography. Civilization does not belong only to the plains or to modern institutions. As anthropologist Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf observed, tribal societies possess coherent



moral and social codes that deserve equal respect (Furer-Haimendorf, 1982). Humanity, in Ray's vision, is layered and shared across cultures.

Death and Renewal

The climax brings tragedy. "*A gulang babu had emptied the magazine of his rifle in Somra's body*" (Ray, 2001, p. 297). The gunshot is not only the killing of one man; it represents the state crushing a voice that had begun to question injustice. Violence attempts to end resistance. Yet the narrative immediately turns toward hope: "*Suddenly, out of the night, came the sound of an infant's cry*" (Ray, 2001, p. 298). Death is followed by birth. Ray concludes, "*Kings die; their subjects die, but Man lives on. His struggle continues*" (Ray, 2001, p. 298). The image of sunrise behind Baburkonda hill suggests renewal. History may wound the tribe, but it cannot erase them. As Frantz Fanon argues, suppressed communities often rise again through new generations (Fanon, 1963). Ray closes the novel with the idea that identity survives through continuity, even after bloodshed.

Conclusion

The Primal Land ultimately affirms that the tribal does speak, but not always in the language that the modern state recognizes. Through naming, memory, land, resistance, labour, myth, and even silence, the Bondas continuously assert their humanity. When they call themselves "*remo*" (p. 2), they claim identity from within. When Soma is described as "*the unwritten history of the Bondas*" (p. 6), oral memory becomes a valid archive. When the people insist that "*The Bonda's country is the Mother's gift*" (p. 297), land becomes voice. Even in suffering, speech survives. The law may handcuff Somra "*immediately*", and a "*gulang babu*" may fire bullets into his body (pp. 292, 297), yet the final cry of a newborn (p. 298) reminds us that identity cannot be erased.

Ray's novel shows that marginalization does not mean voicelessness. Rather, it reveals how power refuses to listen. Development schemes, police records, prison discipline, and bureaucratic language attempt to rename, reshape, and regulate the tribe. Still, the Bondas hold on to honour, memory, and moral complexity. As Ray writes, "*Kings die... but Man lives on. His struggle continues*" (p. 298). Tribal identity in literature, therefore, is not a story of silence but of survival. The real challenge lies not in whether the tribal can speak, but whether society is willing to hear.

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