

‘Reclaiming the Reproduction of Adivasi Knowledge: The Lens of an Adivasi Publisher’

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As Adivasis, our faces, features and bodies hold the landscape of our lived-in experiences, identities and struggles.

I bore the stigma of Adivasi stereotyping and suffered silently for being who I was. I spent my schooling years hiding—from people and places because I became the personification of the inferiority that I was made to feel, internalising the inadequacies I was made to believe I had.

I could not break through the external impressions of who I was to others to assert that there was more to me.

My formative years were clearly the un-making of me.

The story of adivaani is an extension of mine. The becoming of adivaani is the becoming of me. adivaani was born as the result of a threshold I had reached in my lived in experience of exclusion and discrimination as an Adivasi. Mine is only a microscopic reflection of the scales and dimensions these play out in our everyday lives in addition to governmental neglect, state and corporate sponsored crimes.

adivaani wasn't something I prepared for or planned or had an idea about. It was something I strayed into. In the April of 2012, I attended a 4-month publishing course, because I was between jobs and had the time. I wasn't planning on making a career there, most certainly. I was just investing 4 months of my time to learn a new skill.

The first month of the publishing course was called ‘Publishing Lives’—meeting the ‘who’s who’ of the publishing industry—National and International mainstream publishers, independent publishers, authors, poets, illustrators and printers. We met publishers who did exclusive writings of and for women and Dalits or a specific genre etc. That spaces were created for specific narratives was inspiring.

When I paid attention to the list of people we were to meet, I realised that there was no Adivasi name, no Adivasi presence. That invisibility and erasure bothered me. Were we not important to be included as usual or were we non-existent in the publishing panorama?

Non-Existent we were not; despite a shorter writing tradition, we still write—we write in our native languages or adopted regional languages; and mostly self-published, yet it wasn't good enough to be part of this curriculum. That did it for me—I wanted the Adivasi voice to be counted, someone had to do something—who would? Then I said, I would, without knowing how to and that was it. There it was, not a *Eureka, Aha! Moment* but a tipping point.

The adivaani idea was born out of the audacity to say ‘Enough is Enough’.

I said enough is enough to not being represented, I said enough is enough to others speaking for us, I said enough is enough to being labelled as unintelligent and non-

thinking people, to being denied a place in history and literature, to the Adivasi voice being silenced and suppressed.

Reclamation starts with reconciliation—with who you are and what your reality is and that formed the bedrock on which adivaani stands.

This venture somehow caught the attention of the media and reports touting me as a ‘tribal entrepreneur going back to her roots’ and all kinds of problematic fetishism lead to my email inbox being inundated by inquiries and manuscripts. That is a dream start for an independent publisher—but all I could see was that none of those emails were from Adivasis. Resumes that boasted of ‘love for adivasis’ and anything from 5 to 50 years of research experience with tribes rolled in.

This response quickly put things into perspective—1. Where were the Adivasi authors and our stories? 2. There was obviously more material by non-Adivasis on Adivasis 3. There was still so much material on Adivasis that hadn’t been published 4. That unpublished material was probably difficult to pitch to mainstream publishers and 5. Adivasi material probably didn’t make commercial sense to mainstream publishers.

Reclamation begins with action. I began mine by saying ‘No’ to these inquiries and manuscripts. It was not that these manuscripts were not valuable or relevant. This platform was exclusively for Adivasis and that was not something I was going to compromise with—not just yet.

I tried to make sense of the vacuum I was working in, burdened by not knowing how to proceed.

As indigenous peoples we are living documents ourselves, so as a publisher I was and am confronted by the dilemma of transmitting, translating and reproducing what’s organic and breathing into a form that in many ways is limiting. How do you after all project and market insight, experience, memory and traditions?

Production is a process of creation or one that brings something into existence. When it comes to producing indigenous knowledges; what really is the product? Knowledge creators, disseminators and publishers are in the trade and pursuit of information, wisdom, insight, and culture that has sustained our native societies for millennia—the tangible representation of which is a book, an audio or video file, a piece of fabric, food, a photograph, a sculpture or a painting among others.

Edward W. Said in his book *Orientalism* says knowledge “no longer requires application to reality; knowledge is what gets passed on silently without comment, from one text to another. Ideas are propagated and disseminated anonymously; they are repeated without attribution; they have literally become *idées reçues* (*ideas received*): what matters is that they are *there* to be repeated, echoed, and re-echoed uncritically.”

But when he says it is *there*: that’s what we have to negotiate with. The form of our knowledges that exist for indigenous peoples is not congruent with the necessities for survival in the present times. We need to produce knowledges in tangible ways using new technologies available to us and the reasons are not limited to but encompass the

whole gamut of preservation, protection, setting records straight, projection of the authentic voice and from the courage to say—‘you now listen to us, this is who we are and this is how we tell our stories or histories’.

Whichever means of documentation or visualization is used, at the core of it lies language—spoken, written or signed to express that knowledge. For a book publisher, this knowledge is displayed in the printed form in a script that mirrors the language. However, language itself is constantly evolving—it’s imbibing new words and expressions from dominant regional and global languages, losing more complex and specific native words as a way of leveling the ground of language barriers and comprehensibility. The process of mainstreaming and assimilation of indigenous peoples with ‘organized and civilized’ society; both enforced and self-initiated has made us adopt the more urbane languages and allowed them to influence our own native tongue.

This is a reality and with the change and dilution in language, thought processes and meanings change. They become more generic and common. The knowledge, life ways and literature that were once exclusive to a peoples is now becoming everyday and mixed. That may not necessarily be a bad thing or immediately spell doom but it may have alarm bells ringing. We need to question how in preserving indigenous knowledge as authors, writers, scholars, translators and publishers we have used language. Have we modified our syntax and expressions in language so that the non-tribal world relates to what we have to say? Have we simplified our language to ensure conformity and acceptability in the established academic and literary world? Or have we retained what is unique and exclusive to us as indigenous; unapologetically, and left for the world to apply themselves to understand us and our ways.

Reclamation is acknowledging and respecting the liberty and responsibility of knowledge producers—as is understanding the question whether we’re handing down and preserving for our next generations through publications an adulterated version of who we are as indigenous peoples?

While as a publisher, I needn’t explain what I do or what kind of material I produce to my indigenous brethren, I am called on to do so with dominant peoples and audience. To them the tribal narratives I produce are steeped in mysticism, wonder and of a lower cerebral order only. That I can and publish scholarly works doesn’t surprise them as much as that indigenous peoples can produce intellectual material or any writing for that matter. We are not believed to be thinking peoples and our work is looked at suspiciously.

Another challenge for us has been fighting through stereotypes and prejudices that define Adivasi being. Our first book was in Roman Santali about the Santals as a people, their history and entity. The base of the cover for it is black. The printers we took the book to strongly recommended we change the black to a cheery yellow or a bright maroon as “Black is too sophisticated a colour for the very backward Santals”. We stuck to black.

So once you are discovered or identified as Adivasi, most dominant people automatically assume power over you and think they are entitled to tell you what is

‘sophisticated’ for you or not, where you belong or not. How did a color become earmarked only for one people?

The distributors of an online book portal refused to sign us on as “Adivasi books are not good”— that without even looking at our books. The stigmatization of Adivasi peoples and their knowledge systems is so deeply entrenched that any creativity or scholarship is looked at as an exception; a one time, lucky spark of brilliance than a norm.

Tribal literature to the world at large is synonymous with folklore. My concerns are not with the one-dimensional understanding or interpretation of it. My concerns arise from the then derived hypothesis that advanced societies have produced culture, while Adivasis have produced folklore which is a lower form of culture; because it is mythical. Adivasis are thus denied being a people of culture or refused attribution of contributing to Indian culture. In that one premise the importance and urgency of producing Adivasi knowledge and material surfaces.

The need to assert that tribal works is a source of human history, and is not archaic but contemporary, has now become my mission as an Adivasi cultural documentarian and publisher.

India’s long practice of a literary tradition is traced back to the Vedas and other Hindu religious texts dating around six thousand years. However, documentation of Adivasi life and world ways was undertaken only over a century and a half by the ruling class, be it the foreign colonizers or/and the Indian colonizers, because of their advantage of knowing how to, being literate and understanding the significance of the act. But what they also understood was that history-writing was a way of perpetuating the feudal order and dominion, becoming the only or dominant narrative. How could the powerless challenge what was going down as history? Adivasis did not need to document their literature, scholarship or culture because we were living documents ourselves. But we now need to; to counter dominion. Not only the dominion of the texts of the past, but of the dominion we live in and what is to come.

News of publishers being asked to pulp books that offend religious and other sentiments as a legal recourse only shows that laws can curb freedom of expression and literature and ultimately alter the pure form of any culture. How Tribal narratives cope with such bullying, gagging and distortion of our histories is a key question.

This situation of supervision, regulation or surveillance of culture just accentuates the need for Adivasis to take up documentation themselves and reclaim its reproduction. Literature is not only about describing society but also about challenging it.

The earliest recorded written literature by Adivasis was in translation; most often not from one script to another, but from oral discourse to the written form. In that process of recording, I wonder who the copyright holder of the text and guardian of that knowledge was. Was it the singers and storytellers who in their oration and singing preserve and re-create their community’s idea of itself or was it the person recording the narration for posterity and wider readership who was able to market the literary product. That challenges me as a publisher.

I once received a manuscript of a remarkable collection of folktales of the Kamar people of Orissa documented by a Non-Adivasi professor who'd lived and worked among the Kamar's for over 40 years. The stories needed to see the day of light and I wanted to publish them. I asked the professor if he'd consider writing his name not as author but as compiler and the Kamar storytellers as co-authors. From being just 'sources' we have to claim our place in that literary production. We too are not the owners/creators of the folklore but the bearer/s of them and for him to put his name down, as author, was wrong.

Having the book dedicated to the Kamar storytellers and people was not only not enough, it was silencing, objectifying them and reducing them to a people without agency. I never heard back from him.

Writing meant having the tools to do so. And this written form was in a native script if it existed; one invented by the necessity of authentic documentation in the native tongue or a universal more dominant script, borrowed to meet the needs.

The significance of a native script in tribal literature or the lack of it never really affected the way culture was maintained. Tribal cultures have been lost for many reasons, and not having a native script is not the main contributor to that.

What really binds the process of creating written tribal literature is language as mentioned earlier. Language as much as anything else defines tribal communities. Speaking the same language means more than being able to recognize and produce the same sound patterns or communicate. The oral tradition is a distillation of the shared community and corporal experience that gives language meaning. In that, the role of language in translation also becomes critical.

So who translates? Is it the literate, the linguist, bi-linguist, or the academic? As much as credit is due to them for their role, we have to look at ways in which everyday Adivasis, many who do not read and write, can be included in the process. How can their experience of stories, storytelling and culture be incorporated? We may be illiterate but are not bereft of stories and knowledge.

Last year, I was at the Jaipur Literature Festival, being invited to speak on 3 panels. Standing in line to collect my speaker badge, people in front of and behind me started making small talk. There were the usual niceties of where one was from and what brought us here. After I had mentioned my publishing and archiving outfit of and by Adivasis and that I was Adivasi myself, one man responded, 'Ah, now I know, you remind me of my *chai-wala*'. Nothing more, nothing less! I wasn't sure what he meant nor how to react or respond. I didn't know if it was complimentary or if I was to be offended. But I knew it was something that would linger on in my thoughts and churn in my stomach long enough for me to engage with it.

One of the sessions at the Lit Fest, I was on, was called 'A room of one's own' drawing from Virginia Woolf's iconic 1929 essay where she says 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'. It was an all women writer's panel, and when it was my turn to speak, I retold the *chai-wala* incident and stated that I was an Adivasi and I would remind you of your *chai-wala*, your domestic help, your labourer because that is the reality we are at in the established and modern

socio-economical stratification index; but there is no shame in being that or there because it brings food on the table and keeps our daily lives in motion. So for us it's not about 'A room of one's own' but about 'A roof over our heads'. My room then becomes the tools I need to write: language, literacy and the medium I use to put it down—paper and pen, a computer an audio or video recording.

We may come from the margins and remain in the peripheries and may only be the one-dimensional labour class you see us for but that does not mean we have no stories, aspirations, opinions, character or personality. We have accounts that challenge every misconstrued notion about Adivasis, set records straight and advocate for Adivasi being. Then again our narratives are not just about misery, pain and exploitation—we have a rich legacy of intellectual, imaginative, creative, poetic, romantic and thrilling stories that need to be retold, if only we had a 'room' of our own on our own terms.

Creating this room is how we begin to reclaim the reproduction of indigenous knowledges.

Producing knowledges and expressing creativity in original text or translation is fuelled by the desire and need to be heard, known and understood worldwide. As indigenous peoples we release our material to translation with the adage that: "If you don't understand me, I'll tell it to you in your language. However I can't guarantee you will understand".

Our brand of literature may be diverse and distinctive from others that reading cultures have encountered, and in many cases it will require some extra effort, imagination and graciousness on their part to appreciate it. We may feel burdened or imprisoned by standards of language and be forced to alter to simplify it; but how much is too much? The politics of language and its nuances in translation and publication of tribal literature is one we have to address.

I've had to defend one of our Adivasi authors who also writes in English, who has only learnt the language in the last 5 years of his adulthood. I was told "his English writing is so basic, very everyday blog material". As his publisher and editor, I have the liberty to change the language to suit and meet the so-called erudite standards; but then that would not be him anymore, that would be me. My responsibility is towards the author and his authorship whose simplicity in a foreign language doesn't take away from the impact of his stories and narratives. This is who we are, this is the literary stage we are at and we have to take pride in it. I am often ambushed by this arrogance in language syndrome. And it is no easy experience.

As a publisher who's also going to undertake translation as a tool to promote tribal literature, I'd also like to push for a reversed translation; where what has been considered as universally acclaimed texts will be translated for Adivasis to read in their native tongues. Adivasi's are expected to write about themselves and their tribal ways. Why should we not have the liberty to write about whatever, whoever or wherever we want? I'd also like to publish the Adivasi view of the changing world. We have an opinion on worldviews too, why should it not matter?

Our traditions and stories are constantly changing. Our stories have changed, sometimes without our consent or ability to understand the process. Our lives sometimes merge, sometimes run parallel, sometimes run ahead, and sometimes fall behind our culture and literature from the past. How are we coping? What do we do to share what our ancestors created with Adivasis born in cities, in other provinces and under quite different circumstances? How do we interpret texts for the new-breed tribals?

There has to be a way we can transmit ourselves into the future without diluting ourselves as indigenous peoples.

As scholars we have to be responsible for our material. Inexperience is no excuse for mediocrity. We are presenting and preaching to a breed of hardcore believers in the conventional and established scholarship. How do we refine our argument, our erudition to challenge that traditionalism and how do we create our own brand of indigenous scholarship?

Do words in the pages of a book do justice to our knowledge systems? If not, it is our responsibility to make them.

Knowledge production for tribal and indigenous peoples has to be a corporal production and reproduction mechanism, where we contribute and collaborate to co-create the final product. We have to be unapologetic, fearless and proud of what we put out.

If producing indigenous knowledge came with its unique set of challenges, seeking support or funding is met with the same fate. Presenting indigenous knowledge, as something worth sponsoring can be tough because of the limitations of showcasing it as a large-scale, life-changing outcome. That for example does not happen when you seek funds for health initiatives—cataract operations, artificial limbs, food, shelter, blanket distribution etc.

Making the connection of books being a medium to preserve entire indigenous communities from extinction and cultural genocide is not an easy one.

Before we reclaim, we need to claim; before we reproduce we need to produce.

Every time an indigenous speaks it is a claim, a reclaim, a production, a reproduction of a knowledge system that is key to our collective survival— an evidence of who we have been during our centurial travel through our territories. This is, claiming our collective place in our species, as human beings, refusing to be forgotten and marginalized.

Our knowledge is a shared resource—a narrative of pieces of a resistance that need to blossom in a collective resurgence.

Everytime I go to a library or a book fair I am overwhelmed by the number of books on shelves—wondering who would read ours in the mountains of uncountable books—also reflecting on the paradox of how many of us can actually read ourselves. Reclaiming the reproduction of indigenous knowldges is also an assertion to its right

to exist. Whether we are read or not—we need to have our say, we need to nudge our way into shelves just to be.

From typeset text we have to speak, our voices loud, clear, unashamed and our brand of knowledges standing the test of time and critique. Silence is not our mother tongue.

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