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Preservation of Cultural Heritage through Literature: A Study of Odia Poem *Konark* and Novel *Paraja*

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Abstract:

Culture, tradition and Heritage of a society are the contributions of the past. Cultural Heritage boosts the spirit of the present. It is, therefore, essential to preserve the rich cultural Heritage of human society for a glorious future. Cultural Heritage refers to the way contemporary society utilizes the past. It includes both tangible and intangible Heritage. Efforts have been made for the preservation and promotion of rich tradition and Heritage. History books and literary works are valuable for studying past cultures and monuments. Books are the windows to the past norms, values and traditions which is preserved through writing. Literature, through poetry, stories, novels, and plays, presents a comprehensive view of the past, allowing people in contemporary society to understand the monuments and culture of their ancestors. This paper explores the role of literature in preserving cultural Heritage, focusing on two notable Odia literary works: *Konark*, a poem by Sachi Rautray, and *Paraja*, a novel by Gopinath Mohanty. It examines how these works contribute to the preservation of cultural Heritage.

Keywords: Heritage, preservation, mysteries, social milieu, *Paraja*.

I. Introduction:

There is growing demand in various quarters about the preservation of the culture, customs, Heritage, and traditions of human society, as globalization and modernity often contribute to the erosion of the rich cultural Heritage of different communities. Before jumping into the preservation of cultural Heritage, it is important to first understand what cultural Heritage entails.

Cultural Heritage can be understood as "that part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary purposes, be they economic, cultural, political, or social" (Khakzad, 2015, p. 110). According to UNESCO, cultural heritage encompasses the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society. These are inherited from past generations, preserved in the present, and passed on to future generations for their benefit. To promote our rich cultural heritage, the most logical approach is to preserve both its tangible and intangible aspects through writing and, consequently, literature. The primary stakeholder in the preservation of culture is the community itself. Tangible cultural heritage includes places and monuments, while intangible cultural heritage encompasses history, ritual songs, language, poetry, craftsmanship, and other social ceremonies.

A writer lives for several generations; one great example is William Shakespeare, a great English poet and playwright of all time. His themes remain relevant even today, making him one of the most widely read poets and dramatists in history.

Sutapa Basu, a Bengali writer, in her book '*Heritage important part of Storytelling*' says storytelling and literature play an important role in the preservation of human Heritage, culture, and contribute more towards the conservation of Heritage through their stories.

"Literary tales, mysteries or thrillers around old mansions, forts, or monuments not only provide an authentic setting for their narrations, but their readers also become curious to know more. When they visit such sites, a desire to seek out more such Heritage sites grows in them. That is the way literature spreads awareness about Heritage." says Sutapa Basu.

'The Cursed Inheritance', the new book of Sutapa Basu, gives a bird's eye view of Kolkata's Heritage through architecture, social customs, modes of transport and food. It is the story of a young heiress, raised in London, who inherits a vast, dilapidated mansion in Kolkata. She has to take a trip back to this mansion and her family's past to dispose of it. Sutapa Basu says: my aim is to lure this generation away from their screens into the world that surrounds them and has existed even before they were born. Literature plays a significant role in engaging readers with the intangible components of Heritage. When an author describes the food, clothing, and traditions of a particular place and time, readers can connect these elements to the customs and lifestyles followed by their own families, fostering a deeper sense of cultural understanding and continuity.

'In the *Cursed Inheritance*, I describe cuisine, cooking in coal stoves, manners that are specific to regional nuances of Kolkata.' She believes that many ancient buildings scattered across the cities of India hold valuable narratives that must be documented for future generations, lest they fade away with time.

At present, we are increasingly aware of the definitive loss—throughout the world—of languages, knowledge, know-how, customs, and ideas, leading to the progressive erosion of human society's cultural richness. In this context, literature plays a vital role in raising awareness about the preservation of culture. Literature aims to educate the public on preserving traditions amid the changes brought about by colonization, Western influence, and globalization.

The study of literature can enrich our lives in various ways, as it is an integral part of our cultural heritage. Literature provides an effective means of understanding the culture of specific social groups and classes. By studying literature, we gain insights into our history, society, and sometimes even ourselves. Through literature, we experience different countries and cultures as they were, immersing ourselves in their unique climates, languages, and tones.

Literature also gives us glimpses of much earlier ages. These glimpses take our imaginations back to the roots of our culture, in some instances. Places that are written about in literature are more interesting to us as we wish to visit these places to compare and contrast. Images come to mind with landscape, climate, and culture. We can evaluate social change and social values through literature.

Literature is the product of age. It represents the place, people, tangible and intangible cultural Heritage, traditions, language and history of mankind of a particular period. Culture can be expressed in literature based on the origin of the character or author, or even tied to a general location. *Things Fall Apart* by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe describes not only the culture of a tribe in Nigeria but the effects of English white men coming in and taking over. The clash that ensues shows the differing values and attitudes of both.

Race and gender play a crucial role in expressing culture. The struggle between culture and race in American literature can be illustrated profoundly in African American literature, especially slave narratives, which were autobiographical works by free blacks who were formerly enslaved people. These books rose to popularity around the time of the American Civil War. White American culture around the same time was also conveyed, exemplified by Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, famous African-Americans gave insight into their perspective on that culture in their literary works 'Beloved' and 'The Colour Purple' respectively.

Literature is the art of writing through words. It is a sensitive record of what the authors have seen, experienced, thought and felt in life. The literature discloses and transmits many concepts to other generations and the relationships exist from the beginning of history until

now. Literature is an imitation of societal values and, therefore, a reflection of the human experience within a specific time. Written works highlight cultural elements through characters, events, settings, and themes that are unique to the era in which they were created.

Literature is a big part of all cultures. Books from different countries shape their nations, as both children and adults read them to understand what has shaped their homeland into what it is today. Literature has the power to inform people, share history, and become the history of a particular place or even the world. The documentation of an event or even a fictional story can influence a culture. Literature reflects cultural norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes. Through literature, the culture of a specific society can be studied and understood.

Many scholars believe that an excellent mode of keeping the history of Heritage alive, generation after generation, is through stories. In *The Pillars of the Earth*, author Ken Follett provides a detailed account of how a 12th-century cathedral is built. He crafts a story around its unique architecture, intertwining politics, civil war, famine, and religious strife, all set against the backdrop of the cathedral's construction. Bimal Mitra's Bengali Novel *Saheb, Bibi Golam*, is set in a Zamindari mansion that resonates with the period's culture. His entire story is about the feudal and patriarchal traditions which emanate from the mansion. Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy* brings the perfume of courtesans and old-world charm of the Pre-independence period. It gives the reader first-hand knowledge of lifestyles, nations and sentiments of bygone cultures.

Dramas written by playwrights such as Shakespeare, Kalidas, or Anton Chekhov, when staged, offer a feast for costume designers. They showcase the fashions worn during specific periods in particular regions where the dramas are set. When works like *Ramacharita Manas* or *Meghadoot* are recited, vivid descriptions of garments, headdresses, and weapons bring them to life through mental imagery for the listeners. These descriptions make the history and heritage of dress come alive, offering a glimpse into the past.

Dickens' *A Christmas Card* is a superb cameo on the traditional Christmas spirit. Similarly *Sense and Sensibility* by Austen profiles the Victorian custom of older men marrying young girls. Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* are excellent accounts of traditions and rituals in different parts of India. The *White Tiger* of Aravind Adiga gives insights into class disparities that prevailed in India a decade ago.

The great epics *The Ramayan* and *The Mahabharat Project* are the social ways of life of the then age. The respect of Rama for his father Dasaratha, the dedication of Lakshmana to

his brother, the allegiance of Veer Hanuman, and the love of the subjects for their king are all vividly described. The Ramayan presents the honesty, truth and obligation of the bygone age. It represents the lifestyle of men and women, the rule of law, means of transportation, customs and traditions of the people of that period.

The Mahabharat displays the conspiracy of Kauravas, generosity of Karna, love among brothers, practice of truth and regard for Dharma. When the *Mahabharata* is read, the traditions, culture, behaviour, dress, and food of the time come to life, transporting the reader back to that period. The *Puranas* and *Vedas* are rich sources of intangible heritage, offering deep insights into ancient knowledge, beliefs, and practices. Laxmi Purana describes the feud between husband and wife and narrates the importance of Laxmi Puja, Cuisine and ornaments of the period. It also focuses on eliminating the caste system as Laxmi pleads to visit the house of the Chandaluni (an untouchable woman). It vividly describes the custom of worshipping goddess Laxmi on Thursday, maintaining all purity.

Almost all works of art reflect the cultural Heritage of the period in which they were created. The author or poet cannot escape the influence of the time they live in. As a result, the characters depicted in these works represent the people of that era, and the events described reflect the culture of that time. This is why literature is often referred to as the mirror of life.

II. The Odia Poem Konark and the novel Paraja as Means of Preservation of Heritage:

Two texts in the Odia language, *Konark*, a poem written by the revolutionary poet Sachi Rautray, and *Paraja*, a novel written by Shri Gopinath Mohanty, will be studied in detail here to demonstrate that Heritage can be preserved through literature. *Konark* is a poem on tangible Heritage that recreates the story behind the construction of the Sun Temple “Konark” at Konark near Chandrabhaga Sea beach of Odisha. The poet, however, focuses more on the suffering of the sculptors than on describing the beauty of the Sun Temple. The poem brings to light the history of the exploitation of twelve hundred sculptors.

The poem *Konark* was first published in 1937 in *Sahakara*, an Odia magazine, and later in 1942 in the Bengali in *Mandira*. The poem is written in a colloquial style. The poetic persona addresses the visitor of the Sun Temple, who is mesmerised by the beauty of the temple. With deep pathos, the poet expresses that the visitor remains unaware of the suffering endured by the people who sacrificed their lives for the construction of this magnificent

temple. The visitor sees the poetry manifested in the rocks, with beautiful carvings and art on the stones. However, the narrator focuses on the sacrifice of the many sculptors who, for the sake of King Narasinghdev, died as a result of their hard work. The king took pride. The world witnessed and appreciated the gigantic artistic temple. The visitors see the erotic pictures of the men and women in intimate positions carved on the rocks of the temple and appreciate the different positions engraved on each stone and feel elated. But the poet goes back to the history of the making of the temple. Innumerable human beings have died out of hunger and work but nobody bothers to know about them. It is said that twelve hundred sculptors and many more labourers forgot their families and themselves for twelve years just to keep the king's name. At the cost of these helpless people, the extraordinary temple attracts many visitors, and Odisha takes pride in this tangible heritage. However, the temple does not acknowledge the people who paid heavy taxes and fell into poverty. These real heroes are erased from the history of Konark, the Sun Temple. According to the narrator, the temple should have spoken more about the sacrifices of these people rather than focusing on the portrayal of nude, erotic men and women.

The poet Radhanath Roy composed another fictional poem called *Chandrabhaga*, which tells the story of the damage to the temple. It narrates the tale of a twelve-year-old boy named Dharama, the son of a sculptor named Bishu Maharana, who was able to give the finishing touch to Konark—a task that twelve hundred expert sculptors could not complete. To preserve the honour of the sculptors, he sacrificed himself by jumping into the sea. Such stories capture the people's attention, sparking curiosity and eagerness to visit the place. The temple has since been placed on the prestigious World Heritage list.

Gopinath Mohanty, a renowned storyteller in the Odia language, has written many novels about the life and customs of scheduled tribe (ST) communities who live amidst nature in deep forests. The text discussed here is *Paraja* by Gopinath Mohanty, a highly regarded novel in Odisha. Due to its popularity, it has been translated into English by Bikram Keshari Das. *Paraja* is an epic of the Paraja community, narrating their hopes, desires, dreams, struggles, customs, marriage, and frustrations. The Parajas, like the Kandhas and Bondas, are aborigines who live in the lap of nature.

'Paraja', a classic modern Indian fiction, is an epic tale of a tribal patriarch and his family in the mountainous jungles of Odisha. It shows the slow decline in the fortunes of the Paraja family and presents the erosion of the ways of life of Parajas, the peasants. The novel is set in a hamlet called Sharsupadar, a few kilometres away from Koraput, situated in the

foothills and surrounded by hills filled with forests. The village comprises a few families belonging to Paraja and Dombo (Scheduled Caste) communities. There is a description of the hamlet and the huts.

The Parajas are known for their simplicity. Although they live in the forest, they depend on agriculture for their livelihood. By clearing forests, they have made cultivatable land. However, to practice agriculture they have to pay a bribe to the forest guard who comes in a blue moon to collect the non-official taxes. He is presented with offerings such as cocks and pulses. Sukru Jani, the protagonist of the novel, approaches the guard to request the clearance of an area for cultivation. He has paid a bribe for this, but the guard's true intention is to exploit the eldest daughter, Jilli, which is strongly opposed by both Jilli and her father. As a result, Sukru Jani's house is raided, and he is found guilty and fined. Lacking the money to pay, he turns to the moneylender, Rama Bishoi, a Sundhi by caste. Sukru and his son Mandia Jani sell themselves to the moneylender to cover the interest on the loan. Later, when they are fined for Mandia Jani's involvement in selling desi alcohol, Sukru's second son, Tikra, is also sold as a bonded labourer to raise the money needed to pay the fine.

The novel describes the way of life of the 'Parajas' lucidly. The young men and women (Dhangadas & Dhangidis) sleep in the Dhangada and Dhangidi houses. There, they choose their partners. They have freedom in choosing partners. The elders have nothing to do with it. If the young man and woman decide to marry, the young man has to pay a bride price (Jhola tanka) of rupees sixty or eighty (tini or chari kodis). The bride's father is given money, and the marriage is then solemnised by the Disari (priest). Cocks are sacrificed to the god in the jungle, who resides in a large mango tree deep in the forest. Alcohol is also offered to the god as part of the ritual. Then the whole community celebrates the occasion by dancing together throughout the night. As per the community's customs, the couple lives in a newly constructed house.

In the evening, the *dhangadas* (young men) sing songs and play instruments to woo the *dhangidis* (young women). If they fall in love, they may unite physically. If any issue arises, the panchayat convenes to resolve the matter. The couple is fined with cocks and alcohol, after which they are excused. The community also allows the young man and woman to elope. However, they are accepted as a married couple only if the man pays the bride price to the girl's father.

Many young men, like Mandia Jani, the eldest son of Sukru Jani, cannot marry because they cannot provide the *Jhola tanka* (bride's price). If a boy cannot afford the bride's price, he must stay in the girl's house as bonded labour. Once the *Jhola tanka* is paid, he can marry the

girl. The marriage is solemnised by the *Disari* (priest). The marriage process is simple: the bride and groom's bodies are purified with turmeric powder. After bathing, they put on their bridal attire and get married. The community members celebrate by dancing throughout the night.

The *Paraja* people describe their staple food and clothing. They collect firewood from the jungle to cook their meals and eat various plant roots. Both men and women are involved in this work. Their primary food consists of millets and *peja* (a liquid made from millet or rice). They wear khadi (a handwoven fabric). Alcohol is permitted in their community.

The *Paraja* people observe various festivals, with *Chaiti* and *Pausa Purnima* (the full moon of the month of Pausa) being the most significant. The year ends with *Pausa Purnima*, during which bonded laborers are given one or two days off to celebrate the occasion. *Chaiti* is the main festival for the *Parajas* and is celebrated for fifteen days during the last fortnight of the month of Chaitra. The goddess, believed to reside in a mango tree in the dense forest, is worshipped at night. Men and women, dressed in new clothes, offer prayers to the goddess. The priest sacrifices cocks and pigeons, and offers *desi wine* made from *mahua* flowers to the goddess. During this festival, the *Paraja* tribal community dances and drinks alcohol. They also clean and colour their houses with colored soil and go hunting to mark the occasion.

Sukru Jani and his two sons take leave from the Sahukar and return to their village to celebrate. Meanwhile, Sukru's two daughters, Jilli and Billi, suffer greatly in their absence. Without informing their father or brothers, Jilli and Billi go to work elsewhere. In this new place, Jilli, the beautiful girl, succumbs to the harsh circumstances and does not hesitate to form a relationship with the 'Gumasta' (a clerk or agent) of the contractor.

This situation represents the erosion of their culture. Even after returning home, Jilli is forced into a physical relationship with the Sahukar, Ramachandra Bisoi, a non-tribal. The community does not object to it because he is a powerful man, though he is much older. However, the girl faces criticism and ostracism within the community. The *Parajas* continue to be exploited by the non-tribals, and even the judiciary cannot offer them support, as they are seen as innocent. Modernity remains distant from them, and their culture is gradually being overtaken by the advancing society. Driven to desperation by constant exploitation, Sukru Jani and his sons ultimately kill Sahukar Ramachandra Bisoi, as he has taken everything from them.

III. Conclusion:

The novel exposes the ill intention of the non-tribals for the tribal people. Also, it focuses on the eroding culture of the Paraja community. The author has tried to preserve their rich culture through this novel. This work of art has immortalized the cultural heritage of the Paraja community. This study demonstrates that the culture and heritage of different communities can be preserved through literature for generations. Literature is one of the best ways to preserve both tangible and intangible heritage. It sparks interest among readers to visit these places and experience the beauty, art, architecture, culture, and heritage of the sites. By engaging with existing literature, readers become more familiar with the monuments and the stories behind them.

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