

Writings of Sushma Asur

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‘Tribal’ was a term applied by British colonizers and missionaries to understand and relate the living pattern and life style of indigenous people living in remote inaccessible areas. Their dark skin complexion, living conditions, language and attire distinguished them from other residents of the nation. These original inhabitants of the land spoke a language which had no grammar; they worshipped no Gods nor performed any rituals. In Vedic hymns, they were often referred to as Dasayan, Dasyu, Daas, Asur, Rakshasas, etc.

Asurs are primitive tribal group of Jharkhand. Traditionally, they have been iron smelters and slash burn cultivators. Earlier, they lead a nomadic existence but gradually they have settled down in villages.

The Hindus across the nation celebrate Durga Puja as victory of ‘good’ over ‘evil’. Most people celebrate depicting Goddess Durga slaying *Mahishasur* in elaborate *puja pandals*. But members of Asur tribe go in mourning for nine days of ‘Navratri’. They do not venture out of their dwelling nor do they wear new clothes during this phase. They observe ‘Martyrdom Day’ on *Mahanavami* and mournfully reminiscence how an ‘outsider’ employed trickery and illusion to kill their ancestor, the *Mahishasur*.

Members of the *Asur* tribe believe that they are descendents of ‘*Hudur-Durga*’, a name in local dialect for *Mahishasur*. They claim that the narrative in ‘*Markandya Puran*’ related to the birth and description of Goddess *Durga* is biased. They claim that Ravan and Mahishasur are their ancestors. Prem Kumar Mani, a renowned politician voiced the angst of the members of the Asur tribe by relating their version of the story of Goddess Durga:

The Shudra (and perhaps the unadulterated) reading of Mahishasur–Durga story goes like this. Mahish means buffalo. Mahishasur means the Buffalo Demon. Demon (asur) is different from god (sur). Sur means god. God means Brahmin or Swarna (upper caste). Surs do not work. Asur means those who

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work – in today’s parlance, workers. Mahishasur means people who rear buffalo, the buffalo-rearers, those who trade in milk -the dairy people. Asur may have changed to Ahur and then to Ahir (the present-day milkman caste). Mahishasur or the buffalo-rearers must have been the people dominating the Banga region. Racially they must have been Dravidians. They must have also been opponents of the Aryan culture. Aryans had to defeat them. These people used Durga.

In the Banga region, prostitutes mention Durga to be of their clan. Even today when one makes the Durga idol, some soil must be brought from the house of a prostitute. It took Durga nine nights to kill Mahishasur. The Brahmins who sent her waited nine nights with bated breath. This was a difficult task. If not force, deception – Force of deception. On the ninth night Durga tasted success, she killed Mahishasur. As they heard the news, the Aryans (Brahmins) were all agog. They swooped at Mahishasur’s people and cutting their heads (munda) off made a new kind of garland.(Forward Press)

They put this garland around Durga’s neck. Even Indra couldn’t do what Durga had done. But Durga was distraught by the genocide and committed suicide by jumping in the river. This, the tradition of immersing her idol in the river was born. The festival is the celebration of genocide of the natives. It’s a celebration of murder unlike in any other religion. It promotes hatred and justifies caste violence against bahunas which is the continuation of the old racial war. It must be banned. [Forward Press]

The story of the Asurs is not complete without a retelling of their story. The members of this tribe claim that a lop-sided Vedic interpretation has bracketed them in the category of demons. According to K K Leuva, author of 1963 treatise *The Asur reports*:

...A study of primitive iron smelters evidence that the Asurs are the oldest working communities of India and were inventors of iron smelting. It is also believed that Asur tribe made weapons for the battle of *Mahabharata*.

Deep in the forest, the Asur tribe has settled down on a flat topped upland called ‘pat’. Earlier they had stuck to their ancestral trade of iron smelting but now some practice shifting cultivation while others seek employment in the bauxite mines of the region.

Songs and verses sung by these traditional craft communities help preserve and perpetuate important social and technological aspects of the trade and also of living patterns. These songs are composed of simple lyrics and each one of them is sung along the same metre. Hence they are easy to memorize. Such compositions usually outlive the craft and they help the future generation understand the socio-cultural and technical aspects of past craft production. Smelting songs are popular among the Asurs. Most of them are theatrical and they are enacted or physically performed. The song explains the entire process of collecting ores, making charcoal and preparing the furnace for smelting iron. An English version of the song goes thus:

We're making *hasa* [charcoal] on the hills
 We're burning *hasa* on the hills
Hasa ready!
 We make *loha* [iron] in a *kuthi* [smelting-house] on the hills
 We forge our tools in the *kuthi* on the hills
 Lo!
 Take *sansi-kutasi* in front
 Hang the *ghana* [sledgehammer] over your shoulder
 Now let's forge the *pal* [ploughshare]
 Come on!
 Hurry up!

Sushma Asur, a poetess of the clan has undertaken the mission of giving voice to the angst of the members of her tribe. Her simplicity and talent has won the hearts of many. She was in class five when she realised that she could pen down her thoughts. But writing did not come easily to her. Initially she tore up whatever she wrote. Bhawani Prasad Mishra's poem, *Satpura ke ghane jungle*, left an indelible impression in her mind. It filled her with a zeal to compose verses about her tribe and her village. Gradually, this Asuri lady went ahead and learned Mundari, Oraon, Kurukh, Nagpuri, besides Hindi and Asuri. And she writes in both Asuri and Hindi. For many linguists, writers and mostly bilingual city-dwellers, Sushma's multilingualism is a cause for hope as these languages are seen as "disappearing" or "dying".

Growing up in Sakhuapani, travelling to Chaurapat with her friends to school, Sushma's first encounters with education are both hilarious and revealing. She was christened Maghi at birth but when she came to school she became Sushma Kumari. Her friends, Kannan, Sumari, Gani and Bharti became Manita Kumari, Shanti Kumari, Basanti Kumari and Asha Kumari at the

Hindi-medium school. The young learners had to traverse a long distance in order to learn. The girls travelled from their villages in their knee-length saris. Only inside the school premise, the girls would hurriedly change into school uniforms. They took off their trinkets and donned a look of any other school girl from town. They were ready to mix with the rest of the class. The girls usually came in early to rehearse their ‘school names’. Often, her friends Dholu and Phawla would forget their ‘proper’ names and be scolded. The teacher would also instruct them to converse in Hindi whenever possible — at home, markets, fairs and at the neighbours’, often with hilarious outcomes. But as soon as school was over, the girls cast off their acquired identities as they returned home, singing old Asuri songs, sprinting up the hills:

Yeh mandad (drum) kaun baja raha hai

Jo pahaad ki ghati tak aawaz de raha hai?

Kiski baansuri hai

Jo upar tak gaana ga rahi hai?

Sushma’s higher education years were tougher; friends were few and family troubles many. In 2007, her father passed away and later that year, her sister-in-law. With her brother’s two children and sister’s two to take care of, Sushma’s education suffered. She took refuge in reading copiously, acquainting herself with the poetry of Mahadevi Verma, Bhawani Prasad Mishra and KK Leuva’s history of Asurs, and decided to document her history and write in her language. She wrote her first poem *Asur Sangrah Ke Geet*, learned to use social media, operate recorders, travel and talk to her purakh (ancestors). Today, she says happily, there are five Asuri poets in Sakhuapani.

“You are the Asur, aren’t you,” said the man, his voice faltering a little. “So... you are like the rakshasa, the asura?” She threw her head back and laughed. Clad in a white-and-red sari, glass beads around her neck, hair pulled back in a neat bun, the gentle-looking Sushma Asur was nothing like the demonic depictions conjured up by our literature. And she was a poet. (Blink)

She beseeched other communities—particularly in the power corridor to stop celebrating the assassination of their ancestor with such grandeur:

...Ravan and Mahishasur are our ancestors and the celebration of their killing by trickery must not continue the way it has for centuries...the so called upper caste always had a grip over documentation of Indian mythology and that is the reason why the tribal perspective never got highlighted. (TOI, 11th Oct. 2013)

Words of Sushma Asur remind us of the words of Lambale and we realise that the woes of Dalits and tribals are similar in many ways:

The portrayal of us bears no resemblance to us. The picture that you have drawn of us is repulsive and distorted. You don't have the capability to create a sharp and combative image of us .. (Limbale 92)

Sushma Asur, off and on busies herself documenting unwritten tribal folklore, said:

...Tribal tales are mostly in oral form and from various Santhal, Asur and Porkhu folktales we have figured out that Mahishasur was a king and he was killed by Durga. The incident has never been revered in our community. Civilized society should give equal place to all perspectives.

When Sushma Asur is not shouting slogans against centuries-old systematic repression of their culture and religion, she sits down to compose poems. Her motivation and drive brings to mind the words of Hillary Saunders, who had concluded:

We must not let this awareness as women go too far: We are a race of people who have suffered many injustices. We are fighting for self-determination. Women must play a large part in this yet we can only hope to achieve this as one people not a race of men or women...(Saunders 81)

The members of this tribe sing about everything imaginable from fantasy to daily life chores, of conjugal love to protest. They sing of strangers and friends. It may appear that their songs are lurking at the end of each conversation they indulge in. These melodies keep company as they wander around forests and hills.

They have songs to appease Lohasur , the mythical figure of the Asur tribe, believed to be the master smelter and the God of the bloom, who ruled over the forest tracts and invented iron

smelting technology. Through songs they recall the defeat inflicted upon them by Munda Sun God, Singa Bonga.

The poems of Sushma Asur are conversational, motivational and agrarian. She pens down prophetic words, telling her people the way to live and work. The images, ideas and values put forward by her are akin to culture's antibodies that are intended to protect her people. She attempts to transform the bitterness of earthly life into something redemptive and soothing.

While reading this tribal poet's verse *Ploughing*, words of David Orr comes to mind:

...Agrarianism...is no small, whittled down philosophy for rural folks. It is, rather, a full blown philosophy rooted in the realities of soil and nature as 'the standard' by which we also come to judge more. It is grounded in farming, but is larger still. The logic of agrarianism...unfolds like a fractal through the divisions and incoherence of the modern world. ()

In the poem, *Ploughing*, the poetess urges the farmers to shrug off indolence and commence work. She points out that the fruits of hard work will bring immense satisfaction:

...Jab khet mein hal chaloge

Tab dhan bowoge...

If you plough your fields
 You will sow seeds
 Or else wild grass will grow
 Green grass will tempt goats, cows and bulls in your field
 If you plough you plough your field
 You will sow seeds
 If you plough your fields
 Each day for twelve months
 You will cultivate rice crops
 Rice saplings will keep wild grass from growing
 Rich harvest will flourish in your fields
 If you plough your fields
 You will reap a rich harvest

Rivers from high mountains will come down
 To inspect and appreciate your efforts
 Birds will sit around your fields and sing
 If you plough your fields
 You have rice to eat
 Or else spiders will spin webs in your store-rooms
 If you plough your fields
 You will real a rich harvest... (Facebook)

The poetess points out that an unploughed field will soon be covered with lush green grass that will invite goats and other grass eating animals then. Working in the fields' day in and day out will reap a rich harvest. Birds from far off lands will fly in so as to appreciate and admire the labours of a farmer. Hard work will keep the household well provided for. A good harvest will fill up the granaries too or else they would be transformed into a colony for insects. Harvest birds will flock to the abode of hard working farmers. The poet instils hope in the minds of her group members who often submit in the embrace of lethargy and lose interest in work.

Cooking, milking, churning, ploughing, sowing are all a sort of folk art for the tillers of the land. They work and then rejoice. All activities of a farmer's life endow it a sense of process and variation in keeping tune with nature.

In another poem, *Wake Up Son*, the poetess depict a day in the life of a farmer during rice harvest. A man wakes his son up early in the morning and asks him to get ready for work. He instructs his son to wake up before sunrise and head for the fields before sunrise. They would lead the bulls to the fields and proceed with the threshing of grains. The entire process of procuring rice grains from the dried and cut rice grass has been described. As the elderly man urges his son to rise, he relates that his mother will come to the fields with food. All normal hum drum activities in the life of a common farmer has been dwelled upon, the pastoral picture has been painted with a magical brush.

हम जरूर जिएंगे ही

We shall live on

पठार की तरह निडर

Fearless like the plateau

-सुषमा असुर

--Sushma Asur

पठारी क्षेत्र में तुमने

In this plateau region you

हमें (असुरों को) जन्म दिया

Gave birth to us (the Asurs)

पर जिंदा रहने के लिए रास्ता नहीं बतलाया

But never showed us the way to live

पठारी क्षेत्र में तुमने

In this plateau region, you

हमें (असुरों को) मजदूर बनाया

Turned us into working class

पर स्कूल जाने के लिए पैसा नहीं दिया

But never gave us money to go to school

हमें आगे बढ़ने के लिए रास्ता नहीं बतलाया

Never showed us the way to move on

अब तो हमारे पास भाषा नहीं है

We have no language of our own

अब तो हमारे पास संस्कृति नहीं है

No culture of our own

हम तुम्हें कैसे पुकारें

How do we address you?

हम तुम्हें किस विधि से याद करें

How do we remember you?

हे धरती के पुरखों, हे आसमान के पुरखों

Oh ancestors of the earth and sky
ओ हमारे माता-पिता, ओ सभी असुर बूढ़ा-बुढ़िया
O Parents and ancestors
तुम्हारे भोजन की जिमवारी जंगल की थी
Forests gave you food to eat
तुम्हारी मजूरी खेत की जिमवारी थी
You worked in your fields
यहां से वहां तक फैला पठार ही तुम्हारी पाठशाला थी
The entire plateau region was your school
पहाड़-झरने तुम्हें रास्ता बताते थे
Hills and waterfalls showed you the path
हे धरती के पुरखों, हे आसमान के पुरखों
O ancestors of the earth and sky
ओ हमारे माता-पिता, ओ सभी असुर बूढ़ा-बुढ़िया
O Parents and all our ancestors'
तुम सब नहीं जानते थे कचिया-ढिबा (रुपया-पैसा)
You never knew about money
तुम सब नहीं जानते थे परजीविता
You never knew about dependence
हम तुम्हें दोष नहीं देते
We do not blame you
हम तुम्हें अपनी असहायता के लिए
We would never seek your help
कोरट-कचहरी नहीं करते
We would not take refuge of judiciary
पर जब कंपनी धम धम आती है

But when commercial companies come barging in

पर जब सरकार दम दम बेदम करती है

And the Government lashes atrocities

हम किसको गोहराएं

We feel lost

हम किस छाती में आसरा ढूँढे

We seek your solace and company

हे धरती के पुरखों, हे आसमान के पुरखों

O ancestors of Earth & Sky

ओ हमारे माता-पिता, ओ सभी असुर बूढ़ा-बुढ़िया

O Parents and our ancestors

हम सीखेंगे तुम्हारी तरह बोलना

We will learn to speak like you

हम सीखेंगे तुम्हारी तरह नाचना

We will learn to dance like you

हम करेंगे शिकार तुम्हारी तरह

We will learn to hunt like you

उन सभी जानवरों का

All those animals

जो असुरों के घर खोद रहे हैं

Those who shake the foundation of Asur households

जो हमारे झरनों को फुसला-बहला रहे हैं

Those who are misleading our water falls

जिन्हें धरती और इंसान खाने की लत है

Those who have the habit of gobbling Earth and humanity

हम जरूर जिएंगे तुम्हारी तरह ही

We will learn to live like you

पठार की तरह निश्चिंत निश्छल

Content and innocent like the plateau

तुम्हारे रचे इस असुर दिसुम में

In this region created by you (Facebook)

In this poem, Sushma Asur addressed her ancestors complainingly. Her words reflect her deep love for her rich cultural past. She fondly dwells upon the innocence and purity of the bygone era when Nature was the universal teacher and the green fields the sole workplace. Her ancestors didn't have to worry about money. But the present generation has to struggle for existence. They are exploited by the greedy commercial companies who are eager to excavate all treasures that these tribals had preserved so devoutly. In their efforts, they will not mind spoiling the entire topography of the land held sacred by them for so long. The government usually turns a blind eye to the protests of the members of this group. In these moments of agony, the poetess turns to seek solace in the arms of her beloved ancestors. She also assures them that life for the present generation will continue. They will not give up under the present difficult times.

Sushma Asur is the first poetess of her tribe who not composes poems but also avidly preserves those left behind by her revered ancestors. Recently she posted on her blog:

Johar(salam),

I am sushma asur from netarhat (Jharkhand). The aboriginal tribes here are in big trouble. Our lands have been captured by Birla Group for mining bauxite. Thereby snatching our only source of livelihood, things are worse than being hand to mouth.. The government is silent and keeping numb. My father Khambila Asur died three years back leaving me alone and helpless. We would suffer such consequences due to industrial mining, we never had even thought. We Asur, are grateful to Jharkhandi Bhasha SAHITYA SANSKRITI AKHRA organisation who have supported us and given us a voice. Now, we are trying to preserve our rich culture and wisdom and starting an unorthodox school. Also, involving the old people from our Asur community to impart their priceless wisdom, an effort to save it from losing it completely. These include folk culture, folk songs and stories, medication through herbs and roots

etc. I need your support in doing so. U may come forward in helping us by:-

1. a HD video camera
2. an audio recorder
3. a laptop to store data
4. a mac pc for compiling, editing, subtitling collected audio-video.

We need these items in order to document, record and preserve our endangered wisdom from being extinct. (Facebook)

Thirty year old Sushma Asur is now re-discovering the history and culture of her ancestors. She proudly quips: 'I am the first Asur to document our history'. Well equipped with a camera and a notebook, she is now documenting Asur poetry and folklore—one that speaks of the shade of semar, papal, gulnar and tales of ghosts and witches.

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