

Essays - 4.

Tribal Verse

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Q. 1 Identify the common characteristics shared by tribal communities all over the world.

Answer:

Tribal communities all over the world share common characteristics. They live in groups that are cohesive and organically unified. They show very little interest in accumulating wealth or in using labor to gather interest and capital. They accept a world-view in which nature, human beings and God are intimately linked and they believe in the human ability to spell and interpret truth. They live more by intuition than reason, they consider the space around them more sacred than secular, and their sense of time is personal rather than objective.

Q. 2 What distinguishes the tribal imagination from the secular imagination?

Answer:

The tribal imagination, unlike the secular imagination, is dreamlike and hallucinatory. It admits fusion between various planes of existence and levels of time in a natural way. In tribal stories, oceans fly in the sky as birds, mountains swim in the water as fish, animals speak as humans and stars grow like plants, which is highly unlike the secular imagination. Spatial order and temporal sequence do not restrict the narrative in the tribal imagination.

Q. 3 How does G.N. Devy bring out the importance of the oral literary tradition?

Answer:



G.N Devy, through his essay, attempts to highlight the richness of the oral literary tradition. He believes that literary compositions in many Indian languages are not considered as literature because they have remained only spoken. These languages are a feast for the folklorist, anthropologist and linguist but, to a literary critic, they generally mean nothing. Many nomadic Indian communities who are spread over long distances still survive as communities because they are bound by their oral epics. He emphasizes the enormity of wealth and variety of these works. G.N. Devy, for many years, collected songs and stories that circulate in India's tribal languages, and was overwhelmed by their number and their profound influence on the tribal communities. He advocates that the deserved recognition be given this rich literature.

Q. 4 List the distinctive features of the tribal arts.

Answer:

G.N. Devy lists certain distinctive characteristics of tribal arts, one of which is their unique manner of constructing space and imagery, which might be described as 'hallucinatory'. In both oral and visual forms of representation, tribal artists seem to interpret verbal or pictorial space as demarcated by an extremely flexible frame. The boundaries between art and non-art become almost invisible in tribal arts. Tribal paintings merge with living space as if the two were one and the same. There is no deliberate attempt to follow a sequence. Tribal paintings also contain a curious mixture of traditional and modern imagery.

Q. 5 'New literature' is a misnomer for the wealth of the Indian literary tradition. How does G.N. Devy explain this?

Answer:

Classifying tribal literature as 'new literature' is comical, at least to the literary community in India. It is a matter of being unaware of its existence, with absolutely no fault of the tribals themselves. The literature itself isn't new, it is the attempt to see the imaginative



expression in tribal language that is new. G.N. Devy thus emphasizes the need to hear tribal speech not as a dialect but as a language.

TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT

Q. 1 Discuss the following in pairs or in groups of four

‘It is time to realize that unless we modify the established notion of literature as something written, we will silently witness the decline of various Indian oral traditions.’

Answer:

Literature should no longer be considered as something written. It is necessary that we remind ourselves that any depiction with a meaning, whether written or not, should constitute as literature. A failure to do so, as G.N. Devy said, will lead to a silent decline of Indian oral traditions. The numerous tribes and their oral compositions will be lost in our stubborn attempt to limit literature to something written.

Q. 2 Discuss the following in pairs or in groups of four

‘Tribal arts are not specifically meant for sale.’ Does this help or hamper their growth and preservation?

Answer:

Tribals arts, being non-commercial in purpose, helps in the growth and preservation of tribal arts. They are usually a unique mixture of the sacred and ordinary. They often carry a playful tone, although sacred to a certain extent. In fact, listening to tribal epics can be great fun as heroes are not spared of artist’s humor. The tribal artists do expect a certain amount of patronage from the community, like artists in any other context. But, since those performing rituals are very often artists themselves, there is no element of competition in the patron-artist relationship. The tribal arts are, therefore, relaxed, never tense.

Q. 3 Discuss the following in pairs or in groups of four



Because India's tribal communities are basically bilingual there is a danger of dismissing their languages as dialects of India's major tongues.

Answer:

Many fail to notice that all of India's tribal communities are basically bilingual and that all bilingual communities have an innate capacity to assimilate outside influences into their own language. It is indeed a highly evolved mechanism for responding to the non-tribal world. In fact, the tribal oral stories and songs employ bilingualism in such a complex manner that a linguist who is not alert to this complexity often dismiss the tribal languages as dialects of India's major tongues.

Q. 4 Discuss the following in pairs or in groups of four

While tribal communities may not seem to possess the scientific temper, there are many ideas from tribal conventions that could enrich modern societies.

Answer:

Although the tribal communities didn't quite possess the scientific temper, their way of living teaches a lot. Their close relationship with the nature and its offerings is appreciable. They are untouched by the evils of the society that haunt us today. The Kondh tribe for instance do not follow the practice of dowry, instead they fix a price for the bride which the groom pays in cash or kind. Their simple way of living and their proximity with the nature is a lesson for the modern societies.

APPRECIATION

Q. 1 How does 'A Munda Song' show that the perspective of the tribal mind towards the girl child is different from that of (other) mainstream communities?

Answer:



A Munda song is known to be sung at the birth of a son or daughter and it invariably communicates their close association with nature. The birth of a daughter is associated with a cowshed full of cows and that of the son with its depletion. It is therefore clear that the daughter is considered to be a more precious asset than the son. This is probably because, in Munda society, the women have a dominant role to play in the various economic, social and ritual activities.

Q. 2 How does 'A Kondh Song' substantiate the tribal urge to gain domination over time by conversing with their dead ancestors?

Answer:

The Kondh tribe believes in the existence of gods and spirits. A Kondh song is usually sung at the death of a person beseeching the spirit of the dead to stop troubling the living. It is based on the Kondh belief that people love their homes so much that their souls are reluctant to leave the hearth even after death. These spirits, though generally kind, can become harmful at times since they are now unable to participate in earthly life. It is, therefore, customary to make generous offerings to the spirit. The song begins by saying that the dead spirit will be able to receive offerings only if the

others in the family continue to live and prosper. They reveal their willingness to do anything to make the spirit happy but, in return, the spirit must also promise not to trouble them with its visits.

Q. 3 'Adi Song for the Recovery of Lost Health' is in Miri Agom while Adi Agom is the Adi community's language for routine conversation. How does this reflect upon the high level of language sensitivity of the Adi? Can you think of other parallels in modern languages between the literary variety and the colloquial variety?

Answer:



Miri Agom is a highly rhythmic language which is used by the Adi tribe to chant their rituals. This is different from their regular conversational language, Adi Agom. The differentiated languages for routine conversation and chanting of rituals shows the high level of language sensitivity of the Adi. Such parallels can be observed in other modern languages like English and Hindi as well, where a difference in literary variety and colloquial variety exists.

LANGUAGE WORK

Q. 1 Comment on the symbols used in ‘A Munda Song’. What aspect of the tribal worldview do they reflect?

Answer:

The symbols of a Munda song

στοωτηεπροξιμιτσοφτηετριβαλσωιτηνατυρε.
τηειρλιωεσαρεσψνχηρονισεδωιτητηεχηανγινγρηψητημσοφνατυρε,
τηεσεασονσ, τηερισινγανδσετινγοφτηεσυνανδσοον.
τηισισαχομμοναςπεχτοφτηετριβαλωορλδωιδε.

Q. 2 Explain the significance of the lines ‘I tie this Ridin creeper to fasten your soul to your body.’

Answer:

Ridin is a creeper that is supposed to have special medicinal qualities. It is said that the Ridin creeper will tie the spirit of good health to the body to ensure its continued presence.

Q. 3 What is the central argument of the speaker?

Answer:

The author G.N. Devy, through his essay ‘Tribal Verse’ attempts to familiarize people with some aspects of the enormous wealth of oral tribal literature. It begins with an extract from an essay by G.N. Devy in which he discusses the need to create a space for the study of tribal



literature within the framework of canonized written texts. He argues for a new method to identify and read literature in which orality is not dismissed as casual utterances in different dialects.