

CHAPTER IV

INDIAN TRIBAL LIFE IN CORBETT'S WORKS

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CHAPTER - IV

INDIAN TRIBAL LIFE IN CORBETT'S WORKS :

(A) Introductory

This chapter presents the documentation of the contemporary tribal life in the selected works of Jim Corbett for the study. It is related to the social, cultural, economic and realistic life conditions of the tribal life in Kumaon region and at Mokameh Ghat.

As stated in the second chapter, the northern mountain ranges and the Monsoon climate have helped the evolution of a prosperous human life in the Kumaon region i.e. foothills of the Himalaya. The physical features of the region greatly influence the human activities and they provide definite guidance to human life in that region. The Kumaon region has a typical topography rich for its agriculture and significant location for the trade between Tibet and India. This had definitely resulted in its distinct regional tribal culture. The area presents a good example of man-animal harmony where animals and tribal people co-exist in peace in the tranquil life of the forest. A number of small villages are located at the outskirts of the forest. The tribal livelihood is mainly from cultivation and cattle rearing.

Jim Corbett spent his life in the company of tribals in Kumaon region for pretty long time and had keen observation of their life-style. It was out of his relationship with peasants that his autobiographical work *My India* was written and published in 1953 in the form of character sketches. *My India* is virtually an encyclopedia of the tribal life in Kumaon region. It records details of various castes, tribes, their lifestyle, provinciality, domestic life and

social ethos as witnessed by him during his longer stay in the region and for his hunting and work expeditions especially at Mokameh Ghat. These accounts include both domestic and social convention, customs and practices, beliefs, individual attitudes, economic conditions, social conduct, marriage system and superstitions, etc. In addition, he records the lifestyles of the village elites and official in this area. It also records his passing remarks on reciprocal relationship of tribals and wildlife.

Corbett has developed such a great affinity for the tribals in Kumaon that he dedicates his book *My India* to them. He has possessive love for them and India. He writes about them,

“In My India, the India I know, there are four hundred million people, ninety per cent of whom are simple, honest, brave, loyal, hard-working souls whose daily prayer to God, and to whatever Government is in power, is to give them security of life and of property to enable them to enjoy the fruits of their labours.”¹

His *My India* is a picture gallery of character-sketches ‘The simple folk’ among whom he spent seventy years.”² It shows that Corbett’s main intention is to write *My India* to portray the obscure common tribals in their routine life style with their uncommon qualities. Some of them are his close intimate friends e.g. *Chamari*³, *Kunwar Singh*⁴, *Mothi*⁵.

(B) Village Life in the Region

The first chapter of *My India, The Queen of the village* presents everyday village life in the Kumaon region. After describing the location and topography of the village, Corbett admires local tribals as,

“The stout hearted people, who with infinite labour have made these a row of stone houses with slate roofs bordering the rough and narrow road that turns from the Bhabar and the plains beyond, to the inner Himalayas.”⁶

Corbett rushed to that village from Mokameh Ghat on the invitation of the village folk to kill a man-eating leopard. After his futile search for the tiger he came back to the village and was well-treated by the village headman’s wife. She was from the Brahmin elite class of the tribal society. Corbett comments on her fairness and her frank and liberal access in public life in the following words,

“Standing near these chairs to welcome us is the wife of the headman; There is no purdah here and she will not be embarrassed if you take a good look at her, and she is worth looking at.”⁷

Corbett appreciates that she was not a victim like other women of the Purdah system prevailing in India. This is his realistic observation on the status of a woman in tribal society. Though the

village headman is a widow she commands equal respect as a male village headman.

In *Pre-Red-Tape Days*,⁸ Corbett points out the free status of woman among the tribals in the Terai region.

“This aboriginal tribe, living in the unhealthy Terai, is renowned for two sterling qualities – cleanliness, and the independence of the women.”⁹

Corbett refers Tilni’s boldness to comment on the freedom given to the young married woman by the tribal society. She stood firmly in front of a crowd, including two white men to plead her case.¹⁰

Corbett observes that there is a convention to decide the village authority by superior caste and the family inheritance, and not by financial or other factors. The village headman’s word is the final law.

The Brahmin caste is considered to be superior and alone it can be selected as a village authority in the form of the village headman. The widow enjoys the same status that of a male village authority. Corbett throws light on this tribal convention in his statement,

”.....This dear old lady administers, but her rule is never questioned..... but because she is Brahmin, the salt of India’s earth.”¹¹

This comment speaks of the superiority of the Brahmin community, the village authority and equal status of women in the public life of the tribals. They respect their respective ancestry. This is their social system. Jim observes,

“Pride of pure ancestry is inherent in all men, but nowhere is there greater respect for pure ancestry than there is in India.”¹²

Further Corbett deals with the social customs of the tribals. It was the social custom that women do not wear shoes. The widow, therefore, was barefoot. Corbett presents a typical village system in the region. Bania is the most lively and representative character.¹³ He represents the ‘business community’ in the Kumaon region. Corbett records their communication system as,

“No daily paper has ever found its way into this village, and the only news the inhabitants get of the outside world is from an occasional trip into Naini Taland from way-farers, the best-informed of whom are the packmen.”¹⁴

These packmen bring news to the region from distant parts of India and send their news about the region in trading centers.

Corbett admires the hospitality of the village tribals. If the guest refuses or pays for the tea, food or anything else they feel insulted.

“..... for these simple and hospitable peopleand it would be as great an insult to offer to pay the dear old lady for her cup of tea as..... to pay the bania for his packet of cigarettes.”¹⁵

Corbett observes eating and drinking habits of the tribals. He admires their simplicity and compares them with the advanced world as,

“Milk is the strongest drink that has ever been served, except for those few who have come in contact with what is called civilization, our hill men do not drink. Drinking among women, in my India is unknown.”¹⁶

This is Corbett's universal experience in every village in Kumaon region. He specially acknowledges the goodwill towards and affection for the guests by tribals in the area. Thus his deliberate attempt to make the reader familiar with the tribal village is successful.

(C) Social Traditions :

Corbett comments on the tribal traditions marriage system and lifestyle in general in *My India*. He observes the tribal life in greater depth in *The Law of the Jungles*.¹⁷

While providing the details of the poor family Corbett passes critical remarks on the prevailing marriage system. Harkwar and Kunthi, the couple got married when they were children. They had not seen each other until the day of marriage. The parents are compelled to arrange the marriages of the children in the family at tender age to retain the respect of the community. Corbett mentions the feelings of the parents and the role of the village bania, the priest. Corbett found that the early marriage brought no significant change in girl's life except the restriction of wearing one-piece dress. The girl gets married at very tender age but soon after

the marriage she returns to parents house until she comes of age to live with her husband.

Corbett observes that after the marriage the bride loses her original name and she is referred to by her husband's name. But when she becomes a mother of her first child, she is called after that child's name. For example, Kunthi ¹⁹ is called as 'Harkwar's Wife' before she is mother. Later on, she is called as ' Punwa's mother' by the tribals. Corbett records the tradition of the child – marriage system and the role of the girl in the household of the family.

Similarly, there is a tradition to refer to married man as the father of the firstborn child Corbett quotes,

“ No woman in our part of India ever refers to her husband, or address him by name. Before children are born after children come he is addressed as the father of the firstborn.”²⁰

When Mothi ⁽²¹⁾ became the father of the three children, the eldest was Punwa, so to his wife he was 'Punwas's father' and his wife to everyone in the village was 'Punwas's mother.'

(D) Poverty and Economic Conditions of the Tribals :

Corbett shows his concern for the poverty in the region. He comments on the economic conditions of the tribals as,

“There are no drones in poor man's household in India; young and old have

their allotted work to do and they do it cheerfully.”²²

Similarly in *The Brothers* ²³ , he describes the poverty in the region. He describes the poverty of Narwa and concludes,

“With the exception of professional beggars, the poor in India can only eat when they work.”²⁴

Thus Corbett observes that all the members of the poor family have to work for the subsistence. He also records the significance of money and health in the society in *Chamari*.²⁵ When his assistant Chamari began to earn more money than other workers at Mokameh Ghat, his social status was raised considerably. Corbett therefore says,

“In India, a man’s worth is assessed to a great extent, by the money he is earning...”²⁶

However, Corbett came to know that despite their poverty tribals are not greedy and money-minded. He presents two examples to show their selfishness. Harkwar and Kunthi announced the reward of fifty rupees for bringing their lost children. But the herdsman who brought the lost children from the densest part of the jungle refused to accept the prize money.²⁷

In *Pre- Red- Tape Days* ²⁸ also Corbett describes the generosity of the petitioners, Chadi who gives up the amount of compensation considering the poverty of his friend.

“Kalu and I be the men of the same village
..... he will need all his money. So permit

me, Your Honour, to return this money to him."²⁹

(E) The Caste-System and the Exploitation

Corbett mildly attacks indecent traditional contemporary practice of the exploitation of the depressed classes by the contemporaries. He convinces it through the portrayal of the characters Budhu and Chamari,³⁰ the victims of the traditional social attitude to the depressed classes. Corbett expresses his compassion in one short, simple but significantly meaningful sentence,

"His story is the story of millions of poor people in India."³¹

At Mokameh Ghat Corbett started a school for the children of labourers and lower-paid railway staff at Mokameh Ghat. However, he faced difficulties in the outset due to the prevailing caste-system for keeping the high and low caste students in one and the same room of his school. He realized the negative impact of the caste-system in the social set up of tribals and he makes a mention of it in his *The Queen of the Villages, Budhu and Chamari*. In *Mothi*³² Corbett relates his delicate appearance and finely chiselled features as a mark of distinction of the high-caste people in India.

So tribals were not free from the practice of caste-system and ill-treatment to the depressed class usually observed by the urban people.

However, Corbett did not believe in the caste-system and class ascendancy. So he appointed Chamari as the headman of two hundred workers belonging to Brahmin, Chattri and Thakur

castes. Chamari was an untouchable person but Corbett realized his real worth and his loyalty. He pays tribute to Chamari in following words,

“Chamari was a heathen, according to our Christian belief and the lowest of India’s Untouchables, but if I am privileged to go where he has gone, I shall be content.”³³

(F) Superstitions and Religious faith :

Corbett shows that tribals had deep faith and confidence in the religion. The grief stricken couple in *The Law of the Jungles* consulted the village priest and selected the propitious day to start search expedition of their children. They believed that they lost their children because of the anger of Gods.

The incident of Kunwar Singh’s sickness depicts superstitions and religious faith of the tribals. His addiction to opium is referred to as “The curse of our foothills.”³⁵ When Kunwar Singh was on his deathbed in a small cottage, the tribals followed various religious rituals to cure him. For example, they asked him to hold the tail of a cow, because, according to Hindu faith it brings relief to the patient. On account of superstitions he suffered more intensely. However, Corbett drove away all the superstitious people from cottage and was able to cure Kunwar Singh from his deathbed. This shows Corbett’s awareness of prevailing superstitions of the tribals and his timely proper help to them.

Corbett has mentioned some of the superstitions of the tribals in *Jungle Lore*. The tribals never speak about the tiger intentionally in the jungle, as they believe that the tiger really

appears in front of them if they do so, His poacher friend, Kunwar Singh, therefore, warned him,

“never speak of tiger by its name; for if you do, the tiger is sure to appear.”³⁶

The tribals are confident about the presence of the supernatural in the jungle. They believe that all the evil spirits living in the jungle appear in various forms and the churail, was the most feared of all evil spirits. It appears in the form of a woman, whose feet are turned the wrong way and she mesmerizes her victims. Corbett says,

“the other is known to all the people who live along the foothills of Himalayas, as a churail.”³⁷

Dansay was Corbett's childhood friend. As mentioned in the previous chapter, he told him (Corbett) the ghost stories. Corbett believes that it is due to his friendship with the tribals that he became superstitious. So Corbett criticizes him as,

“Living among the people, it was natural for Dansay to have super imposed their superstitions on his own.”³⁸

Corbett observes that hill men do not lack courage but because of their superstitious nature they never attempt to investigate the truth.³⁹ Thus Corbett had perfect understanding of tribal superstitions.

Corbett has mentioned some of religious faiths of the tribals. His friend Mothi was held responsible for the death of an old cow by the villagers. A cow is regarded as sacred animal in Hindu religion. The village priest asked him to make a pilgrimage to

Hardwar.⁴⁰ Moti had to undergo ritual of self-purification and penance. The main priest at Hardwar ordered him to give up his favourite things. So he gave up shooting and eating meat. Corbett comments on his death as,

“The poor of India are fatalist, and in addition have little stamina to fight disease.”⁴¹.

He found one more Hindu faith regarding the river waters. The river water is sacred one the water of Ganges is more sacred and that too the water of the right bank of Ganges is supposed to be holier than the water on the left bank. He saw three Brahmin servants of the Maharaja of Nepal carrying such holiest Ganges water from here to eighty miles away.⁴²

G] Sense of Brotherhood Among the Tribals:

Corbett observes a great sense of brotherhood among the tribals. Amidst various hardships of life they show respect for each other and always extend a hand of co-operation, offer help for the needy people. Corbett has mentioned few incidents which throw light on this aspect of the tribal life.

The Brothers⁴³ records a sense of brotherhood among the tribals. One comes to know how Haria rescued his friend Narwa from the fierce angry tiger in the jungle. Haria was alone and unarmed in the vast expanse of the jungle but he courageously dragged away his companion from an angry tiger. Corbett admires Haria because he saved his friend without any expectation of reward either from Narwa or from the Government.

Corbett provides a good example of the mutual understanding among the tribals. He has described the traditional system of cultivating land known as 'Sagee'. Mothi took on a partner 'Sagee' as the cultivation of the six acres of land was beyond his capacity.⁴⁴ This system involves a partner in cultivation who receives free board and lodging and half of the crops produced in the year.

Corbett has mentioned one of the social customs which exemplifies fellow-feelings among the tribals. It is noteworthy that Corbett himself followed this tribal custom throughout his life. He says,

"It was the custom in our village, a custom to which I also adhered, for an animal shot by one to be shared by all"⁴⁵

Thus the tribals share among them the animal shot, and enjoy it as banquet.

Corbett reviews the British Administrative system of his time in *Pre-Red-Tape Days*. The tribals took help of British officials to settle their disputes with mutual understanding without any prestige issue of their problems and arrive at amicable settlement with broad mindedness and allow each other to live healthy and peaceful life. Chadi and Kalu solved their disputes by mutual understanding.⁴⁶ While taking back his petition against Kalu, Chadi said;

"Kalu and I be men of the same village, and as he has now two mouths to feed, one of which requires special food, he will need all

his money. So permit me, Your Honour, to return this money to him.”⁴⁷

Corbett appreciates the sense of brotherhood and the unity of the poor people in *Life At Mokameh Ghat*.⁴⁸ He observed the poor workers of Mokameh Ghat for twenty one years. Corbett expresses his gratitude in following words,

“....., I am thankful that my men and I served India at a time when the interest of one was the interest of all, and when Hindu, Mohammedan, Depressed class, and Christians could live, work, and play together in perfect harmony.”⁴⁹

Corbett found a sense of fraternity among poor Indians, therefore he says,

“....., for the poor of India have no enmity against each other.”⁵⁰

H] The Tribals and The Wild Life :

Corbett's account of the tribal life shows that they are not hostile to the wild animals. In the third chapter of *My India, Mothi* he has referred to the damage caused by the wild pigs and porcupines and the subsequent efforts of the tribals to protect their crops.

“To protect their crops the tenants used to erect a thorn fence round the entire village,.....”⁵¹

He has mentioned that the Government permitted the use of only one single-barreled muzzle-loading gun and it was shared by all the villagers to protect their crops. He says,

“ Though the gun accounted for a certain number of pigs and porcupines, which were the worst offenders, the nightly damage was considerable, for the village was isolated and surrounded by forests.”⁵²

Corbett therefore decided to built a masonry wall round the village, ‘Choti Haldwani’ when he purchased it.⁵³

Thus living on the fringe of the jungle, man-beast conflict is unavoidable. Corbett has mentioned incidents of man-beast conflicts in *My India* and *Jungle Lore*. However, he observes that majority of the incidents are accidents. Mothi’s encounter with the tiger was an accident. In *The Brothers*, Corbett shows that tiger’s attack on Narwa was also an accident. After thorough investigation of that incident he derives the conclusion that the tiger had no intention of killing Narwa.⁵⁴

“The encounter was accidental, for the grass was too thick and too high for the tiger to have seen Narwa before he bumped into him.”⁵⁵

Similarly it was mistake of Har Singh to offend the tiger in the jungle which resulted in the fierce attack on him.⁵⁶

Kunwar Singh was Corbett’s close friend in his jungle expeditions. He learnt many things about the jungle and the wildlife during the first few years of his explorations. Then Sher Singh became his friend due to his involvement in the jungle life. Corbett describes him as the happiest child in the village. Corbett says that the jungle was Sher Singh’s playground.⁵⁷ Sher Singh had enjoyed the jungle like Corbett himself. He was intelligent and observant.

His knowledge of jungle was incredible. Corbett has described his friendship with his foster-brother Lalu, a young bull. Corbett observes that Sher Singh was more happy in the jungles than anywhere.

He was the reliable informer of jungle life for Corbett. After his untimely death Punwa became his assistant in the hunting expeditions. Corbett gives account of the expedition in which both of them escaped from the attack of an injured wild pig. Later on, Mothi accompanied Corbett in the jungles.

“Mothi had been my constant companion in the Kaladhungi jungles for many years.”⁵⁸

Corbett shows that the tribals derive pleasure in hunting and eating meat of the wild animals especially sambhar and wild pigs. They love hunting but it is not their main occupation. They live on cultivation and cattle rearing. The tribals are not professional hunters, so they hunt occasionally.

I] Corbett's Humanitarianism :

Corbett is not a passive observer of the tribal life. He had an earnest desire to improve their life conditions in all aspects as a close friend of the tribals. He had philanthropical attitude to the tribals. Like Naini Tal and Kaladhungi, he had good rapport with native people at Mokameh Ghat. He had tremendous knowledge about the forest in which they were living. He was able to understand the dialects of their language. He understood their culture and religion very well. He could write *My India* because he had great fascination for observing people of all types. He has mentioned his interest in the study of human beings as,

“.....it gave me an opportunity of indulging in one of my hobbies -----
The study of human beings.”⁵⁹

Corbett, himself belonged to the ruling class but he always treated his fellowmen like brothers. He became friendly with the tribals, workers and the depressed classes. He always thought about their welfare. He became the patron, the counsellor, the doctor, the teacher and the guide for them. One can understand his sympathy for poor and downtrodden class if one reads character-sketches of Budhu, Lalajee, Kunwar Singh, Chamari, Sher Singh and Mothi in *My India*. They are the beneficiaries of his generous help. The character sketch of Lalajee ⁶⁰ shows Corbett's attitude towards the suffering people.

To sum up, Corbett has tried to probe deep into the relationship between man and nature. His sense of satisfaction in helping the poor of India is correlated with his realization of their true qualities. He appreciates, therefore, loyalty of the Indians throughout his book *My India*. He gives credit of the success of Mokameh Ghat work which lasted for twenty two years to the team-work and loyalty of his workers. His home was a secluded place, fourteen miles away from the town. When he went to Europe to participate in the war his sister Maggie was all alone at Kaladhungi. But he never became anxious about her safety and security. He has expressed his deep faith and absolute trust in the village folk.

“Her safety gave me no anxiety, for I knew she was safe among my friends, The poor of India.”⁶¹

The significance of the tribal life is first step towards recognition of peaceful co-existence. The tribals live simple and

rural life in the midst of Nature. To be intimate with them is the right approach towards ecological balance. Therefore, Corbett's approach and involvement in the tribal life and traditions become very important factor in assessing his jungle literature. He learnt many things about the jungle from the tribals e.g. Kunwar Singh and Sher Singh etc. It is very remarkable that while portraying his characters, Corbett describes their social and family background too. *My India* reveals his sharp observation of Indian tribal life, traditions and folklores. Corbett depicts all the aspects of tribal life very vividly.

At the same time one comes to know of Corbett's interest in observing people, his curiosity and kindness towards the tribals. He has friendship with them. Corbett had philanthropical attitude to the tribals. He emerges as extremely adaptable person.

CHAPTER - IV

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