



## Tribals in Kamala Markandaya's "*The Coffer Dam*"

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### Abstract

India has been a vibrant and viable mixture of races, languages, religions and cultures since pre-historic times. The term "tribe", derived from the Latin *tribua*, originally meant a political unit, and was later used to refer to social groups defined by the territory they occupied. Owing to certain social and religious constraints they have an inferior status in society which now fast disappearing by provisions of constitutions and also progressive socialistic ideas. Many writers have profusely dealt with rural life, touched upon tribals as such in their writing. However, the references to the tribal life are insignificantly scattered here and there in Indian English novel.

This research paper seeks highlights the tribal beliefs and practices, customs and traditions, rites and rituals, feasts and festivals, songs and dance as presented in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dam*.

**Key words:** Tribals, constraints, socialistic, rites.

### Introduction:

Kamala Markandaya has emerged as one of the eminent Indian novelists writing in English who burst upon literary scene with ten published novels after 1950s. In her novels, she has extensively dealt with contemporary Indian problems—social, political, cultural and economic. Her sixth novel *The Coffer Dam* (1969) presents the picture of a tribal village near which the British engineers, Howard Clinton and Mackendrick, intend to build a big dam to control and channelize a turbulent river "that rose in the Lakes and valleys of the south Indian highlands and thundered through inaccessible gorges and jungles down to the plains with prodigal waste" (p. 9).

An English woman recently married to a self-styled British engineer, Howard Clinton, Helen comes from England to India along with her husband who has to complete the construction of the dam on a south Indian river as per the contract made with the Government of India. The British engineers, Clinton and Mackendrick, along with their families and assistants come to India and occupy the tribal village forcing the poor tribals to shift to some less convenient place. Thus, at initial stages the preparation for the construction of the dam affect the tribesmen badly.

The laborers employed in the construction of the dam are the poor tribal of the adjoining area. Bashiam, a skilled technician belonging to the tribal society by birth, is the chief crane operator. Nicknamed by the British engineer' Howard Clinton as 'junglywallah', Bashiam is an educated member of tribal community about whom the narrator says:

"He was not like the others, a product of technical training colleges that were being urged into being up and down the country -. He had been born in these

hills, had followed the traditional craft of woodcutting until they began building the hydro-electric station, further up the river, uprooting his family, indeed his whole village, to do so. Bashiam had gone back out of curiosity and staved, spell-bound by the workings of the strange powerful turbine. A discerning foreman had given him employment, and in course of it he had learnt about electricity and machines, about building and repairing and dismantling, welding his new learning on to an older, part-inherited knowledge that inhibited him, prevented him falling in line with the others. They made their plans, reduced by statistics but he had seen what a cyclone could do, had cowered before the storms that swept down the hills to burst in the valleys, know what mincemeat a rogue monsoon could make in one night of the most careful design. It was not easy for him to shed his misgivings, although his later training made him acknowledge that despite them planning was essential” (p. 23).

For Clinton, as to the Indians, Bashiam, despite being an educated and skilled technician, is a junglywallah having a low status because of his roots in tribal community to which he is now a stranger because of his growing affinity with the British staff in general and Clinton's wife in particular. As regards Clinton's attitude to Bashiam the narrator remarks:

“Bashiam seemed to him to be riddled with fears, in thrall to the spirits of forest and rain like the hill tribesmen, he was still at heart. Even the other Indians kept him apart, a stranger in the midst, calling him junglywallah as he had taken to doing. Junglywallah: A man of a jungle. A Primitive just come down off the trees. Englishman and Hindu alike looked down their fine Aryan noses and overtly spurned the aborigine” (p. 24).

A few days of stay in India's tribal dominated area drives Clinton's wife, Helen, to develop intimacy with tribals whose huts attract her more than the grand bungalows in which she failed to enjoy the fullness of life. In order to satisfy her inner urge to identify herself with tribals she frequently visits the tribals huts. Her predilection towards tribals grows day by day. As the narrator puts it:

“Helen got on well with the tribesmen. He had seen groups of them gathered round her in their compound or accompanying her if she returned after sunset from her wandering” (p.25).

Helen's relationship with her husband suffers a jerk due to her growing intimacy with tribals. Led by her inner urge to herself with tribals, she leaves the bungalow without the permission of her husband and drifts into the jungle without worrying the least about what her husband will think on knowing that she values tribals over him.

Clinton is antipathetic towards tribals whereas his wife, Helen, and his fellow engineer, Mackendrick, are sympathetic to them. His vision of the dam blinds him to the tribal community to which Helen is irresistibly drawn. He considers the tribals as savages and sods whereas she regards them as perfect human beings. When Clinton imposes mass fines on tribesmen, Helen strongly opposes this step of her husband and helps them with food to ward off starvation deaths. Helen's attachment to tribals leads to her strained relationship with Clinton. He tries to make her realize that the tribals don't deserve the esteem in which she is holding them. His mind is full of questions

as to why she has developed deep attachment to tribals. Expressing his reservations at his wife's predilection for the tribal community he says:

“What of a tribe whose outstanding characteristic in his view was the severe retardation of its civilization or of the glib communication she had established with a people who presented to him only the blank opacities of their total incomprehension?” (p. 35).

Helen's excursion to the tribal village gives her an opportunity to come closer to the tribal life. Here, she gets wonderfully pleasant experiences of which she would have remained deprived throughout her life if she had not visited this tribal village. No sooner she mix herself with tribals than she that she is the one who internally belongs to the tribal world which holds the promise of true happiness to her. As the narrator says:

“She played with the children, watched the crops grow, watched women at work, sat herself with watching and most of all she marveled that such full and rounded out living could go on, on so feeble and flimsy a footing. The fragile hug man and a boy could put up in a day or a determined wind demolish in less: the primitive patches of surface root crops of a community with one harvest in mind, rather than the recurrent cycle of growth: the haphazard clearing, overshadowed by encroaching forest: on these-- impermanent flyaway foundations, whole people build whole lives” (p. 43).

To understand the language of tribals and convey her thought, to them Helen needs the help of an interpreter. Purposefully, she approaches Krishnan who refuses to render her any help. Then, she hopefully turns to Bashiam who contrary to Krishnan, happily agrees to serve as a link between her and the members of his community. As Bashiam knows the tribal more than anybody' else due to his long association with this community, he can acquaint Helen with tribal ethos to her lull satisfaction. As for his role as a link between Helen tribals the narrator remarks:

“Bashiam, the hillman whom they called jungiywallah or even more. disparagingly the junglywallah became her linkman providing the information she sought of a country and the people who intrigued her, whetting a curiosity' with which she had always been liberally endowed. The curiosity grew with each encounter, no longer satisfied with watching, but wanting to know: entry achieved, now seeking performance. He helped to quench her wanting to know, and she gave him generous credit. He finally declined it” (p. 44).

Helen's conversation with Bashiam encompasses a large number of issue concerning tribals including Bashiam himself. She showers on Bashiam a number of question regarding tribals. Bashiam tries his best to satisfy her by telling her as much he knows about them. To a few of questions he has no answers. The following dialogue between Helen and Bashiam underlines an English woman's sympathy with Indian tribals:

Once she said to him. 'Do you know what they call you behind your back?'  
'Junglywallah,' he said at once without hesitation.  
'Do you know what it means?'  
'A man of the jungle. An uncivilized man.'  
'What it really means,' she said cruelly, 'is someone who does not count. Someone who gets kicked around and does not do anything to stop it.'  
He said slowly. 'Do you mean me?'  
She said quietly, 'There used to be a village where the bungalows are...where our bungalow is. A tribal village.'  
A small settlement yes.'  
'When they were told to go, they went.'  
'Yes.'  
'Without protest. Like animals.'  
I suppose you could put it like that.'  
She said, 'You were, you Are the member of that tribe. It was their land. They did not want to leave it, they were persuaded. why did they allow themselves to be? Why did you? Without even protesting?' (pp.48-49).

The presence of an English woman in a tribal village is a matter of great happiness for the entire tribal community. Children, men and women of the tribal village are extremely happy to think that a representative of the British who ruled over India for long is among them to boost their importance in the eyes of the people belong to the civilized world. Helen loves the tribals for the reasons for which her husband, Clinton, hates them. On the one hand, Helen is infatuated by the way the tribals live their miserable life, on the other, Clinton gets filled with contempt for them the moment they come close to him. She gives a great importance to the tribal beliefs, customs, rites and rituals whereas Clinton rejects them as instances of ignorance. When Helen tells Clinton that snakes are always harmless, he laughs at her for holding on to the false facts told to her by the ignorant and superstitious tribals.

Helen and Bashiam have many things in common. The fields of their interest are marked by commonness. Breaking the boundaries laid down by their society characterizes their nature most strikingly. Ignoring the entire English community including her husband Helen chooses to associate herself with tribals. Similarly, contrary to the tribal ethos, Bashiam opts for the profession that is hated by the tribals. Another field of their common interest is bird-trapping. Clinton's awareness of the growing intimacy between Helen and Bashiam leads him to change. When he is not that Bashiam had been to the jungle for bird-trapping, he nourishes suspicion that his wife's interest in bird-trapping is the result of her intimacy with Bashiam. Till now he considered Bashiam as a junglywallah..But from now onwards he regards Bashiam as his strong rival to reckon with. As for this sudden change in Clinton's attitude to Bashiam the narrator says:

“He turned and looked at Bashiam and saw him then for the first time as a man—the man with whom Helen went: someone with whom one had to reckon” (p.91).

When Bashiam was building the hut, probably might have not thought- that here one night he would be dragged by an English woman into the mud of lust. As the old saying goes "What is fatted cannot be blotted." One night when he comes back to his hut but after working throughout the day, he is astonished to find Helen in the darkness of the hut. She had come here at such time to taste the coarse flavors of a burly tribesman like Bashiam. Romanticizing the thought-provoking meeting of Bashiam, a tribal and Helen, an English woman, the narrator says:

“What do you want with me, he said and stood outside warily, because it was memsahib who wanted. Who would use him like a blackjack upon her white and exquisite body, suck him into her vortex to taste his coarse flavors and when it was done, the rare thing savored, go leaving him to what? What about me, he whipped himself, what about me? While her nearness wafted warm currents about him, about his body" (p. 135).

With the help of the tribal laborers Clinton intends to complete the construction of the dam before the arrival of monsoon. But god wills it otherwise. As the construction work nears the completion, a technical fault in the machine under operation leads to a thunderous blast that causes the death of thirty tribal laborers. As the news of this blast and its consequences spreads all around like fire, the tribals in hundreds gather at the site of the blast and feel a great shock when they see the dead bodies of their poor fellows.

Clinton's inhuman attitude towards the tribals reaches climax when he shows no sign of concern at the untimely death of thirty laborers. Instead of sympathizing with the tribal community he gives vent to his anti-tribal attitude when he declares "the bodies can be incorporated into the structure" (p. 163). Nobody agrees with Clinton's proposal of incorporating the dead bodies of tribals into the structure. Everybody is of the view that the dead bodies should be disentangled from the machine that has ruthlessly crushed them. For this purpose, the boulder has to be lifted so as to raise the dead bodies. But, who will dare to lift the boulder? Everybody knows that lifting the boulder may take one more life as the machine is defective and its operation may endanger the life of the operator. This fact deters the British engineers and technicians from going ahead with the lifting of the boulder. When nobody is ready to risk his life for the sake of the dead tribals, Bashiam, a courageous tribal as he is, comes forward to take up the adventure. Although Clinton is very well aware of the fact that the machine has developed a serious fault and that the one who lifts the boulder in this condition is sure to lose one's life, he allows Bashiam to lift the boulder.

Clinton with Bashiam and all workers dedicates themselves to the construction work with an intension to complete it before the arrival of monsoon so that he may leave India for his country before the rainfall obstruct the execution of his plans. But pre monsoon heavily rainfall upsets his plans. It not only disrupts his construction work but also creates the state of flood.

The successive warnings given by the engineers fall on the deaf ear of Clinton who is least worried about the future of the tribals. The rain that occurs suddenly is so heavy and continuous that the entire area is in a state of inundation and everybody is scared of the havoc nature is going to play with them. The tribal headman's prediction that the rain will stop when "the ridges rise clear" (p. 22) makes everybody wait for the moments when the ridges are clear. The tribal headman dies soon after making the prediction. A few moments after his death the ridges rise clear and the rain stops as predicted by him. All the members of the tribal village and the British staff are extremely happy for the reason that the tribals are now free from the fear of inundation and the British engineers and technicians may now leave for their country alongwith their families and assistants after completing the project of dam construction.

Bashiam, a tribal, is one of the major characters of the novel. He plays a crucial role in most of the incidents major as well as minor that occur from the beginning to the end of the novel. His contribution to the construction of the dam is undeniably great. As a chief crane operator he fulfils his responsibilities to the full satisfaction of the British engineers. His role as a link between the tribals and the British staff in general and the heroine of the novel, The old chief is another tribal character of the tribal village who plays a minor role towards the end of the novel. As a guardian of the village he tries to keep the young tribals tied to the old tribal traditions.

**Conclusion:** It can be concluded that there is a close similarity between the tribal life as depicted in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dam* and as lived by tribals in remote tribal areas which are even today in contrast with urban life. Helen, the heroine of Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dam*, turns to the tribal world when she fails to enjoy the fullness of life in grand civilized world. Nowadays, tribals may be brought to the mainstream of society by making them aware of the fact that they can lead a better life if they progress educationally and financially by driving maximum benefit from the government scheme exclusively for their welfare. Thus, the only way left for us is to bring them closer to us by means of developing a co-operative and friendly attitude towards them. In this regard the following statement of Mahatma Gandhi is worth attention:

“We must approach the poor with the mind of the poor and so too, we must approach the tribesmen.”

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