

This edited volume of essays is a critical enquiry into the polyphonic cultures and literatures of indigenous people across the world and is a companion volume to *Indigeneity: Culture and Representation* (2009). These two collections of select essays were compiled after the 'Chotro' conference that was organized in Delhi. 'Chotro' means a 'place where villagers gather' and a 'place of announcing news' and is an apt title for a conference that brings together such diverse disciplines, regions and participants. This volume brings numerous areas that have received scant scholarly attention under scrutiny like the study of mythologies and origin histories of indigenous people, their literary traditions, marginalized languages, modes of artistic expressions, art criticism and their political ideologies. It stretches the borders of 'literature' to include expressions in oral traditions.

The varied tales and modes of narration chart a space away from the clichéd binaries of celebration and mourning to focus on the resistance of indigenous peoples across the world. Stories of the colonial experience, deterioration of their language and culture and their struggle to find their voice within a larger national literature are rich in political and experiential details. The literature of the indigenous people instead of being resentful towards their oppressors is reflexive and builds on differences to

**VOICE AND MEMORY: INDIGENOUS IMAGINATION AND EXPRESSION**

Edited by G.N. Devy, Geoffrey V. Davis and K.K. Chakravarty

Orient BlackSwan, Delhi, 2011, pp. 341, ₹645.00

bridge cleavages. It documents their ways of adapting, choosing and resisting to the existential trysts they find themselves in with the changing face of political economy in order to recollect and discern their own cultural and linguistic expressions. It is refreshing in the way the essays depart from the objectifying anthropological gaze of understanding the other in order to understand the self. The essays also move away from the human rights regime and find ways of resistance that do not reiterate the tired category of the 'human' while speaking about their marginalization. The indigenous people resort to folk tales, rituals and knowledge systems in order to find solutions to the balance between the environment and needs.

The volume presents a critique of post-colonial theory from an indigenous perspective. Writing in the context of North America, Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua critique postcolonial theorists on the following counts: for ignoring state colonialism and hence offering a partial and distorted exploration of colonialism, racism and postcoloniality; by erasing indigeneity, theorists endorse the ongoing colonization of indigenous people; and because of

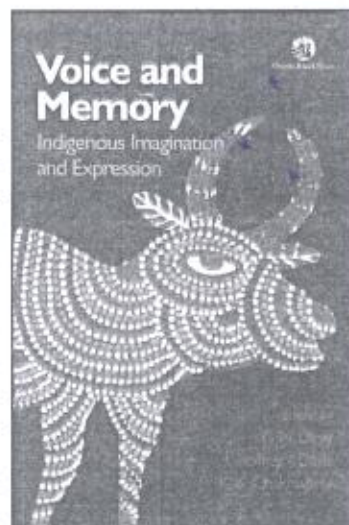
## An Overflowing Cauldron

Ujithra Ponniah

exclusion, indigenous people cannot see themselves through the perspectives offered by post-colonial thinkers. Post-colonial and trans-cultural studies are critically looked at to examine their levels of westernization and tendency to conform and homogenize in the chapter by Vera Alexander. He argues that postcolonialism works only at the level of a label that has subsumed traditional culture within the umbrella of colonialism while ignoring the neo-colonial oppression. Monika Rief-Huesler presents a way of bridging the gap between postcolonial and indigenous discourse through an admission of omissions made in memory and that multiple versions of truth exist.

Many essays in the volume focus on the diversity of indigenous languages and traditions with the fear of extinction looming large. Godini G. Darah documents the response of the Urhobo people of Niger Delta of Nigeria to a history of injustice and cultural erosion by promoting the reading and writing of Urhobo language in primary schools in the 1950s and 60s. Music, dance and song-poetry offered a space for creative critique. The satirical genres of Urhobo 'song poetry' was commended by the public as they serve the purpose of exposing evil and anti-social behaviour. The Irish and Maori language in the Republic of Ireland and Aoteroa/New Zealand find a renewed revalorization through a negotiation with the languages of contact in the chapter by Laoire. Stars shows how Dutch-born Australian filmmaker Rold de Heer uses innovative sound ideas and Ganabingu language in order to present the postcolonial Australian worldview that privileges the justice system and eco-spirituality of Aboriginal Australia.

While the essays do hold the colonialists responsible they also do not shy away from casting a reflective internal gaze on the plight of the indigenous women at the hands of the men. Sue Ryan-Fazilleau documents the critique of indigenous Australian women novelists of white Australians for working in collusion with indigenous male elders to suppress the truth about the rape, violence and exploitation of women within the community. They ask the white Australians to get rid of their guilt and not to place patriarchal indigenous traditions above gender rights. Closer home,



A. Chellaperumal and Sujatha Vijayraghavan analyse the seven ballads of Irular, the second largest tribe in India residing in parts of Tamil Nadu. The ballads climax with the sad vilification of a young woman of the house. Satish C. Aikant documents the songs of Garhwali women of Uttarakhand in India who are separated from their natal homes and long for their families. Recall

the heroic tales of women who participated in the eco-feminist Chipko movement they remember how women tied *rakhis* to trees and embraced them to protect them.

The essays in this volume present a staunch critique of the teleological nature in which 'development' is coined in present times. Rief-Huesler shows how the usage of the term Bushman for San, Hottentot for Khoi Khoi has destroyed the complicated kinship structures of the population. Shaily Mudgal documents the oppressive military onslaughts on Oka in Canada when they protested the building of a golf course on their ancestral burial land. Lawrence and Dua show how the usurpation of Native American land by white settlers led to trade in fur and slave, introducing a new system of labour regimes in plantations, leading to a significant depletion in their numbers and a death knell to their culture. The strength of these essays lies in the way they strive to show how indigenous people bring about change by adapting, selectively embracing and codifying their systems of knowledge and those that they come in contact with. They are agents of change rather than merely being passive recipients.

The polyphony of voices in this volume reiterate the need to understand and celebrate indigenous culture without getting trapped in the wish to museize them or hanging them in the lobbies of five star hotels as pieces of commodified art. To perceive forests not as storehouses of timber but as a home for living histories and mythologies of people. To embrace the alternate epistemologies and systems of knowledge that might question the instrumental values that present themselves as the norm in present times.

**Ujithra Ponniah** is currently pursuing PhD at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.