

Chapter 4: Tribal Verse

NCERT · Class 11 · English · Woven Words · Essay

Understanding The Text

Question 1

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

Solution

Some of the common characteristics shared by tribal communities all over the world are identified by the essayist. They live in organically unified and cohesive groups. They show less interest in gathering wealth or using labour to accumulate capital and interest. They accept a view where human beings, God and nature are linked and trust in the ability of humans to interpret and spell truth. Tribals live by intuition rather than reason, the space around them is considered sacred rather than secular, and their time sense is considered as personal rather than objective.

Question 2

What distinguishes the tribal imagination from the secular imagination?

Solution

According to the author, the tribal imagination is hallucinatory and dreamlike. The fusion between levels of time and different planes of existence is admitted in a natural way. The tribal imagination is distinguished from the secular imagination through these characteristics. In tribal stories, mountains swim as fish in the water, oceans fly as birds in the sky, stars grow like plants and animals speak like humans. Furthermore, in tribal imagination, seas, stars, trees, mountains, animals and men can be sad, angry or happy.

Question 3

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

Solution

G.N. Devy brings out the importance of the oral literary tradition by explaining the richness possessed by the tribal works, which are transferred from one generation to another orally. He clarifies the point that though literary compositions are transmitted orally, they are ornamentally and thematically rich. The songs and stories which are transferred to the tribals by the oral tradition are unique. The exclusive worldview of the tribals is presented by these compositions. He points out that the variety of these works and wealth is enormous. Devy highlights the different characteristics of tribal arts to demonstrate the importance of the oral literary tradition. He states that one of the main characteristics of tribal arts is their distinct way of constructing imagery and space that might be explained as hallucinatory. Another dimension of oral tradition is playfulness. Devy conveys that oral literary tradition should be properly recognised based on its richness and variety.

Question 4

List the distinctive features of the tribal arts.

Solution

According to G.N. Devy, the essayist, many distinctive features are displayed by the tribal arts. One among them is their distinct manner of constructing imagery and space, which might be explained as 'hallucinatory'. In both visual and oral forms of representation, tribal artists interpret pictorial or verbal space as distinguished by an extremely flexible frame. The boundary between non-art and art becomes invisible. In tribal art, an episode from Mahabharata or Ramayana makes a surprising and sudden appearance; tribal paintings have a mixture of modern and traditional imagery.

A strict convention is followed by the tribal arts. Every tribal creation or performance has another such creation or performance which belongs to a previous occasion. The tribal artist's creativity lies in sticking to the past while at the same time subverting it.

The soul of tribal arts is playfulness. A pretentious or serious tone is rarely assumed by the tribal arts. The tribal arts are relaxed and never tense.

The songs and tribal oral stories employ bilingualism in a complex way.

Question 5

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

Solution

According to G.N. Devy, as tribal literature has existed for numerous years, it should not be termed as 'New Literature'. The stories and songs of tribals are orally transmitted, and since they were not written down, most people are not aware of them. The views of the western literary critics who referred to tribal literature as 'New literature' is contradicted by the essayist. He conveys that nothing is new here, the attempt to visualise imaginative expression in the tribal language as literature, not as folklore and to listen to the tribal speech as a language, not as a dialect, would be new.

Discuss the following in pairs or in groups of four

Question 1

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

Solution

Literature is thought of to include compositions such as prose and poetry that are written. Going by this belief, the beauty of compositions which are prevalent in oral traditions might be missing. The other stream of literature has compositions that are both aesthetically and thematically rich. However, as there is a strong criterion of considering compositions as literature only when they are written, these do not obtain the status of literature. This is the case with Indian oral traditions. Only if the notion of literature is modified there is a possibility that we will witness the different Indian oral traditions decline.

Another view –

The oral literary tradition in India is not a unique phenomenon. It has been in existence in different parts of the world. Based on the nature of getting orally transmitted, oral traditions do not die. The oral traditions will exist even if we modify our notion regarding literature or not. Through the patronage of the state, the oral literary tradition can be promoted.

Question 2

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

Solution

Tribal arts are not specifically meant for sale. This helps in their growth and preservation. Tribal arts have unique characteristics and employ a dreamlike and hallucinatory imagination. They are very playful and aesthetically and thematically rich. Tribal arts present a world view of the tribals, which is unique, and any attempt to commercialise it will help them in their preservation and growth. They are simple-minded and not influenced by modern society's ills that are under the sway of the evils of modern consumerism. The tribal arts are a part of tribal life. These arts are performed not to earn money but to express their worldview and imagination.

Another view –

The non-commercialisation hampers the preservation and growth of tribal arts. Tribal arts cannot be economically strong to carry their creative works without any commercialisation. To commercialise their arts, endeavours should be taken so that tribals can preserve them. In society, the tribals suffer from marginalisation and abject poverty, owing to which their arts should be commercialised. This will provide motivation for the preservation and growth of their art forms.

Question 3

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

Solution

The tribal communities are mostly bilingual. Many vocabularies have been assimilated from the country's major languages. To most of us, it may seem that the languages are dialects of the major tongues of India.

Another view –

In India, the tribal communities are mostly bilingual, and there is no need to dismiss the languages as dialects of India's major tongues. It shows the assimilative nature of the tribal communities. The language identity is not destroyed by borrowing some words from other languages. Languages such as Hindi and major languages would have lost identity by borrowing words from languages of other countries. There is a structural variation in tribal languages from the main Indian languages. The words present from other languages will not get identified as dialects of major languages of India and will lose their identity.

Question 4

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

Solution

Tribal communities may not seem to possess a scientific temper. However, most of the ideas from the tribal conventions could enrich modern societies. They live very close to nature and treat it as a living being. The tribals consider nature as a mother who nurtures them, and they possess a positive and intimate relationship with nature. These positive ideas towards ecology help to enrich modern societies. They are simple-minded and are not influenced by the evils of consumerism. A few tribal communities obey the matrilineal system. The dowry system is not followed by the tribal societies; instead, a price is fixed for the bride, which the groom pays in kind or in cash. Modern societies can learn this as a good lesson.

Appreciation

Question 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?

Solution

In 'A Munda Song', the perspective of the tribal mind towards the girl child is different from that of (other) mainstream communities. The girl child's birth is greeted and celebrated in this song. Contrary to the mainstream communities attitude, the girl's birth is regarded as auspicious in the Munda song. This is aesthetically expressed in the lines – A daughter was born, the cowshed filled up. The birth of the boy child in mainstream communities is celebrated. They are considered to be the carrier of the family line baton while the girl child is perceived as a burden and an object of neglect.

Question 2

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

Solution

Tribals have a strong urge to gain domination over time though they don't have ownership over land. This urge is aesthetically substantiated in 'A Kondh Song' by considering the talk they had with their ancestors, who are dead. The ancestors' spirits are requested to accept their offerings of a baby fowl they make. They are offering it as they consider the ancestors to be alive. The spirits are requested not to impose pain after the departure of the spirits.

Question 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?

Solution

The 'Adi Song for the Recovery of Lost Health' is in Miri Agom. In our daily conversation, this language is not used. It is a highly rhythmic language which is used during rituals while chanting. The two different languages' existence testifies to the great level of sensitivity of the language of the Adi Tribe. Such parallels are found even in modern languages as well. The Bangla language, the Hindi language, and the English language contain two different languages – one is the colloquial variety and the other is literary.
