

fight

Raising the Unheard Voice

Joy Tudu with Ruby Hembron and Kuis Gomez



PHOTOGRAPHS: PRADIP JANA

Publishing house Adivaani, literally meaning the 'Ancient Voice', strives at being the authentic adivasi (tribal community) voice, the voice that has mostly been drowned in the dominance of myriad 'mainstream' voices

BY KAKOLI PODDAR

This unique publishing house, for and by the *adivasis*, aims at being the *adivasi* time machine by being exclusively dedicated to the *adivasi* literature and narrative.

Launched quite recently by three maverick enthusiasts—Ruby Hembron, Joy Tudu and Luis A Gomez, Adivaani plans to showcase India's diverse yet endangered *adivasi* cultural and historical heritage. While Ruby and Joy belong to the *adivasi* community, Luis Gomez is a Mexican journalist who has two decades of experience in working with the indigenous people of Latin America. He finds parallels between injustices and discrimination faced by the community in Latin America and India. "The minority white population rules the majority indigenous population there," he says. Joy Tudu is an *adivasi* social activist who has represented the cause of India's tribals in many national and international forums, including the United Nations. Ruby, a law graduate, was working in the IT sector when she decided to enroll for a publishing course in Kolkata. In fact, this is where she met Luis, who was a fellow student. While

she was doing the course, Ruby got to interact with many other writers and publishers, which she found exciting but at the end of the day, she was left wondering, 'Where is the *adivasi* voice?'

Ruby felt the need to fill this great vacuum. Though she has been educated in Kolkata's elite school, La Martinere for Girls, school was never a happy experience for Ruby. Though very proud of her tribal background, she was pained by biased and cruel comments by teachers and classmates when they came to know about her roots. "I looked different. My classmates at times made fun of my 'flat face' and dark complexion. One of them asked me once, 'When you polish your shoes in the morning, do you polish your face too?' I was reduced to tears. I hated going to school. I longed to go back to the cushy, protected environment of my home, my father's quarters in the Theological College where he taught. My father was an enthusiast of Santhali literature and our home often had Santhal writers and poets coming over and I enjoyed their company. Santhali is the language I speak at home. I found it strange that my classmates were totally ignorant about the Santhals. Later, I realised that their cruel jibes probably had a lot to do about ignorance." Ruby hopes that Adivaani would also help others understand the tribal culture, myths and their psyche.

Says Joy Tudu, "The history of the *adivasis* has always been penned by non-*adivasis*. The 'mainstream' historians have written about *adivasi* history from their point of view. They have largely manipulated, ignored and even neglected the contribution of *adivasi* leaders in the freedom struggle of India. The *adivasi* legend, Baba Tilka Manjhi, fought against the British in 1780 and was subsequently hanged. Similarly, other *adivasi* leaders—Sidho-Kanhu, Birsu Munda, Fulo Jhano, Nilamber-Pitamber fought against the British government, but sadly they are not given deserving space in the history books."

Ruby says they want to create a database of *adivasi* writing of, for and by the *adivasis*. "We wish to document the oral

forms of their storytelling and folklore. We also aim to narrate our stories of struggles, exploitation and displacement, in our words." The *adivasi* cultural and historical heritage is indeed something that is endangered. The *adivasi* voice, embedded in the oral narrative traditions and rituals, has not had a proper platform for publication. The mainstream publishing in India has always neglected the documentation and publication of *adivasi* languages and culture.

Adivaani has already come out with three books. The first one is a history of the Santhals in Santhali language, titled, *Santhal: Sirjon Binti Ar Bhed-Bhangaon*, written by Reverend Dr Timotheas Hembrom. The second book, written by renowned tribal human rights activist, Gladson Dungdung, *Whose Country is it Anyway?- Untold stories of the Indigenous Peoples of India*, he writes how tribals are being 'discriminated, exploited, alienated and killed in their



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own country despite having conditional provisions, laws and policies in favour of them. The book points out how the *adivasis* have always paid the price of 'development' and also questions the silence of women politicians on sexual assault on the *adivasi* women. The foreword for this book has been written by Mallika Sarabhai, who says, 'We have made the *adivasi* into a backward group, to be looked upon and pitied, removed from our march towards industrialisation and the fulfillment of corporate greed. Gladson has suffered at the hands of these high-handed policies. He has seen his kin killed, justice denied, poverty augmented, resources held back... And, he has had the courage to continuously raise his voice to bring attention to their plight and what we risk destroying....indeed, it is an important voice to listen to, to broaden our understanding of the alternate narratives running within our people.' The third book is a children's book written by Ruby herself, titled, *We Come from Geese*. It is the first of the Santhali creation stories—about their unique concept of the creation of the world—and two more are in the pipeline.

Attractively illustrated with tribal motifs by Boski Jain, already, many schools in Jharkhand have picked it up for their libraries. Adivaani subsequently also wishes to publish creation stories of other tribal communities like Kodas, Mundas, Oarons and Naga tribes, among others. Adivaani aims at being a pan-Indian publishing house for all the indigenous people of India. They say, "A lot of tribal writers all over India have contacted us and have expressed their desire to publish their writing with us. They have all congratulated us for taking this initiative."

Also, Adivaani has another interesting book in the offing, again penned by Gladson Dungdung, which would be on the Maoist Red Corridor, a burning issue very relevant in India's current political scenario.

The trio at Adivaani looks after different aspects of its fledgling publishing venture—Ruby handles the editorial side, Joy looks after marketing and Luis sees to the designing and printing.

With dreams in their hearts, they set out on whatever they could manage from their own purses, aided by the help from some well-wishers. However, funds remain a nagging problem for them. They have resorted to crowd financing through social networking sites, but though they have received appreciation and encouragement from all quarters, as far as financing is concerned, the response has been very lukewarm. At times, the gang of three finds it exasperating to fight prejudices in the publishing world, especially when they go about distributing the books. Most distributors in Kolkata have turned down requests to keep their books, saying they are not interested in 'such kinds of books'.

While going about printing their first publication on Santhali history in Santhali language, they had to encounter biased stereotype reactions too. The cover had Santhali women dancers in green against a black background. The lady at the press told them bluntly that 'black was too sophisticated a colour for the backward Santhalis', suggesting they should opt for a very bright shade.

Despite fighting these hurdles and prejudices, Adivaani has done quite well in the short span of its existence. It has published 1000 copies each of all the three books, of which half have been sold.

The trio is in an upbeat mood. They are driven by a passionate urgency—an urgency to save and record the tribal history, narrative and culture before it is too late. "We refuse to be a forgotten people," they echo. <<