

## Semiotic Approach towards Identifying and Decoding Tribal Culture in the Documentary Film ‘Naachi Se Baanchi’

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the nuances of tribal culture representation in the documentary film ‘Naachi se Baanchi,’ a biographical film on Dr. Ram Dayal Munda, who was a symbol of indigenous cultural reawakening of Jharkhand. Though tribal culture has gained recognition but does not have enough presence in the intellectual field, i.e. in the field of literature and media. This qualitative study uses Roland Barthes’s semiotic analysis to identify the cultural significance of the documentary film. Signs in the form of images, words, music, movements and objects are analysed based on the connotative and denotative meaning contained in the film scene. The result of the study revealed that the connotative and denotative meaning of all the signs and symbols is to strengthen and preserve the richness of tribal culture. Thus Barthes semiotic theory identifies and creates patterns which reveals in-depth meaning to stir up emotional feeling among the audience.*

**Keywords:** *Naachi se Baanchi, documentary film, tribal culture, semiotics, signs, Barthes*

### 1. Introduction

This study explores a few theoretical issues regarding the semiotic approach in the documentary film “Naachi se Baanchi” directed in 2019 by Biju Toppo and Meghnath. Some scenes in the film are not ordinary scenes recorded with a blend of images, sound, or music, but if deeply analyzed the film has a strong protagonist i.e. Dr. Ram Dayal Munda educating and informing people about keeping the tribal identity alive. The film has received most of its acclaim because of the deep cultural significance it carries – especially in relation to tribal culture and values. In this regards, it is considered a suitable documentary film for semiotic analysis using Roland Barthes theory.

This study uses Roland Barthes semiotic analysis of signs in the form of words, images, sounds, movements and objects. According to Barthes, anything in culture can be a sign and refer a specific message. Barthes uses the denotative and connotative ‘levels of meanings’ to analyse the signs in visual object. Furthermore, representations produced through objects or images can produce meaning that we understand or relate them.

Semiotics in film is mostly used in academic study of film, the actions and visual cues in relation to the message of the film. As a result, these signs are understood by people either innately learned or gathered through interactions in society. Filmmakers create visuals paired with text to provide the target audience with a deep level understanding of the message that is being articulated. Filmmakers extensively deploy semiotics in expressing the myth, history legendary stories and archetypes within the respective cultures where their films are set Tomaselli (1981).

In the contemporary world, film has become one of the most significant manifestations of culture and communication in society. According to Christian Metz, cinema is structured like a language in which each cinematic shot construct their own meaning. This research is directly concerned with the cinematic images, the relation between sound and image and various kinds of editing. The analysis of this documentary film will use the semiotics theory from Barthes which learns about the denotative and connotative meaning of a moving image.

Film is a form of narrative built by sequences of scenes that form a story. It has unique composition and is also a powerful medium for educating and instructing peoples (Petrie & Boggs, 2012). Furthermore, documentary films represent the real life, and the story in the film represent the real story of people. Andre Bazin argues that film as well as photography has the ability to record reality directly, with minimal human intervention.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This study will focus on the basic concepts of Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory. Barthes advanced the concept of semiotics from linguistics to visual image, such as the photography, advertisements and motion picture. Barthes uses the denotative and connotative sign system to analyse the signs in visual object.

- Denotation- is the surface or literal meaning of visual sign.
- Connotation- is the subjective meanings and interpretations of the sign.

## **3. Research Question**

Based on the above research statement, the research questions are as follows-

- What signs represent tribal culture and values?
- What meanings does these signs convey?

## **4. Research Objective**

Based on the above research question, the objective of this research is to-

- Explore the different form of signs conveyed in the film
- To decode the signs and symbols used in representation of tribal culture

## **5. Research Scope**

The study will improve our knowledge and understanding of semiotics in film. Also, the result of this study could provide more reference for the study and development of semiotic theory. Practically, the result of this study is expected to be useful for

students of film and media studies as a source of reference. Tribal people and culture as object of representation would also generate national consciousness on general level and self-consciousness among the tribal people.

## 6. Literature Review

This section reviews some of the literature on the concept of semiotic theory and its relationship with films. Study on the design of visual communication, films, signs and related research methodologies are also reviewed.

### 6.1 Semiotics in film

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their interpretations. In film, semiotics analysis is a way to explain how an audience makes meaning from the visual signs and cues. Semiotics is the study of signs and the way the sign works (John Fiske, 2007). A number of research have been carried out on films using different semiotic approaches such as Ferdinand de Saussure's Dyadic Theory, Roland Barthes' Denotation and Connotation theory and Peirce's Triadic theory, among others.

Saussure in Danesi (2004:3), said that semiotics or semiology is taken from the Greek language "semeion" meaning a sign. Saussure defines semiotics as a science that studies the role of signs in social life (Chandler, 2007). The primary focus of Saussure's theory is the principle that emphasized language as a system of sign that consists of two focal components, namely signifier-the sound pattern (marker sound image) and signified-the concept (the outcome/the interpretation/conception of the signifier).

Film communicates message to the audience through the semiotics of signs, symbols, dialogues, music, sound, gestures and actions. Semiotics, broadly speaking is concerned with signs which can take any form of words, images, objects, sounds, music etc. It's an attempt to show how signs are used to convey meaning and shape our perceptions. According to Roland Barthes, all narratives share structural features that each narrative weaves together in different ways. Additionally, Dennis W. Petrie states a film can be visual images (perhaps in colour), words that are spoken and occasionally written (as in signs or a letter shown in a close-up), background music, actors in costumes, and setting, and other means by which the medium of cinema conveys emotions and ideas to an audience.

In *Film Language* (1968), Metz argued that cinema is structured like a language. In his theoretical model, known as the "grande syntagmatique," Metz explains that each cinematic shot construct their own meaning, unlike the written word having a specific meaning.

The Statesman (2018) reports that Naachi se Baanchi, a documentary film on one of the rarest of rare great "adivasis" in Indian history draws attention to the egalitarian reality of all Indians everywhere in an era when tribal identity is adamant on asserting its strength, presence, and visibility among the mainstream population.

## 6.2 Synopsis of Naachi se Baanchi documentary

The documentary was shot by the directorial duo Biju Toppo and Meghnath between 2011 and 2016. The film documents the life and work of Dr. Ram Dayal Munda who is a symbol of indigenous cultural reawakening. The film bagged the National Award for the Best Biographical Documentary in 2018.

The 70-minute film uses his son Gunjal Ikir Munda as the narrator to tell the story of his father, Dr. Munda, who led the struggle of tribal identity in Jharkhand. The story of Dr. Munda's journey as an enthusiastic tribal kid hailing from a small tribal village Deori who went on to become a professor at University of Chicago and eventually the Vice-Chancellor of Ranchi University is no less than a legend.

## 7. Research Methodology

This study follows qualitative design with a descriptive approach. Since the data was collected from the documentary film 'Naachi se Baanchi' the analysis of this study is contextual in nature. The data were in audio-visual form which consisted of moving images, dialogues, songs, music, and sounds recorded by the director. Hancock (2009:1) states that qualitative research method is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena. Therefore, this qualitative method aims to analyse and interpret the data about socio-cultural phenomena that were collected from the film with reference to Roland Barthes's theory of semiotics as its theoretical framework.

Simple narratives of tribal culture depicted through Dr. Munda's journey of life and employing specific cinematic techniques help to bring forth the implicit. The study proposes a visual communication expressed in camera frames and bodily gestures of the actors.

This study uses semiotics methodology specifically related to tribal culture and identity. These signs are assembled together to achieve the expected impact by the filmmaker in the form of a specific message to the audience. Through this methodology it can be seen how the film builds many forms of signs to keep the tribal culture alive among the tribal community.

## 8. Findings and Discussions

The social semiotic analysis presented in this paper shows how the protagonist interactions can be systematically constructed based on the textual elements in film and how the patterns provide an analytical foundation for understanding tribal culture and lifestyle. To analyse the representation of tribal culture in the documentary film several scenes were selected using Barthes semiotic theory. The data is presented and analysed as follows-

- i. The film was watched repeatedly to find out the signs in it.
- ii. Making a log sheet of the relevant scenes to mark the signs.
- iii. The signs were categorised based on Barthes's concept of connotation and denotation.

Particularly, the study focuses on exploring the potential meaning captured in different frames in the film from a semiotic perspective. Visual semiotics provides a much more detail about the context of the film than the protagonist seen in the shots. Following the skilful camera movements different visual messages and potential cultural and linguistic

meaning are explored to convey meaningful information to the audience. This research successfully represented tribal culture particularly in the form of rituals, festivals, music, songs and their daily livelihood.

The film opens with a mid-close-up shot of Sarhul festival prayer offered by Dr. Munda. As the background song and music continues, the camera gives a tour of Dr. Munda's journey towards improving tribal way of life and culture. Table 8.1 below show occurrences of the signs and multimodal texts in the film. The signs are interpreted in terms of their significance in conveying semiotic meaning.

**Table 8.1: Signs identified in the Film**

<b>Shot No.</b>	<b>Sign</b>	<b>Denotation</b>	<b>Connotation</b>
1	Forest dwelling with mud houses surrounded by mountains accompanied by flute music in the backdrop. Buffaloes, cows and goats grazing in the forest. Farmers husking paddy.	Typical tribal dwelling and lifestyle.	The critical role tribal people play in conservation, preservation and safeguarding the richness of local biodiversity. Depicts simplicity in tribal communities.
2	Pahan (tribal priest) carrying out rituals like offering chickens, handiya (country liquor) and incense and plate of rice during Sarhul festival.	Traditional ritual of Munda tribe followed during festivals.	Reflect the age old tradition and culture of the Munda tribe that have been passed down through generations.
3	Dr. Munda saying prayers with the crowds gathered at Ranchi University during Sarhul festivals.	It's a ritual.	The prayers were mostly updated by Munda ji that reflects an updated culture and knowledge.
4	Munda ji singing and dancing during Karma festival. While the ladies gathered around dancing to the beats.	Music and dance are mandatory in almost every kind of festivals or ceremonies.	Community can reassert their tribal culture.
5	Sakhua flower is plucked on the hair during Sarhul festival. People carrying the sacred branches of Sakhua tree during procession.	The Sakhua tree is held sacred by the tribal.	It has religious, medicinal as well as commercial significance.

6	Steamed rice flour snacks folded in sakhua leaves.	Cooking snacks in traditional way.	Sakhua leaves improves taste and promotes health.
7	Old photographs of Gandharva Singh Munda, father of Ram Dayal Munda and Munda ji himself can be seen playing dhol, along with background singing of Gandharva ji.	Photos allow us to capture a certain moment in time, and also preserve it for generations to come.	Keep tradition alive. Since time immemorial tribal culture has been passed down orally, and today it is being documented as text and videos.
8	A visit to the University of Chicago and Minnesota University, where Dr. Munda had spent his academic life. Establishment of Department of tribal and regional languages in Ranchi university and Dr. Ram Dayal Munda Kala Bhavan.	Academic institution for higher education.	Higher education impact a society and nation by inculcating ambition and knowledge required to participate and make informed decisions.
9	Munda ji's friends at Minneapolis recalled their college days, when they had participated in Jharkhandi tribal dancing and singing competition.	Spread Indian culture.	Munda ji took pride in Munda tribe and consistently sought to propagate this rich culture. He felt tribal culture to be superior and never shied away.
10	Burial ritual of Munda ji. Marriage ceremony of Munda ji with his first wife. Piercing of ear ceremony of Mundaji's son Gunjal Munda. Celebration of Karma festival at Akhra. Kite festival at Sukan buru.	Rituals and festivals marks essential moments in journey of life.	Reflect spirituality, beliefs, and hopes in one's culture. Brings community members together. It is a source of inspiration to strengthen one's culture.
11	Dr. Ram Dayal Munda offering prayer and singing songs in Panchpargania and Mundari languages. Books and translation written in Mundari languages by Munda ji.	Keeping tribal language alive.	Promotes tribal identity and sovereignty.
12	Chokahatu sasandari,	Symbol of pride for	Reminds us of our

	tomb of ancestor. A huge pillar built at Dombari Buru, Khunti, in memory of Birsa Ulgulan massacre.	the community.	rich heritage and appreciate our past.
13	Dr. Munda being awarded Padmashree in 2010.	Gained recognition as a musician, linguist, writer, scholar, educationist, institution-builder, and tribal activist.	Not only the identity of the person, but the importance of his work towards preserving and giving recognition to tribal culture.
14	Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ICITP), March 2011.	A platform to unite the diverse tribal communities from across the country.	Give a voice to the marginalized so as to control their own destinies.
15	Film ends with Gunjal Munda playing dhol during festival.	Son following father's footsteps. Keeping the tribal tradition alive.	A good practice needs to be passed on to the next generations for the development of society. Young generation taking pride in tribal culture.

**Fig. 8.1: Screenshot of abovementioned Table 8.1**



Shot 1.



Shot 2.



Shot 3



Shot 4



Shot 5



Shot 6



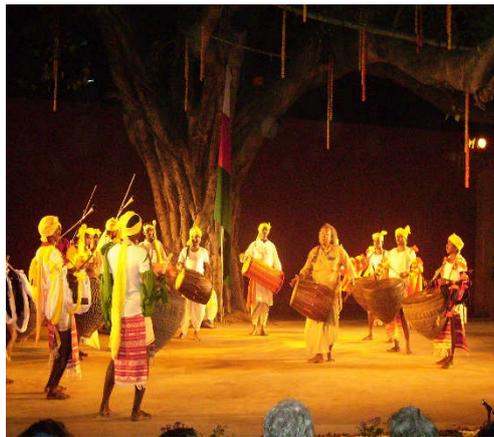
Shot 7



Shot 8



Shot 9



Shot 10



Shot 11



Shot 12



Shot 13



Shot 14



Shot 15

Fig. 8.1 shows the different screenshots as mentioned in Table 8.1. The denotative meaning of the scenes are based on signs shot by the camera movements. From the denotative meaning, we can find the sign for the connotative meaning of the picture. We could see in the Table 8.1 that the Barthes semiotic approach has structural meanings referring to the socio-cultural association of the tribal community.

Every festivals and cultural rituals are accompanied by ambient music of traditional nagada and turi, it signifies the importance of tribal culture in the film. The filmmaker used these signifiers to subtly communicate the importance of music in tribal community and to justify the statement, which is also the title of the film, 'Naachi se Baanchi' Adivasi would survive only if their culture continues to flourish. The preservation of the tribal lifestyle, culture and languages was integral to Dr. Munda's work of improving their lot, and fighting for their rights.

As in the Table 8.1 it can be understood that every sign is intertwined with Dr. Munda's music, academics and politics to assert the tribal culture and identity. The cinematic shot selected by the filmmaker tries to create awareness on tribal lifestyle in each individual frame. Thus, Barthes semiotic theory makes valuable contributions in understanding media signs that are conveyed through audio-visual messages.

There is predominance of tribal music in the film. The songs sung by Munda ji both in Mundari and Panchpargania languages are mostly satire on government and raising voice against oppression. The traditional musical instruments such as dhol, nagara, mandar, flute, etc. used in the songs are not just mere entertainment, but have cultural and social significance attached to them. These are instruments of pride for the community and spread the message of unity and equality.

Overall, in the entire film Dr. Munda's dedication towards cultural mobilization of the people and his contribution towards the upliftment of tribal community is evident.

## 9. Conclusion

Based on the findings it is obvious that the signs decoded represent the tribal culture of Munda tribe, whereas connotation represent the emotional feeling of preserving the tribal culture. Many of the signs in the documentary are actually made to convey message to the audience, especially the Munda tribal community on the richness of tribal culture. Thus, the filmmaker used connotation to deliver powerful messages, to stir up emotions and to impact the audience mind-set.

Naachi se Baanchi is a classic work of art in documenting the tribal identity thriving. With regard to the representation of tribal culture contained in the film there were many signs based on Barthes semiotic analysis. The tribal culture can be publicized through films that can be socially interpreted by the audience themselves. Therefore, the representation of tribal identity in the film is very perfectly depicted, both from the way each scene is selected, to the extraordinary cinematography and sound design.

Its theme is to not only propagate but to pass down the rich Munda culture to the future generation. Gunjal as a narrator admires the life and work of this father Dr. Munda. Gunjal Ikir Munda concludes the narration by saying, "*if culture survives then only society will survive; therefore, I too followed the footsteps of my father*" and the slowly the camera captures Gunjal playing nagada during Sarhul festival.

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