

Tribal stories - a marketable commodity. An Analysis of Vikas Swrup's *Six Suspects*

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Abstract: Vikas Swarup shot into fame with his debut novel '*Q and A*' which was shortlisted for the Best First Book for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and won South Africa's Books Booke Prize. It also won Prix Grand Public at the 2007 Paris Book Fair. *Six Suspects* which was published two years later, centres on the murder of 'Vicky Rai', a thriving businessman, in his farm house, when he was hosting a grand party for his acquittal in a murder case. 'Vicky Rai' is shot and the police suspects six people. The Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh and father of Vicky Rai, Sri Jaganath Rai; a retired bureaucrat, Mohan Kumar; Bollywood heartthrob, Shabnam Saxsena; an American, Larry Page; mobile thief, Munna and an Onge tribe, Eketi from Andaman, who are found with a gun at the time of murder. Of all these suspects, police arrest Eketi suspecting him to be a notorious Naxalite from Orissa. Eketi is killed in prison and the investigative journalist, Arun Advani, brings out the truth behind Eketi's murder and writes an open letter to the president of India. The novel ends with the confession of a common man, who is upset by the corrupt judiciary, revealing himself as the true murderer. In this high-profile murder case, how does a tribe from Andaman gets involved? What could be the motive behind? The aim of this paper is to show that Swarup's use of indigenous people in this book is to make it marketable worldwide.

Keywords: acquittal, bureaucrat, notorious Naxalite, investigative journalist, corrupt judiciary

Vikas Swarup shot into fame with his debut novel '*Q and A*' published in the year 2005, and became an acclaimed writer across the globe when this novel was filmed into the Oscar winning movie 'Slumdog Millionaire'. '*Q and A*' was an international bestseller and was translated into 42 languages. It was shortlisted for the Best First Book for the

Commonwealth Writers' Prize and won South Africa's Books Booke Prize. It also won Prix Grand Public at the 2007 Paris Book Fair.

The novel records the journey of an orphan boy, Ram Mohammad Thomas and his struggles for survival in a completely hostile society. He participates in a quiz show, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* answers all the questions correctly and wins the show. Through this, rags to riches story, Swarup portrays the abuse of street children in India, corruption, police brutality, degenerating social values, and the apathy of fellow beings. 'India Today' hailed his novel as "an extraordinary narrative... through the underbelly of urban India where evil hides in the most ordinary places". With the devastating success of the novel, Vikas Swarup was identified as a writer for the masses. The awards and praises compelled him to write on India's underbelly, even in his thriller, *Six Suspects*, which was published two years later. Swarup's first novel presented the wretched condition of the slums and chawls of Bombay. So in his second novel, he gives a demographic description of places like Kolkata, Chennai, Varanasi, Delhi and Andaman Islands. This time he not only writes about urban miseries but also includes the indigenous people of the Andamans. The aim of this paper is to show that Swarup's use of indigenous people in this book is nothing but a technique to make his book marketable worldwide.

The story of *Six Suspects* centres on the murder of a thriving businessman, Vicky Rai, in his farm house, when he was hosting a grand party for his acquittal in the murder case of a waitress, Ruby Gill. Vicky Rai gets shot dead, and the police suspect six people who were found with guns in the farm house at the time of the murder. The key suspects include the Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh and father of Vicky Rai, Sri Jaganath Rai; a retired bureaucrat, Mohan Kumar; Bollywood heartthrob, Shabnam Saxena; an American, Larry Page, mobile thief, Munna and an Onge tribe, Eketi from Andaman. Of all these suspects, police arrest Eketi suspecting him to be a dreaded terrorist belonging to the outlawed Maoist Revolutionary Centre from Jharkhand. Eketi is killed in prison by the police and the investigative journalist Arun Advani brings out the truth behind Eketi's murder and writes an open letter to the president of India. The novel ends with the confession of a common man, who is upset by the corrupt judiciary, and reveals himself as the true murderer. In this high-profile murder case, how does a tribe from Andaman get involved? What could be the motive behind this?

Swarup wants to reiterate the fact that he is a writer of social issues and extends his canvas from the socially marginalised to the tribal community, which is marginalised in every aspect. He selects characters from all strata from home minister to mobile thief. To add more colour to his novel he includes a tribe from the Andamans. The portrayal of Eketi and his tribal ways is just to make the book marketable and to give it an exotic touch. Though India is the third the largest publisher of books in the English language, the readership of English novels is outside India. So the marketing of books largely depend on western literary taste.

"Writers depending on only an Indian readership hardly earn anything as the English readership in India is minuscule"

(a sale of 5000 copies implies a bestseller). The big numbers (and money) come from a worldwide readership” (Chapke119)

To make their books marketable, writers’ resort to exoticizing of India and its cultural milieu. “Exoticism describes the systematic assimilation of cultural difference, ascribing familiar meanings and associations to unfamiliar things” (quoted in PE 14). Writers in their works try to paint a picture of India that already exists in the western mind as a land of dirty cities, corrupt officials, spices, saris, gender oppression, indigenous people and so on. They become a sellout when they pander to the West. Swarup has done the same in his *Six Suspects* with the Andaman Tribes, Onge. He tries to give a slice of tribal life, but it fails to be realistic. He has given the details of tribal life which he has got through media and books libraries but fails to focus on the real problems faced by tribal community like land and their alienation from it, forests and their access to them, large-scale displacement due to development projects, status of women, social oppression, lack of educational facilities, health issues and constitutional safeguards. For a diplomat, who has served in countries like Japan, Turkey, USA, Ethiopia, Great Britain and South Africa, it is very difficult to understand the ground –level problems of his native land, India and so the authenticity of his writings is questionable.

Swarup presents the Onge tribes as still using traditional medicines for various diseases. “My father had mild fever yesterday. Mother applied some moro leaves to bring the fever down, but by this morning he was gone. Just like the wind” (*Six Suspects* 56). But recent studies reveal that they resort to English medicines as a cure for many of the diseases. He exoticises the tribal as:

the medicine man was reclusive, reticent oracle who hardly ever ventured out of the forest and was notoriously difficult please. But without his powers of medicine and magic, the tribe couldn’t survive. He could stop a storm simply by placing crushed leaves under a stone on the shore, he could divine a gathering illness from the lines on a man’s face and advise a carrying woman whether she would give birth to a boy or a girl simply by tapping her belly. The *torale* alone knew how to protect the clan during a lunar eclipse and what to do to counter-act a curse” (*Six Suspects* 60)

In *Six Suspects*, the tribes send Eketi out of the island to bring back the sacred rock of their tribe, *ingetayi*, which they believe, is the harbinger of all goodness. To locate the sacred rock, they seek the help of the medicine man, *torale*, who has the innate ability to fly out of his body to anywhere he wants. When the tribal head seeks his help to find out *ingetayi*, he visits the world of spirits and informs him that it is somewhere very far away from their land. Such a portrayal of tribal people becomes contradictory and unauthentic when one gets to know the real situation. The magical powers of the tribal people and their ability to move in the world of spirits are just a myth that has been used effectively by Swarup. After India’s independence, many projects were undertaken by the government for the resettlement of the tribes and to put them into the mainstream. Many policies were formulated for their effective resettlement. The policymakers valued the indigenous knowledge of these tribes in water

harvesting techniques, construction of cane bridges in hills, utilisation of forest herbs and shrubs for medicinal purposes, meteorological assessment and formulated policies to preserve and promote such traditional knowledge and wisdom and document it. Unfortunately, the novel does not showcase any of this practical knowledge of the tribes but typifies them as magicians with superhuman qualities.

Eketi reaches Delhi to get *ingetayi* which happens to be at Vicky Rai's house. He travels from the Andamans to several places in India from Kolkatta to Chennai, Varanasi and Rajasthan. Finally, he reaches Delhi. The little bit of schooling helps him understand Hindi and English in India but it is a wonder how he is able to understand Hindi with its regional variations. He keeps quiet, not trying to save himself, when he is arrested by the police, to keep up his promise, which he has made in the name of *Puluga*, the tribal god, to Mr. Ashok, that he would never reveal his identity to anyone. In his attempt to symbolize the traditional tribal beliefs, Swarup makes use of the ancient beliefs of the tribes and presents them as innocents clinging to age old customs.

The stories of poverty and filth in India have great market outside India. Awards are showered on those novels that market the margins of India. Indian books that display squalor and dirt are well appreciated and the writers are awarded prestigious literary awards. While Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* were awarded the prestigious Man Booker Prize Mulkraj Anand's *Untouchable* was not even on the list of Booker Award Nominees because he did not have a good market to sell his work. India's cultural products have a very good market in the western world. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's bestseller, *The Mistress of Spices* presents India as a land of spices, myth and magic. These writers try to answer the global curiosity about India in their writings. Sudhir Arora rightly points out that "The body-the life of the poor people from the village-is Indian but its spirit is Western" (Sudhir 3).

In their native land, writers who bag awards from foreign countries are honoured and considered the pride of their nation. People show this consideration not for demonstrating the dark picture of India but for having been born in India or having Indian origins. Writers are honoured for their exceptional skill in writing in English. Their authenticity in writing in English remains unchallenged. English has always symbolised elitism, and so the natives never dare to question these writers. With all these favourable points, writers try to get a strong foothold in the Western market by projecting a derogatory image of India.

The literary awards have increased demand for Indian books abroad. Swarup himself says on his official website, "There is a new hunger for all things Indian, whether it is Indian food or Indian ICT experts or Indian books". Indian writing in English has undergone a tremendous change in recent years. A new generation of writers have emerged with new techniques and motives. The Literary merits of Vikas Swarup, a diplomat by profession and a novelist by passion can never be questioned. His characterization and narration are exceptional and unique. *Six Suspects* is not an exception to this, but the episode of Eketi is undoubtedly a tactic to make it marketable.

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