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The Study of Adivasi Literature

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Abstract: ***Tribals hold all rituals and functions as a community and those include putting up a mandap. Teksingh Tekam, a scholar of Gondi language and culture, says, "Early in the morning, six or seven men leave for the forest in four bullock carts. The literature departments of some universities have included tribal literature in their curricula for purposes of study and research, but that too has been largely perfunctory – and this when Bodo and Santhali languages have been given the status of Scheduled Languages. Residential schools for tribal students have come up right from villages in the interior to cities but little has changed on the ground for the Tribals. Starvation, exploitation, displacement and mass killings continue. To understand Tribal Literature, we will first have to classify it on the basis of ethnic and linguistic diversities and geographical extent. Tribal Literature can be broadly defined as the literature of the ancestors, which, despite being in different languages and dialects, has an all-India character. Tribal Literature is thus multilingual and multicultural. Culture and traditions are often the products of the place of residence. India, with its wide geographical diversity, has given birth to many different cultures. The geographical and climatic conditions of Gondwana (the area of central India where Gond Tribes are found), Bhilanchal and northeastern states are so different that a difference in lifestyle and food is inevitable.***

Keywords: Bodo and Santhali, Gond, tribality, literature, Issues, Challenges

I. INTRODUCTION

Concept of tribality: Pan-Indian Tribal Literature cannot be conceptualized without understanding tribality. It is tribality that connects Tribal literature with the Indian literature. Tribality is the sum total of different tribal communities, their dialects and languages and their geographical locations. Tribal philosophy can help us identify the common element in Tribal literature. Given the present status of Tribal literature, we can identify three departure points for understanding the concept of tribalism.

Gonds sing this song while preparing for erecting a mandap in the run-up to a wedding. It describes a life based on forest and forest produce. Tribals hold all rituals and functions as a community and those include putting up a mandap. **Teksingh Tekam,** a scholar of Gondi language and culture, says, "Early in the morning, six or seven men leave for the forest in four bullock carts. They cut branches of salai, mavai and saj trees and collect green twigs of bamboo and blackberry trees. They load all this on bullock carts and are back home by 10."

According to **Tekam,** the construction material includes three columns of saj, wood of kham, 27 bamboos and blackberry twigs. These are collectively known as "mandadari". Among the non-tribal elite, this cultural practice of the Gonds is known as mandwa.

The literature of the Tribals, who are ever ready to lay down their lives for protecting their identity and the majesty of nature, has been neither accurately known nor adequately defined till now.

Literature needs a language for expression and a society that speaks that language. Despite all the three factors (society, language and literature) being very much present, Tribal (Adivasi) Literature has yet to acquire an identity of its own.

What has led to this state of affairs is evident from what the Indian representative said at the UN's Geneva Convention in 1994. Despite India having a substantial tribal population and the Constitution giving them the status of Scheduled Tribes, the representative declared that India does not have indigenous inhabitants who fit the UN definition, and "all Indians are indigenous inhabitants of the country and the Indian tribal communities do not face any social, political or economic discrimination".

Through this convention, the UN wanted to convey to the indigenous peoples of the world that it stood in solidarity with them. But India refused to be a part of that endeavour.

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Tribal literature does not form a part of what Indians read and study. Some universities do have tribal studies centres, but for want of inspiration and encouragement, they have turned into centres of academic manipulation.

The literature departments of some universities have included tribal literature in their curricula for purposes of study and research, but that too has been largely perfunctory – and this when **Bodo and Santhali** languages have been given the status of Scheduled Languages. Residential schools for tribal students have come up right from villages in the interior to cities but little has changed on the ground for the Tribals. Starvation, exploitation, displacement and mass killings continue.

Since 2005, the **Sahitya Akademi Awards** have been conferred on nine literary works in the Bodo language. Tribal literature, while being primarily Indian, also has an international dimension. For instance, Bodo is a Tibeto-Burman language. It is spoken by the Bodos living in northeastern India, Nepal and Bangladesh, and is one of the official languages of Assam. These languages can and do the play the role of vehicles of a shared culture.

While talking about Bodo and its transnational presence, it would not be out of place to briefly discuss Rabha, another language of the northeastern India. The Rabhas are next only to the Bodos in the list of the biggest Tribal communities of the Northeast. The ancestors of the Rabha people came from Burma (today's Myanmar). They mainly inhabit the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya.

Their ancient literature is very rich and contains copious references to the shared culture of India and Myanmar. The Rabhas first found mention in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea written by a Greek sailor in the first or second century AD. Rabha is a rich language, with its unique aesthetics.

But for want of script, grammar and dictionary, it could never get the formal status of a language. The Tribals writing in Rabha use either the Nagari or the Roman script.

The Christian missionaries did a lot for the promotion of the Santhali language. The missionaries had the Bible (both the Old and New Testaments) published in Santhali. This gave Santhali tremendous exposure and many British scholars studied it. An Introduction to the Santhali Language (J. Phillips),

A Vocabulary of the Santhali Language (E.L. Fasle) and A Santhali Language Dictionary (A. Campbell) strengthened the base of the language, enabling many a writer to produce a work of literature in Santhali. Thus, it was only after the basic work on the language was done that writing began. After Santhali was officially declared a Scheduled Language, Jadumani Besra's collection of poems Bhabna became the first Santhali work to win the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Besides Santhali, Mundari is also a leading language of Jharkhand, though it has yet to be officially named a Scheduled Language. Some people even refuse to call it a language, as it doesn't fulfil some basic norms of a standard language.

However, for all practical purposes, what communicates is a language. There are copious literary works in Mundari. Since all the writers writing in Mundari are Tribals, their work can be described as nothing except Tribal Literature.

Prior to Independence, the historical and cultural heritage of the Mundas was compiled in the five volumes of the book titled **Matu Rahah Kahani (The Story of Matu Rahah). Post Independence, a new generation of Munda writers, including Ramdayal Munda, Dulaychandra Munda, Manmasih Mundu, Silas Hembram and Manal Singh Munda** emerged.

Against this backdrop, it is pertinent to differentiate between Tribal Literature and other literatures.

India is home to 427 (some sources put the figure at 461 – it is indeed ironic that even so many years after Independence, we do not even have accurate data on tribal communities and their languages) tribal communities in the country, which are very different from each other in terms of lifestyle, language or dialect and literature.

The Constitution uses the word Scheduled Tribes for the tribal communities and enjoins on the state the responsibility of protecting their lifestyle and culture. Article 366 (25) reads, "Scheduled Tribes means such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under article **342** to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this Constitution."

This Article defines the processes and the geographical diversities that are to be used to identify Scheduled Tribes. Ethnic differences, the available literature and Constitutional specifications can help us determine what comes under

Tribal Literature and what does not. These are the standards against which we can test literary works to decide which of them are tribal. The Chanda committee, appointed in 1960, proposed four norms for identifying Tribal communities – geographical isolation, distinct culture, backwardness and signs of being a primitive group.

The Chanda committee sees Tribal communities as static groups, which is somewhat justifiable. However, the question that remains is whether the Tribal communities that have come in contact with the mainstream, that have moved to cities in search of livelihoods, whose generation or two have been living away from their native place and who have changed due to their interaction with other cultures will be considered Tribal or not. We will have to grapple with this question sooner or later.

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To understand Tribal Literature, we will first have to classify it on the basis of ethnic and linguistic diversities and geographical extent. Tribal Literature can be broadly defined as the literature of the ancestors, which, despite being in different languages and dialects, has an all-India character. Tribal Literature is thus multilingual and multicultural.

1) *The 461 Tribal Communities Of The Country Live In Seven Broad Geographical Regions:* Northern region (J&K, Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh): Lepcha, Bhutia, Tharu, Buksa, Jaunsari, Khampt and Kanota are the main tribes. It is believed that they are of Mongoloid origin and their oral literature is in Sino-Tibetan languages.
2) *Northeastern Region:* Lepcha (Sikkim, Darjeeling); Bhari, Mismi, Dafla, Monpas, Sherduk, Pes (Arunachal Pradesh); Hamar (Assam, Manipur); Vuki (Manipur, Tripura); and Lusai (Mizoram). They are also of Mongoloid origin and their languages belong to the Sino-Tibetan family.
3) *Eastern Region:* Juang, Khod, Bhumij, Khadia (Odisha); and Munda, Oraon, Santhal, Ho (Jharkhand, West Bengal). These tribes are of proto-Australoid origin and linguistically, they are related to the Austroasiatic family.
4) *Central Region:* Gond, Baiga, Maria and Abhujhmaria (Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and Maharashtra). They are Australoids and their languages belong to the Dravidian family.
5) *Western Region:* Bhil, Mahadev, Kali, Bali, Dabla (Gujarat); Garasia, Damor, Saharia, Korku (Gujarat, Rajasthan, western Madhya Pradesh). Their languages belong to the Indo-European Aryan family.
6) *Southern Region:* Kota, Bagda, Toda, Karumba, Kadar, Chenchu Pulina, Nayak, Chetti (Karli). They are Dravidians and their languages belong to the Dravidian family. There are theories of their Negroid origin, too.
7) *Islands:* Jakha, Aange, Sentelese, Saimiyan (Andaman and Nicobar). Ethnically Negroid, these tribes are on the verge of extinction.

II. GEOGRAPHICAL DIVERSITY AND DIFFERENCES IN CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

Culture and traditions are often the products of the place of residence. India, with its wide geographical diversity, has given birth to many different cultures.

The geographical and climatic conditions of Gondwana (the area of central India where Gond Tribes are found), Bhilanchal and northeastern states are so different that a difference in lifestyle and food is inevitable.

This also reflects in their oral literature. It was because of favourable conditions that the development of Gond philosophy and empire was possible and Gondi language and literature could flourish. To understand Tribal Literature, we will have to delve into history, especially alternative history. Only then we would be able to reach the fount of Tribal literature.

Adivasi Bhasha Vigyan, Heeralal Shukla writes, “The Gonds of Vindhyachal and Satpura [Dewas, Hoshangabad, Betul, Mandla, Chhindwara and Balaghat] represent the northern branch of the Gonds, whom linguists describe as Parsi Gond and Raj Gonds. According to Verrier Elwin and Shamarao Hiwale, they must have originally inhabited the banks of the Godavari River and in the 12th century, they attacked central India after crossing Bastar.” He adds, “We don’t have anything definitive about how they lived in these places until the 14th century.”

Like Shukla, there are many other scholars who are not ready to concede that the Gonds inhabited the area around the Godavari, because of which it has become difficult to get to the roots of the history and literature of the Gonds.

These scholars find it more convenient and prudent to assert that the Aryans lived on the banks of the Godavari. But many Tribal litterateurs and cultural historians have done ample authoritative work on this aspect of history, making the views of the likes of Shukla redundant. What is needed is the access to such literature and history.

Late **Motiravan Kangali,** a renowned scholar of the history, culture and literature of the Gonds, wrote: “According to geologists, archaeologists and scholars of ancient history, the Narmada Valley civilization appears to be at least 10,000 years old. Many archaeologists believe that the Narmada Valley Civilization is the mother of all civilizations of the world. That ancient civilization was Gond civilization or culture.” (Gondwana Ka Sanskritik Itihas, Acharya Motiravan Kangali, page 2).

Quoting Laxmiprasad Mishra, Kangali writes, “It was the Gondwana civilization of the Narmada Valley that expanded in the west and built the Indus Valley and Mohenjo-daro Civilizations.

These people were called Dravidians. There are many similarities between the Dravidian languages and those of Mesopotamia and Caucasus. The Gondi language of the Gondwana Civilization of Narmada Valley is also a language of Dravidian origin. In India, the civilization of Gondi-speakers of Dravidian origin was at its zenith in 4000 BC.

Their script was pictographic and was the same as the one used in the Indus valley and in Mesopotamia. This cultural heritage of Gondwana was ruined after the advent of the Aryans (Bundelkhand Ka Itihas, Laxmiprasad Mishra, page 3).

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The tribal culture have also worked on the mystery of how the advent of the Aryans sounded the death-knell of the ancient civilization that flourished in India, but I am not going into its details to avoid digressing from the topic under discussion.

It may help here to acquaint ourselves with some more details about the antiquity of Tribal literature and Gondwana. According to Kangali, "In Rigveda (1-126-8), the ten ganrajyas of ganddhars in Gandmandana are described as gandadhari or gandharu.

In Atharvaveda, the ganddhars of gandmandana are counted among non-Aryan pishachs and their country is described as Gandak of Gaud Desh. Roman geographers have described the Gandak Desh as Gondo Chatis, ie the country of Gonds (Gondwana Ka Sanskritik Itihas, Acharya Motiravan Kangali, page 16).

Despite this historical unity, Gondi language and literature are not monolithic – a fact that ancient works like the Markandey Purana demonstrate. The Markandey Purana says that the Paishachi language is spoken all over the Gandmandana region and has eleven sub-divisions.

Kanchi deshiya pandeyyach panchal gondam magdham
Braumcyhandam dakshinatyayach shaursench kaikyam
Shabaram dravinam chaiva ekadash pisachjaa

Meaning, seven dialects – **Kanchi, Pandeya, Panchali, Gondi, Magadhi, Braumchad, Dakshini Saurseni, Shabri and Dravid** – are included in the Paishachi language. All these dialects were spoken in Gandmandana. Ancient linguists refer to the Gandjeevs inhabiting Gandmandana as Pishach and their language as Paishachi (A Grammar of the Prakrit Languages, Richard Pischel, page 54). As a language spreads over a wider and a still wider area, it tends to acquire local colour, which also reflects in its literature. When we talk of the concept of Tribal Literature, we need to locate its roots. Traditions are not linear and it is not easy to identify their source. The keys to understanding Tribal Literature are embedded in Pali, Prakrit and Sanskrit literatures, besides Tribal languages and folk dialects. Serious study, comprehensive compilation, minute analysis and the capacity to distil and synthesize would be needed for that. In the academic circles, it is presumed that Sanskrit literature has nothing to do with Tribal Literature. This premise is misleading. Dr Ambedkar drew heavily on Vedic and Puranic sources in his study on the Shudras.

The Vedas and Puranas are excellent sources for understanding the genesis of caste-based exploitation and the history of the Shudras. They afford an insight into the mental make-up of Savarnavad and its basic literature. What Dr Ambedkar did vis-à-vis the Shudras, the tribal thinkers would have to do with respect to the Tribals.

The ancient Sanskrit literature can provide us a clue to understand our exploitation, defeat and displacement. The forces that indulge in deceit do tend to leave clues behind. We will have to scrutinize the literature of our exploiters and our persecutors to gain access to our heritage. For instance, poet Rajshekhar, who has done an interpretative exposition of the poetic works written between 800 AD and 920 AD, can show the way to tribal scholars.

He has analyzed the ideas that writers in different languages have expressed through poetry. According to him, the poetry of the country of Gonds is of middling quality. He asserts that up to the eighth century, poems were recited in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and Gondi. This clearly indicates that Gondwana was existed till that time.

This brief discussion on Gondi and Gondwana in the context of geographical diversities applies to other tribal communities as well. Dr Ramdayal Munda has done important work in this direction while studying the Tribals of Jharkhand.

1) *Tribal Issues, Non-Tribal Writers:* A large number of non-Tribals are writing on and about Tribals. Many social activists as well as others who have the interest of Tribals in mind are writing about the struggle of the Tribals in all literary genres (story, poetry, novel, play, autobiography) and research papers. They include Indians and foreigners both. Among the foreigners, the first name that comes to mind is Verrier Elwin. Besides him, George A. Grierson and Richard Pischel have done important work in this area. Among the Indian works are Ain-e-Akbari and Jehangirnama. Indian authors include Ramnika Gupta, Mahashweta Devi, Sanjeev, Rakesh Kumar Singh, Mahua Maji, Heeralal Shukla, Roopchandra Verma, Veer Bharat Talwar, Ranendra and Dr Suresh Mishra. Their writings are based on Tribal philosophy. Though their articulation is excellent, the fact that they are removed from tribal languages and culture rankles. Nevertheless, the writings of these non-Tribals have strengthened Tribal Literature. They cannot be ignored while probing the history of Tribal Literature.
2) *Tribal Issues, Tribal Writers:* As soon as Tribals were introduced to the alphabet, they began expressing their feelings through their writings. Being Tribals by birth, their understanding is not acquired. Rather, it is the product of their language, culture and social ambience. This is a different type of writing, which has no place for communal, religious or political manipulations and is humanistic, based on communal living and simple. Nature is present in all its majesty in their writings. Tribal Literature celebrates nature. This is true not only of Indian Tribal Literature but of Tribal Literature the world over. Tribals have an abiding interest in nature.

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III. CONCLUSION

Their literature not only reflects their love for nature but also expresses the pangs of separation from nature. Their anger over the loot of natural wealth is evident in their movements and songs. Among the litterateurs in this category are Sant Sevalal (famous poet of Banjara community), Jaipal Singh Munda, Akis Ekka, Motiram Kangali, Ram Dayal Munda, Tek Singh Netam and Rose Kerketta. The new generation of writers from the Tribals is producing copious literature.

Languages and dialects are means of expression. A community is often seen as conglomeration of people speaking the same language and dialect. However, this is only an external characteristic.

The philosophy and thoughts of a community are the real indicators of its internal characteristics. How a community practises its philosophy of life is what constitutes its real identity. A philosophy can find expression only through a language.

Thus, philosophy of life comes first, followed by the language or dialect. Since a substantial part of Tribal literature is 'orature' (a term coined by Ugandan scholar Pio Zurimu), it is in risk of being ignored unless we accord centrality to the Tribal philosophy of life and tribality. Well-known thinker Anita Haes, based in Sydney, Australia, has rightly said,

"The tribality of the Tribals can neither be classified nor measured against any standard because it is a quality that is part of your heritage and can neither be denied nor rejected. You cannot determine the tribality of any person on the basis of whether tribal blood flows in their veins." I feel that to understand Tribal Literature, we will have to understand tribality. Only then we will be able to create and analyze the elements of Tribal Literature and culture

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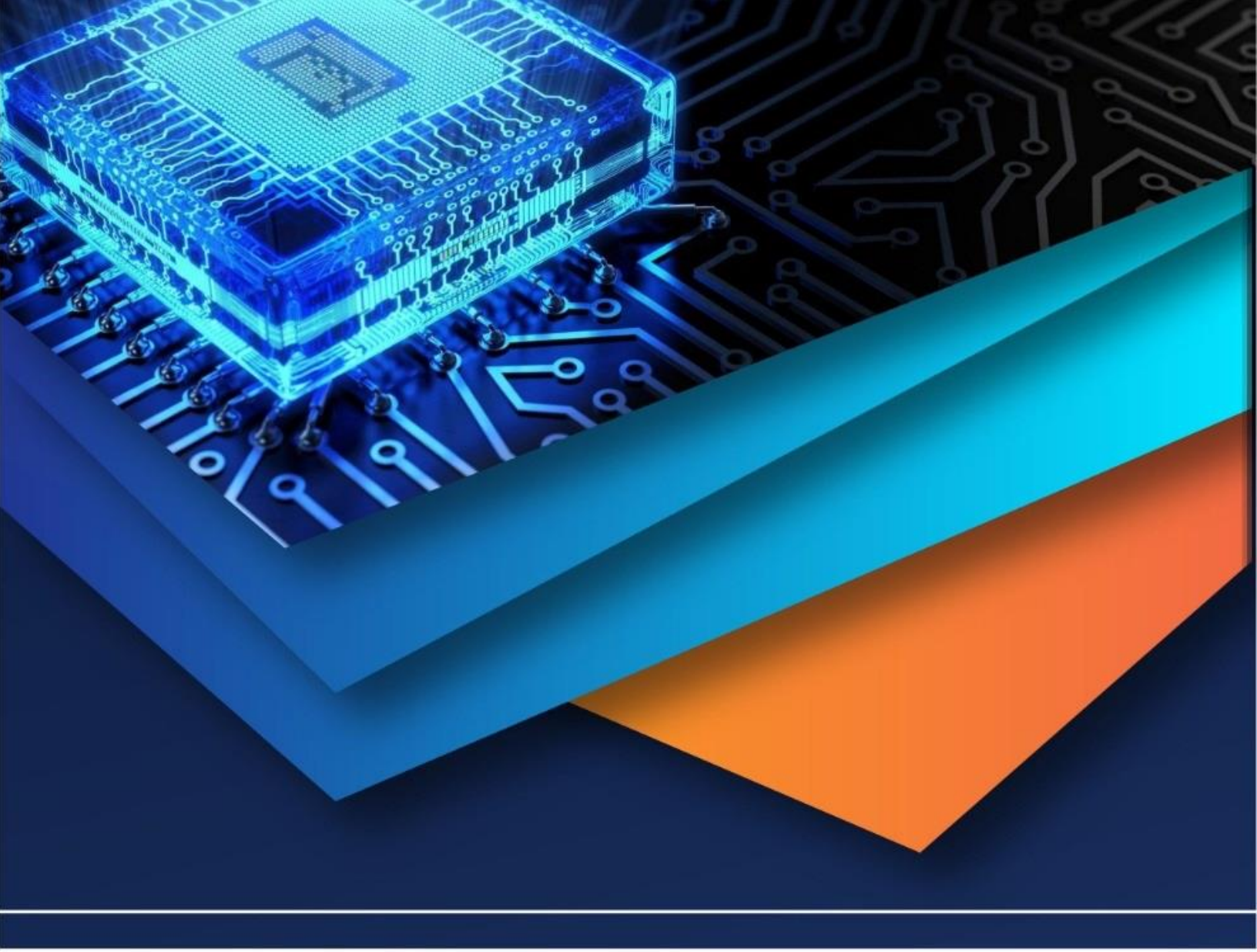

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