

# ADIVASIS AT THE CROSSROADS IN INDIA



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# Contents

<b>Preface</b>	Tapio Tamminen	4
<b>Dungariya village, Southern Rajasthan - A field Report</b>	V.K. Ramachandran	8
<b>Adivasis - dispossessed by development and globalisation</b>	Anita Kelles-Viitanen	25
<b>Ousted without relocation</b>	Aparna Pallavi	40
<b>Tribe-State-Voluntary Organization Interface for Tribal Development:</b>		
<b>Arguing for a Tribe Centered Governance Paradigm</b>	Alex Akhup	48
<b>Adivasis struggle against displacement in Jharkhand</b>	Gladson Dungdung	59
<b>Adivasi Justice Is To Live In The Wilds</b>	Ville-Veikko Hirvelä	64
<b>Is Integration into the mainstream society inevitable?</b>	Malini Shankar	69
<b>The intimate theatre play Boli (The Sacrifice)</b>	Satu Ranta-Tyrkkö	81
<b>The Todas in the Blue Mountains</b>	Tapio Tamminen	98
<b>Contributors</b>		113

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## Preface

I was travelling with my students in March 1995 in Bihar. Late one evening we arrived in a small village which was close to Jagriti Vihara. At the time the organization used to be a co-operative partner of the Swallows of Finland. In the village a young school teacher gave us a lecture, even if we all were tired from a day's trip by a local bus. Everyone tried to seek a comfortable spot to sit: a tree trunk, a suitable stone or some soft tussock.

The teacher was well informed about the local adivasi cultures. In particular, he was lecturing with great enthusiasm of Santali religion and history. He told us of two Santal leaders who had mobilized thousands of Santals to rebellion against their landlords and usurers in 1855. The rebellion expanded rapidly, and the British were forced to command their best troops to tame it. The operation caused a massacre where maybe more than 10 000 Santals lost their lives. When the teacher was starting to tell about their religion, one student immediately interrupted him by asking, "What kind of deities do they have?" The teacher answered laconically: "You are closer to their deities than you might think because you are sitting on top of one of the deities". The student stood up quickly up from a small standing stone.

The Santals belong to the Indian indigenous people which comprise nearly 90 million people out of India's total population (around 1200 million). Nowadays, many of them are proud of being adivasis. The term adivasi means literally the original inhabitants ('adi' signifies oldest and 'vasi' means inhabitant). The term adivasi has a political underpinning. Previously they were called tribal people, but the term was often used in a pejorative sense: tribals were considered as inferiors. Another term used to describe Adivasis is scheduled tribe, an administrative term used for distributing certain specific constitutional privileges and benefits to them.

Indigenous people form a heterogeneous social group which varies greatly in ethnicity, culture and religion. They speak over 100 distinct languages which belong to the six main language groups: Austro-Asiatic, Munda, Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman, Dravidian and Indo-Aryan languages. According to the latest report of Ministry of Tribal Affairs there are over 700 scheduled tribes spread over different states and union territories of the country (Annual Report 2008-09).

According to the constitution (article 342) only those communities who have been declared as scheduled tribes by the President through an initial public notification or through a subsequent amending act of parliament will be considered to be scheduled tribes. The essential characteristics for a community to be classified as a scheduled tribes are: indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, shyness of contact with the community at large, geographical isolation, and backwardness. The concept of tribe varies from state to state depending upon local socio-economic conditions of particular community and the consequent inclusion of a particular group in the list of scheduled tribes. So a particular community may be a scheduled tribe in one state while it can be a scheduled caste or a backward class in another state.

The quota policy means in a sense 'classification struggle', because an access on a list of scheduled tribes should give an opportunity to get certain constitutional benefits. According to the constitution the state should provide preferential treatment for example in allotment of jobs and access to higher education (in proportion to their population). In recent decades the percentage of scheduled tribes in government services has increased but does not reach their respective percentage in the population. Their members in government services are also unevenly distributed, with higher percentages in lower ranking positions.<sup>1</sup>

Indigenous people are found throughout India but the greatest concentration is in the North-Eastern states: in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland where more than half of the total population belong to the indigenous people. In peninsula states adivasis are found most in Chattisgarh (31,8%), Jharkhand (26,3%), Orissa (22,2%), Sikkim (20,6%) and Madhya Pradesh (20,3 %).

The social and cultural position of indigenous people in the North-Eastern states differ from the adivasis in other parts of India in several crucial ways. They have been more or less untouched by Hindu influence. They have been exposed to modern education and therefore their literacy rates are much higher than among adivasis living in other parts in India. Many of these communities have been exempt from the trauma caused by displacements.





*photo V.K. Ramachandran*

The constitution of India (article 46) enjoins upon the state to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, in particular, the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes and should protect them from social, injustice and all forms of exploitation. However, those promises were written 'in the wind'. Since India got her independence 62 years ago many adivasi communities have faced exploitation, struggles for their livelihood and even their very existence as peoples. It has been estimated that there are 60 million displaced persons and development project-affected persons in India. The majority of those are indigenous people and landless dalits. Around 25 percent of indigenous people have become displaced or project-affected persons at least once because their regions are rich in natural resources.<sup>2</sup>

Santals rose in rebellion in the mid of 19<sup>th</sup> century against the exploitation and oppression perpetuated by the British and the local ruling classes. Today adivasis rebel against the giant multinational companies and the state, particularly in Orissa, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand where some of them have joined the guerrilla troops of naxalites.

In 2006 Prime minister Manmohan Singh called the maoists "the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country". Maoists are known also as naxalites, because the movement started in the village of Naxalbari in 1967 in West Bengal.

India's economic growth has been impressive in recent years. However, the benefits of the growth have affected mainly a middle class and a upper middle class which comprise only around 7 percentage of all households (the middle class and upper middle class are defined as households earning at least 200 000 rupees per year).<sup>3</sup> One of the most notable aspects of the Forbes list has been the growth in Indian and Chinese billionaires. They are in a sense citizens of global 'Richistan' formed by new and old billionaires, really rich people "who are financial foreigners within their own country", as Robert Frank has put it.<sup>4</sup> According to the Forbes list (2010) among the world's wealthiest 40 persons there are five Indian billionaires. Their net worth assets are total around 104 billion dollars which is roughly equal to the total amount of international development aid given by rich countries a year. The Indian billionaires (as well as a part of upper middle class) may live physically in India, but they do not share the same social and cultural reality as citizens of 'Pooristan'. In India Pooristan is formed by those earning less than 20 rupees in a day. A report published by NCEUS (National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, 2007) found that 77 percent of Indians, or 836 million people, lived on less than 20 rupees per day.

A growing economy requires more natural resources. India's richest coal reserves (around 85 percent of total Indian reserves) are located in West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. It is not accidental that those five states are most affected by the naxalite uprising. Perhaps prime minister Manmohan Singh's real concern was over control of these energy

resources as a successful of naxalite uprising could have profound consequences for India's energy security. Coal accounts for 55 percent of India's energy need. According to the IEA's (International Energy Agency) estimations coal will remain the dominant fuel in India through 2030. Demand is projected to grow from 391 Mt in 2002 to 758 Mt in 2030.

A major proportion of India's coal and mineral resources are located in traditional adivasi lands. For example, Orissa contains maybe a fifth of India's coal, a third of its bauxite reserves and most of the chromite. When new mining projects are coming up in traditional adivasi lands, displaced adivasis provide potential recruits for naxalite troops.

The region of Dandakaranya, roughly equivalent to the Bastar District, covers an area around 320 km from north to south and 480 km from east to west. The region forms a forest belt which spills over from Chattisgarh and Orissa into Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. Dandakaranya is an important place in Hindu mythology. According to Ramayana, Rama and his wife Sita spent 13 years in exile in Dandakaranya (the name can be translated roughly as 'the jungle of punishment'). Now that mythic name has been adopted by the maoists as their own and within it they run their own parallel government. They are running in the jungle of punishment a 'parallel government'. In June 2009 they set up a FM radio station in the forests of Dandakaranya. The local radio station broadcasts revolutionary songs, folk songs played by adivasis, and of course the speeches of the success stories of the top maoist leaders.

Sudeep Chakravarti, in his book *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country* (2008), tells of Sabita Kumari who went to the local police station in Jharkhand to register a complaint, because her sister had been raped. The police did not care much about her complaint but asked her instead to have sex with him. Sabita escaped into the jungle and joined in the troops of maoists, and swore to kill 'at least 100 policemen'. According to Sudeep Chakravarti there are a lot of similar cases throughout India.

In Nepal a decade-long 'people's war' of maoist ended in 2006. The maoists won the elections in April 2008 and a maoist-dominated government took office in August led by a guerrilla leader Prachanda (Pushpa Kamal Dahal). Although the coalition government disintegrated soon in May 2009, there is no doubt that these incidents have encouraged the naxalites in India. The movement, according to official estimates, has spread now across 223 districts and 20 states. It seems very probable that the escalation will continue. Ajai Sahni, for example, has stressed that "given current state capacities, it must be clear, no proposal strategy can offer the possibility of a decisive victory or even enduring gains against the maoists".<sup>5</sup>

Many Indian researches have pointed out that the naxalite uprising is a consequence of the longstanding failures of the state and of the formal political system. Adivasis have faced the worst failures: they have gained the least and lost the most during the last decades. It seems that instead of making adivasis partners in current economic development, the centre will marginalize them further. According to the clauses of constitution they should protect the rights of scheduled tribes in land and forests as well as provide local councils to share royalties from minerals found on adivasi lands, but "what happens in practice is that the adivasis do not get to see or spend a paisa from mining, whose proceeds are shared between the contractors and the state-level (and usually non-tribal) politicians".<sup>6</sup>

Dalits and adivasis are the two most deprived sections of Indian society. The dalit movement has grown tremendously in India since the beginning of the 1990s, and today its networks are global.<sup>7</sup> On international agenda a turning point was in 2001 when the United Nations World Conference against Racism was held in Durban, South Africa. The dalit activists argued in Durban that caste discrimination, equal to racism, was a problem that ought to be brought to the agenda of the world community. Throughout India the BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) has given a face to dalits in the public sphere. It is now a ruling party in Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state with over 190 million people. The current chief minister of Uttar Pradesh is the BSP supremo Mayawati. However, the real symbol and inspirator for the dalit movement has been B. R. Ambedkar who was India's first law minister and an architect of the constitution.

Adivasis do not have such symbolic figures as Ambedkar or well known national leaders known to everyone, who could unite and create collective identity across the boundaries of state and language. The great adivasi hero Birsa Munda, for example, is well known in Jharkhand and in Bihar, but he is hardly known in the adivasi areas of Andhra Pradesh or Maharashtra.

But something is happening. Many members of different indigenous communities are proudly calling themselves adivasis. Political and cultural movement requires ability 'to imagine a community', a belief in collective identity, a consciousness of common history. The imagination of community may be based on the construction of an alternative vision of Indian history, as has taken place in the dalit movement, by inventing popular myths, folk heroes, and cultural symbols related to the pride of the socially and culturally deprived people.

This ebook gives a detailed overview concerning the position of adivasis in a rapidly changing Indian society. V.K. Ramachandran provides in his article a case study of the Dungariya village in southern Rajasthan focusing on village economy with a digression into the recent history of peasant movement. Anita-Kelles Viitanen gives a historical analysis of the current vulnerable situation of indigenous peoples. Aparna Pallavi's article focuses on the relocation of Ban Gujjar community in Uttarakhand. Alex Akhup is dealing with the question of the interface between tribes, state and voluntary organizations, and asking: 'Is there a political space for the recognition of culture and identity of the tribes in the context of present socioeconomic development'? Gladson Dungdung describes the struggles against displacements in Jharkhand. How adivasis have gradually lost their faith in the state, constitutional authorities and judiciary. Ville-Veikko Hirvelä asks in his article: what are the meanings of wild forests according to indigenous peoples and how their life has adapted to it.

Malini Shankar points out that indigenous peoples are at a great crossroads, having to decide whether to integrate into the mainstream industrial society at the cost of leaving their original culture. In this context she gives a detailed analysis of Soliga people in Karnataka. Satu Ranta-Tyrkkö analyses the play Boli (the sacrifice) and the role of adivasis in the play staged by the group Natya Chetana (the theatre for awareness) in Orissa. The play can be interpreted to address not only the case of tribal people but more generally the position of indigenous people as well as the treatment of subordinate minorities in India. Tapio Tamminen is focusing on the changing Toda culture in the Nilgiri Hills which has impressed Western scholars and travelers since the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its religion, marriage customs and dairies. How do they survive in the pressure of modern economy and increasing tourism?

We are grateful for the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland which has funded this ebook.

Tapio Tamminen

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2 Fernandes Walter (2008): Paying the price for someone else's displacement.

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3 ([http://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/publications/india\\_consumer\\_market/slideshow/main.asp](http://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/publications/india_consumer_market/slideshow/main.asp))

4 Frank Robert (2007): Richistan - A journey through the American Wealth Boom and the Lives of the New Rich, Crown, New York.

5 Sahni Ajai (2010): Disruptive Dominance. Defence and Security in India. Vol. 2.

6 Guha Ramachandra: Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy. Economic and Political Weekly, August 2007.

7 see Hardtmann Eva-Maria (2009): The Dalit Movement in India – Local Practices, Global Connections. Oxford University Press, Delhi.

## **DUNGARIYA VILLAGE, SOUTHERN RAJASTHAN A FIELD REPORT**

V. K. Ramachandran<sup>1</sup>

### **INTRODUCTION**

This article is a brief analytical description of household economies in a village in southern Rajasthan. Dungariya is an underdeveloped village located in Kotra, one of the most underdeveloped tehsils of Udaipur district. It is a village in which people live in the depths of poverty, a village that is technologically stagnant, barely irrigated, and endowed with difficult, stony soil. It is a forest-fringe village. The forests are now thin, though some trees – particularly the splendid mahua – remain.<sup>2</sup> These trees are prominent for their bright green and somewhat waxy leaves and thick bushy crowns, and their very presence emphasises the relatively low density of the forest cover that surrounds them in the summer.

The topography of Dungariya is undulating and hilly. The river Vakal passes through the village, and there is a stretch of flat lowland along the river. The undulating part of the village is criss-crossed by seasonal streams and rainwater channels. We have seen the harsh beauty of the terrain in the summer; I can imagine it being of uncommon attractiveness in the monsoon when the streams are full and the hills are green, and in the winter mist.

This article draws primarily on a survey of Dungariya village conducted in May 2007, as part of the Project on Agrarian Relations in India conducted by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies.<sup>3</sup> It also draws on a detailed interview conducted on July 13, 2009, with B. L. Singhvi, a leader of the All-India Kisan Sabha and of the movement among the Adivasis of Udaipur district in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup>



Dungariya is a village of about median size for the region. It has 110 households with a population of 699 persons (*Tables 1 and 2*).

Table 1. *Number of households, by social group, Dungariya village, May 2007*

Social group	Number	Share
Scheduled Tribe	107	97
Others	3	3
All	110	100

Source: Survey data

Table 2. *Population, by social group, Dungariya village, May 2007*

Social group	Male	Female	All
Scheduled Tribe	355	330	685

Others	11	3	14
All	366	333	699

Source: Survey data

Dungariya is an Adivasi village. Only three families are non-tribal: one is a Jain household that owns a small flour-mill, one is headed by a public-works contractor (who now supervises public employment programmes) and the third owns a small shop. Of the 107 tribal households, 104 belong to the Bhil scheduled tribe, and three to the Garasiya scheduled tribe. The Bhil sub-tribes in the village are: Bhumbariya, Dabi, Dungri, Gamaar, Kher, Laoor, Pargi, Parman and Talal. A Solanki household belongs to the Garasiya scheduled tribe.

The village settlement in Dungariya is scattered. There is no habitation cluster in Dungariya across the 1547 hectares that constitute the extent of the village in official records, or along the forests that abut the village. Houses are built on hillsides or along the bases of hillocks, and generally close, though not necessarily adjacent, to one of



the fields cultivated by their owners. Each house has a fence made of the dried branches of bushes. The extension of the village settlement and the location of individual huts are closely related to the extension of agricultural land. Some time after a couple's son marries, he leaves his parental home for a new one, locating the residence close to the paternal inheritance or to forest he has cleared to make a new field.

Although the village is nominally on the main road, the furthest settlements are about four kilometres distant, along undulating paths. Children from an entire section of the village – Dungariya Thala – are unable to come to school during the monsoon and after, because the streams and rainwater channels are too full for them to cross safely.

(In Tripura, too, in the tribal villages we studied, the village settlements were scattered and huts built on hillsides and near fields and homestead gardens. The great differences, of course, are that agro-ecological conditions in the Rajasthan village are much more harsh than in Tripura, and that basic physical and social infrastructure, in contrast to Tripura, are almost absent in Dungariya.)<sup>5</sup>

This report is not a social anthropology of tribal life in the village, but a study largely of its economy, with a short introduction to struggles that have led to changes in the conditions of bondage and forced labour (*begar*) in the region. It is an economist's study – not an anthropologist's – but with a digression into the recent history of the peasant movement in the region.

## PEASANT STRUGGLE

The tribal areas of southern Rajasthan have a long history of struggle against social and political oppression. Kotra tehsil, in which Dungariya is located, was one of the sites of the struggles that began in the nineteenth century against feudal rule and British colonial power, and for individual and collective freedom for the Adivasi masses.<sup>6</sup>

Many gains had been made by the Adivasi people in the struggles of the pre-Independence and early post-Independence period. The Adivasi people were victims of oppressive and arbitrary systems of land tenure, taxes, and different kinds of illegal exactions. Adivasis suffered oppression and social humiliation through an all-pervasive system of *begar* or forced labour. Adivasi men and women were forced to work in feudal landlords' fields and in their

homes, and they had to provide labour services to the private militia and armies of the rulers and their sub-feudatories. They had to risk their lives as beaters and trackers during hunting expeditions organised by the rulers, during which, most notoriously, Adivasi beaters were sometimes used as live bait.<sup>7</sup> Adivasi families lived in houses made of branches and leaves, Adivasi men could not wear shirts or upper clothes, and Adivasi women were victims of assault and violence by ruling-caste men (Ramachandran and Rawal 2009b).

Although victories had been won by the 1970s against the worst forms of social oppression and violence, many other forms of oppression continued. From 1974, and particularly between 1974 and about 1986, southern Udaipur, Dungarpur, and surrounding areas became areas of militant Communist-led Kisan Sabha activity. The struggles of the 1970s and 1980s were directed, first, against feudal landlords, particularly the Samant of Panarwa and the Rao of Maner, erstwhile sub-feudatories of the former Maharana of Udaipur; secondly, against traders and moneylenders; and thirdly, against corrupt and oppressive officials, especially revenue officials and officials of the Forest Department.<sup>8</sup> Dharmilal, Narayan Amarnath, Tulsidas, and B. L. Singhvi led the struggles of the All-India Kisan Sabha of this period in Udaipur district.<sup>9</sup>

Fierce battles were fought against the seizure of Adivasi land by landlords and traders. The struggles of 1974-75 began in the Panarwa-Jhadol area and in Panisoda village in Kherwasa tehsil, where the local Thakur had appropriated tribal peasants' land to himself. Other examples of struggles against the landlords were the movements of the 1980s against the Rao of Maner. In the late 1970s, the Kisan Sabha fought a battle against Bhanwarlal Seth, a trader of Dariya panchayat in Phalasiya, who had accumulated documents that claimed ownership over tribal peasant land. The Kisan Sabha seized the false documents and made a public bonfire of them.<sup>10</sup>

In the Kotra region, in which Dungariya falls, the Rao of Maner collected a "tax" from Adivasi peasants of five rupees and five kg of mahua per tree for about 500,000 trees that stood on the Adivasi's own lands and on public land. The fight against this was an important part of the struggle of the 1970s and 1980s, as were the struggles against traders for a better price for tendu leaves collected by peasants, against usurious rates of interest imposed by moneylenders, and against arbitrary methods of accounting and seizure of collateral by moneylenders.<sup>11</sup> Struggles against police oppression and oppression by government officials began to give, according to the peasant leader B. L. Singhvi, a new sense of confidence to the Adivasi people, because they challenged the authority and arbitrariness of persons once thought unchallengeable.<sup>12</sup>

The Adivasis of Dungariya village, too, were part of the struggle against the "tax" on mahua, and other movements of the time. An important incident occurred in Dungariya in 1984-85, the incident of the *patwari* (village-level revenue official), described thus by Bansi Lal Singhvi:

As you know, Adivasi households in Dungariya cultivate riverside land. This land is not officially registered in their names, and whatever they produced was subject to harsh penalties – penalties that exceeded production itself. Whenever he went to the village, the *patwari* demanded liquor, he demanded women, he demanded chicken to eat. I was at a political meeting in Paneria village one day when people from Kotra came to tell us that such things were happening in the village. So we said "come on, let's go," and with 50 rural comrades from Jhadol with us, we went straight to Kotra and surrounded the *patwari*. When we were with our peasant comrades, their spirit and enthusiasm was such that we were willing to act and embrace any consequences... So we caught the *patwari* by the throat, stood him up, and the peasant comrades thought what a wondrous thing that was. And the *patwari* himself folded his hands in apology and said he would never do it again.<sup>13</sup>

## CONTEMPORARY DUNGARIYA

Despite the gains made by the Adivasi masses in the struggles for civil liberties and freedom, the tribal village in Rajasthan (and elsewhere) is still characterised by a special kind of underdevelopment, manifested in levels of technological change and economic growth,

human development and social infrastructure, and people's livelihoods and incomes, that are qualitatively lower than in non-Adivasi villages.

### Land and Agriculture

There is no landlord in the village, nor are there landlords outside the village who own land here. Of the 110 households in the village, only three were landless, and 64 households had land holdings whose extent was between 1 and 5 acres. The largest household's land holding was 18.73 acres, the second largest 8.03 acres, and the smallest 0.13 acres. Of the total net sown area, 17 per cent has access to some water, though the quality of irrigation is low and varied. Water is mainly from the river, and comes to the field by means of diesel-powered pumps or dug channels. A few fields are irrigated from traditional open wells fitted with diesel-powered pumps.

Table 3. *Household holdings of land owned and occupied, by size category of holdings, Dungariya village, May 2007*

Size category	Households		Extent	
	Number	%	Acres	%
0	3	3	0	0
>0<=1	35	32	22.6	11
>1<=2.5	48	44	72.79	34
>2.5<=5	16	14	54.27	25
>5<=7.5	6	5	35.92	17
>7.5	2	2	26.76	13
All households	110	100	212.34	100

*Source:* Survey data

An "ownership holding" in Dungariya is generally forest land cleared and held by a household in owner-like possession, but *without legal title*. Households are, in fact, in regular fear of having their holdings claimed and seized by the Forest Department.<sup>14</sup> While the *intensification* of agriculture in Dungariya is, as we shall see below, minimal, the *extension* of cultivation occurs even today. Many households have, in this generation, cleared

land of scrub and trees to create the fields that they cultivate. This is thus a village that is likely to have seen an increase in net sown area in this generation. On the other hand, forest legislation serves as a brake to a continuous increase in ploughed land.

Inequality in the distribution of household land holdings in the village is lower than in other villages we have studied as part of the Project on Agrarian Relations in India (PARI).<sup>15</sup>

A salient feature of the data is that total household incomes were not primarily, or even largely, determined by the size of land holding. Agricultural incomes are influenced, for instance, by the extent of land actually cultivated in a year, and by the intensity of cultivation; household incomes are further determined by the structure of the household labour force, and in Dungariya, by the volume and nature of non-agricultural employment. The income per capita of the members of the households with the largest land holding in the village, in fact, was actually *lower* than the income per capita of the household with the smallest holding.

Differentiation among the peasantry is not absent in Dungariya. There is no doubt that with irrigation and the entry of the cash economy in agriculture, differentiation has begun in the village. Nevertheless, differentiation is not characterised primarily by differences in the *extent* of ownership holdings of land. Further, the nature of differentiation is not such as to make the resolution of contradictions between classes *within* the village an immediate political task.

### **Cropping Pattern and Farming Practices**

Land in Dungariya is stony, that is, a vertical cross-section would show strata of stone and thin soil. Every year the topsoil in each field must be cleared of stones, and clearing stones is an important lean-season activity. If a field has been left fallow for some years, it can take weeks of work by a group of three adults to clear an acre of land for ploughing. The principal crop season is the kharif season, planted in the monsoon (kharif planting in Dungariya is generally in July) and harvested in October-November. The main crop is a lowproductivity crop of traditional white maize, intercropped with red gram (*tur* dal), with a side

crop of black gram (*urad* dal). The maize is harvested in October, and the pulses two months later. On some fields, the seeds are mixed and then planted in rows. Where there is irrigation, a crop of wheat or green gram (*moong* dal) is grown. Wheat is sown in November and harvested in March. Other crops grown in the kharif are cowpea (called *chulai* here), sorghum (*jowar*), pumpkin, okra and cotton (there was one field of cotton grown in this village). There are tree crops, among which are dates (harvested in June-July), mangoes and mahua. In general, the only major crop that is pure-cropped is wheat.



## ***Technology***

In India today, the practice of agriculture as traditional craft can be said to survive, above all, in the Adivasi villages of the country. Dungariya is an example of such an agricultural type, although perhaps not to the same degree as, for instance, tribal villages in certain parts of Madhya Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand or Orissa.

A consequence of the relatively low levels of technological change has been low levels of production and productivity. Of 129 plots on which maize was grown in 2006-07, the crop failed entirely on 20 plots, and the average production on the other plots appears to have been about 420 kg per hectare. Wheat was grown on 81 plots that year, and average yields were about 1.4 tonnes per hectare.

*Biological inputs.* Most households used chemical fertilizers, but in small quantities, the peak being in the region of 100 kg per acre, and some as low as 10 kg. All households used homeproduced seeds. No seeds were bought from the market in the reference year.

*Implements and machinery.* The most important implements used in the village come directly from the forest – every year or two, peasants make ploughs and levellers from wood they cut down from the forest.

Only six households used machinery for field preparation (including ploughing) the whole year, though most wheat-growers hired tractors to thresh wheat. These tractors came from Gujarat and charged Rs 350 per hour for driving over the wheat plants.

Draught animals are of a local long-horned variety. Low production levels mean low fodder production, and consequently, weak cattle. Cattle disease hit the neighbouring tehsils in the year preceding the survey, but seems to have been checked before animals in Dungariya fell ill. Metal implements and shallow metal basins are often the only purchased items that households owned in the broad categories of means and implements of production.

Peasants do not receive agricultural information or extension services from the state.

## **Forms of labour**

A consequence of very low levels of agricultural technology is that almost all labour on a family holding is family labour. Most households hire in no labour at all. A few households exchange labour. A practice that we have not seen elsewhere is that of a *mehmaan* or guest worker. This simply means that a person who comes to stay in a peasant household and eats with the family is expected to participate in the labour process on the family farm.

A feature of many household economies is a sort of gift of usufruct (it can also be described as a sort of rent-free lease). The illustration that follows involves a system of earning from

working and managing an irrigated farm in the rabi season for relatives, particularly older persons. A's father-in-law is too old to cultivate all his land, so he divides it into three parts. He cultivates one himself, invites A to cultivate one, and gives the third to another person. A, who cultivates the land rent-free, pays for all the inputs and brings the produce home to tide over the lean months. To extend the illustration: there is a diesel pump on the land; A pays one-third of the cost of diesel and maintenance. There are cases where the owner of the land provides manure free to the gift-receiver: he has more than he needs himself, and shares it with the cultivator whom he has permitted to till a portion of his land. There were examples of two cultivators cultivating a plot of (rent-free or rented) land. They shared all costs and divided the produce between themselves equally.

In another case, the landowner is Ladu Ram's grandfather and was probably too old to work on his own land. Ladu Ram was granted use of the land without having to give anything in exchange: this arrangement seems to be more of a case of gift of usufruct (within the family) rather than rent-free lease. The land was taken only for the rabi season and was cultivated

with wheat. Ladu Ram didn't use a diesel pump to irrigate his wheat crop as his land is near the river and he made a channel up to the field. Ladu Ram, we understand, helped his grandfather for day-to-day expenses in exchange for the use of his field.

When asked why the older person should agree to this arrangement, Ladu Ram asks: "How else will my family survive after the maize crop? He knows that I have no land that is irrigated, and he does not need the whole plot that he owns, so he calls me to cultivate wheat."

This was the first village in our all-India study in which we recorded such systematic forms of altruism in land relations, survivals of relationships of mutual aid and sharing in a capitalist world.

### **Biodiversity**

There has been one consequence of the absence of technological change that has made tribal villages something of a treasure-house, a repository of agricultural crop and seed diversity. Many tribal villages did not participate in the Green Revolution, and did not convert to different types of high-yielding and modern varieties. A wide range of seeds and crops has thus been preserved by means of traditional methods of mixed cropping. This has been observed and recorded in different parts of India. In Badhar, a tribal village in Anuppur district in Madhya Pradesh that we surveyed in 2008, some 42 crops, covering a wide range of cereals, pulses, vegetables and oilseeds, were grown, mainly as mixed crops, or in kitchen gardens.<sup>16</sup>

## Forest Produce

In an earlier time, the tribal people of Dungariya gathered mahua flowers, tendu leaf, honey, other fruit, flowers and medicinal plants from the forests and hunted partridge, grouse, hare, deer and wild boar. They also collected firewood and wood for house construction and ploughs and rudimentary household furniture, mainly cots. Today, collection is mainly of

wood (firewood and wood for small scale construction and implements) and mahua flower. Other forest products, collected in small quantities but important for subsistence, are resin, bamboo fruit (including dates), grass, honey, castor and gunda, timbru and kambar (for none of which we are able to find the English translation!). All our respondents bar one said that they never hunted at all nowadays (“I have not seen a wild boar in my life”) but this seemed to be for fear of the authorities. The collection and sale of tendu leaf is no longer a source of income – we learn that it has been more than five years (some said more than ten) since the tendu-leaf contractor last came to the village.

***To make mahua liquor:*** Immerse mahua flowers in water in a metal vessel and cover the vessel and allow the flowers to soak. Mix crude jaggery with the mixture. Distil after the ninth or tenth day of soaking.

Cutting firewood from the forest and selling it in Kotra market are very laborious tasks. Buri Laor, who is about 35 or 36 years old, lives with her husband Rupa and their three sons and three daughters. The oldest, their son Sailu, is 22 years old, and the youngest, their daughter Gewari, is 24 months old. Rupa cut firewood some 183 days in the preceding year, and Buri cut firewood 23 days the preceding year. Buri sold about 80 bundles of firewood in Kotra. Buri told the students who surveyed her household that on days on which she sold firewood (to a sweet-shop owner in Kotra market), she sets out at midnight from her hut in the Thala with a headload of firewood. She sells the bundle – for 30 rupees – as soon as she can and returns to the hut by noon. She also has to dodge forest department officials on the way: they demand a fine of Rs 100 if she is caught with firewood cut from the reserved forest.

The extension of net sown area reflects a decline in earnings and subsistence from forests and common property resources. Lakshman Dungri, a Kisan Sabha activist in the village, sees very clearly the relationship between poverty and deforestation. “We are poor, so we cut forests down to clear land and sell firewood; the forests grow thinner, rainfall goes down, and our incomes from agriculture and the forests go down still further.” The narrow “environmentalist” objection to the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers



*photo: V.K. Ramachandran*

(Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2008 seems doubly vacuous when seen from a tribal majority village. The point, surely, is not that forests can be protected only if they are “saved” from the tribal people, but that forests cannot be protected unless the rights of those dependent on forests for livelihoods and direct consumption are protected.

### **INCOMES AND ASSETS**

The Adivasi population of India – as peasants, subsistence-seekers from forest and other common property resources, rural manual workers and unskilled urban migrants – are the most impoverished of the rank and file of India’s reserve army of labour.

In areas of low commercialisation and technological change – and, in particular, where purchased inputs are low and dependence on *gathered* sources of subsistence relatively high –

it is often difficult to apply standardised norms for the measures of weights, area and volumes. Thus, it was difficult to calculate household incomes – monetised and nonmonetised – by any fastidious (or quantitatively precise) cost-accounting method. It was impossible to determine how much land each household kept fallow (or indeed precisely how much it possessed), or the gross physical output per crop, the quantity of biological inputs used or labour-time deployed. When it comes to measuring imputed incomes from forest produce – the physical quantities of different items of produce gathered and their market values – the problem of precise quantitative valuation becomes, as can be imagined, quite intractable. Earnings from wage-labour at public-works sites are more amenable to regular measurement. In such cases, the issues were those of recall, and of conversion of piece-rates into time-rates and total earnings.

In any case, incomes were very low. Most households earned only about Rs 100 to Rs 120 per person per month (excluding forest produce).<sup>17</sup> Of this, 60 per cent and more came from public works, particularly road building, and earnings from wages earned through temporary migration to the cotton fields and construction sites of Gujarat.

Our interviews showed that, in the preceding year (2006-07), workers from Dungariya had worked at road construction, digging ponds, water harvesting and other types of earth-work. During the period of the survey, National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS)

work was under way. The scheme was not run by a private contractor, but supervised by a man who held the job-cards, a former private contractor. He spoke to us of the poor wages paid – because of the nature of the piece rate, a worker earned only about Rs 28 to 35 a day on most days. The work was heavy and laborious: the men cut trenches and the women tossed baskets of earth along rows until the last in line threw it along the stretch that was to become a road linking Dungariya Thala with the State highway.

For all the inadequacies of the wage and the drudgery involved, however, NREGS had become the single largest source of annual earnings for many households, a last barrier against complete disaster. The two pieces of legislation of recent times that are of crucial policy relevance to the people of Dungariya – the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the Scheduled Tribe and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act -- both owe their existence and present content to Left intervention and struggle in parliament and outside.

Large numbers of workers migrate to Gujarat to work at construction sites or in cotton fields. Cotton-pickers received Rs 40 a day with a portion of cooked vegetable or Rs 35 if they opted to take dal and roti as well. It is quite extraordinary how young the children who



go to Gujarat can be: Ladu Ram sent his two sons Kalyan and Chetan, aged 9 and 12, to Gujarat with a group from the village for 30 days to earn Rs 35 a day each. It was Kalyan's first trip and Chetan's second. They came back with Rs 800 each to give their parents. Reports in the press indicate that the migration of children from the area to the cotton fields of Gujarat continues, and that low wages and appalling conditions of work persist.<sup>18</sup>

### **Household Assets**

Income-poverty is accompanied by asset-poverty. Other than in three households – that of the flour miller, the small shopkeeper and the former public-works contractor and jeepowner – assets were few and of low value.

The most important household assets were essentially non-tradable commodities: agricultural land, huts and livestock-sheds. The walls of most huts were of wood and mud, mud and stone or mud and thatch. Only three households had any cement in their walls. All but ten households had earthen floors.

Since there was no electricity in the village, there were no televisions or electric household appliances. One household (the flour-mill owner) had a scooter, one an old jeep, 11 had bicycles, and the rest had no means of private transport. Furniture consisted of a cot or bed.

An important household asset consisted of inventories of food grain – maize, wheat or pulses – with households. The specific amount with a household varied widely, from 2 kgs of green gram in one household, to one metric ton of wheat (a rare case) at the other extreme. Eighty two households had wheat stocks (median holding: 100 kg); 16 households had maize stocks (median holding: 10 kg); and 10 households had black gram or red gram stocks (mean holding: 5.3 kg).

## HEALTH, EDUCATION, BASIC AMENITIES

Health, education and basic household amenities – can there be parts of India where things are worse than Dungariya in respect of these? There is no electricity in the village. There is no toilet in the village. There is no house with running water. Hand pumps for water can be more than half a kilometre away from places of residence; when they break down, it can be weeks before they are repaired. Water for all purposes other than drinking comes from the river, and when households have no access to drinking water through hand-pumps, they dig holes in the sand in the riverbed and filter out water to drink. There appears to be a kind of skin disease endemic in the village, in which the skin becomes dry and scaly, then sore, and finally covered with suppurating sores. Our Kisan Sabha organiser Ladu Ram Dungri says that this is because the water that is used most of the year is stagnant water that accumulates in pools along the riverbeds; others say that chemicals upstream pollute the river-water. There is no anganwadi centre or qualified doctor in the village. Children who are ill are not taken to Kotra because it is too expensive

Table 4. *Literacy rates among population above 6 years of age, by social group, Dungariya village, Rajasthan, 2006-07, in percent*

Social group	Male	Female	All
Scheduled Tribe	26	9	18
Others	90	67	85
All	29	10	20

Source: Survey data

Table 5. *Median years of schooling, population above 15 years of age, Dungariya village, May 2007 in number*

Social group	Male	Female	All
Scheduled Tribe	0	0	0
Others	8	6	8
All	0	0	0

Source: Survey data

Table 6. *Number of years of schooling, persons above the age of 15, Dungariya village, May 2007* in numbers

Number of years of schooling	Scheduled Tribe			All		
	M	F	All	M	F	All
0	125	149	274	126	150	276
1 to 5	25	7	32	25	7	32
6 to 10	19	1	20	26	3	29
> 10	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Survey data 2007

The statistics reported in Tables 4, 5 and 6 were collected in the 60th year of India's Independence: what more damning summary of achievement than the record of education in Dungariya village?

- o Of all Scheduled Tribe people aged 7 years and above, only 18 per cent -- 26 per cent of men and 9 per cent of women -- were literate;
- o The median years of schooling among tribal people -- men and women -- above the age of 15 years was zero.
- o Of all tribal women above the age of 15, only one had studied beyond class 6 and none beyond class 8.

The record could go on. If this is the past, the school attendance data (Table 7) give little confidence for the future

Table 7. *Current enrolment rate, Scheduled Tribe children, Dungariya village, May 2007* in per cent

Age group	Scheduled Tribe children		
	M	F	All
6-12 years	38	20	29

Source: Survey data 2007

School attendance rates were abysmal: the Table shows that of all tribal children in the age group 6 to 12 years, only 29 per cent -- 38 per cent of boys and 20 per cent of girls -- were attending school. Large numbers of children -- skinny, with open sores and unhealthy hair -- played naked in the houses we visited. As the data show, the primary school in the village has failed entirely to attract children to school or to keep enrolled children in school. The school has two teachers for five classes, and the people of the village have no confidence in either. There is no school in the Thala area.

## THE PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM IN DUNGARIYA

The policy of narrow targeting of price-controlled food rations, introduced as part of the economic programme of liberalisation, has been condemned by political parties and academics of the Left as excluding the most needy, and robbing the majority of India's population of its right to food.<sup>19</sup> Dungariya provides a particularly dreadful example of how targeting, a policy that is supposed to ensure "efficiency", starves the poorest.

Every household but three in Dungariya is poor by any standard of income poverty. Nevertheless, 68 households out of 110 have been classified as being "above the poverty line" ("APL") and five households have no ration cards at all. Thus 66 per cent of the village population is excluded by definition from the public distribution system (PDS).

o Navan Lal Pargi (28) and his wife Amiya (22) live in a six-member household. They have an operational holding of 1.6 acres that is irrigated, but poorly so. They work on the land and as manual workers on road-building sites, and their eldest child, their 6-year-old son, Machhru Lal, does not go to school, but grazes the five goats owned by the family. The cash income per capita of the family (this excludes all income – in cash and kind – from forest produce) is less than Rs 200 per month. The official poverty line was about Rs 360 per capita per month. The family was given an "Above Poverty Line" ration card and effectively excluded from the public food distribution system.

o Miriya Bhumbariya (39) and his wife Sehana (34) live in a seven-member household. They cultivate a household operation holding of about 1.07 acres of unirrigated land and also do piece-rated manual work at the National Rural Employment Guarantee worksites. The cash income per capita (excluding earnings and incomes from forest produce) of the households is less than Rs 100 per month. The household has officially been classified as "Above Poverty Line."

o The children of Gujra Bhumbariya (58) and his wife Sitni (55) have married and established their own homes; the couple cultivate a 0.8 acre plot of occupied land. Sitni also worked at non-agricultural manual labour tasks at public work sites in the preceding year. They are very poor, and Gujra is very ill – the students who interviewed the household wrote that when they went to the household, Gujra was "lying on the cot, crying in pain." He had been once to a doctor in Kotra, but was unable to afford medical treatment (there is no medical facility – public or private – in Dungariya). This household has officially been classified as "Above Poverty Line."

Many more examples can be given of the utter and callous arbitrariness of the classification of households as “Above Poverty line” and “Below Poverty Line” in the targeted Public Distribution System and of the exclusion of the poorest from the ambit of the system.

\* \* \*

Dungariya is a village in a region whose people have an exalted place in the history of the struggle against British colonial rule and Rajput feudalism. More than 60 years after

Independence, however, it presents a case study of the worst consequences of the policies of the ruling classes in India. The village today is a site of acute poverty, however that poverty is measured -- whether in terms of incomes, education, health or access to the basic amenities of modern life.

1 Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata. I am grateful to the Foundation for Agrarian Studies team, and particularly to Navpreet Kaur, Vikas Rawal, and Madhura Swaminathan, for help in preparing this report.

2 Mahua: *madhuca longifolia*

3 For information on this multi-village study, see [www.agrarianstudies.org](http://www.agrarianstudies.org), particularly <http://www.fas.org.in/pages.asp?menuid=16> and <http://www.fas.org.in/pages.asp?menuid=28>.

4 Ramachandran and Rawal (2009b).

5 See Government of Tripura (2007).

6 For an introduction to the history of nineteenth-century resistance to feudal Rajput rule, and later struggles led by Vijay Singh Pathik, Motilal Tejawat, Maniklal Varma and others, see Pandey (1974), Singhvi (2004), Ghasiram (2007), and the interview in Ramachandran and Rawal (2009b).

7 Pande (1974), Ramachandran and Rawal (2009b).

8 Singhvi, who was interviewed for this article, was attacked and beaten badly by hoodlums of the Rao of Maner, Himmatsingh, in 1984 (Ramachandran and Rawal, 2009b).

9 Ibid.

10 Ramachandran and Rawal (2009b).

11 Tendu: *Diospyros melonoxylon*; the leaves are used for rolling beedis.

12 Ramachandran and Rawal (2009b)

13 Ramachandran and Rawal (2009b)

14 There is a clear contrast in this respect between Dungariya and tribal-dominated villages in West Bengal; in the latter case, land titles were formally made out to tribal households as part of land reform. See, in this context, Bakshi (2008).

15 See Ramachandran and Rawal (2009a), p. 5, Table 2.

16 See also [www.mssrf.org/bd/integmngmt.htm](http://www.mssrf.org/bd/integmngmt.htm) and links therefrom for an account of the preservation and in situ conservation of rice and other cultivars by tribal communities in Orissa, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

17 The coefficient for the conversion of August 2007 prices to August 2009 prices is 1.25.

18 See Singh and Singh (2009) and Naithani (2009).

19 See CPI(M) (2009), and Swaminathan (2008 a and b).



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# Adivasis - dispossessed by development and globalisation

Anita Kelles-Viitanen

*“When all the trees have been cut down,  
when all the animals have been hunted,  
when all the waters are polluted,  
when all the air is unsafe to breathe,  
only then will you discover  
you cannot eat money.”*

Cree prophecy

## Development or disempowerment?

Old things can continue or return in new garbs. This is the case with the capture of natural resources. Colonial capture of indigenous resources continues in the new global economy. Old roots of capital accumulation continue. Capitalism is not just based on fair and free competition, as professed, but often on demolition and dispossession, taking advantage of crises, catastrophes and vulnerable situations. In historical England, the lands of the poor were enclosed and possessed. Common resources were confiscated. The poor were made into a propertyless proletariat, forced to work for pittance in factories and sweatshops. Poverty was not considered a problem. On the contrary, it was believed to function as a motor for regular labour supply.

The analysis of the situation of indigenous peoples shows that they are dispossessed everywhere in the world, not just in India (Kelles-Viitanen 2008). In capitalism, this dispossession is not just limited to resources of indigenous peoples. All public goods and resources are now threatened to be possessed by capitalism and turned into commodities to be traded in the Wall Street and City opaque stock markets. Unless we are careful, this will also happen to the climate.

Over the years, development too has been captured. A market based development model replaced (but not completely erased) the earlier development economy models of self-sustained growth and sustainable development. The new neo-liberal paradigm has led to growing influence of trans-national corporations, particularly after the establishment of the WTO in 1995. WTO was established to promote liberalised global trading. With the WTO and strengthened economic power of the IMF and the World Bank, the role of the UN system has also weakened. (Rist 1997; Benn 2004; Fine, Lapavistas, Pincus 2000; Nederveen 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Addo 1996).

Global capitalism has become “messianic”, with promises to solve climate change problems and deliver human rights, democracy and public welfare outcomes. Like modernity before it, free market globalization is expected to lift the whole world out of poverty. Instead, inequalities have increased within and between countries. Corporate taxes have declined with shortages of funds for the public sector, for schools, health care and services.

Trade agreements also intend to privatise conditions of production, by expanding private property rights, discouraging protective legislation and protecting expatriate investors. They encourage commodification of nature and remove social constraints to facilitate - what James McCarthy(2007)describesas-cannibalistic capital accumulation. Capitalism requires indigenous natural resources to maximise multinational profits. It expulses poor and indigenous peoples from their lands, yet needs them for sustaining the cheapest possible labour cost. In a similar vein, it needs poor countries with corruption, poor governance and lack of legislation in order to evade taxes as well as environmental and social costs, coming from pollution and free use of public goods and natural resources. This model is now in crisis and challenged by its financial, economic and ecological failures.

A major proportion of India's coal, forest, hydroelectrical and mineral resources are located in traditional Adivasi lands. Expropriation of these resources has intensified under the new patent regime that emphasizes private commodification of natural resources, at the expense of public and shared resources. Most indigenous



peoples have not gained any share of this wealth. On the contrary, there is a steady decline in the area of Adivasi land. According to the Planning Commission of India, half a million Adivasis have lost half a million hectares of their lands. According to Fernandes (2008), indigenous peoples have lost 60 % of their lands in India and 40 million indigenous people have been resettled.

There are colonial roots to the practice of expropriation. In India, the British colonial masters transferred their own economic practices and institutions as well as culture to India. This included a liberal-democratic governance and dogma as a rule of law that gave legitimacy to brutal processes of colonial nation building. Indigenous people were dispossessed of their sovereign rights and resources, and their cultural survival threatened.

The vulnerable situation of indigenous peoples cannot be understood without historical analysis of roots of their exploitation. It is not an outcome from their personal or cultural characteristics. It originates from vicious cycles, predatory relationships, disempowering structures and asset capture.

Research cannot help us in understanding the true picture of the vulnerable reality, unless background assumptions that include neoclassical economic concepts are revealed. It is important to assess how monetary values are replacing other societal values. We must study how money power continues its exploitation of world's natural and public resources. As pointed out by Edelman and Haugerud (2005), we need to imagine other modes of economic organisation. In this, we can get assistance from indigenous peoples and their rich source of alternative lifestyles. We must not confuse quantitative material growth with qualitative human development. We need a new economic model that favours organic growth, where it is possible, but abhors overriding the limits of our planet.

Development strategies, which are ignorant of their inbuilt economic models, cultural and economic biases and power structures of subjugation, are harmful to indigenous peoples.

### **Varieties of indigenous peoples in India**

Indigenous peoples in India are in many ways a diverse group. For several centuries, they have lived along with non-tribal communities, though sometimes with limited contacts only. Three different terms are being used about indigenous people in India: 'indigenous peoples' (particularly those living in North-East India), 'scheduled tribes' (those included in the scheduled lists of tribes held by the Indian government) and 'Adivasis' (all tribes except those living in the North-East).

Some of the indigenous peoples, particularly in the North-East have managed to get constitutional rights to run their civil affairs according to their customary law. Yet, most struggle to hold to their cultural autonomy. Many have managed to save at least parts of their culture and some are promoting it actively. Yet others have already lost out in the struggle for survival and have become part of the general group of the poor.

Adivasis in India live on geographically marginal areas. They vary from the deserts of Rajasthan to the wastelands of West-Bengal and mountainous areas in Himachal Pradesh. Accordingly, their livelihoods vary. Some are nomads and others practice part-time nomadism i.e. trans-humance. Many tribes get their livelihoods from forests, gardens, farms and animal husbandry. Many fish, hunt or live from gathering. Seasonal wage labour is also common. Having multiple sources for livelihood is a part of their economic risk-management strategy.

Adivasis are overrepresented among the poor. While 40 % of all Indians in 1983-84 (Planning Commission) lived below poverty line, 58 % of scheduled castes and 94 % of scheduled tribes lived in poverty. At least in some areas, tribals manage to avoid the worst situations of poverty. According to Choudhary (2009), the farmer suicide rate in tribal areas of Chhattisgarh is less than half compared with non-tribal areas.

Poverty of adivasis is still being debated. Conventional poverty indicators fail to capture the vulnerability of indigenous peoples. They also fail to capture their social and biodiversity wealth. Conventional indicators do not capture vicious cycles and disempowerment influences coming from outside. As Tomei (2005) points out, indigenous poverty and disempowerment cannot be overcome at an individual level as poverty is rooted in historical trajectories and structural causes to poverty.

Indigenous poverty does not originate just from lack of productivity. Poverty is not just a technical issue either. Now, as in the past, the poverty of indigenous people has its roots in dispossession, lack of rights and territorial abuse of indigenous resources.



Outside forces have always tried to control, restrict and reduce their living space, at the same time blaming indigenous peoples for unsustainable practices on ever decreasing areas. The process of dispossession continues with global extractive industries, bio fuel plantations, land speculation and grabbing and even with establishment of nature parks.





### Better status of indigenous women?

The status of Adivasi women has varied over time and in different tribal communities. While most of the communities are patrilineal, some matrilineal communities are found in North-East, especially in Meghalaya. *Khasis, Jaintias, Lalungs, Rabhas* and *Gharos* have traditionally been matrilineal.

In matrilineal societies, property is passed through the female line. Even though men hold power in clan councils, the right to their power position is passed from mother to daughter. Khasi kingdom too was passed similarly. A king cannot give the throne to his son. He must give it to the son of his youngest sister. It is said that this practice facilitates consultation and power sharing between men and women. Men consult their wives before voting in public forums. Matrilineality, therefore, does not mean domination by women but instead can create a better gender balance in decision-making.

According to many researchers, (Agarwal 1994; Arun 2008; Kelkar 2008; Nathan 2004b; Fernandes 2008) indigenous women are in many respect more empowered, less segregated and they enjoy a higher status than other Indian women. This claim is also supported by statistical data. The better status of indigenous women is reflected in the sex ratio between men and women, which at 972 men to every 1000 is more than that (927/1000) of general population in 2001. However, there is declining trend with the Adivasi women from 982 in 1991. The decline has been attributed to a higher mortality of Adivasi women and their limited access to health services. Anaemia and malnutrition are rampant with a very high infant mortality rate. The literacy rate of adivasi women is also lower (18.2%) compared to other women (39.2), with wide variations in regions. All these figures indicate to a fatal process of disempowerment that has started to affect indigenous women. Earlier they had access to a variety of plants and to a rich source of nutrition.

Bina Agarwal (1994, 154) talks about the better position of *Garo* women:

*“Land was communally held, but women inherited all other property. Overall they occupied a position of considerable economic and social strength: they had independent usufructuary rights to communal land, enjoyed the security of matrilineal residence, played a primary role in agricultural production, controlled cash and agricultural surplus, and enjoyed a considerable degree of sexual freedom. Jural authority, however, was held by men.”*

Agarwal's observations relate to a matrilineal *Garo* society. However, according to researchers even in patrilineal indigenous societies, women have a better status and they enjoy of greater freedoms. This is the case, for example, with the *Nagas*. *Naga* women have no inheritance rights over land or housing, yet they have a significant influence in the economy because of their important role in agricultural production (Nathan 2004b).

A bride price paid to the family of the indigenous bride also highlights the importance of women, indicating that their labour is valued. Dowry paid to the groom's family, being the norm in the Indian society, sends a contrary signal. Widow marriage is also allowed in indigenous societies and women do not have as many social taboos as found in non-tribal societies.

The status of indigenous women is though changing. Adivasis too have started to adopt the dowry practice of Hindu women. (Fernandes and Menon 1987). Indigenous people have also started to see themselves with outsiders' eyes, believing that they are backward. This is the case with some *Khasi* men, who have begun to believe that their traditional matrilineal society is “backward” and “uncivilized”. They want to appear “modern”.

Matrilineal inheritance of land is changing too. *Lalung* and *Dimasa* have compromised by becoming a bilinear system, inheriting from both sides. *Rabhas* have completely switched over to a patrilineal system. *Garos* in Meghalaya, *Dimasas* in Assam and *Akas* in Arunachal Pradesh have started to cultivate commercial crops and have privatised their lands. With the *Garos* of Meghalaya, the changeover to commercial crops has come together with individual land ownership. It has led to class formation and has also undermined the role of women. (Fernandes sine datum). The same has happened with *Khasis* in the Northeast India, where women's ownership to land has been reduced to a vestigial right. Even so, it enables women to have a relatively better position compared with Hindu women. However, the erosive change should not be belittled. Among landless tribes such as Khasi families, an emerging male-domination has increased women's risk to family violence. (Nathan 2004b).

We will not fully understand this change without looking at the larger context from where the pressures for change emerge. In the beginning, the change came from the colonialism and its imported practices of capitalism.

### **Colonial influences**

The change in women's status is not just a gender issue, a power imbalance between men and women. It is more than that.

The Supreme Court of India recently made a decision, whereby it granted two tribal women right to land, in keeping with the fundamental constitutional right to life guaranteed to all Indian citizens, irrespective of sex, creed or caste. Adivasi leaders in Jharkand condemned this judgement. They felt that initiating a discussion on individual rights, contradicted with their indigenous claims to community rights, based on the principles of mutuality and responsibility. They thought it was an attempt to create divisions within Adivasi society. According to them Adivasi women had a relatively good position, enjoyed greater respect and autonomy in Adivasi society. They also considered that the issue of their right to land could not be examined in isolation from the overall social context and indigenous practices. They feared that women would become the channel for intergenerational transfer of land to the wealthy, leading to a situation where land would end in the hands of outside traders. Adivasi men's concern is valid. The history speaks on their behalf.

It is also true that new threats on constricting rights of indigenous women come from growing hierarchical masculine values, adopted into indigenous societies. Nevertheless, even they need to be addressed from a larger economic context, from hierarchical economic structures. Nitya Rao (sine datum) poses an important question: how to secure land rights that are clearly distinct from the western-legal forms of private property, while at the same time represent processes of social and economic change.

In indigenous societies, women and men are relatively equal in a classless society. In Northeast India, the rise of economic class-differentiation was inhibited by the institution of reciprocity that controlled surpluses and distributed it to others. Labour obligations were also reciprocal with duties towards the community and people in need. Social prestige was not linked to accumulation, but to sharing with others. Potlach-feasting was known among the *Nagas*. Christian missionaries attacked this feasting and by erasing it contributed to accumulation, on which class differentiation is based. (Fernandes 2008; Nathan 2004b).

Colonialists did not recognise common resources and usufruct rights of indigenous peoples. They saw indigenous communal land without private titles as nobody's land (*terra nullius*). This lack of recognition helped to justify the transfer of lands to the State. The colonial government could reserve for itself or put under its protection any land. (Fernandes and Menon 1987).

Forests too were considered state property. In order to benefit its own industrialisation, the colonial government put in effect new legislations to control land and natural resources e.g. Land Acquisition Act (1894) and Garo Hills Regulation Act (1886).

Traditional livelihoods of indigenous peoples, such as pastoralism and shifting agriculture, were held in contempt and circumscribed. Colonial State's land control and land use policies (Garo Hills Regulation Act and various licences and royalties) and later independent India's policies (e.g. Jhum Regulation Act) forced indigenous peoples to manage ever-decreasing land.

Tribal forest economy had primarily been women's' economy. Therefore, women were directly affected by land restrictions. In addition, the use of forest was controlled by forest rangers. Many forests were also turned into monocrops, providing only few of the resources that women had earlier used. With reduced biodiversity, women's access to rich variety of plants for nutrition reduced. As a result, malnutrition and health problems ensued. Decreased areas and restricted access to natural resources also led to women's increased workload. They had to collect firewood and minor forest produce from more distant areas. (Dasgupta 1988). With limited access to a much-altered forest, women's ability to fend off forces of patriarchy, introduced by the state, was reduced and their social status decreased. According to Kelkar (2008), when forests were under local control, women played an important role in forest-based production, and often enjoyed high status based on their knowledge of flora and fauna, and their role in religious rituals with strong ties to forest.

Colonial administration also started to impose taxes on everything - land, water, timber and other forest produce. In 1878, colonial masters vested governmental authorities with powers to declare any area as Reserve or Protected forests for revenue or raw materials. (Fernandes and Menon 1987). Since taxes were collected in cash, Adivasis had to resort to moneylenders to raise the required cash. As a result, they became bonded to them because of their prohibitive loan conditions. In order to pay taxes, Adivasis started to sell their labour to British estates and mines or for public constructions. With limited access to food from the forest and land, indigenous women were also forced to seek work outside, contracting their labour in advance against credit (as available work is often seasonal) to buy food. Advance sale of labour, had an added disadvantage. It resulted in lower wages than would normally prevail if labour was contracted at the time, when it was needed and available. If women had been secure in food, they would have been able to operate separately in product and consumption market. But food insecurity unfortunately lead to the interlinked markets. (Kelkar 2008; Dasgupta 1988; Nathan and Jodha 2004; Drèze and Sen 2002).

Adivasis had always worked for others, but it was unpaid and based on reciprocity obligations. Reciprocity supported equality between community members. It too is believed to have long prevented class formation of indigenous peoples, especially in the North-East. (Nathan 2004b).

Agarwal (1994) has studied how colonial law, together with taxation and commercial agriculture, weakened the status of indigenous women. Shifting cultivation was restricted with the help of Jhum Regulation legislation. Until that time, an environmentally healthy practice of shifting cultivation deteriorated from the initial 15 to 18 years' cycle down to 3 years. Wet rice cultivation was also marketed by the government to the indigenous people. It changed distribution of labour between sexes by giving men the main role in production and reducing indigenous women's role to that of a helper. At the same time, communal land system was also under threat of privatisation. With privatisation, individual privatised plots (pattas) were given to men. All of this eroded matrilineal inheritance practices. Agarwal considers transfer to the capitalist market economy to be the root cause of the decreasing status of indigenous women. Other researchers (Nathan and Kelkar; Fernandes; Sinha; Harris-White) have similar opinions. Following characteristics have been considered to be part of this process of erosion:

- capital accumulation based on inequality;
- ☐ the rise of big men and wealthy families with powerful links to the external world;
- ☐ increase of working poor without assets;
- ☐ emergence of informal sector with micro industries functioning near poverty levels;
- ☐ the decline of earlier forms of reciprocity that inhibited accumulation (and subsequent class formation);
- ☐ separation of the objective conditions of labour on land from labour itself;
- ☐ growing domination of men in economic matters;
- ☐ emergence of hierarchical social systems with men on top of these hierarchies.

While earlier, male monopoly in village and community affairs was counter-balanced with women's role in the economic and domestic sphere. The growth of external privatised market, women lost their countervailing power. As a result tribal women were exposed to outside discrimination originating from patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism, which they were not prepared for.

### **Old practices in new garbs**

Social institutions, legislation, social norms and practices usually change slowly. Independent India continued some of its 200 hundred years' old colonial practices. Colonial roots intermingled with societal and economic development. Independent India failed to deconstruct colonial tracks and adapted many of its attitudes, political arrangements and laws. New rulers too adopted an economic system and development model, in stark contradiction to the Adivasi worldview, relationship with nature and livelihood. They also created a monopoly of these resources in the name of national interests. These interests were later forsaken to the private interests inside and outside of India.

Indian state applied old concepts of land, based on earlier British 19th century colonial legislation that had served the British crown in its industrial exploitation of India. The Wild Life Protection Act of 1972 severely restricted the rights of Adivasis over their traditional resources, when turning their lands into wildlife sanctuaries and national parks. Land grabbing and bonded labour have also continued while moneylenders continue to choke rural people with exorbitantly high interest rates.

New government did not recognise sustainable economy of matrilineal societies, nor the role that indigenous women play in the forest economy. Traditional livelihoods continued to be seen as culturally backward, economically inefficient and environmentally harmful. Independent India continued to express the averse attitudes of colonialism towards shifting cultivation and pastoralism. They were considered ecologically destructive, economically inefficient and ill suited to 'modernity'. Such attitudes still linger on in spite of the contrary scientific results. New research instruments such as TEV (total economic value) have demonstrated economic, social and environmental values of pastoralism.

Since commercialisation, many crops and varieties planted as swidden agriculture also have disappeared (Kelkar 2009). Women have suffered most from the settlement efforts, often carried out under ruse of development.

The spirit of colonial legislation is visible in implementation of a recent legislation (the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest- Dwellers Recognition of Forest Rights Act of 2008). There is an embedded attitude toward indigenous peoples as destroyers of environment. The legislation aims to control such behaviour. At the same time, multinational mining companies are scott-free to exploit and pollute sacred hills and rivers. There is a legal obligation to protect indigenous culture, but there

is danger that communal right will be turned into individual rights to serve the market. Under the 2008 Forest Act 1, 9 million applications were filed by February 2009. Out of them 307 000 were processed. Yet, legal obligations on communal ownership, access to minor forest produce and traditional knowledge have so far failed to realise.

Situation is full of contradictions. While new national reforms have recognized the importance of forest access and ownership by local people, there have also been increasing industrial claims to capture forestland for agri-food, bio fuel plantations and for extractive industries.

New global masters have advised governments to modify their land ownership policies to benefit foreign investors. After the financial crisis, financial groups have also started to demand actual rights to land. The founder of Black Earth Farming and a former private equity manager with Carlyle and Invesco could not have put their intention better in September 2008: "the trick here is not just to harvest crops but to harvest money."

No one is against economy as such, but the present economic model is predatory: it exploits environment, society, culture and common lands without compensation. It turns areas with rich biodiversity into monoplantations, pollutes rivers, and destroys the ecological capacity of hills to retain water.

Capitalism in all its cycles - also in its present neo-liberal form - has not just sourced new business opportunities. It has also dismantled and reconfigured earlier economic forms with scouring, destruction and abandonment (Heynen and Robbins 2005). It has also destroyed indigenous livelihoods and overridden kin-based and tributary polities. It has also been blind to the economic roles of indigenous women (Wolf 1990). There has been an ideological struggle between egalitarian and hierarchical societies and between ecologically and culturally sustainable livelihoods and those based on expropriation of natural resources at any costs.

Indigenous intellectual property is also appropriated. The Western innovation system is hierarchical and denies plurality of knowledge. It denies all but the historical value of indigenous traditions. It does not recognise the slow innovation and inputs of local farmers in improving plants. Seeds and plants, improved by indigenous people and local farmers for centuries, are construed as free goods and appropriated by the global bio businesses. Bio piracy is built on the pretence of multinational companies that only their innovations count. (Mgbeoji 2006)

Taxation also moves on old tracks. Although the colonial agricultural tax was removed in the 1950s, nomads such as *Gujjars* in Uttarakhand still pay logging and grazing taxes to the forest department.

In the name of national development, tribal peoples are threatened to relocate and give up their lands for dams and roads, industrial complexes and mines. India is one of the busiest dam building nations in the world. There are 4291 dam projects in India, of which 3596 have been completed and 695 are under construction. They are not all large dams, which normally cause the largest population expulsions. Nor are they all situated on the areas inhabited by indigenous people. Yet dams are the single largest cause for displacement of tribals. The trend is alarming: 22.1 % of large dams were built on tribal areas in 1950 - 1970, but in 1971 - 1990 the percentage had increased to 80 %.

In 2008 altogether, 513 special economic zones were approved in India and another 138 were in plans. Little over half of them are located on rural areas. These zones also lead to a large-scale displacement of people. (Fernandes 2008b, 2009) Some of them are found on tribal land: Jindal Stainless Steel project in Kalinganagar, Orissa displacing *Ho*, *Mundal* and *Santal* tribes;

Mangalore SEZ in Karnataka displacing *Kuduki* tribe; and Raigarh SEZ by Reliance in Maharashtra displacing *Koli* and *Katkari* tribes (information personally given by Devinder Sharma.) Hindalco has also expelled hundreds of Adivasis from their areas in Uttar Pradesh.

Displacement of indigenous peoples not only leads to landlessness, but also to a downward occupational mobility, poverty, child labour and loss of culture. It is for this reason that indigenous safeguard policies were originally established in the development of financing institutions.

In practice, special economic zones (SEZ) are free trade zones, of which big Indian and multi-national companies such as Reliance, Jindal Steel, Infosystem, Tata, Nokia and others benefit. According to Ghosh (2008) they enjoy generous tax benefits (tax exemption for the first five years and up to 50 % of exemptions on profits that are reinvested for another three years). The Indian Finance Ministry estimates the loss of tax revenue to amount to 20 billion pounds by 2010. This is a kick in the face to the 900 million poor and Adivasis. The revenue losses will aggravate the deficit in the budget and result in cutback in social expenditures. Moreover, the establishment of SEZs will also distort land, capital and labour costs.

With penetration of SEZs to the tribal areas, there have been tribal uprisings particularly in Jharkhand, Orissa, Chattisgarh, West-Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. Adivasis have put up a stiff resistance. After deaths and rapes of Adivasis, government stalled their plans in Singur and Nandigram in West-Bengal. Finally, the Government has admitted that there is a need to take better care of indigenous rights.

Mining companies also churn Adivasi lands. One of them is Sterlite Vedanta on Niyamgiri hills in Orissa. After a global civil society campaign, the government of Norway sold all its Vedanta stocks and declared mining on adivasi lands as unethical. One can only hope for the same rectitude from other governments.

Adivasis have also won struggles against bauxite mining in Chintapalli forest in Andhra Pradesh by a Dubai company. Other struggles continue.

Bauxite, found on the holy mountains of Adivasis, is also an environmental problem, as it produces acidic gases, carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. A tonne of aluminium is estimated to produce 4-8 tonnes toxic red mud and 13.1 tonnes carbon dioxide. Bauxite mining also hampers mountains' water retaining capacity. Aluminium, in general, plays a vital role in holding moisture, by combining with H<sub>2</sub>O. Mining and metal factories, therefore, also reverse those life-giving properties.

In debates over causes of climate change, the role of mining and metal production does not get sufficient attention. Arms manufacture and polluting effects of wars are also neglected.

Aluminium is an essential raw material for the weapon industry, classified as "strategic" by Pentagon. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Vedanta mining company's subsidiary Balco is a principal supplier to India's arms industry. Most powerful governments have deemed it essential to ensure constant supply of bauxite at lowest possible cost while also having cheap hydropower available from dams for aluminium production. Because of its strategic importance for defence, aluminium is subsidised in many ways: it is priced too cheaply, and real costs of electricity, water, transport and pollutants are all externalised onto manufacturing countries such as India.

There is a dangerous link between wars and exploitation of indigenous peoples and their resources. (Padel 2008). It is this, which is at the root of so-called resource wars.



### **Climate for whom?**

There is a good reason to claim that indigenous peoples subsidise globalisation. Environmental costs are not only borne by future generations, but according to Nathan (2004), immediate 'subsidy - normally hidden from public scrutiny - is paid by indigenous peoples and other forest communities. Constanza (quoted by Nathan 2004) estimates the subsidy of local indigenous ecosystem services to be USD 1766 per hectare. It is probably more, as it excludes social costs.

Exploitation of nature consists of underpayment of real cost of natural resources. Another exploitation consists of transferring pollution costs to the developing countries and transforming them into pollution havens, when polluting industries migrate to countries with lax environmental regulations. According to Hornborg (2007), one nation's environmental problem can be the flipside of another nation's affluence.

The ideological basis of climate efforts need to be scrutinised. Climate too is turned into a neoliberal financial instrument. Instead of their claimed benefits, they harm biodiversity and indigenous peoples, as market systems and instruments are extended to fish, carbon and waters. (Lohmann 2006 and 2008; Heynen and Robbins 2005; Heynen, McCarthy, Prudham and Robbins 2007).

Civil society in India also talks about carbon colonialism. There is an ongoing debate, whether many of the clean development mechanisms (CDM) help to clean the climate or rather just provide new financing for big industries. India has been one of the leading countries in these mechanisms. It has also pressed to get CDM funding for nuclear power and large hydroelectric dams, in spite of the fact that in tropical countries dams are big emitters of greenhouse gases. Moreover, in India 85 % of Indian carbon credits are generated by two environmentally harmful projects that generate HFC harmful for ozone (Lohmann 2006).

Even good climate programs can go wrong, when indigenous peoples are excluded from planning. This was the case with wind farms in Maharashtra. Suzlon kept indigenous people mostly in the dark. Men's role as community managers of natural resources was recognised, but that of women ignored. It had serious repercussions. According to Kelkar (2009), "men drank away all the money gotten from the sale of land to Suzlon. When women get money, it is used for household needs."

Climate policies too can continue the same people unfriendly anti-advasi policies in new disguises, when they capture and "protect" their lands from them as biosphere reserves.

The carbon footprint of indigenous peoples is small, in dark contradiction to the life style of the global elite, whose consumption is supported by the resources of many globes. Indigenous peoples in India and elsewhere provide many services of natural capital. These services are global when they absorb greenhouse gases. They are regional, when they regulate, store and supply water. They are local, when they control and improve soil, cycle nutrients, help pollination as well as promote biodiversity. All these valuable functions can be reduced by monoculture, mining and deforestation and other Advasi unfriendly programs and policies.

Rather than blaming indigenous and local people, where is the discussion on the carbon footprints of mining, heavy factories, military industries and war!

## **Rights instead of development**

Give us our rights, instead of development! said the indigenous peoples in the IFAD regional meeting in Chiang Mai in 2008. For indigenous peoples, these rights do not just encompass right to work, nor just right to livelihood. For security of livelihood, they require security of resources. Their struggle for legal rights to resources also means acceptance and recognition of their right to their own livelihood strategies.

In the present globalised world, poverty and disempowerment come from outside forces that interlink with national power structures and elite capture of development goals and processes. Poverty cannot be solved just by technical and antipoverty projects. One must reverse the vicious cycles and demolish disempowering structures that produce and reproduce poverty. This is not just a welfare issue, but also a rights issue. As pointed out by Krishna (2007) citizenship should also include the political recognition of livelihood.

In similar vein, improving the status of indigenous women cannot be achieved just by technical mainstreaming. We must always analyze into what kind of social system and economy, we are mainstreaming women's concerns. Mainstreaming them into a system that robs women of their rights, culture, livelihoods and resources cannot be a solution to anything.

Capitalist expropriation of indigenous resources continues with increased speed. It does not only reproduce the old colonial patterns, but it also transforms old livelihoods with new globalisation, where transnational and domestic capital dictate the industrial role for agriculture. According to Ryali (2000), even if we could curb consumption in western societies, we still need to defend the rights of indigenous peoples over their land, alternative livelihoods and natural resources.

We also need to hear indigenous peoples and their voices - not just as victims - but also as experts in sustainable development. For thousands of years, they have lived in environmentally and climate wise challenging regions. They have a detailed knowledge of the natural world and can understand even the smallest changes in nature (Stewart-Harawira 2005). Such knowledge is important when monitoring climate change. It already demonstrated its usefulness in 2004 in the Andamans and Nicobar Islands, when *Onga*-tribe recognised the first signs of the tsunami: super-tide and animals fleeing to the hills.

Indigenous knowledge is not based on romantic and inherent ethnic characteristics. It is a result of thousands of years' adaptation to the environment. It has been a slow innovation process of trial and error and above all learning. This slow process of innovation is not recognised by our hierarchical expert-dominated knowledge- and patenting systems. A wedge was driven between tradition and rationality in the 17th century, when a dichotomy between them was established (Glenn 2007).

It will take a struggle to give indigenous people an influential position when solutions are sought to the huge challenges that the world is facing now. This struggle already started in the end of 18th century, when *Mundas*, *Santhals*, *Kols* and *Bhils* revolted against land grabbing, usury, forced labour and other exploitation by landlords, contractors, moneylenders and petty officials. Adivasi women actively participated and Mukta Jodia is one of them. For a decade, she campaigned in Orissa against bauxite mining. In 2007, she won the Chingari Award for Women Fighting Corporate Crime for her efforts. Recently adivasi women have lead a fight against renewable energy projects in Gujarat and Maharashtra, trying to save their ancestral lands and forests from bio fuel plantations and wind energy corporations (Kelkar 2008). They have also taken their campaign to the Supreme Court of India. This struggle needs to be taken to global arenas.

There are glimmers of hope. The Adivasi struggle has not been in vain. A historical decision was made by the Supreme Court on the Reliance Industries' land acquisition for its Special Economic Zone, showing that a farmer can fight and win a big corporate case. So too elsewhere in the world. In Paraguay, government argued before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, that it was precluded from giving an indigenous community its rights to property over ancestral lands, because the lands now belonged to a German investor, whose rights were protected by a bilateral investment treaty. The Court considered that such bilateral commercial treaties could not negate universal human rights. It pointed out that the states also have a responsibility to protect human rights from the acts of private parties, particularly taking care of vulnerable groups. States also have extraterritorial obligations (de Schutter 2008).

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## **Ousted without relocation**

**By Aparna Pallavi**

On May 12, 2008, Jahoor Hussain, 40, was riding his bicycle on his usual morning round to sell milk when he was caught by some forest officials, taken to the local range forest office, and beaten till he fell unconscious. It was only after a police complaint was filed regarding this incident that he was freed. But not before he had coughed up Rs 500 as 'fine'. Needless to add, no receipt for the said amount was issued.

Gulam Rasool, 38, a close neighbour of Jahoor's, was issued death threats by forest officials if he failed to leave the Rajaji National Park, located close to Dehradun, capital of Uttarakhand state, soon.

A few months later, on October 17, 2008, a posse of forest guards and police men attacked Jahoor's 'dera', demolished it and forced his family of five out of the park. Gulam Rasool and his family were also evicted by force soon afterwards, along with 17 other families from the East and West Dhawalgarh ranges of the park.

Jahoor's and Rasool's are among an estimated 1,300 families of Ban Gujjar tribals who are being pressured by the Uttarakhand Forest Department to leave the Rajaji National Park, where they have been living since generations, without any compensation or relocation benefit. Community representatives say that a considerable number of these families have already been evicted by force – in October 2008, at the same time when Jahoor and Rasool were evicted, 109 families were also forcefully evicted from the Ramgadh range. These families collectively moved back to their old 'deras' in November.

There are, however, differences between the accounts of the Forest Department and community representatives regarding the number of evicted families and families still inside the park.

In Jahoor's family, only his father and his eldest brother have been given relocation land, while Jahoor and three more of his brothers, all having children, have been left out. Says Jahoor, "When in April 2008 my father and brother went to take possession of their land, forest officials drove them off saying that they will not be given any unless the rest of us move to the relocation site at Pathri too. But how could we have moved without land and other relocation facilities?" A case filed against the range forest officer involved in the violence against Jahoor in May 2008 by the Ban Gujjar Kalyan Samiti, the organisation of the Gujjars protesting forced ouster from the national park, is still pending in the Nainital High Court. No protest could be registered against his violent eviction.

### **The Ban Gujjars**

The Ban Gujjars are traditionally a forest dwelling tribe of transhumant buffalo herders living in various parts of the Himalayas. During the summers they migrate to the upper alpine regions of the Himalayas in search of fodder for their buffaloes who belong to the ancient 'Neeliravi' breed, and during the winter they descend into the Shiwalik foothills. This migration pattern is highly ecosensitive.

The Gujjars do not live in villages, but in small patrilineal household groups comprising several nuclear families. The dwellings of one household, collectively called 'dera', typically has a population of anything between 25 and fifty, including adults and children, depending upon the number of families in one household. Deras are usually located at one or two kilometers distance



from each other in the forests, though the gujjars have strong communication links and a strong sense of community.

The main source of income is the sale of milk and milk products like ghee and khawa. The Gujjars are a prosperous people, and most families own motor cycles and mobile phones, though in all other matters their lifestyles continue to be simple and close to nature, though not exactly primitive.

### **History of relocation**

The Rajaji National Park, located very close to Dehradun city, came into existence in 1983, and it was decided to relocate the Ban Gujjars living inside the park, their land and grazing rights being derecognised. Before this, Gujjar families were issued grazing permits on the forest land.

At that time, 512 such families of Gujjars were identified, and in 1987, some families moved on to land provided to them at a relocation site in Pathri, located in the Haridwar forest division.

Meanwhile, protest was rising against the official definition of a gujjar family. The original definition was based on the permit system, and each permit holder's household, which in fact included two, sometimes even three generations of married couples with children, had been granted 2 acres of land by the government as compensation. In 1994, the government accepted the new definition of a family as a unit consisting of an adult married couple or a widow or widower, with children. It was decided to give 2 acres of land to each family.

In 1998, the survey of Gujjar families living in the park under the new definition of family was completed and 1390 families were identified for relocation. In 2001, a total of 1,043 hectares of land was allotted for relocation purposes, 243 ha at Pathri and 700 ha at Gaidikhatta, both located in the Haridwar district. Another 80 ha of land, 55 at Gaidikhatta and 25 at Pathri, was added in 2006.

Till May 2009, 1,297 of these 1390 families have been relocated, according to park director Mr S S Risaili, while another 93 families remain to be relocated.

### **Missing families**

In 2005, the park director issued an eviction order against all Gujjar families from the park. The families were intercepted on their way back from the upper reaches of the Himalayas and asked to leave the park immediately.

In response, 500 families of Gujjars living in the eight forest ranges which comprise the national park, whose names had not been included in the original relocation list of 1998, approached Nainital High Court with a petition to have their names included in the relocation list, and the right to settle permanently in the park. After the Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA) was passed, local NGOs and the National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPFW), a forum of various forest struggles going on in the country, intervened, demanding that the claims of the Gujjars be considered under the new act.

In June 2007, the court ordered that the left out families be included in the list and, in the first judgement of its type in the country, allowed the petitioners to seek relief under the FRA.

The then park director Mr Pande, however, declined to take action on the court order on the technical ground that FRA was not in force. On January 4, 2008, after FRA came into force, the Gujjars, organized under the Ban Gujjar Kalyan Samiti, approached court for permission to file a second petition, and the said petition was submitted to court on January 27. On June 13, in response to the petition, the High Court issued a contempt of court notice against Pande for failing to take action on the earlier judgement.

Speaking on the issue of the families left out of the relocation list, Noor Alam, a community leader and office bearer of the ban Gujjar Kalyan Samiti, says, "Not only is the list 10 years old and hence leaves out new families, but names of families in existence at the time of the survey have also been left out." He counts out the names of at least 10 original permit holders, who are still alive and whose names figured on the first list of 512 families who have been left out of the new list. Jahoor says, "I was married in 1997, and in 1998 when the survey was being carried out I already had a child. But my name was left out because I could not pay the forest officials a bribe." Other members of the community also allege corruption in the making of the list.

Community members estimate that in addition to the 500 families who have applied for inclusion in the relocation list, there are some 700-800 more families whose names do not figure on the list.

Talking to this correspondent in May 2008, Pande, was rather off hand on the issue of the names left out. "If we start listening to these pleas, we will never get the relocation done. The number of families will keep increasing. And anyway, the lists are bogus." Current park director S S Risaili goes a step further and alleges that the families whose names are not included on the relocation lists are 'outsiders' who have entered the park 'illegally'. He said that it was not his job to update the list. "Let the government do it," says he.

Advocate Shrikant Verma, who heads the Ban Gujjar Kalyan Samiti and is also representing it in its legal struggles, strongly contends this. "This is a serious allegation," says he, "How can the list be called bogus when we have submitted ration cards and voter identity cards with every name in our court petition? The High Court itself has ordered the names to be included on the list, but successive park directors have refused to comply, violating both FRA and court orders."

Pressed on this point, both park directors conceded that there are families in the park whose names do not figure in the list, and admit that neither they nor the Uttarakhand government has any plans regarding these families. They, however, refused to answer the question as to why the families were being ousted without relocation, and denied knowledge of incidents of violence.

Asked how he expected these families to leave without relocation, Risaili said, "The two issues are not related, and the Gujjars cannot hold the park to ransom for their relocation claims. They should join their households in the relocation colonies and then file for claims in court."

Community leader Noor Alam contests this hotly, "This is a trap. Staying in the park is the only stake our people have. The conditions in the relocation sites are despicable, and the oustees have been ignored completely by the administration. How can we give up our stakes and move into such horrendous conditions?"

### **Constant harassment**

Meanwhile, the Ban Gujjar families who are within the park are facing constant harassment. The situation is especially bad in the Kansroo, Gori and the east and west Dhaulkhand ranges where most of the population has left for relocation camps, leaving a small number of families isolated and vulnerable to violence.

Describing the type of harassment being faced by the Gujjars, Adv Verma says, "Gujjars are routinely brought to the forest check points and told to leave. If they refuse, bribes are extracted from them and false cases of timber theft and poaching are slapped against them. Every check post has a collection of items like ivory, horns, skins and so on, and the Gujjars are shown these items and threatened that if they do not leave, they will be charged with possessing these items."

Cases of violence against women have also happened in these ranges, reveals Verma. In some cases girls and women have been forcibly kidnapped and kept hostages by forest officials. Last year, a court case was registered against a range forest officer after he hit a girl on the head with a rifle butt. The girl had put up a stiff resistance to the official's attempt to kidnap her. Three years ago, an old man named Gami was beaten up very badly and fined a whopping Rs 50,000 after he resisted attempts to kidnap a woman from his household.

In the Cheelewali and Ramgadh ranges, however, very few families have left for the relocation camps. Says Abdul Kasim of Cheelewali range, "My name is on the list and I have even been allotted land. But one of my sons has been left out. Also, we have decided that no one in the range will leave till everyone has received relocation facilities." Cases of violence and coercion have, predictably, been fewer in these two ranges, though residents say that forest officials visit the area intermittently and try to create rifts in the community.

The Ranipur, Motichur and Cheela ranges have been vacated almost completely.

### **Problems with FRA**

Noor Alam, who is 'pradhan' (leader chosen informally by the community) of the Gujjar community living in the Cheelewali range, says that while the community is aware of the self-determination rights granted to forest dwelling communities under FRA, it is not able to claim the same because the rights have to be claimed through the gram sabha. Since the Gujjars live in family groups, they do not have any recognized gram sabhas of their own community. Their claims are linked with settled villages of other communities in the park.

"We do not want to be made to leave the park," says he, "We have visited the relocation sites and the situation is bad there. We want the government to recognise to the Gujjar community living in one range as a gram sabha so that we can pass our own resolution and reject the relocation drive."

Mohammad Musa, 'pradhan' of the Ramgarh range, agrees. "There are some 1,000 Gujjar votes in the Cheelewali range and around 800 votes in the Ramgarh range. According to the government, a village with 500 votes can have its own gram sabha. So why can't we be recognized as a gram sabha?"

Even in their relocation sites the Gujjars have not received status as independent villages with gram sabhas. They are still linked with the gram sabhas of the old Pathri and Gaidikhatta villages, despite the fact that the two relocated colonies have 2,000 and 3,500 votes respectively.

### **Relocation blues**

Talking to this correspondent in May 2008, park director Mr Pande repeatedly referred to the hugely successful relocation at Pathri and even offered to arrange a visit, but did not mention a word about the Gaidikhatta relocation colony. The reason is obvious enough to anyone who visits the two colonies. While Pathri, where the first 600 relocated families were settled, is equipped with concrete houses, tolerable roads, electricity, school, drinking water, toilets, community hall, health centres and other facilities prescribed under the national relocation policy, Gaidikhatta has nothing.

Pande rationalizes that the work on the provision of amenities has already started in Gaidikhatta, but residents say the work is progressing at snail's pace and is of very low quality. Says Mohammad Rafiq, one of the first settlers in the colony, "We have been here for six years now, and the first development work involving 150 cattle sheds, 140 toilets, roads and electricity was taken up last year. The work is still incomplete and of very inferior quality."

One look around the colony confirms the facts. Wires are dangling loose from electric poles, toilets are nothing but little brick cabins with no fittings, cattle-sheds are leaky and some are already crumbling, and the single freshly metalled road is sinking in several places. And the single most important need of the people – concrete houses to withstand the floods – has not been attended to at all.

The change in geography and lifestyle has also made the traditional house-building skills of the Gujar women irrelevant. During floods in May 2008, hundreds of Gujar 'deras' – magnificent and roomy structures of mud, thatch and timber, which were traditionally designed, plastered and decorated anew every season by women, were washed away. "Our deras were very suitable for our mountainous lifestyles," says Hussain Bibi, "But here we need concrete houses to withstand the floods."

Building of these deras is now an expensive affair. Says Khatoon Bibi, "In the hills it was maximum three to four days work for a woman to collect enough grass for her 'chappar' (thach). But here my chappar cost me Rs 6,000 in grass alone. It is four years old now. We badly need a new chappar, but do not have the money for it."

"Now even the timber which we brought with us is beginning to rot," says Mustafa Mai, "Unless houses are built, it will not be long before the whole colony is out in the open."

A departmental inquiry in 2008 has exposed substantial allegations of corruption and irregularities worth crores of rupees against the then park director Pande. However, no action was taken and Pande was simply transferred out. Current park director Risaili says that development will be started in Gaidikhatta only after all Gujar families have moved out of the park.

### **Loss of livelihood**

But the apparent difference in provision of facilities is where the difference between the two colonies ends. There are other problems caused by relocation that both colonies share, the most vital being the loss of livelihood.

The Gujjars are traditionally buffalo herders, and have a thriving milk trade. But shifting to the plains has sounded the death knell of this trade, because the buffaloes, belonging to the rare Neeliravi breed known for its high yields, have been dying in large numbers in both colonies. While in the mountains each Gujar family owned an average of 10-15 buffaloes, in the





*photo: Aparna Pallavi*

relocation colonies, buffaloes are a rare sight. In Gaidikhatta, in the last six years, more than 2,000 buffaloes have died, says Roshandeen.

“Our buffaloes are used to cool hill weather, abundant green fodder, free access to water bodies and lots of exercise,” says resident Hussain Bibi, “But here they have to be kept tied in a shed and fed on dry straw. The heat and dryness causes them to suffer from infections of the throat and hooves. In the hills hoof infections would strike once in 15-20 years, but here there is simply no getting away from it.” Hussain Bibi’s family had owned 12 buffaloes, but just one is left now.

Elderly Mohammad Musa, whose household has lost 33 of its 35 buffaloes says, “Except for a handful of lucky people who

managed to sell their buffaloes, and start petty businesses like daily needs shops, everyone in the colony is now reduced to manual labour. In the hills even a family that owned only 10 buffaloes could send 60-70 litres of milk to the market every day, and ghee (butter oil) production was anything between 100 and 200 kilos per season per family. The milk alone would fetch a family Rs 600-700 per day. Now it is difficult to get even Rs 70 per day."

Agricultural land is small consolation because, unused to agriculture, most families are unable to cultivate their lands. Mustafa recounts how he lost two paddy crops in a row and Rs 15,000 in investment because he simply did not know that paddy seedlings need to be transplanted or paddy fields bundled. "I do not know if I will ever be able to learn enough to feed my family," he rues. Most families in both colonies have entered into unremunerative share-cropping contracts with local farmers for the want of an alternative.

The people have also not been given any ownership papers on the land, despite the fact that some of them have been living here for 10 years. Questioned on this point Pande said that the land is forest land which has not yet been denotified. "We will complete the process and distribute ownership papers once all the families have moved," he assures.

But community members are not convinced. Says Noor Alam, a community elder and an office bearer of the Ban Gujar Kalyan Samiti, "How can we believe this? In 1972, the government gave some Gujjars land in Satiwale and Kunaoon, but now they are also being forced to relocate. How do we know this will not be repeated?"

Adv Verma opines that the clause regarding all families moving is misleading. "The relocation has been going on for ten years already. And the relocation list being 10 years old, there are some 1,300 families who do not figure on the list, and there is stiff resistance to the move. It could easily take another decade or more before the relocation is 'complete' in any sense of the term. How long can these families wait for relief? And what about the rights of the 1,300 families left out?"

### **Health impact**

Health has been the number one casualty of relocation. The diet of the Gujjars, traditionally consisting of ample quantities of milk, curds and ghee (the cooking medium is pure ghee), has undergone a sea change as these products have disappeared from their platters altogether. Raushan Bibi, who has been living in the Gaidikhatta relocation colony for six years now says, "In the hills we used to sell ghee for Rs 100 a kg, but here it costs twice as much and is substandard. Food cooked in vegetable oil causes stomach troubles. Women and children in nearly every family are suffering from constant stomach ailments since we moved here."

Milk consumption, reveals Hussain Bibi, another resident, has also dropped sharply. "In the hills it was a practice for everyone to drink at least one tumbler full of milk daily – both men and women. Butter-milk flowed freely. But here there is no milk even for tea."

The change in diet and stomach problems has resulted in emaciation, anemia and weakness in women and children. Constant fatigue and body ache are usual complaints.

Lack of hygienic facilities and open defecation has taken its toll. In the last two years, a large number of cases of whooping cough have erupted among the children in the Gaidikhatta colony. "Since I have come here, all I appear to be doing is taking care of sick children," says Noor Bibi, mother of four children, who is suffering from anemia herself, "In the hills our children were hardly ever sick."

To add to the woes of the families, the Gaidikhatta colony does not have a health centre. Residents have to travel 10 km to Ranipur for expensive treatment by private doctors.



### **Women's livelihoods lost**

With the buffaloes, the women have also lost their traditional work of making ghee, butter and 'khowa' (milk dehydrated by boiling constantly). "Each woman in the hills used to send at least 100-150 kg of ghee along with large quantities of khowa to the market every winter, which means an income of Rs 20,000 to 35,000 per year," says Hussain Bibi, "It is our own income, and among Gujjars, women are much respected because of this work which supplements family income."

But in the colonies, the women's butter churners are idle, except on rare occasions.

The devastation of the milk economy has forced many women to turn to wage labour, but this form of employment is so foreign to their traditional lifestyles that a large number of women gave it up. "The employers keep saying, do this, do this, do this!" says Noor Bibi, who worked for four months before giving up because of failing health, "And they always suspect us of shirking work."

"Our women are proud and self-sufficient," explains Roshan Deen, a community leader and husband of Hussain Bibi, "They are not used to being ordered around. In our culture even a husband has to speak courteously to his wife. When the employers here order them around or talk rudely, the women get too stressed, and can't work."

Raushan Bibi says, "We had consented to relocation chiefly for two things – education for our children and medical facilities, neither of which has been provided. We are so impoverished that we can't afford good schools for our children. And though we have much better access to doctors, it is also true that we need them a lot more than we used to in the hills. Our losses are so great that they quite cross out the gains we had hoped for."

### **Pressure intensifies**

With passing days, pressure is mounting on Ban Gujjars, in the park in particular and in the Uttarakhand state in general, to give up their simple and eco-friendly lifestyle and settle down in the plains, relocation or no relocation. State machinery is using every trick in the book to force or harass the Gujjars into not just leaving the park but also giving up their traditional lifestyle. In May 2009, some 18 families were intercepted at Uttarkashi on their summer migration route by the Forest Department, and held up in a place with no food, fodder, water or hygiene facilities. "The families were asked to get written permission to go to their summer 'deras' or go back – both options were not feasible because meant a return journey of around 300 km on foot, incurring huge costs." Despite the fact that the collector of Uttarkashi had given permission to the families to move to their deras, the Forest Department did not relent, and the families were permitted to proceed only after around 15 days after the Ban Gujar Kalyan Samiti and NFFPFW obtained written permission from the state PCCF RPS Rawat, informs NFFPFW convenor Munnial. "By this time, some 20-25 buffaloes had died of starvation and each family had incurred a financial loss of Rs 20,000 or more," says he.

Risaili says that a state-level committee is currently studying the 'Gujjar problem' with a view of preparing a 'package' for the entire Gujar population in the state. Asked if this would mean more displacement, he said that the aim is to 'bring the Gujjars into the mainstream', but refuses to specify the modus operandi of doing so.

# **Tribe-State-Voluntary Organization Interface for Tribal Development: Arguing for a Tribe Centered Governance Paradigm**

**Alex Akhup**

Taking ownership and self governance is a pre-requisite to the process of development and change in the adivasis and/or Scheduled Tribes society, just as it is to all human society. The adivasis and/or scheduled tribes are in constant process of change studied usually under the frame of 'tribe in transition'. This change is dynamic and complex, and has evolved over a period of history. However, it is important to identify this change focusing on changes generated 'from within and without' so as to understand the basic structural process of change effecting tribal society. From the existing literature evidence on the study of tribes, it is generally inferred that the exogenous process of change has had a greater impact than the endogenous process of change. The change process of the larger society; social, political and economic, has had a very coercive impact on tribal society. Thus, change is effected on the tribal society expressed variedly across regions inhabiting tribes in our country.

Therefore, it becomes extremely difficult to find a common frame of understanding tribal society. However, if one has to locate this discourse within a sociopolitical context, than one is able to locate the premise from an endogenous perspective. This perspective allows the identification and understanding of 'tribal question/s' from within the community, 'the voice/s of tribal people'. The common base of the tribal society from this perspective is definitely an 'identity' – a culturo political entity (Oommen, 1997) as different and autonomous from the State and other societies. Thus, tribal society is a cultural and political entity which is characterized in its cultural system, ownership over land and resources, and self governance. Based on this frame, the tribal question/s is commonly expressed in a demand for a critical political space of their culture and identity even within the common/mainstream development processes. This question is today manifested in resistance, autonomy and self determination movements across the tribal regions with varying degree.

Contextualized from this present reality, understanding the process of interface between tribal community, State and voluntary organization, the same has to be located within the larger sociopolitical context. In this context, tribal community is situated within a dynamic boundary interaction of different political realities. The tribe as social and political entity comes into the realm of the narratives of interaction and power in relation to the state and other social categories. In this historical process, the emergence of State and its institutions is very critical. In other words, the State emerges as a primary domain on which the present social and political reality gets operationalised.

It is therefore, critical to engage on the question of the interface between tribes, state and voluntary organizations locating it within the larger context of the state led development and governance vis-à-vis the history, perspective and politics from an organic narrative – an interface based on the premise of tribe centric governance; engaging to understand the politics of power dynamic viewed from a tribal perspective, 'Is there a political space for the recognition of culture and Identity of the tribes in the context of present socioeconomic development?'<sup>1</sup>

## **Adivasis/ST, State and Governance**

The latest policy focus of the government in tribal area is governance for inclusive development. However, the challenge of this policy lies in locating the organic theoretical based; that in the context of tribes, governance should be defined as self governance, 'self rule'. It is an organic governance system of people themselves wherein the supremacy of the community in the affairs that matters related to their lives is taken as the defining principle. Although policy recognition of this system of governance has come in the PESA Act or Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, the implementation of this Act seems defused in the politics of mainstream governance.

In reality, there is a constant confrontation between the local governance system and self governance system within the domain of electoral politics. The former is usually understood to be more identified with the state led federal system with 'strong centre' and the latter as self governance system. Moreover, the local governance system is more identified with post-developmental ideologies of neo-liberalism. 'Good governance' is believed now to consist of two functions: facilitating the free play of market forces, and enabling decentralized institutions of 'participatory management' (Baviskar, 2001). This emerging political situation definitely changes the political position of tribal self governance system; ownership of resources of land, water, forest and the right to manage themselves in accordance with their own organic system, sustainable and empowering.

Therefore, if one is to understand the politics of interaction between the state and tribal society, one has to decipher the politics of omissions and commission in the Constitution of India. From an overview of the Constitution vis-à-vis tribal community, one is able to perceive the constitutional space given to tribes. The Constitution recognizes tribes as 'Scheduled Tribes'; a political, legal and administrative entity. As individual citizen of the state, Scheduled Tribe is entitled to all the provisions of Constitution besides having special and specific constitutional provisions, broadly categorized under the themes of protection, mobilization and development (Xaxa, 2005). And above all, Fifth Schedule and Sixth Schedule, the basic premise of the Constitutional provision for scheduled tribes creates a political, legal and administrative unit for the administration of scheduled areas. Though the premise and functioning of the schedules have been often questioned vis-à-vis the role of governor, bureaucratization, inflow of money and outsiders, corruption and fragmentation of community etc. (Bandhari and Channa, 1997; Savyasaachi, 1998; Sharma, 2005, Burman, 2006 and Sunder, 2007 etc.), they remain as the baseline principle for protection, development and change, structured broadly within the philosophy of 'Nehruvian Panchsheel romance'.

Therefore, understanding the politics of scheduling Tribes, cognizance must be taken of the politics of recognition of tribal identity and culture, a collective identity in the Constitution as a crucial critique to the liberal democratic frame of the country. Within the frame of the Constitution, tribe, as culturo-political entity finds limited or no space, a very serious act of omission or commission on the part of the Constitution from the perspective of the tribal communities. The Constitution recognizes tribes only as a politico, administrative and legal entity called Scheduled tribes (articles 342 and 244). It raises the issue of tribal identity and culture, ownership of land, water, forest and natural resources and community self governance. In fact under the present constitutional frame, Scheduled tribe at the micro level process is a mere object of electoral politics. Till date there is no common accepted policy frame for scheduling or de-scheduling.

Nevertheless, considering the growing complexity of the situation of the tribal societies; economically, politically and culturally, one cannot do away with the State and State system. Therefore, the challenge lies in understanding the premise of 'how', towards making the system function in line with community ownership and power over the system rather than finding alternatives outside the state and the tribal society. The state, during the last six decades has made considerable efforts to bring to reality the provisions laid down towards development and protection of scheduled tribes through various programme strategies. One such programme strategy, adopted right from the beginning of 'plan period', is recognizing the role of voluntary organizations towards the welfare and development programmes for scheduled tribes. Although the significance of this strategy cannot be overruled, the issue of the involvement and participation of tribal people; ownership of the process of change and development becomes a critical element. Therefore, there is a constant need to critique the project from the perspective of an organic voluntarism of tribes to counter and negotiate political space within the larger context of development, civil society and governance.

### **Contextualizing Organic Voluntarism**

Voluntarism can be simply understood as a 'social concern for the others'; voluntarily generated, autonomous in nature, ubiquitous in every society. It is embedded within the conviviality nature of society and expressed more clearly in socially and culturally bounded societies. It constitutes the altruistic spirit (I-Thou) of every person or society, an organically generated social and human concern, for its fellow beings.

Today, discussion about voluntarism is basically subsumed within the realm of a sector (of development), a voluntary sector, NGO<sup>2</sup> sector, a third sector subsumed within civil society and governance. This phase of change has further intensified the complexity and tension within, which according to Sheth and Sethi is considered unfortunate, stated as;

'The conversion of voluntarism into primarily a favored instrumentality for developmental intervention has changed what was once an organic part of civil society into merely a sector – an appendage of the development apparatus of the State. Further, this process of instrumental appropriation has resulted in these agencies of self-activity losing both their autonomy and political-transformative edge' (Sheth and Sethi, 1991).

Therefore, the challenge of understanding voluntarism becomes more difficult as one takes this concept to the larger discourse of civil society, governance and mainstream development politics. Moreover, Government policy is leaning towards the so called established voluntary organizations; usually a voluntarism from outside tribal society. In fact there is an indication of a more frequent reference to voluntarism of 'NGOs' in the recent time. However, a clearer picture of voluntarism and voluntary organizations emerged after 1980s (Karat, 1984; Sethi, 1984 and Kothari, 1984 etc.).

In the context of tribes, literature on voluntarism and voluntary organization are mainly government evaluation reports. Wherein, the primary aim of the Government to involve voluntary organizations is service and welfare (M. L. Patel in Bhandari and Channa, 1997). Nevertheless, in recent times, Nongkynrih (2006) made an attempt to understand voluntarism and voluntary organizations in the context of tribes. He locates voluntarism in tribal society as an organic societal behavior, commonly understood by people as 'to give, share, and do something for other without expecting anything in return'. Based on empirical data and experiences from Khasi-Jaintia tribal community, he describes and explains the process of voluntarism into two types of voluntary initiatives; traditional and modern. The former is located within traditional beliefs and practices expressed at the level of *ling* (domestic group), *Kur* (clan) and *Dorba Shnong* (village council) and the latter in the state. He also observed the evolving nature of traditional initiatives along modern organizations.

Drawing from the understanding of the above discussion, one is able to make a distinction between the significance of voluntarism in tribal community and other larger societies. In the tribal community volunteerism is culturally embedded, 'a part of traditional values, spirit and norms' (Nongkynrih). 'It is intricately linked to all the spheres of community life'. The difference is one of 'a choice' or enrolling with other agencies for the state part-time or full-time; and a volunteering as an accepted practice in the society which derives its legitimacy from social structure (Carson, 1999). The former volunteering basically comes from personal endowment, status, a middle class initiative, an individual project as strongly motivated by the religion and the latter, tribe community volunteering, is an organic process based on culture and identity.

### **State and VO<sup>3</sup> Interface: Politics of Welfare and Development**

As a policy frame, interface between State, voluntary organizations and Scheduled Tribes can be traced back to the planned national development process from 1950s and 60s (Thakur, 1997). The process was guided by a two pronged national philosophy of development; state led capital intensive economic growth in industrial and agricultural sector, and social welfare programmes to answer the question of poverty in India. The former emphasized on community development programmes particularly focusing on increasing community participation to capital intensive agriculture activities under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the latter focused on welfare programmes for women, disabled, elderly and children under the social welfare Ministry and departments (Parekh, 1991, Murthy and Nitya, 1997 and Sen, 1999). In 1953 Central Social Welfare Board<sup>4</sup> and Khadi and village industries commission were set up to channel funds to NGOs for implementing welfare programme. The Gandhian Organizations, Ramakrishna Mission and various other social service oriented organizations involved in the welfare services for socially and economically vulnerable sections of society, including tribal society. Many Christian based aid agencies supported these programmes and activities particularly in south, central and eastern tribal areas (PRIA, 1991) in the area of education and health.

However, the overall politics of interaction between the so called voluntary organizations and the State in context of welfare programmes has been one of apprehension and often times a tension. The state had been engaging with them quite consciously



from the very beginning of the plan periods. Voluntary organizations were incorporated in field for enhancing the welfare service delivery particularly in the welfare programmes within Social Welfare Ministry and departments. It is well known history that the period between 1970s to 1980s, witnessed one of the greatest tensions in the politics of the interface between the state and the NGOs (Murthy and Nitya, 1997; Sen, 1999), referred as period of 'a fall from grace' of NGOs (Sheth and Sethi, 1984). This era also brought in a formal critique to the whole voluntary sector vis-à-vis the political stand. Henceforth, one could see the emergence of a diverse types of organizations; a state and foreign funded organizations, action groups, nonparty political formations, community based organizations, grassroot organizations, local based organizations and Self Help Groups considered broadly within 'the universe of NGOs' (Sen, 1999). As a subsequential outcome of the era of critique of the voluntary organizations, there was an emergence of the state and foreign funded organizations that were given proactive role in the welfare programme since 1980s. This phase, also witnessed the emergence of idea of centrality of people's participation, conscientization and empowerment and understanding poverty in context of diversity of poor based on class, caste, gender, ethnicity (PRIA, 1991). However, there was a mixed reaction of the people on the voluntary organizations especially after the 1990s. On one side, voluntary organizations commonly referred as 'NGOs' were considered to be the catalytic agents of change for the poor and vulnerable sections of society, and at the same time they were also considered to be the neo-liberal state, market agents or imperialist agents (Karat, 1984 and Kothari, 1986). In the former case, government is seen to take active part in strengthening the government identified organizations through funding and in the latter case there is the emergence of the movements and people based organizations raising basic structural and political issues of the community.

### **State and VO: Welfare scheme for Scheduled Tribes**

As regards the scheduled tribes, a significant emphasis on the involvement of voluntary organizations for the welfare programmes is observable across the successive five year plan documents. VOs were recognized as important agents of service delivery from the very beginning of Plan period in the field of education, health & and training. This initiative was established formerly in the institution of the 'Scheme of Grant-in-aid to Voluntary Organizations, Working for the Welfare of Scheduled Tribes' in 1953-54 under the Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare. In 1985 the Ministry was renamed as Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. Considering the context and uniqueness of the population in question, Ministry of Tribal Affairs was established in 1999 as the nodal Ministry for the welfare and development of the Scheduled Tribes. Since then, the scheme is within the purview of Ministry of Tribal Affairs (Annual Report, 2006).

An evaluation study<sup>5</sup> was conducted in 2006 by the author to assess 'Scheme of Grant-in-Aid to Voluntary Organizations Working for the Scheduled Tribes' vis-à-vis the implementation and effectiveness of the scheme. The study identified seventeen schemes, out of which, one scheme is specified for voluntary organization besides other three schemes where voluntary organizations are also involved. This 'scheme' approach provides the basic rationale for the involvement of voluntary organizations in the welfare and development of scheduled tribes. It defines the nature of the interface between the government, voluntary organizations and

tribal communities over the last ten plan periods. On record, 300 organizations are directly receiving the grant from the Ministry for the welfare of scheduled tribes implementing 331 projects encompassing education, health and other livelihood skill training programmes (Ministry of Tribal Affairs Annual Report, 2007-08).

The record of the government (Ministry of Tribal Affairs Annual Report, 2007-08) indicated a long history of involvement of voluntary organizations in welfare programmes for scheduled tribes. In fact, a few organizations receiving grant have a history of establishment dating back to 1920s and 1930s. A significant number of organizations (18 percent) have been registered before 1950s. However, a majority of them have been established in 1980s and 1990s. In record, all the organizations funded under the Ministry were registered voluntary organizations under Society Registration Act, 1860 or Trust Act. A significant number of these organizations also possessed 80G, and FCRA certification.

As a practice, upto the 10<sup>th</sup> plan, the Government recognized two types of organizations; Established Voluntary Organizations (38percent) and Non-Established Voluntary organizations (62percent) at the time of the field visit. One commonality found among these organizations is their engagement in working for the upliftment of the Scheduled Tribe community with a significant number (53percent) having their sub-centers in tribal habitation areas.

### **Structural Implication of the Scheme**

The grant-in-aid scheme to voluntary organizations highlights the perspective and understanding of Government about voluntarism, tribe and voluntary organizations explicitly. It raises political and structural issues of process initiated for welfare and development. The scheme displays the strategy for interface between the State and voluntary organizations for tribal upliftment vis-à-vis a pro-tribe approach. Here the focus of the partnership and voluntarism falls outside the boundary of tribal reality. It is basically an undertaking between State and voluntary organizations and/or NGOs. Therefore, there is an over emphasis on the voluntary organizations and state bureaucratic authority subjected within larger frame and policy of the ruling parties and leaders. In fact, what has been missed out in the process overall is the tribal community initiative; an organic voluntarism which is a defining feature of a tribal society.

If one is to look at the number and type of organizations currently in partnership with organizations through various schemes, one could also identify those organizations which are locally based, tribe specific organizations (around 30percent) and generic organizations (70percent). The first organizations are generally initiated and managed by endowed tribals themselves, emerging from the organic tribal voluntarism, having their main base in tribal area, tribe specific vision and mission, and or/ working exclusively for tribe. The second type of organizations is usually initiated and managed by individuals or groups having a generic mission, a tribal welfare work is only one the activities. As a policy, greater focus is given to the so called established organizations. The involvement of the organic tribal based organizations is an area yet to find its due as policy and practice in the grant scheme.

The scheme also confirms the process of the proliferation of voluntary organizations, 'NGO-ization of tribe', a continuous effort of the government to align with voluntary organizations for any welfare and development programmes within the larger context of mainstream development politics. It is also indicative of the process of state co-option of voluntary organization into the state led agenda of development which is institutionalized through the process of legislations and regulations. In the latest developments, the government has infact operationalised the process of online registration and application of projects. While these initiatives are undertaken to bring in accountability, transparency and effectiveness, it raises the larger political questions of autonomy and the primacy of tribal self governance. Given the context, therefore the discourse on 'State retreat' or 'NGO-ization of politics' – 'de-politicization' and 'NGO-ization of welfare' becomes a critical engagement in understanding and redefining the interface between the state, tribes and voluntary organizations within the larger domain of the state led political ideology and strategy idealized and operationalised by various political parties and ligetimate authority from time to time.

Among many issues confronting the bourgeoning sector, field observations indicated that a few large and formal organizations have been taking projects as a means to further their own organizational goals. In the absence of accountability, transparency and participation of the community, the VOs has proclivity towards self-growth, especially, in relations to power hoarding and formation of hierarchical rigid formal structures. In fact a few of them are in legal problem (Ministry of Tribal Affairs Annual Report, 2007-08). In such a situation, individual organization's well being takes precedence over needs and respect for the community, to the extent that community needs takes a back seat while VO's own existence becomes the primary goal and focus, thereby bringing about conflicting situation in the community.

In the light of the case under study, it is very clear that tribal welfare and development is within the domain of the politics of mainstream development. State aligns with the voluntary organization and implements its project of tribal development. Nevertheless, the State as well as voluntary organization is an outside agent of change and development. Both of these agents impinge upon the tribal community with their own agenda and ideology as is implicated in the process of state land acquisition in scheduled areas for development purpose (Samta Judgment as a case in point) as well as a constant cooptation along communal and religious lines (Prasad, 2003). The tribal society today is thus fragmented on various grounds; religion, market, state led institutions of governance and development (Sarangi, 2003 and Sundar, 2007). There is a constant process of coercion upon the community giving them no option but to resist or to be displaced. This is a structural issue that requires a paradigm shift if equitable and just change is intended.

### **Re-Positioning the Grant Scheme**

Considering the structural issues arising in the scheme, one has to critically re-look at the present scheme of interface between the State, voluntary organizations and tribal community from an emic perspective, an understanding and positioning the primacy of tribal worldview, organic voluntarism and self governance. The worldview of the tribes should review the policy and the strategy of the scheme. The tribes should be placed right at the centre of every welfare and development process. The scheme should find its primary operation anchored through tribes, community voluntarism or community organizations.

Therefore, it becomes imperative here to shift the focus of state led service approach, towards a more tribal centered governance approach which aims at an empowerment process from within the community initiative rather than from relying on VOs outside the community. This shift is aimed at enhancement of tribal community's capacity through partnership with the State and local organization. Community, the local or tribal based organizations should take precedence over State and external voluntary organizations based on tribe centered voluntarism within the larger frame of self governance. Therefore, the focus in this paradigm is around understanding, centering and strengthening organic voluntarism, tribe specific organizations for welfare and development of scheduled tribes.

### **A Tribe Centered Governance Paradigm**

A tribe centered governance paradigm for development is based on tribal identity frame; identity as understood within the perspective of a cultural and political entity, a collective identity, a tribe. In such context, there is a dynamic politics of autonomy, self-rule, self determination as proactive self identification process in the context of the larger politics of categorization (Jenkins, 1997; Laird, 2008). Implied in this process is the politics of identification and/or scheduling as an ongoing dynamic socio-political process which fall out of the purview of this paper. The point of emphasis in this paper, at this juncture, is that within the given space it is important to understand State, tribe and society from a coexistence and multi cultural frame of self-governance system. In simple terms this formulation can be referred to the process of the State, as a political entity, recognizing the authority or governance at the tribal community; 'to have control over the resources and to manage institutions that promote their own development while maintaining their culture and identity' (Singh, 1990; Savyasaachi, 1998). Therefore, positioned from tribal identity frame, development has to be culturally and politically contextualized to create a free political space for tribal communities to exercise their power and authority over their community and safeguard their resources, culture and identity.

In this context, the State has to work towards an inclusive, equitable and just development paradigm taking into consideration the culture, identity and self governance; 'to protect and development them along their own genius'. In this process, identity based resistance or mobilization has been commonly observed as socio-political strategy to negotiate for a space across tribal habitations observable since the emergence of the modern state. Every move towards the processes of a modern nation building exerts coercion on the tribal identity. Therefore, a nation building process in the context of tribal society is a politics of narratives of interaction and power - a dynamic discourse between the State, tribe, nationalities and ethnicity in a multi-nations context (Burman, 1983; Singh, 1990; Devallé, 1992; Oommen, 1997 and Xaxa, 2005 etc.), a necessary critique to Indian democracy.

### **Conclusion**

In final summation, a tribe centered interface between the state and voluntary organizations is a very critical political positioning of the autonomy and self governance of the scheduled tribes across regions. Beginning with envisioning tribes themselves as agents of change, the goal of development must shift away from a top down growth oriented State centered formulation and

move towards a non-imperial, non-hegemonic and anti-oppressive politics of perception between development actors; tribe, State and VOs. While identifying contentious political spaces and basic parameters of convergence and divergences between the three identified political actors the age old historical articulations of the tribes for 'autonomy' will find a meaningful dialogue within the narrative of the state. This is a road map towards a sensitive contract between stakeholders to minimize conflicts and fragmentation, and to maximize justice and respect for the tribal society. Therefore, the author is not arguing for a State-VO-Tribe enmeshment, but arguing for the recognition of a political space for a self governance, power and authority of the tribes over the land, water, forest and other natural resources, and the right to govern themselves according to their own culture and custom for development and change within the democratic frame of the country.

#### **(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup>. The organic voice of the tribes expressed in the International Conference on Adivasis/ST: Development and Change, at Delhi 2009

<sup>2</sup> . Non-government Organization (NGO) as a concept emerged in the international context; first recognized in United Nations Charter, 1945. Since Fifth Five Year Plan there has been a concerted effort on the part of the Government to involve them in tribal development.

<sup>3</sup>. VO, Voluntary Organizations is the preferred term for the Government of India

<sup>4</sup>. The author also carried out an all India evaluation of the scheme of Family Counseling Centre of the Central Social Welfare Board in 2004. The evaluation strengthened the process of professionalizing the management and implementation of the scheme.

<sup>5</sup> This assessment was conducted on the request of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in 2006. The Study contributed to the strengthening of the Government system for the implementation of the Voluntary Organization Grant-in-Aid scheme for the welfare and development of scheduled tribes.

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# Adivasis struggle against displacement in Jharkhand

Gladson Dungdung

**The Adivasis have lost their faith in the state machinery, constitutional authorities and judiciary therefore they have firmly decided not to allow laying down the foundation of corporate development model over their graves.**

Jharkhand is known as the abode of Adivasis (the indigenous people, constitutionally they are called as scheduled tribe), the land of struggle and mineral rich state in India. "Jharkhand" literally means 'the land of forests' came into existence as 28<sup>th</sup> state of the Indian union on 15<sup>th</sup> of November, 2000 after a long mass struggle, which took place in the 20th century for the realization of a beautiful dream of the Adivasi heroes – Tilka Manjhi, Sidhu-Kanhu and Birsa Munda. The dream was to form exploitation free, humane and just Jharkhand, where the Adivasis can practice their ownership rights over the natural resources, enjoy autonomy and rule themselves as earlier they used to. The outsiders perceive Jharkhand as the abode of uncivilized, uneducated and the most backward people i.e. Adivasis therefore the region was mostly neglected in terms of the development but its natural resources were highly exploited. The Adivasis were alienated from their resources, exploited and injustices were done to them in the name of development, civilization and nationalism.

Jharkhand is an important state from the viewpoint of Adivasi population. As per the Census 2001, their total population in the state is 70,87,068 including 35,65,960 male and 35,21,108 female, which consists 26.3% of the total population (26,945,829) of the state though they were more than 50 percent before the independence of India. The growth of the Adivasi population is steadily declining. It was 17.3 per cent in 2001, which is lower by 6 per cent if compared with the growth (23.3 per cent) in 1991. The state has a total of thirty two (32) sub-communities of the Adivasis. Among them Santal, Oraon, Munda, Ho and Kharia are the major Adivasi groups in the state. The major Adivasi populations (91.7 percent) reside in villages and merely 8.3 percent have shifted to the urban areas. The rapid industrialization is one of the major reasons for population declination of the Adivasis.

Jharkhand is witness of unending struggle for mineral resources as the state contains 40 percent of India's precious minerals like Uranium, Mica, Bauxite, Granite, Gold, Silver, Graphite, Magnetite, Dolomite, Fireclay, Quartz, Feldspar, Coal, Iron and Copper. Forests and woodlands occupy more than 29% of the state which is amongst the highest in India. But unfortunately, the exploitation and injustice are prevalent in the state. Irony is the political leaders of Adivasis do not realize it even today. They have signed 102 MoUs (memorandum of understanding) for establishing steel factories, power plants and mining industries with the estimated investment of Rs 4,67,240 crore, which require approximately 200,000 acres of land, which directly means the displacement of approximately 1 million people.

The government, the Industrialists and the Media are putting hard efforts to convince the people by propagating the messages that the industrialization is only way to develop the young Jharkhand therefore the villagers must surrender their land for the development projects, which would provide them jobs, infrastructure and boost the economy of the state. But the Adivasis are not convinced with the ideas as 91.7 percent of them still rely on agriculture, forest produces and livestock for their survival. They are resisting against displacement, attacking the company's officials and not allowing them to enter into the villages. Consequently, the government is unable to execute the MoUs at the grassroots.

There has been turmoil against displacement in the state. On 1st of October 2008, the villagers attacked on the Kohinoor steel plant near Jamshedpur, seized 70 trucks and stopped the work. They alleged that after acquiring their agricultural land,

the company neither compensated nor gave them jobs as promised and the company is also causing huge environmental affect in agriculture, water sources and public health therefore they would not allow the company to destroy their livelihoods. In another case, the villagers attacked 3 surveyors of Bhushan steel Yusuf Ahmad, Sheetal Kumar and Sahdev Singh when they were conducting land survey near Sarmanda River at Potka of East Singhbhum district. The villagers caught them, painted on their faces with cow dung, asked them to eat straw and cow dung, garlanded with shoes and paraded in the villagers on 11 September 08. Somari Hembrom of Roladih village (Potka) justified it by saying, "We had already declared for not giving our precious land to the Bhushan Company but despite of this, these people were measuring our land without informing us therefore they were taught a lesson".

Similarly, the villagers attacked Jupiter Cement factory, beaten the workers and stopped the factory on 11 September 2008 at Kharsawan alleging for violating the land related laws. The Indian CEO, Project head and other officials of the steel giant Arcelor Mittal Company were not allowed to enter into the villages in Torpa- Kamdara region near Ranchi several times. The people of Tontopasi in Saraikela-Kharsawan district are not allowing the Tata Steel to acquire land for its Greenfield Project. In another case, the Adivasis of Dumka district have imposed "Janta Curfew" (public curfew) in Kathikund and Sikaripada blocks with the slogan "We shall give up our lives but not land." against the proposed power plant of CESC Limited, where police firing took place on 6 of December, 2008 caused the killing of two activists – Lakhiram Tuddu and Saigat Marandi and another 7 activists were severely injured. The people resistances have forced the Tata Steel, Arcelor Mittal Company, Jindal Steel, Esser Steel and CESE Limited to leave the proposed areas.

Interestingly, the corporate houses have not given up their hopes and attempting to enter into the region through the back doors. They are playing many tricks and also luring people with the huge monetary packages for acquiring land. The global steel giant Arcelor Mittal Company is a crucial example to understand how the companies attempt to trick the Adivasis. The Arcelor Mittal Company signed a MoU with the Jharkhand government on October 8, 2005 for setting up a steel plant with the capacity of 12 million tones per annum at an estimated investment of Rs 40,000 crore. The company requires 25,000 acre of land and 20,000 unit water per hour for the steel plant and a township in Torpa-Kamdara region of Khunti and Gumla district. Since, the company needs huge water, a mega Dam will be constructed at Koel-Karo River for ensuring the water supply to the steel plant. According to the plan, the steel plant will be set up by the end of 2009 and the production will begin from 2012. Consequently, there will be a mass displacement of Adivasis as 256 villages would be affected completely by the project.

The people of Jharkhand especially the Adivasis have been undergoing through the adverse affect of the unjust modern development processes for more than a century therefore another mass movement against the Arcelor Mittal Company began in 2005 in the region under the banner of "Adivasi-Moolvasi Astitava Raksha Manch". The people are resisting against industrialization in the region and not ready to give even one inch of their remaining lands. They have declared that "they need grains not iron for feeding their stomach". Consequently, the Mittal Company was unable to enter into the region. Therefore it began playing tricks with the people. Eight months after the MoU was signed, Laxmi Mittal the owner of the company visited India in July 2006 to explore more investment prospects, but he was quite upset with the progress of the project in Jharkhand and warned the state government that mega project could be shifted to the neighbouring Orissa if the project continued at a snail's pace. But by then, Arjun Munda then the Chief Minister of Jharkhand had already made history signing MoUs with 43 companies. He could very well afford to tell Mittal he was free to choose between the two states.

This is when the idea of flaunting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) struck Mittal. Soon, Arcelor-Mittal Foundation was launched in 2007 with the objective of investing in social programmes, and promoting Arcelor-Mittal's commitment to society and sustainable development, focusing in particular on the communities where it operates. It is also said that the Foundation will seek to develop partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to drive the programme forward. But the hidden agenda of the foundation seems to be to use the local NGOs to find a foothold in the project areas. It was obvious from the start the foundation was going to pour large funds to enhance its public relations.

The Arcelor-Mittal's activities gathered momentum with the appointment of Sanak Mishra as the CEO of the Indian project. The announcement of CSR programmes started, which was in the form of election campaigns. The first move was to launch an ITI (Industrial Training Institute) in Khunti, slated to open from 2009. 50 percent of the total candidates were selected by the state government and the rest by the company. Half of the seats were reserved for Adivasi students and 50 scholarships were to be awarded on merit to deserving local students of the region. The ITI was projected as a catalyst of change for the Adivasi community. Meanwhile, the Mittal was told about the Adivasis' love for hockey. Soon, the company was sponsoring hockey tournament for girls and boys of Khunti and Gumla districts. The training for boys and girls started with the support of the district and the state hockey federations. The next step was to lure NGOs with huge funds. Finally, the company declared \$300 million CSR programme, which would be spent for Rehabilitation & Resettlement package for the state. But it also didn't work.

The company made a new holy business strategy to join hands with the church based social services institutions as the region is highly dominated by the Christians Adivasis. Earlier, the vice president of the Arcelor Mittal Company, Remi Boyer, who has more faith in the holy business for overcoming on the mass movement, had said that the church is ready to co-operate the company in land acquisition. Consequently, the Arcelor Mittal Company and Don Bosco Society made a secret agreement for holy business, under which the company would bear the cost of ITI training for Adivasi youth of the proposed project area and the Don Bosco Society would provide training in its ITI centre based at Kokar, Ranchi. But when it came into the notice of a forum of Adivasi called "Jharkhand Indigenous People's Forum", it intervened on the matter immediately.

The forum wrote letters to the Superior of the Don Bosco Society and the Cardinal Telesphore P. Toppo asking them to make their stance clear on the issue of supporting Arcelor Mittal Company. The forum members also asked the Church leaders whether they are committed to the cause of Adivasis or they have joined hands with corporate for economic gain through the holy business. They also threatened for mass resistance including rally, protest and locking up the ITI Centre of Don Bosco. The forum released its plan and strategy of mass resistance through the media, which created an upheaval in the church arenas. Consequently, the Church leaders and the Superior of Don Bosco were in a huge pressure. Finally, the Don Bosco Society made it clear that it operates in Jharkhand only for the upliftment of Adivasis, Dalits and poor therefore it will not tie up with any corporate house, which takes away the rights of the Adivasis. The tricks of the Arcelor Mittal Company failed.

The Adivasis' struggle against displacement has spread across the state. "Loha Nahi Anaj Chahiye" (We want grains not iron), "Jal, Jungle aur Jamin Hamara Hai" (Land, forest and water belong to us) and "Jan denge, Jamin Nahi Denge" (We will surrender our lives but not land) are a few overwhelming slogans being raised from villages to the state capital. A series of mass meetings, Road blocks and Rallies are being organized in these areas, where thousands of Adivasis and local people participate, shout slogans and echo their voices. The message they want to convey to the government, the industrialists and the middle class is that 'they won't give up agriculture land for the development projects.

There are some prominent organizations of the Adivasis like Bisthapan Virodhi Ekta Manch, Adivasi Moolvasi Astitva Raksha Manch, Jharkhand Ulgulan Manch, Creaj Jan Mukti Andolan, Jharkhand Mines Area Coordination Committee and Jharkhand Indigenous People's Forum, who play crucial role in the displacement movement in Jharkhand, have cautioned the state government against increasing intrusions of representatives from several industries in villages, registering false cases against anti-displacement activists and threatening the villagers. "Our message is loud and clear that we do not want to give our land for industries", says K.C. Mardi the convener of Bisthapan Virodhi Ekta Manch. "Such attempts should be stopped immediately because the conspiracy to snatch our land would cause social unrest in the villages" he adds.

Dayamani Barla the convener of Adivasi Moolvasi Astitva Raksha Manch, the organization fighting against the Arcelor Mittal at Torpa-Kamdara says, "We will not allow the Arcelor Mittal Company to enter into the villages because one can not be rehabilitated if once displaced. The lands, which we cultivate belong to our ancestors therefore we will not leave it". According to the General Secretary of Crej Jan Mukti Andolan, Jerom Jerold Kujur, the development of agriculture is a need of the hour. He

says, "It is more important to boost up agriculture than setting up industries in Jharkhand, as agriculture production in Jharkhand is marginal". "If the government provides irrigation and other facilities to the local farmers, they could reap three crops in a year" he adds. The corporate houses are in anxiety, worried and uncertain about their future in Jharkhand therefore they are putting pressure on the government for taking action against the displacement activists. As a result, 3 criminal cases were registered against 1025 anti-displacement activists under the sections 307, 147, 148, 149, 323, 341, 342, 427, 506 of IPC and 9 of them were arrested but some of them were released after a huge people's protest. But the leader of Jharkhand Ulgulan Manch, Munni Hansada was kept in Jail for six months.

The fundamental question is why Adivasis do not want to give their land for the development projects, which can provide them jobs? The instant answer can be found in the history of pains and sufferings of the displaced people, which suggests that after the independence, 17,10,787 people were displaced while acquiring 24,15,698 acres of their lands for setting up the Power Plants, Irrigation Projects, Mining Companies, Steel Industries and other development projects in Jharkhand. In every project approximately 80 to 90 percent Adivasis and local people were displaced but merely 25 percent of them were halfway rehabilitated and no one has any idea about the rest 75 percent displaced people. The benefits of these development projects were highly enjoyed by the Landlords, Project Officers, Engineers, Contractors, Bureaucrats, Politicians and outsiders, and those who sacrificed everything for the sake of the "development" are struggling for their survival.

Secondly, the people were betrayed in the name of rehabilitation, compensation and jobs. The promises were not fulfilled and the jobs were given to the outsiders. In the present era, the technologies are mostly used in the companies therefore job opportunities and job security have declined the corporate. For example, when the Tata steel was producing 1 Mt steel, the work force was 70,000 in 1995. The growth of the Tata steel went up to 7 Mt in 2008 but the workforce declined to 20,000. Similarly, in the Heavy Engineering Corporation, Ranchi there were 23,000 employees at the beginning but it declined to 3000 in 2009.

The Job insecurity can be learnt from the Mittal company, which is said to provide 1 lakh, jobs to the people. Presently, the company operates in 60 countries and it has plants in 20 countries but the company has been suffering from the economic crisis since 2008. The demand of company's steel went down to 10 percent. Consequently, the company cut the production in Canada by 45 percent and axed 9,000 employees. It also cut the job of 1000 employees in lowest cost plant in Poland and shut one out of its two blast furnaces in west Belgium. The company had total workforces of 3,26,000 which was cut down to 3,15,867 as a result 10,133 people lost their jobs. The present status shows that the company is totally failure in protection of its employees' rights therefore 2000 employees had attacked the company's headquarter at Lubzumburge. In these circumstances, how can people believe on the propaganda of providing job to the affected people?

Thirdly, In fact the Adivasis had the ownership rights to the natural resources and they judiciously used these resources for their survival. But soon after the East India Company entered into the territory, the Britishers realized the enormous commercial potential of India's natural resources and systematically went about acquiring control over it. In 1793 the "Permanent Settlement Act" was passed, which affected the socio-economic and cultural life of the Adivasis, and their lands slipped into the hands of the Zamindars (landlords). In 1855, the government declared the forests as the government property and the individuals have not right and claim over it. In 1865 the first Forest Act came into force, an avalanche of regulations followed this act. Wherever a loophole was detected in the existing laws a new law would be passed. After the independence, when Indians took over the driving sit they also followed the Britishers' foot steps. The rights over natural resources of the Adivasi were snatched away through the various legislations. The government of India accepts through the Forest Rights Act 2006 that the historical injustice was done on the Adivasi community.

Fourthly, there are numerous laws made for protection of the Adivasis' rights but these laws were never enacted honestly. The Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act 1908 and Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act 1949 prohibit the sale and transfer of Adivasi land to non-Adivasi but the land were illegally snatched away from them. In 1969, the Bihar Scheduled Areas Regulation Act was enforced



for prevention and legalization of illegal land transfer and of Adivasis. A special Area Regulation Court was established and the Deputy Commissioner was given special right regarding the sell and transfer of Adivasis land. When the special court started function, a huge number of cases were registered. According to the government's report, 60,464 cases regarding 85,777.22 acres of illegal transfer of land were registered till 2001-2002. Out of these 34,608 cases of 46,797.36 acres of land were considered for hearing and rest 25,856 cases related to 38,979.86 acres of land were dismissed.

But after the hearing merely 21,445 cases regarding 29,829.7 acres of lands were given possession to the original holders and rest remains with the non-Adivasis. Further more 2608 cases of illegal land transfer were registered in 2003-2004, 2657 cases in 2004-2005, 3230 cases in 2005-2006, 3789 cases in 2006-2007 and 5382 cases in 2007-2008, which clearly indicates that the cases of illegal land alienation is increasing rapidly. According to the Annual Report 2004-2005 of the Ministry of Rural Development of the Government of India, Jharkhand topped the list of Adivasi land alienation in India with 86,291 cases involving 10,48,93 acres of land. Similarly, the constitutional rights, provisions for the sixth scheduled Areas and the Extension of Panchayat Act 1996 were never been implemented with the true spirit in the state. The ruling elites always misused these laws for their benefits.

Fifthly, the government of India was unable to bring a law for the rehabilitation of the affected people even after the 62 years of independence but legislation for the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) was passed immediately. Similarly, when the Jharkhand state was created the first chief minister, Babula Marandi brought the Industrial Policy but at the same time, the same government was unable to make a rehabilitation policy. This is why the intention of the state was always questioned and the people are resisting against displacement everywhere. The people were displaced from one place to another in the name of development but they were not rehabilitated. Hence they feel that they were betrayed in the welfare state in the name of "development" and "national interest". Therefore now Adivasis believe that they can protect their land only through the mass struggle.

Finally, one should understand that the displacement is not just shifting people from one place to another but it is destruction of their livelihood resources, culture and identity which they develop by nourishing for the ages. The life cycle of the Adivasis is based on the natural resources therefore their co-existence with the nature can not be questioned. Hence, it is need of the hour to rethink on the present development model. The unjust development process can not be carried on as the Adivasis also have similar rights to life with dignity, freedom and equality guaranteed by the constitution of India. The Adivasis have lost their faith in the state machinery, constitutional authorities and judiciary therefore they have firmly decided not to allow laying down the foundation of corporate development model over their graves.

# **Adivasi Justice Is To Live In The Wilds**

Ville-Veikko Hirvelä

India has the world's largest population of indigenous/tribal people, totalling roughly 90 million. They are usually known as "Adivasis" and depend on their deep connection with the surrounding lands as source of livelihood.

During the last 60 years 30 million Adivasis have been displaced by "development projects". In India, as well as in other parts of the world, resources such as minerals, lumber, oil, and gas are sought to be exploited primarily from the lands of these indigenous peoples.

This eviction of indigenous communities has a negative effect on the Earth's wild biodiversity and climate, as people whose lives were mostly adapted to live within the natural conditions of their environments are forced into cities. This is mostly the fault of commercial agri-business, as areas from which these people have been evicted become open to commercial exploitation. Following the displacement of 30 million Adivasis in India, a destruction of 40% of the region's "primary" forest has ensued.

In 2006, after recognising the need to correct the "historical injustice" of displacing Adivasis from the ancestral forests that they have sustained, India enacted the (FRA) or Forest Rights Act. This act decrees the authority of traditional forest communities to initiate the determination of their rights to live in forests and to use, own, manage and protect them under their own traditional law.

However, to implement these rights the modern world would need to better understand and respect the indigenous methods that allowed them to use and sustain wild forests for millennia.

## **On Adivasi understanding of Earth, wilds and justice**

Modern forms of lifestyle, cultivation, ownership, production and culture have managed to displace wild forests and damage many of our planet's ecosystems. Adivasis, on the other hand have used the forests for the same purposes and managed to do so without destroying them. They were able to sustain their own lives while allowing the regeneration of the forests'.

This ability to live sustainably within the life of a wild forest is based on how Adivasis understand and treat the Earth. The word 'Adivasi' means 'one who lives without beginning in an area and to Adivasis this word also encompasses the trees, rivers, wild animals and air. They see in these surrounding lives and resources their ancestors and thus treat them with a great deal of respect.

"We are part of all our ancestors...the stone is also my ancestor. ..You should learn to be part of the stone, the tree, the jungle".  
"We survive on them and they survive on us". (Raimotin Markam, Gond Adivasi woman from Bastar)

"Like we, also the trees and animals are...sisters of a common mother. They have existed from time immemorial, when everything was just beginning. They are all from that time and we are also with them...also trees and animals are our own relation to commonly joint mothers...like our sisters. (Kalawati, Gond Adivasi woman from Dantewada)

Adivasis see their lives being inherited "not only from the animated mothers and fathers but also from the ancestors that are the rivers, the changing seasons etc...We are living in those traditions and do not want to change and mold them in the way the modern world changes". (Raimotin, Gond Adivasi woman from Bastar)

The indigenous rights with which Adivasis have sustained the wilds have not been based on justice determined by laws or land titles but rather by a "common sense" practicality that ensures the sustainability of their much needed wild resources.

"We had laws neither for ourselves, nor for the animals. We and all forms of life were free to roam the forests and to sustain ourselves". "We did not accept the introduced categories of land". "But now...we are destroying the very basis, that is freedom of existence". (Indu Netam, Gond woman from Bastar)

"Now the laws are forcing us to domesticate the nature which will certainly destroy the wilderness, the freedom of ourselves, as well as that of nature" through "this philosophy of owning a thing and privatising and ultimately domesticating the wilds". But "previously we never domesticated the boars, the hens or the cows. They were available wandering in the jungle". (Raimotin, Gond Adivasi woman from Bastar)

The indigenous view of justice in regards to the resources of the wild runs completely counter to that of the modern world. While we would see a cow or a tree as part of somebody's land or property and therefore, 'theirs'...the Adivasi see these things as part of the earth (as we are also) and thus they are 'ours'. This attitude leads to a more communal or ancestral sense of ownership and makes our modern paperwork inexcusably prohibitive of their right to live by their own traditions.

"We...do not believe that land is mine or personal. It belongs to everyone, because it...is everyone's mother" (Kalawati, Gond woman from Dantewada). The relationship of Adivasi to land, water and forest is like that of child to parent. Land and forest belong indigenously to those who live the life of that land or forest rather than to those who simply claim ownership without the responsibility of maintaining and helping to sustain it.

"To sit under a tree used to be for us, like to take a shelter of a mother." (Indu Netam, Gond woman from Bastar). "Forest gives you everything like our mother, that feeling we have...I never wear any foot-wear, but I walk bare-foot as I want there to be nothing between the mother and me." (Kalawati, Gond woman from Dantewada)

"We have the feeling that forest is our mother and mother will protect and provide everything. But today we are made to believe that forest does not belong to us and it belongs to the forest department." (J.P. Raju, Jenukurunba Adivasi from Kodagu, Karnataka)

"Earlier there was no government, yet everything belonged to us...the entire forest was somehow their property but even the word property is wrong. It is an outside word. Forest had other value with us...We do not calculate our lands. We do not think needlessly...Whatever thinking is needed, so much is done".

"We know that we are born in this land, we are part of it. This forest...is part of our life". "We see through the eyes and we live through the land...Just as we can not sell away our eyes, our heads or our hands, similarly we cannot sell away the very basis of our existence...the land. It belongs to the life of the people who survive on this land and care for it". (Indu Netam, Gond woman from Bastar)

"This is our forest, our hills, and we belong to this area". "If we are born on mountains we should never get down from mountains". (Pandiyan, a leader of a Paliyan Adivasi community in Tamil Nadu)

Adivasi communities have lived in close communion with the wild for millenia. They interpret and understand the calling of a tree, the screaming of a bird or the language of a stone. "The joy of the surrounding environment...its cry and tears...the message it is trying to say." (Raimotin, Gond woman from Bastar)



*photo Ville-Veikko Hirvelä*

In the Andaman and Nicobar islands, local tribals managed to avoid the worst of the Tsunami by this very same interpretation of their environment. As the elephants, cattle, dogs and snakes retreated to the highest ground the Adivasi followed suit and thus survived its wrath. In this case the Adivasi understanding of themselves as a part of the environment ultimately led to their salvation.

### **Culture and cultivation as forest and wild**

The sustainable indigenous ways of perceiving and treating the Earth and the wilds are displaced by modernity and its applications of 'natural science'. Even the modern idea of 'conservation' leads to the wilds becoming less wild and more controlled. Man has always taken from the Earth's wild growth, but in the modern world he gives nothing in return and thus overconsumes.

As seen by 'natural science' the term 'forest' is institutionalised as a modern commercial and social artifact with known sights, smells and sounds. This modern sensibility based on exactitudes and certitudes colors the term as a systemic product of industry and thus limits indigenous access to it.

In the wild trees and plants grow where they are able to. Often they grow within a diverse 'family' of plants within which they are accustomed to thriving. Now the modern governance of trees and plants organises and determines where plants should grow, regardless of these plants natural inclinations.

The modern meaning of 'forest' demands that these ecosystems be treated as something entirely different from what they are (under the applications of 'natural science' etc.). "Forest is an institution...an extension of the state...a product of industrial age or post-industrial age". "Forest needs to be sustained because it is a social artifact like a train or a market and must be kept in condition by humans- leading to a question of ownership in respect to resources." "The tree is growing in the wild in a family amongst kith and kin while in a forest or plantation the tree exists outside the family, and are therefore like orphanages. The distinction between wild and forest is similar to that between Adivasi and modernity". (Narendra, a researcher working in Bastar)

"Earlier there was so much available in the forest that Adivasi were never worried about what one will eat, because all one was to do was to go into the forest, collect roots and herbs...fruits, nuts and small game. Everything was given as food. Adivasi did not even know or did not want to do farming". (Sita, Gond Adivasi from Bastar). "We did not allow any cutting or any misuse of the Earth. We did not permit stone cutting, any digging into the land. Whatever grew naturally, on that we lived. Land ownership came with this occupation by the outsiders, who did not belong here". (Bhil Adivasi from Jodhpur area of Rajasthan)

"Adivasi have lived and cultivated within the wilds without destroying land as it is...without destroying forest as it is". (Sita, Gond Adivasi from Bastar) "Adivasis also did not see much value in agriculture as they knew they would survive on hundreds of types of leaves, roots...mushrooms and shoots of bamboo trees. We go to look for birds, for rats, for hare, rabbits, but more importantly we go for just roaming around. And there is no greater joy than just roaming around, even if we come up empty handed". (Indu Netam, Gond Adivasi from Bastar) "We did not think that growing of food is a duty of humans because we always thought that it is the mother Earth or mother jungle which will give the food to us and we belong to it". (Raimotin, Gond Adivasi from Bastar)

Baiga myth says: "All the kingdoms of the world...may fall to pieces, but he who is made of Earth...shall never forsake it. He will make his living from the earth, dig roots and eat them...But one must not tear the breasts of Mother Earth with the plough". This view defined the role of Baigas in the world as "guardians of the forest and soil who have sacred understanding of how to cut trees and sow seed in the ashes of burnt trees. Baigas would thus enjoy the produce of the forest and grow crops by shifting cultivation in the forest but would never get rich. For if they did, they would forsake the Earth and then there would be no one to

guard it and keep in place its nails, which keep soil and earth together. As fastened through growing trees and vegetation, fertile soil has agreed with the Baiga to stay upon the Earth in hills and not slip down to the underworld.”

A suitable mixture of crops in the rainfed shifting cultivation, which the Baigas and other tribes have practiced, requires less human and capital resources compared to settled agriculture. After one or two years of cropping a field it lies fallow for years of natural regeneration before the cultivation shifts back to that site. Shifting cultivation also guides the regeneration of wilds to provide a variety of wild forest produce. This tackles climate vagaries and at the same time acts as subsistence farming suitable to the closed Baiga economy. However, government policies have placed a ban on shifting cultivation and forest life without providing them with an alternative livelihood.

### **Injustice of modern rule over the wild**

After the land, water, forest and other sources of non monetary indigenous subsistence were taken from 30 million Adivasis and put under commercial control the GNP grew rapidly. However, the production maintaining peoples lives has not grown by the same rate. These valuable resources, newly calculated in simple commercial terms, were taken out of Adivasi control. While the GNP appears to grow even without any real increase in production, the amount of people served by these resources is lessened. Profits and public support are captured for business with attractive figures on how to take over the sustainable non-commercial livelihood in the name of 'emission reduction', 'conservation of nature', 'eco-development' (tourism) and 'climate change mitigation'.

”We walk even long distances to give votes hoping that some leader, some minister, some government will help us...through our votes they win elections, but we are the losers, though they win by our votes”. (A displaced Gond Adivasi from Bastar)

The Earth as the home and source of all life should not be allowed to become displaced or endangered by our modern ways of life. The Earth has been sustained for ages with its lands managed by indigenous peoples by their own 'common sense' methods and have not caused global environmental crisis as our modern methods have. Over the course of the last 3 centuries as we have systematically displaced the indigenous ways of life while applying our so called 'natural science', we have managed to create a global environmental crisis.

There is a crucial difference between the indigenous and modern ways of understanding, treating and using the Earth. People that live indigenously find their livelihood within Earth's natural ability to regenerate resources. They have managed to live on the Earth without displacing its wilds. They have observed the surroundings within such ancestrally created significance and sense-perceptibility which have sustained these surroundings as liveable for people for ages. They have continued this ancestral creation by building indigenous senses that support wild biodiversity which helps to sustain life on Earth. Such ways of understanding the Earth and living with it have adapted and thrived within the planet's limits and thus have earned them their right to subsist on the land they have lived on and cared for for millenia. As stated within the international human rights covenants and UN Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples, "in no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence". It must be ensured that people shall not be deprived of their indigenous right to locally sustained livelihoods.

With all its knowledge and data on nature, the modern world seems increasingly incapable of slowing its destruction of the planet. People who have the most education on 'natural science', biology or ecology are consuming the most and thus damaging the environment the most. People without such knowledge of ecology or biology are able to live more sustainably through practice. Adivasi women have played a crucial role in sustaining relatively equal and natural indigenous ways of life. In traditional Adivasi communities, like in Bastar, women are the majority of the population. Elsewhere, this is not the case and it seems that with the increase of literacy rates comes the decline of women as a percentage of the population.



"Today it is said that everybody has a right to education. But we do not want this education. According to today's systems of education the majority of our people will fail. But according to our earlier system of education no-one ever failed. Our children were not used to studying in schools as such. We got our education by climbing trees, picking mahua flowers, and roaming the forest. We were ecologically literate people". (Indu Netam, Gond from Bastar)

### **Learning from the Indigenous**

We need to search for a way to re-educate ourselves in seeing the surrounding earth, atmosphere, growth and movement of animals as a sign of life for all beings. There is a rich diversity of indigenous heritages and ways of life that have managed to adapt to living within the Earth's own wild regeneration. They have done so, not with our modern bio-ecological educations, but by learning to give back something when they have a need to take.

People's lives have a significant impact on what takes place on the Earth. While the wild growth of Earth's life used to serve as a sustainable indigenous human home and a valuable living resource, modern life has adopted a means of life that seeks to displace these wilds to make room for our modern 'needs'.

Indigenous life on the other hand places emphasis on seeing its surroundings more respectfully by maintaining a dialogue with the wild lands, forests, water, trees, stones etc. As they continue to place such significance on their relationship with their surroundings they ensure that the Earth can continue to open itself as a living space for all beings. This ancestrally inherited sense of respect (Earth as mother) and participation in passing on their folklore and knowledge of the stones, mountains, rivers etc, further supports their sustainable traditions and thus places them within their surroundings as a welcome participant.

The majority of the world's people have made their homes and found meaning in these surrounding wilds and have thus become integral participants in the environments' own regeneration. When people live by simply gathering food and resources where they naturally grow they often have less of an impact on their environment and promote a natural form of regeneration. On the other hand, our modern tendency to own a portion of land and eliminate all but one species (a crop), destroys that land's biodiversity and thus impacts the environment in a much more severe way.

Even now the Earth's majority lives by much less commercial and consumptive ways of life and has little effect on the current global crisis. Even in areas inhabited by huge amounts of indigenous people they experience very little pollution, carbon emissions and biodiversity loss than what is currently seen in our modern areas.

We would thus need to learn much from indigenous people and their ways of life to find within our own environments a way to minimize our pollution, emissions and biodiversity loss. People can learn to live more indigenously by simply placing a higher importance on what they bring to the Earth rather than what they consume or take from it. We must go back to an earlier time where we took a greater internal pleasure in our surroundings and managed to find our own importance within them.

# Is Integration into the mainstream society inevitable?

**Malini Shankar**

India's indigenous peoples are at a great crossroads, having to decide whether to integrate into the mainstream industrial society at the cost of leaving their homes and hearths deep inside desolate forests.

Other challenges to their survival include malnutrition, stifling poverty, inbreeding in some tribes, declining birth rate, inadequate access to health services... for most of which the blame is laid at the doorstep of conservationists and the government. Their logic is that wildlife conservationists and forest department have prevented development coming into tribal areas, which invariably coincide with wildlife reserves.

## **Conflict with the wildlife conservationists**

Many are also often accused of connivance with poachers. Sharpening the edges of conflict between the anthropologist and wildlife conservationist lobbies was the Sariska slaughter of 22 tigers in the premier tiger reserve of the same name in 2004. When the forest department admitted to the system failure that led to the annihilation of all the tigers in Sariska by the poachers; wild-lifers cried hoarse in a "we told you so" battle that found fruition in a worst fear manifestation: the Central Tiger Task Force which was appointed by the Indian Prime Minister in 2005 following the debacle at Sariska submitted a report "**Joining the Dots**" which bemoaned the tribals' struggle sympathising with the hunter rather than the hunted...the report grudged the exaggerated and exclusive 'tiger conservation constituency' which not only alienated the hapless homeless forest dweller but also the tribal. "Villagers here regard the tiger, and the park administration, as their common enemy no 1: they live sandwiched between the two, and are bitter about their desperately wretched existence and continued harassment. The park management talks about relocation, but has done little. In the meantime, even the one village that had been moved out has come back into the reserve. There is unease all around. In this situation, protection cannot and does not work... If "people versus parks" — and its inevitable corollary, "people versus tigers" — is one contentious point of the debate around conservation in India today, the report finds extremely sensitive deliberations upon this issue in the past".

"The biggest disservice of the Prime Minister's Tiger Task Force is that it introduced a new element to the debate - 'people versus tigers'. People have lived in and around tiger areas with a huge degree of tolerance for centuries. The rights of people are of course important, but protected areas for tigers should be just that - for tigers" says Belinda Wright of the Wildlife Protection Society of India in New Delhi. While talking of tigers the entire faunal spectrum in the sub continent under the stride and stripe of the Royal Bengal Tiger's bestirring gaze is what is generally implied. "There is credible evidence to conclude that poaching is a criminal activity that affects our wildlife reserves on a continuous basis. In reserves where the tested system of protection comprising foot patrols, permanent anti poaching camps at strategic locations along with mobile patrols are active 24X7X365, poaching activities can be controlled. Reserves which are not intensively protected will surely lose its wildlife due to unchecked poaching that can result in a Sariska kind of situation" says Praveen Bharghav of the Wildlife First NGO in Bangalore.

## **Can legislation help?**

Somewhat worsening matters for the persecuted tiger and its entire faunal spectrum was the legislation of the Forest Rights Act 2006 known as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act which guaranteed

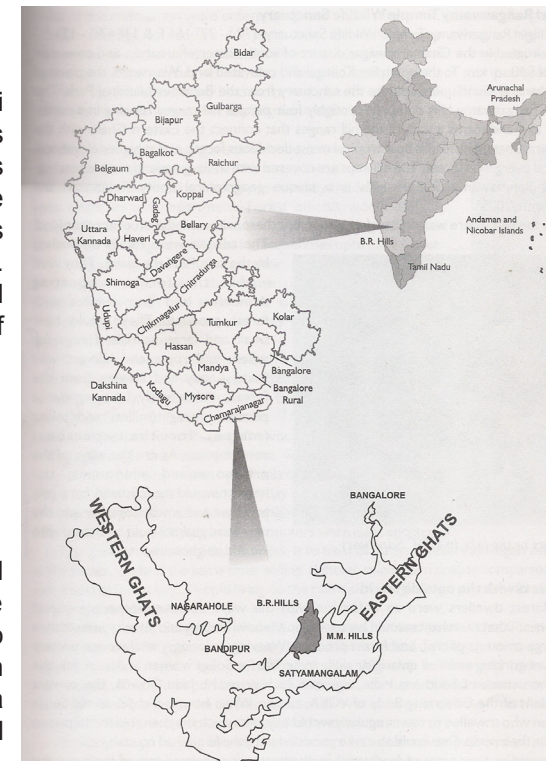
land rights to those forest dwelling squatters and indigenous tribes who could prove ancestry in forests for three generations. No other piece of legislation in independent India – save for the still born Defamation Act of 1987 – divided the thinking class in India as much as the Forest Rights Act. The lack of a clearly defined land use policy put enormous pressure on the State from both sides of the divide: anthropologists clamouring for development inside forest reserves and puritan conservationists battling for inviolate spaces for highly endangered wildlife. Despite a sympathetic Press and a robust intelligentsia, the anthropologists have been unable to prove the indigenous peoples' interdependence on forest ecosystem. Seen from the rigid stance taken from the opposing schools of thought it seems neither is able to prove effectively its argument. Wildlife conservationists opposed the Forest Rights Act on the basis of wildlife literally losing ground to encroachers and squatters. Further, if their dependence and survival depended on the forest ecosystem then it might have been condoned, but 99% of the indigenous people in India are no more than an impoverished and deprived lot, frustrated on account of inadequate amenities and political neglect besides a social alienation. "The Recognition of Forest Rights Act gives the Adivasis the right to land and forests. They will be in a position to finally determine their own livelihoods and development models based on the constitution and larger economic paradigms that relate to society in general" says Dr. Nitin Rai, Fellow at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment in Bangalore. The patriarchal logic revolves around integrating them to the mainstream industrial society for economic upliftment while the sociologists and anthropologists seek isolation and a non interference platitude for the manipulated lot of the indigenous people.

The indigenous peoples' dire fate stems from isolation in inaccessible forest terrain, low standards of health and hygiene – which explains their low health standards, illiteracy, which translates to inadequate awareness of their rights and privileges, and abysmal poverty which is blamed on conservationists.

Among the myriad indigenous peoples of India the Soligas have retained a clean reputation of living inside wildlife dense Billigiri Ranga Swamy Temple Hill Wildlife Sanctuary (BRTWLS) and in return offering a largely unblemished record of harmonious lifestyle with Mother Nature. The Soligas live in the forest landscape where the Western Ghats merges with the Eastern Ghats – both are mountain ridges flanking the coasts on peninsular India. See map Within its relatively small 540-sq km area the BRTWLS has a biodiversity map with dry scrub forests at lower altitudes that give way to woodland savannah and deciduous forests at mid-elevation. At higher altitudes, where it is wetter, one finds evergreen forests, Shola forests and grasslands. The forests of BRT are home to a number of animals and more than 245 species of birds including 12 endemic and several endangered species. Further 1000 species of higher plants, 36 mammals excluding bats and rodents and 145 species of butterflies inhabit the 6 types of biotopes that sprawl across the forest reserve.

### The Soligas or children of Bamboo

"The Soligas were hunters and food gatherers for their own livelihood. Occasionally they hunt only wild boars for their food through 'pit method'. The involvement of Soligas in poaching and smuggling is very rare. There are only very few and rare cases of their involvement" says Dr. H. Sudarshan a medical practitioner who has dedicated his entire professional service to the cause of upliftment of the Soliga tribe who live in and around the B.R. Hills Reserve in Chamrajnagar district of the Indian state of Karnataka (77° 16' E and 11° 47' – 12° 09' N). Dr. Sudarshan established the Vivekananda Girijan Kalyan Kendra which translates to Vivekananda tribal welfare centre (<http://www.vgkk.org>) in 1981 which was founded on the premise of medical



intervention for the then semi-naked, tree top dwelling hunter gatherers - the Soligas, and the Karuna Trust in Yelandur following his successful nomination to the Right Livelihood Award (Alternate Nobel Prize) in 1994 (<http://www.karunatrust.org>)

#### Profile of Soligas

- *Soligas – the children of Bamboo*
- *Location: in and around the forests of Billigiri Ranga Swamy Temple in Chamrajnagar, Kollegal, Satyamangala, at the foothills of the confluence of Eastern and Western Ghats in and around (770 – 770 16' E and 110 47 – 1209' N)*
- *Language of the Soligas: Soliganudi (colloquial version of the local language - Kannada)*
- *Population: 16500 (approx)*
- *62 villages*
- *Adults: NA*
- *Males: Females: NA*
- *Children: NA*

*“The tribals have been traditionally doing organic farming and have conserved rich diversity of seeds. The gene pool is much safer in the hands of the tribal community than in the multi national gene banks and corporates. They have a multi cropping pattern which takes care of their cereals, pulses vegetables, their requirements for sustenance, etc., this organic farming is devoid of pesticide consumption.” says the ardent tribal rights advocate Dr. Sudarshan who admits that he went to the forests on a mission to evangelise the health care for the tribes but ended up getting converted himself!*



But tribes are much more than just a burden on the wildlife legacy of India...they are the genetic link to the evolution of humanity. Indigenous people are the last vestiges of human evolution and are credited with evolving the rationale for regional, agro climatic, hydro meteorological wisdom – the world over. Butter tea for example, obtained from the cream of Yak / Di milk serves as a calorie full meal, fit to beat the biting cold in Ladakh and the Himalayan regions. Yak milk is boiled at different temperatures to make different kinds of curds which defies curdling in the refrigerated environs of the Himalayas. “The process of making ordinary meal involves solidifying the blood, cutting the blood block into pieces, boiling, adding salt, drying and grinding into meal (Tao L. *et al.*, 1993). A report by Huang X. S. (2000) describes that yak blood can be made into a fire-extinguishing agent for use in industry” according to a FAO paper - **10 PRODUCTS FROM YAK AND THEIR UTILIZATION**. Similarly the merits of consumption of garlic to outwit the hazard of cholesterol in a sedentary era of modern day technological / industrial society has been understated and under documented; but would serve the health consciousness of an indifferent industrial society pretty much effectively.

Despite the diverse richness of their inherited traditional wisdom, indigenous people have never before been as much threatened by the crossroads of civilisation: They are unable to either respond to, or resist the onslaught of the mainstream industrialised society which stifles the lifestyle of the indigenous people. They survived the Tsunami but are unable to survive the commercialisation of modern society in all its wretched manifestations: Media sexes up consumerism, development paradigm alienates them from the fruits of modernity like education, good health care system, transport and communication; both the government and the NGOs exploit them, with each pointing fingers at the other; and they are unable to wipe out their accursed destiny.

Today though, they are struggling to meke out a modest standard of living amidst depriving conditions and widespread poverty; their identity crisis is compounded by the antagonism with the forest department and conservation lobby that alleges indigenous peoples' connivance with the poaching mafia. At stake is the land with biodiverse reserves where both Man and Beast are struggling for a piece of land to call it their home. The question today is if indigenous people in India can make ends meet by owning forest lands or by making best use of opportunities that forest resources provide? Who or which agency can husband their survival in a complex and transitional society?

While wildlife conservationists and the forest department questions the indigenous peoples' land rights in pockets of wilderness that barely stretch 2 - 4% of India's landmass meant for the faunal spectrum that thrives under the bestirring gaze of the remaining 1411 Royal Bengal Tigers, anthropologists and tribal rights advocates seek isolation from the corrupting influences of the commercialised, industrial society, nevertheless they do clamour for development for the tribes even if it means inside tiger terrain. Anthropologists even claim that the best of wildlife reserves coincide with the tribal hotspots where they have lived for generations with the faunal spectrum: “the 150 poorest districts of India; the fact that these are also constitutionally designated Schedule V areas (areas primarily inhabited by tribals); and the fact that these are prime “tiger districts... The fact is that communities — not necessarily tribals, but equally impoverished — live in and around those areas the official conservation apparatus protects for the sake of the tiger” says the Central Tiger Task Fore Report Joining the Dots.

Unanswered is the argument that indigenous peoples are stuck in a rut of poverty and are unable to uplift themselves because of isolation advocates. But, growth is inevitable and they have to be released from abominable and impoverished conditions, the integrationists argue with the isolationists. The point of debate is where should the tribals be housed where undeniably the tribals deserve development and a higher standard of living? It is the land that is so fiercely at stake, something that the forest Rights Act has not entirely answered.



### **Integration is largely inevitable, despite a painful debate**

Integration and relocation outside reserves might seem the inevitable compunction to the remaining population of impoverished indigenous tribes in India. Admittedly, they earn 60% of their income from their forest based livelihood: collection of non timber forest produce like nuts, fruits, leaves, honey, and selling it to the LAMPS (Large Scale Adivasi Multi Purpose Societies), and hunting small game for subsistence. Having been introduced to a monetary economy – ironically with the best of intentions to uplift them from their wretched poverty and to initiate self sustenance - the indigenous people have inevitably been led to a sense of deprivation: without giving them access to the goods and services that money can buy, they are left to misuse money by obtaining illicit liquor, opium, and they have also been often caught conniving with urban based poaching mafia. The lucrative returns of poaching put the entire spectrum of indigenous people in India at the mercy of the government's determination to integrate them into mainstream society.

The Deputy Conservator of Forests of the B.R.T Wildlife Sanctuary where the Soligas traditionally live, Mr. Biswajit Mishra says the forest department is trying to placate the tribals in a three pronged approach, emotionally, economically and also socially: "The Karnataka Forest Department has evolved a package to find ways of utilising their conservation skills for the overall good. Their inherent skill in chasing marauding elephants and extinguishing forest fire for example are assets to the forest department; Eco tourism should contribute to the community's welfare in terms of health care and education needs of the younger generation. Addressing their economic needs calls for effective employment for community asset building as envisioned in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme" which assures every rural adult of 100 days of employment on minimum wages basis in rural areas (like digging elephant proof trenches, de-weeding, fire and elephant chasing squads, collection and sale of Non Timber Forest Produce – NTFP etc).

Lacking the discretion between the right and the wrong, almost all the indigenous peoples in India feel exploited by those in power: NGOs, - who try to uplift them introduce them to a higher standard of living but inadequately so. It is an irony indeed that isolation seeking tribal rights advocates also propagate formal education. When asked what the purpose of subjecting tree-climbing, forest-dwelling indigenous people to a rigorous, lettered education in a formal competitive education system is, and if that does not contradict the purpose of seeking isolation for forest dwelling indigenous people... NGOs do come across as somewhat confused. Many admit off the record that spreading education and higher standards of health and hygiene etc only serve their own purpose. Nevertheless, the conclusion they draw from years of experience in serving the indigenous people is that basic formal education is necessary for these have-nots to distinguish between the right and the wrong and for them to know their rights atleast. But Atree's Dr. Nitin Rai says "with adequate policy and state support as is being provided by the Recognition of Forest Rights Act the roadmap (road map / integration plan for mainstreaming alienated tribes) might be evolved by the Adivasis themselves".

They lack the means to sustain a higher standard of living today, living as they do under the thick canopy of the forest and the watchful gaze of the tiger and other carnivores. Their conflict with the wild animals is largely untold. Every forest reserve with human settlement has atleast a few victims of wildlife attack: Invariably Black bear, sometimes man eating wolves, panthers and tigers, but also marauding elephants and snakes bring such untold misery to the hapless forest dwelling squatter and tribal. For this assignment I had to travel to the B.R. Hills wildlife sanctuary where the Soliga tribe is spread across vast pockets. One malnourished 16 year old boy in a tribal settlement – Purani Podu - was attacked by a black bear in June 2008. The attack was caused because of habitat disturbance. The attack was so vicious that the poor boy's eyelid and the scalp next to his left temple were gouged off. It was a sheer miracle that the profusely bleeding underweight undernourished boy survived at all.



### **Poverty is their bane**

“The 1991 Census figures reveal that 42.02 percent of the Scheduled Tribes populations were mainstream workers of whom 54.50 percent were cultivators and 32.69 per cent agricultural labourers. Thus, about 87 percent of the mainstream workers from these communities were engaged in primary sector activities. The literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes is around 29.60 percent, as against the national average of 52 percent. More than three-quarters of Scheduled Tribes women are illiterate. These disparities are compounded by higher dropout rates in formal education resulting in disproportionately low representation in higher education. Not surprisingly, the cumulative effect has been that the proportion of Scheduled Tribes below the poverty line is substantially higher than the national average. The estimate of poverty made by Planning Commission for the year 1993-94 shows that 51.92 percent rural and 41.4 percent urban Scheduled Tribes were still living below the poverty line” according to the website of the Indian Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

Some indigenous people are so threatened that they number in the hundreds – for example, the indigenous folks of the Andaman Nicobar Islands (10°42'13.99"N 93°27'45.64"E) - the Onges, (90) the Jarawas, (360) the Sentinalese, guesstimated to be 100 (no official contact has so far been established thus their numbers remain a matter of speculation; the Great Andamanese, between 40 – 50; and Shompens around 300 but Nicobarese around 30,000 (the Nicobarese have integrated into the so called 'mainstream society', they clothe, dine and speak the same language as the mainstream society, they have taken up employment, are lettered, and enjoy good health and hygiene. It leaves government and conservationists to propagate that integration is the ethnologically successful formula for survival of all people, historically.

### **The conflict of debate**

Other issues of conflict are surgical interference in issues concerning indigenous people, lack of representation, and stifled tribal voices, besides political neglect and insensate handling of tribal affairs all of which are extremely detrimental to indigenous peoples' welfare. The Andaman Trunk Road (ATR) which slices the Jarawas' territory – Jarawa Reserves into half and inevitably exposing extremely fragile and pre historic Jarawas to all kinds of evils of a modern industrial society – including sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol, spurious liquor and its ill-effects, and modern stress induced and digestive disorders besides dependence on food rations and other doles from the administration. An allegation that sticks with considerable temper spin offs in online intellectual debates is the point that the Administration introduced the indigenous people to cereal consumption and made them dependent on the public distribution system without teaching them the skill of cultivation and agriculture. A tribe unused to cooked food was suddenly exposed – thanks to the ATR to baked snacks, fried food stuffs illicit liquor and introduced them to disorders, besides the infections that the tourists brought with them on the road. Those in favour of the road enlisted the advantages of infrastructure in a remote island on account of defence preparedness, logistics in times of natural disaster that the islands are so prone to, and to provide an economic link to those settlers who inhabit non-forest areas in the island chain. The necessity for infrastructure as a development index was argued in the context of medical emergencies in the islands' far flung areas. The settlers who make up more than 65% of the islands' population want more infrastructure even if it is at the cost of the survival of the highly endangered and fragile indigenous people of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands who still lead a Neolithic lifestyle. The settlers from mainland India are often accused of colonising the remote Andaman and Nicobar Islands, often with considerable credence.

There are 622 different types of indigenous people in India, all with their own uniquely shaped and evolved culture, invariably synchronous to the agro climatic and agro meteorological conditions prevalent in their region. The sum total of the traditional wisdom and best practices that have evolved through their challenges emanating from their ecosystem has failed to touch and

make a difference to the industrial society that progressed from colonialism... leaving at large the open ended question: is mainstreaming them and their skills for a hungry, individualistic industrial society necessary at all?

Though 60% of their income comes from NTFP collection like honey, bee wax, gooseberries, roots, nuts, fruits, soap berries and soapnut, mango, wild turmeric, lichens and mosses etc..., these are collected seasonally. Agricultural labour, temporary work assignments with the forest department are other means of income to the tribals to the extent of 30%. Their dependence on forest products for self-sustenance is 10%.

The Soligas or the “Children of Bamboo” who live in and around the Billigiri Ranga Swamy Temple Hills on the slopes of the high mountains where the Eastern and Western Ghats converge) are completely in synch with Mother Nature’s blessings. Some of their traditional wisdom and best practices are worth integrating atleast for the benefit of the so called mainstream industrial society. Yes they do offer the romantic spectacle of living off Mother Nature for those seeking simple living.

### **Integration has to be an evolved process, not just relocation**

By integrating the traditional wisdom and best practices of the indigenous people, India will succeed in protecting the traditional wisdom and best practices of all indigenous people from the prying eyes of the ruthlessly opportunistic WTO regime.

The question the anthropologists ask with considerable credence is if there is space and time for the self serving industrial society to assimilate the have-nots who know no frontiers other than green horizons, berries and burrows if they are relocated into an economically complex and socially complicated society. Worse, without appropriate harnessing of their forest bound skills, they would be no more than impoverished wretched slum dwellers desperately seeking dignity in urban / mainstream slums. Secondly, burdening the overstretched and inadequate infrastructure in Indian towns and cities will only accentuate the divide and alienate the downtrodden further. Inadequate sanitation infrastructure in towns and the indigenous peoples’ lack of familiarity with urban sanitation systems can wreck havoc not only on the fragile urban infrastructure but also lead to unknown health hazards for the equally vulnerable indigenous migrants. India’s caste conscious Hindu society is not yet ready to assimilate indigenous people. The necessity to integrate them is defended from two divergent schools of thought: to alleviate them from impoverished conditions and to sustain the traditional wisdom in a scientifically tempered social structure in inviolate isolation in their forest homes.

Nevertheless questions remain: By relocating the indigenous peoples outside the forest ecosystem in which they live, they will be left to fend for themselves without the skills to seek employment they will be in more poverty, more despair, more of an identity crisis. Besides, the caste conscious Hindu society is not likely to accept them into their fold at all. It will result in no more than slums, more unemployment and crime, and other social economic evils that follow urbanisation.

The challenge then for an industrial society in a healthy democratic ethos is to find ways of integrating their skills for the mutual benefit of such a transitionary, complex and socially fascinating fabric in a pluralistic social ethos. The traditional wisdom they have obtained by living for centuries in specific, biodiverse pockets are certainly regional and cannot be universal. All the same, it takes the diversity of today’s Media to offer the most effective interface for integration of their skills because their best practices can benefit humanity and more significantly - the industrial society.

VGKK - Dr. Sudarshan’s organisation - has painstakingly researched and documented the Soligas’ way of life and their best practices besides traditional wisdom. According to VGKK’s senior Manager – Master Ramachar the beloved headmaster of the ‘Kendra’ school in the B. R. Hills Wildlife Sanctuary, “The tribes have evolved their own life skills based on their forest ecosystem in which they have lived for generations for thousands of years. By integrating their life-skills we benefit.

Reading the monsoons from cloud pattern and natural history behaviour, butterfly behaviour, bird flying pattern etc the Soligas deduce weather patterns". It's a traditional skill that the Indian Meteorological Department, (IMD) filled with pension-able-job seeking bureaucrats would do well to learn from. Today though, the IMD has expensive working relationships with a host of agencies across the Globe. Not that the accuracy and scientific temper of the IMD's predictions are questioned. But it would serve as a social responsibility if the Indian government can take up for better integration of such tribes. That way:

1. The Government of India's credibility for practising what it preaches will be enhanced;
2. Secondly the indigenous peoples and their traditional knowledge and wisdom will be protected from the prying wolves of WTO;
3. Thirdly the burden on the state exchequer thanks to unaccountable bureaucrats in IMD would scale down and
4. Fourthly the indigenous people, in their effort to integrate would be monetarily, and socially rewarded.
5. Lastly we would learn traditional means of computing weather patterns

Most indigenous people in India today begrudge the forest department's custody of wildlife and wildlife reserves, because it makes them feel alienated. The forest dwelling tribes are at their wits end because of inadequate access to health care and education, lack of infrastructure and poverty. During the fire season the forest department's cooperation to mobilise the sick and ailing is jeopardised. The forest department in its thankless responsibility to defend as sacrosanct tiger terrain without sovereign ownership of the lands in which the tiger and its faunal spectrum roam, are often accused of harassing the indigenous people. Allegations of harassment stretch from the sublime to the ridiculous, although largely unsubstantiated.

But it is indeed the State's thankless responsibility to protect biodiversity reserves for future generations, nay for posterity. Employing these alienated indigenous people would not just give an incentive to the tribes but also benefit the forest administration infinitely. The forest guards walk often with open toed footwear, with no more a defence than a wooden baton; torches, wireless sets and all terrain vehicles etc are only text book rules during training! The demoralised forest staff, living far away from their homes have no monetary incentive apart from a secure job. But that same secure job makes them sluggish, demotivated and unaccountable as it proved to be in Sariska's tiger tragedy. Indigenous people on the other hand have the wherewithal and stamina, natural history behaviour is part of their traditional upbringing. They know the forest terrain best. Thus if they would be gainfully engaged by the forest department for vigilance against poachers or for protecting wildlife in its natural habitat it would certainly help integrate them and serve to protect the faunal spectrum as well. "It is not only realistic but essential to employ local people with jungle skills in wildlife protection work. Unfortunately the prevailing recruitment rules of the forest department that emphasize scholastic learning over jungle craft and local origin, do not facilitate hiring them except as temporary labourers. This is unfortunate and needs to change" says Dr. Ullas Karanth; renowned wildlife biologist of the NY based Wildlife Conservation Society in Bangalore. Given the fact a 3 old Soliga child learns as part of his traditional repertoire the types of trees, fruits nuts berries and fauna that flourish in the B.R.T.W.L.S., the VGKK is trying to augment their traditional knowledge of biodiversity by offering a government recognised course in forestry that addresses conservation needs like silviculture, social forestry, waste land development, watershed management, soil conservation, forestry management, and forest production. Dr. Sudarshan hopes that this will help get the Soligas sought after employment opportunities in Indian Forest Service.

The Soligas' health best practices include consumption of 60 varieties of spinach and leafy vegetables found to be endemic to the Hills, which they use for food. Tubers are nutritional supplements found seasonally and consumed once or twice a month only. Millet is their staple diet. Millet balls steam cooked and eaten with lentils, and spinach is their staple diet along with fruits, (both ripe and raw), honey, tender bamboo shoots, roots and tubers are supplements. They refrigerate their foodstuffs in the hollow trunks of Bamboo stumps. Atleast they have been more effective in preventing modern stress induced disorders like Diabetes Miletus and Hypertension... the bane of industrial societies.

Childbirth is done in squatting posture. “Laying a pregnant woman on her back on a hospital bed for childbirth is convenient only to the doctors attending to the childbirth not to the pregnant lady” says Dr. Sudarshan, utterly convinced of this tradition as a best practise. Late Jalesiddamma, - the matriarchal midwife of the Soliga community who died in 2004 knew how to turn the foetus in the womb in case it was stuck at childbirth. She knew which herbal tonic and concoction to prescribe for every month of pregnancy with the variety of herbs available in and around the BR Hills. “She would prescribe herbal tonics, concoctions and sprays by feeling the partition on the pregnant woman’s head, hair strand, or bone joint, nail enamel, eye balls, and skin as also walking style. This was the best manifestation of ‘traditional wisdom’ for maternal health” says Master Ramachar. These skills that Jalesiddamma left behind as a legacy to her daughter are something that has evaded the mainstream gynaecological services.

The fiercely independent Indian Media which has neglected developmental journalism could do well to dedicate itself as an interface to integrate such best practices for mutual benefit of the indigenous peoples as well as the mainstream industrial society. This kind of a media induced integration and interface could well stymie the ill effects and dangers of “patenting traditional wisdom” in tune with the commercial diktats of the World Trade Organisation Regime (TRIPS).

The Soligas’ agricultural best practices include: organic farming, multi cropping system only for self sustenance. They do not sell agricultural produce. Neither do they utilise hybrid seeds. They use only those agricultural produce that they harvest for the net crop without buying seeds. They do not plough but use the hoe. The Soligas absolutely detest use of pesticide, and insecticides, no chemical fungicides and fertilizers either. Calcium and lime water, bovine urine, turmeric with water are their fungicides. “No matter how much of tutoring the NGOs and other interventionists would undertake, they will not accept non traditional agricultural practices” says Master Ramachar. Another fascinating aspect of their agriculture is their traditional knowledge of complementing crops in their multi cropping practice: if a pest attacks one crop, the pest of another crop becomes its predator. “For example mustard cultivation takes care of the pests that attack vegetable crops” according to Ramachar.

Monoculture cultivation of crops is self defeating according to the Soligas. They also believe that flowering plants which attract bees facilitate pollination and the best possible genetic diversity of their ‘seed bank’. Thus agro seeds are utterly endemic, thus no question of importing seeds for commercializing agriculture. To avoid crop raiding by wild elephants, they resort to traditional methods of scaring them away: namely tying a wooden cross with clothes blowing in the wind, or a calcium tainted mud pot reversed to resemble a man’s head, pierce a tin with a rope and hang a stone in it ... which when pulled from a distance creates a ruckus scaring away the elephants. They also sow the crops before the thunder storms and hailstorms that precede the monsoons. In the interest of soil conservation they dig only upto 5 cms of top soil for agriculture. They do not de-weed, instead they use weeds to make fertilizers. Similarly, harvest quantification is indicative of monsoon and weather variations according to Soliga wisdom and logic. Natural history behaviour serves as early warning for meteorological predictions... Things the mainstream society could well learn.

### **A spiritual connection to Mother Nature**

Their spiritual connection to the forest could perhaps be the most difficult to disconnect for a relocation seeking government because “they plead with their God - the 1000 year old Big Champak Tree (or the *Dodda Sampige Mara*) that their ecosystem sustains this year, that they get a good harvest, a good monsoon, etc. They also pray for their own well being. While praying they avow piety, defence and protection of their home and hearth – the B R Hills forests, and lead simple lifestyles to live up to the ideals they promise to the deity. The Big Champak Tree is God incarnate to the Soligas, and a communal conscience keeper. Somuchso that a dispute amongst them takes them to the tree, where the liar or the defendant honestly owns up to his mistake.

This conscience keeper is the Supreme Court in their legal system called 'Nyaya'. It is far more effective judiciary but might not be entirely in synch with a Democratic ethos. Nevertheless it shows the efficacy of a conscientious culture and simplicity of their worldview and sense of justice.

They plead for protection of their land holdings, their agricultural implements, health of the family, and material well being. Each clan has a different worshipping place but the Big Champak tree is the Supreme Deity. The Big Champak Tree is estimated to be at least 600 years old by modest estimates. Being their Supreme God Incarnate it has not been possible for official agencies, - anthropologists included - to scientifically establish its accurate age. The Soligas themselves believe it is at least 1500 years old and this Pagan Goddess is their ultimate conscience keeper. Close to the Dodda Sampige Mara Tree is a junior version – the Chikka Sampige Mara or the Smaller Champak Tree. Given the sacred nature of the Dodda Sampige Mara or the Big Champak tree, reverence demands that its real age has been indeterminate. Thus the question of relocating / severing the Soligas from the God incarnate will be unthinkable and offensive. Every forest reserve in India has one such pious pilgrimage location.

*Kalgudi* (literally means stone temple) or their ancient burial sites - specific sites to each tribal clan is considered sacrosanct. These are found in deep desolate forest interiors. When 7 of us went looking for the Kalgudi clutching each others' hands we nevertheless lost our way 3 times over, in spite of being led by a Soliga himself – such is the dense undergrowth in the forest. We were also petrified of making the slightest noise under our feet- the rustle of leaves might disturb the Black bears, troops of monkeys and elephants utterly unused to the human presence. Finally when we found the Kalgudi – no more than a modest heap of stones marked as tombstone by all the earthly possessions of the departed Soul it was an emotional link to my own forefathers – a collective yet sociological link to my own ancestry. Each departed soul gets a stone or piece of rock in memoriam. The search for the appropriate stone sometimes takes weeks, and if the right kind of stone is not found, then the funeral is postponed till the right kind of stone is found. Once the stone is found, the entire clan descends to cook a grand communal meal, share it amongst themselves, and communicate with the Pagan Gods on behalf of the departed souls saying “please accept one of us into your fold, please do not quarrel amongst yourselves, please do not alienate this Soul, and please forgive us if we have done any wrong”. The only 2 occasions the Soligas go to these burial grounds are when they have to surrender a departed Soul to the ancestors or if they are in dire desperate need of something they have not found for themselves. In case they are in need of something that they have not been able to find despite long arduous searches, they then go to their Kalgudi or clan's ancient burial site where they pray in all sincerity to the Mother Nature asking for a shower of the needed item: it could be a rare fruit, nut, a particular type of honey, wax, or meat. It is their faith that their sincerity pays off – proportionate to their sincerity. This altruistic faith in their ecosystem might render it impossible for the inevitable relocation to the mainstream industrial society.

### **Conclusion**

If the development of any one sector or segment of the economy of any society has to be at the cost of the other it reveals very corrosive innards, and effectively implies that it neither values its symbolic blessings nor its inheritance. Much as the Media is the culprit in a rapidly transitional society, it can also serve as a constructive catalyst in developmental alternatives. It's a responsibility the Media has to carve a space for.

**Malini Shankar**

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*Pictures and graphics by Malini Shankar, CEO Weltanschauung Worldview Media Centre, ([www.wvmcindia.com](http://www.wvmcindia.com)) Bangalore*

### **Agrodiversity in Soliga diet**

*“Their traditional nutrition includes 21 species of green leaves, 8 species of tubers, 14 species of fruits, 8 species of seeds, 4 species of flowers, 7 species of mushrooms, 10 varieties of spices, and 4 varieties of honey. They cultivate 5 species of cereals, 5 species of pulses, 5 species of tubers, 2 species of oil seeds and 5 species of green leafy vegetables. Whole grains are powdered and consumed. The Soligas also consume pulses and vegetables. The high roughage in their diet (coarse cereals consumption) helps them in preventing colonic cancer, appendicitis, and constipation. The green leafy vegetables take care of their dietary needs of Vitamin A and iron. Amaranthus is the most commonly used leafy vegetable – the leaves stem and seeds are all consumed. They have very little fat in their diet; hence obesity is almost unknown in the community. They consume plenty of the Jamoon fruit – Indian blackberry (*Syzygium cumini*) which takes care of the folic acid needed for generation of red blood cells especially in patients of Sickle Cell anaemia. Their food is totally devoid of pesticides” says Dr. Sudarshan in the VGKK handout “Our Forests, Our Lives”.*

### **The Soligas’ relationship with the forests**

*Soliga society elders say the numbers of the wild animals have dwindled notably that of the elephants. The naturally occurring diversity of grasses have been cleared for monoculture silviculture plantations undertaken by the forest department. When the endemic biodiversity is manipulated it does have an impact on the agro meteorological conditions they aver. Natural history behaviour changes with traumatic consequences for the wildlife. But the forest department undertakes monoculture plantations only as a small step in the ecological succession of the deforested areas. Much as monocultures bring disrepute they do serve a small purpose like restoring soil nutrition perhaps. Tribal elders could also be appointed as forestry teachers in the forestry training institutes in the country.*

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# The intimate theatre play Boli (The Sacrifice)

Satu Ranta-Tyrkkö

## The process

When I joined Natya Chetana in September 2001, the group was gearing up for a new play, the making of which was the concluding step in Natya Chetana's cooperation project with Norad, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation. I was personally involved in the play process from beginning to end, with the exception of a two-week period during rehearsals due to a previously arranged conference trip.

As Natya Chetana prefers to engage interested newcomers, and not only those already experienced in theatre, the first mission was to recruit the crew for the play. Natya Chetana cast around for 18-35 year old volunteers capable of committing themselves for two months by putting posters up around Bhubaneswar and placing advertisements in local newspapers. Respondents were asked to come for an interview to the group's office. On the day of the interviews, the arrangements at Natya Chetana's office were massive. At the opposite side of a narrow dirt road were two tents for registration and waiting. The tents had a microphone connection with the office, and a hired security guard accentuated the formal air of the event. The interviewees were faced by a "jury" consisting of Subodh, two senior actors, Kunia and Nira Bhai, and me. I had no role to play in selecting people, but my white, mini-disc and camera equipped appearance added to the gravity of the situation.

After more than 30 aspirants, all male, of various backgrounds, age and ambitions had been seen in person, they were asked to do some exercises in groups. On the basis of their theatrical and group work skills, a dozen were selected. The next day, however, only seven returned. Others may have had second thoughts or had not been able to settle matters with their families or educational institutes. As the group was now smaller than intended, the decision was that Natya Chetana full-timers would compensate as much as their schedules would allow. Of them some, like Santosh, were to have also training responsibilities, with majority of the training falling to Subodh.

The training was held in *Natya Gram*. A few days after the start, three young women joined the team. They had been recruited through Natya Chetana's connections to local theatre groups and other institutions, and were assured to be safe with Natya Chetana. Accompanied by Natya Chetana's actress Chuni, they were accommodated in a small room with a proper bathroom. The male volunteers relied on more simple facilities, washing up by the well and living with some Natya Chetana full-timers in one big room, in which their mattresses and mosquito nets were lined up in two rows, leaving a narrow alley in the middle. The remainder, including myself, slept in the oldest, small, thatched roof -building of *Natya Gram*. Natya Chetana's cook Dhira Bhai prepared food three times a day, and the campers did their own part by serving the food and cultivating *bindi* (a vegetable also called lady's finger) for the kitchen. All in all, the period of rehearsing *Boli* was living as a close-knit theatre camp in the countryside. During it the entire team visited

Bhubaneswar only once, to attend to the preparations and the celebration of the foundation day of Natya Chetana on the 10th of November.

The days began in the early morning at the *Natya Gram* camp with a Morning Prayer. Thereafter we had theatre games, yoga or dance class or a play rehearsal until bathing time before breakfast, which was between nine and ten. Then the day continued with rehearsals and classes, split by lunch in the afternoon. The evening meal took place at 10 pm or later. Finally, we slept. To my surprise, the camp started largely as an educational gathering with no pressure to join the actual play making despite the awareness of the tight schedule. The first days consisted of exercises, lessons and discussions on topics such as "What is Theatre". One of the exercises, coined by Subodh, followed two fictional characters, a landlord 'Gobardhan' and a schoolteacher 'Bharat'. It lasted eventually several days, making the campers to think and discuss about culture, power relations, desirable and justifiable cultural actions, as well as their own relationship to popular culture and what kind of theatre they would like to see and do. I felt as if I had been in the middle of an Orissan version of 'The Dead Poets Society'<sup>1</sup>, because everyone was so ambitious and enthusiastic.

Despite the peaceful start, during my two-week absence the developments at the camp were remarkable. Everyone had written a script for a play. One of them, that turned out to be Subodh's script, was chosen by ballot to be developed further, and so there was now a play with a name and shape, and rehearsals going full tilt. Trinath, a ten to eleven year old boy from the neighbouring village, had been added to the team as the child actor of the play. Alongside the rehearsals the classes also continued, in particular dance and music, and a mid-term examination, which drew on the theatre lessons, was held. On the first of November all of the participants made their suggestions for casting, and the cast was decided according to the results compiled. Everybody got a role, some received several.

A week later, less than two weeks before the opening performance, the play was still messy, the dance parts and a number of scenes had a lot to improve. My field notes describe Subodh's feedback to the team: "Only ten people have learnt their dialogues by heart, others just by brain". Pratima, who plays the leading female role, "has to learn to cry in different ways according to the situation". And "few are conscious of the space; most remain unconscious of the height of different spaces". Subodh ordered all the actors into an exercise of silence so that they could better internalise their movements. They were allowed to communicate only by gestures and sounds, but not through speech. The responsibilities were distributed regarding the coming tour: stage manager Badri, light manager Panchanan assisted by Debi, music manager Prasant assisted by Sibbo, time manager Pratima, team manager Sanjaya, trouble shooters Trinath and Ohlia, rehearsal place neat and clean Ramjan and Mongu, and so on. (Notes 7.11.2001)

The camp and rehearsals proceeded. We planned the schedule of the tour: the première November 17th in *Natya Gram* for the local villagers, then Konark, Berhampur, Damanjodi, Bolangir, Belpahad, Angul, Talcher, Baribada, Bhubaneswar, Jatani and again Bhubaneswar. With two nights to the première all of the men, and I, got a hair cut by a village barber. The dolls signifying babies in the play were ready, and costume-making was proceeding. Subodh conducted a "fast forward" rehearsal to help the actors in self-examination. "If there is any uncertainty about the role, locations, movements, replicas, or if one is not serious about it, he or she is sure to make mistakes." There were still a number of worries: The actors had not quite caught the dialect of the characters they were performing. Nibaran forgot the age of the character he performed

when he had to get agitated on the stage, and the contractor who was a millionaire walked like servant. And the dance parts needed improvement. At night, a number of invited critics came for "a critic show to give feedback on the play. They put their hearts into the work. The harshest criticism was that the play was anti-people. *Adivasis* are not that submissive, it was argued. Moreover, they held the play to be overly moralistic, which is not typical for *Natya Chetana*. The suggestion was that the end of the play should be changed. Accordingly, after the show Subodh rewrote the script, and the première was moved back a day later than initially it was planned. There were also slight changes in the tour programme.

The morning after the successful première we were all ready at 5.20 am at the rehearsal shed with our things packed. The man in charge of light and sound, and *Natya Chetana* full-timers and other volunteers were added to the team to help with specified tasks on the tour. The plan was to reach Berhampur, a town in Southern Orissa at around 9.30 am. After the Morning Prayer and last-minute discussion on the overall planning, discipline and the management of the tour, everyone got a t-shirt emblazoned with the play's symbol, a picture of a boy whose head is cut off from his body. Then we loaded ourselves into the bus and left *Natya Gram* in a hilarious and excited mood. At the destination in a somewhat neglected theatre hall with water on the floor in front of the stage, and plenty of dust and mosquitoes in the air, constructing the stage took time but everything went well. It became clear that the performing is just one small part of tour work. For hours and hours every day, our task was to unload, carry, construct, reconstruct, carry, and reload again.

Gradually, after a few (at least for me personally) taxing days, we grew accustomed to tour life and its daily routine: Arrival at the place of the night's performance in the morning, constructing the stage and setting up the poster exhibition giving additional information on the play during the day, a nap and a wash if we were lucky, the performance, unloading the stage, food, and off we went for another night on bumpy roads, to arrive at the next place in time.

Along the way *Natya Chetana's* local collaborators took care of advertising, booking the performance spaces and providing food. The play is performed in various kinds of halls, some made for theatre, others not, town squares and other open areas, at the club of local aluminium company workers, and once in a large children's home maintained by the local Gandhian institution. The places were all different from one another, demanding different solutions for constructing the stage. The place I remember particularly well was Belpahar, perhaps due to the fact that I knew one of the local organisers beforehand. Knowing what touring is, Subhas and his Mirror Theatre people had done their best to take care of us: A space to take a nap, good food, even a welcoming banner. They had also done heaps of publicity work for the play. Some local people even competed for who buys the largest number of tickets. One elderly lady, who had paid for her whole extended family to see the show, received a commendation, as well as front row seats for her party. The performances were highly successful, responses from the audiences being appreciative and excited. Only one show was somewhat of a disaster with failures in timing, speech, and other actions on stage. The actors feared reproach by Subodh, who however just analysed what the problems were, why they occurred, and insisted on an obligatory nap for everyone.

On November 30th we were back in *Natya Gram* at a post-production workshop, evaluating what we did and how. We counted what it all had cost, including food and lodging, the coach hire, lights, costumes, poster making and sundry expenses. The total sum of around 260 000 rupees (that time approximately five thousand Euro) was a surprise to many.

We watched the play from a video, something that was supposed to take place earlier but could not be organised. The actors-turned-spectators had fun although they are also horrified by how poor the dance scenes were. On the closing night, everyone was able to be a very important person and while being videotaped and photographed in spotlight, give a speech by microphone on what s/he found personally important in the process of making and performing *Boli*. Then we had a feast with plenty of good food. The next day everyone received a group photo of the team, and a paper, into which all others have written comments and regards to him or her. Then we left *Natya Gram*, with most of the participants continuing on to their homes.

In brief, the play making process illustrates how a group of people, many of whom do neither know each other beforehand nor have earlier experience of theatre, are transformed into a team of actors. As the actors embody and represent Natya Chetana, an issue returned to from social work perspective in Chapter Eight, the goal is that theatrical process changes not only the audience but also the actors involved. In practice, that means among other things that the participants need to reflect their own relationship to the content and form of the plays, as well as practice and develop their group work skills. While the form and content of the performances are linked, the mode of building up the performance and the spirit of the teamwork also have implications on the stage.

### **The play**

*Boli* means sacrifice. In the play, it referred first of all to the human sacrifices that are believed to have taken place a while back in Orissa. They are rumoured to be performed even today as part of *tantric* or local rituals, with the belief that the goddess desires blood. If someone, human or animal, has been found without a head, the belief is that this has probably transpired in the name of *boli*. Secondly, many people sacrificed their lives for independence. Mahatma Gandhi used to call this *swarthara boli*, kill your own selfishness. The play drew on these two meanings and on the highest ideal of sacrifice in Indian society.

*Boli* used a transferable stage structure constructed of bamboo and coarse cloth that served both as a mountain and a hut. It was possible to enter the stage from the hut or from the mountaintop, as well as bypass the hut/mountain. It was also possible to walk 'a path' up and down the mountain slope. On the ground level of the stage, the path led to the hut, but also functioned as the site of a railroad construction project, around which much of the play was centred. As the play was located in a hilly forest where tribal people reside, scattered across the stage were bamboo sticks with a piece of green cloth on the top, indicating trees. An important element of the play was drumming that varied in intensity, giving rhythm and accentuation to the drama at the stage. The drums were played by Santosh and Purna behind the hut/mountain, unseen by the audience.

## THE CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY WERE:

Newspaper readers

Minister/politician (*Mantribabu*)

Collector<sup>2</sup>

Servants (2)

Police officer

Journalists

Tribal people, including a tribal family: father Kazra, mother Sumni and their son Bagra

Contractor

Engineer

Guards (2)

Machine Drivers (2)

*Jani*, tribal priest of the local Goddess Jungle Ma

*Jani*'s assistant (his drummer, executer)

Contractor's father, a follower of Gandhi

Forest Goddess Jungle Ma

*The play starts by a procession of a tribal couple (Kazra and Sumni) carrying a dead child. The woman is keening loudly. They disappear behind the top of the mountain.*

*Newspaper readers walk in. They comment on the news of hunger deaths that are occurring among tribal people in Gutikhuda. The government and Supreme Court deny that the deaths are due to starvation. In their view, the tribals died because of poisonous food, mango seeds<sup>3</sup>. What is the truth? The minister will visit the village. To ensure his security, there are arrests in the area.*

*In the next scene the minister, Mantribabu, is visiting the area. Dressed in black and white waistcoat, Gandhi topi (cap), dhoti (waistcloth) and kurta (shirt) he moves around greeting people. Suddenly he is surrounded by loud shouts of protests, and people are throwing pieces of black cloth at him. The minister has to escape. He and the collector accompanying him take refuge in the home of an astonished tribal family (Kazra, Sumni and Bagra). The parents tell the minister that they have lost one son due to poisonous food, and beg the minister to take the remaining son with him. "Just give him what you throw away! Without any payment you will have the boy as a servant!" The minister is tempted by the offer, but refuses when the collector warns that he would be accused of using child labour would he take the boy. A policeman arrives to announce that the mob has gone. The minister and the collector leave.*

*Next, the minister is holding a press conference at the tribal village. Journalists ask questions, take photographs, one is filming footage for television<sup>4</sup>. The tribals become agitated by the minister's speech. The security guards force them back violently, but finally the minister and the guards must escape the angry tribals.*



*After the press conference the minister is at his house. The field visit was far from successful; he is tense and does not want to see anyone or take any phone calls. A servant brings him a chair, dusting it off carefully, and serving the minister tea, which the minister refuses as too cold. Then his mobile rings. This call he takes. Soon a person with a briefcase comes in. He has an idea for a railway project. The railway could pass the famine-hit area and provide employment for the starving tribals. The proposition is that the minister goes to Delhi and negotiates a shift in the focus of the original project. This is easily justified by showing the results of a little survey, and the briefcase that turns out to be full of money. The minister is obsessed with the money and readily agrees. He barely remembers to ask why this person brought the money. Now things become crystal-clear. The person is the contractor for the railway project to be proposed. As soon as the minister is given flight tickets and the attaché case filled with money, he rushes to the airport to go to Delhi. In the forest the tribals hear sound of a helicopter (made by drumming), and come to see the plane flying high in the sky.*

*In next scene, the tribal people are happy clearing the forest at the construction site, singing and dancing through the work. The contractor and the engineer of the project are also at the site. All of a sudden, Jani, the priest of the Goddess Jungle Ma, enters the site. He brings the work to a standstill and blames the tribals for killing their own Mother Forest. The tribals withdraw in fear, but the contractor comes to see the interrupter, and points out that the site is a government effort to give work to the people. In response, the Jani claims that they should have asked permission from the temple. If they want to get it now, 50 chickens have to be sacrificed and a one-day feast with rice and country wine arranged for people from five villages. Having no choice, the contractor agrees on the condition that he does not have to be present. The agreed puja takes place. The tribals arrive, there is drumming. The Jani performs his rituals and goes into a trance: the tribal villagers witness the Mother in the Jani. Only after he has left, the villagers can finally take a breath: "We are saved!"*

*Next, the villagers come to the contractor's office dispirited and sad. They have discovered that they will not be needed at the site for much longer. Instead of manpower, a machine will be used to build a bridge. They plead with the contractor to go and talk to the government for them so that the machine would not replace them. The contractor merely laughs at their petition. The tribals stand up and the atmosphere is tense. Their anger, however, crumbles. In the end they walk away gracelessly, with faltering steps, as if they were very old. Subsequently, one of the tribals is spying on the machines and trucks arriving in. When he signals, the others come to see what's going on. To obstruct the procession they go to sit in a line in the way of the machinery. A machine arrives with two drivers. Once it confronts the tribals it has to stop. The drivers ask to let them through. The tribals answer that they are poor, everyone has lost family members due to the hunger; they are not going to move. The contractor arrives to demand that the tribals have to allow the drivers to do their work. The tribals laugh at him. He goes away, and returns after a while with two policemen. After a period of negotiation, the policemen come to the conclusion that there must be someone behind the tribals' opposition. As a message from the headquarters orders the policemen not to do any harm to the tribals, they cannot really do anything; the contractor has to compromise. The contractor gives in and tells the tribals to come back to work next day. The victorious tribals rejoice and then leave.*

*Working again happily at the construction site the tribals build a rhythm with one another with a working song. Dancing, they carry white baskets loading them on top of each other. Soon the baskets make a pillar that grows to a great height quickly. The leader of the tribals places the final basket. Suddenly the whole construction crashes down over him, making him cry out in pain. He turns out to be severely injured. The engineer shouts accusingly: "This is why we want to use machines!" Kazra shouts: "Oh now we know the plan of the government! We want to live, we don't want to die!" Carrying the injured man away the tribals leave. The engineer is shining: "My plan worked very well!" He leaves to tell the good news to the contractor.*

*The next scene shows emotionally drained and suffering tribal people. The injured man has only one leg now, and needs a bamboo stick to move around, whereas the bridge construction proceeds at full speed. With the rhythm of intense drumming, the machine drivers dance the bridge to its spot. There it is! The contractor and the engineer come to see the brand new bridge. They look pleased. Suddenly there are menacing sounds. The land is trembling, the baskets rise and fall in the air; the bridge collapses! All of the people are thrown to the ground. One by one, they get up to see what has happened. Shocked, the tribals wonder if the accident means that they will get work again. The contractor runs amok, making the tribals leave the place. He rages at the engineer: "Your techniques and materials were all wrong!" The men blame each other until the arguing is enough for the engineer, who resigns and leaves. The contractor shouts that he will not allow the engineer to leave now, and orders the guards to catch the engineer.*

*In the next scene, the contractor sits alone in the middle of the stage. His mind is shaken. Trying to find escape in alcohol, he gets drunk. Suddenly he notices two ghosts (tall, masked figures walking with wooden legs) approaching him. They are the ghosts of the machine drivers who died at the bridge collapse. The ghosts hold the contractor responsible for the fate of their families, for whom no one is providing after their death, and want to take him along. The contractor stands up as if about to join the ghosts but sits then back and drinks more. The guards find the contractor unconscious. Uncertain what to do, one guard stays with the contractor while the other sets out for help, drinking the remains of the contractor's bottle on the way. When returning, the contractor's father accompanies the guard. With his village-spun khadi and few belongings, the father looks like a devoted gandhian. They stop at the mountaintop to look at the scenery. The guard does his best to testify how unsophisticated and boring it is to stay in the forest but the father is pleased by what he sees. He is not very satisfied with the present state of the society; rather he likes the forest and its people. All of sudden he sees a crowd of tribals writhing in pain farther down in the forest. The guard cannot see nor hear anything, but gets worried warning the father that the people of the area are very violent. If the forest people would know that the old man is the contractor's father, they would kill him without hesitation. The father, however, moves around looking concerned and sensitive. Then they continue their journey.*

*The Jani has come to see the contractor at the hut. The contractor is still unwell but comes out. The Jani's message to him is that if the Jungle Ma is made happy, She will protect the bridge. The contractor accuses the Jani of being just another swindler. The Jani flares up and tells that he has come only for the sake of his people, not to seek any personal benefit. The thing is: The Jungle Ma wants a human sacrifice. As the contractor is telling the Jani to disappear from his eyes, his father arrives from the hut. Bothering neither about the Jani nor his son, he goes to salute a tree, ringing a bell and making blessings by it. All of this makes the Jani very curious. After the father has*

*gone back inside, the Jani comes to know that that the old man is the contractor's father. Returning back to the issue of the sacrifice, the Jani promises to arrange for a human to be sacrificed, if the contractor will pay ten thousand rupees. The contractor states that the Jani is mad, but then asks if there would really be someone. The Jani tells the contractor to leave that to him. The contractor agrees, and so the matter is settled.*

*Next, Kazra and Bagra are playing hide and seek. Kazra keeps searching as if he would not know where the boy is. Eventually Bagra is caught and sits on the lap of his father. The Jani enters. He is very keen on the boy. He has a talk with Kazra, who finally agrees. The Jani takes the boy with him. Suddenly the stage is crowded with tribals offering to give their children (dolls) away. The Jani holds to his decision to take Bagra, and not the others. Bagra resists, but away they go. All of the others but Kazra depart. There is slow, melancholic music (the same tune as otherwise before but now in a very slow and blue mode). When Sumni, Bagra's mother, comes back from collecting firewood, she finds Kazra lying down with his eyes closed. She tries to shake Kazra awake, but receives nothing but monosyllabic answers from him. At last, Kazra manages to tell that he gave Bagra away. Sumni bursts into desperate tears. They both cry standing together on the stage. Then Sumni makes up her mind and states that they have to get Bagra back. She leaves, and Kazra follows her.*

*The Jani comes with Bagra and the guards to the contractor's house. The contractor and his father come out. Suddenly, the father understands what the whole business between the Jani and his son is all about. Though the contractor is making excuses, the father has had enough. He takes his things and leaves. Nevertheless, the Jani insists that the contractor has to follow the original plan and pay him the ten thousand rupees. Then he gives instructions: The sacrifice must be done at the break of dawn. Now it is the time to take bath and feed the boy. The boy eats and eats, and is finally led away from the stage by his plate.*

*In the forest, the contractor's father comes across Kazra and Sumni. They greet each other and start to discuss. The threads of the narrative begin to come together: Kazra and Sumni realise that instead of being taken care of, their boy is about to be sacrificed. The father reaches a decision and turns back to return to the contractor's house.*

*The guards, the contractor, the Jani, and his assistant, the executer, walk in a procession with Bagra, whose eyes are covered and hands tied, to the place where the sacrificial death is to take place. At the destination the Jani is performing his rituals, and Bagra is forced to kneel and to put his head on a log. The boli will be complete in just a few moments. The executioner lifts his scimitar. At that very second the contractor's father rushes in and seizes the scimitar from the executioner's hands. Before anyone realises what is happening, he kills the contractor, his own son. All of the others escape in horror; only the dead contractor, his killer the father, and the bound child remain. Kazra and Sumni run in. Horrified by the scene but happy to get their son back, they take the boy and leave.*

*The father throws flowers on the body of his son. The Goddess Jungle Ma appears on top of the hill in a bright yellow sari and her hair flowing. She comes down to see what has happened, and goes then to stand on the red stool, as if possessed. The father discusses with the Jungle Ma; She is happy.*

*In the final scene, all the tribals run towards the audience, while the contractor's father leaves to continue his journey. There is intense drumming. Once the drums stop, the play is over; it is time for the last bow.*

As a whole, Natya Chetana's *Boli* is a good example of how one storyline can incorporate a number of issues. Notwithstanding the versatility of the performance both onstage and outside of it, as art, as social work, the performance economy, and so forth, in the following my choice is to discuss the play from the perspective of the issues addressed on the stage, namely the position of tribal people, corruption, and the sacrifice. All of these fit into the earlier discussed framework of social justice. Regarding basic needs, the story comments on hunger and thereby need of adequate food.

### **Hunger deaths in Orissa in 2001 and the issue of child trafficking**

In 2001, the play reflected topical issues in Orissa. A number of tribal people were reported to have starved to death in southern Orissa. In the investigation it was found that they had been eating mango kernels, known to be unsuitable for human consumption. This was because they had nothing else to eat. What followed in the local English speaking press that I was able to follow was a debate on whether the people in question had died due to hunger or ignorance.<sup>5</sup> One writer suggested that had the tribal folks dug up some edible roots, could they have survived. I found most of the debate bewildering and detached from the issue. The people were dead and speculating how they might have potentially survived little longer seemed useless. What's more, I was told that if there was evidence that the dead person, however malnourished, ate the day before his or her death, even if it was mango kernels, according to the letter of law, the case was not deemed to be a hunger death<sup>6</sup>. If anything, the need for this kind of public discussion indicated that the reasons for the starvation and death of the tribal people were something other than their eating habits, and obviously a delicate issue. At stake between the lines were timely lack of political interest and responsibility with regard to the plight of the tribal people.

Another issue widely discussed in the local media through small pieces of news was trafficking in children. The newspapers reported that children could be bought from most hospitals, the usual demand for girls being 30,000 and for boys 35,000 rupees<sup>7</sup>. One investigative TV journalist actually went to buy a child and would have apparently got one. The reasons why people would want to buy children were listed as inability to conceive, need for a servant, even a need for 'spare parts'.

These issues occupied our minds at Natya Chetana. Connected to the issue of giving up children, I was told that it is not rare for tribal families to give their children away, or to just send them to cities with no means to return: children like this come to Bhubaneswar from different tribal pockets every day. To survive, they adopt the habits and the worldview of the mainstream population, and remain silent about their origin. Mamata stated that this denial is the sacrifice they are compelled to make every day. When I wondered about the reasoning behind the decisions to give or send a child away,

I was given the explanation of hope and optimism. In the struggle for survival children are a burden, yet in the lack of family planning more and more children are born. In situations of a severe scarcity, giving or sending the child away can still give him or her a chance while staying with the parents would almost surely lead to death due to hunger or poverty. Usually the child is given away with the hope of granting him or her better options, but sometimes the parents are fully aware that that is unlikely the case. In situations of distress it is not unheard of that parents sometimes end up selling their children (e.g. Mishra & Nilofer & Mohanty 2004, 228). In relation to *Boli*, the opinion was that tribal people would never give away their children to die, but they could offer them as servants as the minister is offered in the play.

### **The role of the tribals**

As noted, India is famous both for her ethnic and cultural diversity, and the imbalances in power and prestige that different ethnic groups, castes and classes enjoy. By many indicators the tribal people together with *dalits* have the lowest ranking and are the most disadvantaged in Indian society. This is the case also in Orissa, where the proportion of tribal people is more than one-fifth (see Appendix 3) of the population of the state, much more than the all-India average<sup>8</sup>. The tribal people live mostly in the mountain ranges in the interior of the state, whereas in the coastal area Hindus are a majority, caste Hindus holding most of the political and administrative power. As Ramachandra Guha (2007) observes, "among those who have suffered from economic liberalisation, the tribals of Orissa are perhaps foremost". While changes in natural environment (such as loss of forests that the tribal communities have been dependant on) are one reason, another significant reason is the expansion of the mining industry, for Orissa's mineral reserves are concentrated in the tribal districts. Despite the popular discontent of the tribal people to whom mining brings by and large only displacement and misery, the state government has "signed a series of leases offering land at attractive prices to companies who wish to mine these hills". At times, local police or the companies themselves have protected their interests also with violence, shooting tribal people to death (e.g. firing in Kalinganagar 2006). (Ibid. 707-709.) Having followed the local English-speaking press during my stays in Orissa, I have not recognised the tribal people having 'voice' of their own in them. Rather, despite exhibitions and *melas* (festivals) introducing tribal culture, tribal people seem to be for the main objects of knowledge rather than producers it. (I suppose this is largely the case of *dalits* too.) And it is not rare to see or hear somewhat evolutionary views taken to tribal people, as if they would be living relics from earlier stages of the human kind. Already the term tribal, though commonly used in India, echoes racist and primitivising histories.

Natya Chetana's *Boli*, though suggestive rather than aiming to realistically depict 'real' tribals, has various references, particularly to the *Kuttia Kond* tribe<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, below the surface of the local case, the close observer can find global remarks. The play can be interpreted to address not only the case of tribal people but more generally the position of indigenous people as well as the treatment of subordinate minorities. On the other hand, as none of the performers belonged to the tribal minority, the play could be accused of merely projecting the stereotypes and prejudices of the non-tribal majority. One thing that bothered me in *Boli* was the manner in which the tribal people of the play moved around



the stage. Their movement was bent and somewhat gnarled. The manner of representation was rationalised to me on the basis that people who move in the jungle really have to move like that. Once the tribals come to a city, it takes them time to learn to move in the way people familiar with roads and traffic do. Another explanation could be that for most of the performers of *Boli* tribal people remained as the exotic Other, which was then manifested in the way the actors performed them. At any rate, if *Boli* was biased in its presentation, it was it in a rather positive manner, unlike some other Orissan plays presenting tribal people I have run across. *Boli* persuaded the audience to identify with the tribals, their joys and sorrows, to understand and to give value to them. Still, they were not represented as totally pure; they had their *Jani*, in good and bad. Furthermore, kindness and simplicity alone are not enough in the face of starvation and oppression. On the whole, and recognizing the lack of tribal views, I still find it important that the tribal people also do have non-tribal spokesmen like Natya Chetana, willing to address the issues facing tribal people in civic discussion.

In my view, in *Boli*, the main qualities the tribal people embodied were a community-orientation and an emotional sensibility but, in the absence of other options, also submissiveness in confronting exploitation. The tribals of the play displayed their emotions, and appeared therefore simple and innocent in the sense that they lacked gamesmanship (which, from Natya Chetana's perspective, was surely to their advantage, innocence, or a sort of peasant attitude, largely being seen as a virtue). Perhaps because of their innocence, the tribals were portrayed as slightly childlike in their manner of speaking or acting as a group. Despite its possible problems of infantilising them, the depiction can

*photo Satu Ranta\_Tyrkkö*





be seen as a strategic choice to take a stand against crookedness and opportunism. Furthermore, it is especially as a collective that the tribals were able to reach a sense of power, however short-lived. Mainly, however, they were the ones who were treated violently. But unlike those who treated them as (violently as) they liked; at end of the play the tribals had gained a reputation of being violent and vicious.

Following the ideas of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, who has drawn her insight from Kalimantan, Indonesia, "the myth of the savage", "is always a strategic myth". In relation to tribal minorities the states are still today represented as agents that integrate and rescue; in other words, sponsor the traditional people towards modernity. This entails also disciplinary aspects. In relation to state the position of traditional people is ethnic asymmetry and low political status. According to Tsing's observation, instead of attempting to integrate the tribals into the core or the mainstream, the strategy of the states tends to be maintaining them in a position of peripheral vulnerability. (Tsing 1993, 87.) In a similar manner, taking an attitude towards what is commonly labelled as development, like the building of the railway through the jungle, the play *Boli* indicates that the tribal people benefit little and at best lopsidedly from such development schemes. Interestingly, Tsing also points to the importance of building as state activity. She points out that in Kalimantan building is locally understood as development, whereas ideas of development as a set of activities aiming to enhance human well-being are not an issue. Not unlike in *Boli*, in Kalimantan 'development', in other words state construction projects, are an issue of state ceremony. Moreover, construction projects are rife with rumours of headhunting – of water buffalos if not humans. For Tsing, the setup suggests a relationship "between core and periphery, city and frontier, such that the ostentation of the first requires the vulnerability of the latter. These are indeed the conditions of uneven development." (Ibid. 90-91.)

In cases where the tribal people are unable to have an impact on the schemes, or in general prospects to formulate their vision and proposals for the future, it is questionable whether such schemes really serve them and their culture. In *Boli*, the *adivasis*/tribals are forced to carry out solutions that are of benefit to others rather than themselves; their needs do not really matter. Following the notion of Nandy and Jahanbegloo (2006, 65), as an ideology of the winners, modernity does not need the acceptance of the tribal people. The question that remains at the end of the play is whether projects such as the railroad construction serve the tribals, even if carried out properly. At the end of the earlier version of the play, performed for the critics and changed before the première as too moralistic, the father of the contractor replied to the request of the tribals by stating that he is not interested in becoming their leader. Instead, they should strengthen their *panchayats*. He would be willing to help, but only as a human being, not as a master. His wish was that the tribals would not, despite the difficulties, put all their thoughts solely into day-to-day survival, but to try to figure out long-term possibilities as well.

### Politics and corruption in the plot

Systemic corruption and the exploitation of labour in India have long been central themes in Natya Chetana's plays (Table 2; Pattanaik 2000, 89). In *Boli Mantribabu* the minister depicts the shady qualities for which politicians in India are notorious. Being led by his greed, he needs people around him to think on his behalf, such as the collector who warns that it would be politically dangerous to take the malnourished boy as an unsalaried child servant. If bribed, *Mantribabu* can make deals worth *crores* of rupees with complete strangers, as with the contractor. However, *Mantribabu* is not the only one corrupted in the play; the contractor and the *Jani* are as well. In their mutual encounters they immediately recognise each other as significant players, outline their conditions without fear, and are open to being bribed. As each of them has eye for money and power, in their mutual 'fair play' all the three of them benefit.

In depicting the reverse side of power, the play is also about what Subodh calls the "service mentality". The guard, for instance, "has a complete service mentality, no citizenship. He does not know what democracy is." Moreover, the tribals have their share of service mentality and submissiveness in the way they allow themselves to be commanded and oppressed both by the *Jani* and the contractor. In the national context, Rajesh Tandon names the same issue as the crisis of the relationship between citizens and the state in India. In his view, the crisis has arisen because of the apathy and alienation of the people from the government, and the dependant attitude of the people towards the governing institutions. (Tandon 2003.) In *Boli*, those who revolt run the risk of paying a high price, like the leader who lost his leg. Still, from time-to-time they revolt even if the hopes to achieve anything are marginal.

Discussing the reasons for people's submissiveness in front of authoritarianism, Ashis Nandy and Ramin Jahanbegloo (2006, 21) differentiate between traditional feudal-patriarchal authoritarianism and modern 'authoritarianism proper'. In their view, each produces its own version of social pathologies, and contributes to the situation in contemporary India. In *Boli*, the minister, the contractor and the *Jani* have power because others have given that power to them. In a way people, by surrounding them and backing them up, enthrone them every day. This reflects Mohandas Gandhi's idea, according to which use of power does not work, at least not for long, without some kind of consent by those upon whom the power is exercised. Having said this, as the consent is often based on fear in front of repression, refusing to cooperate can be far from a harmless choice.

In *Boli*, once in a position of authority, the minister, the contractor and the *Jani* do not hesitate to take advantage of it. While doing so they nonetheless know that their position is not that stable. To remain in power, they have to perform that power through actions that legitimise it: To avoid being accused of not taking seriously the plight of the tribals, the minister has to travel to the famine-hit area and hold a press conference after all, even the malnourished have right to vote. Likewise, the contractor, who claims that he is at the service of the people, has to, besides literally cashing in by the construction work, also get the railroad finished. If this service to the people then requires police protection against those very people, or when things get out of control, *boli* (to perform a modern man he is not that rational in the end), that is fine for him. Among the tribals, the authority of the *Jani* is based on keeping the other tribals in fear. He performs awesome rites, and demonstrates his power by getting the contractor to pay for a big feast for the people of five villages. Whether

the *Jani* believes in *Jungle Ma* or not is difficult to say, at the very least the *boli* seems to be his personal means to make money.

As far as corruption is concerned, the world depicted in the play matches well to Dipankar Gupta's (2000 b) analysis of corruption and its causes in India. In his opinion, one of the reasons for the virtual impossibility to combat corruption is the tradition of patronage: Even in politics people do not elect representatives but patrons.<sup>10</sup> The reasoning behind this is that if someone wants to get something, he (or she) is dependent on the benevolence of a patron, for in a country with the size and amount of poverty of India the possibility of making things better by democratic means would take more than a lifetime. The patrons, on the other hand, need to keep their position as well as show their usefulness. Hence a politician, having access to resources and power in political decision-making, is useful only when corrupted, and corruption is blessed at the top, and largely accepted as a 'normal' state of affairs. (Gupta 2000 b, 135-153.)

Darren Zook (2001) points out that in India the systemic corruption is hard to combat even in drama as "political theatre finds itself in competition with an equally theatrical and dramatic state". Being in grave contradiction to each other, prevailing political practice and rhetoric have become so comical and absurd that left-wing, socialist and 'realist' dramas cannot really satirise them any longer: "How can one evoke a people's theatre when everyone claims to speak for the people?" (Ibid. 174-176.) In my view, in *Boli*, Natya Chetana claims programmatically to speak and perform for and in the name of the people, and manages if not to satirise, at least to illustrate the double-dealing of political decision-making. Not unlike leftist dramas in general, *Boli* displays the fabric of oppression. This is also in line with Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970/1996). In it Freire writes, "A deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation as a historical reality susceptible of transformation" (ibid. 66). In this sense, Natya Chetana can be seen as one local interface of a fairly universal theatrical and pedagogical movement. As explained by Subodh, Natya Chetana's wish is: "If a group of theatre workers can artistically portray justice and injustice, perhaps it can transport its audiences beneath the surface of appearances, to investigate truths, and even help to provide the courage to protest against the evils of society" (Pattanaik 2000, 86). At the very least, *Boli* took part in local civic discussion and activated it. As most of the shows easily accommodated an audience of 500-800 people, during its relatively short performance tour the play was received by thousands of spectators. It is also noteworthy that in Orissa, like in many other places in India, the electronic media or print capitalism reaches only a part of the population, and the literacy rates are low. In these circumstances, the potential of theatre as media, entertainment and a civic arena should not be underestimated. What it comes to overall audience reactions, in the case of *Boli* neither the fans nor the opponents of the play were very dramatic; the reception was favourable.

### **The sacrifice**

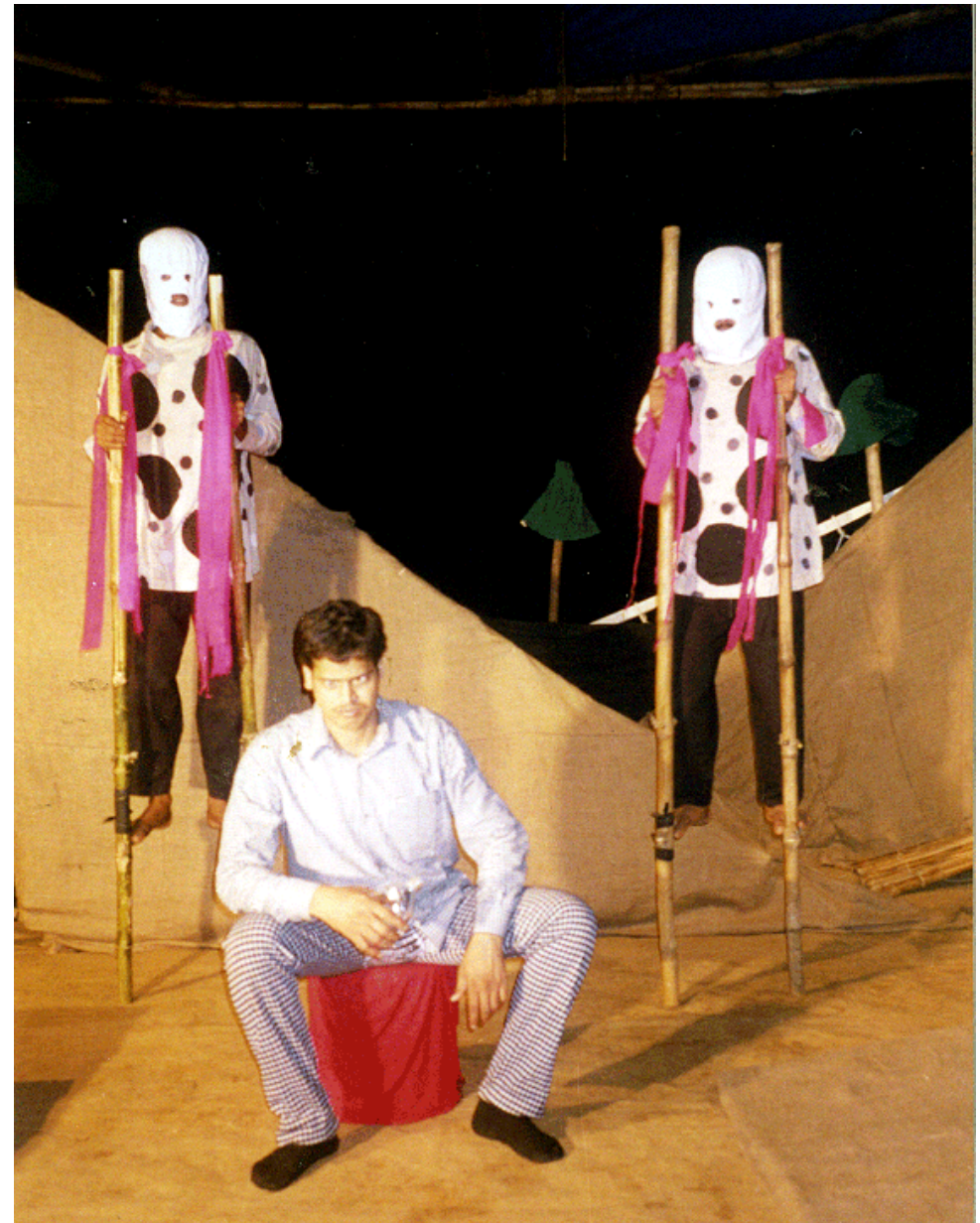
Lastly, with regard to the issue of human sacrifice which gave the play its name and attracted audiences to come to the show. Human sacrifice has been an enduring subject of interest concerning the eastern part of India<sup>11</sup>. Even now human sacrifice is

a powerful topic, which easily captures the imagination. On the level of the popular imagination, rumours about sacrifices are still going strong, the common understanding being that some people somewhere are still carrying on the practice. The belief is attached to Orissa also outside the state borders, which marks Orissa as the place where "they not only sacrifice animals, but humans", as one lawyer from Gujarat noted.

Rather than being interested, or competent, to gauge the accuracy of *boli* as a cultural practice, there are two things that caught my attention in Natya Chetana's play. First, it is striking, albeit not new, how easily a human being can be killed or injured. In India, as throughout the world, human life is valued low, the more so if it is a poor, malnourished or in some other way 'unimportant' or marginalised life. Within the world of *Boli*, it is the modern man, the contractor, who pays for and thus orders the murder to take place. In doing so, he enforces the notion known both in South and Southeast Asia that construction projects have to be planted in heads (see Tsing 1993, 91). Looking at the play as an account of majority and minority, or modernity and tradition, who should be afraid of whom? Secondly, the twist of *Boli* is that in the end it is the contractor, and not the malnourished tribal boy, who is slain. The killer is his very own father, who was up until then is depicted as a non-violent nature worshipper above all else. Within the world of the play this violent act of murder serves higher ideals: rather than the innocent boy, the corrupt, selfish contractor, the master who is unable to feel the sufferings of others but capable of almost anything that benefits him personally, is eventually the appropriate sacrifice for the *Jungle Ma*.

That a man, a father, has to sacrifice his own son is a theme that cuts across cultures, signifying a sacrifice unbearably high<sup>12</sup>. As Subodh explained at the time of the rehearsals, the sacrifice that Mahatma Gandhi advocated was the sacrifice of one's own selfishness. In the play, the selfish and corrupt son is possibly the most dear and precious thing in the life of the old father. Though we might wonder how come a gandhian father had such a son, we must also wonder how the father was able to kill him. One of the exercises at the *Boli* rehearsal camp, brought to mind also by the final play,

photo Satu Ranta-Tyrkkö





was to get rid of master-servant attitudes. The masters should kill their own selfishness, their beloved sons, and the servants should learn to stand up for themselves. Even in retrospect, the play *Boli* offers food for thought: What about us? Who or what are our utmost corrupt, precious sons, and what shall we do with them?

**(Footnotes)**

- <sup>1</sup> A 1989 film directed by Peter Weir, *The Dead Poets Society* was the story of an English teacher who inspires his students to change through his teaching of poetry and literature.
- <sup>2</sup> In the Indian administrative system, each district has a collector, who is the principal representative of administration, as well as the revenue officer.
- <sup>3</sup> In Orissa, the consumption of mango seeds is synonymous with starvation.
- <sup>4</sup> All of the cameras were particularly fine and funny, made out of bamboo.
- <sup>5</sup> I have later learned that more generally there has been a great deal of debate in India on the question whether there have in fact been large numbers of starvation deaths. According to Kent's observation, those who deny it view starvation in narrow terms, taking it to mean adult deaths directly attributable to an extreme lack of food. However, most deaths associated with the malnutrition are due to a combination of malnutrition and disease, the death certificates usually reporting some infectious disease as the cause of death. Moreover, according to UNICEF estimates in 2000 approximately 2,420,000 children in India died before the age of five, meaning that more than one-fifth of child mortality worldwide took place in India. The estimate was that about half of these deaths of children under five were associated with malnutrition. Kent's conclusion is that in India the denial of the deep and widespread hunger all around the country is a deeply political matter. As long as the government and its agencies refuse to recognise hunger, there is no hope of solving it. (Kent 2005, 146-147.)
- <sup>6</sup> This convention is also reported by Daniel Lak (1999). Although it sounds so trivial that I am still not sure about its accuracy, at least the belief was widely shared among the people with whom I took up the issue.
- <sup>7</sup> Later, in August 2007, when I discussed the issue with the Natya Chetana team members again, they wondered whether I had the numbers right, thinking that I might have an extra zero in both figures. As I have only my field notes and not the newspaper clippings to rely on, I decided to stick to the information my notes recorded. Rather than tell the exact price of the day, the point is that babies can be bought and sold.
- <sup>8</sup> According to the 2001 census, so-called scheduled tribes (*adivasis*) make up 8.2% (84 million) of the population of India, which means that India has more aboriginal people than any other country in the world. Around one-tenth of India's tribal people live in Orissa.

- <sup>9</sup> On Kuttia Konds and their religious practices see, for instance, Boal 1982.
- <sup>10</sup> Rajesh Tandon (2003) calls the phenomenon the '*mai baab*' syndrome.
- <sup>11</sup> As early as 1796, a certain Mr. Blaquiere reported in Calcutta to the Asiatic Society in detail about local practice of sacrificing humans and other victims to the Goddess, in particular to Kali (Blaquiere 1799, 369-391). In the case of Konds, the practice has been later studied for instance by Barbara Boal (1982) and Felix Padel (1995). In Orissa human sacrifice, which was essentially a blood sacrifice to the Earth Goddess, is known to have been part of the religious rituals of the Konds until the early 19th century, after which it was replaced by buffalo and other animal sacrifices (Boal 1982, 86-87).
- <sup>12</sup> In Christianity, the core of the faith is that the Son of God was sacrificed for the sake of those who believe in him. Abraham was also expected to sacrifice his son Isaac in obedience to God's command.



## The Todas in the Blue Mountains

### Tapio Tamminen

A young high-school boy seems to be confused when I ask him in the nearby village of Ooty, why so many Toda females have converted into Christianity. What do you mean? How I have got my information? The boy admits that some have converted but he continues rapidly that people do not consider them anymore as Todas. They have become ordinary Tamils. He is clearly very proud of his culture.

The Toda people in Nilgiri Hills were nearly dying out completely when their population had dropped to under 500 nearly half a century ago. The major cause for the rapid decline of the birthrate was the prevalence of gonorrhea and syphilis. With the help of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru the authorities could establish the Government General Hospital in 1952 in Ooty. A young woman of the Toda Christian community, Evam Piljain, who had been trained as a nurse both in India and in England, returned then to Nilgiri Hills. Evam Piljain offered her medical services without payment for more than a year because the authorities were not able to pay any salary. After the direct intervention of Nehru she received a permanent appointment as a nurse-in-charge. Her personal commitment was the crucial turning point in the battle for the survival of the Toda people. Venereal infections responded to penicillin – and the birthrate began to rise.

*The traditional embroidered shawl (putkuli) is used by males and females*



According to the The Tribal Research Centre which is situated near Ooty, the Toda population has risen up to 1648 people in 2004. The figure also includes the people converted into Christianity. (Parthasarathy 2008, 32).

Nilgiri Hills is located at the border of Tamil Nadu and Kerala (see the map). The District has also been called the Blue Mountains because 'Nilgiri' means literally in Sanskrit 'Blue Mountain'. The center of the district is Ooty (or Ootacamund), a town situated near Kerala border.

According to the Census Report 2001, the total Adivasi population in Tamil Nadu is 651 321; out of those 36 Adivasi communities only the population of Malyalas and Irulas exceed one lakh (100 000). Their population comprises around 69 per cent of the total Adivasi population in Tamil Nadu. The number of communities with less than 1000 people is 16.

Government of India has classified a part of the Adivasi communities in the category of 'Primitive Tribal Groups' (PTG). The basic criteria fixed for their identification are a very low level of literacy, stagnant or diminishing population and the presence of pre-agricultural level of technology.

In India 75 Adivasi communities are considered as Primitive Tribal Groups (around 2.4 million people). The Todas as well as Kotas, Kattunayakans, Kurumbas, Paniyans and Irulas are classified as a status of Primitive Tribal Group in Tamil Nadu. The all live in Nilgiri Hills.

Linguistically Adivasi languages in Tamil Nadu are related to Dravidian languages such as Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada that are spoken in the southern part of India. According to an eminent linguist Murray B. Emineau (1958) the Toda language separated from pre-Tamil at least 2000 years ago.

Only a few Adivasi cultures in Tamil Nadu have been a subject of intensive research. The Todas are an exception because they are one of those peoples who in particular have become classic anthropological subjects along with for example Trobriand islanders, Balinese culture, Hopi Indians or Masai culture in East Africa. It has been argued that to be the target of a continual study has assimilated anthropological knowledge about them as part of their sense of themselves and part of their cultural identity (Marcus, Fischer 1986, 36).



The very first anthropological study conducted in Nilgiri Hills by W.H.R. Rivers resulted in two volumes named *The Todas* published in 1906. Even today many Todas seem to accept whatever he wrote in his classical book about their culture. If an outsider is asking about their religion, kinship, polyandry, dairies or buffalo cult, they may respond to your inquiries: look at the book of Rivers, there is everything.

The Todas have shared Blue Mountains with four other Adivasi communities: Kotas, Kattunayakans, Kurumbas, Paniyans and Irulas. Sometimes even the Badaga community is considered as an Adivasi group but officially they belong to The Other Backward Castes. Most of the population in the Nilgiri Hills has migrated from other parts of India: Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and some even from North India. Thousands of families have escaped from unrest Sri Lanka during the last decades.

The Toda and Kota villages have traditionally concentrated in the highest elevation. Kurumbas and Irulas live mostly on the lower slopes and spread onto the plains. Around 400 years ago peasant families started to migrate from the Mysore plains. The immigrants gradually consolidated into as a single caste cluster, taking the name 'Badaga' ('northerner' in Kannada) after the direction of their origin (Walker 1986, 11-12). The Badaga people have become the dominant agricultural community who nowadays dominate nearly all of the tea plantations in the Blue mountains.

These Nilgiri communities have all been linked traditionally in a ritual, economic and social symbiosis comprising features typical of multi-caste communities throughout India. This ritual division of labour meant that the Todas were herdsmen, Badaga people were cultivators, the Kotas leatherworkers, smiths and potters, and the economy of the Kurumbas and the Irulas involved hunting and gathering and some slash-and-burn agriculture. In fact, the ritual system was flexible in a sense that some Todas gathered certain forest products, Badagas also herded buffaloes and Kotas were partly cultivators and herdsmen. But members of a particular community were not free to choose any occupation. After the British occupied the Nilgiri District in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this ritual and social symbiosis collapsed (see Walker 1986, 20-22).

The traditional Nilgiri society formed hierarchical ordering. This might have been adopted from the outside Hindu culture. Even today the Todas lay claim to ritual supremacy of their purity. They used to argue that their ritual position is due to vegetarianism or their refusal to deal with the products of dead buffaloes. Unlike the Brahman castes, the Todas have no holy scripts to support their ritual ranking. Therefore the members of Badaga community may consider themselves the Toda's equals or even betters because they are nowadays dominant in economic and in political matters.

The middle ranks have been occupied by the Kurumbas and Irulas, and at the ritual bottom end were the Kotas, or this was the firm belief among non-Kotas, because they ate flesh (or even carrion), dealt in hides and used to play music at funerals.

The Adivasi peoples in the Blue Mountains still live in separate settlements. Endogamic rules have dictated marriage within a group to which one belongs. Each community has its own temples and priests, although today Hindu rituals and deities have become more popular among all communities. They have preserved their separate cultural identities because each of them speak their own language. Badaga has worked as the lingua franca of the Nilgiri District but nowadays Tamil has become more popular because of media and education.

### **How the west discovered them**

The vessel of Italian Jesuit priest Giacomo Fenicio came ashore in Malabar in 1584, 86 years after Vasco Da Gama had arrived with his Portuguese sailors on the Keralan coast. Fenicio was 26 years old at the time and under orders to report his observations on Indian culture to the Roman Catholic Church.

There were a lot of rumours circulating among the Roman Church in Malabar that there was a lost community of Malabar Syrian Christians living in the Nilgiri mountains. Fenicio arrived in Nilgiri Hills in 1603. He was lucky to get an opportunity to meet one of the highest-ranking grade of dairyman (or priest) who illuminated to the Italian priest about the Todas as they were at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century: on the institution of the dairyman, on the buffalo-based economy, their eating habits, their marriage and funeral customs. Fenicio recorded the dairyman's knowledge carefully and later reported his findings to the Roman Church. (see Walker 2005, 164-165; Rivers 1986, 724).

The East India Company acquired the Nilgiris in 1799 after they had defeated the troops of Tipu Sultan who was the Muslim ruler of Mysore. The first British officials led by William Keys climbed up onto the high Nilgiri plateau in 1812. John Sullivan visited Toda's hamlets seven years later. He made remarks on Toda appearance which later became stereotypic models, describing the menfolk as '*robust and athletic... with Roman noses and handsome features*'. Sullivan was less enthusiastic about the womenfolk, of which he reported: '*their features are coarse and their mouths unusually wide... Their dress consists of a single cloth, which completely envelops their persons, and effectually conceals any grace of figure they may possess*'. According to Sullivan both men and women were fair – '*fairer perhaps than the fairest Mohamedans*'. (Walker 2005, 168)

After Sullivan many British officials arrived in Nilgiris and were wondering about the Toda culture. They presented wild guesses about the origin of the tribals: maybe the Todas are one of the lost and wandering tribes of ancient Israelites or perhaps their original home is Italy. The others were confident that they are the remnants of the Celto-Sythian race.

After some time a Russian lady arrived in the Blue Mountains and she assured that the representatives of the colonial power had erred in their conclusions. This cosmopolitan, adventurous woman was the famed theosophist Helene Blavatsky who spent 3 months in the Nilgiri Hills during the year of 1883. Helene was sure that the Todas were the remnants of ancient Atlantis since they were tall like Greek divine heroes. Blavatsky argued that their supernatural wisdom was beyond the scope of western scholars. They were familiar also with the ancient white magic. Blavatsky later published a mysterious book about her experiences named *The People of the Blue Mountains* (1893).

Nearly a century after Blavatsky's visit to Nilgiris another Russian lady, Liudmila Shaposhnikova, wrote a book *The Secret of the Tribe of the Blue Mountains* (1969) devoted to the Todas. As a representative of Soviet Russia her ideological influences were different but by no means bereft of certain flights of fancy. She believed firmly in progress, and in the Soviet context this meant unilinear social evolution such as the evolution of society, family or technology. Shaposhnikova was familiar with the ideas presented by Lewis H. Morgan who had elaborated upon his theory of social evolution through three major stages: savagery, barbarism and civilization. Morgan's ideas influenced strongly Engel's theory on the origin of the family, private property, and the state. In fact, Morgan's speculative theory eventually became canonized by the Soviet Marxists.

According to Liudmila Shaposhnikova the primitive peoples like the Todas were valuable 'living fossils' whose study might reveal the origin or the social evolution of mankind. She was fascinated by the unchanged culture: 'In order to get into past, one doesn't have to invent a time machine... History has made a generous gift to men of the atomic age. It has preserved, almost inviolate, the customs, traditions, and social organization of a tribe which can claim more than a thousand years of existence... The Todas stubbornly refuse to yield to the influence of civilization and continue to live as their forefathers lived in far-off times' (cit. Walker 2005, 178).



Adam Kuper (1988) has argued that the invention of 'primitive culture' was a fantasy invented by the early evolutionist anthropologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that the primitive culture described by Shaposhnikova and other western scholars never even existed. It had been profoundly misconceived and both the search and the goal were illusory study projects. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropology the hunter-gatherer societies have traditionally been classified as the most 'primitive form of culture'. Nowadays, it has been presented that even the category of 'hunter-gatherer' might be a myth developed by the western scholars because it is often difficult to draw a clear cut-line between agricultural and hunter-gatherer societies, and in many cases the ancestors of hunter-gatherers were agriculturalists or pastoralists who were later pushed into marginal areas as a result of economic exploitation and migrations (see the great Kalahari debate [http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FSAN%2FSAN14\\_01%2FS0964028205001837a.pdf&code=b1a996d64b4e0a9aead73b8e039e5e6c](http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FSAN%2FSAN14_01%2FS0964028205001837a.pdf&code=b1a996d64b4e0a9aead73b8e039e5e6c)).

The Todas became an interest of anthropological study after *The Todas* was published by W.H.R. Rivers. He was interested, like the previous British officials, in their origin but his interpretation of their history was less exotic. Who are the Todas? Rivers (1986, 693-718) claimed that the social and religious customs of the Todas bear a general resemblance to the customs of Malabar coast regarding the marriage institute and the funeral ceremonies among the communities of Nambudiris and Nairs. Rivers suggested that the Todas used to live in Malabar and for some reason migrated later to the Nilgiri Hills.

Rivers arrived in the Blue Mountains in 1899. Later he confessed that the literature regarding the Todas was so extensive that he was suspicious whether he could say anything new about them. A review of the literature, however, showed him that there were certain subjects about which the knowledge was very limited: the social organization, the system of kinship and the custom of polyandry (Rivers 1986, 1-2).

Rivers was too modest because he described the society on the Nilgiri Hills so profoundly that 'he discovered more about the Toda than all the previous writers put together, and corrected much of the earlier record besides' (Walker 1986, 1).

In the beginning of the 20th century many Western artists visited the Blue Mountains. One of the most famous was Marguerite Milward who travelled through the Indian subcontinent in the mid 1930s, mostly in the so-called 'tribal areas'. As a sculptor she was impressed by the culture of the Todas. Later Milward published a book *Artist in Unknown India* (1948) about her adventures among indigenous peoples. Three decades after her trip in Nilgiris the French movie maker Louis Malle directed the fascinating documentary on the Todas (Phantom India 1969, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GfejXtDfw>).

The eminent American linguist Emeneau B. Murray started his studies about the Todas in 1930s. His researches covered folklore, mythology as well as oral poetry. Murray's deep interest in the culture of the Todas continued a half-century. Later he documented and analyzed the rich heritage of their traditional songs (Toda Songs, 1971).

Tsuyoshi Nara and Peri Bhaskararao (2003) from Tokyo University have recently recorded traditional and modern Toda songs. Their study project is a first systematic audio recording of Toda Songs. It has been said that everyone in Toda villages is able to sing and compose. The following song (ibid. 38) describes the greatness of a very popular man who died suddenly.

*People who played the old flute – where are those people? Where are those buffalos?/ People who played the drum made of jacktree wood – where are those people? Where are those buffalos?//*

*People who went to all the sacred places – where are those people? Where are those buffalos?/ People who went to all the temples (gods) – where are those people? Where are those buffalos?//*

*People who gave proper hospitality – where are those people? Where are those buffalos?/ People who gave proper protection – where are those people? Where are those buffalos?//....*

Anthony R. Walker is perhaps the most well known current anthropologists who has researched the Todas extensively since the mid 1960s when he first published his thesis. His book *The Toda of South India* (1986) signified a turning point in modern Toda studies. He has published regularly on the changing culture of the Todas during the last decades. Finnish renowned emeritus professor of Indology Asko Parpola (1984) has also done research on the language and culture of the Todas.

This short introduction gives an idea of how fascinating the Toda people have been for the Western scholars. According to Paul Hockings (1997) the regional scientific and historical literature on the Nilgiris is so extensive 'that one could almost literally paper the Nilgiri district with the pages of its publications'. Hockings himself is an expert on the Badaga people. Why have the peoples in the Nilgiri Hills been the subject of so much study by anthropologists? The scholars and travelers have been impressed by their religion, marriage customs and dairies. Many romantics have dreamed of these pristine and isolated people, untouched by the Western civilization, and living in their magnificent hills.

### **Holy dairymen**

The Todas live nowadays in 69 villages or '*munds*' which literally means a herd of cattle. A typical Toda mund is comprised of three to nine houses, one to three dairy huts (or temples), at least one buffalo pen and a couple of calf sheds. The Toda houses are usually built close to each other, sometimes in a row or a line. A single house, or a line of houses is normally surrounded by a stone fence (Parthasarathy 2008, 32-35).

Traditional houses and dairies are shaped like half a barrel with a barrel-like roof. The entrance to the hut is always very small. These kind of houses are found nowhere else in India. Nowadays, modern and often electrified houses have outnumbered everywhere the old ones. Traditional huts are found, however, in the villages nearby Ooty where they still exist because of tourism.





The villages are divided into ritually pure and impure areas. The dairy or the temple of the Toda village situated in the sacred area some distance from the domestic area. Females considered as impure at birth are not allowed to enter the dairy building. There a dairyman-priest who has performed special purificatory rites processes the milk of temple buffaloes.

Pure and impure areas also apply to paths and waterways. There are normally several paths leading into villages, particularly those associated with the dairies and buffaloes are considered pure and therefore may not be traversed by females.

In an outward appearance the Toda dairy buildings usually resemble the traditional houses. The front wall is made of stone and often has carvings of buffaloes, the sun and the moon. The majority of these dairies are divided into front and back rooms. The inner room is reserved for the sacred dairy equipment, and there the dairyman performs the most important duty: the churning of milk into butter and buttermilk. In order to preserve the purity of this inner room, only an ordained dairyman can enter it (Walker 1986, 123).

The daily routine at the dairy begins soon after dawn when the dairyman leaves the front room where he may have spent the night. He salutes the rising sun and raises his right hand to his forehead and says one word: '*swami*' (lord), before releasing the animals from the pen. Then he goes to the buffalo pen and releases the animals. An unordained man or a boy may help him perform the task. Although only a dairyman may milk the temple buffaloes, it is permissible for an ordinary male to touch the sacred animals (Ibid. 126-127, Rivers 1986, 49-52).

His first task is to process the milk drawn the previous evening. Once the churning work completed, he prepares his milking equipments. He steps outside the building and salutes the dairy by raising his milking vessel to his forehead. Then he goes to the buffaloes and milks them. When the dairyman has finished the milking he calls an ordinary man to receive the buttermilk. He brings it to a prescribed spot which may be marked with stones, at the boundary between the sacred and secular areas of the village. Here women are allowed to take away the buttermilk in their vessels. Then the dairyman eats his morning meal. If he still has butter left from his churning, he may make *ghee* which is sent out for sale in the Nilgiri bazaars.

Around 4 p.m. the more ritualized afternoon dairying begins. The dairyman bows down at the entrance of the dairy, touches his forehead to the threshold. He repeats the same ritual in front of the inner room, fans up the fire and lights the dairy lamp which is considered an important ritual act. He starts to recitate the sacred names of the village: the buffaloes, the dairy, the cattle pen and nearby hills, streams, swamps, etc. This ends with a series of the following kind of requests or boons (Walker 1986, 128):

*"May butter become sufficient for rubbing on the priest's garment! May butter become sufficient for rubbing on the priest's front lock of hair!*

*May that which gives milk give milk! May that which grows grow!*

*May the barren women bear children! May the barren buffaloes bear calves!*

*May the god of the dairy subdue disease! May the god of the dairy subdue illness!*

*May the god subdue the messenger of death! May the god subdue the Tamilians!"*

After the prayer the dairyman churns the morning's milk and milks the buffaloes again. He pens the animals for the night and recites the same prayer that he used when lighting the dairy lamp.

The buffaloes are also divided into sacred and secular ones. They may be milked by ordinary men in the profane area of the village without any special ceremonies. However, females are not allowed to milk or touch these secular buffaloes which have formed the basis of the Toda economy. They have derived income from secular buffaloes by selling milk, ghee, dung and sometimes a buffalo or a calf. Among the temple buffaloes there are higher and lower grades of sacred buffaloes. The dairies are also graded into a hierarchy - the higher they are, the more elaborate is the ritual associated with the tasks of the dairyman. But this depends on the subcaste because the Todas are divided into two endogamous subcastes: *Tarthars (or Tharthazolls)* and *Teivalis (or Theveliolls)*. All dairies and temple buffaloes owned by Teivalis are of one grade and those owned by Tarthars a higher grade. (Parthasarathy 2008, 37-40; Walker 1986, 128-130; Rivers 1986, 682-683).

Tarthars are considered superior to Teivalis. The names of the subcastes refer to their different position in the community. According to Emeneau (1966, 26-28) the meaning of Tarthar is probably 'important people' and the name of Teivali signifies 'servants of the gods' which is likely to be a reference to the important priestly role of this subcaste. The most important dairies belong to the Tarthars but only Teivalis may perform the priestly tasks associated with them. These relations between the subcastes, the restrictions on intermarriage as well as the hierarchy determined on the basis of purity resemble greatly mainstream South Indian Hindu society.

Nowadays, the Tarthar subcaste has more members than the Teivalis. The dominant subcaste is ritually purer. Even today the Toda women of the Tarthar are eager to visit the women of the Teivali instead of visiting the hamlets where Tarthars used to live (Parthasarathy 2008, 38). Each subcaste is divided still into many exogamous patrilineal clans.

The above presented description of the dairymen and the rules of ritual purity provide a view of the Toda religion that has made it difficult to understand for outsiders. James W. Breeks wrote confusedly in 1873 that 'the Toda religion is of the vaguest and smallest kind, some old men of a devout turn of mind make salam to the rising sun, and in some seasons to the moon... but no one except the pujari attempts anything beyond this. "May all be well! May the buffaloes be well!" is the only form of prayer (cit. Parthasarathy 2008, 87).

The view presented by Rivers was much more sophisticated and accurate. He interpreted the milking and churning of the dairy in its ritual context, how it formed the basis of the Toda religion, and how the life of the people was largely devoted to buffaloes. Later Murray



B. Emeneau and Anthony R. Walker have provided a more detailed analysis of the religion. Emeneau stated that in the core of the religion is a highly ritualized buffalo cult while Walker has emphasized the role of the sacred dairies.

The dairies or the temples are different. The most common dairy is called *Pali* which is seen in nearly every village. Another type of temple is *Sathimumd*. The temple buildings called *Ti* or *Triari* have two huts, one for a priest and the other one for a watchman. Boa temple is called the Toda cathedral.

In addition Rivers collected a lot of data about the mythology of the Todas. According to many myths the Toda gods were believed to inhabit the summits of the hills, but they were never seen by mortals. Before the Todas were born, the gods used to live in Nilgiri Hill alone, and later it was believed that gods and Todas inhabited the hills together. According to Rivers two gods stood above the rest: a male deity named *On* and a female deity *Teikirzi*, who most probably were brother and sister. However, the ideas of gods and deities have always remained vague in their oral tradition.

### **From womb to grave**

A couple of months after birth a Toda boy child is recognized as a social being in a ritual called "the face-uncovering ceremony" in which his face is uncovered for the first time and a name is chosen for him. On the chosen day for the ceremony the dairyman rises before daybreak, kindles the dairy fire and lights the dairy lamp. It is still dark as all the men of the village assemble inside the wall of the dairy. A clansman brings the infant to the dairy and hands the covered boy to the oldest patrilansman. As dawn breaks the man kneels at the dairy entrance and touches the child's forehead and then his own to the threshold. The assembled men pray for the child: *'May it be well, may he have good health, may he become a good strong man, may he catch many buffaloes, may he be a good runner, may he have many children, may he become a rich man, may he go to every dairy temple and every important hamlet'*.

The eldest man uncovers the child's face and says: *'See the dairy, see the men, see the sky, see the birds...'*. He turns to the other men, who should ask the boy's name, and the man announces the child's name publicly for the first time. Then all go to the buffalo pen. The old man with the child bows at the entrance and murmurs to the child: *'See the pen, see the buffaloes'*. For a girl child there is practically no ceremony (Walker 1986, 198).

At around ten o'clock in the morning, guests begin to arrive at the parent's home. They have invited all members of the community to celebrate the boy's face-uncovering and naming. There is dancing and singing and men and women seat themselves in separate lines on the grass while festive food is served. The boy is then taken around to bow to his elders, first the men and then the women. Each person greeted gives a blessing and a small cash gift to the boy's parents (Ibid. 199).

Traditionally, all boys are expected to have their ears pierced at their childhood or early youth. The rite marks the attainment of ritual maturity. The ear-piercing ceremony is performed for several youths together, so that the parents may share the costs. Nowadays, it is generally performed in a Hindu temple close to Mullikorai village. As usual, the ears are pierced by two men: his maternal uncle and a member of the opposite subcaste.

Girls are also expected to have their ears pierced but it happens without ceremony. A toda girl is normally taken to the Mariamman temple in Ooty where her maternal uncle and, if possible, a man of the opposite subcaste pierces her ears.

In traditional Toda society marriage is initiated in childhood and completed at maturity, when the husband takes the wife from her parental home. The children married in childhood remain with their parents until maturity. According to Rivers (1986) the Todas had 'a completely organized and definite system of polyandry'. This meant that, when a boy married it was understood that his spouse was also the wife of his brothers, even those yet unborn, so the girl became automatically the wife of all the boy's brothers.

When the boy's parents had chosen a girl, they were expected to visit her parents with their son. Later the boy's father would bring a white loincloth to the girl as a gift from the boy and with this the alliance was fixed. The boy's father gave the girl a new loincloth every year, or nowadays a frock or a cloak. A wealthy man was expected to give more clothing. The girl's father must provide a dowry after the couple has begun to live together. The dowry is completed often after a couple of years have passed since they started to live in the same house.

The reasons for polyandry among the Todas were probably the same as in other polyandrous communities: the consequent shortage of women due to the practice of female infanticide. After a woman had given birth to one or two daughters, the subsequent girls were suffocated at birth by an older woman. The custom was outlawed in 1819, but the disproportionate sex ratio recorded until 1951 census suggests that it have continued until early 1950s, and there is evidence of isolated cases well beyond that time. It seems that the last polyandrous household disappeared in the early 1980s (Walker 1986; 59, 208). Nowadays, the Todas do not remember polyandry warmly and many are ashamed of the custom (Parthasarthy 2008, 43-44).

Also practiced in traditional Toda society was a custom known as wife-capture. If a man desired another's wife it was socially acceptable to steal her away. A wise man sought the cooperation of the wife, and he could even ask her parent's permission if he felt that it improved his chances. When the woman's husband was away, he came to her village and took her away. The new couple used to escape to the plains or to the cities in Tamil Nadu. They were to hide there until the father of the capturer had requested a meeting of the caste council. If the former husband accepted the new union, the new husband had to pay '*ter*' (compensation in buffaloes) to him, and the union was formalized by the caste council. In many cases it took several meetings of the council to settle the matter to everyone's satisfaction. The custom of wife-capture was rather common still in the early 1960s (Walker 1986, 208-210).

During the last decades the Todas have felt hostility towards this tradition. Today they practice monogamy, the age of marriage is higher and the bride price custom has slowly given way to the dowry as it has in many Adivasi communities throughout India. According to Jakka Parthasarathy (2008, 45), the director of the Tribal Research Center, the data collected in 2007 shows that 89.8 per cent of the Toda households are nuclear families. The rule of residence is still mostly patrilocal which means that the bride leaves her parental home and joins the household of her husband's parents. If the couple is wealthy enough, they move directly to their own house.

The women do not have legal rights to share the property of their parents except when allowing their husbands to accept dowry. The females are excluded from the religious activities of the dairies and do not have any role in the political matters of the traditional councils. Many feel that neighbouring Hindu and Christian women have a higher status among their communities. Some of the Toda women have complained to the State authorities that '*even our buffaloes are protected better than us in your development schemes*'. This is the background against which many women have recently joined The Hill Women's Front in order to demand better status for women. The organization also tries also to improve their livelihood by including marketing facilities for their embroidery.

### *The bow-and-arrow rite*

When a woman becomes pregnant, it is a matter of great pride among the Todas. In her first pregnancy, during the fifth month, from the day of the new moon she has to spend a lunar month in a temporary hut outside her village (Parthasarathy 2008, 58). The woman is accompanied on by her husband who prepares food for her. The woman is not allowed to cook as she is believed to be polluting during this time.

On the day of the new moon, the ceremony of social paternity is performed by a rite bow-and-arrow. It determines the social father of the unborn child in the community. If a child was born to a woman who had not been given a bow, it would be a bastard without a patriclan affiliation. But after the first child the rite needs not to be performed again, because the paternity thus established extended to all subsequent children of the woman, even those conceived after the bow-giver's death (Walker 1986, 190).

This ceremony is an important communal event and people use to invite guests from all Toda villages, even non-Todas may receive personal invitations. Sometime before noon the husband along with a few Toda men of his clan go into a nearby *shola*, they cut a particular tree and collect a particular type of grass and prepare the symbolic bow and arrow from those twigs. Then they return to the place of the ceremony.

The husband with a bow and arrow goes to the tree with the niche, where his wife and other invitees await him. First he asks three times from his wife's father, '*Shall I give the bow*' and the father replies, '*Give*'. Then his wife asks: '*What is the name of the clan?*' and the husband replies with his patri-clans name. The the wife accepts the bow and raises it to her forehead. The couple bow to the community elders, and everyone returns to the hamlet where there is dancing and singing. The invitees bring their gifts which usually are money and different type of household goods (Parthasarathy 2008, 58-59; Walker 1986, 190-192).

### *Funerals*

*'O woman of wonderful birth, renowned were you born, O flower, lime, O flower, tree. Having found a proper husband you married; having found a proper wife I married, husband you married; having found a proper wife I married. I gave my best buffalo to Piedr for you. I took you as a beauty to Kuudr. A house we built, bracelets and buffalo horns we made in sport... We thought to live together, but you have left me alone, you have foresaken me. My right eye sheds tears, my right nostril smarts with sorrow. I bewailed but could not find you. I called out for you and could not find you. There is one God for me'* (Rivers 1986, 386).

This traditional song was performed by a Kuudr clans man after his wife of the Piedr clan had passed away.

The Todas have traditionally performed two funerals. The first funeral was held after death, while the second used to be held months or even a year after the first one. Today second funerals are not performed anymore.

After the death, the body is laid on a sleeping bench or a cot in the house and the foretoes are tied together with black thread. A rupee coin is fixed to the forehead, and the deceased is adorned in jewellery, if he or she has any, and dressed with new cloths.

The funeral day is decided by the elders of the clan of the dead. News of the death is taken by clansmen to all Toda villages. The female relatives will keep vigil with the body up to the funeral. On the day before the funeral, men of the subcaste opposite to the deceased go to a *shola* near the cremation place to cut wood for the pyre. A wooden cot is brought or made in the village and decorated with flowers, ballons, umbrellas, etc. The visitors salute the dead person. Then one of the relatives of the deceased selects a buffalo as a sacrifice. The guests begin to dance in a circle singing about the achievements of the deceased person. The body is kept firmly tied on the decorated wooden cot and carried slowly by the opposite clan male members to the funeral place. The musicians follow them. As they walk, the musicians play, the men chant and compose songs about the deceased while women weep.

The selected buffalo or buffaloes are brought near the funeral place. The general rule has been that the more important the deceased, the greater the number of buffaloes sacrificed. The right flank of the dead buffalo is put to touch the deceased. All the close male relatives salute the dead animal. However, there has been much opposition by the reform-minded Todas since the 1970s to the sacrifice of any buffaloes at all. Today many Toda funerals have given up the ancient custom entirely (Walker, 2004). At the cremation place, the body on its wooden cot is laid near the pyre. It is the duty of the close female relatives of the deceased to select those articles which are believed to be necessary for the journey to the after world: jaggery, lime and handfuls of puffed millet are put into the pocket of the cloak of the deceased. Finally the pyre is set alight from the top, where ghee has been poured, by opposite subcaste members (see Parthasarathy 2008, 62-64).

Second funerals were held until the 1950s. The role of the son of the deceased was then very important. Generally the ceremony repeated the rites of the first funeral. The relic collected in the first funeral was kept in a wooden frame. On the selected day the relic was taken to the funeral place followed by the guests and hired musicians. A buffalo was sacrificed and its tale was set to touch the relic of the deceased. Finally the relic anointed with ghee was cremated.

According to the Todas, when a person dies, he goes to the afterworld to join his or her ancestors. The afterworld is said to be only a little different from this one, and they live there much the same sort of life as do the Todas in this world. Just as there are many countries in this world, so there are many in the afterworld. They have their buffaloes, the animals sacrificed at funerals and the men carry out the same dairy duties as in this world. The women, just like on this earth, are not allowed to touch the sacred animals in the afterworld.

### **The ecological crisis in the Blue Mountains**

The Todas have been a pastoral society which was almost totally dependent for their livelihood on the hill buffaloes. They used to leave for the dry-season pastures in February. The herdsmen burnt off their regular grasslands to facilitate the growth of new grass during the first rains of March and April. By the time the buffaloes returned at the end of May from their temporary grazing grounds, their regular pastures would be covered with fresh green grass (Walker 1986, 114). Gradually these grazing lands were diminished because of forest plantations and extension of agriculture by non-Adivasis. So the Todas were encouraged by the state officials to practice agriculture to supplement their pastoral economy. They started deriving income mainly by selling milk and ghee. Nowadays, a Toda family with less than twenty buffaloes is considered poor, if the animals are the main source of income. The Toda buffaloes are usually light brown horns curved upwards and they are hairier and bigger with than the Indian water-buffaloes.



The first attempt to try cultivation of potatoes and vegetables was recorded in 1892 by British officials. Three decades later, the Government of Madras observed that some of the Toda families took the potato cultivation with enthusiasm and good results. From Independence onwards, official attempts have been strengthened to 'create agricultural bias' among the Todas. Today many have become experts in cultivating tea and vegetables, which are sold in the market area of Mettupalayam.



According to the data collected in 2007 by the Tribal Research Centre (Parthasarathy 2008, 70) only a small number of households (3.7 per cent) get their income mainly from pastoral activities. Most of the households (62.8 per cent) get their earnings from buffalo herding nearby and selling milk and ghee. Embroidery and the sale of shawls and other items in the market provide livelihood to 15.2 per cent of households and agriculture to 13.7 per cent. A few Todas (2.2 per cent) are working in the modern sector of the economy as managers in tea estates, government officials, bank clerks, police officers or in tourist companies.

The literacy rate is 19.2 per cent among Toda males and 17.3 per cent among Toda females. In India these figures are according to census 2001 75.6 per cent and 54.0 per cent

The rest of Nilgiri Hills remained a unique and nearly undisturbed ecological area until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when it became a British colony and a popular hill station for rest and recuperation, and for raising commercial plantations. The traditional indigenous crops were replaced by 'European' vegetables and the natural forests gave way to commercial plantations of coffee, tea and different exotic species of trees.

After 1947 the government of India accelerated the developmental process on the same line as during the British period leading to a rapid growth of urbanisation and commercial plantations. In the 1950s the ecologically irreplaceable grasslands

were commandeered to raise eucalyptus. According to Dharmalingam Venugopal (2007) this process with increasing pressure on land for agriculture and monoculture plantations displaced an alarmingly high proportion of natural forests and grasslands leading to an extensive loss of biodiversity. It has turned the Nilgiris into a biodiversity 'hotspot', as identified by World Wildlife Fund, India (1995). The development process since the 1970s further tilted the scale precariously, pushing the hills to the brink of an ecological disaster in which landslides have become more frequent and disastrous in recent decades.

The colonists also developed the Nilgiris as a tourist resort for the English population. When India got her independence, the British were replaced by the Indian privileged classes. After the 1970s, tourism became a mass industry. Tourist arrivals increased rapidly and crossed a million per year since the year 2000.

In the 1980s tea was propagated as a perennial source of prosperity. Nilgiris is home to some 65 000 small tea growers. In the beginning of third millennium the small scale tea industry was in deep crisis. They had to face a different kind of challenge: market reforms, liberalisation and globalisation. The crisis hit small tea growers hardest, forcing youngsters to leave villages to look for jobs outside the Nilgiri district. Almost all tea plantations belong to the Badaga community. According to the anthropologist Paul Hockings the Badagas have never faced such a deep crisis in their history in the Blue Mountains.

The limits of growth appear to have been reached in many ways in the Nilgiri Hills and tea district has been at crossroads from the beginning of the 21st century. Dharmalingam Venugopal, who launched Save Nilgiris Campaign in 1988, has pointed out that this type of "development appears to have reached its limits with the predominant plantation economy collapsing and its tourism industry stagnating. Any further shifts in land use or cropping pattern appear economically unsound and ecologically catastrophic". Many researchers have suggested that the tourism should be small scale eco-tourism and should be restructured with local inputs so that the participation of the indigenous communities with due benefits can be ensured.

Although the way of life has changed a lot in the Blue Mountains during the last decades, some basic things have prevailed. The Toda dairymen still bows down at the entrance of the dairy of the dairies, and the sacred buffaloes give their milk for churning.

*Photos: Tapio Tamminen*

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