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INDIA

Advasis and the Indian State: Tribals' philosophy of collectivism is humanity's best chance to end cycle of exploitation

It is the Adivasi philosophy of collectivism, being one with the nature and all its elements, which will ultimately end the cycle of exploitation

Gunjal Ikir Munda | September 20, 2019 20:47:21 IST



Mainstream society must have the courage to acknowledge its borrowings from Adivasi society

The traditional governance system of the Advasis emphasises on consensus decision-making, which will always be a threat to a system promoting hierarchy

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The solution lies, perhaps, in giving choice to the Adivasi rather than imposing things on them, the choice to remain rooted in their own culture

Editor's Note: In this eighteen-part series, we will attempt to address the tropes associated with the communities in question from an Adivasi perspective while also exploring the contemporary relationship of Adivasi citizens with the Indian government. This is the the eighteenth article of the [series](#) on Adivasi communities in peninsular India.

“Hum aagaye” meaning “we have come” would bring out giggles if said by an Easterner, who in all intention meant to say “I have come.” Millions speak this variety of Hindi, who equally frown on the word “mein”, meaning I, as much as the Western Hindi speakers frown on “hum”.

“*Mein* seems too sophisticated, as if people are showing off, *hum* seems raw and tough, and it is our way!” Eastern Hindi speakers would reason. In a fight between the Eastern and the Western Hindi varieties, little do the people know, that the habit of using we in place of I has its origins in the languages of the rugged hilly terrains of Central-East India: the languages of the Adivasis.

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I brought up this example merely to establish two things – first, the failure of Indian society to acknowledge the contributions and influence of the Adivasis on their society, culture and religion, and second, the struggle of the Adivasis in upholding we, collectivism, in the current modern onslaught of I, individualism.

The first pertains to undermining the dignity of the Adivasis and the second pertains to the disintegration of their time-tested, sustainable, lifestyle. We will see that both points are at the root of the present discontentment among Adivasis.

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Two years ago, I was attending a conference on Munda languages, where someone piped in a question to one of the young speakers: “How has Santali influenced Bengali?” to which the speaker shrugged and said, “Adivasi languages are minor languages, they cannot influence large languages like Bengali.”

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If it was true, then how come Bengali has no grammatical gender, unlike Sanskrit which has three, whereas Santali and other Munda languages have had no grammatical gender? Not only languages, but also the names of places: Sealdah, Maldah, Nawadah and numerous other places dotted all over Northern India have no meaning in Indo-Aryan languages but finds its meaning in Munda languages.

Indian classical music has named the highest note as ‘ni’ for nishad, an alternate name for Adivasis, attributing their habit of singing at the top of their voice. Adivasi deities like Mahadev, Kali and others, Adivasi places of worship like Puri’s Jagannath Temple, Kerala’s Sabarimala Temple, Deoghar’s Baijnath Dham and others have been appropriated into the Hindu religion.

It is true that cultural exchange has and will always take place, but ‘mainstream’ society must have the courage to acknowledge its borrowings from Adivasi society, which up until now has been looked upon as mere consumers of cultural elements, having nothing of its own.

There are other numerous examples, where ‘mainstream’ societies have hijacked and internalised Adivasi cultural elements without proper acknowledgement, which has led to the degradation of self-confidence and has hurt the dignity of Adivasis. In the words of Adivasi scholar Ram Dayal Munda, Indian culture has more to do with de-Aryanisation of Aryans than with Sanskritisation of the tribals: a fact which has not been recognised and accepted till date.

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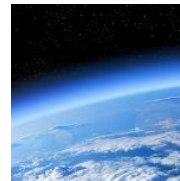
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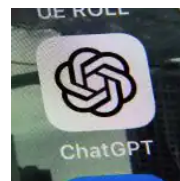
While the US media reported that banging sounds have been heard in the area where the vessel disappeared on Tuesday, authorities say passengers will run out of oxygen early Thursday. Experts say options for rescue at the depth where the Titanic wreck rests remain extremely limited



Why has Earth’s pole moved? What’s the connection to India?

According to a new study published in Geophysical

Research Letters, the Earth’s pole has shifted around 80 centimetres over the past thirty years. This is because of groundwater being pumped – most of which has been redistributed in western North America and northwestern India



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Until the 19th Century, Adivasis had plenty of places to fall back to after their culture was appropriated.

Though their culture was constantly under threat, they could find solace in the inaccessible hills and forests where they would carry on with their livelihood.

With the advent of industrialisation of the British, Adivasis were exposed at both fronts, their culture and livelihood at stake. With their back against the wall: their culture humiliated by yet another organised religion (Christianity), their lands being grabbed by foreigners, their forests intruded upon by the British government's policies and local Zamindars, tribals were left with no choice rather than to vehemently resist the system. Adivasis were the first, starting with the revolt of Tilka Manjhi in 1794, to fight intrusion into their land, and the last to keep up their struggle against external colonialism and exploitation.

Indian Independence promised a new beginning for Adivasis, with adequate constitutional provisions being provided such as retaining the pro-Adivasi land laws from the British era, the direct monitoring of the tribal areas by the President of India through provisions in the 5th Schedule, ensuring adequate representation of Adivasis through reservation in government offices and so on.

But soon the government, in its zeal for 'development', forgot why these pro-Adivasi provisions were put in the first place. Adivasi areas rich in natural resources became internal colonies. There was mass displacement of Adivasis as huge dams were built, steel



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'Gaddar Divas': The fresh tension between Sena (UBT) and Shinde-led faction explained

The Uddhav Thackeray-led UBT has called for 20 June – the day last year that Eknath Shinde raised a banner of revolt – to be marked as 'Gaddar Divas' with Sanjay Raut even tweeting a letter to the United Nations demanding the same. Shinde in turn has accused Uddhav of being a traitor for 'betraying



Explained: The 'catastrophic implosion' of the Titan submersible

The implosion itself would have killed everyone within less than 20 milliseconds. In fact, the human brain can't even process information at this speed. As much as the news is devastating, perhaps it is somewhat reassuring the Titan's passengers would not have suffered a terrifying and drawn-out end



Why Titanic tourism draws people in despite dangers

Many people on social media are wondering why the five passengers who died on the tourist submersible would risk their lives to view the wreckage of the Titanic. For some, the trip to the floor of the North Atlantic has become an obsession, while others are searching for an adrenaline rush

plants established, mines opened: all on Adivasi land, but they never received the benefits.

As Munda put it: “Adivasis neither found God nor any deity in the temples of modern India.” Parallel to this the government was undermining Adivasi right to self-determination, neither was the traditional governance system of the Adivasis recognised by the government nor did the government heed the demand for a separate Adivasi state.

However, after much struggle, violence, counter violence, negotiation and deliberation, the Indian government recognised the tribal village administration through Provisions of the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996, the tribal state of Jharkhand was formed in the year 2000 and the rights of Adivasis over the forests was recognized through Forest Rights Act, 2006.



Tribals celebrating the Baha Parab festival. Image courtesy: Pera Sangat YouTube Channel

On paper, the story seems to be heading towards a happy ending with Adivasi security and progress having been promised and provided by the above mentioned laws and provisions, but the present situations tells otherwise.

The CNT and SPT acts prohibit the transfer of Adivasi land to outsiders, but a nexus of corrupt government officials and greedy individuals have been bypassing the laws, paving way for stealing Adivasi land. Although the central government recognised the rights of village administration in the tribal areas through the PESA Act of 1996, Jharkhand is yet to formulate laws following the spirit of PESA.

Adivasis have not been made aware of the power and functions of the Gram Sabha under this Act and as a result, few influential individuals hold all the power and misuse their connections with corrupt officials for personal benefits. The Adivasis always had a decentralised administration in their traditional governance and PESA too encourages decentralisation of power to the Gram Sabhas, which popularly made the act to be referred to as “abuadisum, abuaraaj” or “apne gaon meinapna raaj” meaning our village, our rule.

This particular spirit did not go down well even with some tribal MLAs, and their insecurity was evident when one of them said, “If everything is to be done by the Gram Sabhas, what would the MPs and MLAs do?” This type of exploiter’s mentality, even of the tribal MPs and MLAs, is perhaps the reason why in Jharkhand, even after twenty years after its formation and tribal chief ministers taking the helm, the situation remains the same for Adivasis.

On the education front, Adivasi children have the highest dropout rates, the reason being lack of education in their mother tongue at all levels. In schools, Adivasi children are made to learn in alien languages and their textbooks have an equally alien cultural context.

This type of situation not only makes students disinterested, but also makes them dislike their culture, background and existence. Self-confidence suffers the most and they are not able to expand to their full potential. All these result in a generation that always doubts itself. The government cites the problem of unavailability of qualified teachers and literature in the tribal languages, but Adivasi teachers think otherwise.

Every year for the past 30 years, the government prepares books for primary schools in Adivasi languages with the help of Adivasi teachers and experts, but these books never reach their destination. Perhaps the commission involved in distributing the books is not lucrative enough for government officials.

On the socio-cultural front, the government does not recognise the distinctiveness of Adivasi religion. Although the 1951 census recognised Adivasi religion as distinct and separate from other religions, it was removed from the census reports of later years, the reason for such a step was never made clear.

Today, Adivasi religion is wrongly considered as a part of either Hindu religion or the insignificant ‘other’, even though the Adivasi religion has third highest adherents after Hinduism and Islam. This

attitude stems from indifferent attitude towards Adivasis who are thought of having nothing of their own.

Throughout history, their religion has been thought to be either Hindu-like or Christian-like, their mythologies and ethno histories are twisted to fit into the hierarchy of the structured religion where the converted Adivasi always finds the lowest spot.

Much has been talked about the problems of Adivasis but what lies at the root of Adivasi conflict with the outside world? That is the difference between how an Adivasi and how the rest looks at things: we vs I.

We vs I

Once during the festival of Baha, I casually asked my Adivasi hosts, “Where is your dance ground?” This question would seemed normal to the outside world where exclusive private ownership of space and resource is unquestionable. But my Adivasi hosts were offended by the question.

“It is our dance ground, my friend!” they replied. I quickly realised that the Adivasi culture was collectivism. They make everything inclusive: “How are we?” they would ask instead of the more rude “how are you?” Later during the day, they prayed for the well-being of the entire world: “May the air be fresh, may the water flow free, may all be good, may everything be fine”. They never asked anything exclusively for themselves!

Collectivism has always been at the base of Adivasi philosophy.

The belief that they are one with nature, not above it makes it difficult for an Adivasi to exploit it. It is this Adivasi philosophy which brings him into conflict with the modern world. The traditional governance system of Adivasis emphasises on consensus decision-making, which will always be a threat to a system promoting hierarchy where the elements at the lowest level are always dispensable.

Although the Constitution upholds the Adivasi philosophy to the highest degree, the people entrusted with upholding the Constitution perhaps lack the conviction in it.

Many might think the idea of collectivism to be theoretical and romanticised but humans are facing an imminent threat for ignoring it: the threat of extinction. Never before humans as a species have faced a more threatening situation due to self-made reasons. The environmental crisis on the global level is like never before. It is expected that the earth would be made uninhabitable by the humans in the next hundred years. It is the Adivasi philosophy of collectivism, being one with the nature and all its elements, which will ultimately end the cycle of exploitation of individualism. Why be concerned about Adivasis? Because they are the last hope of the humans.

Way out

Much has been deliberated into fixing the problems of Adivasis. The 'mainstream': be it governance, language, culture or religion, thinks that bringing Adivasis into the fold will end all their miseries, all the while ignoring its own flaws.

It is a fact that Adivasis have perished in 'mainstream', the tribal politicians today are no good than their non-tribal compatriots, buying and selling of votes is as rampant as it is in other parts of the country. All the economically well to do Adivasis are the ones who have forgotten their language and culture and they hardly look back at their deprived fellow community members.

The solution lies, perhaps, in giving choice to Adivasis rather than imposing things on them, the choice to remain rooted in their own culture and select for themselves from the varied options available in the modern world. But at the end of the day, the doings remain in the hands of Adivasis. It takes courage to be oneself in an uncomprehending world but believe me, 370 million Adivasis around the world are trying to do this at this very moment.

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