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## When Adivasi culture begins to influence mainstream society, India will become a much more beautiful place: Dr S.Faizi

in Life/Philosophy by Dr S Faizi 23/06/2025

*This article is based on excerpts from a talk by Dr S. Faizi at the second KP Sasi Webinar on Religion and Spirituality in the Age of Fascism held on 18 May 2025. Dr Faizi's speech is from 35 to 56.30 minutes*

KP Sasi Webinar - Religion and Spirituality in the Age of Fascism



When Binu invited me to speak on spirituality, I was actually quite embarrassed. I don't consider myself someone who should be speaking about spirituality. But

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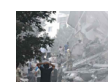
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he said I could talk about indigenous people and their way of life, so I agreed.

I believe in a certain kind of spirituality—not in the sense of organized religion—but one that I derive from the animal world. Not in the way some people oppose the use of animals for food, but rather by observing how animals live and deriving lessons from it. For instance, animals generally do not rape. They have explicit courtship displays to attract mates, and they don't conduct wars or kill others just because they dislike them.

Of course, there is competition and occasional fighting among animals, but they have their own ways of resolving conflicts without killing. And when they do kill—for food, like when a tiger kills a deer—it is only out of necessity. Once they've eaten, they don't kill anymore, nor do they kill in large numbers and keep for future use. There's an inherent balance and respect for life in the natural world that we humans seem to have lost.

In the past 200 years, industrialized human society has moved far away from natural ways of living. Even our circadian rhythms—the daily biological cycles—have changed due to artificial lighting. We no longer follow the natural rhythm dictated by sunrise and sunset. Our modern lifestyles, including sitting on chairs instead of sitting on the ground as we evolved to do, disrupt our natural postures and lead to various health problems.

As former president of the Ethological Society of India, I have seen fellow scientists presenting papers at our academic conferences on animal behavior such as the impact of the changes in light pattern on different species of wildlife. Yet, strangely, no one has ever studied the impact of artificial light on humans, despite the fact that it has dramatically altered our physiology.

I find great inspiration in indigenous societies around the world. When industrial civilization eventually collapses—due to a synergistic combination of climate change, environmental degradation, eroding inclusive physiological fitness of humans and western wars—it will be these indigenous communities who will survive. Industrial man is no longer autonomous species; we rely heavily on medical systems to survive. We are not self-sustaining biological entities anymore.

The struggles and injustices faced by indigenous communities today point to a future where industrial civilization may perish but humanity—as a species—will continue through those who still live outside the reach of technology: the indigenous peoples.

In India, the term “indigenous people” is translated as \*Adivasi\*, which means “the first people.” In fact, a Supreme Court judgment has clearly stated that Adivasis are the original inhabitants of this land. However, there is resistance from a section the Indian state to officially recognize them as such. Why? Because calling them Adivasis or indigenous people gives them political power, they fear. So instead, terms like \*vanvasi\* (forest dwellers) are used to dilute their identity.

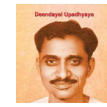
During Meira Kumar's time as Speaker of the Lok Sabha, she observed the International Day of Indigenous Peoples in Parliament—an event that has never happened after her. She recognized Adivasis as indigenous people and spoke highly of their contributions to building the country. However, the Indian government has often resisted the recognition of indigenous rights in



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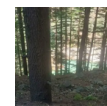
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international forums like the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

There was once a debate at a CBD expert committee over the term “indigenous peoples and local communities.” This was in 2012. India, along with Canada, objected. Later, during another meeting, an Indian delegate clarified that it was the personal position of the official representing India at that time and not the official stance of the Indian government. Still, in domestic politics, the term “Adivasi” is avoided in the government language, even though it accurately reflects the identity and history of these communities.

Adivasis are often treated as a defeated people—pushed into forests and marginalized by successive waves of migration and colonization. With the arrival of the Indo-Aryans the dark skinned native people were pushed into the peripheries of settlements, namely the forests. Even the name “Gondwana,” from which we get Gondwana Land, the name of the geological South Asia, comes from the Gond tribe of central India.

They have fought against colonial rule and continued to resist oppression, yet mainstream history often ignores their struggles. Before 1857, there were numerous uprisings in regions like Dehradun triggered by the appropriation of forest lands by colonial powers. Over 104 such wars were recorded across the country, but they remain largely unrecognized in historical narratives.

Since independence, over three crore Adivasis have been displaced—either in the name of conservation or development. However, in 2006, India passed a landmark legislation: the Forest Rights Act. It was the first time the Indian state acknowledged historical injustice committed toward Adivasi communities and recognized their rights over forest land.

India's forests would be best managed by Adivasi communities themselves—not by bureaucratic machinery, which has become a huge burden on the system.

Now, regarding the topic of spirituality—I want to caution against the misuse of the word. Spirituality is often misappropriated to replace the idea of religion or religious enterprises. Controversial spiritual gurus are able to sell themselves to some international organisations and often appear even at UN meetings. Their presence paves the way for fascist ideologies and organizations to gain legitimacy abroad.

One must also be careful about how the idea of “spirituality” is misused to spread violence in the country in the name of vegetarianism to serve regressive political agenda.

Adivasi communities have their own spiritual systems—like the Sarna faith practiced in Jharkhand. The Jharkhand state Assembly unanimously passed a resolution in November 2020, urging the inclusion of ‘Sarna’ as a separate religion in the national census. This was to acknowledge the unique religious practices of the Adivasi communities, particularly their nature-centric worship traditions. The Chief Minister of Jharkhand advocated for Sarna to be recognized as a religion, he became a target of Union govt agencies.

Similarly, the Gond people follow the Boya Puna spiritual system, meaning “the way of nature.” In Attappady, the Adivasi heartland of Kerala, they follow a worldview called Pasad, where the god is without form or structure—they pray



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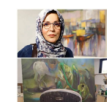
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to the essence of nature itself.

These diverse spiritual beliefs—worshipping rivers, mountains, animals, and nature—are increasingly being subsumed into mainstream religions. Their identities are being destroyed. The cultural heritage and worldviews, religions if you like, of Adivasi communities must be protected in line with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We have laws—such as the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and PESA—that safeguard their rights, but implementation remains weak due to bureaucratic apathy.

What I admire most about Adivasi communities is their worldview: they do not wage war, they do not harbour prolonged hostility, they share resources, and they feel kinship with all living beings. They live in harmony with nature's rhythm. Yet, the very people who protect the forests are treated as encroachers and enemies of conservation.

This is a disservice not only to conservation efforts but also to justice and the fundamental rights of Adivasi communities. It needs to change.

When Adivasi culture begins to influence mainstream society, India will become a much more beautiful place.

As for my own spirituality, it is about learning the way of life of our fellow species on earth and connect with them. It also about growing beyond remembering our grandparents and our ancient civilisations and connecting with our ancestral grandparents in the African forests and savannahs who were struggling hard to survive, to sustain our species, with limited capabilities to hunt for food or run, without language to communicate, just in order for the germplasm flow into us deep down the lane. My spirituality is imagining my ancestral grandfather courting my ancestral grandmother, without the aid of a language, amidst danger of predators, and our ancestral grandmother carrying the next generation for a good nine months, in the difficult terrain, with no assured food, amidst predators, giving birth to a progeny with a large head. We must have this history of our species in our consciousness.

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**Dr. S. Faizi** is a distinguished ecologist and environmental policy expert from Kerala, India, renowned for his significant contributions to biodiversity conservation and climate change advocacy on the international stage. With a career spanning over three decades, he has been a powerful voice for the Global South in major environmental negotiations. Dr. Faizi played a pivotal role in the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit)



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and the negotiations for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). His work has been instrumental in advocating for national sovereignty over biodiversity and championing the rights of indigenous communities, particularly the Adivasi, as historical custodians of forests and wildlife.

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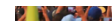
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