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How the Adivasi way of life is contrary to mainstream development

Saturday, August 09, 2025

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By **Rajkumar Sinha***

If one wishes to understand the plight of Adivasi (Indigenous) society, it is easy to point to the insensitivity with which the state, capital, and society at large have tried to trap Adivasis in their own model of development. Strikingly, this development is being carried out without even consulting or understanding the Adivasis. What are the consequences of such actions?



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Every Adivasi community has evolved its own systems to meet essential needs such as food, health, medicine, and shelter. It is often said that Adivasis earn for the present and do not think about the future. They believe that the natural systems of water, forest, and land will fulfill their needs. Hence, rather than exploiting these resources, the Adivasi priority has always been to conserve them. What gives them life, they hold sacred. For them, forests are temples and trees are deities. Yet, the very resources and values they built their lifestyle upon have been misinterpreted as markers of backwardness.

Adivasi society is generally viewed as economically weak, but there is little study into the processes that have pushed them into poverty. Studies on their economic condition have failed to understand their indigenous economy or autonomy. Their unique lifestyle, philosophy, history, language, literature, and worldview have been largely ignored. As a result of this ignorance, a notion emerged that Adivasis need to be integrated into the so-called mainstream.



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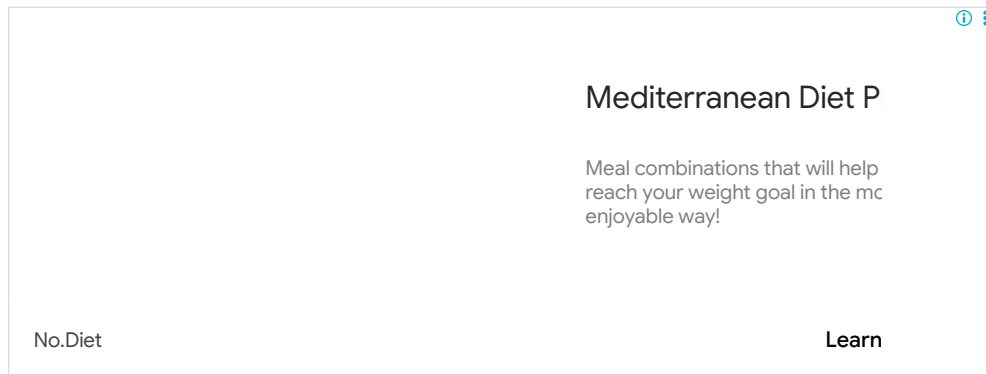
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This idea stems from a superiority complex—a conspiratorial mindset aimed at uprooting Adivasis from their water, forests, and land to take control of these resources. Both during colonial times and after independence, ruling elites have deprived Adivasis of their resources and dismantled their production systems. This has crippled them economically and culturally.

For thousands of years, Adivasis have protected natural wealth as caretakers and guardians, yet they have never claimed private ownership over forests or hills. To them, everything belongs to the community. Their worldview is rooted in collectivism, harmony with nature, and community welfare. This stands in stark contrast to individualism, emphasizing shared responsibility and cooperation. In Adivasi life, community welfare is prioritized over individual gain, and resources are used for the benefit of all.



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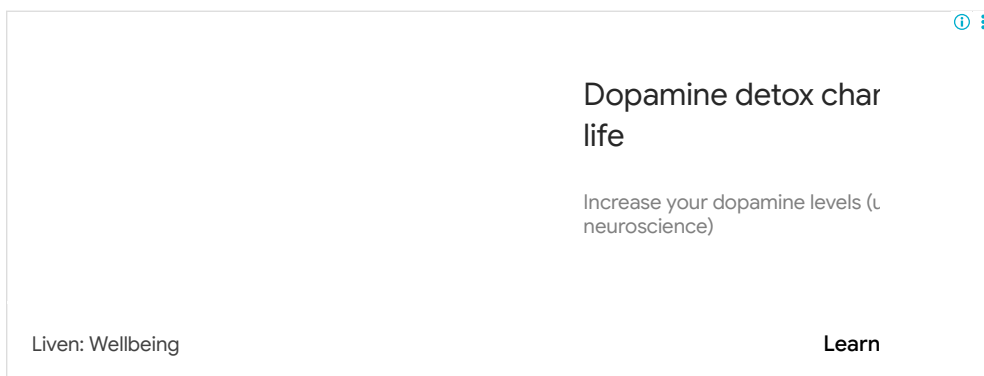
Adivasi philosophy is nature-centric, viewing nature as a partner rather than a mere resource. Unlike in non-Adivasi societies, livelihood systems in Adivasi communities are not based on inequality. Clearing forests for agriculture, practicing collective farming, and relying on forest produce are all integral to their life. Whenever external forces have attacked this autonomous and free system, Adivasis have responded with strong collective resistance.

Adivasi society, founded on co-existence and collectivism, is an egalitarian society. Hence, the concept of ruler and ruled—class divisions—never took root here. In a democracy based on majority rule, Adivasis are a small minority. Scattered across the country, how can they assert their presence in such a framework? This is why they believe not in majority rule but in consensus. After independence, all Adivasi regions were merged into large states.

In this phase, their traditional systems were neglected, and uniform systems were imposed everywhere. As a result, the space once available for local traditions vanished. This led to contradictions and conflicts in tribal regions. Because the collective Adivasi philosophy remains unaddressed, they continue to be marginalized in policymaking. All so-called development schemes for them have failed, pushing them

deeper into crisis.

In Indian society, Adivasi communities are viewed almost like colonies. They also face internal contradictions and complexities that hinder their progress. Globalization advocates, seeing the vast potential hidden in forests, have targeted both the forests and Adivasi lives. Under the guise of industrialization, a global conspiracy has been hatched to seize all resources. This centralizing, colonial tendency has only grown stronger in the post-independence "development" narrative. The involvement of state powers in this colonial-developmental assault has pushed Adivasi existence into peril.



Adivasi Wellbeing Card

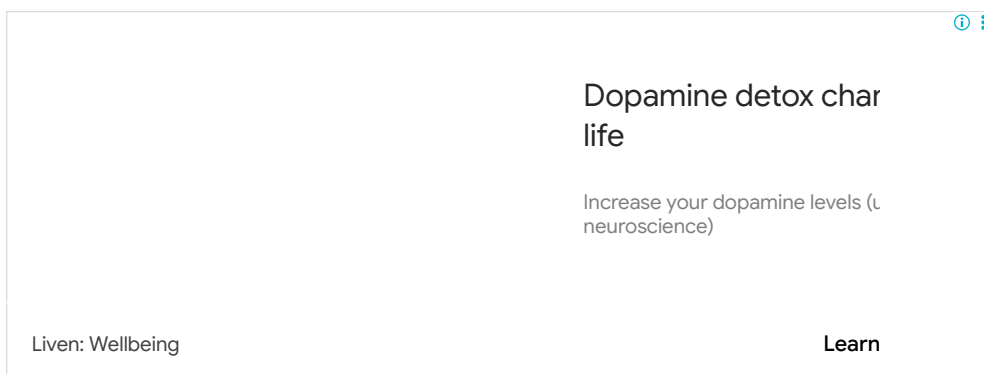
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Today, everyone wants to develop Adivasis, but no one asks whether they even want to be part of this blind race of development. While development may be a natural process, here we are dealing with an agenda driven by capitalist forces. The capitalist system is run not for social equality, justice, or environmental protection, but for private profit. Development based on resource extraction and destruction displaces those who depend on these resources. Projects like dams, mining, and wildlife sanctuaries have led to the forceful acquisition of agricultural land, proving disastrous for Adivasis. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs' 2016 Annual Report, 8.7 million Adivasis were displaced in India between 1950 and 1990.



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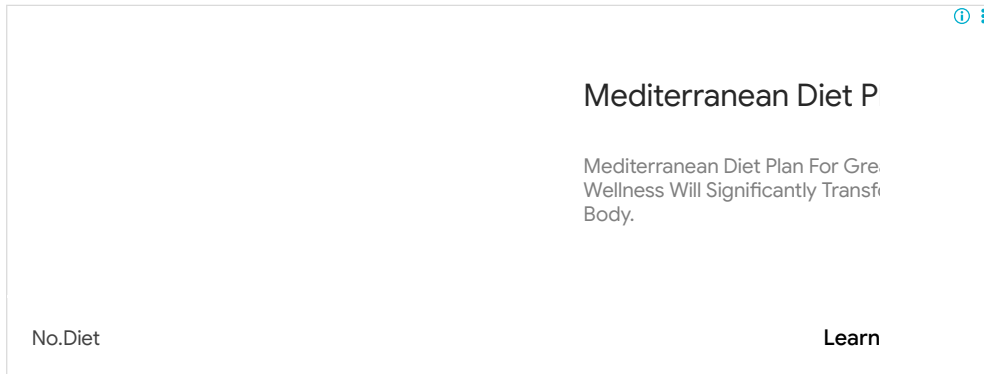
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At the root of the Adivasis' present suffering lies the very idea of development. Dragged into this blind race, they have reached a

state of devastation. If development continues this way, they may not survive at all. Their worldview—detached from capital and profit—has always been sensitive to water, forest, and land. Their existential crisis is a global crisis, and saving them means saving the world itself. That is why today, the slogan "Our village, our rule" echoes across Adivasi villages. Only after establishing self-governing village republics can we hope that the Constitution—the foundation of our vast formal structure—truly becomes ours.



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The Constitution has provisions for self-governance in Scheduled Areas through the PESA Act, but due to its poor implementation, mistrust is growing among Adivasi communities. If our national system had been as democratic, liberal, and tolerant as the Adivasis themselves, many questions around autonomy would have already been resolved. Unfortunately, in our country, democracy is imagined not as power in the hands of the people but rather as power in the hands of their representatives.

**Bargi Dam Displaced and Affected Union*

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