



TRIBAL IDENTITY IN INDIA: Extinction or Adaptation!

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TRIBAL IDENTITY IN INDIA

Extinction or Adaptation!

This volume is concerned with the issues of cultural survival of those population groups which are the true curators of the biocultural diversity of the world. It is also dedicated to the life enhancing indigenous knowledge systems of those tribes, whose habitats are living workshops for harvesting the environmental resources wisely and sustainably. These are the ecosphere people, who need to be protected against bioprospectors, in the interest of guarding the best and finest in the human environment, as the common heritage of mankind. The book is timed for release in the 50th year of India's Independence. It is expected to be a voice raised in defence of the living indian traditions against the Europeanisation, technification and homogenisation of the planet.

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EDITORIAL

This volume has emerged out of a large celebratory event called Chinhari (Insignia in Chhattisgarhi) held at Bhilai, Eastern Madhya Pradesh in March, 95 in which the Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (National Museum of Man) Bhopal had assembled representatives and spokesmen of tribal communities from all over India to assert certain truths which seem to need reassertion. The tribal person is no less unique as an individual for being a member of his community. He is not outside the pale of history, which is not the exclusive domain of the non tribal people. Nor is it true that the tribal civilisation does not have a sequence or cannot acknowledge change and development. The capacity of the tribals to codify, classify, document and preserve his knowledge and environment must be recognised. Research on tribals, programmes for tribal development, or use of tribal knowledge systems and technology must be undertaken with the prior information, consent, participation and compensation of the tribals. The tribal should not be seen as an object of experiment and development strategy, refined according to imported models, but perceived for what he is, a subject not only capable of self direction, but also of redeeming, correcting and balancing the many life negating westernising ways of the so called advanced cultures. Unlike the life and art of the peddlers of technological civilisation, there is no divorce between the life and art among the tribals, just as there is no alienation of the tribals from the organic and inorganic communities and their habitats. Truly speaking, it is only by appreciation of the tribal identity, fulfilled through a realisation of the identity of all biological and non biological forms, of the conjunction of the beauty and utility of man made objects, the union of form and function, in tools and implements, that the modern technological civilisation can exorcise and banish the uncanny ghost of nihilism, stalking it at its door. It has to be realised that all scientific knowledge is not western, nor is all western knowledge scientific. It is the in situ rather than ex situ conservation of knowledge which is important for combating social and mental alienation and environmental pollution, created by westernising and exclusive models of development.

There is an attempt in this volume to assert the identity of the tribal as an integral part of his environment. Thus, in the north east, among the Kacharis in Assam, the Mishings, Miri and the Adi call themselves the children of sun and moon, who came from the height, negotiating dangerous water falls and hills. The Dimasa are the sons of a big river or Dim; the

Mishing are literally man (Mi) living on river side (Shing or water); Mizo are the people (Mi) of the highlands (Zo). The tribe Lalung are people rescued (Lung) from water (La). The Naga, used as a suffix of the Ao, Angami, Lotha, Konyak in some 30 odd groups and sub groups, probably derives from the Sanskrit word Nag or mountain, or the Assamese word, Nokua or nude. In the north, in the Himalayas, the Khasi creation myth speaks of a descent from the mountain north of Shillong known as u Lum Sohpetbneng or the navel of the sky. The Pangwals, Gaddis and Kinnaras in Himachal Pradesh worship deities personifying crops, mountain, forest and worship nature in the festival of flowers called Phulaich.

In central India, among the Gonds of Bastar, the Marias derive their name from Mar or forest, which is no mere physical entity, but father, mother, lover, friend, sibling, God, source of sustenance, affinity and consanguinity of the house hold and clan for them. The forest is seen as the environmental womb, homologous to the biological womb, and at the same time, equivocally perceived as a preserve of man as against the village with its equivocal feminine presence. Among the Pando in Sarguja, Jabalpur and Raigarh, Karma, Nacha dances are tied to the rhythm of work in harvesting the forest produce. Mediation with supernatural forces is done by Baigas, Gunias and other pujaris to sanction and facilitate their activities. The god Kohalang is appeased for slash and burn cultivation in Abujhmad. Bamboo caps with bison horns and feathers of crow, fowl, peacock, wild boar tusks form the head gear of the Maria and Muria dancers. In eastern India, festivals are held in celebration of the rhythm of good and bad, the balance of order in nature every twelve years, among Oraons and Khariyas. Agricultural festival like Hari Hari, Karma on Bhadon Ekadasi and Khalihani Puja are common among tribal groups like the Santhals, and Sarhul is held to welcome the event of the Sal forest coming into flower. The drum beats, the masks, the steps, the movements in Chau dance in Jharkhand areas indicate the stalk of the crane, the descent of Gods, the prowling of the tiger. The nature and intensity of the flow of water from different sources is captured in an expressive language related to the forest habitat. Santhal songs respond to the hum of the forest, the sound of the wood pecker on the peepul tree, equate the womb of the mother with the womb of the forest, and describe the birth of the child as descent from the hill, suggesting a transition from the visible to the invisible, unmanifest to the manifest. The Oraon of Rourkela, Orissa see themselves as the original inhabitants of the earth who first dug the earth for construction, embanked it for irrigation and the mined it for extracting ore. The Parajas, Bhumiyans, Gadabas, Koyas in Koraput

perform fertility rites for better production of crops.

In the South the Chenchus of Andhra connect their name with the Telugu word Chettu or tree or Chunchu or rat. They continue to live as hunter gatherers in traditional patas or settlements with the suffix Dung, named after the local streams, flora, fauna or the deities of the terrain which provide shelter and sustenance to their cattle in course of their movement in temporary camps. Bamboo, bamboo fibre and wattle grass are used for their bows, arrows and sticks. The tuber called Chenchu Gadda forms an important item of the diet. Families and clans are named after plants and animals. Worship is offered to water streams and other spirits presiding over nature and its bounty like Masimma, Peddamma, Gurubappaswamy. The Malasars and Mahamalasars of Annamalai hills of Koimbatore in Tamilnadu are the Alasars or wanderers of Malas or mountains. They worship trees, mountains, rivers, use bamboo as cradle at birth and both bamboo and sorghum tree as dais in marriage pandal. They offer worship and sacrifice before gods and spirits like Mallung, Veerabhaardan, Arappusamy, represented by stone heaps, sometimes arranged as Kaattu Atha, in the shape of animals. The bark cloth of the Shompen, the coconut leaf girdle among the Nicobarese, the dugout canoe, beehive cane leaf hut, wild boar as food among the Onges, the multi pronged wooden harpoon, hibiscus bark rope, cane basket among the Sentilene, the turtle hunting and turtle shell feast in the Andamanese marriage ceremonies, define the identity of the tribes of Andaman and Nicobar in many ways, in relation to their environment.

This symbiotic relationship of the tribals in India with their environment is articulated through an entire set of semiological, cultural and linguistic markers, and through the socio political structure. In the four north-eastern hill states, the tribes derive their biocultural and social identity from South east Asia, and the songs of the various tribes recall their migration routes, and common kinship, clan and lineage descent systems. Among the Nagas, the intergroup division is based on territorial rather than linguistic and political distribution, as also on different cultural practices of tattooing, disposal of the dead, taking of head in war, use of wardrum, legend of group dispersion, while the differences are overridden by a broad similarity in material artifacts, rites of passages, interkhel relations. The Paharia Korwas are related through different totemic clans called Killi. The Kharias derive their clan names from different totems in the hills. Both these groups resolve their inter village disputes through Barmukhiyas and Parga

Panchayat respectively, acting as inter village councils. The Santhals also have their inter village council called Pargana, presided over by the Parganait. The Mundas have the head men Mahatos. The Ho village groups called Pir are presided over by Manki. The Santhal Majhi is simultaneously village head, head priest, the chief teacher of the young and the main organiser of dance festival. The Pandos of Chattisgarh have their local Panchayat known as the Darbar presided over by the Mukhiyas. Problems are resolved by them by taking panch bhat from the contending parties.

Man woman relationship is another plank of tribal identity. The practice of Idi Me among the iron smelting. Asurs, or cohabitation of man and woman without marriage, the story about the boy and girl from the Ippimala hill among the Paniyan of Wynad in Nilgiris, who are friends, and, on being married by the temple priest, are advised to be sister and brother from the waist up and husband and wife from the waist down; the vogue of cross-cousin, uncle-niece marriage, premarital conjugal relations, marriage by elopement among the Chenchus of Andhra Pradesh are some of the unique examples of this.

The binary distinction drawn by the tribals to identify themselves from outsiders is another trait defining the tribal identity. The Bhatra define their friends as Gharer log, Gaonriya log or Bandhu, and outsiders as Digar log or Behariya in what are termed as peek or dilettante show from the point of view of identifiers, and mimic shows from the point of those identified. Similarly, the Santhals characterise themselves as Hor Mitang, or man and friend and outsiders as Hor Diku or foreigners. The Oraons assert their identity by treating other tribes like the Kharia as low caste Hindus, by restricting entry of Routia Hindus, or by wearing a locket in conferences with the portrait of the Danda Katta, the sacred symbol of their community. The Khoda on women's forehead or Sika on man's hand are supposed to remind the Oraons of their victory over the Muslim folk in Rohitasgarh. The Bori among the Nagas were dependent, and the Abori independent of the Ahom kings. While the Pandos have their internal hierarchy, the Sargujias consider themselves to be superior to the Uttarahas. The rural vagrants, wage labourers or cultivators called Bura Chenchus are distinguished from the Chenchus proper, who follow the traditional hunting gathering ways. Similarly, the Malasars treat themselves as exclusive in Tamilnadu since they still follow the primitive Tamil dialect, with greater commitment to traditional practices of animism, totemism, hunting gathering, older forms

of Kottumolokku music. The Malasars at the foot hills have been deserting traditional ways for undergoing Tamilisation and Hinduisation. The Hill Vedans, who have started living in the periphery of caste Hindu and Christian groups in Kerala, are treated as Hindu and Christian converts without losing their Vedan ways, and without being accepted in the Hindu and Christian folds.

Underlying this entire question of tribal identity is the question of cultural extinction, or survival by adaptation, of these various groups. In some cases the change is historical. In Assam, the Mongoloid and tribal elements have continued in the inaccessible hill areas along with the pre-Sanskrit, Kamakhya cult, place and river names, but, in the plains these elements have been overtaken by Bodoisation and then Ahomisation, and by a further process of Hinduisation, Sanskritisation as well as permeation by Buddhism. Replacement of clan system by Gotra system, taboo on eating certain unclean animals, abandonment of matriliney are some of the influences of Hinduism. This is accompanied by a contrary movement of revitalisation of Tibeto-Burman, Mon-khmer languages, of tribal religions like the animistic Sanamahi faith among the Meitis in Manipur, and by the introduction of new tribal acronyms. Christianity and education has divided the learners or Tazungers and non learners Mazungers, with the learners giving up their villages, their work in the fields, their traditional costumes, and songs or their deities connected with village Morungs among Nagas. This is accompanied on the other hand, by continued adherence to village councils, phratry rites, log cut zylophones and traditional rituals. The Roman script has ultimately enlarged the use of Naga dialects, reducing direct missionary influence on tribal dances and rituals.

The paganistic animism of the Lepchas of Sikkim and Darjiling of West Bengal, has been over laid by Tibetan Buddhism introduced by Bhotias in the 17th century, and by Christianity, the Lepchas and Bhotias sharing a common perception against the Hindus and the Nepalese. The Khasi identity is maintained in spite of the conversion of the Khasi literary tradition from oral to written Roman. The many folk, fairy, aetiological tales, creation myths, foundation legends, slangs, jokes, proverbs, lullabies chants, ballads, animals and trickster tales, couplets about love and war, magic and bravery in the dialects of the Mon-Anam family, continue to keep the Khasi identify vital and alive. The flower festivals, festivals of new crops, the worship of lord Shiva as Ishuras, and Hemkunt, the father of Parvati, flourish among the Kinnaras, Gaddis, Gujjars and Pangwals together with legends

of witches, demonesses, old ladies like Boodhi Nagni Devi and Buddhist deities like Saonis and Yoginis.

On the one hand, the language of the Santhals of Jharkhand is under the assault of the language of the dominant community, replacing communication by silence, which becomes evident through the loss of phonemes or morphemes, which indicates the biosocial age of man and woman, and the sounds of nature among the Santhals of Chhota Nagpur. The loss of the original language due to different media of instruction has resulted in oblivion of the native place. On the other hand, among the Santhals only, there is an attempt to reinstate the lost script Ol-Chiki, using the Roman script, and to present Santhal culture through Jattras, audio cassettes and seminars. Among the Oraons, the revivalist attempt is directed to the assertion of the Kurukh language, supposedly derived from Karush desh in Sahabad distt. of Bihar with Devanagari script. Among the tribals of Koraput, the nonviolent, non-ritualistic worship of Jaina Tirthankaras and Sasana Devis, is being combined with the animistic, totemistic life cycle rites and sacrificial rituals of the tribals. The artificial categories imposed by British Colonial, Anthropological and Constitutional definitions of the SC and STs, combined with area restrictions, have ignored the common misery or economic deprivation, which binds different Vedan groups together, and which have deprived the economically backward Vedans of the benefits they are entitled to under the Govt. dispensation. Mis-definitions and misclassifications impoverish tribals, who often need the the protection most. In spite of the burden of traditions, tribal artists like Sona Bai or Sahadev Rana from tribal Chhattisgarh, are able to innovate and create beauty by giving a new look to the old, and by treating objects in daily use with changing media and solutions. Despite the tension between the converted and advanced Christian Santhals and unconverted Santhals, the Santhals as a whole, are trying to reassert their primordial identity against other tribal groups like Mundas and Hos.

The assimilation of caste and tribe has not necessarily been only a process of change of tribe to caste but also of a certain acculturation of the castes by the tribes. Indeed, both castes and tribes are undergoing change together, being bound into the dynamic westernising national and global economy. The egalitarian tribal society is being slowly transformed into a stratified one, but both are undergoing the levelling influence of the technological society. Indeed, at the lower economic and social levels, the caste groups are often indistinguishable from the tribes, having probably evolved

from primitive tribal groups. Many caste like groups among the Bhumij, the Mahali, the Bauri in West Bengal, or the Cheros, the Kharwar, the Manjhi in Bihar, and various segments of the Bhils and the Gonds, have been accepted in the caste system with appropriate status. Just as the tribal groups are not uniform in terms of tribe-caste, inter or intra-tribe relations in their marital or other social relations, the patterns of settlements also vary among the tribes from the compact, nucleated types in the deltaic plains of Bengal, through the linear settlements in the fishing villages on the sea or along rivers, to temporary encampments in the highlands of central India. The economy ranges from hunting gathering, through slash and burn and shifting cultivation, to intensive plow cultivation. Their religion moves from worship of the mountains, rivers, springs, trees, and sacred groves, through the worship of Shiva, Singh Bonga or the sun, the mother earth, to Buddhist, Jaina, Hindu, Christian amalgams. The influence of Hinduism has accounted for upward mobility through 'Brahmanisation', 'Sanskritisation', and 'Kshatriyaization'. This has been accompanied by a whole range of nativistic, perpetuative, revivalistic or transformative movements with eschatological, millennial or messianic features, as a result of encounters with the dominant Hindu or western cultures, culminating in the modification of the inclusive pantheism, polytheism and catholicism of tribal religion towards puritanical morality and monolatrous worship.

The survival of the forest based tribal communities of India is linked with the survival of the ecological and cultural diversity of India and the world. Attempts are being made to replace the diversity of ecosystems and species by uniformity of crops, trees, live stock or monolithic technological approaches through mega-development projects, by clearing or burning forest, over harvesting plants and animals, or using pesticides indiscriminately. This will destroy the trophic diversity which helps human beings guard against over dependence on particular species. The precolonial tribal inhabitants may constitute only about 4 % of the world population, but about 5000 different cultures, which is 90 to 95% of the cultural diversity in the world. To override their interest in the name of conservation or development of natural resources, is the surest way to encourage a biological and mental monoculture. Just as 95% of the DNA is dismissed as junk, valuable crops and trees as weeds and health giving herbs as scrub, because of ignorance of their value or function, the tribal communities of the world are also often seen as irrelevant obstacles in the path of progress. The interdependence of the tribal communities with the non human biological and non bio-

logical communities must be seen for what it is, as valuable per se, to exclude overdependence on any particular life or resource form, so that disease or disturbance of the ecology and the resource base in one part, is not translated into a destruction of all other parts. These communities have been designated as the ecosphere people, who are not only dependent on particular ecosystems, but are integral parts of those systems. They have to be protected against the Biosphere people, who keep on exhausting and switching from one ecosystem to another. The eco conservation practices of these communities are in consonance with the natural self regenerating processes of nature, and are ultimately in the interest of the survival of the human species. Today, the extinction rate of living communities is about 40000 times higher than the Background Rate, due to the unprecedented and destructive intervention of such Biosphere people, leading 'not only to the death of species but to the end of birth'. It is wise to recall in this context, the Kari-Oca declaration and Indigenous Earth Charter of 1992, promulgated in Brazil: 'We feel the earth as if we are within our mother. When the earth is sick and polluted, there is no human health. To, heal ourselves, we must heal the planet, and to heal the planet, we must heal ourselves'.

-Editor

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