The Adivasi way of life: Relic of the past or wave of the future?

If we think of the Adivasi way of life in terms of values, especially democratic values, then there is no reason for it to be a relic of the past rather than the wave of the future. The rich tradition of democratic living in Adivasi societies is a useful source of hope and inspiration, writes Jean Drèze

Jean Drèze May 11, 2022

It was a privilege, last month, to visit the home of Gopinath Mohanty, the legendary writer and scholar. His novel *Paraja* made a deep impression on me when I read it thirty years ago, soon after its English translation was published. At that time, I had no inkling of the Adivasi way of life. Later on, as I travelled far and wide through Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha, I often remembered *Paraja* and its profound insights.

Remembering Gopinath Mohanty

As we honour Gopinath Mohanty's memory, we are remembering not only a particular person, but also the kind of person he represented. Aside from being a great writer and an inspiring thinker, Mohanty was a public-spirited civil servant. During his early years as an officer of the Odisha Administrative Service in Koraput and Rayagada, he spared no effort to understand, befriend and help the Adivasis of southern Odisha. He studied their way of life, learnt their languages, shared their joys and

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sorrows, and joined their festivals with abandon. When they kept a distance, he sometimes played the flute to befriend them. It did not matter to him that all this created some resentment among the local netas, babus and baniyas. Some of them, we are told, even complained in writing to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in the following words:

"To our great calamity and disaster Sri Gopinath Mohanty is posted here as the Special Assistant Agent at Rayagada. He is always fond of hillmen and behaves like hillmen himself. He very little respects other classes of people before them. He behaves as if only born for Adivasis."

The Kondh Adivasis, on the other hand, adopted Gopinath Mohanty as one of their own. They even assigned one of their *totems* to him and another to his wife Adaramani. It is rare indeed for a civil servant to identify so closely with the underprivileged.

Gopinath Mohanty retained the same values and commitments throughout his life, even as his administrative and academic postings took him away from the tribal world. "In all my stories and novels", he said, "it is the human concern that is always at the centre". This human concern had a universal reach, but the Adivasis were always closest to his heart. As a civil servant, he stood up for their interests. As a thinker, he helped us to understand and value the Adivasi way of life. As a writer, he conveyed the beauties and tragedies of the tribal world better than the best surveys or studies can do. Gopinath Mohanty's message is more important than ever, as the Adivasi way of life is in danger of becoming a relic of the past.

I hasten to clarify that there is no such thing as a unique Adivasi way of life. The lifestyle of Adivasis varies between tribes and areas, even if we restrict ourselves to eastern India, as I shall do here. Also, the Adivasi way of life does not remain the same over time. For one thing, it changes with changing modes of production. The way of life of a foraging band is bound to be different from that of a tribe that subsists on shifting cultivation or settled agriculture, not to speak of working in coal mines. The Adivasi way of life also changes over time under the influence (good or bad) of the outside world, as well as through its own creativity. In this abundance of Adivasi ways of life, we can only look for some basic patterns. I am not particularly qualified to do this, but still, let me share a few thoughts and let you decide what you make of them.

Aspects of the tribal economy

As a starting point, let me evoke the opening pages of *Paraja*, where my encounter with Gopinath Mohanty began thirty years ago. If you remember, the novel begins with a grand daydream. Sukru Jani, the lead character, contemplates his surroundings from the veranda of his modest hut in Koraput. There are hills and forests as far as the eye can see. At the top of one hill, there is a small plot of farmland that became his after he cleared the forest there. Seeing that plot of land, he dreams that one day all the surrounding hills will be cleared of forest land and turned into thriving fields, with the houses of his sons and grandsons in between.

During his village tours as a civil servant, Gopinath Mohanty would sometimes play his flute to befriend Adivasis.

Environmentalists, of course, may not be so thrilled with this vision. But remember, it is only a dream. In reality, there is only so much forest land that Sukru Jani and his sons would have been able to clear with their rudimentary tools. Forest areas, in those days, were immense and population density was very low. So, there was nothing odd in this daydream. The reason I mention it is that it points to an interesting aspect of the Adivasi economy of eastern India, or at least of the Adivasi economy as it existed there not so long ago.

In this traditional economy, there is open access to land, but not to cultivable land. Land is made cultivable by the application of labour, mainly to clear the forest. Whoever clears the land and makes it cultivable becomes the owner of the land, or rather, takes legitimate possession of it. The nature of these ownership or possession rights varies between different areas and communities. For instance, in the traditional land tenure system of the Mundas in Jharkhand, called the *khuntkatti* system, the land is held in common by the patrilineal descendants of the ancestors who cleared the land. It is cultivated by individual households, but the land is no-one's individual property, and there is no question of selling or even renting it. Among the Oraons of Jharkhand, on the other hand, individual possession is the norm, but even individual possession used to be subject to some restrictions, for instance on selling land.

Cultivation is not the only way in which forest land becomes productive by application of labour. Other ways include hunting, gathering, fishing, grazing, and processing of minor forest products. The forest is also an abundant source of household items such as construction material, fuelwood, water, baskets, ropes, brooms and herbal medicine. Other economic activities, for their part, tend to be poorly developed in the same areas. Open access to forest land, therefore, is the defining feature of the traditional Adivasi economy of eastern India.

At the risk of simplification, we can say that this is a stage of the Adivasi economy where people have the best of both worlds. Open access to forest land ensures a modicum of social equality. Household possession of cultivable land guarantees some individual independence. It is the abundance of forest land that makes this possible.

In this respect, the situation of Adivasis in eastern India is fundamentally different from that of poor people in land-scarce areas such as the Gangetic Plain where there are hardly any forests, cultivable land is entirely privatized, and common-access resources such as ponds and grazing land are also scarce. Private ownership of land in these areas is an obvious source of inequality and conflict. It enables landlords to call the shots. It puts the landless in a situation of extreme vulnerability, to the extent of forcing them to endure abominable practices such as slave-driving, sexual exploitation and the caste system. Lack of common-access resources also restricts women's employment opportunities and turns them into domestic workers or casual labourers. In India, private land ownership and the caste system have also led to an obsession with the control of women, because sexual

freedom is a threat to the integrity of the family land as well as to the purity of the caste. In short, the morass of class, caste and gender inequalities in which the bulk of Indian society is entangled is connected in many ways with land scarcity and the private ownership of land. Common access to forest land was the traditional escape from this trap in Adivasi society. I am simplifying of course, but the basic contrast is hard to miss.

The most democratic people on earth

If someone were to ask me for a single word that captures the Adivasi way of life, or rather the common element of Adivasi ways of life in eastern India, I would say "democracy". Jaipal Singh Munda himself put it very well in his first speech to the Constituent Assembly on 19 December 1946. He said: "You cannot teach democracy to the tribal people; you have to learn democratic ways from them. *They are the most democratic people on earth*."

For those who do not remember him, Jaipal Singh grew up in a small Munda village near Ranchi and then studied in Oxford after an English clergyman took him under his wing. He was the first Adivasi to enter the Indian Civil Service but risked and lost his ICS career in 1928 when he absented himself to captain India's national hockey team in the Amsterdam Olympics, where India won the gold medal. After a few detours, Jaipal Singh returned to Jharkhand, where he led the Adivasi Mahasabha and later the Jharkhand Party, both of which had tremendous popular support. He was a Member of the Constituent Assembly where he often spoke up for the Adivasis, including Adivasi women. From 1952 until his death in 1970, Jaipal Singh was a Member of the Lok Sabha. I mention all this because we tend to have a selective memory of history, with some people being elevated and others forgotten. Jaipal Singh Munda is one victim, among many, of this selective intellectual memory.

Jaipal Singh's statement that "Adivasis are the most democratic people on earth" can be read as an allusion to the remarkable self-government institutions of Adivasi communities. These institutions are typically based on consensus building, with everyone having a say. When I say "everyone", I should clarify that this refers mainly to adult men or household heads. Even among men, some may have a higher status, for instance as a local headman or priest. But an Adivasi headman in eastern India is very different from the north Indian Thakur who lords it

over the village by dint of brute force. The average Adivasi headman is more like a coordinator than a commander. To illustrate, consider this account of village councils in Santal society (by George Somers):

The village councils must give to each household head an equal voice and permit free access to the discussions of the village elders by any regular member of the village community. Even the village headman cannot be regarded as more than primus inter pares, first among equals. His home and his holdings are not noticeably different from those of his fellow villagers. His dress and manners are those of the common man in Santal society. Although headmanship is traditionally inherited by the eldest son, he must be sanctioned by household heads who compose the village council.

I had an opportunity to observe for myself how gram sabhas are conducted to this day in Khunti, the heartland of the Mundas. It was a revealing experience. The gram sabhas are held every Thursday morning, in memory of Birsa Munda who was born on a Thursday as his name indicates. Much as Somers describes for the Santals, every household is welcome to attend and there is great respect for everyone's right to speak.

It is in these democratic gram sabhas, incidentally, that many Munda communities in Khunti recently decided to erect large stones on the outskirts of their village, asserting their right to self-governance under the Constitution, a practice known as *pathalgadi*. The government, unfortunately, misunderstood this movement and proceeded to repress it. Many innocent Adivasis were sent to jail on absurd charges of sedition. Needless to say, this repression intensified the suspicion of the local Mundas towards the Indian state and their aspiration for self-governance.

Democracy as a way of life

Having said this, when Jaipal Singh Munda told the Constituent Assembly that "Adivasis are the most democratic people on earth", I am sure that he was thinking of a little more than their self-government institutions. To appreciate the full weight of this statement, we must remember that democracy is not just a method of government but also a way of life, or as Dr. Ambedkar called it, a "mode of associated living". The basic principles of a democratic way of life, as he saw it, are well expressed in the old slogan, "liberty, equality, fraternity". The relation between the three was beautifully clarified by Dr Ambekdar in his historic speech to the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949:

"What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items ... Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural order of things."

As it happens, these democratic principles are also dear to the Adivasi communities of eastern India. Gopinath Mohanty himself drew our attention to this in his writings. *Paraja*, for instance, can be read as a tragedy of lost freedom, and by implication, as a tribute to the freedoms that Adivasis have traditionally enjoyed and cherished. Adivasis are freedom-loving people who do not submit easily to arbitrary authority, whether it is that of the colonial government, or the zamindar, or the Forest Department, or the sahukar, or even the employer. They are very allergic to the *diku*, as the exploitative outsider is known in eastern India. It is the love of freedom that united the Adivasis off and on over large parts of Chotanagpur in the 19th century, in their attempts to resist the takeover of their lands by dikus from Bihar and elsewhere with the complicity of the colonial government. It is the love of freedom, again, that created mass support for the Adivasi Mahasabha, the Jharkhand Party and later the Jharkhand movement. And it is the love of freedom, yet again, that makes thousands of Adivasis resist displacement all over eastern India today, even when the government offers them a lot of money to make way for mines, dams, roads or sanctuaries.

I would go further and argue that Adivasis, almost by definition, are people who managed to retain their freedom, by fighting for it if need be. Those who failed to do so were quietly dispossessed, subjugated and integrated in the caste system at the bottom of the ladder. Consider for instance the Bhuiyas of Jharkhand or the Musahars of Bihar. The Bhuiyas of Jharkhand are counted as a Scheduled Caste today, but around the end of the 19th century they were widely regarded as a tribe, and even as "a tribe which once held considerable power" as one scholar puts it. The Bhuiyas, as their name suggests, almost certainly had some control over land not so long ago (according to the Anthropological Survey of India itself, "Bhuiya means owner of the soil"). It is the process of dispossession and subjugation that has reduced them to land-starved casual labourers at the bottom of the caste hierarchy.

Much the same story applies to the Musahars, who considered themselves Bhuiyas before their upper-caste oppressors gave them their pejorative name, widely interpreted as "rat-eaters". The Mundas and Santals, by contrast, defended their land tooth and nail. Remember, it is after a series of tribal uprisings against the dikus and their colonial sponsors that laws such as the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act were passed. In Jharkhand at least, these laws played a critical role in halting the dispossession process and enabling Adivasis to retain their identity. It is by resisting subjugation and defending their freedom that today's Adivasis have remained Adivasis.

Adivasi egalitarianism

Turning to the principle of equality, the Adivasi societies of eastern India are known for their relatively egalitarian values and practices. I say "relatively" to avoid wishful thinking, and also because the egalitarian ethos of Adivasi societies is under stress today. Nevertheless, the earlier foundations of Adivasi egalitarianism have not entirely disappeared. One of these foundations, as explained earlier, is the fact that the traditional Adivasi economy in eastern India is substantially based on open-access resources such as forests, pastures and rivers. Another foundation, related to the first, is that Adivasi society has largely escaped the tentacles of the caste system. As Jaipal Singh Munda put it in the same speech to the Constituent Assembly: "There is no question of caste in my society. We are all equal." This statement, of course, is a simplification, but it strongly conveys that the caste system is alien to the Adivasi tradition of eastern India. As Gail Omvedt

observed forty years ago, “the opposite of the Brahman is not the Untouchable, suppressed bottom element of the caste hierarchy, but the Tribal, who is external to caste hierarchy, but not to Indian culture and society”.

Similarly, Adivasi society is relatively free of extreme gender inequality. Verrier Elwin went so far as to claim that “tribal women are as free today as all India’s women were yesterday and will be tomorrow”. That, once again, is an exaggeration. Adivasi communities have their share of patriarchal practices, including some disturbing ones like witch-hunting. The fact remains that there are fewer restrictions on women’s freedoms among Adivasis than in most other sections of Indian society. For instance, the division of labour is not so rigid, there is no seclusion of women, love marriage is routine, and widow remarriage is well accepted. The fact that women and girls are valued in Adivasi society is evident even from the sex ratio in the population. In a country with abysmal female-male ratios, especially among children, Adivasis stand out as a community where there is no trace of sex-selective abortion or of major discrimination between boys and girls. The female-male ratio among Adivasi children was a healthy 957 per thousand in 2011, compared with just 918 per thousand in the Indian population as a whole.

All this, of course, is changing. With the depletion of forest resources and gradual shift to settled cultivation and wage labour, the economic basis of Adivasi egalitarianism is much weaker today than it used to be. Under the influence of their Hindu neighbours, some Adivasi communities have also adopted elements of the caste system, as Verrier Elwin noted as early as the 1930s among the Gonds of Mandla district. I myself was shocked to find that Adivasis in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand often practise untouchability towards members of so-called “particularly vulnerable tribal groups” such as the Pahari Korwas. Gender relations in Adivasi societies are also changing, as the widespread transition from bride-price to dowry in the 20th century illustrates. All said and done, however, the Adivasi societies of eastern India remain one of the strongest bastions of egalitarian counter-culture in India today.

Solidarity and Cooperation

What about fraternity? First of all, I would prefer to call it solidarity, for two reasons. One is to avoid the sexist ring of the term “fraternity”, the other is that fraternity is more demanding than solidarity. Fraternity is about the feelings that we have for each other. It is a kind of love, or

what Dr Ambedkar called “fellow feeling”. Fraternity, he said “consists in a sentiment which leads an individual to identify himself with the good of others …”. Solidarity, on the other hand, is more about what we do than what we feel. And acts of solidarity are possible with or without feelings of love or fraternity. For instance, when you rush to the rescue of someone who had a road accident, it is an act of solidarity, but it does not necessarily mean that you have any special affection for the victim. More likely, it means that you simply feel it’s the right thing to do in that situation, whoever is the victim.

(If you have seen the film *Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi*, you may remember the scene where angry labourers in a Bihari village storm the house of the local landlord. Their intention is to kill him, but when the landlord gets frightened and has a heart attack, they call a doctor instead. This is a great example of an act of solidarity that has little to do with fraternity.)

I have no idea whether there is more fraternity among Adivasis than among other people. Sometimes, that is what it looks like. Friendship certainly abounds among Adivasis, and they often give the impression of being gentle and peaceful. But this can be deceptive. Some Adivasi communities at least have a rich history of violence and murder. It seems to me that asking whether there is more fraternity among Adivasis than others is pointless, just as it would be pointless to ask whether there is more fraternity in India than in China.

However, what we can say with some confidence is that the Adivasis of eastern India have remarkable traditions and institutions of solidarity and cooperation. So, let me leave fraternity aside for now and talk a little more about these manifestations of solidarity.

More than a hundred years ago, the great Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin wrote a wonderful book called *Mutual Aid*, where he presented extensive evidence of mutual aid and mutual support in all human societies and even in the animal world. The culture of mutual aid, however, is stronger in some societies than others. Mutual aid, for instance, tends to be much easier among people who are relatively equal. This is not difficult to understand, because mutual aid is a form of reciprocity. There is little scope for mutual aid between a rich landlord and a landless labourer. “You graze my cow today, I’ll graze your cow tomorrow” does not make much sense when all the cows are

with the same person. It is when two persons have one cow each, or ten cows each, that it makes sense. It is not surprising, therefore, that mutual aid has tended to flourish in relatively egalitarian societies.

As it happens, numerous forms of mutual aid and mutual support can be found among the Adivasis of eastern India. One simple example is the way people build their house or replace their roof. Typically, this is done by a small group of friends, relatives or neighbours who work together without pay. The owner of the house just has to feed them, and perhaps give them a good amount of *daru* at the end of the day.

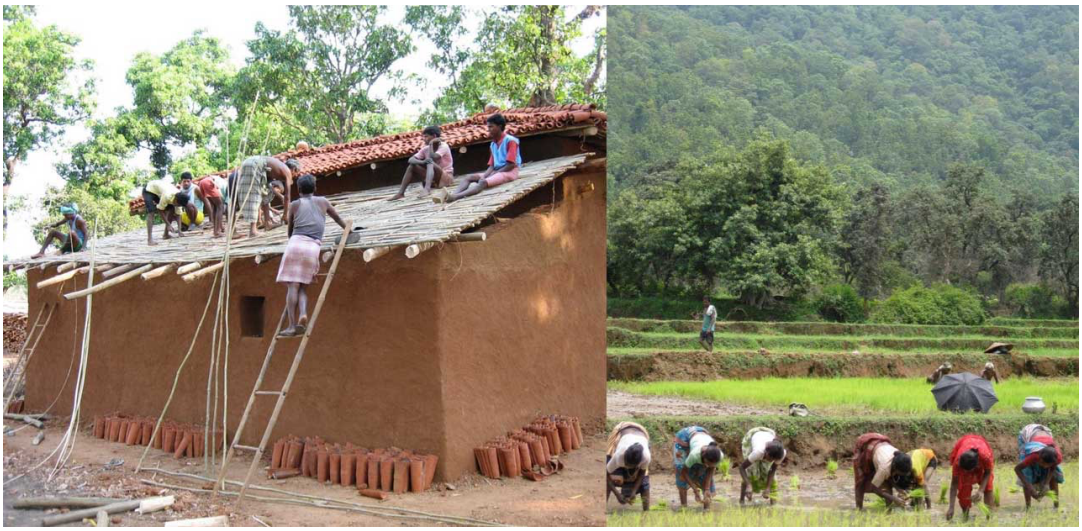
There are many other examples of this sort. Hunting used to be a grand occasion for mutual cooperation among Adivasis, less common today because there are so few animals left to hunt. Fishing is another example. Once or twice, I have seen all the young men and women of an Adivasi hamlet catching fish in the same pond with their bare hands. Catching fish with bare hands is virtually impossible if you are on your own, but when everyone is in the pond, the fish have no escape. Needless to say, this is also good fun, and the fish is shared equally.

Mutual aid comes to the rescue again at the time of rice transplanting. This is really hard work, because it means bending your back the whole day with your feet in the water, right in the middle of the monsoon when it rains most of the time. Perhaps it is to make things easier that people, mainly women, work in teams, taking turns in each other's fields and often singing as they go along. Mutual aid turns this hard work into "a time for merriment and bonding", as Alpa Shah puts it in one description of this activity.

Mutual aid is also common for activities as diverse as clearing the forest, celebrating festivals, organizing marriages, resolving disputes and local self-government. When an elephant threatens to trample people's houses, everyone helps to chase it away. When an Adivasi is locked up by the police for no good reason, the entire village goes to the police station to demand his or her release. If there is such a thing as an Adivasi way of life, solidarity and mutual aid are surely part of it.

Indeed, the examples I have given should not be seen in isolation. Mutual aid or *madait*, as it is known in some Adivasi communities of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, is an all-purpose method of getting things done. *Madait* can be deployed to build a house, guard a field, harvest a crop, graze the cattle, organize a celebration, or do whatever is better

done through cooperation than individual action. Participating in *madait* is an integral part of the pattern of conduct expected from every member of the community.



Cooperation in the Oraon tribe: Men building a house and women transplanting rice (Photos: Alpa Shah)

The examples I have given so far relate mainly to everyday activities at the village level, but it is not difficult to cite cases of cooperation on a larger scale. The annual hunt of the Santals, called *lo bir sendra*, used to be a grand affair bringing together many villages. It was followed by a democratic assembly described by one observer as the "Santal High Court of Justice", where inter-village disputes were adjudicated. This court was also a forum for hearing appeals against decisions of individual village headmen. Interestingly, the Mundas and the Hos, who are close cousins of the Santals, had a very similar tradition, also known as *lo bir sendra*. Among the Mundas, according to Jaipal Singh, every seventh year it was the women who went hunting while the men stayed at home to do the cooking.

As this example illustrates, mutual aid in Adivasi communities often extends well beyond the village level, and even to the entire tribe in some cases. Cooperation between Adivasis of different tribes is also common. I have attended some Adivasi gatherings where thousands of people were able to pursue a common purpose without any sign of top-down policing. The Sarhul celebrations in Ranchi and the annual gathering of Jan Sangharsh Morcha in Netarhat are two examples. Both events involve men, women and children of many different tribes and areas.

We have much to learn from this culture of cooperation. Of course, there are many examples of solidarity and cooperation in other sections of Indian society as well. Sadly, however, solidarity in India tends to

work mainly within the caste. As Dr Ambedkar wrote in *The Annihilation of Caste*: "Caste has killed public spirit … A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste." There is a telling illustration of this in Sujatha Gidla's book *Ants among Elephants*. Here is how she remembers what happened when the village of her childhood was flooded after a severe storm: "Throughout the village, families of each caste helped others *from the same caste*." The three families of her own Dalit community were marooned for three days in the local school, shivering and hungry, with no one helping them. Some of the upper-caste families in that village, incidentally, were Communists.

I cannot resist one more example of the spirit of cooperation among Adivasis. Soon after the formation of the first Lok Sabha in 1952, Jaipal Singh Munda organised a cricket match between Members of Parliament *of all parties*. The fascinating thing about this cricket match is not only the event, but also the thinking behind it. Lots of people helped in one way or another. Except for a predictable gender bias, the event was an egalitarian affair, with everyone paying for their ticket including the Prime Minister. It was a charity event, but also good fun. Jaipal Singh himself got some free beer for the occasion from a leading brewery. He concludes his vivid account of the occasion as follows: "The match, the lunch at the National Stadium and the dinner, achieved a great thing. They brought together all political parties and a friendly atmosphere developed in both Houses of Parliament."

There is a profound lesson in this event. We are so addicted to the competitive mode of social interaction that we forget how cooperation can sustain and enrich numerous activities. In fact, the best things in human life often build on cooperation more than competition.

Competition itself depends on cooperation, because the participants must observe the rules of the game. If they don't, it is not competition anymore, it is a fight. That, incidentally, is what is happening to the Indian parliament today. The cooperative spirit that Jaipal Singh was trying to promote has vanished, the rules of the game have gone for a toss, and political competition has degenerated into a fight. This is a good time to remember Jaipal Singhs's advice that we should learn democratic ways from the Adivasis.

Relic of the past or wave of the future?

Before concluding, I should give some sort of answer to the question I have posed in the title– is the Adivasi way of life a relic of the past or the wave of the future? The answer would depend on what we consider as the Adivasi way of life. If we think of it in terms of material life or cultural artefacts, it is unlikely to be the wave of the future. It is certainly possible to resist the economic policies that are all set to destroy the environment in eastern India and turn Adivasis into casual labourers on their own land. But even an alternative approach that respects the interests and rights of Adivasis is likely to lead to some major changes in their material and cultural life. Some traditions will survive, others not. Preserving them all at all cost, if such a thing were possible, would be like turning Adivasis themselves into a relic of the past.

On the other hand, if we think of the Adivasi way of life in terms of values, especially democratic values, then there is no reason for it to be a relic of the past rather than the wave of the future. Right now, of course, it is difficult to feel optimistic about the future of democracy in India, whether as a form of government or as a mode of associated living. But the history of democracy is full of ups and downs, this is not the time to give up on it. The rich tradition of democratic living in Adivasi societies is a useful source of hope and inspiration.

I would go further and argue that cultivating some elements of the Adivasi way of life in the society at large is a matter of survival. We have reached a point, perhaps for the first time in history, where there is a real danger that the human race will self-destruct relatively soon, or perhaps go back to the middle ages. Nuclear war, climate change, genetic engineering, pandemics and a worldwide economic crisis are just five examples of possible ways in which this could happen.

Averting these dangers requires a new culture of human cooperation across the world. It also requires creating the conditions that make cooperation possible. If we are to develop this culture of cooperation and solidarity, we would do well to take a leaf from the Adivasi way of life. To say that the Adivasi way of life is the wave of the future may sound like wishful thinking, but failing that, there may be no future at all.

(This is the Gopinath Mohanty Memorial Lecture delivered by the author in Bhubaneswar on 20 April 2022. Minor revisions have been made.)