

A Study of the Culture and Lifestyle of *Adivasis* and its Ecological Implications

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Abstract. The concerns regarding the wellbeing of planet Earth and the natural environment began to be first raised in Europe and North American sometime around the mid- to late-19th century, and yet, two centuries later, the concerns still exist, and we as an entire race of people are at a loss in finding a middle path that strikes a balance between exploitation of natural resources and conservation of the resources that nature's bounty has bestowed upon us. At a juncture when the entirety of the human race is standing at crossroads trying to figure out how best to strike a balance between use of natural resources for the purpose and development, and at the same time maintaining the wellbeing of Planet Earth, it would be pertinent if we sought to take a lesson or two from the people who have, since almost the prehistoric times, served as the umbilical cord of nature. A nature-centric lifestyle and sustainable living have always governed the very ethos and cultural discourse of the *adivasis*, irrespective of their nationality, region, tribe, community or clan. A study of the writings of *adivasis*, and even of *dikus*, who have written about *adivasis*, be it in poetry, fiction or non-fiction, reveals that the very culture of the *adivasis* is irrevocably intertwined with the world of nature. In their discourse, not only does nature occupy a prominent pride of place but figures as an individual entity with its own independent existence, laws and principles of being. Yet another aspect brought to light during the study of the aforementioned category of works is that the tribal way of life is the most sustainable one – be it in the observation of rituals and ceremonies, or the celebration of festivals – such that even though they may rely heavily upon nature and its resources, they are committed wholeheartedly towards its wellbeing, health and safekeeping.

Keywords : *Adivasi*; ecological balance; cultural discourse.

It was in the late 19th century, when the concerns regarding the wellbeing of planet Earth and the natural environment began to be first raised in Europe and North American. Two centuries later, the concerns still exist, and we as an entire race of people are fumbling to find a foothold that is a middle path that strikes balance between exploitation of natural resources and conservation of the resources that nature's bounty has bestowed upon us. At a juncture when the entirety of the human race is

standing at cross roads trying to figure out how best to strike a balance between use of natural resources for the purpose and development, and at the same time maintaining the wellbeing of Planet Earth, it would be pertinent if we sought to take a lesson or two from the people who have, since almost the prehistoric times, served as the umbilical cord of nature. A nature-centric lifestyle and sustainable living have always governed the very ethos and cultural discourse of the *Adivasis*, irrespective of their nationality, region, tribe, community or clan. A study of the writings of *Adivasis*, and even of *Dikus*, who have written about *Adivasis*, be it in poetry, fiction or non-fiction, reveals that the very culture of the *Adivasis* is irrevocably intertwined with the world of nature. In their discourse, not only does nature occupy a prominent pride of place but figures as an individual entity with its own independent existence, laws and principles of being. Yet another aspect brought to light during the study of the aforementioned category of works is that the tribal way of life is the most sustainable one – be it in the observation of rituals and ceremonies, or the celebration of festivals – such that even though they may rely heavily upon nature and its resources, they are committed wholeheartedly towards its wellbeing, health and safekeeping.

The religion of the indigenous people is usually referred to as animism or nature worship by the outsiders and the prime reason behind this is the fact that be it any tribe across the globe, the practice of their religion and the basis of their belief stems from the fact that the world of nature is a manifestation of the Supreme One or Supreme Being who is the creator of the universe, and it is a consequence of this Nature is treated as an individual entity. According to the *Sarna dharam*, Sing Bonga is the Great Spirit who created the universe and all that it contains and while the created world is the “first basic principle”, Sing Bonga is himself part of the great circle of scheme of things, implying that though he is the creator, he himself is not greater than his creation and cannot exist apart from it.

In the philosophy of Christianity, the Trione God is not only the Creator, and the center of creation, He is also believed to be all-encompassing and above all creation, God, the Father is the Creator, Who created man in His own image and the world of nature for man, who is the crown of creation. According to Hindu philosophy, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva form the Holy Trinity, wherein Brahma is the creator and Brahman is the highest universal principle as well as the ultimate reality and metaphysically, is the binding force of all that exists in the universe. With regard to both of the aforementioned religions, the creator is the

supreme being, a similarity shared with the beliefs of tribal religions; however, following this is a major point of contrast, which is that in both Christian and Hindu religions, the Supreme One is above his creation.

Also, among tribes, especially of Native American origin, there exists a strong association between geography and the mythic world of nature. It is the belief that when the world was first created, all aspects of creations were once human and that form was fluid. In the mythology of many of these, it has been mentioned that the mountains of the Northwest, referring to the Rocky Mountains range in North America, were once people and had come to be immovable masses of land as punishment by the One, for making too much trouble. With the passage of time, when physical form ceased to be fluid and the natural world came to be fixed, it was their spirits that came to be with the humans and became united with human form by means of totems and charms. "Rivers, lakes, waterfalls and mountains are abodes of spirits and often appear as living characters in stories." (Erdoes & Ortiz, xii)

The relationship that exists between the culture of tribals and the world of nature is singular in approach and execution. According to the definition of culture as given by Robert Morrison MacIver, "Culture is the expression of our nature in our modes of living and our thinking, intercourse, in literature, in religion, in recreation and enjoyment." (49) Building upon the above premise, if one were to closely scrutinize the various aspects of the cultures of the *Adivasi* people, be it their everyday routine, or be it important occasions such as rituals of initiation, marriage or death or be it festivals, all have as their fulcrum, the world of nature in all its aspects, be it grandeur or dearth.

In India itself, there are about 705 ethnic groups, recognized as such by the Constitution of India and broadly categorized as Scheduled Tribes. While each of them have different origins and are scattered throughout the vast geography of the land, they are all united in the fact that their culture is particularly nature-centric. For instance the tribes of Jharkhand, those that still follow the *Sarna dharam*, celebrate festivals of Sarhul, Karam and Sohrai, among others, which are primarily nature festivals – to celebrate the onset of spring, to commemorate fertility, or to honour cattle as gods for having assisted the humans in their toil. In the North-eastern states of India, the renowned Hornbill Festival of Nagaland is an elaborate ten day affair to commemorate the bird, Great Indian Hornbill which finds pride of place in the myths and legends of almost all the Naga tribes. Towards the west, in Rajasthan, the Bhils, who are reportedly the

largest tribe in India, second only to the Santhals, too celebrate many native festivals like *Diwasa*, *Nawai*, *Bhagoria*, *Gal*, *Gar*, *Dhobi*, *Sanja*, *Indel*, *Dohaand Gavari*, in addition to mainstream festivals such as Navratri, Diwali, Rakshabandhan and Dussehra. The native festivals celebrated by them are particularly nature oriented wherein the rituals require the performers to be in reverent and constant contact with the spirit of the world of nature, one in soul and being.

According to the view of Robert Cummings Neville, in his foreword to Rodney L. Taylor, in *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism*, Neville is of the view that rituals and traditions are but aspects of religion; similarly, culture is composed of beliefs, customs, rituals and traditions. Building upon the above premise, the concept of Shamanism may be seen under the aegis of culture, custom and tradition. Just as there are priests and high priests who head the religious communities of the major religions, in the same manner are the shamans who are the link between the Great Spirit and the human realm. They are the high priests of both nature and of humans, although they may be referred to by various names such as; Healer, Witch Doctor, Wise Man or Wise Woman, as per the custom of the region, they are basically kindred spirits, one with the spirits of the water, air, soil, forests, stones, and so on. Their spirit is in such a state of communion with the spirit realm of nature that they are able to foretell events of the past, the present and the future and can even decipher the patterns of the winds and the rain.

Another aspect of this oneness with nature translates into the concept of the transmigration of souls, that is, believing that all aspects of nature are endowed with soul and spirit, those that share a connection with each other may easily move from one body to another, without having to change form. In the Walt Disney animation movie, 'Brother Bear', which is set against the backdrop of Alaska and follows a story of the Inuit tribe, the concept of transmigration of souls is explored, according to which, humans, after death take the form of the animal who is conferred upon them as a totem during the coming of age ceremony. Even when alive this transmigration can be made to happen under special circumstances, one of them being the occurrence of the Aurora Borealis, which is referred to by the Inuits as the phenomenon of the 'lights touching the earth' and coinciding with the spirits momentarily taking material form.

The indigenous people are the best example there is, who embody the concept of sustainable living and a healthy symbiosis with nature and its resources. Tribals are the unofficial custodians of nature

and function as nature's umbilical cord. While it is from them that the practice of using natural resources to one's benefit may be imbibed, it is also from them that discretion and sustenance in doing so, may be learnt. The consciousness of using within means without putting into jeopardy the threshold capacity of nature, stems from the knowledge that nature is a benign force that has the capacity to react should it be subject to over exploitation. In *Sosobonga*, is narrated one such story of the Asur tribe, one of the major tribes that reside in Jharkhand and its neighbouring states.

The *Asurs* are said to have been the most intelligent and industrious of the tribes created by the Great Spirit, and it was they who discovered the art of smelting iron from its ores. When at first they set up a furnace for the purpose, they were successful in obtaining iron from which could be made stronger ploughshares and more advanced equipments and hence became more prosperous as compared to the other tribes. However, the passage of time, they became greedy and forgot the principle of sustenance, such that began to set up furnaces at almost every place, and began to work in them by day and by night. While the Asurs continued to forge iron, they did not pay heed to the fact that the heat and the smoke from the furnace was wreaking havoc upon the crops, the forests and the rest of the vegetation :

Trees and plants
Leaves and foliage
They are burning
They are on fire
Animals, creatures
Birds and the like
Do not get water
Do not get air. (Munda, 81)

The condition is such that Sing Bonga and Earth Mother themselves had to intervene; and when upon repeatedly being asked to curtail their appetite for iron and its riches, they did not pay heed, Sing Bonga and Earth Mother were enraged and vexed with their disobedient and greedy children they were struck down by disease and famine, and the fire in the furnace was put out. The Asurs were desperate to have their furnaces up and running once again and even agreed to resort to human sacrifices. In the process of the sacrifice, they were tricked by Sing Bonga and his messengers into sacrificing themselves at the furnace, one by one till there were no Asur men left. Even the women who were left behind were not shown mercy were pushed away towards the rivers valleys, ponds, hills, caves and deep into the sacred groves, so that

those who died on the hills became Hill Spirits, those who died in the forests became *Chandi* Spirits, those who died in the ponds became *Nage* Spirits, and so forth were forever bound to nature to serve and take care of the hills, rivers, ponds and forests.

In the mythology of many of the Native Americans, such as the Brule tribe, the world has been destroyed twice – by fire and by flood because it was thrown into jeopardy and imbalance. And the third time that it was given life by the turtle, the Creating Power warned all will be well only till “the two-legged, the four-legged, the many-legged, the fliers, the no legs, the green plants of this universe”(Erdoes and Ortiz, 499), could all live in peace and harmony. However, the onslaught of the White Man had been predicted long before they actually encountered one in life. It was predicted that the *Wasichu*, as the White Man is referred to in legend, would bring an end to their way of life and bring in its stead; evil, sickness, war, death and destruction, that is, an end to sustenance and balance.

As Chief Seattle says in his famous speech of 1854 during the treaty negotiations with the Governor of Washington Territory, “Tribe follows tribe, and nation follows nation, like the ways of the sea. It is the order of nature, and regret is useless...”(33) It is embedded deep in the subconscious of the people that no matter how much greatness is achieved or riches be amassed in the physical realm, it will amount to nothing once one has passed on to the spirit realm, and then all that counts is that they are joined with their ancestors in and are one in spirit with the living. It is with this in mind that they go upon the business of their lives, knowing well that in the sustenance of their land is the well being of themselves and their progeny.

Hence, be it *Adivasis* or *Dikus*, it is the need of the hour to take heed and pay attention to the signs that Mother Nature has been giving since quite some time. While nature, is meant to be at the disposal of mankind, to be made full use of, it is implicitly prescribed that the humans, the designated crown of creation, should be indeed more mindful of the way in which nature and its many blessings, are put to use and that imminent destruction is averted.

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