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THE EARTH MOTHER AND THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF INDIA

Children of the Earth Mother

A lion's share of the primeval people of India consider that their ancestors have appeared on earth as and when the Earth Mother gave birth to them; then she took care of them, fed them, protected them, developed them and finally called them back through the process of death. The *Juangs* of Orissa believe that the first *Juang* emerged out of the Earth Mother and all of their posterity are her children. They have a filial relationship with the earth. To the *Muria Gonds* of Bastar, the human population is one of the crops of God raised by Earth Mother. These crops are in favour of the clan. As the crops depend on the soil, all the beings in the world rely on Earth Mother. Her presence is all pervading and all encompassing. She is the common mother to all. The *Munda* of Jharkhand revere the Earth as the goddess who gives birth to them; at the point of death she will take them back into her lap. In the Near Eastern tribal tradition the first human being is called Adam, meaning made out of earth or clay. So too Sita means the furrow, daughter of the earth. As Vannucci points out, "Sita the generous goes unscathed through the ordeal of fire and at the end she returns to Mother Earth, cleansed by water and purified by fire"¹. Originated from earth, humans have to return to earth. "You are dust and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19b). In fact the whole of a life cycle-birth, growth, occupation, marriage, death - all are related to earth. The dead are commemorated by erecting memorial stones on the ground. The earth remains as a reminder to the tribals of their ancestors and of themselves. Since the tribal life revolves around the Earth Mother, they treat her as their own preserver, protector, progenitor and above all the most revered and respected Mother.

Worship as a Duty

The Earth Mother is adored and admired by many tribal groups. Paying homage to her is perceived as a duty by the clan members; accor-

1. M. Vannucci, "Tradition and Change," in G. Sen (Ed), *Indigenous Vision* (New Delhi: Sage Publications 1992), p. 25.

dingly they pay respect to her individually as well as a community. The *Muria Gonds* of Bastar affectionately address her as *Tallur Muttai*; it is a personification of the Earth Mother. She is often glorified in their songs and legends. They perform a number of rituals to invoke her blessings on the fields of cultivation. According to Grigson, "they touch the ground and raise their hands to the foreheads repeating the following formula, '*Bhum kenji!*' Earth hearken! Mother hearken! All that is here and around hearken! Let our crops and vegetables grow here, let them grow and yield full increase! Let our kutki ripen! Let our cucumbers and pumpkins mature!"² The *Muria Gonds* will start their agricultural operations just after this worship; Bereft of it, their fields will be cursed. Like the *Muria*, the *Santals* too have personified Earth Mother as *Jaher Era* and extol her in their worship. For the *Warlis* of Maharashtra *Dhartari* (the Earth Goddess) is one of the most esteemed deities. The *Muthuans*, *Uralis* and *Kanikkars* of Kerala pay homage to her as the Sun comes out of the Earth Mother everyday. Earth Goddess is central to the worship of *Muria* and *Abujmarhia Gonds* of Bastar in Madhya Pradesh. For the *Bondo* of Orissa Earth Mother is one of the important deities of their pantheon. During the Karma festival, the *Oraons* of Jharkhand ceremoniously bring the Karam branch and plant it at the '*akhra*', dancing ground, in order to preserve the various forces of the earth. To all these indigenous people the Earth Mother is the very source of life, vegetation and fertility. No work of importance will be undertaken without invoking her name and requesting for her blessings. On all chief occasions worship of the Earth Mother is a sine qua non for the primeval community.

Blood Sacrifices

The worship of the Earth Goddess which is observed as one's duty has assumed different forms and shapes in course of time. In olden days there were human sacrifices in order to appease the Earth Mother. It is continued sporadically in a few places. This is because of the strong belief that human blood is the best form of sacrifice; running of the blood through the earth can ensure a better crop. Among the human modes of sacrifices, the *Meriah* sacrifice of the *Khonds* of Orissa is quite well known. Their prayers and salutations reveal the purpose of the sacrifice. Mahapatra has recorded their invocation to Earth Mother as follows:

2. Grigson, *The Muria Gonds of Bastar*, Reprint, (Bhopal : Vanyap, 1991) p. 130.

Let no famine visit our land,
Let no calamity plague our people.
Our land and this earth -
Let them be in peace.
Let everything be in plenty
Like the siali and gulchi creepers,
Let our crops flourish.
This offering we make
To Thee, O Dhartani³

Shedding of human blood was found to be the supreme form of sacrifice among a number of primitive people. As time passed on, human sacrifices were substituted by animals; then offering of grains, pulses, fruits, flowers etc. Elwin has narrated this transition from a legend prevalent among the *Muria Gonds* who were performing human sacrifice. 'Once a *Muria* thought of worshipping the Earth Mother. But he had nothing to offer; finally he decided to offer the most important gift in his life, his own daughter. He covered her whole body with soot to make her black and forced her to walk on all fours like a black cow. Then he went to the jungle to worship Mother Earth. On the way he met Lingo driving a cow. Lingo said, 'O man, where are you going?' 'I am going to worship Mother Earth'. 'What are you going to sacrifice?'. 'I have nothing to give but my own daughter and I am going to sacrifice her'. Then Lingo said, 'Give me your daughter and I will give you my cow'. From that day the *Muria* have not offered human beings to the Earth Mother but taught by Lingo, have sacrificed cattle'.⁴ This tradition is faithfully kept by the *Muria* even today. Among the *Dongaria Khonds* buffaloes are sacrificed since it is essential for a good harvest from the soil.

Village Puja

At present the Earth Mother is venerated by the primitive communities in different names. Invariably in every village there is a village goddess. A shrine is set apart in her honour and festivals are celebrated in her name. In the context of a number of gods and goddesses, there is a confusion regarding the role and function

3. S. Mahapatra "Invocation: Rites of Propitiation in Tribal Societies," in G. Sen, (Ed), *Indigenous Vision*, op.cit., p.68.

4. V. Elwin, *The Muria and Their Ghotul* (Reprint) Bhopal: Vanya Prakashan, 1991, p. 258.

of the Earth Mother in some communities. The most archaic form of the Earth Mother transcends all specificity and sexuality. However, in the mythological systems she becomes a more limited Mother Goddess. The Mother Goddess is the feminine earth, consort of the masculine sky. The Mother Goddess has to undergo intercourse in order to be fruitful and productive. One such instance is the *Sarhul* festival of the *Oraons*. When the sal trees are in full blossom, a symbolic marriage of the Sun with the Earth is enacted. This ensures the fertility of the mother earth. The *Muria Gonds* have identified the Earth Mother with goddess Danteswari, the tutelary goddess of Bastar; They continue to worship a number of other gods and goddesses. Their predicament is summarised by Elwin, "When the Muria worships either Gaon Matal, Jimmedarin Matal, Thakurain, Danteswari Matal, Maoli or indeed anyother Matal, he is really thinking of Tallur Muttai or the Earth"⁵ It follows that the gods and goddesses of the *Muria* have a fundamental and basic relation with earth. The soul of the earth is penetrating into all other beings in the cosmos. There is an organic link of man with nature, persons, gods and goddesses.

Land is Life

Owing to the symbiotic relationship with everything in nature, the primitive people are directly in contact and communion with their ecosystem. The indigenous people have developed their culture by coping with the exigencies of their immediate ecology. The land becomes a pivotal point in their endeavours of coping with the realities in nature. Land is central to the original inhabitants' lives, to their history, their culture, their identity, their spirituality, their economy and to their very survival. Land is sacred to the indigenous people; it is the abode of the Earth Mother; She provides various fruits and crops for feeding her children. The land is given to them as a community by God; it is a gift for the clan. The demarcation of the villages, cultivating fields, new residential areas etc. are not done by human beings according to their whims and fancies; These are done in accordance with the revelations received from the gods and goddesses from time to time. The attitude of the *Muria Gonds* is written by Grigson, "For them to raise their sustenance he (God) divided up the land amongst the clans and the clan area among the villages,

5. V. Elwin, *Ibid*; p. 182.

and in each clan and village he appointed priests or headmen who alone might communicate with him, and to whose first ancestor he revealed the clan and village boundaries, which knowledge has been handed down from father to son".⁶ The oral tradition passed on from one generation to another, contains the soul of their history, their ancestors, fields of cultivation etc. The communion with the gods and goddesses is being continued through the authorised religious functionaries. The pujari, headman and the bhumihaar generally hold the tribal heritage in tact. If the bhumihaar locates a better area for residence, the pujari and the headman are called in; they perform elaborate puja to ward off the evil spirits. They have to know the designs of the divine; and the residence will be started only after the sanctification of the territory. This custom is strictly followed among the *Maria Gonds* of Maharashtra. The predominant tribal residential areas too prove the above fact. For instance, the *Gondwana* is the habitat of the *Gonds* who were rulers of the Gond Kingdom; *Bhilwara* is the dwelling place of the *Bhils*; Nilgiri is the abode of the *Toda*; Jharkhand is the home of a host of tribes like the *Munda*, *Ho*, *Santal*, *Oraon*; Bastar is the domicile of the *Muria*, *Maria*, *Abujmarhia*, *Bhatra*, *Halba*. The North Eastern states are known by the main tribal groups like the Naga, Mizo, Manipuri, Tripuri. When people migrate to other areas in search of job or studies, they will refer back to their original roots at home. Hence, the territorial affiliation is taken as a distinguishing mark of the tribal community. It shows the importance of land as the hallmark of tribal history and identity. Landlessness is equal to rootlessness. And it leads to an identity crisis.

Besides the divinely ordered nature of the land, it is the heritage of the tribal ancestors. The ancestors have toiled and laboured in the same area; they are buried in their locality; their bones are interred in their territory and are finally taking rest there. So the land is a sacred place of communion with their ancestors and spirits. Their past history is enshrined in the lives of the ancestors. Hence, they are worshipped and remembered in their religious practices.

Land being a gift from the Earth Mother is not in possession of an individual; since it is a generous gift, it is shared; the ownership is in

6. Grigson, *op. cit.* p. 197.

common. According to the divine plan, the leaders of the community divide the land for cultivation; even then the work is done on the basis of a co-operative; all join hands together at the time of cultivation and harvesting. The land gets priority over the individual; It is not that the land belongs to him or her; but that he or she is belonging to the land. Individuals may come and go; but the land as a medium of communication with the spirits and ancestors continue to exercise more influence. The communitarian character of the Hill Maria is described by Grigson as follows: "The Hill Maria still regards the crops as the result of the combined labours of the village rather than of the labours of individuals. If one suffers, all suffer and all combine to support the old and needy, and to help each fellow villager to get through the heaviest parts of the yearly agricultural round. In the raising of crops, then, the village and not the individual cultivator is the unit in the Abujhmar hills".⁷ The world view of the tribals behind the common ownership, co-operative work and sharing of the produce is a hard nut to crack for the capitalists. The capitalist see the land as an object of permanent agriculture under legal individual right; the tribal world view is diametrically opposed to mercantalism and individualism. Superimposition of the laissez faire values have destroyed and devastated the corporate rights of the original inhabitants.

Traditionally the tribals are the custodians of the forest land; They are the natives and kings of the jungle. They depend upon the forest as a source of sustenance provided by the Earth Mother. The various roots, tubers, barks, fruits, flowers, leaves, herbs etc. which appear at different seasons form a major portion of their diet. They collect the wood, bamboo, grass and straw for constructing houses and for making handi-crafts. The forest is also a source of indigenous medicines which are really a panacea for the tribals. The forest land is sacred to the tribals because of the religious and magical beliefs connected to it; some of the flora and fauna are objects of worship for the primitive people. In terms of the traditional occupation, modes of thinking, music and dance etc one can say that the tribal life is punctuated by the forest ecology. Their common hunting and sharing of the catch, their turning towards the rhythms of nature, their melody and tempo of music and dance reflect the pulse of the forest.

7. Grigson, *Ibid*, p. 197.

Access to the forest has been curtailed by the new legislations. As the SC/ST Commissioner has pointed out in the 28th Report, "A crucial distinguishing feature of the tribal society is their association with a territory to which they belong and command over which is sanctified by their tradition. The first blow to this ingrained belief came with the reservation of forests in the name of scientific management by the colonial rulers but with an eye on its exploitation for purposes of revenue".⁸ The situation has not changed even today with new rules and regulations. In all such forest policies the tribal world view is conveniently set aside and ignored. Their command over land, forest and resources is never recognized. The tribal people have come to a covenanted relationship with gods, spirits, ancestors and among themselves in and through the land. So the land is not merely an economic factor but it is an inalienable inheritance, a part and parcel of their personality, identity, security and freedom. The recently formulated International Chapter of the Indigenous has declared that "All policies towards the forests must be based on a respect for cultural diversity, for a promotion of indigenous models of living and an understanding that our peoples have developed ways of life closely attuned to our environment".⁹ Any genuine forest policy must take into account the above mentioned aspects seriously.

Lords of the Soil

Although the tribes today have to struggle for their very survival, still some of them keep up their age old traditions and beliefs. One of them is the Baiga tribes of Madhya Pradesh; they are called to be the Lords of the Soil, owing to their total identification and emotional attachment to Earth Mother. They venerate earth as their holy mother. She is the source of knowledge and wisdom; She has imparted knowledge regarding the values of forest, trees, vegetables, grass, leaves, flowers, seeds, medicinal plants etc. By giving such precious knowledge to the Baiga, she has made them lords and masters of the jungle. They claim to possess the exclusive secrets of shifting cultivation which is considered to be a superior form of cultivation. According to Elwin the Baiga are very clear about their vocation in life based on

8. SC/ST Commissioner's Report, Extracts in *Dalit Voice*, Dec. 16-31, 1989, p.19.

9. Article 5 of the Charter of the Indigenous Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests, Penang, 1992, p.1.

the blessing of God, "All the kingdoms of the world may fall to pieces, but he who is made of earth and is Bhumiaraaja, lord of the earth, shall never forsake it. You will make your living from the earth You must not tear the breasts of your Mother the Earth with the plough like the Gond and Hindu. You will cut down trees and burn them and sow the seed in the ashes. But you will never become rich, for if you did you would forsake the earth and then there would be no one to guard it and keep its nails in place".¹⁰

Cult of the Shifting Cultivation

The Baiga have accepted their vocation and have kept up the secrets of the shifting cultivation in tact. There are various legends regarding the origins of shifting cultivation. The most prevalent among them is narrated by Russell and Hiralal; "In the beginning God created Nanga Baiga and Nangi Baigin, the first of human race and asked them by what calling they would choose to live? They at once said that they would make their living by felling trees in the jungle and permission being accorded have done so ever since. They had two sons, one of whom remained a Baiga while the other became a Gond, a tiller of the soil. In another version of the story the first Baiga cut down two thousand old sal trees in one day and God told him to sprinkle a few grains of kutki on the ashes and then to retire and sleep for some months. When on his return he would be able to reap a rich harvest for his children. In this manner the habit of shifting cultivation is accorded divine sanction".¹¹ To the Baiga God has revealed the secret magic of shifting cultivation and they are proud about it; and they look down on the Gond, whose vocation in life is to be a tiller of the soil. In the eyes of a Baiga the use of plough is an inferior form of cultivation. And it is a taboo for the children of Earth Mother. In fact the Baiga are incapable of wounding their mother through the laceration of the plough. They simply ask, how can you plough through the breasts of your own mother who delivered and provided generously for your upbringing? It is a heinous crime. If you yield to plough you will be standing on the sinful earth. This divinely sanctioned belief has paved the way for the continuation of shifting cultivation among the Baiga. Besides the Baiga, about ten percent of the total tribal population

10. V. Elwin, *The Baiga* (Reprint), (Delhi: Gian Publishing House), p. 106-7.

11. Russell & Hiralal *Tribes and Castes of the Central Province of India* Vol. 3 (reprint) (Delhi: Rajdhani Book Centre, 1975), p. 71

in India still practise shifting cultivation. It is known by different names in different places. In Orissa it is known as Koman, in Andhra Pradesh as Podu, in Madhya Pradesh as Bewar, in Bihar as Kureo, in Assam as Jhum, in Nagaland as Tekonglu, in Arunachal Pradesh as Adiabik, in Tripura as Hooknismany etc. In about 15 states a total area of five million hectares are covered by shifting cultivation in India. As per this method ploughing is forbidden and there is no need of domesticating animals; instead the cultivators repose total faith in the efficacy of Earth Mother. At the end of summer the slope lands are chosen, the bushes, shrubs and trees are cut and burned; the ashes are supposed to provide manure. Before the onset of monsoon once again the bushes will be set fire to; as soon as the rains come in the seeds will be broadcasted; the remaining efforts are perceived to be in the hands of the earth mother. As a rule they can get the harvest for a three year term consecutively from the same area. When the land becomes infertile that portion is left fallow for recouping and the field of cultivation is shifted to another site. The religious belief behind leaving the land is important. Grigson observes, "The Maria leaves his penda slope for another after two or three years because the god is suffering from having too much nourishment extracted from that slope, but he will return to it when the god has recovered from his exhaustion"¹² The god of the land is given a sabbath for regaining the lost health and the shifting of the site of cultivation is done out of respect to him. The Maria Gonds of Bhamragad in Maharashtra claim that their original home was in Abujmahar in Bastar; but as their land became infertile, some of them travelled across in search of the red soil; they found it abundantly in Bhamragad region and settled there. In the shifting cultivation the tribals keep up the bio-diversity; there are a lot of varieties of seeds which take different times and tastes. The kutki seeds have the following varieties: Arku, Turi, Budki, Lan, Koli, Goman and Goha. Thus the shifting cultivation is not merely one of the methods of agricultural operations but it is a way of life for the primitive people. Their attitude towards the Earth Mother is unique; their mutual concern, care and solidarity are remarkable; Their ownership of land is in common. Music and dance have become a part and parcel of their everyday existence. There is no solo music; but it is a communitarian item. The pace and rhythm of music and the stepping of dances are conditioned by the pattern of terrain in which they live. During

12. Grigson; *op. cit.* p. 197.

the Bihu festival in Assam they have various types of dances; one of the notable features of these dances is that they will never raise their feet from ground but only slip one step to another in the movement of dancing. The Earth Mother is honoured and esteemed in every walk of life of the tribals.

Mango Festival of the Maria

Apart from glorifying the Earth Mother in agricultural operations, the Maria Gonds extol the products produced by her and bestowed on them. The most celebrated event is the Mango festival known as Macca Pindum among them. During the summer when the mangoes are about to ripen the pujari is invited to perform puja; before that no one is supposed to touch the mangoes even if they are ripen; perfect control is insisted by the whole community so much so that not even a single individual or child break the norm; severe punishments are meted out if the custom is not abided by. After the performance of puja they start eating the mangoes and other fruits of the season. The mangoes are not plucked all on a sudden; there is a religiosity in its consumption. The consumption is need based; no one will pick up the mangoes more than what is needed for the use of the day. The remaining mangoes are left on the tree itself, making them available for other potential users; there is a consideration for others in the tribal community as well as reverence and respect for the products given by Earth Mother. They follow an ethics of conservation and not of consumerism which is based on greed. This way of life is quite natural and spontaneous to the tribals; it is the secret of maintaining a sustainable ecology. They have high esteem for the Earth Mother who provides generously for all; the fruits of the earth are accepted as gifts from the mother and are used for their daily sustenance without being bothered about tomorrow or keeping for a rainy day.

Follow the Earth Mother

In the Maria community the role of a woman is to follow the course of Earth Mother. The ideal and norm set in the society is based upon the generous nature of Earth Mother who delivers, cares and feeds her children. They have a legend in which this aspect is brought to light. It is as follows: The Earth and the Sun are the parents; once they went for a dinner; they ate very tasty food and

appreciated the dinner; while the Sun, father, took all that were provided there, the Earth, mother, kept a little in her mouth. When they returned home the Sun felt like taking the tasty food again. The Earth told him to open the mouth widely and spit out; a few invisible particles came out which the Maria believe are the invisible parts of the solar system. But when the Earth opened her mouth and spat there came out the preserved particles which formed the visible and shining stars of the sky. The Earth because she has preserved the food she is treated as the reservoir of food and nourishment. A woman in Maria society has to emulate the role of earth; she has to prepare and keep food ready for the family and nourish them; she is given the work of looking after the children, taking care of them and developing them into mature people. In a Maria house generally the woman sleeps on the floor; if cots are available they are left for men; the woman enjoys being in touch with the earth. In all their imagination and definition of the role of a woman in the society they look upto earth mother as the torch bearer and imitates her.

On the Golden Hilltops

The attitude of the tribals towards Earth and its products is one of respect and reverence; so they accept the nature as a gift from earth and they never come in the way of utilization of nature by others. If we examine any tribal belts we can see that they are all filled with a large number of minerals which are exploited by non-tribals. The tribal areas are depositories of rich minerals and they are sitting on the top of the golden mountains without being aware of it. Take the case of the tribals in Bastar; the best quality of iron ore in the whole of Asia comes from Bailadilla which belongs to Bastar in Madhya Pradesh. It brings about 700 crores per year; besides the iron ore there are a number of other minerals available in Bastar. The local tribals believe that these are the manifold gifts of Earth Mother, whom now they call as Danteswari. She has provided these golden hillocks for her children. Jharkhand is another area in which the tribals are concentrated; the various enriched minerals found here are about 98 percent of the total mineral output of the whole of Bihar. What is significant is that while the tribals foster esteem for the natural gifts bestowed upon them, the industrialization has augmented an attitude of ruthless commercial exploitation, bereft of the human face of development.

Eviction from the Land and Forest

The various Forest and Land Laws enacted from time to time have given a deathblow to the time tested oral traditions of the tribals. Superimposition of the written laws upon the illiterate indigenous people of India has led to a clash of cultures. According to the unwritten tradition of the tribals, the land is sacred; it is a place of communion with their gods, spirits, ancestors and of the community itself; the transaction of it is contrary to the laws of nature; buying and selling are akin to acts of treason to the spiritual powers on which life itself is based upon. On the otherhand, according to the written traditions of the non-tribals the land and forest are assessed from merely a mercantile point of view; written documents and proofs are needed to establish the ownership. The ruling classes have enacted laws without letting the affected parties know the contents and consequences and literally confiscated their land and forest for which the tribals have an inalienable right as they were residing there for centuries. The original inhabitants were evicted from their abodes through the freezing bombardment of written laws, rules and regulations. Deprived and dispossessed of the land, they have become people without a history, culture and identity,

Lievens and Land

When the tribals were evicted from their land they had to struggle for their very existence; they were uprooted from the Earth Mother and were in utter dismay. But they were ready to co-operate with anyone who lend a hand to them in regaining the lost land. A typical example is that of Fr. Constant Lievens. He came to India in 1885 to work for the spread of Christianity. There were no proper roads or communication facilities in those days in Bihar. So he travelled on horseback, getting into the interior villages; With zest and zeal he laboured vigorously for an year among the people. But to his utter disappointment not a single individual accepted Christianity. He analysed the cause of his failure with the Jamadar, police officer, in whose house he was residing. The Jamadar of Torpa said, "If you concentrate on their land which is already lost to the aliens, you can get any number of followers".¹³ Lievens thought

13. "Clarysse, Lievens and the Missionary" in *Indian Missiological Review*, VII, no.1 (Jan; 1985), p. 21

well over it and started to work as per the advice of his friend. When he succeeded in the first case, the news spread like wild fire. From far and near tribals flocked before him and they were ready to do anything in order to regain their lost land; it became a mass movement. Within four years he could regain the lost lands of 73263 tribal people. This clearly brings to light the impact of tribal consciousness on land.

Indigenous People's Year

1993 is declared as the International Year of the Indigenous People. Their world-view about the Earth Mother and their attitude to sustainable living should be an eye opener to the non-tribals all over the world. Apart from the achievements of science and technology, there are gems of wisdom from the traditional lives of people. In the words of Maurice F. Strong, "Asian and Pacific countries have developed patterns of agricultural and rural life and effective methods of land and water management that have been sustainable over many centuries".¹⁴ This traditional wisdom needs to be the guiding light in the years ahead. Those who live on earth must keep in mind the following Article of the recently concluded Charter of the Indigenous People:

Our territories and forests are to us more than an economic resource. For us, they are life itself and have an integral and spiritual value for our communities. They are fundamental to our social, cultural, spiritual, economic and political survival.¹⁵

14. F.M. Strong, "Only One Earth", in Sen, G (Ed) *Indigenous Vision*, op. cit., p. 49

15 Article 3 of the Charter of the Indigenous Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests, Penang, 1992, p. 1.