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THE HUMAN PERSON : PERSPECTIVE OF THE PRIMEVAL PEOPLE

Ecological diversities

The primeval people are the earliest settlers of a region; they are also known as indigenous people, original inhabitants, adivasis, tribals or Scheduled Tribes. More accurately, they are the earliest migrants who have established a reciprocal relationship with their immediate ecology. There are 200 million indigenous people all over the globe, divided into more than 2000 ethnic groups. Roughly three quarters of them live in Asia.

After Africa, India houses the largest number of tribals in the world. Indian tribals have a glorious tradition stretching continuously from the pre-historic past. Paleoanthropologists have found *Homo erectus* skulls from the Pleistocene bed in Narmada valley as a proof of the antiquity of prehistoric people in India. From the pre-historic times to the present, tribals have been an important segment of Indian population. According to the 1991 census, 7.95% of the total population in India are tribals. All the Scheduled Tribes belong to different ethnic groups, linguistic classes, religious faiths, economic categories which range from the paleolithic hunters and gatherers to the modern industrial workers. Their habitats are clustered around isolated hills and dense forests. In their struggle with their respective ecological diversities, they have developed various patterns of adaptation. In the words of Raza and Ahmad, "Constrained by a rigorous environment which has fostered physical and social isolation for ages, the tribal communities have developed their own traditional mode of living."¹ These adaptations have paved the way for the prevalence of cultural pluralism in India. Hence, the primeval people have a rich and varied profile of the human person. The present paper is restricted to a few groups among whom the author has stayed for four years at different intervals.

1. M. Raza and A. Ahmad, *An atlas of tribal India* (New Delhi: Concept publishing company, 1990), p.5.

The Human person in the community

When one lives among the tribals, one can become an insider of their community, can participate in many of the activities and can know them at close quarters. One of the most outstanding features of the primeval people is to perceive the human person as a part and parcel of a living and vibrating community. The community members are ever alert and conscious of their individuals. The individual gives top priority to the concerns of the community. Apart from the community, the individual has no role or existence. It is the larger community of houses termed clan that gets predominance. Generally, the clan emerges from an ancient leader. The followers identify themselves as descendants of the clan leader and pay homage to the line of ancestors. Thus an individual belongs to a large network of clan relationships. The Madia Gonds of Bastar have a pertinent saying, "The human population is the crop of men that the Earth raises for the clan."² There are two vital dimensions of the human person implied in this statement. One is the source and the other is the purpose of the human population. The source is Mother Earth. Just as the crops depend on the soil, all the beings rely upon Mother Earth. She is the common Mother to all-humans, animals and plants. The aim of the Earth in raising the humans is in favour of the clan. Individuals may come and go; they are not counted much; but the clan goes on. Therefore, the clan members take keen interest in propitiating Mother Earth.

Worship and blood sacrifice

Mother Earth is often personified and worshipped by the tribals. She is glorified in their legends and songs. She is propitiated through rituals and ceremonies. Paying homage to her is a must before the agricultural operations; bereft of it the land will be unproductive and cursed. The Madia Gonds, as reported by Grigson, invoke Mother Earth in the following way, "they touch the ground and raise their hands to the foreheads repeating the following formula; "Earth, hearken! Mother, hearken! All that is here, hearken! Let our crops and vegetables grow here, let them grow and yield full increase! Let our millet ripen. Let our cucumbers and pumpkins

2. W. Grigson, *The Madia Gonds of Bastar*, Reprint (Bhopal : Vanya Prakashan, 1991), p. 125.

naturel."³ The Madia Gonds faithfully follow this tradition even today. Worship of Mother Earth is considered as a duty of the clan.

The Muthuans, Uralis and Kanikkars of Kerala believe that the sun comes out of Mother Earth everyday. So they pay obeisance to her at the dawn of the day. The Todas of Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu hold that their God On and his wife brought buffaloes from the Earth. "Behind On's buffaloes there came out of the earth a man, holding the tail of the last buffalo and this was the first Toda."⁴ Accordingly Mother Earth is given due respect and reverence by the Todas.

Mother Earth is treated by many tribals as a living entity. Her sacredness has compelled the devotees to offer human persons as sacrifice. Shedding of the human blood on earth is believed to bring fertility to the land and prosperity to the clan. Thus individuals were sacrificed for the sake of the clan. The elaborate ceremonies and rituals of Meriah sacrifice of the Khonds of Orissa is an illustration. Among the Madia Gonds too this custom was prevalent for a long time. The human sacrifice was later switched over to animal sacrifice in course of time. Elwin has described such a legend: Once a Muria thought of worshipping Mother Earth. But he had nothing to offer, finally he decided to give the most precious 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 God Lingo driving a cow. Lingo asked, O man, where are you going? I am going to worship Mother Earth. What are you going to sacrifice? I have nothing to offer 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 sacrificed human beings to Mother Earth, but taught by Lingo, have sacrificed cattle."⁵ The teaching of Lingo has stood in good stead for the Murias. When the animals are slain shedding of much blood on the ground is regarded as a

3. W. Grigson, *Ibid.*, p. 130.

4. W. H. R. Rivers, *The Todas*, Vol. 1, (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1986), p. 184.

5. V. Elwin, *The Muria and their Ghotul*. Reprint (Bhopal: Vanya Prakashan, 1961), p. 258.

sign of heavy rains and plentiful harvest. The tribals as a whole are heavily dependent upon Mother earth for getting their food and drink. This primary need may be met by cultivation, hunting or gathering, fishing, etc. Hence, in all their occupations Mother Earth plays a prominent role.

Role of the tribal woman

Specialization of roles is minimal among the tribals. However, there may take place a division of labour based on sex. The Madia Gonds in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra have a clear notion of the role of their women in the society. A Madia woman has to follow the course of Mother Earth. They have a legend which runs 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 took all that were provided there, the Earth kept a little in her mouth. When they returned home the Sun felt like taking the food again. The Earth told him to find out any left overs in his mouth; but the Sun could not find out any. He opened his mouth and spat out; a few invisible particles came out which the Madia believe are the invisible parts of the solar system. But when the Earth opened the mouth and spat; there came out the preserved particles which formed the visible and shining stars of the sky. Thereafter the Earth is treated as the preserver and reservoir of food and nourishment. A woman in the Madia community has to emulate the role of the Earth.⁶ She has to gather, prepare and keep food ready for the family and nourish them. She is to deliver and look after the children. In a Madia house, the woman sleeps on the floor; if a cot is there, it is left for the man. The woman is expected to be in touch with the earth.

A Madia woman gets up early in the morning. After the household chores she proceeds to the forest to collect fresh leaves to make donas, that is leaf plates and cups. She has to gather seasonal vegetables, roots, tubers, barks, fruits, fuel and water. The women teach the children about the forest products. Pereira has written about a Warli tribal girl of Maharashtra, "Raji Vavre, a twelve-year-old girl, knows the names of over a hundred herbs,

6. J. Vadakumchery, "The Earth Mother and the indigenous people of India" in *Journal of Dharma*, Vol. XVIII. No. 1 (1993), pp. 94-95.

shrubs and trees and their varied uses."⁷ As women play a major role, the tribal economy has often been called a "female economy."⁸ The tribal woman held the key for conservation orientation of their culture; because it was her responsibility to see to a regular supply of food and resources to the family. And the consumption was just for the day and for their need. The rest was preserved.

The higher status enjoyed by women had far reaching social consequences. Adult marriage became the order of the day. The adults were free to choose their partners. Then the man and his family had to pay bride price to the woman and her family. As Elwin has observed, "The necessity of paying a bride price is an incentive to family thrift and a stimulus to youthful labour."⁹ And the woman gets respectability in the community.

Persons in the likeness of land

Each and every member in a tribal community does not have a marked individuality. What gives them identity and security is the land. The concept of land is central to the rootedness of a tribal group. It is the substratum on which their existence is brought forth by Mother Earth. It is the abode of the Mother. Hence, the land is sacred. The land is a heritage from their elders and ancestors. They have toiled day in and day out in their fields; their bones are interned in the same field. Their heroic deeds and efforts are brought to mind through the narration of stories, legends and songs. Thus the land serves as a medium of communication with the ancestors and spirits. "The sacred soil of ancestors into which one is born is a part of one's fundamental psychic experience of life and is part of its spiritual dimension."¹⁰ Often the territories are occupied by the tribals after a long process of purification. Troisⁱ has rightly observed that "for the Santal, the land not only provides him with economic security but is also a powerful link with his

7. W. Pereira and J. Seabrook, *Asking the Earth*, (London: Earthscan Publications, 1990), p. 36.
8. E. Boserup, *Women's role in Economic Development*, (London : George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970), p. 18.
9. V. Elwin, *The Baiga*, Reprint, (Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1986), p. 271.
10. S. Mahapatra, "Invocation : Rites of Propitiation in Tribal Societies", in G. Sen, (Ed.), *Indigenous Vision*. (New Delhi : Sage Publications, 1992), p. 64.

ancestors. No land is taken possession of unless the spirits approve of it."¹¹ As devotees of Mother Earth, the tribals perceive the land as a sacred and generous gift for the clan. Hence, the land is not possessed by an individual; but it is held in common. Common ownership of land is still prevalent in many a tribal group, especially where shifting cultivation is in vogue. In such instances, the land is owned by the clan; the clan leader divides the portions to each family as per the number of members. If needed the labour is made cooperative. At the time of harvesting a sufficient share is distributed to all who helped in the fields. The old and the disabled are given a share for their maintenance.

The communitarian character of the Hill Madia is described by Grigson as follows: "The Hill Madia still regard 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 part 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".¹² The solidarity and unity of the tribals depend very much upon the land they have in common. The human person-land association is very basic to the tribal consciousness. Territorial affiliation is giving them an identity and security. The land as an arena of human endeavours is an inalienable part of their personality. Article 3 of the Charter of the Indigenous People states: "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 as distinct peoples".¹³ To be deprived of the land is equal to the loss of identity, freedom and heritage. When Lievens moved around the villages in the beginning, no one took interest in him; but the moment he started to work for regaining their lost land, the tribals flocked to his place, with the hope of regaining a lost paradise. The loss of land is leading the tribals to an identity crisis and

11. J. Troisl, *Tribal Religion*, (New Delhi : Manohar Publications, 1979), p. 36.

12. W. Grigson, *Ibid.*, P.197.

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

uprooting of their culture. This is proved from their displacement from tribal habitats.

People of the woods

The tribal concept of common land necessarily includes the forest area. The name of the tribe Madia is derived from "mara" or tree. The term "madia" thus means one who has anchored life among trees, people of the woods. The Madias trace the origin of life to a massive tree of the forest.¹⁴ They show great respect to the trees in the jungle. Traditionally tribals are the custodians of the forest land. They are the natives and kings of the jungle. They pay homage to Mother Earth and the spirits that are residing in the forests. Many of their beliefs and magic are connected with the forest ecosystem. For their everyday needs they depend on the forest. Edible roots, tubers, seasonal vegetables, leaves, fruits, flowers are gathered from the forest. The Baiga tribals of Madhya Pradesh venerate Mother Earth because she is the source of knowledge and wisdom. She has imparted knowledge regarding the values of forest, trees, seeds, flowers and medicinal plants. They claim to possess the secrets of shifting cultivation which is considered by them as a superior form of cultivation. Shifting cultivation is done on the hill tops of the forest. The Baigas are instructed, "You must not tear the breasts of your Mother, the Earth, with the plough".¹⁵ While the tribals are so much attuned to the lap of nature in which they live, the commercialisation of land and forest are evicting and estranging them. They no more feel at home in the forest. From the introduction of the first Forest Act by the Britishers, the tribals lost their human dignity as custodians of the forest land. Various modifications were made in the Forest Act. However, tribals are never made partners in the decision-making process. But the forests today owe much to the care and nurture of the tribals. And they have developed ways of life closely attuned to a sustainable environment.

Common meal

The tribal community celebrates life whenever important occasions occur. Generally common rituals are held followed by the sharing

14. For a detailed description, J. Vadakumchery, "Religion in the tribal ecosystem", in *Journal of Dharma*, Vol. XVII, No. 2, (1992), pp. 87-89.

15. V. Elwin, *The Baiga*, Ibid., p. 107.

of a meal by all. A festive occasion never passes without a sharing of food, music and dance. No fire will be burnt in the hearths of other houses; meals will be prepared at the venue of celebration. Non-tribals too are invited for the meals; in case they do not receive food from them, they will be given a share of the items before cooking. Thus the entire village partakes of the feast and renew their solidarity. Sharing becomes a natural outcome of the egalitarianism among them.

Music and dance

Born in the lap of nature the tribals learn music and dance in their ecological set up. The children are taught and prepared at a very tender age under the supervision of their immediate seniors. The children enjoy them very much and learn the songs and steps by heart. They may be reluctant to sit in a class room; but they are experts in learning and performing music and dance gracefully.

Youth dormitories termed as ghotuls by Murias were prevalent in the past. There music and dance, folktales and myths were taught. Practically the ghotuls served as integral personality development centres. The youth of the villeges were inculcated with the tribal lore and traditions. Some vestiges of the same exist even today. The children are taught music and dance near the common place of the village. Meticulous training is given by the seniors. The result is that within a short time, the children become used to the rhythms and steps. As soon as they hear the beating of a drum, they sing and dance. Music and dance as natural expressions of personality are used both in the social and ritual context.

Person as a religious being

To the tribals their 'Culture really becomes an applied religion or living religion.'¹⁶ This is because every aspect of their behaviour has religion as its basis and support. For a Toda tribal his everyday activities are punctuated by religion. 'The ordinary operations of the dairy have become a religious ritual and ceremonies of a

16. P. Kullu, "Tribal religion and culture", in *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XXIV No. 140, (1994), p. 90.

religious character accompany nearly every important incident in the life of the buffaloes."¹⁷ Hence the tribal viewpoint of a person indicates necessarily the religious dimension.

The tribals do believe in the existence of a Supreme God. He keep away from the ordinary affairs of the world. That management is entrusted to numerous deities and spirits. They are to be appeased and propitiated. Sickness occurs due to the displeasure of any of these spirits. To diagnose the etiology of disease, the Pujari is called in. Through his divination a remedy is prescribed. Perhaps he may call for specific individuals in the community, and pinpoint their offence. The accused may or may not have thought like that. Nevertheless he will accept the sin and perform the remedial measures. In the words of Fuchs, "A wrong action becomes sinful only if it is discovered by the community".¹⁸ Generally the malevolent spirits will expose them.

The predominant role of community is the hallmark of tribal religion. The educated Gond Tribals are gradually discovering the rich heritage of their traditional religion. Recently there was an attempt to bring together all the scattered knowledge and vision of their traditional religion in book form. It is entitled as *Gondi Dharma Darsan* written by Motiram Kankali.¹⁹ The salient features of the Gondi religion which reflect the role of human person can be summarised as follows:

1. The supreme aim of religious practice is the welfare of all. Hence the spirit of service is given more importance; the individual does not count much; it is the community that gains prominence.
2. Pari Kupa Lingo, the founder of Gondi dharma, has divided the entire Gonds into 750 clans.
3. For each clan he had assigned one animal, one bird and a tree or shrub as their identification mark. Thus there are two

17. W.H.R. Rivers, *Ibid.*, p.38.

18. S. Fuchs, "The concept of salvation in tribal religions" in *Indian Missiological Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, (1982), p. 362.

19. M. Kankali, *Gondi Dharma Darsan* (in Hindi), Nagpur: Gondwana Vikas Mandal, 1989.

thousand two hundred and fifty ($750 \times 3 = 2250$) beings in nature which are taken care of as well as preferentially consumed, keeping the optimal balance in nature.

4. Lingo has named the Supreme power in nature as Parsapen.
5. It is through the mutually exclusive but complementary principles of plus and minus (Sallang and Gaagra) that the universe is going on.
6. Marriage is based on the above principle.
7. Marriages are with the number of gods different from one's own.
8. To enculturate the young, Lingo had instituted the Ghotul system of holistic training imparted from the age of three onwards.
9. Lingo had taught the disciples to be honest, straight forward, to speak the truth and above all treat others well by serving them.
10. Lingo had taught them music and dance both for worship and relaxation. These salient features clearly brings out the emphasis given by the practitioners of Gondi Dharma. Again, these aspects are culled from their living and vibrant traditions, myths and folklores. They throw light upon the respect given to the clan, its members and the attitude of interaction in the tribal community.

One-two-and many

The primeval perspective on the human person is in contrast to the Western world-view. After analysing the cosmogonic myths of the North-East tribes, Saraswati concludes that "in tribal perception, neither man nor god is unique. Nobody reigns supreme, one is only different from the other".²⁰ He goes on to add that every creature performs the same paradigmatic action of creation, preservation and destruction. The principle of one-two-and many makes the cosmos what it is. Tribal communities have regarded the earth as their Mother. And they had developed a symbiotic relationship with all

20. B. Saraswati, (Ed.), *Tribal thought and culture*, (New Delhi : Concept Publishing company, 1991), p.17.

the beings in the world. So much so the human person was not differentiated from the rest of the ecosystem. There is the harmony of all existence.

Tribal myths indicate that primordial knowledge came to human persons from birds and animals. Hence the knowability lies with the transcendence. That is why myths have an important role in the tribal communities. The narration or singing together of it really gives a reliving experience of the events described. Modern scientific and abstract thinking cannot decrease the space of the unknown in the universe. As M. Strong has remarked, "What modern civilization has gained in knowledge, it has perhaps lost in sagacity. The indigenous peoples of the world retain our collective evolutionary experience and insights which have receded from our understanding. Yet these hold critical lessons for our future".²¹

21. M. Strong, "Only One Earth", in G. Sen (Ed.), *Ibid.*, p. 52.