

ADIVASI: A PORTRAYAL IN DILEMMA

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This work, 'Adivasi: a portrayal in dilemma', is a humble effort to bring forth the dilemma and strain of an adivasi. This term paints a blurred picture and raises a lot of uncertainties. This paper throws light on the debates around the word 'adivasi'. Besides it also highlights various thoughts, ideas and instances related to the adivasi population. Different pictures are drawn to understand the adivasi, a picture drawn by a missionary, an activist and few others. One also critically understands the play of education, roles in the society, interaction between the adivasi and the larger society, struggle in their history of existence and the rise of the leaders.

'Adivasi: a portrayal in dilemma' is a carefully selected name for my proposed work, which reflects the apprehension of one being an adivasi. The above phrase constitutes terms from Hindi as well as English, which makes it sound uneasy and troubled. Yet the term 'Adivasi' is chosen over the word 'tribe' for many a reason. The crude translation of 'Adivasi' is indigenous inhabitants, an understanding that was well engrained in Jaipal Singh Munda who represented the Adivasis in the Constituent Assembly of India. Taking pride in being an adivasi, he portrayed the grey history of disgraceful treatment and neglect for more than six thousand years. He acknowledged terms like Jungli, backward, primitive, criminal which are associated with the understanding of the "original people of India". On the similar line, the term tribe carries a derogatory connotation of being 'uncivilized', 'savage' or 'primitive' people. It is a biased colonial construct which portrays the adivasis as untamed; someone less than a human and more like a beast.

Having mentioned "primitive", it takes one into yet another debate which is worth understanding for a better insight. The word 'primitive' in spite of all its imperfection and criticism, it has definitely taken hold in the contemporary anthropological and sociological vocabulary. What does the word primitive mean? The expression denotes a vast array of non-literate people, to whom; getting access through the research methods is near to impossible. Second, they have been adversely affected by the industrial civilization. Owing to their social structure and world view, the contemporary concept of economics and political philosophy are not applicable to them. One must understand that a primitive man is neither backward nor retarded. He may be a genius for invention or action that leaves the achievements of 'civilized' people far behind. A primitive man is not a man without history. This is asserted by a twofold argument.

First, the history of primitive people is completely unknown to us. The lack or paucity of oral traditions and archaeological remains it is forever beyond our reach.

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Thus one ought not to conclude that it does not exist. Second, the primitive people preserved their history and knowledge through oral narration. It is the re-interpretation and re-construction by the sociologist and anthropologists that portray a very fragmented picture, which is difficult to understand in a holistic way.

Taking into consideration, oral tradition in India is one of the native styles of transmitting and percolating knowledge from one generation to another, since time immemorial. Folklore, folksongs, poetries, stories, dance, drama, music, painting, sculpture are other various forms of oral history. For centuries we have been accustomed to literature primarily as an oral manifestation of language and for our rural and tribal population literature had meant only the spoken word. Of the 1952 distinct languages spoken in our country, not more than 24 can be associated with the written culture. Even in these so called “recognised literary languages, a very marginal population have had hand in their written literature”.

Oral history is laden with knowledge and lessons of wisdom. The value behind the simple narrations is blurred, if not lost, when this native style is overshadowed by the printing technology. As Bhalchandra Nemade has appropriately mentioned in his book “Nativism” (Desivad), “ the written or printed literary systems have generally maintained “safe” distance from the “vulgar” oral styles.

However one must not mistake to assume that writing was by all means alien to the people of India. Oral culture was consciously encouraged for various reasons, both political and social. But the most important reason was lying behind the fact that reading and writing were the privilege of the upper castes. Written culture was elitist, courtly, discontinuous and deeply influenced by English after 1818. On the other hand, oral culture was proletarian, rural, continuous and comparatively standardized in its uses.

A clear division can be seen between the written and the oral culture. The oral culture may be difficult to preserve, but it has certain intrinsic advantages over the written one. It is dialogic and demands more direct contact between the speaker and listener. It also necessitates the physical presence of the speaker, thus generating a personality influence which gets lost in the written culture. It also implies a fundamental use of languages along with external function of symbols which further strengthens group solidarity.

Having glanced at the debate surrounding the word ‘primitive’, and related to it, the distinction between oral and written history, one can further look at the dilemma of the terms tribals and ‘adivasi’. As been mentioned before, the term tribe is a derogatory term meaning savage or beastly, while on the other hand the word adivasi means the original inhabitants. The identity which is expressed by this term is an expanded identity cutting across tribes, bearing different different languages. For instance, most of the tribal communities in central, western and southern India prefer to call themselves “adivasis” that is indigenous people or original settlers. On the contrary, the tribal communities of North –East India do

not want to be called adivasis; popularly denoting themselves as tribes. It is important to note that such assertion is stronger when there is greater degree of marginalisation and powerlessness. There are however, variations in the way this identity is conceptualised at different levels. The social workers, administrators, scholars and social scientists have generally used the term in the sense of only the 'original inhabitants'. The adivasi ideologues primarily use this term in the sense of the original settlement. The aspect of the marginal status has evolved in course of historical development. The radical scholars conceive it only in relation to particular historical development .i.e., the subjugation during the 19th century. There were various communities which remained free or relatively free from the alien state control till the British colonial period. It is argued that this process brought an influx of traders, moneylenders and land lords. Through the new judicial system, they started to deprive the adivasis from their large tract of lands. Oppressed by outsiders, whom they called Dikus, the adivasis rebelled against these money lenders and the British government under Charismatic leaders. Some of the leaders worth mentioning are Birsa Munda, singi Dai, sidho- kanu and few others. Adivasi is hence defined as groups which share a common fate in the past centuries. Emitting from this has evolved a collective identity of being an adivasi.

It is the collective identity which gives rise to an adivasi consciousness. It has further articulated towards the indigenous people status. The consciousness coupled with the articulation is basically an expression of yearning to have or to establish a special and strong relation with the territory in which they live. This yearning is similar to the yearning that the various dormant communities of India articulated in the period before independence and after independence. It is a fact that the issue of this identity is more strongly articulated in central, western and southern India than in North –East India. The reason behind is that North-East people exercise certain power over their territory. The scenario is just opposite in other parts of tribal India.

Now the interesting part of the articulation of indigenous people status is that, the term indigenous comes not without giving rise to other problems. It was used in anthropology to describe tribes for quite some time. Its use has now gone beyond the discipline of anthropology. The international agencies are increasingly making use of this term and concept in their deliberation and discussion. The term has gained popularity in general as well as in the other social science literature. The term was used for the first time in 1957 and it gained currency after 1993 when the year 1993 was declared the "international year of the indigenous people".

The status of "being Indigenous" is a highly contested and debatable topic. Of all, the foremost issue revolves around the lack of consensus of the definition and number involved. During the discussion on the International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention 169 Of 1989, the Indian representatives objected to the terms such as "self-determination" and sovereignty. Such terms would ensure great

amount of independence and autonomist power. Under autonomy or self-determination, collective rights are recognised as the “whole” and ‘community’ ethos is strong and intrinsic to the indigenous tribal identity and resource management. The belief of the ‘people’ or ‘community’ is very strong in indigenous people. The conviction that they have distinct collective rights and distinct historical, political, social, cultural and spiritual identities that unites them. It is in the collectiveness that they exercise their right to self-determination in their language, laws, values, customs, practices, traditions and laws and institutions. Thus, it is important to understand that sovereignty and self determination is not similar to independence and secessionism. Most tribal struggles are for autonomy and the government has acted on some of their demands.

Thus, acknowledging indigenous status to the adivasis was not accepted. The Indian representative justified themselves arguing that hardly any tribe exists in India as a separate entity. They have been absorbed into the mainstream; hence one cannot attribute the indigenous status to anyone. Apart from this, India then, and some other countries with large indigenous minorities, was struggling with the nationalist issues. The government interpreted sovereignty and self-determination to lead to further secessionist movement. They were apprehensive of the fact that indigenous status would empower the tribes to demand an independent autonomy. The Indian government felt that this would legitimize such struggles.

The government recognises them as distinct communities and their historical continuity. But what remains the burning concern is the issue of displacement and alienation of their sustenance in the name of the development. The rapid economic growth has resulted in the transfer of forests in the name of national development. This has led to a large displacement of the tribal population. Indigenous demand the protection of their livelihood with regard to higher impoverishment and poor work opportunities. The attack on their land and livelihood continues due to the fact that more than 50 % of the mineral deposit, including 80% of coal and 40% of iron ore are in their area.

Monopolising the resources for the national development is a threat to their right to a life with dignity under article 21 of the Indian Constitution. It is right to life that the Supreme Court has interpreted as every citizen’s right to a life with dignity. By depriving the adivasis of their sustenance, it represents that the Constitutional Rights do not apply to them, as the legal system does not recognise their livelihood and their customary laws are seen at the margins of the wider society.

The flaw with the term tribe is that, it oversimplifies the indigenous status. ‘Tribe’ only empowers the adivasis to protect their identity and material culture but not their sustenance. The situation is a dangerous one as the loss of their material sustenance can ultimately deprive them even of their identity and culture. For

example- the adivasis of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh who migrated to the tea gardens of Assam since the 1860's. They were dispossessed of their livelihood and were brought to Assam as indentured labours. The dispossession of the adivasis and the disintegration of their communal rights created a pool of landless population which did not have any other choice than to emigrate in search of new livelihood. The present scenario is such that these adivasis are not recognised as tribes in Assam by the Government.

Keeping all these concerns of being an 'adivasi', the status of indigenous people is basic to their identity. Their tradition not only should be preserved, but to be revived and interpreted through their culture and material sustenance. Their customary laws ought to be given importance and interpreted to fit into the present scenario. There are three aspects which are central to the conceptualization of the indigenous people. First, the indigenous are those people who lived in the country to which they belong before the colonisation or conquest by people from outside the country or the geographical region. Secondly, they have been marginalized as an aftermath of conquest and colonised by the people from outside the region. Thirdly, such people govern their life more in terms of their own social, economic and the cultural institution than the law applicable to the society or the country at the large. (Xaxa V,(1999), *Tribes as Indigenous People of India*, Economic and Political Weekly).

The term 'adivasi', the Indian term for indigenous people, has been found in various writings and reports by scholars and administrators. It's popularity is not limited by only a small section of scholars, administrators, politician and social workers; it trickled down to the people into the. It referred to the tribal population and it was hardly criticised or debated upon. With the international rights and privileges associated with the indigenous status, it came to be critically examined and challenged in the Indian context.

Having glanced at the debated surrounding the terms, 'adivasi' 'tribes' and 'indigenous people' one needs to go beyond the boundaries and study the relation shared by the adivasi with the greater society. It is a very popular assumption that the 'tribes' lived in isolation and were totally excluded from the alien world. It is partially true but one needs to understand that isolation does not imply that the adivasis did not keep any contact with the outer world. The khonds of Orissa shared a mutual relationship with the local kings. One should not mistake the existence of any hierarchy in such a reciprocated relation. In fact it was the khond adivasis who would enter into alliance with the Hindu rajahs and incorporate into their kingdoms. Mutual consent was the basis of the shared relation between the rajahs and the khond. The khonds were independent of the rajah's rule. All the major decisions were made by the khonds in large open councils and the hindu rajahs respected the decisions of the khond councils. (Padel F, (2011) *Sacrificing People, Invasions of Tribal Landscape*, Orient Blackswan, India).

However, when the Britishers first came to India, the ethnographers were not very clear about the distinction between caste and tribe in India. The eighteenth century writings show identical use of the term tribe with caste. The colonial ethnological recycled and ratified the pre-colonial Indian idea of tribe of beastly and demonic connotation. The traditional idea is subsumed in the Aryan concept of *mlech-chh*. It came in use in the post-1850 colonial Bengal. A peer group of intelligentsia imagined the Indian tribe in the following way: The Hindu books in poetical legends describe those aborigines as monkeys, so Megasthenes writes of Indians one-eyed, without noses, wrapped up in the ears (*hastikarnas*): even Marco Polo and Ptolemy believed that men with tails had a real existence. Thus, the naive looking and frequently used eighteenth century British term 'Hillman' or 'dhangar' (deriving from *dangoar hill*) for tribe came to be replaced by such brutish variations as "semi-barbarous", 'demon' or "kol" by the early nineteenth century. The munda and the uraons were described as 'dhangars and other low caste people in the jungle; still impure, as probably unconverted *mlechchh* (Bara, J (2009) *Alien Construct and Tribal Contestation in Colonial Chotanagpur: the medium of Christianity*. Economic and Political Weekly).

In post-independent India, the problems regarding the adivasis did not catch the attention of the leaders till the early 1940's. However, there were figures like Amritlal Thakkar and Verrier Elwin who were concerned about this neglected population. They dedicated their work towards better days for the adivasis. Amritlal Thakkar was popularly known as Thakkar Bapa who influenced Gandhi's interest in the tribal issues. Besides this, Thakkar Bapa and Verrier Elwin also framed the free India's tribal policy. In the 1930, Gandhi's concern was more inclined towards the harijans than the adivasis. According to him, it was a duty of a Hindu towards the harijans that should be the first priority. He even persuaded Thakkar Bapa, who was earnestly working towards the betterment of the adivasis, to accept secretary ship of the 'harijan sevak sangh'. It is not to imply that Gandhi 'depreciate the service of the adivasis' but he thought the 'service of the harijans must have the first claim of the hindu' (Singh K.S, *The Mahatama and the Adivasis in Gandhi and Social Science*, Ed by L.P Vidyarthi).

It did take more than a decade for Gandhi to realise that adivasis were materially no better than the harijans. He saw that the former constituted a sizeable segment of the population. Further the danger of their neglect and denationalisation was soon recognised to be real. He announced, 'the adivasis are the original inhabitants whose material position is perhaps no better than those of harijans, and who have been long victims of neglect on the part of the so-called high classes' (Singh K.S, Page 125.)

If one recalls the Act of 1935, it separated the adivasis from the rest of the inhabitants. The nationalist Gandhi reacted sharply to the segregation of the tribal, under the dangerous spell of the policy of the 'isolation and status quo'. The

'excluded areas' were placed under the government's direct administration. Thus the adivasis were put into watertight compartments and classified as tribal people by the government. Gandhi found it shameful of the social workers that they had allowed them to be treated like that and accordingly it was their responsibility to make the adivasis feel one with them.

It was an 'isolationist' interaction with the adivasis, according to which they would be confined and isolated from the larger society. However one tends to forget that confining people and their knowledge will lead to adverse consequences. For example, the Ik tribe of Uganda can be considered here for better insight. The whole tribe starved to death due to a famine among them. The reason behind this, that they were displaced and excluded from their former hunting grounds (Padel F,(2011) *Sacrificing People, Invasions of Tribal Landscape*, Orient Blackswan, India.). Knowledge is found in networks and confining it, only leads to the path of destruction.

Besides 'isolationist', 'assimilationist', and the 'interagationalist' are the two other viewpoints offered by Thakkar Bapa and Verrier Elwin who influenced the India's tribal policy. The isolationist, according to Bapa believed in keeping the 'aborigines in their areas, untouched by the civilization of the plains' because they feared that contact with the hindus of the plain would

1. Break the solidarity of the tribal society
2. Pollute the adivasis with social evils of untouchability, early marriage and purdah.
3. Expose the adivasis to the temptation of imitating only the lower strata of the hindu community of the plains and
4. Bring about demoralization among the adivasis to be contained as another depressed community like the various Hindu social castes.

Thakkar Bapa was against the efforts to isolate the tribe. He pleaded for unity and assimilation. He argued that the aborigines should form a part of the civilized communities, to share with advanced communities the privileges and duties to equal terms in the general, social and political life of the country (Singh K.S, *The Mahatama and the Adivasis in Gandhi and Social Science*, Ed by L.P Vidyarthi Page 136). Now if a careful study of the above line is taken, it shows how Bapa too looked at the tribe. The fact that he says that the tribes should be the part of the 'civilized' and 'advanced' society, he makes it clear that he assumes the tribe to be uncivilized, primitive and stagnant in nature. However, these areas have already been discussed in the initial stage of this paper.

Further into the study, many social workers and nationalist politicians have argued that the 'interventionists' approached the aborigines with feelings of moral evil and social superiority and brought back with themselves social evils and taboo with regard to food. It was here again, one finds that Thakkar Bapa was highly

critical of the isolationists who remained silent and did not object to the 'Christian missionaries' contact with the tribals. Besides they remained silent against the introduction of the roman script for tribal dialect, spread of Christian propaganda, and migration of thousands of tribal to tea garden from their natural surroundings on low wages. Thakkar Bapa appreciated the Salvationist and other missionaries' work. His own organisation and programmes were very much influenced by their work, but he sharply differed from them in many a matter. He felt that the adivasi children should be taught through the medium of local language and in their script through the medium of tribal dialect in lower and primary classes. He was against the introduction of the roman script for the khasi language because it presented innumerable complexities and estranged the feelings of the major communities, besides having many technical disadvantages.

Talking about propagating education through resident language, there is no better figure to look upon than James Long. A protestant missionary of Ireland, James long, dedicated his life to Bengal, "his first love and the country of his adoption." He is well recognised for his passionate contributions to the development of Bengali vernacular education, vernacular literature, historical studies and sociology. A Street is also named after him in Kolkata as a gesture of gratitude and respect.

James Long believed in propagating Christianity through local language and education. According to him, the English educated would do nothing for the masses as they would be "divorced in feeling from the simpler village people." (Oddie G, (1999) *Missionaries Rebellion and Proto-Nationalism James Long of Bengal 1814-1887*. ISPCK, Delhi). He advocated for vernacular education as he believed that a student educated through vernacular would be "more likely to remain contented with rural life and retain their sympathy for and understanding of village people." (Oddie G page 42) He even critiqued the "filtration theory" arguing that the knowledge failed to filter down to the masses of the population mainly because the English educated Bengalis were too selfish and too conscious of their caste superiority to take an interest in the village people. In his programme for Christian children, one of Long's main objects was to help them develop vocational skills that fit into the pattern of rural life. His experience of English educated converts in Calcutta had convinced him that nothing could do so much mischief to the cause of Christianity as a dissatisfied wandering Christian lad who cannot dig neither can he beg. One should reflect on the success story of Long's experiment at the vernacular day school at Thakurpukur. His schools had interesting and unusual features. They were extremely successful and clearly demonstrated that a sound and thorough education could be given through the vernacular.

The stress on vocational training was one of the more unusual aspects of Long's plan for educating Christian children. Long's overall plan of education combined the utilitarian practical features with the broad range of more academic subjects.

During the 1850's and after, Long's vernacular schools at Thakurpukur were visited by a large number of Government officials, missionaries and clergy. Some of them were attracted to Thakurpukur because it was a rural mission station which was conveniently close to Calcutta and reasonably accessible during the dry season. But the majority probably came and visited here because of their genuine interest in Long's experiment.

The above illustration is important to understand that vernacular education and its success should not be covered by the dark clouds of doubt. Having looked at Thakkar bapa's point of view, one should also study Verrier Elwin's understanding of the tribe. A radical priest and a writer, Verrier Elwin served the most disadvantaged and least visible of India's poor. An admirer of Mahatma Gandhi who saw himself as a British born Indian, Elwin called attention to the neglect towards the tribe by the national movement. He once argued that, hill and forest tribes, were a despised and callously ignored group.

A self-taught and self-trained anthropologist, Elwin travelled widely over the Indian heartland. He studied and wrote about the tribes in the British-ruled territories of Orissa, Bihar and the Central Provinces, as well as the large tribal chiefdom of Bastar. His contribution turned into a successful series of ethnographies and folklore collections for 'academic' purpose. Besides, it was also profoundly used in numerous policy pamphlets, reports, and newspaper articles for a more general audience.

Elwin's first writings from Mandla are marked by this Christian belief that the meek shall inherit the earth. The Gonds are dignified, by their suffering and quiet courage in the face of adversity. Elwin had come to the forest as a reformer, with an attempt to 'teach a primitive group the best things about civilisation'. His agenda was influenced both by Gandhi and European traditions of social work which incorporated temperance, education, health and sanitation. He believed that the Gonds had to learn much and had even little to offer. (Guha R, (1999), *Savaging the Civilized Verrier Elwin, His tribals and India*. Oxford University Press). But the more he lived with and among tribals, the more Elwin came to view their culture in positive terms. His transition was based on the growing familiarity with their language, a better appreciation of their life and thought; and his marriage to a Gond girl named Kosi, in April 1940. Within a decade of his move to Mandla, Elwin had put in place his critique of modern civilisation. It slowly became his trademark as his corresponding regard for tribal values deepened. Verrier had not come to Mandla to convert the tribes, but it was not long before they had converted him.

Verrier Elwin was different and so were his aboriginals. Perhaps the first thing that distinguished Verrier Elwin's aboriginal was his love of Nature. The forest provided him food, fruit, medicine; materials for housing and agriculture; birds and animals for the pot. The significance of the forest was economic as much as

cultural, practical as well as symbolic, All tribals had an intimate knowledge of wild plants and animals. Both the Baiga and the Muria liked to think of themselves as children of 'Dharti Mata', Mother Earth, fed and loved by her. The forest was also a setting for romance, the ideal place for lovers. The Gond's idea of heaven was 'miles and miles of forest without any forest-guards'; his idea of hell, 'miles and miles of forest without any mahua trees'.

Besides this, the high place of their women also set the aboriginals apart from more civilised societies. Among the Mandla Gonds (whom Elwin knew best of all), the woman was the real ruler of the house'. As for the Baiga woman, "she generally chooses her husband and changes him at will; she may dance in public; she may take her wares to the bazaar and open her own shop there...; she may drink and smoke in her husband's presence" - freedoms all generally denied to the caste Hindu woman (Guha R (1996), *Savaging the civilized Verrir Elwin and the question of tribals*. Economic and Political Weekly).

Among the core elements in Elwin's celebration of tribal life: the identity with Nature, the honoured place of women, a joyful attitude towards sex, there were other aspects which is worth mentioning. These are the love of children, a strong sense of community and equality, gaiety and variety in forms of recreation. This celebration was at the same time a condemnation both of modern Western civilisation and Hindu caste society; cultures characterised by the oppression of women, social hierarchy, the spirit of competitiveness, aggression, and sexual repression.

Most of all, Verrier Elwin is to be distinguished from other anthropologists in the sense that he actually lived with the communities whose culture he so vigorously celebrated. Elwin was a different type altogether, who lived with the adivasis, loved with them, and therefore defended them. Elwin was aware of both the tradition he came from as well as his departure from it. By the early 1940s, Verrier Elwin had emerged as an eloquent spokesman for the tribal communities of the Indian heartland. He had just completed his book on the Baiga, with its daring and controversial proposals for creating a National Park to protect the tribe from the corruptions of civilisation. That work was only the first in a series of rich ethnographies and pamphlets through which Elwin fought for his poor, the voiceless tribals of central India.

Thus, in the closing pages of *The Baiga* he proposed the creation of a National Park, where the Baiga would have the freedom to hunt, fish and practice bewar, with the entry of non-aboriginals prohibited. The term 'National Park' was unfortunate, for it led critics to immediately accuse him of wanting to put the tribe into a zoo, to which the anthropologist, alone among outsiders, would have privileged access.

Looking through Elwin's paradigm, he was advocating for the aboriginals to live their lives in the way they knew best. This meant providing them security of

land, the freedom of the forest, and protection from landlords, moneylenders, and subordinate officials. He quotes with relish an Orissa aboriginal who told him: "We love our hills; we have always fed on fruit and roots and we don't want to change. We care nothing for hospitals and schools; all we want is our hills". This was a freedom denied by the British and the Congress, but not by the more sympathetic of Indian princes. The anthropologist's model was the chiefdom of Bastar, whose officials were respectful of tribal custom, where forest laws were liberal, and where local self-government (as in the village panchayat system) was firmly in place. For Elwin, the preventive and remedial measures taken by the Bastar administration had kept their tribesmen as dignified and noble population.

For Elwin, of course, 'assimilation' merely spelt 'degeneration'. Where Elwin gloried in their joyful altitude to sex, Thakkar upbraided the aboriginals for their "crude marital relations and promiscuity in sexual matters" (Singh K.S, *The Mahatma and the Adivasis in Gandhi and Social Science*, Ed by L. P Vidyarthi). Where the anthropologist defended the tribal's love of drink, the reformer wished to introduce prohibition. Elwin wished for protection to be given to shifting cultivation on the basis that tribals did not plough the land because they considered it a sin to lacerate the womb of *dhartimata*. However Thakkar Bapa condemned it as a sluggish form of cultivation which only encouraged the tribal's indolence

Verrier Elwin also raised his critical voice against Gandhi with regard to the khadi programme. In July 1937 he wrote to Gandhi that the utility of spinning for Gonds and other tribe was questionable. In areas where cotton did not grow, spinning seemed artificial and uneconomic. In August he visited Gandhi at his new ashram at Wardha to acquaint him of the aboriginals' plight. But to his utter disappointment, he found that for, 'all his desire for Home Rule Mahatma Gandhi did not appear to think that the original inhabitants of India deserved any special consideration.' He concluded that the Congress wished on one hand to use the tribal as cannon fodder in their political campaigns and on the other to convert them to all vegetarianism, abstinence and settled cultivation. The plough was 'everything the symbol of the Congress-Hindu culture that is sweeping tribal area'. Verrier was so fed up with the 'caste and humbug and prohibition' that at times he felt like fleeing India for one of the Buddhist countries like Burma or Ceylon. But there was one odd politician whom he liked- Jawaharlal Nehru who was liberal and cosmopolitan, 'all breed and back bone'. (Guha R, (1999), *Savaging the Civilized Verrier Elwin, His tribals and India*. Oxford University Press).

Verrier elwin was very likely the first Englishman to become an indian and most certainly the best known. His official position and proximity to Nehru seemed to many as the just reward for persistent and devoted work for the tribes. Even those who dissented from his views conceded he had stayed the course: twenty five years in tribal India, twenty five fine books about them.

Besides Elwin, there were other anthropologists who studied the tribal life of India. Out of many, one name which strikes me is Sarat Chandra Roy. His dedication and hard work is truly reflected in the detailed book, 'Oraon religion and customs'. It should be mentioned that S.C Roy was not an anthropologist by profession. He was a lawyer. But he was humble enough to rise beyond the professional boundaries and study the adivasis. People who were close to him testify that Roy would visit each of the twelve villages without fail for his field work. He would not even miss out one. His hard work is clearly reflected in his books which is presented with much clarity, even though they are not without certain mistakes.

The above mentioned book, 'Oraon religion and customs' revolves around religious beliefs, gods, goddesses, deities, churails, omens and taboos related to Oraon everyday life, whether its hunting, or festivals, settling down, marriage, death or birth ceremonies. The book was first published in Ranchi in 1928 in English. However the portrayal of the adivasis in the book is very stagnant. The winds of time have brought a lot of change their present scenario. Not deviating much from the topic, the focus shall be on the religious lives and conversions or assertions upon the adivasis.

The issue of conversion has been a point of contention among Hindu Nationalists since the late 19th century, when a wave of mass conversion movements of both Protestant and Catholic faith took place across India, especially in the tribal belt in North East and central India. These movements alleged that such conversions were related to 'illegitimate methods' such as the provision of material inducement. In response to this threat, RSS campaigns like *ghar vapasi* (homecoming) or *shuddhi* (re-conversion) were instituted in Adivasi regions across Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and other states to 'reclaim the souls' of Christian Adivasis who, through conversion, had strayed from the Hindu fold. (Froerer P, *Christian piety and the emergence of Hindu Nationalism* in Magins of faith, dalit and tribal Christianity in India. Ed by Robinson and Kujur)

Adivasi communities have been especially weakened in the last century through imposed religious divisions. First by large scale Christian missionary activity which were mostly peaceful and welfare focused. But more recently this community has been disturbed and threatened by the Sangh Parivar. It has arrogated to itself the authority to control the lives of the adivasis and is engaged in a massive drive to 'bring back' the tribals into the fold of Hinduism. They are using everything from vicious attacks by thugs under the name of protecting Hinduism to setting up organizations that claim to work for tribal welfare and education. The objectives of the Sangh organizations working among the adivasis are twofold: First to 'bring them back' to Hindu faith and second to 'check' the conversions to Christianity. First, the task of bringing adivasis 'back' into Hindu fold is seen as bringing them into a national mainstream – i.e, the national mainstream in this definition is a Hindu one, perfectly in tune with the idea of a Hindu Rashtra and further, the

“anti-national” elements are the Christians – thus underscoring the idea of a nation for Hindus as the core project of Hindutva. (Adivasi versus vanvasi : the hinduization of tribals in India. Outlook, November 2002).

There are many instances where riots are triggered in the name of faith, for example- the riots at Kandhamal in Orissa during 2007-08. At the peak of the violence, over 20,000 refugees found themselves in relief camps. Hundred of villages were attacked, thousands injured and over 4,000 homes were destroyed. At least a hundred churches and Christian institutions turned into ruins. A full year after the beginning of the conflict, in august 2009, thousands of Christians had yet to return to their homes, fearing violence or forced conversion. Those who returned placed a saffron flag on their homes for protection.

So who were these Christians and the Hindus and what provoked the conflict? The answer is not simple. The riot which took a religious turn was actually the clash between the tribes and the dalits. The tension between the Kandhas (or khonds) and Panas (for Panos) clearly provided fuel for the fire. Both the communities speak the same language Kui but the Khandhas are recognised as scheduled tribe and the Panos as scheduled caste by the Government of India. Beginning in the 1950's, a large number of Panas and Kandhas converted to Christianity. Today the proportion is not balanced. On one hand where there are 70% of panas who are Christians, on the other hand a very few of the Kandhas follow Christianity. The kandha community embraced Hinduism. The current scenario shows that kandhas constitute the 52% of the population in the kandhamal district where as the Panas are just 17 %. And out of the total population only 18 % were Christian. Thus the conflict engulfed both the Kandha adivasi versus Pana Dalit which portrayed them as active players in the riot.

The above instance is just a drop in a sea. Conflict and struggle for the adivasis has always marked their history of existence. They have always been pushed to take extreme measure to guard their lives, existence and beliefs. In the course of these battles, a lot of lives have been sacrificed. But these rough times have always witnessed a rise of an adivasi leader. Birsa Munda, Singi Dai, Sidho- Kahno and many more have shown the path during the crisis. The struggle is not just to live, but to sustain and strive in harmony with the environment. On one hand where the wheel of capitalism does not seem to set any limit, there are these indigenous people who would fight till their death to save the natural resources, whether its land, or forest or hills and mountains. Recent turn of events like the issue of Nagri in Jharkhand and Niyamgiri in Orissa portrayed their bravery and strength. They voiced their displeasure and their opinion of difference against the government's verdict. Their determination and rigour, succeeded them to overthrow the decision of the state. In the light of liberalization and globalisation, these indigenous people should be encouraged to lead us on a better path towards sustainable development. In this hour of need, where the cry for environmental protection is at its height, one

shall understand that the adivasi knowledge can teach to strike a balance between nature and nurture.

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