

## Sacred worldview in tribal memory: sustaining nature through cultural actions

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Let's imagine a tribal habitation without a road. Before the road, no jeep or truck could reach there. No forest contractors, forest officers were in the forest. The worldview of the people was of the forest as eternal as the earth and the universe. Huge resources of the forest lay in the forest, there was no need for private greed, no dearth of natural resources for daily sustenance. People believed in 'today is today', not in 'tomorrow is tomorrow'. There was no authority over the jungle except the forest goddess and hill gods. All the jungles have female goddesses and the hills and mountains male gods.

No cart was even seen in *Kalahandi*<sup>1</sup> jungle before 1830. The liquor vendors attracted by the mahua tree came to Orissa from *Ganjam*,<sup>2</sup> and Kalars<sup>3</sup> from Chhatishgarh<sup>4</sup> to Nuapada<sup>5</sup>. Home-brewed liquor was not plentiful - it was like medicine. But manufacture of liquor other than by the tribal people brought a new economic disorder, that is ***give me your labour, I will give you liquor!*** Then it turned into the proverb, ***give me your mahul tree, I will pay you liquor and money.*** Finally it became, ***give me your land, I will give you money, with that money you can live happily with liquor.*** Thousands of tribal people gave their land either to keep the word of truth, or the written paper in which they had given their thumb impression. They were afraid, how dangerous and powerful writing is; it can turn your life upside down.

Nature and indigenous people are inseparable. Nature has given them a worldview, and their worldview is naturalistic. Nature and animals are the spit, the left over food of the Earth mother Goddess. She is the mother, and tree and man and animals are her sons and daughters, dependent each upon the other. Earth mother Goddess takes care of her creation by providing all facilities available in the earth, air, water, and forest. The supernatural is present both in the animate and the inanimate. The indigenous people acquired their knowledge from their close association and interdependence with nature. Their experiential knowledge has given them the skill of adapting themselves to changes in the natural environment. The earth, and the forest, the river and the hills, the birds and animals constitute the life of the tribal people who, dependent upon them, construct their knowledge, personality, folklore, and culture.

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<sup>1</sup> A district in Orissa State of India

<sup>2</sup> A district in Orissa state of India

<sup>3</sup> Kalars prepare liquor from the mahul (*basia latifolia*) flower and sell it

<sup>4</sup> A state in middle India

<sup>5</sup> A newly formed district in Orissa, richly populated with tribal people

In changing times, the tribal people have also fallen prey to change. They did not plan this change. Others (Diku) changed them. This change is just like a new road made in the forest, with jeeps and trucks suddenly appearing. They appeared to exploit, and not to understand the naturalistic worldview. When they destroyed the forest, they did not know that they were cutting the tree in which the goddess sleeps. They did not care that the hill they blasted was the legendary seat of Lord *Rama or Sita*<sup>6</sup>. They also did not know that the forest and the land have a social history, attached to the race memory, glory, and creativity of the community. Before the people began to understand that they were being exploited, they were exploited. They lost their land, trees and, displaced, relocated, lost their identity. Can we say that the road is the symbol of development? The tribal people once content without a road now understand the road made in their forest is a metaphor for destruction.

But they adjusted to the trucks, contractors, foresters and guards, revenue officers, and other development planners. Some could understand the values and worldviews of the new authorities and what changes might come of them, but could do nothing to forestall them. Some did not understand them, followed their orders, and met the targets set for them. Tribal people became instrumental to accelerating the disorder. Truck Driver is powerful because he has the ability to run such a huge truck. Males were exploited in wage labour, but both nature and women were exploited physically. Forest lost its chastity. Greed replaced need.

While the forest was abundant, there was no threat to survival, so there was no plan for tomorrow. This is a problem with tribal ways because, if a tribal has earned for today, he will not think for tomorrow. But conversely, his planning for living is more flexible than that of people who make five-year or ten-year plans. His attitude to nature tells him how to plan for a day or a season, and not for the whole future. The individual's plan is intertwined with the community plan and with nature and the local environment.

Most insecure people plan for the future, but the man of nature plans with nature. Nature plans for the whole universe. People in need never hoard, but in greed, people plan to grab, to grab land, water, trees, and animals. There are two incompatible worldviews. Tribal people can speak of the earth, water and forest, and forest animals. Their knowledge of their own environment is full of information, which signifies their close relationship with nature and the supernatural. Tribal people living in the village and forest cannot understand the politics of using up natural resources. The openness of the tribal worldview, however, has given space to people who want to exploit the tribal people without understanding their life or culture.

My concern here is to focus on some examples which demonstrate the symbiotic relationship of tribal people with natural resources. As an indigenous research fellow, I would like to describe some items of oral tradition and rituals that represent the integrated worldview of tribal people in relation to nature and its resources. It is the local knowledge of the people, which represents the collective mind and experience of the people in their

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<sup>6</sup> Sacred hero and heroine respectively from the Epic Ramayana

socio-cultural context. Religion and religious practices are ingrained in their physical world, their mental world and the supernatural world.

Myths, legends, tales, oral epics, caste genealogies, proverbs, riddles, rites and rituals represent the sacred worldview of tribal people. Each item of folklore, verbal or non-verbal, has purpose and meaning in its socio-cultural context. The functioning of traditional knowledge in sustaining the community is highly structured and communal. Everybody comes to share the knowledge and practice it in their lives - it is the foundation of their subsistence. The appendix gives examples of the mental world of tribal people in its interdependence with the social and natural worlds.

The function of myth and ritual is to unite the mind and action of people, linking inanimate within animate, and past with present. Consequentially, the mental world of tribal people shows vast experience in facing environmental hardship and maintaining a sustainable livelihood. Any word, any action, has a purpose and meaning. It is shared, enjoyed, distributed and socialized. No knowledge is kept private. The water harvesting techniques, utilisation of forest herbs as medicine, meteorological assessments, knowledge of the characteristics of birds and animals, the concept of time, perceptions of space, are among the most important aspects determined by experiential knowledge. Knowledge is learned by experience to be useful for people's welfare, tried, tested and shared freely within the community. Values are universally agreed by the community, not imposed.

Oral epics and narratives found among the tribal community of Orissa demonstrate rich knowledge about subsistence. The discovery and inventions including water harvesting, leveling the soil, and folk technology are found described in the oral narratives. The invention of iron and liquor, categories of trees and birds, and animals, kinds of land and forest, totem animals and trees, clan based distribution of land and territory are vividly narrated in the oral tradition, particularly in myths and oral epics. This reveals the importance of local knowledge perpetuated through oral performance. In oral epics of *Kalahandi* it is found that there is a gradual change from hunting and gathering to an agrarian society. *Mahadeo*<sup>7</sup> is the first cultivator, and inventor of the plough. *Bhima* is the first helper to *Mahadeo* in cultivation. He is also the inventor of liquor, and rainmaker. Bulls and buffaloes are the first animals used in cultivation. Getting rainwater through rituals is another aspect in the folklore of *Kalahandi*.

In almost all narratives, water, and land are narrated as a most necessary component of tribal life. Selection of land to dig a pond by the community is based on long experience and careful testing of the soil by elders. But the diggers of Mahabandha<sup>8</sup> do not apply the indigenous knowledge, but dig the pond where the wasteland or government land is available. The relation of land with water is central to the universe of human existence, but is being forgotten. The result was rural children use to play cricket in the dry pond.

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<sup>7</sup> supreme Gond God who created humanity and the technology of cultivation

<sup>8</sup> a large pond dug by the government

There is an African proverb that runs along the lines “those who are uninitiated cannot understand us”, signifying the importance of local knowledge. Similarly, another proverb runs that ‘when an old man in our village passes away, a rich library is lost.’ Tribal people do not try to popularize their ideas, or try to spread the oral traditions, which sustain their existence. At the same time, they do not resist the spread of ideas that occurs with development. They don’t understand why knowledge is copyrighted where nature has offered all resources to mankind for their sustenance. But the planners are unable to understand the symbiotic relation of nature and the universe and try to become powerful with their limited knowledge. This leads to the kind of consequence where indigenous development is impossible and the development conceptualized by the so-called planners cannot be realized. This leads to a series of urgent questions:

- ◆ Do development planners for tribal people understand indigenous knowledge? Are they concerned with preserving this knowledge?
- ◆ Do the planners and implementers believe that indigenous culture and traditional wisdom are treasures of human experience and if yes, have they used local knowledge as part of development?
- ◆ Have the planners tried to assimilate and integrate the voices and ideas of indigenous people into development planning, or it is a one-way process?
- ◆ What power do tribal ideas and community life have for sustaining natural and cultural resources?
- ◆ Can non-tribal people adopt the best practices of tribal wisdom in their model of human development?

The cultural attitude of tribal people in relation to their land, water, forest, family, society, greater human society and the universal as an integrated whole need to be understood and preserved. Now, rapid deforestation, the new economic order, and new development plans in which tribal people are not masters, but slaves. These have forced the tribal people to forget their traditional wisdom. With the loss of nature, cultural loss also goes hand in hand. It may be that tribal people cannot adjust to current development mechanisms because they want to perpetuate the past. Or it may be possible that the tribal people have become fascinated with westernization and have thus abandoned their traditional wisdom.

Many tribal people feel, and are often told, that their language is inferior in comparison to state languages or foreign languages. The dominant language does not allow the indigenous languages to thrive. Tribal people are taught in the dominant language. In this situation less than 10 percent of tribal people become literate and these people become assimilated into the dominant culture. Unfortunately they also oppose mother tongue education. Therefore locally relevant education, knowledge and language is denied to tribal children. The first educated tribal people become agents of the dominant culture. The schools in tribal areas therefore contribute to linguistic and cultural genocide. Both tribal knowledge and languages are devalued and disregarded. Therefore even though the constitutional provision is there in India, tribal children are denied their linguistic human rights. This results in high dropouts and low achievement. Oral tradition tales, myths, and legends with lots of local history and social history are lost, or become irrelevant with the

predominance of the written word. Many educated tribal people have given up their language, culture, and traditional wisdom. Perhaps now, as we attach increasing importance to indigenous knowledge and traditional wisdom, they may be able to regenerate some of their knowledge.

An invocation by a Jani priest is as follows:

O mother,  
As inside the earth pit,  
Covered by a big stone, the offering is secured  
This Earth is a great pit  
This sky the cover and  
We the nature and creatures are inside  
O mother, save us likewise.

In the *Dharnikhal*-earth pit where the sacrifice is offered to the Earth mother Goddess, a stone is placed on top to protect it. Comparing the Earth to the sacrifice pit, and the animals and nature within protected by the sky like the stone, the *Jani*-priest recites an invocation for the Earth and the universe. We can equally picture the global scientist speaking at a global environmental conference, saying “we have only one earth, let us save it”. The Jani and the scientist – both pray for saving the world from disaster. One speaks the method of transmitting experiential knowledge; the other speaks the ‘truth’ of science.

The natural world is formed into a cultural world through human experience, imagination, reasoning and memory. Language as the unique facet of human beings provides a vehicle for knowledge in the mind. The tribal people created the cultural world through their collective memory, drawing ideas and learning from the natural world. Human resources and natural resources are inseparable. Human beings construct belief, knowledge and attitudes from life experience. This helps them create the folklore in which experience is embedded. Folklore as the vehicle of communication and transformation of knowledge plays an essential role in perpetuating knowledge. The oral nature of transmission also allows knowledge to change with the changing situation. In order to sustain natural resources, people’s traditional knowledge needs to be acknowledged. This can be realized through:

1. Ensuring that planners understand the importance of traditional knowledge.
2. Adopting and reproducing good practice by recognizing collective technologies already in use.
3. Documenting oral traditions of experiential knowledge, and emphasizing their value to society.
4. Using the local knowledge of communities to influence planned developments.
5. Integrating local knowledge with the development process to strengthen the resilience of resources.
6. Developing the self-confidence of people in their local knowledge.

7. Using local knowledge in primary education and adult literacy, forest and environmental education, health awareness programmes, and even economic development programmes.
8. Utilizing community resource centers for empirical study and action research with and among community partnerships in which the people with traditional knowledge can be in the front line.
9. Encouraging sharing of knowledge and dissemination of best practices among other communities.

## **Appendix**

The spatial organization of the mental world of tribal people can be visualized in the following order:

1. Supernatural spirits, local gods and goddesses originate in the forest. Then they search for a priest who is a tribal. After that the deities are installed in the town (Manikeswari, Raktambari, Duarsani).
2. Goddesses named after a tree: Mahulgachien, Pendragadien, Kenduguchhen.
3. Goddesses in the name of river: Indradi (Indra) Sindradi (sunder) Udanti.
4. Hill God: Guru Donger, Chaura Donger, Nagesh Donger, (Khariar) Devagiri, mahendra giri, Ramgiri, (Gajapati) Balisugri Pahad (Bonda hills) Pahar Bhandar, Char Chourasi (four, eightyfour).
5. Forest Goddess: Vanadurga, Vanadevi,
6. First progenitor/ First worshipper: Budharaja, Budha Deo, Baburai, Dulha Deo.
7. Jungle with mythic significance: Patdarah Jungle: Ramayana, Maraguda Jungle with Allah Uddal and heroes of mahabharata.
8. Huge stones, / foot prints/water origin: deeds of Bhima/ demons/demigods.
9. Land: Mahadeo/Shiva the first cultivator, Bhima the first ploughman.
10. Jungle associated with mythic/ historic/legendary heroes: Ramud Jungle for Ramai Deo, founder of Chauhan dynasty in western Orissa.
11. Land and Jungle associated with a tribe/ ethnic group: Bonda/Juang/Bhunja/Saora/Kondh etc.
12. Abode of God: kadli jharia (Mahadeo used to live here with Parvati/ or Kadlivan for Gorekhnath).
13. Water god Bhima, and water goddess Kondhen (union of spirit and woman).
14. Prohibited jungle: Small, full of spiritual deeds, prohibited area.
15. Sacred grooves. Burial space.
16. Jungle of Saints/Jogi: Jogi math/Risipiti/Bamhan Devta/ Bankhandi risi/Parsuram, Gurubudha famous for penance and magical results.

The jungle is sacred, and it purifies the sin. In Bhunjia community, when a girl attains her puberty before the Kanabora ritual is instituted, the community consider it a sin and takes the girl to the nearby forest, and tie her to a tree until she is rescued by an uncle. Then the girl is allowed to come to the village.

The original Shakti-power of goddess Manikeswari is a jungle. During Dasahara festival, the original Shakti is brought through a ritual to the main temple for ten days, and then returned to the Jungle after the festival is over. The same procedure happens for Duiarsani, Durga, Raktambari and many other goddesses. Being asked, the priest's reply is that the spirit of pure goddess always remains in her place of origin. Installation of the Goddess in a human habitation is for common people. Association with humans in the temple is full of pollution, and therefore The Shakti, which is eternally pure, must be brought from her place of origin.

The origin myth of tribal community teaches the interdependence of man and animal with earth, land, water, tree, and vegetation. The tribal priest is responsible for community harmony, and the mantra chanted in the worship of Earth mother Goddess integrates the tribal worldview. The meaning of the mantra is:

Oh Earth mother,  
We the creatures,  
Your spit, your left over food,  
Worship you, save us from all dangers  
Let the rain appear,  
Let the forest be evergreen  
Let there be no danger from tiger and snakes,  
Let there be abundant harvest  
Let rice be plenty  
Let the issue-less beget child  
Let the rajj- country be bright  
Let the Earth be healthy.

A Kondh belief about a sacred land for human settlement consists of three symbols.

Kondh kurlmel matir dub.  
Jenne basle sethan subh.

A land is considered auspicious, if you see a Kondh has settled there, or the kurlmel mouse is found there or the grass (dub) has sprouted on that land. It signifies the fertility of land.

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