



Special issue with the Sunday Magazine
From the publishers of THE HINDU

ADIVASI: JULY 16, 2000

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Treading lightly on earth

Ashish Kothari

The author is founder of Kalpavriksha, Pune.

It is a sign of our times that the one group of people who have hardly participated in the global parleys on "sustainable development," are the ones who probably live most sustainably. Adivasis in India, natives in the Americas, aborigines in Australia... variously termed, but all characterised by a lifestyle far more in tune with nature than any of us who call ourselves environmentalists or eco-developmentalists.

I do not pretend to know even a tiny fraction of the lifestyle of India's adivasis, but can cite others who do. Adivasis consider themselves a part of nature, not outside of it, and examples of this abound. The widespread phenomenon of sacred spaces and species is well-known: entire valleys in Sikkim, forest groves ranging from a few trees to a few hundred hectares at thousands of sites across India, totemic animal and plant species that are not exploited. Anthropologist Savyasaachi details the universe of the Koitors of Abujmarh Bastar, in which a complex set of rituals combines rights to use land and forests with the collective responsibility to protect nature. Forests cannot be owned, as they are a creation of nature. Even in shifting cultivation, universally condemned by the "modern" agricultural scientist and the forester, there are rules on how to treat the forest so that its regenerating capacity is not extinguished.

Vasumati Sankaran tells us of the fishing methods of the Korkus of Maharashtra. From temporary bunds across streams to the use of plant-based poisons, these methods are sustainable and cause no irreversible harm to aquatic biodiversity. My friend Madhu Ramnath, once a student and scholar like many of us but with the guts to give up urban life and take up long-term residence with adivasis in central India, gives other examples. Forest-dwellers here tell of the changes in season, of the oncoming rains, by close

Amit Khullar



observation of the behaviour of flowering plants, ants, and mushrooms. Deviations in the seasons are predicted through deviations in this behaviour . . . with probably as much accuracy as our sophisticated meteorological devices!

Are their footsteps still light?

Respect and even awe of the adivasi lifestyle cannot blind one to some of the problems inherent in such ways of living, and the changes that have taken place in them. Social, political, sexual, and many other forms of exploitation have existed traditionally, and continue to exist, in adivasi society. But the much more serious problem is the way in which adivasi cultures and livelihoods have been transformed over the last few decades.

Two simple stories tell it all. Madhu Ramnath recounts the changes that came into the resource use patterns of adivasis in central India. Traditionally, these people used to fish in a stream by making a temporary barrage of sticks and stones, and using plant based poisons to stun the fish. The barrage would be dismantled at the end of the session. Then came the Kanger Ghati National Park of Madhya Pradesh, with the objective of conserving the area's dwindling wildlife. Fishing was banned. But the adivasis still needed fish for survival, so they started sneaking in, swiftly killing fish with DDT, and rushing out. The same people had a tradition, that the wild mango trees in the forest would not be harvested till the birds had had their first feed. This ensured that seeds were spread out through fall of fruits or by animals, and hence the trees regenerated. "Development," meanwhile, brought in a mango pickling plant in an urban area nearby. With a great demand for raw mangoes, the villagers began to pick the fruit even before it had ripened, thus hastening the decline of wild mango in the area.

Ashish Kothari



Such stories can be told from virtually every part of tribal India. Excessive and indiscriminate demand of the urban market has reduced adivasis to raw material collectors and providers. It is a cruel joke that people who can produce some of India's most exquisite handicrafts, who can distinguish hundreds of species of plants and animals, who can survive off the forest and the streams with no need to go the market to buy food, are labeled as "unskilled" by our economy!

And it is supremely ironical that areas with the highest deforestation rates in India include the predominantly tribal parts of north-east India, where, till the Supreme Court recently put a halt, timber logging was being carried out by the same communities that earlier nurtured these forests. The reasons? The insatiable demand for paper, plywood, furniture, housing, from the rest of India.

Centralised politics and governance have done as much damage as the external market. Though Independent India's leaders appeared to give special attention to the needs of adivasis, actual governmental programmes have only served to destabilise the

self-governance systems in tribal areas. Universal franchise is fine as a principle of democracy, but when it divides a hitherto well-united community between two or more political parties, and when this causes the breakdown of carefully evolved systems of common property governance, we must question it. We must also cast a doubtful eye on centralised resource management systems that are sometimes counterproductive. The example of the Kanger Ghati National Park is symptomatic. Wildlife conservation is a laudable aim, and protected areas are a powerful tool for achieving this, but such steps can boomerang when they ignore local human realities and sensibilities.

And so, in many parts of India, no longer are adivasis living "in harmony with nature." But we who influence public policies and programmes, for whom the markets and the State runs, must look within ourselves for the reasons for this change. Fortunately, adivasis themselves are forcing such a rethink among us.

Revitalisation and Resistance

G.B.Mukherji/Wilderfile

A quiet revolution is spreading through local communities. Alarmed at the dwindling natural resource base around them, tired of waiting for governments to deliver on promises, and concerned about the increasing rootlessness of their own youth, adivasis and other communities have begun reviving aspects of their culture and traditions that enabled wise management of resources, and resisting external and internal pressures of destruction.

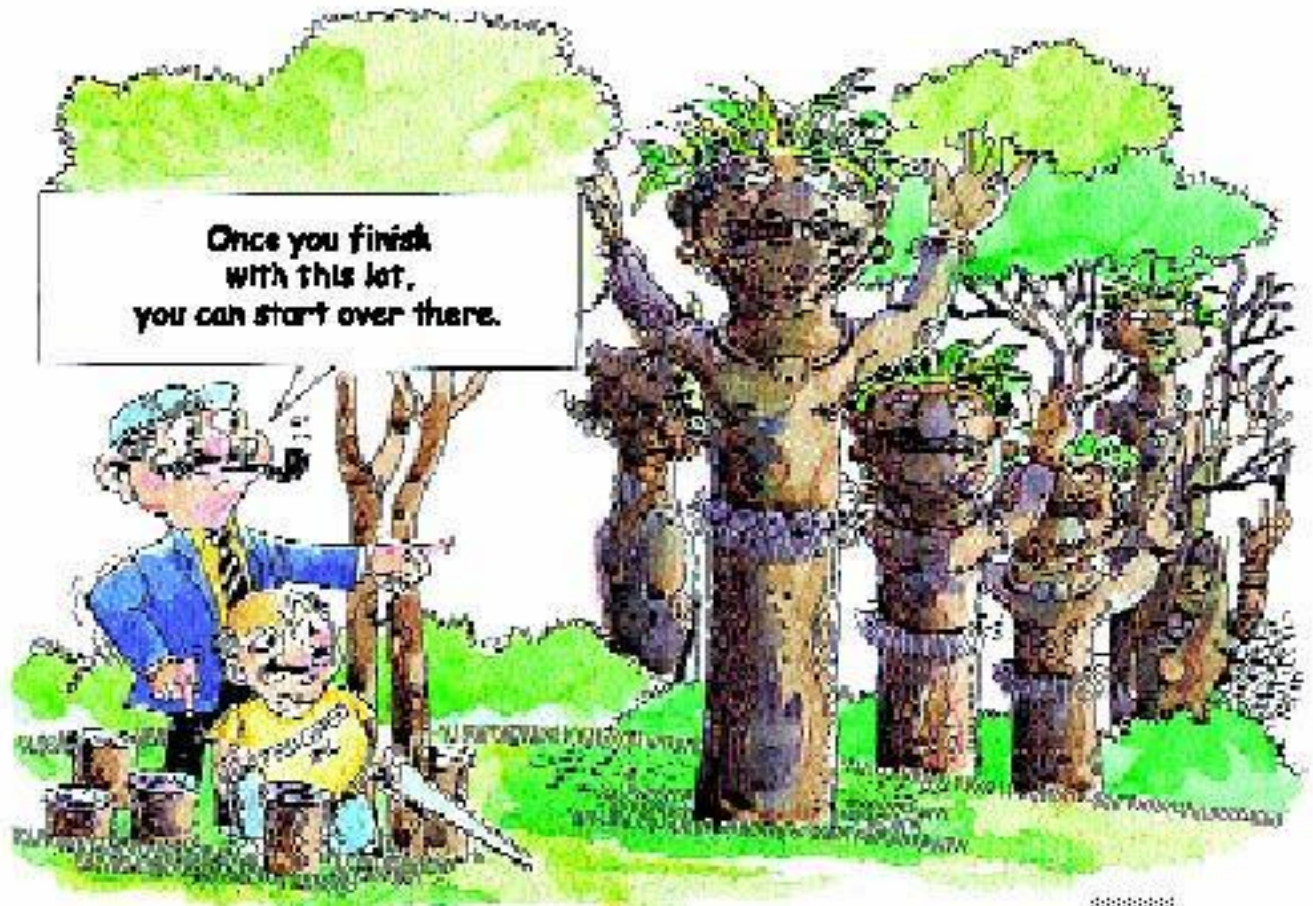


At Mendha (Lekha), Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra, a tiny village of 300 Gonds have stayed off a paper mill that was destroying their forests, and halted (in association with thousands of other adivasis of the area) two huge dams that would have submerged their lands. They now protect and manage 1800 hectares of forests, including relatively, sustainable extraction of bamboo and other products. They have initiated livelihood programmes, built irrigation tanks and biogas plants. But much more remarkable is the political, social, and intellectual empowerment they have achieved. Through a unique institution called *abhyas* gat (study circle), comprising villagers and guest experts, they have striven to obtain greater understanding of ecological, political, and policy issues. With the aid of local NGOs, the villagers are now armed with a high degree of knowledge about the policies and rules that impinge on their lives. And the gram sabha is so powerful, that no government agency can now work in this village without its permission. Such a movement of adivasi self-rule is spreading in many parts of India, though not always with the same successful results as seen in Mendha (Lekha).

Tribals and non-tribals have teamed up in several hundred villages of Alwar district, Rajasthan, to regreen the land. With several hundred small *johads* (checkdams) placed at sites chosen with local knowledge, an area that was chronically drought-prone just 15 years back has become water-surplus. Seasonal streams have become perennial, catchment forests are reviving and being protected. Several villages of the Arvari river basin have

even formed a Arvari Sansad (Parliament), for decisions regarding land, water, forest, and agricultural use, and for dispute resolution.

Shashi Shetye



All these examples, customary or community-based rules of resource use have been drawn up, some of them new. Residents are fined or ostracised for violations. Major decisions are taken by the adults of the village, not by a supposedly representative panchayat. Women are encouraged to participate, though in many areas this is as yet far from satisfactory.

Equally critical are the paths of resistance that many adivasi areas are displaying. Koel Karo, Bodh Ghat, Inchampalli, Bhopalpatnam, Rathong Chu . . . big dams that were proposed by our development planners and would have destroyed adivasi homelands and forests, have all been halted by mass movements. As part of the larger fishworkers' movement, adivasis on our coasts are fighting off ecologically destructive and economically inequitable commercial trawling and aquaculture. At the Nagarhole National park, adivasi groups fought on the ground and in the courts, to halt a luxury hotel project.

All the above examples do not yet amount to a comprehensive response to the threat faced by adivasi cultures and the biological diversity they live within. The overall slide continues. Mass hunting (unsustainable and cruel in today's context), increasing consumerism, and corruption among the tribal elite, remain burning. But these examples of revival and resistance are signs of hope, indicators of a growing trend. If the rest of India wants to, it can learn from them. It can attempt to understand the dynamic nature of adivasi lifestyles and traditions, to use sustainable practices as a mirror to showcase our

own rampantly destructive consumerism. It can respectfully give much greater decision-making and planning powers to adivasi communities, including in conservation programmes. In so doing, it can jointly forge a way to once again live lightly off the earth. If, on the other hand, adivasi India sinks with the sheer weight of our ill-conceived development models and ideas of "progress," we too will sink with it.

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