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## **Ecology and the Indigenous Peoples**

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### **Abstract:**

After articulating the indigenous peoples' understanding of and approaches to ecological issues facing them, the author wishes to enlarge approaches to ecology which are prevalent among the non-indigenous peoples. Then, he seeks to unmask the presumptions of the understanding of the nature-human relationship in contemporary ecological studies. The article is limited in its scope to the indigenous people of central India in general and Mundas in particular. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the insights from the traditions of the indigenous peoples of central India would break open the 'conceptual prison' into which most of our theological thinking concerning the ecological crisis has been imprisoned. Finally, the author poses the question: Will the earth survive if the current way of human involvement continues? The answer, according to the author, is an emphatic "no".

### **Keywords:**

Ecology, Mundas, Santals, indigenous people, indigenous ecology, Jharkhand, Asur myth, ontology, landscape architects, Santal Parganas.

It has become a platitude on the lips of the academicians (sociologists, anthropologists, economists, philosophers, theologians), social reformers, politicians and governments of various nations to say that the indigenous peoples are ‘nature lovers’, and that they have a symbiotic<sup>1</sup> relationship with nature (that is, animals, birds, insects and reptiles, plant, land with its green covered high hills and forests, green meadows, rivers and tanks). They come to this conclusion by observing that the indigenous peoples mostly live in the hill ranges away from the cities. They are agriculturists and far from either the capitalist or the Marxist ideal of economics and society. Furthermore, they hold that indigenous peoples are land-based people and that the things they use in day-to-day life are made of the raw materials which abound around their habitat. Each house has various animals – goats, sheep cows, chickens, ducks etc. All these things are true but this way of portraying their love for or symbiotic relationship with nature does not seem to resonate with their understanding of their love or symbiotic relationship. It is so because they understand themselves as part of nature rather than nature as an ‘object’ out there for them to grasp and use as a commodity.

In this article I intend, first, to articulate the indigenous peoples’ understanding of and approaches to ecological issues<sup>2</sup> facing them, with a view to enlarging the understanding and approaches to ecology which are prevalent among the non-indigenous peoples. Second, to unmask the presumptions of the understanding of the nature-human relationship in contemporary ecological studies. The article will be limited because I will deal with the indigenous people of central India in general and Mundas in particular. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the insights from the traditions of the indigenous peoples of central India would break open the ‘conceptual prison’ into which most of our theological thinking concerning the ecological crisis has been imprisoned.<sup>3</sup>

Before I enter into a reflection on the points mentioned above, I would like to clarify the word “ecology”. The lexical meaning of ecology is that it is a branch of biology concerned with the relationships of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings. The definition points to the existence of a relationship

among the living organisms and the space in which they live or are placed. The eco-problems, in simple terms, rupture of life-giving interrelationships, and change of environment in which life becomes difficult, have shown that it is a section of rich and powerful human groups which are not only adversely affecting the relationships of the living organisms among themselves and with their habitat, but the same human groups also are destroying the weaker sections of the human group along with the environment, assisted by science and technology to serve the former's capitalist ideology and greed.. The ecological crisis<sup>4</sup> is the outcome of the unethical claim of a rich and powerful human group's supremacy over other weak human beings, nature and creation as a whole in view of satisfying their greed. .

In this context it is pertinent to be aware of the people and groups who "see it as quite all right to be involved in environmental campaigns for tree-planting and reforestation, clean water and air and organically produced vegetables and fruits. But one must not say anything about logging bans, boycotts of pesticides and industrial fertilizers, mono-culture crops, transnational agri-business, open pit mining or chemical and radioactive pollution."<sup>5</sup> Such people would like to set environmental and ecological issues apart from the political, economic, social, religious and cultural dimensions of society. They would not consider the problem of the displacement of indigenous peoples from their land and habitat as an ecological issue in the name of development and 'national interest.'<sup>6</sup> However, everybody is concerned about air, water, and soil. Everyone shows that he/she is pro-environment, but in his/her own interest. In such a situation of conflicting attitudes towards ecology and development dynamics we must place the issue of the 'survival of the peoples', 'the daily bread' at the core. Therefore, in the light of the past experiences and the recent experiences of the earthquake in the North and tsunami in the South of our country we need to go back to our religio-cultural traditions and re-interpret them in order to discover a new mode of our be-ing among living beings as well as in the whole creation.

A visit to Netrahat on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2004 brought home to me new dimensions of ecological crisis and responses, from

merely saving forests, protecting air, water and land from pollution, maintaining biodiversity, taking measures to stop depletion of natural resources etc. to the core of the issue, namely, genocide (that is, destroying the so-called less developed peoples by the rich and powerful groups of people represented by the Government, politicians, industrialists, economists who are champions of a capitalist ideology of development) by displacing indigenous peoples from their centuries old land and habitat in the Netrahat hills. The Netrahat Field Firing Range Project is an ambitious plan of the Indian Government to acquire 2.5 lakh *hector* land for defence purposes. Within this area of forest there are 245 villages with a population of 2.35 lakh persons, most of whom belong to the Indigenous Peoples. In fact since 1956 the people had been suffering from military exercises which had been taking place on a twice yearly basis. By 1992 the Government proposed to acquire the whole area permanently. The people non-violently began opposing the military exercises. The people began asking questions: "It seems that the tribes have the sole responsibility of developing the country. Why are all the dams, factories and firing ranges built only in tribal area? I also want to ask them: Is this the only way you have to develop the country?"<sup>7</sup> The hills resounded with the cry of the people "*jaan denge, jamin nahi denge*" (we will lay down our lives but we will not give our lands). Since then every year on the 22-23 March people from every affected village come to consolidate their struggle against the possible displacement at Tutuwapani. On the night of 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2004 people remained on the roadside under the trees telling their stories of struggle through songs and dances, and street plays throughout the night. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> morning the people were asked to move a bit away from the meeting place in the direction of their respective village and assemble again in the meeting place in the form of a procession. While procession was in progress and each group was moving towards the place of meeting it began raining. People did not have umbrellas to cover them but they remained in their lines and kept on marching and shouting '*jan denge, jamin nahi denge*'. This cry was that of human survival as a people along with their habitat and other beings.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, I believe that any discourse of ecology cannot be limited to only protecting and saving from extinction some non-

human living beings and inorganic beings, but must focus on saving the less fortunate indigenous peoples, which necessarily includes the non-human living beings and inorganic beings, from the socio-political-economic, religio-cultural pursuits of the rich and powerful groups of the country. Why are the indigenous peoples determined to lay down their lives for a piece of land? Why can people not give their lands for a price (which is being offered) and go elsewhere? The people and the area are backward and undeveloped, therefore should it not be developed by the Government through setting up the firing range in addition to enhancing nation's military power? Why are some groups opposing the industrialization of the state? The new breed of greedy 'colonizers' asks these questions. In the present case the colonizers are not from outside but from inside the country. The history of the colonizers had been to destroy the people as people, the land and whatever was found in the particular area so that they could satisfy their greed.

### **Indigenous understanding of ecology: Rooted in their religious foundation**

When we look around the topography of the indigenous peoples of Jharkhand we notice a marked difference from the villages of non-indigenous peoples. They live amidst hills, valleys and plains, with bushes and shrubs all around. The village proper is like a forest where we find various kinds of full grown fruit trees – jackfruit, tamarind, drumstick, mangoes, blackberries etc. The village would never be on a plain ground. Close to the village or within the boundary of the village one would see a cluster of old sal trees which is called the sacred grove (*sarna*). The fields all around the houses will have standing crops. The houses are not separated by wide metal roads or pavements in front of the house. The house itself will have sections for humans (living and dead<sup>9</sup>), animals and fowls living in close proximity. The physical set-up of the dwellings illustrates the interrelationships and mutual communion of humans, animals, land and invisible supernatural beings and God. Rootedness in the land is central to interrelationship and survival. An outside observer will miss the harmonious living, rhyme and rhythm, dance and music of life in the village set-up. This feeling of harmony is rooted in their

vision of life which is fundamentally a religious vision. Therefore, indigenous peoples' understanding of ecology must be sought in their religious beliefs.

In all the myths of origins of the major indigenous peoples (Munda, Ho, Santal, Oraon and Kharia) we see how before land and other beings appear on the land, water is found everywhere. According to the Munda myth the Old One (the Supreme Being) asked the tortoise, crab, earthworms to bring up earth from the womb of water.<sup>10</sup> It is also true of the other cognate indigenous groups of Ho, Kharia, Santal and Oraon. Once the land is made, the Old One made animals who live on the land, trees and, finally, human beings. The Old One took the help of other creatures to make the land. This is how in fact cultivable land is made in the villages. He is not portrayed as all powerful, but as someone who is the source of everything that was taking place. We notice how in the primordial times itself other-orientedness, interrelationship and cooperation characterize the mode of engagement, and not the competitive and individualistic operations which we encounter today in our world.

Once the creation of all beings was completed, the Hos and Mundas have kept up some myths which shed light on the relationship among the beings in the creation. The Fleeing of the Rice Mother,<sup>11</sup> The Legend of Mother Cotton and the Ashes, the Creation of Tobacco<sup>12</sup> illustrate the relationship among the beings in the universe. The Ho version of the Fleeing of the Rice Mother is illustrative of human-divine-nature. Rice is called mother for it feeds human beings, other animals and birds. It is symbolic of all grains. In the beginning paddy grew and yielded grain without husk. Having harvested and threshed it, people used to cook it. They ate while it was standing in the fields too. The Rice- Mother tolerated all that, but one day a non-Ho while defecating in the paddy field plucked the grains and began to eat it. The Rice Mother could no longer bear this indignity. She wondered: how human beings ate her while defecating and urinating! How they ate her either uncooked or cooked! So she decided to run away from the human beings. When human beings saw her running away, they prayed to Singbonga. Singbonga then said to the Rice Mother: "Do not flee. Human beings will no longer desecrate you, I will clothe you." Then Singbonga covered the rice

with husk. Afterwards the Rice-Mother remained among human beings. Ever since every year before the sowing of paddy during the *Her mut* feast the Rice-Mother is called back by offering a sacrifice of a white cock to Singbonga. The myth has the following symbolic meanings: first, it is human beings who break the ontological interdependent relationship ('desecrate') between nature and human beings out of greed. Second, Nature breaks its life-giving relationship by 'running away' from human beings. Third, human beings on their own cannot call back the Rice-Mother, therefore during the feast of *Her Mut* the headman of the house prays to Singbonga that he send her back to his house in case she had left the house because of his ill-treatment of her. Fourth, the myth refers to an abiding relationship between the human-divine and nature. The survival of humankind and nature depends on each other and both in turn are rooted in the divinely ordained mode of inter-relationship and communion with mutual respect.

Can human beings survive without animals? The myth of tobacco brings home the truth that human beings cannot exploit animals the way they want to. According to the Munda myth the first man yoked his oxen in the morning and never rested till midday. The animals always got exhausted. Therefore they appealed to Singbonga saying that they were happy to serve human beings, but they were never allowed to rest a bit from early morning to noon. Singbonga saw the plight of the animals so he told them that he would cause a craving for tobacco in human beings. They would stop ploughing while they prepared tobacco to eat. Thus the animals would get rest. Now historically speaking tobacco might have come among them very late, but the main concern is that human beings must not exploit animals (nature) to the point of their death (degradation). Animals would not be able to help human beings to survive if they did not take care of them in turn.. This argument may be extended to the unscrupulous, greedy extraction of natural resources, such as land, minerals, water, forest by humankind. The impact is not hidden to anyone except to the greedy rich and powerful class, which does not want to see its cosmic ill effect. It lives in an illusion that it can save itself while it continues to destroy other weaker human beings, non-human beings and nature as whole in the name of development or maximum profit (for itself).<sup>13</sup> The Ho-Munda myth points an

accusing finger towards humankind for its own destruction and the destruction of creation.

The myth of the Rain of Fire which is found in all the five major indigenous traditions- Ho, Munda, Oraon, Kharia and Santal – also powerfully illustrate that it is human beings who violated the divinely ordained way of life among themselves and in respect of nature. This made the Supreme Being angry. So in order to purge creation he rains fire to destroy it. The cause of human evil is not clearly spelled out in the myth. But the divine displeasure and anger is highlighted. All the versions of the myth agree that the Supreme Being saved a pair of brother and sister in a crab hole and from them humankind multiplied. The myths are silent about nature, but the listener of the myth understands that it is the myth of the destruction of human wickedness and saving of humankind from utter annihilation because a creation without humankind is inconceivable. Even the Supreme Being needs human beings, not in the ontological sense but in the existential order of life. He gets food through sacrifices which he does not eat but distributes it to his servants. This is clearly brought out in the Oraon version of the myth.<sup>14</sup> Dharmes (the Supreme Being) had decided to destroy human beings because they had filled the earth with their excreta. They had become numerous. Upon this his wife told him that it was foolish to do that. It was human beings who were offering them rice and eggs. Because of human beings everything on the earth has life. But Dharmes did not listen to his wife and he rained fire. As a result everything got burnt. After the rain of fire Dharmes went hunting. Everything was reduced to ashes. He remained hungry. His wife had prepared rice with a little millet flour. She gave him water to wash his hands. Dharmes sat down to eat. Being very hungry he put his hands in the food immediately. It was very hot so he got his hands skinned off. Then his wife asked him how could he get rice and eggs (through sacrifices) because he had destroyed all human beings in his anger. The myth refers to the fact of how the interdependence of the human, the divine and nature is at the root of life in creation. Destruction of one or the other dimension of creation results in self-destruction. Dharmes getting angry to the extent of destroying humankind shows the extent and gravity of human wickedness.



The most definitive insight into human wickedness is exemplified in the Asur myth which is alive among three major indigenous traditions of the Hos, the Mundas, and the Oraons.<sup>15</sup> The myth begins with the situation of cosmic lack of “food and drink” due to the heat emanating from the furnaces of the Asurs (a section of human-kind which is rich and powerful) The heat is so intense that even Singbonga felt the scorching heat (recall global warming). The lack of food in creation is the direct result of the Asurs’ mode of economic operation in order to satisfy their excessive greed for more iron (profit). Then Singbonga sends different pairs of birds to carry his message that the Asurs must adhere to his wisdom and law of economic activities. His message was simple and direct taking into consideration the good of every creature in the creation: “ If you blow the bellows by night, then do not blow them by day; and if you blow them by day, do not blow them by night. The tank with its floating lotuses, the bund with its marsh flowers are drying up...” This mode of activity was established and regulated by his creation of day and night.<sup>16</sup> The Asurs violated the divine wisdom of working either by day or night for it ensured rest for human beings as well as other beings. Now, making other creatures of the earth suffer was not the end of their oppression, they placed themselves above Singbonga (pride) by saying to the divine messengers: “We ourselves are Singbonga; we ourselves are the great deity. We obey no orders. We had our dawn and sunset before Singbonga, the Sun-God had his (i.e., we existed before him). Nobody is greater than we are.. We will blow the bellows by night and will blow them by day. We hold together like plantain in a bunch, like mangoes spitted on petioles of a twig. We obey no orders”<sup>17</sup> The reply of the Asurs reflects the attitude of a proud rich person (a group/groups of humankind). They become masters over every being and creation. They make their own laws to suit their greedy drive of amassing maximum profit. In the indigenous terminology Asurs symbolize the proud and greedy people. The experience of being exploited by creation and all beings and Singbonga’s timely communicated message through birds is an indictment on what is happening on the earth in the name of economic prosperity, scientific and technological development endangering the whole of creation with all the living and non-living beings. Whatever we see in Jharkhand in the name of development

and national interest is the continuation of the life of greed and pride of the rich ruling class which is predominantly non-indigenous. The policies of development through industrialization, open cast mining operations, forest law, urbanization, mega dam projects are symbols of the furnace in which the poor indigenous peoples, earth and the whole creation are 'sacrificed' so that a top rich class and the ruling class may never lack the material comforts of life.

Moreover, the myth highlights forcefully that Singbongae/Dharmes (the Supreme Being) is not a god who allows the Asurs (proud and greedy people) to continue in their designs defying his design and destroying fellow creatures. Singbonga, first, makes an attempt to tell them directly through his messengers to abide by the ontological laws of interdependence, fellowship, and equality, but they refuse and even make them 'outcastes' (uproot them from their identity by disfiguring them). Second, he transformed himself into a despicable servant boy wanting to be hired by them, but they disown him. However, the poor, old and childless couple hired him. He wanted to show them the way of self-emptying servanthood. Third, he tried to make them recognize him through games, yet they do not recognize him. Finally, he showed them the way of sacrifice. The Asurs ran short of iron. They came to the servant boy and asked him to divine the cause of it. He showed that they have to sacrifice to Singbonga in order to get iron coagulated. Twice they went through the experience of the good a sacrifice to Singbonga does. Even then, because of their greed and pride they did not recognize Singbonga and showed more interest in amassing gold and silver. When the Asurs came to the servant boy for the third time he suggested that a human being be sacrificed. They went to the country of Mundas to get a human child, but the Mundas chased them away. They came back to the servant boy and told him that no one would sell them their children to be sacrificed. At last the servant boy asked them to sacrifice him and told them how to do it. After the sacrifice the servant boy came out transformed and with plenty of gold and silver. On seeing the boy adorned with gold and silver, the Asurs enquired whether there was more gold and silver inside the furnace. He told them that there was plenty. If they wanted to go inside then all males must go inside. They went inside. The boy asked their women to plaster the furnace and lit the fire. When the furnace was opened the women saw only the charred bones of their husbands. The women saw the trick the boy played on them, but he told them that he had

sent messengers to remind them of his command to regularize their economic operations. They did not obey. They would survive (get their food) only if they obey his commands by revealing themselves to the diviner. The myth ends with the women being thrown down by the ascending Singbonga to different places. They possessed the places they fell into. They got back their 'spirit' existence in the wild country. But some of them were identified with the benevolent 'spirits' of the village. One thing is clear that they have to protect humans, the cattle and the crops.

## **The Asur Myth: Watershed of Life in the Creation**

The myth brings to light deep insights into the life in creation. It is time to articulate them as the indigenous people believe. First of all, the myth affirms the abiding communion, interdependence, fellowship and self-emptying mode of servanthood of all beings. In serving one another each one lives and helps others to live and makes the whole creation a life-promoting and enhancing one. No one being can exercise its mastery over others to its advantage alone. In the concrete, human beings cannot do with the natural resources as they want in order to satisfy a few people's greed; nor can they oppress fellow human beings.

Second, it is the greed and pride of a few rich and powerful people, that cause cosmic destruction in terms of ecological crisis (degradation of land, water and air - the whole creation), the annihilation or oppression of human beings, species extinction and biotic alterations of animals and plants, and wastage of natural resources and their toxification. Every human act of greed and pride is an abomination. It is an offence against divine wisdom which sustains and gives purpose to the interdependent harmonious living and be-ing in the universe. It is an act of self-destruction like that of the Asurs. No amount of arguments for the homocentric vision of life in the universe will be able to save humankind as long as the greed and pride of a few is not overcome by the religious vision of life as espoused by the indigenous peoples' Asur myth.

Third, the myth reveals that the creation is not like a unicellular being. It is a communion of beings. They are necessarily interrelated and interdependent. The interrelationship is not based on autonomy

or heteronomy but an ontonomy.<sup>18</sup> The basis of ontonomic relationship is “the assumption that the universe is a whole, that there is an internal and constitutive relationship between all and every part of reality, that nothing is disconnected and the development of one being is not to be at the expense of another- not because it should or ought not, but for the same reason adduced in the case of cancer, namely that it neither promotes the life of the whole organism nor is it of any utility for the affected organ.”<sup>19</sup> The myth does not deal with material creation alone. It deals with the human and divine reality. Therefore, when we talk of ecology from the indigenous perspective we cannot limit ourselves only to the material earth, but the network of the human, divine and cosmic worlds.<sup>20</sup> The indigenous people live by this belief and it is expressed in the rites of passage, feasts and festivals, social organization and in the day-to-day life too. The loss of this religious foundation caused the Asurs to behave the way they behaved which eventually led to their own destruction. Any ecological concern cannot bypass the religious foundation for ignorance of this will result in a part of humankind playing god.

Fourth, the myth advocates a self-emptying servanthood in the individual and collective inter-human and inter-being relationship. It is a prophetic denunciation of the contemporary mode of seeking human supremacy over creation, disregarding the divine wisdom through the capitalist ideal and mode of economic prosperity and amassing of material conveniences by a few rich and powerful. It is also an indictment on the use of science and technology to further the greedy and arrogant attitude of the unholy alliance of the rich and powerful class in the society. The present Jharkhand Government and non-indigenous industrialists and population have accelerated their efforts of pursuing the path of development through industrialization and urbanization (which need a lot of land, building of big dams for water and electricity and all of these imply displacement of the indigenous peoples from their homes and hearths). Do these not reflect the policy of the Asurs? Tribals would be completely wiped out of human history because they would not be able to compete with the rich and powerful class who determine what is best for them. The people would be reduced to a labour reserve without any name or identity of their own. The myth calls

for seeking an alternative path in the lines of divine wisdom as discovered in the Asur myth.

Fifth, the myth gives a call to the indigenous people to wake up and see the illusory vision of life projected by the rich and ruling class of the state and country. They are presenting an alien vision of life which will destroy the indigenous seed of life just as it seeks to destroy the indigenous animals and plants through its bio-engineering technology. No bio-engineered species will be able to survive in the natural ecosystem which has not shared in the millennia of co-adaptation of native species with the environment. Once the rural indigenous population opts for the bio-engineered paddy, it will not be able to preserve the seed for the following year. It will have to depend on the scientific community which is controlled by the rich and the powerful. It will be subservient to the rich and the powerful for everything. The individual faces of the rich and powerful people or groups might change but the societal structure of the rich and the poor will remain. The gulf between the rich and poor will be widened day by day. Hence the indigenous peoples will have to stand united and not only present their alternative but also oppose their plan.

## **Indigenous Peoples: Landscape Architects**

The belief system of the indigenous peoples of Jharkhand has highlighted for us that ecology has a religious foundation. What we see in the world is that a section of human beings due to their greed have become the destroyers of ecology. Now the Indigenous peoples' belief is lived out daily. The clan system of the indigenous peoples is related to trees, birds, reptiles or material objects. It not only serves the social purpose of human alliances (in terms of regulating marriage)<sup>21</sup>, but it expresses the ontological foundation of brotherhood and sisterhood extended to all beings in the creation. For example, Horo (tortoise) among the Mundas: People belonging to this clan do not destroy a tortoise for they become their brothers and sisters. It is believed that in the primordial times, the tortoise was instrumental in saving the group. Unfortunately under the influence of modernity the sacredness of the clan and its deeper meaning is being lost. Under the influence of non-indigenous people

who have dislodged them from their land there began a movement of striking off the clan name. This is a sinister design of the anti-indigenous people so that the indigenous people will forget their specific name and identity.

The principles of inheritance and succession<sup>22</sup> of the indigenous people presents before us a unique structure of relationship with ecology. It is not I who own the land but we belong to the land. We inherit it from the ancestors and so possess it collectively. Accordingly, three principles determine the human-land relationship: one, the land and all the property belongs to all in common; second, the land is inalienable; and third, only the sons get an equal share of the ancestral land and property for their use. These principles are the backbone of the indigenous peoples' identity. The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act and Santal Parganas Tenancy Act are the twentieth century bulwarks which have saved the indigenous peoples from the onslaught of the non-indigenous peoples who had already pushed them to the deeper forests. The non-indigenous people find these principles and their application in real life intriguing and against the dynamics of development. With the invasion of non-indigenous peoples in Jharkhand region, ecology has changed drastically which had not altered despite centuries of occupation by the original settlers. For the non-indigenous people the land and its natural resources are means to gain wealth; for the indigenous peoples they are wealth. So how can one destroy wealth?

The character of the indigenous architects is founded on two ethical values: non-addiction to material things (anti-greed life) and non-addiction to self-sufficiency (anti-pride life). These two values give direction to their interrelationships at all levels. All values that make human beings divine, namely, cooperation, consensus, mutuality, equality, solidarity with the weak, sense of belonging to the group (family, clan, village and tribe), joy and celebration, are guided by the strong adherence to anti-greed and anti-pride life. Both these values strike at the root of the spirit of individualistic and competitive pursuits, and nurture the spirit of communion of communities.

Whatever is said above is symbolically represented in the dance during the feasts and festivals. Their dance is circular and all the

dancers are interlinked with one another. The drummers remain in the middle of the circle. As such, the line of the dancers is never closed so that anyone is welcome to join the dance. The feasts follow the seasonal cycle of the main crop. One must keep in mind that feasts are sacred events because without sacrifice the dance does not commence. Each sacrifice is a symbolic ritual communion of the human, the divine and nature for harmonious existence. In this way dance is the celebration of the harmonious fellowship which was ritually enacted and experienced. On another level of celebration comes the place of songs in their life. Their songs manifest their closeness to the life of plants and animals. An indigenous person is so connected with all that is around him/her visible or invisible, that he/she bursts out in song spontaneously whether he/she is alone or in a group, in the forest or on the river banks, while working in the fields or resting in the shade or while returning from a hard day's work.

## **Exorcism of Asurs: Identification of the Assumptions**

The foregoing considerations have helped us to identify the Asurs (demons) who are in fact late comers on this earth, that have brought about an ecological crisis in the whole of creation. For centuries the indigenous peoples lived on this earth, but ecological degradation was unheard of. The cause of all the ills that have been imposed on the earth is just one species: human beings. Even within the species of human beings it is the rich and powerful class of people, groups and nations in the name of development who are turning the earth into a furnace which will not be able to sustain the species.

It is the greed and pride (human arrogance of superiority among the organisms in creation, even the denial of the divine) of a few rich and powerful groups and nations which are the root of all illness of the earth. They are using science and technology to abuse the earth. The capitalist mode of engagement with one another and with the earth has already caused the extinction of thousands of non-human species. It is a forerunner of what will happen to humans. The extinction of the human species would not be so obvious as it is in the case of non-human species. But the process of extinction would be the same. First, the weaker groups of people (like indigenous

peoples) who live in the rural areas would be the target. Their identity and constitutive elements (such as language, religious vision, social-cultural structure) would be made to appear inferior and the so-called superior one would be imposed on them by the rich and the powerful groups. They would be dispossessed of their land, the basis of their identity, under the pretext of development and national interest. The post-independence Jharkhand is a fitting case of this process. The present Bhartiya Janata Party Government of the state (which is in alliance with the Hindu fundamentalist family consisting of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Bajrang Dal etc.) is promoting the industrialization of the state and imposition of Hindu religion on the indigenous people. For industrialization the state government has signed 40 Memoranda of Understanding with big industrialists who would set up their industries in the hilly areas and villages where mostly indigenous peoples live. Where will these indigenous people go once they are evicted from their lands? They would have no choice but to live in the margins of the city. They would be reduced to a faceless people living in the peripheries of the cities. The Hindu fundamentalist groups are driving a wedge between the indigenous people who have embraced different religions especially Christianity. They are championing the anti-conversion bill which the current chief minister proposed in the rally of the Bhartiya Janata Party on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, 2005.<sup>23</sup> These groups are brainwashing and terrorizing the vulnerable rural indigenous peoples saying that they are Hindus. The history of the indigenous peoples of Jharkhand is the sad story of exploitation by the Hindus who were introduced by the Hinduized raja of Chotanagpur.<sup>24</sup> These people little by little dispossessed the people of their land and became rich and powerful. Unfortunately historians have focused only on British colonialism but have overlooked the colonialism of the Hinduized group. These later joined hands with the British and subjugated the indigenous people. Today we witness a similar unholy alliance of the non-indigenous population and the government who are key players in destroying the indigenous people and their territory in the name of development.



## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I do not offer any action plan which a reader might expect from me. I merely pose a question: will the earth survive if the current way of human involvement continues? The answer is an emphatic “no”. The greedy and proud human supremacy needs to give way to the indigenous vision of interdependence of all things and self-emptying servanthood. The economic pursuit of making a few rich richer and more powerful must be replaced by the dynamics of equal sharing of “food” among human and non-human beings. The greedy methods of destroying the earth and even the power of the earth to renew itself must be changed by adopting the indigenous sense of brotherhood and sisterhood with the living earth. The indigenous peoples’ understanding of ecology challenges the rich and ruling class who give lip service to the preservation of ecology by perpetuating its consumerist (greedy) way of life.

I would like to conclude my considerations by referring again to the Asur myth. The myth has the key to save both ecology and humans. Human beings are the root cause of the ecological crisis. Hence, they alone can save themselves and establish ecological balance.

## Notes

1. *The Compact Oxford Dictionary*, Thesaurus, and Wordpower Guide defines ‘symbiosis’ as follows: “a situation in which two different organisms live with and are dependent on each other, to the advantage of both”. The definition sounds a bit too superficial as understood from the point of indigenous peoples. The relationship between the two is understood at the ontological level, that is, they are interdependent for their existence. It is not a question of mere ‘advantage of both’, hence relationship is maintained and which could be optional, but it refers to a relationship inherent in their be-ing.
2. Bas Wielenga, *Towards an Eco-Just Society*, Bangalore: Centre for social Action, 1999, pp. 47-72. The author has succinctly narrated how different groups, guided by their particular interests, have responded to ecological issues.
3. David G. Hallman (ed.), *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, Geneva: WCC, 1994, p. 6. The author has described the conceptual

prison as a fact that in most of theological thinking human supremacy among the species is maintained, whether it espouses steward theology or talks of more responsibility than dominion in relation to various species. Furthermore, such thinking underplays so-called non-living beings (such as land, water, trees etc.) from its purview. In 1978 a book *The Earth is the Lord's: Essays on Stewardship* edited by Mary Evelyn Jegen, New York: Paulist Press is a fine example of theological thinking proposing stewardship of the earth.

4. Various aspects of ecological crisis are systematically presented by Bas Wielenga in his book *Towards an Eco Just Society*, Bangalore: Centre for Social Action, 1999, pp. 12-46. Also Calvin B. DeWitt, "The Religious Foundations of Ecology" in *The Mother Earth Handbook* edited by Judith S. Scherff, New York: Continuum publishing Company, 1991, p. 253-254 wherein the author has summarized seven degradations of creation enveloping the whole universe.
5. Jose Pepz M. Cunanan, "The Prophet of Environment and Development" in David G. Hallman (ed.), *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, Geneva: WCC, 1994, p. 26.
6. The magnitude of displacement of the indigenous peoples all over the country and Jharkhand in particular since independence is quite alarming. The displacement of indigenous peoples in particular through mega dam projects and industries such as, Sardar Sarovar on the Narmada river, Tehri Bandh Pariyojna. Steel industries in Bokaro, Rourkela, to mention a few, present a gory picture of destruction of people and ecology. See the work *Development-induced Displacement and Rehabilitation in Jharkhand 1951-1995* by Alexius Ekka and Mohammad Asif, New Delhi: Indian social Institute, p. 67 which presents the issue of displacement of the indigenous peoples in Jharkhand
7. All India Coordinating Forum of the Adivasis/Indigenous Peoples, *Voices of the Adivasis/Indigenous Peoples of India*, New Delhi: AICFAIP, 2001, p. 44.
8. A brief history of Netrahat Field Firing Range is found in *Visthapan Ka Atank* edited by Pius Tirkey and others, Gumala: Kendriya Jan-Sangarsh Samiti, 2005.
9. An interior portion of the main house is marked out as an abode of the deceased members (ancestors) of the family.
10. Munda myth in John Hoffmann, *Encyclopedia Mundarica*, Patna: Government Printing, 1930-1979, pp. 3981-3982; Santal myth in P.O. Bodding, *Traditions and Institutions of the Santals*, New Delhi: Gyan

- Publishing House, 2001, pp. 2-5, reprint. Kharia myth in S.C. Roy, *The Kharias*, vol. 2, Ranchi: Man in India Office, 1937, pp. 414-418.
11. The story of the fleeing of Rice Mother is the basis of Her mut feast in which before sowing paddy Singbonga is invoked to send back the rice mother. The story may be found in Dhanur Singh Purty, *Ho Disum Ho Honko*, Book 7, Chaibasa: Xavier HO Publications, 1982, p. 10.
  12. These myths are from the Munda tradition; the texts may be found in Hoffman, *Encyclopedia Mundarica*, pp. 4466 and 4197-4198 respectively.
  13. See the impact of irrevocable degradation of nature Alex Ekka, *Development-Induced Displacement*, pp. 119-126.
  14. See John Lakra, The Genesis of Man: The Uraon Myth” in *Sevartham* 19(1984), pp. 41-47.
  15. See the Ho version of Asur myth in Dhanur Singh Purty, *Ho Disum Ho Honko*, Book 7, Chaibasa: Xavier Ho Publications, 1982, pp. 13-21; Munda version in John Hoffmann, *Encyclopedia Mundarica*, pp. 1648-1658; Oraon version in Sarat Chandra Roy, *The Oraons of Chotanagpur: Their History, Economic Life and Social Organisation*, Ranchi: Man in India Office, 1994, pp. 251-272; also John Lakra, “Genesis of spirit: The Uraon Myth” in *Sevartham* 11(1986), pp.45-57.
  16. See for the myth Hoffmann, *Encyclopedia Mundarica*, pp. 3985-3988)
  17. *Ibid.*, p. 1649.
  18. Raimundo Panikkar, *Worship and Secular Man*, Mew York: Orbis Books, 1973, pp. 41-55. I am indebted to him for these neologisms in the above pages.
  19. *Ibid.*, 42.
  20. In the Indian school of Anthropology human, divine and cosmic network is expressed as ‘nature-man-spirit complex’. See the edited work of R.S. Mann, *Nature –Man-Spirit Complex in Tribal India*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1981 which is a fine anthology of the explication of a wholistic indigenous vision of reality.
  21. The marriage laws are based on the clan exogamy and tribe endogamy. Clan exogamy is a sacred law for all those belonging to the same clan are brothers and sisters. Incest is the greatest evil act a person can commit..
  22. Munda principles of succession and inheritance are recorded in “Principle of Succession and Inheritance among the Mundas” in the *Journal of The Bihar and Orissa Research Society* 1(part 1/Sept 1915), pp. 5-

19. Similar Ho principles of succession and inheritance may be found in the "Appendix: Inheritance and Partition of Property among the Aboriginal Races" of *Census of India 1911*, vol. 5, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, report by L.S.S. O'Malley, Calcutta: Bengal Secestrate Book Depot, pp. 1-v.
23. See *Sunday Hindustan Times*, December 11, 2005, p. 1.
24. Fidelis de Sa, *Crisis in Chotanagpur*, Bangalore: Redemptorist Publication, 1975, p.35..

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