

Utilization of Natural Resources in Tribal Life

Dibyajyoti Ganguly

Guest Lecturer, Dept. of Anthropology, Ramsaday College, West Bengal, India

Dr. Palash Chandra Coomar

Former Joint Director of Census Operations, Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India

Contact Address: 94/4, P Road, Howrah, P.O. – Netajigarh, P.S. – Dasnagar, Pin – 711108, Howrah, West Bengal, India

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I. INTRODUCTION

It has generally been accepted that close relation with nature and living within its proximity used to give tribe a distinctive identity of its own as reflected in its thoughts and beliefs, activities and customary practices. But with the spread of education and rapid expansion of modernization process, the tribal population slowly but surely is being alienated from the nature. The tribal people used to derive nourishment, both materially and symbolically, from the nature and rely on it so heavily that it was thought to be a cause of techno-economic backwardness prevailing among them. It has become a stark reality of tribal life, particularly in those cases where life of tribals is intricately linked with nature as provider and protector of their life ways. Nature provides them food, fodder, fuel and makes available a rich collection of medicinal plants and all other basic requirements needed for survival. Hence it is no exaggeration to say that such tribals giving the impression of an 'eco system people' are the real friends of nature in true sense of the term. Conversely, they inculcate a healthy attitude towards nature treating it as a friend rather than a foe. In the present paper an attempt has been made to look into this intimate relationship between nature and tribe a little more closely and to see what extent it still holds some meaning to them.

Human beings are capable of passing from one environment to another as well as of changing the conditions of a given environment to suit their own purposes; in truth the relation of life and environment is extremely intimate (MacIver-Page, 1950). But the capacities and attributes of the organism are related with the entire environment in which they manifest themselves. The environment is more than a conditioning factor of a life that can be conceived of a part from it. Furthermore every change in a living creature involves some change in its relation to environment; and every change in the environment make some changes in the response of the organic being. The environment is the habitation of human being in complete sense (MacIver-Page, 1950).

Man tries to accustom with his environment to fulfill his wants. In this consequence of modification of the conditions of life, man creates a dual role in the environment i.e. an outer and an inner aspect. The outer milieu consists of constitutional modifications of nature, including our houses, cities or other means of communications which deals the whole appliances of our society and it is called as material culture. The inner milieu is the society itself. It consists of the organizations and the regulations, the traditions and institutions, the repressions and liberations of social life of what we collectively call as the social tradition. To the inner social milieu man is regulated through conscious response and habituation (MacIver-Page, 1950). Ultimately it can be stated that, the life of human being has an intense co-relation with the nature.

The term ecology was first defined by Ernst Haeckel in 1866 as 'the science of relations between organisms and their environment' (Barnwell, 1989). The environment of human being stays in his outskirts of land, air, water, forest. These components of natural environment provide the inevitable resources to human being for their survival. We get our food, water and respiratory means from the surface of the Earth to satisfy the needs of our hunger, thirst and respiration. When we get fuel, minerals and ores from the stratum beneath the surface of the Earth which provides us the required energy to meet up with different economic pursuits. Thus the need of the human society is totally depended on the nature in a diversified manner and their way of gathering reflects the culture of the human being.

Cultural ecology exhibits a vivid relationship between culture and its surrounding environment. Man is influenced by his environment and in turn influences the environment. It is believed that environment ordains a culture and environment controls a culture. Rappaport 1968, in his Ecosystem-based Model focused on the

relationship of specific human population to specific ecosystem. Geertz 1963, in his System Model stated about the interaction between ecosystem and social system, where the latter includes social organization, nutrition, health, economy, religious values etc (Sarkar, 2000).

Today there are only 179 tribal groups (out of 860 tribal groups) who can be identified as bearing some features of hunting-gathering economy in varying degrees. In Jharkhand 12 percent of tribal population belonging to this category show a declining trend; among them 9 tribal groups are either partly or wholly in the endangered list. *Birhor, Savara, Sauriya Paharia, Mal Paharia, Birjia, Korba, Asur* who are in this group are basically dependent on forest for their survival. Generally speaking, the four socio-economic levels attributed to tribal life, such as hunting and food gathering, pastoralism, agriculture, horticulture (including shifting cultivation or *Jhum* cultivation) might not have anything in common barring the fact that they all, in varying proportions, display a close intimacy with the surrounding natural environment.

Environment and Tribal Dwelling Place

Carrying capacity of land is directly and proportionately linked with sustenance of human beings in a given ecological niche. Generally, tribal people reside in hills and dales, forests and plateau, inaccessible terrains braving harsh climatic condition. Peoples like *Eskimo* of Alaska, and the aboriginal inhabitants of *Kalahari* (who are often referred as *Kunsan*), living in arctic cold and hot desert respectively, provide excellent examples of adaptation from the bio cultural point of view. Tribes residing in the tropical rain forest of Brazil, islands of Polynesia, Andaman & Nicobar as well as Lakshadweep, high altitude Himalayan and other sub-Himalayan ranges, *Arabolli* Hill range as well as Eastern and Western Ghats in a relatively low altitude exemplify diverse ways of adaptation to nature in different forms. At the specific level, each tribal group developed its own adaptive mechanism depending on the situation it was placed in. In the case of a tribe like *Birhor*, forest still affects and controls their lives significantly and their religion in the form of beliefs and practices is to a large extent centered round the hilly forest. As a matter of fact, the etymological meaning of *Birhor* is 'the man of the forest', which amply suggests their close relationship with nature as a forest-dwelling tribe.

The tribal people are often referred as *BanyaJati* or *Girijon*, which means they are the men living in forests and hills. The place name of their habitat is also linked with environment. For example, *Lolegaon*, a famous tourist centre of Darjeeling district of West Bengal is popularly and locally known as the appellation *Kafer*. According to the *Lepcha* tribal population of Darjeeling, the name *Kafer* signifies a kind of tree which grows in abundance in the same region. *Sonagong*, which is locally called *Sonagaon*, reminds us of the importance of consciously adopted environmentally-linked names of places among the *Lepcha*. The aforesaid word is derived from the two *Lepcha* words, *Sona* meaning bear and *gong* meaning cave. It is believed that the area was once inhabited by black bear. All these examples bear testimony to their intimate knowledge about the environment in and around the place of settlement.

The traditional abode of the *Oraon*, i.e., *Chhotanagpur* is characterized by the rich presence of flora and fauna. Here one finds abundant growth of *Sal* and *Mahua* trees. Bamboo also grows in plenty. The settlement pattern of the *Oraon* shows a marked preference for constructing houses in a relatively elevated position. The houses of *Oraons* of this area are made of logs of locally available *Sal*, *Mahua* and Bamboo trees. Most of the *Oraon* villages are traditionally located at a higher level from the cultivable and wasteland. The houses are generally huddled together in a clustered manner. Traditional houses are mud built with tiled roofs. The relatively affluent ones maintain kitchen-garden in the rear for domestic consumption. The Khasis of Meghalaya hold the distinction of being one of the few remaining matriarchal tribes of the world. A traditional Khasi house is made largely of wood, bamboo and stones which are as plenty as available in this area. The traditional *Khasi* religion is characterized by theistic and animistic beliefs culminating in propitiation of spirits in their natural abode e.g. *Ka lawbi* who is the most exoteric as well as adorable Ancestress and a large number of megaliths are witness to her ascendant position in the Khasi pantheon. Natural incidents exercise remarkable impact on Khasi pantheon and each of their villages has its personal quota of sacred groves. The *Chenchus*, concentrated in small pockets of forests and dry land in the heart of Andhra Pradesh live on either side of the river Krishna with the *Nallamalai* forests on the southern side and the rugged and densely wooded plateau on the northern side. They used to represent one of the largest food gathering tribes belonging to the pre-agricultural level, depending upon wild roots, tubers, fruits, honey, yarn and small games as their daily meal to survive. *Chenchus* even sometime back led a wholly nomadic life. During their nomadic survival they were also dependent upon hunting animals for their protein diet and wild roots as well as honey for their carbohydrate diet. In this way they used to make a proper balanced diet. For a new settlement they preferred hill slopes and high ridges so that the enemies could not locate them from a distance and they would be left with ample time to escape. Invariably, these settlements would be located away from the water source to avoid wild animals frequenting the same source. Their in-built defense mechanism has taught them to avoid the ferocious animals who otherwise cannot be tackled with a mere bow and arrow. *Toda* villages are mostly located at a slight

elevation near a wood and a stream. Locally available bamboo and thatch are the basic materials used in the construction of their huts. The habitat of the *Toto* tribe of North Bengal is on the bank of the river *Tista*. Their general preference is to set up their settlement close to the river where adequate amount of water is available, which is applicable for their livelihood, for both consumption, horticulture and agriculture. Their houses are made of bamboo or *Odla* wood and thatched with straws collected from nearby forest. These materials are locally known as '*Soudi*' and '*Kaati*'.

The above examples suggest how tribal material and social existence has been conditioned by environment in its multiple forms, creating in the process a type of dependence on the natural forces, either manifest or imaginary.

Impact of Environment on Tribal Social Life

Clearly, environment has a lasting impact on tribal social life. The *Todas*, for example, have not been quick to adapt themselves to their changing environment of predatory competition and exploitation by the new comers to the *Nilgiris*. Their whole economic life rotates round buffalo and whatever development has taken place is not without the all important buffalo. Hierarchy of social status depends on their stock of the sacred herds and the dairies. Apart from polyandry they are particularly known for their pastoral economy which they have raised to the level of a cult – the cult of buffalo worshipping. The *Chenchus* mostly depend on what nature could provide them. Their economic organization is still in the stage of a hunting- gathering tribe. On the top of it, they have developed a psyche in which saving for future is alien to them and this has led to a carefree and hand-to-mouth existence. It is probably a reflection of the type of dependence on their immediate environment as provider of basic requirements. The natural environment has a deep imprint on the people and has provided support in the form of materials and protection. Although a growing number of tribals in India are now employed in government offices or are working as teachers, physicians, nurses, magistrates, administrators, merchants and businessmen, majority of them are still attached to their original habitat. The extent of their adaptation to the local physical environment may be gauged from the fact that even those who no more depend upon exploiting traditional resources and are engaged in other occupations have no qualms or hesitation in taking up hoe or plough in their spare time. Even such people still love taking a day out to be in the midst of their environment bearing the stamp of community identity.

The people of the simple societies are basically animists. With a close association with the nature, they have a number of deities related with their forest and environment. According to them animals, plants, trees, plants, rivers, stones, hills or mountains are all abodes of spirits. Apart from nature as a whole the tribes also cognate themselves with the animals and plants in the form of totem (Vidyarthi, 1977). Many of the clan names of tribes are having their respective totems which are plants, animals and natural objects signifying their origin. One way of maintaining the traditional structure is not to harm, kill or eat or show disrespect to any of these objects and materials. Community-wise break up of some of those clan names are given in the following table:

Sl. No.	Name of Tribal Community	Sl. No.	Clan Name of the Tribals	Totem of the Clans
1.	<i>Lodha</i>	a.	<i>Bhukta / Bhokta</i>	<i>Chirka Aloo</i> (a kind of Yam)
		b.	<i>Digar</i>	<i>Susuk</i> (Dolphin)
		c.	<i>Bhuniya</i>	<i>Sol</i> (a kind of fish)
		d.	<i>Mallick</i>	<i>Makar</i> (Capricorn)
2.	<i>Kharia</i>	a.	<i>Tesa</i>	A kind of bird
		b.	<i>Kulu</i>	Tortoise
		c.	<i>Dungdung</i>	<i>Pakal</i> (a kind of fish)
		d.	<i>Soren</i>	Rock / stone
3.	<i>Munda</i>	a.	<i>Bhengra</i>	Horse
		b.	<i>Hansaa</i>	Swan
		c.	<i>Amba</i>	Mango
4.	<i>Mahali</i>	a.	<i>Hembram</i>	Betel nut
		b.	<i>Hansda</i>	Wild Swan
		c.	<i>Tudu</i>	Rat
		d.	<i>Murumar</i>	<i>Nil Gai</i>
5.	<i>Santal</i>	a.	<i>Kisku</i>	Sankhachil (Sea gull)
		b.	<i>Baskey</i>	Stale rice
		c.	<i>Chode</i>	<i>Girgiti</i> (Cameleon)

Table.1. Clans and Totems of Some of the Tribal Communities.

Traditionally, the socio- economic life of the tribals is linked with the ecology and environment that surround them. Bose (2007) in this regard observed,

Many tribes and castes on the main land of India live by hunting, fishing or gathering. But they do not depend upon these exclusively for satisfying their needs.

Tribes have a number of religious festivals related with their economic pursuits and different social occasions. All of the community members participate together. In religious festivals and rituals we observe the reflection of the encysted ecosystem that surrounds them. For example, the *Bhumij* observe *Badna Parab* or cattle caring ceremony during mid October to mid November; *Buru Parab* or worshipping the hill during mid January to mid February and so on. The *Karam* and *Sahrul Parab* of the Mundas are related with *Karam* and *Saal* trees respectively. Similarly, *Santals* worship *Saal* tree during *Baha Parab*. Many of the minor and supreme Gods and Goddesses of the tribal people are equated with nature, e.g. *Marang Buru*, one the major Gods of the *Santals* is nothing but a big mountain. Similarly, *Lorha Bonga* of the *Birhor* is the minor god residing on the bank of the river. They also worship *Bonlumai* or forest deity; *Lugumai* or mother earth; *Kundi Bonga* or river deity; and *Hanuman* with utmost passion and devotion.

Nature at the Centre of Tribal Folktales and Folklores and arts: Some Examples

One of the major cultural aspects of the tribal societies is their folk cultural heritages (Vidyarthi,1977). Being closely related with nature and environment their cultural exercise is not only for their amusement, it shows their adoration and obligation to the nature. Their folk cultural elements are nothing but the image of interaction between the concerned people and surrounding environment. Folklore in tribal communities has much significance. The folklore materials explain the life of the tribal and rural people at the axis of self as well at the axis of community. Cultural history and customs of day to day life are depicted in the folklore (Vidyarthi, 1977).

The tribal folklore, folk-tales, folk-songs, folk-music, dance and their expressions form the aesthetic part of their life. They are fond of riddles and proverbial expressions. The tribal arts add vitality and creativity to their life pattern. Some of these artistic activities relate to hunting, agriculture and other aspects of their everyday life. Various aspects of tribal life such as their economic life, social life, conjugal life, sacred life, their thoughts about supernatural existence, their cattle and poultry, vegetables and fruits – all find a place in their folklore, art and craft. The folklore of the tribe stands as an unwritten record of their cultural life. In other words, folklore is the speculum of the tribal life.

For the tribal people, the functions of folklore are more important than its form. The following *Munda* song (English translation) illustrates the truth about human life and laziness at the time of work. The following folk song has also an environmental connotation.

Newly blossomed tree or the opening flower

Or young age is similar to the blooming
A creeper grown on a tree or a rotten flower
is similar to the old tree with a creeper twining it.

Young age is like blooming flower
O fair maid, are you smiling for the same?

Old age is like a creeper of a tree
O hold men and women! are

you anxious for the same?

Why are you smiling for that?

Don't you see, flower is withering.

Why are you anxious for that

Where shall you find the past time?

Tribal myths can be classified (Elwin, 1955; c.f. Vidyarthi & Rai, 1985) as those dealing with (a) periodic natural and seasonal changes, (b) natural objects and extraordinary natural phenomena, (c) origin of universe and Gods, (d) origin of animals and of mankind, (e) heroes, families, village and tribe as an entity and (f) belief in existence after death and places of the dead.

The habitat of the tribal is forest, can be understood by going through their folklores (Rai, 1967). Some examples can provide a better insight.

An English translation of a Ho folk-song of *Kolhan* at the *Maghe* festival may be illustrative :

“The fruits of Pipul ripen, so also the fruits of banyan
You jackal, you have come in time (to taste the fruits).
When the fruits Pipul and those of Banyan disappear,
you come in vain to taste them.”

(Majumdar, 1950;217)

(c.f. Vidyarthi & Rai, 1985)

It gives a sketch of nature at the time of the *Maghe* festival. In another song a Ho possessed by a spirit points out a spot which is accepted by the villagers as the haunting place of the spirit. The possessed man runs with the villagers in his trance to a big tree or jungle nearby and addresses the spirit by singing,

“We have brought you here,

We want you stay here,

Please take up your abode on the tree.”

(Majumdar 1950:220)

(c.f. Vidyarthi & Rai, 1985)

This again reflects the relation between the tribals, their deities and their forest. According to Bandyopadhyay (2012), there is a deity of earthquake namely ‘*Bhairab*’ among the *Santal* community of Orgonda village of Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal. *Bhairab* used to be worshiped as the deity of forest. People living there are accustomed with various myths and legends about *Bhairab*. Often people living in the surrounding areas experience trepidation of the ground beneath their feet. They assume that *Bhairab* is desiring to be worshipped now. They believe that when the earth vibrates, the body of *Bhairab* gets covered with thin film of sweat. They play conch shell in the surrounding village. The priest (*Laya*) of the deity comes to the abode. He anoints the body of the idol with turmeric paste and spatters water on it. He also fans the god to ‘cool’ it down. According to the local people, the *Bhairab* has an associate (*Bhairabi*) at Ghatshila. She is *Devi Rankini*, another famous folk deity of Ghatshila. *Devi Rankini* comes to *Bhairab* to meet at this place. The earth vibrates out of the eternal bliss of their union.

There is an ancient form of folk dance of Purulia district, West Bengal, i.e., *Natua*. This dance depicts the velour of participants. It is basically a group dance, though individual participation is permitted. This dance form flourished under the patronage of the native *Jamindars* (Land Lord) of Eastern part of Bengal (Chakraborty, 2016). *Natua* is performed during the *Charak Puja* festival on *Chaitra Sankranti* – the last day of the Bengali month of *Chaitra* (March-April), which signals the end of the month. This is also time for *Gajon* celebrations in honour of the Lord *Shiva*. In a carnival like atmosphere, the dance is a great crowd puller. The dance is typically performed by members of a subaltern community – the *Kalindis*. It is also occasionally performed during marriage ceremonies. The origin of this dance, it is believed, essentially lies in a ritualistic submission of the inhabitants to the Gods for rain; the *Chhotanagpur* plateau which is the original home of this folk dance, is primarily a dry hilly region. The practitioners perform exceedingly difficult physical feats, somersaults and fire eating done by the minor ones to placate the Gods. According to another version, *Natua* is an ancient dance form that features in the text of the *Shiva Puranas*. The word *Natua*, might have been derived from the name of Lord *Nataraj*. It is believed that *Nandi* and *Bhringi*, the associates of Lord *Shiva*, were the first performers of this dance during the time of *Shiva’s* marriage with *Durga*. The *Jai Dhak*, whose beats accompany the dance is said to have been created by Lord *Shiva*. Hindu pantheon of Gods and Goddesses has gradually been accepted by the tribal people giving rise to a syncretic system of representation. But even when Lord *Shiva* is worshipped by them, he is treated more like a form of nature.

II. CONCLUSION

In recent times, indiscriminate and mindless destruction and denudation of forest for collecting timber and other forest produce, construction of roads and other avenues of infrastructure development, cleaning of forest land for agricultural activities have adversely affected lives of the tribals. Such effects are particularly noticeable in house construction and settlement pattern of the hill people like the *Lepcha* and *Bhutia* of North Bengal.

The hilly tribes of North East India used to stay in the wooden houses built with *Dhoopy*, a stem of a kind of timber, with its frame constructed from *Katus* wood. These houses are not so durable and strong and are in need of regular replacement by fresh wood at regular intervals. Yet their traditional knowledge system has taught them that these are resistant to earth quake and other kind of natural disasters. Similarly, people in temperate region or in cold climatic condition used to stay in wooden houses for comfort. They also prepare sloping roofs as a safe guard against profound rainfall which is the characteristic feature in temperate and hilly region. Now-a-days, due to scarcity of wood, the tribals prepare roofs with corrugated tin sheets, which are proved to be deleterious during strong and heavy rain.

According to Julian Steward (1955)(c.f. Upadhyay & Pandey, 1997), societies with a similar technology and existing in a similar environment would develop parallel social organizations. Steward suggested a systematic way of studying the dynamics of man-habitat interaction so as to keep track of the process of transformation at the specific level and at the same time to go for cross-cultural generalizations. There is a simple assumption that not all features of a given habitat and ecology are relevant to a given socio-cultural system, nor all systemic elements, i.e., religion, politics, technology and kinship are equally affected by man-habitat interaction. But if culture-specificity carries any meaning to the tribal society, it is in the way folk-

tales and folklores have been created by them and continued for generation after generation as a mark of continuity of tradition.

According to Bourdieu's theory of Habitus (1967) (c.f. Brubaker, 1993), tribal social structure has a natural tendency to be incorporated into the appropriated physical space, i.e., the surrounding environment. Habitus relates to structured structures, generative principles of distinct and distinctive practices -what the tribal people eat, and especially the way they eat it, the ritual or sport they practice and the way they practice it, their political opinions and the way they express them, which are systematically different from the industrial proprietor's corresponding activities. Habitus is thus structured by the condition of existence, which in turn generates practices, beliefs, perceptions, feelings and so forth in accordance with its own structure.

In these days of fluidity and flexibility it is questionable how far Steward's concept of 'Environmental determinism' working out a direct relation between tribal habitat and surrounding environment is tenable. Probably, we will have to imbibe something like 'Environmental possibilism' to dwell at length on the question of environment or, more broadly speaking, nature in tribal life in the midst of complexities surrounding them at present.

From the overall discussion it can be abbreviated that, the role of environment on the livelihood of the human being has a multidimensional aspect. The people of the tribal societies have a deep alliance to their nature. Such feelings is not restricted only to relation between one individual with the other but it is also extended up to individual and nature such as men and land, house, cattle, bird, plants and other natural objects (Upadhyay and Pandey, 2002). All these aspects are interwoven with each other and collectively form the internal environment of the tribal society. Moreover these are closely associated with the social structure, social organization and the traditional cultural heritages of the tribal society. Vidyarthi in 1963, stated that the dependence of human being upon the forest and environment together form a close interaction between Nature, Man and Spirit. The Nature denotes the inter-relationship between man and environment i.e. the ecological setting of their hill and forest from which the people can accumulate their common minimum livelihood. The term Man denotes the kinship system, social structure, social organization as well as the process of socialization and personality formation. The spirit denotes the belief in supernatural world as well as the religious performances associated with the concerned society which ultimately maintain their social solidarity and community consensus.

The contemporary world is deeply concerned with environment as well as ecological issues. At present the world is facing a tremendous environmental crisis, because in different ways a continuous environmental degradation is happening and increasing the crisis of survival. In this regard accelerated land degradation and soil erosion is a serious matter or problem.

In practical life indiscriminate felling of trees and immigration of outsiders in tribal areas have considerably disturbed the demographic and ecological balance adversely affecting the tribe-nature relationship. Deforestation is also another major issue related with environmental degradation. Forest and environment help to maintain a balance ecosystem and provide sufficient food to the people. So any type of degradation of the forest environment and ecological set up is likely to affect the whole balance and thereby create an adverse effect on the concerned people. Thus, environmental degradation can cause a rapid change to the socio-cultural, socio-economic as well as religious life of any tribal community in the world. As things stand today, tribal life and culture are notionally linked with specific environments. Their sustenance and survival are only marginally linked with their respective environments. Rapid urbanization and modernization are responsible for the loss of tribal identity, once inseparably linked with nature. Consequently, their folk-based knowledge system and all aspects connected with it have been facing the test of time.

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