

GUARDIANS or EXPLOITERS?

'While tribal population of forests is blamed for nature's depletion, the commercial exploiters are termed as development agents'

In the clock evolution, if earth is formed an hour before, human are just two second old. Imagine the new entrant on earth- the human are the most powerful, exploiting the natural resources, flora and fauna, disturbing the whole biodiversity for their personnel gains. No other place to our knowledge in the whole universe is a place like Earth, most beautiful, colourful, microscopic forms to blue whales- bounty of nature, yet to discover, in the sky on earth and under sea.

Yet having such abundant, rich biodiversity, we the humans are mindlessly slashing and consuming beyond our needs only to satisfy the greed. Not even realizing the aftermaths of such blind decisions which are going to cost dearly for us and for the future generations. And the day won't be far of when the humans too will become extinct because of their own deeds.

Still, there is a section of people amongst the vast majority of exploiters, who live, with nature, gel their lifestyle accordingly and from an integral part of it. They are often termed as custodians of forests or tribes. Ironically, tribes who are guardians of nature, living for ages, having a symbiotic relationship with their environment, are often blamed for destroying forest. In fact, it is the other way round. In many tropical areas around the world, the natural forests are being cleared for commercial uses, including rubber, palm oil and pulp production. The increase in these activities in being matched by a growth in illegal wildlife trade, as logging trails and cleared forest mean easy access to more remote areas. Logging, land clearing and conversion activities are considered to be the greatest threats to the tribal life, so what if it is affecting the Cinta Larga Indians in North America, Ayoreo of Paraguay, Korubo of Brazil, or the tribes in the remote parts of the Peruvian Amazon.

The situation of tribals in India is precarious. The Forest Survey of India, Dehradun in its 7th report, states the pressure on India's forests. With a population of a billion, of this a whopping 147 million living in 170,000 villages are in the proximity of forest areas. A majority of these being poor, their survival depends on forest produce. They need fuel-wood and fodder at the very minimum. Often they look for marketable produce for their cash needs. Then there is the practice of 'slash and burn' style of agriculture of the tribals. And finally the play of the poachers and plunderers.

However, it is the unscientific to blame the villagers for consuming the forest produce and collecting fuel-wood, which are often the fallen twigs. It is to be researched whether the loss of forest is more due to slash and burn or logging and clearing forest for conversions and developmental activities. Forest dwellers are the right custodians of forests and also most capable of taking care of the forests. They are able to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable aims of securing livelihood of people and conserving forests. Community ownership/stewardship does not mean free for all access. In fact, community held resources are often controlled through their customary laws, rituals and ceremonies,

revolving around the nature and its seasons in sensible and sustainable ways. Hence bringing these resources under control actually created the tragedy of open access rather than solving it, as local communities lost all incentives and interests in the proper management of forests.

Forest dwellers are the right custodians of forests and also most capable of taking care of the forests. They are able to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable aims of securing livelihood of people and conserving forests. Adding to the wretchedness of these marginalized people are the large scale developmental activities like big dam projects, powerplants, displacing them, and not rehabilitating and adequately compensating them. They now struggle to eke out an existence on fringes of the town and cities. The Warlis in Bombay are among the more than 90 million “ adivasis” who make up nearly 10 per cent of India’s billion- plus population but are quickly falling by the wayside of the country’s new found prosperity. Tribal areas endowed with natural bounty are being opened for tourism in Chattisgarh, Nilgiri Hill, Andman and Nicobar Islands. They have and will bring forth a lot of vices into their lives, like alcoholism, beggary, sex trade.

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Exploiting the tribals of their resources will have serious implications on women’s health. Where institutions like Gotul are openly being talked about making inroads to exploit sexually.

The Ethno Bias

It is estimated that there are 66.5million tribals in India. With few exceptions the majority of continue to depend on forests for their livelihood. Historically, in India. Tribal perspectives on forests and government policies affecting forests have followed very different trajectories. State policies driven by industrial demands were in direct conflict with the customary use of forests by forest population. Colonial state policies since 1894 and post independence forest policies have characterized tribals as indiscriminate users of forests and therefore sought to protect forests from the tribals. On the other hand the draft Scheduled Tribes(Recognition of Forest Rights bill 2005) aims to provide Adivasis rights to forest resources that are so intimately linked with their lives. The right proposed to be accorded to Adivasis include pattas to forest lands occupied before 1980.

Are we not being ethnocentric by categorizing the civilized, industrial world as the epitome of civilization and discarding all other societies as redundant and outmoded?

In a last five years, under the joint forest management policy of Indian government, various state governments have experimented with developing authority for forest management to local communities. This new approach to control protection and management of forests –joint forest management (JFM)-has profound implications for forest dwelling tribals. JFM policies, when viewed from a gender perspective, have significant consequence for women in tribal communities. Women are central to the ecosystem and connect the livelihood strategies of tribal households with forest wealth. Tribal women are largely responsible for collecting and processing many of forest products. Therefore for JFM policies, to be successful in promoting sustainable forest

management by tribal communities, must involve tribal women in deliberate and significant ways.

Past five decades have seen a tremendous deforestation and receding forest cover. Tribal who were thriving for centuries, are now at the mercy of the so called civilized people. From evolutionary perspective if societies move from simple to complex, are we not being ethnocentric by categorizing the civilized, industrial, modern world epitome of civilization and discarding and disregarding all other societies as redundant and outmoded? The modern civilization with all its fallacies, risks, growing inequalities and increased morbidity, still considered to be the most evolved forms on the earth. With this ethnocentric biases and perspectives on development, we barge in to the serene lives of people, content, happy, simple, oblivious and open them to the world of exploitation, disease, where are heading? Who will decide for whom? When are we going to learn lessons? Are we heading to catastrophe?

Yet there is a hope in the network society, the individuals, the groups and the media are powerful, they only need to organize and agitate. The environmentally, socially conscious and sensitive network groups can bring change, with a campaign 'unite to make this world green and sustainable', save the earth.

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