

# TRIBAL LIFE AND OUR EXISTENCE

Aju Mukhopadhyay \*

## **The Issue**

It is an irony of human civilization that the most wealthy areas on earth are most impoverished; the people die of disease and hunger, live in ghettos being driven out by the agents of civilized people who live thousands of miles away in air-conditioned rooms in sophisticated countries, who become billionaires plundering resources from the bowl of the earth where lived and still live the adivasis.

The legacy continued in India from the time it was a British colony but it was accelerated when Free India wished to take part in the globalization process. Becoming a member of the World Trade Organisation in 1995 India invited all Multi Nationals, both Indian and foreign, to reap the fruits of whatever resources India still had. Economic prosperity has been achieved but it has not percolated to the millions. The sons of the soils could neither themselves exploit the resources nor stop others doing it. They have not joined the technology propped mainstream of society. Instead, they decided to follow their age old life style living in their own place, so they became the worst victims of exploitation.

Looking back we find how millions of original Americans, incorrectly named as Indians, and aboriginals of Australia were killed, pushed to the sea and now incredibly reduced, live in reserves, ghettoised. It is a world wide phenomenon.

## **Mining, the Core Issue**

National Mineral Policy was formulated in 1993 after the economic liberalization policy was declared in 1991. Since then mining has become one of the fastest growing sector, allowing 100 per cent Foreign Direct Investment. The new National Mineral Policy of 2008 is more investor-friendly policy to the extent of ignoring schedule 5 of Indian Constitution which safeguards the rights of the tribal people as it forbids the lease or sale of adivasi lands to nonadivasi people. Going a step further, the R. K. Dang committee recommended permission to mining in hitherto un-mined adivasi inhabited areas.

The proposed European Union-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA), under negotiations from 2007, was a real threat to the tribal land and our forest resources including the wildlife which it is still. Through the FTA the Government would be legally handing over the rights of resources, the dependent communities and wildlife to business interests.

---

*\* Eminent Researcher, Bi Lingual Poet, Author and Critic. 8, Cheir Lodi Street, Pondicherry-605001 E-mail :  
ajum24@gmail.com and ajum24@yahoo.co.in*

---

Mining brings all sorts of disruptive activities that are inimical to conservation of wildlife; roads, labour force settlements, power lines that bring electricity, water and other pipelines that carry semi-finished product to the nearest ports; linear structures breaking the continuous tree canopies are highly disruptive to the wildlife. Surface mining is farmer's nightmare as it changes the hydrological profile of an area. Mining has heavily polluted Ganga, Tunga, Bhadra, Kali, Selaulim, Mandovi, Zauri and innumerable other rivers. Reservoirs built with billions of rupees of public money are clogged with mine silt, decreasing water-holding capacity. Remnants of Forest lands in Bellary, Tumkur, Chitradurga, Koppal and Bangalore beyond the Western Ghats, are gasping for breath. Panna Tiger Reserve has two diamond mines inside it which acted as the most depletive factors for losing all its tigers. Threat looms large over Bandipur and Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserves. Goa has 100 mining leases in two districts which have 65 forest cover.

The aluminum industry depends primarily on bauxite, a porous rock that caps mountains, some of the highest and most pristine of which are in Odisha. Out of more than 20 mountains in Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, mining is planned or has started on all. Stripping the old-growth forest off the summits and sides of mountains; using explosives to blow up the mountaintops themselves; herding people who live on the hills, building dams for supplying the enormous quantities of water required to smelt aluminum (almost 1,400 tons of water for every ton of the metal), drowning neighboring valleys and villages; crushing, refining and smelting, leaving behind toxic smoke that chokes lungs, weakens bones and bleaches crops, as well as caustic, radioactive red sludge that leaches into the rivers and kills fish, along with the occasional humans are unheard of stories in India, until recently. The U.S. Government has not thought it prudent to produce aluminium in their country for these reasons but to import it at cheaper cost; India is one of the greatest and perhaps cheapest sources. Bauxite was sold by India at the pitiful royalty rate of Rs.64 per ton against the world average price of \$30 per ton, whereas the finished aluminium is sold by the companies at about \$2,500 a ton.

Now these hills have been sold for the bauxite they contain to a company called Vedanta, established in London. Let us see the fall out of this mining industry. Borbhata and Kinnari villages with 120 families have been displaced to give way to the factory at Lanjigarh. Villagers of Rengopalli and Chatrapur wake up to a stuffy smoke cloud enveloping their villages as ash cloud spread from 500 metres. The poisonous Ash pond and Red-Mud pond of refinery's alkaline waste disposal are situated nearby that pollutes Vanshadhara river and the ground water. A ton of toxic waste is produced for every ton of alumina produced. People die of tuberculosis, cattle die and trees do not bear fruit or do not yield as before. Supreme Court's Central Empowered Committee recommended closure of the project as early as in 2005. Still it goes on doing its job though very recently, under tremendous public pressure, the stage-2 clearance for mining of bauxite in the Niyamgiri hills has been rejected and that has become a bone of contention between the State and Central Government. The problem and industrial production continues though restricted by public revolt.

Lalgarh in West Bengal was cordoned off, attacked by another undisclosed official force, called Hurmad, besides the Government forces. The forest, once known as the Dandakaranya, which stretches from West Bengal through Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, parts of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, is home to millions of India's tribal people. It too has come under fire by the operation 'Green Hunt'. People who had come from the war zones have spread the stories of police repression, arrests, torture, killing and the corruption; all are done, it seems, on behalf of

the industrialists. Different governments bring changing situations through their actions but the main scenario remains almost the same for every government supports industries at any cost.

Gond tribe constitutes 60 per cent of Bastar's population. The tribal population of Chhattisgarh is 33 per cent of the total population of the province. Most of the tribal people all over India are utterly poor, ignorant, simple folks, almost entirely illiterate.

It should be remembered that the tribal people have taken up arms because for centuries they have been exploited, neglected and their resistance has been paid with violence. They believe that if they do not fight for their land they will be annihilated. They have been pushed to the brink of existence.

According to report from the Ministry of Environment and Forest 1.10.000 hectares of forest land was lost up to January 2010 to mining. Besides this illegal mining is galore, raising the dust of controversy everywhere. The repression and eviction of the aboriginals continue to take place throughout the world wherever scope for mining, logging, extraction of oil and plantation are aplenty, where paper making is a major industrial activity as in Amazon rain forest. Among the countries India occupies a major part.

## **MAOISM**

It is not Maoists only, they could have joined hands with any group who would have helped them to exist for it is ultimately an war for existence. It's worth keeping in mind that the adivasi people have a long and courageous history of resistance that predates the birth of Maoism. To look upon them as brainless puppets being manipulated by a few middle-class Maoist ideologues is to do them a disservice, thinks Arundhati Roy, the writer, as in her article, "The Heart Of India Is Under Attack" (31 October, 2009)

Maoists run with budgets of millions rupees which comes from extortion, drugs, ransom, loot and robbery. Every sack of potato, each consignment of merchandise and every Government salary has a price. They encourage running poppy and ganja farms and earn fabulous sum from such operations. It carries on the same line of action as shown by their leader in whose name their party is founded. In fact, to those who know or have read the activities of Mao Tse- Tung (Mao Zedong), how he achieved his goal at the cost of innumerable lives of poor peasants and ordinary people of his country, would find it detestable to find any party or movement named after him, associated with his name. The internal condition of India is far different from the condition of the then China when Mao operated very brutally and treacherously leading towards his dictatorial position. So it is not in the name or group that matters but the spirit of the tribal people who have never been helped to come out of their poverty and ignorance, illiteracy and deprivation, almost losing all, losing the last straw to hold on in the sea of despair, that fights with their last blood with whatever weapons and help or solace given by any opportunist or others. Amidst the hot blows of death and destruction of the indigenous people throughout the affected parts of India, Indian Prime Minister's Independence Day speech of 2010 brought some apparent solace. He said that they should be given 26 per cent of mining profit. But if it is a percentage of the meager royalty as is taken by the Government, it becomes a pittance. We have no idea about the future actions on such speech. Apart from everything it may be argued, who

pays the environmental cost of such devastating destruction? Each tree that exists in the land can be valued based on the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> it would absorb over its life besides other attributes of the tree. The land could then be valued based on the value of all the trees. The industrialists need to pay that amount to the tribal people for buying their habitat. This would be a fair commercial transaction, besides other aspects of such acquisition.

## **FOREST IS THE MAINSTAY OF OUR LIFE**

Apart from the problem with the tribal people there is a greater problem of destruction of forests, so vital for human existence. In India Forest Conservation Act (FCA) was passed in 1980, Environmental (Protection) Act was passed in 1886 followed by Coastal Regulation Zone Notification (CRZ) in 1991, Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification in 1994 and Biological Diversity (BD) Act in 2002. Streams of amendments were made to facilitate speedy clearance of such industrial proposals for which Ministry of Environment and Forest is best known.

More and more areas that are wildlife habitats, agricultural lands, critical watersheds and sensitive coastal and marine areas are being freed of legal and administrative encumbrances for roads, logging, mining, cattle ranching, for new human habitats. Since 1980, with the promulgation of FCA, the MOEF has allowed diversion of 11,40,176.86 hectares of forest land for non-forest use. Illegal encroachments continue with many bitter results.

The trees, the vegetation, the rivers and streams, the pristine earth and all those human and non-human agents who help maintain the ecology, are the mainstay of our life. Their environmental cost is almost invaluable. But forests are being destroyed everywhere as it exists. It may be the cause of destruction of our civilization too. We can find the consequence of it from an example of a glorious civilization ruined hundreds of years ago:

The ruin of Mayan civilization, after its ruler Tikal, has been attributed to many possibilities like wars, famine, natural calamity, disruption of trade routes, popular unrests and others. A combination of all these might have hastened the process but the real reason or the core issue was destruction of forests, the essential green belt. It is said that the constant need for cal (stucco) to cover the big temples certainly produced a complete deforestation in a land not suited for agricultural use but for forestry due to its very little humus content. To cover just one temple with stucco, the Mayans had to cut 400 hectare of forest because only green wood reaches enough temperature to form it and there were hundreds of big structures in their cities. (As quoted in 'Temples of doom',

*Down To Earth. New Delhi. September 1-15, 2009 issue)*

## **CONCLUSION**

The adoption of the U. N. O's declaration on the rights of the indigenous people in its General Assembly in 2007 and the observation of the General Secretary of the United Nations Organization on the 'International Day of the World's Indigenous People' on 9 August 2009, that scattered in 70 countries 370 million people throughout the world are the custodians of some of the most biologically diverse areas of the earth, speaking majority of the world's languages, that

they are the repository of traditional knowledge and diverse cultural resources, calls for our immediate attention towards their struggle to get proper social justice and equal rights for their livelihood and development. Though American and Australian aboriginals were the worst victims earlier, the U.S. Government has recently passed the 'Tribal Law and Order Act' in favour of harmed aboriginal women.

It should be our duty to conserve the forests with its age old residents, the human and non-human habitats. To maintain ourselves we have to maintain the biological diversity. Mining should be of secondary importance, to be practiced when essential, not exactly for profits. No technology can save us if the nature's bounties are denied. We depend on natural resources for whatever we do.

**(Tribal Life and our Existence- read at the International conference on adivasi, named Chotro-three in September 2010 at Chail, near Simla, India.)**