



Need versus Greed

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In today's world where human greed is dominating the lives of nations and people, arms race, nuclear proliferation, chemical weapons, armed invasion, man-made environmental pollution, electronic spy net work, cut-throat competition and the like are the order of the day. That is where the tribal world is an altogether different one standing out against the ideology of greed.

That is how I have understood the down to earth reality of the tribals in north India, particularly Jharkhand. After having lived and worked with them for the last four decades I salute them for keeping up their age old primitive forms of fellow feeling and humane values.

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I have learnt that greed is not in the dictionary of tribal ethos. Today we, in the non-tribal world, go into overdrive to cater to our greed in terms of accumulation, cut-throat competition and one-upmanship. The philosophy of our drawing room is: 'Owner's pride is neighbour's envy.' That is what is dinned into us as an eternal truth by media magnates, pest-like sales men and sales women, ad agencies and even loan agencies. Such mesmerizing formula forces us to live in a

make-belief world. The more we have, the better! If my neighbour has a luxury model car, why should I not have a super model to make him envious of my status?

The tribals do not conduct their lives in such ways. To them need is a value whereas greed is not. Greed is anathema to them. For example, living close to nature and enjoying nature's material resources which they basically need, they gratefully take from nature what resources they actually need to cater to their basic necessities. Not for their greed. Mr. Peter Paul Hembrom, a Munda tribal and herbal specialist, once narrated to me the following: 'Among us tribal people, there are many value oriented customs teaching us that greed is an alien and sinister force in our world view. Our actions should be driven by the thought of common needs and preserving nature. One such custom is when one goes to the forest to collect things for his or family's needs. If he has to uproot a medicinal plant, he has to do it in one breath and with a single jerk. That means, by that action, some roots will necessarily remain back in the earth, helping to regenerate the plant again for future needs. Or, in another instance, when one has to collect some bark of a tree for medicine for a patient, one should take a deep breath, wield the knife on the tree trunk in upward direction in such a way that one shaves off a piece of bark quickly. What he will get will be considered enough for the patient for the time being.' Dr. Hembrom went on to say: 'The wisdom behind such practices is that we should not wield our greed in collecting and accumulating things and resources to such an extent that we overexploit natural resources. Rather, we should help nature regenerate for its own sake and for future generations. We do not live only for ourselves. We live in a community. We are bound to respect others' needs. We are duty-bound to preserve things for future generations.'

Such a philosophy goes against the capitalist grain of thinking and acting. '*Me, myself and mine*' philosophy does not revolve around tribal lives. Rather, the tribal *Weltanschauung* or world

view is centred on communitarian living and communitarian fellow feeling. It is no exaggeration to say that tribal people live and function in the way primitive communism was practised by the early Christian community.

Land, water and forest are three essential things that have sustained the tribals for long and they consider these as their life line. These resources have been held in common for generations. There is the community sanction that these things cannot be alienated, polluted, disfigured, distorted or destroyed. Happily, the British-initiated land-related tenancy laws support this custom. Land cannot be alienated by sale, purchase or barter. Only certain exceptions are allowed for public purpose or for use within the members of the community. Hence, a life-giving resource like land in a tribal community has no commodity value. In the village the land area is demarcated and held under common ownership. A family

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is allowed to cultivate what is needed for its upkeep. If more is needed, due to increase in family membership, unutilized common land will be given by village consensus. The family or an individual in the family cannot alienate the land in their possession. Possession may be individual but ownership is community-centred. Even if village land is to be given for needs of the government or for purposes of development, the process of getting the approval of the village community has to be adhered to. If one family finds it difficult to cultivate its land, the village community decides in its common gathering in what way such needy person has to be helped.

Just as land is held in common, their lives also are governed by common customs and rituals. All ceremonies from birth to death

are functions conducted as community events and participated by every member of the community. Expenses for such events are also shared by the village community. Even dates of all such events are fixed in community meetings. For example, the date for even the naming ceremony for a new member of a family is approved in the village council. A newborn child is accepted as a village citizen.

In the tribal world, with this sense of fellow feeling and *agape*, there is no room for orphans to remain uncared for. If a child is bereaved on the death of both parents, the child will need to be taken care of by the nearest relatives or by the village community. Sometimes, unfortunately, outside charitable organisations walk in where angels fear to tread by opening orphanages and promising to render help for orphans from tribal families. Such outlandish inroads weaken value oriented tribal customs. Charity pushers need to understand that charity has a limit and that they should not cross the 'line of control'.

Crime and punishment also come within this area of community life. Even an individual's unruly behaviour is an offence to the community as a whole. The village community takes responsibility in sorting out such matter within the community and rendering punishment through community legal process. The *finale* of the process will be a fine and community reconciliation by sharing a leaf-cupful of country liquor as a sign of fellowship and reintegration of the repentant/pardoned sinner into the community. (This process does not take away the State's criminal or civil legal procedure if such a process is needed for more serious offences.)

Even religious rituals are a matter of the community. So are festivals and rituals. Among the Paharia (Malto) hill tribal community in Jharkhand I noticed a particularly encouraging custom. The community decides the time when annual harvest is to be started. Prior to the harvest, not even a grain is removed from the field by any one either by stealing or by personal harvesting. No one can put a grain into one's mouth before the

common harvest is initiated and common festival completed. Once the harvest is completed by all the families, a community ritual of offering the newly cooked food to ancestors is done. Thereafter every family cooks its own food and the common village celebration begins through dancing and rejoicing. Apart from this communitarian aspect, one practical advantage is that such a custom prevents anyone from stealing another's crop. If, by chance, one does steal or goes against the custom, he or she has to answer it in the community gathering and get punished and reconciled.

All such humane and value-oriented customs are not common to a modern world which is governed by individualism, accumulation,

avarice, lack of respect for nature and fellow humans and no thought of future generations. If tribal areas have so far been

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preserved from the pollution of air, land and water, it is precisely because tribals have taken care of these elements with love and respect. Their harmonious blend with nature and nature's forces has so far helped nature's own sustenance and regeneration. Nature is respected, loved and worshipped by the tribals. But let us not call them pantheists. Rather, their reverence for nature goes so deep that they feel that it is because of nature around them that they survive and have survived for centuries. Destroy this nature, exploit natural resources of tribal belts for alien use, you destroy the tribals. Today, in the name of so-called development, mineral and other natural resources are excavated and exploited. In the process tribal people are dispossessed of their home base and displaced into an alien world where they get lost.

Instead of envisioning and executing a sustainable form of development, the arm-chair strategists of development agenda connive with industrialists and multinationals to invade tribal belts and displace tribal people and dismantle their lives.

A strategy for sustainable development should make the land holders partners in development. This should be done by allotting to them a fair share of the profits of the end product of the raw materials extracted from the land which is acquired through due process. If that does not take place, we the so-called ‘elite’ shall be fooling ourselves and destroying the lives of simple-minded and innocent tribal people.

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Let us remind ourselves what Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of India said: ‘Our mother earth has enough for all, but not enough for the greed of a few.’ 🌿

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- “Do you allow yourselves to be gazed upon by the Lord? But how do you do this? You look at the tabernacle and you let yourselves be looked at . . . it is simple! “It is a bit boring; I fall asleep.” Fall asleep then, sleep! He is still looking at you. But know for sure that he is looking at you!” — Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy