

## ADIVASIS: PRIMITIVE OR CIVILISED?

The Adivasis, the original inhabitants of India, are usually called "primitive" and "tribal", terms which are usually used in a derogatory sense, meaning "uncivilised". This notion was introduced by the British to rationalize their policy of colonial appropriation as the "white man's burden". They even called them "criminal tribes" to justify their oppression of the Adivasis who were among the few people to continue to fight against the British to the very end. But can a civilisation (and we use this term intentionally) which has survived for millenia be primitive or criminal? Surely the Adivasis are more civilised than those who cut off the hands of expert Indian weavers in order to sell inferior British textiles, than those who destroyed the grain crops of India in order that the poppy may be cultivated so that opium could be forcibly sold to the Chinese, than those who make and use nuclear, chemical and biological weapons?

Certainly the Adivasis who live in equilibrium with their environment are more civilised than those who are consuming non-renewable resources so fast that even their children will have little or none to use, who are polluting and destroying the environment so rapidly that their nuclear weapons may not be needed to destroy the world. We have a lot to learn from the people who have survived for centuries!

## The Knowledge of the Adivasis

Most of the Adivasis do not know how to read or write but they have a vast store of knowledge which has been handed down from parents to children for generations and generations. It enables them to live in a tough environment in a nearly self-reliant and self-sufficient way. They have had no need to write things down because everyone has to possess this knowledge if they are to survive.

There is a twelve year old girl, Raji, who knows the names of hundreds of herbs, shrubs and trees and their varied uses. Many of these supplement her meagre diet of cereals and pulses with essential proteins, vitamins and minerals. The girl also knows which plants are a source of fibre, which are good for fuel and lighting, which have medicinal uses. She knows how to get crabs out of their holes and how to make an ingenious fish trap built across a small stream. She knows how to catch wild hare and quail and partridges and where to find bird's eggs. After over two years of learning from her we have still not exhausted her store of knowledge. And because her father is no longer alive she teaches all this to her younger brothers and sisters.

So besides being the possessor of a vast, complete knowledge system, which includes such western divisions as animal husbandry, agriculture, meteorology, herbal medicine, botany, zoology, house construction, ecology, geology and psychology, she also is part of a very successful educational system in which there are no dropouts or failures and in which those who succeed do not need a multinational company to give them a job.

And Raji is not unique: most boys and girls of her age have the same or even more knowledge. However, there are increasing numbers who do not have this knowledge and most of them are those who attend the formal education schools. Those who go to the formal education system learn that only the knowledge taught there is valid, knowledge which has mainly come from the West. This idea that what comes from the school, what comes from the city is better than what they themselves have is spreading widely and is one of the causes of the loss of self-respect by the Adivasis with their resultant domination by the rich farmers and others.

The now-fashionable notion of integrated rural development is a step closer to the Adivasi concept of life in which the cultural, spiritual and psychological as well as the physical and economic aspects of life are recognised as influencing one another. The system of knowledge of the Adivasis, covering all aspects of life, has enabled them to survive for thousands of years whereas the western industrial system which we are all desperately trying to imitate, has been in existence for barely a few hundred years and is already showing ominous signs of total collapse. Most people have completely ignored or downgraded the indigenous knowledge systems because of their infatuation with the western model.

The Adivasis, above all, try to be self-reliant in all their basic needs, particularly of food and shelter. Their priority is to grow enough paddy and pulses for their own consumption.

Their agricultural system, again, almost always called primitive, is in fact a sophisticated system which has proved itself by being sustainable for centuries. Paddy is their most important crop. In order to provide food security in spite of the unreliability of the monsoon, the Adivasis plant more than one variety of paddy, each with its own peculiar characteristics. If there is a lot of rain at the beginning of the monsoon they transplant some varieties, if there isn't, they transplant others. If the monsoon proceeds normally, some varieties produce a good crop, if it doesn't, others do. Besides, they also have some varieties that grow on bad land and others that mature very early. The result of all this is that 1) they have food to eat within three months of planting the early maturing varieties, 2) whatever the vagaries of the monsoon, they always have some food to eat, 3) if pests attack the crops, not all the varieties are equally affected and lastly the different transplanting and harvesting times allow them to make the most efficient use of their own labour.

The Adivasis have a special relationship with the forests. Their culture has evolved in harmony with the forest environment and in many ways they are still dependent on the forests. They get much of their food, especially vitamins and minerals, from the large variety of fruits and vegetables that grow wild. A lot of their protein is from wild animals, birds like quail and partridge and fish from the streams. Most of the medicines used by the bhagats come from the forest. Much of their fuel wood and nearly all their timber and reed requirements for housing comes from there too. And most important, the leaves for manuring their fields also comes from there. But though the Adivasis are so dependent on the forests, they in no way degrade them. For instance, fuel wood is only taken in the form of side branches of certain trees. This not only preserves the main trunk but the pruning of the side branches is absolutely necessary if the main trunk is to grow straight and its wood to be without knots.

As an example of how their knowledge can be used consider this: A farmer from Bombay bought a piece of land and called in an expert water diviner to point out locations for wells, at a cost of Rs 500/- per location. He then drilled a bore at one of the spots, going down to more than 60 metres, for which he spent about Rs 23,000/- and got not a drop of water. His Adivasi workers then suggested that he dig open wells at two places which they indicated without charging him a paisa. At both the spots he got ample water at about 3 m. At one of these, the only source of water in an area of 12 m diameter was at the spot indicated. The Adivasis located the spots by looking for the holes of land crabs. The mounds of wet mud that the crabs leave around their holes make them easy to find. The holes of the crabs lead directly to the water spring. It's as simple as that!

There are many other things which we can learn from them. Besides the standard crops they grow, they gather or cultivate

hundreds of food plants which are not used by others. Many of these may prove more nutritious and higher yielding than the commercially available varieties. The Adivasis have their own efficient methods of organic fertilizing, oraganic pest control, soil improvement, their own technology for fishing, bird and animal trapping, and many other things.

This does not mean that all the knowledge of the Adivasis is valid. There is no doubt that there is a lot of superstition involved and some of their practices are positively harmful. But it is up to us to separate the good from the bad.

Even the World Bank in a report on "Economic Development and Tribal Peoples" published in July 1981 refers to "the great potential value of tribal knowledge of management of marginal lands". Though, the World Bank, naturally, sees this knowledge as representing "an increasing investment opportunity contributing significantly to the dominant society".

Put very plainly, we must learn from the Adivasis, and that is precisely what the Mandal has been trying to do. Rather than forcing them to imitate the dominant culture, which is mostly western based, we must realise the importance of their knowledge and make use of it to help them as well as to develop a more indigenous technology for the country as a whole.

#### Why They Are Poor

The question can be asked that if the Adivasis are so knowledgeable and the natural resources so abundant, why are they so poor today? One reason is that they have lost much of their land to the rich farmers or their land has been subdivided among children into plots that are too small. A further reason is that they have been self-sufficient in all their needs for so many centuries that they still cannot realise the necessity of growing for sale in the cash economy and saving some of their income. Another is that the forests which were abundant and luxuriant earlier have now been mostly cut down to cater to the fuel and timber needs of the cities. The result of all this is that most of the Adivasis are below the poverty line, most of them are undernourished, which puts them into the poverty circle where they do not have the energy to cultivate their own fields and so get further undernourished.

The Mandal hopes to be able to help the Adivasis by means of suitable agroforestry to get not only all their food, fuel and timber and other necessities from the forest or from plants grown in their own or on community fields but also to get many products that can be processed on a small scale as cottage industries. And because the Adivasis realise that we are learning from them, it gives them much-needed self-respect, which can help them overcome their domination.

Further information on the Adivasis is available in the Alonde Project Reports.

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