

Indian Environmentalism and Tribal Movements

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Abstract: *The history of Indian environmental movement is the study of the struggle for the rights over land, water and forests. Environmental movements in India emerged mainly as a reaction against the modern economic developmental process initiated by the government. Contextually, Indian environmental movements emanated through many diversified issues of social protests such as agrarian unrest, forest rights movement, anti-displacement movement, survival related movement and movement for proper rehabilitation and resettlement and these movements highlighted Indian tribes as victimized group. A considerable figure of tribals was participated in these movements for democratization of natural resources. Thus the broad base of Indian environmentalism has been constructed. But the role of middle class politics is very significant this context. The middle class activists developed tribalism within their organizational base and directed the movement from non-party line. Thus Indian environmentalism took a definite shape pertaining to tribalism. The paper is dealing with the intricate relationship between the tribes and nature; highlighting how the tribals have been affected by the developmental initiatives taken by the government; and depicting the nature of tribal movements for the democratization of natural resources from historical point of view.*

Keywords: Environmentalism, Tribal politics, Social movement, Development-induced-displacement

Discourses on tribal politics and Indian environmentalism, in essence, explored many events of social resistance for democratization of natural resources. Broadly, these academic discourses – highlighted the socio-economic lifestyle of tribals and other subaltern masses, exemplified the episodes of age old injustice done to the tribals and also depicted the nature of tribal politics of environmentalism. It is asserted that, the history of Indian environmental movement is the study of the struggle for the rights over land, water and forests and tribals and other marginalized communities are the main plaintiffs of such rights. From the ancient past, the tribals and other marginalized communities are the sole bearers and porters of ‘hunting-gathering’ cultures. Scheduled tribes and other marginalized communities have been unable to diminish their dependence over natural resources for survival and existence even after introducing several constitutional provisions that aimed at promoting the affirmative action for the tribal people.¹ But due to the acceleration of modern developmental process, the

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economic and cultural lifestyle of the tribals faced severe threats. As a reaction, tribal mobilization and politics took a definite shape on the grounds of agrarian unrest, forest rights movement, anti-displacement movement, survival related movement and movement for proper rehabilitation and resettlement. All these movements, in one way or other, are linked with social ecology and in these movements tribals and other marginalized communities are identified as the victimized groups. However, the emergence of the politics of middle class activists in that perspective is a coherent socio-political identity based activism that emanates from the outside of 'hunting-gathering' society but develops a popular culture that endeavours to protect the tribal way of lifestyle against state authoritarianism. Thus theoretical base of Indian environmentalism has been developed pertaining to tribalism.

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Indigenous People and their Relations with Nature: Economic, Religious and Cultural Lifestyle

Close interconnection and interdependence between man and nature can be easily sensed in the poor and marginalized tribal societies. Such interconnection and interdependence is basically economic, religious and cultural. Depending upon forest or natural resources, people of a group of marginalized people or traditional communities often practice or carry on the same economic activities or profession or mode of production or, in the best sense, means of survival and subsistence, which ultimately helps to generate social integrity within the community. In India, from the ancient past, most of the marginalized traditional communities are dependent upon agrarian economy; some of them practice *jhum* or shifting cultivation, settled cultivation etc. Hunting-gathering activities were also a tradition in the tribal world. In ancient India, agraria's economy as well as hunting-gathering economy was the sources of income for the traditional communities. But the colonial exploitation and non-tribal domination evicted the tribals from their ancestral dwelling places, made them marginalized and forced them to rely intrinsically upon hunting-gathering economy.

According to the Tamil heroic poems of *Sangam* literature, the tribals or the descent groups like *Kuravar*, *Vettuvar* and *Vetar* were subsisting on hunting/gathering and shifting cultivation; *Itaiyar* people were subsisting on agro-pastoralism; *Maravar* lived on predatory means and *Paratavar* subsisted on fishing and salt manufacturing. In ancient Southern India, as Tamil heroic poem depicted, there were several groups of functionaries like *Ulavar* (wet-rice agriculturalists), *Toluv*

called *Punam* and *Enal*), *Taccar* (carpenters), *Kollar* (smiths), *Vanikar* (traders) etc. who were coexisting and interactions were going on among the various tribes following the means of subsisting determined by the landscape of ecosystems that they inhabited. Thus social formation was entrenched upon hunting/gathering/fishing, agro-pastoralism, wet-rice agriculture, salt manufacturing, crafts production and exchange as the consistent economies. Multiple use of iron was the main source of technological application behind all the economies and productive and distributive relations were based on kinship relation.¹ It is also evidenced that, since the ancient times the traditional communities and other marginalized people are habituated to reside in the remote areas, open space and mostly in the areas of richest natural resources, even few traditional indigenous people time wise change their dwelling places for the better access of natural resources. *Arbukahas* of mount Abu, *Haimvatahs* of the Himalayas, *Vindyapmulakahs* of the *Vindyas* are few mountain dwellers. *Kausijakahs* of Kosi, *Saindhavas* and *Sindu-Sauvirahas* of Sindhu, *Bhadras* of the Ganga are the people live on the river banks. *Pasupah* and *Govindahs* are the pastoral people and *Marudha/Maradhas* are known as desert dwellers. *Adirashtra*, *Vanarasyah*, *Nishad*, *Mundah*, *Savarah*, *Kokuratah* (Korku), *Karusha* (Kurukh), *Kollagir* (Koli), Bhil are identified as forest people and apart from these communities, a number of forest dwellers are mentioned as *janggalaha*, *dandakah* etc.²

Different tribes and castes groups have many sub-tribes or sub-castes with a number of exogamous totem clans.³ In many context, sub-tribe or sub-castes status has been ascertained on the basis of different species of plants and animals. Totemism systematically analyses the relationship between groups such as clans and various species of plants and animals. For instance, among the Oraons, the Toppo clan takes its name from a bird, the Minj clan from a particular species of fish and the Lakra clan from the tiger. Such totemic structure also can be found among the Mundas, Kharias and Hos. Tribal people consider certain limits or prohibition on moral or religious grounds with respect to the objects of their totems. Tribals do not eat, hark, kill, destroy or even domesticate the plants or animals which ascertain their totemic status. The tribals do not use anything made or obtained from their totems. They have their reverence towards their totems. The particular species of plants or animal that the tribes take as totems are not from any one single family of animals, birds, reptiles or plants rather where totemic exists; natural objects from all of these families take part in constructing the social structure. Thus the tribes make a balance between social and natural order.⁴ Although hunting, one of the means of survival for the tribes, is a natural instinct, apart from the totemic values, tribal people control such necessity in respect of nature's cycles of production and reproduction. Even most tribal societies apologies to kill the animals to which they have to hunt.⁵ Many of India's hunters-gatherers (tribal groups) have their respect for conservation of natural resources and hence, they believe that certain animals many not be hunted between July and October and they impose restrictions on the cutting

of particular species of tree such as Sal (*Shorea robusta*). In tribal societies Sal is regarded as sacred and clusters of Sal trees on the outskirts of villages are known as 'sacred groves'.⁶ Thus the tribals play an ecological role in context to biodiversity conservation. Hunting-gathering economy and agrarian economy of the tribals revolve around the forest areas and the forest resources. For example – Bonda of Orissa; Birhor of Bihar; Cholanikan of Kerala; Chenchu of Andhra Pradesh; Onge, Jarwa and Sentinelese of Andaman and Nicobar Islands are solely dependent upon forests and forests products for hunting, fishing, collection of roots tubers, fruits etc. Gatherers use several indigenous tools like digging sticks, iron knives, pots and vessels made of mud, wood, bamboo etc. Hunters use rope nets and traps, bows and arrows with wooden or iron heads, knives, sticks etc. On the contrary, tribes of Northeast India, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka, Sikkim, Gujarat and Bihar practice shifting cultivation in the hilly and forested areas of their habitat.⁷ For housing tribals use nature elements and forest products. Hence, they have mud walls and tiled or thatched roofs even considerable use of bamboo and timber as poles and frames can be seen in the agriculturalists tribal societies. Materials obtaining from the forest, they produce agricultural implements like plough and yokes, devices for lifting water for irrigation and threshing and winnowing tools. They make handled and ribbed umbrellas with bamboo covered with leaves, wooded waterproof coats, wooden stools, baskets, cups, plates, cushions, ropes, mortar and pestles, oil presses etc. form the forest resources. Even the art objects, artifacts, musical instruments and ornaments, which they use, are made from forest products. Therefore, the whole material culture of the tribes is rooted in the tribal people's dependence on forests and forest produce.⁸

Vandana Shiva explored tribal-nature relationship from the ecological and economic point of view. Ecologically indigenous and naturalized vegetation provides essential life support by stabilizing the soil and water systems. Economically trees have been regarded as the sources of small timber, fodder, fuel, fiber, medicines, oils, dyes etc. Indigenous medicines are produced from more than 2,000 species of wild and cultivated plants.⁹ For the remedies of pain like headache, toothache, stomachache, eye pain, ear pain, migraine and the treatment of the diseases like high and ordinary fever, malaria, wounds, constipation, diarrhea, dysentery, epilepsy, rheumatism, insomnia, tetanus and eczema etc. the Oraons use leaves, roots and barks of plants and trees. Many of these plants and trees grow wild in the jungle and some of these are cultivated in the field by the tribals. Thus we find a close relation between the nature and the tribal communities in the sphere of the knowledge for the treatment of diseases.¹⁰ Forest areas of Mawphalang village of East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya are known as 'sacred forest' for the Khasi tribe. *Taxus baccata*, a rare species of tree, was found in that area. The plant is very sacred to the Khasis and they find worth medicinal value on it. In the medical science the plant is used for anti-cancer reactions.¹¹ Khasis use 57 common abundant and rare medicinal plants for the treatment of ordinary and incurable diseases. Khasis use *Taxus*

baccata (Dieng seh Blei is the local name of the plant) for the treatment of tumors.¹² Therefore, indigenous knowledge system has been developed by the tribal communities centering round the forests.

In the tribal societies, forests have an intrinsic value on their religious beliefs and sentiments. Many myths of tribal culture placed forests at a very highly dignified position. Undoubtedly, usefulness role of the forests is the motivating factor behind such sacredness belief and their urge for the protection or conservation of forests and even of other natural objects. Didayis of Orissa believe that when the world was destroyed by a flood, the supreme deity made a new world without trees. As a result, people faced difficulties to cook and build houses. But when God saw their sufferings he added trees.¹³ Verrier Elwin, an anthropologist and tribal activist, observed the Gond's (tribe of Central India) idea of heaven is 'miles and miles of forest without any forest-guards' and the idea of hell is miles and miles of forest without any *Mahua* (*Bassia latifolia*). Similarly, Baigas and Murias of Central India, think themselves as children of 'Dharti Mata' or Mother Earth who loves them and takes care too. They believe that the forest is a setting for romance and considered the forest as the ideal trysting place for lovers.¹⁴ In tribal culture, forest is seen as earth's fertility and productivity is systematized in yet another as the form of Mother Earth. In Bengal, *Sheora* (*Tropis aspera*), *Sal* (*Shorea robusta*) and *Asvathha* (*Ficus religiosa*) are regarded as the *Vana Durga* or the tree Goddess; in Comilla district of Bangladesh she is known as *Bamani* and in Assam she is *Rupeshwari*. Tribals worship the trees and forests conceiving them as Vana Devatas or forest deities. Tribals have their reverence towards nature not because of fear and ignorance rather because of the ecological insight which the tribal societies have measures in their time and space. In context to Central India, tribals discovered the utilities of *Mahua* tree over their survival economy. The tree is most valuable for the tribals of Chhattisgarh, Santhal Parganas, Bastar and Satpurus. Tribal women collect the fleshy corollas of its flowers which can be eaten raw or cooked, or dried, ground and mixed with flour for making cakes, or distilled into spirit. Tribals produce thick white oil from the *Mahua* seeds and the oil can be used for cooking and burning even the oil is used for the manufacturing of margarine soap and glycerin. It was examined that, in 1897 and 1900 when serious famine continued in Central India, profuse blossoming of *Mahua* flowers was insurance for the tribals.¹⁵

A close interconnection between the tribals and nature can be found in the *Karam* and *Sarhul* festivals among the Oraons, Mundas and Santals. In these festivals, nature and natural phenomena occupy a central place. In *Sarhul*, marriage is enacted between sun and the earth in hope that such ritual would ensure the fertility of mother earth. Sacred grove or a cluster of Sal trees acts as a place of worship. On the other hand, like the *Sarhul*, *Karam* festival is celebrated in the month of September after paddy has been transplanted and turned green symbolizing the *Karam* (*Neolamarckia cadamba*) tree as

the Karam deity who has the power to determine whether the autumn harvest will be good or bad. Therefore, nature's fertility and productivity are the prime concern behind the celebration of such festivals.¹⁶ Even the nursing of the crops is also important for the tribals. Mundas believe that spirits exist in the nature and their duty is to look after the crops. These spirits are known as *Bongas* which is the generic name referring to spirits and the power and the force of mountains, hills, forests, trees, rivers, houses and villages. *Desawali* is one the spirits which plays a vital role in the Munda festivals which are connected to the cultivation of land. The home of this deity is the *Sarna* or sacred grove which is identified as a little path of forest and was created when all else was cleared for the cultivation and was left as a refuge for the Gods where they might live apart.¹⁷

Development and Displacement by State Fiat: An Overview of the Tribal Situation

Garrett Hardin's economic theory of 'tragedy of commons' provides an idea of sustainable development interpreting economic activities of the common people depending on natural resources. In contemporary India, various developmental measures initiated by the state are enormously affecting the economic system of the poor tribes and other marginalized people whose survival economy is deeply entrenched with natural resources of the country. Tribal people's dependence on natural resources for survival and existence is a long journeyed tradition. Similarly, the process of tribal eviction from rich natural resource area by the ruler of power holders has become another practice or custom to hold a full procedural trial to deal with public good, reformation, conservation and economic development. The involuntary displacement of the tribals is a historically explored phenomena and the process still continues to exist. The inscriptions of Gupta period carry some evidences on violence against forest tribes. The inscriptions state that, in ancient time, the forest dwellers were brought under control, their forest resources like timber, mines and gem-stones had been appropriated and they were converted into the lower castes of the area and established on the edges of towns or in separate settlements in the forest. All these were done concentrating on the development of human settlement, extension of agriculture and reformation of revenue system.¹⁸

In medieval period, tribal people were harassed by the then Mohamedan rulers as well as by the regional rulers. The Bhils of Western India faced oppression due to Muslim and Maratha invasion. Bhils were converted into Islam; they were evicted by the Maratha invaders and other local rulers forcefully. Similarly the Mughal army conquered the Gond region of middle India and Marathas also destroyed the Gond dynasty.¹⁹ Constant changes in the economy of the Gonds took place and they were displaced to the plains from the hills and foothills also from the plains into the forests during and after the Maratha conquest.²⁰ Above and beyond, both the Mughal armies and Maratha officials were clearing the jungle for security and settlement and the process instigated the India tribes.²¹ Under Mughal era the forest tribes were considered to be outside the pale of

civilization and fit only for massacre or slavery. Hundreds of forest tribes were captured for the slave markets of India and Turkestan. The Marathas, after coming into power, entrapped and killed the forest tribes as pests and outcasts so that the East India Company assumed territorial sovereignty; the Santals, Mundas, Bhils, Badak, Minas and many others in various parts of India had degenerated into mere bands of robbers and assassins.²² Therefore, in the medieval period, rulers hardly followed any step to ensure justice for the indigenous tribes; moreover, medieval rulers pursued a globalized business and market system where the tribals were considered as a commodity. Accordingly age old injustice and oppression over the Indian tribes continued.

In the early nineteenth century, the Baigas of Central provinces were dependent on the hunting-gathering economy and *bewar*, i. e. swidden or shifting cultivation, for their survival. The gathering activities made the Baigas a part of the wider local and non-local economy.²³ But conflict between the *bewar* practice and the natural regeneration of Sal forests played an important role in the intensification of the internal conflict between segregation and integration in the Baiga society.²⁴ The creation of Indian Forest Department was another issue behind the tribal resentment against the British government as enacting laws the Forest Department imposed several restrictions on the economic activities of the tribals. In 1864, the government general appointed Dietrich Brandis as the first inspector general who established Indian Forest Department as an organized State Department managed by the Indian exchequer. In 1871, the Department of Revenue and Agriculture oversaw the Forest Department under the supervision of the home department.²⁵ The imperial environmentalism considered tribes as the destroyers of the ecosystem. Hence, to guard the forest resources British officials have recommended for the eviction of indigenous tribes from the forests by planting a band of white settlers as a buffer zone.²⁶ It is reported that that the shifting cultivation is invariably harmful for forest regeneration, destroys the ecological balance, it results in substantial soil erosion which subsequently leads to flooding of rivers and drying of hill springs. In Madhya Pradesh, Indian Forest Act banned *jhum* in all areas including large tracts which were under princely states. But the tribals were continuing the traditional rotations of *jhum*. The Forest Department charged the prosecutions and monetary fines but such remedial have failed to stop the cultivators. Then the Forest Department turned to the police and made several arrests. When the cultivators kept the promise that they would follow the plough cultivation, the police released the arrested persons. Forest authorities were hopeful of persuading the younger generation of Baigas to give up *bewar* practices but the older generation of the community was not ready to surrender because they believed that the Baigas were born to be kings of the jungle and the soil and did not want to give up *bewar*.²⁷ The Forest Department also imposed restriction in matters of plough cultivation, cattle grazing and community's ownership over the forests. It was instructed that each household is to be allowed a patch for cultivation at fixed rates per plough, free grazing is to be allowed for a limited number of cattle etc. All these regulations were

brought into force by the forest officials to control the natural resource use pattern of the forest villages. Furthermore, if the forest was leased, it was specified that, the forest community's relationship with the contractors shall be regulated and what kind of 'subsistence relations' would be developed among the forest dwellers, that was fully determined by the choices of Forest Department.²⁸

Even in the post-colonial period, the state government followed the British policy to cease the traditional way of land use pattern, basically *jhum*. Some within the scientists, technocrats and politicians believe that the shifting cultivation is a destructive form of agriculture. Therefore, the authority should ban it for the ecological sustainability. In the Garo hill of Northeast, a considerable figure of tribal population practice primitive system of agriculture, i. e. *jhum*. In the post-colonial period, the government took an initiative to switch the *jhum* cultivators to plantation crops, horticultural crops and cash crops. Under this scheme, pilot projects for the control of *jhum* accompanying with river basin schemes were started under North-East Council Plan in 1974-75. At its starting point, dry terrace and wet-rice cultivation were introduced on several areas of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills. But Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) study of 1983 reported that, by 1983, 3,000 families came under this project, but 150 families had give up *jhum* totally. Therefore, governmental schemes, projects and plans met with little success and most of the *jhum* cultivators were continuing this traditional system of agriculture. However, against this backdrop, Soil Conservation and Forest Departments reinstated full-scale inquiry on the motives of the shifting cultivators providing few alternatives on plantations and cultivation of selected crops.²⁹ Scientist like Prof. P. S. Ramakrishnan viewed that, *jhum* is not intrinsically irrational on the grounds of environment and production. He viewed *jhum* or slash and burn cultivation is a highly sophisticated farming system and can be best suited to the ecosystem of the North-East. For continuous cultivation heavy is essential in the mountain soils. In *jhum* cultivation, cultivators burn the vegetative cover which helps to enrich the nutrient base of the mountain soils. But it is only when the *jhum* cycles become very short that this traditional practice becomes ecologically destructive. In various parts of North-East India, while *jhum* cycles now range from 3-5 years, previously it was 15 to 20 and the productivity also has been dropped. It would be pertinent to note that the Naga farmers (tribes) of Khonoma village in Nagaland have invented a kind of traditional knowledge to stabilize shifting cultivation at lower cycles. The Nagas discovered that the alder (*Alnus nepalensis*), a tree that grows across the Himalaya in landslide areas, is capable of fixing nitrogen and coppices extremely. About a hundred years ago the Nagas started to plant this tree in a large number in their shifting fields. Pollarding or cutting the branches of the tree the Naga farmers cultivate the land for two years and after two years of production they make the field as fallow land for another two to three years. In that period, they move on to cultivate another field having alder. Thus the Nagas are practicing shifting cultivation following a rotation and without destroying forest cover.³⁰

In Karnataka, the practice of *podu* cultivation (shifting cultivation) by the Soliga tribe helped in wildlife conservation. It was observed that, during their shift to another place, Soligas leave some of the some of the crops and fruits like bananas, tubers, mustard, amaranths, ragi and ragi grass, papaya, guava, tapioca, *sebu*, bottle gourd, cucumbers, pumpkin, climber beans, lemon and jackfruit etc. After their departure the remaining crops and fruits became the forage for the wild animals like wild boar, barking deer, bison etc and birds like parrots, dove etc. Thus *podu* cultivation provides food for the wild animals, birds and for the insects. When crops were being cultivated, the wild animals, birds and insects came and fed on the different crops. On the contrary, during *podu* cultivation, Soligas dig pits or wells for drinking water but after departing agricultural field all these sources of water become the source of drinking water for the wild animals and birds.³¹ Therefore, *jhum* practiced by the indigenous communities is not ecologically destructive rather through this traditional system of agriculture communities play a vital role for ecological conservation. Presently *jhum* cultivation is threatened due to the state-sponsored developmental projects. In Eastern and North-East India, many tribal communities have been forced to give up *jhum* for the implementation of economic developmental projects.

'Development-induced-displacement' has become a challenging issue since the immediate post-independent era. Since 1950's alienation between tribes and the natural resources is coming to be a reality as a process of the implementation and realization of national development planning, integrated multipurpose projects and new economic policy. The wave of development and modernization has put forth an economic movement worldwide but such strategy has failed to minimize the poor people's dependence on natural resources. The established truth is that the poor tribals and other marginalized people generally reside very close to richest natural resource area and to those places which come under government vested land. Similarly, when the government authorities take initiative for modern development, like huge industrialization and multipurpose river projects, the authorities often choose those land properties which have already been occupied by the tribals and other marginalized communities for their survival and existence. The state authorities have adopted the hypothesis that no development is possible without extracting the natural resources like land, water, forests and mines etc. But simultaneously we must stay on the alert to another hypothesis that the greater the development, the greater the human displacement with destruction of natural resources.

Displacement of people not only means the physical rather it has psychological implications too. Because after being displaced from an ancestral dwelling place, the potentially displaced persons would face displacement from traditional occupation and displacement from traditional culture and identity. Market centric modern developmental process makes the modern state system more dependent on natural resources of its own

ignoring the poor people's dependence. Thus with the acceleration of modern developmental process, natural resources of the country turn into commodities and notably if rehabilitation and resettlement policy, in any case, fails to satisfy the local communities or, more clearly, fails to accommodate with the larger developmental process, the massive environmental migration would take place and the conflicts over natural resources would disturb the whole political system of the country. Therefore, we find little difference between the British age of natural resource extraction and the present era of natural resource based modern developmental action. Conflicts, process of eviction and occurrences of resentment of the powerless masses are everywhere. More or less the Government of independent India continued the British policy for the economic development.

Development projects, like multipurpose river projects or dams, setting up of mining and other factories and creation of park and wildlife sanctuaries have displaced millions of people of whom tribals are vast in number. From 1951 to 1990, the total number of displaced people by planned economic developmental projects range from 110 lakh to 185 lakh.³² Another data source reveals that, a total of 231 lakh people have been displaced by several economic developmental projects between these periods.³³ Between 1951 and 1990, 164.0 lakh people have been displaced by dams and out of this figure a total of 63.21 lakh people were tribal. Mining projects displaced 25.5 lakh people out of which 13.30 lakh people were tribal. 12.3 lakh people were displaced by industries, 6.0 lakh people by wildlife projects and 5.0 lakh by other development projects. Out of these figures a total of 3.13 lakh, 4.5 lakh and 1.25 lakh people were belonging to tribal communities respectively.³⁴

In view of the state authority, perhaps, 'national development' and 'larger interest' are prior to the satisfaction of the local people. In other words, priority will be given to the issues of 'national development' and 'larger interest' than the issues of satisfactory rehabilitation and resettlement, at least Indira Gandhi's letter to Baba Amte bring forward such reality. On 30th August, 1984 Smt. Gandhi wrote that:

"I am most unhappy that development projects displace tribal people from their habitat, especially as project authorities do not always take care to properly rehabilitate the affected population. But sometimes there is no alternative and we have to go ahead in the larger interest..."³⁵

Hyper developmentalism or tendency towards the modern development made the state system authoritarian and rendered the tribals and other marginalized people vulnerable. Observing the nature of state-sponsored developmental activities, Arundhati Roy has drawn the dynamics between the powerful state and the powerless masses. She wrote that:

“Power is fortified not just by what it destroys, but also by what it creates. Not just by what it takes, but also by what it gives. And powerlessness is reaffirmed not just by the helplessness of those who have lost, but also by the gratitude of those who have gained”.³⁶

However, politics of social movement against economic developmental projects made the civil society very strong. In many cases, civil society organizations have succeeded to drive out the multinationals to stop massive human displacement and broad environmental damage. Thus in most of the cases state-sponsored economic developmental projects have been abandoned because of prolonged social resistance by the civil society organizations.

Through the Five Year Plans, the state authority made the large dam as the icon of national development. Between 1951 and 1990, over 1,600 major dams and thousands of medium and smaller irrigation projects have been built with the attendant canal systems and the invariable consequences of water logging and soil salinisation which displaced millions of people forcibly. Most of such involuntary displacement took place in the tribal areas.³⁷ For example – the Sardar Sarovar project had enough potentiality to displace a vast range of people, basically tribals, from the catchment areas of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. When the policy of resettlement has been placed before the commons, the policy highlighted the *Adivasi* people as ‘encroachers’ and denied them their rights over the land and the consequent benefits as ‘oustees’. Only the reservoir affected people were declared as the ‘oustees’ or dam evictees. More than 4,200 hectares of forest in Taloda-Akkalakua are of Maharashtra was cut to resettle the Narmada dam evictees from Maharashtra. Around 50 villages were dependent on this forest land and earlier there were *Adivasi* settlers who were called ‘encroachers’.³⁸

By the name of ‘national interest’ mining projects in Jharkhand intended to displace thousands of indigenous people such as the Santals, Mundas, Oraons, Hos, Gonds, Kharias, Bhuiyas, Bhumij, Birhors, Turi, Sadans, Kumar, Kumhars, Kurmis etc. In accordance with the government report, 1985, between 1981 and 1985, during Sixth Plan period, the Central Coalfield had acquired 1,20,300 acres of land and the Eastern Coalfields acquired 30,000 acres of land which caused displacement of 32,750 families. Besides, the Piparwar Coal Project in the North Karanpura Valley took initiative to fell 289 hectares of reserved forests clearly. Mining extraction and refineries have polluted the Damodar and Karo Rivers draining radioactive and chemically contaminated wastes.³⁹ Thus mining industry, another index of national development, made massive human displacement and produced environmental hazards etc. In the mid-seventies of last century Cachar Paper Mills of North Cachar Hills district of Assam reduced the forest cover which threatened the natural forest resources and the community life of the tribal people who inhabit in the area. This is not an isolated case of development victims. The Tuli Paper Mills of Nagaland in the early eighties provides the similar instance. The

displaced persons had no adequate compensation. Such developmental schemes push the tribals to further marginality.⁴⁰ Similarly, three thermal power plants, viz., Chandrapur Thermal Power Station, Namrup Thermal Power Station and Bongaigaon Thermal Power Station in Assam displaced thousands of people including tribals. Severely all these power generation projects affected the tribals of both hills and plains of Assam.⁴¹ In most of these cases, conflict between the project supporters and the non-supporters came to the surface of development politics raising the issues of fair compensation, proper rehabilitation and resettlement etc. In many cases, either the project has been abandoned due to such conflict or the local communities have been displaced from the proposed areas victimized by livelihood crisis and environmental pollution. However, many of such development projects proposed alternative mode of livelihood status, compensation and rehabilitation and resettlement (R&R) packages but only few projects have been implemented with fair compensation and R&R packages.

Creation of National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries, another pattern of development by the name of conservation, brought to pass similar kind of conflict between the traditional marginalized communities and the governmental departments and initiators of the amusement parks. Here also the question of fair compensation is similarly important like the other development projects but in this context mainly the Forest Department itself takes the accountability for the redressal of the grievances forwarded by the affected people because the Forest Department is liable to the management of forest and wildlife conservation. Therefore, possibility of conflicts arises mainly with the Forest Department. The Nagarhole National Park in Southern Karnataka attempted to protect forty tigers with Indian and foreign monetary aid. But Nagarhole is the home to about 6000 tribals who are also dependent on the natural resources of the park. The state Forest Department wanted to evict the tribals accusing that the tribals destroy the forest and kill wild game. In reply, the tribals viewed that they do not possess the gun, they only collect fuel-wood, fruit, honey and the partridge for their survival needs and they claimed it as their modest demand. They also viewed that the coffee planters living in the edge of the forest may poach big hunting game with gun. Dr. John G. Robinson, a biologist, wildlife conservation society, New York, came to Nagarhole and suggested to relocate the tribal people for the protection of wild prey for the tigers. Robinson argued that the tribals deprive the tigers from food competing for wild prey and that would cause conservation management ineffective. Thus, all over the India, the management of parks has sharply opposed the interests of tribals.⁴² In the last three decades of the 20th century, there were several instances of clash between the villagers and park authorities over access to natural resources. Between 1979 and 1984, fifty-one such clashes occurred in national parks and sixty-six clashes have taken place in sanctuaries. It was accused that, the states of Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Manipur and Rajasthan do not pay any compensation in the cases of death or injury to humans on account of attacks by wild animals.⁴³ Between 1979 and 1984, a total of 189 human deaths took place by tiger attack

in West Bengal; between 1981 and 1983, damage done to the crops of worth Rs. 6.5 million due to rampaging elephants in South India; between 1974 and 1983, 622 cattle were killed by tigers or leopards near the Bandipur Tiger Reserve in Karnataka. Under these circumstances, Forest Department, in a few cases, compensated poorly and many cases remained uncompensated. In context to Gir forest of Gujarat, Forest Officials claimed that the villagers release the old and essentially useless cattle into the forests in hope that the animals will be killed by the predators and that would provide an opportunity to claim compensation.⁴⁴ Thus conflict between the Forest Officials and forest villages regarding the claim of compensation made the conservation management further ineffective. However, in case of Gir National Park, the state authority took positive steps for the Maldhari people who are known as the 'settled pastorals' of Gir Forest. The Forest Department of Gujarat government allowed the Maldharis to live together with the wild animals inside the Gir forest.⁴⁵ Such step was followed as R&R package to prevent traumatized displacement and that provided an instance of human-wildlife coexistence.

The existence of tribals was not always a negative sign for wildlife conservation management. It was reported that, many times, with ill-health and in injured situation, wild animals wander into the tea garden areas and *Adivasi* settlement of Dooars region of West Bengal. If the *Adivasi* compassionate tea garden labourers observe such cases, they immediately pass the information to the Forest Department and take required action to save the wild animals from the possible threat and harm. Even for such initiative many tribals received rewards from the Forest Department. Therefore, it would be very helpful to develop a cordial relationship between the tribals and the Forest Department for a healthy conservation management. In the book *The Baiga*, Verrier Elwin, defender of aboriginals, argued for the creation of National Park where the tribes would have liberty for hunting, fishing and practicing of shifting cultivation and most importantly the non-aboriginals would be prohibited to enter into this zone but the anthropologists would have privileged access. Other anthropologists, like G. S. Ghurye, criticizing Elwin, argued that if we put the tribe into a 'national park', i. e. in the anthropological zoo, such isolation would make them further marginalized. In reply to this criticism Elwin amended his earlier position, he added that the term 'national park', was unfortunate but with this connotation he wanted to protect the Baiga culture and their identity, the modest aim was the development of the aboriginals.⁴⁶ Therefore, creation of national park making a consistency between the Adivasi culture and effective forest management is not above criticism. Wilderness enthusiasts or the nature lovers always argued for the eviction of tribals from wilderness and protected areas for effective forest and wildlife conservation as development.

Tribal Resistance and Politics over Natural Resources: A Historical Narration

Social scientists have identified a number of tribal movements that arose since colonial period to modern India. V. Raghaviah identified 78 tribal revolts between 1778 and 1971.⁴⁷ Kathleen Gough explored 77 tribal uprising between 1770's and 1970's.⁴⁸ Towards the close of 1976, Anthropological Survey of India identified 36 ongoing tribal movements in India. Among 36 tribal movements – 14 were found in the North-East India and the rests were observed in Eastern, Central, Western and Southern parts of India. Tribal movements in North-East India include – political movements for the transition from the politics of insurgency to that of integration, social-cultural movements for new identity, script based and language movements etc. In Eastern India, tribal movements emerged as a movement for separate statehood and upward mobility movement, for example – Jharkhand movement. In Central India – Bhagat movement and the movement by Gond tribes emerged for political autonomy. Tribal movements of Northern parts of Andhra Pradesh took a militant turn for the same political reason. Western India reported four movements among the Bhils, Halpatis and others for agrarian development, rights of tribal peasants and political autonomy. In the Southern part of India tribal movements were observed among the small isolated primitive tribes as an incipient political process.⁴⁹

In accordance with the two publications, viz., *Tribal Movements in India*, volume I and II edited by K. S. Singh, tribal movements in India can be categorized into four types: a) political autonomy movement, b) agrarian and forest based movement, c) sanskritization process and d) cultural movement on script and language. Surajit Sinha identified five types of tribal movements: a) ethnic (tribal rebellion), b) reform movement, c) movement for recognition as 'tribal' states within the Indian union, d) violent secessionist movement and e) agrarian unrest and communist movement.⁵⁰ 'Sanskritization' is synonymous to 'reform movement' and 'cultural movement' is similar to 'ethnic movement'. B. K. Roy Burman divides tribal movements into two categories: a) proto-national and b) sub-national. Behind this categorization Roy Burman envisaged the following parameters:

- i) Response to threats to the privacy of habitat,
- ii) Response to threats to access to and control of resources,
- iii) Response to disruption of traditional roles in the total interaction set-up,
- iv) Search for new meanings of the relationship between man and nature,
- v) Search for new meanings of the relationship between individuals and society,
- vi) Search for new frontiers of identity,
- vii) Search for a more satisfactory system of control of resources,

- viii) Search for a more satisfactory system of organization of community power at all levels.

According to Roy Burman, proto-national movement is the outcome of the transformation of tribal people and society from 'tribalism' to 'nationalism'. On the other hand, sub-national movement emerges due to social disorganization. A section of acculturated elite people take part at the forefront of this movement. Proto-national movement is a phase of contraction of identity. Proto-national movement results from the orbit of development whereas; sub-national movement is the product of the disparities of development. Under the parameter of 'response to threats against access to and control of resources' Roy Burman exemplified two types of forest movement: a) 'revolts against imposition of state or state sponsored capitalism on primitive social base in the forests' and b) 'movement against alienation of tribal land'.⁵¹ These movements can be considered as 'environmental movement' by the tribals because environmental movement is nothing but the struggle for rights over natural resources. Mostly Eastern, Western and Central parts of India have witnessed such movements by the tribals since long back than the other parts. S. M. Dubey divided tribal movements in North-East India into four categories: a) religious and social reform movement, b) movement for separate statehood, c) insurgent movement and d) movement for assertions of cultural rights.⁵² But such categorization is not satisfactory on account of present day North-East India. Since the last three decades of 20th century a number of anti-industrialization and anti-dam movements have been identified mostly at the tribal belt of North-East India where during protest tribals have raised the issues of human security depending upon the land, water and forest resources. In all over India, there are so many instances on tribal movements which are emerging centering around the issues of forest rights, environmental protection and human security. Sometimes these movements dignify the ideals of tribalism for the security and or very survival of the vulnerable sections of tribal societies and sometimes predominates 'environmentalism' transcending tribalism in hope that the ideals of environmentalism would secure both the tribals and non-tribals from the negative side of the state and market. To Ghanshyam Shah tribal movements can be divided into five types: a) ethnic movements which include culture/religion identity, b) agrarian and forest rights movements, c) environmental movements, d) involuntary displacement and rehabilitation movements and e) political movements around the nationality question for a separate state.⁵³

In course of a talk, it would be relevant to note that the tribal movements in India had its origin in the experiences of the peasant mobilization by the tribesman. Ramachandra Guha views that "...a large segment of what presently passes for the environmental movement is a peasant movement draped in the cloth of environmentalism. Thus a number of local initiatives in defence of traditional rights in land, water and forests and other living resources collectively constitute what sympathetic

intellectuals have termed the 'environmental' movement".⁵⁴ Peasant resistance itself was the first organized social protest among the tribals. Gradually, when the tribals have become conscious about their rights, their resistance got typical colours which transcend agrarianism. Santal and Kol uprisings of 1832 and 1855 respectively were the instance of tribal peasant resistance against the non-tribals or outsiders or *dikus* who made the life of the original settlers intolerable. It was a movement against the feudal exploitation.⁵⁵ The leaders of the movements were purely from tribal societies and professionally were the cultivators. On the other hand, after Indian independence, Naxalbari movement of West Bengal in 1967 and peasant struggle in Khammam and Karimnagar districts of Andhra Pradesh in 1969 were communist tribal revolts against the exploitation and injustice done to the tribals by the *zamindars*, landlords and even by the popular government.⁵⁶ Here the organizational base was developed by the communist ideology and leadership came from the tribal peasant background and also from the non-tribal political groups. The movement was basically a struggle against land alienation, loss of forest rights, state intervention into the life and culture of the tribals. Both in the pre-colonial and post-colonial India; tribal revolts emerge to the loss of control over their natural resources. Revolts in the tribal areas originated due to the question of forests. The tribal revolts attempted to drive out the outsiders to restore a 'golden past' in which they had enough liberty to consume the natural resources.⁵⁷ Therefore, to Ramachandra Guha, most of the tribal resistance in India was basically land and forest based struggle. However, K. S. Singh argued that, movement of the indigenous people in post-modernist phase is the movement for self-determination or self-management of the resources and identity and ethnicity oriented movement. The environmental movement focused on the communities, their relationship to nature, interaction with nation and their worldview. Therefore, growing concern for environment, particularly bio-diversity, pluralism, ethnicity and identity all are interrelated issues and highlighted all these issues of tribal movements are assuming new characters. But presently all are becoming more and more identity based movements with various issues concerning control over resources etc. being considered as ramifications of this central issue.⁵⁸

Scholars classified tribal movements in India on the basis of geographical distribution, chronology, aims and objectives and the issues of land, ethnicity, political autonomy, secession, mobility and identity. The educated middle class people prominently took the position of leadership in various contexts of the movements but between 1795 and 1860 the leadership came from upper sections of the society and after 1860 the leaders came from lowest rungs of the society. Significantly, in the agrarian and forest based tribal movements, women played a considerable role that the men.⁵⁹ The urban middle class leaders have tried to connect the localized and isolated peasant and tribal movements to a wider struggle against the undesirable aspects of colonial rule.⁶⁰ Before independence, the middle class leaders have aggravated the nationalist movement mobilizing the peasants and tribals but after the independence the educated tribal elites

belonging to middle class family emerged and came to lead the movement on political line. Emphasizing on the political autonomy or local self-government, middle class tribal elites organized intense resistance in context to North-East India for the solidarity of indigenous tribes.⁶¹ Thus developed ethnic nationalism even sometimes on militant way, echoed 'sons of the soil' slogan and gradually solidarity concern made a transition from nationalism to regionalism. On the contrary, the environmental politics among the tribals developed another dimension, i. e. a transformation from regionalism to localism in which middle class tribal leaders emphasized on the rights of the tribals over natural resources. In Alirajpur tehsil of Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh, local organization by the urban middle class activist and local *adivasi* people, called *Sangath*, finds that the reserve forest has a great contribution to the subsistence economy of the local tribals which is known as *nevad* (cultivation within the forest land encroached by the tribals). *Sangath* viewed that the forest will be destroyed due to illicit felling by contractors and expensive afforestation programmes will be launched without any lasting benefits. Simultaneously, forests are also being destroyed due to increase in the tribal population and their land hunger. The *Sangath* argues the problems can be solved by empowering the tribals to control the resource. The tribals should have the power to decide the best measures for the management of the forest. As a result, their survival needs will be secured and conservation management will also be effective. Thus, *Sangath's* politics secured the partial control over the forest.⁶² Notwithstanding, conflicts were measured between the middle class activists and *adivasi* leaders within *Sangath* politics. The middle class activists have highlighted the model of sustainable development to improve their condition but the *adivasi* leaders were demanding more control over resources to be 'masters of their own destiny'. The middle class activists viewed that it would be best to situate the tribals very close to nature in the forest but the *adivasi* leaders replied that the forest-tribal relationship for economic dependency is not a forced provision rather that chosen and their lifestyle would improve if they had enough access to land.⁶³

During 1930s demand for separate political entity was consistent in the Jharkhand movement, however, it can be noted that, the ecological questions were very significant in the movement. The tribals protested against the alienation of land and forest resources, the uncontrolled influx of outsiders who usually monopolized jobs and positions of power and the grave neglect of infrastructural development by the government.⁶⁴ In 1978, tribal movement in Singhbhum district of Jharkhand was originated raising the issue of forest rights. The movement was known as 'tree war' or 'forest *andolan*' as a symbolic protest against the threat to livelihood and identity of the tribals, the *adivasis* took destructive strategy by felling trees in the forests, hence, the movement was '*jungal katai andolan*'. Encroachment by the Forest Department on *adivasi* village and their customary rights on forest, exploitation and harassment of tribal by forest officials, commercialization of forests and resultant pauperization of tribal, large scale legal and illegal alienation of tribal land, displacement of tribal due to various

development projects without proper rehabilitation and adequate compensation, increasing unemployment in the area due to closure of mines and the frequent drought conditions existing in the area were the root causes behind the tribal unrest in the forest areas of Singhbhum. At its first moment the leadership came from tribal leaders like Magi Dorai and Jogo Munda under *Samyukta Morcha* between 1981 and 1983. Santal, Ho and the Mundas were the main participants of the movement.⁶⁵ Preferably, tribal movement as social movement is not devoid of politics and environmental questions. Before independence, in the second phase of the tribal autonomy movement of Chhotanagpur, from 1920 to 1938, tribal movement for political autonomy was dominated by *Chhotanagpur Unnati Samaj* (Chhotanagpur Improvement Society) which was formed by the tribal urban middle class Christian people. This period witnessed the development of mini-revivalism among the tribes by the Samaj. In the fourth phase, between 1949 and 1963, the movement was directed by 'Jharkhand Party' which was originated from the regional level but the party was open for all. Thus, as the formative factor, the movement witnessed a transition from 'ethnicity to regionalism'.⁶⁶

The World Commission on Dams and the India Supreme Court did not hint for a satisfactory solution of the Narmada dam problem. The possibility of massive displacement, including huge number of tribal, was obvious; hence resistance movement by the civil society organizations was continued unabatedly. Gujarat enthusiastically supports the dam project with the highest height possible, Maharashtra mildly opposed the dam and the state of Madhya Pradesh was largely ambiguous. The conflict between the supporters and non-supporters of Sardar Sarovar Project and or damming Narmada generated an ideological debate behind the reality of state vs. civil society conflict. The supporters or the advocates of modern development were popularizing 'developmentalism'. Clearly the supporters yearned for development even, if necessary, displacing the people and rendering them 'ecological refugees'. On the contrary, the non-supporters insisted for the abandonment of the dam project even if only limited displacement occurs. The non-supporters indulged 'environmentalism' demanding the integrity of environment that is to be maintained in its pristine purity. Thus the blind supporters of dam were advocating 'mal-development' and the opponents were championing 'anti-development'; both were at the unsustainable positions.⁶⁷ The protest over Narmada dam was of course a struggle for environmental justice, and also a movement against tribal displacement and rehabilitation movement in which participants came from cross-section of the people. But the tribals, NGOs and middle-class activists from different occupational and professional background were the key players.⁶⁸ Apart from the tribal displacement problem, reduction of forest land due to resettlement in the forest land was another problem even the policy of rehabilitation and resettlement was unjustified. The state government resettled more than 1,500 displaced persons in the barren land; waterlogged tracts and in the areas where sanitation, drinking water, educational and employment facilities were unavailable and most of the residential sites

were surrounded by anti-social elements. Such anti-tribal policy intensified the tribal resentment against the government's policy of rehabilitation and resettlement.⁶⁹ The protest against Narmada dam in the tribal areas became radical when the charismatic leaders and social activists like Medha Patkar and Baba Amte took the position of leadership. They were considered as the outsiders who organized the movement in a radical way.⁷⁰ Medha Patkar admitted that, in the Narmada struggle, both the tribal and non-tribal communities were the strength of the people's movement and more than ever mobilization of tribal communities had special implication on the movement. Patkar viewed that, in the people's movement for Narmada, importance was given to both the non-consumerist lifestyle and to the balance and direct relationship between man and nature. Thus, the leaders followed the holistic principle and organized both the tribals and non-tribals considering their heterogeneous interests. Consequently, the movement witnessed a non-class position like the Gandhian nationalist movement.⁷¹

Therefore, loyalty towards the tribal people by the non-tribals was a part of social movement politics to fulfill the larger interest of the civil society organizations. Nodoubt, *Narmada Bachao Andolan* was a cohesive movement to protect the natural and social environment against the state directed developmental paradigm and the middle class intellectuals took the credit to concretize the movement but it cannot be denied that the agony of tribals was the motive force for the leaders to make the movement radical being Gandhian. With environmental protection issue the Narmada movement leaders added the security concern and survival needs of the tribals, hence, reflected tribalism from anthropocentric viewpoint of the struggle. Thus, in Indian context environmentalism is purely a social movement and environmental lobbying by the middle class activists. But without developing tribalism, i. e. compassion for Indian tribes, it was easier said than done for the middle class activists to make Indian environmentalism a dominant ideology to hinder the processes of obsessed growth or destructive development.

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