

## Felix Padel: Adivasi economics may be the only hope for India's future

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India's Tribal communities are under extreme pressure, right from big dams and mines to violent insurgencies and militarisation engulfing their lands. In 25 years, will these communities cease to exist? Or, will they represent thriving, revitalised models of egalitarian sustainability that the rest of the world has come to recognise and is learning from?

### [Felix Padel & Malvika Gupta, Down to Earth](#)

India's Tribal communities are under extreme pressure, right from big dams and mines to violent insurgencies and militarisation engulfing their lands. "Cultural genocide" sums up an even deeper threat, spreading partly through residential schools that claim to impart education and literacy, but often function as centres of brainwashing and abuse, alienating children from their communities by cutting them off from age-old knowledge and values vital for future survival.

So in 25 years, will these communities cease to exist? Or, will they represent thriving, revitalised models of egalitarian sustainability that the rest of the world has come to recognise and is learning from? To visualise multiple possible trajectories, we need to understand the dire complexities of the tribal situation today, and the whole history of how these arose.

Many communities that acted as one till 25 years ago have become divided by party politics, religion or invasive projects. Divide and rule remains a key core strategy of mining and construction companies trying to set up projects in tribal areas, buying out larger landowners, leaving the rest to fight among themselves.

Marx and Engels understood the essence of tribal society when they called it "primitive communism". "Original" or "aboriginal" communism might have been better, but the concept encapsulates how fundamentally these societies differ from "modern society" in their emphasis on communal rather than private property—an insight that gave rise to the term "communism" and a difference that remains alive in India even today. It became visible when the 12 gram sabhas (village councils) in Niyamgiri not only rejected Vedanta's mining project, but also said "No" to parcels of forest land granted under the Forest Rights Act (FRA). Rather, they claimed common ownership over the whole area.

Of course, this culture of common ownership has been eroded in many ways since the colonial era, when forest laws undermined the traditional rights of communities to the forest and the symbiosis with nature that forest-dwellers had developed over centuries. At a time when FRA makes it difficult for communities to apply for

communal ownership, attempts to do away with the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, which officially recognises tribal land rights, extends this erosion.

Despite the divisions, India's tribal cultures remain the antithesis of capitalism and industrialisation, in their age-old knowledge and value systems that promote long-term sustainability through restraint in what is taken from nature; in emphasis on equality and sharing rather than hierarchy and competition; and in the resilience of dozens of movements against land grabs.

The biggest danger is of splits and break-ups in community as well as identity politics that accentuates differences. The very categories of Scheduled Tribe (ST), indigenous and Adivasi are often the bones of contention that divide people, diverting attention from core issues. Some members of STs, especially in urban areas, would prefer to do away with their "tribal" or "Adivasi" status. The main reason for this is the extent to which these terms have been used pejoratively, as manifestations of extreme cultural racism. On the other hand, the term "Adivasi", which became widespread through Jaipal Singh Munda's usage in the 1930s-40s, despite bitter opposition during India's transition to Independence that saw it as a "divisive" term, has proved popular as a positive, unifying identity. (Munda, a tribal hockey player who captained the Indian team to win its first hockey gold in the 1928 Olympics, actively campaigned for the rights of Adivasis.)

What the terms express above all is rootedness in the land. Ame matiro poku achhu (We are earth worms), as Odisha Adivasis often put it. The idea that these cultures live in symbiosis with nature is not the "romanticised" notion it is often dismissed as. "Adivasi economics" promotes a way of life based on non-monetised exchange labour and restraint in what is taken from nature.

In the face of the monstrosities of modern, neo-liberal capitalism, tribal cultures may well be the only hope for the future of our human species, as Noam Chomsky has emphasised, and the only hope for India's future well-being.

A positive future depends, above all, on solidarity—between environmental and social activists; and between competing interests and ideologies. "Self-interest" is the big con of seductive modernity—the basis of an economic "philosophy" that spreads competition. In politics, economics, law, sport and education, tribal cultures show that other ways are possible: democracy as consensus politics rather than the Western model of liberal democracy that perpetuates division and corruption behind the scenes; exchange labour rather than the ruthless, anti-life logic of "the market"; law as reconciliation rather than judgements that depend on exorbitant legal fees and divide people into winners and losers; dance as an expression of physical prowess; and democratic meeting of communities, rather than the competitiveness inculcated by professional sport; and learning as something to be shared, not competed over.

At present, tribal societies stand divided through corrupt behaviour of the elites who assumed power in the process of class formation, that accelerated under colonial rule and even more rapidly since.

Maoists offered Adivasis a taste of freedom in the relative autonomy of “liberated zones”. But once these drew the full force of military-style retaliation, the divisions escalated through fake encounters and bogus surrenders.

To dream of a positive future, we need to envisage a real peace process, as in Colombia, that marries the best of what Maoists brought, such as truth-speaking in assemblies and enforcing fair prices to end exploitation by liquor mafias and others, with the rule of law where security forces and corporate elites submit to equality before the law. A truth and reconciliation process is needed.

Can we seek guidance on reconciliation from Adivasis themselves, instead of trying to impose peace by force?

If solidarity can be maintained and extended among tribal people in the face of the divisive tactics of capitalism and internal colonialism, with solidarity instead of antagonism with environmental activists, between Dalits and Adivasis, and tribal or indigenous communities from neighbouring as well as distant areas, tribal culture cannot fail to be a force for regeneration and survival-against-odds in India as a whole.

The overall threat, to all of us, is actually the system of “economic growth” based on the most dangerous fundamentalism—the illusion that continuous economic growth is possible, when it is actually destroying the ecosystems that life on the earth depends on. In the words of a Muslim fisherman in Gujarat, mining companies are digging out the entrails of Mother Earth. Factories and coal-fired (and nuclear) power stations are poisoning our water, earth and air.

One crucial need is to revitalise the knowledge and value systems that have been undermined by boarding schools. India’s policy of assimilation-in-all-but-name has promoted an “ashramisation of tribal education” (as expressed in the silently censored Virginius Xaxa Committee Report 2014), which is alienating tribal children from their families and communities, cutting them off from the skills and value systems that sustained these societies since history began. The Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences in Bhubaneswar is regimending the lives of over 25,000 ST children, with funding from the very mining companies that orchestrate land grabs.

The pattern promoted by Ashram schools over many years replicates the “stolen generation” boarding schools in North America and Australia, now recognised as a national shame in Canada and other countries. In India too, sexual abuse seems endemic in such institutions; but beyond the physical violence is the attempt to force assimilation into the mainstream, as an industrial workforce of cheap labour, brainwashed to weaken resistance to the takeovers.

What Adivasis often say encapsulates the value systems that motivate the movements, questioning key tenets of capitalism: “We are being swept away by money”; “We cannot eat money”; “It’s not money up there on Niyamgiri, it’s our maa-baap (mother-father), and we must defend her”.

In the US, a country built on genocide of its native inhabitants, tribal resistance to the Dakota pipeline replicates movements in India and across Latin America. Education

models from Māori and Canadian First Nations show that other ways are possible. Jaipal Singh Munda once confronted Jawaharlal Nehru, saying democracy isn't something that can be brought to tribal areas—"Tribal people are the most democratic people on Earth. You have to learn democratic ways from them."

Does the "mainstream" still have the capacity to learn though? Will India's indigenous communities—those who work the earth through skills of the hand, whose identity roots them in the land—survive as cohesive entities? Will their knowledge and shared values survive, for us to learn from before it's too late?

The predicted end of the Maori, Australian Aborigines and America's Red Indians did not occur. In India too, a resurgence is bound to come. Survival by living lightly on the land and sharing its gifts are intrinsic values of forest-dwelling communities. The Andaman and Nicobar PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups) survived the tsunami through understanding the patterns and forces of nature. If we are to survive the Anthropocene and its catastrophic threats of human-generated global heating and resource-wars-to-the-finish, Adivasi economics sets the model for a flourishing future.