

Tribal Philosophy: Fusion of Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract

The road less travelled often leads nowhere. But seldom, the uncharted path is the most sensible journey. Writing on this topic is an attempt to wade against the current discourse, not because it is a perspective from minority but it is a topic knowingly neglected by the majority. Tribal philosophy in India stands in contrast to majoritarian philosophy and hence, either looked down as insignificant or even considered the impossible. But its metaphysics illustrates the very heart of a worldview which offers an alternative to the chaotic human experiences and institutions. This worldview is the oldest yet the newest. Tribal societies have lived the worldview without ever requiring the need of articulation. This paper, in that sense, is an attempt to capture and articulate first, the Philosophy inherent in a tribal lifestyle, second, pointing out the fusion of modernity in the life of a tribe. Articulating Philosophy of a tribal being is not a construction of metaphysics; rather it is a representation of thoughts of an indigenous being arising from her/his association with world, nature and life. Philosophy of the tribal world is the inner voice of the community diffusing through every member of the community. That inner voice of the community brings forth the indigeneity or 'Adivasiyat' – a strong sense of connection to land, nature, spirits and community. With modernity unsettling the life of a tribal person, a fusion in life must be sought to preserve the tradition and culture. Hence this paper will point out the outlook of tribals and shall try to bridge the gap between present and the past.

Keywords: Indigenous Being; Nature; Indigeneity; Adivasiyat; Interdependency; Intra-terrestrial Reality.

Introduction

D.D. Kosambi (1965) observes that no human group can remain in a fixed state for long. Either they evolve into some more efficient form or

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lifestyle or decay by atrophy. This is also true of a tribal society. Even in a complete untouched tribal society, life forms keep evolving. And if a tribal society is exposed to the influences of a non-tribal lifestyle, the tension of evolution is significant. This tension is the result of the outlook. The tribal world untouched by non-tribal elements perceives the universe entirely different. And when a tribal begins her/his education in an environment constructed by the non-tribes, the sense of being alienated pierces her/his very being. "Knowledge seems to be divorced from experience. Even religion is a process of memorizing creeds, catechisms, doctrines and dogmas – general principles that never seem to catch the essence of human existence." (Deloria Jr. Vine, 2012, p. 1).

Just as Western scholars regarded Indian customs and beliefs as primitive superstitions, unworthy of serious attention, non-tribals often presumed the same of the beliefs and customs of tribes. (ibid) Although in recent times the non-tribal world has recognized the ecologic and scientific soundness of the practices of the tribal world. But by definition tribe is discredited of its significance, because the 'rational' mind of the non-tribe strips the mechanical and technological aspects of tribes as primitive. In a sense, this is a suspension of the reality even before it is tabled for discussion among academia. However, a tribal self-indignant to this negligence comes anew to imbibe only those values and principles from a non-tribal reality that gives meaning to his life in these modern times. And it is the most valuable wisdom to recognize that the view of the world presently dominating Western science must transform itself into an ancient and all-compassing attitude towards life, best characterized by the American Indian (Tribal) cultures and traditions (ibid).

The gap of understanding reality needs to be observed between tribals and non-tribals. Till the beginning of the 20th century, the tribal and non-tribal cultures were significantly different; only by the second half of the 20th century did tribal land began to feel the influence of Hinduism and Christianity (Sinha, 1982).

Fundamentally for a non-tribe, the reality is physical whereas for a tribe it is experiential. Reality as immeasurable doesn't make sense to the non-tribal 'rational' mind, that to think rationally means to allow emotions their respective places, is irrational for a non-tribe. For a tribe, being emotional is being intelligent, whereas the world of non-tribes is intellectual, void of emotions. In a tribal world, the unity of

mind and heart is the rudimentary approach to life.

Ian Barbour, a physicist-theologian defines metaphysics as "the search for a coherent set of categories for the interpretation of all experience" (Deloria Jr. Vine, 2012, p. 22). I take this definition of metaphysics, a branch of philosophy, to preview morality, religion, practical beliefs, custom; a total outlook towards the world, nature and self of a tribe. This total outlook being surmised as philosophy. In this paper, I shall couch the philosophical underpinnings circumventing a tribal self in modern times. The attempt to weave the roots into the very fabrics of modernity may perhaps have glitches of misunderstanding but the journey opens a horizon where a tribal self finds its meaning today. Modernity has bestowed on us the gift of knowledge. Every decade witnesses a two-fold rise in our system of knowledge. As we keep on progressing our knowledge becomes more specific, controlled and myopic. This reminds us of Robert Ardrey who observes that "we have banished the philosophers from the tables of knowledge; little is being done today to pull the mass of information and knowledge together and bring it into a simplified coherent whole" (ibid, p. 257). This remark makes us realize one significant fact; although the tribal world does not possess vast literatures on philosophies, the tribe itself is a philosophical society. Its existence, identity and importance lie in its ability to see through beyond what is given into what is real and meaningful. As the Greeks understood by Kosmos, the whole segments of lives, universe and nature, in the same way, a tribal being perceives herself/himself in total connection with nature, universe and life-bodies.

For centuries tribes have lived on the laps of nature, depending on it, caring for it and in turn being cared for by it. The circle is that of mutuality, a relationship that not only binds but also frees a human soul. Land, forests, rivers and mountains are not seen as properties but as the means of livelihood. Only when invaders and outsiders (dikus) came into contact with the tribals, a sense of belonging is thrust upon them. The sense of individual ownership is an ill-effect of the so-called civilized world. All the means of livelihood were part of the group, and the sense of rendering community help was nurtured and encouraged. If a house needed repairs, for instance, the village community would come together and offer their help. If anyone lacked land for cultivation, for any reason which rarely happened, the tribal head would decide the allocation of land. The paperwork was never required, and it showed the sincerity and the simplicity of

the tribes. Rivers and forests belonged to the villages that inhabited beside it. Mountains and terrains were part of the villages. These had no individual owners. Forests sustained life for tribes. They would go for hunting, collect firewood, fruits, berries, leaves, wood for house making, mushrooms and even just for a roaming. Thousand years of experience led them to decide which tree to cut or which bird, animals to hunt, and the seasons for it. Mountains provided rocks and stones for various uses besides being a dwelling place of their ancestors and gods (Sing Bonga and Marang Buru). Rivers with their pristine pure water provided for their thirsts. With the advent of factories and their wastages drained in rivers, the water turned contaminated with poisonous effects. With less felling of trees, with mountains intact, nature did take care of its people for centuries. For thousands of years, tribes and the environment remained interconnected and in harmony. It is only owing to the advent of "Modernity" both Tribes and the environment are put in danger.

At this juncture of modern times, it is apt to repeat Noam Chomsky's words, "All over the world, it's the Indigenous communities trying to hold us back: First Nations in Canada, Indigenous people in Bolivia, Aborigines in Australia, tribal people in India. It's phenomenal all over the world that those who we call 'primitive' are trying to save those of us who we call 'enlightened' from total disaster" (Chomsky, 2017). This remark straightforwardly sends a message home that only in the philosophy of tribes, modernity can be beneficial to human beings.

Tribal Philosophy

When Thales of Ionia speculated the archê of the world as water, he attempted to understand the existence of the world in the form of a single fundamental reality. His successors in western philosophical system have only followed his footsteps making the argument further complicated. Aristotle restricts metaphysical studies to first causes and principles (Aristotle, 2012). The division of knowledge between particular and universal, of reality between first and the categories of beings on sensation, memory and wisdom has resulted in a dichotomy which western metaphysics has not been able to overcome even to this day. Indian metaphysicians construct the world as something full of *dukkha* and hence the need for *Moksha*, *Nirvana* etc. is paramount. With such bases, western metaphysicians celebrate omniscient being occupying the apex of a hierarchical ontology and

Indian metaphysicians have recourse to many gods and goddesses assisting the humans to reach the final goal. Their ontological universe is thus based on extra and supra-terrestrial reality making humans and nature insignificant and secondary.

The tribal universe is beyond the dichotomy basing the ontology on intra-terrestrial realities. A tribal universe is inhabited by diverse types of subjective agents, human or otherwise-gods, animals, the dead, plants, meteorological phenomena, and often objects or artefacts as well-equipped with the same general ensemble of perceptive, appetitive, and cognitive dispositions: with the same kind of soul (De Castro, 2014). There is an absence of hierarchy. In the words of Castro, the indigenous world is a world of immanent humanity where primordial assumes a human form, unlike a non-indigenous world that experiences the primordial as bare transcendence, and pure anti-anthropoc alterity-as the nonconstructed and noninstituted opposed to all custom and discourse" (ibid, pp. 62-63). No wonder, when everything is human, the human becomes a wholly other thing (ibid).

The tribal ontological universe is intertwined between nature, being and becoming. Ethnologists, Philologists, Linguistics and Anthropologists all have failed to identify tribals as indigenous, due to the lack of clarity on ontological universe. In India, different categories have been attributed to tribals by colonial administrator-ethnographers. These range from "tribes to agricultural and pastoral tribes to 'animists to tribal animists or people following tribal religion to hill and forest tribes to primitive tribes to "tribes". After the independence of India, tribals are named as scheduled tribes. None of this capture how tribals view themselves. The term scheduled tribe strips the very essence of what a tribal being experiences and cages her into a structure completely alien to her. This cage is purely worldly, trying its best to shackle a tribal being solely to worldly existence.

A tribal universe is replete with myths, not in the form of a story but as a process of becoming (Munda & Manki, 2009). In myths, the inter-linkages of being nature and becoming of the tribe is the most significant. What ail a tribal being are her intra terrestrial experiences? The intra terrestrial world is fully human in the sense everything is human. Eduardo states,

"All animals and cosmic constituents are intensively and virtually persons, because all of them, no matter which, can reveal

themselves to be (transform into) a person. This is not a simple logical possibility but an ontological potentiality." (Castro, 2014, p. 57)

An Adivasi does not treat plants, animals, spirits (in nature) and ancestors as the other rather personhood penetrates into every being, even in the land. In the words of Nirmal Minz, "Personhood of Adivasi is rooted in their concept of land" (Kujur, 2001, p. 18).

The source of her own personhood is not given; rather it is depended on the land as a mother. Land is a mirror through which an Adivasi being sees her own reality. Destruction and brokenness of land refract a broken reality. Just as a person cannot be owned, a land cannot be owned. Humans are only the stewards of the land.

A tribal being views intra-terrestrial space as a place to encounter supernatural forces. Any rupture of this interconnection between tribal beings and intra-terrestrial space, results in an irrevocable complete displacement of his/her identity. Displacement of a tribal from her land is not merely a displacement of an individual, but dislocation, a full rupture of her being with her existence. Rehabilitation is impossible (ibid). Cultural and religious displacement cannot be compensated.

The matrix of nature, being, and becoming results in indigeneity. An indigenous being through ancestral space and speech encounters reality. This encounter nurtures within her being, the sense of communion, togetherness and thus creates a bond. With the sense of bonding, an indigenous being inculcates, imbibes and assimilates social values and traditions. Her becoming is deeply rooted in what is ancestral and hence a being cannot be stripped of its indigeneity. Nor indigeneity can be conferred. The rift in the bonding may lead to everything that is base. But this drifting is merely a temporal phenomenon. Her being encounters reality every day and the openness to that reality is always a homecoming. This rift is possible only when the matrix is broken. The reality as encountered by a tribal being is intra-terrestrial but aspires for the supra-terrestrial reality. Tribal Universe is a Pluralistic realistic world. Many realities are admitted and the number never specified- God, Spirits, Nature, Land, Mountain, River, Forest, Soul, Ancestral spirits, Humans, Animals, Birds. Here nothing is 'Maya'.

Tribal Philosophy in Modern times

The advancement of human society in the fields of science, technology, business and every other aspect of life suggests that we have almost reached the Post-Modern age. Life has become fast and busy. In every field, it is what we produce that counts. In this hustle and bustle of life, a tribal not only confronts a contradiction between belief and practice, but the indigeneity and modernity within her/him are always at war. However, this paradoxical self can be rested at peace, only if a tribal society is convinced of its own greatness. The fusion between traditional and modern can only be possible if there is a recognition that in present, it is the past that brings meaning.

In this post-modern era, tribal society has struggled to maintain its social, political and ethical values. Equalitarian and interdependent society is challenged by stratified and individualistic society. The tribal social structure has been always peripheral but today the centric tendency has overtaken its structural values. Communitarian interests in terms of economic achievement are being replaced by self-proprietors. Collective political decision-making procedures of tribes are overruled by majoritarianism or at times dominance of a few influential people. Pluralistic spiritual aspirations are subdued by the rigidity of ritualism or at least demand for textual evidence.

Today the tribal Philosophy of total integration is neglected for its lack of compartmentalization. This is another matter that compartmentalization leads to disharmony in society. Tribal metaphysics, which is Kosmos - personified, is considered ancient and imaginative. The ethical values of tribes, i.e., humanistic -coexistence is rapidly overtaken by materialistic- consumerism. Hoarding and accumulation of materials is seen as more important than cooperation and kindness. Tribal logic where reasoning is done with the heart more than the mind is considered naïve and foolish. Tribal's sensitive ecology is a hindrance to the over-utilitarian economic development. Communitarian -participatory cultural values seem primitive and monotonous in front of Individualistic- competitive cultural practices. Tribal music is often denied aesthetic appreciation and refinement but it is altogether a different matter that tribal music is a piece of music after all and does elevate a tribal soul to ecstasy. Inclusive gender practices of tribal society are torn apart either by male dominance tendencies arising due to non-tribal influences or by the intrusion of the idea of purity and pollution by dominant religions.

The accommodative tradition of tribal society is often ridiculed by the exploitative society of non-tribes and the talk of sustainable development is an opportunity to make a profit. In tribal society, the general attitude of the members has being person-oriented but with the coming of post-modernity, profit and objective market values are trained mental attitudes of the majority.

With such a clear-cut value-clash what gives meaning to a tribal being is sticking to the tradition. The majoritarian society that is in complete contrast to the tribal perspective, in the longer run, cannot bring meaning to a human being, not to speak of a tribal self. It is not a rejection of values present in majoritarian society, but what gives meaning therein is all that is at par with tribal values. This needs to be reiterated definitely and continuously. Because as Bodhi and Jojo (2019) pointed out that dominant people often presume that 'tribes' are devoid of intellect and are incapable of producing knowledge that is 'valuable' and 'modern', The normalization of non-tribal values couched in the theoretical niceties of concepts such as 'post-modernity, 'development' good governance' and 'civility' have wreaked havoc on the lives and practices of tribals (ibid).

Tribal society, placed in such a predicament of fusion between tradition and modern, must acknowledge two facts; the first that tradition is not uncivilized, primitive and second that modern is not ideally civilized. Only by sticking to the roots, nurturing its own perspective and learning the pitfalls of modernity can a fusion take place. Today, with growing influences of non-tribal society over a tribal society world over, a tribal cannot claim her/his title void of its philosophy. Today a tribal living among the non-tribals needs to look back at the ethos and ontology of his/her ancestors, customs and traditions of the past. The demand is not to take up the past as it was; rather, it is to recognize the past as something valuable for the present and the future. If the unmindful absorption of 'modernity' happens in a tribal society, its philosophy will fade away, turning it into a society without a steering wheel. A tribe is a tribe only by virtue of the shared perspective on the values discussed above. The practice of those values alone makes it the practical philosophy that brings every tribe under the same indigeneity.

The end remarks:

"In me two worlds at war
 Trample the patient flesh,
 This lighted ring of sense where clinch
 Heir and ancestor." (Lewis, as cited in Fox, 2011, p. 1)

Whatever and how so far, we advance in life, one fact can never be neglected: that the past is eternally present in the fashioning of our future. The perspectives towards the world and nature implanted in our genes by our ancestors must not be taken for granted. In the cauldron of modernity, in a city away from nature, when the tribal self longs to return to the tribal life she/he can have an idea of a society that lives in her/his mind and for which one her/his self is ready to fight (Kerketta, 2018).

The world today under the grip of a pandemic must challenge blind adherence to the 'development'. Modernity with all its paraphernalia needs constant checks. Tribal Philosophy firstly concerns 'here and now' and only later the 'other world'. With its emphasis on the immanent, tribal philosophy does present us the mechanism to check the glitters of modernity. The non-tribal world being highly competitive, individualistic, majoritarian, exclusive and divisive cannot bring fulfilment in a person's life. Tribal values must penetrate into the very core of modernity, in order that Kosmos remains intact. The need of the hour is to construct a philosophical foundation with a philosophy which is neglected by the majority yet stands tall amidst the uncertainties and perils of modern times. This philosophy is as ancient as the first man, and as newest as every child being born. Tribal philosophy in this sense not only unites our existence with our ancestors but also guides us in the uncertainties of our present and future.

In Modern times revisiting the roots is not only essential but is the demand of the hour. Tribal Philosophy as the root is ever-present to dispel the darkness of modernity. Following in the footsteps of those ancestors, a tribal self can bring harmony in society and life. Communitarianism becomes a force of unity. Logically being emotional makes a tribal self-considerate and less competitive. Sensitive to ecology influences its utility. Multi-realism and pluralism bring forth social freedom. Tribal metaphysics results in the equality of persons, nature and beings. Dearness and closeness to nature provide

epistemological strength and in turn, the eco-system remains intact. Humanistic values celebrate individuals over gods, emphasizing the importance and unity of life over *moksha* or liberation after death. In short, a meaningful co-existence, not only with humans but also with nature and non-human persons is possible when we become true followers of tribal philosophy. This practical philosophy can be nurtured and practiced only in close communion with nature. If modernity succeeds in distancing us from nature, we are much closer to untimely extinction. (Mukherji, 2016).

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