

Listen to Marching Tribals, Their Stories of Green India

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June.17 : Moments of history often begin in the margins. They begin as acts of survival. On June 5, 2009, hundreds of tribals began a march from Tejgadh to Vedchi in Gujarat. They walked from village to village carrying a message. The press ignored them, dismissing the march for the Green Economic Zones (GEZ) as a mere footnote.

This walk for sustainability was what the aboriginals could call a song line. It was a walk to tell a story, but a story that's not merely a set of anecdotes but is a way of theorising. The tribals wanted to tell modern India that the Special Economic Zones (Sez) were not utopias but harbingers of hell. To the SEZs of Gujarat and Maharashtra, they offered their vision of GEZs. This demands a story. Walking into the future always begins by retelling the past.

When the battle around Singur took place, Mahasweta Devi, the author and activist, realised that she was not merely fighting the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its anaconda-like hold on West Bengal. What she was challenging was industrialisation which had corroded a culture. She realised that industrialisation involved the rape of land and decimation of tribes. As historian Aditi Sarkar puts it, "Industrialism has decimated the Hos, the Mundas, the Santhals and the Oraons. These four tribes had virtually invented agriculture in India. A way of life was being destroyed without any sense of memory or gratitude".

Fighting for the tribal way not as a museum or as an apology was the strategy of Tribal Academy at Tejgadh. Its founder Ganesh Devy, the literary critic, and his friend the architect Karan Grover realised that SEZs could be as cancerous as nuclear installations. A critique of SEZs was not enough. The latter had appropriated the paradigm of sustainability. The SEZ destroyed the future of the commons, substituting market for memory. They misread the idea of a carbon footprint as a market opportunity. The carbon footprint was a testimony to the future of how a society lived in terms of ecology, a oneness with nature. It was a world where Constitution and cosmology were in synergy.

The current proponents of its idea realised that the world of tribals had to move beyond museum and utopia. Now the tribal was not an ancestor or a defeated culture, he was its post-modern future. The tribals had decided to intervene as a custodian of time which any storyteller is. Their argument was simple: sustainability cannot be derived from the market but from a culture embedded in nature. It is a way of life where the seeds you plant, the soil you till, the songs you sing, the body and all senses are in synchrony. It begins by recognising that nature is a perpetual experiment and the diversity of nature and language allow evolution to grow in new directions. Sustainability is not what you legislate; it is what you live and leave behind. There is nothing sentimental about it. It guarantees that the seed, soil, water, air, language retain their vitality through community action.

The tribals have written their manifesto as an invitation for India to secede from itself and realise that the future has not been pre-empted by idiot politicians and greedy corporations. It also avoided false conundrums that trapped high-IQ politicians like our current environment minister still thinking that there is a contradiction between growth and the environment. It helps one realise that what museumises fastest is a particular form of intelligence based upon false contradictions.

The tribals are not leaving it only as a story. What they are suggesting is that the carbon footprint has to be translated both as myth and as a complex system which can be as ruthless as an accountant's sheet, which is open enough to grasp climate change yet wise enough to understand why wells go dry. It is theory of nature as part of our lives; it is a concept of livelihood not as a job; it is an unfolding of time which challenges waste and obsolescence as myths and rituals which need new forms of enhancement. It challenges the logic of economics in the following ways:

It offers a fuller theory of accountability than any theory of corporate social responsibility. Try asking the Tatas to match it.

It accounts for violence — physical, symbolic, ecological — within its notion of economics.

It shows that the SEZ is only an old company town in a more hygienic and lethal dress. The GEZ do not isolate themselves, they are a weave of communities.

Its keywords understand waste, diversity, time, obsolescence, and violence not as externalities but as an everydayness to be lived out.

It brings alive languages, dialects, forms of knowledge condemned as non-knowledge.

The margins can speak and theorise. So, democracy is invented again not as a liberal theory of table manners or a socialist homogenising but as emergency. It is an ethical term, a vision of repair that India desperately needs. An economics born of hospitality is challenging an economics created out of scarcity.

The tribal is saying that he is no longer an object of history, something disposable, a margin to be silenced. He is offering an understanding of what climate change, the carbon footprint means in terms of time and justice. Climate change cannot be set up as set of equations, one needs notions of connectivity of different order. It is a semiotics of the earth which reads cycles of rhythm and order in a different way. The tribes and the friends of the tribes are saying that sustainability and welfare are not homogenous policy voices. They are a collection of dialects, to be spoken of in a multitude of voices. Unless you can tell what the carbon footprint means in many anecdotes and in as many cosmologies, it will remain a lifeless idea.

The march from Tejgadh is an attempt to democratise sustainability, the idea of greenness by creating panchayats of green thought, what philosophers would dub the hermeneutic circle of green interpretations. The tribal as contemporary is not anti-modern, he is post-modern. He is offering and participating in the citizenship of future, making knowledge come alive as a commons not as a committee or commission.

One wishes India and its environment minister have the humility and intelligence to listen. But power has always been a form of deafness.

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