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## **Wise Adivasis of Yore**

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During ancient days, sages and saints departed to the forests to seek the divine. They resided, pondered and meditated in the peaceful environs. The positive energy emanating from the bodies of these holy men was absorbed by the surrounding flora and fauna. Gradually the stretches of forests transformed into a haven of tranquillity and a storehouse of wisdom. The residents of these woodlands silently gauged the positivity and enjoyed a peaceful existence. These forests have often enticed travellers in its fold. Long back, Robert Frost had experienced the same magnetic pull, but his worldly duties prevailed and he concluded:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep. (Frost)

Narratives of the beginning of life on earth are fraught with reverence for Nature. The Sky, the Sun, the moon, the trees are all clothed in divinity. These narratives stand by us even today as our guides, helping us make sense of our lives on Earth, helping us define our values. Even in this fast track era of modernity, we agree that those who remain rooted within nature are wiser. On observing them closely, their collectivism and proximity with the ecosystem appears almost unearthly.

The Adivasis are not selfish. They are simple people living a life which perhaps is a model which all of us should have practiced to retain the beauty of this world. Their senses continue to be tuned in to the calls of the wild while ours have been deafened by modernity and the market forces. Folklore traditions, jealously guarded by these gentle folks, needs to be treasured and spread for conserving of natural resources.

John Muir has captured the environmental destruction of America. He wrote stirring of the glorious past, the horrifying present and a possible future:

American forests! The glory of the world! Surveyed thus from the east to the west, from the north to the south, they are rich beyond thought, immortal, immeasurable, enough and to spare for every feeding, sheltering beast and bird, insect and son of Adam; and nobody need have cared had there been no pines in Norway, no cedars and deodars on Lebanon and the Himalayas; no vine-clad selvas in the basin of the Amazon. With such variety, harmony, and triumphant exuberance, even nature, it would seem, might have rested content with the forests of North America, and planted no more.

So they appeared a few centuries ago when they were rejoicing in wilderness. The Indians with stone axes could do them no harm than could gnawing beavers or browsing moose. Even the fires of the Indian and fierce shattering lightning seemed to work together only for good in clearing spots here and there for smooth garden prairies, and openings for sunflowers seeking the sunlight. But when the steel axe of the white man rang out in the startled air, the doom (of the forest) was sealed. Every tree heard the doleful sound, and pillars of smoke gave the sign in the sky.

I suppose we need not go on mourning the buffaloes. In the nature of things they had to give place to better cattle, though the change might have been made without barbarous wickedness. Likewise, many of nature's five hundred kinds of wild trees had to make way for orchards and cornfields. In the settlement and civilization of the country, bread more than timbre or beauty was wanted; and in the blindness of hunger, the early settlers, claiming heaven as their guide, regarded God's trees as only a larger kind of pernicious weed, extremely hard to get rid of.

Accordingly, with no eye to the future, these pious destroyers waged interminable forest wars; chips flew thick and fast; trees in their beauty fell crashing by millions, smashed to millions, smashed to confusion, and the smoke of their burning has been rising to heaven (for) more than two hundred years...( Guha 68)

Muir's stark, chilling summation of ecological disturbance was very effective. It motivates to save the forest cover that is left. While academicians grasp, conclude and shout out loud of the need to save and conserve, the learned indigenous people are well equipped with the rules and benefits of conservation even better.

The knowledge that dawned upon Muir was already known to the wise men or the first settlers of earth. Traditional knowledge of Adivasis promotes conservation by taboos and fear of evoking anger of the Supreme Being. Certain plants and animals are never hunted. It is believed that they are the Almighty or reverent ancestors in disguise. Species thus attired in divinity are worshipped and go unharmed. This holds true for certain water bodies and other natural resources too.

The tribes believe that the forest is the abode of benevolent and malevolent spirits. Some believe that the forest is the abode of their numerous Gods. Adivasis believes that trees like *Rotne* found in their surrounding forest are the abode of an evil spirit. They usually do not fell such trees. In case such trees fall down in a storm, the tribal population performs rituals to seek forgiveness. They sacrifice pig and fowls to appease the spirit whose habitat has been torn down.

The tribal population never cut cane bamboo and leaves for thatching their huts. *Epoeng* or the big bamboo with big leaves is uprooted on the fourth night just after full moon night as it is commonly believed that during that period this bamboo remains free from insects that are harmful to the long life of leaves and barks. They

believe that some trees have sprung up from the bones of a mythical hunter who drives away evil spirits.

The Sal tree holds an important position of respect in the community of Mundas. Sachidanand discloses the reason:

Once an ancestor of the Mundas went to hunt in a jungle. Suddenly it started raining and he had to take shelter under a sal tree. Then a tiger appeared and was about to attack the Munda hiding behind the tree. A cobra living in the sal tree came forward to rescue the youth from the tiger. The tiger was frightened and ran away. The Mundas believed that it was the tree that had saved his life and thus it became sacred to them. (Sachidananda 285)

The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh consider forests to be venerable. They never spit or urinate or throw stones in such places. The villagers cut trees from distant forests for making huge, traditional drums. While axing the trees, they sing songs, seeking pardon from each and every creature of the forest expressing their guilt for having disturbed their habitat. They believe that interference with the ecosystem will lead to death as it is the abode of supernatural forces. Akas of Kamend district believe that the ponds in their region are sacred. Plucking a leaf from the hedge of the pond can lead an individual to forgetfulness and loss of memory.

The tribes of Sundarban forests were apprehensive of tigers and alligators that abounded the areas in which they dwelled. Each individual offered prayers with the help of a fakir, priest or saint before venturing into the forest. The fakirs claimed to possess magical charms against the terror of wild animals. At times these fakirs were carried away by wild beasts. When they returned, the villagers venerated them lifelong.

The tribe of Jharkhand celebrates their festivals amidst dance and music. The themes of most of their songs appear to be the appeasement of all spirits that reside upon Earth:

Oh Great Spirit of high heavens,  
Mother Earth down below,  
You rise like milk,  
You set like curd.  
Four corners, ten directions,  
East, west, north, south.  
The Earth extending far,  
The sky bending low,  
Spread like a mat,  
Covered like a bowl.  
Plants and trees, animals and birds,  
Forests and hills, rivers and plains.  
They are all your creation,  
They are all your making,  
They are all supported by you,  
They are all protected by you.  
Today, on this day of Sarhul,

Today, on this day of festivity,  
We, your children, we, your off-spring,  
We invite you, we call upon you,  
Come and sit with us, come and talk with us.  
A cup of rice beer,  
A plate of mixed gruel.  
You drink with us, you eat with us.  
The hill spirits of the hill,  
The forest spirits of the forest,  
The water spirits of the deep,  
The Nag, Nagin and others  
Who watch our fields?  
Who protect our wealth?  
Who give success at hunt?  
Who dispel sickness and misery?  
When afflicted with stomach ache  
And head ache,  
You protect us and give us peace.  
The village spirits of the village,  
The house spirits of the house,  
Our elders, our forefathers, our ancestors,  
The path you made, the road you showed,  
We follow after you, we emulate your example.  
We invite you, we call upon you.  
You sit with us, you talk with us.  
A cup of rice beer,  
A plate of mixed gruel.  
You drink with us, you eat with us.  
You have come here,  
You have arrived here,  
We sitting with you,  
We seated with you,  
To you Gods, to you Goddesses,  
We offer a prayer, we make a request,  
Our cultivation and crops,  
Our animals and wealth,  
May they grow day by day,  
May they multiply always.  
On the road we tread, on the path we walk,  
Let there be no threat of tigers,  
Let there be no fear of snakes,  
Let there be no splinter,  
Let there be no stumbling.  
Jealousy among us,  
Anger and greed among us,  
Let them be uprooted, let them be destroyed.

Sickness and trouble, pain and misery,  
Whichever direction they may come from,  
Let them go back in the same direction,  
Let them return to the same direction.  
From you Gods, from you Goddesses,  
We expect these things,  
We hope for these things.  
Johar! Johar! Johar! ( Munda 17)

Folklore is replete with cultural ideas and wisdom. It can easily be preserved and documented so as to provide a framework for transmitting knowledge so as to preserve ecology. Adivasi population has shared a sustainable life with the forests for ages and they still form a basis of their livelihood and culture. But their green abode is rapidly depleting.

Modern man fails to understand the language of a tree while an ‘adivasi’ freely converses with them. They possess the sensitivity to understand and commune with Nature. When a tree is cut, sap oozes out which does not mean a thing to a modern man. But for an adivasi, it is equivalent to human blood. Trees suffer in silence and the modern man does not care. A tribal woman understands the ways and manners of trees as those of her own children. When she collects firewood, she never breaks the branches of trees. She only picks up parts of dead wood. She understands that trees cannot be cut any time of the year—trees can withstand chopping with less pain on a full moon, winter night.

A tribal woman shares her wisdom thus:

...when they prepare themselves for renewal of tissues, then the Kaar- Baans or Kandi (shafts of wood used for roofing of their homes) are chopped. As also the white ants do not attack the wood cut (making the wood fragile) at this time, it is preserved and we do not have to cut wood repeatedly.

In spring, the trees are clothed by new greenery and new tissues are being formed. They are in a state of growth and rapid multiplication. Then it is a taboo for us to even break a leaf from the tree. If we have to pluck out a branch in sheer urgency, we express our remorse before the plant, use the minimum part of the branch and plant the rest back in the forest. Likewise, when we see a tree laden with fruit, we do not grab them all, but only take as much as we need. So our life is tuned to save the forest. (Web)

Adivasis have lived as part of the forests and indulged in intimate dialogues with trees, plants, animals and ancestral spirits surrounding them. They can easily fathom the calling of trees, the screaming of birds, and the message of joys and sorrows of their environs. They lead a life of contentment in the midst of nature. The Adivasi values simplicity, truthfulness, contentment, hard work, hospitality, generosity, independence, egalitarianism love of peace and a care free attitude. The agricultural Adivasi see fulfilment in having plenty to eat, drink cattle, crops land and children. Sin is a violation of these priorities. When their connection to the land is threatened they can fight back. Their laws forbid them to do the same. Myth of Baiga tribe lays down:

All the kingdoms of the world may fall to pieces, but he who is made of earth shall never be forsaken. He will make his living from the earth. He will dig roots and eat them.... He will not tear the breasts of his Mother Earth with the plough... He will never become rich, for if he did, he would forsake the earth, and then there would be no one to guard it and keep its nails (trees) in place which kept soil and earth together. (Web)

The laws of the adivasis defined their role in the world as guardians of the forests. They were to enjoy the produce of the forest and grow crops, practicing shifting cultivation. Modern civilization, however, tries in many ways to displace the adivasis and dissuade their communion with Nature.

Peace loving, God fearing adivasis realize that their happiness and carefree existence amongst the buzzing bees and blooming flowers of dense forest is timed out. The shrills, chirps and roars—the sounds of music that had entertained and soothed them—will soon be smothered by encroachment. The protective spirits of the forests will disappear as soon as modern man, with eyes sparkling with greed, will come roaring in with their wicked machinery to uproot and spoil.

Afforestation and abiding by the laws laid down by the government are however not sufficient preventive measure. The adivasis or soul mates of these green patches should be permitted to co-exist. Together they will thrive. Peace will resume. The forests will once again entice learned men into its arms, transform them into sages and send them back to dwell amongst us so as to spread knowledge and wisdom.

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