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The Adivasi Paradigm: Towards an Embedded and Sustainable Economy | Sujit Choudhury

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Abstract:

The present-day GDP-driven neo-liberal economic model has resulted in irreversible climate change and extreme economic inequality in India. An alternative, sustainable economic paradigm is the need of the hour. In post 2008 global economic crisis class-based modern civilisation history, is being questioned with the discovery of new evidence of prehistoric equitable and sustainable societies in different parts of the world. But in India such comprehensive studies on tribal socio-economic history with new methodology are lacking. Nearly a century ago, the embedded economy theory was conceptualised by Karl Polanyi to the modern economy, an evolved version of which have been practiced by many Indigenous societies from time immemorial. Many colonial and post-colonial studies and literature shows ample evidence how Adivasi's practiced social democracy with sustainable equitable social framework which India is grappling with. A closer investigation is required into Adivasi societies of India and their social structure to understand their importance in Indian ecological and economic history using this framework. These forest-based tribal societies flourished

over millennia and evolved in harmony with nature into more equitable, sustainable societies. The dominant narrative over the years kept the Adivasi study in a narrow realm of anthropology and related fields. The importance of their society-embedded sustainable economic paradigm in the context of the present-day Indian economy and history requires more attention.

Background

The juggernaut of the neo-liberal capitalist economic model, steamrolling all other systems uninterruptedly across the globe, suffered a significant setback post the 2008 global financial crisis. Those living in poverty, particularly in the Global South, are disproportionately affected by the interrelated crises of economic marginalisation, political disenfranchisement, social exclusion, and environmental degradation. The neo-liberal economic model created a new aristocratic oligarchy with immense power in our politics and economy. The concentration of wealth and power is underpinned by an extractive economic model that prioritises unregulated growth, often at the expense of environmental and social sustainability.

The failure and unsustainability of the neo-liberal capitalist model have prompted many scholars, economists, historians, and intellectuals from various fields to search for alternative, sustainable social, economic, and political systems. Consequently, the earlier interpreted human behaviour, economics, history, and the social sciences are undergoing a profound transformation. The idea that civilisation began with the agricultural revolution and the prehistory of humans before that, is the story of only primitive hunters' gatherers' is changing rapidly. Many indigenous societies across the globe have come to the limelight as many of them have successfully managed social equality and environmental sustainability over thousands of years.

The modern Indian state, the GDP-driven economic powerhouse with neo-liberal growth model, is also the home of the largest population of indigenous people in the world. These indigenous people, Adivasis [**1**] or tribes, constitute the poorest population of the country. Over 582 Scheduled Tribes are present in India, of which 48 major tribes constitute 75% of the total tribal population (NSSO 1990). Most of the indigenous people live in and around the great Indian forests, from Kerala to Arunachal Pradesh, from Kashmir to Andaman, with a unique, rich culture, tradition,

language, and lifestyle. Out of the 257 Scheduled Tribe districts, 230 (90%) are forested or hilly, or dry, and they account for 80 % of India's tribal population (BRLF 2022).

In central India, the region constituted by parts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Odisha, Jharkhand, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and West Bengal is referred to as the "Central Tribal Belt". This heartland of Adivasi population, accounts for an overwhelmingly 88% of tribal population of rural India ((NSSO 1990). Some of the major tribal groups in the Central Tribal Belt include Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Bhumij, Kharia, Birhar, Bhuiyan, Juang, Kandh, Savara, Gond, Baiga, Bhil, Koli, Korku. It is undesirable to paint all the tribes of the Central Tribal Belt with the same socio-economic and cultural brush. But there are underlying similarities that exist among them in terms of their economic culture and the socio-economic crises they face in modern times. This essay mainly considers the Adivasis of the Central Tribal Belt.

Substantial gene flow among the populations living in the Central Tribal Belt, including Gonds, has been revealed (Chaubey, G, et al 2017: 495). This supports the notion that the central Indian region served as a selective melting pot for various populations speaking in different tongues. Adivasis are isolated from the mainstream of Indian society, and the social and economic relationships among many of the tribes are still governed by their unique customs and culture (NSSO 1990). Adivasi societies follow a different social system without destroying their environment and have thrived uninterruptedly in the Central Indian Forest cover plateau area for thousands of years.

Adivasi societies long flourished in India's peninsula, yet colonialism and the modern market society brought them poverty, malnutrition, and marginalization. As a result, tribal protests and uprisings have plagued these regions since colonial period till now, including the modern-day Naxalite-influenced tribal movements in Central India.

The Big Questions on Adivasis

Most people in Adivasi societies across central India are interdependent, self-reliant, intelligent and hardworking. They live in communities in villages near forests and love their social festivities. But Adivasis are one of the poorest social groups in India. They are not interested in economic activities like trade and commerce, and more importantly, running a business or accumulating capital. According to the recent

World Inequality Lab report on India, 88.4% of billionaire wealth in India is concentrated among upper castes (Bharti, N, K, et al 2024). Though Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute 104.28 million as per the 2011 Census, which accounts for 8.61% of the total population of India, they are among the most marginalised communities, with little to no representation among the wealthiest Indians. There are some representations of OBCs and SCs in the wealthiest class but there is no representation from ST communities. Much smaller communities like Parsis and Jains with less than 0.005% and 0.54% of the population (Census of India 2011) respectively, have much higher representation in the country's billionaires' club. But even with a relatively bigger population size, tribals have very poor representation among the wealthy or ultra-wealthy moneyed class.

If one tries to figure out the cause for poor participation of Central Indian tribals in modern capitalist activities on the surface, one can point to poor educational facilities, lack of knowledge and/or capital. Though it must be pointed out that during the last two centuries, due to European Missionary presence in the tribal heartland, many educational institutions have been established, imparting modern education to tribal children.

Tribals in India have always been master hunters, amazing artisans and painters, and excellent farmers. During the last 250 years, despite huge social disparity, they have also proved themselves as intelligent workers, engineers, exceptional athletes, brave, gallant soldiers, excellent administrators, and academicians. Nearly a century ago, Jaipal Singh Munda, an iconic tribal leader, captained the Indian hockey team that won gold at the 1928 Olympics. He was also a prominent politician, journalist, writer, editor, and educationist of international repute. In recent times, Prof. Sonajharia Minz, a noted computer scientist and former president of the JNU Teachers' Association, has earned recognition for her academic contributions. Similarly, Prof. Naresh Chandra Murmu, a distinguished scientist and Fellow of the Indian National Academy of Engineering, currently serves as Director of the CSIR-Central Mechanical Engineering Research Institute. G.C. Murmu, an accomplished IAS officer, served as the 14th Comptroller and Auditor General of India and was the external auditor for the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The list of eminent personalities from India's Adivasi communities is long.

Despite achieving success in many fields their interest in accumulating wealth in modern capitalist society remains insignificant. One might ask how, even though the Adivasis have lived so close to the non-tribal communities for thousands of years, they did not learn to accumulate capital successfully?

Why don't we see generational wealth in Adivasis like other communities?

We put aside this question for the time being and ask a different question altogether. The presence of many tribal communities in the Central Tribal Belt since time immemorial is well known, but in its long history, there has not been a single tribal emperor or king who has conquered a vast swath of the sub-continent by defeating and consolidating others and building an empire. Not only that, even within the Central Tribal Belt for thousands of years, large tribal communities like Bhills, Gonds, Baigas, Santhals, Korkus, Hos, Mundas, Oraons, Pahariya lived in relative peace and harmony. They never tried to subjugate other tribal communities and conquer lands that did not originally belong to them. On the other hand, the same tribal communities never submitted their land to outsiders without resistance.

In the history of Rajasthan, "The association of some kshatriyas with groups regarded as outside caste society - what are sometimes termed 'tribal peoples' - such as the Pulindas, Bhillas, Shabaras, Meenas, Medas and Ahirs, suggests that these kshatriyas were helped by such groups in their rise to kshatriya status, or may even have had some kinship connections with them" (Thapar 2002: 419). But in general, these tribal communities are considered peace-loving. The colonial British Empire got its first military resistance in 1778 from Maler Pahariyas, the indigenous people of Rajmahal Hills. In 200 years of British rule, the empire faced over 70 tribal revolts, including the famous Santal Hul revolt in 1855. All this happened when the British capitalist system tried to destroy their homeland by plundering natural resources like timber and minerals. It is surprising that, though tribal societies pushed back militarily against the encroachment of the modern British army, they have never tried to build a single large kingdom or even occupy land that did not belong to them. The 2nd big question; Why did they not try to conquer and consolidate land to build kingdoms or empires in India's long history?

Is there any relation between these two questions? Let us ask some more questions that tie them together:

- Did tribal societies consciously choose to make a self-sufficient economy that is embedded in the society and nature, not surpassing it?

- Was it a structural outcome of their fundamental economic reasoning for the sustainability of their resource base (forest dependence vs. agrarian surplus)?

- How does their historical, economic, and socio-cultural trajectory continue to shape their modern economic exclusion?

In the present global socio-political-economic scenario, finding answers to these questions is important. These answers may add a new dimension to Indian History as well as the cause of social inequality worldwide (Varoufakis 2019). The time has come to reassess the tribal history of India and to recalibrate Indian history in this new light.

The Tribal Studies in India

To answer these questions in the Indian context, a systematic and detailed scientific study on the Indian Tribal society is necessary. If fully modern humans appeared around 50,000 years ago (Singh 2008: 63), then their presence during the middle to upper palaeolithic era in peninsular India is certain, but their relation with modern Adivasi society has not been established comprehensively. The history of the Indian tribal society goes back to much beyond India's known civilizational history. There were limited attempts to integrate the texts studied by Indologists with the data collected by ethnographers, which constituted substantial but diverse information on Indian society. As per Prof. Romila Thapar civilization implies "a pattern that is thought of as more complex and sophisticated, incorporating urban living and all that it connotes, a conscious aesthetic awareness, sophisticated religious beliefs and the use of texts. City societies are stratified and the wider context is the state, with its unequal social divisions" (Thapar 2002:71). In this definition the possibility of relatively non-stratified, equitable, simpler tribal communities is not bracketed in the civilisational category. The same has been reaffirmed by Prof. Thapar in a different way that is: "Presumably the bifurcation was influenced by the distinction between 'civilized' and 'primitive' peoples, the latter being said to have no literature" (Thapar 2002: 10).

Captain J Forsyth from the British Army in the mid-19th Century in his memoirs described the Indigenous people of Central India in the light of the so-called civilised upper caste Hindu Society (Forsyth 1889: 141–65). Being in the Military, his first interface with Hindu Rajput landlords in the tribal area highly influenced his writings about the central Indian tribes. He wrote, 'in case of these particular tribes, moreover, the admixture of Hinduism has proceeded so far that one has to be constantly on his guard against admitting as belonging to them what is in fact of foreign origin'. He considered himself as the representative of the most civilised race and described the Tribes as 'Savages'. His poor knowledge about the tribes can be understood from his lack of knowledge about tribal languages, and not surprisingly, he put the blame on the tribal language itself 'The poverty of their languages is another great obstacle to the enquirer" (Forsyth 1889: 147).

India's Ecological History is interwoven with the tribal history of India, but few efforts have been made to make a scientific study in this direction. Captain Forsyth found that the tribes' relationship with the forest is very close; he wrote, "Everywhere the aboriginal is the pioneer of the more settled races in their advance against the wilderness. His capacity for toil that would break the heart of a Hindu, his endurance of malaria, and his fearlessness of the jungle, eminently qualify him for this function; and his thriftlessness and hatred of being long settled in a locality..." (Forsyth 1889: 161). The conservation history of different tribes is deeply linked with India's ecological history. But surprisingly, in India's ecological history, tribal presence has not been represented properly (Gadgil and Guha 1992).

A colonial viewpoint on Indian forests in the 19th century, is heavily biased. After 200 years, it is necessary to study the Adivasi history and economics from a fresh modern-day research perspective. In 1964, Economist Dr. R P Saxena wrote that "There is unfortunately a deplorable lack of competent studies of the rural economy of the tribal countryside. Anthropologists have studied them, sociologists and folklorists have approached them now and then, but rarely the economists" (Saxena 1964). Since then, the situation has not improved much. D D Kosambi also felt the need for a new methodology for such a study. In his book, 'History and Society'; "Our villagers, low caste nomads, and tribal minorities live at a more primitive stage than city people or the brahmins who wrote the puranas. Their cults, when not masked by brahmin identification with Sanskritised deities, go back to prehistory …. The technique of observation has to be developed afresh for every province in India." (Kosambi 1985)

Recently historian Prathama Banerjee raised the issue of making Adivasi studies a separate disciplinary field, like gender studies and Dalit studies within subaltern studies in India. The challenges for such a study in India are many; “It is difficult to write their stories because of their archival, archaeological and textual invisibility—Adivasis and tribes are doubly disadvantaged, because they have not been able to claim alternative archives and alternative histories of their own, unlike some other subaltern subjects such as Dalits” (Banerjee 2016).

The findings and the research methodology of anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow in their recent book The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity may show some direction in this regard. They have explored a different path to understand the influence of Indigenous people on modern civilisation. They highlighted issues like the rise of the ‘Equality’ question during the enlightenment era in a highly inequal European society. It emerges during the European exploration of Indigenous societies in the New World, suggesting a deep link between the two. Similarly, to understand the impact of Adivasi society’s influence on mainstream Indian culture, philosophy and history, it is important to look into Indian Tribal history with a different alternative perspective than the traditional one.

Two Parallel Civilisations

For thousands of years nature has divided the Indian subcontinent into broadly three geographical segments: the northern mountains, the Indo-Gangetic plain and the peninsula. The high northern mountains were a cold and difficult terrain for human civilisation to flourish. These mountains have been described in the past as a barrier that isolates India from Asia. But the natural bounty in the other two segments helped two different civilizational cultures to flourish. On one side there are the large river valleys, particularly in the north, suitable for agriculture to grow grains in the fertile soils of the vast river flood plains. Over the millennia, different intruders and invaders from the north-west settled in this fertile river basin belt with the local inhabitants where the early agrarian societies developed. With surplus rich resources, these societies started building a civilisation which is usually considered as the mainstream Indian civilisation. The colonisation of the fertile lands of northern India took place from 500 BC to 300 AD (Gadgil and Guha 1992: 85). It was characterised by the availability of large surpluses of agricultural production for activities outside food production. The river valleys of peninsular India-for example of the Krishna, Godavari,

Kaveri and Vaigai, were also being brought under the plough at this time. The larger the surplus available, the larger the area controlled by the elite for the usurpation of this surplus.

On the other side, the remaining segment of undulating forest-covered peninsular India, lying to the south of the Vindhya Mountains, the Satpura Ranges and the Narmada River, is largely a plateau region but with hilly terrain in the Western and Eastern Ghats. This area was covered with forests, mainly occupied by the Adivasis of Central India. Nature provided enough food and resources for the indigenous Adivasi people to thrive and flourish for thousands of years. For many of them agriculture was not the only means of survival or food production. Their living patterns ranges from hunting-gathering, shifting cultivation and horticulture to farming. They built uniquely harmonious societies that had 'embedded economies' with efficient production systems and equal redistribution social mechanisms. Central India was regarded as the major habitat of such 'tribal societies', even though such societies were scattered throughout the subcontinent.

Till recently domestication of plants and animals took place in a few centralised areas in the world in which large scale, politically centralised societies later appeared. Such neat geographical alignment between early centres of crop domestication and rise of centralised states developed the speculation that agriculture was responsible for the emergence of surplus based civilisation with cities, centralised political organisation, administrators, elites and large population, where surplus distribution was inequal (Graeber and Wengrow 2021:251), like the rise of the Indian river basin-based civilisation. Recent archaeological study has changed this perception. Between 15 to 20 independent centres of domestication across the globe have been identified, many of which followed very different paths of development. In India two such centres are located, one in the Gangetic plain with indica rice and other in south India with browntop millet, mungbeans and horse gram. Agriculture did not always present itself as an obviously beneficial thing to the forest living tribes with efficient foraging and hunting skill (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 252).

The earliest farmers in the Indian sub-continent were cultural underdogs. They filled the territorial gaps left behind by the hunters and foragers of that time like other parts of the world. The fate of the earliest farming societies often hinged less on 'ecological imperialism' than on 'ecology of freedom'. The ecology of freedom is the proclivity of early human societies to (freely) move in and out of farming; to farm

without fully becoming farmers; raise crops and animals without surrendering too much of one's existence to the logistical rigours of agriculture; and retain the food web sufficiently broad as to prevent cultivation from becoming a matter of life and death (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 259-260). Till recently many tribal societies like Baigas, Maler Pahariyas, Gonds etc. of Central India preferred to live on this 'Ecology of Freedom'. Such ecological flexibility is excluded from the conventional narratives of the Indian ecological history.

These mountains and hills of the central India plateau, with their dense forests, tended to get bypassed by migrants and plain land settlers for many centuries. The plain land civilisation had a marginal impact on the forest dwelling tribals until later centuries when encroachments into the forests for timber and elephants, as well as cultivable land, became more common. A distinction between these tribal societies and the neighbouring peasant societies had been the centrality of plough agriculture and tenancies among the latter. Although this has entered the lives of the former in recent times. Ecological regions were not sharply demarcated and there were symbiotic relations of interdependence between adjoining regions. Forests and savannas were much more extensive in the past than they are now (Thapar 2002:45).

The forest dwelling tribal societies were not completely oblivious to the outside developments. In the long history of India there was continuous interaction between the tribal societies and river valley civilisation. There were exchanges of goods and commodities as well as ideas but the two societies grew separately in terms of socio-economic cultures. Most of the tribal communities built their respective unique societies based on sustainably living in nature. For example, the presence of the Maler Pahariya tribes in Rajmahal hills has been known since ancient times by the writings of the Greek ambassador Megasthenese in 302 BC and Chinese traveller, Hiuen Tsang in 645 AD. Maler Pahariyas were described as Malli the brave warriors (O'Malley 1910: 23-24).

In the middle of the first Millennium CE, in Banabhattas Harsacarita a forest village in the Vindhya hill range was described as large and well stocked. "In addition to cowpens the text mentions rice paddies and sugarcane fields worked by farming families. Blacksmiths collect wood for charcoal, while hunters, trappers, and fowlers utilise the forest for other resources. Others come with the produce of the forest-bark, cotton from Simul tree, flax and hemp, honey, waterlily roots, and wax-and women carry baskets of forest fruit to sell at the next village" (Thapar 2011:31-55).

Similar description is found in the Paumacariyam of Vimalasuri- a Jaina version of the narrative of Rama, where exile in the Vindhyas entails travelling through many more kingdoms (Thapar 2011).

The politics of ancient India, in fact preferred non-interference in 'tribal' life and customs suggesting that there was no inherent antagonism towards them. The state impinged on these localities only on certain levels. The formation of endogamous caste groups brought about more permanent changes in the social configuration of these areas and also restricted their geographical distribution. This inhibited large-scale homogenisation of tribals with non-tribal populations. On the contrary their fragmentation led to the conservation of skills achieved through a range of survival strategies in much more localised environments. The transformation of such micro-regions in different historical phases was thus necessarily slow and gradual (Parasher-Sen 2011).

The Adivasi System

In Adivasi economy the forest land is accessible and part of it is made cultivable by the family labour by clearing the forest, the family takes legitimate possession of it. But the nature of these ownership or property rights varies between different areas and communities. In many communities land is cultivated by individual households, but the land is no-one's individual property. For example, the traditional land tenure system of the Mundas in Jharkhand, the land is held in common by the patrilineal descendants of the ancestors who cleared the land. It is cultivated by individual households, but the land is no-one's individual property for selling and rent. Among the Oraons of Jharkhand on the other side individual possession is the norm, but even individual possession was subject to some restrictions like selling (Drèze 2022).

Other than cultivation, forest land becomes productive in other economic activities like hunting, gathering, fishing, grazing, and processing of minor forest products. The forest is also an abundant source of household items such as construction material, fuelwood, water, baskets, ropes, brooms and herbal medicine. Open access to forest land, therefore, is the defining feature of the traditional Adivasi economy, which has the best of both worlds. Open access to forest land ensures a modicum of social equality and household possession of cultivable land guarantees some individual independence (Drèze 2022).

What they produced through physical labour was primarily for their own consumption, not for any commercial profit. Their market or Haat was for exchanging their surplus production, but it was not only for exchange of goods but also for their social interaction. Haat was basically a social medium of exchange and not a place for commercial profit. There was no business group in the tribal society to accumulate profit and additional capital by trading in the surplus production of others. Therefore, the Adivasis did not feel any need for accounting and calculations related to the market and trade. In daily Adivasi life, production for fulfilling family need, its consumption and living an equitable, interdependent social life were very important. Overproduction for commercial profit and accumulation of capital through excess wealth and property and ultimately the centralisation of social and political power were not part of tribal society and culture.
The early history of Adivasi societies in the sub-continent can be traced from the palaeolithic evidences found in various parts of the sub-continent. The initial studies focused on the north-west, in terraces of the Soan River and in the Potwar Plateau. Many palaeolithic sites have been identified scattered across the subcontinent. The modern tribal societies evolved in the Sub-continent in a more mature and evolved social framework from the prehistoric societies. These indigenous people developed a social system in the rich forests which provided sufficient food and other material requirements for sustenance over millennia. This system did not yield surplus like agriculturally based societies in the vast river flood plain.

Consequently, it did not accumulate wealth at one point creating social and political inequality. They developed an embedded community based socio-economic culture, which emerged within the natural ecosystems. Even in the 21st century, with receding forest cover, the majority of these tribes are still dependent on forest produce, hunting, agriculture, fishing, etc. The diverse livelihood pattern of tribal households pursued by the members in various geographical contexts indicates the nature of their economy (NSSO 1990).

Over the millennium concentration of wealth in the Indian river valley civilisations gave birth to the kingdoms and monarchs. This also gave rise to the so-called complex civilisation with marvels like writing, debt, money, states, bureaucracy, police, armies priests and wars (Varoufakis 2019). But the Indian tribals were continuously living in well managed forest societies in their embedded economy without accumulation of wealth, or the idea of states and war. The economic relationships in the tribal society were regulated by social institutions, with

redistribution and reciprocity playing a leading role. Tribal society generally controlled the economy in order to prevent starvation of individuals and granted basic economic social security to its member groups.

Most Adivasi communities till recently were well organised and have very distinct political system like the council of village elders, village headman, village panchayat and so on. Institutions like the council of elders is a temporary council of selected elders who take up a particular village problem/business at a given time. Such businesses most commonly consist of making decisions regarding ceremonies, agricultural schedules, activities relating to external relations, outsiders' intrusion etc. Such bodies automatically dissolve once the problem is solved. The village headman is an informal leader of the village, acts as spokesman for all the villagers in dealing with outsiders. Majority of the villagers follow him as a guide and keeper of traditional values and who has the betterment of the villagers at heart (Vidyarthi and Rai 1976: 202–05).

Santal villages are used to governed by village council consisting of the household heads of the village. It is important for all household heads to be present at every meeting of the council in which manjhi (headman) is the presiding authority and his position as facilitator of the meeting as guardian but he controls only one vote and it is headman's duty to guide discussions in the council meetings towards a consensus (Somers, 1977).

Traditionally there was regular communication network among different tribal communities, neighbouring and regional. Tribals like Munda, Oraon, Kharia, Ho, Kolha had intervillage or regional organisations like pargana to manage their socio-ritual and occasional political relations. Santals in certain areas had, other than village and intervillage organisation, annual assemblies on the occasion of ritual hunts, represented by various intervillage units. Such assemblies also held for discussions related to other matters like conflict resolution and inter-tribal relations related to the landlord, local princely head etc. during the colonial era. Such assembly of Santhals is in the spirit of direct democracy (Sinha 1987: 8–9).

Their critical understanding about social harmony, equity and sustainability has been reflected in their various activities even in building settlements. Verrier Elwin wrote about Baiga settlements in Madhya Pradesh that 'A typical Baiga village gives a strong and vital corporate life. It is not bound together by an exacting code of reciprocal

obligations between kin, nor by a common loyalty to some dictatorial chief; but it is vitalized by a vivid consciousness of the tribal idea, a devotion to Mother Earth, and an adherence to Baiga law. The plan of the village fosters this impression of energy, equality and corporate loyalty' (Elwin 1939: 22–23).

In search of an alternative Paradigm and Adivasi society

The three questions related to Adivasi society mentioned earlier remain extremely relevant in modern India when modern economic activities are causing unprecedented harm to ecosystems and bringing unsustainable inequality in the society. The heart of the problem revolves around the financial addiction of the modern society to growth. Every decision in the world of finance revolves around the question of 'rate of return' which is triggered by the profit motive, the driving force for capitalist economy since it took off in Britain in the nineteenth century (Raworth 2017: 272).

Excess production from agricultural revolution created the basic element of a true capitalist economy: surplus. Karl Marx defined the role of surplus in building modern capitalist society in his seminal work Das Capitol. Forests were cleared for more agricultural lands and made way for more surplus. Large settlements for more people were organised, and excess surplus goods in the early farmers' land turned into commodities in the market for commercial transaction (Varoufakis 2019, 32- 33). All along in India, the tribal societies living side by side the so called mainstream Indian society, passed through from feudal India to modern capitalist India remaining socially unchanged. Commodification of everything, privatisation of common land and victory of private profit over common goods was unknown to them till the 20th-century market economy started capturing their resource base and knocking down their social frameworks.

In the last century, around the 2nd World War, Karl Polanyi, the Hungarian economic anthropologist, wrote 'The Great Transformation', a book on Economic Embeddedness. In Polanyi's Embedded economy model, the economy is embedded within human society and is itself a social system. At the same time, human society is embedded within and dependent upon Earth's ecosystems ("The Embedded Economy" n.d). His anthropological argument is that man's primary need is not for the improvement of one's individual well-being, but for the improvement and preservation of the system of institutions and social relations. The question legitimately raised by Polanyi is- does the market system allow us to satisfy this

primary need in the best possible way? His answer was negative to the inability of the market economy to guarantee the fundamental needs of man (Vanura 2011). But his idea was largely buried by the rapid rise of the modern neo-liberal market economy across the globe post-Second World War. In this context, we notice that the embedded economic model as described by Polanyi nearly a century ago has been practised by the majority of the Central Indian Tribal communities all along for centuries, albeit battered by the onslaught of the present Indian market economy model.

The socio-economic structure in Adivasi communities is markedly different from that of the non-tribal groups in India. Their lifestyle, livelihood and culture traditionally fit well with the ecological surroundings. In the eyes of modern economic theories, their economy is referred to as a primitive and subsistence type (Dalton 1961). But the important point to be emphasised is that a tribe is usually considered an economically independent group of people having their own specific economy and thus having a living, pattern of labour, division of labour, gift and ceremonial exchange, trade and barter, credit and value, wealth, consumption norms, capital formation, land tenure, and good- tangible and intangible-economic status (Vidyarthi and Rai 1976: 97).

Adam Smith and social philosophers of the eighteenth century believed primitive societies progressed from economic linear stages from “hunters”, “shepherds” and “agriculturists (Firth 1929: 6). But such views of unilinear stages of economic development can not be applicable for central Indian Adivasi societies since Adivasi societies adopted various livelihood activities based on their natural resource base and convenience. Tribal culture is cognate to tribal economics, and the economic system of the tribals can be understood in the purview of the cultural factors. In the conventional wisdom of economics, non-economic factors like social and cultural relations are non-essential, though they are the tribal reality for the very organisations of their economic process (Vidyarthi and Rai 1976: 93). The tribal economy is embedded into their society and their society is not governed by the market dynamics. For the assessment of the tribal economy, social organisation and culture – kinship, political organisation, religion affect economic organisation and performance so directly and sensitively in tribal communities that only a socio-economic approach which considers explicitly the relationships between economy and society is capable of yielding insights (Vidyarthi and Rai 1976: 94). This can be analysed using a theoretical framework like embedded economy concept of Polanyi.

In the last 2000 years next to their homeland, within 100 Kms away, large empires of Magada, Gauda, and Murshidabad rose and perished but Maler Pahariyas remain untouched and lived in their homeland. Few outsiders dared to enter their lands till the British Empire and in more recent times, the modern Indian State. The Pahariyas remained content in their small village communities without excessive production and surplus, market economy, debt and profit motive. All the societal disputes and conflicts they faced were amicably resolved by the tribal social governance structure within their embedded economy. Economist Kate Raworth in her book 'Doughnut Economics' mentioned that "When the market is unconstrained, it degrades the living world by overstressing Earth's sources and sinks. It also fails to deliver essential public goods–from education and vaccines to roads and railways– on which its own success deeply depends". To save humanity in 21st century she suggested writing a new economic story of Embedded Economy (Raworth 2017: 93).

The Adivasi economy is deeply embedded within tribal life and its cultural system. The main characteristics of the Central Indian indigenous tribal production and social organisation are; a) forest based or ecology centric economy, b) Unit of production, consumption and pattern of labour being the family, c) Indigenous local innovative technology, d) absence of Profit motive in economic transaction e) The community, itself as a co-operative unit, f) Regular market or Haat as an Institution without competition and monopoly g) Gift and ceremonial exchanges are not based on material values only h) Interdependence, specific specialised technical abilities are absent, i) the notion of property is primarily related to display and expenditure of wealth rather than accumulation, j) Both type of ownership, individual and collective are practiced (Vidyarthi and Rai 1976: 98–9). All these characteristics are contrary to the modern capitalist market economy.

The western agrarian imagination did not take into account various other modes of use and habitation of land and forest that were common in India. Tribes in modern times are communities who are not fully identifiable as sedentary cultivators, though many communities were practicing agriculture of various sorts, and therefore could not be mobilised simply in the name of labour and productivity. Indian tribes were those who were seen as not necessarily following the absolute principle of productivity, that is, who did not use land purely as property and resource but also often simply inhabited it and even sacralised it. The tribes considered geographical and ecological context, commonly lived by a complex combination of individual ownership, common property and communal and village rights and also inhabited a

combination of forest, valley, field and hill spaces rather than only cleared plains. In colonial modern discourses, these communities were therefore seen as misfits to the modern regime of property and productivity. Therefore, colonial attempts to 'pacify' tribes were to turn them into productive peasant communities (Banerjee 2016).

Conclusion: Adivasi civilisation and New sustainable India

In Rig-Veda the word dasa indicate the flat nosed, physically dissimilar to the arya, probably the indigenous communities. Perhaps it would be more viable to argue that the Rig-Veda depicts various societies adhering to different cultural forms, particularly the ancestors of Adivasis but since the hymns were composed by Aryan speakers it is their society that emerges as dominant (Thapar 2002:13, 112). Since the Vedic period numerous Hindu, Buddhist and Jain sages, monks and traders passed through and lived near their forest covered habitats and lived with or near them. It is impossible to assess the influence of the tribal social and economic culture developed in harmony with nature on the Indian Philosophical thoughts, primarily developed by the travelling sages, saints and monks of the river valley civilisation. It is high time we reassess the influence of Adivasi society to the mainstream Indian civilisation.

For the last 50 years mainstream economists have propagated the neo-liberal market economy as the model of development with the support of State and multilateral institutions'. Polanyi was a critique of this and thought this model was a disembedded economy. In his thesis, (1) disembeddedness means the predominance of transactions and social interactions that are not submerged in social relationships but are based on economic self-interest, and (2) disembeddedness also means the absence of social control over the economic process of production and distribution (Vanura 2011). Polanyi's famous quote is "The heart of the feudal nation was privilege; the heart of the bourgeois nation was property; the heart of the socialist nation is the people, where collective existence is the enjoyment of a community culture. I myself never lived in such a society [2]." He would have probably found an interesting case study in the Tribal Societies of Central India.

In 1940s Polanyi felt that the mechanism which the profit motive gain set in motion was comparable only to the most violent outburst of religious fervour in history. He felt within a generation the whole human world was subjected to its undiluted influence (Polanyi 2001). Polanyi was not the first to realise that the pursuit of gain opened the door to endless accumulation. Before him Marx described Capital as

‘money which begets money’ and ‘has therefore no limits’ (Raworth 2017). Indian market society at present is witnessing this violent outburst of wealth accumulation in the hands of the few without any redistribution mechanism. The mindless wealth accumulation is resulting in random exploitation of the Indian natural resource base and ecosystems by decimating the Adivasi societies of Central India. The Central Indian tribal societies like many other indigenous societies across the globe already had a viable sustainable system which is the need of the present hour. They manged to attain an equilibrium with their consumption in order to preserve their natural resource base.

During last 200 years, the capitalist economy entered their homeland, destroyed their forests for timbers and minerals and evicted them from their villages. Nearly a century back, S C Roy described the emerging crises of the Indian tribal society and wrote ‘But with the opening up of their country by roads and railways under British rule and the gradual deforestation of the country and ever-increasing restrictions on the use of the forest, these forest tribes are slowly but surely dying out, partly by famine and partly from loss of interest in life’ (Elwin 1939: 511).

The Baigas of the Baiga Chak area of the Maikal hills who lived in Sal forests for thousands of years practice a type of shift cultivation known as Bewar without destroying the Sal forests. The concept of property, ownership and inheritance was not there in Baiga society till recent times. With their socially controlled economic model, when they faced high uncertainty, they mainly relied on redistribution to ascertain the individual members’ security without any support from formally established ‘states’ for centuries. In 1939 Verrier Elwin wrote that “What Baiga needs above all else is the restoration of the freedom of the forest. After all, the forest did originally belong to him. At the time of the first settlements, everybody else was established in his property, but the Baiga was not permitted to own anything. I find it hard to write temperately when I think of the injustice that has been done them. The forest was their home, they were the true Pashupati – the masters of the wild beasts, they were natural lords of the forest- and now their once proud-quivered loins must tremble at the lash of every little whipper-snapper of a forest guard!”

Adivasi societies are subjected to the laws of India’s Market society; in the name of conservation, many tribal communities are evicted from their age-old forest habitats. In the name of development, thousands of hectares of forest lands are destroyed to build expressways and roads. Hundreds of tribal villages are submerged under the

waters of large river dams. Today Central Indian Tribal belt is infested by mines and eroded by unsustainable agriculture. Adivasi cultures are gradually dismantled by the Indian Market societies' destructive exploitation of natural resources and development model. The time has come to rewrite Indian History incorporating the thousand-year-old tribal socio-economic paradigm for its own sake, not only to protect the numerous tribal communities but to look deeply into the sustainable embedded economy practiced by them over millennium. India, the largest democracy on earth, the living civilisation is facing its worst social and environmental crisis by pursuing an unsustainable economic model. It is high time we explore an alternative socio-economic embedded model which has been practised by Adivasi communities through centuries.

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