

INDIGENOUS WAYS**SATISH KUMAR**

I am often asked: Are there any examples of sustainable, spiritual and ecological living? I look around, I scratch my head, and I realise that almost all countries around the world seem to be engulfed by the tsunami of economism, consumerism and anthropism. All our political, social, educational and legal systems have become the pillars of domination and control of the natural world. We have developed a philosophy of human superiority which conditions our minds and we are compelled to think and believe that all forests, oceans, rivers, minerals, animals and land are there for our use. So, we use them as quickly as we can; never mind the fate of future generations and of course the wellbeing of other species is none of our business.

But there are exceptions. There are some good examples of communities, tribes and even nations who live sustainably, spiritually and ecologically. In India they are called Adivasis or the natural inhabitants of the land. In Australia they are called the Aboriginal people who were an integral part of their land before the arrival of Europeans. In North America they are called First Nations who practised democracy before the word was invented. Similar indigenous communities are there in China, Japan, Africa, South America and even in Europe.

But, the industrial civilisations have called them 'primitives', 'savages' and 'uncivilised'. They have been described in one or other similar derogatory terms. Although some humble anthropologists, some wise academics or some enlightened activists have understood the profoundness of indigenous cultures, mainstream modernism is on the mission of civilising the 'uncivilised', educating the 'uneducated' and developing the 'undeveloped'. Unless they have schools, hospitals, cars, computers, banks and unless they use roads, railways and runways, they are not considered to be evolved enough to be accepted as proper human beings. The only way to bring progress to them is to make them live in cities, work in factories, buy consumer goods and pay taxes to the governments.

Sadly this narrow view of civilisation is not confined to the industrial modernity. Even religious missionaries of all kinds have derided and denigrated the indigenous rituals and spirituality as superstition or mere mythology. These missionaries are working to bring a more rational, institutional and theological teaching to the tribal communities. There is little understanding of the depth, dignity and mystery of indigenous religiosity among the adherents of the religions of the Book, the temple or idol.

The indigenous communities are under attack in more than one way. Many of the mines containing minerals, metals, uranium and raw materials are situated in the indigenous lands. Some of the big oil reserves and great forests are also found in the areas where indigenous people are the long term inhabitants. By removing them from the native lands and settling them in cities global industrial corporations and their governmental collaborators can bring the precious natural wealth in to the market and transform them into money and material goods.

Thus, indigenous peoples are in a precarious predicament. They are condemned from all sides. They suffer from grave social injustice and grossly unfair treatment.

The truth is exactly the opposite. They have lived in harmony with the natural world for millennia. They are totally integrated in their landscape. They live by the Book of Nature. The Earth is their mother, the Sky is their father and all the species upon the earth and under the sky are their kith and kin. They use their legs to move incalculable miles along their songlines. They use their hands to grow, to make, to build, to gather, to fish and to hunt. They use their imagination to craft, to paint, to sing, to dance and to dream the dreamtime. Even when the industrial onslaught, commercial conspiracy and political pressure has been upon them for hundreds of years, even when many of their communities have been destroyed, even when their children have been taken away from them to be schooled and brainwashed into submission to the industrial paradigm, there is strong resistance still alive in Mexico, in Bolivia, in India, in Australia, in Papua New Guinea and in many other parts of the world.

Mechanistic modernity and the industrial infrastructure is a very recent event. We are already witnessing the fragility and fatigue of this phenomena. Whereas solidity and resilience of the indigenous way of life has been in evidence for millennia.

We had better practice humility. One day we may have to take refuge in the wisdom of indigenous people. We may have to learn to live close to nature. A day will come when we will realise that humanity cannot live by cars and computers alone. We need nature, we need caring communities, we need arts, crafts and culture and we need each other more than we need money. Moreover we need freedom to be ourselves more than we need markets.

Economic growth is all very well but we need wellbeing which comes from a deep sense of interdependence. Indigenous people intrinsically enhance these non-economic values in their way of life. They deserve our respect. If we do so, we will find many living examples of ecologically fulfilling and sustaining, as well as sustainable, communities there.



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