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Sustainable Development: Paths for the Future Looking at the Experiences of Adivasi Women

Maya M. Pillai*

Abstract

The article looks at paths for a more sustainable development for the future of the world through the experiences of Adivasi women. The article discusses how historically Adivasi communities had close ties to forests and land in symbiotic relationship with each other, which met all needs in plenty and where women enjoyed a better status. But as external social systems began to change with the advent of more colonial systems that prioritised industrial-commercial needs over home and community needs, Adivasi communities became disempowered and subjugated over time, and there was increased dissonance between the social and ecological worlds from extensive deforestation and displacement of communities for development projects, which resulted in the loss of entire social systems that were more in tune with nature. The changed social systems also impacted the relationship of Adivasi communities with the environment in adapting to the new, more capitalistic worldview. But there were also responses that arose out of the social-ecological imbalance, through social movements, programmes and individual initiatives that worked to redress the imbalance; some of the more successful initiatives were those that centered the participation of women, youth and more marginalised communities in decision-making by increasing the representation of home and community needs in development approaches, away from industrial-commercial needs. The article goes into how this approach is necessary for paths towards a more sustainable development that can re-integrate the social and ecological world more harmoniously for a better quality of life for all.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Adivasi Women, Environment

INTRODUCTION

Adivasi communities have historically had close ties with the forest and land, such that all needs, from food to fodder to medical and companionship, were met in close harmony with nature. Over time, however, the external social systems began to change, impacting even Adivasis in more remote regions. From the Aryan invasion to British colonial rule to the globalisation order, the external social systems worked to disempower and subjugate Adivasis over time, with Adivasi women facing the brunt of these impacts. The colonial impacts of prioritising industrial and commercial needs over home and community needs were seen through rapid rates of deforestation, displacement of whole communities from habitat, and the loss of entire social systems that were in balance with nature. These changed systems in turn changed the relationship Adivasi communities had with the environment, such that participation in systems that eroded the environment became necessary as part of survival in the larger social system. But there were also many positive responses, movements and initiatives to redress the social and ecological imbalance that resulted from the changed social systems. The paper discusses the above and highlights how some of the more successful responses and initiatives towards a more sustainable development path involved centering the participation of women and youth in development approaches for holistic solutions and ways of life more conducive to social and ecological balance for all communities in a more global order.

Earlier Times

The close ties that many Adivasi communities had with the forest, land and environment were part of a holistic

* Independent Researcher. Email: mpillaipwd@gmail.com

world-view in consonance with the world of spirits, departed and of the living along with nature (Fernandes & Menon 1987; Irudayam & Mangubhai, 2004). All food, fodder and medical needs were met from the forest; as Adivasis of Nagarhole and Konakunte forests in Karnataka portray, communities used to see jackfruit, oranges and neem in plenty from the forest (Documentary, The Bee, The Bear and The Kuruba). Plants and herbs from the forest were seen to cure, with Adivasis in more interior parts of the forest having better health being in close relationship with the forest (Mukhopadhyay, 2002). Traditions and customs were also handed down from one generation to another in close union with nature, with songs and dance as the Bhil communities' Ghoomar dance or Adivasis of Gujarat in the Timli dance, inviting trees, birds and mountains along with siblings and elders in the family to join in the dance building trust and togetherness in learning traditions, with songs for each particular work and season as a song for planting paddy (https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2020/03/adivasi-dance-the-culture-of-collectivism/) (pages 26-28, 65-67; 69, Mukhopadhyay, 2002). The forest for many was considered a sacred space, sarna, where young would be initiated into the way of life in the community, where life partners would be found in the akhara or dancing ground and where, sasan, the burial ground of ancestors, would tell of the long history of Adivasis in the forest (page 65-67; 69, Mukhopadhyay, 2002). Many agricultural practices were also closely tied to nature as part of the social system, from the quantity of firewood each family used or to the technique of cutting trees or to slash and burn practices restricted only to bushes and shrubs, ensuring renewal and rejuvenation of the environment as part of the long-term health of the community (Fernandes & Menon, 1987). In such systems, women also enjoyed a better status, where work was shared with men as with the gathering of forest produce, and where there was little dependence on the external world with everything available in plenty from the forest (Mukhopadhyay, 2002). In this way, the world of community, of environment, of ancestry and spirit were all closely tied to each other that brought forth sustenance and renewal of community and environment together.

Changing Social Systems over Time

As social systems began to change over time with greater external influence, Adivasi communities became more disempowered and subjugated. From the Aryan invasion of the pre-colonial era to the British invasion of Adivasi lands and subsequent rule, deemed Adivasis to be trespassers on British lands (Irudayam & Mangubhai, 2004; Fernandes & Menon, 1987). Although the post-Independence era did see many freedoms for Adivasi communities, many of the land and forest laws with roots in the earlier colonial laws were retained (ibid). The Land Acquisition Act and the Forest Act continued in many ways to see forests and lands as primarily a source of revenue for industrial and commercial interests rather than as a home to many communities, limiting the autonomy of Adivasis over the natural environment while increasing state control (Irudayam & Mangubhai, 2004; Fernandes & Menon, 1987). The globalisation period with international financial institutions such as the WTO, World Bank and IMF, through policies such as the Structural Adjustment Program and the New Economic Policy in the 1990s saw large flows of international capital into the country together with reduced government spending in key social sectors prioritising industrial needs (Aerthayil, 2008; Fernandes & Menon, 1987; Fernandes & Raj, In Mann, 1996). The continued focus on an industrial type of development meant that forests in the country were rapidly depleted to cater to industrial-commercial interests, and agricultural land was devoted to exportable commodities rather than food staples for domestic consumption (Aerthayil, 2008; Fernandes & Menon 1987; Fernandes & Raj, In Mann, 1996). Developments as the UN Conferences on Environment and Development, as UNCED Rio in 1992, which actively advocated for Third World interests, there was a subsequent decline in this focus (Fernandes & Raj, In Mann, 1996). Tribal communities are impacted the most as issues as the lack of patents for biodiversity do not recognise the work of tribal communities working over generations to preserve plant and animal diversity, an intellectual property (Fernandes & Raj, In Mann, 1996). Changes have taken place in more recent decades to increase community participation in forest management, but states still have significant control over decision-making, prioritising more commercial interests, but with significant impacts on the social and ecological system, made visible through rapid rates of deforestation, displacement of whole communities from habitat and the loss of entire social systems that once worked to renew community and environment (Irudayam & Mangubhai, 2004; Fernandes & Menon, 1987; Aerthayil, 2008; Fernandes & Raj, In Mann, 1996).

Impact of the Changing Social Systems

Deforestation

The most visible impact of the changed social systems favouring more industrial needs can be seen on the forest, such that Adivasis find it very difficult to meet daily needs in the rapidly reduced forest space, becoming more reliant on external industrial-oriented systems. The extensive reduction of forest space has meant that Adivasis need to put in far more time and effort to source food and medicine. Studies reveal that in Thane, Maharashtra, walking time needed to source produce from the forest increased considerably by as much as 3–4 hours of work time on a daily basis, and in Orissa, communities saw the work-day increase to as much as 14 hours for women and 9 hours for men (Fernandes & Menon, 1987; Munshi, 2007; Mukhopadhyay, 2002). Also, there is far more limited produce available from the forest due to deforestation, making it difficult to rely on the forest alone for basic needs. As Radikabai, the first woman leader of the Sanghatana, describes, there was plenty of food available in her childhood days, but that has declined over time,

"...There was enough food in the forest. There was as much food in the forest as there was hunger among the adivasis. We used to go to bathe in the forest streams, to eat fruits and berries and sometimes we would take 'daru', liquor also. Even now women plan and go. They go together for Holi. Now the Adivasis have got a little land, but there are not that much leafy vegetables now, and even the roots and tubers have dissapeared. When there was hunger there was plenty. In one year, I remember, there was nothing to eat, so we only brought food from the forest and ate it. You could bring vegetables from the forest, but to cut and bring wood was difficult. Sometimes the foresters stopped us from taking firewood, but we answered back. We did not listen to them. There was flowing water in the forest. We did not see wells those days. Now we have wells." (pg 99, Munshi 2007).

The quality of food, fodder and medicine from the forest has also seen a decline as land made available through deforestation has been used to grow more protein-rich foods that do better in the market, as opposed to more vitamin-rich foods that may be better for home and community (Fernandes & Menon, 1987). As women face discrimination in the household, including in the distribution of food in the household, women tend to suffer from malnutrition to a much greater extent suffering the burden through multiple paths (Mukhopadhyay, 2002). Even medical needs are met with far more difficulty due to deforestation, as the plants and herbs that are the basis of indigenous medicine are difficult to obtain (Mukhopadhyay, 2002). And although the turn to allopathy has increased, the distance to the health centre and the high cost of treatment together with other barriers, make the situation particularly difficult for women and children, who tend to suffer the most from health issues (Mukhopadhyay, 2002). With primary roles in sourcing and collecting food, water and medical needs for home and community, the difficulty in meeting these needs through the forest together, with increased dependence on outside sources has brought about a decline in the status of women both in the household and society (Mukhopadhyay, 2002). In addition to all other difficulties, it becomes difficult to resist oppression even in the marital relationship, where often women may have a lot more work than men from cooking to cleaning to washing, to looking after the children, and also agricultural work of bringing firewood, collecting cowdung, sowing and transplanting even during rain, and there might be other problems as men drinking that women have to deal with (Munshi, 2007). Moreover, with reduced incomes from the forest given decline in forest produce, men increasingly need to seek work outside, increasing the work burden for women who have to meet the agricultural work as well, which, being unable to do so may altogether abandon cultivating the land (Fernandes & Menon, 1987). There are also exploitative tendencies from money-lenders to landlords to businessmen that women have to deal with, particularly if the woman is single, widowed or when the husband has migrated, becoming particularly vulnerable in these situations (Fernandes & Menon, 1987). In all, what was once an enjoyable space for women has now only meant additional burdens: in Thane, Maharashtra, Adivasi women have described how there was a time when collecting produce from the forest was so enjoyable—women could get together, sing, roam, bathe, drink daru together and escape household chores. Now, the forest has become a hostile space, degraded, and women also face harassment from forest officials (Fernandes & Menon 1987; Mukhopadhyay, 2002; Munshi, 2007).

Displacement

The changed social systems that prioritise more industrial-commercial interests have also worked to displace communities from habitat that has been a part of their history over generations, with particular repercussions for Adivasi women. The land acquisition laws for development projects often favour bigger landowners and industrial interests rather than the needs of communities living in those areas over centuries (Kumar & Mishra, Social Action, 2019). And the Relief and Rehabilitation laws are far from adequate to meet the needs of communities who have been displaced, where there are extensive psychological costs involved. Moreover, any compensation offered for dispossession of Adivasis from their land is often very difficult to obtain, with more money spent in trying to obtain it as the process may extend over many years in the cities (Kumar & Mishra, Social Action 2019; Padel & Das, In Behera & Basar, 2010; http://ncwapps.nic.in/pdfReports/Development%20Induced%20Displacement%20of%20Women.pdf). The situation is particularly difficult for women given the gender bias, with land being registered under men's names, and for unmarried, widowed and divorced women, the court may have to be moved in order to obtain any compensation for land lost (Kumar & Mishra, Social Action 2019; Padel & Das, In Behera & Basar, 2010; http://ncwapps.nic.in/pdfReports/Development%20Induced%20Displacement%20of%20Women.pdf). When new land is given as compensation, it is often in an area that lacks the fields and forests nearby which Adivasis previously had access to and depended upon. The loss of access to common property resources as lands, forests, rivers and mountains, upon which Adivasi communities used to depend, means increased dependence on outside sources as market and social networks in order to meet basic needs of home and community, and a subsequent loss of social and economic status for women who find it difficult to do so, decreasing the quality of life (pp. 21-23, (http://ncwapps.nic.in/pdfReports/Development%20Induced%20Displacement%20of%20Women.pdf). Many times, there are also lack of sanitation facilities provided as was seen in a development project in Orissa (Documentary, "The Fire Within"). along with lack of fields and forests nearby to which to go, conditions which are particularly acute for women and children who tend to face multiple discriminations also due to lack of access to health care and differential treatment in health care (pgs. 23, 30, http://ncwapps.nic.in/pdfReports/Development%20Induced%20Displacement%20of%20Women.pdf; Fernandes & Menon, 1987). Displacement that facilitates projects as the building of large-scale dams is not limited to displacement of communities living in the area historically, it entails the destruction of the entire habitat. There is damage to the trees, forests, rivers, lakes, wildlife who depend on these sources of food and water and on the communities who play an important role in looking after the forest and land, endangering the wildlife, flora and fauna. The documentary, "a valley refuses to die" portrays how Saurashtra was once a land where many rivers flowed through not too long ago, but due to extensive deforestation and displacement of communities over decades for development projects, the land has now become arid, desertified and drought-prone (Documentary, "a valley refuses to die"). The music-documentary "Gaon Chhodab Nahin" expresses a similar sentiment about displacement for development projects; Bhaghwan Maaji, leader of the Adivasi movement in Kashipur against bauxite mining sings:

"..They built dams, drowned villages, built factories,
They cut down forests, dug out mines and built sancturies.
Without water, land and forest, where do we go?
Oh God of Development, pray tell us, how to save our lives?." (1.07 – 1.35, Documentary, "a valley refuses to die"; Padel & Das, In Behera & Basar, 2010).

The song expresses a loss not simply restricted to land but rather, of an entire way of life of Adivasi communities, which does not promise well for the future of the world.

Loss of Entire Social Systems

The changed social systems that cater more to industrial-commercial interests have brought about a loss of entire ways of life when social and communal systems are lost, where a new way of life has to be embarked upon, more in tune with the capitalistic worldview. In the new way of life, as when displacement takes place, everything from water to food to firewood may have to be purchased (Documentary: "The Fire Within"). And the land to which Adivasis are relocated most often is devoid of forests and rivers, is degraded and is difficult to cultivate (ibid). Jobs promised as compensation may require bribes

to obtain them and are hazardous and low-paid (ibid). In other circumstances, as with a World Bank coal-mining project in the Bihar-Jharkhand area in the 1990s, communities that were displaced were offered loans to set up enterprises in the new area as opposed to jobs. But with land in the new area being unproductive, requiring intensive irrigation and with no forests nearby and no other means to survive, Adivasis were forced to enter into illegal coal mining activities (Documentary, "The Fire Within). Women from these communities face more acute difficulties, going from a position of self-reliance to heavy dependence on the outside world due to the loss of an entire social system that occurs upon displacement, as the case study below depicts:

Mrs Padli and her family had a small portion of land but which was highly productive; she had a kitchen garden, and was also able to collect forest produce that yielded an income of Rs 1500. But Mrs Padli and her family were displaced for a development project, forced to move to a new area, promised 3 acres of irrigated land under the R&R scheme. Upon arriving, Mrs Padli found the land was highly degraded, there was no irrigation and authorities could not provide it either. In lieu, Mrs Padli was supposed to receive an additional 3 acres of land, which was eventually substituted for 1 acre and Rs 2000. But given that the land was so degraded, it required significant investment to cultivate it and with no other means to earn an income, as from the forest, Mrs Padli and her husband had to become wage labourers. But in the first year itself, Mrs Padli's husband had an accident and became bedridden. Mrs Padli had to raise her sons on her own, struggling to do so. Later, the sons got married but then abandoned her. Mrs Padli, much older, continued to look after her husband.

(p. 28, http://ncwapps.nic.in/pdfReports/Development %20Induced%20Displacement%20of%20Women.pdf).

The new areas to which Adivasis are displaced is difficult not just because there was previous dependence on the forest but because industrial activities have degraded the land (Padel & Das, In Behera & Basar 2010). There is increased dependence on more fragmented plots of unproductive land and there is a lack of abundant natural resources as flowing water with which to irrigate the land, with considerable pressure on existing forest and land spaces (ibid). The changed circumstances may lead Adivasis to adapt in ways that further environmental degradation in order to survive (Padel & Das, In Behera & Basar 2010). More holistic relationships with the environment, get affected as it becomes no longer conducive to the new more industry-oriented systems. For example, earlier practices of shifting cultivation involved a longer period of time in keeping the land fallow for a cycle of regeneration, but the cycle has greatly reduced over time from about 30 years to about 15–16 years until the 1980s to about 3 years in the 1980s, with an over-exploitation of smaller portions of land and forest (Mukhopadhyay 2002). The traditional *paath* system of irrigation practiced by Adivasi communities, where streams were diverted for irrigation before once again re-joining the main stream to ensure sustenance and renewal of the land in consonance with the rivers, has died out as communities ceased to practise the system upon displacement (Documentary, "a valley refuses to die"). Adivasi women face the impacts of environmental degradation due to the loss of more holistic social systems in multiple, cumulative ways, having to work much longer for a lot less yield and often on others' land for lower wages, together with systems of ownership where land is registered in men's names, bringing about an overall decline in the status of women in these communities (Fernandes & Menon, 1987).

In the more industrial-oriented systems, Adivasis are seen at odds with the natural habitat around when displacement is prioritised, which is not as per the Adivasi world-view, where life was in consonance with renewal and rejuvenation of the natural environment and where women also had a better status (Documentary, "The Bee, The Bear and The Kuruba"). An industry-oriented world view also tends to prioritise cost-benefit analyses, which became especially popular during the Narmada Valley Project, but as the documentary, "a valley refuses to die" depicts, cost-benefit analyses do not adequately cover the immense social and psychological costs involved in losses of forests, lands, wildlife, social and cultural systems that result from development projects. There are losses not just of traditional occupations but also of close familial, ancestral and spiritual ties, the breakdown of social networks, difficulty marrying daughters, all heavy costs of displacement from habitat which R&R officials are not capable of alleviating (Kumar & Mishra, Social Action, 2019; Padel & Das, In Behera & Basar, 2010).

The overall vitality of the community becomes weakened as the songs, the dance, the stories, and the homes that were carefully built to suit the weather, beautifully painted and with little nooks for storing things all gets demolished during displacement, creating circumstances where communities struggle to cope in the new systems (Kumar & Mishra, Social Action, 2019; Padel & Das, In Behera & Basar, 2010).

Changed Relationships to the Environment

Social systems that have prioritised industrial-commercial needs over community and home needs have resulted in increased inequalities and a decline in the status of women. The traditional social organisation and ties of Adivasi communities and also amongst women are weakened with increased dependence on the external market economy (Fernandes & Menon, 1987).

Relationships with the environment have thus been impacted in adapting to the new, more capitalistic social systems. In Thane, for example, Adivasis have increasingly participated in activities around illegal felling and small-scale timber smuggling and women have also participated (Munshi, 2007).

But these attitudes need to be seen in light of changed circumstances where there is greater dependence on more exploitative social systems requiring a new worldview (Irudayam & Mangubhai, 2004). The view that Adivasis are born conservationists, as Munshi (2007) argues, can thus have dire consequences, as Adivasis today may not have the same attitudes towards the environment as did Adivasis of earlier times. But there are also plenty of examples where Adivasi communities have responded to the social and ecological imbalance from industrial-commercial activities, where community programmes, social movements and individual initiatives and to address, restore and rejuvenate the natural world in consonance with community.

Addressing the Imbalance, Local to the National

Adivasi communities have a long history of responding to the social and ecological imbalance that has resulted from changed social systems with more capitalistic worldviews. There is a long history of Adivasi social movements, the earliest documented being the Mal Paharia uprising in the north in the 1700s against British Rule to the popularly known Chipko Andolan in Uttar Pradesh in the 1970s (Irudayam & Mangubhai 2004; Das & Negi, in Singh, Volume 2, 1983). In the Nagarhole and Konakunte Forests in Karnataka, Adivasi communities advocated for changes to forest policy in struggles with the Forest Department, chalking out a People's Plan for the forest, which, although not accepted by the government saw other successes through the Supreme Court in rights to the land (Documentary "The Bee, The Bear and the Kuruba"). Bihar in the 1980s saw Santhali women, predominantly Christian, assert through an NGO for land rights to be registered in women's names by utilising the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 while maintaining their Christian identity, which enabled them to join the government social forestry programme that required land titles in order to sign up and also led to changes in customary law in the community (Chandra, in Mann, 1996).

Women in groups have also been able to bring about changes together at the village level, which grow into federation level efforts. In the 1990s in Orissa, women of a Mahila Sangha stopped a coal mining project which had dried up all the lakes and ponds, struggles which the case study below illustrates:

Women of a Mahila Sangha in 1997 in Orissa were becoming more angry about the coal mining activity in the area that was impacting them – all the ponds and wells had dried up due to the coal mining work. The women of the Sangha began to discuss the matter. Although initially hesistant to challenge the mining authorities, the women led by Manika Behera and Bulari Nayak, decided to stop all the transportation of coal from the mines for about three hours. Stopping the movement of coal for three hours was a huge loss for the company, and the authorities had to rush to pacify the women of the Sangha. The women pointed out that the promises of compensation and rehabilitation for the company's activity had not been fulfilled, and that the coal mining would not be continued until the company provided drinking water to the village. The mining authorities were forced to accept immediately. The Sangha members then began to mobilise villagers towards better roads. (p. 17, http://ncwapps.nic.in/pdfReports/Development%20Induced%20Displacement%20of%20Women.pdf).

Community forestry programmes in Orissa as The Bana Bharathi Seva Kendra programme have seen much success in centering women and youth in decision-making, overcoming many conflicts with the Forest Department. The women and youth centered committee, part of a community who had been displaced due to an irrigation project, meant that decisions were taken to favour community needs, planting trees as mango, jamun, jackfruit and other fruit and fuel bearing trees to meet home needs (Fernandes & Menon, 1987). In Thane, Adivasi women initiated the Jungle Bachao Programme in response to the rapid deforestation activity, where the entire community was involved in protecting the forest, as Radikabai, the first woman activist of the Sanghatana narrates:

"Everyone including women, all the plot holders and also those who don't have a plot decide about the forest because everyone needs wood. Women and even children are part of the meeting where decisions about the forest are taken. If a policeman comes to the village, and asks, who is the leader of the Sanghatana here, the child replies, I am the leader. Earlier, if the children saw a policeman, they used to run. Now they say that they are the leaders." (p. 115, Munshi, 2007).

Many individuals have also started initiatives that address the social and ecological balance, often working against many traditional stereotypes and norms in community and society. The examples of Behenji of Udaipur who started an organisation to raise awareness about the activities of multi-national companies, and of Radikabai of the Sanghatana in Thane, who had to take on everyone from the forest officials to the money lenders to the landlords in order to join the Sanghatana as the first woman activist (Channa, in Mann, 1996; Munshi 2007), breaking many traditional barriers in doing so.

Forest laws have also seen increased participation of communities in decision-making, drawing on a history of community participation from pilot projects in West Bengal in the '70s and Orissa in the '80s, the National Forest Policy of 1988 was formed moving away from older colonial laws, and in 2000 saw the formation of Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) and Eco-Development Committees for more community participation in decision-making through sub-committees with reservations for women, SC/STs and landless workers for greater say in managing Non-Timber Forest Produce, and for protected areas for plants and animals in local areas backed by national-level boards (Sahu, 2020; JFM Handbook – http://ifs.nic.in/Dynamic/pdf/JFM%20handbook.pdf; (ENVIS RP on Forestry and Forest Related Livelihoods 2011; http://www.frienvis.nic.in/Database/Joint-Forest- Management_1949.aspx) https://indianexpress.com/ article/explained/draft-environment-impact-assessment-norms-explained-6482324/; https://www.thehindu.com/ sci-tech/energy-and-environment/what-is-eia-and-why-is-indias-new-eia-draft-problematic/article32110013. ece). The PESA 1996 and the Forest Rights Act of 2006 have also worked to increase participation of forest dwellers in decision-making through devolution of powers to the Panchayats and through conferring individual and community forest rights for increased self-governance through the Gram Sabha, seeing as in Vidharbha in Maharashtra more success as with undelayed payments and without middlemen involved in the claims process (ibid). The Environmental Impact Assessment Framework (EIA), which came in 1994, also saw more regulation for use of natural resources by development projects, and the EIA 2020 is being debated. These changes have meant much more community participation in forest management and protection of the forests and lands towards a more sustainable development (Sahu, 2020; JFM Handbook – http://ifs.nic.in/Dynamic/pdf/JFM%20handbook.pdf; (ENVIS RP on Forestry and Forest Related Livelihoods 2011; http://www.frienvis.nic.in/Database/Joint-Forest-Management_1949.aspx) https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/draft-environment-impact-assessment-norms-explained-6482324/; https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/what-is-eia-and-why-is-indias-new-eia-draft-problematic/article32110013.ece) Enterprise based approaches have also seen a rise with innovative models as eco-tourism projects as with the project at Hajra waterfalls in Maharashtra, which works around economic generation, community inclusion and environmental sustainability, working with the local JFMC and the Gram Sabha to manage the project amidst dense green forests and waterfalls, with women and girls also encouraged to join (https://tribal.nic.in/repository/ViewDoc.aspx?RepositoryNo=TRI28-08-2017110408&file=Docs/TRI28-08-2017110408.pdf).

Way Forward

As of 2011, there are more than 705 notified tribes documented across 30 states/UTs of the country, with 75 tribes being designated as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, being far from the mainstream; Adivasi communities are as diverse in custom, tradition, social and economic developments and live in varied ecological and geo-climatic habitats (pp. 26-27, 28-30, 34-35, 27, 31, "Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India 2013"). The impact of the changed social systems on ways of life of Adivasi communities even in more remote locations are seen not just through deforestation, displacement and the loss of social systems; indicators as the sex ratio of tribal communities particularly for children are also indicative of the impacts, although improvements have taken place over time. While the sex ratio is more favourable for women in tribal communities as compared to the All-India population, the number of girls for every 1000 boys in the population has been declining, indicating that the overall status of women and girls in communities is affected (page 26-27, 28-30, 34-35, 27, 31, "Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India 2013"). Greater contact with the outside world is an important reason for changes taking place, with Adivasis moving to cities in larger numbers to join the mainstream populations as forest-life proves to be less dependable. But this is not a desirable path given the drivers for migration: as elders of Adivasi communities in Nagarhole and Konakunte Forests of Karnataka have expressed, cities have grown from out of material in the forest, but now Adivasi children are struggling to seek work outside (Documentary, "The Bees, The Bears and The Kuruba"). Elders do not see the city-world as a positive way of life but instead wish for all to continue to live as a community in the forest (Documentary, "The Bees, The Bears and The Kuruba").

Given changes that have taken place at the macro level, it is difficult to romanticise the way of the forest, nor to look to mainstream Adivasi communities into a way of life that is neither sustainable nor desirable. What is necessary is a re-centering of home and community needs in social systems and ways of life for more integration between our social and natural worlds by valuing practices and ways of life more conducive to restoring social-ecological balance. Moving away from industrial-commercial needs requires efforts at both the larger societal level as well as at the home and community level. Home and community needs could be centered in consonance with income generation needs, so that the two are not separated from each other but work in unison for paths that are socially and ecologically harmonious. Such an approach would also entail centering empowerment of women and youth in all approaches to development, so that home and community needs, traditionally oriented around women, can be better brought to the forefront of decision-making. Afforestation programmes, for example, cannot simply involve the re-growing of trees, as the trees that were cut down for industrial-commercial development projects were part of a habitat that was several generations old and tied to social and communal systems on which wildlife also depended, which cannot be re-grown. Quick-growing species to meet income generation needs also do not address the social and ecological imbalance. Rather, including women and youth and more marginalised communities at all levels of decision-making is necessary to better integrate home, community and environmental needs in relation to forests and lands (Singh, Vyas & Mann 1988; Fernandes & Menon, 1987). At the home level as well, the breadwinner-homemaker roles need to be less separated out between income generation and home needs, with more integrated decision-making that also impacts society; men playing a larger role in household work and women who may still prefer to be homemakers can also have greater participation in decision-making in community and society. In this way, more holistic approaches can be cultivated—paths that work towards renewing and regenerating community and ecological life in harmony with each other, towards a more sustainable development and way of life.

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