

REPORT

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National Seminar –Tribal Heritage of South India

Dr. Nita Mathur

The seminar on 'Tribal Heritage of South India' held in Mangalore from December 26-29, 2000 was the second in the series of seminars being held on subject. The first seminar was held in 1995, focusing on the Northeast. The basic objectives of the seminars are (i) to recognize the distinct tribal heritage, encourage preservation and restoration of the heritage and (ii) develop indigenous models of research for understanding tribal heritage in all its guises. This particular seminar provided the meeting ground of over forty experts specializing in different disciplines of Anthropology, Archaeology, Folklore, Linguistics, Literature and Sociology belonging to different states mainly from southern India. Mangalore University co-hosted the seminar.

We began with an exposition of the term 'Anadi' as cross-linked with 'Adi' representing the timeless tribal heritage. We challenged the very notion of 'tribe' as an arrested stage in the evolutionary ladder. Different terms Adivasi, Vanyajati and paradigms such as Tribe, Caste, and Nature and Culture were examined, thereby deconstructing the category of 'tribe' as a referential category unto itself. The chief questions that we addressed were: Who is a tribal and what constitutes tribal identity. We referred to the 'tribe' largely as a cultural category and as a linguistic category juxtaposed, not opposed to the rural and urban communities. There were five major themes around which presentations were organized. These were; ecological heritage; sacred traditions; imaginal heritage; linguistic heritage; and continuity and change. We explored the many dimensions of tribal heritage and the element of change conjoined with it.

Particularly fascinating was the emphasis on the integration of tribal culture with elements of nature - sky, earth, water and trees. In fact, a tribal regards each one of them as enlivened and bestowed with consciousness. He reveres them as deities; turns to them in times of crises; and communicates with them through rituals and incantations, through song and dance, and through narratives and myths. This is the primordial pristine vision from which the new world order has much to learn.

There was reference to cultural pluralism and organic pluralism. On the one plane there were descriptions of several tribal lifestyles and cultural practices. At another level, we were abstracting methodological issues and debates from these descriptions. We talked about mythologizing history and historicising mythology. We talked about tribal heritage from the vantage point of myths, rituals, beliefs, customs, symbols, artistic creations and people's wisdom. There are no written texts, no records and no documents, yet, knowledge is most precisely preserved and perpetuated. There are verbal texts and multiple forms of expression that enfold the spoken words, visual images, and aural genres through which knowledge is transmitted. More importantly, all knowledge is experiential and enmeshed with the fabric of life as its warp and woof. Tribal cultures are rich repositories of mythical and historical past and yet provide rich and powerful models for contemporary social order. This constitutes that core of tribal heritage. There was also the dimension of communication at the intra-tribal-plane, inter-tribal plane and tribal-non-tribal plane. There has been incessant intervention in tribal life both at the political level and at the academic level. Tribal cultures respond to such situations in their own way. Within this perspective, we discussed the agenda of socio-political management strategies of the tribals and in the larger framework of conjuring strategies for the tribals.

What came up repeatedly in the discussion was the discourse on the polemics of 'They and We', 'Self and Other', 'Particular and Universal'. Whether boldly or tacitly, each one of us was repositioning our own identity in the larger context of the tribal 'Other'. We agreed that there is impending need to 'essentialise

tribal identity in terms of their own perceptions and cultural assertions.

This has far reaching implications in the context of planning for tribal cultures. Each one of us agreed that somewhere along the line, the tribal voices had not been heard. The issue of empowerment of the tribals, sharing discourses and domains were discussed at length. There was a general consensus on the proposition that academics particularly anthropologists should intervene at three levels (i) at the academic level whereby they should evolve appropriate methodologies to understand tribal heritage in its own idiom taking note of the new cultural landscapes; (ii) at the planning and policy making level where they should uphold the safeguarding of tribal heritage and evolve means and ways to optimise their life situations, and (iii) at the active level wherein they should generate sensitivity towards tribal cultures among lay persons and bureaucrats alike.

No seminar ever ends, neither did this one. For, the ideas that are generated in such meetings remain with the participants. In moments of leisure quietitude the reminiscences of occasions such as this one lead to dialogue with oneself and reaffirm commitments.