

Culture and agro-ecology in tribal areas

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Integrated Development through Environmental Awakening or IDEA has considerable experience of working in the tribal areas in India. Its focus is sustainable environmental management amongst tribal populations. IDEA has made a comprehensive study of the belief systems of tribal populations, the relationship between man and nature and the role of traditional institutions. Based on the insights gained from this study environmental protection and development groups were formed. Here men and women design plans for the development of their village areas and the integration of their cultural festivals, ceremonies, and totemic clan concepts with natural resource protection programs.

The Eastern Ghats in India is the homeland of about 60 tribal communities with a total population of about 10 million people. The majority of these tribes live in hilly, forested areas. The tribes of the Eastern Ghats are commonly known as the Adivasi, Girijan and Vanya Jati. Each tribal group has a distinct life style based on their belief in nature and the spiritual world.

The tribal people believe in the existence of natural and supernatural divine beings. Everything in their lives is controlled by these divine beings who inhabit their houses, villages, fields, mountains, forests, rivers and burial grounds. The tribal people also believe in ancestral spirits, who watch over them and help in times of danger and distress. All spiritual beings differ from one another in nature, composi-

tion, function and character; some of these beings are good, others have bad influences. They are beyond human control, human submission, devotion and reverence is needed to appease these powers. Tribal people do not start the construction of a house, distribute land, fell trees, eat fruits and cereals, perform marriages or go hunting until they have performed the appropriate rites.

Traditional institutions

The physical and material well-being of the tribal people is controlled by traditional institutions and functionaries. The *naik* is the village headman responsible for village administration. He maintains law and order and settles inter-village disputes. He also mobilises financial contributions in money

or kind to celebrate community-based festivals and rituals. The *kotpaik* is the sacerdotal head. He is responsible for maintaining social, cultural, religious and agricultural norms. The *disari* is responsible for magic-religious matters and he is the medical man of the village. He has considerable knowledge of agro-ecological matters and land management practices. The *poojari* is the priest who controls the religious protocols of the village and performs rituals associated with agriculture. A communal woman priest or shaman known as *gurumayi* and the *guniya* are the traditional birth attendants. *Kattela disaries* and *sirla disaries* are the religious and medical men of the region and the communities consider them to be supreme and sacred saints. A group of eight to ten villages constitute a *muta* and



The Disari's functioning is crucial for the well-being of the community. Based on astrological observations he calculates dates for religious and agricultural festivals. Here he studies a gonda.

this is headed by a *mutadar*. This person plays a vital role in maintaining cohesion, integrity, stability and social identity of the communities in their specific geographical habitat.

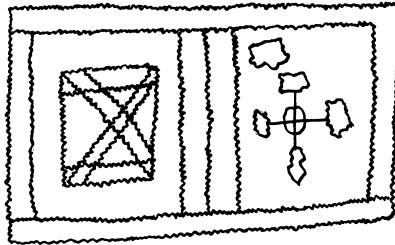
Eco-agricultural knowledge

The tribal communities have special knowledge of soil conservation and land management. Soil and land selection for different crops requires the skilled knowledge of religious leaders, who are able to test soils by colour, weight and taste and assess the gradation of the land. They know specific plants that arrest soil erosion, how to improve soil fertility and how to use green manure and growth stimulants. They celebrate the rituals related to grain conservation and ensure that individual members follow the rules for conserving food grains. Touching, eating or selling grains and vegetables without celebrating the necessary festivals is taboo. *Mutte* is the name given to the body of traditional agricultural knowledge that only spiritual leaders can possess. It is a range of agricultural practices written on palm leaves. They cover three main subjects: astronomy, herbal medicine and information on spiritual beings. Some villages have lost the tradition of keeping *mutte*; other communities, however, still maintain it. Knowledge is also preserved in the form of folk songs, mostly retained by women. These songs describe the mythological histories of the communities and their worldviews. Knowledge related to the agricultural activities of men is also preserved in the form of dance and music, like the *Kandul Baza*. This is a combination of music and song that explains the origin of red gram, a traditional legume, its cultivation practices and the need to protect it. The *karkota* is a musical instrument made of wood that is used to create different sounds to drive away wild animals and birds and prevent them from damaging the crops.

The *num* or sacred forests show traces of their mythological histories and the origin of various spiritual beings. *Gondas* or chalk marks are symbols of communication with super-natural beings. They are used by religious leaders to appease evil spirits and protect crops from humans, animals and witchcraft. For example *Chitti Ban Gonda* can undo black magic and witchcraft and *Thaas Gonda* can control pests in nurseries. Some of the chalk marks observed on the walls of houses also contain information on agriculture, but nowadays villagers find it increasingly difficult to explain the purpose and the meaning of these marks.

Emotional integration

IDEA works on sustainable development of the tribal population in harmony with non-tribal communities. We have been involved with tribal communities for twelve



'Sisagudri gonda' is used to protect agricultural fields from thieves and wild animals.

years to enhance endogenous eco-agricultural diversity and revive traditional institutions for sustainable development.

We can distinguish four main stages in our approach. When entering a new community, we start by building up a relationship with individuals. Case studies, group discussions and building relationships with traditional institutions follow. We encourage and participate in cultural programs with songs related to the people's history, culture and festivals, their lives, their ancestors, clan totems, beliefs, customs, norms and inter-relations with the forests and the environment. This attracts immediate attention and creates emotional participation and physical integration. Then the more formal part of the process begins. Short simple lectures are given during group and village meetings. Examples and evidence from the community are cited and further explanations of the meanings of songs are given. We try to establish relationships between customs, norms, festivals, forests, environment and animistic religious practices. This enhances their confidence in their practices. The community feeling is strengthened in their minds and hearts. All people, including the traditional institutional heads, participate in the program.

The third stage of our approach begins with the process of formalising the group with more elements for building emotional integration and awakening. For example, CODE centres - COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION - are established with young people of the tribe. Initially we take care not to comment on their beliefs; they are normally discussed at a later stage when people examine them with their hearts as well as their heads. This stage further develops their confidence. The questions raised for further clarification, the intensity of group discussions, but also the learning and singing of their songs in their houses, fields and during meetings, are an indication of the quality and degree of participation. Traditional herbalists receive training in allopathic first aid. Traditional birth attendants receive training in mother and childcare, immunisation and nutritional improvement. Village-based women's development groups are organised and the traditional heads are involved

in these groups. Environment Protection and Development Groups (EPDG's) are also established to work out plans for the integrated sustainable development of the village and for the integration of their ecology-related cultural festivals, ceremonies, hunting and revived totemic-clan concepts with natural resources surveys and analysis.

The fourth stage includes leadership building, experimentation with sustainable technologies like bio-pesticides and the revival of traditional practices. Meetings with other villages are also organised. Further analyses of present problems are made and responsibilities shared.

The experience of IDEA proves the feasibility and viability for this new type of development approach. We have established alternative sustainable eco-development processes in about 200 villages in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa.

Further activities

During the present phase of Compas we want to further document tribal indigenous eco-development processes, practices and knowledge systems and extend them our support. It is important to continue to strengthen tribal traditional institutions and we also hope to promote people-based platforms for cross-cultural dialogue and exchange of information on agri-eco-cultural practices and cosmology.

During the first six months of Compas fieldwork we have started an action research program on indigenous eco-cultural practices in 25 villages. Traditional leaders have chalked out their knowledge and practices as far as soil testing, seed testing and the protection of flora and fauna. Songs and knowledge systems related to agriculture have been recorded and translated for interpretation and analysis. Two cultural groups have been trained. There has also been a training program for field staff based on the concept of endogenous development. Village-level demonstrations and experiments in close cooperation with traditional leaders have started on the low use of external inputs, agro-forestry, medicinal-plant gardens, bio-fertilisers, biological pest control and the use of wild, leafy vegetables. In the next COMPAS Newsletter we will continue to share our experiences.

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