

## Son of the soil

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Some years ago we have just completed a project of a budget hotel near the Ratnagiri Railway station in the beautiful Konkan region. The project was a pilot scheme to offer conveniently placed, cost-effective and good quality hotel accommodation for tourists and business travellers to be run on a BOT on behalf of the Konkan Railways. Our work was appreciated and the client wanted us to work on a sea facing site near Ganapatipule for the Maharashtra State Tourism Development Authority. (MTDC).

A site visit was arranged. It was a breathtakingly beautiful site- a gentle hillock right on the sea that offered wonderful possibilities for a unique sea-side resort to be developed on a time-share basis.

The site was a peninsular projection into the sea with a very steep cliff on one side and a gentle descent to the sea on the other. Portion of the site had dense plantation quite visibly man-made. Within a few months the whole site had a barbed wire compound wall. 'Government' owned land was now under private management.

I was visiting the site with the horticulturist who was delighted to see the already existing plantation. It was a very thoughtful mix of trees to provide shade, fruits, flowers, firewood, timber, medicines, attract beehives and a variety of birds, butterflies.... This was a planted forest. There were religious structures scattered in the grove and deep trenches which we figured were for harvesting rainwater into subsoil natural aquifers. That explained why the grove was perennially green despite the harsh summers that parched most of the natural forests around.

As we were moving through the site we heard some loud voices. A few minutes later one of the clients managers got 2 young men that he held by their neck- as city folk do when they catch a petty criminal. The men were beautiful- dark, lean and athletic. If they wanted they could have easily freed themselves and even thrashed the manager. But they were visibly in awe, afraid and trembling at hearing words like चोर, पोलीस चौकी, तुरुंग ... (thief, police station, jail...)

The Client who had come in his customary white SUV and the fan following started explaining to the 2 men- जागा आता आमची इहाली आहे, तुमी कोणीही आता इथ यायचे नाही. (*This place is ours now. You people cannot come here anymore*). The 'culprits' were speechless. They could only do a meek namaskar and walk away quickly. I was told they were from the nearby *adivasi* settlement.

A few hours later older men from the village came to talk to the client. What followed was a dialogue between two worlds that possibly cannot co-exist. The village elders did not know anything about the MTDC tender. They were perplex. They did not bother much about the ownership of land- land only mattered to them in terms of what it could yield- shelter, shade, fruits, flowers, firewood, timber honey etc. The survey from the collector's office did indicate the location of a tribal village but only the actual settlement and without demarking any of the larger support perimeter that served it. The eco-system of the village included surrounding land like this planted forest, land for cattle grazing and fields for their grain and vegetables. They did not and need not own the land but did need its fruits. That was not compatible with the modern idea of land ownership. So far the traditional systems were not threatened as land value was low. That

was not the case anymore. Capital surplus from the urban economy had reached here in order to generate even more wealth; but at what expense?

The proposed seaside resort will eventually kill the very soul of the adivasi community. It can obviously not benefit from the proposed development, its people will not be employed there and if they are they will be exploited. They cannot continue their subsistence without the land resource required to support it. This was a sure shot recipe of pauperisation of a healthy self reliant community by dispossessing them of the very means of their subsistence / existence. This situation raises many complex questions that are very relevant when the Land Acquisition Bill is about to be debated in our parliament and tribal lands in various parts of the country are being coveted for mineral exploitation, development of special economic zones, industrial corridors, dams, satellite towns (a la Lavasa) etc.

### **Land:**

The *adivasi's* are interested in the land for what it can directly produce- it's 'use' value whereas the proposed project to be built as second homes to be leased on timeshare basis is banking on the speculative gains from property - its 'exchange' value. These are 2 different worlds-systems, as Fernand Braudel may put it, contesting the same land. Even the idea of a rightful compensation of the land value cannot work as the value systems do not coincide. To one the land is a perpetual provider and to the other a transactional opportunity. The religious structures made use of the 'sacred' to signify the importance of the land and the plantations on it and effectively stall any plans of occupying it for habitation.

### **The State:**

Under section 36 A of the Maharashtra Land Revenue Code 1966, the land of a Tribal can not be transferred in favour of any non-Tribal without permission of State Government and/or Collector as the case may be. This provision clearly recognises the need to accord a special status to tribal land. The 'permission' of the State Government would imply concertation with and consent of the tribal community or that there is an indisputable public / national interest linked to the acquisition of the land- there is otherwise no need for such a provision. In this case however the state government has initiated this project without any dialogue with the community. The national / public interest of a resort is debatable to the say the least. The state is thus dispensing as 'owner' of the tribal land and not its guardian as it should be. It is a different matter that the *adivasi's* are in no position to initiate a legal battle and no one will do it on their behalf. Their political representatives are only too happy to support such an initiative for the economic opportunities that it represents. Thus judiciary and the legislative, two majors institutions of democracy, will be ineffective in their role of defending the fundamental rights of the *adivasi's*. The very institutions meant to protect the weak and the marginalised are abusing them (कुंपण शेत खात आहे). How else will they perceive the State than an exploitative and unjust apparatus? It is hardly surprising that Maoist / Naxalite 'anti-national' militancy is gaining currency in the tribal belts in Central and North-East India..

### **Human Rights:**

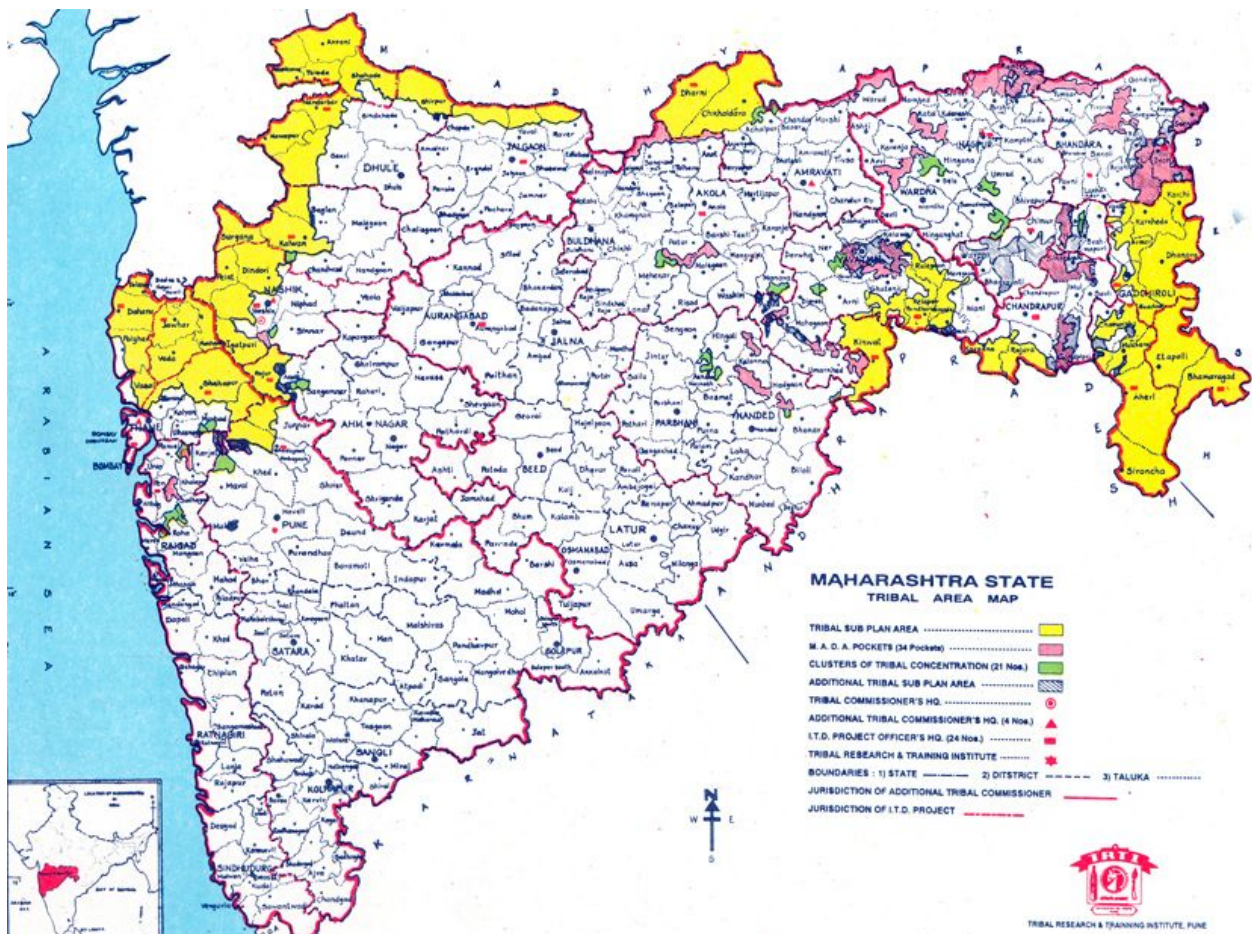
Without having asked for anything this community is going to face sweeping changes in their social, economic, natural and built environment. They are in no position to influence these changes that will transform their lifestyle forever with no turning back. Forget consultation the community is not even aware of what is being proposed and left without any option but to suffer a system where they will never stand an equal chance in any transaction. There is no equity in

this exchange. This is a new form of colonisation; as violent and dehumanising as any; in fact worse. The coloniser is 'legitimate' democratic state and there is no freedom in view.

### Societal transformation:

So far the sheer distance from 'civilisation' allowed the village to subsist in relative independence, though not in isolation. A few adults could barely read and write, a few were working in nearby towns or even Ratnagiri, Chiplun. Many of the children went to a district residential school. The ST bus did come here once a day creating the biggest daily event eagerly awaited by all. There was no electricity so no TV and the transistor radio ruled supreme as the media for information and entertainment. There were posters and pictures of political parties and from the movies. A few owned 2 wheelers and occasionally rickshaws plied in. Modernity is trickling in gradually. With the resort it will gush-in and wipe out this tiny and fragile 'world'. It will put the village in direct and constant contact with it a society with completely different socio-cultural references and economy. A gradual process of 'modernisation' would have allowed the tribal society to prepare and adapt to a new world-system. This abrupt imposition leaves no chance for that. In Navi Mumbai the rural communities dispossessed of their agricultural land, albeit with compensation, to create the satellite town could not become an integral part of it. The accelerated urbanisation and resulting disintegration of traditional social structures gave rise to new social evils: rampant alcoholism, violence and crime leaving them on the margins of the new landscape they are part of.

### Social and ethnic diversity



Maharashtra State Tribal Area Map. Source [http://mahatribal.gov.in/images/TSP\\_MAP.jpg](http://mahatribal.gov.in/images/TSP_MAP.jpg)

As per the 2011 census 9.4% of the population of Maharashtra is tribal. Though Konkan is not a region with high tribal population there are dispersed settlements of *Katkaris* a forest tribal community. Unlike in the rapidly urbanising Thane and Raigad district where they are farm labour, brick kiln workers etc. lowly paid and in abject poverty *Katkaris* here may still be in their relatively independent forest settlement- as in this case; living in dignity. Though the *Katkaris* will continue to exist as an ethnic group it is likely that their forest linked life and settlement will decline in the coming years. In this context each such settlement is a ethnological treasure that needs to be documented. It is a whole world-view and a knowledge system that will disappear forever. Instead of an anthropologist, to observe, analyse and record this dying world-view and wisdom, it is the real-estate developer who is reaching there to summarily annihilate it.



Katkari Settlement in Konkan. Source: <http://www.rainforestinfo.org.au/projects/india/Katkari.htm>

### **Ethics of development:**

One cannot deny the need to encourage new business ventures that will create jobs and support local economy. However these have to take into account the local social realities. The *Katkaris* obviously have a certain ‘know-how’ and skills. Instead of implementing standard projects like time-share based second homes and resorts there is certainly a need for projects that would take into account local capacities and build over that if aim of development is the well-being of all and not creation of outlets for surplus capital surplus. Economics, like ecology, cannot be ignored but its ethics can be directed. Development WITH the people (सबका साथ, सबका विकास) will also maintain the dignity, pride and identity of all communities.

### **Conclusion:**

The question is complex and there are no easy answers. It is not that the tribal societies are perfect and that they can possibly continue to evolve in isolation. At least around urbanising regions their integration in the ‘mainstream’ is unavoidable. It is the process of this integration that needs to be more considerate. The one operating now is imposed and will necessarily lead to their pauperisation. The state has an important role to play to ensure that their interests are protected till such time that they can negotiate a more equitable bargain with the modern world.

- Correct record of ‘Notified Tribal Areas’ with due consideration the different perception of landuse that they harbour.

- Special laws to protect them from purely capitalist expansionism which is bound to marginalise the tribals.
- Sustained educational programmes that will prepare these communities to come to terms with the new world and gradually participate in it with dignity.
- Thorough documentation of the few remaining forest tribes for the anthropological value and record of their traditional wisdom.
- Identifying existing skills and knowledge-base and building a more ethical developmental model from that base.

Isn't it an irony that when environmental degradation is the most important crisis for the entire humanity, when world leaders are grappling with climate-change, instead of learning from ancient communities who have lived sustainably for generations, we are dragging them with us along the same suicidal route.