

Tribal Communities and Their Age-Old Sacred Groves: A Fair Fieldwork in the Purulia District of West Bengal, India

Arup Kanti Konar

*Department of Economics, Achhruram Memorial College, Burdwan University,
Jhalda, Purulia 723 202, West Bengal, India
Email: akkonar@gmail.com / akkonar@rediffmail.com*

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ABSTRACT In the inchoate sustainability revolution, which has started its effective life since the enthusiastic celebration of the “First Earth Day” on 22 April 1970 throughout the globe, and whose sole objective is to bring about a “Third World War” against the emerging threat of global unsustainability syndrome, or in other words, to thwart the “Second Tragedy of the Titanic of Global Life”, this paper has been designed to explore the trinity indicated by the 3Cs such as “causes, consequences and cures” of the degradation of sacred groves in the hundred sample tribal communities, most of which are located on and around the Ajodhya Hills covered with forest layer, of Purulia district in West Bengal. This paper also attempts to explore the causes of unprecedented unsustainability of tribal communities. Here the problem of sustainability encompasses both the tribal people and the sacred groves preserved by them. The third objective of the paper is to expose how the social and ecological status of the minority groups of tribal people is correlated with that of their age-old “forests of goddess” in the emerging threat of unsustainability syndrome, and what policy package can be prescribed to reduce or rule out the tribal unsustainability in which the unsustainability of sacred groves is embedded. The study also seeks to awaken the appropriate authorities from the culture of connivance or silence for creating mass-awareness among the citizens of the non-tribal mainstream society so as to restore the sustainability of the diverse tribal communities. “Tribal culture” coupled with “cultural tribalism” may create tribal unsustainability.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the inchoate sustainability revolution, which has started its effective life since the enthusiastic celebration of the “First Earth Day” on 22 April 1970 (the 1970s was declared as the “Decade of the Environment”, while the 21st century is treated as the “Century of the Environment”) throughout the globe, and whose sole objective is to bring about a “Third World War” against the emerging threat of global unsustainability syndrome, or in other words, to thwart the “Second Tragedy of the Titanic of Global Life” (the First Tragedy of the British Titanic occurred in 1912), a fair “fieldwork”, which has been defined by Nash (1970) as a “participant observation combined with extensive eliciting”, sponsored by the University Grant Commission of India in the name of Minor Research Project, is undertaken during the stipulated period 2006-2008 to explore the “causes, consequences and cures” (3Cs) of the degradation of sacred groves (SGs) in the hundred sample tribal communities or villages, most of which are located on and around the Ajodhya Hills covered with forest layer, of Purulia district in West Bengal. But going to inquire the foregoing 3Cs of the SGs, I am

bewildered by the unprecedented unsustainability (deplorable and agonizing struggle for subsistence) of tribal people of the communities or villages surveyed. Their level and means of subsistence are too poor to communicate. By history, we are led to learn that in the global human society, West is developed, while East is underdeveloped. But the paradox is that the extreme western Purulia district in West Bengal is the most backward by any criterion, while the eastern districts are developed. Most of tribal population, which constitutes 18.27% of total district population, is worst hit by the unprecedented poverty, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy, poor housing facilities, starvation, semi-naked clothing, hunting and gathering means of living. In this situation we must ask: Is the communist ruled government in West Bengal going through the culture of connivance or silence since its inception in 1977?

Ajodhya Hills covered with forest layer have become the important tourist spots, which are being socialized or humanized by the inflow and outflow of people coming from various communities and lands. A few hotels and motels have been established to meet the needs of the tourists. Earlier Ajodhya Hills were inhabited by only tribal people. But now, these hills and their forest cover

are being colonized by non-tribal people of close and distant origin in the sense that almost all types of economic activity (e.g. road construction and repairing, reforestation or replanting, hotel and motel businesses, primary health services, primary and secondary educations, running of different administrative departments or units etc.) are undertaken by the non-tribal colonists to satisfy their own interests, while the tribal people get “nothing except everything” owing to their lack of requisite knowledge, skill and technical know-how. Thus the sole objective of this paper is not only to inquire the 3Cs of the emerging threat of unsustainability of the *SGs* but also the correlation between the unsustainability of the *SGs* preserved by the tribal people and the unsustainability of the tribal people themselves in the tribal communities of the Purulia district in West Bengal.

2. RELEVANT CONCEPTS WITH LITERATURE

Sacred Groves (*SGs*)

The *SG* assumes various names and nuances depending upon the nature of the cultural characteristics or traits. The examples are sacred grove, goddess’s green, holy garden, temple forest patch, abode of forest god, garth of goddess, greenwood abode of goddess, forest of goddess, forest of reverence, religiously preserved forest patch, serene place of worship, temple grove, sacred microforest, religious microecology, sacred microbiosphere etc.

In India, the earliest documented work on *SGs* is that of the first Inspector General of Forests, Brandis (1897). The *SGs* have been defined differently by different authors (Gadgil and Vartak 1976; Vartak and Gadgil 1973; Khiewtam and Ramakrishnan 1989; Rodgers 1994; Basu 2000; Roy Burman 1995, 1996; Malhotra 1998; Deb et al. 1997; Ramakrishnan et al. 1998; Berkes 1999; Deb and Malhotra 2001; Basu 2000). For example, *SGs* are the repositories of rare and endemic species and can be regarded as the remnant of the primary forest left untouched by the local inhabitants and protected by them due to the belief that the deities reside in these forests (Anthwal et al. 2006). In India, as elsewhere in many parts of the world, a number of communities practise different forms of nature worship. One such significant tradition of nature worship is that of

providing protection to patches of forests dedicated to deities or ancestral spirits. These vegetation patches have been designated as *SGs* (Gokhale et al. 2001). Thus *SGs* are segments of landscape, containing vegetation and other forms of life and geographical features that are delimited and protected by human societies under the belief that to keep them in a relatively undisturbed state is expressive of an important relationship of humans with the divine or with nature.

In fine, “*SG* can be defined as a micro-ecological zone of both biological and cultural diversity including land, water and air, which is preserved through religious beliefs, practices, sentiments, sanctions and/or taboos of the micro or ethno community for its dedication to the goddess of the green pocket (or grove), who is assumed to grant boons if she is worshipped in terms of sacrifices offered in the form of animal or plant substances” (Konar 2008). The empirical findings reveal that each tribal village or hamlet in the Purulia district of West Bengal has at least one *SG*.

Sustainability

Sustainability is “euphemism and euphuism for survival of human species” (Konar 2007, 2008, 2009). It is the sophisticated camouflage in the instantaneously electronic communicative society, because survival is treated as naïve in the overdeveloped human society, particularly in the Northern society. In other words, survival is camouflaged by sustainability, because survival has compatibility with the underdevelopment, not with overdevelopment for/with which the Northern society swaggers. Sustainability is an “enlightened self-interest” (Clayton and Radcliffe 1996; Konar 2007, 2008, 2009), as opposed to “destructive self-interest” (Prakash and Gupta 1997), where “self-interest” is confined to the “survival”, which refers to “the perpetuation of life on ‘the tiny little islet of life amid the boundless ocean of lifelessness’ (Rebrov 1989) over the eons”. Enlightened self-interest has two definitions: (i) inter-species or being oriented definition and (ii) inter-temporal definition. The former definition states that if the “self-interest of at least one species or being” is satisfied or optimized (e.g. gain maximized or loss minimized) “without excluding” the “self-interests of other species or beings”, the former self-interest is called enlightened. And by the latter definition, we can say

that if the “present self-interest” is satisfied or optimized (e.g. gain maximized or loss minimized) “without excluding” the “future self-interest”, then also the former self-interest is called enlightened. Thus enlightened self-interest indicates the “relation of complementarity” (i) among the self-interests of all the stronger or superior and weaker or inferior species (or living organisms) and (ii) between the present self-interest and future self-interest. On the contrary, destructive self-interest is guided by the “relation of substitutability or excludability”. Enlightened self-interest is backed up by “dual monopoly” of the stronger or superior, never of the weaker or inferior such as “moral monopoly” and “compulsive or forced monopoly”. The purpose of “either monopoly” is to sustain the foregoing “relation of complementarity” for the persistence of global diversity of life over the eons.

Enlightened self-interest is based on dual ignorance such as (i) “Veil of Ignorance” of Rawls (1971), which is a new version of Gandhi’s “Trusteeship Theory” (Gandhi 1957; Fischer 1950; Upadhyaya 1976), which is backed up by “irreducible moral values of humans” (Wilkie 1993) and (ii) “Informed Ignorance” of German Cardinal, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464 AD) [Meschkowski 1964; Konar 2007, 2008]. Rawls’s veil of ignorance principle shows how the present self-interest or the self-interest of the stronger or superior beings can be harmonized/reconciled with the future self-interest or the self-interest of the weaker or inferior beings for the realization of common good (here sustainability). This means how present self-interest optimizing (e.g. gain maximizing or loss minimizing) humans (current generation of stronger or superior species) should or can care for and share of global resources (natural and humanized/socialized resources) among current generation of human species, future generations of human species and non-human species in the globe. In fine, Rawls’s veil of ignorance principle suggests that the stronger or superior beings should “stoop” to the weaker or inferior beings for “conquering” “mutually common good” (here global sustainability) [Konar 2007, 2008]. Gandhi’s trusteeship theory is closely associated with his famous “doctrine of non-violence”. According to Gandhi, non-violence is the highest ideal. It is meant for the brave (superior or stronger), never for the cowardly (inferior or weaker). It is the eradication of the desire (of the stronger) to inflict cost, harm or loss (to the weaker).

Further if sustainability is to be renewed or revived, the whole human species (stronger or superior beings) should achieve a “state of informed ignorance” of Nicholas of Cusa, which implies that the more we know, the more aware we will be of our ignorance and the further we penetrate into informed ignorance, the closer we come to the “truth” itself. For even one who is most greedy for knowledge can achieve no greater perfection than to be thoroughly aware of his/her own ignorance in his/her particular field (Konar 2007, 2008). Here “truth” discloses how “destructive self-interest” can be substituted with “enlightened self-interest” for realizing surrogate, socialized or renewed sustainability.

Even if it is assumed that (current generation of) human species is superior to and stronger than non-human species and perhaps the future generations of human species in all respects or aspects, the superior and stronger beings should obey the dual ignorance, which should be equated with the two maxims of Confucius that (i) “Expand knowledge as much as possible” and (ii) “Consideration: Never do to others what you would not like them to do” for the realization of common good (here sustainability). But who will listen to such voice? “For only rational being is capable of doing something irrational” (Konar 2007, 2008).

Hence sustainability (or unsustainability) should be reconceptualized as the coexistence of ecological stability (or instability) and social stability (or instability), given the exogenously and autonomously determined natural instability indicated by natural catastrophes (e.g. earth quakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, typhoons, collisions with cosmic wanderers, meteoric falls etc.) and natural stability indicated by various natural life support systems (Konar 2007, 2008, 2009). Thus sustainability means coexistence of ecological sustainability and social sustainability under the *ceteris paribus* assumption. It is worthy to note that socialization of sustainability vis-à-vis sustainability of socialization is inevitable in the inchoate sustainability revolution, since each acts either as the cause or the effect in a cyclical order. Sustainability is a socialized concept and also a social learning process and social sustainability is a quality of societies (Littig and GrieBler 2005). Sustainability can be likened to the global “public goods”, which have two properties: non-rivalness and non-excludability. Non-rivalness is the property of a good to be utilized jointly by many at the same

time, and non-excludability is the property of a good where utilization by those who do not pay for the cost of its supply is possible.

3. FIELDWORK FINDINGS OF SOCIAL SITUATION OF TRIBAL COMMUNITIES SURVEYED

The term “tribe” has various names and nuances such as aborigine, aboriginal, animist, primitive, pristine, backward, adivasi, vanyajati, banabasi, submerged humanity, hill and jungle folk, forest and hill dweller and the like. The constitution of the Indian Union (Article 366) has designated the tribe as “Scheduled Tribe”. The existing tribes in the Purulia district of West Bengal can be classified into the following four categories, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive: (i) pristine primitive tribes, who are still subsisting on the natural resources like hunting, gathering etc. in the remote hills and forest areas isolated from the non-tribal mainstream society, (ii) semi-tribes, who have settled down in the hamlets and have taken to agriculture and allied occupations as last resort, (iii) partially acculturated or integrated tribes, who have migrated to rural or semi-urban areas and are engaged in small and cottage industries and petty vocations and have adopted quasi-civilized culture, and (iv) completely assimilated or integrated tribes, who have been living keeping consistency with the modern civilized way of life.

In Purulia district of West Bengal, to my knowledge, there are fifteen types of tribe such as (i) Sabar, (ii) Birhore, (iii) Chikbaraik, (iv) Paharia, (v) Bedia, (vi) Bedomajhi, (vii) Bhumij, (viii) Bhunia, (ix) Karmali, (x) Koramudi, (xi) Lohara, (xii) Mahali, (xiii) Munda, (xiv) Oraon and (xv) Santal. Hardly any of the tribes exists as a separate society. All categories of tribe have remained under the long process of assimilation, acculturation, absorption, integration and/or harmonization. But we wonder why the tribes have remained at the tribal stage of historically social evolution and revolution. Evidences indicate that the tribes are in the slow process of upward transition toward the mainstream society.

Tribal population in the globe is not only fast declining but also on the verge of extinction like non-human species. In the Purulia district of West Bengal also, the exception is ruled out. Perhaps the “National Scheduled Tribes Commission”, “Ministry of Welfare”, “Ministry of Rural

Development” and the “Ministry of Tribal Affairs” of Government of India are either sleeping or maintaining the culture of silence even in the inchoate sustainability revolution. Thanks to inefficiency and corruption of government officials of the foregoing sections.

Thanks also to the “National Policy on Resettlement and Rehabilitation of Project Affected Families - 2003” and “National Policy on Resettlement and Rehabilitation of Displaced Tribals - 2003” for 4Ds, namely dispossession, displacement, dislocation and disempowerment (Kujur 2005) and disentanglement, a process whereby the tribals are gradually denied access to the support system of their livelihood (Sahoo 2005) and human rights violation in the name of development. Evidences reveal that most of the displaced persons by various “National Development Projects” are tribals. Displacement is treated as inevitable for development, while rehabilitation and resettlement are demoted or disregarded. The “Integrated Tribal Development Programme” has become too elusive and ineffective to reiterate. Most of the “Tribal Development Programmes” of the government can not touch the “skin of the tribal society” owing to inefficiency and corruption of the government officials. “It is a paradox, yet true, that millions of our country men who have no ‘standard of living’ still have a ‘standard of life’, the Scheduled Tribes not excluded” (Editorial, *Vanyajati*, July 1997).

In addition to their extreme poverty, the tribal people in this district are under the constant threat of violence, torture, oppression, murder, rape, abuse, atrocity, aggression, arson and the like committed by the non-tribal people. Besides they are exploited by landlords, money-lenders, contractors and government officials. In order to withstand the violence against the tribes, the ruling Communist West Bengal Government has decided to construct “District Committee” in each district (*Anandabazar Patrika*, December 07, 2006). The State Government has also announced that Rs. 20, 0000 will be given to any member of the SC and ST communities if she / he is killed, murdered or assassinated and Rs. 25, 000 will be given to those, who are wounded or molested along with the expenditure for medical treatment. But a Committee comprising 25 members is still persisting in the State to reduce or rule out the violence against the SC and ST people. So committee proliferates, but “action” is silent. Despite the proliferation and constitution of

various anti-violence committees and sub-committees, the intensity of violence against the tribes is still inexorable. By any criterion, Purulia is the most backward or underdeveloped district in West Bengal and the tribal communities in this district are the poorest of the poor. The tribal people are surviving in suffocation caused by the “Vicious Circle of Poverty” (Nurkse 1953) and “Low-Level Equilibrium Trap” (Nelson 1956). In such an extremely ecological and social unsustainability, will a great awakening occur among the tribes? The answer must be negative, because awakening needs some amount of calorie, which should be greater than the calorie required for subsistence. Their ingrained calorie level is far below their subsistence-calorie level that is why tribal awakening in this district should be ruled out. This does not mean that non-tribal awakening can not occur. Since November 26, 2003 “Maoist Terrorist Awakening” in the Purulia district has been started and is still sustaining. Since 2003 Purulia district in West Bengal is being treated as the “Maoist-infested District” and the Ajodhya Hills as the “Terror Hills” (Ghoroi 2006). Some training centres of the Maoists are located in and around this district. However, general people are in the dark about the occurrence of blood-bath or blood-shed executed by the Maoists. Tribals are not the target of torture or violence to the Maoists.

Various NGOs are working in the Purulia district for the overall development of the backward and underprivileged classes, castes or communities. For example, PRADAN, New Delhi based NGO, has been working on the Watershed Development Programme benefiting over 8,000 families largely tribal, small, or marginal farmers and the landless. Similarly, “Kheria-Shabar Kalyan Samiti”, set up and led by famous Bengali writer and former Lecturer in English literature, Mahasweta Devi for over 25 years, still has been working for the welfare of the Kheria-Shabar tribals in the Purulia district. Totally committed to their cause, Mahasweta Devi donated her entire prize money from the “Jnanpith Award” and “Magsaysay Award” to the foregoing Samiti.

Most of the tribals are being economically integrated or assimilated with the non-tribal society by the means of (i) selling fuel-woods, (ii) buying essential commodities and (iii) selling labour power, if needed, in the non-tribal markets. But the cultural integration or assimilation of the tribals with the non-tribals is seldom observed.

To undertake economic transactions with the non-tribal society, the tribals have to incur high “transaction costs” in terms of long up-down journey (at least 30 km) through walking with naked feet along the undulated narrow but short-cut and rough hilly path loaded with a bundle of dry-woods (in times of approaching the market) and essential commodities (in times of returning from the market).

Since the India’s pre-independence period, three different schools of thought or ideology regarding the tribal population are still persisting: (i) ideology of tribal separation, isolation or alienation, (ii) ideology of tribal assimilation, acculturation or absorption, and (iii) ideology of tribal integration or harmonization. India is not only a multilingual and multiethnic country, but also multicultural. Indian society is stuffed with various tribes, castes and religions. In such a country, the first school claims that the tribal population should be kept cut off from the orbit of mainstream non-tribal population, while the second school claims that they should be assimilated, acculturated or absorbed in the non-tribal mainstream society. But the third school views that they should be civilized or socialized, and more fully integrated into the mainstream society retaining their distinctive tribal culture. The third school acts as a reformist, which seeks to bring about over all development of tribal communities and peaceful integration or harmonization with the mainstream non-tribal larger society without dismantling their own cultural identity.

In this context it is surprisingly worthy to recall the advertisement displayed in *The Statesman*, dated August 25, 2007 by the “Ministry of Tribal Affairs of Government of India” in which it is clearly stated that “Ministry of Tribal affairs, Government of India and Photo Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting are jointly organizing a Special Photo Contest to collect and then depict, through the medium of calendars, the ‘carefree and happy life of the Tribals’ of our country with the SUBJECT: JOYFUL TRIBALS.” The highest and lowest prizes declared are Rs. 25, 000 and Rs. 2, 000 respectively. Now we must ask: Does the Ministry of Tribal Affairs want to civilize, socialize or tribalize the tribes? Actually some of us are much ardent to see the tribalness or tribalism of the tribes like the animals in the zoo or museum to satisfy our aesthetic and recreational needs or values. So long as we, the so-called civilized people, can not dismantle our own

“veil of tribalism”, how is it possible to look at them beyond tribalization?

A Rich-Poor Gap has been emerging in the tribal society also like the civilized society. A small, privileged, property owning and educated section has been exploiting the vastly rest of the tribals. The vocal, richer and privileged minority of the tribal society is utilizing the benefits granted to the tribals in the form of Tribal Development Projects, Special Concessions, and Reservations etc. by the “One Kind of Power” (Basu 1986). This newly civilized tribal minority (or tribal imperialism) appropriates the fruits of various development programmes launched in the name of tribal whole. In the asymmetrically informational atmosphere, “Moral Hazard” (Hayami and Godo 2006) created by the tribal imperialists to cheat the pauperized tribals, acts as the major cause of the failure of the various Development Projects, Programmes and Policies of the Government. This tribal imperialism induces the local government officials and pressure groups to launch development programmes only to satisfy the interest of tribal imperialist minority depriving the tribal proletariats.

Beyond exaggeration, like non-tribal people in India, tribal people also have unprecedented proneness or propensity toward religion. This religion is sacred, not corrupted or dirty, and is stuffed with various saints, sages, sanctuaries, sacrifices, salvations and various sacred sites, places, rivers, ponds, tanks, lakes, plants and animals. In India no village can be disclosed in which the practice of worshipping of God, Goddess, demon, demoness, deity, image, photo or picture, and terracotta or clay form of god or goddess is non-existent. Even some specific stone pieces or slabs and plant and animal species are also worshipped treating them sacred. The worshipping practices are performed to realize spiritual boon or to wipe out spiritual bane, as spiritual boon brings forth psychological pleasure, while spiritual bane brings forth spiritual fear leading to psychological toil and trouble. In addition, they also worship Earth or Nature as Mother Goddess. In some places of India, the fossilized animals are worshipped due to embeddedness of “fear-factor” in the minds of the worshippers that they are the skeletal remains of the demon or demoness killed by the God or Goddess. Some specific species of animal and plant are worshipped treating them as the faithful carrier of the God or Goddess. Religious beliefs, practices, sentiments, emotions,

taboos and/or sanctions are assumed to maintain sustainability. For maintaining social sustainability or stability, religious sanctions are also assumed to produce more social welfare compared to social sanctions.

Prior to the inception of global unsustainability, a consistency between the religious sacredness and sustainability was persisting in Indian civilization. But recently, despite the perpetuity of religious symbolism, the unsustainability is in the air. So we must ask: Is religious sacredness degrading or eroding? Is religious sanctity being corrupted? Is religious corruption the sole cause of unsustainability? Are other non-religious factors responsible for the emerging ecological erosion? In this connection, it is worthy to recall an old Bengali proverb which states that “when the shelter of a deity is burning, the shelter of the priest, who worships the deity, can never remain unburnt”.

An urge among the tribal population to be integrated with the non-tribal population of this district, and to march forward together with them, has become eventually inevitable for the overall social development. For example, when the people of Birhore tribe, who are now living in the brick-built quarters or cabins in the villages namely Barria, Bhupatipally, Bersha, Baridi of Bagmundi Block, constructed by the West Bengal Government Rehabilitation Programme, are interrogated about their present position compared to their previous forest- or hill - dwelling life, they, as hosts frankly and cordially respond without any hesitation that they are satisfied with this integration.

Various projects and programmes have previously been undertaken and are still being adopted for the poverty ridden tribal communities in this district in the name of tribal development. So we must ask: If this is the development, where have the funds invested for these development projects gone? Or, if this is the investment, where is the development? These two questions are analogous to the following two questions borrowed from the well-known story of Molla Nasiruddin. The story (*Anandabazar Patrika*, July 24, 2005, p. 9) is like this: Molla, purchasing one kilogram of meat, requests his wife to cook it. After cooking the meat, his wife tests the taste of cooked meat. Perceiving its tastefulness, his wife consumes the entire cooked meat, being failed to tame her greediness. Then she tells to Molla, “The pet cat has consumed the entire cooked meat”. Molla then takes the weight of the cat sitting

nearby and finds that its weight is just one kilogram. Being taken aback, Molla asks his wife: "If this is the cat, where is the (cooked) meat? Or, if this is that meat, where is the cat?"

The social unsustainability of the tribals is also indicated and influenced by various tribal customs, norms, codes, practices, beliefs, rituals etc., which bring forth fundamentalism, fetishism, dogmatism or "cultural tribalism". Fundamentalism means tradition defended in traditional way, while tradition refers to the customs, beliefs, practices, ceremonials, rituals etc. by which the past can be substituted for the present (Konar 2007). Fundamentalism can arise wherever traditions are under threat or challenge or are being eroded. Fundamentalism can be created or reinvented. It is much dangerous to the society, since it does not accept the dynamic and varying nature of tradition. The examples of fundamentalism are witch-hunting, head-hunting, polyandry, polygamy, sacrifices of animals and tribal babies, violence against women, beliefs in superstitions, preservation of unscientific, immoral and unethical cultural practices, aversion toward modern scientific, technological and electronic system etc.

Further beliefs, practices, attitudes, fundamentalism, fetishism, dogmatism etc. are also determined by the culture. The sustainability or unsustainability of a community depends on whether its cultural features are adaptive (or favourable) or maladaptive (or unfavourable) to its environmental conditions, under the *ceteris paribus* assumption. Some cultural practices are maladaptive, leading to the decline, and sometimes to the extinction of the communities. For example, witch-hunting, based on tribal culture, and backed up by "cultural tribalism", is treated as legal and justified in the tribal communities of Purulia district in West Bengal.

4. FIELDWORK FINDINGS OF SGS SURVEYED

Name

In the tribal communities of Purulia district, the SG is known as "Jaherasthan", while the Bengali people call it by the name of "Pabitra Kunjaban".

Ownership and Management

Though in other states of India, the SGs are

owned and managed by the three agencies such as (i) the state forest departments, (ii) the revenue and other government departments, and (iii) private family, group, clan, trust, body etc., but in the surveyed tribal communities of Purulia district, each SG is owned and managed by the members of the associated (tribal) village community.

Genderization

The SGs are genderized with respect to (i) deity of the SGs, (ii) priest worshipping the SGs, (iii) interactions with the SGs and, (iv) decisionization of duties or performances. Almost all deities worshipped in the SGs are female. But the all the priests worshipping the SGs are male. Whatever type of interaction with the SGs may be, women involvement and participation are praiseworthy and prioritized. Traditionally, women are led to learn that in the time span of their menstruation, entry into the SGs is a sin that is why, they cease themselves from entering. This is a one kind of religious taboo, sanction or prohibition. Men's interaction with the SGs is infrequent and partial.

Functions

The functions of SGs can be classified into two broad divisions: (i) social functions and (ii) ecological functions. Social functions can, in turn, be subdivided into following sub-social functions: (i) religious functions, (ii) cultural functions, (iii) economic functions and (iv) political functions.

All the foregoing sub-social functions can successively be epitomized as follows:

- (a) As its name implies, any SG is related to a certain kind of deity depending upon the cultural or social characteristics. Most of the ceremonies and rituals are performed in the SGs in order to propitiate the deity. Various animals and/or plants are sacrificed to realize the gentlest boon of the deity. In times of familial crisis or adversity, the family members take vow before the deity for getting rid of the crisis. When crisis is wiped out by the boon of the deity, she is propitiated in terms of various offerings, gifts and/or sacrifices in the form of living animals and/or plants and/or terracotta of animals, birds, humans etc. In most cases, the offerings assume the form of terracotta of horses and elephants. That is why the clay figures of the deities and animals are seen in almost all types of SGs. Some SGs are situated

within the burial grounds or graves for the purpose of cremation, where ancestral spirits are worshipped. In some cases, *SGs* are accompanied by small temples and ponds.

- (b) Various cultural functions and festivals are performed in the *SGs*. Here the people are socialized, assimilated, integrated and moralized by the cultural functions.
- (c) There are some *SGs* from which biomass can be collected. But in most cases, *SGs* are treated as “no-entry zone” due to social or cultural taboos or sanctions. In important festivals, gifts are exchanged in the *SGs*. Sometimes *SGs* are propitiated by the people for the realization of private or social better-off.
- (d) Some *SGs* act as the means of indicating the cultural or ethnic identity. However in most cases, political meeting, conferences etc. occur in order to solve the community conflict, misunderstandings, disputes, distrust, disorder etc.

The ecological functions performed by the *SGs* are as follows:

The *SGs* act as the pool of biological diversity owing to the rigid restrictions imposed by the communal taboos or sanctions against free entry and exit of the people. Due to sustained destruction and degradation of preexisting forests, the *SGs* have become the last refuge for many threatened and endangered plant and animal species. The *SGs* also act as the repository of many medicinal plants. Water resources, particularly in the form of ponds, springs, lakes, streams or rivers, are seen in most of the *SGs*. The water resources act as the last resort for the organisms living in and around the *SGs* along with their water conservation. Thus *SGs* are the traditional tools of preserving biological as well as cultural diversity. Noteworthy that smaller *SGs* among themselves can generate more biological diversity than the several larger *SGs*.

Causes of Emerging Threat to Sustainability of *SGs*

In the age of inchoate sustainability revolution, the *SGs* are also going through the phase of unsustainability syndrome due to the following factors: (a) commercialization of forestry, (b) execution of development projects, (c) diminishing trend in the sacredness (loss of faith in the deities) of *SGs* or increasing trend in the sadness of sacredness of *SGs*, (d) conversion of tribal

people into other religions, (e) voluntary or involuntary Hinduization of tribal people, (f) operation of the “tragedy of common property resources”, (g) colonization by various government and non-government agencies, (h) substitution of tribal culture with Western culture, (i) propensity toward cultural homogenization (or Americanization), (j) operation of “moral hazard” in the atmosphere of asymmetric information, (k) detraditionalization of traditional value system, (l) aversion of current generation toward traditional culture or custom, (m) marketization, monetization and commoditization of diverse facets of human social life, (n) demoralization of irreducible moral values, (o) technologization of indigenous production methods, and (p) lack of mass awareness regarding the intrinsic importance of *SGs*

5. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY PRESCRIPTION

Social unsustainability and ecological unsustainability are positively correlated. We are led to learn that economic factors are much responsible for the emergence of unsustainability. For example, low or absence of income is the sole determinant of the set of key indicators of social and ecological unsustainability, which becomes obvious from the inverted-U-shaped “Environmental Kuznets Curve” (*EKC*) (Selden and Song 1994; Grossman and Krueger 1995). But our survey findings show that cultural factors also play an important role for the emanation of social and ecological unsustainability. Today culture is defined more briefly as a way of life or living of a people, a legacy of tradition handed down from generation to generation and it is that part of the environment created by man. Because of accumulation of tradition, even the simple things that people as animals want are expressed in cultural patterns such as, an animal eats whenever it is hungry, but a human being waits for lunch. How malnutrition, for example, in a community is affected by adverse cultural factors rather than economic factors, will be obvious from the works of different scholars (e.g. Aguilon et al. 1982; Bartholomew and Poston 1970; Botton 1972; Chikermane 1975; Ebomoyi 1988; Kotana-Apte 1977). The cultural elements or features of a community, that create a threat to sustainability of its people, should be designated as cultural tribalism, fundamentalism, fetishism or dogmatism. Further the nature of economy, ecology,

anthropology, politics etc. is also influenced by culture that is why they are respectively named as cultural economy, cultural ecology, cultural anthropology, cultural politics etc. Thus tribal unsustainability is a multi-factored phenomenon instead of being uni-factored. So unless and until maladaptive tribal (or cultural) tribalism can be erased, tribal unsustainability will persist, given the economic status.

So educating the tribal population is the most important weapon for wiping out tribal unsustainability. It is the “push factor”. Confucius said: “Expand knowledge as much as possible. Never do to others what you would not like them to do”. A more basic role of education may be to transform culture or people’s value system (favourably) by improving their knowledge of their own position in wider national and international perspectives (Hayami and Godo 2006). The “pull factor” required to erase tribal unsustainability goes to the present day civilized people, whose intelligent, rational and conscious brain should be embedded with “moral capillary web”. Because “Self-interest-seeking by an individual without due regard to the interests of other community members is counterproductive to the goal of maximizing his own welfare” (Hayami and Godo 2006). Going to give an example of Becker’s (1974) definition of “social interactions” in terms of consumption externality, Hayami and Godo (2006) write that “A’s welfare depends not only on his own personal income and consumption but also on how B looks at A’s income and consumption levels.” So the non-tribal population should go through the process of “remoralization” to conserve the cultural diversity, not coupled with cultural fundamentalisms, to sustain the human species with maximum lifespan, as biological diversity, determined by nature, is needed to sustain the maximum number of non-human species with minimum risk of extinction. Here education acts as a two-way traffic. On the one hand, it enables the general people to look at and treat the backward and underprivileged communities, classes or castes from “conscious, rational and moral” perspective. On the other hand, education civilizes and socializes the backward and underprivileged communities, classes or castes to reduce or rule out the age-old gap between advanced and backward communities. The Education Commission of India (1964-66) strongly emphasized on the education of the tribal people and remarked that “No expenditure is too great

for this purpose”. Though the ultimate fate of all species is extinction, yet premature extermination is too regrettable to reiterate. Poverty is also a vital cause of tribal unsustainability beyond doubt. The success or effectiveness of various development programmes launched by the government is being vitiated due to corrupt and inefficient practices of bureaucrats and politicians. So government should adopt requisite steps to maximize the degree of public sector transparency.

For the restoration of ecological sustainability of the tribal community, the first precondition is the restoration of social sustainability. The forests or hills, where the tribals today live, are designated as “common property resources”, which, though formally government owned, are traditionally conserved by the tribal (or local) communities. In modern society also, if local communities are properly organized, they should be the most effective mechanism, not only for monitoring environmental conditions, but also for negotiating with polluters and lobbying the government. Government regulations against degradation of environment can work most effectively when supported by the monitoring activities of local residents and, further, backed up by markets’ evaluation on eco-friendly business (World Bank 2000). The community mechanism has been considered to be an effective control on common-property or common-pool resources that are subject to exhaustion by overexploitation, while users, who do not pay for the cost, are difficult to exclude (Ostrom 1990). The community mechanism for enforcing rules is everyone’s fear of the eyes and mouths of their fellow community members. In a small community, everyone is watching everyone. Gossip about one’s misconduct is circulated by words of mouths faster than modern communication means, sometimes culminating in social ostracism (Hayami and Godo 2006). It is not surprising that many rural communities in developing economies have failed to strengthen controls on the resource use. Despite the obvious failure of communities, it is dangerous to shift the role of common-property resource management to government. In many developing economies, forests are formally owned by the state. This state ownership has often been a source of forest destruction. Thus, exhaustion of common-property resources due to over-exploitation by “free-riders” – the so called “Tragedy of Commons” (Hardin 1968) – tends to become more pervasive in state-owned than communally

owned lands. There is no reason to deny the potential of rural communities to develop the capacity of managing common-property resources adequately. The appropriate attempt is not to substitute governmental organizations for communities, but to improve the capacity of community organization by such means as education and technical assistance. The first requirement for this strategy is a correct understanding of the community mechanism.

Regarding the status of the *SGs*, it can be stated that both sacred and non-sacred factors are responsible for the degradation of *SGs*. The absolute poverty of the tribal people leads them to undermine the importance of religious activities. They are keen to maintain their own survival at the cost of all other social activities. In some cases, religious superstitions act as powerful means for the conservation of *SGs*. Generation gap is also a determinant of the degradation of *SGs*. The current generation is less interested to attach much importance on the *SGs*. They are being much induced by the globalizing influences induced by globalization. So the inevitable question that should be raised is: How sacred are the sacred groves? Conservation of *SGs* should be prioritized in the areas where protected forest zones are non-existent. Local or tribal community management should be considered as the most effective means of conserving the *SGs*. Our findings indicate that smaller *SGs* among themselves can generate more biological diversity than the several larger *SGs*. Mass awareness programmes such as workshops, seminars, conferences, symposium etc. should be frequently organized to increase the degree of conservation of *SGs*. *NGOs* should be involved in the conservation activities of the *SGs*. The Delhi based *NGO*, PRODAN is spending lot of money and energy to conserve the water resources in the tribal and other backward communities in the Purulia district. It never thinks about the present position and utility of *SGs*. "Actions" are more powerful than the "war of words". But conservation "action" should be prioritized over the "purely academic game" or "war of words" for *SGs*. Small is beautiful and the sum of micro systems gives rise to macro system. So it should not be consistent to undermine the usefulness of the innumerable small *SGs* compared to several larger forests. Political activism, if activated properly, can prevent the worsening condition of both tribal people and the *SGs* preserved by them

through various means and mechanisms. The tribal economy is trapped in the "Low-Level Equilibrium Trap" due to the operation of "Vicious Cycle of Poverty", which is being accentuated due to operation of another trap, called "Debt-trap" caused by non-institutional credit or finance. Credit is an important input for promoting growth and equity in the tribal economy. The institutional credit, particularly bank credit, granted by the nationalized commercial banks, is not only inadequate but also highly unsuitable as it does not suit the attitude and temperament of the tribal people (Sinha 2005). The Integrated Tribal Development Programme is also too elusive to need elucidation. If tribal sustainability is subject to unprecedented threat, how is it possible to imagine the sustainability of the tribal *SGs* preserved on religious taboos and sanctions?

Irrespective of the necessity of cultural diversity, like biological diversity needed to sustain the existence of diverse species in the tiny little spaceship of life, some cultural traditions or traits act as the suicidal input for the culture itself as they are maladaptive instead of being adaptive. The maladaptation of the cultural practices leads to the extinction of the cultures in which people are born and brought up.

Evidences indicate that some tribal taboos are harmful, not benign for the sustainability of the tribal population. Given the requisite economic condition of some tribal families or communities, they are suffering from malnutrition or starvation only due to persistence of such tribal taboos. The "terror of taboos" is not the monopoly of the tribal communities. Even in some Hindu families in India, the physical along with the mental condition of young widows deteriorates for the "terror of Hindu taboos".

Some tribal families or communities do not want their children to get at least literacy owing to the tentacles of taboos. Artificial control of birth is considered as a religious sin. In consequence, child-labour market is being bolstered up. By its very nature, culture is not static or stationary, rather dynamic. Culture should be reconceptualized as a dynamic process of refinement, improvement, progressive (quantitative and qualitative) transformation or upward revision or reformation of way of human life or living toward perpetual survival of our own species and other species on the basis of some rules, regulations and restrictions in the same fashion as the terms agriculture, sericulture as well as blood-culture,

urine-culture etc. are being used. But most of the tribal communities can be likened to the bee-society based on instinct, not on improvement or refinement. In tribal society, tradition, traditionalism and traditionalization are prioritized over detraditionalization and dynamism that is why tribal people fail to come out through breaking the persistent vicious cycle of social and ecological unsustainability. "Tribal culture" is not synonymous with "cultural tribalism" in the same way as "cultural diversity" is not synonymous with "cultural fundamentalism".

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