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BOOK EXCERPT

A new book examines the gap between nature in the laboratory and diverse landscapes

An excerpt from 'A Tryst with Nature: Labour, Self, and Language', by Savyasaachi.

Savyasaachi
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Parth Sanyal/Reuters

My curiosity to know the horizons of modern social life led to the Koitor forest dwellers in Bastar, to the Kuttia Khonds in Phulbani, and to the Kharias in Mayurbhanj, Odisha. I observed the inappropriateness of the theory and practice of the "informant", time-bound interviews, structured questionnaires, thematic-focused group discussions, and other similar tools of data collection. These were "intrusions" into the social life of people by the anthropologists who are positioned as privileged observers.

From the very beginning of discussions on the environment and ecological crisis, the term “nature” has been used to refer to atoms, molecules, physical laws on the one hand; as well to living beings such as dogs, tigers, birds, elephants, and natural landscapes, on the other.

While in the US, New Zealand, and South America the distinction between the indigenous people and the alien outsiders has been easy to make, in India it has not been so easy. There have been several waves of culturally diverse people coming from different parts of the world, intermingling over several generations and belonging equally to the place. For this reason, the parameter of the historically and chronologically “first” or culturally “original” does not hold for India.

However, there are similarities in the way colonisers defined indigenous people in other parts of the world and the forest dwellers in India.

The forest-dwelling tribal people in India and the indigenous people in different continents are witnessing that mainstream efforts continue to destroy their sense of belonging to a place by taking away their land, forests, and waterways for purposes of militarisation; through the formation of nuclear States; the building of large dams; and the construction of reserves of nature.

As international development decisions affect tribal people in India, their participation on international platforms has also increased. How do we see the convergence of the tribal-indigenous response? What is this indigenousness that brings the indigenous and the tribal people together? This chapter highlights the difference between caretakers’ reflexivity and conquerors’ instrumentalist.

According to the “indigenous” perspective, the politics of alterity embedded in the teleology of industrial labour is manifest as genocide. Here, labour was determined in alterity to nature. Its difference from earlier genocides was two-fold. On the one hand, it is based on the view that people’s cultural values determined laziness, rendering them incapable of the labour necessary for the accumulation of capital, and therefore has to be exterminated. On the other hand, it prepared the ground for the emergence of a European subjectivity unsettled by the imperatives of capitalist penetration. This particular subjectivity mapped the “Other”, not only in the outside world (Africa, America, etc), but also internally in Europe and its neighbourhoods (for instance, the Jews in Germany).

This section is based on conversations with Koitors in Abujhmarh, North Bastar, Chattisgarh and Hill Kharias in Similipal Biosphere Reserve, Koraput, Odisha. These people have not sought to become a part of the mainstream. They stay away, and this counts as a radical assertion. The villages I visited in these regions are at a considerable distance from the cities and towns. Here social life, enveloped by dense forest, breathes along with plants and animals. People see their world along with them through a variety of niches, and the canopy brings light from the sun, moon, and stars.

Distance continues to inhibit the frequency of visits and large flows of people. Unlike in the past, village people go to towns and townspeople, largely traders, government officials, political party representatives, NGOs, social movement activists, religious proselytisers, and students and researchers, come in occasionally.

Koitors observed several changes over the past two generations – depletion of the area available for shifting cultivation because of government encroachment on

forests; decrease in the time available for forest regeneration; restrictions placed on access to the forest by government legislation, and recently by armed confrontations between the State and Maoists. Increasingly, erratic rainfall, lowering of the groundwater level, government propaganda in favour of settled rice agriculture for which there was insufficient land, and the demarcation of territory for mega projects, have also led to the depletion of forest land for livelihood.

They also described instances of injustices suffered. Development officers have acquired the habits of careless work, behaving badly with women, and taking away their poultry forcefully. Koitors were distressed with the schools, where their children were compelled to not speak in their mother tongue, which resulted in their returning home to become a burden, because they refused to contribute to any work at home. They ask their families for money and look down upon their elders' way of life in the forest. In recent times, there have been reports of increasing fear because of an escalation in armed confrontation, which undermines their cultural activities and customary practices.

On one occasion several years ago, in order to assert their point of view, when the district magistrate of Bastar visited a village, the Koitors placed before him on one side "several" leaf cups, each with one variety of rice, and on the other side, 'one' leaf cup with several varieties of seeds. They explained that one leaf cup with several varieties of seeds represents one shifting cultivation field on a hillside, where a variety of crops could be harvested. It was most suited to the soil and topography of the forested hills and was a part of their cultural traditions and institutional structures. In contrast, the several leaf cups represented rice cultivation fields. Each leaf cup stood for one flat rice field where only one rice variety could be harvested. It thus required a large quantity of flat land. They further pointed out that in their experience, there was insufficient flat land and for this reason, the rice economy of wage labour was both unstable and unsustainable. The Koitors' preference for shifting cultivation did not, however, register with the magistrate.

The oral tradition records forty-eight years of the shifting cultivation cycle. A forest cleared once for cultivation was left fallow for 48 years.

One harvest lasted roughly for at least two lunar years. A fresh clearance was made every third lunar year. In other words, a new cultivation cycle would begin every third lunar year. In this manner, cultivation rotates over 24 fields and then returns along the same pathway. All clearings cultivated in succession during these years had the same fallow regeneration time.

It is worth considering that a notion of justice determined by the presence of the forest universe is meaningful for social life as such. This notion of justice is concerned with the injustices that stem from the 'denial of language and not listening'. This chapter underlines the hermeneutic injustice consequent to the denial of one's own language to uphold value generated either from utility or scarcity or from the objectification of subjectivity.

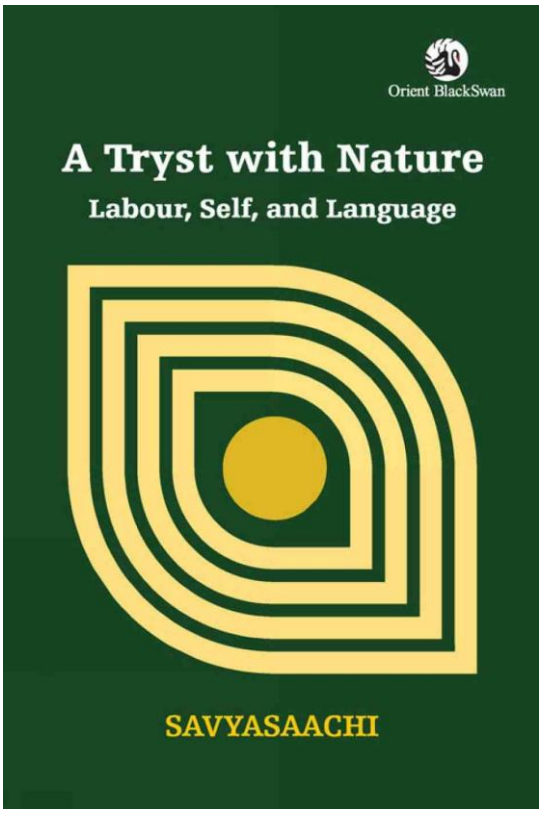
From the Koitors, we learn that in the presence of the universe of the forest, justice lies in recognising that everything that comes to be part of landscapes must also, of necessity, dissolve back into it. Correspondingly, things come to be when remembered and dissolve when forgotten. Both are of equal importance and must happen. Here, reflexivity, an attribute of critical thinking, is nourished by both memory and forgetting when confronted with the question: What is worthy of memory and what is worthy of forgetting?

Koitors have no reluctance to learn a new language. When they communicate with speakers of other language(s), they maintain their own language and the different languages complement each other. This is because they know that no one single language can fulfil *all* the functions of everyday communication.

Language holds memory and different languages remember differently. Equally, a loss of language induces forgetting (a loss of memory). To forget everything and to not forget anything both undermine social well-being. Accordingly, from this perspective, justice is respectful of this association of language and memory.

The fetishising of memory (to try to hold on to everything, occurrence, experience) and forced forgetting (wishing it away) are both unjust. To hold on, not letting them pass away (dissolve) is to privilege remembering, and equally, to wish things away (force them out of memory) is to privilege forgetting. Such injustice is perpetuated when critical thinking entangled in the fetishised memory does not listen to those who do not abide by its norm, and respect diverse ways of exploring and knowing the relation between knowledge and way of life, thereby effectively forcing these other ways out of historical memory.

I saw a glimpse of the cultural manifestations of linguistic suicide in the course of working with the Koitors of Shringarbhum, Bastar, Chhattisgarh, and the Kui people in Phulbani, Odisha. During my stay in Shringarbhum between 1982 and 1987, I met women from villages deep inside the forest, who tattooed their entire faces. When asked the reason for this defacement, they said, “to look ugly”. Not long ago, outsiders would come to their villages to pick up women and abuse them. This was the “only way to protect ourselves”.



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