

# HUMAN LONGING AND FULFILLMENT: AN ADIVASI<sup>1</sup> PERSPECTIVE

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## *Background*

To define 'Human Fulfillment' is not as simple as it appears to be. 'Human Fulfillment' means different things to different people but in common parlance it means fulfilling the physical, psychological, spiritual and social needs of human being. A realization of the meaningfulness in human beings' existence and their struggles are not independent of the promises of 'fulfillment'. Human beings' spiritual nature with their capacity to transcend themselves is what makes them different from other forms of life, either plant or animal. Their perennial quest for understanding the meaning of life and what goes beyond the phenomenon of death keeps their conscience consistently vibrant. They have dreams and desires, needs and aspirations, hopes and promises culminating in fulfillment.

Various religious traditions such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity have their own distinctive world-views regarding human fulfillment. In an Adivasi worldview, too, there is a notion of human fulfillment. But can 'fulfillment' be achieved if the dreams of Adivasis come true? Will a sense of ultimate 'satisfaction', a state of 'desirelessness', a state of total 'liberation' and an 'accomplishment' of a task either sacred or profane, bring about real 'fulfillment' in their life and in the life beyond? These are the questions this paper attempts to examine in the context of the Indian tribes, especially the major tribes of Jharkhand<sup>2</sup>. It tries to explore the Adivasis' sense of

1 'Tribes', 'Indigenous people' 'Adivasis', or the original settlers of the land. It should be noted that Roy Burman (1972: 39 & 1994: 5), on the basis of territorial identification, categorizes the Indian 'tribes' into the following groups: (i) North-East India comprising Assam, NEFA, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura, (ii) the sub-Himalayan region of North-West India comprising the Northern sub-montane districts of Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, (iii) Central and East India comprising West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, (iv) South India comprising Madras, Kerala and Mysore, (v) Western India comprising Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra, and (vi) Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

longing for land that is so very crucial not only for their physical existence but also for their encounter with the supernatural forces. While the metaphor of the 'Jharkhand' idealizes the tribes' concrete fulfillment on the earth in communion with their own people, the promises of communion with the ancestors in the after-life is metamorphosed in the idea of *parom disum* or *merkha* (heaven).

Thus the paper also tries to study the intimate inter-relationship and interconnection between longing and fulfillment and its interpretation in the context of some major proto-australoid<sup>3</sup> indigenous adivasi groups from the newly carved state with their affiliation to the Dravidian and the Austric family of speeches<sup>4</sup>. The paper comprises three dimensions of the dialectics between longing and fulfillment. Longing for Sat-pati-raji and its fulfillment in the newly created state of Jharkhand. The ideology and concept of Jharkhand epitomise adivasis' hopes and aspiration, dreams and visions irrespective of its territorial integrity and identity. Hence the Sat-pati-raji is filled not only with promises and fulfillment but also with promises and challenges. The second section includes the longing for fulfillment in *Parom Disum* or *Merkha*, the abode of God and ancestor. Finally, the adivasi-Christian encounter and in that transition the perception of human longing and fulfillment will be analyzed.

### *No Fulfillment Without Longing*

For the Adivasi, longing and fulfillment are the two sides of the same coin. There is hope in longing; there is also frustration when the hopes are belied

- 2 'Jharkhand' literally means a "forest tract". For over 50 years there was tribal people's movement for a separate Jharkhand state to be carved out of the 26 districts of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. The long cherished dreams of the tribals were partly fulfilled as they finally got the separate state, but only comprising 18 districts bifurcated from the old state of Bihar.
- 3 Racially, tribes can be grouped in three categories, according to Guha: (i) The Proto-Australoid characterized by dark skin colour, sunken nose and lower forehead. Tribes such as the Munda, the Uraon, the Ho, the Gond, the Khond, etc., predominantly bear this racial strain; (ii) The Mongoloid are the tribal people of the Himalayan region; (iii) In the Negrito racial stock fall the Kadars of Kerala and the Andamanese islanders.
- 4 Scholars opine that the tribal people of India may be classified into three linguistic families: (i) Dravidian speech family such as Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Gondi, Koi spoken by Kandh of Orissa, Malto of Rajmahal hills, the speeches of Toda, Paliyan, Chenchu, Irula and Kadar; (ii) The Austric family of speeches, also known as Munda speech family, including Mundari, Ho, Kharia, Santhali, Bhumij and so on; (iii) the third group of speech family Tibeto-Chinese, spoken by the tribes of Mongol stock. This family is divided into two branches Tibeto-Burman, and Siamese-Chinese. The tribes of Assam, Meghalaya and other parts of Northeast India speak one or the other languages of this family.

and the dreams shattered. Fulfillment is never devoid of longing. For all the major agriculturist Adivasis in Jharkhand the longing and fulfillment can be understood as having "plenty to eat and to drink, cattle, crops, land and children".<sup>5</sup> Anything against this goal is a serious offence. Hence, offences such as theft, adultery, murder, incest, false testimony, calumny, neglect of parents, and any violation of social customs, are considered to be sinful.<sup>6</sup>

What does an Adivasi long for? Adivasis irrespective of their racial affiliations have two kinds of longing: personal and communitarian. At the personal level they have the dreams which they try to make come true in their capacity as individuals. At the level of the community their longing is guided and determined by the collective faith-experience of the community. Adivasi fulfillment, either personal or collective, has two dimensions: this worldly and the other-worldly. While at the first level an attempt is made to realize the network of relationships with beings while still on earth, at the second level there is an effort to understand and interpret a synthesis of those human relationships with the divine in the life beyond. At both the levels it is a matter of faith and one's own conviction either individually or collectively. In fact, individuals receive their faith in and through the community. Their incorporation into the community ensures, through the process of socialization and inculturation, an inculcation of the ethos and values of the group.

### *I. Adivasi Fulfillment in Sat-Pati-Raji, This World*

#### Happiness: the Key to Fulfillment

'Happiness' is the key to liberation or total emancipation. One cannot claim to be liberated without attaining happiness. Happiness is the criterion of a successful life either here on earth or in the life beyond. For Adivasis this happiness is collective. It is the collectivity that gives the individual a sense of achievement, a sense of satisfaction, a sense of direction and a sense of accomplishment. This happiness, for the Oraon, is articulated in terms of three C's, namely "cattle, crops and children" as indicators of happiness and prosperity for their family<sup>7</sup>. They even envisage their life after death as having plenty of fields to plough, with lots of cattle, children and bumper crop. Thus the criteria of happiness are underlined very clearly in the Oraon worldview.

5 Parapullil (1977), 27 ff.

6 Ibid., as quoted from Cordon, C. S. in 'The Kharias and their Customs'.

7 See Kujur (2000), 156 ff.

What it is going to be like in the life after death is reflected in what it is now on this earth. The Munda, the Kharia, the Santhal, and the Ho, have similar criteria for their fulfillment. They are basically agriculturists and hence a longing for the land and a rich harvest is justified. The Kharia have a special respect and reverence for cattle and the latter are a part of their household as they are crucial to their survival. Children continue the generation of the parents. Every tribe looks up to them for its perpetuation. Therefore children who are well versed into the norms and values of the tribe, those who can uphold the dignity and pride of the tribe, are always held in high esteem. The philosophy behind their love for the land manifests a network of relationships, both in this world and in the next. The Adivasi characteristics of simplicity, truthfulness, contentment, hard work, hospitality, generosity, independence, a care-free attitude, egalitarianism and love for peace, etc., are indicative of their harmonious life.<sup>8</sup> Thus Soares-Prabhu is convinced that in the midst of individualism, greed, aggressive competition and growing alienation from nature, the tribal values of solidarity with nature and egalitarianism, should show others the way.<sup>9</sup>

The experience of harmony and solidarity with nature, neighbour and the Supreme Being in *Sat-pat-raji*, is reflected in the longing for *Jhar-khand*, a forest tract, separate from the state of Bihar, as shall be seen in the next section.

### Longing for *Jhar-khand*: the Land of Promise and Fulfillment

#### Land-Life symbiosis

Land is central to the tribes' existence. Without land they simply do not exist. In absence of land there is no space for their social, cultural, economic and ecological life. Sanjay Bosu Mullick opines that "identity of the indigenous peoples rests on two vital elements, space and speech". Spatial habitat or the geographical territory of their ancestors is their birthright. That part of "Mother earth" has been passed on to them by their fore-parents. Therefore, the rationale for their struggle for a separate land can be justified in terms of three J's, namely, JAMIN (the land), JAL (the water), and JUNGLE (the forest), which belong to them from time immemorial.<sup>10</sup>

A rationale for Jharkhand separate state is underlined by CBCI Commission for Scheduled Castes and Tribes and Backward Classes in the memoran-

8 See Kullu (1994), 88ff.

9 See Soares-Prabhu (1994), 85 ff.

10 Mullick (1993), 13.

dum submitted to the honourable Prime Minister of India, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee on 01. 08. 2000, for declaration of Jharkhand state. The highlights of the memorandum are: (i) it is a demand for more than hundred years, (ii) increasing exploitation and oppression of the Tribal people, (iii) inadequacy of past measures, (iv) to safeguard Jharkhand identity, (v) Jharkhand: rich land but poor people, (vi) Jharkhand not Vananchal<sup>11</sup>.

Jharkhand stands for life and all that is pro-life. Vananchal represents all that is anti-Jharkhand, anti-life. Victory of Jharkhand is the defeat of Vananchal. Land for the indigenous people has emotional quality. Land is their altar for sacrifice to God and to the spirits. That is why Adivasis are instrumental in safeguarding land and its produce. As Mullick puts it, "a part of the virgin forest is preserved since the settlement of the village as the sacred grove, the abode of the Mother earth, to be propitiated regularly. The spirits of all the natural objects are also propitiated as benevolent ones. The spirits of the ancestors are believed to be residing in the household itself who protect the family from all kinds of evils".<sup>12</sup> Gadgil and Vartak emphasize that the religious practice of preserving the sizeable patches of forests, known as 'sacred groves' are responsible for the "preservation of isolated specimens such as *peepal (ficus religiosa)* or *umber (ficus glomerata)* which are often preserved and worshipped even without any association with a deity"<sup>13</sup> This is the functional use of the sacred grove inborn in the tribal system of preservation of the forest, intertwined with their religious life.

### Rape of the earth

For Adivasis, land, forest and water belong to the Mother earth, and they only enjoy usufructuary rights over them; anybody cannot own them; they can neither be sold nor exchanged, nor can they be mortgaged or privatized. The social values that go along with their emotional bond to land, are "egalitarianism in social life, symbiotic relationship with physical nature, participation in performing arts and harmony and co-existence in inter-communal living."<sup>14</sup> However, according to a study as reported by Jaydas, "Every biosphere reserve in the country is on Adivasi land. Every major dam since the 1970s has been submerging Adivasi land. Every wildlife sanctuary in India is on Adivasi homelands. Every National Park is totally Adivasi. Of the mines in

11 A synonym for Jharkhand given by the Hindutva forces to the tribal dominated areas, to counter the impact of the struggle for a separate Jharkhand state.

12 See Mullick (1993), 13.

13 Gadgil & Vartak (1998), 82-88.

14 Mullick (1993), 14.

India, a majority — 90% — is on Adivasi land. Adivasi lands produce most of India's coal, bauxite, and mica. Almost 50% of the mineral wealth of India come from Adivasi areas. Yet 85% of the Adivasis are below the poverty line. They form 50% of those forcibly evicted from their homelands by "National Development Projects", forming about 8% of India's people, the Adivasis predominate in about 20% of the most inhospitable, inaccessible yet perhaps the richest tracts of the land. Yet only one per cent have any legal recognition of their land rights"<sup>15</sup>

### Permeating Sacredness of the Earth

The divine origin of the land and its stewardship by the tribes is an open secret. Singbonga, Dharmes, Chando Baba, Ponmesor, Thakur Jiv, the gods of their respective tribes have given the land to the tribe to be taken care of. Nirmal Minz rightly points out that the personhood of Adivasi is rooted in their concept of land. From earth comes all sustenance to human beings and non-humans. No land, no personhood of the Adivasis! Therefore ownership of the land alienates it from the user. For the Tribe land and forest, water and air and all nature's bounty are gifts of God. No king, no landlord, no Government has ever created the land. Land was there from time immemorial and the Adivasis have been using this gift as stewards and not as owners.<sup>16</sup> On account of the Adivasi-land symbiosis, land forms a major part of their being in terms of culture, religion, socio-cultural organization, philosophy, history, economy, and geography. An Adivasi honours, respects, reveres and protects the land. The Adivasi intimacy with land results in a vast repository of knowledge of the flora and fauna, which have sustained them for centuries. The land forms the core of the education of the Adivasi to teach them how to exist in harmony with nature, so much so that "a tree in the hamlet ceases to be merely a tree, but an important member of the village community, so also animals and birds."<sup>17</sup> It is said, "No other community can understand the link between the Adivasi and the land than the one that knows and shares this sacred link of the "Holy Land". For the Adivasi, their land is the "Mecca" of Islam, Jerusalem of the Christian and the Jew, the Bodh Gaya of the Buddhist. The sacredness permeates even the offspring of the land — the animals, birds, trees, rivers, and the people."<sup>18</sup>

15 Jaydas (1993), 34.

16 See Minz (1993), 68-69.

17 Jaydas (1993), 34.

18 Ibid., 36.

## Human Dignity and Assertion of Identity

'Land' gives the tribe a sense of dignity, pride and identity. An Adivasi even with a small piece of land will give his life to save it. But if he has no land, he can be utterly helpless, subservient and subjugated like a bonded labourer without any dignity. No wonder why there is so much resistance in the face of displacement due to the so-called 'development' projects in Jharkhand. Ideologically, tribal identity is articulated in terms of "geographical, historical, ethnological, linguistic and other features."<sup>19</sup>

Adivasis are basically peace-loving people but if their self-esteem is hurt they can be dangerous. Most of the developmental projects in the Jharkhand area have an adverse impact on the socio-religious system of the tribes as their *Sarnas* (sacred groves), *Sasans* (burial places of their ancestors), and the various spirits associated with their religious life, in their opinion, cannot be rehabilitated. So intimate is the relationship between nature and *Adivasi* that the influence of the former has penetrated the very ethos and world-view of the Adivasis. They have evolved norms, values, beliefs and practices and other socio-cultural mechanism which regulate the use of the natural resources around them in a way that is always sustainable. Their world-view is cosmo-centric and not anthropo-centric. Nature, man and spirit form a complex and are inter-linked. In such a world-view where nature-human-spirit form an integrated whole, there is no 'I' and 'the other' dichotomy; nature is part and parcel of human-spirit complex, and human-spirit is not independent of nature. What spontaneously follows from this relation is reverence for life.

That is precisely why there have been so many movements either cultural, social, agrarian or political whenever there are attacks of the 'aliens' on the tribal life-support system, resulting in Adivasi impoverishment and migration. A brief survey of some movements in India shows that the tribal conflict with the British, such as 'the Santhal Struggle' in 1860s and 1870s; 'the Bhagat movement' among the Oraons of Chotanagpur about 1895; 'the Gond movement' in Madhya Pradesh in the 1930s, and so on, had the agrarian problems at their root, although some protagonists of those movements, as a fallout of the influence of Bhakti movement, emphasized on the purification of the tribe as well.<sup>20</sup> Even the review of Surajit Sinha (1972) on the "Tribal Solidarity movements in India" substantiates the above argument. Sardari Larai (1885), Birsa Movement (1895-1900), Kol Movement (1932), the Santhal Movement (1857-58), the Kacha Naga Movement (1880s), Naxalbari Movement (1967),

19 Mullick (1993), 33.

20 See Mahapatra (1972), 403-407.

Girijan Movement at Srikakulam (1968–69), Birsa Dal movement in Ranchi (1968–69), all had the problem of identity crisis in some way or the other.<sup>21</sup> There was a danger of an onslaught from the 'outsiders' and dominant cultures in terms of exploitation, oppression and dispossession of the Adivasis from their lands and thus alienating them geographically, historically, religiously, psychologically and culturally. This was unacceptable to the tribes, hence armed resistance. Though the rulers, administrators, anthropologists and historians, brand these armed struggles as 'revolts', 'rebellions', 'insurrections', 'secessionism', etc., I prefer calling them 'liberation movements' or 'freedom struggle' for fulfillment, setting the tone for freedom from colonial regime and also from the neo-colonial powers of the post-independent era.

The experience of fulfillment already on this earth can be understood in terms of communion with the divine, the tribe, and the entire cosmos. Qualities such as simplicity, truthfulness, honesty, joviality, etc., are associated with the Adivasis but in the face of problems such as indebtedness, land-alienation, drinking, displacement, migration, corruption, exploitation, oppression, etc., it is not easy for the latter to maintain their traditional qualities. The problems of the tribes at present are in the same direction with a lot more subtlety and complexity. The question of identity, for instance, is as relevant as ever. It is in the context of their relationship with other communities either dominant or subservient. The issue of the tribes' identification with the Hindus is a major problem. There are other similar problems, which come as blocks to their realization of their fulfillment here on earth.

### Down to Earth Fulfillment

The concept of the Jharkhand as a separate state stems from the experience of 'oppression' and 'subjugation' of the Adivasis by the dominant society. It needs to be understood in the context of the 'liberation movements such as 'Munda Raj', Gond Raj, Naga Raj, Bodoland, Uttarakhand, Chattisgarh, etc. The philosophy behind the Jharkhand separate state, dreams of a land where there be no poverty, no land alienation, no tears in the eyes of the Adivasis in the region; that there flow milk and honey in the mineral rich region with the developmental programmes reaching the poorest of the poor in the remotest areas possible, that no multi-nationals step in the land to suck the blood of the poor Adivasis. Since its very inception the philosophy of Jharkhand stands for the struggle against all evil forces epitomized in the concept 'diku' meaning 'they', 'others', 'foreigners', 'strangers' or 'outsiders'. Hence a sense of fulfillment would inculcate a liberation from the clutches of the 'jagirdars',

21 See Sinha (1972), 410.

'jamindars', moneylenders, contractors, and all exploitative agents who came along with Raja Durjansal after his return from Gwalior jail in 1628 and were given villages as jagirs to collect revenue. This was the first contact of the tribes with the Hindus who were courtiers in the palace of the first tribal king. The problems that the tribals faced from time immemorial were basically agrarian. An Adivasi fulfillment would mean a total liberation, which would entail the restoration of the lost land, the lost pride and the lost dignity. Now that Jharkhand separate state has become a reality will there be a holistic emancipation as well? Perhaps we will have to wait and see.

The issues of human rights and social justice, which the Constitution of India tries to redress, continue to be violated. Atrocities on the tribes by the police, in league with the local Zamindars and the powers-that-be, continue in a different form. Despite the Constitutional safeguards the Adivasis continue to be harassed. The dominant societies still look down upon them as inferior, pre-literate, pre-scientific, *vanvasi* (forest dwellers) and as primitives. Education, industrialization, modernization and other such processes of social change have, to a large extent, changed the pejorative connotation of the term 'tribe'. However, the above processes of change have also alienated the tribes from their own culture. They have faced identity crisis; so much so that some of them are apologetic that they are Adivasis. Some of them are found to have dropped their clan names, which is a definitive sign of their identity crisis. Can there be a real fulfillment in this loss of identity? Is mere progress in social and economic status a criterion for human fulfillment? In a tribal society economic and social considerations are only secondary, as they are basically an egalitarian society. There is no ranking, no caste-type hierarchy. In their Panchayats all of them are equal irrespective of their economy. The institution of *Parha*, which is a confederation of villages, takes care of the inter-village disputes. An Adivasi, therefore, identifies himself/herself with this social organization, which has suffered a major set back with the introduction of the British system of governance. Can a tribal still find fulfillment in the new system? It is not practical at this juncture of human history to revert to the traditional style of life. Does it mean that the Adivasis will never have the fulfillment on this earth and so they should accept it as Singbonga's will and wait for the endtimes when they can find liberation in the after-life in the company of the Supreme Deity and the ancestors?

Accountability to the community, family, and to the members of the tribe finds its resonance in their interests, welfare, vision for future, hospitality, hard work, honesty, simplicity, equality and humility. Anti-Adivasi attitudes of greed, pride, disobedience, and contempt are the biggest obstacles on the way to human fulfillment. These anti-life tendencies the tribes would never long for. These are the tendencies that cause the 'Rain of Fire' and 'Deluge' in

the genesis myths of the Uraon, the Kharia, and the Munda.<sup>22</sup> In the pollution of the cosmos by the Asur iron smelters, the resultant ecological imbalance and the creatures' cry to the Supreme Being for mercy and deliverance from being extinct, saw the messengers being sent to the Asurs in the forms of a crow, a crane, and finally in the incarnation of the Supreme Being Himself in the disguise of the Khasra-Khusro boy. The tribal longing for harmony and union with their fellow beings get ruptured by the fact of the aliens disturbing the cosmological order. Not that the tribal society has ever been purely pristine and isolated from external influences; it is rather a reflection on the faith experience with its primordial characters. The message is clear: if one tries to disturb the original harmony and balance, s/he will never be spared. But this is not really punishment for the sake of punishment. It is not at all divine retribution to teach God's creatures a fitting lesson. It is a strategy to bring the defaulters to their senses in order to make them conscientious of their fellow beings. Selfishness has no place in the tribal worldview. A selfish person is necessarily greedy. His/her greed leads him/her further to neglect the communitarian dimension of his/her life. The moment one becomes individualistic, others simply do not matter for him/her. There is a process of alienation, thus, from community, self and from the divine. The dream of a true tribal is always to be in harmony with one another, which implies his/her sense of fulfillment within the parameter of the tribal society but in relation to the cosmos. The genesis myths of the tribes underscores the aim of creation, that is, to ever live in ecological harmony with the cosmic community.

## II. *Fulfillment in Parom Disum or Merkha: Abode of God and Ancestors*

*Parom Disum*, the world of immortality or the world of the ancestors, is also known as *Bitarpur* in the Munda tradition. Among the Uraons this state of bliss is known as *merkha*. This state of life is beyond death. It is known as the world across yonder, the world over there, and the inner indwelling. In the words of Martin Topno, "This *parom disum* is looked upon as a world separated from our world by some mighty barrier such as is formed by an impassible chain of mountains or an unaffordable river or a boundless ocean. How do they conceive the nature of this barrier, which separates those of this world from those of the world across? Not in anything that can be expressed in term of distance, height, or depth; for the *parom disumreko* (those of the world across) are not thought of as living in far away places, since they dwell in the

22 See Van Exem 91982), 41-44.

huts of their nearest relatives, in streams, rivulets, fields, and mountains of their villages; and Singbonga, the Lord of all, is explicitly declared to be everywhere and to see everything. These two worlds are rather conceived as co-penetrating each other, and yet as not possessed of any means of direct inter-communication."<sup>23</sup>

Death in the tribal worldview is inevitable and yet a mere transition to another way of life that is invisible. Death is not an end but a beginning of a life very similar to the earthly life. Otherwise how could the Chottanagpur Adivasis explain the rituals of the dead before the burial? *Gami* among most of the Jharkhand tribes, *Ekh mankhna* and *Koha Benja* among Oraons, *umbul ader* among the Mundas, *Kaman* among the Kharias, and so on, are the rituals of the deceased and they point to the Adivasi belief system of longing for and fulfillment in a communion with the Supreme God called by various names by different tribes. In the Oraon genesis myth narrated by John Lakra<sup>24</sup> Dharmes made human beings "in a mould like tiles", gave food to them and to all creatures "men monkeys, ants-insects, tiger-bears". God's care and concern — its realization is happiness. Dharmes's company, God walks with human beings. He is not an otiose God, far above in the sky; He is the Dharmes of the tribe, caring for them, providing sustenance to "sinners, enemies to all" without overlooking anyone. This God-experience for them is an experience of fulfillment.

There is also an experience of corruption, injustice, insensitivity, pollution, exploitation and all that is evil, bad, disgusting, frustrating, anti-life, etc., that make human existence apologetic. This situation needs to be rectified for the continuation of the cosmos, for the perpetuation of the entire humanity. The regularization of human life is done in harmony with nature and neighbour. Anything evil, for instance, 'evil eye' or 'evil mouth' that may have a negative impact on their children, cattle and crops could be neutralized by 'bhakh khandna' (neutralizing the effect of the evil eye and evil mouth) ceremony. Thus focus of Adivasi life is prosperity, which brings happiness in terms of bumper crops, bumper cattle, marriage of the adults and multiplication of human beings all over *Sat-pati-raji*.

### From the Body to the Imperceptible Self

Scholars like Hoffmann<sup>25</sup> and Van Exem have analyzed the constituent elements of the human being in the Munda tradition. The four constituent ele-

23 Topno (1978), 7.

24 See Lakra, J. (1984), 33-55.

25 See Hoffmann (1930), 3619.

ments of the human being in the Munda worldview, namely (i) *Horomo* or *Hormo* (Body), (ii) *Man* or *Mon* (Mind, Intellect), (iii) *Ji* or *Jiu* (Soul), and (iv) *Roa* (the Imperceptible self of the human being), are crucial to the understanding of the human fulfillment. 'Horomo', the first element is the body produced by the parents. It is flesh and blood, composed of various organs, i. e., eyes, ears, hands, legs, nose etc., for multiple functions.

*Mon*, the mind or intellect, is responsible for thinking and reasoning. *Ji* is the life principle infused by God at procreation or conception. It is seen in the creation myth where "Haram" puts *Ji* into the clay figure and makes it alive. *Ji* is intimately connected with the body. It grows, matures, and becomes old with the aging body. What is of our importance here is the Munda belief that the *Ji* is immortal. At death a person's body returns to the earth, but the *Ji* goes to 'parom disum' (the world beyond) or to 'bitarpur' (the inner dwelling). It is either punished or rewarded there by Singbonga, for it is responsible for man's good or bad deeds on earth.

### Union of Shades, Bones: A Divine Communion

For the Munda even after death the 'roa' or 'umbul' (the disembodied soul) continues living. On the basis of this belief only the spirit of the deceased is brought back through a ceremony called 'umbul ader' (sheltering the spirit) which is conducted seven days after the burial. The 'umbul ader' ceremony marks the homecoming of the deceased person. This sets all the fears to rest as the spirit of the dead is said to settle down happily with Singbonga and the ancestors. The philosophy behind the 'umbul ader' ceremony and its feeding at the grave every evening is that in death the spirit of the dead becomes an outcaste and the family has to feed it separately until the spirit is sanctified.

This shows a spiritual solidarity among the dead and the alive. The *umbul ader* ritual is not just an empty rite. It is indeed a symbolic action of the Munda religious worldview. The immortal *roa* which is known as 'umbul' till it is taken into the *ading*, becomes *ora bonga* (the house spirit) by the *umbul ader* (*ading*) ceremony. It joins the ancestors in the *ading* and stays with them for ever. It is united with Singbonga through the union with the ancestors. It prays to Singbonga for the welfare of the family. In response the head of the family offers it rice and curry in the *ading*, and expresses the relationship with the deceased who has now become the *ora-bonga*.

The ritual of 'Jang-Topa' or the 'Second Burial' also symbolizes their continuous solidarity with the departed ones. The sacrificial victim symbolizes a living worship to Singbonga and a living memory of the deceased. The function of the ritual is to unite the Mundas and strengthen their bond. This is also a reminiscent of the eternal happiness and a state of bliss after death. It is also an occasion for purification. It reminds one about a great future, a hope

for eternal life, happiness and eternal fulfillment. Thus life here on earth is full of hope and promises because their communion with Singbonga and the deceased ancestors is a matter of joy and happiness. Thus the Munda fulfillment is attained through this very communion.

According to Dehon, two main rituals of the deceased, namely: (i) *Ekh mankhna* (Chhain Bhitrana) or calling back the light shade of the departed into the house, and (ii) the *koman* or the re-uniting of the heavy shade with the shades of their ancestors, are reminiscent of the tribe's communion with the ancestors and the Supreme Being.<sup>26</sup> The ceremony of *Harbona* or *Koha Benja* is a sequel to this. The Uraons are not satisfied with the reunion of the shades. They want also the reunion of the bones. Relatives over whom they put some rice, native gin and money, collect the bones. Then they take this urn to the river, which holds the bones of their ancestors. The *Bhuinyars* (first settlers and proprietors of their fields) have a particular spot called *kundi* in the river where they deposit the bones of all the members of the family. The *Koha benja* is celebrated in the month of January. After the banquet in honour of the dead, a procession is taken out to accompany the bones to their last resting-place. *Nasre*, namely the ancestors gone to *Merkha*, personifies the *panch* of the heavy shades. *Pachbal* personifies the light shades that remain with their relatives.<sup>27</sup>

There is no hell for them, no place of punishment. They say, they go to *merkha*, which corresponds to heaven. The Red Indians speak of the happy hunting grounds and the Uraons imagine something like the happy ploughing grounds where everybody will have plenty of rice-beer to drink after their labour. Hence, they have no anxiety at all about their future life, provided that they conform to all the customs imposed on them by the *panchayat* of the other world, which they personify under the name *Nasre*. All their anxiety is about this world, and all their religious practices tend only to worldly things, namely to get good crops and be free from sickness. All evils are attributed to the 'evil eye' and 'evil mouth'. In such cases they have recourse to Dharmes in the 'Palkhansna', i. e., the breaking of teeth.<sup>28</sup>

### Separation and Communion — From Death to Life

Death is always mourned whether it is of an old person or an infant, whether it is a natural death or unnatural. The difference, however, in the case of the unnatural death is that there is fear in the minds of people. The one dying of

26 See Dehon (1906), 121-181.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

'dubal' (drowning), 'pasal' (murder), 'tangkal' (suicide) is said to turn into 'muan bonga' or harmful spirits. Such people have no hope of fulfillment. Thus there is hope only for those dying a natural death. In the category of 'unredeemable' spirits come also the infants who have not been formerly incorporated into the tribe through the initiation ceremony called 'chchatti'. Those dying in a state of 'chchilan' (ostracism) are also meted out the same treatment. In Christian terminology their 'salvation' is not possible. Decision of the 'Panchayat' is final in matters relating to tribal identity. A person endangering tribal solidarity and peacefulness by way of violating taboos is bound to be excommunicated. It is like public conviction. Parapullil mentions three kinds of punishment among the Oraon, Santal and Munda tribes: (i) Ritual separation (e. g. birth, death in a family); (ii) Ostracising from the community for such crimes as inter-tribal marriage, theft; (iii) Total exclusion (Bitlaha) from the community (e. g. for marriage with a non-tribal, also called 'adultery'). In the wake of any or all of the above, reconciliation is a communal event<sup>29</sup>, and in the event and experience of reconciliation there is fulfillment.

The event of excommunication is symbolically neutralized among some tribes by killing a fowl or a goat and the excommunicated drinking the victim's blood. This is the re-incorporation into the community. This is also an emancipatory sacrifice. Panchayat represents the community. The 'Sirpanch' receives water/beer from the culprit's hands symbolising readmission and acceptance. Since the separation is communitarian, reconciliation, too, has to be a communal event. The Mundas have a belief that a bad person cannot obtain happiness after death. The bad are deprived of the community of the ancestors. The separation from the tribe is the greatest punishment for the tribes all over, either it be the Munda, the Oraon, the Kharia, the Ho, the Santal, the Andaman Islanders. It is the experience of 'hell' for them, for without the tribe they fail to attain the destiny set for them.

### III. *Adivasi-Christian Encounter and Human Fulfillment:*

#### Twofold Liberation of the Converts

A discussion on human fulfillment in the context of tribes cannot be complete unless and until the impact of Christianity on the tribes is incorporated into it. It is a fact that the missionary pioneers made a break through in the God-forsaken, impenetrable, and alien tribal lands all over the country. The Christian missionaries of different denominations penetrated the Indian Adivasi

29 See Parapullil (1977), 39.

communities living in different geographical zones. Whereas in the tribal belt of the newly carved Jharkhand the Lutherans came in 1845, the Evangelists started their work in 1849, and the Catholics in 1885. Was it the "saving souls" which would give Adivasis a sense of fulfillment? What about the sociological problems of the alienation of land, exploitation, oppression and atrocities? Various Churches tried to respond to the signs of the times in their own limited way within the theological framework of the bygone era. Salvation of soul was indeed very important to them. But the liberation of the Adivasis in terms of their economy and society was equally important. Hence, a liberation from the clutches of the (i) Zamindars, and (ii) 'bhuts' or spirits, gave them socio-economic and psycho-religious fulfillment in the true sense of the term. That was the main reason for the thousands of Adivasis embracing Christianity. Much before the arrival of Lievens in Chotanagpur, the Protestant Churches were involved in the works of social justice. The tribes' hopes of liberation were confirmed as they had millenarian-type expectations of a messiah coming and saving them from their impoverished situation. Lievens fought court cases for them and behold hundreds of thousands of Adivasis rushed to him to convert to Christianity.

### Notion of Collective Liberation

Lievens did not baptize individuals. He baptized villages. It means that he had understood the pulse of the tribal society and the fabric of their social organization. If he had baptized individual Adivasis they would have been ostracized from their community. Ostracism has serious consequences for an Adivasi. Ostracism is social ex-communication. This implies that the rest of the tribe or the whole village for that matter would have no association with the defaulter. It is like 'dead' while still alive. There would be no interaction with that family. Not only there is no association with the family while on this earth, there is also no place for that man in the company of Singbonga and the ancestors after death. Thus they have a collective notion of salvation. Liberation comes only through the tribe. Outside the tribe there is no emancipation in their worldview. Does it not sound orthodox like "no salvation outside the Catholic Church?" Not at all! Adivasis are not concerned theoretically about the salvation of others in their respective ethnic groups. Their worldview is what matters to them. They, unlike Christianity, are not "busy with the body counts", that is, their concern is not the salvation of other cultures by converting them to their tribe. This is something beautiful as they have deep respect for other cultures. In their worldview other cultures have their own identity and it is unthinkable to convert them to their religion. However, it is true that in inter-tribal marriages a ritual process of 'restoration' and 'reparation' is made by offering sacrifice to the ancestors and by making the

defaulters drink the blood of the sacrificial victim. Thus there is room for reconciliation; there is space for other cultures and religions as well.

### Ancestors, the Invisible Guardians

The benevolent spirits of the deceased are considered as the guardians of those still living on this earth. They protect the cattle, crops, property and people. In the hierarchy of the supernatural beings they do not occupy a place as high as that of Singbonga. That is why the spirits are not worshipped. They are only propitiated and placated. Thus in the Munda religion the Christian concept of 'salvation' is understood as communion with Singbonga in the after life. Thus Singbonga becomes the centre of their life here on earth and in the life beyond. 'Janau suku' (eternal happiness) for the Munda is possible only in and through Singbonga and their ancestors. There is 'suku banowa' (no eternal happiness) apart from Singbonga. Umbul ader is a sacrificial and ritualistic means to attain communion with Singbonga. 'Sirma disum' refers to a heavenly state, or 'heaven' in Christian terminology. Thus 'janau suku' is in 'Sirma disum'. Etymologically, the terms 'umbul' meaning 'spirit' and 'ader' meaning 'to enter into', refer to the spirit of the deceased entering into the abode of Singbonga. This is the final state of liberation and fulfillment every Adivasi hopes for.

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