Locating the ethical: Understanding sustainability through the Baiga's association with its forests

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings into question the developmental understanding of nature and the manner in which it has shaped (wo)man's relationship with it. Existence is in relationalities. It is in our relatedness with the other, and the practice of it that gives shape to our sense of ethic. The paper then asks what has been (wo)man's relatedness with nature, and what bearing has it brought onto our ethics? How can unilateral and material relatedness, which has extraction as its main (and perhaps the only) motive, ever give birth to an ethic of co-existence and care? And without such ethic, how can one bring to life the very question of sustainability? The paper, informed by the eco-feminist thought, challenges the dominant tendencies of western thought which hovers around dualisms, categorizations, hierarchical classifications, and particular understandings of ownership. Such tendencies can't host pluralities and are reductionist towards diversity of meaning systems, sense of relatedness and ways of being.

The research work, undertaken in Kandawaani village of BaigaChak (situated in Samnapur block of district Dindori, Madhya Pradesh) adopted participatory and immersive approach. Thus, the theme of research was co-identified along with the inhabitants of the village, the Baiga. As the researcher lived-in-with the Baiga, the question of forest and community's relationship with it became the central theme of inquiry. The fast reducing forest along with the various life-forms that it hosts got featured into the community's interactions with me.

The paper attempts to formulate the problematic in regard to nature, and locates it in western intellectual (and historical colonial) disposition towards nature. The paper then inaugurates the possibility of realizing the ethical from within the Baiga life-world. The paper, though wary of nostalgia for clinging adivasi particularism (a blind glorification of the particular), problematizes the tendency of rootless universalism (blind to the existence of the particular) which has informed most of the (developmental) policy discourse on Baiga and has thus birthed a particular modern environmental subjectivity. It is in midst of this complex interaction going on in between the modern environmental subjectivity and the age-old Baiga subjectivity, that the self of today's Baiga is located. It is from this interaction that one may hope to uncover or perhaps recover an ethical way of being with nature which has hitherto been foreclosed under the dominant aegis of modern thought. It is here, in my transformative praxis with the Baiga (a kind of praxis in which the self-other exist in relational continuum, are mutually constitutive and thus encased in a mutually transformative mould) that I mark my methodological departure in regard to knowingness. With the Derridian conception of
l'avenir, the paper asks if we can rethink our methodology of knowing, a knowing which comes without posing a questionnaire, a knowing which receives the unanticipated arrival of the Other, a knowing which is situated in being with the Other and gets itself unfolded in associations with the Other. A knowingness which can help understand the traditional Baiga subjectivity through the community's tradition of storytelling wherein the tradition (in practice) itself is a repository of the said subjectivity. In this realm of knowing the Baiga, can one reach an understanding of the forest which doesn't see it as a (re)source of utility and/or property? What kind of ethic generates when one sees the forest not as a natural resource but a dwelling, or perhaps a source of healing? The paper doesn't claim conclusive answers to these questions but stresses upon the need to ask these questions, it stresses upon locating the problematic in human's relationship with nature. The Baiga, traditionally living-in-(with) forests, have an intimate knowing (which perhaps is much more than just cognitive knowing) of the forest and have their own traditional healing system wherein they practice healing through the forest. One then pushes the frontier of relatedness further and asks: Can there be a possibility of looking at forest as a living and breathing organism or perhaps a living relative (as posed by Kristi Leora Gansworth & Karen Werner) wherein the concern for sustainability is inherently addressed? Perhaps, it is not even possible to ask the question of sustainability without locating the ethical. From the time spent with the Baiga, there have been insights which suggest that the women of Kandawaani have ways to show the possibility of an ethical being with the forest. When some of these women come together to recover the seeds of Mahilaa (Bauhinia Vahlii), one realizes the quest to regenerate a forest specie which apart from its utility to human world, plays significant role for survival of other forest species too. In this effort, the ethic then is that of mutual care and not extraction.

**Key Words:** Baiga, Forest, Dualism, Relatedness, Practical Philosophy, Ethic
INTRODUCTION

As part of M.Phil. Development Practice at Centre for Development Practice (Ambedkar University, Delhi), I have been situated in Samnapur block of district Dindori. I am immersed with the community of Kandawaani, Gram Panchayat Dhurkuta of the mentioned block which, in governmental sense, is also a PESA (Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas) block. The term immersion has been used in place of the more conventional field work to mark the methodological departure that the programme takes in terms of doing action research work with communities. To be immersed with a community is to let go of the positivistic objectivity of observation based work. To be immersed is to live in with the community, be their co-travellers in their everyday experiences. To be immersed with the community is to bridge the starkly different world of the action researcher with that of the community's life-world through subjective associations. A more descriptive account on methodology has been addressed in the paper. At the moment, it shall suffice to say that as an action researcher in the community, I have attempted to co-identify (with the community) the problematic of their lives; which has opened up questions for my own personal self. What the researcher hears from what is being said by the community is a point of significance and speaks of the researcher's own subjective position; this paper however shall not be focusing on this particular aspect of the self-other relationality.

Before going further, I wish to acquaint the reader with my immersion site and the everyday life of the Baiga who inhabit that place (wherein the place bears significance as a carrier of their historical experiences).

INTRODUCTION TO THE IMMERSION SITE

There are different ways of locating and introducing Kandawaani, which I chose as my immersion site. From amongst these possibilities, I choose to begin by locating it in BaigaChak and introducing it as a habitation of Baiga. My choice finds alignment in how Kandawaani is popularly located and introduced with there being a sharp sense of 'looking down' upon the Baiga by its immediate neighbours.

As a female action researcher, with westernised education and urbanised appearances, my movement in and around Samnapur draws attention. With awareness of this attraction, I write about an outsider's accessibility to Kandawaani. The only option of local transport is the bus that leaves from Samnapur bus stop at 5 'o' clock in the evening. In monsoon, this route runs
risk of damage, with the possibility of movement getting suspended. By the bus, it is a ride of 3 hours, filled with scenic views of the Samnapur passing by. With my reverie as my companion, the bus reaches its last stop at Dhurkuta. At this point, the traveller with Kandawaani as its destination, is often in a divided mind, whether to continue the journey and walk through the jungle in the night, or to take shelter in Dhurkuta. The walk from Dhurkuta to Kandawaani takes one through the charmingly thick forest, with the pagdandi (kaccha raasta) surrounded by tall sarai trees (Shorea Robusta, along with many others) on either sides. While on is walking down the last few steps of the downward sloping pagdandi, a panoramic sight of the village, enabled by relative elevation of the pagdandi, comes in view. And the view has it all: the tall and green hills in the backdrop, a river flowing by at their foot, paddy fields (of Kharif) spread across the panorama with small brown huts organized in a longitudinal cluster. Upon crossing this village, one enters the adjacent block Bajag. There is thus another way of reaching the village, i.e. through Bajag. This one marks a very different experience of arriving at the village. The road from Bajag is much engineered, passing through Gram Panchayat Chada it heads toward Silpidi, the last of Bajag and also the last of the said road. From Silpidi, one may find way to Kandawaani through a pagdandi. The modern infrastructure of Chada (which also happens to be station for forest department functionaries) is a picture in contrast to Kandawaani. Jokingly, the field executives of a not-for-profit organization working in Samnapur block (along with various other parts of India), refer to Chada as the Las Vegas of BaigaChak as it hosts a number of modern amenities which are nowhere in sight in the rest of the BaigaChak. Very interestingly, over the years, Chada has also been the site of visit for politically significant dignitaries who visit the place to interact with the particularly vulnerable tribe of BaigaChak, the Baiga. It is as if, Chada is the nuclei of BaigaChak's development and for each of these apparently significant visits, it stands testimony to the Baiga's development without betraying the fact that the rest of the BaigaChak is a picture in contrast to Chada.

The village is constitutive of two tolas: Talai Dabra and Kandawaani. The village has around 64 households (according to the data maintained by the Aanganwaadi worker). Talai Dabra is home to 40 households while the other tola has around 24 households. Most of the families in the village are Baiga except for one Gond family in Talai Dabra, and a few Ahir families in Kandawaani.
LOCATING THE BAIGA

In the governmental and developmental discourse, understanding of the Baiga has been reduced to the category of a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group. The outlook of the modern developmental state, towards such communities, has been influenced with euro-centric visions of growth and progress. This is evident in the bio-political classifications and categorizations (of population groups). Sundar (2016) in the introductory chapter of The Scheduled Tribes and their India has provided a comprehensive account of the parameters laid out by the National Commission of Scheduled Tribes to identify a Scheduled Tribe. The criteria are: indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness. The Report of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission (2002-04) reported that most of the tribes were able to converge with the mainstream however 75 of the tribes were found to have: extremely low literacy, a pre-agricultural level of technology, a stagnant or declining population, and subsistence level of economy; and hence were given the status of Primitive Tribal Group (PTG). In more recent times, the category is now called Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, and suggests poor socio economic development of such groups. Such categories create an impression of 'backwardness' and charts out a particular trajectory of development for the people falling under these categories; trajectories of development which envision to create homogeneity.

However, if one traces the history of Baiga (in particular the ones living in and around Dindori of present times), through narratives of the elderly people of the community and ethnographic accounts of the likes of Verrier Elwin, one realises that the historical experience of Baiga has been marked by coercion and a sense of loss. During the Colonial Settlement Operations, the community was coerced to give up their nomadic ways of being in favour of a settled dwelling. Along with their nomadic ways with the forest, the Baiga lost yet another thing: the practice of Bewar, a cultivation practice very specific to Baiga and their sense of identity. A practice which, under the colonial gaze, got itself rendered as backward and ecologically disastrous, thus had to be replaced by settled agriculture which has been dominantly seen as the marker of civilization. Against their beliefs of ploughing the earth, the Baiga, albeit with considerable resistance, took up settled agriculture. Elwin states that it is in response to this resistance that BaigaChak was carved out of district Mandla in 1890 as a reserve for Baigas where they were allowed to practice Bewar. The loss of Bewar is still in the memory of the present day elderly lot of the community, though the memory erupts only
occasionally but nevertheless, it still lingers. When one of the sayanins of the village recounts, 'Sarkar hamare jungle kabja kar lia hai. Hume jhaad na kaatne de toh bewar kaise hoe? Hum Baiga ab zyada nahi jeeye, bimari pakad lei hai. Dhaan hame kamzori kare hai. Kodu kutki se tagad hoe'. (Government has occupied our land. How can we do Bewar when we can't lay down the trees? We Baiga won't live long now, diseases strike us. Rice is making our bodies weak. Millets give strength to our bodies). When asked if the said practice damages its immediate eco-system, the sayanin says, 'tanak saal main jungle jon ka tau ho jaae, jaan na sake koi ki bewar ho raha. Bewar main jhaad ko kulhaadi se kaat rahe, toh jhaad phir phoot aae, aari se kaate toh na phute' (within a span of few years, the forest regenerates, no one could tell if the practice was done. The tree which gets slayed by axe regenerates, but the one which gets cut down by bandsaw doesn't). The debate here isn't if the practice is right or wrong (that debate too exists, but my intention isn't to engage with it presently). What is important here is to note that some from the elderly lot of the village feel that Bewar was justified and was undeservedly prohibited. The realization of the loss of a particular way of life is thus there in the conscious realm. However, what goes unmentioned and unaccounted (perhaps, even unrealized) is the ethic that had its habitation in the now lost (and compromised) way of life and relationality with the forest. The Baiga of Kandawaani identify themselves as Bhumia Baiga, wherein the term Bhumia is believed to denote the set of people who belong to the land and protect it, and have traditionally lived in with forest. Sahbin would say, 'Baiga ko dharti banta main mili hai'; resonating with the origination myth provided by Elwin in *The Baiga*. Could it be the loss of a certain kind of relationality and the accompanying ethic that has rendered the Baiga melancholic? The question becomes significant: how does one make sense of the self derisive utterances of the Baiga of Kandawaani? How does one make sense of what Bhadli (one of the elderly women of the village says), 'hume buch Baiga kah rahe, hum dimag se kamjor hai. Baiga buch, dongar ghus' (We are called buch, the one who doesn't know, Baiga. Our minds are weak. The ignorant Baiga goes in the forest.)? How does one make sense of a young Baiga man addressing the Baiga samaj meeting says 'hum Baiga sudhar nahi rahe hain, hume sudharne ki zaroorat hai.' His words left me wondering, what does sudharna entails? It is as if an interiorised exteriority, an acquired sense of lack, a lack which the Baiga feels in the self when she looks at herself from the modernist gaze of the other.

The idea here isn't to induce nostalgia for a time gone by and glorify the Baiga's way of life but it is also certain that the ethic which the Baiga (and similar communities living in with
forest) have lived by in its relationality with the forest has been different from the ethic which the modern developmental discourse have had, a discourse wherein the location of state (colonial as well as post-colonial) has been important in shaping human's relationship with forest. How else does one make sense of the village healing practitioner visiting medicinal plants, a day prior to plucking its parts, praying and requesting the plant to take away its parts: an account presented by fellow researcher from Kaliga village of Jharkhand (P. Negi, Personal Communication, 15 September 2018)? Doesn't such practices probe us to rethink our problematic around the question of sustainability, or the way we are presently defining it?

To re-iterate the already stated, the idea here isn't to glorify the Baiga's way of life but to not necessarily declare it as backward, lacking and lagging. The Baiga is Other(ed), the hegemonic function has homogenized the Other and reduced it to a 'lacking other' or a 'lagging other' (Chitranshi & Dhar). The idea is not to see the Baiga as a living embodiment of past, something which once was and now belongs to the museum.

Coercive settlement of Baiga and restriction on Bewar were probably the first instance of modern colonial state's exertion of (centralised and organized) control on their ways of being, a form of control which brought convoluted disturbances to the Baiga's idea of a dwelling and a way of life with the forests. In the present day habitations of the Baiga, one may find rectangular cemented houses, the a(was) houses (which are mostly used as store rooms) then come across as constant rem(a)inder of what once was, and now is not. The presence of what is has become a reminder of what is not.

**METHODOLOGY:**

Hans-Georg Gadamer in his work *Truth and Method* argues that social sciences have prejudice against prejudice, as there is no such thing as an unbiased criteria of rationality; he states that the pursuit for objective rationality is illusionary as our biases are always historically contingent and culturally situated. However, the philosopher talks about the possibility of rationally revising the prejudices inherent in one's own historical situation by that level of self reflective awareness that Gadamer calls 'effective historical consciousness' i.e. awareness of that effective history that is sustaining the prejudices. This is one of my own rationales to trace the Baiga's historical experiences otherwise one would be operating in the realm of imagining futures without taking account of the past as if the past has no significance. Perhaps, only a teleological understanding of past, wherein past has been understood as backward and primitive (something which needs to be forgotten and moved
on) may find it possible to imagine past-less futures wherein the future strives for modernist homogenization. For an imagination of future, one cannot but address the past. In Gadamer's account, genuine dialogue has been understood as a means of generating awareness of effective history. It is through this means that one may reach a shared understanding wherein the inadequacies and limitations of each participant become transparent such that the valid and the valuable is retained.

'The social sciences' aspirations to transcend the distorting influence of prejudice and tradition is one of the illusions of modernity' (Gadamer, 1975a, p. 465 as in Carr, 2006, p. 430). The said philosopher thus turns towards a re-understanding of ‘the remote and no longer vital tradition of Aristotelian philosophy’ (Gadamer, 1980, p. 78 as in Carr, 2006, p. 430).

The present work is situated in the philosophy of action research, it finds its roots in the pre-modern conception of practical philosophy. Emergence of the concept of action research is often accounted to the early decades of the twentieth century wherein Kurt Lewin is understood to be the first one to conceptualise the idea of action research. Lewin has understood action research as the means to bridge the gap between theory and practice. A gap that still persists. Chambers (1986) in 'Two cultures of outsiders' draws attention to the gap and the contrast between two (outsider) cultures which work on rural development i.e. academicians and practitioners. Lewin, while addressing the stated gap, talked about a spiral of steps wherein action research comprises of 'a circle of "planning", "action", and "fact finding" about the result of the action' (Lewin, 1946) such that the findings feed back to planning. In this sense, action research during the period between the 1920s and 1950s was understood as a practical (in practice) application of theories produced by the social sciences and thus remained firmly wedded in the 'applied science' view of the relationship between social science and social change (Carr, 2006). However, due to its failure to meet the methodological requirements of positivism (i.e. production of empirical generalisations by employment of quantitative methods) which dominated the social sciences in the twentieth century, action research became marginalized (Sanford, 1970 as in Carr 2006). The resurgence of action research in the 1970s refuted positivistc research methodology, and gave relevance to qualitative research methods rather than quantitative (Kemmis, 1988 as in Carr, 2006). It was seen as the means which allowed practitioners to assess the practical adequacy of their own tacit theories 'in action' (Elliott, 1991, 1998 as in Carr, 2006). However, the fundamental argument that Carr (2006) puts forth is that by strictly adhering to
the notion of methodology for action research is to implicitly assume that methodology cannot come from action research but has to be articulated a-priori from the existing knowledge. In order to answer the dilemma, Carr invokes a radically different history of action research. By going back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* he retrieves the pre-modern tradition of Practical Philosophy (of ancient Greece) wherein conceptual distinctions weren't between 'theory' and 'practice' but between different kinds of human activities and the types of knowledge which informs them. Carr invokes Aristotle's distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* as two forms of human actions such that the former is a kind of action whose end is known prior to the means taken to achieve it and the form of reasoning which guides it is called *techne* (which allows one to make more and more of the same: *replicability*). Whereas, in *praxis*, "the 'end' of it is not to make or produce some object or artefact, but progressively to realise the idea of the 'good' constitutive of a morally worthwhile form of human life. But praxis is not ethically neutral action by means of which the good life can be achieved. The good of praxis cannot be 'made': it can only be 'done'. It follows from this that praxis is a form of 'doing' action precisely because its 'end' - to promote the good life-only exists, and can be realised, in and through praxis itself" (Carr, 2006, p. 426). Derived from the non-technical mode of situated and contextual practical reasoning *Phronesis* (ibdi), the action researcher doesn't enter the 'field' with a pre-conceived idea of problematic and/or methodology.

Cotton and Griffiths (2007) invokes distinction between practical philosophy and philosophy of practice, and looks at practical philosophy as philosophy in human practices. The said authors talk about truths in place of a singular truth; and put forth the concept of 'little stories' as a way into the diversity of significant particularities. It is here 'in these little stories that the unfair distribution of resources become more apparent as the perspective of the loser demonstrates the effects' (Cotton at al., 2007, p. 550). In this sense, the authors redefine the concept of social justice and look at voicing of little stories as a process of social justice. Coming from here, little stories or narratives shared by the *Baiga* of *Kandawaani* become important. Action research involves a ‘systematic reflection on action by the actor themselves’ (Carr & Kemmis, 2005, p. 189 as in Cotton & Griffiths, 2007). The stated requirements for action research get fulfilled when one is working together with the community to explain: "‘what it is like to be here.’ Or perhaps, more precisely, ‘What is it like to be me, here, now’" (Cotton et al., 2007, p. 559).
Apart from 'little stories', the Baiga art of storytelling 'kissaa paadna' has been significant in locating the traditional Baiga subjectivity around nature. When one of the elderly women tells the kissaa of the tree Saja which cries (with the pain being unknown), it is as if the kissaa is a repositary of the Baiga's world view. When the kissaa teller says, 'eh kissaa jani be tah mile byaari, naa jani be toh gadhaarthan' (if only you can give answer to the kissaa shall you get the meal, if not then there is going to be scolding). It is as if an expectation from the Baiga to be aware of the kissaa. The various kissaa then become a way of locating and comprehending relationship with forest.

Another significant point wherein the work takes departure from conventional research method is in its attempt to let the researcher be host to the unknown of the community. Borrowing from a senior fellow's insights on the documentary titled Derrida, the said philosopher utters: Becoming as l'avenir. The philosopher, in elaboration of this phrase further says, "In general I try to distinguish between what one calls the future and "l'avenir." The future is that which- tomorrow, later, next century will be. There is a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future. l'avenir (to come) which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future beyond this other known future, its l'avenir in that it's the coming of the Other" (Derrida, 2002). In this sense, the work has attempted to be host to the community's experiences rather than reaching it with pre-conceived notions of problematic.

**LOCATING THE PROBLEMATIC**

This section attempts to understand the category 'forest' and the problematic around it. Scott (1988) presents an account of the modern colonial state's attempt at setting up generic villages which were intended to be uniform in every possible aspect (with particular emphasis on physical layout of the villages wherein geometric uniformities composed the aesthetic), thus building sameness for the purpose of administrative ease. The socially embedded principles (not to be read as necessarily glorified) of organization or governance were too peculiar to their given contexts, thus had unrepeatable ways of being which the state couldn't have centrally administered without a set of standardized and universalized principles of settlement. Similarly, with forests, the modern state's administrative practices were reductive towards the diversity of the forests, the then dominant model of managing and controlling
forest had arrived in the name of Scientific Forestry. The purpose of the administration was to generate economic revenue hence the very classification and categorization of forest (along with its huge diversity) was for this purpose alone. Forest species which had economic worth were grown into huge amounts (leading to promotion of mono-cropping) and thus causing disturbance in the natural life of the forest. Geometric perfection and visible layout of the forest became the outward sign of a well-managed forest. Rational ordering and organization of the forest (deriving the basis of its rationality from economic revenue optimization) became the logics for controlling and taming nature. Setting up of standard measurement systems and cadastral mapping were one of the first techniques to deepen the modern state's administrative reach and hence improve the coverage of governable and taxable subjects. The purpose of this was to expand the coverage of taxation system and make it more exhaustive, something which the pre-modern state wasn't so competent with. Similar was the logic behind settlement of nomadic population groups as it was difficult to keep track of such population groups, hence taxation would become difficult. Banerjee (2016) makes the argument that precisely those communities (or population groups, governmentally speaking) who couldn't be classified as sedentary cultivators were classified as tribes in modern times though they were indeed practising agriculture in different sorts but it was difficult to mobilize them through notions of labour and productivity. Thus, tribes were those population groups who did not use land purely as property and resource (an approach which conceptually had emerged from western intellectual tradition of rationalist thought, and went hand in hand with rise of capitalism). Settlement of such population groups and making them accustomed to sedentary agriculture, coercively done in case of the Baiga of Central India (Elwin, 1939) was thus the part of civilization mission which attempted at creating more governable and taxable subjects. In such strategies of the state, one may locate the western dualistic division of reason-nature, universal-particular, the civilized-primitive (among many other) wherein the attempt is to transform the latter into the former. What in effect went into these dualistic divides was instrumentalisation of the other: the primitive instrumentalized by the civilized, nature instrumentalized by reason. Dualism supports the idea of instrumentality (Plumwood, 2003) as the other isn't believed to possess intrinsic value of its own: terra nullis. It is through such dualistic rendering of other that Lockean justification of property could be made i.e. incorporation of the other into self as 'property' which is obtained by putting in labour as self substance (idbi). Scott (1998) invokes the entry under "forest" in Diderot's Encyclopaedia which is almost exclusively concerned with the utilite publique of forest products and the taxes, revenues, and profits that they can be made to yield. Thus, the forest
loses meaning as a habitat and becomes an economic resource which is to be managed efficiently and profitably. Scott further states that "the utilitarian discourse replaces the term "nature" with the term "natural resources". .. Thus, plants that are valued become "crops," the species that compete with them are stigmatized as "weeds," and the insects that ingest them are stigmatized as pests." Thus, trees that are valued become "timber," while species that compete with them become "trash" trees or "underbrush" (pp. 15, Scott, 1998). These dualistic divides have been rendered problematic, not because it marks the world in binary divisions (which can also be problematic as it may deny space to diversity) but because it constructs a devalued and sharply demarcated sphere of otherness (Plumwood, 2003). Dualism is then "a way of constituting difference in terms of the logic of hierarchy" (Derrida, 1981 as in Plumwood, 2003). Indian law, in terms of communities' accessibility to forests has come a long way but in its foregrounding of forest as property and forest as natural (re)source for livelihood, it produces a particular environmental subjectivity which dwells within the framework of property rights (and ownership) and forecloses the possibility of a relationship with forest that the Baiga (at some point in time) might have had or can possibly have.

INSIGHTS AND QUESTIONS FROM THE IMMERSION SITE

The attempt of this paper hasn't been to provide crisp conclusions but to think if we are asking the right questions. Before seeking solutions, one may want to (re)think the problem itself.

When the Self Help Group women of Kandawaani collectivise themselves to resist the forest functionaries from cutting down trees, are they then the interlocutor of a double subversion which attempts towards a de-gendered and de-instrumentalized view of nature? A subversion which challenges the outlook which perceives both women and nature as 'environment' for man. The struggle here, of some of these women, is: tura saath nahi dete, jungle akele turi ka toh nahi? (The men aren't forthcoming with their support, does the forest only belong to the women?). There are intra-community fissures which are hindrance for these women. Within these fissures, reside traditional practices of healing and magic: cryptic in their intelligibility, cocooned away from the outside world, they are source of power for their possessor; thus, at the heart of intra-community fissures. The stated fissures are an evidence that the present Baiga's subjectivity towards forest isn't homogeneous and that within the community there are some who are looking at the forest as a source of utility (or monetary profits) however, the subversion of the aforementioned women gives one hope that there could be a departure
away from this utility laden subjectivity towards forest. The Baiga women, when they gather in monsoon nights to sing their traditional Reena and Dadaria (on multiple other occasions), one gets to realise the community's traditional sense of relatedness with the forest. Celebration of forest for its own sake and not because they are a potential resource of monetary profits. People (from within the village) after long tiresome days of labour on their paddy fields often take a day off from their fields for recreation and attending to household chores. On one such day, I was invited by a group of young girls to accompany them wherein they said, 'jungle ghoomne jaa rahe hain, accha laga hai' (going around to roam in the forest, it feels good) though the village is already always surrounded by forest. Sukhmat once told me, 'shahar jaate hain toh bhook nahi lagti, Baiga dongar bhitar ke log hain, shahar main beja chibri hoth hai' (I lose my appetite whenever I happen to visit the city, we Baiga are people of the hills. The city is too loud and boisterous for us). Little stories like these are glimpses of a life-world which is deeply 'immersed' with nature: the very being and essence of this life-world is inseparable from forests. It is as if there is an appreciation of forest just for its own sake, and not because it can potentially bring in monetary profits. Moreover, the Baiga have traditionally been healers; the vaid of their community is believed to intimately know the different kinds of jadi that the forest hosts. The forest, in this sense, then becomes a source of healing too.

Gansworth & Werner (2016) evokes the question of relatedness with nature and asks if there is a possibility of looking at nature (here, forests) as a living relative? When Jhamia tells the kissaa of a tree (Saajha) which cries, though the pain is unknown to them, or the reference to a no moon day as marti (something which is dying to be born again), one gets a glimpse into meanings attributed to nature. Lamia says, 'dongar main hamare dev bhoot rah rahe, koop kath hai toh ola gussa lagt hai' (Our dev bhoot dwell in the hills, the koop makes them angry). An elderly woman of the village, Badhua, who perhaps is the last of her generation, often become sombre when she recalls that her companions (those of her age) are all gone now. She says, 'mola dongar maa maya phast hai, mor bhaai bahani sab dongar maa bhag gaye' (I feel attached to the forest because all my dead brothers and sisters, now, dwell there).

The forest then unfolds a very different kind of relatedness for the Baiga (though I am not certain if this sense of relatedness is very strong within the younger generations especially in wake of those men from within the village who support koop as it brings money; but my attempt here is to locate the traditional sense of the Baiga's relatedness and in that case the elderly woman's viewpoint becomes very essential). A small conversation with the women of Kondha community (inhabitants of village Emaliguda, Rayagada district, Orissa) talked
about how they look at their forests, rivers and lands as living beings. These women asked, how else would earth give birth to plants and trees, if it isn't already a living being? Only a living being is capable of giving birth to life. One may then ask at this moment, doesn't the question of sustainability acquire a very different connotation when it is asked in context of a relatedness with nature wherein the objective isn't deontological (instrumental) but that of co-existence and mutual care. Isn't sustainability already implicitly addressed in this kind of worldview? When some of the women of Kandawaani decide to come together to attend to a fast disappearing bela, Mahilaain (Bauhinia Vahlii as per botanical nomenclature), one finds hope. From the said women, I have gathered that at some point in time the forest had lush presence of Mahilaain. However, a few decades ago (sometime during the 1980s), there was a massive drive by the forest department to cut down the bela. The bela, due to its strong network around trees, made it difficult to cut them down which was a hindrance to the department which back then was timber centric in its approach. One of the elderly women conveyed that 'bela rahe toh rukhwa la nahi kaat sake' (one can't take the trees down, if the bela remains). In this sense, the bela which apparently needs 5 a host tree for its being, then becomes the one to host back the forest. From amongst the many (fast) disappearing life-forms of the forest, the choice to come together for Mahilaain perhaps says something about the Baiga women's sense of mutual care towards the forest 6. Perhaps, the Baiga's idea of sustainability is in that ethic of relatedness with the forest at the heart of which is mutual care and not extraction. The women have decided to gather seeds of Mahilaain from the neighbouring villages in the forest of which the bela has managed to survive.

The mainstream idea of sustainability (which got introduced in the realm of development somewhere in the 1970s) talks of utilizing natural resource in a manner such that it remains available for future generations as well; nevertheless the ethic of such an understanding of sustainability remains deontological. The problematic here is: how to sustain instrumentalization of nature? Sachs (2010) evokes the Brundtland Report to put forth his argument that by articulating poverty as the reason for un-sustainable use of resources, development as a conceptual category was extended another lease of life in a time when prominent thinkers were questioning its euro-centric (i.e. economic and industrial) genesis and its ineffectiveness in reducing poverty. From this misplaced understanding of seeing the poor as responsible for environmental degradation, sustainability got intertwined with development under the category: sustainable development. And at the heart of the concept, one is rethinking the ways of optimizing returns from resources (while saving them for the future generations as
well) however, still remaining within the extractive mode wherein forests continue to remain within the economic category called 'resource' which is to be 'optimally extracted' through economic calculations. What gets missed out is the moment to rethink human's ethic of relatedness with nature. With shift in the articulation of the problematic, the connotation of sustainability also shifts. Perhaps, the very articulation of our problematic in regard to nature has been a misplaced one, the problematic might be situated in our relatedness with nature.

Footnotes

1 The understanding of melancholia has been derived from Dhar*'s reading of Sigmund Frued's *Mourning and Melancholia*. Melancholy has been understood as that response of the subject, upon losing the object, from which the subject never recovers as it becomes impossible to replace the displacement of the lost object. A sense of loss which locates itself not in the conscious of the subject but its unconscious. The ego of the subject develops an identification with the loss, and thus internalizes the loss rendering the subject debased (self-abasement). Conflict with the lost object morphs into a conflict with(in) the ego. The important question then isn't who is lost but what is lost? While this has been one understanding of melancholia, Zizek (Dhar*) argues that melancholia occurs not when the object is lost but when the subject no longer desires it. It is the loss of desire that the subject grapples with, as it is not object that abandons the subject but desire. Object loss means that something catastrophic has happened to the subject's internal connection with its object (Roth in Fiorini, Bokanowski and Lewkowicz 2009 as in Dhar,*). The question then, coming from Dhar's reading of melancholia, is: did something catastrophic happen in the *Baiga*’s relationship to its forests (which perhaps was the *Baiga*’s dwelling, among many other considerations) when the community had to forcefully settle down? The question which further occurs is: what bearing would it have brought upon the community's idea of dwelling?

2 *Baiga samaj sammelan* wherein the chief guests of the event are the various *padadhikari* (position holders) of the *Baiga Samaj* (understood to be the progressive lot from amongst the *Baiga*) who decide to inaugurate the *sammelan* by remembering their *purkha* (*ancestors*) wherein the act of remembrance is performed by offering *chandan bandan* to *Maa Saraswati*. Later that afternoon, from my interaction with my *Baiga* companions from *Kandawaani*, I realised that there was no recognition of *Maa Saraswati* as a *purkha* which left me all the more uncertain about the connotations of *sudharna*.
Dualism derives its logic from classical (western) prepositional logic which appears as a logic of two but in effect is a logic of one as the other is completely usurped and assimilated such that it becomes visible and marked only for its lack. The other is then present in its absence and visible only for its invisibility. The universe is divided in two categories: p and ~p (that which is not p i.e. the latter is defined by the absence of the former). This structure of logic renders an otherness which in its very fundamental conception and definition carries a lack. The other (~p) doesn't have any independent standing of its own. Plumwood has provided a conceptual elaboration on how this structure of logic supports dualism: **backgrounding of the other**, **radical exclusion of the other**, **assimilation of the other**, **objectification of the other**, and **homogenization of the other**. She further indicates that classical logic has firmly entrenched itself as the logical (my emphasis), rendering the other systems of logic as lacking (~p) and invisible.

Plumwood (2003) through her eco-feminist thought states that "phallocentrism and the exclusion of women's experiences is a very good indicator of similar exclusions of other related subordinated groups", as she feels that the problematic of nature is closely interwoven with that of gender. The mother herself is background and is defined in relation to her child or its father (Irigaray, 1982 as in Plumwood, 2003), just as nature is defined in relation to the human as 'the environment' and hence rendered homogenized. She, thus, invokes the need for an integrated framework for the critique of domination both at the level of humans and nature.

If one pushes the thought further, the term **bela** (climber in botanical classifications) is gendered (understood to be feminine) which, in popular imagination, needs support of a sturdy tree to find its being. If one thinks that here in the forests of Kandawaani some women believe that it is the **bela** which hosts the trees, and hold their roofs together: one senses the potential of an alternative perspective of the feminine.

The **bela** not only offers sweet edible seeds but, due to its strength, it is also used to hold the **Baiga's** (house) roof together. The leaves of the **bela** are significant, the guest is served food on them; thus, the leaves become particularly important for collective feasts.
References


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