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## **ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET-378**



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## Giant conglomerates 'favoured': Whither tribal rights for jal-jungle-jameen?



The struggle for “Jal, Jungle and Jameen” has been a long-drawn battle for the tribal communities of India. This tussle was once again in the limelight with the proposed diamond mining in the Buxwaha forest of Chhatarpur (Madhya Pradesh). The only difference in this movement was the massive social media support it gained, which actually seems to tilt the scale for the tribal people in a long time.

A lot has changed over the past two decades when it comes to the people’s movement fighting for tribal rights. Prafulla Samantara, the 2017 Goldman Prize Recipient, when recounting his days of struggle in the Niyamgiri Movement, talked about the three death attempts and how it did not deter his motivation.

Starting as a student activist, he has always been active in fighting for constitutional rights, be it against the unlawful Emergency during

Indira Gandhi or his most celebrated success against the bauxite mining of Vedanta. Unlike the earlier times when it was very difficult to gather support for such causes, the internet has made it a lot easier to gather support for a movement.

But there are things which still have not changed. The greed of the corporates for natural resources is still the same, if not worse. Coupled with the support from the government and the police, the conglomerates have got free reign over the “Jal, Jungle and Jameen”. It again brings us to the basic question as to who owns them – is it the government, the tribal people, the general public, or the companies? While we debate over this, there is certainly a need for sustainable development.

Samantara, during our interaction, stressed for a strictly implemented national policy on the utilisation of natural resources. The national policy needs to address these key questions:

- How much “Jameen” (Land) will be destroyed?
- How many “Jungles” (Trees) will be cut down?
- How will “Jal” (Water Resources) be impacted?

At the same time, we have to ensure that all the stakeholders, particularly the tribal people, get an equal say during key decisions. According to few reports, the tribal people in the mined areas are hardly gaining anything while the conglomerates, at the same time, have multiplied their wealth. Hence, there is a need for equity when reaping the benefits from these natural resources.

Article 38 of our constitution already demands the same:

*“The State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life.”*

Yet, governments have failed miserably to uphold the same for the tribal people. Over 25 million people have already been displaced due to development projects during 1951-2000, out of which 70% are tribals. Only 25% of the displaced people have been rehabilitated. There also has been a blatant attempt to suppress all the voices of

dissent. Those who have protested against this injustice are often labelled as Maoists. Therefore, it is the tribal people who have been on the receiving end due to mining.

On top of that, the judiciary has failed the tribal community as well. The lawsuits often go for a few decades when deciding on the tribal rights over “Jal, Jungle and Jameen” and most of them favour the giant conglomerates. It is only a few cases like the Niyamgiri Movement where the court ruled in favour of the tribes.

When asked about the reason as to why many movements failed, Samantara refused to accept those movements as failures. In his opinion, every movement has helped to save the environment and tribal rights – even those movements where the decision was not in their favour.

Many of the so-called failures have brought people together in raising voices against the wrongdoings. These movements have made the government, police and corporate more conscious of their responsibilities for the tribal communities of the mined areas.

But the responsibility is not just restricted to the judiciary, government, or the corporate. The invisible hand of the free market has already inculcated a toxic culture of “every man for himself”.

People nowadays believe that their sole objective is to earn for themselves, even if it comes at the cost of others.

We need to learn from our tribal friends to consume as much as required and live a simple lifestyle. If we use everything today, what would we leave for our children in the end? At the same time, the general public also needs to stand together with their fellow tribal people in these tough times.

The road is not that easy, given that the voice of dissent is attacked from all sides. The constitutional rights of the public have been heavily suppressed. It is also not helped by the fact that the state has become a facilitator in the same.

In the absence of the people’s voice, the state is no less than a tyrant. In that case, we can even say goodbye to the last ray of hope for the tribes – people’s movements. At such a crucial junction, the youth can

make or break the situation.

Hence, they need to be educated and made aware of the current shortcomings of the development. With the advent of the internet and social media, nothing is hidden from the sights of the public. And the fight is not just restricted to raising voices against the companies. The youth, therefore, must be encouraged to debate about these topics and arrive at a solution.

They must shift their focus towards sustainable practices and arriving at better feasible solutions for all the stakeholders, including the conglomerates. They can learn from the examples of countries like Brazil etc., where the youth have been proactive in fighting for the rights of the indigenous communities and saving Amazon forest. In the end, I would like to quote William Shakespeare from “Merchant of Venice” to summarise what “Jal, Jungle and Jameen” means for the tribal:

*“Nay, take my life and all. Pardon not that.  
You take my house when you do take the prop  
That doth sustain my house. You take my life  
When you do take the means whereby I live.”*