

# Bastar—At the Crossroads

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*Intervening in any community with the intention of helping tribals is a delicate, sensitive and continuous process of preserving life-enriching traditional practices while introducing 'modern' development activities*

Baldev Mandavi, a quintessential *Koya*, is a happy young man today. After all, he is returning to Pandupara to attend the *pendul* (marriage) of his beloved friend, Mahadev. He has been toiling hard in the stone quarries of Tirupati for three long months. These months have been difficult for him—away from home, away from his folks, cut off from his roots. His dreams of making it big, a quest for good things in life—a bike, a mobile, a stable income— by starting a business had proven to be an El Dorado. He was duped of his savings; three acres of his lowlands had to be mortgaged; and migration for six months a year to the stone quarries in Andhra Pradesh was the only way to pay off his debts.

One comes across many such Baldevs in Bastar where, for tribals, the notion of development is synonymous with a 'modern' lifestyle and material wealth. After spending the last three-and-a-half years working in the Darbha block of Bastar and many interactions and conversations with the people, I find that Bastar seems to be at the crossroads today, with tribal communities trying hard to preserve their identity and, at the same time, keeping pace with the changes taking place around them. It is a continuous struggle and a lot is at stake.

Ever since the colonial times, Bastar, with its bounty of forest resources (timber, non-timber forest produce), mineral wealth and cheap labour has been seen as a source of revenue. Nandini Sunder in her book, *Subalterns and Sovereigns, An Anthropological History of Bastar* (2006) says, "In a place like Bastar, there are further continuities between the colonial and the post-colonial regimes in that the individuals who are doing the 'developing' continue to see themselves as more 'advanced' than the natives being 'developed', and have retained the language of a civilizing mission." This idea of development also emanates from a feeling of superiority of the state representatives/outsideers over the natives and a sense of self imposed responsibility of bringing the natives into the mainstream.



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The often-used stereotypes such as 'the Adivasis are always drunk; 'they have no sense of responsibility; 'they have no thoughts for the future; and 'assimilating with the civilized world is the only way out for them', dent the self image of the indigenous communities. This attitude of superiority influences and coerces the tribal people to adopt urban ways. The influence of right wing groups has accelerated the process of abandoning their traditional beliefs—not because these are irrelevant for them but because these are made to seem 'primitive' or not 'modern'. Eating beef or pork, which was so much an integral part of their culinary tradition, is now seen as taboo. Cherchera, the Dhurwa dance, is rarely practised because the youth is more interested in the Ramayan Mandali, etc. The celebration of Ganesh puja, Diwali, etc., have taken centre stage and festivals related to nature and agriculture such as Diyari, Bija Pandung, and Amoosh are slowly but steadily losing their significance. The night-long community feasting on *mahua/landa* in *sal*

*donas* and the *endanat* dance and *pata pari* have been replaced with video shows. The playing of pipes by the Maharaa community in marriages is a rarity nowadays, giving way to band parties. Even the *Mandais*, the annual congregation of the village *debis/debs* (local deities), now have an external influence in the form of sponsorship, organized gambling, etc.

Forced migration to places such as Raipur, Hyderabad, Nizamabad and Bangalore due to the unavailability of year-round livelihoods, has also resulted in exposure to new lifestyles that subsequently influence the milieu back home. Many young men from the villages in Darbha such as Chindbahar, Lendra and Kamanar find it difficult to practice cultivation after a stint or two in the saw mills of Andhra. It would be extreme to say that the youth of Bastar are alienated from their lands and their primary occupation, but a degree of ennui has set in, mainly because of the non-remunerative agriculture and the availability of various other market-driven livelihood opportunities.

The government's education policy of using Hindi as a medium of instruction has also resulted in some sort of a cultural alienation of the people from their roots. The teachers, or *gurujis*, as they are called are mostly from outside Bastar, with no knowledge of Halbi, Dhurwa or Koya-matha. They teach the students in Hindi and eulogize the need for fluency in Hindi as the language understood by the outside world and professionally rewarding. In the process, tribal dialects and languages are looked down upon. Dhurwa is now an endangered language. Very few children of Chitapur, Gudra, or Dodrepal now converse in Dhurwa. I haven't come across a single Muriya person who knows his language. Increasingly, the children are being given Hindu names and using traditional names such as Mase, Kumma and Somaru (which were names they could relate to), is seen as anachronistic. Cultural identity—and language as a clear proxy for that—assumes great importance when a culture is perceived as subordinate. Koya people are typecast by outsiders—the Dhakars (who are mostly migrants from UP and control the economy of the villages) and the government officials (mostly from the Chhatisgarh plains, Andhra Pradesh or Maharashtra origin)—as bereft of intelligence and typified by their ferocity.

The dependence on *Sirha*, *Gunia* and *Veddes*, the traditional faith healers has waned, particularly in places near Jagdalpur or other block towns. They are slowly being replaced by the modern health care system, however basic and bureaucratic it may be. In the process, however, the traditional knowledge of medicinal herbs and plants is being lost, rather than enriched. Traditional knowledge and the cultural fabric of society are not seen as a resource but as regressive and archaic.

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The traditional knowledge of the Bastar tribes regarding the forests, the cosmos, the health practices, agriculture, food preservation, water conservation and agricultural practices have all slowly been eroded. There's no denying the fact that not all tribal/traditional knowledge is rational or scientific and sometimes needs to be challenged. But the colonial

attitude of superiority of the urban culture and the clamour for adopting a modern lifestyle has led to blind aping rather than conscious and participatory decision-making.

Over the last decade or so, in the name of scientific agriculture, there has been unbridled use of hybrid seeds (medicines and fertilizer have followed suit), particularly of maize and these are threatening the fragile biodiversity of Bastar. Traditional crops such as millets, pulses, paddy, oilseeds and their varieties (particularly, of paddy) are portrayed as unproductive and economically unviable. There has possibly been no systematic work in Bastar to promote crops such as mandiya, kodo and kutki. However, everyone talks about how Bastar's identity is linked with these. Even if these are promoted, paradoxically, it would be to cater to the urban masses rather than for the indigenous people.

Development practitioners, like me, have for long argued, "By first improving livelihoods, health and education levels, other intangibles will follow." For the large tribal population, which has chronically been food and nutrition insecure, talk about preserving biodiversity, traditional crops, traditional knowledge and culture may sound patronizing and hypocritical. However, at the rate tribal knowledge, culture and languages are fading, it will be too late to let these wait for development of livelihoods, health and education.

My dilemma is: Who decides what development means for the tribals living in the villages of Darbha? Why should the state, the financial power centres or the development practitioners decide on their behalf what is good for them? Aren't we also donning the role of self-styled emancipators? At the same time, I cannot think of the tribals as some museum artifacts clinging on to the last vestiges of redundant rituals and beliefs. Neither am I proposing that tribal people should be insulated from the market forces

that would hamper their growth. But I am not sure how the processes of assimilation, transformation and metamorphosis can be made fair and participatory. The debate of tradition versus modernity has to be deliberated by the tribals and not by us 'outsiders' and the choice of adopting 'modern' practices as well as propagating traditional knowledge and culture has to be with the people of the region themselves. Change is inevitable. How then can I help my communities to be the prime actor in the process of change?