

Seminar Report



Seminar on Adivasi Art-Craft: A Culture of Ecology in Chhattisgarh

**March 14 2014
New Circuit House
Raipur
Chhattisgarh**

**Organised by
Deshkal Society
205, 2nd floor, Indra Vihar
Delhi-110009**

**Supported by
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Government of India
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Over particularly last two centuries adivasis' access to forest and forest produces has decreased alarmingly. Quality and size of forest cover are in sharp decline. This has grim implications for adivasi identity and survival, ecology, and the future of humankind. The increasing power of global forces beyond their control, virtual absence of effective institutions, and decline of cultural processes to counter it threatens the natural and historical strength of adivasi communities.

Deshkal Society, in association with Mayaram Surjan Foundation, Raipur chapter of INTACH, and Ministry of Culture, organised a daylong seminar on above theme at Raipur. Nearly a hundred participants from the academia, political sections, Adivasi craftspersons and media attended the Seminar. Hon'ble Governor of Chhattisgarh, Shri Shekhar Dutt, inaugurated the seminar. Amongst those who attended were Shri Lalit Surjan, Editor, Deshbandhu; Vice-Chancellor of Pt. Ravi Shankar University; former Director General of Police Shri Vishwaranjan; Dr. Sushil Trivedi, former State Election Commissioner; Professor Hanumant Yadav, Pt. Ravi Shankar University; Shri. Rahul Singh, Deputy Director, Dept. of Culture, Chhattisgarh; and Shri Gautam Bandhopadhyaya, Convener, Nadi Ghati Morcha.

Shri Sanjay Kumar, Secretary Deshkal Society, welcomed the honourable guests and participants.

In the inaugural session **Shri Narendra**, Advisor, Deshkal Society, elucidated on how cultures are an outcome of and effect ecologies. As against the homocentric worldview, there are not so much human cultures as ecological cultures. Once ecologies deteriorate, cultures too. They are replaced by other forms of cultures, not necessarily conducive to the well-being and sustainability of human and other life forms. He emphasized on dialogue between modernity and adivasis; between politics of knowledge building and ancient cultures of sustainability and well-being, as also alternative imaginaries of human futures. There is a need to interrogate not just established ways of thinking but also the protocols of culture-making associated with these ways. It is urgent now to create a possibility of sustainable cultural discourse between the local community and concerned segments in the larger civil society. Till even about 20 years Adivasi retained their cultural resources, skills, memory and the sense of value placed in them to resist. There was a certain vigour and power in the rhythms and flows of daily life in Chhattisgarh. In recent years, the cultural confidence has been rapidly eroded seemingly irreversibly. In turn, all this is deeply and directly related to their livelihood and survival. He explained the seminar is aimed to contribute towards deepening and giving substance in the contemporary context to democracy, ecology, representation and sustainable ways of living. The seminar may be read as the premise whence this program seeks to engage with questions of adivasi life

and its future. Promotion of the local indigenous craft, which is an environment friendly livelihood as it uses local materials, which eventually return back to the environment to advance and encourage the research and study on indigenous environmental and livelihood issues.

Dr.Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty, Chairperson, Lalit Kala Academy (National Academy of Fine Arts) a premier institution of the Government of India to conserve, spread and develop art and culture, shed extensive light on the various and rich art-craft forms of Chhattisgarh. He dwelt at length on Chhattisgarh's terra-cotta, bell metal, wood craft, smelting, weaving, and pottery; how they are organically linked to people's worldview, ethos, practises, livelihoods and skills. He emphasized that such attributes of a people be seen in conjunction with local landscapes and not separate. It is a holistic culture wherein gods and goddesses, ancestors, landscape, beliefs, artefacts, practises, livelihoods and skills in Chhattisgarh are conjoined in a given reality. Viewing them separately is reducing their potency to sustain human communities. Thousands of years old songs, sayings and stories are people's mode of both articulating and perpetuating their culture.

Hon'ble Governor, Chhattisgarh, Shri Shekhar Dutt stressed on the need to study and document, in the manner of Verrier Elwin, adivasi cultures in their authentic modes. Organic relationship between ecology and cultures need be documented as well. That would constitute the premise for long term vision and perspective. Adivasis sustain purity of genes and purity of all life enabling forces. He urged the academia to actively interface with adivasis and document ecology in its amalgamated wholesomeness. Every stream, every tree and hillock has its own identity in adivasi imagination; unless this be done we cannot know our own people and their rich heritage. Separating culture from economy, anthropology and other vital areas of life has been the lasting loss of modernity. Honourable Governor suggested forming a consortium on priority basis of people dealing with knowledge building from amongst academics, university, government, social activists and other socially sensitive individuals. The foremost thought and attempt for the consortium ought be to help revitalize Adivasi community's cultural confidence and help create a sustainable cultural discourse between the local community and concerned segments in larger civil society..

ShriNiranjanMahawar, author and foremost collector of traditional artefacts in Chhattisgarh, informed that till coming of the British local cultural and ecological traditions had remained free of outside interference. Some are so ancient that references are found in some of the oldest texts. They continued over the millennia uninterrupted. Colonialism segregated the composite craft forms into Adivasi and non-Adivasi, wood and metal, earth and fabric. Similarly, songs, stories and plays were segregated from other crafts. The various artefacts came in one way or another from beliefs, myths, songs and stories. As an instance the molding of *sarota* has to do with *Kaam Dev* and *Rati*, the piggy bank is shaped after a mother's breast. So is for the forms on *paandaan*, *kumkum*, and *kajal* boxes. After 1947 the Indian state and academia continued the segregation at a yet more intense rate. The resultant chasm damaged not only local cultures and communities but also ecology and landscapes. The vocabulary of segregation is now deep in our consciousness. Such

vocabulary is incapable of communicating much about local cultures and communities. Each craft compliments the other. It cannot be comprehended --or sustained-- in isolation.

Shri Agnu Ram, social activist from Bastar region of Chhattisgarh intervened to underline how adivasi art-craft is a very crucial part of local ecological system and the need to remain alive to folk traditional culture of India along with their livelihood resources. Mr. Ram's intervention comprised various views adivasi culture, traditional healing, traditional livelihood and more. He drew attention to the sorry plight of artisans in Bastar today, some of whom are on the brink of bankruptcy.

Shri Sushil Sakhuja, eminent craftsman from Sarguja outlined the need to link Chhattisgarh's traditional craft to the market, lest it disappears forever. He informed his endeavours at training and sustaining iron and bell metal craft. In the same vein **Shri Rakesh Aggarwal** underlined the difficulties faced by craftspersons in procuring raw material, rising costs and increasing lack of learners. **Ms. Rashmi Dwivedi** outlined how the modern apparatus is overtaking and destroying Adivasi and folk societies. With a damaged ecology and environment the *Baigas of Kawardha* have been reduced to penury whereby their traditional role as repositories of Adivasi knowledge and wisdom has been almost irreversibly damaged. Taking away of their geography and landscape through setting up wildlife sanctuaries has deprived them of sources of conserving and regenerating their skills, knowledge and wisdom.

Professor Savyasachi, Head, Department of Sociology, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi stressed that Adivasi craft provides different landscapes to imagination. Essentially Adivasi's worldview lives with living materials. Every mode and expression is an expression of life force. For them the habitat is a living entity. Hence, usage of mud, wood, straw and water in construction of huts or other structures. These, too, are life force and have to be revered thus; so for art-craft and culture. When the habitat is considered dead, there comes usage of bricks, cement and stone. He illustrated the example of how image making in Adivasi-folk imagination generates life force and photography arrests it. The wooden or other material, sculpture is never identical to the original. The new image has a new life force. Photography is freezing an image in time and space; it is arresting a continuing life force. Professor Savyasachi raised the issue of growing chasm between a dominating and demanding market and local creativity that unsuccessfully aspires to keep distance from modern forms of market. Contrasted with modern financial market, traditional local *haats*, based on agrarian and shifting cultivation economy, left ample room in people's work and rest cycles. Traditional art-craft of Chhattisgarh, particularly Bastar, remained close to life.

In the same vein, speaking of cultural expressions in North East India **Dr. Kailash Kumar Misra**, lecturer in Anthropology, mentioned that the community never climbs to the summit of mountains, particularly Kanchenjunga. They stop short. Summits are the abode of five guardian deities that sustain life. The deities

are herbs, social composition, law, governance and context of living. All inspiration for culture and craft is drawn from local ecology. He mentioned how the first lessons in weaving are taken from leaves.

Dr.Sudhirendar Sharma, eminent expert on water issues and advisor to Deshkal Society, cautioned that water as a life enabling force is moving away from culture. Removed from the paradigm of ecology and culture, it has been placed in the paradigm of market. Now water is being spoken of as human right, as though it was not so earlier. Modern perception of water has changed from one that humans could relate to. From life it is now considered as dead matter; from a god to a product. Hence, its bottling and selling. Market has converted water into conflict. Now there is politics of water. Chhattisgarh and Orissa are in a state of conflict over sharing of *Mahanadi* waters. Dr Sharma further informed, in the folk worldview floods, too, are regarded as a form of goddess. River *Son* in Bihar is believed to be spinster. When its waters used to reach doorsteps, women would threaten it with marriage unless it recedes.

Summing up the deliberations at the end of the day, **Shri Sanjay Kumar**, Secretary Deshkal Society, thanked the associate bodies-- MayaramSurjan Foundation, Raipur chapter of INTACH and Ministry of Culture-- for helping organise the seminar. He observed that the seminar has brought out the underlying philosophical, programmatic and policy issues of its theme **Adivasi Art-Craft: A Culture of Ecology in Chhattisgarh**. He pressed for forming a consortium as a follow up to Hon'ble Governor's, Shri Shekhar Dutt, suggestion for a long term vision and intervention. The seminar has thrown up several possibilities. There have emerged multiple approaches and multiple strategies. The challenge remains, however, how to go about forming such a consortium and take aboard like-minded civil society groups, government representatives, folk-crafts persons, media personnel, and socially sensitive individuals. The challenge also remains to ascertain how to use instrumentalities of modern discourse for documentation of folk-historical processes and discourses as recommended by Honourable Governor and other eminent people in course of the seminar; and how to organise material support for such endeavours. Going by the urgency demonstrated by rank and file of speakers and participants it is evident there is a way out. A working group may well look into these possibilities, and highlight anticipated challenges and issues.

Way forward

It is recommended, as a first step, a meeting of a small group from above be called soon at Raipur and a dialogue on plans and strategies for a common minimum program to revitalise Chhattisgarh ecological culture be commenced. It is imperative to continue sharing and discussions and speak about ecological cultures in these rapidly changing times, aspects left unstated and ecological processes that celebrate life in the manifest spirit of Adivasis. It is urgent to capture the ephemeral fast fading essence now less seen/displayed even in Adivasi regions as Chhattisgarh.

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Programme Schedule

Inaugural Session	10.30 am-11.30 am
Welcome address:	Sanjay Kumar , Secretary Deshkal Society
Context of the Seminar:	Sri Naren , Advisor, Deshkal Society
Inauguration:	Sri Shekhar Dutt , Hon'ble Governor, Chhattisgarh
Chairperson:	Dr. KK. Chakravaty , Chairman, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi
Vote of Thanks:	Representative of Mayaram Surjan Foundation, Raipur (Moderator: Dr. Sudhirender Sharma , Consultant Deshkal Society)
Tea	11.30am- 12.00pm
Session I	12.00-1.30pm
Moderator:	Sri Savyasachi , Professor, JamiaMilia Islamia, Delhi
Speakers	Reviving the Dhokra (Bell Metal): A personal Journey by SriSushil Shakhuja , Sculptor, Bastar Performing Arts from Bastar, Chhattisgarh Sri Anoop Ranjan Pandey , Eminent Theatre Personality, Bastarband: A music and Dance Band Dr. Mahendra Kumar Mishra , Head ICICI Foundation, Raipur
Lunch	1.30-2.30pm
Session II	2.30-4.00pm
Moderator:	Prof. MitasreeMitra , Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur
Speaker	Natural Resources and livelihood pattern among the tribes of Chhattisgarh by Dr. L. N. Soni , Keeper, Archaeological Survey of India Technology, Market and Adivasi Tradition by Sri Savyasachi , Professor, JamiaMilia Islamia University, Delhi Water and Future Prospect of Tribal Ecology by Dr. Sudhirender Sharma , Advisor and Consultant, Deshkal Society
Concluding Session	4.00-4.30pm Way Forward Sri Rahul Singh , Deputy Director, Dept. of Culture, Chhattisgarh Dr. Sudhirender Sharma , Advisor and Consultant, Deshkal Society Sri Naren , Advisor, Deshkal Society
Vote of Thanks	Mr. Sanjay Kumar

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A PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY



Hon'ble Governor received by Sanjay Kumar, Secretary, Deshkal Society



Beginning the Seminar with National Anthem



Sanjay Kumar, Secretary, Deshkal Society is Welcoming the Guests



Dr. K K Chakravarty, Chairperson of the Seminar,
Lalit Kala Akademi



Hon'ble Governor delivering Inauguration speech



Dr. Sudhirendar Sharma, Moderator of the Seminar



Part of the audience



The panel