

REVIEWS

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**Recovering the Lost Tongue:
The Saga of Environmental
Struggles in Central India**
Rahul Banerjee

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yahoo.co.in](mailto:joshippc@yahoo.co.in). 2008. 352 pp. Rs 250.

A group of people live in harmony with nature and have minimal needs. They do not breach nature's inner recesses and find a cosy place in her lap. Their lives are drastically changed when some 'explorers' come to their home, claim the land they lived in for ages as their new-found land, and impose strange beliefs, customs, and languages on them. These new self-proclaimed rulers invent euphemisms for the original people—like 'adivasi' or 'aborigine'—which for them connote 'backwardness'. Flustered, the original people find themselves in search of a civilization, a livelihood—they end up with a 'lost tongue'. The new settlers exploit nature to the risk of extinction of its resources and soon realize that they have to conserve. That is when they turn to the practices of the original people, whom they have systematically annihilated. Absurd though it may seem, this is the story of the Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, African Pygmies, and various tribes of India. This is the story that unfolds in the present book, which is aptly subtitled. The author says: 'The devastation of nature and the decimation of populations living in harmony with it has been a singular feature of modern industrial development' (96).

This book tells us, through a captivating dialogue, the failings of free India in understanding the nature and the needs of its tribal people. It shows the follies in the formulation and implementation of state policies for tribals. This leads to protests, organized and unorganized, that are systematically quelled without supplying any solution to the problems. It is unfortunate and disheartening that even movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan, which generated a lot of interest worldwide, fail to bring any concrete results.

This is the tale of the author, a graduate of the Indian Institute of Technology, who left a lucrative career to live among people who had very few supporters.

The author recounts how supposedly uneducated people of the tribes can fight for their cause if they are trained for it. This fight can never be substituted by the one of non-tribals for the tribals, as the latter is not a struggle from within. In his witty style, Rahul tells us how even daily habits like bathing are influenced by the natural surroundings; he also questions our wisdom in challenging apparently primitive customs. We find here an echo of activists like Anupam Mishra, who believe that many of the urban problems can be solved with the wisdom of ancient people.

The cover of the book depicts the state of the tribes of India. It shows a Bhil woman unhusking rice with her face veiled. This image brings home the stark reality of the extensive utilization of the tribal resources, all the while denying them their right to speak, denying them their identity. The unhappy state of women in the specific context of tribal life in India is portrayed with a hope that women can regain their rightful place by tackling the 'problem of patriarchal oppression'.

The story of the making of this book is much like the struggles it talks about. The present version of this book is a metamorphosis of the author's enormous research and recorded experiences, and it has been supplemented by the painstaking efforts of his friends, whose contributions he acknowledges. Containing material of value for social and environmental activists, this book will make a wonderful read for anyone concerned with human dignity.

Concluding her acclaimed paper 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says: 'The subaltern cannot speak.' She talks of marginalization of the rural, the tribal, and concludes that the marginalized have no voice. This book presents a vivid story of such marginalization and pleads us to return the 'lost tongue' to the tribes. It is for us to act soon or they will lose their tongues forever.

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