

Adi-dharam and Jharkhandi Culture:**Understanding *Adivasi* existence in relation to the environmental identity and environmental heritage of *Adivasi-Moolvasi* communities of Jharkhand.**Sudeshna Dutta¹***Abstract:***

Why do the Adivasis of Jharkhand resent the word Development? Since the Koel-Karo movement (Which went on for about thirty-five years) the Adivasis demanded ideal rehabilitation for them. The government officials or policymakers have so far failed to understand the meaning of the ‘ideal rehabilitation.’ In this paper, I argue that without considering the environmental identity of the Adivasi communities, it is impossible to understand the *Adivasi* interpretation of rehabilitation and the rationals behind such understanding. *Adivasi* environmental identity, I argue, has a close connection with the land, water, forest. *Adivasi* culture is closely related to the three elements of nature. *Adivasi* way of living or *Adivasi* way of viewing life is practice-oriented and cannot sustain without them. In this paper, I have tried to engage with the three main festivals of Jharkhand to show how the festivals carry the ethos of *adi-dharam*. The philosophy of *Adi-dharam* is about maintaining harmonious relationships with the other elements of the ecology. The rationale behind maintaining such relationship is acknowledging the contribution of others in keeping the food-security and food-sovereignty of the community. The structure of the relationships shapes the environmental identity of the *Adivasi* existence. The rehabilitation programmes, I conclude, need to incorporate the *Adivasi* interpretation of existence to protect the interest of the *Adivasis*.

Keywords: Environmental Identity, Environmental Heritage, *Adi-dharam*

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Introduction:

The company is luring the tribal communities because it wants their land, forests, water to set up a plant which will displace thousands and thousands of people from their culture, language, identity, and the legacy of their ancestors. It is a known fact that once a tribal farmer is evicted from the land, she/he becomes non-existent. (Barla 8)

The lines quoted above are from a booklet naming “A Sweet Poison”. It was published in 2009 by *Adivasi-Moolvasi¹ Astitva Raksha Manch* (Forum for protection of *Adivasi-Moolvasi* existence). The indigenous and non-indigenous peasant activists of Khunti block formed *Adivasi-Moolvasi Astitva Raksha Manch* in 2007 at the wake of ArcelorMittal’s proposed integrated steel factory project. Under the banner of this *Manch*, residents of some forty-two villages gathered to safeguard their ancestral lands (Dungdung 91). The year 2009 was also crucial for the people of Khunti and Gumla districts of Jharkhand. Geographically both Khunti and Gumla are located in Chotanagpur plateau where Birsa Munda started his Ulgulan against British Raj.

In the historiography of Jharkhand, the year 2009 also bears the valour of Birsa Ulgulan. Because in this year the people’s movement against land acquisition for steel project won the victory. The *Adivasi-Moolvasi* people stood up against Arcelor Mittal’s integrated steel plant project that demarcated twenty-five thousand acres of land for the project. But the villagers of Khunti and Gumla districts were determined not to give one inch of soil (Dungdung 91). It is clear from the lines that the villagers felt apprehended about their existence in the face of these developmental project. Following the cue of apprehension, one may inquire: Why did the villagers perceive that displacement from the land would make them ‘non-existent’?

In reality, the cases of industrialisation or projects related to heavy industries (dam, mining, infrastructures) have failed to bring any hope in the lives of thousands of displaced villagers. Neither they were adequately rehabilitated, nor they got proper compensations. But if we go back to the quoted lines once again, we can notice that the writer is relating the land to Adivas culture, language, and identity which are of no concern in any rehabilitation and

compensation programme. The primary reason for their exclusion is the fact that no fiscal structure can measure the value of these three things. In other words, the rehabilitation programme so far implemented by the government for the displaced Adivasi-Moolvasi communities of Jharkhand made them feel 'non-existent'. Hence, to engage with the question of Adivasi existence, we have to understand the basis of it. How does the 'Adivasi existence' come into being? Why is it distinct?

This article aims to engage with the question of *Adivasi* existence from the relational perspective — that means the intention is to look at the way an *Adivasi* individual builds her relationship with the surroundings. The relational perspective, I will argue, shapes the environmental identity and environmental heritage of adivasi existence and acts as the cornerstone of the distinctiveness of adivasi *Asmita* (identity/pride/selfdom). In the context of resistance movements against development-induced displacements, it is imperative to engage with the issue of connectivity or relationships to understand the interpretations of land from the Adivasi perspective. Here, I have focussed on the Creation Myth (*Sosobonga*) of Munda people and the three annual festivals - *Karam* or *Karma*, *Sohrai*, and *Sarhul*. These festivals can be interpreted as the cultural expression of the Creation Myth. Here three Adivasi women who lead three different resistance movements in Jharkhand narrated their experiential connections with the festivals. Their narrations point out how Adivasi existence is intrinsically related to the *Adivasi* culture, which again is the expression of Creation Myth.

The Creation Myth reflects the ethos of *Adi-dharam* (proposed by Dr Ram Dayal Munda). *Adi-dharam* (as explained by Dr Munda) is the indigenous way of viewing life. From the perspective of *Adi-dharam*, human and human communities exist in relation to non-human and non-living beings on an equal plane.

Environmental Identity, Environmental heritage, and The imperative of *Adi-dharam*: - 'Adi-dharam' is a term coined by late Dr Ram Dayal Munda. He explained in details the term *Adi-dharam* and the exigencies of using the term in Independent India in his book *Adivasi Astitwa Aur Jharkhandi Asmita ka Sawal*, published in 2002. The intention behind coining the term was to establish distinctness of *Adivasi* religion, hence existence (D. R. Munda 48-77). Here, on the one hand, he has presented *Adi-dharam* as one of the components of *Jharkhandi* culture (Munda 2 (Utsler) 002). On the other hand, he has posited the term as a

common religious platform for all the indigenous communities living within the territory of the Indian nation-state. *Adi-dharam* thus is used as the identity denominator to get recognition from the Indian Constitution. *Jharkhandi* culture, according to Dr Munda, is intertwined with *Adivasi-Moolvasi* existence (Munda 2002.29-30) and through *Adi-dharam*, *Adivasi* society can resurge with a renewed vitality. The rationality behind the hope for a resurgence of a confident, conscious and proud *Adivasi* community was not arbitrary. By the time this book got published, Jharkhand has received its statehood, on 15th November 2000 after a long drawn movement.

The idea of Jharkhand as separate state meant for Adivasis itself bore the hope for Adivasi resurgence. In the context of this newly received statehood, the book deals with two burning issues- the rudiments of Adivasi existence and the threat to it. Adivasi communities living within the territory of Jharkhand, he shows in his book have shaped a distinct culture in relation to the landscape. In fact, according to him, the social structure, religious beliefs, the rituals, and festivals, arts and literary creations of Adivasi societies of Jharkhand are intrinsically related to the culture of Jharkhand which is again associated with the land, forest, water of the place. Hence the intention behind the book can be interpreted as the intention to procure environment identity of the Adivasi community.

What is Environmental identity? Environmental identity as David Utsler puts it: “is not only defined in terms of a relationship to the environment but it gathers all aspects of personal and communal identity that are connected to the physical environment of a person or a group”. (Utsler 126).

Hence according to Utsler, environmental identity is both multidimensional and dialogic. The members of the indigenous communities have been maintaining a close connection with the environment for sustenance. The environmental identity is thus intertwined with the experience of a person embedded within her community. With the active presence of experience, the place -the foundational aspect of environmental identity becomes a bearer of the environmental heritage of an indigenous nation. What is most important over to note that the environmental heritage incorporates within its realm several layers of interpretations and meanings of the place. If one considers environmental heritage from the perspective of time, the place of living becomes a vital element of that heritage. Because it

includes within its sphere variegated memories of individuals and the memories are necessarily attached to that place. (Utsler 127).

In other words, it can be said that environmental identity and environmental heritage point out the ways members of a community extend their relationships with the place along the axes of time. The memory plays a pivotal role when a community choose to locate itself within the web of several connections with the various elements present within a landscape. This freedom of choice is what makes the community's existence distinct. Environmental heritage of a community thus bears the memories of connections that the ancestors' chose to establish, nurture, and maintain with the surrounding environment. With the time the memories layered with several interpretations got accumulated in the history of the community. History is not only about what is remembered, but it is also about remembering "how things were done" or remembered (Simpson 22). From this perspective, *Adi-dharam* can be viewed as the environmental identity and environmental heritage as well as the basis of epistemic existence of indigenous communities of Jharkhand and also of India. Any perpetration that is capable of affecting the basic condition-the structure of relationships -of the indigenous existence would be a threat to the environmental heritage of Adivasi being. (Munda 8-9). *Jal, jangal, jameen* (water, forest, land) are the cornerstone of environmental heritage as well as the environmental identity of Adivasi-Moolvasi communities. As the relationship is dialogic in nature, derecognition of any of the two ends of the link - that is distinct *Adivasi* existence or land, water, forest would be intimidating to the sovereign existence of *Adivasi* communities. Ram Dayal Munda pointed out the very fact in his book *Adivasi Astitwa Aur Jharkhandii Asmita ka Sawal*. According to him, even after independence, the word Adivasi is not recognised. Instead of that Adivasi communities are identified as 'Scheduled Tribe' which is, according to Munda, is a misnomer.

(आदिवासी (शब्द को संवैधानिक मान्यता नहीं है .संवैधानिक शब्द है अनुसुचित जनजाति) शिङ्गुलुड ट्राईब .. .('अनुसुचित जनजाति' में यह इशारा साफ है कि यह 'अनुसुचित' होना एक अस्थायी स्थिति है .और शेष बचे 'जनजाति' के रूप में भी आदिवासी भारतीय जाति ब्यबस्था के हि एक अंग है. (D. R. Munda 42).

(*Adivasi*) shabd ko sangvaidhanik manyata nahi hai. Sangvaidhanik shabd hai anusuchit janjati (scheduled tribe)... 'Anusuchit janjati mein yeh isharah spasht hota

hai ke yeh 'anusuchit' hona ek asthayi sthiti hai. Aur sesh bache 'janjati' ke roop mein bhi adivasi Bhartiya jaati byabastha ke hi ek ang hai'

the word adivasi does not have constitutional recognition. The constitutional word (for adivasi) is 'scheduled tribe'... The presence of 'scheduled' in the word 'scheduled tribe' is a clear indication of the fact that the state (of the tribe) is temporal and the remaining tribes, is a part of the Indian caste system.

Here the author implies that Adivasi societies being recognized as scheduled tribes are deprived of their *Adivasi* identity and *Adivasi* heritage. Both the *Adivasi* identity and *Adivasi* heritage fall under the domain of different value system. The values are governed by way of viewing at the world. As an Adivasi scholar, activist, and thinker, he took the onus of describing the basis *Adivasi* existence. His endeavour in extending the meaning of *Adi-dharam* can be read in tandem with the need for recognition of Adivasi society by the Indian government. In his introduction to *Adi-dharam*, Dr Munda says,

By *Adi-dharam* we mean the basis, the roots, the beginnings (*adi*) of the religious beliefs of the Adivasis, the first settlers of India. Behind this effort of analysis and determination of the roots, our purpose is to set participate in the process of setting up- at the national level-a religious system on the basis of which the self-confidence of the Adivasis could be restored and re-awakened, and in the absence of which the religious identity of the Adivasis is probably almost negligible. ((R. D. Munda 1).

The politics behind his proposition of *Adi-dharam* can be seen from the perspective of 'native survivance'. Gerald Vizenor describes native survivance as " an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent" (Vizenor 85). In the census of India, there is no definite recognition of '*dharma*' of Adivasis. It is recognized as 'other'. According to Munda, this is a conspiracy against Adivasis. By categorising *adi-dharam* as 'other', the government passively encourages Adivasis to declare themselves as Hindu or other. (D. R. Munda 45).

The encouragement, according to him, a deliberate attempt to erase the existence of *Adivasis*. To resist such attempts that push the *Adivasis* into obscurity, Dr Munda, in his book, has tried to bring forward the uniqueness of *Adi-dharam*. *Adi-dharam*, as explained by Ram Dayal Munda, is a strategy to continue the stories of *Adivasi* existence. This strategy of survivance

is intrinsically related to the question of displacements of *Adivasis* from their ancestral lands. Hence, it is to be understood the rationality behind choosing *Adi-dharam* as one of the components to show the importance of land in Adivasi existence.

Adi-dharam- A way of connecting with the world:-

आदि-धर्म की सबसे बड़ी विशेषता सम्भवतः यह है कि संस्थागत धार्मिक आवश्यकताओं के विपरीत इस धर्म में मनुष्य और प्रकृति का सम्बन्ध पारस्परिक निर्भरता में निरुपायित हुआ है, न कि सृष्टि के उपर विजय पाने की भावना में।” (D. R. Munda 46).

Adi-dharam ka sabse bari viseshta sambhavatah ye hai ki sansthatgat dharmik avashyakatayon ke viparit is dharam mein manushya aur prakriti ka sambandh parasparik nirbharta mein nirupayit hua hai., na ki srishti ke upar vijay pane ki bhawna mein”

The primary aspect of *Adi-dharma* probably is the fact that unlike the institutionalised religions, it has manifested itself on the mutual relationship of the human being and nature. It does not believe in the superiority of human beings over the creation.

The aspect of ‘mutual relationship’ and its manifestation in human lives are the basis of *Adi-dharma*. *Dharma* in ‘*Adi-dharma*’ in its signification holds closer relation to the Sanskrit word than its English counterpart -Religion. In Classical Sanskrit, the root of the word ‘*Dharma*’ is ‘*dhri*’ (धृ). ‘*Dhri*’ according to *A Sanskrit Dictionary* means “to hold, bear (also bring forth), carry, maintain, preserve, keep, possess, have, use, employ, practise, undergo. (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>). The range of meanings attached to *Dhri* compels us to look at the word ‘*dharma*’ beyond the stringent meaning of law or duty. According to Vrinda Dalmiya, *Dharma* with big D can be interpreted as harmonious existence of the moral, ethical, social values. The motto of such harmonious coexistence is to reach the ultimate Good’. As there is no definite formula or law to attain that point of harmonious coexistence, an individual must use her reflexive mind to, the right way among various alternatives and obligations. The general guideline to that choice must be ‘made clear through love’. Vrinda Dalmiya interprets the phrase ‘made clear through love’ in the care-ethical term. In her interpretation, (R. D. Munda, *Adi-dharam: religious Beliefs of the Adivasis of India*) *Dharma* bearing the telos of Ultimate Good ‘means establishing non-violent webs of relationality’ (Dalmiya 101).

The mutual relationship between the human being and the nature seen from this interpretation can be read as a continuing knowledge-building system. The individual who follows this system must deal with multiple layers of relationships. But it should be noted the motto is to maintain the intention of the Great Spirit behind the Creation.

“It is impossible to understand the Great Spirit in ‘totality’. But it is ‘bound by its creation’. The Great Spirit is the ‘embodiment of patience, compassion, love and cooperation” (R. D. Munda, *Adi-dharam: religious Beliefs of the Adivasis of India* 4).

But how could one prove that the Great Spirit embodies those qualities mentioned above (*Guna*)? To know the qualities, one must observe the creation closely from the position of a caring epistemic knower. The Creation Myth or *Sosobonga* embodies two narratives. The Creation narrative and the *Asura* Story. The Great Spirit or the *Singbonga* and the First Mother planned to create the world, as there was no one existing but them. So they felt the need of someone with whom they could communicate.

“ Our questions

Our inquiry...

Returns to us.”

They wanted to hear songs; they wanted to try dances, feel warmth; they wanted to express their emotion (Ram Dayal Munda 21-23). So they created Earth over the water. Various animals of water helped them to fulfil their desire. Human beings, the children of *Latkum Haram* (the first man) and *Latkum Buria* (the first woman) grew in number. ‘Wherever they could make a living’ they settled. They ‘followed’ the forests, hills, rivers, and streams. With their growth in numbers grew the love among them.

“ There spread all around

A kingdom of happiness” 11

The Creation Myth, the very basis of *Adi-dharam*, is the intrinsic part of the ‘*Karam*’ festival. This festival is celebrated by every Adivasi communities of *Jharkhandi* society in August - September. The song and dance that follow the ritual of *Karam* can be seen as the real celebration of the Creation Myth. Dayamani Barla belongs to Munda Adivasi community. She narrated her relationships with *karma* like this:

वो तो प्रकृति के साथ आदिवासी समाज का जीवनचक्र चलता है...और करमा तेओहार पहले का जो होता था, बड़ा धुमधाम से होता था .उस मे आदिवासी एक जुटता का परिचय जो था वो मिलता था...सामाजिक रिस्ता जबरदस्त था... .वसन्त के बाद गरमि आता है, उसके बाद बरसात आति है...आदिवासी सब लोग खेति के काम में लगे हुये है....तो करमा तेओहार मनाया जाता है खेतिबारी को लेके और वो जंगल को लेके...तो जो अभि सभि खेतिबारि करके, थकके निकलते है, उस के वाद ये तेओहार मनाया जाता है...

Wo to prakriti ke saath adivasi samaaj ka jivanchakra chalta hai..aur karma teohar pahle ka jo hota tha , bara dhumdham se hota tha. Us mein adivasi ek jutta ka parichay jo tha vo milta tha....samaajik rista jabardast tha..vasant ke baad garmi aata hai, uske baad barsat aati hai,..adivasi sab log kheti ke kaam mein lage huye hai..to karma teohar manaya jaata hai khetibari ko leke, aur vo jangal ko leke..to jo abhi sabhi khetibari karke, thakke nikalte hai, uske vaad ye teohar manaya jata hai.

It is with the nature the lifecycle of Adivasis moves on. And on earlier days Adivasis used to celebrate the *Karma* festival with much more enthusiasm. The festival reflected the solidarity of Adivasi society. The social relation was strong. The season of summer comes after spring. After that comes the rain. Adivasis are busy with cultivation. So Karma festival is celebrated in relation to cultivation and forest. So now as all of them have finished their work of cultivation and they are tired, there would be a celebration of the *Karam* festival.

The exciting part of this narration is her use of time in relation to *Karma* or *Karam*. There is a continuous dialogue between past and present. She starts with the past tense and then moves to the present time. This sudden shift of time reflects a sense of eternity in relation to the interpretation of time that connects the past with the present. This sense of eternity demonstrates her way of connecting to the Creation Myth. Her narration starts with the relationship of Adivasi lifecycle with nature. Why did she choose to begin her narration from the perspective of the relationship between *Adivasi* existence and nature? Should we read the first sentence from the standpoint of Dayamani-the Adivasi activist? Or Should we read the sentence from the perspective of an Adivasi woman who is bearing the Creation Myth through her cultural epistemology? Or the activist Dayamani is a reflection of that Dayamani-the epistemic knower of *Sosobonga*? If we read the lines from the perspective of *Sosobonga*,

we can understand the meaning of lying beneath her word ‘*Adivasi* solidarity’. *Singbonga* and First Mother desired to get answers to their questions and inquiries. They wanted voices that will carry on their problems and queries. So they created the world, made human beings and taught them to live with happiness. They taught them to live with others, to learn the flows of life in hills, forests, rivers, and streams. Every single place bears the memory of the Creation. The celebration of *Karma* is a celebration of that relationship that has been sustaining the *Adivasi* lives along with nature. But again, one must ask why do the *Adivasi* society celebrate after roping the seedlings? The ritual, of course, includes the prayer for a good harvest. But there is more to it. There lies the principle of keeping a balance between the work and rest.

The second part of *Sosobonga* carries the story of *Asuras* who were also created by *Singbonga* and First Mother. *Asuras* knew to forge iron and chose to work day and night. Thus they polluted the water, forest, field, air, and everything living on it became unhealthy. *Singbonga* asked them to keep a balance between work and rest. So that the “Earth can cool down” and “the sky can calm down”.

Asuras declined to listen, and finally, *Singbonga* defeated them. The balance of the world is restored. (Ram Dayal Munda 71-217). *Karma* is not only sharing solidarity and remembering the connection between human beings and every other species but it also about keeping a balance between work and rest. That’s how nature and different species can live in a usual, healthy way. That’s why after the strenuous jobs of cultivation, people need to rest. So the energy can be restored in every species. The celebration is to remember that “the land for us all, the earth for us all”. Sharing the land and the Earth with all is the ‘ultimate Good’. The aspect of maintaining the well-being of the environment is the basis of *Adi-dharam*. One can understand the happiness in sharing by knowing the way to balance between the work and the rest. This way of looking into life may give an idea about the ‘simple’ living style of *Adivasis* and their practice of ‘minimalism’.

If the festival of *Karma* rekindles the memory of the Creation Myth, *sohrai* festival is about expressing gratitude to both human and non-human beings who helped to get a successful harvest. *Sohrai* is observed by the *Adivasi* communities in the month of Kartik and Poush (November-December). It is “basically an observance and of honour of the cattle, which assist in the cultivation operations..” (R. D. Munda, *Adi-dharam: religious Beliefs of*

the Adivasis of India 21) (Barla, Visthapan Ki Dard). In the context of India, showing reverence to particular animals is not unusual. While walking on the roads of Ranchi, one won't fail to notice the scene of feeding roti to a wandering cow. Hence, one can argue that even in the non-Adivasi Hindu society, there exists a connection of reverence with the animals. What is so special about Adivasi relationship?

I think the distinction can be determined by critically examining on which plane the connection is perceived. Feeding a cow does not mean placing the cow on the same plane of a human being. The act of feeding a cow is a way of earning 'punya' (merit). The man or woman feeding cows is just concerned about securing a good place in heaven. The cow is just a medium to reach there. So the sight of stray cows chewing plastics by the roadside does not agitate them. Neither they would feel ashamed for appropriating the grazing land for housing. The cow is just the resource for milk or merit. The consumer of that milk both psychologically and socially alienated from that resource. The reflection of this kind of attitude is apparent in cases of rehabilitation programmes that follow the development-induced displacements. The plans do not think of rehabilitating cattle or poultry with the displaced Adivasis. In the book naming *Visthapan Ka Dard (The Trauma of Displacement)* the representative members of various public organisations working against development-induced displacements have registered the voices of the displaced. During their fieldwork, they met "Shrimati Dukhni Dige" at Nandup rehabilitation Colony. She expressed her resentment against rehabilitation. Dukhni Dige, a resident of Nandup village, was displaced because UCIL company started coal-mining. The number of displaced persons was two-hundred and forty-five. The company, as part of a rehabilitation programme, built twenty-five small houses are measuring six by eight feet. The report says,

इतने छोटे घर में रहना किसी भी आदिवासी परिवार के लिये संभव नहीं है.

Itne chote ghar mein rahna kisi bhi Adivasi parivar ke liye sambhav nahi hai.

(no Adivasi family can live in such small houses". Dukhni Dige says,

हमलोगों को तो अपने घर से खदेड दिया और वो लोग) सरकारी) तो पक्का मकान में रहते हैं . हमलोगों को तो अपने खेत-टांड, जमीन के साथ अपना मूर्गी -चेंग्रा, गारु-छगरी सब से अलग कर दिया." (Barla, Visthapan Ki Dard 8)

Humlogon ko to apne ghar se khader diya aur wo log (sarkari) to pakka makaan mein rahte hain. Humlogon ko to apne khet-tanr, murgi-chengna, gaaru-chagri se alag kar diye..

They expelled us from our home. And they (government employees) live in the brick houses. They separated us from our land-field, chicken-chicks, cow-goats.

The festival of *Sohrai* and the celebration of it bear the evidence of adivasi existence in a dialectic relationship with another world. The pain of being separated from the livestock could not be understood until we get to understand the way the non-human species are viewed. In relation to this, I would like to bring here the voice of Munni Hansda narrating *Sohrai*. Munni Hansda belongs to the Santhal community.

सोहराइ में सारे बहन को बुलायेगा..सारे बहन को सोहराइ में आना हि चाहिये..बैल का भि पुजा करेगा...बैल के सिंग में धान बंध देगा .और बैल के गले में बडा बडा पिठा बंध देगा...और झुक झुक के उस के पास से पिठा लेगा.. .पूजा के बाद सुबह गौजगा होता है...घर घर में मन्दार बजाके जायेगा . गीत गाये गा .गौ जागा का गीत होता है बाहा का गीत होता है..सब का अलग अलग गीत होता है..गौजागा के बाद हि नाच-गान शुरु होता है.

Sohrai mein saare bahan ko bulayega..saare bahan ko sohrai mein aana hi chahiye..bail ka bhi puja karega..bail ke sing mein dhan bandh dega..kahega ke bahen ka baal bandh diye..bail ke gale mein barabara pitha bandh dega aur jhuk jhuk ke us pitha ko lega..puja ke baad subah gaujagaa hota hai..ghar ghar mein mandar bajate hue jaayega, geet gaye ga..gaujaga ka geet hota hai..baha ka geet hota hai..sab ka alag alag geet hota hai..gaujaga ke baad hi naach-gaan shuru hota hai.

According to Munni Hansda, *Sohrai* is a festival in which brothers invite sisters. The centre of the festival is the cattle. Here the sense of kinship includes both the human and the non-human species who unless come together and work in harmony food can't be produced. Hence, the images of *Sohrai* drawn by Munni Hansda from her experience becomes rhetoric of cooperation and coexistence. Through this festival, Adivasis acknowledge the work and collaboration of the bulls and cows in leading a self-reliant way of living.

I am here quoting from RamDayal Munda's book. The songs may differ across region and communities, but the essence remains almost same. Master of the house after invoking prayers to Singbonga recites the prayer to the cattle god like this:

“In our work, in our cultivation,

Those who help us, those who assist us,

.....

Those who stood by us,

Those who faced hardship with us

For our welfare, for our well being

.....

Friend -like bulls, mother-like cows,

we honour them; we greet them.” (R. D. Munda, *Adi-dharam: religious Beliefs of the Adivasis of India* 22-24)

The prayer ends with an appeal to cattle god and cultivation mother. The *Pahan* (the priest)² appeals to the Great Spirit, gods, and goddess to provide enough grass, leaves, and water for the cattle. So that the animals can retain their vigour. Muni Hansda talks about a congregation of family members to celebrate the -cattle festival. The cattle festival can be read as the celebration of the connection between human and non-human species. The festival is the space where the *Adivasi* communities of Jharkhand show gratitude to those human and non-human beings that help in farming and thus play a critical role in maintaining the food security and food sovereignty of *Adivasi* communities.

Both food security and food sovereignty are the cornerstones of the self -reliant identity of *Adivasi* communities. This festival can also be read as an acknowledgement of agencies of the animals. If the harmonious coexistence or the balance of harmonious coexistence is not maintained, the *Adivasis* will lose the strength. The connection thus thrives on an equal plane, and this is the cause behind egalitarian characteristic of the *Adivasi* social system. The festival is also a way of remembering the desire of *Sing Bonga* and First Mother. So long *Adivasis* have land to cultivate, they would connect with the desire of *Singbonga* and First Mother through practice. The showing of gratitude does not end with the ritual. The

practise of remembering the functional relationships of various species with the peasant *adivasis* persists in everyday living. That's why the interpretation of *Adi-dharam* is personal.

Every individual understands the meaning of *Adi-dharam* through her engagement with *Adivasi* way of living. There is no single or monolithic experience. The arrays of experience and continuous active engagement with the Creation Myth make the relationship both personal and communal (Simpson 31-32). It is a way of connecting with the ethos of harmonious coexistence in a self-reflexive manner. The *Adivasi* existence is conscious and careful about the other non-human existence. This careful consciousness emerges out from the sense of moral obligation existing in *Adivasi* environmental heritage. The 'moral obligation' of the relationship demands the active engagement of both the mind and body of an individual. From the perspective of care ethics, this moral obligation situated in the '*inter-relation*' can only be reached by means of feeling the relationship. The objective relation, when perceived from the subjective standpoint, one finds out her meaning of connection. The rituals and the festivals act as a medium of connecting the personal experience with the collective. "Moral obligations arise from and within relationships when they are: how one should live follows how one feels one's circumstance. *Anukrosa* (*empathy*), thus works to convert actual relationships into *experienced ones* and, thereby into motivating bonds" (Dalmiya 63-64).

If *Sohrai* is the festival of showing the gratitude to both human and non-human beings who help in cultivation and a way to practice social relationship, then *Sarhul* festival is the festival of hope for a new cultivation year. Ram Dayal Munda explains the essence of the festival like this: "By extension, *sarhul* is the welcoming of nature in its new form through honouring the *sal* flowers... No *Adivasi* would bring home any new leaves or flowers or use them in any way before the village priest has formally welcomed it" (R. D. Munda, *Adi-dharam: religious Beliefs of the Adivasis of India* 11).

Nandi Kachhap belongs to Uraon community. She resides in Nagri village, which is some twenty-three kilometres away from Ranchi -the state capital of Jharkhand. The festival is named after *sal* tree. But why specially *sal* flower is honoured? What is so special about *Sal*? To answer my question, Nadi Kachhap chose to narrate a story that she learned from her elders. And she did not forget to mention that she would not push me to believe the story. She did not care whether a non-*Adivasi* non-Jharkhandi researcher believed in her story or, not.

Before she began her story she told me that she would not be able to tell me how much of the story bore the 'truth'. The only truth is she heard the story from her elders. She only reiterated: “हमने ये सुना है अपनि पुर्वजों से”. “That's what I have heard from my elders”.

The story tells about a time when the Adivasi ancestors made their living by hunting-gathering. Once a group of five men went for hunting. One person among them met with death. Rest four could not bring his body back to the settlement. So they covered the body with the flowers of a *sal* tree. It took them four to five days to bring back more people to that place. And on reaching over there, they found the body of the dead person was intact. It did not decompose. The other forest animals, insects left the body untouched. The *sal* flower thus gained the reverence of the Adivasis. The body got a proper burial, and the spirit of the dead could join the spirits of the ancestors. Thus *sal* flower helped that adivasi community to maintain the balance between the world of the living and the world of spirits. The narrative of the story demonstrates the way a relationship gets established through the act of observation and interpretations. It also exhibits the way Adivasi ancestors acknowledged the agencies of *sal* flower. Here *sal* flower helped Adivasi villagers to perform proper death rituals for the deceased member. Thus the spirit of the dead was allowed to sit with his ancestors.

Hence the relationship once made by the ancestors with the *sal* tree is still remembered in *Sarhul*. It is celebrated in the springtime. In this festival, *Adivasis* predict rain for the upcoming season of cultivation. The prayer again carries the essence of *Sosobonga*. Though the prayer *Adivasis* ask *Singbonga* and Mother Earth to come to them and talk to them. Then the prayer seeks peace and protection from both the spirits and non-human species. Because it is for their active participation and cooperation, *Adivasis* can sustain their lives peacefully. The prayer is recited 'hoping' proper cultivation. Finally, the prayer ends with a longing for peace and harmony.

“ Let there be no stumbling

Jealousy among us,

Anger and greed among us,

Let them be uprooted; let them be destroyed”. (R. D. Munda, *Adi-dharam* 16)

The main ritual or *puja* is performed on the ground of the sacred grove (*Sarna*). *Sarna* is the place that bears the memories of the forest that once permitted the village ancestors to settle down there. And the last part of the prayer seeks protection from jealousy, anger, and greed—the elements that bear the power to disintegrate the community.

The disintegration of the community would mean a violation of the wish of *Singbonga* and the First mother. And integration will continue to live till the community will continue to live, remember, and practice the directives of *Singbonga*. That means *Adivasis* need to place themselves in relation to other human and non-human beings, and that is not possible without psychological and physical freedom to participate in the act of connecting with the surroundings. The environmental identity and environmental heritage of an *Adivasi individual* thrive within a complex maze of relations that give space to memories, interpretations, individuality, and inclusivity. This is how *Adi-dharam* holds an integrated relationship with the Creation Myth. That is how *Adi-dharam* can be interpreted as one of the cornerstones of *Adivasi* existence. Separated from her landscape and community and without a provision for suitable rehabilitation, an *Adivasi* individual loses her sense of environmental identity and also loses her connection with environmental heritage. Without these two, *Adivasi* culture, as well as *Adivasi* existence, lose the vitality and spontaneity and the threat of obscurity looms large over them.

Conclusion:

Hence, it can be claimed that *Adi-dharam* is a ‘*darshan*’ of coexistence that thrives on the practice of cooperation and survives in relation to place/land. Through the festivals of *Karma*, *Sohrai*, and *Sarhul* a cyclical order of remembering and engaging with the memories of Creation Myth is maintained. This is the way *Adivasi* people nurtures the ethos of balance and harmonious coexistence. It is a way of practising as well as celebrating the ‘inter-relationships’ with the environment. The relationships help to nurture a sense of self-reliance within *Adivasi* communities. This sense is the basis of *Adivasi Asmita*. It also bestows an *Adivasi* community with the freedom of self-determination within the place (Alfred 55). The conglomeration of all these aspects shapes the environmental identity of an *Adivasi* individual who is part of the environmental heritage of her community. These are the sustainers of *Adivasi* existence. *Adivasis* have ensconced the values of *Adi-dharam* as the regulatory force

behind *Adivasi* way of looking at the world. These values are the normative features of *Adivasi* Identity. The presence of self-reflexive agency embedded within and also nurtured by the environmental identity of every member of *Adivasi* society makes *Adivasi* existence distinct. Until she can't have the freedom to exercise her agency within a relationship, she can't be a part of her environmental heritage. Without the environmental heritage, *Adivasi* communities would lose their relationship with their knowledge systems, hence the basis of existence.

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¹ *Moolvasi*- Non-*Adivasi* communities of Jharkhand. But they adopted *Adivasi* way of living.

² The priest should not be interpreted from the Brahmanical aspect. Pahan is the one who conducts the rituals. But he does not enjoy the absolute authoritative position in the community.