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Adivasi

Stephen Gill

Reghu knew that *Adivasi* was the Hindi expression for the aboriginals of India, and that the Adivasi were not within the Hindu caste system. He also knew that the Adivasi became paranoid about faces from outside when their forests began vanishing. Deforestation and the debasement of their mother activated Nexalites, Christian missionaries and humanists to defend the Adivasis and to make them mindful of their rights.

Reghu also knew that Tamils were among the original inhabitants of India. He knew that their language was older than Sanskrit, the language of *The Vedas* and Aryans and that Tamils were the Dravidians, who at one time had ruled most of India. Why Tamils were educationally advanced whereas the rest of the aboriginals were not, posed a question that stimulated Reghu's intellectual curiosity.

The magnet of Reghu's abiding fascination was the spiritual roots of the Adivasis. He was convinced that their songs, narratives, folklore, stories, legends and cultural relics as well as their marriage patterns, governance system, dancing styles, clothes and the concept of justice must have a rich tradition. He was also convinced that the culture of the early Adivasis must have been simple and based on need because hunting communities such as theirs did not hoard, build empires or enslave people.

Reghu felt he was close to finding answers to suit his intellectual curiosity when he was invited to speak at Kaligarh University, in the province of Chhattisgarh, by Dr. Saroj, a professor. Dr. Saroj introduced Reghu to Principal Dr. Bahadur, a sober and deep thinker – an embodiment of dignity and kindness. Dr. Bahadur arranged Reghu's talk at his college which was managed by the former rulers of Chhattisgarh province. During the British times, this college was reserved for the children of rajas and its principal was always from England.

After the talk, the assistant principal took Reghu for a quick tour of Adhraj College. He felt that tranquility and nobility lay submerged within the campus as are the waves of the oceans. The college's temple had evidently been a church during the British regime. That evening, Reghu preferred to enjoy his meals in the comfort of his suite and decided to go to the dining room only for his breakfast to meet others.

The next morning at around ten, he was greeted in the dining room by a man in his thirties of amiable appearance. The man offered a plate of toast and jam to Reghu as he introduced himself, “I am Jai Deo Singh, the last ruler of Baster, though the government has dethroned all rajas. I am still crowned by the people of my state as a gesture of respect.”

“I am Reghu from Canada. I was invited by this college to give a talk.”

“I know you are a writer,” Raja Jai Deo Singh said.

“I would like to know about Baster, and about its rulers. You speak good English. Did you study in India?”

“I have two masters from England. Baster has an interesting background and is known for Nexalites and Adivasi. You are welcome to visit it,” the raja said in a firm and serious tone.

“Both scare me, though I want to write about them—just the real history,” Reghu was being honest.

“You don’t have to be scared if you are with me. I will take you around Baster. People still consider their rajas as gods. Would you like to see the slides of my coronation?” asked Raja Deo Singh.

He went to his room and shortly fetched his laptop to show the ceremony of his coronation. “Slides have not captured the true spirit,” he said. “The actual ceremony was more glamorous than what these pictures reveal.”

Reghu was curious to see the raja’s crown with the stones that decorated it, but Raja Jai Deo Singh calmed him down. Towards the end of the slide show, he saw the raja wearing a turban with a blue stone in the front. Reghu was disappointed because he had expected to see a crown like those worn by kings and queens he often saw in the movies.

Raja Jai Deo Singh told Reghu that he paid a large sum in business taxes and his company dealt in the minerals found in Baster state. He also told Reghu that he had six wells full of gold which he never visited and that he would buy his own airplane when he married and had children. He said he was the only surviving heir of his family and therefore would not like to take a chance.

“I would like to write the history of your state,” Reghu said at one point.

“Baster is one of the notable former princely states of India,” Raja Deo Singh said.

Looking at the slides, Reghu remarked, “My account would be fictionalized. A factual record may create problems. The writer may be challenged in courts. Moreover, imagination has a limited part to play. But if the record is turned into a fiction, a writer is in a safer boat. We will talk about it later,” he said and exchanged contact details for correspondence.

Reghu wanted to bring up the financial aspect of the project but could not find a proper way to talk it over. He left the issue for some other day. In any case, the project did not materialize because the raja’s email did not work and his telephone was picked up by some strangers who appeared to be his servants. They did not know English and his whereabouts. Meanwhile Reghu got involved with other projects which contributed to dampening his enthusiasm. He realized the merits of literary agents because such situations can be handled better by them. Once he got an offer from an agent to represent him but he was not in a hurry in those days.

He observed that these former rulers from Chhattisgarh frequented Adhraj College without bodyguards. Their cars were reasonably expensive but not luxurious. Moreover, Reghu did not find anything extraordinary in their mannerisms except the politeness. They had appealing facial features and lighter complexions. Their women had more sharp features and appeared more polite.

Reghu had been anxious to write about any former princely state of Chhattisgarh because their subjects were largely tribal, and some of these rajas must have descended from them. To write about one of them would be exciting and give him a closer look into the tribal life. However, after his discussion with Dr. Bahadur his interest had undergone a slight metamorphosis. After the dinner, Reghu asked Dr. Bahadur: “I feel somewhat uncomfortable in the company of these ex-rulers because I don’t know how to address them. Should I say Your Excellency or Sir or...?” “In letters, we address them as Your Excellency. In informal conversation, you may say Raja sahib,” Dr. Bahadur replied.

“These ex-rulers must be still rich.”

“Many of them have been ruined,” he replied.

“Why?” They had influence and money. They could invest in a business or just deposit their fortune in any bank to live on interest.” Reghu was quick to say.

“Not every ruler was that smart. Their lifestyle remained the same even after they were dethroned. A number of them did not give up womanizing, alcoholism and gambling. You know the Privy Purse that was given to these rajas. It was their monthly allowance from the Government of India for taking over their states. When the Government eliminated the Privy Purse, some clever rajas used

their money and influence in politics and some in business. Those who did nothing were ruined to gambling and drinking. Such stories are in abundance,” Dr. Bahadur said.

“It reminds me of something relating to a former raja of Indore when I visited India in the eighties. This story proves that some rajas were dumb. I don’t know how they were able to command the respect of their subjects,” Reghu responded.

“What is that story?” the Principal asked.

“I went to a tea stall looking for a friend who asked me to meet him there. It was in the month of May when the city is tortured by the sun and hot winds. I was glad to find the tea stall tucked under the shade of a cluster of trees. A man in his seventies invited me to sit down in a chair. We started talking in a friendly way. I remarked that this was the first time I had seen running water during that visit. He told me that everything was fresh and clean there, even the water.”

“How come?” I asked the man.

“We have a well. See there. That tap is connected to the well.”

The tea was very sweet. He began telling me about the previous raja who had no brains. Gold was cheap in those days. Their raja used to give gold worth millions of rupees to friends and relatives who never bothered to return. Many sycophants looted his treasures. They took money from the raja and loaned it to others to make money. The children of the raja were smart. One of them opened a liquor store and prospered.

He told Reghu further that once one of those sycophants of his father-- who was dead by that time-- went to buy liquor. The prince told the man not to enter his store again. He threatened to shoot the man if he saw him once more inside his store. The children of that raja did not want to be cheated like their father was.

Sipping tea, Reghu asked the Principal, “What do you think of the mythological Panduas? Do you think they had brains? They were princes. They were either drunk or dumb when they gambled with the Koruas. The Panduas knew that Shakuni was a trickster. It proves that the Panduas were stupid. Yudhishtra knew that Shakuni was a cheat and that the game was rigged. They were all from a royal family. Obviously not every raja was smart,” Reghu said.

Dr. Bahadur continued, “Gambling is considered bad in India. At the same time gambling is a part of the Hindu mythology. Mahabharata was the ramification of this vice. In this game of dice, the Panduas, five brothers, lost their kingdom and even their common wife Drupadi. They were exiled.

Their wife was openly humiliated. Even *Ramayna* makes references to gambling. It is said that nuts of the Vibhitak tree were used to make dices, because of their five flat sides.”

Dr. Bahadur added, “Gambling was an accepted recreational activity during the Aryan period, and is still a social recreation during Diwali. It is said that if Lakshmi is in your favour on Diwali, the forthcoming year will also be favorable. On the night of Diwali, millions of Hindus gamble at house parties.”

“Is Diwali a material festival?” Reghu asked.

Ignoring Reghu’s direct question, he said, “According to mythological sources, the goddess Parvati enjoyed playing dice with Lord Shiva on Diwali. A scene of gambling between them was carved on a stone in the temple of Kailash at Ellora in the eighth century. She is believed to have said that those who play dice on the night of Diwali thrive. It is also said that those who refuse to gamble on Diwali are born again as monkeys or donkeys. It is advised that friendly gambling should start after worshipping the goddess Lakshmi. The *Rig Veda* and *Atharva Veda*, which may have been written around two thousand years before Christ, mention gambling. It seems the game of dice was there even before that and during the period of Mohenjodaro and Harappa at the time of the Indus Valley civilization which goes back to 3300 years before Christ.

“Police do not interfere when Hindus gamble on Diwali. The practice of gambling has been passed down in India through generations, changing it into animal- related sports like cock fighting. Though these practices are illegal and non-ethical, they have assumed sophistication in the form of horse racing and card games of Rummy and Matka. In the fifteenth century, there were operations in which rulers claimed a part of the profit. Today cricket- betting is a form of those early practices. Gambling is still an integral part of social and cultural activities on Diwali.”

Reghu said, “I visited Kaligarh University last year. I met a doctoral scholar who rented a modest house from someone who belonged to the royal family. She told me that the first week of every month, it was difficult to contact any member of the royalty because at that time they collect rents and pass their leisure in gambling. Royalty is known for that. This is their recreation. Some also drink heavily.”

In his next visit to India, a year later, Reghu somehow ended up at the same Adhraj College for a week and met the same rajas who were largely polite and recognized him easily. This time, he was the guest of Principal Bahadur. He met also Raja Jai Deo Singh of Baster state.

As they sat around a small coffee table, Raja Jai Deo Singh ordered tea. This time, Reghu was not as curious to write about any raja as he had been before. His focus had shifted to the tribal life.

“How much more have you found about Baster?” Raja Deo Singh asked.

“Almost nothing. There is nothing, even online.”

Raja became somber and said, “My whole family was butchered by the soldiers. The establishment could not find anyone from the local population who could do that dirty job. A special group of soldiers from Delhi was assigned this work. The palace which you will see one day was filled with dead bodies, and there was so much blood that they had to drill holes in the walls to let it flow out,” he said, wiping the drops of tears from his eyes.

After a pause of few minutes, he resumed, “All the precious stones from the walls and ceiling of our palace were plundered. Baster is larger than the size of Scotland. It has mineral deposits. The government wanted to cut forests and establish commercial complexes there. Jungles are the gift from nature for the tribal people. Basterians were against the destruction of this gift. It was the core of the motive, I think,” he raja said.

“Do you know who was behind that?”

“It was a conspiracy. Some within our family were also involved. I know them and we still socialize.”

Reghu decided to keep the line of communication open, though he felt distinctly uneasy, thinking he might become a target if the same group found out that he was writing a book.

The next evening he met the Raja of Kanoja, a tall and intelligent former ruler. He ordered the best whisky to share with Reghu. After three drinks his conversation began to slur. He often asked Reghu to visit his state. He told Reghu that Kanoja had no railway or aerodrome and was about a fifteen-hour journey by deluxe buses with sleeping accommodation. He also told Reghu that a couple of years ago two Germans had visited his palace and had written something about that visit. He was glad to accept a copy of a book of poems authored by Reghu.

The Raja of Kanoja told him that his father was one of the five founders of the college, pointing out to him the name of his state carved on the front wall of the guest house. He also mentioned his sister again and again, inviting Reghu to go with him to visit his sister who taught at Adhraj College. When he asked the driver to bring the car, Reghu did not feel like refusing.

His sister's spacious house was a few blocks away. Tall, with the features of a legendary princess she invited them in gracefully and later he met her husband, who was also a teacher at the same college. A servant brought a glass of fresh mango juice and snacks. It was a short visit, and the hosts were quiet most of the time.

Back at the guesthouse, they enjoyed a couple of additional drinks with some spicy chicken. Hearing his insistence that Reghu pay a visit to his state, holding a glass of whiskey, he came out with the raja to relax in the porch.

Reghu saw a man in his early fifties not far from them. He had seen him a few minutes ago while getting out of the car after visiting the raja's sister. He appeared to be in charge of the assistants who took care of the garden of the college. Raja asked a servant to go and bring him,

"We were passing through and you did not greet us," the raja said.

"I did, Your Excellency." The man was spontaneous in his response that did not show any emotion.

"It was not the proper way to greet. My guest is from Canada."

"In spite of the problem with my back I did bend." The man replied, still without any emotion and also looking at Reghu.

The raja looked at Reghu and asked, "How do you like these plants and flowers? Are they looked after properly?"

"I see that the trees have been professionally trimmed and the paths are taken care of. The flowers are looked after the way they should be. The place is an oasis of a poet's imagination."

The raja looked at the man and asked, "How long have you been in service?"

"Ten years". There was no fear in his manners.

"Your work is not satisfactory. Moreover, you have to learn the ways to greet properly, particularly when the boss is with a guest. You will receive a notice of the termination of your services tomorrow by mail. You can go now."

Reghu thought that the raja was joking but there was no smile on his face. His sentences were direct and curt. The man also did not lose his composure. He greeted, lowering his head and left.

Reghu asked, "Who was that man. He looked different, though educated. He was mixing his Hindi with English."

"He is an Adivasi."

"They live in forests."

"Some Adivasis have come to cities to work, because their trees have been destroyed and land grabbed by powerful land owners called zamindars here".

Shortly, they were joined by the Raja of Jagdishpur. When he left, Reghu said, “Raja of Kanoja is an interesting...”

The Raja of Jagdishpur completed the sentence, “An interesting character.”

The Raja of Jagdishpur began discussing a couple of articles by Reghu which he had read online. He did not agree with some of his points. During the discussion Reghu asked: “What is the significance of Chhattisgarh?”

“It means thirty-six forts. The province was a part of the Madhya Pradesh province. Thirty-six ex-rulers proposed to the leaders of the Bhartiya Janta to carve this province out of Madhya Pradesh if their party came to power. This is what happened. The BJP came to power with the support of the rajas of Chhattisgarh and we have now this province. It is also said that thirty-six refers to pillars, including temples. Chhattisgarh has a distinguished culture.

“Its origin goes back thousands of years. It is believed that Lord Rama spent a part of his exile of fourteen years here. November 2000 is the historical month when this area was separated from the province of Madhya Pradesh. It is sixteen times the size of Kerala state, and has the diamond deposits in Raipur. This province is prominent for producing electricity and steel. Witchcraft is also common and women are believed to have extraordinary access to demonic powers. In time past some women were beaten or burnt alive if any tragic event happened in the village, alleging they were witches. Old women were held responsible for death of any animal or human, and in some rural areas are held responsible even today.”

“That’s terrible,” Reghu said.

“The Adivasis are dreadfully superstitious. It is believed that if a sorceress gets hold of an image of a person, she can torment, even put her victim to death. People use their services to avenge their enemies. Chhattisgarh is known for such beliefs.”

“Bullshit. A fertile ground for Christian missionaries.”

Ignoring these beliefs, Reghu thought of writing about tribal life instead of a raja because no member of any royal family appeared to be serious in getting it done by a professional writer. They didn’t understand the value of preserving the history of their dynasty. They could ask their political representatives or universities to find money for this project. It seemed that either they did not know the way to handle the situation or were not interested in any documented record of their families or their states.

Before leaving the guesthouse, Raja Jai Deo Singh had invited the head of the tribal community to the University in Baster, who happened to be in the close vicinity, to meet Reghu.

Through this man and his own research, Reghu learned that Baster was a hub of Nexalites and the Adivasi activities. He also learned that eight percent of the population of India was tribal and that there was social and political fray between Christian missionaries and Hindu extremists because missionaries were making these tribal people aware of their rights. Some of them were accepting Christianity, mainly because of their revolt against the prevailing injustice. To restrict the activities of Christian missionaries, some provincial governments, particularly the Bhartiya Janta Party who was in power, passed anti-conversion laws that made it difficult to convert to other religions.

The head of the tribal university told Reghu that the government could not suppress the consciousness of the citizens through laws nor could it suppress the Nexalites who formed parallel governments in the areas where tribal presence was strong. Soldiers, police and most government officials were afraid of going to Nexalite areas. Reghu also kept hearing that the Nexalites were not against civilians.

Glancing over the brochure that the head gave him, Reghu asked, “How many tribal teachers are there on your faculty?”

“None at present. We have several scholars on tribal life, culture and literature. They have studied and written about them.”

“Why is there no one with the first hand knowledge?”

“It is difficult to approach them in the hinterland of forests. Their language is a hurdle. Also, the Adivasis suspect that intruders visit to grab their land.”

“Did you try to find qualified individuals among the eight percent tribal population of India? There are roughly eighty-five million Adivasi-- they are more than twice the population of Canada. Maybe your advertisements appear in selected government media. Try a different way out.”

“It is a sensible suggestion. The problem is that our university is funded by the University Grant Commission. Orders come from a coterie of faceless salaried UGC bureaucrats supported by a corrupt political system. They live in the metropolitan city of Delhi, unaware of the ground realities. Their decisions have a massive impact on us,” the head of the tribal university told him.

“Something must be done to preserve their culture,” Reghu stressed. “The world is changing. Under this situation, it is the right of every citizen to know his or her past. Citizens must be allowed to preserve their past with dignity. Many of these rich traditions are likely to be destroyed if adequate measures are not taken to protect them. Preserving cultural heritage is associated with

activities like maintaining libraries, museums and educational institutions. The main goal of preservation is to keep the culture alive as long as it is possible.”

Reghu added, “I agree that citizens cannot depend always on governments because their representatives cannot be everywhere all the time. Preservation of beautiful tribal literature is the responsibility also of the tribal people. Governments are taking care of tribal literature through universities to make citizens aware of their heritage. It is a step in the right direction. Tribal literature is rich—it is fascinating because it is different. Its stories and folklore have depth and carry centuries-old wisdom. Such a wealth deserves to be preserved in print media for the enjoyment of every citizen of India and abroad.”

Going further, Reghu said, “Jungles are the banks of the tribal people. They are against the destruction of their banks. In any case, what is the main concern of the Adivasi?”

The head answered, “They were living in forests even before the invasion of the Aryans. Their forests were enough to sustain the economy of India but not enough to sustain the life of the Adivasi of today. It is true that not much is known about them. It is believed that Aryans invaded India some 3,000 years ago, pushing them to the hilly areas. Some powerful chiefs paid tribute to Hindu rulers, who in turn gave them some areas to rule over tribal and non-tribal people. Some of these rulers began to use *Singh* as their suffix.”

“Why Singh?”

“It was used as a suffix to their own name by Hindu warriors and kings of India. Singh means lion. Some Brahmins also used this suffix. The name denotes power and authority. Adivasi rulers and also an influential segment of their subjects began to accept the Hindu caste system. The British tried to subdue the Adivasi to collect money from them. They began to revolt. To maintain peace and order, the British passed laws to recognize the rights of the Adivasi to their ancestral properties.”

“Tell me something about their lifestyle,” Reghu interrupted.

“All I can say they live together, helping one another in need. Each community has its own form of worship. They hunt and fish, and are mostly non-vegetarian because of the easy availability of food.

“As I said before, their population in India is about eight percent, and they speak about one hundred languages. They depend on forests for most of their needs. You are right that their trees are their collective wealth. They use this wealth according to their need.”

“Deforestation is a real problem. Tell me something about it,” Reghu asked.

“As I look at it, forests are the greatest assets of nature. Human health is directly associated with them. Deforestation leads to irreversible damage. Trees are vital to maintain pure air. What humans breathe out is poison. This poison is absorbed by plants who convert it into oxygen through a process called photosynthesis.

“Trees are important particularly these days because of the increasing toxic elements in our body that come from food, water and air. These toxic elements are deposited in the colon. Oxygen cleans the walls of the colon in a healthy and natural way. Let us not forget that forests provide ingredients for a number of medicines, including malaria, hypertension, heart disease and some forms of cancer. A number of even more useful ingredients are yet to be discovered.

“Forests also balance the climate in general by cooling the environment and help maintaining ecological balance. Forests provide food, water and shelter to wild animals. Deforestation causes loss of species.” The professor paused.

“Anything else”? Reghu asked.

“Forests help to cause rain. Trees absorb water from the soil for their nourishment. This water is evaporated by the sun or absorbed back into the atmosphere just as water is absorbed by the sun from the wet clothes. This water gets into clouds and when clouds become heavy with water, they send the water back to earth in the form of rain. Trees are air conditioners and water pumps provided by nature.

“Trees provide food as well as materials that are used for paper, furniture and to build houses. Their wood is burned to cook food and heat homes. Even the rubber for shoes comes from certain types of trees. They are also the source of honey and spices like cinnamon.

“Deforestation has a disastrous impact on the Adivasi culture. The loss of forests is the loss of a repository of knowledge and wisdom about the surrounding of the day- to- day life of the Adivasi.” Reghu listened to this description about forests attentively. However some of his questions about the Advasis and former rulers remained unanswered. He wanted to know why these rulers had different facial characteristics than were characteristic of the people from Chhattisgarh and its aboriginals, and why they had fairer skin. He also observed that their women were not seen much around the guest house of Adhraj College.

The Adivasis he had seen lived the normal life of any villager. Their women looked after the family and men worked outside the home. There must be primitive tribes among them who used bows and arrows and did not farm. Where were they? If they were approachable by Christian missionaries why

were they not approachable by others? What was their pattern of family life? He was in search of knowledgeable people who would put him in touch with the primitive life.

When Reghu had a chance to go out of Kaligarh city with Professor Saroj and two other scholars, he expected to see that aspect of the tribal culture. They drove out of the city for about thirty miles and stopped in front of a tea shop. The owner warned them not to go beyond that point. They saw even the road was ending there. So far, they had not seen any Adivasi settlement.

Reghu thought that Raja Fateh Singh, the former ruler of Kaligarh state, might share his experiences on this subject. He arranged to see him through his niece, Professor Manjari, who was Vice Chancellor of Kaligarh University and also had blood ties with the royal family.

Reghu had observed that Vice Chancellor Manjari had sharp features and a fair complexion. She looked more like Raja Jai Deo Singh of Baster or like the Raja of Jagdishpur and Raja of Kanoja. She was different from Chhattisgarhians also because of her round face. She had an unusual dignity in her walk. She had a good knowledge of Hindi, in which she had authored some books and research papers. She was also a classical dancer but after her appointment as Vice Chancellor, she only taught it.

In their first meeting, a year before, she had told Reghu that she had not been interested in the position of Vice Chancellor, but she applied in any case on the insistence of some friends. People thought that she was offered that responsibility because of her affiliation to the royal family of Kaligarh. She shared with Reghu that she did not want to be selected. She actually had prayed for that but the government did select her because of her contribution as an artist and her research work. Moreover, she was local and unattached. Her blood ties with the local royal family might have had an influence. After hearing comments from others and seeing her once in her office, Reghu was impressed with her abilities as an administrator and her dedication.

Reghu remember the day a year before when he had been invited to the annual conference of her university. He had seen her in her office, and the next day in the auditorium of the university where the conference was to be held. He reached a few minutes early and took one of the seats. He heard the door open and saw a woman appearing. He felt he had seen her somewhere but could not place her.

She sat next to him after her formal greeting. Nothing happened for a couple of minutes. This unusual silence between them prompted her to say, "Perhaps you have not

recognized me.” That was enough to remind Reghu that she was Vice Chancellor Professor Dr. Manjari. He expressed his apology, saying poets often live in a different world.

While in that frame of mind, Reghu thought of the next evening when he was to meet Raja Fateh Singh who was visiting Kaligarh a day earlier because Reghu was leaving for Tamil Nadu. He decided to talk about writing about Kaligarh and also about the Adivasi. The Raja himself looked different as did Professor Manjari, his niece.

Professor Manjari had arranged a drive that arrived exactly at 7:30 in the evening in front of the door of his guest house and within minutes he was approaching the palace. It was the sister of the Raja who lived there. The palace was on the outskirts of the city. The thick trees which surrounded the palace added to its majestic calm. He saw rows of flowers on both sides, appearing to welcome him. There were no guards and no bustle of servants. Reghu could hear the psalm of silence even from the walls of the palace, while the moving shadows of the trees in the dusk produced a hypnotic effect on him. The stillness in its splendor was enough to awaken the seeker in any human. The palace itself was old, needing plaster to be repaired, yet it held dignity. Reghu thought of the charm it must have had more than a hundred years ago. Coming out of the car, Reghu proceeded towards the three chairs around a small table in the outer porch.

Raja Fateh Singh stretched his hand to shake, introducing his nephew at the same time. Once they were comfortably seated, his sister appeared from a side door. She was somewhere in her forties, a tall, irresistibly attractive of quiet disposition. He came to know that she was a professor of political science. To open the conversation he asked about the children. Her reply was short, “My husband had an accident.”

She gracefully invited Reghu to have a meal with them, and turned to go inside, while he began to enjoy the whiskey with the raja and his nephew. Reghu asked the former ruler some information about the aboriginals of India.

“Financially and educationally they are backward. Political parties raise issues of their development and forget those issues soon after the election. There are attempts to amalgamate them in the mainstream; to use them as vote banks but they love the traditional bank of their jungles.”

He spoke about the custom of some Adivasis for selecting marriage partners, “All the eligible girls gather one night in a room. These girls are almost of the same age. Any eligible bachelor enters a completely dark room to pick one girl. He then spends either that night or the whole life with that girl. Normally on such a day the inmates of that village drink liquor made from Moua flower. Its

liquor in pure form is nourishing. These days, it is mixed with some unhealthy chemicals or synthetic ingredients to make it stronger. The Adivasis blame it for some of their health problems. After that all go out hunting in the evening and eat together in a festive atmosphere.

“They have a weird sense of justice. They kill the person who steals or cheats. They have no other punishment between life and death. They do not know what forgiveness means.

“These rituals are among some primitive tribes,” the raja added.

Reghu told the raja that he was never in favor of eliminating the princely states. The division of the nation was a rush job. Jinnah was in a rush because he knew of his approaching death due to his terminal disease. He died within months of the formation of Pakistan. Indian leaders thought that they would be able to dissolve their differences without bloodshed, but the division caused the worst massacre in human history though both shared the same culture, except their religions.

Reghu was of the opinion that other arrangements could have been sought to make use of the power, experience and expertise of the rulers. These states should have been treated like the modern provinces of India. Hereditary autocrats could be nominal rulers like governors who are transferred from one province to another without knowing the local problems.

Under the present system it takes years and huge money to educate governors of the states. It has become also a political game. In many cases these governors who come from other provinces intensify problems when they interfere in local politics. These rajas by contrast knew their local areas and their subjects. In many cases, particularly for the tribal people of Chhattisgarh, they were not less than gods. Reghu wanted to write about Baster and Raja Jai Deo Singh from this angle.

Enjoying the delicious dishes, Reghu said: “I am in favour of preserving the culture of the tribal people as long as they do not harm anyone. Tribal people should be welcome to the mainstream if they like. They should not be disturbed if they are happy with their traditional culture.”

While in the car, his mind was occupied with the tribal life. He had basic questions, which he thought of discussing with Professor Pujari who often helped him in such situations. His ancestors had immigrated to the Chhattisgarh region two generations back from the Delhi area. He loved the Chhattisgarh culture and knew its history. He also knew other religions as well as *the Vedas*. Though

a Hindu Brahmin, he interpreted *the Vedas* logically. He used to attend Christian services and had a good knowledge of *the Bible*. Reghu liked his views because he was scholarly in his approach.

Professor Pujari gave Reghu a ride to the airport to fly to Tamil Nadu, where he was invited as a keynote speaker at a university conference. During the ride, Reghu asked,

“How many parliamentarians are there from Adivasi communities?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps there is none.”

“How many lawyers are there from Adivasi communities?”

“Not even one, I think, ” the professor replied.

“The medium of instruction at the university level is English. Why the medium of instruction of the tribal universities is not English?” Reghu asked.

“Because their English is poor.”

“Is it because their English is poor or it is because the establishment wants their English to remain poor or become even worse, so they keep developing an inferiority complex?” Reghu emphasized,

“In these 5000 years, India has not been able to produce a single leader of a national stature, let alone international, from the Adivasi. This explains something.”

Looking at the sky-high chimneys of factories and the ugliness of their thick rising smoke, he resumed, “Why do the females from royal families have lighter complexions and sharper features?” This question had been in his mind for a while. “Even the males have lighter complexions and have sharp features and are tall. They are not like any Indian in the north, south or central part?”

Professor Pujari replied, “Indians have a weakness for fair complexions. It stems from the caste system. The colonial era may also have something to do with it. Today, TV shows, movies, magazines and advertisements are flooded with fair skin. Fair skin helped rulers to command more respect from their subjects. They have been treated as the reincarnation of gods. Because of their glamour and money, to find a spouse who was fair and had sharp features was not difficult for the ruling class. There are some areas of India where people are fair- skinned and have features different from the people of the rest of India. They speak English fluently because of their early education in missionary schools. Moreover royal families preferred to have arranged marriages within their own circle. ”

After a short pause Reghu said, “The Adivasis have owned their forests and their lands for the last roughly 5000 years. Their land is rich with mineral and forest resources. Establishments have constructed railways and have set up plantations on their land. They have hunted their animals, destroying their economy and culture. They take up mining explorations to loot their natural wealth. The minerals of Chhattisgarh province include iron, bauxite, coal, manganese, limestone, dolomite, tin, china clay, quartzite, quartz-silica, fluorite, diamond, granite, corundum, etc. Just in Baster iron ore is in abundance.

“Let me share that when the Aryans came, the Adivasis let them come and settle. In the sixteenth century, Zoroastrians also known as the Parsees, came from Iran as refugees, and the Adivasis let them settle without any fuss. Then Muslims came. Adivasis let them also come and settle. Then came the British and they let them come and reign as long as they did not bother them. But when they encroached on their lives and started asking for tribute the Adivasis resented it. Eventually, the British recognized their rights to their land and trees.

“When India was freed, the Adivasis were not much concerned but revolted when their land was stolen and trees were destroyed. Forests were their treasure banks. The land was their mother. They accorded her as much respect as they could. When their bank was robbed and their mother disgraced, Adivasi communities began to revolt. Citizens came to their help as Nexalites, Christian missionaries, human rights activists and others. Some of them were sincere and some had their own designs.

“Prosperity does not come with the destruction of trees, nor does it come neither with installing industrial complexes nor by uprooting the helpless. Prosperity is nourished in the womb of peace.”

“Where is peace?” Professor Pujari asked, while stopping his car in the parking lot of the terminal.

“Peace is the thoughtful blossom of *live and let live* which silently spreads a healthy aroma of a meaningful prosperity,” Reghu concluded stepping out of the car.