

# CULTURAL ALIENATION OF ADIVASIS LEADS TO CULTURAL GENOCIDE

Priyanka Sandilya\*

*Book: Sacrificing People: Invasion of a Tribal Landscape*

*Author: Felix Padel*

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## Introduction

The book ‘Sacrificing People: Invasions of a Tribal Landscape’ under review is a historical re-setting of those tribal images by the Indo-British anthropologist, Felix Padel. This is a new and updated edition of the previous one *The Sacrifice of Human Being: British Rule and the Konds of Orissa*. The journey of the book, like the struggle of the Konds, is from colonial intrusion to developmental destruction. In other words, the book looks at the colonial roots of the relationships between the ‘Adivasis’ – the indigenous people in tribal areas of India – with the rest of the country.

The new and updated edition under review has placed sacrifice as part of the life of ‘uncivilised Konds’, in a contemporary perspective. Padel argues the Konds have stopped this sacrifice, but others have taken over. The victims are now the tribal people and the perpetrator is the ‘government’ that once invested everything to stop the sacrifice. Minerals have replaced the turmeric crop. Companies are the new savages and the Meriahs are the Konds now.

Padel is a native of London town. He has an enduring interest in a long view of human history. Padel is a trained, freelance anthropologist. He takes inspiration from his great great grandfather Charles Darwin, for his holistic vision of man-in-nature. The method he applied in this book is Social Anthropology – as it has great potential for giving a wholistic understanding. It is the author belief that a truly human anthropology can find real answer to fundamental questions. Padel reveals his motivation behind the book and says it’s hard to explain how such associations start. The beauty of the landscapes and streams drew him

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\* The author is an activist cum researcher. She is currently an MPhil-PhD scholar at School of Rural Development, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Tuljapur. The author could be contacted at [spriyanka18@gmail.com](mailto:spriyanka18@gmail.com).

alongwith the humour, dances and beauty of the people. This book is a re-written version of his doctoral thesis in Social Anthropology. Tribal culture contains a wealth of knowledge and human contact that most of the literature on them barely hints at. This richness in culture filled with huge potential, mystery and humour of what it means to be a human being.

### **The Book and its Background**

Padel's core argument in the book is that development, civilisation and impoverishment occur in the name of displacement and cultural genocide. Historical research reveals that the Konds are basically the same people as the Kalinga, whom Ashoka attacked with such violence around 2,270 years ago, in which nearly 1,00,000 people were killed and 1,50,000 were enslaved. In fact, the whole history of Ashoka's war or cultural genocide was waged against the Kalinga (the Konds). Further, he argues that it involved a *sacrifice of life* as great as took place by human sacrifice, as well as a *sacrifice of human being* – a much greater, yet less visible and much more indirect mode of violence.

Through this book Padel aims to understand what has been forcefully imposed on tribal people by objectively investigating the history, legacy, attitudes and behaviour of various groups of the people who have imposed on them. There are other aspects being examined such as the context, not taking anything for granted, and looking beneath the surface, behind the mask of their own idealised image, unveiling the 'shadow side', that has affected tribal people more or less destructively.

Some of the beliefs of the author also get reflected in this book. He believes that one of the very few tribal groups which actually practices human sacrifice runs the risk of counter reinforcement of the very stereotype which he wish to combat – the negative view of tribal people as 'savages'. Human sacrifice is a dangerous subject, yet he feels that there is great value in facing it and believes that a key to many of the horrible situations where human cruelty is on the rampage may lie in trying to understand it. He opines that '*Adivasi religion's centrality is Respect for Nature, as it forms the basis for real sustainability.*'

Padel brings in his understanding about Indian Adivasis in this book. The book reflects his understanding on the significant different between tribals and mainstream Hindu culture. It could be observed in these few lines. 'To a large extent they are outside the caste system, eating meat and drinking alcohol. They have shamans as well as priests, and practice areligion

that is based on a reverence for nature and revolves around the forest and the forces of nature: changes of season, water and fire, fertility and death, disease and healing. Plants and animals forms the continuous cycle of food and there is nothing sentimental about this reverence. But this killing is performed with a precise knowledge of natures' laws and limits as well as a profound respect for the spirit world that manifests through nature.' He refers to the constant laughter and banter between men and women. Dancing to drums and the singing of love songs are at the heart of these cultures.

### **Glancing through the pages**

The key theme of the book surrounds around the question of cultural genocide of Adivasis: a pattern of pushing the Adivasi people towards the margins. Two levels can be distinguished: physical extermination and cultural genocide. India's tribal societies, which always existed on the edges of 'civilisation', escaped this extreme level of extermination. However, dispossession from their land started during colonial times, and has accelerated since independence. Displacement by dams and other 'development' projects, and invasion of their territories by large-scale mining projects, involve an immensely painful process of cultural genocide. Cultural genocide often accompanies ecocide – a destruction of ecosystems that tribal societies had maintained intact over centuries.

On the basis of theme and centre idea the book can be divided into four parts. A Case Study of Colonialism constitutes the first part of the book. The second is all about Tribal history, culture, ecology, rites and rituals, customs and system, faith and religion, gods/goddesses and pantheons. It also provides glimpses of Kondh interaction with outside Hindu world and how it has impacted the culture in multiple ways. The third part is about the advent of British as merchants, colonisers, and Christian missionaries, which he observes as the beginning of this modern line of alienation and marginalisation. The fourth part could be placed as a broad reference to post-colonial phase, where the alienation continues as 'internal colonisation' in the name of development in modern India.

Throughout the book, the sense of moral outrage is evident. The book shows the rigorous engagement of author's fieldwork, which helps in understanding the tribal culture and the politics of other actors. In fact Padel engages in an interaction between the Tribal versus the colonial culture. The author's tone is like an activist. On the whole it is an influential book leaving questions in the readers' minds regarding tribalism and humanity among the little

known traditions. It is a highly rich research placed in an appropriate contextual setting that demystifies the very notion of human sacrifice practice. The book rescues significant facts from the junk bin of historical memory and could reset many of our relationships with our own development history. Each episode quoted and qualified in the book provokes to rethink. In the end, all of them convince what Felix believes: human sacrifice does continue.

This book will fascinate scholars and the discerning public alike. From a very personal perspective of being an Adivasi, the last chapter, 'Questioning the Sacrifice: A Postscript', had a deeper impact on my personal being. It is a critical autopsy of the modern development model and its enormous cost being paid by the tribal communities in terms of life, resources, sufferings, sacrifices and cultural alienation. If one does a reverse social engineering from this chapter, you end up with Konds sacrificing a Meriah (the human sacrifice). But as the other chapters argue, Konds were not as aggressive and rigid with human sacrifice as the current practitioners are. As much as it fascinated me reading it, it was very painful too. Much of the things seem controversial.

## **Analysis and Evaluation of the book**

### **Strengths**

As already mentioned above, it is a voluminous work as an anthropologist. I would not repeat any of those, but would look at other aspects that the book brings forth. This book follows the classical pattern of ethnographic writing with the strength of deep insightful fieldwork. The fieldwork has been done in a setting, which builds the theoretical argument based on the data generated in it. As a researcher, it brings in the new methodological epistemology of going beyond the existing patterns of ethnographic ontology. The author offers a method to people from a multitude of different perspectives which speak for themselves. He has also kept the original spellings in these quoted passages, since the variety of spellings is part of this variety of perspectives.

One could also see the beauty of blending the scholastic and intellectuality of Padel in this book. The book is an anthropological study of the structure of power and authority imposed during British rule on tribal people of Central India. This book initiated an approach of 'reverse anthropology'.

## Limitation

The author more or less used the very academic conventions which he called questions. He wrote something that is only for intellectuals. The language of the book does not connect with the ordinary masses or the subjects – the Kondh Adivasi. The Adivasis (and Kondhs) are very ordinary people without having the language strength, which has been placed in this work. There is not much reference to the other side of the Indian indigenous reality – the ex-untouchables – who have been closely associated with the Kondhs at multiple levels. Though there are scanty references to Doms, Pano and Gandas (and a few others) in the book, it does not give a real picture of such inter-connections. This is important since all the facts placed in the context of cultural alienation and cultural genocide is common with the Dalit groups too. Most of these communities have several common cultural patterns. These aspects have been least found in it.

At one level, it also provides the feeling that the Adivasi community is something that has nothing to do with the current phase of history. Thus the idea of ‘primitiveness’ gets reinforced in a lighter way as something which does not align with the current phase of history. While there is much criticism of Christian missionaries, the interactive mechanism and intrusion of Hindu ideas and ideologies into the Adivasi realm needs deeper explanation and further research. These are important to look at since at present everything is being homogenised under the armpit of Hindutva. Connecting and writing on the vast themes are not an easy task and therefore such aspects need to be acknowledged and emphasised as a researcher.

## Scope

This book opens the space for further exploration of knowledge both in the academic realms as well as at personal levels. It is the threshold of entering the unexplored world of indigenous communities. It gives many insights that will in some way help to heal some of the intolerance, inhumanity and cruelty in the world. The book is a good source to search answer to questions like:

- Why are human beings so cruel to each other?
- What are the values, beliefs and 'myths' that motivate atrocious behaviour, masking it as heroism?
- And why have so many 'civilised' people oppressed tribals and exploited them so ruthlessly, in India and elsewhere?

### **Readability**

Despite the limitations mentioned above it is worth reading for all students, scholars, academicians, activists, professionals, social workers and intellectuals. This book offers a way of understanding the roots of violence among communities by investigating ourselves and our place in the power structure. The book reveals how much of the colonial mind-set and system is still in place. The author explores the link between the way the picture gets painted and the destruction of that. Here, the picture is the portrayal of the tribal world in India since the early 1800s, that has been tied to the need to exploit and if advantageous to those who exploit, to dispossess it.

The book analyses administrative, missionary and anthropological discourses as these three stood tall in the colonial power structure. His straight forward critique is about developmental concept and cultural genocide. This book is meticulously researched and brings an exceptionally original study of the forms of domination that permeate the modern world. The book questions academic conventions too. This is a thought-provoking and well-argued book. On the whole Padel had summed up his own personal experience in this book.

### **Conclusion**

Reading the book forced me to ask one question to myself. How can I end Cultural Genocide? Which death is more human? What is real development? Is it development to displace people? Is it development on the cost of human sacrifices? Whose future? What has been imposed on tribal people? What if human sacrifice was not a 'survival' in an evolutionary scale of civilisation, but a constitutive element of our so-called 'civilised' world? To what level the administrator, the missionary, and the anthropologist are in all of us?

The human sacrifice practice and the British rulers' campaign to stop it, in context of complex strategy to colonise resources, this is relevant in today's context. Hence we – the Adivasis – are still colonised and this process of colonialism is a continuation of what has been happening since colonial times. To my personal consciousness, development is the establishment of justice, equality, harmony and space for all. In many ways the forms of power and authority that have evolved in Western society and have been imposed on people of other cultures, ostensibly to 'civilise' them, involve several levels of cruelty on human and nature that go beyond human sacrifice, sacrificing the essence of what it means to be human.

At present all these ongoing invasions of tribal territory for iron ore, coal, bauxite, limestone and other minerals in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Jharkhand broadly feed the imperial arms industry and therefore it's the continuity of wars. In such context occurrences of Kandhamal violence, SalwaJudum in Bastar creates the new model of proxy civil war. To conclude, all these wars get internalised in each of our lives.