



# IMPACT OF ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION ON TRIBALS: BIBLICAL RESPONSE

**Lalfakawmi**

Department of Old Testament

Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College

Shamshabad, Telangana

## **Abstract**

In the sake of technology and innovative advancements, humans have ruined the environment. However, these changes have a significant impact on the cosmos and its inhabitants, particularly the tribal peoples, who are the underserved groups in society. In this essay, we make an effort to examine the diverse effects of ecological degradation on tribal and scriptural responses to ecological destruction.

**Keywords:** ecology, ecological destruction, tribals, land, displacement.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Ever since India opened to Globalization from 1991 nation has given multinational companies an open space to control State authorities' minds by engaging with various development projects, which unfortunately proved rather deleterious to Tribals. The main reasons are as follows: Most of the natural resources, such as minerals and forest produce, belong to the Tribals, but these properties are being sold to industrialists by the state authorities without the prior consent of the native people and often by means of force. Selfishness and inhuman use of force have uprooted many Tribal people from their own land and have alienated them from their natural occupation, livelihood, culture, and spirituality, thus leaving them with no option but to struggle through it all with or without violence.

With the increasing struggles of the Tribal across the country, people from various walks of life, such as activists, social movements, NGOs, civil society, theologians, and even the Central Government<sup>1</sup> have started addressing issues such as human rights, protection, and privileges, the Government encoding them as legal rights in various Acts and Declarations.<sup>1</sup> This paper is an attempt to look into the impact of ecological destruction on Tribals. The presenter has looked into the problems of all the Tribal existing in India in general.

## **2. THE HISTORY OF TRIBAL'S ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION**

The history of land alienation among the tribes began during British colonialism in India when the British interfered in the tribal region for the purpose of exploiting the tribal natural resources. Coupled with this tribal lands were occupied by moneylenders, zamindars and traders by advancing them loans etc. Opening of mines in the heart of tribal habitat and even a few factories provided wage labour as well as opportunities for factory employment. But this brought increasing destitution and displacement. After the British came to power, the Forest policy of the British Government was more inclined towards commercial considerations rather than human. Some forests were declared as reserved ones where only authorized contractors were

allowed to cut the timber and the forest-dwellers were kept isolated deliberately within their habitat without any effort to ameliorate their economic and educational standards.<sup>ii</sup>

The expansion of railway in India heavily devastated the forest resources in India. Forest land and its resources provide the best means of livelihood for the tribal people and many tribes including the women engage in agriculture, food gathering and hunting are heavily dependent on the products of the forest. Therefore when outsiders exploit the tribe's land and its resources the natural life cycle of tribal ecology and tribal life were greatly disturbed.<sup>iii</sup>

### 3. EXPLOITATION AND UNREST OF THE TRIBAL

The provisions granted in the constitution for the welfare and development of the tribes is very impressive. But the actual reality on the ground is very disappointing. The tribal people have been subjected to structural violence of land alienation, deforestation, displacement, and forced migration, deprivations of education, health services, safe drinking water, proper housing and physical security.<sup>iv</sup>

For ages tribals are considered primitive segment of Indian society. They lived in forests and hills without any contact with civilizations. During British rule they consolidated their position and their political aspirations and administrative needs necessitated to open up the entire country. The British introduced the system of landownership and revenue. Annual tax was trebled which was beyond the paying capacity of tribal cultivators. Many non tribals began to settle in the tribal areas offering credit facilities. Initially it provided relief to tribals but gradually the system became exploitative. Over the years the tribal population faced all types of exploitation.<sup>v</sup>

### 4. IMPACT OF ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION ON TRIBALS

At present ecological destruction is one of the issues which is affecting the living conditions and for the tribals whose lives depend on nature has become a grave issue for them. The process of industrialization in developing the country is one of the problem for the cause of massive ecological destruction. It has positive impact which helps in improving the lifestyle of the people but not so in keeping ecology in balance. As mentioned the natures for tribals is everything and therefore if the nature around them are destroyed it affects every area of their life. Lets then look into the impact of ecological destruction on tribals.

**4.1. Tribals and Land:** There is a close link between tribal people and the land and forests. However, many tribal people have lost their traditional lands and forests and in the process become some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of Indian society. Land ownership is a contentious issue and has become even more so as India has sought economic development. Very often the traditional homelands of tribal people harbor abundant sources of natural resources such as timber, minerals and water. As India has industrialized, the increasing demand for water, land, minerals and timber has led to a conflict of interests between modern industry and tribal people. Most often it is the tribal people who are the losers in such disputes. Deforestation, mining and the construction of large dams have been incredibly disruptive to Tribal people's traditional way of life, and have often led to exploitation, alienation and poverty. Many tribal people have been displaced by large scale development projects since independence and many have been adequately resettled and compensated for lands and livelihood destroyed.<sup>vi</sup>

**4.2. Tribals and Forest:** Forest plays a vital role in the life of the tribals. The tribals derive their benefits from forest. To a large number of them, it is their home. They maintain their livelihood from the forest. Forest and trees are interlaced with their culture and tradition and regulated their socio-economic life. Tribals were the supreme lords of the forest and enjoy all resources and thereby maintain their secluded happy life and tradition. This was the pattern of earlier tribal life.<sup>vii</sup>

Tribals underwent a change not only in their relationship with land but also in their relationship with forests. As mentioned the colonization drastically altered their relationship with the forest. To colonizers the forests were important source of revenue and profit, hence their forest policy in traduced state control over forest resources and imposed the curtailment of rights and privileges over them. These policies lead to environment degradation as total fores cover went down. Tribal areas in India have also seen an influx of people from outside in search of employment in industry, mines, railways, government. These activities

have given rise to increasing urbanization of tribal areas and have caused large scale of migration of non-tribals depriving of tribal of fruits of development in tribal areas.<sup>viii</sup>

Since independence, tribal ecological and economical conditions have undergone many changes due to the change in governmental policies. Rapid industrialization through economic planning, constitutional laws which is responsible for the creation of democratic, secular, and egalitarian society, introduction of land reforms and Community Development Projects (CDP) in tribal areas since 1950's, influences of modern science and technology specially on their pristine practices, all have deeply affected the social, institutional, economic, cultural as well as political structure of tribes.<sup>ix</sup>

**4.3. Land Alienation:** The fundamental violation of right to own property, food security and employment are connected with land alienation. The tribal land is taken away for industries, extractive mining operation, mega dams, roads, railways and other development projects. The Land Acquisition Act of 1894 specified taking of land for Special Economic Zones left the tribals, especially the forest dwelling tribals at their mercy. Land taken for development purpose is not illegal. Such policies ruined the livelihood means of tribals and did not take care of the ousted population in terms of proper rehabilitation.<sup>x</sup> Industrialization has further intensified the alienation of land and transformed the tribal cultivators either into agricultural labor or into industrial proletariat, and as a result, the population of landless tribal labourers has increased.<sup>xi</sup>

**4.4. Water Pollution:** Damage to the environment contributes to declining health among tribal communities. Exposure to harmful chemicals associated with extracting and processing energy resources leads to cancers and respiratory problems. Beyond the direct impact on peoples' health, loss of productive land and clean water makes it difficult for native people to practice traditional agriculture, and therefore difficult to feed themselves. For many traditional communities, the "survival of a people is tied to survival of the land," and destruction of that land means destruction of the people.<sup>xii</sup>

The study reveals that water pollution, caused by the screening plant of the Iron Ore, is the worst kind of disadvantage scoring over the rest that the tribals have been facing since the setting up of the mechanized mines. It has further increased the tribal's dependency on the economy of the complex. It has inflicted disastrous effects upon the traditional economy and upon agriculture in particular.<sup>xiii</sup>

**4.5. Displacement of tribals:** Construction of big dams, land acquisition for industries and extractive mining, railway lines and roads, animal sanctuaries and parks, reserve forests, electric grids, etc, are the main sectors for displacing people forcibly. From Independence till date million of people are displaced out of which many are tribals. The State administration dropped the preventive exploitative measures. Thus, so many adventurers like industrialist and miners entered tribal areas to make fortune Ironically. The mining industrialist mafias spread widely in Odisha, Maharashtra, Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.<sup>xiv</sup>

**4.6. Migration:** The causes of migration of tribals are forced eviction due to land acquisition and loss of employment, poverty and status improvement. The main reason of course is loss of employment and agricultural land. Rural populations, particularly the tribals, are driven faster to cities and town because they are subject to cheap labour. Today, human trafficking for cheap labour and sexual exploitation has also increased in tribal areas.<sup>xv</sup>

**4.7. Economic:** Management of energy resources on tribal lands has important direct and indirect economic consequences. Not surprisingly, given the historical treatment of native people, tribes still have little control over how their land and its resources are managed. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a federal agency that supervises tribes, was put in charge of managing tribal resources. Through this agency, non-native companies began to lease reservation land containing resources in the early 20th century. To further deprive tribes of the possible benefits of these resources, the 1938 Indian Tribal Mineral Leasing Act did not allow tribes to conduct their own extraction. The BIA, without tribal input, continues to negotiate all leases and payments between companies and tribes. The lack of tribal involvement in managing these resources also contributes to a lack of job opportunities on tribal lands. For people living on reservations, the economic situation fosters poverty and dependence on whatever economic opportunities come along.<sup>xvi</sup>



## 5. THE URGENT NEED OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FOR THE TRIBAL SOCIETY IN COMBATING ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION

The need of the hour for the tribal society is the need of sustainable development and the care for creation for its survival. Sustainable development is possible when the local Tribal community practice is appropriated with the climate-adaptive farming techniques and micro-level watershed management, and when they participate in the local governance in the planning and decision-making process in their locality. As the land, soil, water and plant are no more in their unpolluted condition, the environment is no more friendly today with the experience of extreme weather condition, unpredictable precipitation, degraded land with constant soil erosion, water scarcity, etc., especially in the tribal inhabited regions in addition to the misery of poor local governance. Due to these factors, the tribal people suffered many crises, such as unemployment and starvation.<sup>xvii</sup>

Sustainable development has a direct link to food security. If the local community fails to grow crops for their need due to climatic condition and adverse government policy, then how does this community sustain its livelihood? So, there is an urgent need to address the issue of food security in a sustainable manner; it is imperative to address the issue of low agriculture productivity, ground water depletion and degrading natural resources. There is also a greater need to establish linkages between existing government institutions, local community and civil society organisation. Getting engaged in the sustainable development process, the community needs to be constantly provided with relevant knowledge and skill. Sustainable development is complex because it involves environmental sustainability.<sup>xviii</sup>

## 6. BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION

### 6.1. Stewardship

Christian stewardship is based on the concept that everything we have was given to us—our health, our emotions, our intellect, our talents, the social and economic benefits into which we have been born, and all we do or earn or make with what God has given us—all ultimately are gifts from God for which we cannot take credit. In fact, because God created everything, He owns everything and they are only on loan to us. We are not owners but caretakers. And as the Biblical parable of the Talents tells us, we will be held accountable to God for what we do with the resources He has entrusted to us.<sup>xix</sup> Men and women were created in the image of God, given a privileged place among creatures, and commanded to exercise stewardship over the earth (Gen. 1:26—28; Ps. 8:5). Fundamental to a properly Christian environmental ethic, then, are the Creator/creature distinction and the doctrine of humankind's creation in the image of God. Our stewardship under God implies that we are morally accountable to him for treating creation in a manner that best serves the objectives of the kingdom of God; but both moral accountability and dominion over the earth depend on the freedom to choose. The exercise of these virtues and this calling, therefore, require that we act in an arena of considerable freedom—not unrestricted license, but freedom exercised within the boundaries of God's moral law revealed in Scripture and in the human conscience (Exod. 20:1—17; Deut. 5:6—21; Rom. 2:14—15). These facts are not vitiated by the fact that humankind fell into sin (Gen. 3). Rather, our sinfulness has brought God's responses, first in judgment, subjecting humankind to death and separation from God (Gen. 2:17; 3:22—24) and subjecting creation to the curse of futility and corruption. (Gen. 3:17—19)<sup>xx</sup>

When he created the world, God set aside a unique place, the Garden of Eden, and placed in it the first man, Adam (Gen. 2:8—15). God instructed Adam to cultivate and guard the Garden (Gen. 2:15)—to enhance its already great fruitfulness and to protect it against the encroachment of the surrounding wilderness that made up the rest of the earth. Having also created the first woman and having joined her to Adam (Gen. 2:18—25), God commanded them and their descendants to multiply, to spread out beyond the boundaries of the Garden of Eden, and to fill, subdue, and rule the whole earth and everything in it (Gen. 1:26, 28). Both by endowing them with his image and by placing them in authority over the earth, God gave men and women superiority and priority over all other earthly creatures. This implies that proper environmental stewardship, while it seeks to harmonize the fulfillment of the needs of all creatures, nonetheless puts human needs above non-human needs when the two are in conflict. People, alone among creatures on earth,

have both the rationality and the moral capacity to exercise stewardship, to be accountable for their choices, to take responsibility for caring not only for themselves but also for other creatures. To reject human stewardship is to embrace, by default, no stewardship. The only proper alternative to selfish anthropocentrism is not biocentrism but theocentrism: a vision of earth care with God and his perfect moral law at the center and human beings acting as his accountable stewards.<sup>xxi</sup>

## 6.2. Covenantal Vision

The prophetic vision neither treats nature in a romantic way nor reduces it to a mere object of human use. Rather, it recognizes that human interaction with nature has made nature itself historical. In relation to humanity, nature no longer exists “naturally,” for it has become part of the human social drama, interacting with humankind as a vehicle of historical judgment and a sign of historical hope. Humanity as a part of creation is not outside of nature but within it. But this is the case because nature itself is part of the covenant between God and creation. By this covenantal view, nature’s responses to human use or abuse become an ethical sign. The erosion of the soil in areas that have been abused for their mineral wealth, the pollution of the air where poor people live, are not just facts of nature; what we have is an ethical judgement on the exploitation of natural resources by the rich at the expense of the poor. It is no accident that nature is most devastated where poor people live.<sup>xxii</sup>

When human beings break their covenant with society by exploiting the labor of the worker and refusing to do anything about the social costs of production i.e., poisoned air and waters, the covenant of creation is violated. Poverty, social oppression, war and violence in society, and the polluted, barren, hostile face of nature -- both express this violation of the covenant. The two are profoundly linked together in the biblical vision as parts of one covenant, so that, more and more, the disasters of nature become less a purely natural fact and increasingly become a social fact. The prophetic text of Isaiah 24 vividly portrays this link between social and natural hostility in the broken order of creation. But this tale of desolation in society and nature is not the end of the prophetic vision, when humanity mends its relation to God, the result must be expressed not in contemplative flight from earth but rather in the rectifying of the covenant of creation. The restoration of just relations between peoples restores peace to society and, at the same time, heals nature’s enmity. Just, peaceful societies in which people are not exploited also create, peaceful, harmonious and beautiful natural environments. This outcome is the striking dimension of the biblical vision.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In the biblical view, (Is. 11:9) [Isa. 35:1-2] [Joel 2:22-24] [Amos 9:13] the raping of nature and the exploitation of people in society are profoundly understood as part of one reality, creating disaster in both. We look not to the past but to a new future, brought about by social repentance and conversion to divine commandments, so that the covenant of creation can be rectified and God’s Shalom brought to nature and society. Just as the fact of nature and society grows hostile through injustice, so it will be restored to harmony through righteousness. The biblical understanding of nature, therefore, inheres in a human ethical vision, a vision of ecojustice, in which the enmity or harmony of nature with humanity is part of the human historical drama of good and evil. This is indeed the sort of ecological theology we need today, not one of either romance or conservationism, but rather an ecological theology of ethical, social seriousness, through which we understand our human responsibility for ecological destruction and its deep links with the struggle to create a just and peaceful social order.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## 6.3. The Relation Between Humans and Nature

We can see biblical parallel for the relationship between humans and nature.

### 6.3.1. Humans above nature

This may be the hidden ideology of the scientific and technological culture of the period. Science was considered as power and not as a source of wisdom. Attempts are made to provide a biblical basis for the development of technology. They are primarily based on the exegesis of Gen. 1:28-30 and Psalms 18:6-8. They provide a biblical and theological basis for the technological manipulation of nature by humans. They unequivocally affirm that technology is a liberator, an instrument in the hands of God for releasing humans from the tyranny of natural necessities. In the Bible, the planes of human history and nature are never set in opposition. (Isaiah 42:5) The two planes are held together in the biblical witness of faith. Liberation,

according to Exodus, is a struggle to possess the land. Faith in Yahweh, the Liberator, is also an affirmation that God is sovereign over earth. In an interesting study on *Land in the Old Testament*, Walter Brueggemann points to the significance of land for Hebrew religious experience. The land as promise and as problem: promised land, alien land; landlessness and wilderness -- all these appear at different stages in the history of the Hebrews. There is, of course a tension between landedness and landlessness; the former becomes a cause of exploitation and the latter leads to total trust in Yahweh. The Christian practice that directly or indirectly supported colonialism and capitalism comes out of this view of "humans above nature."<sup>xxv</sup>

### 6.3.2. Humans in nature

This maintains that there is no distinction between humans and nature. Biblical support may be found in Isaiah 40: 6-8. Yet it is difficult to conclude on the basis of this verse that the biblical idea is to treat human life as grass. There is a mystery of their being, and there is a distinction between human and other creatures, but the difference is not superiority because it comes with an awareness of responsibility.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The command of God to Adam and Eve in Gen. 1:28-30 to have domination over creatures is problematic. In its original Hebrew, domination is a harsh word. It is to tame and control the forces of nature that are destructive and violent. Taken in isolation and purely in this context, that word gives a basis for a ruthless exploitation of nature. But in interpreting biblical images and words, we need to see them through the prism of our Lord's saving mission. "In the light of Christ's mission," says Moltmann, "Gen. 1:28 will have to be interpreted in an entirely new way. Not to subdue the earth, but free the earth through fellowship with it!" Lordship, therefore, has a new meaning. It is responsibility for the other in love. The overriding emphasis in the Bible with regard to human relationship with nature is on human responsibility for nature.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Human participation is necessary for maintaining the Cosmos Over against the threat of Chaos. "The Earth is the Lord's and all that fills it, the world and all of its inhabitants." (Psalms 24:1,2.) Scholars point out that the Hebrew words for sea (*yam*) and river (*nahar*) are also the words for ancient, near-eastern gods of chaos. If humans break the covenant, disobey the laws of God and unjustly treat the neighbor, then, creation will return to its primeval chaos. To maintain creation, cosmos, human participation of responsible love and justice is necessary.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Human participation is also needed to keep the earth fertile and productive ( Gen. 2:5, 3:17-19). Man is called the gardener and tiller. Again, humans have no right to exploit and plunder the earth. Some of the symbols and practices that emerged in the history Israel clearly articulate this. Sabbath and jubilee year are two of them. Rest is a way of preventing over exploitation of the earth. Also, the drastic change in ownership is a poignant reminder that humans are merely trustees. They are called to maintain the integrity of creation. Human responsibility for the whole creation is to participate, with love and care, in God's continuing act of creation. Human responsibility and co-creatureliness is further emphasised with the affirmation that all creation, along with humans, long and groan for perfection and liberation.<sup>xxix</sup>

## 7. CONCLUSION

One is called to actively engage not only academically and intellectually, but also physically and sensitively in the actual life setting of the people. Theology is always local with global concerns. The local context in which the church is located and is called to witness and serve is very much influenced by the 'global' phenomenon. Therefore, to do theology contextually, we must take into consideration the global and ecumenical perspective of the local issues. Think globally and act locally.<sup>xxx</sup>

From the discussion in the paper it is learnt how ecological destruction has great impact on the lives of the tribal people. It is not only about affecting their daily bread but as the land and forest around them are destroyed their entire life is shaken. Politically and socially they are alienated, economically they are exploited, culturally they lose their identity and religiously they lost their connection in worshipping their divine. It is the call of the hour that justice should prevail for every human. For tribal, the justice for them would be preserving the ecology around them and stopping the excessive exploitation. As mentioned in the



paper, sustainable development at the same care for creation will balance the life of the tribal people in India.

## ENDNOTES

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