

# THE OTHER PEOPLE

By Dr TV Sajeev

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**T**here are two types of people on this planet. One is a set to which most of us belong, those who are born at one place but able to live anywhere. Like me who live 140 km away from my place of birth. When I had to move, I just needed to pack my clothes, get my wallet and I am quite comfortable at another place, able to do whatever I did back home. The second are those who cannot survive if moved from the locale they are in. Bonded so closely with the nature around, they would be shattered

if shifted from their place of living. We call them the indigenous people or technically, the ecosystem people.

The distinction between the two types of people and my placement in this classification struck me the hard way. Once while getting back after spending a week in the hamlet of the most primitive indigenous people in South India who are still hunter gatherers, a few of them joined me in my vehicle. That day they were to forage and gather from the forests through which I was getting back. Before the forest ended, they alighted. I stopped the vehicle, got out and while going through the farewell gestures, an old lady fondly asked me "How dare you go out of the forest? Do take care!" She was referring to the fact that I was going out of the forest and in to the town and cities

where vehicles whistles past and structures grow so tall that nobody knows what they hide- things a forest dweller finds hard to make sense of. It is the other way round for my friends and family. Their concern always is how I dared to go into the forest. I bid good bye, alighted the vehicle, drew away from them, but was caught between the two totally different world views, not for a day, but for a lifetime.

The difference in sensibility across the two worlds is best articulated in the famous but unverified 1854 letter from the Seattle Chief to the American President Franklin Pierce which says: "The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle

of the water, how can we sell them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people."

Unlike the world which we knew and the history we wrote, the other people had different stories to tell. While we used to "discover" them and document them, they had been through a process of massive onslaught on their culture, livelihood, native land and life. Epitomised best is the life of Crazy Horse, the Native American War leader of the Ogala Lakota who took up arms to fight against land encroachments on the territories and way of life of the Lakota people. He was captured by the US troops in 1877 and was fatally wounded by a bayonet-wielding military guard when he resisted



imprisonment. That was the last of the wars between the two world views in America. Crazy Horse died and his heart and few of the bones were buried at a place called Wounded Knee, 11 miles west of Batesland, South Dakota.

“The wounded knee” was part of the last line of a twentieth century poem. The full line went like this: “Bury my heart at wounded knee”. This phrase later turned out to be the title of one of the eye opening works on the struggle between the two worlds. Dee Brown, who was librarian at US Department of Agriculture and the Illinois University with immense access to the archival documents, put them to good use in his 1970 book titled ***Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West.***

Brown has traced the initial gentle and peaceful welcoming of the settlers by the native people to the later stiff resistance. He described the encroachment and removal of the native homelands of Wampanoags, Narragansetts, Iroquois, Cherokee and also what happened to the Navajo Nation, Santee Dakota, Hunkpapa Lakota, Oglala Lakota, Cheyenne, and Apache people.

While the other people were dismantled, displaced and marginalized, the main stream expanding world view was discussing methods on how best to civilize them. With the formation of the modern state, measures were in vogue as state mediated programmes to educate them into our world view. Historians wrote about the discoveries of new continents and countries and about the people living there as if they never knew that they are living in this planet. The rich oral history they maintained could not travel far and wide as against the written text of the expanding world view.

And then came Calude Levi Strauss, the French anthropologist who argued that

the “savage” mind had the same structures as the “civilized” mind and that human characteristics are the same everywhere. In his four-volume study called *Mythologies*, during the later 1960s, he followed a single myth from the tip of South America and all of its variations from group to group, north through Central America and eventually into the Arctic Circle, thus tracing the myth’s cultural evolution from one end of the Western Hemisphere to the other. He examined the underlying structure of relationships among the elements of the story rather than focusing on the content of the story itself. Strauss was one among us who studied the other people. At the far end of his life, he had this to tell about our world: “There is today a frightful disappearance of living species, be they plants or animals. And it’s clear that the density of human beings has become so great, if I can say so, that they have begun to poison themselves. And the world in which I am finishing my existence is no longer a world that I like.” It’s just that it is our number that is increasing. The number of indigenous people is tumbling down, across the globe.

Its now time to turn to the English born Verrier Elwin who went ahead to marry one among the other people and settled in India. His early work was on the Baigas and Gond of central India, but he expanded his research into the tribals of North East Indian states. Although part of the Indian nationalist movement, disgusted with the overhasty process of transformation and assimilation of the tribals, he left the movement. He remained the adviser on tribal affairs to the first Prime Minister of India. James Scott was the next to work on the ways in which agrarian communities resisted the domination of settlers in the other half of the World- South East Asia. It was Scott’s project to demonstrate that



central governments fail to see the complex and valuable forms of local social order and knowledge of the other people. Using examples like the introduction of permanent last names in Great Britain, cadastral surveys in France, standard units of measurement across Europe, he demonstrates a reconfiguration of social order necessary for state scrutiny was achieved at the cost of local information and knowledge held by the other people across the world. He also showed that schemes to civilize the other people have miserably failed.

What these gentlemen tried to acknowledge is that there exists two types of people who differ in many ways. Relationship with nature, private property, beliefs, vulnerability, all differ for these types. Also that no one type is in any way above the other. Last time I was trekking, Kannan who belonged to an indigenous tribe was my tracker. We were having bread and bananas beside a stream after a pretty long stroll, when my friend who knew him earlier introduced me to him as Dr Sajeev. He came to me and sat beside me. He told

that he needed urgent help from me. I asked about it and he told that it is regarding the allergies caused by specific trees in the forest. He had met a few doctors and they could not figure out what it was, but even then they prescribed medicines. Kannan’s request was to treat him for his allergic ailments. I told him that I am not a medical practitioner but one with just a doctoral degree. He couldn’t agree. His question was simple and straight: Are you a doctor? If yes, come on and help me.

Times have changed for good. When our past generations entered the terrain of the other indigenous people, we had guns. Guns have given way for the camera. But the question the old lady asked about how I dared to go into the city and the big gulf in communication between Kannan and me, demonstrates the presence of two worlds. One closer to nature and the other moving briskly fast, away from it. I wait to know how best the new sensibilities associated with the camera and the new times we are in, can help us know each other better.