

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND THEIR LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEMS: A PERSPECTIVE ON PRODUCTION PROCESSES

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Summary

The article is concerned with showing that the term indigenous has acquired a much wider meaning compared to the its meaning when it was first used in 1920 by the ILO. It now includes the marginalized people as such. From their perspective, the life support systems are inclusive of social, cultural, economic and political considerations and just technology. These conditions need to be defined from the standpoint of people's capacities and capabilities. Life support systems are being undermined not just by the depletion of external natural but also by the erosion of the productive capacities of man.

1. The Indigenous Perspective and Industrial Development

An important feature of the first phase of industrial development was the wars between the Europeans colonizers and the original inhabitants, the earliest known (indigenous)

people of America, Africa and Asia. They pointed out that the Europeans showed no care for the gift of nature to mankind. They protested and warned that if this were checked then over time the life support systems would be destroyed and with this life, itself would be under threat. This was the beginning of the indigenous perspective. Their voices have been raised relentlessly over the past few centuries, however they continue to be marginalised. Today they articulate a point of view. They critique the process of industrial production for having destroyed the life-support systems in nature, in culture and alongside highlight aspects of sustainable systems.

The first effort to take stock of their voices was made after the First World War. In this endeavor, their modes of thought were not taken into account. The social ethos after this War made it necessary to initiate steps globally to combat the injurious effects of industrialization with the idea that an important precondition for peace was social justice for all workers. In the treaty of Versailles the creation of ILO was suggested for the protection of workers. The ILO was born in 1919. The term 'indigenous' was for the first time used in 1920 by the International Labor Organization (ILO). One of the first studies undertaken by the ILO in 1921 was concerned with indigenous workers. In 1926 the Governing Body created a 'Committee of Experts on Native workers. It included the 'natives', the 'aboriginal' and the 'tribal forest dwellers' that were either living in isolation or had become integrated in the mainstream national society in the condition of peasants, farmers and workers. In 1957, the ILO Convention 107 was adopted; the first treaty dealing with indigenous and tribal populations described these people as 'Natives' and 'Aboriginal'. From 1945 up to the adoption of Convention 107 in 1957, the main impetus for activities concerning indigenous people came from the Americas. This convention included not only aboriginal people predating settlement or conquest but also tribal or semitribal groups irrespective of whether or not they could be regarded as indigenous in this sense. It included people from America, Australia, the Near and the Middle East and from the African continent.

These measures were designed to facilitate the integration and assimilation of indigenous people into the mainstream. The key terms for discourse at this point in time were, nation building, equity, development, and diversification of industrial production. Productivity was most important determinant in this discourse. It defined as the relation between land, labor and capital. In this relation, technology was seen as the most important mediation between productivity, equity and development on the one hand, and it laid down standards that opposed modernity to tradition on the other. Accordingly, people's social and cultural traditions of work that linked their knowledge system to their way of life were considered obstacles and marginalised because their perceptions of productivity differed from those of industrial production.

Nevertheless, an important aspect of the process of nation building was the integration of the marginalised people. This view created a large mass of wage labor. The underlying approach to the identification of the indigenous people was that they are those whose social and economic conditions are at a less advanced stage than the stage reached by the other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations. Here, historical chronology and cultural uniqueness with regard to other groups in the national community were emphasized for identification. The hegemony demonstrated

from the ethnocide and genocide of the Indians by the European settlers remained undressed as a problem

With the emergence of the human rights movement during the 1970s, social and cultural condition became important factors for industrial production and development. It was pointed out, that culture mediates technology and labor. On the one hand, the culture of the workplace was defined only by technology but also by labor and, on the other labor could not be understood without taking into account people's social and cultural practices. In other words, social and cultural perceptions of work and of workers identity(s) determined the social dynamics of the production process and of the work place. Thus, the social and cultural framework for production – became important.

On account of these developments, a change took place in 1981 with the UNESCO Declaration on 'Ethnocide and Ethno-development'. It included minorities groups in Europe as well. It condemned the policies that denied the rights of indigenous peoples and proposed the need for alternative development. The suggestion was that there are no alternatives with out the indigenous people. The consequences of the First and the Second World War played an important role in the formulation and acceptance of this declaration. On the one hand, the UN inherited a series of political instruments signed after the Wars. These contain special measures for the protection of ethnic, religious, linguistic groups and refer to minorities in Poland, Austria, the Serbo-Croat-Slovenic State, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Danzing, Albania, Lithuania, Letonia, Greece, Turkey, Estonia and Iraq. On the other hand, the sordid story of Nazi genocide made it more than clear that all genocide begins with cultural aggression. As a result of these developments the original genocide of indigenous people, which lay the foundation for the modernization of people all over, became significant.

This was tantamount to a return to the origins of modern reason namely, vivisection. It demonstrated that a fundamental component of the social frame of modernization and development was its intolerance of social cultural diversity in its external and internal environment. On account of these developments, the indigenous question was concerned with an alternative development that is grounded in pluralism. This question could not be addressed without including the indigenous people not only because were they the first to suffer and point towards the intolerance and violence inherent in the culture of modern man, but also because they in fact constitute this plurality. These policy initiatives opened up the possibility of creating democratic spaces for the questions raised in the history of the indigenous struggles to emerge onto the political arena.

The first change came in 1989. On account of the criticisms of integration and assimilation, a revised version of Convention 107 was formulated as Convention 169. This convention stipulated that "self-identification as indigenous or tribal shall be regarded as fundamental criterion for determining the groups to which the provisions of this Convention apply. This drew attention primarily to the endogenous efflorescence of human potential. This allowed for defining indigenous in a historical-axiological sense and not in a purely chronological sense. The emphasis was on the relation between social formations and a sense of identity. This allowed for the inclusion of tribal people from all countries in Asia and Africa, while the purely chronological criteria applied to

North South America and Australia.

During the 1980's indigenous peoples all over the world were engaged in struggles against invasions and genocide; militarisation; the formation of nuclear state; mining; large dams; reckless commercial forestry; pollution; missionaries; modern education; racism; exploitation of labor; sterilization of women; prisons; tourism and against sale of land (Moody 1988). Towards the end of the twentieth century these struggles have multiplied and have become more articulate as in a standpoint. Underlying them is an indigenous perspective. From the late 80s onwards, environment and ecology became important factors of production. Technology and finance were directed towards the preservation and conservation of the environment and of ecology. Control over natural resources gradually became 'monopolistic' on account of which these were denied to the people. This added to their subsistence problems and further marginalised them. At this stage, the socially and culturally heterogeneous indigenous people were concerned with finding an alternative, to the 'mainstream' way of being part of the world order and of acquiring a sense of belonging. Their search is linked their perception and understanding of the notion of origins.

Several terms are used to refer to indigenous people: natives, aboriginal, autochthonous, ethnic minorities, tribal people, first nation and fourth world. Of these, "the most undisputed criterion is that indigenous peoples are the descendants of the original inhabitants of a territory taken over through conquest or settlement by aliens (RICIHI 1987: 6)". To capture the sense of 'being original inhabitants' Roger Moody uses the expression 'the species of origin' and suggests that their struggles are concerned with 'conscientisation and the recovery of origins' (Moody 1988). History for the indigenous people has meant nothing other than dispossession. In the light of 'being dispossessed' the meaning of 'species of origin' and of the 'recovery of the origins' is defined by the substantive concerns of their contemporary struggles. For them 'origins' is not dated. It cannot be determined in a frame of linear time for this is infinite regress. It articulates a sense of belonging that is, of space and of the passage of time that is continuously refers to the larger processes that open the possibility of life.

A beginning in this direction was a change in the frame of reference. The process of industrial modernization was no more conceptualized in terms of the opposition between the traditional and the modern. In its place the opposition and discourse was identified between the marginalised and the dominant forces. The dominant forces totalised the process of modernization. They monopolized the definition of 'standard' and of the 'norms' of social and economic life, by taking control of the terms and categories of the cultural and intellectual discourses. As a consequence, people's sense of their own identity, of their capability and of their confidence was undermined. Thus, it was argued that equity and development by themselves lead to economic imperialism and cultural hegemonisation. This critique of the 'dominant modernity' project was concerned with equity, development and identity from the standpoint of a pluralist framework (in opposition to the monopoly framework).

By the beginning of the nineties, the ground was prepared for the pursuing the question of alternatives in a pluralist framework. Their concern is the suffering inflicted to the people of the world at large. The issues, against which indigenous people are struggling,

define the agenda and processes of mainstream industrial modernization. Towards the end of this century, it is clear that this mainstream agenda has continuously unleashed social forces that have undermined the support systems that sustain life itself. It is well known that as ‘species of origin’ the indigenous people share a view towards work, nature and productivity that is differently institutionalized in different communities allowing for plural work cultures.

The relation between technology, equity, development and identity could not be understood without taking into account the social and cultural identities of people and their perception of natural resources. Together they determine the social framework of production. This framework emphasized the links between peoples systems of knowledge and their right to their means of earning a livelihood. Not only production but reproduction as well became important.

Today ‘sustainable development’ is premised on the continuity of life support systems. These systems are primarily concerned with processes of social reproduction. There is no sustainable development without sustainable life support systems. Today the meaning of the phrase ‘sustainable development’ is defined from two contending standpoints namely, of globalization and indigenisation. The former is supported by the dominant mainstream and the indigenous people support the latter.

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Biographical Sketch

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