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*Book Review*

# Tryst with Nature: Labour, Self, and Language (2023) Savyasaachi, Orient BlackSwan Pvt. Ltd, India. ISBN-13: 978-9354424557

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The discourse on forest life today is an oblivious one. More often than not, it forgets the lives that borrow from, return to and remain within the mellow greens, and instead focuses on the forest as a policy object, which is in need of governance and management. Contrary to this popular discourse, Eduardo Kohn (2013) reminds us that "the world beyond the human is not a meaningless one made meaningful by humans" (p. 73). Savyasaachi's book, *Tryst with Nature: Labour, Self, and Language,* can be read as a distinctly indigenous, and careful effort to answer that sentiment. It asks what it means for a forest to be living and to identify with the ways in which people inhabiting it make do with their surroundings. The book is best where it is most stubborn in its reading of the world.

The book has found itself in a rocky, well-trodden discourse. The past three decades and more of political ecology in India tells us of a forest machined by the state, the forest and its people have been colonized, enclosed and persecuted (Gadgil & Guha, 1992; Guha, 1989; Rangarajan, 1996; Sivaramakrishnan, 1999). Later texts attempt to understand how the state not only governed forest life but also, shaped it (Agrawal, 2005) and displaced its inhabitants (Baviskar, 1995).

The historic location of the ongoing conflicts and tribal resistance in Bastar has found expression in more recent works (Sundar, 2016). This is also the region where Savyasaachi outlines the world of Koitors. What is distinctive about 'Tryst with Nature' is that it asks questions of how labour holds the fort for the forest dwellers and what happens when that same relationship with the forest is maneuvered with the language of the mainstream. The catalyst of this relationship is labour, and the heart of the book lies in its conception of labour.

The first chapter examines the difference that seems both simple and unusual at first glance, meaning of abstract and concrete labour. Savyasaachi begins his argument with water and not forest. Barnett's discussion on posteriori identity establishes that water and h20 have chemical likeness; however, the book disputes that a scientific simplification of water as a compound displaces conceptions of water in other knowledge systems, particularly in the Greek notion of water as a primordial element. H20 is thus, a means to toy with nature; a form of conquest trying to add, separate, recombine elements. The book identifies this disposition as characteristic of the industrial labour system, which makes way for the practice of instrumental labour. In a sharp contrast, the idea of water resounds with rain, groundwater, rivers. These life-forms act as derivatives of other life-forms. The book makes this argument using

Goethe's "Urphaenomen," J.P.S. Uberoi's "eading" (1984) and Sartre's "inert totalities" (2). This account bears resemblance to Hasok Chang's philosophical question whether water is simply H2O? (2012) from which the book draws its inspiration. However, Chang's text remains within the domain of chemistry (3), Savyasaachi brings the argument to ontology of labour.

The book parts away from familiar terrains of scholarship of indigenous knowledge. Since the 1990s, traditional indigenous knowledge has been objectified to be documented, and assessed, only to be folded into resource management (Berkes, 1999). Critics have pointed to the precarious judgement towards "indegenous" and "scientific" knowledge (Agrawal, 1995). This is where Savyasaachi's work becomes precisely insistent. In the fifth chapter, Savyasaachi highlights how the lack of collaboration between corporate ethnobotany, indigenous medicine men, and pharmaceutical companies has grown vary of the fact that "products" of forest knowledge are a result of the indigenous discovery (122). The book protests that the mainstream is not impervious to indigenous knowledge, but it chooses to notice only what can be formalised. In the history of science and ideas, this criticism comes in the form of acknowledging how modern science disqualifies certain ways of knowing (Nandy & Visvanathan, 1990). Latour (1993) denounces the methods that separate nature from society. "The Prologue" of *Tryst with Nature* expresses an alliance with the same search for a reflexive, alternative perspective. Savyasaachi's first report to Indian Council for Social Science Research simply contained a list of words learnt from the Koitors, which led to his doctoral scholarship being annulled for it (xviii).

In chapter two (adapted from Savyasaachi's 1991 doctoral thesis), the conceptual distinction between labor materialises in the lives of Koitors of north Bastar. Language mediates in between signs and its significance. The capacity to imagine, construct and present language demands reflexive labour. This chapter explains how, for the Koitors, the language used to conceptualise the everyday is strongly asserted by the community and expressing the idea of the forest does not exist external to the self. This perception denounces the forest as a resource or a utility. In contrast, the forest is considered a self-regenerating and living universe that continues like other sensible forms (13). The rituals of socialisation of a child growing in the forest are not merely acts of routinisation, they are also acts of attunement- attunement with the "thinking forest" (Kohn, 2013). To understand the degree of reflexivity in the relationship between the Koitors and the forest, the book draws from an incident when a Koitor is lost in the forest. The Koitors' advice in such a situation is one needs to confront the forest from within. One needs to orient oneself to sounds and sights correlating it with the knowledge of the land. A keen sense of observation emerges from within directing a new sense of knowledge of the forest while lost, rather than a parable of failed knowledge (30).

The primordial conception of the forest, for Koitors, abides in Shringarbhum. Through 'Talurmuttee,' or mother earth, the knowledge of the forest as a "self-activity of nature" emerges. The Koitors explain two different lands as a contrast; Hema land represents space where forest returns after a disruption in the continuity and Pariya land represents the space where the forest doesn't return. The relation of Koitors to the changing landscapes is shaped by "dreamtime." They reconcile their understanding of forest with the principle of how the forest merges different senses of time. Past and present knowledge of the land must negotiate and coexist for the Koitors. Reflexive labour, therefore, ensures a balance between memory (leski) and forgetting(pattari) (35). This composes the social life of the Koitors and ties reflexive labour as the condition of their existence.

The third and fourth chapter presses on closely reading the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996 and the Forest Rights Act of 2006 through Lukac's perspective of labour teleology. The teleology determines labour as subject and nature as subject. The trouble here is not as simple as nature being manipulated with, but how the logic of labour in modern society presupposes the isolation of people and nature. The text argues that the removing people from the interaction with their means of subsistence, as expressed by Marx's labour theory of value, breaks contiguity and erodes the sense of self foundationally found amidst nature. This act normalises this teleology in everyday life and plays a crucial role in displacement of tribal communities from forests.

PESA (1996) was formulated to articulate the troubles of the people and bring political resolution to the forest dwellers. Not only did the institutionalisation of the forest world lead to diminishment of tribal language into discussions of rights, land and compensation (65), but it also left the adivasi communities' assertions in a linguistic asphyxiation. The suffocation of their language left no avenue for the communities to express injustice. FRA (2006) further weakened the relationship with the forest because the expression of shared space translated into the claims over forest land. The notion of forest land reduces the transcendental nature of the life forms that constitute the forest (70). Co-existence is abstracted for the convenience of instrumental labour and placements of "rights." Chapter four pays close attention to the use of language, especially in implying categories such as "Scheduled Tribes," "Indigenous" and "Adivasi." Here, Savyasaachi poses a direct argument with Ranajit Guha's text on Peasant Insurgency (1983), reading the insurgency as a self-reflexive withdrawal instead of negativity and inertia (92). The Adivasi sensibility, Savyasaachi argues, becomes a channel to refuse the reinforced assimilation.

The fifth chapter distinguishes the margins from the mainstream by deciphering the roles of caretakers and conquerors, both oriented towards nature differently. The conqueror is Gilgamesh, who performs deforestation (112) and the caretaker is the Koitor. The book's criticism of conservation is most clearly expressed here. Savyasaachi argues that "reserves of nature" are ex-situ elements of laboratories (116), designated to keep the pace of industrial production flow running. The framework of the sanskrit "aranya" offers five elements for the praxis of conservation: plurality, judiciousness, resilience, wholeness, and sheltering. (125). The aspect of "reciprocal seeing" in the context of care is the one of the most original insights of the book, "To be able to see life on a tree, it is necessary to not move faster than the tree" (124).

Chapter six locates social injustice also in hermeneutic injustice, drawing on Fricker (2007). Savyasaachi discusses how the tribal language question was dismissed in the constitution and the notion of "linguistic suicide" (140) is devastating as Koitors are expected to learn other languages while deserting their own. This produces an epistemic disadvantage, denying their being-in-the-world. These situations created conditions for linguistic extinction beginning with standardisation. The final chapter questions what is worth conserving, and the answer is topsoil. It is set against the "inert I," the consumer which is ridden with consumption (148). Topsoil acts as a metaphor for modern social life, its significance in ecological life is rooted in the slow regeneration of soil, similarly, social life is recuperated through language, labour and self. In a conservation habitus, five aspects mediate between the human and non-human forms- shelter, parsimony, resilience, elasticity and plurality. It becomes a form of reflexive labour associated with bringing life through sustained social relations with other sentient

beings (154), located in the idea that "to belong is to be attuned to" (158).

The book does what only a few works in this literature of political ecology and history of science foreground. It is a book for those asking what forest requires from those who live alongside it. The requirements of the forest are not merely met through conserving it as a resource, but expanding the sense of labour, language and self through which it continues to live as a world of its own. In Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Word for World Is Forest* (1976), the word, Athshean used for forest, is also the word for world. Read alongside the world of Koitors, which echoes a familiar inseparability of forest from life itself.

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