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## SAMSKRITI: Trying to Fill a Vacuum

*In times where globalization process and modern communication and information technologies take grounds worldwide there are not only pros but also cons related to this development, emphasized once and again by various scholars and practitioners in the field. Many critics from so-called Third World countries already emphasize that these western technologies again dominate and colonize their countries as the new technologies mean especially a great threat to the cultural values, world views and behaviour patterns of marginalized/simple cultures in terms of anthropologists. In the Indian context the simple cultures are the Dalits (ex-untouchables), the Tribals and the Fisher Folk, who form more than 50% of the Indian population, still they are known as marginalized people and therefore marginalized (simple) cultures. The SAMSKRITI (Institute of Cultural Research and Action) is based in a small village in the northern part of the Indian Union State of Kerala and operates under the directorship of Jesuit Father P.J. Joseph. The main objective of the initiative is to promote the culture of these people and to preserve and revive their traditional technology while interestingly the term „technology“ in the context of anthropologists here comprises also habits - especially vitally necessary and important survival factor - rooted in cultural traditions. How and why the exceptional initiative SAMSKRITI operates can be gleaned from Fr. P.J. Josephs following report:*

When two cultures of opposing value systems co-exist, the technologically dominant one subsumes the other. The history of the whole world is a history of conflict between invading cultures and the original cultures. The technique used by the dominant cultures almost universality to marginalise the original inhabitants is by disparagingly labelling them as „cultureless“, „uncouth“, „rough“, etc. But in reality it is observed that the marginalized are the most cultured people in terms of their humane value system and behaviour patterns. („Cultureless“ and „cultured“ is yet another contradiction created by the dominant culture. For an anthropologist „to be human is to have a „culture“).

The socio-cultural activists and academicians, thus, recently started recognising the importance of preserving and promoting the cultural values, world-views and behaviour patterns of simple

cultures because they felt that the dependent cultures hold the key to the ills of modern culture such as destruction of nature, elimination of ecological and cultural diversities, discrimination against women, race and region.

Today, in the Golden Jubilee year of the independence of India, the already languished simple cultures are facing two very grave threats which would result in its total annihilation. A political wing Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) of Brahmanic Hindu Fundamentalists is trying to Hinduise the simple cultures by imposing Brahminic cultural values. The tribals are being converted into Hinduism in large numbers all over the country by the implicit support of the government. So also, the rituals, symbols, myths and celebrations of the Dalits are being replaced by the Brahmanic religious practices. Many of the Dalit priests are being replaced by Brahminic priests

in well-known Dalit places of worship. In short, in the name of Hinduising India, the simple cultures are being eliminated by the Brahminic dominant cultures.

Introduction of market economy and the process of liberalization for globalization have become a grave threat to the simple cultures. Through the mass communication media, particularly TV and cinema, the young generation of the simple cultures are short circuited into imbibing directly the values of consumer culture. The frustrations of poverty such as alienation of their forests, technologies and the sea, and the ever widening gap between the artificially created needs and their fulfilments, the destruction of cultural identity, etc., are leading the simple cultures to uprising. The Jarkhand movement, Dalit protests, fishermen's struggles and Bodo ethnic conflicts are some examples.

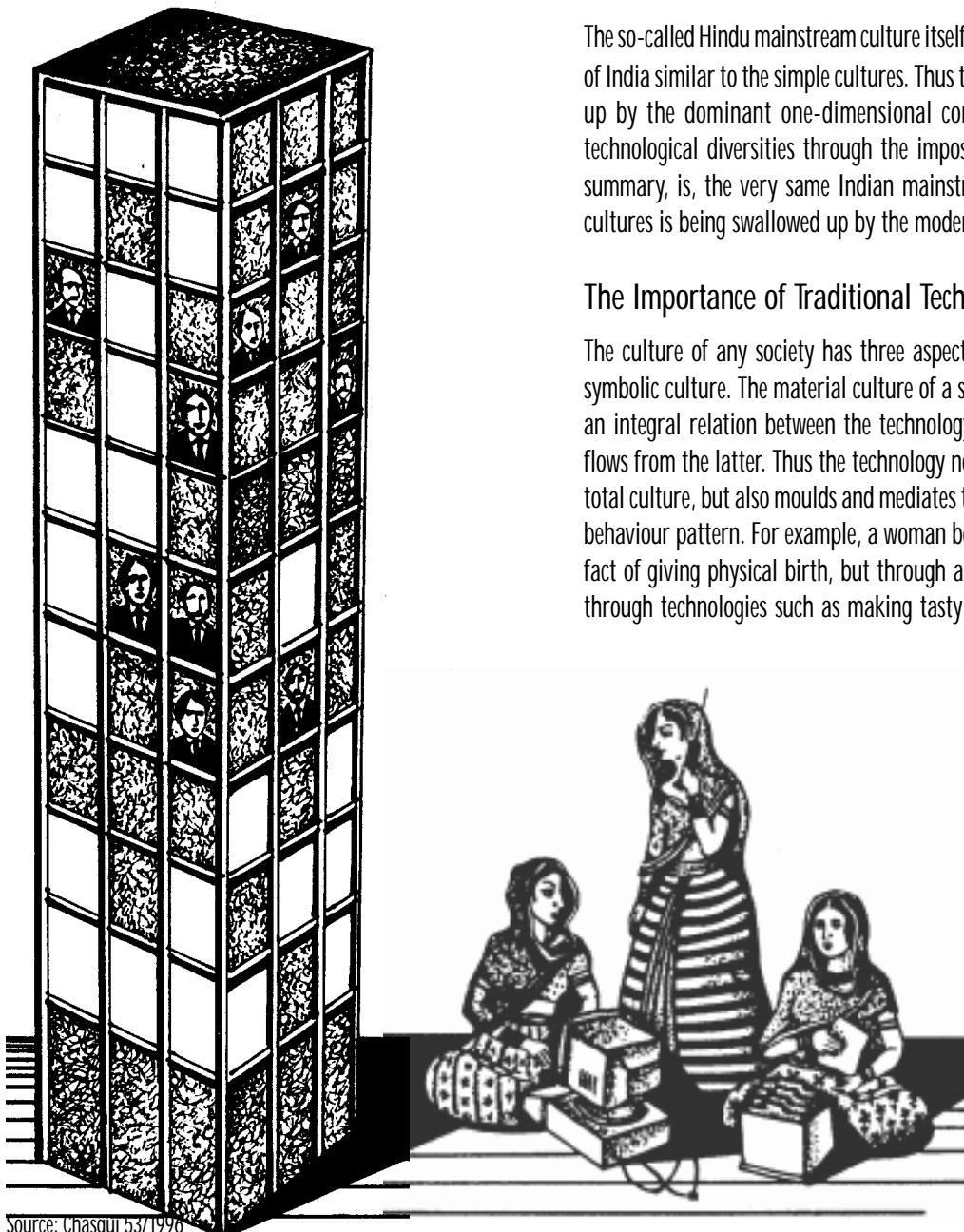
The so-called Hindu mainstream culture itself vis-a-vis modern culture suffers from an inhibition of India similar to the simple cultures. Thus the mainstream culture of India is being swallowed up by the dominant one-dimensional consumer culture which denies bio-cultural and technological diversities through the imposition of mono-technology. The problem thus, in summary, is, the very same Indian mainstream culture which ruthlessly absorbs its simple cultures is being swallowed up by the modern consumer culture.

### The Importance of Traditional Technology

The culture of any society has three aspects. They are: material culture, social culture and symbolic culture. The material culture of a society is synonymous with its technology. There is an integral relation between the technology and the habitat (environment) for, the former flows from the latter. Thus the technology not only forms the foundation for the edifice of the total culture, but also moulds and mediates the entire culture: its world view, value system and behaviour pattern. For example, a woman becomes a mother to a child not only by the simple fact of giving physical birth, but through a cultural process of using her traditional wisdom through technologies such as making tasty food, applying home remedies when the child is

sick, in other words, the mother-child relationship is mediated through technologies. So also the values such as cooperation, sharing, generosity, etc., of tribals and fishermen are generated and mediated through their technologies of earning basic needs such as food and housing. By changing the technology, the social and symbolic cultures (art, music and literature) of a society can be changed - nay - even destroyed.

The introduction of Western technology which is shaped in another habitat, into Asia, has destroyed the natural resources of Asia, its world view and behaviour patterns. This is taking place at Asian level, and so, knowingly or unknowingly, the rich eco-cultural diversity



and folk cultural forms of our planet are being destroyed.

### Modern Education is the Trojan Horse of Modern Technology

Modern education in the South Asian context is de-skilling its traditional technologies. By traditional technology we mean, that technology which is developed in tune with the habitat to meet the needs of a people. With no respect for the indigenous and traditional technologies, the modern technology is taught in secondary schools and at matric level, particularly so in the professional institutes. Thus the modern generation of South Asia, especially of India, has come to debilitate its traditional technology and denigrate its traditional and indigenous craftsmen, and at the same time it uncritically eulogises the modern technology. The terrible unemployment of Asia is the creation of the de-skilling modern education. The modern Asian generation should be taught one of the traditional trades at primary school level, and all of them should be experts in one or another traditional trade by the time they pass out of matric. And also the folk cultural forms should form an integral part of their entertainment at school age. Such a step will inculcate in them a love and respect for the traditional and the indigenous technologies, and so for their respective cultures.

### SAMSKRITI

The twin efforts of Samskriti are: to research into the possibility of viably employing the traditional technology for sustainable development and demonstrating the findings through production centres for developing models for employment, and to collect the folk cultural forms which are disappearing, and promote those which are facing the danger of extinction. With these objects, Samskriti has initiated the following programmes:

#### \* Traditional Technology and Folk Cultural Research

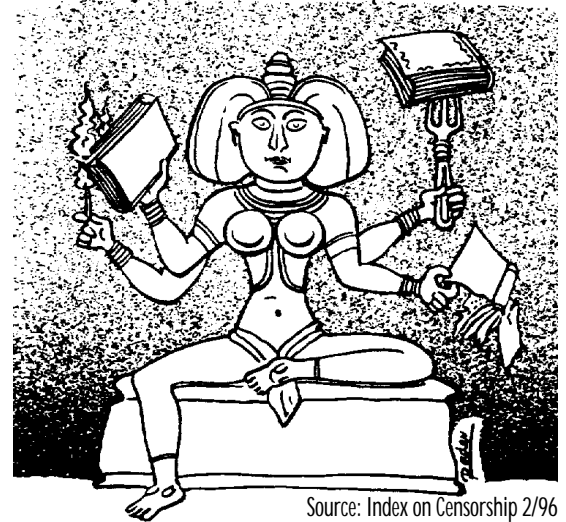
The objective of Samskriti research is to investigate - scientifically - the simple cultures with special emphasis on their technologies to highlight its eco-friendly nature and humanizing quality. It also aims at exposing the alienating trends of the modern dominant culture. Samskriti researches are not the „neutral“ university type of studies, but are genuine investigations to bring out the cultural contradictions embodied in a subtle manner in the modern life style, and also to show that the roots of modern culture are in the simple cultures. The greatest oppression in the modern world - we are convinced - is the cultural oppression in terms of annihilation of ethnic cultures by the dominant civilization under the veneer of civilizing the simple people.

#### \* Training and Seminars

Samskriti staff conducts regular training and courses in cultural studies and analysis, traditional technology, folklore and ethnospirituality. Occasionally, small groups come for studies cum experience in ethno-folk cultures. There is a regular training programme in traditional technology at the demonstration centre.

#### \* Cultural Circles

We are building up „cultural circles“ all over Kerala. Its main purpose is to create interest in



Source: Index on Censorship 2/96

the younger generation, an alternative understanding of development and a way of life based on ethno-traditional world view. This should serve as a counter-culture movement against the modern civilization which denies myths, symbols and rituals both secular and sacred.

#### \* Publications

Our publications are different from the profit-oriented, run-of-the-mill publications which produce books according to popular demand. Samskriti has built up an alter-media, publishing enlightening books on culture, folklore and traditional technology, which other established publishers refuse to publish.

#### \* Production cum Demonstration Centre

It is our experience that the traditional products are not market friendly, mainly due to the lack of diversity in design. We discovered that the introduction of new designs can give value addition to handicrafts. In the Samskriti Demonstration Centre we make products employing modern designs using traditional technology such as carpentry, pottery, bamboo work, weaving, etc. The Samskriti products such as children's toys and clothes, using natural (vegetable) colours are found to be very much in demand.

#### \* Kunnala Nadu Ethno-folk Museum

This museum preserves and promotes those tribal, folk and peasant cultural items that are typical of the simple cultures and are fast

disappearing due to the onslaught of modern techno-culture (Kunnala Nadu, was the ancient name of Kerala).

#### \* „Herbal Commune“ and Herbarium

The motto of Samskriti is, return to the original culture and return to nature. The museum realizes the former aim of the motto and the Herbarium, the latter. The herbal commune is growing herbs in different villages including tribal settlements.

#### CONCLUSION

The human history tells us that when two cultures of diametrically opposite value systems co-exist, the economically dominant one subsumes the other. The history of our part of the country is not different from this general experience. Such dependent-dominant relation will necessarily create human as well as cultural anomalies. Social scientist, activists, political leaders and religious gurus have been making various

Source: epd-Entwicklungspolitik 17/97

