



# Value Monist Organisations:

## A Study of Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram and Tudum Debba

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In this article, I examine two organisations, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) and Thudum Debba (TD), and their pursuit of the ‘common good’ (rights, development and identity) for the tribal communities (or ‘adivasis’) in the region of Telangana, India. In particular, I elaborate on how dominant values permeate and animate Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) and Thudum Debba (TD), orientating them towards their respective telos for adivasi communities. I draw on Joel Robbins’s notion of value monism, where he examines value relations from a Dumontian perspective and describes ‘a monism that appears to subordinate all these other values and their levels under a single paramount one.’ I suggest that in the context of adivasi development and identity, VKA and TD resemble ‘a strong monism in a Dumontian sense’ where both organisations place emphasis on a paramount value as means to achieve their telos. For VKA, I show that it is driven by the values of assimilation and integration of the adivasi culture into the Hindu tradition. As for TD, it is driven by an assertion of the value of indigeneity, where indigenous identity and culture is articulated through the term ‘adivasi’. In doing so, I hope to develop insights on adivasi activism in India and how it is mediated through the ideologies of tribal organisations.

**Keywords:** activism, adivasi studies, Dumont, indigenous identity, ideology

This article focuses on the work of two tribal organisations, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) and Thudum Debba (TD), and their pursuit of the ‘common good’ (rights, development and identity) for a Koya community in the region of Telangana, India. I suggest that this engagement with the pursuit of the ‘good’ by both organisations is not merely motivated by altruism or political strategy, but rather involves broader questions of ethics as the term has been understood in anthropology. Robbins (2013b: 457) suggests that one of the key concerns in the anthropology of the good is about ‘the way people understand the good and define its proper pursuit’ and calls for anthropologists to be ‘attentive to the way people orientate and act in world that outstrips the one most concretely present to them.’ This resonates with my analysis of VKA and TD, as each organisation has its own conception of a telos for tribal communities and proposes ways in how it can be achieved. Their respective pursuit of this telos are embedded in ethical concerns, where both organisations and their activists reflect and form a conception of what is a telos for tribal communities in India, orientate their respective practices around this conception, and suggest to others that it is a viable and fruitful endeavour to pursue this telos. Also, both organisations hold distinctive values that are central to their ethos and work. It is similar, I argue, to what Robbins (2013a:106) describes as ‘a strong monism in a Dumontian sense (a monism that subordinates all other values under a

paramount one).’ In the following paragraphs, I elaborate further on how both VKA and TD and their respective activists are configured in a value monist framework and how these particular values permeate and shape the organisations and their activities.

### The impetus for activism

The pursuit of rights, development and identity has been a consistent trope with regard to tribal communities in India. This emphasis on rights and development stems from the fact that tribal communities, or adivasis, continue to be amongst the most marginalised groups in India. According to Guha (2010), the adivasis ‘have gained least and lost most from six decades of democracy and development in India.’ Nilsen states that ‘the most unequivocal manifestation of the adverse incorporation of adivasis – or Scheduled Tribes (STs) as they are also known – in India’s political economy is the extent to which their lives are blighted by severe poverty.’ (Nilsen 2013:615) Despite the fact that the Indian State has inscribed various positive discrimination policies within its constitution and regularly promised development for tribal communities, it is widely acknowledged that it has not adequately addressed the issues facing these communities. The July 2014 report released by Amnesty International, poignantly titled ‘When land is lost, do we eat coal?’, showed that mining operations by India’s state-owned Coal India Limited (CIL) ‘failed to ensure meaningful consultation with adivasi communities on land acquisition, rehabilitation and resettlement, and the environmental impacts of mines, seriously affecting their lives and livelihoods’. This is exacerbated by the fact that India has been experiencing rapid economic growth in the past few decades but yet continues to register slow progress in living standards and adverse poverty amongst marginalised communities. This is manifested in the tribal areas where ‘acceleration of economic growth in recent decades has coincided with unprecedented environmental plunder, mining activities (often illegal) have spread with few safeguards, destroying forests and displacing (tribal) communities.’ (Dreze and Sen 2013:49) This has led to tribal communities dwelling

in what Corbridge and Shah (2013) term as India’s underbelly, where they are ensnared in persistent structural inequalities, debt bondage, and exploitative structures. In response, tribal organisations similar to TD have emerged to articulate and demand their rights and development on their own terms, as opposed to those of the state. Others, such as the VKA, have taken the approach of doing welfare to help address these issues.

Another factor leading to the emergence of organisations such as VKA and TD is the issue of tribal identity. Both organisations aim to dispel the notion that tribal communities are backwards and ‘primitive’, which originated in the ‘period of colonial anthropological constructions of the country’s aboriginals as ‘primitive tribes’. (Shah 2007: 1808) These terms have placed the tribals at the bottom of the social hierarchy during colonial times, and in post- independence India, continue to be a site of contestation for the tribals today. The Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have defined tribal communities as having the following traits; distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness. According to Mosse, ‘adivasis have had to contend constantly with the categorisations of dominant others, whether British officers, Gandhian nationalists, missionaries, bureaucrats, communalist politicians and agents of rural development.’ (Mosse 2011: 159) Another contested categorisation is the term ‘encroachers’, where tribal communities are described as illegal occupiers of forests by the state, while the tribal communities view themselves as the rightful owners of the forests. This tussle over control of resources has resulted in tense relations between the state and tribal communities and in some areas, relations have deteriorated into armed insurgence against the state by tribal groups in West Bengal, Chhattisgarh and parts of Northeast India. These contestations and tensions show that tribal identity is not merely a matter of pride and prestige but one that is inimically linked to issues of rights, welfare, and development. The presence of these tensions and the failure of the State to protect the rights of tribal communities have led to the proliferation of activism, creating a ‘site of open

discourse where the term 'adivasi' can be unpacked to reveal political and representational tensions that can be re-read and re-articulated in wide ranging activist and academic contexts.' (Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011:2) The emergence of tribal organisations such as VKA and TD and their respective discourses on tribal issues and identity is an example of this.

The efforts by tribal communities to regain control over their identities, rights and culture is well-documented in recent anthropological work. Megan Moodie (2015) explored how the Dhanka engage in 'creative imaginative work' with regards to their tribal identity as a form of affirmative action. She shows how the Dhanka's claim of 'We were adivasis' reflects on the one hand their distancing from the primitiveness associated with tribalness, yet also, depending on the context, creates 'adivasi-ness' as a possibility and a means to preserve their claims for state welfare on the other hand. Alpa Shah's article (2014) on tribals joining a Hindu devotional sect in Jharkhand illustrates how they act as 'bricoleurs' in the Levi-Straussian sense; borrowing from various sources in order to create something 'different' in response to the socio-political conditions that they face. Both cases highlight the rise of tribal subjectivity in postcolonial India and I suggest that VKA and TD are two examples of the manifestation of tribal subjectivity in organisations. However, research on tribal organisations in India tends to focus on their effectiveness in promoting welfare and how they serve as a form of struggle or resistance against the state. For example, Banu's work in rural Karnataka has shown how welfare organisations have contributed significantly to Indian democracy by the 'enhancement of substantive democracy in the rural areas through empowerment of marginalised sections, especially women.' (Banu 2003:53) The work of these welfare organisations clearly deserves attention for they highlight pertinent social issues that affect marginalised groups in India. It is obvious that VKA and TD focus on ameliorating the social ills affecting the tribal communities, but I argue that VKA and TD do not just do work in the form of welfare, rights and representation to the tribal communities.

## Conceptualising Organisations as telos oriented and monist

By classifying both VKA and TD as tribal welfare organisations, we obscure how the different values that each organisation holds determines how they define welfare for tribal communities. On the surface, they may be similar in their objectives in ameliorating the social ills plaguing adivasis. Yet, when we examine them in detail, we find that both organisations hold different ideas about what is considered as 'good' for the tribal communities. There is a need to deepen our understanding of these organisations and their members to examine the 'continual flux in the political, cultural, and intellectual terrains of adivasi subjectivity.' (Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011:9) VKA is a pan Indian tribal welfare organisation with links to right wing Hindu ideology, or Hindutva, while TD is a grassroots organisation that focuses on asserting indigenous rights as a means of ensuring welfare development for the tribals. Members of both organisations describe their activism as 'good for tribal communities.' While both organisations profess to be tribal welfare organisations, VKA and TD hold differing values that lead to different conceptualisations of a telos for tribal communities. VKA clearly aligns their telos with the assimilation and integration of tribals into the Hindu fold, while TD presents an opposing stance, preferring to preserve the indigeneity of its tribal identity. The values they hold also serve as the basis for how both organisations conduct their respective projects amongst the tribal communities. In the anthropology of ethics, Laidlaw (2014:44) calls for attention to the 'ethical dimension of social life – the fact that everyday conduct is constitutively pervaded by reflective evaluation.' Through the framework of ethics and grounding it within a specific context, we are able to delve into understanding how organisations work to affect this process of reflective evaluation by persuading people to accept their conceptualization of a telos. Laidlaw (2014:104-105) uses Barbara Metcalf's example of how groups might constitute themselves as ethical agents. The group missions organised by the Islamic movement Tablighi Jama'at illustrate how collective self-fashioning

becomes individual self-fashioning as members are 'compelled by the group's charisma and authority, fostering a disposition to humility.' Likewise, I illustrate how VKA and TD constitute themselves as ethical agents by embracing certain values in their pursuit of their respective telos and orientating their work around these values.

Anand Pandian's *Crooked Stalks* (2009) serves as an interesting point of comparison here. His ethnography of the Kallar community in Tamil Nadu focuses on the theme of cultivation, defined as 'developmental horizons that lend individual lives a moral impetus and direction, the practical techniques through which people may engage their own desires, deeds, and habits in the pursuit of a model life, and the material labour that may transform a world of embodied experience into an environment for both moral and natural growth (Pandian 2009:3). In a similar vein, I examine the work of tribal organisations and their activists in cultivating a moral impetus by expressing their ideologies and ideals of what constitutes good for the tribal community, developing practical techniques in terms of their programs and activities and for the activists, getting involved in material labour in their pursuit of the good. In addition, I investigate how in defining their respective telos, it forms the grounds of contestation between both organisations and concurrently, the basis of their ethical projects. In doing so, I move beyond viewing tribal activism as merely a means of struggle for rights and resources; instead, I argue that tribal activism by VKA and TD form two competing projects of the 'ethical', that is, conscious efforts to defining a telos and the means of pursuing it.

Next, I elaborate on how dominant values permeate and animate VKA and TD, and in so doing, orientate them towards their respective telos for tribal communities. I employ Joel Robbins's notion of value monism, where he examines value relations from a Dumontian perspective. Using a case study of the Bobover and unaffiliated Hasidim of Brooklyn, he describes 'a monism that appears to subordinate all these other values and their levels under a single paramount one' (Robbins 2013b:106) Likewise, I suggest that in the context of tribal development and identity, VKA

and TD resemble 'a strong monism in a Dumontian sense' (Robbins 2013b:106) where both organisations place emphasis on a paramount value as means to achieve their telos. For VKA, I show that it is driven by the values of assimilation and integration of the Koya culture into the Hindu tradition. As for TD, it is driven by an assertion of the value of indigeneity, where indigenous identity and culture is articulated through the term 'adivasi'. In the following paragraphs, I describe various aspects of VKA and TD such as their origins, ideologies, aims, objectives and activities to show how both organisations are driven to articulate and promote these values through their respective projects for the tribal communities. I build on this to suggest that VKA and TD do not just work to propagate and promote a certain set of values, but also that these values constitute the organising principle of the organisation itself, hence my description of them as holist organisations.

### **Assimilation and Integration: Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram**

I begin with VKA, which is a part of the family of Hindutva organisations established by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a volunteer Hindu nationalist organisation that aims 'to carry the nation to the pinnacle of glory through organising the entire society and ensuring the protection of Hindu Dharma.' It is underpinned by Hindutva, an ideology where religious and national identity are equated to being Hindu, and advocates for the transformation of Hindu culture into an undifferentiated, unified whole, for the purpose of achieving 'one nation, one people, one culture.' (Froerer 2006, Khilnani 1997) In order to achieve this goal, various affiliate organisations were set up by members of RSS to reach out to different groups in Indian society. For example, Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (Indian Farmers Union) was set up to garner support from farmers. Hindutva groups aim to 'convert Dalit, Adivasi and other marginalised groups to the Hindutva world view, to inculcate them in Hindutva ideology, to "integrate" them into a "Hindu" social order, and to prevent them from aligning with other religions or regional

movements, or indeed movements for social justice and caste emancipation.’ (Sud 2007:132) VKA was founded in 1952 by Babashaeb Deshpande for tribal outreach. Today, it has developed into an organisation that has reached fifty thousand tribal villages throughout India. These welfare projects are operationalised under five main areas, Education, Health, Economic Development, Sports, and Cultural Development. Activities by the VKA include building residential schools, hostels, libraries and health centres, developing sports facilities, providing agricultural education for farmers etc. Membership to the VKA is free and open to anyone who subscribe to VKA’s mission of tribal welfare and protection of tribal culture. Funding for their programs is solicited via donations from the general public, corporate and agricultural groups. VKA publishes a monthly newsletter ‘Vanvasi’ in Telugu and contains articles on VKA’s welfare programs, problems facing the tribals, and commentaries on promoting Hindu culture.

Related to the aim of assimilating and integrating the tribal communities into the Hindu fold, the term ‘Vanvasi’ employed by VKA becomes a key aspect of their outreach to the tribal communities. A brochure by VKA states, ‘A segment of our society has been called tribal, backward, aborigines, heathens and pagans. These derogatory terms are dishonest and misused. In keeping with their inseparable continuity of cultural existence with the rest of the country, it’s more appropriate to call them Vanvasis.’ Froerer (2007:33) writes, ‘the term Vanvasi allows the RSS to propagate the view that the Aryans, not adivasis, were the original inhabitants of India and that, far from being ‘outside the Hindu fold’, the forest dwellers have traditionally held an honoured place within Hindu society.’ This shift towards using the term Vanvasi, instead of ‘adivasi’ or ‘tribal’ is an example of how VKA is actively reshaping tribal identity from ‘backwardness’ to ‘honourable’, but this ‘honour’ is intricately connected to being assimilated “back” into the Hindu fold. The brochure goes on to claim that VKA is a nationalistic tribal welfare organisation for the upliftment of the tribals. In a video featuring the work of VKA in Telangana, scenes of VKA volunteers from the city meeting the tribals in the villages are described

as an expression of ‘Vanvasi (forest dwellers), Nagarvasi (City dwellers), Gramvasi (Village dwellers), we are all Bharatvasi (Dwellers of India)’. This act of the urban dwellers coming to the tribal villages is thus deliberately designed to symbolise the coming together of two communities.

Next, VKA’s alignment with Hindutva values is encapsulated in its motto, ‘Tu Main Ek Rakta’ meaning ‘We are one blood’. This idea of ‘one blood’ resonates with the writings of V.D Sarvakar (1923), an Indian activist who first defined the three essentials of Hindutva, a common nation (*rashtra*), common race (*jati*) and common culture/civilisation (*sanskriti*). The motto reflects the role of VKA in assimilating and integrating tribal communities into the Hindu fold, making them one with the Hindus. The aim of assimilating the tribals into the Hindu fold through welfare projects is illustrated through its Maharashtra branch website, [www.vanvasi.org](http://www.vanvasi.org), where it states “the main objective of VKA is to eliminate the chasm between the Hindu community and their Vanvasi brethren with affection and good faith. VKA is working on several fronts which will help in furthering the development of Vanvasis and help them in assimilating into the mainstream of the urban society.” This assimilation and integration is mediated through the various welfare projects and activities that VKA implements amongst the tribal communities. For example, VKA provides regular medical camps at tribal areas where information about VKA’s projects are distributed in these camps by the volunteer doctors. In doing so, it raises awareness about VKA’s work and fosters acceptance by the tribal communities as VKA is seen as showing affection and concern for their well-being.

Having introduced how welfare projects are key to mediating the values of assimilation and integration of VKA to tribal communities, I now illustrate in greater detail how the values of assimilation and integration are mediated through VKA’s work in the Koya community. VKA’s nascent presence in the village was established when a small building was rented and converted into a boys’ hostel in 2012. It began by housing nine boys and has grown to twenty boys as of 2014. As well as providing accommodation and food, VKA

has sponsored their education fees and free coaching was provided for the various government and entrance exams. Other programs that were conducted include mobile camps providing free medical check-ups, hygiene and sanitation awareness programs, and sports events. In the Samakka-Sarakka Jatara, VKA conducted a medical camp where forty doctors volunteered to provide free medical assistance for the devotees attending the Jatara. VKA plans to build a new hostel within the next two years to accommodate one hundred and fifty boys and further their outreach to the less privileged amongst the tribal communities in the area. With these welfare projects, VKA has established regular engagement with the Koya community and bolstered its reputation as an organisation that is concerned about the well-being of the Koyas.

Concurrently, these welfare projects serve as a conduit for VKA to promote the values of integration and assimilation into the Hindu fold. During my fieldwork, I was invited to VKA's annual meeting near the village. The boys that were staying at the hostel presented a dance and the event concluded with speeches from key members of VKA, which were mainly about its welfare projects and the importance of Hinduism in tribal culture. Apart from the speeches that expressed VKA's alignment with Hindutva, there were symbolic expressions that conveyed how VKA integrated the values of assimilation and integration with their welfare work. For example, in Picture 1, there are three photos on a table placed at the side of the tent: they depict, from left to right, the Founder of VKA (Babashaeb Deshpande), Bharat Mata (Mother India), and Lord Rama. The placement of these photos illustrate the links between VKA and Hindutva as the photo of Babasehaeb Deshpande is placed next to two Hindutva icons, Bharat Mata and Lord Rama. The picture of Bharat Mata is an indispensable icon of Hindutva as it encompasses Hindu nationalism and motherhood in one picture, signifying that every person, and by extension, every tribal, born in India is a Hindu. This is supplemented by a picture of Lord Rama, which according to Corbridge is, 'a particularly male and martial (kingly) incarnation of Vishnu. The Ramayana tells the story of Rama's epic battles with Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, to rescue his wife,

Sita, and to regain his throne in Ayodhya.' (Corbridge 1999:234) The significance of this myth is that it alludes to how Hindutva organisations are portrayed as protectors and rescuers of Mother India, 'a Mother that had been raped by the Muslims and the British (the 'two invasions' referred to by Hindu nationalists), and whose honour could only be restored by men and women who resisted 'the emasculation of the Hindu Community'.' (Corbridge 1999:234) By putting these 3 pictures on a table at a VKA event, it conveys a message that VKA is an organisation that intertwines Hindutva values alongside their welfare work.



Picture 1: Hindutva Icons at VKA event

The emphasis on assimilation and integration is further reinforced as we examine the VKA hostel in the village. These hostels are a universal feature in VKA's projects and a site where we see the merging of tribal welfare and Hindu nationalism in the way in which free education, food, and lodging in the hostels are coupled with the inculcation of Hindutva values. When I visited the hostel, I witnessed how the boys adhered to a strict timetable, with early morning prayers before school, and after school there were sports in the evenings, and singing of Bhajans (Hindu religious songs) and the worship of Hindu gods before dinner. There was a roster for various duties in the hostel such as cleaning and the preparation of vegetarian meals. Pictures of Hindu deities and Bharat Mata were hung up in the sleeping areas and on the walls of the hostels. The warden wore a bright saffron VKA shirt (a colour associated with Hindutva). All these served as expressions of how Hindutva values have been integrated into the welfare development of

the tribal boys and represent a process of inculcation that blurs the line between the tribal and the Hindu.

The ways in which VKA integrates tribal communities through welfare projects raises a number of interesting points. In India, Hindutva organisations such as Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) are known to perpetuate violence in the name of protecting 'Indian culture'. Literature on Hindutva organisations tends to view them as perpetrators of 'militant Hindu nationalism' (Katju 2003) and members are seen as 'agents capable of extraordinary violence.' (Mathur 2008) Manjari Katju's work on the VHP showed how it has transformed Hindutva from a verbal idea into a broad, militarised and forceful social movement linked to militant and majoritarian ideas of Hindu resurgence. (Katju 2003, 2011) The dominant scholarly view of Hindutva organisations is that they are violent, destructive and oppressive entities. While there is much truth to this, it does not account for the appeal of Hindutva to tribal communities and can come at the cost of exploring alternative manifestations of Hindutva organisations such as VKA and understanding VKA activists' self-perception as 'doing good'. According to Amit Desai (2007), processes of religious and social transformation that are taking place at the ground level are key to understanding Hindutva. Through his fieldwork on the connections between witchcraft, religious transformation, and Hindu nationalism in a village in a tribal area of eastern Maharashtra, he has shown how membership in a Hindu religious sect, the Mahanubhav Panth, is not merely a solution to quotidian problems faced by the tribals, but also a question of how Hindutva narratives have resonated with the tribals and changed their lifeworlds. This is illustrated by how the adherents in this sect changed their dietary practices to vegetarianism and teetotalism, which reflected a way of thinking that was resonant with ideals of the local VKA and the sermons of sadhus or 'world-renouncers' associated with the Hindu nationalists. (Desai 2007: 27) Likewise, it is important to understand how VKA is able to create a way of thinking about Hindutva that is resonant with notions of development. Sahoo (2014:488) suggests that VKA does this by implementing a 'continuous and planned

process of political socialisation' through emphasising an integration into the Hindu fold and implementing welfare programs for social upliftment. The welfare programs serve as a medium through which Hindutva narratives can be made relevant to the tribal communities and in so doing, orientate their lifeworlds towards assimilating and integrating into the Hindu fold. Thus, by merely focusing on the narrative that Hindutva organisations use oppressive and violent force, there is a risk of obscuring how the ideology of Hindutva can be made pliable through welfare projects that facilitate the assimilation and integration of tribal communities into the Hindu fold.

Next, I wish to deploy two linked aspects of Dumont's theoretical work to describe how these values of assimilation and integration form the organising principle of VKA. First, I suggest that the pervasiveness of these values can be seen to reflect Kapferer's definition of Dumontian holism as 'communities as wholes in which all practices are interconnected and mutually influential' and 'a search for the principle whereby assemblages or forms of human social realities take shape.' (Kapferer 2011) The emphasis on 'Vanvasis', the hostel as a place of inculcating young tribals, the use of Hindutva icons such as Bharat Mata and Lord Ram, all illustrate the holist nature of VKA, in which each aspect or practice is linked to the values of assimilating and integrating the tribals into the Hindu fold through the provision of welfare. By adopting this perspective, we see how values shape VKA as a Hindutva organisation in how it relates to others and to itself. Secondly, these values reflect Robbins' argument of Dumont's hierarchical dynamism where he 'shares the conviction that values do not produce inert representations, but rather set social life in motion.' (Robbins 2015: 174) We have seen how VKA has tried to shape the social life of tribals by assimilating and integrating them into the Hindu fold through their welfare programs. Robbins goes on to suggest that 'dynamism is experienced by social actors as a striving for ever fuller or better realisations of key values.' (Robbins 2015: 175) Through their programs, VKA is constantly striving to create a better realisation of the values of assimilating and integrating the tribals. For example, it has made inroads into

Northeast India where Christianity is the dominant religion by setting up hostels in rural areas in Arunachal Pradesh and parts of Nagaland. This constant striving by VKA towards a fuller realisation of their values has culminated in the recent release of a 90-page vision document which provided a detailed roadmap to tribal development and placed VKA as the pan-Indian organisation for tribal welfare, thus enhancing their efforts to assimilate and integrate the tribals.

From VKA's work and the vision document, I suggest that VKA is an organisation that is continually thinking and developing new inroads towards fulfilling its telos to assimilate and integrate every tribal into the Hindu fold. It orientates its conduct towards realising this telos and suggests to the tribal communities that it is a viable and fruitful endeavour to be part of the Hindu fold. In relation to shaping the conduct of tribal communities, VKA is not merely developing itself into a welfare organisation, but is developing itself as an exceptional Hindutva organisation that is aggressively promoting its set of values, models, ideals and practices to the tribal communities. VKA has shown that, through its events and activities in the villages, extending its inroads into areas that are Christian strongholds and in developing the vision document that it is constantly and consciously thinking about making its ideal goal of assimilating and integrating every tribal a reality.

### **Indigeneity as core value: Tudum Debba**

As for Tudum Debba, I suggest that they present an opposing discourse of what is a telos for tribal communities. If the assimilation and integration of tribals into the Hindu fold is a telos to VKA, then for TD it is the emphasis on indigeneity, hence rejecting the notion of tribals being assimilated into the Hindu fold. Simply put, VKA wants every tribal to be a Hindu, but TD wants every tribal to be an 'adivasi' (original inhabitant), to maintain their tribal identity and to be free from external influences, such as Hinduism. The notion of 'adivasi' focuses on how tribal communities in India are the indigenous inhabitants of the

land and their way of life should be accorded protection by the state in the form of rights and privileges. For TD, it is only through assertion of these rights and privileges that the tribal communities can achieve social upliftment. TD was founded in 1996 by a Koya, Dabbakatla Narsingharao, and has evolved into a conglomeration of 6 different groups, namely students, women, graduates, land, culture and employment. In terms of organisational structure, each wing has its own committees that are further divided into state, district, mandal and village levels. TD focuses on protecting the indigeneity of tribal culture and engaging the state to regain rights such as the establishment of autonomous State Councils for tribals, the implementation of acts such as Land Transfer Act, Forest Rights Act and Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), protesting against displacement of tribals from development projects such as the Polavaram Dam, and the mining of forest areas. TD was first named 'Girijan Hakkula Porata Samiti' (Association for the struggle for Tribal Rights'), before changing to 'Adivasi Hakkula Porata Samiti' or Tudum Debba, and the change in the titles from Girijan (aborigine) to Adivasi (original inhabitants) was deliberate as the term 'adivasi' connotes the meaning of indigeneity and legitimised their demands for rights, welfare and autonomous rule. Hence, the value of indigeneity is a central principle of which TD operates on and this can be seen in various aspects of TD.

I begin with the key symbols of TD as manifestations of the value of indigeneity. A translation of Tudum Debba means 'beating of a drum' and the symbol of Tudum Debba (Picture 2) shows two sticks hitting a drum that is commonly used by adivasis for their festivals, signifying a call for unity to fight for tribal rights. Another key symbol for Tudum Debba is the colour green and is featured prominently in flags, banners and scarves belonging to Tudum Debba and symbolises their claim over forestlands. The student wing of TD, Adivasi Student Union (ASU), carries a symbol of a tribal couple that is inscribed on their scarves (Picture 3). There is a man carrying a bow and the lady is holding a sickle used for harvesting rice. The bow symbolises the call to arms for the





Picture 2: Symbol of Tudum Debba



Picture 3: Symbol of Adivasi Student Union

men to fight for their rights and the sickle emphasises the importance of the women in ensuring sustenance for the tribals. This signifies an equal and symbiotic relationship between men and women in tribal communities, and highlights how tribal culture is different from patriarchy in Hinduism. The words above the symbol are 'Jai Adivasi!' 'Jai Komaram Bheem!' which are indicative of their close relationship with Komaram Bheem, a tribal hero who fought for the emancipation of the tribals. By incorporating Komaram Bheem as one of their symbols, TD is highlighting their desire for the emancipation of tribal communities. Hence, through these symbols, we see how TD are reminding the tribal communities of their indigenous culture and identity.

Apart from symbols, the connection between indigenous identity and the assertion of their rights is clearly manifested in the work of TD in the village and surrounding areas. I suggest that there are two interlinked areas in TD's work, education and intervention. Both areas contribute to promoting the value of indigeneity to the tribal communities. Beginning with education, I refer to TD's efforts in educating tribal communities on adivasi identity and their rights through participating in padayatras (long marches), organising night meetings in villages, public rallies, discussion and seminars in universities. During my fieldwork, I attended two night meetings chaired by Imna, a TD activist. Both meetings started with a detailed description of the Koya clan names, totems, marriage practices and rules. This was followed by the topic of tribal religion where he emphasised that the worship of Sammakka and Sarakka during the Jatara is 'purely tribal and nothing to do with Hinduism.'

The next part of his talk was about land issues and how the tribals in the village should not be 'cheated' of their land by the non-tribals. He went on to share how TD has helped some of them to regain back their land rights through their protests. Imna concluded by sharing about TD's public rallies and how these rallies work towards securing their rights and privileges. He ended by asking the people present at the meeting if they had any doubts or to bring up any issues they face when dealing with the state or non-tribals. The impact of these meetings is twofold. First, they help to reinforce the value of indigeneity through telling of the Koya clan names and reminding the Koyas of their customs and traditions. It also served to counter the VKA's project of assimilation and integration by presenting the indigenous interpretation of two prominent tribal deities. Second, by educating the tribals on their rights and helping to resolve their problems. this was akin to what Kamat describes as 'a pedagogy directed at demystifying the state' (2002: 122) and empowering the adivasis by developing knowledge about the state and their rights as citizens. I build on Kamat's point by suggesting that these meetings also serve as a means to remind the tribals of their indigeneity and thus, the struggle for rights is linked to a struggle for their identity. Nilsen's research on adivasi organisations in Madhya Pradesh showed that these organisations were capable of 'transforming local rationalities where Bhil and Bhilala Adivasis of Madhya Pradesh had once seen state officials as all-powerful figures, they came to see public servants whose powers were legally circumscribed and who were accountable to them as citizens; where the villagers had once seen a state apparatus whose



Pictures 4 and 5: Padayatras by Tudum Debba and Adivasi Students Union

activities centred on the forceful exaction of tribute, they came to see an institution that was supposed to provide services and safeguard rights.’ (Nilsen 2013:623). Similarly, these night meetings reflect the role that TD has played in transforming the relationship between the institutions of the State and the adivasis. Through these night meetings, TD promotes awareness of indigenous rights and calls for diligent enforcement of these rights by the state. In doing so, it raises the consciousness of the tribal communities that assertion of their rights is legitimate and using TD as an intermediary, any form of exploitation by the State or other external agents can be questioned.

Hence, this creates a ‘local rationality’ where tribal communities can engage the state directly with knowledge of their indigenous rights. Another way in which TD activists manifest the value of indigeneity through education and intervention is by organising long distance foot marches, or *padayatras*. The reasons behind doing a *padayatra* are often linked to an issue pertaining to tribal rights. By walking from village to village, the *padayatra* allows for TD activists to interact with the tribal communities, educate them about the importance of indigenous identity and rights, and are a means to galvanise support for TD. Pictures of TD *padayatras* below (Pictures 4 and 5) show a couple of the activists dressed in traditional adivasi dress, while the rest carried green flags and wore scarves, once again emphasising the importance of adivasi identity to the tribal communities that witness these *padayatras*.

Another key aspect of TD’s activism is the organ-

isation of public rallies in various towns and villages. These rallies were centred on the theme of indigeneity by reminding the tribal communities of how they are the original inhabitants and protectors of the forest lands, that external influences such as Hinduism, have diluted their culture and they should be the ones controlling the resources of the lands and reaping the benefits that will eventually lead them out of poverty. Some rallies covered information on specific legislation such as the Forest Rights Act or reiterating their demands for an indigenous and autonomous State Council. In a manner similar to the *padayatras*, these rallies by TD do not merely serve to inform the tribals about their rights but are also an attempt to awaken the indigenous pride of the tribal communities. Apart from these public rallies, TD partners with other tribal organisations to organize peaceful protests against the State on issues of pressing concern, such as the displacement of tribal communities due to dam construction or mining projects, forced seizure of lands, and the inadequate implementation of welfare and development policies etc.

From this brief overview of the work of TD, it is evident that TD is trying to anchor itself as an organisation that is working for the welfare of tribal communities by emphasising the value of indigeneity and the assertion of rights. As mentioned, if VKA wants every tribal to be Hindu, then TD wants every tribal to be an adivasi. TD pursues this by educating tribals on their indigenous culture and facilitates interventions by asserting their rights. Their symbols, night meetings and *padayatras* are each linked to the value

of indigeneity, which is, defining the tribals as adivasis. In doing so, it reflects on how TD is similar to VKA, a holist organisation where values serve as the organising principle. However, TD takes an opposing stance where it rejects assimilation and integration in favour of indigeneity and autonomy. While VKA influences the social life of the tribal communities by defining and shaping it according to Hindutva ideology, TD takes a different approach by reminding tribal communities of their indigenous culture, history and identity. From the examples provided, we see how TD constantly educates Koyas on their ways and customs, essentially providing the Koyas a direction on how to order their social lives. This reflects Dumont's concept of hierarchical dynamism, where there is a 'striving for ever fuller or better realisations of key values, or for fuller or better understandings of kinds of values and their relative ranking—a kind of striving that we often figure as giving life "direction"' (Robbins 2015:175). By explicating the term 'adivasi' and linking it with asserting their indigenous rights from the State, TD has attempted to provide its own roadmap towards tribal development and welfare. From the value monist framework, we have seen how the value of indigeneity permeates throughout TD and influences its various practices. TD has shown through its activities that it is constantly and consciously thinking about its telos, which is influencing every tribal into accepting that he or she is an adivasi. At the same time, TD plays the role as an intermediary between tribal communities and the State by asserting their demands for welfare and development. Hence, the telos of making every tribal an adivasi is crucial in linking the two aspects of indigeneity and development.

Thus, we see how both organisations operate on a value monist framework and how this framework allows us to view them as holist. We have also seen how their respective values permeate and animate the organisations towards their respective telos. In doing so, it allows us to view them not just as mere welfare organisations, but rather, their 'welfare' are manifestations of them finding ways and means to fulfil a telos.

## Conclusion

It is evident that here are two organisations that are dominated by particular values: for VKA, the values of assimilation and integration into the Hindu fold is paramount and for TD, it is the assertion of the adivasi identity that is paramount. From their respective frameworks, we see how their practices are oriented around their respective values to pursue different visions of the good for the tribal communities. From this, I have established VKA and TD are not merely welfare organisations, but are organisations that subscribe to a certain set of values that 'set social life in motion' (Robbins 2015:714) towards the pursuit of telos. In the concluding chapter of *The Future as Cultural Fact*, Appadurai describes three 'notable human preoccupations that shape the future as a cultural fact, imagination, anticipation and aspiration' (2013:286) With regards to aspiration, Appadurai writes about how there needs to be a 'systematic effort to understand how cultural systems, as combinations of norms, dispositions, practices, and histories, frame the good life as a landscape of discernible ends and of practical paths to the achievement of these ends.' (2013:292) This article represents an effort in that direction as I analyse Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram and Tudum Debba from a value monist framework. I conclude that on a broader level, both organisations are aspiring to frame an idea of a good life for tribal communities in India by persuading to either adopt VKA's values of assimilation and integration into the Hindu fold, or TD's values of indigeneity and autonomy.

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