

The End of Time *in* Adivasi Traditions or the Time of the End *for* Adivasi Traditions?

Abstract: The recent remarkable economic growth on the Indian subcontinent has moulded a new, powerful, globally active, and even assertive India. At the same time India's indigenous peoples (Adivasis), have benefited the least from the country's rise, whereas their territories and basic human rights have not been openly questioned. Starting from the tragic events of Jharkhand in 2006 and the subsequent judgment of the Supreme Court in 2011, this article proposes a twofold analysis on the concept of the End of Times: as a real risk of the apocalypse of indigenous cultures, and as an ethnographical approach to eschatological rituals and vernacular beliefs.

Keywords: *Adivasi, eschatology, indigeneity, Salwa Judum, tribal*

This article intends to propose an analysis of the concept of the End of Time/end of a time-cycle in the indigenous cultures of India. At the dawning of the third millennium – as has repeatedly occurred through human history in all times of crisis – we often hear about the end of the world, catastrophes, the decline of humanity. In such a distressing period of cultural dispersion and ethnic and social upheaval, many new-age movements, as well as many new religions, have engaged with this topic, giving rise to disparate millennial fears.

In the West, the idea of the end of the world is felt more dramatically since the running of time is perceived as occurring along a straight line: we have a development proceeding in a specific direction, and finally what the Greeks called *eschaton*, or the end (*τα ἔσχατα* – the last things). In the East, the concept of time is perceived as being cyclical, recursive, or rather spiral shaped, with the end of one era being the prelude to a following one. However the sequence of dissolutions (*pralaya* in the Indian sacred tradition) acts as a prelude to the end of an entire major cycle (*mahapralaya*).

Moreover, since time immemorial, all great civilisations – those that have disappeared as well as those still alive – have handed down (through written or oral tradition) prophecies concerning the conclusion of the age: the 'dark era', the 'iron age'/Kali Yuga, i.e. the current age of humanity. The concept of time itself has involved – and still does involve – the need for a conclusion to the human cycle, since it had a beginning chronicled in mythical and cosmogonic memories. However, this conclusion is conceived as the end of time, as the end of a world, as a deluge of fire and rain or as a final war involving the reappearance of the heroes of the past, perhaps in different form. It is described as a dramatic event, an authentic collective punishment or purge, from which the righteous alone will eventually be saved and redeemed and be carried to a new, purified world. The

history of religions has documented a long sequence of disturbing signs anticipating the idea of a final catastrophe; this would be correctly interpreted only by chosen souls. By contrast, in the conception of reversal of sacred and profane, an eschatological feature common to many cultures, all these distortions and anomalies will be evaluated in the opposite way (and therefore positively) by those unable to overcome the barriers of space and time. They would therefore become accomplices of the personified ignorance and violence that will eventually unleash ‘The End.’

¹ The term tribe, although outdated and questionable, is commonly used in the Indian subcontinent since the indigenous minorities are classified according to the welfare rules and defined by the Indian Constitution in this way (ST: Scheduled Tribes).

The idea of a cyclical time, a historical becoming, as well as the idea of *post-mortem*, the cult of the ancestors and the ancestral tie to a territory are possible linkages between tribal¹ India and the major classical traditions of the Subcontinent (Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.). In this play of overlapping layers and cultural osmosis, the knowledge of the Adivasis is as important as any other tradition, and it is possible that it holds valuable lessons for understanding other cultures, since it preserves in a particularly vivid and energetic manner such religious and proto-religious² phenomena as ancestry, shamanism, empathy with the sacred, etc. On the other hand, indigenous culture is a paradigmatic starting point for reflection on the world in which we live and on the most important challenge for our future: sustainability, the relationship between human beings and the environment, indigenous knowledge of the forest, etc.

² We do not intend to give an evolutionist interpretation to Adivasi religiosity, which features varied and constantly evolving cultural aspects. The belief that shamanism was the universal religion of Paleolithic hunter-gatherers and that it represents a kind of neurotheology has the problematic nature of many of the central assumptions concerning shamanism and its place in the development of human religiosity. On the other hand, it is anyway clear that in South-Asian shamanism several archaic elements common to most religions are vividly present. While it is commonly accepted that many indigenous groups have undergone a process of Hinduisation in the Indian subcontinent through the ages, it is my opinion, however, that the opposite is not excluded, that tribal cultures have brought – and possibly continue to bring – a significant contribution to Indian religions. See Homayun Sidky, “On the Antiquity of Shamanism and Its Role on Human Religiosity”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 22 (2010), 68-92.

The most important point to note is that tribal cultures are now endangered since the laws of the welfare state (from the Mandal Commission till date) have led to differentiated and inhomogeneous consequences. The creation of a policy specifically addressed to Adivasis was tortuous, development plans were often uneven, and yet today there is an intense debate on the issue of minority rights.³ While the Adivasi areas are characterised by a series of valuable specificities, such as a rich cultural heritage and an abundance of resources, there are other unresolved critical issues – such as their isolation,⁴ a lack of infrastructural development, the presence of centrifugal forces – the resolution of which will be the key to the future of India and a correct balance in its relations with the surrounding countries.

³ Padmanabh Samarendra, “Anthropological Knowledge and Statistical Frame: Caste in the Census in Colonial India”, in Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, eds., *Caste in Modern India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2014), Vol. 1, 256-93.

⁴ The concept of isolation has often been stereotyped and romanticised particularly in the colonial and in the first post-colonial period. It is not possible to theorise an absolute isolation today for communities that through the centuries have always interacted in some way with their regional social background. However peculiar elements of the territory, such as the inaccessibility of the jungles or Himalayan valleys – from which adaptation processes, techniques of subsistence and general conditions of backwardness derive – are today taken into account by the Indian government. This element thus appears as relative or rather this isolation of the Adivasis can be considered as a result of their marginalisation under colonial rule. Bhangya Bhukia, “Enclosing Land, Enclosing Adivasis: Colonial Agriculture and Adivasis in Central India, 1853-1948”, *Indian Historical Review*, 40.1 (2013), 93-116.

For some years the governments of the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal have signed numerous MoUs (Memorandum of Understanding) with international companies worth several billion dollars, for iron and steel plants, factories, power plants, aluminum refineries and even dams or mines. For such bilateral agreements between the Indian state and multinational corporations to be translated into real development for the country, it seems that the authorities can contemplate no other option than the displacement of the Adivasis who live in those areas. All this contrasts with fifty years of efforts to enact laws on Reserve Forests, on the environmental impact, on the safeguard of minorities’ tribal cultural identity and, last but not least, the protection of the Adivasis within their environment.⁵ Consequently, in the procedures for

⁵ Stefano Beggiora, “Storia delle politiche tribali e del *Tribal Welfare* in India dal periodo coloniale a oggi”, in Gian Giuseppe Filippi, ed., *Il concetto di uomo nelle società del Vicino Oriente e dell’Asia Meridionale* (Venezia: Libreria Editrice Universitaria Cafoscarina [Eurasistica 84], 2010), 17-40.

registration and authorisation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ), some governments have acquired land using the power of expropriation for public utility.⁶

Vedanta Resources Plc *docet*. The desperate battle of the Kondhs against Vedanta multinational steelworks, which was destroying the sacred mountain of Niyamgiri in Odisha is now quite renowned. That incident fortunately reached the headlines, gaining greater visibility leading to broad participation from below, as well as raising awareness among international organisations and members of the public who embrace the cause of environmentalism and human rights of minorities.⁷ Indeed, that was a paradigmatic case of a thousand battles that are fought silently even today in these states and throughout India.

Today the tribal areas are increasingly becoming areas of contrast and conflict. In the Northeast, for example,⁸ the ethnic and cultural identity of many indigenous minority groups has often been used to foster centrifugal and separatist pushes.⁹ But in the so-called Red Corridor, many districts are considered 'Naxal affected': the Indian government continues to define the Naxalite movement as Maoist. The left-wing extremist movement in India goes back to the famous peasant revolt of 1967 that took place in Naxalbari in West Bengal, led by Communist cadres subsequently expelled from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in 1969, in particular by Charu Mazumdar and Kanyu Sanyal. Later, the AICCCR (All India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries) formed the Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML), led by Charu Mazumdar in order to fight against the landowner and caste system through an armed struggle without any mediation with the 'bourgeois state'. Since then, the goals and strategies of the movement have greatly changed. After the death of Mazumdar there was a period of fragmentation between 1972 and 1980 leading up to the emergence of the People's War Group (PWG) and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) in 1999-2000.¹⁰ Currently, despite a phase called 'strategic united front against state repression' marked by the fusion of the PWG and MCC in the CPI-Maoist in September 2004, the Naxalite movement is not monolithic in character, but boasts many regional groups who are very active.¹¹ It is clear, on the other hand, that Maoism as it was understood in the Sixties, culminated at that time. Today, however, all the dissatisfaction of those who have suffered for years from a lack of institutions has clustered around the Naxalite movement. It would be more correct to define those groups that also involve minorities as "More than Maoist".¹²

The response was the *Salva Judum*: euphemistically known as 'the Peace March' in Chhattisgarh, the project involved the creation of paramilitary militias, which in turn organised an army of volunteers recruited from among the tribal populations, soon to be armed in order to flush out the Naxalites hiding in the jungle through a military operation called 'Green Hunt'.¹³ A few years ago this atrocity appeared paradigmatic since it highlighted a policy that, in the attempt to solve the problems, contributes rather to crushing the social fabric of the lower castes and indigenous

⁶This practice has in the past also had several precedent: U. N. Majhi, "Tribal Land Alienation: Needs Radical Solution", in Akhila B. Ota, ed., *Critical Issues in Tribal Development* (Bhubaneswar: Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute, 2009), 180-86; Karunakar Patnaik, "Land Alienation and other Land Related Issue in Tribal Area. An Overview", in Ivi, 187-204.

⁷Amnesty International, *Don't Mine Us Out of Existence: Bauxite Mine and Refinery Devastate Lives in India* (London: ASA, February 2010); Survival International, "Vedanta Resources/Complaint to the UK National Contact Point under the Specific Instance Procedure of the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises", December 2008. See also the documentary film *Mine: Story of a Sacred Mountain*, by T. Nicholas, 2008.

⁸Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* [2007] (New Delhi: Pan Macmillan-Picador India, 2012), 261-278.

⁹Many armed factions in the various scenarios of the northeastern border in recent decades have hinged on ethnicity and identity notions (i.e. Nagas, Bodos, ULFA of Assam, AITF of Tripura, PLA and Kangleipak Party of Manipur etc.). As the issue is too complex to be treated here, we will therefore make only a quick reference: see the whole section 2 of the book of Arpita Anant, ed., *Non State Armed Group in South Asia: A Preliminary Structured Focused Comparison* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses/Pentagon Security International, 2012), 65-150. See also: S. K. Agnihotri and B. Datta-Ray, *Perspective of Security and Development in North East India* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2002); Ved Prakash, *Terrorism in India's North-east: A Gathering Storm* (Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008); Sankaran Kalyanaraman, "Thinking about Counter Terrorism in India's National Strategy", in Krishnappa Venkatshamy and Princy George, eds., *Grand Strategy for India 2020 and Beyond* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses/Pentagon Security International, 2012), 107-128; Namrata Goswami, *Indian National Security and Counter-Insurgency: The Use of Force Vs Non-violent Response* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁰Javeed Alam, "Communist Politics in Search of Hegemony", in Zoya Hasan, ed., *Parties and Party Politics in India* [1988] (New Delhi: Oxford U. P., 2013), 289-316; Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and Their Ideology* (New Delhi: Oxford U. P., 2011).

¹¹Palepu V. Ramana, *Measure to Deal with Left Wing Extremism/Naxalism* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses/Pentagon Security International, 2011), 8-11; Palepu V. Ramana, "Profiling Indian Maoists: An Overview", in Anant, ed., *Non State Armed Group in South Asia*, 151-164.

¹²Guha, *India After Gandhi*, 619-621. See also Robert Jeffrey et al., eds., *More than Maoism: Politics, Policies and Insurgencies in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2013).

¹³Randeep Ramesh, "Inside India's Hidden War", *The Guardian* (May 9, 2006); Rakesh Prakash, "Tribal

Youths Will Now Fight Naxals”, *Times of India* (May 11, 2006); Vishwa Mohan, “Salwa Judum, Force Too Violating Rights”, *The Times of India* (Jul. 16, 2008); “Indian State ‘Backing Vigilantes’”, *BBC News* (July 15, 2008); Aman Sethi, “Green Hunt: The Anatomy of an Operation”, *The Hindu* (Feb. 6, 2010).

¹⁴ “Naxalism Biggest Challenge: PM”, *Hindustan Times (Archives)*, New Delhi (April 13, 2006); “Naxalism Biggest Threat to Internal Security: Manmohan”, *The Hindu* (May 24, 2010). Fatalities as a result of the fighting or attacks, among the police, the guerrillas Naxalites – the macro-groups of Left Wing Extremism (LWE) and CPI-Maoist – and, finally, among the civilians, according to official sources would exceed six thousand units for the time frame 2005-2014. Since 2007, more than fourteen thousand people have been arrested or surrendered to the government forces: New Delhi Institute for Conflict Management, “Fatalities in Left Wing Extremism, 2005-2014”, database updated to 6th April 2014. The data, however, differ in the extensive literature on the subject, it is plausible to argue that in some cases the numbers are based on estimates and projections.

¹⁵ Vivek Chadha, “Left Wing Extremism – Challenges and Approach”, in Venkatshamy and George, eds., *Grand Strategy for India 2020*, 93-106.

people of the place. We would contend that this could be considered a true apocalypse, not in a Christian understanding of the term or in the revelatory sense of its Greek roots, but rather in the common meaning of a predicted ultimate catastrophe.

We now come to document a conflict that has slowly acquired the characteristics of a civil war. In awareness of this, in a geopolitical context that sees China’s influence along the Indian border growing out of control, following the political upheavals beyond the border of Nepal, the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressed serious concerns about the insurgency in the so-called Red Corridor. The fact dates back to the 2006 elections, but its echoes continue to reverberate in all the newspapers: even more than Islamic terrorism, the Naxalite threat was depicted as being “the single biggest challenge” for India.¹⁴ However, few people seem to wonder about the actual impact of statements like this. Local government forces and police, facing the well-established network of Maoists in inland tribal areas, awaited a positive sign from the Central government. This admission by the Prime Minister legitimised the hopes of local police forces who, together with the Government of Chhattisgarh, demanded a massive intervention on the part of the army. Unexpectedly, at that time, however, the upper echelons of the Indian Army considered the Naxalite insurgency to be a local problem of public order and declined to give direct support, arguing as justification the intensification of activities in Kashmir and the Northeast.¹⁵

In 2006 therefore arose the abomination of the *Salwa Judum*, almost as a natural response to the contradictory hesitation of the Central government on the issue. While the inclination to pacifism of the unpretentious people of the tribes is indeed desirable, it goes without saying that the distribution of weapons to the population in general is probably not a good idea and could easily lead to an indiscriminate use of force. Thereafter, violence and attacks were reported throughout the region, merciless battles in which any non-belligerence among ordinary citizens was interpreted by each faction as siding with the enemy. Incidents of rape have been recorded, as well as the systematic burning of villages inevitably involving the killing of innocent people. All these cases, destined to descend into a turmoil of violence and madness, led the paramilitary militias to support the police in Operation Green Hunt. This was a clear paradigm of the Times of the End, precisely because it represents a tangible risk of the annihilation of that world and of indigenous cultures.

Here, despite the army initially distancing itself, special forces have converged from different Indian territories under the aegis of a policy called WHAM (Winning the Hearts and Minds). Among the Special Police Officers (SPO) the *Salwa Judum*-organised tribal squads were known by the name of Koya Commandos, because some groups were formed at the time by young men from the area inhabited by Koyas, although this ethnic affiliation was not a real discriminating factor. In this case we consider that, paradoxically, the most striking

aspect is that tribal people were sent to fight against other tribal people. It has also been documented that as the battle-front lines between the Naxals and the state shift with every jungle encounter, Adivasis across the zone of operations were forced to assume a series of fluid identities according to the force in power on a given day.

The wave of violence that has ignited many tribal territories partially controlled by the Naxalites, evidently aroused great concern, so much so that after the end of the fighting an inquiry commission was set up to investigate the case. In particular, it was shown that it was not possible to solve the problem of the insurgency through the indiscriminate distribution of weapons to the population. Public opinion finally suffered a real shock at the publication of several photographs showing children enrolled in the SPOs carrying weapons in hand.¹⁶ The image of children carrying weapons – overwhelmed, manipulated, unaware victims of the madness of war – can arouse nothing but sheer horror. All this is much closer to the sad scenarios we are accustomed to seeing in the conflicts of Central Africa. It is truly amazing to read that the Supreme Court of India itself, when called to rule on this juncture, perhaps unsurprisingly referred to the famous novel by Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. We quote some passages from the document, *The Supreme Court of India, Civil Original Jurisdiction (Civil) NO. 250 of 2007, New Delhi, 5 July, 2011*:¹⁷

The State of Chattisgarh, claims that it has a constitutional sanction to perpetrate, indefinitely, a regime of gross violation of human rights in a manner, and by adopting the same modes, as done by Maoist/Naxalite extremists. The State of Chattisgarh also claims that it has the powers to arm, with guns, thousands of mostly illiterate or barely literate young men of the tribal tracts, who are appointed as temporary police officers, with little or no training, and even lesser clarity about the chain of command to control the activities of such a force, to fight the battles against alleged Maoist extremists.

As we heard the instant matters before us, we could not but help be reminded of the novella, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad ... Set against the backdrop of resource rich darkness of the African tropical forests, the brutal ivory trade sought to be expanded by the imperialist-capitalist expansionary policy of European powers, Joseph Conrad describes the grisly, and the macabre states of mind and justifications advanced by men, who secure and wield force without reason, sans humanity, and any sense of balance. The main perpetrator in the novella, Kurtz, breathes his last with the words: “The horror! The horror!”. Conrad characterised the actual circumstances ... as “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience”.

As we heard more and more about the situation in Chattisgarh, and the justifications being sought to be pressed upon us by the respondents, it began to become clear to us that the respondents were envisioning modes of state action that would seriously undermine constitutional values. ... Through the course of these proceedings, as a hazy picture of events and circumstances in some districts of Chattisgarh emerged, we could not but arrive at the conclusion that

¹⁶ Suhas Chakma, ed., *India's Child Soldiers* (New Delhi: Asian Center for Human Rights, 2013), 2, 6-7.

¹⁷ Also reported under the name of Nandini Sundar Case, it takes its name precisely from Nandini Sundar, a writer and professor of sociology at Delhi University who started the petition, which was then signed by many prominent personalities in India, and which will be destined to be an uncommon case in Indian law since the Court will recognize the actions of the state of Chhattisgarh as unconstitutional. The judgment is now available at major Indian newspaper archives and legal sites with the title: *Nandini Sundar and Ors. vs State of Chhattisgarh on 5 July, 2011*. See the Supreme Court of India: <http://supremecourtindia.nic.in/outtoday/wc25007.pdf>.

the respondents were seeking to put us on a course of constitutional actions whereby we would also have to exclaim, at the end of it all: “the horror, the horror”.¹⁸

¹⁸ The Supreme Court of India, Civil Original Jurisdiction (Civil) N. 250 of 2007, New Delhi, *Nandini Sundar and Ors. vs State of Chhattisgarh on 5 July*, 2011, cit., 4-5. See also: J. Venkatesan, “Salwa Judum is Illegal, Says Supreme Court”, *The Hindu* (3 August, 2011).

¹⁹ Lars K. Pharo, “A Methodology for a Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the Concepts ‘Shaman’ and ‘Shamanism’”, *Numen*, 58 (2011), 6-70; Håkan Rydving, “Le chamanisme aujourd’hui: constructions et déconstructions d’une illusion scientifique”, *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines*, 42 (2011), 2-12.

²⁰ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London Wakefield Press: Hurst & Co., 2005); Graham Harvey, “Animism Rather Than Shamanism: New Approaches to What Shamans Do (for Other Animists)”, in Bettina Schmidt and Lucy Huskinson, eds., *Spirit Possession and Trance: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2010), 14–34; Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines, 2005).

²¹ For a general discussion on the Asiatic shamanism I refer to Åke Hultrantz, “Ecological and Phenomenological Aspects of Shamanism”, in Vilmos Diószegi and Mihály Hoppál, eds., *Shamanism in Siberia*, Vol. 2 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1996), 1–31. For a more critical discussion on this topic I suggest Vladimir N. Basilov, “Cosmos as Everyday Reality in Shamanism: an Attempt to Formulate a More Precise Definition of Shamanism”, in Antonio Rigopoulos and Romano Mastromattei, eds., *Shamanic Cosmos. From India to the North Pole Star* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1999), 17-40 and Mihály Hoppál, “Shamanism: An Archaic and/or Recent System of Beliefs”, in Anna-Leena Siikala and Mihály Hoppál, eds., *Studies on Shamanism* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1992), 117-131.

²² With a particular reference to the *ādivāsīs* of India see Piers Vitebsky, *The Shaman* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Piers Vitebsky, *Dialogues with the Dead* (New Delhi: Cambridge U. P., 1993).

²³ The culture of the indigenous communities of India is essentially oral: the cosmogonic myths, as well as the traditional knowledge of the forest have been handed down from generation to generation orally. We have observed the crystallisation of these traditions in conventional writing only in rare cases in contemporary times as a result of moments of forceful socio-political change: i.e. religious reforms, the need to be recognised by the Indian state as distinct cultural/ethnic group, the translations by missionaries who strive to bring these cultures to Christianity, etc.

Before we bring this essay to a conclusion, however, it seems appropriate to make at least a general reference to the end of time in traditional terms, or at least to how it can be understood in what we have conventionally defined as tribal shamanism. The term shamanism is currently somewhat controversial and its conventional use has been debated over decades of study.¹⁹ Some scholars have recently proposed the term animism as a qualification of the ontological perspective on the phenomenon.²⁰ It would require too deep a digression to enter now into this longstanding debate; as far as this study is concerned, we will refer to the attempt to define Central Asian shamanism²¹ whose general characteristics are also found in the religion of the Adivasi communities of India and in the rituals of so-called indigenous *pujaris* (priests/worshippers).²²

Time in the world of Adivasis

In this section we will explore some common concepts that can be found, notwithstanding some obvious regional differences, in most Adivasi communities and in major Indian traditions. Alongside the use of terms from tribal languages the use of sanskritic terms that refer to more or less shared concepts of the Hindu world will however be prevalent. Moreover there is no doubt that the influence of the different castes at the local level has had a significant role in the history of the various indigenous communities. We can however testify in addition that among those Adivasi groups that affirm their identity by rejecting Hindu hegemony over Indian culture, a certain terminology – even if related to sometimes slightly variable contents – is now commonly assimilated. Our highlighting of these similarities does not necessarily aim to evidence a Hinduisation process that, if it certainly has occurred in some circumstances – and should be discussed case by case – we consider to remain a very controversial and open issue. We restrict ourselves here therefore to providing a comparative and phenomenological comparison, in an arduous attempt not to generalise. It is still important to consider that in the contemporary age these cultures are highly endangered, so that the risk of extinction in some ways overlaps tragically with the very religious thought about the end times. Through over fifteen years of experience of field-research we have collected many tribal myths, legends and stories: a rich narrative crop concerning the many beginnings and many ends constantly adding to and creating a never-ending succession to the orality of groups,²³ presenting a more or less well-known form, but in some ways not devoid of its own originality and vigour.

The breadth of this fascinating topic is such that in this context we can offer

only some preliminary considerations about the most common aspects, accompanied by a few examples. In general, the end of the world is not fully theorised in the tribal world and shamanism. But we can propose the formulation of three premises:

- 1) Primitive societies based their subsistence on hunting and gathering, for this reason their way of life relied on a close observation of natural cycles: so the idea of the End in itself gives rise to the idea of the renewal of the world. In shamanism in general, this regeneration occurs through the ritual repetition of the cosmogony.
- 2) The shaman has a profound knowledge of the forces governing nature – both manipulating it and acting as the guardian of its primeval harmony. Thus, shamanism is the spearhead of the (empirical) knowledge of this world with all its subtle forces, but rarely ventures beyond the world (transcendental), providing notions of an eschatological nature.
- 3) Contemporary movements, with strong new age influences are characterised by messianism and the expectation of the end times regarded as an *eschaton*. This is often the result of a misunderstanding engendered by a misinterpretation of indigenous cultures.

It might be of some interest to digress on this third point. Non-violent nativistic, eschatological, apocalyptic, and millennial themes appear in modern shamanic spirituality, as they do in Neopaganism.²⁴ Humans and the earth are envisaged as being in grave danger. This is partly due to contemporary man's increasing loss of transcendent awareness and the related weakening of a connection with nature and the spiritual world. On the other hand, "shamanic cultures" have retained this connection and are the custodians of the mystical knowledge that will prevent catastrophe and create a saner world. Part of the mission of modern shamanic spirituality is to prevent the world's destruction by rekindling a lost spiritual awareness. This mission entails learning from indigenous people and carrying out activities in the supernatural world that will save our material world. The current global warming fears and other environmental problems have added fuel to this concern. It is interesting that these Neopagan movements often come into contact with the tribal traditions that they tend to idealise. Otherwise, however, they superimpose their new-age interpretations on actual traditional environments. This matter is of anthropological interest.²⁵

The shamanic cosmos of Indian tribes – in continuity with the Hindu and Buddhist traditions – consists of two dimensions, spatial and temporal. The spatial dimension is subdivided according to a sacred geography, which is axial and vertical, and another earthly dimension, which is horizontal and circular. In summary, space can be divided into:

²⁴ Joan B. Townsend, "Anthropological Perspectives on New Religious Movements", in Joseph Betteis and S. K. Johannesen, eds., *The Return of the Millennium* (Barrytown - NY: New ERA Books, 1984), 137-151.

²⁵ Bill B. Brunton, "Western Shamanism in a Cultural Context", in AA. VV., *Proceedings of the International Congress: Shamanism and Other Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs and Practices*, Vol. 5, sec. 2 (Moscow: Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 1999), 231-239.

-
- 1) Supernal and underworld dimensions: Here the earth's surface separates the empirical world inhabited by men (as well as subtle entities, spirits and deities) from a dark complementary dimension, chthonic (sometimes upside down as if it were a reflection of the former) which is the abode of the dead. This concept is the basis of the cult of the dead and the ancestors.
 - 2) *Vana e ksetra*: The forest and field; i.e. the jungle – the dimension of wild nature, the kingdom of spirits and animals, of dynamic and creative potential, of chaos – which is opposed to the field, or rather the domesticated space of the village, inhabited by men, the dimension of order.

Thus time, even in the Indian Adivasi world, is understood through a repetition of cycles, marked by regular intervals of different length, so that it can be imagined as a parabola rather than as a circle, expressing its evolutionary potential interspersed with counter phases of free fall. This motion, which is spiral form according to Indian traditions, seems almost to 'intersect' space in key moments during which all divisions are cancelled and the forces and the relations between the parties seem to reverse. These moments determine the end of the world and its cyclical renewal. Within tribal religions we are able to identify at least three types, three different degrees which characterise the temporal dimension of the shamanic cosmos.

The small cycle is the first short period of time, usually an annual recurrence, characterised by the dissolution of the spatial separation of point 1 (axial). The ritual opening of the passage through the supernal and the underworld dimensions takes place on so-called cataclysmic days; in some villages it occurs one to three times in a year. There are certain preliminary taboos to be respected, at that point time stops, work or cultural activities are suspended: in these days the gates between the human/empirical dimension and the underworld are open and the dead come back to the surface wandering among men. The margin of the chaotic risk of the end of the world is set by the space-time coordinates. However, these festivities combining the cult of the dead with the rituals of spring and fertility (two conceptions which are always strongly related in ancient civilisations) culminate with the renewal of a covenant with the ancestors. This bond is made concrete precisely by the rebirth of the world in the following season.

The *mundus patet*, the ancient rite of worship of Ceres that contains this symbolism, therefore finds a certain correspondence among the Adivasi shamans. The uterus of the world that opens up spewing forth a flood of the dead and other supernatural beings is not in the *cardo* and *decumanus* of the village, but is rather the mortar for grain. This is often to be found, not by chance, at the foot of the central pole that supports the home: almost everywhere in the shamanism of the Subcontinent this supporting pole has an axial symbolism, while the hole of the mortar, dug in front of it, is the way through the dimensions. Among the Lanjia Saoras of Odisha the mortar grinding the grains for the whole community is a

symbol of fecundity. The interaction between the pestle and the womb of the earth clearly alludes to the fertility of a sexual-ancestral act. Other passages consist of megalithic sites in honor of the dead (*ganuar*).²⁶ From here, on the appointed days, when the activities of the village are postponed and agricultural tools remain silent, the procession of the dead rises to the surface. Among the Lanjia Saoras the commemoration of all the departed is called *karja* and is perhaps the most sumptuous of similar rites in the area, at least for the number of buffalo sacrificed and the profusion of memorial offerings.²⁷

The average cycle, marking the end of time and the ritual regeneration of the world, renews itself when the *kesetra* unfolds to the *vana*, usually in cycles of twelve years. Under normal circumstances, the human space of the village, enclosed in the *kesetra* to define it in Hindu terms, is a sacred space surrounded by the primordial chaos of the jungle. This *mandala* is consecrated by the shaman's ritual that defines the boundaries, celebrating sacrifices and offerings, proceeding in a circular motion (*imago aeternitatis*), in the awareness of mimicking the cosmic journey.²⁸ However, precisely because it is a projection of the macrocosm, the sacred space of men is not immutable and expires over time: it becomes profane as described in India in the sequential theory of *yugas*.²⁹ Here too at its culmination, at the lowest point of its fall, a reversal takes place, in a process similar to that documented for the shorter cycle time. The shaman accompanied by the bravest warriors of the community must go in the *vana* to restore the purity of the past. This is clearly a *topos* in India: the ascetic (the *vanaprasthin*, the *sadhaka*) performs the ultimate retreat in the jungle, renewing knowledge, through the vision of God, by meditating in the forest (for instance, the asceticism of Rama in the Dandaka forest). Every twelve years, in fact, the *murti* of Jagannatha in Puri is renewed: the sacred wood is transported from the forest to the holy city in a cult whose origins have clear references to the tribal cosmos.³⁰ For the Oraons of the districts of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, the end of the twelfth year is the celebration for the restoration of the sacred places of *Sarna Devi*, at the edge of the fields of the village, consecrated by the sacrifice of a buffalo.³¹ For the Khonds of Odisha, the *meria* festival – an ancient relic of human immolation for Dharani Pennu, the Earth goddess, now celebrated with the sacrifice of a buffalo – is closely related to the spring celebrations and will ensure, through the renewal of the world, fertility of the fields in the years to come. In the area of Kuttias (a Khond subgroup), this festival is observed at yearly intervals, rotating among the villages, until the completion of a full cycle of twelve years that determines the most sumptuous celebration.³²

The long cycle finally involves the end of this world: the theme frequently recurs of the shaman/hero of the tribe who mediates the end of the mythical time. The theme is developed orally in epic cycles and mythological cosmogony: a primordial hero, the founder of the clan, the first shaman is destined to return. Often the narrative handed down the idea of the history of the community as a removal, a departure, a loss of some faculty or dimension of the ancestors in the

²⁶ See also Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, "Megalithic Ritual among the Gadabas and Bondos of Odisha", *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Society of Bengal*, 9 (1943), 149-78.

²⁷ In the cultures of old Europe, there is a vague analogy with the Wild Hunt of the Nordic and Teutonic traditions: the 'Furious Army', is led by a kind of trickster, a Harlequin: the Hölle König with the tailed fox hat is clearly a shamanistic figure. See Claude Lecoteux, *Phantom Armies of the Night* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2011).

²⁸ Baidyanath Saraswati, "Cosmology, Oral Tradition", in B. Saraswati, ed., *Sacred Science Review*, 2, Varanasi (2003), 4-5.

²⁹ Marine Carrin, "The Santal Conception of Time", in Georg Pfeffer and Deepak K. Behera, eds., *Contemporary Society: Concept of Tribal Society* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2002), 139-59.

³⁰ Roland Hardenberg, "The Renewal of Jagannath", in Hermann Kulke and Burkhard Schnepel, eds., *Jagannath Revisited, Studying Society Religion and the State in Odisha* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 64-92.

³¹ Amitabh Pandey, *Conservation and Management of Religious Common Pool Resources: A Study of the Sacred Groves of Jaspur Nagar, Chhattisgarh* (Bhopal: Indian Institute of Forest Management, 2011), 76, 89-90.

³² Klaus Seeland et al., *Forest Tribes of Odisha. Vol 2: The Kuttia Kondh* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2006), 245.

mythical time. What was the transition from a higher to a weaker condition will be restored, vice versa, at the end of time, to start the next cycle. Here too, the advent of the hero will be announced by signs, but the final catastrophe, characterised by water and fire, is usually decisive. As in cosmogony, the passage from era to era (or *pralaya*, to use a Hindu term) is marked by fire and water. Fire is the magmatic element: especially in shamanism, which has a strong metallurgical symbolism, there is the principle of transformation of matter. To remain within the imagery of the forge and blacksmith, water – the element that universally holds the potential of the manifest world – cools the molds, tempers steel, fixes the new form and brings about the new world. Here, then for the Saoras, the primeval hero Kittung, the demigod who like Prometheus gave fire to mankind, will come back giving rise to a new world. Not by chance, the Catholic missionaries here have superimposed the image of Christ onto the old cycle of Kittung reinterpreting him in a Christian eschatological key.³³ For the Oraons, the Santals, and for many groups of the Northeast there will be a rain of fire incinerating the world. After the catastrophe there will be a flood, but the diluvial water will initiate the new era.³⁴ It is interesting to note that where this idea is theorised in a more defined way, the deflagration of the cosmos, the ‘battle of the stars’,³⁵ puts an end to space in all its dimensions, transcending the aforementioned axial or geographical subdivisions. It is like a second death and the restoration of a primordial and potential level.

³³ Stefano Beggiora, *Sonum, spiriti della giungla* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2003), 58-59.

³⁴ Baidyanath Saraswati, “Forms of Life in the World of Matter: Reflections on Tribal Cosmology”, in Jayant V. Narlikar, *The Nature of the Matter, Prakriti Series*, 4 (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Center for Arts, 1995), 70-74. Biyokesh Tripathy, *Tribal Myths and Legends of Odisha* (Delhi: Pratibha Prakashan, 2005), 249.

³⁵ Boniface Tirkey, *The Smiling Uraon, a People on the Move: Introducing India's Uraon Community, Yesterday and Today* (Patna: Navjyoti Niketan, 1989), 72.

The end of the existing worldly order may be considered as a cultural theme in the context of a mythical configuration to which shamanism makes explicit reference: i.e. the topic of periodic destruction and regeneration of the world in the context of the myth of the renewal of time.

Moreover, on a sociological level, the tribal narrative *corpus* of the end of time and its renewal is a platform of collective identity for local groups and is a guarantee of the purity of its elements. This is the reason why the tale of the End of Times – that it is a master narrative for the group, in which the community emphasises its own Adivasi identity – integrates into a larger context, consisting of recursive cultural elements, which makes up the meta-narrative of Indian culture.

As an anthropological and permanent risk, the *end* is simply the risk of not being able to be in any possible cultural world, the loss of the opportunity to be operationally present in the world, the reduction to annihilation of any horizon of worldly operability, the catastrophe of any community not being able to plan its existence according to its values. Indigenous culture in India is in itself a solemn exorcism of this radical risk. If the cultural theme of the *end* of a certain order is a historical mode of recovery or pre-emption of this risk, even where this issue is less present, the risk is there, however, and the culture of the Adivasis rises to face it.³⁶

³⁶ See Ernesto De Martino, *La fine del mondo: Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali* [1977] (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 218-20.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, we would consider that today, war, as an inevitable side effect of compulsory development and modernisation, is quickly wiping out these cultures. The unbridled impulse for greed, born out of modern neo-liberal economic ideology, along with the false promises of an overwhelming growth that will raise the threshold for all consumers, dangerously underlies a scenario that is not yet socially, politically and de facto economically sustainable in vast tracts of India. However, the advocates of the neo-liberal paradigm of development seem to be concerned about the frantic race for positive signs in the variation of the annual percentage of GDP. Development is always understood as the use of resources and increase of productivity.

This process, in India as well as in other countries that are now ‘developed’, results in a further need for additional resources to bring about successes in production and so on. If such exploitation cannot be managed within tight deadlines, the country is believed to be unable to compete on a global scale, lacking the necessary wealth to efficiently deal with the endemic problems of illiteracy, poverty and backwardness.³⁷

The development of large metropolitan centres is producing a major anthropological change in the urban substratum – as it did in other countries during the first and second postwar periods – while large pockets in the country remain cut off from such a change. Meanwhile, the country is growing demographically, and for millions of people there is also a growing awareness of living in a country that desires to be modern, that has the means but perhaps not yet the capacity to ensure for all its citizens a minimum standard of civil rights. If on one hand the rights of Adivasi minorities are violated, on the other the social pressure of unemployment and underemployment is huge.³⁸

Our point here is that the idea of progress is the Trojan horse for the pursuit of economic interests, formally deploying itself behind the screen of the technological application of modern scientific knowledge. On the other hand the persecution of economic development was the keystone of the election campaign that has recently led the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s Narendra Modi to win the last elections in 2014.

It is interesting to note that for the right-wing ideology, or more specifically for the concept of *Hindutva*, the Adivasi issue has always been central. According to this vision the indigenous peoples of India are to be considered an integral part of Hindu society. On the evidence of this contamination or reciprocal cultural exchange throughout the Indian history we mentioned above, in many cases, this idea would not be so inaccurate. And on the other hand, this concept was shared by the illustrious names of anthropology descending from Gandhian thought who were more inclined to understand the categorisation ‘Hinduism’ in its extraordinary

³⁷ Arundhati Roy, *In marcia con i ribelli* (Parma: Guanda, 2012), 149 [1st ed., *Outlook* (National/Essays), “Mr Chidambaram War” (November 9, 2010); “Walking with the Comrades” (March 29, 2010), 1-26; “The Trickle-down Revolution” (September 20, 2010), etc.].

³⁸ Niklas Swanström, “Globalisation and the Rise of Asia: Regional Cooperation to Sustain Economic Stability in Asia”, in Ali Ahmed et al., eds., *Towards a New Asian Order* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2012), 65-80.

³⁹ Saraswati, who was a disciple of N.K. Bose, postulated a differentiation within an organic totality: Baidyanath Saraswati, "Tribe as Caste", in Dev Nathan, ed., *From Tribe to Caste* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1997), 114-116; see also Nirmal K. Bose, *Cultural Anthropology and Other Essays* (Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing Company, 1953).

⁴⁰ Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam, *Potere e contestazione. L'India dal 1989* [2007] (Torino: EDT, 2009), 31.

⁴¹ Eamon Murphy, "Politics, Religion, and the Making of Terrorism in Pakistan and India", in Randall D. Law, ed., *The Routledge History of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 361.

⁴² Tariq Tachil, *Elite Parties, Poor Voters: How Social Services Win Votes in India* (New York: Cambridge U. P., 2014), 9, 282, 293.

⁴³ Christophe Jaffrelot, "India: The Politics of (Re)Conversion to Hinduism of Christian Aborigines", in Patrick Michel and Enzo Pace, eds., *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion: Volume 2. Religion and Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 197-215.

variety of elements.³⁹ If, however, this categorisation is already problematic in the modern era, in the colonial and post-colonial periods, the *Hindutva* ideology is in this sense even more radical because it leads one to imagine a religious unity and homogeneity that the subcontinent has never had. The attempt by the right-wing to return tribal religion today to the embrace of the *Hindu dharm*, is clearly the prelude to a process of assimilation, homogenisation, simplification and annihilation of the very specific characteristics (such as shamanism and other religious peculiarities, for instance) which are the hallmarks of Adivasi identity.⁴⁰

Despite this, the incorporation of Adivasis into what they regarded as a superior religion and culture has won the support to the cause of several communities in many central areas of India. Dalits and Adivasis have been given leadership positions at the lower level within the *Hindutva* organisation too, thus enhancing their self-respect and sense of their acceptance by upper castes.⁴¹ Such propaganda in recent decades, although it has provided relative political results,⁴² has led to further social tensions, attrition between groups and such unifying episodes as anti-Christian pogroms.⁴³

It is clear that today the administration of Modi, which appears to offer open-mindedness concerning the rights of tribal communities and towards the reserved forests, is trapped between the imperative of economic development and a strategy for tribal policy to be rethought from scratch. We cannot know where India will go to in the coming years, but we can imagine that, just as there were recently great debates as that about the origin of civilisation (Indus valley issue), or on the Islamic contribution to the history of India (culminated in the quarrel over Ayodhya), the next theme of great challenge will be the resolution of the question of Adivasi identity.