A large proportion of those displaced are tribals and dalits; one-third of our entire tribal population has been uprooted in the last fifty years and 15 per cent of our tribes have been fully uprooted. The gods and goddesses of these vanishing communities, silently and invisibly facing threats of extinction, are the ones who have made me aware of a divine species who, unlike Vivekananda’s Kali, require something in addition to devotion. There are also the gods and goddesses of communities that, after centuries of oppression, the communities themselves have begun to undervalue or forget (so that they can redefine themselves as only a cultureless group of oppressed poor operating on a clean cultural slate).

I believe that these gods and goddesses — as biographies of threatened cultures, as symbols of their resilience and resistance against the juggernaut of mega-development — deserve something more than standard, rationalist, dismissive ethnographies or archeologies. We owe something not only to them and their humble devotees, but also to our own moral selves. For no intervention in society, politics and culture becomes moral by virtue of the fact that we cannot, at the moment, think of any alternative to it.

Dr Ashis Nandy is the Director, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi

References:
1. Keynote address at the American Academy of Religion, New Orleans, 27-28 November 1996. This was originally an informal extempore presentation and answers to some questions raised by participants at a sanskriti shivira (workshop on cultural studies) on gods and goddesses, organised by Ninasam, Heggodu, Karnataka, 8-15 October 1995. Subsequently, K. V. Akshara and his associates painstakingly transcribed the lecture and my exchanges with the participants for the Kannada readers. It is D. R. Nagaraj’s persistent interest in the lecture that has prompted me to turn it into something resembling a proper essay. I am grateful to him, U R. AnanthaMurthy and Ganch Devi, and the intellectually extremely alert, mostly non-academic participants in the shivira who have, through their comments and criticisms, shaped this essay.


4. In Malaysia and Indonesia, for instance, they critically influence the mythic life of a majority of the people. Under the influence of Islamic revivalism, in Malaysia, there are now stray attempts to purify Malaysian Islam and demands that the Malaysian sultans, who constitute a ruling council, drop parts of their titles that are ‘Hindu’ and obvious remnants of pre-Islamic traditions. However, the sultans seem reluctant to do so, for a part of their legitimacy in a predominantly Muslim community is linked to their ritual status. Gods and goddesses can be in odd places.


9. This part of the story is entirely missed by those who read all recourse to astrology as the denial of free will. For a recent example, see Peter R. deSouza, ‘Astrology and the Indian State’, The Times of India, 19 July 1996.

10. Though I have recently found out in that, in Sri Lanka, there is at least one temple where Vibhishana is worshipped.
14. Some folk tales presume Olaichandi, Shail, Dhakeshwari, some believe, still pro-
tects one from serious accidents and cholera. Her Islamic edition was
claimed to be an ancient Santoshi Ma
temple, Prachin Santoshi Mala
Mandir.
15. Albert Schweitzer, Indian Thought and
its Development (New York: Beacon,
1959).
16. This also seems to indirectly emerge
from Veena Das, ‘The Mythological
Film and its Framework of Meaning:
An Analysis of Jai Santoshi Ma’, India
International Centre Quarterly,
17. Appropriately enough, Sinhala chauvin-
ists have begun to interpret this ex-
pression of mutuality as an instance of
contamination of Buddhism by Hindu-
ism.
18. Interested readers may look up Ashis
Nandy, The Intimate Enemy: Loss and
Recovery of Self Under Colonialism
(New Delhi: Oxford University Press,
1983); ‘Politics of Childhood’, in
Tradi-
tions, Tyranny and Utopia: Essays in
the Politics of Awareness (New Delhi:
Oxford University Press, 1987).
19. Veena Das gives a fascinating account
of the birth of a god sired by commer-
cial cinema. See Das, Jai Santoshi Ma.
Such entry into the pantheon can even
be quite enduring. Only a few weeks ago,
writing this paper, I chanced upon a
poem, legally and socially.
12. Shail Mayaram, Resisting Regimes:
Myth. Memory and the Shaping of a
Muslim Identity (New Delhi: Oxford
University Press, 1997).
13. Some folk tales presume Olaibichi, for
instance, to be a thinly disguised
incarnation of Kali, who presided over
cholera. Her Islamic edition was
Olaibibi. Often, in a village or town, if
Olaibibi was seen as more potent, the
Hindus also went to her and vice versa.
Exactly as many Muslims in Dhaka go
to the Dhakeshwari temple for specific
forms of protection or blessings.
Dhakeshwari, some believe, still pro-
tects one from serious accidents and
few among them want to take the risk
of testing out the truth of that, not
even in an Islamic society.
14. So Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s (1824-
1873) great act of rebellion, his epic
Megnadbadh Kavya which makes a
hero out of Ravana and a villain out of
Rama, as in some of the earlier dissent-
ing premodern Ramayanas, was after
all not that disjunctive with the origi-
nal as Dutt might have thought. I think
I now know why, despite being taught,
like all Bengalis, to hero worship Dutt,
I could still enjoy my grandmother’s
conventional version of Ramayana.
15. Albert Schweitzer, Indian Thought and
its Development (New York: Beacon,
1959).
16. This also seems to indirectly emerge
from Veena Das, ‘The Mythological
Film and its Framework of Meaning:
An Analysis of Jai Santoshi Ma’, India
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