Adi-dharam
Religious beliefs of the Adivasis of India

Ram Dayal Munda

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Preface by *Samar Bosu Mullick* vii

Introduction 1

I. The Great Spirit and the Creation 4

II. Festivals (Rituals) 10

1. The festival of nature 10

2. *Karam*—The festival of cultivation 18

3. *Sobrai*—The cattle festival 21

4. Annual hunt 25

III. Life cycle rituals 29

1. Ear-piercing—A rite of social inclusion 29

2. Marriage 31

3. The ritual of death 38

IV. Conclusion 45

Selected Bibliography 49

Addendum: *Other Religions* 51

About the Author 57
Dedicated to the Adivasi people of India
Adi-dharam, the original belief system, as we know it today may not be the earliest but certainly one of the oldest systems of belief still in practice in its various forms and different levels of continuity and transformation from time immemorial among the Adivasis (the Indigenous Peoples) in India. An overwhelming majority of the Adivasi communities, constituting more than 80 million people of the Schedule Tribes follow it. Besides a large number of forest-dwelling so-called Schedule Castes and artisan communities who are also a part of the wider Adivasi society also practice it in its various diluted forms. However, its non-recognition by the modern state and denouncement by the normative religions of the dominant society have caused immense damage to it and created an atmosphere, detrimental to its very survival.

A closer look at the faith takes us to the world of our ancestors who lived on this earth till the beginning of the Iron Age. That world of upper Paleolithic and early

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Neolithic peoples is still struggling for survival in some plateaus and plains of the country often dotted with inaccessible hills and forests. Whatever we know today about that world is through the oral tradition of their descendents, as it has been passed down from generation to generation through myths and legends, rituals and rites, customs and festivals. The present volume, Adi Dharam, compiled and interpreted by late Dr. Ram Dayal Munda is the first of its kind that contains the oral literature of the Adivasi communities of the central India, especially the Austro-Asiatic language speaking ones. The worth of this work is immense on many counts.

The motivating spirit behind the preparation of this book stems out of the Adivasi communities’ age-old movement for identity and autonomy. In Jharkhand the present phase of the movement started in the late 70s. Dr. Ram Dayal Munda’s appearance on the scene in the early 80s added a new dimension to hitherto dominant political orientation of the movement. He emerged as the leading personality of the growing ‘cultural reawakening movement’ that attracted a large number of youth and drew the attention of the state as well as the civil society. The historical role that he had played to rejuvenate the popular spirit of fighting back went beyond Jharkhand and kindled hope among the weakest of the weak Adivasis all over the country. The book, therefore, should be seen as an important part of the ‘cultural reconstruction project’ that Dr. Munda had undertaken as, I think, the penultimate objective of his life.

The author in no uncertain terms maintains the objective of the compilation as to generate ‘religious self’
confidence’ of the Indigenous Peoples in the face of constant humiliation, erosion and disintegration. It is an uphill task. Since the colonial times the proselytization efforts by the dominant faiths have been weakening the Adivasi society considerably. People sacrificed traditional faith and accepted a new one to regain and protect land in the early years of colonialism. But at a later stage privatization of land and introduction of feudalism, on the one hand and alienation of forest from the people by the state, on the other, created an atmosphere of sudden spate of Sanskritization. While the medieval states were the harbingers of Brahmanism the colonial landlords (zamindars) emerged as the ruthless missionaries of the same. The Adivasi communities became the open access society for both the forces ‘Christianization’ and ‘Hinduization’. Unfortunately the situation has not changed even after independence. It is a matter of great shame for the world’s largest democracy that the faith of the original settlers of the country, the Adivasis, is relegated to the rank of the anonymous ‘others’ in the census reports and thereby denying them the constitutional safeguards to ‘the right to religion’.

The objective of the book is obviously to forge a unity of all the Adivasis who still follow the traditional faith at its different levels of disintegration by standardizing the basic tenet of the faith. It has been a matter of good fortune for the community that the task was taken over by the most competent individual of the field. Dr. Munda was a trained anthropologist and a linguist of great repute. The contents of the volume are mostly in poetry. Therefore they demand the poetic mind to organize and in places
reconstruct them. The author, an acclaimed poet of both Mundari and Hindi, did justice to this demand to the best of his ability.

The most significant aspect of the motivation of the compilation of the volume is the author’s deep insight about the inner strength of the ancient faith that he prefers to call the ‘Adi-dharam’. It is the world outlook that the faith upholds makes it relevant in today’s greedy, selfish and destructive world. The author believes that the message the Adi-dharam gives to the humanity is exactly what it needs at the moment for its very survival. The Adivasis are going to play a historical role in presenting an alternative way of life and belief that is capable of protecting the planet and the people from the impending threat of anthropogenic disaster.

Adi-dharam unfolds before us a way of life based on egalitarian principles, a continuum of nature, ancestor and human, and a symbiosis between human and animal kingdom. It emerges from a lost world the whole of humanity shared once. It was the world of magic where the creator and the created lived together. It was a spirit-centric world as opposed to anthropocentrism of the normative religions. The Great Spirit (Sing Bonga) created it for his own pleasure. The cause of the variegated creations was, therefore, not to please the human. Human was created along with others to fulfill the desire of the Great Spirit to have companions. The scheme of the creation of world is such that it becomes the home of all the creations; the celestial bodies, the spirits, the life, the vegetation and the animated matters. It is a holistic creation of interdependent components.
However, this pristine world is largely lost! Human beings once disobeyed the scheme of the Great Spirit and faced the wrath of the creator. The rain of fire almost destroyed the life on earth. He left the earth for good. But the children of the ‘grandfather’, the creator, and the ‘mother earth’ could not accept this painful parting. The longing to be back in the company of them is expressed in the fervent prayer, ‘We thy children pray thee, do come and sit with us, let us talk and drink, let us dine together’. The creator is till in the vicinity. One can go and meet him in distress. And he is ever ready to help the life in all its forms to thrive on earth in peace and pleasure.

The creator lived with the created. Therefore, life is eternal and immortal. Death is the beginning of rebirth of life but not in its inferior or superior forms. Human dies and shakes the visible existence off only to live on as a shadow in the same abode with the spirits of the ancestors as benevolent spirits. There is no hell and no heaven where human spirit may go after death. Life is neither subjected to purity nor to pollution. Sin and virtue yield pain and happiness respectively in this world only, not in any imaginary ‘other world’. The message is loud and clear. The philosophy of life is to enjoy every bit of it for the Great Spirit and the Mother Earth created it as an expression of their own pleasure of creation.

The international community today has recognized the strength of the Adivasis world outlook, its protective spirit, and its sustainable lifestyle. Therefore, the book does not only provide strength and confidence to the Adivasis but also at the same time illuminate the dark alley of pandemonium of the present dominant civilization for
the rescue of humanity from eminent chaos and crisis of very survival.

The survival of the Adi-dharam is, therefore, crucial for the survival of all, the toiling and peace loving people of the world, both indigenous and non-indigenous. But one should not forget that like any other faith the Adi-dharam is premised on a certain mode of production. ‘If the forest is the provider of peace the field (swidden or agriculture) is the provider of life’, maintains the author. Forest and land provide the economic and cultural base of the Adivasi faith. They are both under gravest threat today. Thus the struggle to protect the land, forest and water is the precondition of the survival of the Adi-dharam. The ray of hope on the otherwise dark horizon of our future is the growing trend of forging unity between Adivasi and the non-Adivasi masses of working people to that end. The ‘another world’ that we all believe is possible has to be built on the foundation of the reconstructed world of the Adi-dharam.