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By C.R. Bijoy

THE ADIVASIS OF INDIA - A HISTORY OF DISCRIMINATION, CONFLICT AND RESISTANCE



Tangkhul Naga Women



Santal women carrying goods near the Subernarekha Dam, India. Photo: Roger Begrich



Van Gujar children at school, India. Photo: Christian Erni



Munda people, Tarub, India. Photo: Roger Begrich



Kui children, Kuldina/Orissa, India. Photo: Roger Begrich



Kui elder, India. Photo: Roger Begrich

The 67.7 million people belonging to 'Scheduled Tribes' in India are generally considered to be 'Adivasis', literally meaning 'indigenous people' or 'original inhabitants', although the term 'Scheduled Tribes' (STs) is not coterminous with the term 'Adivasis'. 'Scheduled Tribes' is an administrative term used for the purposes of 'administering' certain specific constitutional privileges, protection and benefits for specific sections of peoples considered historically disadvantaged and 'backward'. However, this administrative term does not precisely match all the peoples called 'Adivasis'. Out of the 5,653 distinct communities in India, 635 are considered to be 'tribes' or 'Adivasis'. In comparison, one finds that the estimated number of STs varies from 250 to 593. For practical purposes, the United Nations and multilateral agencies generally consider the STs as 'indigenous peoples'. With the ST population making up 8.08% (as of 1991) of the total population of India, it is the nation with the highest concentration of 'indigenous peoples' in the world!

The Constitution of India, which came into existence on 26 January 1950, prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15) and it provides the right to equality (Article 14), to freedom of religion (Articles 25-28) and to culture and education (Articles 29-30). STs are supposedly addressed by as many as 209 Articles and 2 special schedules of the Constitution – Articles and special schedules that are protective and paternalistic. Articles 341 and 342 provide for classification of Scheduled Castes (the untouchable lower castes) and STs, while Articles 330, 332 and 334 provide for the reservation of seats in Parliament and Assemblies. In order to focus specifically on the development of STs, the government has adopted a package of programmes, which is administered in specific geographical areas with considerable ST population, and it covers 69% of the tribal population.

Despite this, and after more than half a century of existence of the largest "modern democracy" in the world, the struggle for survival of the Adivasis - for their livelihood and existence as peoples - has today intensified and spread as never before in history.

Over the centuries, the Adivasis have evolved an intricate convivial-custodial mode of living. Adivasis belong to their territories, which are the essence of their existence; the abode of the spirits and their dead and the source of their science, technology, way of life, their religion and culture.

Back in history, the Adivasis were in effect self-governing 'first nations'. In general, and in most parts of the pre-colonial period, they were notionally part of the 'unknown frontier' of the respective states where the rule of the reign in fact did not extend, and the Adivasis governed themselves outside of the influence of the particular ruler. The introduction of the alien concept of private property began with the Permanent Settlement of the British in 1793 and the establishment of the "Zamindari" system that conferred control over vast territories, including Adivasi

territories, to designated feudal lords for the purpose of revenue collection by the British. This commenced the drastic and forced restructuring of the relationship of Adivasis to their territories as well as the power relationship between Adivasis and 'others'. The predominant external caste-based religion sanctioned and practiced a rigid and highly discriminatory hierarchical ordering with a strong cultural basis. This became the natural basis for the altered perception of Adivasis on the part of the 'others' in determining their social, and hence, economic and political space in the emerging wider society that is the Indian diaspora. Relegating the Adivasis to the lowest rung of the social ladder was only natural and formed the basis of social and political decision-making by the largely upper caste-controlled mainstream. The ancient Indian scriptures, written by the upper castes, only too well served to further this legitimacy.

Indian epics and Adivasis

In Asia, migrations have been taking place for more than fifty thousand years. The subjugated peoples have been relegated to low status and isolated, instead of either being eliminated or absorbed. The entry of Europeans and the subsequent colonisation of Asia transformed the relationship between the mainstream communities and tribal communities of this region. The introduction of capitalism, private property and the creation of a countrywide market broke the traditional economy based on use value and hereditary professions.

Not all the tribal communities are alike. They are products of different historical and social conditions. They belong to four different language families, and several different racial stocks and religious moulds. They have kept themselves apart from feudal states and brahminical hierarchies for thousands of years.

In the Indian epics, such as *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas* (folklore) there are many references to interactions and wars between the forest or hill tribes and the Hindus. Eminent historians who have undertaken detailed research into the epic *Ramayana* (200 B.C to 500 B.C) have concluded that 'Lanka', the kingdom of the demonic king Ravana and 'Kishkinda', the homeland of the *Vanaras* (depicted as monkeys) were places situated south of Chitrakuta hill and north of Narmada river in middle India. Accordingly, Ravana and his demons were an aboriginal tribe, most probably the Gond, and the *Vanaras*, like Hanuman in the epic, belonged to the Savara and Korku tribes whose descendants still inhabit the central Indian forest belt. Even today, the Gond hold Ravana, the villain of *Ramayana*, in high esteem as a chief. Rama, the hero of *Ramayana*, is also known for slaughtering the *Rakshasas* (demons) in the forests!

The epic of *Mahabharata* refers to the death of Krishna at the hands of a Bhil Jaratha. In the ancient scriptures,

considered to be sacred by the upper castes, various terms are used to depict Adivasis as almost non-humans. The epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas*, *Samhitas* and other so-called 'sacred books' refer to Adivasis as *Rakshasa* (demons), *Vanara* (monkeys), *Jambuvan* (boar men), *Naga* (serpents), *Bhusundi Kaka* (crow), *Garuda* (King of Eagles) etc. In medieval India, they were derogatorily called *Kolla*, *Villa*, *Kirata*, *Nishada*, those who surrendered or were subjugated were termed *Dasa* (slave) and those who refused to accept the bondage of slavery were termed *Dasyu* (a hostile robber).

Ekalavya, one of their archers, was so skillful that the hero of the Aryans, Arjuna, could not stand before him. But they assaulted him, cutting his thumb and destroying his ability to fight - and then fashioned a story in which he accepted Drona as his Guru and surrendered his thumb as an offering to the master! The renowned writer Maheshwata Devi points out that Adivasis predated Hinduism and Aryanism, that Siva was not an Aryan god and that in the 8th century, the tribal forest goddess or harvest goddess was absorbed and adapted as Siva's wife. Goddess Kali, the goddess of hunters, definitely had a tribal origin.

History of the Adivasis

Little is known about the relationship between the Adivasis and non-Adivasi communities during the Hindu and Muslim rules. There are stray references to wars and alliances between the Rajput kings and tribal chieftains in middle India and in the North-East between the Ahom Kings of Brahmaputra valley and the hill Nagas. They are considered to be *atisudra* meaning lower than the untouchable castes. Even today, the upper caste people refer to these peoples as *jangli*, a derogatory term meaning "those who are like wild animals" - uncivilised or sub-human.

The Adivasis have few food taboos, rather fluid cultural practices and minimal occupational specialization while, on the other hand, the mainstream population of the plains have extensive food taboos, more rigid cultural practices and considerable caste-based occupational specialisation. The Adivasis have no place in the Hindu caste system. The so-called mainstream society of India has evolved as an agglomeration of thousands of small-scale social groups whose identities within the larger society are preserved by not allowing them to marry outside their social groups. The subjugated groups became castes forced to perform less desirable menial jobs such as sweeping, cleaning of excreta, removal of dead bodies, leather work etc - the untouchables. Some of the earliest small-scale societies dependent on hunting and gathering, and traditional agriculture, seem to have remained outside this process of agglomeration. These are the present day Adivasis. Their autonomous existence outside the mainstream led to the preservation of their socio-religious and cultural practices, most of them also retaining their dis-

tinutive languages. Widow burning, enslavement, occupational differentiation, hierarchical social ordering etc are generally not found. Although there was trade between the Adivasis and the mainstream society, any form of social intercourse was discouraged. Caste India did not consciously attempt to draw them into the orbit of caste society.

However, in the process of economic, cultural and ecological change, Adivasis have attached themselves to caste groups in a peripheral manner, and the process of detribalisation is a continuous one. Many of the Hindu communities have absorbed the cultural practices of the Adivasis. Although Hinduism could be seen as one unifying thread running through the country as a whole, it is not homogenous but in reality a conglomeration of centuries old traditions and shaped by several religious and social traditions that are more cultural in their essence (and including elements of Adivasi socio-religious culture).

Adivasis at the lowest rung of the ladder

Adivasis are not, as a general rule, regarded as unclean by caste Hindus in the same way as Dalits are. However, they continue to face prejudice (as lesser humans), they are socially distanced and often face violence from society. They are at the lowest point in every socio-economic indicator. Today, the majority of the population regards them as primitive and aims to decimate them as peoples or at best to integrate them into the mainstream at the lowest rung of the ladder. This is particularly so with the rise of the fascist Hindutva forces.

None of the brave Adivasi fights against the British have been treated as part of the "national" struggle for independence. From the Malpahariya uprising in 1772 to Lakshman Naik's revolt in Orissa in 1942, the Adivasis repeatedly rebelled against the British in the north-eastern, eastern and central Indian belt. In many of the rebellions, the Adivasis could not be subdued but ended the struggle only because the British acceded to their immediate demands, as in the case of the Bhil revolt of 1809 and the Naik revolt of 1838 in Gujarat. Heroes like Birsa Munda, Kanhu Santhal, Khazya Naik, Tantya Bhil, Lakshman Naik, Kuvar Vasava, Rupa Naik, Thamal Dora, Ambul Reddi, Thalakkal Chandu etc. are remembered in the songs and stories of the Adivasis but ignored in the official text books.

The British Crown's dominions in India consisted of four political arrangements: 1. the Presidency Areas where the Crown was supreme, 2. the Residency Areas where the British Crown was present through the Resident and the Ruler of the realm was subservient to the Crown, 3. the Agency (Tribal) areas where the Agent governed in the name of the Crown but left the local self-governing institutions untouched and 4. the Excluded Areas (north-east) where the representatives of the Crown were a figurehead. After the transfer of power, the rulers of the Residency Areas signed the "Deed of Accession" on behalf of the

Thousands of Korku children below the age of six died in the 1990s through malnutrition and starvation in the Melghat Tiger Reserve of Maharashtra due to denied access to their life-sustaining resource base. Adivasis of Kalahandi-Bolangir in Orissa and of Palamu in south Bihar have reported severe food shortages. According to the Central Planning Committee of the Government of India, almost 41 districts with significant Adivasi populations are prone to deaths caused by starvation, but which are not normally reported as such.

Invasion of Adivasi territories

The "Land Acquisition Act" of 1894 concretised the supremacy of the sovereign in order to allow for the total colonisation of any territory in the name of 'public interest' which, in most cases, is not the community notion of the common good. This is especially so for the Adivasis. The colonial legal concept of *res nullius* (that which has not been conferred by the sovereign belongs to the sovereign) and *terra nullius* (land that belongs to none) bulldozed traditional political and social entities, beginning the wanton destruction of traditional forms of self-governance.

The invasion of Adivasi territories which, for the most part, commenced during colonial times, intensified in the post-colonial period. Most of the Adivasi territories were claimed by the State. Over 10 million Adivasis have been displaced to make way for development projects such as dams, mining, industries, roads, protected areas etc. Although most of the dams (over 3,000) are located in Adivasi areas, only 19.9% (1980-81) of Adivasi landholdings are irrigated as compared to 45.9% of all holdings of the general population. India produces as many as 52 principal, 3 fuel, 11 metallic, 38 non-metallic and a number of minor minerals. Of these, 45 major minerals (coal, iron ore, magnetite, manganese, bauxite, graphite, limestone, dolomite, uranium etc) are found in Adivasi areas, contributing some 56% of the national total mineral earnings in terms of value. Of the 4,175 working mines reported by the Indian Bureau of Mines in 1991-92, approximately 3,500 could be assumed to be in Adivasi areas. Income to the government from forests rose from Rs.5.6 million in 1869-70 to more than Rs.13 billions in the 1970s. The bulk of the nation's productive wealth lay in the Adivasi territories. Yet the Adivasi have been driven out, marginalised and robbed of dignity by the very process of 'national development'.

The systematic opening up of Adivasi territories, the development projects and the 'tribal development projects' make them conducive to waves of immigrants. In the rich mineral belt of Jharkhand, the Adivasi population has dropped from around 60% in 1911 to 27.67% in 1991. These developments have in turn, driven out vast numbers of Adivasis to eke out a living in the urban areas and in far-flung slums. According to a rough estimate, there are more than 40,000 tribal domestic working women in Delhi alone!

In some places, development-induced migration of Adivasis to other Adivasi areas has also led to fierce conflicts, such as between the Santhali and the Bodo in Assam.

Internal colonialism

Constitutional privileges and welfare measures benefit only a small minority of the Adivasis. These privileges and welfare measures are denied the majority of the Adivasis and they are appropriated by more powerful groups in the caste order. The sharp increase of STs in Maharashtra by 148% in real terms in the two decades since 1971 is largely due to the questionable inclusion, for political gain, of a number of economically advanced groups among the less advantaged in the list of STs. This increase in numbers, while it distorts the demographic picture, has more disastrous effects. The real tribes are inevitably pushed down the 'access or claim ladder' with these new entrants cornering the lion's share of both resources and opportunities for education, social and economic advancement.

Despite the Bonded Labour Abolition Act of 1976, Adivasis still form a substantial percentage of bonded labour in the country.

Despite positive political, institutional and financial commitment to tribal development, there is currently a large-scale displacement and biological decline of Adivasi communities, a growing loss of genetic and cultural diversity and destruction of a rich resource base leading to rising trends of shrinking forests, crumbling fisheries, increasing unemployment, hunger and conflicts. The Adivasis have preserved 90% of the country's biocultural diversity, protecting the polyvalent, precolonial, biodiversity-friendly Indian identity from biocultural pathogens. Excessive and indiscriminate demands of the urban market have reduced Adivasis to raw material collectors and providers.

It is a cruel joke that people who can produce some of India's most exquisite handicrafts, who can distinguish hundreds of species of plants and animals, who can survive off the forests, the lands and the streams sustainably with no need to go to the market to buy food, are labeled as 'unskilled'. Important are the paths of resistance that many Adivasi areas are following: Koel Karo, Bodh Ghat, Inchampalli, Bhopalpatnam, Rathong Chu ... large-scale dams that were proposed by the enlightened planners and which were halted by mass movements.

Such a situation has arisen because of the discriminatory and predatory approach of the mainstream society to Adivasis and their territories. The moral legitimacy for the process of internal colonisation of Adivasi territories and the deliberate disregard and violation of constitutional protection of STs has its basis in the culturally ingrained hierarchical caste social order and consciousness that pervades the entire politico-administrative and judicial systems. This pervasive mindset is also an historical construct that became reinforced during colonial and post-colonial India.



A Kui man, Kuidina/Orissa, India. Photo: Roger Begrich



A Tangkhul Naga man with a traditional violin. Photo: Christian Erni



A young Oraon man, Bhagitoli, India
Photo: Roger Begrich

The term 'Criminal Tribe' was concocted by the British rulers and entered into the public vocabulary through the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, under which a list of some 150 communities, including Adivasis, were mischievously declared as being (naturally) 'criminal'. Although this shameful act was itself repealed in 1952, the specter of the so-called 'criminal tribes' continue to haunt these 'denotified tribes' - the Sansi, Pardhi, Kanjar, Gujjar, Bawaria, Banjara and others. They are considered as the first natural suspects of all petty and sundry crimes, except that they are now hauled up under the Habitual Offenders Act, which replaced the British Act! Stereotyping of numerous communities has reinforced past discriminatory attitudes on the part of the dominant mainstream in an institutionalised form.

There is a whole history of legislation, both during the pre-independence as well as post-independence period, which was supposed to protect the rights of the Adivasis. As early as 1879, the "Bombay Province Land Revenue Code" prohibited transfer of land from a tribal to a non-tribal without the permission of the authorities. The 1908 "Chotanagpur Tenancy Act" in Bihar, the 1949 "Santhal Pargana Tenancy (Supplementary) Act", the 1969 "Bihar Scheduled Areas Regulations", the 1955 "Rajasthan Tenancy Act" as amended in 1956, the 1959 "MPLP Code of Madhya Pradesh", the 1959 "Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Areas Land Transfer Regulation" and amendment of 1970, the 1960 "Tripura Land Revenue Regulation Act", the 1970 "Assam Land and Revenue Act", the 1975 "Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction of Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act" etc. are state legislations to protect Adivasi land rights.

In Andhra, for example, inquiries about land transfer violations were made in 57,150 cases involving 245,581 acres of land, but only about 28% of lands were restored despite persistent militant struggles. While in the case of Kerala, out of a total claim for 9909.4522 hectares made by 8,754 applicants, only 5.5% of the claims were restored. And this is happening in spite of favourable judicial orders - orders which the state governments are circumventing by attempting to dismantle the very protective legislation itself. The callous and casual manner in which mainstream India approaches the fulfillment of the constitutional obligations with reference to the tribes, and the persistent attempts by the politico-administrative system to subvert the constitution by deliberate acts of omission and commission, and the enormous judicial tolerance towards this speaks volumes about the discriminatory approach that permeates society with regard to the legal rights of the Adivasis.

Race, religion and language

The absence of a neat classification of Adivasis as a homogenous social-cultural category and the intensely fluid nature of non-Adivasis is evident in the insuperable

difficulty of arriving at a clear anthropological definition of a tribal in India, be it in terms of ethnicity, race, language, social forms or means of livelihood.

The major waves of ingress into India divide the tribal communities into Vedoids, similar to the Australian aborigines, and the Paleamongoloid Austro-Asiatic from the north-east. The third were the Greco-Indians who spread across Gujarat, Rajasthan and Pakistan from Central Asia. The fourth is the negrito group of the Andaman islands - the Great Andamanese, the Onge, the Jarawa and the Sentinelese who flourished in these parts for some 20,000 years but who could well become extinct soon. The Great Andamanese have been wiped out as a viable community with about only 30 people now alive, as is the case with the Onges, who now number less than 100.

In the mid-Indian region the Gond, who number more than 5 million, are the descendants of the dark-skinned Kolarian or Dravidian tribes and speak dialects of the Austric language family, as are the Santhal, who number 4 million. The Negrito and Austroloid people belong to the Mundari family of Munda, Santhal, Ho, Ashur, Kharia, Paniya, Saora etc. The Dravidian groups include the Gond, Oraon, Khond, Malto, Bhil, Mina, Garasia, Pradhan etc. and speak the Austric or Dravidian family of languages. The Gujjar and Bakarwal descend from the Greco Indians and are interrelated with the Gujjar of Gujarat and the tribes settled around Gujranwala in Pakistan.

There are some 200 indigenous peoples in the north-east. The Boro, Khasi, Jantia, Naga, Garo and Tripiri belong to the Mongoloid stock as do the Naga, Mikir, Apatani, Boro, Khasi, Garo, Kuki, Karbi etc. and speak languages of the Tibeto-Burman language groups and the Mon Khmer. The Adi, Aka, Apatani, Dafla, Gallong, Khamti, Monpa, Nocte, Sherdukpen, Singpho, Tangsa, Wancho etc. of Arunachal Pradesh and the Garo of Meghalaya are of Tibeto-Burman stock while the Khasi of Meghalaya belong to the Mon Khmer group. In the southern region, the Malayali, Irula, Paniya, Adiya, Sholaga, Kurumba etc. belong to the proto-Australoid racial stock speaking dialects of the Dravidian family.

For more than 5.7 million people, the Census of India 1991 records 63 different denominations as "other", of which most are Adivasi religions. Although the Constitution recognises them as a distinct cultural group, when it comes to religion those who do not identify as Christians, Muslims or Buddhists are compelled to register themselves as Hindus. Hindus and Christians have interacted with Adivasis to civilize them, which has been defined as sanscritisation and westernisation. However, as reflected during the 1981 census, it is significant that approximately 5% of the Adivasis registered their religion according to the names of their respective tribes or the names adopted by them. In 1991, the corresponding figure rose to around 10%, indicating the rising consciousness and assertion of identity!

Although Article 350A of the Constitution requires primary education to be imparted in the mother tongue,

this has generally only occurred in areas where the Adivasis have been assertive. NCERT, the State-owned premier education research centre has not shown any interest. With the neglect of Adivasi languages, the State and the dominant social order aspire to culturally and socially emasculate the Adivasis, subdued by the dominant cultures. The Anthropological Survey of India reported a loss of more than two-thirds of the spoken languages, most of them tribal.

Fragmentation

Some of the ST peoples of Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, W. Bengal, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram have their counterparts across the border in China (including Tibet), Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The political aspirations of these transborder tribes who find themselves living in different countries as a result of the artificial demarcation of boundaries by erstwhile colonial rulers continue to be ignored despite the spread and proliferation of militancy, especially in the north east, making it a conflict zone.

The Adivasi territories have been divided amongst states formed primarily on the basis of the languages of the mainstream caste society, ignoring the validity of applying the same principle of language for the Adivasis during the formation of states. Jharkhand has been divided between Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, although the Bihar part of Jharkhand has now become a separate state after decades of struggle. The Gond region has been divided between Orissa, Andhra, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Similarly the Bhil region has been divided between Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan. In the north-east, for example, the Naga are furthermore divided between Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Further administrative sub-divisions within the states, into districts, *talukas* and *panchayats* have been organised in such a way that the tribal concentration is broken up, increasing their marginalisation both physically and politically.

The 1874 “Scheduled District Act”, the 1919 “Government of India Act” and later the “Government of India Act” of 1935 classified the hill areas as excluded and partially excluded areas where the provincial legislature had no jurisdiction. These formed the basis for Article 244, under which two separate schedules, namely the V Schedule and the VI Schedule, were incorporated for provision of a certain degree of self-governance in designated tribal majority areas. However, in effect this remained a non-starter. However, the recent legislation of the Panchayat Raj (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996 has raised hopes for a radical redefinition of self-governance. By not applying the same yardstick and norms to Adivasis as to the upper caste-dominated mainstream, by not genuinely recognizing the Adivasis’ traditional self-governing systems and by not being serious about de-

volving autonomy, the Indian State and society demonstrate a racist and imperialist attitude.

The call for a socially homogenous country, particularly in the hindi-hindu paradigm, has suppressed tribal languages, defiled cultures and destroyed civilisations. The creation of a unified, albeit centralised polity, and the extension of the formal system of governance have emasculated the self-governing institutions of the Adivasis and with it their internal cohesiveness.

The struggle for the future

The conceptual vocabulary used to understand the place of Adivasis in the modern world has been constructed on feudal, colonial and imperialistic notions that combine traditional and historical constructs with the modern construct based on notions of linear scientific and technological progress.

Historically, the Adivasis, as explained earlier, are at best perceived as sub-humans to be kept in isolation, or as “primitives” living in remote and backward regions who should be “civilized”. None of them has a rational basis. Consequently, the official and popular perception of Adivasis is merely that of forest isolation, tribal dialect, animism, primitive occupation, carnivorous diet, naked or semi-naked, nomadic habits, with a love of drinking and dancing. Contrast this with the self-perception of Adivasis as casteless, classless and egalitarian in nature, with community-based economic systems, symbiotic with nature, democratic according to the demands of the times, an accommodative history and people-oriented art and literature.

The significance of their sustainable subsistence economy in the midst of a profit-oriented economy is not recognised in the political discourse, and the negative stereotyping of the sustainable subsistence economy of Adivasi societies is based on the false premise that the production of surplus is more progressive than the process of social reproduction in co-existence with nature. The source of the conflicts arises from these unresolved contradictions. With globalisation, the hitherto expropriation of rights as an outcome of development has developed into expropriation of rights as a precondition for development. In response, the struggles for the rights of the Adivasis have moved towards struggles for power and a redefinition of the contours of state, governance and progress.

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