

Adivasis Farmers

In the culture of indigenous peoples across the world, humans are deeply connected with nature; the two are equal and interdependent, even kin. Many other indigenous peoples around the world share this intimate relationship with their lands and the natural world. They regard nature with deep respect, and have a strong sense of place and belonging. Their culture and way of life, evolved through an intimate interface with their natural environment, stand in stark contrast to that of the dominant mainstream.

104 million of the world's estimated 370 indigenous /tribal people live in India. According to the 2011 census, the population of Adivasis in the country is 10.43 crores, constituting 8.6% of the total population. 89.97% of them live in rural areas. Adivasis comprise over 630 communities, including 75 "particularly vulnerable" communities, previously called Primitive Tribal Groups.

While the information about their original homelands is part of oral history, their experienced history has been one of incessant displacement and relocation, often with the use of force and violence deeper and deeper into inhospitable terrain.¹

The predominantly adivasi-populated States of the country (i.e. those with tribal population of more than 50% of the total population) are Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Union Territories of Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Lakshadweep. The State of Odisha has the largest number of tribes, i.e. 62 adivasi communities.

Development and Adivasis

Without doubt, the development paradigm pursued since independence has aggravated the prevailing discontent among the tribal people. The reasons are not difficult to recognize. The development paradigm conceived by the policy makers has been imposed on these communities, remained insensitive to their needs and concerns and caused irreparable damage to their harmonious, non-appropriative, nature inclusive, ethical and egalitarian way of life which has been the core of their sense of well-being. It has ended up in destroying their social organization, cultural identity and resource base and generated multiple conflicts, undermining their communal solidarity, which cumulatively makes them increasingly vulnerable to exploitation.

The tribal thought leaders have been discussing how they perceive the process of development underway in their societies. From the perspectives of these leaders, the tribal

¹ The process of pushing the tribals from the traditional homelands to distant frontiers is not new. Recent historical research originated by Kosambi in his Introduction to the Study of Indian History and in Myth and Reality, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1963 p.87 shows the eviction of tribals to be an age old process. Niharjan Ray writes about the tribes in early medieval India as "These indigenous so called "tribes" were just slowly but surely obliged to move, bit by bit, to farther and farther areas until they came to find their refuge in relatively more inaccessible regions of the forests and hills and large mountain slopes, i.e. the *atavikarajyas, mahakantara rajyas oor pranta desas* (frontier regions" , Ray N, Introductory Address in Tribal Situation in India, Singh K. S. (Eds), Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1972, p.11 Historically these migrations were enforced through the aid of procurers and pimps (arkathis) of Kol, Munda, Oraon and Santhal labour. De Barun and Bandyopadhyay N. in An Approach to the Study of Tribal Economy in India , in Economy of Tribes and their Transformation pp 11-13.

way of life revolves around a few non-negotiables, the first of which is the value placed on freedom and dignity of all persons, with personhood being conferred on all beings, natural, supernatural and human.

The second non-negotiable, defines complementarity in relations between the various life forms. To put it simply, 'a person is not permitted to take advantage of another person's disadvantage'. The principle is also manifested in the relations with the animal kingdom, wherein hunting is permitted only for food and not for sport, pleasure or to establish masculinity or power.

The third non-negotiable is the interdependence of the three persons, nature, super-nature and human. Within this framework, nature cannot be owned; nature and humans are linked to each other in a complex matrix of rights and duties. The quality of the relationship between humans and land is the basis of subsistence not surplus production, because nature provides for life and not for exploitative extraction. Land is not a commodity for the market, but the site where ancestors have been buried and the *raison d'être* of their homeland. Referring to this facet of human-nature relationship, merely as environmental sensitivity would be inadequate, as its roots go deep into tribal existential philosophy.

Adivasi societies were constructed as non accumulative, non exploitative, non appropriative, subsistence based and not surplus driven, attributes which reflected relations between humans inter se within the matrix of nature, which ensured a mutuality of survival of both humans and nature.

The mainstream development paradigm encouraged the elites to usurp resources of adivasis, the logic and process of development destroyed the equilibrium of nature and society, introduced competition, instilled private ownership and destroyed their strength based on a culture of independence and dignity.

These leaders believe that the root causes for the failure of development lie in a failure to understand the adivasi world view, to the continued imposition of the dominant development paradigm, which as report after report show, has effectively subverted the goals of wellbeing of adivasis.

Land, CPRs, MFP and Forest Rights, Alienation & Displacement

The tribal people have always been closely associated with the forests and land and are often referred to as forest people.

Data shows that the proportion of rural Adivasi households that do not own any land – not even homestead land – increased from 16 per cent of all Adivasi households in 1987–88 to 24 per cent in 2011–12. The land loss and dispossession have been a significant feature of Adivasi livelihoods in the last two decades as per National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) surveys including the 66th Round (2009–10), 68th Round (2011–12) and 69th Round (2012), the Censuses of India etc. Common property resources, which are very important to the livelihoods and survival of Adivasis, are an important part of the land wealth that has been lost by Adivasi households. The loss of these resources does not show up in government statistics.

This Discussion Note has been prepared by Debjeet Sarangi for the 4th Kisan Swaraj Sammelán, Ahmedabad (Nov.2-4, 2018). For more information, please contact debjeet2002@gmail.com

Although numerically only about 8.6 per cent, they disproportionately represent the people living below the poverty line, and suffer from extremely poor physical health. The States of Jharkhand and Odisha have highest percentages of tribal people living below the poverty line. In 2004–05, the proportion of tribal people living below poverty line stood at 54.2 per cent in Jharkhand while the percentage was as high as 75.6 % in Odisha in the same year. However, Adivasis who still live on their own land supporting themselves with their own labour often emphatically deny that they are ‘poor’.

Historically, usage and access of forest resources by India’s Adivasi community and other forest dwellers have been considered as encroachment and their efforts of forest land acquisition have been used as evidence of their anti-development attitude. In 2006, the passage of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (hereafter FRA) tried to make amends by recognising customary rights of forest dwellers, including the right over common areas and the right to manage and sell forest produce. However, the overall implementation of FRA still suffers from inadequate community awareness, conflicting legislations, lack of dedicated structure for implementation and devoted staff, administrative roadblocks to smooth processing of claims, and governance deficit. Reportedly, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has been pushing for a set of new rules that will dilute FRA and limit powers of the Gram Sabhas, despite the objections raised by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA).

The implementation of the Act has been a mixed story, where a few successes were shadowed by many failures. It is disappointing that the most empowering provisions of FRA - the Community Forest Rights (CFRs) and the Community Forest Resource (CFRe) Rights - the right to protect, regenerate, conserve or manage forest resources - are still lagging behind. One of the main factors inhibiting the FRA’s full implementation is the reluctance of the forest bureaucracy to give up control. The forest bureaucracy has misinterpreted the FRA as an instrument to regularise encroachment. This is seen in its emphasis on recognising individual claims while ignoring collective claims — Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights as promised under the FRA — by tribal communities. To date, the total amount of land where rights have been recognised under the FRA is just 3.13 million hectares, mostly under claims for individual occupancy rights.

The latest threat to the forests and adivasi livelihoods seems to be in the form of a draft Forest Policy being brought out by the Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change.

Adivasi way of Agri~culture

The mode of food production of Adivasis links people with the land, forest, mountains, rivers and seeds. Their traditional food system encapsulates ecological realities, their identity, knowledge systems, social meanings, health, nutrition and economies.

Production practices are grounded in ecological principles like sustaining life of crops and the soil, recycling nutrients, sustaining biodiversity and conserving energy. They practice mixed or poly-cultural farming with numerous food crops growing in tandem. This practice helps in improving soil health, as carefully planted legumes/nitrogen-fixing plants (such as beans) accompany a crop of maize. As one crop uses soil nutrients, the legume crop replenishes them ensuring soil fertility is maintained. They grow their food by integrating exchange of labour, seeds, skills, services and counsel one another on decisions related to growing and/or collecting food.

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FOREST FOODS: They also collect varieties of foods - edible leaves, fruits, berries, flowers, seeds, stems, tubers/roots, and mushrooms from forest etc. Some are exclusively famine foods, some are seasonal, some are occasional, some are collected routinely as a staple and some may be delicacies. They provide a vital safety net against increasing crop failures caused by climate change, erratic rainfall, and mounting ecological degradation, including water scarcity, and depleted soils.

The agri~culture of the tribals reflects the principles and practices of agroecology. They use agricultural biodiversity ('cultivated' and 'wild') to meet their food and livelihood security. Their genetic mixtures not only bring greater yield stability and local adaptations to a climate change, but it also contributes to dietary diversity.

However, in recent years the traditional self-reliant bio diverse agriculture of tribals has been encountering threats from various external circumstances. The implementation of green revolution model of agriculture in the name of modernization is characterized by unwanted imposition of alien agricultural technology, replacement of traditional by 'high yielding', hybrid varieties of seeds and chemicalisation of farming, increase of land under cash crops, and growth of commercial mono-cultural plantations, which has endangered the farms and forests of the adivasis. The dominant paradigm of agriculture tends to ignore the ample benefits offered by diversified agroecological systems, often practiced by Adivasi farmers. These include higher total outputs taking all crops cultivated in combination; greater resilience to shocks; more diversity resulting in improved nutritional quality. The intrusion has impacted their culture governing agriculture, replacing sustenance by extraction, replacing shared spaces with atomization and contributing to more inequity in the these communities.

Adivasis and Education

The Adivasi parents feel that education and literacy are important as it would help them in their dealings with the world outside, but sending the children away for residential schools would also mean that an entire generation would not learn their way of life, being alienated from agri~culture, forests and their parents' livelihoods. Residential schooling obviously has a profoundly negative impact on adivasi families. The schools are far from the home community, and it is difficult for children to come home or for the parents to visit them on a regular basis. Children studying in residential schools are allowed to go home once in a year. The children are being compelled to bridge two totally different and disconnected worlds, and parents feel totally alienated from the universe of the school. The children during their vacations have shared their experiences of how they are taught to be ashamed of themselves, and their tribe.

So, the parents are looking for appropriate EDUCATION, which will enable them, and their next generation to go for what they think is their vision of a good society. 'Our children are becoming materialistic – they are forgetting where they come from and who they are,' says a tribal mother. They see education as central to their struggle to hold on to their culture, values and language. 'The dominant education system in India is top-down,' 'In this system, everything is de-contextualized,' says an adivasi youth. 'It creates disharmony among our people. They want to make everyone think in the same way, wear the same clothes, eat the same food. But they don't take our land into account and the value of each individual.

‘Without this knowledge, in the future we will have a weak education without memory. We will have a sick society where our generations to come will have no traditions – an empty space in history. We need to pass on our customs and law and way of life just as our grandparents did,’ says a mother. “We need to pass on the pride of being an Adivasi”.

Nutrition, Malnutrition and Adivasis

Adivasi areas have been identified as high risk areas in terms of food and nutrition security. Several factors have contributed to the increasing food insecurity in tribal areas, ranging from loss of traditional food sources in the forest, decreasing size of land holdings, shift from self sufficient agriculture to chemical intensive agriculture, loss of the commons, increasing land alienation and acquisition of land has rendered a considerable part of Adivasi communities as food insecure, with growing numbers of food insecure families relapsing into food scarcity and starvation.

Suggested possible Interventions

- Keeping alive local governance structures and systems where decision-making starts at the smallest unit of human settlement, in which every human has the right, capacity and opportunity to take part, and builds up from this unit to larger levels of governance, and where decision-making is not simply on a ‘one-person one-vote’ basis but respectful of the needs and rights of those excluded and the ecology.
- Creating horizontal spaces for inter-generational learning for young Adivasi women and men and between traditional experts, and thought leaders with scientists, academicians from mainstream institutions.
- Democratizing production and consumption, involving clusters of villages with common ecological features to enhance local self-reliance for basic needs, in which they can trade goods and services with each other (on mutually beneficial terms) to reduce dependence on the outside market and government.
- The recognition and promotion of multi-dimensional benefits of the adivasi food systems including uncultivated forest foods in terms of ecological, economic, environmental, sociocultural and resilient polycultures.
- Mobilising communities to file their community forest rights claims under the Forest Rights Act 2006, and facilitating community led re-generation and conservation of natural biodiverse forests.
- Reviving local health traditions and health security. Working with local healers, midwives, traditional birth attendants and gynecologist/obstetrician and general physicians to sensitize the doctors regarding local healing practices and discuss, decide a framework for which ailments require village level health care by traditional health care providers and which require medical assistance.
- Addressing malnutrition through recognising the core existentialist issues that affect all aspects of the existence of Adivasis and other rural marginalized communities, i.e. poverty, indebtedness, household food in-security and control over their productive resources etc. A rural family and / or a single woman-headed household that does not yet have legitimate ownership over ancestrally cultivated and owned lands / and or

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forest is forced to live in a state of perpetual food insecurity and compelled to prioritise child health, nutrition and education lesser than more pressing daily survival needs.

- Strengthening community's agency to have critical reflection on the immediate, underlying and structural causes of their under-nutrition, finding locally appropriate solutions and strategies, which contribute to empowerment of partnering communities, undertaking responsibilities to implement them to address each of the prioritized problems, monitor and have assessment to decide the next course of action as opposed to approaches, which tend to 'consult' communities and then take away the findings for analysis, with no assurance that they will be acted on.
- Reorienting the local food system to produce safe, diverse adequate and nutritious foods, promote improved dietary diversity and consumption of balanced diet, make agriculture fields safe for pregnant and lactating mothers, and recognize peoples' rights over food producing habitats etc.
- Creating livelihoods based on the essence of the underlying culture of the community and the local ecology.
- Facilitating dialogue on the implications of emergent 'development' paradigm, share information resources; search for appropriate choices, deliberate on possible alternatives for wellness of humans and nature and support efforts of Adivasi communities to envisage their future.
- Reclaiming the culture of shared spaces and communitarian way of living of Adivasis in the context of building homes, growing and collecting foods, managing their ecology etc.
- Creating theme based contextual curriculum around local issues-Adivasi Agriculture, Adivasi architecture, Adivasi Ecology and Environment, the Agroecological movement, Food sovereignty, Direct democracy, PESA and FRA.
- Facilitating adults in the community to play crucial role of "teachers" imparting their knowledge to the children and youth and participate in curriculum building.
- Encouraging children to participate in village socio-economic-political life. This will involve working with hands, studying local issues, doing actual problem solving, evolving appropriate socio-economic-political systems, leading to a balanced growth of head-hand-heart.