

Adivasis: The World's Largest Population of Indigenous People

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Abstract This essay discusses the Adivasis of India as the world's largest population of Indigenous People and addresses the critical problems faced by them. Adivasis bear a disproportionately huge part of the impact of the climate change.

Keywords Adivasis · Indigenous People · India · Livelihoods · Climate change

The word 'Adivasi' in almost all Indian languages means the first inhabitants or the Indigenous People, and the Constitution of India denotes them as the Scheduled Tribes. According to the 2011 population census Adivasis constitute a total population of 104 million. This constitutes 8.6 percent of the Indian population (Census India 2011), making them the world's largest population of Indigenous People. They are found in multiple tribes and are widely regarded as the historical custodians of India's forests that cover about twenty percent of the country's terrestrial area (FSI 2013).

The Supreme Court of India has affirmed that the Adivasis are 'the original inhabitants' of India vide its order of 5 January 2011.¹ Scholars of ancient Indian history argue that the Adivasis are the descendants of the Indus valley civilization who have been forced to move to forest as the incoming Aryan groups spread across the plains (Sharma 1995).

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In observing the International Indigenous Peoples Day on 9 August 2012 the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Parliament) Speaker Meira Kumar told the house, 'The Indigenous People whom we refer to as Tribals in the country are an invaluable and integral part of our country's rich cultural heritage.'² Various Indigenous Peoples organizations have been observing the Day in the country since its inception in 1994.

Fear of the Political Power of the Term

A section of the ruling elite and the militant Hindutwa that has taken over as the ruling dispensation in the country dread the political power that the term Indigenous People evokes. Recognizing the Adivasis as the Indigenous People would, they fear, flatten the ideological base of their militant politics of exclusive claims on the nation. The Hindutwa therefore uses and seeks to popularize a different term, Vanavasi, meaning forest inhabitants, to represent the Adivasis, in a desperate effort to erase the term Adivasi itself. The ancient scriptures call the Adivasis as Nishada, Rakshasa etc., synonyms of demon, and treated them as a defeated people, just as the West sought to treat us all as savages.

A section of the Indian bureaucracy belligerently fights the term Indigenous People, on their own, without a political mandate, indeed against the stated policy of the State. An instructive example was the position the Indian delegation took on the phrase Indigenous People at the eleventh meeting of the Conference of Parties to the UN

¹ Kailas & others versus State of Maharashtra in criminal appeal No. 11/2011 (AIR 2011 Supreme Court of India 598).

² <http://164.100.47.194/Loksabha/Debates/Result15.aspx?dbsl=7772>. Accessed on 15 May 2017.



Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), held in Hyderabad in 2012, where the senior author had been a delegate. In the lone company of Canada, the Indian bureaucrat who spoke opposed the move by the rest of the world community to change the CBD terminology of Indigenous and Local Communities to Indigenous People and Local Communities, as proposed by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples and to be in line with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). This was despite India having had endorsed the UNDRIP.

However, it was interesting that in the subsequent meeting of the CBD Expert Group on Biodiversity for Poverty Eradication, where the senior author was an expert member, the Indian government representative, a senior bureaucrat and co-chair of the Expert Group, upon criticism of the Indian government position, explained that the Hyderabad CoP position was not exactly that of the government of India but the unfortunate position taken by the particular delegate from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) who spoke on that occasion. India did not press the objection to the term Indigenous Peoples when the issue was re-opened for discussion at the next CoP of CBD. Interestingly, the Ministry of Tribal Welfare, in an RTI (Right to Information) reply to Rajendran Uliyakkovil, a civil rights lawyer, had dissociated itself from the Hyderabad position taken by MoEF, clearly indicating that it was not a government of India position (but the position of a small section within).

While the dominant populations all over the world begin to show repentance to the respective Indigenous Peoples for the atrocities committed on them, the Indian elite do not relent in their political position to recognize the Adivasis as the Indigenous People. However, the Indian Parliament had, in an unprecedented move, recognized in a law, namely the Forest Rights Act 2006, the 'historical injustice' committed to the Scheduled Tribes of India, and therefore created provisions for the restitution of their traditional rights to forests. But the militant Hindutwa and a segment of the ruling elite refuse to give up their political postures. Some (like Burman 2009) even seek to tactically use the inter-tribe tensions in some pockets in the north-eastern part of India to openly argue against both the terms Adivasis and Indigenous People.

A History of Exclusion and Marginalization

The People of India Project of the Anthropological Survey of India has identified 635 Scheduled Tribes communities spread across the countries, out of a total of 4635 communities of various kinds (Singh 1994). They are also repositories of a tremendous linguistic diversity, having

447 recorded languages. These languages belong to the various linguistic streams and are rich in environmental vocabulary.

Even as the level of their poverty increases, Singh (1994) notes a decline in their traditional occupations such as hunting and gathering, trapping, pastoral and shifting cultivation. There has been a notable increase in occupations such as horticulture, terrace cultivation, animal husbandry, sericulture, etc. although the mainstay of Adivasi population is dependent on non-timber forest produce (NTFP) and their economic condition remains severely constrained. The 11th Five Year Plan has reported that 47.3 percent of the Schedule Tribe population live below the poverty line set by the standard of Rs. 356 per month per capita consumption expenditure (Planning Commission of India 2008). The Schedule Tribes population constituted 15 percent of the total poor in India during 1994–95, which was about double their population ratio according to the 2001 census. The years since Independence in 1947 over 30 million Adivasis have been displaced from their homes in the name of development projects—mining, dams, highways, etc. and on the pretext of conservation.

The Adivasi life style is largely in harmony with the principles of nature and their harvests are always within the regeneration capacity of the natural resource base. The biodiversity utilization practised by the Adivasi population has been known to be sustainable; for instance, even the much criticized case of shifting cultivation Prasad (2012) records that the historical *swiden* (slash and burn) cultivation practised by the Baiga tribes of central India was within the regenerating capacity of the forest resource base.

The Adivasi way of life and survival have been threatened by the British colonial regime since the time they began to take over the forest as a source of commercial income for the imperial government. That was about the 1860s. This colonial project was marked by 'savage assault' on the forest on the one hand and subjugation and disenfranchisement of the Adivasi population (Guha 2001). India's forests thereafter became the sites of intense conflict between the Adivasis and the colonial forces. Williams (2010) provides the graphic details of the ruthless colonial wars on the Adivasi population of the Dehradun area in the nineteenth century, from the viewpoint of the British occupying forces. Similar battles have taken place in many other tribal heartlands of the country—Kuki Invasion, Halba Rebellion, Khurda Rebellion, Bhil Revolt, Gondh Rebellion and Santhal Rebellion are some of these. Hasnain (2007) gives a list of over a hundred such wars between the Adivasis and the colonial regime, most of these being rather side-lined in the mainstream narrative of history.

The Adivasis communities have, through their traditional practices and customary rules, managed the forest in



a sustainable way in their benign self-interest (Kumar 2012). Once the Adivasis lost the control of the forest, the progressive destruction of the forests set in. The colonial regime had denuded massive swaths of forest for their rapidly expanding railway project in different countries and for ship building, all the while the survival and the livelihood of the Adivasis have increasingly become threatened. The Indian Forest Act of 1927, firming up a similar colonial instrument of 1865, marked the culmination of process to take over the forest from the Adivasi stewardship. The post-colonial government also followed more or less the same colonial policy by continuing the Indian Forest Act 1927 and by formulating the National Forest Policy in 1952.

The Constitution of India provides special provisions (Schedule V and VI areas, reservations in legislative bodies and government jobs) for the Schedule Tribes as a form of partial historical compensation, though often thwarted by the bureaucracy in implementation. However the loss of control over forest that the Adivasis have suffered has not been restored, at least in legal terms, until the Forest Right Act was enacted in 2006 to partially address this. The well-meaning legislation passed by the Parliament has been largely defeated by the forest bureaucracy in several States. It is high time that the forest departments across the country, with their colonial legacy of a century and half, are dissolved or significantly reduced in size and the forests are handed back to the Adivasis for sustainable management. The over 120,000 states forest staff and about 3000 persons of the elite Indian Forest Service, presiding over the destitution of the Adivasis on the one hand and biodiversity degradation on the other, are already a huge burden on the tax payers and can be safely retrenched or re-deployed. Faizi and Ravichandran (2016) provide a framework to reform the forest management to address the twin crises of forest degradation and increasing impoverishment of the Adivasis, in line with the objectives set out in the CBD and its ecosystem approach.

Victims of the Climate Crisis

Being at the bottom of India's caste pyramid the Adivasis suffer a disproportionately huge part of the devastating impact of the climate change though they have not played any part in creating this disaster. The extreme weather events affect the Adivasis who are left without economic resilience or alternative livelihood sources more than any other segment of the population. Crop failures, diminishing fresh water sources, fuelwood shortage, new types of viral diseases and such other effects are already being felt by Adivasi communities in the different forest areas of India.

The impact of climate change on biodiversity and the livelihood of the Adivasis is best represented by the decline in lac production in states such as Jharkhand, Chatisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. Lac is a resin produced by a tiny insect named *Kerria lacca* and is processed into shellac and other products and India has been the highest producer of lac- up to 55 percent of the world's total. The insect is found in trees such as Palas, Ber, Pipal and Kusum. Kelkar (2009) gives an account of its decline in Khuti district of Jharkhand where the Adivasis collect lac from domestic trees. However with untimely rains, often short, heavy downpour followed by extreme cold weather and frost in March when the insect is about to produce lac have a large number of the insects die. The host trees with the exception of Kusum also are on the decline. Poverty deepens as the Adivasis lose this critical source of supplemental income.

The Adivasis, along with their equally poor fellow inhabitants of the Sundarbans- the world's largest mangrove forests on the Bay of Bengal shared between India and Bangladesh- suffer the impact caused by the sea level rise due to climate change. The islands here, famous for the Tiger, are progressively being submerged in water. Seventy percent of the 8.5 sq km Ghoramara island is already under the sea and the fate of the nearby Sagar island is much the same. Besides the sea level rise, the life of the Adivasi groups here—Santhal, Bhumij, Munda, etc.—is severely constrained by unpredictable tidal surges and heavy coastal erosion. The poverty and misery of these vulnerable groups have increased manifold.

The mitigation measures also seem to target the Adivasis in an adverse manner. The new carbon forestry projects designed to sequester and store carbon take over the community forest lands traditionally used by Adivasis and convert the same into commercial plantations. Such projects erode the biodiversity, destabilizes the ecological integrity of the forest system and removes the livelihood source of the forest dependent Adivasi communities. The alternative energy projects meant to reduce the emission of carbon dioxide often accentuate the Adivasi misery. In Attapady, the Adivasi heartland of Kerala, Zuzlon, a private sector company has taken over legally inalienable Adivasi lands to install wind mills to generate energy, with meagre compensation to the people. The company has also felled trees planted by the Adivasis as part of an eco restoration programme of the Kerala govt- for which the planning was done by the senior author in the early 2000s—to create road for the transportation of the massive wind mill structures.

The government should shed its hidden hesitation to categorically recognize the Adivasis as the Indigenous People of India and accord them the rights as provided in the UNDRIP and effectively enforce the special



Constitutional provisions on them. The Adivasis shall no longer be treated as a defeated people.

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