

Voices of the Submerged

Adivasis and Forests

C. R. BIJOY



Adivasis are considered "illegal occupants" of their own homelands



The adivasis' struggle for survival is inextricably related to the history of their colonisation and to the conditions they are subjected to. Adivasis are also known as "forest dwellers," simply because where forests are or were, there are the adivasis. This is true of the majority of the 67 million adivasis of India.

The forest was the adivasis' home and not just their house. It was their religion, alive with their gods and the spirits of their dead. Their cultural values, lifestyles, ethos, social norms, knowledge and associated science and technologies were shaped by the fact that the adivasis were integral to the forest eco-system, which was not external to them, but a continuation and extension of their collectivity.

The form and content of their cultural expressions — songs and dances — depict their reality explicitly, along with strong elements that have surprisingly persisted to manifest their way of life even today, despite rapid changes in Indian society.

The forest and her people

In order to understand the tribals' relationship with their world — the forests — it is imperative to look into the way they organised production and community, using their labour. The dignity and value of physical labour were primary to them. They produced for their essential needs in "partnership" with nature — a collective activity that involved sharing with each other as well as with their domestic animals. They produced a surplus that was just enough to meet contingencies like disease, bad weather and so on.

The sick, the old and the young were the responsibility of the collectivity. Individuality and the motivating force of self-interest or profit were absent. Accumulation of wealth and private ownership of produce, of forests, of land or of the means of production were alien concepts. Adivasis took care to conserve, preserve and vitalise the forests in order to leave the forests to future generations.

All human creativity — whether it related to their knowledge of the laws of nature or of nature itself, science and technologies, the arts and crafts — was geared to the collective good of the community and the enrichment of community life. Living amidst abundance, their human creativity was phenomenal.

Their forms of governance were essentially decentralised, democratic and participatory, functioning on principles of equality and justice, with the leadership having functional responsibility while

authority rested with the community.

Their life was ordered on the basis of a complex and elaborate body of knowledge, principles and values. Their homelands were rich in biological diversity; their ecological knowledge was a map to this biological richness. For example, they utilised a few thousands of medicinal herbs for their healthcare and cultivated and used a few scores of edible food items. Their ways of life, evolved over generations, could only thrive by encoding their world view of ecological sustainability into the body of practice, myths and taboos passed on from generation to generation.

Precisely because of their intricate and intensive relationship with their eco-system, they evolved their own distinct lifestyles, languages and cultures, more diverse than all the cultures of non-*adivasis*, who constitute 92 per cent of the population put together. There are over 427 *adivasi* communities in India, with as many languages and cultures. Biological diversity has contributed to this cultural diversity.

Each *adivasi* community has its own pattern of membership, loyalties, common goals and rules of behaviour. It employs sanctions against those breaking laws. They have a common history and language and a common will to act together. They are institutions with the same pretensions and functions of a nation-state.

The colonisation process

During the feudal era, the *adivasis* were either enslaved by the migrants or pushed farther into the forests. Both developments resulted in the drastic reduction of their vast homelands. It is a historical fact that conquerors perceived themselves to be superior in wisdom, knowledge and culture to the defeated, in order to legitimise their conquest. This is true even today. The popular belief of the dominant society conforms to this reality and it is reflected by the popular media. These notions of superiority and the consequent attitudes of the dominant class, on the one hand, and the *adivasis'* feelings of inferiority, on the other, are thus reinforced.

With the beginning of colonisation by the British for the plunder of resources, the feudal system was transformed into a tyrannical system. The forest constituted a major source of resources which were

essential for the rapid expansion of the British empire worldwide. As is the practice, the British rulers embarked on a series of actions to provide legitimacy to their plunder. Lord Dalhousie conceived the 'scientific management of forest resources' with his Forest Policy of 1855. This was followed by the setting up of the Imperial Forest Department.

The Forest Act of 1864 empowered the imperial government to declare any land covered with trees, brushwood or jungle as government forest by notification and to prescribe punishments for breach of the provisions therein. Areas that had been *adivasi* homelands for generations could now be declared to belong to the government by "law," making the *adivasis* "illegal" occupants of "state property." Perfectly legitimate activities of *adivasis* in the forest suddenly came to be classified as "criminal" by "law."

Drastic changes

The Forest Act of 1878 further provided for the classification of forests into 'reserved,' 'protected' and 'illegal' forests, thus asserting the right of the rulers, including the government, over forest resources.

In response to this new impetus to the colonization process of *adivasi* homelands, there were widespread revolts and uprisings from the latter part of the 18th century. The whole of the 19th century saw consistent and widespread uprisings by the *adivasis* against *dikus* (migrants), both British and Indian, especially in the Chattisgarh and Jharkhand regions and the central belt of India.

Despite the adverse 1887 report of the Bombay Forest Commission, for instance, condemning the Forest Department and the government for the widespread revolts of *adivasis*, the British withdrew even the few privileges given to the *adivasis* to collect and sell firewood. The Forest Act of 1927 further strengthened the state's hold over the forests.

The feudal and capitalist leadership of the independence movement coopted the *adivasi* movements by promising to incorporate the rights of the *adivasis* over the forests. However, this promise was betrayed by the Indian ruling class. British interests were substituted by so-called "national interests," meaning the interests of the dominant class.

In 1952, the Indian government formulated the forest policy in line with the Forest Act earlier formulated by the British. Thus the "rights" of the *adivasis*, which became "privileges" in 1927, reduced to "concessions" in 1952. Though lofty goals, like the preservation of the environment, development needs and *adivasi* welfare, were enunciated in the forest policy, the forest legislations and practices were primarily concerned with ensuring a regular supply of timber and minerals at subsidised rates to industry.

The internal colonization of *adivasis*, accompanied by the alienation of their lands and resources became so rapid that, in the space of just four decades, over 50 lakh *adivasis* were displaced — legally and illegally. Hunger and poverty spread so rapidly that over 85 per cent of them now live below the poverty line. They were, in fact, forced to live off the garbage of development.

Devastation of forest lands

Like the British, the government of India, too, appointed various committees which continued the process of marginalization carried out systematically by the state through its policies and practices. In 1976, the subject of forests was transferred from the State list to the Concurrent list through the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution, thus centralising control over the forests.

Meanwhile, a revised Forest Act, which would have driven out the *adivasis* from the forests, surfaced in 1980 but was buried quietly because of widespread protests by the tribals. Instead, a Forest Conservation Ordinance was promulgated in 1980, prohibiting states from allowing the use of forest lands for any purpose without prior approval of the central government. This was later converted into an Act.

Large tracts of forest land continue to be devastated in the name of national progress. The forest area has dwindled to about nine per cent and for the *adivasis* it is no longer a question of livelihood but one of survival itself. The state considers them a law and order problem and the repressive state machineries work overtime now.

The media have, by and large, continued with their perception of *adivasis* as backward and inferior, as people who ought to be brought into the mainstream. They often highlight the

attempts of both governmental and non-governmental development organizations/initiatives to bring them into the mainstream. At the same time, there has been increasing exposure of human rights violations, of hunger deaths and rapes, of atrocities and exploitation, as well as of large-scale corruption and insensitivity by the state machinery.

That adivasi development is not merely a question of handouts of welfare, of developmental activities or of bringing them to the "mainstream" that they are not just an exotic species to be gaped at, but are citizens engaged in a genuine political struggle, is conveniently ignored.

Implicit in these reports, however, is the notion that this is so because adivasis are not "developed" and have not yet joined the mainstream. Consequently, a distorted perception of the situation of the adivasis has persisted and gained widespread acceptance. This is tragic simply because it is ahistorical and convoluted, successfully concealing the real issue.

The real issue

It must be recognised that ever since British rule, forest policies and laws have been really colonial and ecologically destructive in character, catering to the imperialist designs of developed nations. The Indian ruling class and the state have only been colluding with the designs of the imperialist nations. It must also be recognised that separating the adivasis from their part of the earth — the forests — is the surest way to kill them as peoples. This constitutes ethnocide.

This is so because the forests are not merely "resources" for the adivasis (as elaborated upon earlier) to be exploited as the "outside world" sees fit. Their persistence in remaining in the forest, "refusing to be developed and brought to the mainstream" despite decades of persistent efforts — positive discrimina-

tion through various policies, programmes and reservations for the scheduled tribes by the government, coercion through welfare and development by the government and others, policies of displacement and repression — reveals that they do have "another view" of development and insist on projecting this view.

It is also a result of the impact of the brutalization of their psychological as well as economic source of survival. This has resulted in the rise of various forms of political demands and struggles spreading throughout the length and breadth of the country. All of them essentially aspire for political power, autonomy and self-governance. The majority of these demands are well within the scope of the Constitution, emerging from movements that are patriotic and democratic in nature.

Once again the popular media either ignore them or characterize them as evil and anti-national. That adivasi development is not merely a question of handouts of welfare, of developmental activities or of bringing them to the "mainstream" that they are not just an exotic species to be gaped at, but are citizens engaged in a genuine political struggle, is conveniently ignored.

While the ruling class and the media saw perfect legitimacy in the political aspirations that led to the formation of the states based on language through the 1950s and 1960s, they view the political aspirations of the adivasis with suspicion and contempt. They would rather project adivasi issues as a matter that could be sorted out if the adivasis would only become meek objects of welfare and development, thereby getting assimilated within the mainstream.

Will the popular media and even the counter media outside their own political movements reflect adivasi issues from within the historical context of their colonisation and the alienation of their lands and forests? This is a moot question. But it is imperative and history demands that the media take cognizance of this reality, so that due legitimacy is provided to the political process of adivasi self-assertion, and so that the non-adivasi populace develops a proper understanding and acceptance of this process. This is particularly important for the oppressed classes among non-adivasis, so that they can relate their struggles with those of the

adivasis, thus spreading and speeding up the process of liberation of all the oppressed sections of society. ■

C. R. Bijoy is a human rights and environment activist based in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

