

## ADIVASIS: COLONISATION VERSUS SELF-DETERMINATION

C.R.Bijoy

### Adivasis in India

The 67.76 mn persons from the Scheduled Tribes (STs) in 1991 make India the nation with the largest number of indigenous people in the world. Constituting 8.08% of the total population of the country, the Adivasis are spread over 26 states and union territories (UTs) in about 20% of the geographical area. Some Adivasis have their counterparts in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, China and Tibet. Within the country, there are six broad regions of Adivasi concentration (Table 1). The central region can be divided into two – north-central (the entire Jharkhand area consisting of parts of Bihar, West Bengal, North Orissa and East Madhya Pradesh) and south-central (Gondwana).

The “**Scheduled Tribes**” are those communities specified by the President of India under Article 342 of the Constitution. This administrative term applies to areas and is envisaged to reflect the criteria of geographical isolation, distinctive culture, primitive traits, shyness of contact with the community at large, and low level of socio-economic development. “**Adivasis**” means original inhabitants or indigenous peoples, which identifies certain peoples as having a distinct socio-cultural identity compared to mainstream peoples. “*Adivasis*”, largely but not entirely, correspond to the officially designated “*Scheduled Tribes*”. In some places, non-Adivasis have indeed been listed as “*Scheduled Tribes*”, and not all Adivasi communities are included in the ST list.

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C.R. Bijoy (Doctors’ Quarters, Sri Ramakrishna Hospital, Coimbatore, TN, 641 044) is an activist with the National Front for Tribal Self-Rule and a Core Committee member of the All-India Coordination Forum of Adivasis/Indigenous Peoples.

development' directed by the national and regional elite and their imperialist masters fell on the Adivasis. These resources were considered by the elite to belong to the state and therefore, the Adivasis had no right over them. **The legal cover legitimised the colonisation of Adivasi territories which were converted into internal colonies to be utilised at will by the elites.** *The monopoly on these resources was sustained by laws in the name of "national interest" and "public purpose".* More than 10 mn Adivasis have been displaced by this juggernaut of 'national development'.

*This economic system and development model, which is in opposition to the Adivasi ethos, worldview and life, was firmly adopted by the rulers. This was also inimical to the Adivasis' distinct and paramount relationship with nature – their being part of nature and protecting it, the ecologically sustainable and communitarian ownership of the means of production, and the very mode of production and consumption ensure the security for all future generations. The systematic and rapid opening of Adivasi areas for the expropriation of resources was intensified in the 1990s with the formal adoption of the 'new' globalised economic dispensation managed by the IMF-WB-WTO triad and global capital.*

*In the pre-colonial feudal era, there was a distinctly different political system in the Adivasi areas – an independent and non-centralised participatory democratic system. The Adivasis were already self-governing nations. Notionally, however, some of the Adivasi regions were part of non-Adivasi realms where the rule rarely extended to the Adivasis. For Adivasis, freedom and access to common survival resources were of greater importance than 'ownership of property'. Colonial laws, especially the forest and related laws from the Forest Act of 1878 to that of 1927, intruded into their territories. This began the process of colonisation through a politico-administrative system that was in conflict with the traditional Adivasi system of self-governance, in which the individual rights of enjoyment were enmeshed in communal systems of rights of access and the particularities of individual requirements were within the generality of community requirements. For Adivasis, the territory moreover had a social, cultural and political significance. Numerous and persistent revolts were but the natural response.*

While negotiating a surrender or a cessation of hostilities, the colonial administration agreed for a nominal presence of the sovereign through an agent, even when the realms were totally or partly excluded for the purpose of administration. *The rulers of independent India adopted a political system which essentially retained the colonial arrangements and laws* with varying degrees of administration in some parts of the North-East (Schedule VI of the Constitution) and western, north-western and central India (Schedule V), along with various constitutional provisions of positive discrimination. As under the British, West Bengal, the southern region and parts of Assam were however kept outside the purview of these special arrangements for economic reasons. While strengthening the internal structures of self-rule, Schedule VI suffered from major flaws due to irrational and conflicting structures and authority. Schedule V was largely relegated to the confines of statute book and was ignored until the 73rd Amendment on Panchayat Raj in 1993. In course of time, the govt. made certain concessions like the formation of the state of Nagaland and the autonomous regions of Bodoland and Jharkhand, but these did not fundamentally solve the problems.

The Wild Life Protection Act, 1972 and the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 were further used to strengthen the stranglehold of the state over forest areas and thus serve the interest of capital. *Political compulsions since the pre-independence period have led to a history of land legislations.* The 1879 Bombay Province Land Revenue Code prohibited the transfer of lands from a tribal to a non-tribal without the permission of the district collector. The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908 in Bihar prohibited the transfer of lands without the sanction of the deputy commissioner. The Santhal Pargana Tenancy (Supplementary Provisions) Act of 1949, the MPLP Code in 1959 in Madhya Pradesh, the Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Areas Land Transfer Regulation of 1959 and amendment of 1970, the Orissa Scheduled Areas (Transfer of Immovable Property) Regulation, the Bihar Scheduled Areas Regulation of 1969, the Maharashtra (Restoration of Lands to STs) Act of 1974, the Kerala ST (Restriction on Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act of 1975 (now withdrawn and replaced by the Kerala

Restriction on Transfer by and Restoration of Lands to STs Bill, 1999), the Karnataka SC/ST (Prohibition of Land Transfer) Act of 1978, the land revenue and land reforms acts of various states were all enacted to provide various degrees of protection to Adivasi lands. *However, the implementation of these provisions have been tardy and manipulated, depending on political pressures.* With globalisation there are even attempts to roll back these protective provisions to make the Adivasi assets available to the market.

The neo-liberal doctrines pursued by the ruling class also aimed at destroying collective structures like the traditional ways of governance of Adivasis, which prevent the unhampered pursuit of the exploitation and expropriation of resources. The neo-colonial structures developed, fuelled by imperialist and capitalist expansion. 'Tribal development' sponsored by the state – especially through the Tribal Sub-Plan approach in operation in 18 states and 2 UTs with its 193 Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs), 249 Modified Area Development Approach (MADA) pockets, 77 clusters of tribal concentration and through micro projects for 74 primitive tribal groups – as well as by non-state entities helped in further opening the tribal areas to the outside. The tribal areas were made suitable for the entry and settlement of migrants on a large scale. The development programmes themselves promoted the plunder of the wealth of Adivasis while sustaining the notion of 'development'. *This diabolical approach coopted the Adivasis and relegated them to the lowest rung of the social order, while intensifying the colonisation of their territories.*

Contiguous Adivasi territories have been divided among nations (with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, China and Tibet), and among states within the nation and still further into politico-administrative units. The Adivasi areas were relegated to the fringes of these units. The formation of states on the basis of dominant linguistic groups divided the resource-rich Adivasi areas amongst them in total disregard of the fact that these areas were the Adivasi traditional self-governing realms. Even in Adivasi-majority areas, the economic and political structures became but the extension of the dominant system and interests, though largely staffed by Adivasis as in the North-East.

*Geographical fragmentations ensure that Adivasis remain politically isolated, suppressed or marginalised. Their languages and cultures – their ethnic identities – have been suppressed by such divisions, along with modernisation and homogenisation. The Adivasis are pushed into the cultural mainstream with dire consequences. This systemic internal colonisation has brought the Adivasi communities to the brink of ethnocide.*

### **Politics of Resistance and Struggle**

**This oppressive process obviously intensified the struggles for survival and resulted in increased alienation, frustration and unrest amongst Adivasis.** *This has also created divisions within and between Adivasi communities as well as with non-Adivasis.* The constitutional provisions for the protection and promotion of Adivasi interests, including the special political arrangements of partial or potential autonomy, have been subverted or rendered non-functional. They have failed to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the Adivasis. Moreover, the dominant political institutions and values that have been imposed on Adivasis are in direct conflict with their traditional institutions and ways of life. *Consequently, political struggles for genuine autonomy and assertion of rights have not only intensified but spread to most Adivasi areas.*

The rise of Naga nationalism, the Mizo insurrection, the Bodo struggle for autonomy and other autonomy movements as those of the Karbis, Khasis and Garos in the North-East have been treated by the state as issues of law and order. Equipped with the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1972 the peace-keepers have turned aggressors, causing the death of thousands. Militarisation has driven democratic struggles underground. The Jharkhand movement is caught up in a web of deceit, with the formation of a state still a distant dream. Parts of India have been turned into war zones to counter revolutionary struggles. The village self-rule struggle has spread and intensified in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and elsewhere, reaching even the sparsely tribal-populated southern region. The Jarwas, Onges and others in the Island region are threatened with extinction due to the opening of the Adivasi areas to tourism and logging. Struggles against development projects like big dams, mines, etc. and protected

areas that deny survival rights are the outcome of the colonisation process.

Though the agendas and forms of struggles are varied as also the political ideologies, there is an increasing awareness that it is the very same process that causes the problems and that the forces the Adivasis are pitted against are the same, nationally and internationally. *The last two decades have seen the rapid development of linkages amongst diverse Adivasi movements at the regional, national and international level.* These submerged peoples have risen now that the UN is in the process of finalising a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and creating a Permanent UN Forum for them. However, the Indian govt. stubbornly opposes the inclusion of STs as indigenous peoples.

*Justice demands that peoples enjoy the right to the means of subsistence and the right to live in community . For Adivasis, this means the right to their traditional territories and natural resources, with which they have a special relationship.* The violation of this right not only means the disruption of lifestyles and the destruction of communities, but constitutes ethnocide. The inalienable right of Adivasis to participate in decisions that affect their lives as communities is violated by inadequate, inappropriate or patently unjust policies, programmes, laws and structures. Their right to protest is often violated with outright coercion, which leads to loss of liberty and life. The right to self-determination, which stems from the values of freedom and equality, is denied. Self-determination requires that the political institutional order should substantially be the creation of processes determined by the will of the governed peoples.

The state – an instrument to mediate between various interest groups as per the Constitution – has been reduced to the status of a client of capital, adjusting its domestic priorities, policies and laws to respond to the predatory global economy. The response to this situation in the Adivasi areas has been to carve out a political space beyond the pale of the Constitution and Law. The nationality movements in the North-East, the state-demand movements as in Jharkhand, the autonomy and the village self-rule movements in other parts of the

country, etc. are all basically forms of the struggle for self-determination. This struggle necessitates the adoption of political means that are different from the prescribed behaviour of the representative democratic system. The state interprets such responses as anti-national or subversive, treating the Adivasi problematique as a mere 'law and order' problem, and unleashing its repressive machinery.

Laws are enacted or elaborated to legitimise the state's actions wherever necessary, often in an attempt to accommodate political demands as long as they do not threaten the system. If they do threaten the system, then the repressive machinery of the state works overtime. *The conflicts between the institutions of the state and the people have intensified and are increasingly becoming violent.* The judicial system also currently appears incapable of understanding the issues involved. **The political nature of the Adivasi struggles demands a political resolution.**

*The Adivasi movements have multiple dimensions.* They include the "access" to or "rights" over resources as well as "equitable entitlements" and "due share" in the benefits of the system, both of which address the "malfunctioning of the system". Ironically, this gives the system an opportunity to make amends or pretend to do so, thereby giving scope to strengthening the system. Some movements may also simultaneously challenge the system when they seek to break the state through violent revolts for the creation of an alternate structure. Yet, some others seek to negate the state by trying to recreate it in a new non-centralised form. *With the reduced role of the state nowadays, the political process that challenges the system, and its instrument, the state, becomes increasingly relevant, especially the movements that go beyond ethnic, geographical and other parochial boundaries which the ruling classes are so adept at manipulating.*

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READINGS

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**3.** Cheria Anita, K. Narayanan, C.R. Bijoy and Edwin, "A Search for Justice. A Citizens' Report on the Adivasi Experience in South India", 1997. **4.** Sarini (ed.), "Jai Adibasi, A Political Reader on the Life and Struggle of Indigenous Peoples in India", undated. **5.** Sarini (ed.), "Indigenous Peoples of India", CEDEC, Bhubaneshwar, 1987. **6.** Sarini and Birsa-Johar (eds.), "Jai Jharkhand", ibid., 1999. **7.** Sharma B.D., "Whither Tribal Areas?", Sahyog Pustak Kutir, Delhi, 1995. **8.** -- --, "Tide Turned", ibid., 1997. **9.** -- --, "The Little Lights in Tiny Mud-Pots Defy 50 Years of Anti-Panchayat Raj", ibid., 1998. **10.** South-Asia Regions, International Alliances of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests, "Adivasi/Indigenous Peoples in India – A Brief Situationer", Delhi, 1998.