

Adivasis and Sustainable Development Not just a Good life—Not yet a Good life!

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The largest democracy, the second most populous country, a civilization that predates most of Europe, a country of a rich and diverse cultural heritage, tradition and history are facts that adorn India. The other popular images it immediately garners are Taj Mahal, elephants and spices.

I too am from India—the Indian absent from popular discourse, the Indian the government chooses to ignore. I'm one of the 86 million Indigenous peoples of India; trying to make sense of being the original people of a country that treats us as sub-human. Policies and paperwork for us though existent remain just decorated words.

What does the *good life* mean for the Adivasi (Adi-first, primal or ancient; vasi-inhabitants)—the natives, the first settlers or first inhabitants in a rapidly changing India in the hands of those who only see us as a resource to be exploited or an obstacle to be removed?

My focus is to explore this through the prism of the Adivasi population and thus I don't speak for all of India.

BACKGROUND: WHO ARE ADIVASIS?

CONSTITUTIONAL STATUS: Adivasi are the indigenous peoples of India; a name given to us by ourselves. Tribal or Scheduled Tribes is the official way to address us. Scheduled Tribes is a constitutional status, explicitly identified for the purposes of implementing the country's affirmative action programs in a periodically revised plan. The purview of that term only implies that 'special protection and help due to their backwardness' should be given to these people. The scope of fighting for our rights thus comes from appealing only for 'protection on accord of backwardness' and not as first citizens or indigenous peoples. We have been denied acknowledgement of being indigenous peoples by not being named so. Denial of rights through terminology is a denial of identity rights!

ADIVASI LIFEWAYS: Adivasi being is rooted in social, cultural and religious values that are centred on their relationship with their land and natural environment, and with each other. A community based existence where law and order is placed in the hands of a participative democratic system of leadership.

We take pride in being self-sufficient for most of our needs by our own labour:

for food, building houses, hunting and farming tools, sourcing medicine from the forest, etc.

Indigenous knowledge has been learnt experientially and passed on to the next generation in a natural, informal way whether it be stories, values, skills, music, dance, healing, crafts, tool making, hunting and gathering. This tradition of teaching and learning both for adults and children is millennial and has sustained us and our environment in an organic manner for centuries.

THE 21ST CENTURY ADIVASI:

However, as time passes, we lose more control over our time, space and self-sufficiency; not voluntarily but circumstantially. Penetration of the business class (corporations or non-tribal traders) into our territory, development and conservation projects have only led to alienation and displacement from our traditional ways of living and livelihood. The sacredness of nature, respect for elders' knowledge, ritual contact with the ancestors, growing our own food on family land and making our own houses and tools, exchanging food with neighbours with an egalitarian spirit: these things are swept away by corporate values, which emphasise money and financial power.

When you equate our lifestyles and us with the 21st century modern ways of existence you continue to find us primitive, backward, uneducated and poor. The yardsticks for measuring development and social mobility are squarely different.

To call us 'poor' is accurate only when the system of exploitation enforced on us is already taking away a large part of the food we grow or the land grabs and alienation leaves us incapacitated.

Large scale 'development' or 'conservation' projects imposed on Adivasis amount to an invasion and dispossession of land and traditional culture, which carries further the colonial colonising process to something far more difficult to shake Internal Colonialism.

WHAT IS THE 21ST CENTURY DEVELOPMENT FOR ADIVASIS AND DOMINANT CLASS INDIANS?

Bhagban Majhi a young man of the Kondh tribe has been at the forefront of resistance to the Utkal alumina project (UAIL) in the state of Orissa, Eastern India. Some years ago he asked the Superintendent of Police of Raygada district: 'Sir, what do you mean by development? Is it development to destroy these billions of years of mountains for the profit of a few officials: is it development to displace us from our land?'

Also in Orissa, a female member of the legislative assembly from the ruling party in that state, said in June 17, 2006: 'What's wrong with selling Niyamgiri (a mountain revered by the Dongria Kondh, who live in and off it) if this gets rid of poverty?'

Jawaharlal Nehru, speaking to Adivasi villagers who were to be displaced by the Hirakud Dam in 1948 said: 'If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country.'

Some even say, 'Let's face it, these are people whose time has come. Look at any developed country, Europe, the US, Australia they all have a *past*' implying there is no harm in eradicating us for the greater good.

When Adivasi terrain starts to be rapidly exploited, it plunges into a resource curse. For many regions of India, being rich in minerals has spelt devastation of nature and spiralling poverty, instead of the wealth that is always promised.

Whatever wealth India's industrialisation generates for the business elite, it is always important to bear in mind that the people it displaces face a worse poverty than anything they knew before: 'projects meant to reduce poverty are the ones that add to the numbers of the poor'. This *Reality Gap* is often just dismissed and taken for granted as a done consequence.

Industrialisation has often involved a process of dispossessing people from the land in huge numbers, with extreme misery intensified by environmental degradation. The process of fencing off common land and turning them into private property is taking place throughout India's tribal areas now. It stems from policy decisions to promote industrialisation, and a collective devaluing of the people and cultures being displaced.

Using the justification that Adivasi houses are mud huts, their lifestyle backward and uneconomical, hundreds of communities are permanently erased.

From the tribal's perspective all these projects should be called *displacement projects*—the word development acts as a mask, and contradicts their experience of loss and alienation.

Of all of India's citizens, Adivasis can least afford to lose their land and community, and after years of exploitation and oppression they least deserve to.

WHAT IS THE 21ST CENTURY EDUCATION FOR ADIVASIS?

All that educators and policy makers see while framing curriculum or educational opportunities for the Adivasi's is a gap. All efforts are made to inculcate literacy, numeracy and knowledge building in accordance with their (mainstream Indian) formal education policy and standards. This is also done in a way where the Adivasi's knowledge is considered inferior and what is being offered is superior, relevant, important, modern and liberating. This arrogance against our knowledge is the gap; they are trying to fill it with methods that don't agree with an Adivasi's natural being.

Adivasis come from a tradition of Orality. Sadly though, this oral tradition is being rapidly eroded by the state sponsored process of mainstreaming the indigenous peoples of India, in the name of exterminating them out of their *primitivity* and placing them into *modernity*. Modernity, at least in the tribal areas, is built around the written word. 'Illiteracy' of Adivasis translates into the inability of negotiating the written word, which the State equates with *primitivity*, *backwardness*, or *uneducated*, in the process completely undermining tribal cultures.

The framework of 'development', though in essence is emancipation and advancement, results in serious distortions of tribal civilizational constructs, condemning the indigenous peoples and their advanced civilizations built around collaborative geniality. This communal ethos of living where the survival of all life forms has a central place, is degraded, destroyed and replaced with systems of adversarial competition where the philosophy of the *survival of the fittest* or *dog eat dog* doesn't agree with the basic tenet of Adivasi communities lifestyle and belief system.

Ironically, education is the vehicle of destruction in tribal societies.

This mainstreaming curriculum offered is on a model of schooling and distancing from home and natural environs. There are a few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that incorporate a balance between our traditional knowledge and formal learning and pedagogy but the rest is all eyewash to meet targets without any real objectives being met; whether those objectives clash with the Adivasis' outlook notwithstanding.

The government's policies of Right to education primary compulsory education till the age of 14 has not had real impact on Adivasi's lives. Having a school close to Adivasi settlements does not ensure education. Irregularity of classes, untrained and unqualified non-Adivasi teachers, instruction in an unfamiliar language, rote learning, out of context content and learning of concepts alien to Adivasi's immediate surrounding and understanding of the world and things in it have caused more drop-outs, more failures than successes. Not even a free meal keeps them in schools. It's another matter that the quality of food served is far below sub-standard.

It is said that the development of any society depends on the education her citizens receive. I'd say it's not the education but the quality of education that its citizens receive.

The chasm in the quality of education provided in Urban and Rural India is glaring. The standard, options and choices of what and how you can be educated and what you do with that education is unparalleled in the Urban pockets. There is no equality in education and the education we receive makes us redundant for mainstream society. So why put us through this process of mainstreaming which is only a course where our knowledge, skills and culture is depreciated and the new imbibed knowledge is rendered useless.

This education does not teach us our rights or how we can get them.

When we don't know our rights, how can we assert them or advocate for them?

What Adivasi children and adults need is an education that will help us cope with economic, social, cultural and emotional risks and challenges that come with changes due to displacement due to development and conservation projects, environmental degradation due to the purging of the earth and lack of livelihood options. We need an education that will help us survive, that will help address problems and advocate for rights in newer, unfamiliar and unwelcoming locations that land alienation has placed them in.

When the government sanctions most of the injustice and labels activists and NGOs that make efforts of learning for sustainable development as anti-development, we are left in a flux. So the help coming is as good as no help at all.

OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT VERSUS OUR DEVELOPMENT

1) *Ethical Justification*

Emphasis on the idea that tribals (the official term used for us) have to make a 'sacrifice' 'in the national interest,' for the 'manifold benefits for the nation as a whole' a concept which underlies the whole idea that it is justifiable to displace Adivasis to make way for industrial development. This boils down to an assumption that it is necessary to sacrifice 'marginal' people for the sake of others' prosperity.

2) *The Economic System*

Losing lands means we can never grow our own food and don't have the power to buy food.

Enforced change of livelihood from agricultural self-sufficiency to an industrial worker is unjust. Adivasi's traditional skills and knowledge are not recognised and we are immediately thrown to the bottom of the pile in terms of jobs, through their classification of being 'unskilled'.

'Opportunities of gainful employment' is a patronising way to describe the lowest grade of jobs in mines and factories, involving hard labour in conditions that are generally terrible in health and safety standards.

3) The *Kinship System* is fractured by displacement from villages, where social relations follow the pattern of a village's traditional layout, and a spatial distance from kin in neighbouring villages. In every area where a project causes displacement, there is a split in long-standing relationships, and tension between those who accept compensation and move and those who remain opposed.

4) The *Religious system* is undermined by removal of sacred village sites, as well as mining of venerated mountains.

5) The *Material Culture* as a system in which people make most of their things they need, is destroyed as soon as their houses built from local earth and wood are knocked down and replaced with concrete ones. You need to depend on others for fixing or renovating anything going forward.

6) *Power structure* is transformed. From being in control of their area and its resources, people find themselves at the bottom of an extreme hierarchy of power and authority.

Traditional tribal society is remarkably egalitarian, and women have a higher status than in much of mainstream society, which they lose when new, corporate forms of domination invade their area.

Many displaced Adivasis and Dalits (lowest of the lowest castes) join the army of migrants to the cities as labourers, domestic servants and economic refugees. Here they live in *bastis* (shanty towns) where they have to compete with each other to line up for water at designated hours of supply and use of common toilets. From a life of co-existence and co-operation one is plunged into one of competition and rivalry. You find yourself in a race for survival you didn't sign up for.

7) *Traditional Knowledge and experience*

Studies of displaced people mostly call on 'experts'. Reports are full of statistics but the displaced people have no voice most of the times. The implication of this silence is that these people have nothing to say, or are too uneducated to say anything of value. They need representing/representation by the articulated class in a language that is dominant.

A fundamental arrogance, in negative stereotypes and patronising attitudes towards 'isolated groups of tribes', who have no future orientation' a gross distortion, when the culture is based on cultivating land in a careful progression through the seasons. To denigrate their land as third grade, their houses as mud huts and them as unintelligent people, practically of no value, is an outrageous distortion.

To understand what the good life for the Adivasi is; we need to know what it is not. The above is certainly not a good life.

THE GOOD LIFE FOR THE ADIVASI

I attended a symposium for Adivasi grassroots activists who were indigenous themselves earlier this year (2015) on what development meant for them. We asked the participants to find a replacement for the word *development* and the suggestions

they came with all pointed to what a good life for us would be *A life with dignity; A life of equality; A life where our existence is acknowledged; A life where our rights are honoured.* And they all agreed that the *established development* that was handed to us and what it brings does not encompass the above.

Many would question that since we know what we want, why don't we move towards getting it? Why don't we do anything about it?

Adivasis are not taking things lying down and letting their age-old cultures die anymore. The trouble is they face huge repression by security forces and company mafias, and our movements get confused in the popular imagination with the Maoist (Naxal) insurgency, which has grown in the region because of the outrage at the increasing subjugation and exploitation. Caught in the crossfire of the government and the Maoists' life becomes more precarious.

Many Adivasis have been tagged as being against development. The truth is Adivasi *raiyats* (landholders) are petrified of the term *Development* and all that comes with it. Understandably so! Even after 66 years of Independence, the Indian State continues to use internal colonialism to exploit, take over lands and extract minerals from Adivasi peoples and their lands.

When they resist they are branded as anti-nationalists, put behind bars, terrorised and murdered. Their slogans of resistance tell a painful story of survival in an Independent India: *Loha Nahi Anaj Chahiye* (We want grains not iron), *Jal, Jungle aur Jamin Hamara Hai* (Land, forest and water belong to us) and *Jaan denge, Jamin Nahi Denge* (We will give our lives but not our land).

For the Adivasi, global education for sustainable development is an irony and an insurmountable challenge. Industrial and Capitalistic *Development* has removed us from our traditional ways of living and livelihood and placed us in territories and situations alien to our being and now we are told that our earlier ways were sustainable and that's the way to counter the imminent threat to the earth and the environment.

The mainstream style guzzles unsustainable quantities of metals and oil, while Adivasi life is based on cultivating the earth and nurturing long-term coexistence with the forest.

But going back to the earlier state of affairs is a huge challenge because the eco systems are already imbalanced and to place the responsibility of restoring the earth to pristine ways on the Adivasi solely is unfair. Not because we don't want to but because Industrialisation is not going to stop.

Industrialisation and development can never be ethical or eco-friendly. Purging the earth can never be green or clean. Our well being depends on the well being of the earth.

We worry about our identity. How will we continue to remain indigenous when the economic and political systems fundamental to our culture and identity are effectively destroyed when dispossessed of our land?

Losing the land brings a death of all we value.

When the government, several NGOs, activists, historians, anthropologists, educationists only emphasise on civilising, disciplining and telling us what's good for us; how can our struggle to survive be sustainable.

How are we going to trust the government machinery, the courts and the police, when they stand for and with the oppressors and perpetrators and not against them?

Sustainable development for Adivasi's has to come and be done from within

them and not outside of them. Adivasi's need to be made partners and not subjects in the learning process of sustainable development for it to make any sense or have any real impact on our lives. The indigenous population more than anything is fighting for its right to survive; fighting for its right to co-exist with the dominant peoples.

A good life comes from just being able to be.

In today's permanent tension between the indigenous peoples in India and the extractivism interests laced with words such as 'progress' and 'development', lies a critical fight the Adivasi peoples are forced to engage in. By protecting our territories, our *lands*: we are not just saving the forest or fighting against Capitalism. We are in fact, and most of all, trying to preserve ourselves and the deep and ancient roots that link us to our earth.

REFERENCES

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