

ACPP – Hotline Asia

Backgrounder on Situation of Adivasis in South India

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INTRODUCTION

Indigenous People

“Indigenous People” is a collective term referring to the native people who have close ties with the land they inhabit but each person (or tribe) has their uniqueness. They are groups or tribes with different historical and social backgrounds, language families, racial stocks and religious moulds. Indigenous Peoples constitute about five percent of the world’s population. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) reported that about 300 to 370 million people belong to the world’s indigenous groups. There are around 4,000 languages used by Indigenous Peoples. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) reported that there are more than 5,000 different groups of Indigenous Peoples living in more than 70 countries. Indigenous Peoples inhabit in every region of the world, but about 70 percent of them are concentrated in Asia. Two centuries ago, Indigenous Peoples could be found in most parts of the world. However, nowadays, they have legal rights to use only about six percent of the planet’s land and in many cases their rights are partial or disqualified.

Indigenous People traditionally have a harmonious and symbiotic relationship with the natural environment and their societies tend to be organized on an egalitarian and communitarian basis, with their own systems of knowledge, self-governance and nationhood. They have governed their ancestral territories and natural resources as a participatory community based on democratic processes. They have a collective dependency to the natural resources in their habitats and territories. They also have a historical and unique relationship with their ancestral territories. They have developed particular cultures, life styles, traditions and belief systems according to their territories and natural resources. They have been accumulating vast indigenous knowledge, science and technologies and continuing to practice an egalitarian life style.

However, the mainstream society always fails to appreciate the unique cultures of Indigenous Peoples but considers them as socially and economically backward communities. Ironically, Indigenous Peoples suffer from encroachment on and dispossession of their territories by settlers, companies and state agencies. They have been denied the right to self-govern and governed by superimposed and inappropriate structures of governance. Hence, their lifestyle and livelihood are threatened.

Adivasis

The term “Adivasis” (original inhabitants) refers to the Indigenous Peoples of India who possess distinct identities and cultures often linked to certain territories. The term is derived from the Hindi word “adi” which means “of earliest times” or “from the beginning” and “vasi” means inhabitant or resident, and it was coined in the 1930s. Officially they are termed as “Scheduled Tribes” (STs) which is a legal and constitutional term specifying the tribal groups with distinctive cultures, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, traditional beliefs and practices, such as indigenous arts of dance and music, unique way of life and nature worshipping, living in unreachable areas. STs also refer to the groups living in unreachable areas with social and economical backwardness and highly depending on forests resources.

Adivasis are not a homogenous group, but over 200 tribes speaking over 100 languages, which vary greatly in ethnicity, culture and language; however, there are similarities in their way of life and they are generally rendered inferior position within the Indian society. There is over 50 million Adivasis population constituting 7.5 percent of that of the whole country, thus making it the largest tribal population in the world. Anthropological Survey of India under the Ministry of Culture states that there are 461 Adivasi communities. According to the Census report of India 2001, there are 577 Adivasi groups. Ministry of Tribal Affairs reported that there are 622 ST communities in India.

Adivasis are the earliest inhabitants of the sub-continent and they once inhabited in a much greater area than at present. However, little is known of their history. Although it appears that many of them were forced into hill areas after the invasions of the Indo-Aryan tribes 3,000 years ago. As a group, they are one of the most marginalized and vulnerable communities in India, characterized by high levels of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, displacement and landlessness. Adivasis consider the earth as mother from whom they can respectfully take whatever they need. As the poorest among the poor, Adivasis often represent victims of unfair labour practices and unorganized labourers across the country.

SITUATION OF ADIVASIS IN SOUTH INDIA

Constitutional Status

The Constitution of India has devoted more than 20 articles on the redress and uplift of the underprivileged following the policy of positive discrimination and affirmative action, particularly with reference to the STs, in order to protect these communities from all the possible exploitation and thus ensure social justice.

The Adivasis, along with Dalits, other so-called untouchables, became subjected to special protective provisions under the Constitution 1950. The vast majority of Indigenous Peoples were classified as STs. Article 341 authorizes the President of India to specify 'castes, races or tribes which shall for the purposes of this constitution be deemed to be scheduled tribes'.

The Fifth Schedule to the Constitution lays down certain prescriptions about the Scheduled Areas (SAs) as well as the STs in states other than Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram by ensuring submission of Annual Reports by the Governors to the President of India regarding the Administration of the SAs and setting up of Tribal Advisory Councils to advise on matters pertaining to the welfare and advancement of the STs (Article 244(1), the Constitution of India). Meanwhile, referring to the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram, the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution prescribes certain tribal areas in these states as Autonomous Regions with special district councils (Article 244(2), the Constitution of India).

The Panchayat Raj (Extension to the SAs) Act 1996 was introduced to ensure effective participation of the tribal inhabitants in public affairs, including policy making, since 1996, as the original statements of the Constitution do not precisely clarify what "planning and decision making" means. The Act was designated to be a legislative means of promoting self-governance in rural areas through the creation of local village bodies. This legislation has helped Adivasis to formulate responses to various local issues and to organize themselves at the local level by building local political institutions.

There are reserved seats for STs in the Parliament and the State Legislatures. In the two houses of Parliament, the Lok Sabha and the Rajiya Sabha, 7 percent of the seats were reserved for members of STs and similar representation occurs in the states' assemblies in proportion to the percentage of STs in the state's population.



MAP. TRIBAL AREAS IN INDIA

Source: <http://isgi.soc.hit-u.ac.jp:8181/researchgroups/outsidere/lectures/2005-07-01/resolveuid/9a59e7ed3c4d7cc297f1b3cb17116629>

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 was passed by the Government to ensure Forest Rights to the Adivasis. It was a major step to address the historical injustice done to the Adivasis through the Forest Laws and land alienation.

Tamil Nadu

The majority of the Adivasis in Tamil Nadu belongs to the following tribes: Todas, Kadars, Irulas, Kotas, Kattunaikas, Kurumans, Muthuvans, Paniyans, Pulayans, Malayalees, Kurumbas, Eravallans, Kanikkars, Mannans and Paliyans. According to the Census Report 2001, the total STs Population in Tamil Nadu is 651,321 (1.04 percent of the total population in Tamil Nadu). There are six particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTG) in Tamil Nadu, such as Irular, Kattunaikan, Kotas, Kurumbar, Paniyan and Todas. Adivasis' literacy rate is 27.89 percent. About 87 percent of Adivasis are living under the poverty line and have lost their indigenous identities. Government's schemes have not reached them and still many villages do not have basic amenities like drinking water, schools, electricity, road and transport. Exploitation, ignorance and discrimination are some of the stumbling blocks for the development of Adivasis. About 53 percent of Adivasis do not have permanent houses while about 48 percent do not have permanent employment. The Government has not yet addressed these issues properly.

Karnataka

49 Adivasi communities are currently identified in this state. The majority of them belongs to the following tribes: Gaudalus, Hakkipikkis, Irruligas, Jenu Kurubas, Malaikuds, Malikudis, Bhils, Gonds, Chenchus, Koyas, Yeravas, Haleyas and Koramas. The share of Adivasis' population in the state is 2.95 percent. Adivasis' literacy rate in Karnataka is 36.01 percent. About 85 percent of the Adivasis are living under the poverty line. About 52 percent of Adivasis do not have permanent employment in this state.

Andhra Pradesh

There are 33 Adivasi communities were identified in this state. The majority of them belong to the following tribes: Chenchus, Koyas, Gadabas, Konda, Doras, Konda Kapur, Konda Reddis, Sugalis/Lambadis, Yenadis, Yerukulas, Bhils, Gonds, Kolams, Pradhans and Valmikis. According to the Census Report 2001, the share of STs in the state is 6.47 percent. Adivasis' literacy rate in Andhra Pradesh is 17.16 percent. About 89 percent of the Adivasis are living under poverty line. Over 46 percent of the Adivasis do not have permanent employment in this state. Andhra Pradesh state has both SAs and non-SAs. The Northern Andhra Pradesh is entitled as SA under the Fifth Schedule, where most of Adivasis depends on non-timber forest produce for their livelihoods and basic needs. However, in Southern Andhra Pradesh, Adivasis have lost their forest rights and identities.

Kerala

There are 36 Adivasi communities listed in this state. The majority of them belongs to the following tribes: Paniyas, Malakuravans, Malayarayans, Malavetans, Malayans, Mannans, Ullatans, Uralis, Vishawans, Arandans, Kattunaykans, Koragas, Kadar, Kurichiyans, Kurumans, Pulayans, Malsars and Kurumbas. The share of Adivasis' population in the state is 1.14 percent. Adivasis' literacy rate in Kerala is 57.22 percent, among them 63.38 percent are men and 51.07 percent are women. About 82 percent of Adivasis are living under the poverty line. 54 percent of Adivasis do not have permanent employment in this state. The PTVGs in Kerala are Chola Naikker, Kattunaikker, Kurumbar, Kadar and Korugar.

Wayanad district of Kerala

Wayanad is the most backward district of Kerala. More than one third of the Adivasis of Kerala State resides in Wayanad district. Adivasi communities, numbering 136,062 (17.43 percent of the total population of Wayanad) do not form a homogenous entity. Major communities found in the district are Paniyan (44.77 percent), Mullu Kuruman (17.51 percent), Kurichian (17.38 percent), Kattunaickan (9.93 percent), Adiyani (7.10 percent) and Urali Kuruman (2.69 percent). Adiya,

Paniya and Kattunaikan are the three tribal communities which are still seriously underdeveloped comparing with the others. Adivasis labourers can be generally categorized into three groups, namely agricultural laborers, marginal farmers and forest dependants.

The Adivasi communities of Wayanad have been detribalized considerably owing to the socio-economic transition that the district has undergone since the middle of last century. Heavy influx of non-tribal people to this district since 1940s, coupled with tribal exposure to modern education, political process, and mass media, has altered the traditional lifestyle of the communities. Because of the migration from the southern districts in the 1940s and 1950s to Wayanad and the stipulations of the Forest Laws, most of the Adivasis of this district are entitled with either no land or very little.

CONTRIBUTION AND INSPIRATION FROM ADIVASIS

Sense of Equality

Adivasi society was built on a foundation of equality and respect for all forms of life. In the philosophy of Adivasi, there is a deep recognition of interdependence between nature and human society. Moreover, people are given respect and status according to their contribution to social needs but only while they are performing that particular function. For example, a priest could be treated with great respect during a religious ceremony; while a doctor revered during a medical consultation. But once such duties had been performed, the priest or doctor became equal to everyone else. The possession of highly valued skills or knowledge does not lead to a permanent prestigious status. In other words, no individuals or groups could engage in a lordship over any kinds of life, nor enjoy hereditary rights. It was the simplicity, the love of nature, the absence of coveting the goods and wealth of the others, and the social harmony of tribal society that attracted Gautam Buddha, and had a profound impact on the ethical core of his teachings.

Indigenous Knowledge of Adivasis

India's regional languages such as Oriya, Marathi or Bengali are developed from the tribal languages as the fusion with Sanskrit (or Pali) and virtually all the Indian languages have incorporated words from the vocabulary of Adivasi languages.

Adivasis who developed an intimate knowledge of various plants and their medicinal uses played a valuable role in the development of Ayurvedic medicine. In a recent study, the All India Coordinated Research Project (AICRP) credited Adivasi communities with the knowledge about 9,000 species of plants, including 7,500 used for human healing and veterinary health care. Dental care products like *datun*, roots and condiments like *turmeric* used in cooking and ointments are also the discoveries of Adivasi, as are many fruit trees and vines. Ayurvedic cures for arthritis and night blindness owe their origins to Adivasi knowledge.



Source: Neethi Vedhi

Adivasis also played an important role in the development of agricultural practices - such as rotational cropping, fertility maintenance through alternating the cultivation of grains with leaving land fallow or using it for pasture. The country can learn much from the beauty of Adivasi social practices, their culture of sharing and respect for all- their deep humility and love of nature- and most of all - their deep devotion to social equality and civic harmony.

The Role of Adivasis in the Freedom Movement

Adivasi uprisings in the Jharkhand belt were quelled by the British through massive deployment of troops across the region. The Kherwar uprising and the Birsa Munda movement were the most important struggles in late-18th century against British rule and their local agents. The long struggle led by Birsa Munda tackled the British policies that allowed the *zamindars* (landowners) and money-lenders to harshly exploit the Adivasis. In 1914, Jatra Oraon started the Tana Movement, which drew the participation of over 25,500 Adivasis. The Tana movement joined the nation-wide *Satyagraha* Movement (the non-violent movement for independence) in 1920 and stopped the payment of land-taxes to the colonial Government.

During ruling period of Britain, several revolts also took place in Orissa with the active participation of the Adivasis. The significant ones including the Paik Rebellion (1817), the Ghumsar uprisings (1836-1856), and the Sambhalpur revolt (1857-1864).

In the hill tribal tracts of Andhra Pradesh, a revolt broke out in August 1922. Led by Alluri Ramachandra Raju, better known as Sitarama Raju, the Adivasis of the Andhra hills succeeded in drawing the British into a full-scale guerrilla war. As the freedom movement spread, it drew Adivasis into all aspects of the struggle. Many landless and deeply oppressed Adivasis joined with the upper-caste freedom fighters expecting that the defeat of the British would usher in a new democratic era. Although independence has brought widespread gains for the vast majority of India, Dalits and Adivasis have often been left out, and new problems have rose for the nation's Adivasi populations. A disproportionate number of Adivasis have been displaced from their traditionally inhabited lands while many witnessed the access to natural resources were undercut by mafias and corrupt officials who have signed irregular commercial leases that conflict with the rights granted to Adivasis by the Indian Constitution.

ISSUES FACED BY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

According to IFAD, Indigenous Peoples suffer higher rates of poverty, landlessness, malnutrition, human rights violation, unemployment and internal displacement than other sects of the society, and they have lower level of literacy and less access to health services.

Situation of Adivasis in India

- 40.1 percent of the Adivasis are displaced
- 55.2 percent of the Adivasis are under the below poverty line
- 64 percent of the Adivasis are the poorest of the poor
- 63.5 percent of the Adivasi households do not have electricity
- 53.1 percent of the Adivasi households do not have drinking water source
- 83 percent of the Adivasi households do not have access to toilet facility
- 56 percent of the Adivasi children are undernourished
- 53 percent of the Adivasis are illiterate
- 76 percent of the Adivasis do not have permanent houses
- 93 percent of the Adivasis do not possess land

Land Issue

Land has been a major issue of Adivasis since 1950s. Few tribal families were allotted a portion of land by their erstwhile landlords. Government provided small holdings, but most of these holding are not viable and without proper title deeds. For the traditionally agricultural communities, land alienation has brought serious impacts on their livelihood, as a major portion of their land was alienated to settler farmers.

Economic Issue

The lifestyle and livelihood of most Adivasis are dependent on forest and agriculture which is the major source of their income. Adivasis became landless due to the large scale migration of people from the other districts. This leads to low family income and reduced employment opportunities in the agricultural sector. The poor marketing infrastructure, changes in cropping pattern, supply of poor quality of seeds, pesticides, low-levels of agricultural yields due to non-adoption of improved agricultural methods, entry of large number of non-tribal in labour market and the decline of price for cash crops resulted in low-income levels of tribal groups. In addition, diminishing traditional skills, non availability of alternative skills, regulations on non-timber forest produce have also caused low income of Adivasi families.

Health Issue

Most Adivasis live in poor hygienic condition resulting in various problems such as low life expectancy, low nutritional intake, high morbidity and high infant mortality rate. The inadequacy of public health care delivery system, poor preventive measures, insufficient income and high consumption of tobacco and alcohol have led Adivasis to an unhealthy life. Comparing to the earnings of Adivasis, the expenditure on health is a heavy burden which keeps Adivasis living in a poor health conditions.

Education Issue

The lack of motivation of parents and teachers to educate the young generations, high level of drop outs from schools and unsatisfactory performance of staff in schools cause low results in higher secondary levels and, thus, low educational attainment. Lack of infrastructure in schools, lack of transport facilities and low income of parents are some reasons for failure of retaining young people's interests in education.

Human Rights Issue

In terms of human development index, Adivasis are at the bottom of the rank in every state, every district and every village. No one can question the basic fact and truth that the Adivasis are the poorest of the poor in India. About 65 percent of the ST population in India (except north east region) is living below the poverty line. Low literacy rate, high drop-out rate in school, nutritional deficiencies, endemic diseases and poor living conditions, low bargaining power, indebtedness, forcible eviction, migration, mortgage, atrocities, violence, exploitation of traditional knowledge, and degradation of forest resources, negligence are the long-term problems faced by Adivasi people.

The Adivasis in India live under extreme poverty and hunger because the majority of them do not have land for cultivation. The Adivasis do not have the habit of saving money. Most of the displaced Adivasis are denied of their right to live in forest which used to be their source of livelihood. Now they depend only on daily manual work to meet their expenses.

Needs of Adivasis

- Eradication of extreme poverty & hunger
- Promotion of alternative livelihoods & employment opportunities
- Education to increase school attendance & reduction of school drop-outs
- Protection & promotion of forest rights of the indigenous communities
- Revival of indigenous knowledge & traditional identity & wisdom
- Regeneration of forest resources & conservation practices
- Preservation of gender equality & promotion of women's empowerment
- Creation of political education & awareness on reservation policy
- Development of civil society action for the sustainable development

RESPONSE OF GOVERNMENTS AND NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS

The Indian Government: Laws Relating to Indigenous People

Many tribal places are in hilly and forest areas and the tribal activities mainly depended on the resources from forests. Forests and tribal have a symbiotic relationship. In spite of being threatened by modernization of the country, some of the tribal continue to live in forest areas. Some of them survive only on the collection of minor forest produce. The tribal have been using forest from generation to generation as their source of livelihood. However, with the enactment of the Forest Conservation Act 1980, their rights to collect minor forest produce and other forest produce has been restricted considerably. In the view of this, the National Forest Policy 1988 stipulates that all agencies responsible for forest management should ensure that the tribal peoples are closely associated with the regeneration, plantation, development and harvest of forests so as to provide them with favorable employment.

Moreover, there are several laws and amendments, enacted in the tribal areas, which are working at cross purposes or have no linkage to the Fifth Scheduled of the Constitution. But whatever rules or legislations made in these areas have to strictly fall within the ambit of the Fifth Scheduled and not allowed to dilute it. For example, the Panchayatraj Extension to Scheduled Areas Act of 1996 (PESA) clearly supports the Fifth Scheduled and the rights of the Gram Sabhas (Village assembly) in the SAs. Also, the Land Acquisition Act, the Mines and Minerals Development Act, the Forest Management Act, the Environment Protection Act and others are to be superseded by the Land Transfer Regulation Act or the Fifth Schedule.



Source: Neethi Vedhi

As per the PESA Act 1996, the Gram Sabha has the supreme authority to make decision over the natural resources, including non-timber forest produces (NTFP). Those monopoly restrictions over NTFP should be immediately removed while ensuring social protection through providing support price to tribal. Tribals are allowed to collect, process, transportation and market NTFP freely.

Although the government has passed many Laws and constitutional provisions to respect the constitutional rights of Adivasis, constitutional rights, like the Fifth Schedule, have been denied to tribal of South India, except those living in certain areas of Andhra Pradesh. For example,

in spite of the Government passing the Forest Rights Act, the Forest Department is not willing to hand over forest land to the Adivasis. Although there are agricultural lands available with the Government in many places, the Kerala government is not ready to respect the Agreement signed in 2001 with the Adivasi leaders promising to give one to five acres of land to every Adivasi family in the state. Despite the Government Order to permit the Adivasis to construct their own houses after receiving grant from state governments, the Integrated Tribal Department and Panchayats do not allow them to construct their own houses. The tribal groups in Southern States, despite their demand of entitlement of SAs, have been deprived the ST status for a long time. Contrary to Government's claim that tribal populations are diffused in certain states, Adivasis live together in certain locations of every state. The notification of these areas as SA has not been done due to lack of concern for tribal on the part of rulers and Tribal Departments. Although 6.3 percent of tribal populace of Andhra Pradesh was entitled with SA, Tribal Welfare programmes have not been implemented properly.

Although there are constitutional rights provided, the excessive political influence and pressure on the Panchayats and the Department Officials, deny basic rights to the Adivasis. The political parties are concerned only about the mainstream communities, while Adivasis are not a vote bank

in most of the states in India. Most Non-Government Agencies also do not take up a Rights-Based Approach to tackle the issues faced by Adivasis as they fear of losing Government funds. The Government must take Adivasis into priority and implement all the schemes with their active participation of tribal peoples.

Non-Government Organizations: Programmes with Different Approaches

The Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) have been spending a great amount of time and money to uplift the Adivasi communities in the past 25 years. The NGOs conducted various training programmes and awareness sessions on human rights to Adivasis. However, these programmes have focused more on increasing welfare provision than raising the human rights consciousness and developing people's movement. The Adivasi communities become over-dependent on NGOs for providing their necessities. Recently, initiatives have been taken by some networks with rights-based approach to instill right consciousness in Adivasis and to form a national movement to fight for their rights. Only this approach will enable efforts of Adivasis to demand their rights in both public and private sectors

In India we have enough laws and regulations, policies and welfare schemes to uplift the life situation of Adivasis. But the root problem is that the Government and its officials do not show commitment and determination to implement them properly. It is important that the international community pressurize the Indian Central Governments, State Governments and the Adivasi welfare-related Departments to protect the rights of Adivasis.

CONCLUSION

The country can learn much from the beauty of Adivasi social practices, their culture of sharing and respect for all - their deep humility and love of nature - and most of all - their deep devotion to social equality and civic harmony. However, in the increasingly industrialized and modernized world, the indigenous peoples always become marginalized with their distinct relationship with the nature. The government and civil society movements should ensure that means of livelihood for indigenous peoples are available to them. The culture and traditions of indigenous people should be protected at all cost. The society at large should be ready to learn from the value system of indigenous people to keep the world with greater sense of equality and fraternity.

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Abbreviations

All India Coordinated Research Project (AICRP)

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)

Non-timber forest produces (NTFP)

Particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTG)

Scheduled Areas (SAs)

Scheduled Tribes (STs)

Panchayatraj Extension to Scheduled Areas Act of 1996(PESA)

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII)