

“We Are, We Were And We Will Be Here”

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[This report is based on the final narrative discourse of Mazdoor Adhikar Mela Organised by BIRSA Mines Monitoring Centre at Bokaro, Jharkhand, April 2-4, 2006]

Adivasis are the first peoples of India. Dalits as untouchable Indians subsist at the margin or outside of the so-called civil society. A third set of marginalised peoples, long added but very recently has come into focus of attention, courtesy Medha Patkar, are the oustees who are displaced from a sustainable livelihood by the mines, dams-bridges-flyovers and industries. A vast tract of land comprising the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh in Eastern India—the homeland of the Adivasis, Dalits and oustees—contributes about 80% of the country’s energy needs in the form of coal, hydro and atomic fuels. And more than 40% of India’s mineral wealth is found in this region. A large rain forest and a vast tract of fertile agricultural land put stamp on this region as one to be expropriated from the Adivasis, Dalits and the marginalised by the rapidly penetrating capitalism facilitated by both UPA and NDA governments at the centre and therefore by all the parliamentary political parties of India. Capitalism entered this region long ago in the days of the British raj by bringing in its own class of rulers, encouraging immigration by outsiders gradually reducing the Adivasis to a smaller ratio. In their scheme the Adivasis were considered an ‘overburden’ until they could be transferred to the class of workers much needed for hazardous manual work in mines and allied industries that were initially non-mechanised and badly needed this kind of labour. The Adivasis who joined this class were reduced to the coolie-proletariat class that fill the hovels and shanties at the margin of so-called development structures such as industrial units, mills and factories, railways and ports. They build structures, yet they are displaced by the structures and undergo untold misery in their millions.

Already being the underdog, the implementation of the IMF/WTO agenda in India unfolding through the NEW Economic Policies of UPA pursued by state governments including the CPI(M)-led government of West Bengal has hit this segment of the working class the hardest. This segment is the primordial unorganised informal ghost-labour-through contractors euphemistically called contract labour that is outside the purview of Indian labour laws. The so-called Contract Labour Abolition Act, 1972 has been on paper ever since its promulgation in the early 1970s. The Adivasis, Dalits and now the Ousteers from Narmada, Singur, Kulpi, Haldia, Kalinganagar constitute almost the whole of this segment. The movement of peoples in this segment is based not on economic issues alone but more than that by the issues of right to a distinct identity and culture, the homeland rights, the issue of livelihood rights and ownership rights to natural resources. A new subaltern politics in the form of continuous surge of people’s movements with linkages to Adivasi-Dalit-Oustee-segment of contractual labour in Special Economic Zones is now in incubation, as is evident from Mazdoor Adhikar Mela (MAM), a workers’ right jamboree,

held at Bokaro, Jharkhand (2-4 April '06), promising to bring the rights of the unorganised and contract labour back on the political agenda, collectively to look for innovative ways and means to reinvent workers' bargaining power, to strengthen trade union movement and to develop linkages between social movements and workers' rights movement. Ample opportunities await MAM since in this region alone the Steel and Mineral sector's profit has grown at the rate of 300% over the years, yet the labour costs are continuously cut (in the same period)—a contradiction not attended to by the advocates of market reforms, the party-controlled national Trade Unions in different hues.

From the deliberations in MAM came the story of plight of the migrant girl children from Tribal villages bordering “developed” industrial hubs in Jharkhand that has witnessed such development for more than a century. Domestic labour by girl children is a kind of bonded labour. According to Jemma Toppo the narrator, there are over 3.5 lakhs (350000) of young women and girl children from the central Indian tribal region, working as housemaids in other Indian cities. Most of the women who migrated to urban areas in this way do not return to their homes. At first these migrants were employed in convents and other church institutions in the 1970s. Large number of young girls with no means of livelihood in their villages were lured to seek a job elsewhere. And the church organised a placement cell in Delhi. Soon the ‘private’ sector entered the scene. Violence on women who emigrated through the private sector became commonplace. The ‘private sector’ operators use Christian motifs and names of saints to force migration and women trafficking. Sexual harassments, physical violence and mental torture are the common lot of these poor tribal girls who are mostly illiterate and have no idea about the city they have been forced to live in. Everyday young girl children from rural Jharkhand are trafficked to resource-rich and maid-servant-deficient areas, mostly in cities. “I found 35 pregnant girls in Delhi, working as domestic labour”, says Jemma Toppo. On the other hand large scale migration of young girls from Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and other tribal areas have created a ‘shortage’ of mothers in the villages leading to chaos and extinction of some family lines and clans. The demographic situation in some villages in tribal Jharkhand is so acute that only 35 women who are engaged in reproduction in a village with 1000 population, that is 35 per 1000 ie, 0.35% reproduction rate per year, far below the national average, is in vogue. What a “non-violent” genocide! And that too in the name of “development”. Perhaps, this fate awaits the oustees of Singur hundred years hence! Chetna, an NGO from Chennai added fuel to the fire kindled by Jemma Toppo by reporting that in the southern cities there are “placement agencies” with air conditioned offices who draw commission from prospective employers. At the tail end of the chain is often a middle aged woman who herself was violated like this during her childhood.

Many notables and VIPs stepped into MAM and chaired some sessions. But the message “We Are, We Were, We Will Be Here” of the Adivasis, Dalits, Ousteers and the Trafficked to produce an impression about the rapidly emerging scenerio of social upheaval was by and large sidelined. Could not the BIRSA meet add “We Will Rise in Rebellion”? *EE*