

## **Of Tribals and Salwa Judum**

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Tribal people living in the jungles of Chattisgarh make a living mostly by selling tendu leaves, chironji seeds and barks of trees. The income is small. Much more income is possible by mining of bauxite and other minerals lying beneath the tendu and chironji trees. Thus, the Government has taken the decision to uproot these people from their traditional livelihoods which is a necessary cost of development-like birth pains. Lord Krishna and Arjuna had once burnt down the Khandava forests. Tribals living in those forests would perhaps have perished along with the massive trees and innumerable wildlife. The cleared land was then used for expansion of settled agriculture in the doab of Yamuna and Ganga Rivers. Soon, billions of plants of rice and barley grew instead of wild trees previously. Similarly, the Government of Chattisgarh had decided to mine minerals from the forest areas while displacing the tribal people.

The impact of this 'development' on the tribal people is terrible. They are deprived of their livelihood, howsoever meagre. But leaving them dependent on agriculture is no solution either. The share of agriculture in India's national income has declined from 56 percent in 1951 to 20 percent at present and this trend is continuing not only in India but across the world. This happens because the use of capital in agriculture is inherently limited. Only so many tube-wells can be sunk and tractors deployed in ten acres of land. The same land can absorb crores of investment and provide employment to a thousand persons if used for industry. Less use of capital leads to less income of Indian farmers. Moreover, increase in agricultural production along with small increase in global population is leading to a long term decline in price of agricultural commodities.

Tribal people often demand implementation of land reforms. This demand is wholly justified. However, implementation of land reforms as done in West Bengal and Kerala will not solve the problem of poverty as it has failed to do in these states. Young people from the villages will continue to migrate to the cities and seek jobs in industries in Chattisgarh as happening in West Bengal and Kerala. Such migration takes place because the increase in incomes from land reforms is eaten away by declining price of agricultural commodities and inflationary pressure on daily consumer goods.

Expansion of rural infrastructure will likewise be ineffective in securing the tribal people's welfare. The British established a well knit network of railways, roads, telephone and telegraph in the country. Yet, India continued to get impoverished. This infrastructure was used to transfer India's natural resources to England. Mere creation of infrastructure thus brings no guarantee of development. It must be examined whether the road is used, in the main, to take out natural resources or to bring in manufactured goods. The direction of pull determines whether infrastructure will benefit the local people or harm them. Given the fact that people of Dantewala have little bargaining power vis-a-vis Raipur, it is likely that roads will be used more to impoverish the people of Dantewala and enrich the people of Raipur. Road should certainly be made because development of Raipur is also the development of the country. But one

should not be under an illusion that such roads will help the tribal people to obtain higher incomes.

Preservation of tribal culture does not help either. Truly, the tribal people have a worshipful attitude towards the land of their village. Their soul is destroyed when they are uprooted from their ancestral lands. But glorification of tribal culture comes with its own problems. Dr Ambedkar had compared the villages to ghettos and advised dalits to migrate to the cities. He did not glorify the dalit culture of the villages. Similarly many tribal youth itch to move to the cities. This author has heard them complain that the urban people glorify the tribal culture in order to lock the tribals into their backward mould and reduce the claim from tribals on urban facilities.

The politics of *Salwa Judum* should be seen in this backdrop. Main problem is that tendu leaves and chironji seeds provide little incomes. This lack of income was made worse due to exploitation by contractors and patwaris. The helpless tribals sought help from Naxalites whose ideology is pro-poor even if many perversions have crept into their practice. Naxalites followed the formula of civil war. They challenged the state directly. They blew up electricity towers like Saddam Hussein's retreating army burnt the oil wells. Both sides perpetrated atrocities in the process. Naxalites killed innocent tribals on mere suspicion of being police informers. The state burnt houses of innocent tribals on suspicion they were supporting Naxalites. Caught in this cross-fire, many tribals, not all, fled their villages and they were given protection in refugee camps [concentration camps?] by the state. This movement came to be known as *Salwa Judum*. The civil liberties movements accused the state of excesses in engineering this fleeing of tribals from their villages. The Supreme Court asked the National Human Rights Commission to inquire into the violations of human rights by the state. The Committee of the NHRC found that there were some violations by the state but those by the Naxalites were more. However, the NHRC Committee has accepted that violations by the state are more serious in view of it being the custodian of human rights of the people. This writer feels that violations by the Naxalites are less serious also because they are a reaction to deprivation of livelihood of the people.

This debate on atrocities is futile, however, in absence of a roadmap of development. The civil liberties advocates and NHRC, both concede that the problem is basically socio-economic. According to a report issued by Centre of Science and Environment, the Government of Chattisgarh wants to open the area for mining. The spontaneous displacement of people under *Salwa Judum* is being used as a cover to remove the people from the mining areas. On the other hand, the civil liberties movement contends that distribution of land would lead to the development of the tribal people. The common meeting point is that both want 'development'. Question is whether this should be secured by mining or by land redistribution. This writer feels the position of the Government is more accurate. It is difficult to secure 'development' of the tribals through land distribution because incomes in agriculture are declining anyways. The problem, however, is that development of mining, under present circumstances, is worse. Tribal people are displaced from their traditional livelihoods and are left in a no-man's land with no income whatsoever. The solution to this predicament is to give the displaced people a genuine and respectful share in the incomes from mining. Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh repeatedly says that displacement should be a win-win proposition for

all concerned. But businesses are greedy and Governments are shortsighted. They deprive the people of their meagre livelihoods in the name of 'development'. The problem can only be solved by giving a share to the tribals from the royalty obtained from mining bauxite and other minerals. □□□