

RIGHT TO EARTH

Adivasi Awakening and Emergence of New Politics

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The rising trend of adivasi awakening is a defining characteristic of contemporary India. There is an unprecedented scale of assertion of not only the right to livelihood, but also right to dignity and the right to selfhood among the adivasis of India. The political upsurge in tribal India in defence of right to land and forest reflects this new awakening which is a positive sign of democratic transformation of modern India.

Yet, it is an irony that much of the intellectual and policy discourse including the media does not treat it as a positive phenomenon. Instead of making that the fundamental premise in discussing the subject, the adivasi awakening is seen as a disruption of a rising India's growth story. Indeed the adivasi movements have resisted the corporate plunder of India's natural resources and are the bulwark of people's defence against capitalist globalisation.

It should be pointed out that the new political condition of adivasi awakening challenges the governance paradigm of the state that seeks to reduce the issue to one of violent challenge to state authority. It also contests the patronising approach of the dominant sections of the civil society advocating empathy and welfare of the tribal people. At the same time, this new trend of tribal consciousness exposes the mobilization perspective of the major political parties who only try to build vote banks in the tribal areas. This awakening also raises new questions about the longstanding anthropological preoccupation of much of the academia with the "uniqueness of the tribes" which forms the basis of many social policies.

The new awakening is the cumulative outcome of many historical processes and centuries of struggle against colonial domination. It is not the result of the naxalite movement alone. In fact, Maoist politics has been reoriented to respond to this new awakening in the adivasi areas and in the process has undergone transformation and achieved much support among adivasis. For one thing the new level of political consciousness in the adivasi areas demands a reconsideration of all previous formulations. It shows the emergence of a new politics that ends the era of treating adivasis as objects of welfare and assimilation and begins an era of adivasis as subjects and agency of self-determination heralding comprehensive emancipation of all oppressed people. An acknowledgement of this new phenomenon will lead to a serious indictment of prevailing state policy despite measures such as the Forest Rights Act. It also calls for the adoption of a fresh outlook on the part of the civil society and the academia on politics and development.

QUESTIONING THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE STATE, CIVIL SOCIETY AND ACADEMIA

The present political awakening of adivasis reconnects their history with the adivasi revolts against colonial onslaughts in the 19th century when the colonial state sought to penetrate tribal areas in search of timber and minerals and established control over those territories. During the first half of the 20th century numerous uprisings took place against the British as well as feudal autocracies. But after independence and integration of the princely states, while most of the colonial laws continued to operate, the tribal areas were governed under the constitutional framework of cultural protection and economic welfare. It had the clear objective of slow assimilation of the adivasis into 'mainstream' society. Nehru's *Panshasheel* on adivasis welfare, the reservation of seats for Scheduled Tribes in legislatures and civil service and even the tribal sub-plan providing for special allocation of funds in every department of government were part of this overall strategy. The vantage point for state policy was thus one of

governance and welfare. This policy envisaged administering tribal areas through state apparatus and planned development and promoting welfare activities such as education, health and building of infrastructure for economic development. This flowed from the Constitutional stipulation providing special protection in the Fifth Schedule and other measures. While these welfare measures were being implemented, the exploitation of forest and mining resources by indigenous and foreign capital persisted. As the years went by, the state strategy failed to cope with the aspirations of the tribal people who remained poor and marginalised.

The vantage point for the dominant civil society was inherited from the colonial state to treat the adivasis as the poor brethren deserving special support. The Hindu Brahmanic culture was projected as the 'automatic process' of acculturation in the history of the adivasis just as the western education was promoted as the common goal for all Indians. European colonialism had colonised the non-western world for what it considered as its 'civilising mission'. In the same vein, the non-tribal upper class, upper caste elite of India considered it their duty for 'civilising' the 'uncivilised' adivasis. The dominant discourse is still permeated by terms like 'primitive tribes', 'criminal tribes' and the like. Even many of the most pro-adivasi social workers, civil servants and intellectuals carry patronising attitudes, though with the best of intentions, to promote welfare of the adivasis. But the days of such patronage seem to be over. It is a different era, the era of people's rights.

Congress and the other major political parties operate within a framework that combines the state perspective of governance and welfare, and the civil society approach to patronise. The electoral system requires reservation of seats for ST a specified number of constituencies (6.5% reservation in central institutions though the ST population in 2001 census was 8.2%) in Parliament and proportionate number in State legislatures and panchayats according to the ST population in the area. It should be recognised that this process of reservation-based electoral politics has brought up from the grassroots level upwards two generations of adivasi politicians in India. The reservation for ST in civil services has also produced large number of adivasi officers, though many posts remain unfilled despite the monitoring by the judiciary and the National Commission on Scheduled Tribes. But even after sixty years of electoral politics none of the major political parties has allowed the emergence of a significant tribal political leadership capable of influencing national level policy making. The adivasi leaders remain protégés of upper caste or middle caste leaders in the various States. After the late Jharkhand movement leader Jaipal Singh, there has not been an adivasi leader of national repute. Shibu Soren could have filled that void but for the pressures of coalition politics which severely damaged his reputation. Thus the party system has failed the adivasis in making their voice critical in national policy-making.

Anthropologists and other social scientists, some working within government and many in the academia, generally recognised the dignity of the adivasis and their customs while engaging in in-depth analysis of the uniqueness of various tribal groups. While some of the colonial scholars assessed the tribal practices against European civilisation norms, a few others discovered the logic and reason behind many tribal practices. In the post-independence period some scholars put forward evidence to appreciate the rational practices of the tribal communities in spheres of economy, politics and culture. Still a minority, they engaged in deeper understanding of the knowledge systems, production practices, political traditions and environmental philosophy of adivasis and argued the case for taking them seriously and with respect, as alternative systems in the human civilisation. They championed the cause of the adivasis in public discourse as well as government forums often with great sincerity and determination. However, all their strenuous efforts ended up as inputs into the dominant policy making of the state. Their work, valuable as it certainly was, failed to persuade civil society to re-examine its patronising attitude or the state to go beyond its welfare and assimilation strategy.

The operative consequences of these approaches did include many laudable initiatives in independent India. For example, alienation of tribal land to non-tribals was forbidden by law in practically all the States. But in practice massive land transfers took place circumventing the law. The Panchayat system under the 73rd amendment of the Constitution was extended under PESA Act 1996, but

its very important provisions were hardly implemented or were invariably manipulated to suit the state or the corporate interest. Not a single State has notified rules under the PESA Act so far. The Forest rights Act, 2006 was another major step to restore rights to land and forest to the tribals and other forest dwellers, but its implementation has been extremely tardy. The education and health policies did make special provisions for the adivasis which did have some positive consequences. But the basic social indicators show vast disparity between adivasis and dalits on the one hand and the rest of the society on the other, the former with distressing levels of living conditions. Thus on the whole as a result of these approaches and policies Adivasis, remained the victims of cumulative deprivation in contemporary India.

GLOBALISATION'S AGGRESSION ON ADIVASIS

In the early 1990s the onset of neo-liberal policies of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation brought in a new wave of aggression on the adivasis. The old colonial logic was back—arguing that capital and technology should be allowed to go freely wherever raw materials were located. On that basis European colonialism had occupied most of Asia, Africa and Latin America (ASAFLA). Indian rulers now adopted an economic growth strategy inviting foreign capital and encouraging major Indian business houses to enter the forest areas, engage in mining and set up mineral-based industries. This put the mineral-rich States of central and eastern India, especially Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha in the centre of attention for major investment firms. A number of proposals for steel and alumina plants came up in these states which are rich in iron ore, bauxite and coal as well as other precious metals. Steel plants by Tata were to come up in Lohandiguda in Chhatisgarh, Kalinganagar in Odisha. The Korean company POSCO signed an MoU with Odisha government to build a steel plant in Jagatsinghpur and mine iron ore in Khandadhar. Aluminium Plants by many foreign based companies were to be set up in the tribal areas of central India; for example, by Utkal Alumina in Kshipur and Vedanta in Lanjigarh. These are only a few illustrations of a vast number of mineral based industries being located in adivasi areas.

This is when adivasis woke up once again to strongly protest against the location of such projects in their land. Already, they had suffered enough due to displacement caused by dams, mining and heavy industries since independence. According to one estimate, 80 percent of the sixty million displaced by projects in the first fifty years since independence were adivasis. In each of these project areas people's movements came up challenging the rationale for these projects. The movements pointed out that the projects caused displacement, took away the sources of livelihood, destroyed the natural environment and created cultural alienation. It should be stressed that all the movements—Kshipur, Lanjigarh, Kalinga-nagar, Jagatsinghpur (POSCO) were peaceful democratic struggles by local people. Even though they started as protest movements against specific projects, they grew into movements raising fundamental issues of the development strategy, of the consequences of globalisation for the marginalised sections of society and the larger human rights issue of self-determination. A new right thus appeared on the scene, *the right to earth*.

ADIVASI SWARAJ AND THE RIGHT TO EARTH

The people's movements in the adivasi areas affirmed the right of the adivasis and all local inhabitants to exercise control over their land and other natural and cultural resources of their area and share it with others only on mutually agreed terms. This can be called the 'right to earth'. The entire philosophy underlying the anti-colonial struggle was indeed this. Extending Mahatma Gandhi's concept of swaraj one can suggest that this is the right which can fulfil the urges of self-realisation of the people in an area, and adivasis included.

It is a recognition of this right that led to the provision in the PESA that without the consultation with—it should mean the consent of—the Gram Sabha no land can be acquired in a village in a scheduled area for any industrial purpose. But as people have seen in practice this provision exists only in violation. There are many examples in Kshipur where Gram Sabha consent has been obtained by government officials

with police presence in the meetings. In Jagatsinghpur two Gram Sabhas have clearly decreed against the POSCO project. Yet the government succeeded in meeting the formal requirements by manipulating the process and was determined to go ahead with the project. The POSCO Pratirodh Sangram Samiti, however, persisted with its strong mobilisation of local people to resist acquisition of their land.

Right to earth is not only a narrow defense of local right to land, but is a defining right to evolve a mode of transformation and manage it according to the interests of the local people. No doubt, the local community has to be transformed at the same time so that the hierarchical structure of the village did not perpetuate existing inequalities. This is where swaraj has to go together with mutual development which is embodied in the concept of *Ubuntu* which in Zulu language of South Africa means “I am because you are” and “I can develop only if you can develop.”

The ongoing discourse on a new Land Acquisition Act and a new Rehabilitation Policy in India has clearly shown that the state and the corporate interests still do not read the writing on the wall. They do not take cognizance of the right to earth of the adivasis and other local inhabitants. Hence the confrontation is likely to escalate.

NAXALBARI TO NARAYANPATNA

In the first decade of the Maoist movement in India, in Naxalbai and more so in Srikakulam two issues had come to the fore, land to the tiller and exploitation of the adivasis. These two issues, namely land rights and multidimensional oppression, are most conspicuous in the case of the adivasis. But more importantly, they are symptomatic of the general situation in the country. Initially during the 1970's the Indian state took a few measures in response to these demands by treating the Naxalite challenge as essentially involving issues of agrarian structure. This policy changed in the 1980s when a new approach emerged in state policy that put it as both a law and order challenge as well as a socio-economic problem. The era of killings in false encounters thus began. This policy continued with varying degrees of field application in different States. By the mid-2000s when globalisation reached a new momentum and mega industry projects came up, a new perspective was announced. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's statement in 2005 that naxalite threat posed the greatest challenge to India's internal security opened a new chapter on the Indian state policy towards the Maoist movement. It gave priority to liquidating the naxalites on the ground. Operation Green Hunt launched in 2009 represented this new phase of state policy on the naxalites.

During the first term of UPA a Planning Commission Expert Group led by D Bandyopadhyay had recommended a host of socio-economic measures by treating the naxalite problem essentially as a development challenge needing a political response. That perspective was relegated to the background and a fullscale militaristic offensive was on against the Maoists. As Home Minister Chidambaram put it, civil authority had to be re-established before development activity can be launched in an area. There were some initiatives such as the Integrated Action Plan in 60 naxalite affected districts out of the 160 affected districts in 13 States of India allocating Rs 30 crores a year for each district. These were seen by the adivasis as bureaucracy-led programmes to mainly facilitate armed operations against their movements. The new anti-naxalite package consisted of three elements: one, the Operation Green Hunt using massive paramilitary force and giving arms and training civilians for anti-naxalite operations such as Salwa Judum in Chhatisgarh and Special Police Officers in the all the affected districts; two, enacting and enforcing extraordinary laws such as UAPA, AFSPA and , giving enormous powers to security forces, and three, showcasing some developmental measures. Paramilitary forces are engaged in what they call area domination operations in the affected areas. These operations have been documented in detail. It involved arresting tribals in large numbers as Maoist sympathisers, killing them if challenged, burning pro-Maoist villages, harassing and raping women and so on. This package has failed to check the growth of the Maoist movement among the adivasis. In fact they have extended their support base to new areas in central and eastern India. The policy of arming civilians to fight the Maoists through formations like Salwa Judum has been a clear failure and it has only increased the violent confrontation in the region. The judgement of the Supreme Court on 5 July declaring the arming of tribal youth as SPOs,

Koya Commandos, Salwa Judum and the like as illegal and unconstitutional has discredited this tactic of the state even further. The policy package of the Indian state has failed to win over the adivasis into the state system. That is because this did not address the basic issues underlying adivasi awakening.

This was once again demonstrated in the case of the kidnapping of Vineel Krishna, the Collector of Malkangiri in Odisha in March. The agreement worked out by the mediators which secured the release of Krishna stipulated the release of political prisoners, especially adivasis of Narayanpatna and implementation of some development plans in the remote cut-off areas of Malkangiri. On both the fronts the state failed to act and the violent operations by the paramilitary forces as well as the Maoists resumed in July.

The state policy also aimed at silencing civil liberty voices who challenged the coercive approach of the state and persisted in demanding comprehensive responses to the root causes of the Maoist movement. The arrest and prosecution of Binayak Sen in Chhatisgarh is the single most blatant illustration of this approach. But for the widespread protest in India and abroad and the Supreme Court intervention Binayak Sen would have languished in prison like hundreds of other activists. He is out on bail from the Supreme Court while the appeal against his life imprisonment verdict continues in court.

The naxalite movement provided substantial support to the process of adivasi awakening at a time when state policy instead of responding to their political urges, had facilitated their further exploitation through mega projects. However, adivasis awakening has a distinct history of its own and is wider and deeper than the Maoist movement in many ways. Their movements against exploitation by the moneylenders, against land alienation, against big dams and recently against mega industrial projects started as autonomous movements and not by the Maoists. In some of these cases when peaceful struggles were suppressed by the state, the alienated youth joined the Maoist ranks to carry on the struggle. The Narayanpatna land struggle is a clear case of this where Nachika Linga, a naib Sarpanch at one time, after failing through the panchayats to recover illegally transferred tribal land, led a people's march to occupy the land in June 2009. His organisation, Chashi Mulia Adivasi Sangh had given notice to the government giving details of the illegally alienated tribal land. Initially the State government was considering to examine the land alienation cases. But Operation Green Hunt reached Narayanpatna in October 2009 and decided to treat it as a Maoist venture. It launched a massive operation to suppress it. The movement is still going on with a section having joined the Maoists while another section still carrying on the peaceful struggle.

The fact that Maoist movement expanded its ideological scope to include the displacement issues showed, first of all, how naxalites had adjusted their strategy in the light of local conditions. Second, adivasi awakening challenged the development paradigm in totality, not only its capitalist class character. That the process of change has to be decided by the local adivasis, in conformity with their socio-political goals, environmental philosophy and local culture is far broader than the industrial revolution paradigm which many Marxists still share. Third, the totality of the adivasi struggle tradition may include armed struggle, but does not ignore the vast areas of open democratic political, economic, social and cultural struggle. They inherit great civilisational legacies of adivasi civilisation the positive elements of which they must preserve and develop. The knowledge systems of adivasis deserve as much respect as any other knowledge system. Fourthly, the perspective on the relationship between humans and nature which gives rise to a host of environmental questions is yet another dimension of adivasi awakening. Fifthly, that there are local systems of religious beliefs other than the major religions of the world is emerging as yet another phenomenon in recent times. Many adivasis are listing themselves as members of their local religious community, rather than the recognised major religions, though the Census enumerated them under 'others'. Thus adivasi swaraj raises a number of issues which are equally significant for democratic transformation of Indian society as a whole. The Maoist movement and all other political movements can enrich themselves by fully integrating themselves with this process of adivasi awakening and participate in the new politics of people's democratic revolution in the twenty first century.

The State, civil society and academia can find liberative possibilities if they recognise the full magnitude of the evolving process of adivasi awakening which is much more than merely a violent challenge to authority. □□□

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