

Chapter 5

Adivasis struggle to survive where inequality rules

The 104.2 million Adivasi in our country constitute 8.6% of our total population. Nearly 20% of India's land mass is Adivasi's predominant area. Adivasis in India can be broadly classified into three groupings. The first consists of populations who predate the Indo-Aryan migrations, and are termed by many anthropologists as the Austro-Asiatic-speaking Australoid people. The Central Indian adivasis belong to this grouping¹. The other two groupings are the Caucasoid and Sino-Tibetan or Mongoloid tribal people of the Himalayan and North Eastern regions who migrated in later periods.

Article 366 (25) of the Constitution defines 'Scheduled Tribes, as "such tribes or tribal communities or part of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this Constitution". The criteria used for classification being geographical isolation, backwardness and having distinctive culture, language, religion and "shyness of contact".

Adivasis are found in the greatest numbers in Madhya Pradesh (12.23 million, or 20.3% of the state's population), Maharashtra (8.58 million or 8.9%), Odisha (8.15 million or 22.1%), Jharkhand (7.1 million or 26.35%), Chhattisgarh (6.16 million or 31.8%), Andhra Pradesh including Telangana (5.02 million or 6.6%), and West Bengal (4.4 million or 5.5%).

By proportion, however, the populations of states in the North East have the greatest concentrations of Adivasis. Thirty one per cent of the population of Tripura, 34% of Manipur, 64% of Arunachal Pradesh, 86% of Meghalaya, 88% of Nagaland, and 95% of Mizoram are scheduled tribes. Other heavy concentrations are in Dadra and Nagar Haveli, and Lakshadweep (94%)².

The Khasis, Nagas, Mizos, Garos, Karbis, Dimasas, Bodos, Misings, Rabhas, Dauris, Mismis, Daflas, Akas, Serekdukpens are the major Adivasi communities in the North-Eastern and Eastern frontiers of India. The Santhals, Mundas, Hos, Kharias, Paherias, Oraons, Konds etc. occupy the central belt of the older hills and plateaus along the dividing line between Indo-Gangetic plain and peninsular India. The Gonds, Bhils, Kurkas, Kols etc are the major tribes in the

¹ <https://scroll.in/article/773759/adivasis-indias-original-inhabitants-have-suffered-the-most-at-its-hands>

² <https://www.counterview.net/2019/12/favouring-tribals-and-ignoring-adivasis.html>

western region, the Koyas, Todas, Banjaras, etc. in South India and the Onges and others in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are the remaining Adivasi belts. There are about 550 tribes in India but 414 main tribes besides a good number of sub-tribes are listed as Scheduled Tribes.

Historically, access to, and ownership of, natural resources first stemmed from the principles of Common Property Rights over land, water and forests. When the British colonial rule began, Adivasis and colonial rulers fought a pitched battle over the natural resources. The colonial state began seizing control of these resources through the barrel of a gun. The British Imperialists used these natural resources to fuel their industrialization and profiteering models. In order to ensure uninterrupted access to these resources for the State, elaborate legislations and laws were drafted, thereby alienating the Adivasis from their cultural and historical rights over land, water and forests. Even though a special provision was made in the Indian Constitution for the Adivasis, the ruling class in Post-colonial India had continued with the same model of development.

Mainstream development paradigm pushes Adivasis out of their forests

The struggle for the survival of the Adivasis are inextricably related to their history and to the conditions in which they been subjected in course of time. Today the Adivasis, not only in India but also elsewhere in the world, are continuously being threatened with brutal deliberateness to be submerged. Following the legacy of the British colonial masters, the intention of India's ruling class since Independence has been 'to melt the Adivasi with the mainstream', where the 'mainstream' is modeled on the image of the class-in-power.

As a result, the alienation and exclusion of Adivasis from their historical rights over their natural resources continued in the name of 'national interest', which took the form of large dams and mega industrial and mining projects. In the neo-liberal era in post nineties, this alienation has accelerated and the objective has changed from the so called 'national interest' to market led economic development, a euphemism for privatization of natural resources.

The mainstream development paradigm imposed by the India's ruling class has aggravated discontent among the Adivasis. As described in Chapter 3 titled 'Jharkhand- a new state, old issues and its struggling people' that 'State-sponsored destructive development projects –be it mining, industries, firing range, power plants, dams or acquiring land for opening IITs, IIMs or other premier institutions – deprives Adivasis, Dalits, women and the marginalised sections of the basic tools of sustenance which they shape and build lives that retain a freedom from want. Displacement brings them face to face with human and ecological paradoxes with tragic consequences. Alienation, forcible

evacuation, the shifting of emotional territories, the schizophrenia of new locales'

Development projects are moreover legitimised as the cost of progress of the nation- a cost being borne by the Adivasis. The Adivasis are being pushed out of their forests and land. Though it's new, the process of pushing the Adivasis from their traditional homesteads to distant frontiers has been happening for years together. There is historical evidence which shows that the eviction of Adivasi peoples has been an age-old process. Their geographical history has been one of incessant displacement and relocation—often with the use of force and violence—deeper and deeper into inhospitable terrain³.

However, the tribal department or forest bureaucracy, lack an understanding of how Adivasis historically 'tilled' their land and survived in the forest. Since the times of the British rule, the "strange and unconventional" Adivasi way of cultivating and living, often nomadic and temporary, was not legally acknowledged even by the meticulous records of the British.

Consequently the state agencies responsible for correcting the historical injustices to these Adivasis end up glossing over this unjust past, not realising that Adivasis have been where they are due to the non-recognition of their way of life by the British colonial rulers. This misconception has been carried over to the post-independent state agencies, evident in the manner in which they have dealt with recognition of rights of genuine claimants⁴.

Adivasi hamlets turned into big prisons

Since Narendra Modi became India's Prime Minister in 2014, the NDA Government at the centre has been accelerating the path previous governments paved. It had turned the nation into a giant prison. Academicians, human rights activists, legal practitioners, journalists among the best brains of the country espousing the cause of the adivasis and the marginalised sections of the masses have been incarcerated for years together under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). They have been working for the fundamental rights of the poor and marginalised and upheld constitutional values were being labelled 'Urban Naxals' and harassed to no end. The façade of world's largest democracy has been torn asunder.

The present ruling dispensation of BJP-led NDA Government is a lethal combination of authoritarian and neo-liberal reforms which has been on the

³ <https://thewire.in/rights/how-development-excludes-adivasis>

⁴ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/forests/forest-rights-forgotten-histories-or-deliberate-ignorance--66139>

rise. The BJP led Central Government has been benefitting the corporate business while curtailing people's freedoms, dispossessing adivasis and dalits of their livelihoods and sharply increasing inequalities. The rising percentage of unemployment has broken all the records.

Adivasi forests, land and homesteads have turned into big prisons, deep into the heart of the country. The para military forces-CRPF, BSF and other security forces have surrounded adivasi villages or hilly areas, occupied their schools, and ran amok in their villages. The security forces murder, pillage, rape and burnt down entire village. As in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, it's estimated that 644 adivasi villages were emptied and villagers were put into internment camps. They also forced villagers to join their ranks under the threat of violence⁵. It devastated the adivasis living in Chhattisgarh. When adivasi' homes were burned down, if they hadn't already fled, they were branded terrorists, promised their 'freedom' only if they surrendered it first, and otherwise imprisoned.

In Jharkhand alone there are more than 4,000 Adivasis & Dalits who are incarcerated as alleged Naxalites are kept without even being produced for trial. As Father Stan Swamy, 83- year old Jesuit priest filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in Jharkhand High Court against the government Persecuted Prisoners Solidarity Committee (PPSC) founded by him and Sudha Bharadwaj, to fight for the release of around 3,000 adivasi men and women who had been labelled as Maoists and imprisoned. Most of them have been unjustly labelled 'Naxals'⁶. The court has been quite supportive and ordered the state to provide all the information about all the under-trials in January 2018. The BJP led Jharkhand Government was unwilling to provide the details because it has much to hide. Hence the case has been foisted on both of them to get out of the way.

Father Stan Swamy was arrested by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) on 8 October 2020, from Ranchi and charge-sheeted under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA) on unfounded charges and he breathed his last on 5th July 2021, which is an 'Institutional murder'. Sudha Bharadwaj earned her reputation as a lawyer who always spoke up for the oppressed. People from all corners from Chhattisgarh would make their way to her, whether to fight against the wrongful acquisition of their land by large companies or their unfair

5 <https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/06/27/fear-and-longing-in-bastar-for-adivasis-in-salwa-judum-camps-there-is-no-way-home>

6 <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/interview/stan-swamy-condition-of-human-rights-in-jharkhand-is-awful-question-govt-and-you-can-be-called-extremist>

retrenchment from the factory. On 28 August 2018, along with other lawyers, writers and activists, Sudha Bharadwaj was arrested in the Bhima Koregaon case and put in jail under the UAPA⁷.

While moving throughout India during my field visits prior to national lockdown, deeper into the adivasi hamlets in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and other states, many of them whom I met recounted the tales of police harassment and torture. During my interactions I came to know that police barge inside adivasi homes to arrest anyone on slightest of pretexts and take them into police custody. They are thrashed black and blue, even administered electric shocks and branded with hot iron rods to extract confession.

During 2019- 20, a total of 1,731 persons died in custody in India and there is almost five such deaths daily and most of the victims are Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims according to a report by United NGO Campaign Against Torture (UNCAT) which is a platform for action of the NGOs committed to stamp out torture worldwide.

Pushed to the condition of impoverishment and continuous harassment by the police or forest bureaucracy, Adivasis migrate to faraway places to escape the horrors at home and join the precarious armies of invisible workers. Despite their sweat, tears, and energy, they were ultimately barred from ever entering a shining new India. Underpaid and overworked, unprotected by labour legislation, often tied to labour contractors, they lived in slum colonies in conditions almost as bad as that of their kin in prison⁸.

However, Adivasis are constantly under assault by outsiders who see them as fossils of our past and attempt to exploit and colonize them while stealing their land, flora, and fauna. The British colonial rule forced them into permanent settlements so they could extract revenue, sold their trees for building railways and military ships, and excavated coal, ore, and bauxite from under their feet. Although the Adivasi bows and arrows were no match for the cannons and muskets fired at them, they maintained some access to their land, forests, and water to survive. Yet, despite these protections, it has been a losing battle to try to keep at bay the national and multinational corporations, aided and abetted by the state, who today steal Adivasi land and forests, perpetuating severe

7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sudha_Bharadwaj

8 <https://lifestyle.livemint.com/news/talking-point/from-naxalites-to-hindutva-forces-india-s-ideas-of-progress-have-failed-the-adivasis-11160265598747.html>

human rights abuses and turning India into world's most unequal nation. The class-in-power and ruling party leaders view Adivasi lands as vast mineral reserves that must be freed from the jungles inhabited by savage people who must be tamed, civilized, chained to work for the nation or they would perish.

Naxalism and Adivasis

To put a brave front against the class-in-power launching indignities, humiliation and imposing inequalities, the Naxalites marched into Adivasis forested hills from the agricultural plains organising the Dalits. The Naxalites marched into the Adivasi belts looking for better terrains for guerrilla warfare for their protracted war against the ruling class. Although, for centuries' colonial and independent India's ideas of progress had failed to value the Adivasi world, so the Naxalites have penetrated to confront the state repression and transform it for the betterment of the Adivasis

The Naxalite movement is essentially an act of dissent, a protest. This has been occasionally acknowledged by the government, although the government's actions never reflect this. It extends this attitude to all who question the government's violations of civil rights. The state has preferred to criminalize Naxalites in the name of fighting Naxalism, to the point of waging a full-fledged war against Adivasi populations. Lawyers and activists, who have taken it upon themselves to defend the constitutional rights of citizens, argue that ordinary laws available to the government are capable, if applied equitably, of dealing with any criminal activity of which the state accuses Naxalites. Such laws have not achieved anything except to misrepresent the notion of security: alienating the interests of state security from the security of the population.

In September 2004, the People's War Group and Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) merged together to form the CPI (Maoist) party. This party has flourished in the adivasi areas of central India and predominantly dalit areas of Bihar. Of late it has infiltrated into the hilly and forest adivasi areas of West Bengal. Earlier in August 1998 Party Unity Group, based in Jehanabad, Bihar, merged with CPI (ML) PWG Naxalites/Maoists gained confidence of the adivasis as they stood by their concerns of empowerment and command over resources. They advocated the formation of separate adivasi states in central India and supported the opposition of the adivasis against oppression and exploitative state structure. More specifically, they stood opposed to the Forest bureaucracy and helped the adivasis fetch better returns from the sale of minor forest produce. They also distributed land to the landless agricultural labourers.

Dispossession of adivasi land, forest and water bodies by the state and multinational companies (MNCs) has alienated adivasis resulting in growing resistance against the class-in power. The corrupt modus operandi by the state, political parties and their functionaries and MNCs have terribly angered the adivasis to build up movement against it. Adivasis who have symbiotic relationship water, forest and land, adivasis not only have desire for better development facilities but also want to be in charge of the processes of development. The Naxalite movement gained footing because it was seen as representing the real interests of the adivasis. Since the neo-liberal reforms in 1990s, apart from Adivasis resistance, Naxalites have been the only major stumbling block to selling land and natural resources to MNCs.

Majority of the Naxal movements have grown in those belts, which are margins of the state, adivasi and mineral rich belts. These areas are abundant in natural resources but suffer from deficient development, chronic poverty, absence of basic physical facilities and connectivity. These pockets, however, are “catchment areas” for both the Government and private investors due to the availability of vast tracts of Government and forested land at throwaway prices, having a large army of labour. In 1991, when neo-liberal economic reforms were launched by the Central Government then it had targeted Adivasi regions even more so than in the past for accelerating industrial development so that economic reforms to serve the ruling class gains momentum. The central point of the reforms was liberalization of the economy, simplifying regulations, giving more roles to the private sector and opening up of the economy to competition.

Second wave of COVID- 19 and Adivasis

In the second wave of the pandemic COVID-19 from March to May 2021 as it wreaked havoc in Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Kolkata and other urban cities of India, infections had reported devastated the vulnerable adivasis belts in Odisha, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat and other states. Deaths in adivasi villages due to lack of oxygen, beds or ambulances have gone unreported or deliberately hidden.

As there no specific protocols to combat the spread of the virus, the government has failed to stop the virus from spreading into adivasi communities in central India tackle its spread. In spite of their relative isolation, members of several tribes in central India tested positive for COVID-19.

Some of the reasons for the spike in infections in closed communities are due to the movement of outsiders and the spread of contact through local markets. The spread has been made worse by nutritional and health discrepancies among the

adivasis, as well as a lack of trust in government policies including vaccination and access to healthcare, resulting in viral infections especially COVID-19 being deadlier among adivasis.

Take the case of Odisha, where the State Government's COVID-19 management practices were once hailed by everyone, but the truth is that the government had no idea how to address the spread of the virus in adivasi areas. Despite having one of the largest adivasi communities in the country, Odisha has yet to develop any guidelines for tackling the situation on the ground.

Adivasis have historically been treated with utmost disrespect and indignity by the state health agencies, including primary and community health centres. Though the Government won't do it, there is utmost need to decentralize COVID-19 management. Furthermore, the government should realize that home isolation is not an effective measure among the adivasis. Adivasi cultures define privacy very differently.

As the government closes its eyes and ears to the needs of adivasis, the situation would degenerate into a crisis similar to the 16th century epidemics that wiped out whole of the adivasi communities.

There was an acute shortage of ICU beds and medicines in Maharashtra's Palghar region as fears mounted over the spread of community infection. Kunbi, Bhandari and Warli adivasi communities as they confronted concerns about the lack of ICU beds.

In the adivasi hamlets of Mysuru and Kodagu regions of Karnataka, however, there were reported a spike in infections. Adivasis belonging to the Soliga community contracted the corona virus infection and there were cases from Jenu Kuruba adivasi community, as well.

Gujarat's Bhil adivasi group has also reported cases of fatal infection in the villages surrounding the Statue of Unity. However, lack of testing and data collection, and suppression of information in these areas led to fragmented information about COVID-19 related deaths among the Bhils.

As Chhotubhai Vasava, an adivasi leader from Gujarat, said, "There is no model for the treatment of the adivasis amid the pandemic⁹. In addition to many cases in the remote belts of Dahod and Panchmahal, in the area surrounding the Statue of Unity, over 34 COVID-19 deaths of Bhils have also been reported. However, only 9-10 deaths were recorded as major cases were unaccounted for.

⁹ <https://www.newsclick.in/COVID-19-Increasing-Cases-Reported-Among-Vulnerable-Tribal-Communities-Central-India>

In remote adivasi regions, the communities have locked their areas from outside contact to minimise the spread of infection¹⁰. This is being done by the communities themselves as the state government has failed to address the issues of the adivasis.”

In an Oraon adivasi village of Bargarh in Garhwa district of Jharkhand, 80 people died of infections in the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic. Villagers returning from Ranchi, the state capital from a marriage ceremony were infected and it spread in the village. Activist and journalist Umesh Nazir, who was based in Ranchi, also died of COVID.

The COVID-19 crisis has also fuelled suspicions and anxieties among adivasis contributing to reluctance and fears regarding the vaccination process, as per reports. Meanwhile, the Centre and the state governments have initiated vaccination, but distrust towards government machinery remains strong¹¹.

Highlighting the situation in adivasi belts of Burhanpur region in Madhya Pradesh, Madhuri Krishnaswamy of the Jagrit Adivasi Dalit Sangathan said, “There are huge fever surges, sometimes accompanied by pneumonia-like symptoms. Compared to urban areas, tribal people live in remote areas with mild to moderate symptoms. On the other hand, there is the question of vaccination. Adivasis do not fear COVID-19 as much as the alleged cases of post-vaccination deaths. Many are viewing this as an attack by the government on the poor, especially as last year even the mildly symptomatic were whisked off to COVID-19 centres against their will¹². Also there has been no attempt made by the government to disseminate information about the vaccines and the people who are at potential risk from the vaccine.”

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¹⁰ <https://www.newsclick.in/COVID-19-Increasing-Cases-Reported-Among-Vulnerable-Tribal-Communities-Central-India>

¹¹ <https://www.newsclick.in/COVID-19-Increasing-Cases-Reported-Among-Vulnerable-Tribal-Communities-Central-India>

¹² <https://www.newsclick.in/COVID-19-Increasing-Cases-Reported-Among-Vulnerable-Tribal-Communities-Central-India>