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Towards Intensified Struggles for Adivasi Rights

The recent formation of the Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch (National Platform for Tribal Rights) at the initiative of the CPI(M) should help to build a coordinated and effective nationwide movement and intervention in defence of and for the advancement of the rights of adivasi citizens of India. No movement for radical social change and for justice can hope to advance which does not address in specific terms the oppressions and exploitations of different social groups in our country, be they the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, women who suffer discrimination and oppression on the basis of gender or those like the minority Muslim community who suffer discrimination on the basis of their religious beliefs. This two part article attempts to put together, in the first part, the CPI(M) perspective of work among adivasi communities, and in the second part, the status of STs and important issues facing adivasi communities today. (In this article the term adivasi and tribal are used interchangeably.)

PERSPECTIVES

Adivasi communities face both social and economic discrimination

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and exploitation. Historically adivasi communities played a glorious role in the struggle against the colonial rulers and equally against feudal landlord subjugation. It is a measure of the arrogance of dominant historical narration that the role of adivasi communities in India's freedom struggle is downplayed. The heritage of resistance and heroic deeds against injustice runs deep in the culture and traditions of many adivasi communities spread across India. In today's context, the large majority of adivasis belong to the exploited classes and thus form a most important contingent, in class terms, in the struggle for revolutionary social change.

The overriding characteristic of the exploitation of adivasi communities is the alienation from their land, livelihood and common ownership of forest resources through violent and coercive displacement from their original habitations, from the colonial period onwards. This process was greatly intensified by the post-independence policies of capitalism followed by successive Governments of independent India, till the present day though the process differs from region to region. In describing the situation of adivasi communities the Party Programme in Para 5.6 states "the adivasi and tribal people who constitute seven crore (8.43 crores in 2001 census) of the population are victims of brutal capitalist and semi-feudal exploitation. Their lands are alienated from them, the right to forests denied and they are a source of cheap and bonded labour for the contractors and landlords. In some States there are compact areas inhabited by adivasi people who have their own distinct languages and culture.... The capitalist-landlord contractor nexus constantly seeks to disrupt their traditional solidarity .. denies their legitimate rights and suppresses them with brutal force..."

In the current phase of neo-liberal policies, capitalism has spread to adivasi inhabited villages through intensified and aggressive takeover by corporates of adivasi and forest land, facilitated by Government policies for mining and quarrying akin to a process of primitive accumulation. It is a tragic reality that the country's poorest people, adivasi communities, live on the country's richest land in the form of mineral wealth. Valuable iron ore, bauxite, coal, stone quarries and so on can be found in areas under the Fifth Schedule or in other adivasi dominated areas. The nexus of capitalist-trader-contractor-corrupt forest department official has been joined by touts of big

corporates and MNCs to facilitate forcible takeover of adivasi land leading to massive displacement. The trend of proletarianisation among adivasi communities is taking place at a time when capital intensive industries impose a pattern of jobless growth. The old world of the adivasi communities is being destroyed, but in the alternative structures, adivasi communities find they are not even at the margins. The reality of tribal lives does indeed make a mockery of descriptions of India as a modern democratic republic.

The deep regional disparities and inequalities created and increased by the path of capitalist development in India is further accentuated in the case of adivasis. Adivasi communities because of locations of habitations in remote and ecologically rigorous areas, away from the fertile river valleys, would have required a decentralized and location-specific approach to development which would have strengthened the democratic structures within the communities to enable adivasis to take decisions about the requirements of protection of their land and livelihoods even while enabling them to access the rights to education, health, civic facilities and so on. But on the contrary the British colonial policies of placing and displacing tribal communities according to the perceived requirements of the State have been a continued feature, determined at present by the urgent corporate requirement of access to mineral wealth located in tribal areas. Democracy has been brutally butchered in tribal areas reflected in the arbitrary decisions taken by the State which virtually transformed tribal communities into encroachers on their own land and turned their traditional rights and common ownership of forest resources into gestures of generosity by the State “granting” them highly diluted and limited access to what rightfully belongs to the community.

It is in this context of the development of capitalism in tribal areas that there can be a broad class characterization of tribals as (1) poor and marginal peasants with small unproductive landholdings (2) as landless agricultural workers (3) as workers in plantations, mines, quarries (4) as workers in the unorganized sector with no rights such as construction workers or daily waged or contract workers in non-agricultural work like coolies, as domestic workers in towns and cities. A large section of adivasis are migrant workers (5) Those sections who have had access to education facilities have been able to avail of

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the reserved quotas and get Government or public sector jobs and therefore been able to achieve a better standard of living through which there is a developing, though still comparatively small middle class among adivasi communities. However these sections still face different forms of discrimination. (6) The traditional chiefs, the “royal” families, who have diminished power and wealth. Though still representative of the old feudal setup a small section have transformed into capitalist entrepreneurs, but the numbers are negligible.

A large section of the adivasi work force comprises of adivasi women. Adivasi women are in many regions the mainstay of the economic welfare of the family. They face not only economic exploitation but also sexual exploitation by contractors, forest guards and often the police. They thus have a high stake in changing the system.

Thus it can be seen that the vast mass of adivasis constitute the basic classes who must form part of the core of the alliance of different classes to achieve the peoples democratic revolution in India.

ADDITIONAL DIMENSIONS OF OPPRESSION

The specific nature of the exploitation and oppression of adivasis has two aspects. The first aspect concerns the impact of capitalism and neo-liberal policies on the lives and livelihood of adivasis. The other aspect concerns the political, social and cultural context of adivasi lives. The two are interlinked. The policies of neo-liberalisation deeply impact adivasi ways of life in a variety of ways. There is no single homogenous culture or identity of adivasi communities just as there is no overarching culture that can be called Indian culture. But within the 700 or so adivasi groups across the country there is a richness of cultural expression, of different tribal languages and dialects, of practices related to preservation of nature, of different forms of marriage and customs, of religious and spiritual expression and belief distinct from the religious rituals imposed by upper caste Hindus. The inevitable and relentless spread of capitalist relations in tribal areas, the expansion of the market and introduction of consumerist cultures have their own, most negative impact on tribal communities. In general, the attitude of the State has been to attempt an artificial separation between the economic status of adivasis on the one hand

and their cultural practices on the other as though the former will not impact on the latter. The attitude of the Indian State is symbolized by its reduction of adivasi culture to parading adivasis in their traditional dresses performing their traditional dances on official anniversaries. The issue of protection and development of tribal languages, literature, knowledge, histories, have been areas of gross neglect and discrimination by the bourgeois –landlord State thus adding a further dimension to tribal oppression.

At the same time adivasis are victims of the caste system. Adivasis are excluded from the hierarchies of the dominant savarna caste system. Adivasis as a whole are considered of a socially low order by caste Hindus and discriminated against as such. The brutal violence and discrimination against adivasis by the non- adivasi landlords and capitalist is a general phenomenon. Along with class exploitation adivasis suffer social bias and discrimination

Within the different adivasi communities, some consider themselves superior to others. Normally, intermarriage between communities is not approved. But this feature of endogamy is the distinguishing characteristic of all the tribes since they came into existence. However no untouchability practices as in Hindu caste societies ever existed or exist among the tribes. Nor do they practice such barbaric and inhuman practices with lower caste non- adivasi communities. There are however some retrograde practices such as witch hunting . In some areas bigamy is also an accepted practice under adivasi customary law. There are increasing mobilizations against such practices.

In the last decade or so there has been an increased attempt by majoritarian fundamentalist forces to “Hinduise” adivasi cultures. One of the more common instruments used in this attempt is the promotion of “Hindu gods” and Hindu festivals in tribal areas backed by substantial funds. On the other hand different variants of identity politics have been promoted by foreign funded NGOs that seek to fragment and separate adivasi identities obliterating the class nature of exploitation. These trends do damage to the democratic requirement of the protection of adivasi cultures, languages and identities while building the unity of working people for justice and for the advancement of adivasi rights.

The bourgeois –landlord State is often in aggressive opposition

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to adivasi demands for more democracy. State repression against adivasis fighting for their rights is common. Whether through the local police, the central forces, contractors and supervisors supported by the Government and police, adivasis are victims and targets of repression in many areas. More recently in the name of fighting Maoists, the central Government and more particularly the Home Ministry has fashioned an approach which is shortsighted as it relies almost entirely on the armed police. At the same time the Maoists have also targeted adivasis who refuse to accept their dictats. Thus adivasis are caught in the cross fire between the State and the Maoists as in Chattisgarh. The Maoists have to be fought politically, through an exposure of their bankrupt ideology as well as administratively. Their mindless violence and brutal killings of innocents has to be ended. This point is elaborated later in this article. However, the CPI(M) strongly opposes in policy and in practice, any and every form of repression against adivasis and their struggles, including against the sexual assaults and abuse, of tribal women.

In conclusion, for the CPI(M) the adivasi question is an intrinsic part of the mobilization for the peoples democratic revolution. The mobilization of adivasis along with other exploited sections in class struggles against the exploiters is one aspect. At the same time, the other aspect of the discrimination against adivasis rooted in elitist dominant casteist cultures which consider adivasis second class citizens, which look down on adivasis as lesser, “backward” beings has to be recognized and fought against along with defence of adivasi rights, land, livelihood, cultures, languages is equally important and crucial. The concerns of adivasi communities for justice must hold therefore an equally importance place for other organised anti-capitalist, anti- landlord movements.

STATUS OF STS AND GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Questions on Some Policy Issues

According to the 2001 census the tribal population comprises of 8.2 per cent of the population of India numbering 8.43 crores. This is equivalent to the entire population of a number of States like say Bihar and W.Bengal and more than the populations of Rajasthan and

Madhya Pradesh. While Government policies for the more “backward States” include, at least in name subsidies and special programmes, it is striking that within Government programmes there are no specific components which would address the problems faced by adivasi communities arising from geographical locations, limited livelihood choices available, and so on. Adivasis should not be treated as a homogenous group. Tribals live in forests, in hilly regions, or in the plains and therefore their needs and demands also differ depending on their location. Historically, some groups have been able to access facilities and rights more than others. The Meenas in Rajasthan are an example. The situation of tribals in the north-east is quite different with tribals forming the majority dominant population in some of the States. Ethnic strife among some tribal communities has been a major problem. But there is hardly any understanding of the different needs and requirements of different tribal communities in official thinking. Government policies on major issues like food security, health, rural employment, social security or livelihood related issues like debt relief for farmers, relief for drought etc. are designed in such a way that they actually exclude those sections, like adivasis, who most require them. Thus even a positive policy decision of a Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) as a special component of budgetary fund allocations has got subverted because the allocations are spent within the framework of “mainstream” policies which suffer from a serious deficit of a tribal sensitive approach.

A common feature in policy approaches is to club together Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for “affirmative action.” Yet the social and cultural context of specific discriminations suffered is quite different although both are rooted in systemic structures of the bourgeois landlord State. Such a “clubbing” approach may be convenient or advantageous for a political projection of social inclusion, yet it does injustice to both as specific discriminations which require specific policy approaches are often ignored.

Yet another policy fault lies in the entire process of scheduling, both as far as recognition of communities as scheduled tribes as well as definition of scheduled areas. ST recognition is decided at the local level. Yet even to include it in the State list central Government permission is required through an amendment in the list passed mandatorily by Parliament. Even when State Governments have

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recommended inclusion of this or that ST group citing genuine grounds, it is denied by the central Government. There are numerous genuine cases such as Nagesia STs in Chattisgarh, Deswali Manjhis in WBengal, the tea tribes in Assam, the Kuruman, Kurumbar, Kuruma tribes in Tamilnadu who have been denied ST status. Surprisingly, the Gonds in UP were not only deprived ST status and designated as SCs but recently they have been declared as OBC. Such arbitrary actions which lead to deprivations among genuine tribal communities is blatantly unjust. More common is the non-recognition between States. For example a group recognized as ST in Andhra Pradesh may not be recognized as such in neighbouring districts of Maharashtra, as for example the Banjaras or the Kol tribes in Uttar Pradesh who are recognized as SC while their counterparts across the border in Madhya Pradesh are recognized as ST. There are numerous cases of members of the same family who live in villages separated by administrative borders being recognized as ST in one case and denied it in the other. The Supreme Court has held that “when an SC/ST migrates from one State to another, there is no inhibition to migrating, but when he migrates, he does not and cannot carry any special rights or privileges attributed to him or granted to him in the original State.” (Marri Chandrashekhara Rao case) Such an approach does grave injustice to adivasis who are denied guaranteed livelihoods in the places of their original habitation, are thus forced to migrate but then are denied the rights guaranteed to them by the constitution. The contrast in the approach, to say rich NRIs who migrate, yet are given a slew of benefits is in sharp contrast to the Supreme Courts understanding of adivasi migrants within India. The Supreme Court has decided to once again refer the issue to a larger bench. There are also cases where political lobbies of powerful groups wrongly try to get recognition as ST. The Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch (AARM) had in a resolution demanded that the Central Government should set up a Commission which in a time bound manner would look into the anomalies in the process with a view to bringing justice to legitimate claims of adivasi communities.

The constitutional provision of the Fifth and Sixth Schedule give important rights to adivasi communities. At present four of the north east States, namely Mizoram, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura where the adivasi populations are high as a proportion of the total

population are covered by the sixth schedule. States covered by the Fifth Schedule are Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Orissa and Rajasthan. In the present scheme of scheduling, many adivasi dominated areas are left out. Himachal with a population of 4 per cent adivasis is included whereas Karnataka with an adivasi population of over 6 per cent or Bengal with an adivasi population of over 5 per cent are excluded. Further, many areas which are contiguous with Fifth Schedule areas are excluded, as in States like Andhra and Jharkhand. Even blocks with a majority of tribal populations do not get the benefit of the constitutional provisions though they do have access to schemes under the Modified Area Development Agency (MADA). Thus a large section of adivasis are denied the constitutional protection that they could enjoy under Schedule 5. As is known these include prohibition of land transfers to non-tribals to prevent land alienation, the formation of a Tribal Advisory Council and so on. Additionally the advantages of the underestimated Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act are also denied in the non-scheduled areas. This law, though underused and violated has provisions which ensure enhanced rights of gram sabhas, the right of consent or refusal to projects in areas governed by PESA etc. In fact the historic Supreme Court judgement in the Samata case of 1997 which had ruled that adivasis must have control over the mineral wealth and other rights in areas inhabited by them was based on the rights given by the Fifth Schedule and PESA. Struggles for the implementation of the given rights have also increased in recent years. In this context the report that the Cabinet has approved a clause in the Mining laws to ensure 26 per cent of profits of such companies must be given to tribals in the area of the company's operation is significant. However while the Samata judgement had ruled that mining in tribal areas should be entrusted to cooperatives run by the tribals themselves, the Cabinet decision is to allow the entry of private companies. The 26 per cent clause should not become the gateway for automatic clearance for mining companies in Fifth Schedule areas. Further study is required of the actual amendment and its implications.

The issue of reservations in employment also requires serious intervention. At present as is shown later in this article, the number of jobs are going down because of the ban on recruitment. At the same

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time privatization of basic services as part of the neo-liberal framework has reduced the number of jobs available in Government or public sector. The expansion of the job market for tribals definitely requires extension to the private sector. Further, the issue of bank loans for self-employment, guarantees of a quota in Government contracts for STs etc also has to become part of the reservation policy.

The point is that the present framework of constitutional and legal rights cannot and should not be taken as a given and must be revised with a view to strengthening adivasi rights against the onslaught of neo-liberal policies. Adivasis do not need to be mainstreamed into a weak policy framework—it is the mainstream approach that needs to be changed.

CONSEQUENCES OF A DISCRIMINATORY APPROACH

After 64 years of Independence the consequence of faulty policies based on discriminatory “development and growth” are reflected in the continuing gaps between adivasis and others reflected in major social indicators. The obscene inequalities in India are symbolized by dreadful deprivations. The most recent Forbes list of richest Indians shows that the richest 100 Indians have increased their cumulative wealth by 24 billion dollars in a single year to reach 300 billion dollars, which is crore rupees. The list of billionaires has increased by 17 more to 69 billionaires. At the other end according to assessments made in a UNDP paper, the all India average monthly expenditure for Scheduled Tribes was just 260 rupees (at 1993 prices). The Government claims a decrease in below poverty line percentages calculated with dubious methods. But even within those claims, according to its Eleventh Five Year Plan document the decrease in poverty for STs in the decade 1993-1994 to 2004-2005 was 4.64 percentage points compared to a decrease of 9 percentage points among others. Other indicators in the document show that STs are at the bottom of the ladder. Shockingly, in spite of the claims of schemes to promote educational rights of adivasis the gap between the STs and non-ST sections has remained at over 17 per cent in the decade 93-94 to 2004-05. Other official assessments made in the National Family Health Survey, reports of the HRD Ministry, analysis of the 2001 census show a dismal picture:

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	<i>STs</i>	<i>Non-ST/SC</i>
Infant Mortality Rates (per 1000)	84.2	61.8
Under 5 years Mortality rate (per 1000)	131.4	93.1
Undernourishment (per cent)	56	44
Literacy males (per cent)	59.17	75.3
Literacy (female) (per cent)	34.76	53.76
Drop out rates (1-X, boys) (per cent)	77.8	60.4
Drop out rates (1-X, girls) (per cent)	79	61.9
<i>Percentage of working and non-working population</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>STs</i>
India, urban and rural (per cent)	49.06	39.10
Agricultural workers (per cent)	38.37	33.05

Thus while adivasis make up a disproportionate number of agricultural workers, meaning thereby their low incomes and terrible conditions of work, they also form a disproportionately large number of those deprived of basic human rights. An example of the extreme insensitivity and callousness of Government policies is on the denial of food security to adivasis. Firstly, the wrong criteria used for the identification of the poor which virtually excludes those owning land from the category of BPL, since it does not factor in the nature of the landholding, the type of cultivation, and whether it is unproductive land, has meant that a large section of the adivasi population who hold unproductive land holdings which provide little or no income, do not get food subsidies or any other subsidies including health subsidies. Secondly, the lack of the PDS in remote areas makes them dependant on a market they cannot afford. In Tripura, on the other hand, about 60 per cent of ration shops are in remote areas. The Central Government is supposed to give a hill subsidy to help States reach remote areas but the arrears in payments to Tripura amount to over three crore rupees. This is probably the case for remote areas in other States as well. Further, the hike in diesel and petrol prices has meant a big increase in the funds required to move foodgrains to these areas but the Central Government has not factored this in. The Tripura Government has increased its expenditure to ensure the adivasi inhabitants in the remote areas don't suffer but this is an indication of the utter lack of sensitivity in Central Government policies which get reflected in the high levels of food insecurity and subsequent malnutrition among tribal communities.

Even the allocations for the Tribal Sub-Plan, which are supposed to be in accordance with their proportion of the population, has been

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much less. The budgetary analysis done by the CBGA shows that the proportion of plan outlay earmarked for STs has been decreasing and is also below the mandated amount. For example the total Plan expenditure for 2010-11 (BE) excluding central assistance to States was 2,84,284 crores rupees. Accordingly the allocation for the tribal Sub-Plan should have been 23,311 crore rupees. However the allocation was less than half the amount at just 11,746 crore rupees.

LAND ISSUE AND ADIVASIS

Need for Land reform

It is assessed that approximately one third of adivasis have no cultivable land. The majority have extremely small and unproductive land holdings. Adivasi communities urgently require land reform and distribution of cultivable land. It is estimated that there is 21 million hectares of surplus ceiling land but only 2.7 million hectares was taken over by State Governments and 2.3 million hectares was distributed. Adivasi families got a meager portion of that land. For example, in Orissa where there is a substantial landless adivasi population, 2,73,000 acres of Government land which should have been distributed to the vast numbers of landless in the State has been handed over to companies or for Projects. Land is arbitrarily taken over in the name of establishing a bird or wild life sanctuary and adivasis are arbitrarily evicted. It is only in the Left led States that adivasi communities have benefited from land reform measures. West Bengal stands first in the distribution of cultivable land to adivasi communities through land reform. Tripura stands first in the distribution of forest land pattas under the Forest Rights Act. Kerala has a policy framework to ensure that every adivasi gets cultivable and homestead land. Where land is available the Government has taken it over and distributed it among tribal families. In other areas, the Government has set aside a sum of money to buy land and distribute it to landless adivasis.

Land grab

Between 1980 and 2006 11.33 lakh hectares of forest land, including

in Fifth Schedule areas has been “diverted” for non-forestry purposes. Of this as much as 5.7 lakh hectares was “diverted” between 2001 and 2006—a joint project clearly of the NDA and UPA Governments. The term “diversion” is of course a euphemism for the legal sanction given for land grab by corporate, mining companies, power companies and also for Government projects like building dams, roads etc.

Lakhs of adivasi families have already been displaced some, multiple times and an equal number face displacement.. The absence of land records in the main in adivasi areas, also results in the denial of compensation to adivasis when they are forcibly evicted. For example, in the Posco project in Orissa, of the 4000 families who will be displaced, only 220 or so will have the legal right to compensation because they do not have the papers to prove their ownership. Adivasi displacement does not just affect livelihood but destroys cultures and a way of life. The status of women in particular is badly affected as they become refugees living in an environment far removed from the more democratic framework of their own cultures, thus facing a reduction in status in different spheres.

Another aspect is the alienation of adivasi land by illegal land grab encouraged by powerful political lobbies. In spite of the legal ban on transfer of adivasi land to non-adivasis, lakhs of acres of adivasi land is in the forcible occupation of non-adivasis in Fifth Schedule areas. In Jharkhand alone, according to the Rural Development Ministry report around 87,000 court cases concerning 1.48 lakh acres of adivasi land are pending in the court for years. Unscrupulous money lenders, contractors, real estate developers cheat adivasis of their land and the State either remains a spectator or more often than not colludes with the illegal occupations. Such clearances have become easier after the Environmental Impact Notification 2006 and the National Mineral Policy. Clearances are given without thought of human cost. The Land Acquisition Act 1894 which gives the State and through the State, private parties, the right to forcibly acquire land is a draconian law which must be scrapped and replaced by new laws that guarantee no forcible acquisition without consent and ensure compensation, rehabilitation on a long term basis.

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Duplicity of Maoists

What is the role of Maoists on the issue of displacement? Maoists are in adivasi areas not because of any particular commitment to adivasi rights but because the geographical location in forests and hills provide them with safer bases away from security forces. But how much have they done for adivasi rights? Have the Maoists played any role in preventing displacement? For example, they have had a free run in Jharkhand and have supported this or that bourgeois party who in turn has afforded them patronage and safety. Jharkhand as is known has been the State where the largest number of MOUs have been signed for mining in adivasi areas. A quick study by the AARM in Jharkhand has shown that in districts where Maoists are active as in Sarai Kela Kharswan, East Singhbhum, West Singhbhum and Latehar over 10,000 acres of land has been taken over by companies giving farmers a pittance. There have been resistance movements but Maoists have not played any role. It is an open secret that in many of these areas company agents pay the Maoist protection money. This land is in the 5th schedule area of Jharkhand, where PESA and Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act apply and is therefore illegal. Yet the Jharkhand Maoists who are absent in the anti-displacement movements in their own State, claim to be working for the adivasis in Lalgarh, West Bengal where not a single inch of land has been acquired. There are examples from different States, such as Orissa and Andhra Pradesh where Maoists have actually eliminated those who have been involved in the struggle for adivasi rights. Recently the most disturbing and shocking reports of sexual exploitation of young tribal women by Maoists have surfaced. It is indeed unfortunate that Maoist supporters among intellectuals have chosen to remain silent about these Maoist atrocities.

Forest Rights Act

In many States, adivasis are being denied their rights under the Forest Rights Act. Worse there are increasing cases of open violation of the Act by the forest department in league with the timber and other mafias who have been looting the forest and the forest produce for years. The percentage of pattas given is lower than the rejection of claims. The rejections are inordinately high and include rejection of

tribal claimants who are settled on land which has been targeted for projects. In particular the absolutely retrograde and obnoxious clause for non-tribal other traditional forest dwellers (OTFD) to produce evidence of 75 years residence in the forests has been used to deny these sections their rights. Historically, the British had moved populations comprising the scheduled castes and other oppressed castes into the forests to look after the interests of the Empire. No land titles were ever given to these sections nor were records maintained. In the name of removing encroachers the Government is now targeting the poorer sections of traditional forest dwellers and also in the process creating divisions between tribals and non-tribal poor sections who have lived together in the forest for generations. At the all India level only a very negligible number, if at all, of non-tribal claimants have been given titles. While pressing for the proper implementation of the Act, it is necessary to demand an amendment in the present Act to remove the clause of 75 years proof, which was smuggled into the law at the last minute, by the then UPA Government-1, in the face of strong opposition from the CPI(M).

Special Package for Adivasi Farmers

It is estimated that 82 per cent of land cultivated by adivasis is rain-fed. Even small irrigation projects have not been sustained. In the absence of infrastructural support and agricultural extension services, and given the unproductive nature of the land owned by adivasis often in difficult stony, hilly areas, adivasis cannot even produce enough for their own needs leave alone for the market. In many areas, adivasis grow nutritious millets like jowar, bajra. Strains of indigenous varieties of wheat and rice grown in adivasi areas, are getting extinct because of lack of support. The minimum support price for millets and other crops grown by adivasis is woefully low and has not registered any significant increase nor are there easily accessible procurement centres. The lack of Government support has meant that adivasis, driven into debt to private money lenders paying high rates of interest have no alternative but to work on others land to survive. Studies show a disturbing trend of decrease in adivasi cultivators and an increase in agricultural and manual workers. This trend is also reflected in the published data for MREGA(Mahatma

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Gandhi Rural Guarantee Employment Act). Whereas the adivasi population as a percentage to the national population is 8.20 per cent, the proportion of adivasi workers to total workers under MREGA is as high as 20 per cent. This is projected as an achievement by the Government. It may indeed have brought relief to those who get some work. However, it also points to the desperation and distress of adivasi cultivators, who are forced to abandon their land for manual work under difficult conditions.

There is an urgent need for a special package for adivasi farmers in the form of debt relief, proper procurement price and procurement infrastructure for coarse grains produced in adivasi areas such as jowar, ragi, small millets, cashew as well as non-timber forest produce. There is need for massive public investment and government support to dryland cultivation and watershed development.

Adivasi farmers because of the geographical location have specific and special needs which require formulation of new demands. Evidence collected by AARM in Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Jharkhand show that only a negligible number were found to be eligible for the debt waiver. Many adivasis do not have proper land records without which they cannot get bank loans and are thus forced to borrow at exorbitant rates from money lenders. Since the Central Government has not included private loans in its debt relief programme, very few adivasis are eligible. In Kerala under the LDF Government the Debt Commission formed has included private debt which can benefit adivasi farmers. This is an important demand for adivasi communities. Another area is that of drought relief. Adivasis, particularly adivasi women depend greatly on collection of non-timber forest produce like soapnut, tendu leaf, honey, shikakai, grass, bamboo etc. During a period of drought, it is not only the crop that is destroyed, but the forest dries up drastically affecting the collection of produce and consequently the money to be earned by its sale. Yet at present drought relief packages do not include losses suffered due to non-availability of MFP. Should not adivasi collectors and gatherers of such produce be compensated for their losses due to drought. They are given the responsibility of ensuring protection of the forests but when it comes to giving relief, the official thinking ignores the special requirements of adivasis.

In many parts of India, particularly in the north eastern States

adivasis still practice jhum farming or shifting cultivation. Environmental concerns and degradation of the soil prompt Governments to prevent such jhum farming without providing any alternatives. The efforts of the Tripura Government in this area are significant in helping jhumias, as the farmers are called. The Government has not only allotted jhum cultivators land but has also helped them to develop rubber plantations under which the income from the trees is guaranteed to the tribal farmers, apart from the grains they may grow.

Adivasis as Workers

The acute agrarian distress has led to a process of proletarianisation of adivasi communities dependant so far on land and forest produce. A substantial number of adivasis are still however bound by feudal fetters as bonded workers. An increasing number of adivasi citizens are forced to earn their living through poorly paid non-agricultural work, often manual work in the worst of conditions. In the post reform period the employment of tribal workers in the mining sector has declined by 30 per cent from 8 lakhs in 1991 to 5.5 lakhs in 2004-2005. Now adivasis are employed only as contract or casual workers without protective legislation. In particular the entry of adivasi women in the construction industry in large numbers is a significant feature. In addition, young adivasi women from remote areas of Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand are brought by various agencies into metropolitan cities as domestic workers. Here they are often subjected to slave like conditions and also sexual abuse. The crucial requirement to help the unionization of these new sections in the unorganised sector cannot be emphasized enough. Huge numbers of adivasi migrate every year in search of work. They are mistreated, abused, humiliated, exploited and in many cases sexually assaulted. The cases of recorded atrocities against adivasis between 2001-2005 was as high as 30,128 cases. Very few of these cases were registered by migrant workers who once they cross their village boundaries become exceedingly vulnerable and rarely are able to file cases against their abusers and tormentors. Worse, there is no social security for these adivasi migrant workers. No health insurance for those who need it most. Mandatory enrolment in all social security schemes for tribal

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workers in the unorganized sector and stringent punishment to contractors who deny them a minimum wage are urgently required. A fairly large number of adivasi women are employed in the ICDS and as accredited social health activists (ASHAs) in the National Rural Health Mission. While this is a positive development, those working in remote areas are denied the same wages as those working in the plains on the basis of low populations in remote tribal habitations. The anganwadis there are called mini-anganwadis and the standards are lower. This of course is highly objectionable. The tribal ICDS workers or ASHAs deserve rewards for their work in such difficult terrains, but in the present policy of giving them lower wages in the name of mini anganwadis punishes them for serving adivasis in remote areas. There is an urgency for trade unions to take up the demands of adivasis workers specifically and mobilize the entire working classes in their support.

Aspirations of Adivasi Youth

Even as traditional occupations of adivasis are destroyed, the frustrations and aspirations of adivasi youth have increased. An increasing number of adivasi youth are joining schools, many of them are in hostels. But to what end? Having worked so hard to pass their examinations, denied the infrastructural support that most other students get, these young men and women return to their villages, their hopes and aspirations destroyed. There are no vocational institutes or training facilities for different professions in adivasi areas. This is an important demand which could open up more avenues of employment for our adivasi youth.

Neo-liberal policies have negatively impacted on the constitutional rights of adivasis for reservations in employment. Reservation of jobs for adivasi communities has shown a decreasing trend given the ban on Government recruitments and the huge cuts in recruitments in the public sector. The percentage of STs in public services has declined from 6.07 percent in 2004 to 5.83 percent in 2006. Most of this decline has been in Group D employment on which there is a moratorium on recruitment by the Central government. At the same time there is no uniformity in reservation of seats for ST people in state level public services. It is essential to address the issues of adivasi youth.

Prevent Imposition in the Name of Indian Culture

Today tribal identities are sought to be manipulated by capitalist as well as communal forces. In a recent example of how the communal forces work, in Jharkhand, the RSS-BJP combine has tried to hijack a demand raised by some adivasi groups for inclusion in the census of 'Sarna' as a religion practiced by adivasis. According to the groups it is unfair to expect adivasis to list themselves as Hindu or Christian or any other of the "recognised" religions as they as adivasis follow different practices. The BJP immediately supported them but added that Sarna was part of the Hindu family just as Buddhism and Sikhism is. This forcible assimilation by a dominant religious identity is part of the communal agenda of the RSS-BJP mainly directed in this case against the Christians whom they accuse of forcibly converting adivasis. These political mobilizations in the name of religion do great damage to adivasi unity, culture and identity and can be seen in operation in many States, sometimes with terrible consequences as in Kandhamal. At the same time, there is a real danger of extinction of some of the Primitive Adivasi groups now officially designated as Particularly Vulnerable groups (PVG). Approximately 75 such groups have been identified. But because of an absence of a comprehensive approach to ensure survival and for their all round development, their rich heritage is on the verge of being lost. Governments should be forced to take some positive measures to specifically address the problems of the PVGs. Some NGOs wrongly glorify adivasi cultures as a monolithic system. For the CPI(M), a democratic approach to such issues would require defence of adivasi languages, right to their beliefs, customs, traditions while at the same time resisting retrograde practices such as witch hunting or denial of adivasi women's right to land which still exists in many parts of India.

Mobilise, Organise, Resist

The formation of the Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch should give a fresh focus and impetus to the struggle for adivasi rights. In large parts of India, adivasi communities are vulnerable to inhuman exploitation reflected in chronic malnutrition, illness, and poverty. The multi-dimensional nature of the situation they face today with

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the onslaught of capitalism gives rise to the needs for concrete study and formulation of demands. The unity of all sections of the poor and the working people is a prerequisite for the advance of adivasi welfare and rights. At the same time, democratic movements of different sections of the working people like kisans, workers, women, students, youth, employees, teachers need to develop a sensitive and more detailed understanding of the specific demands and needs of adivasi communities. This is an urgent task of the democratic and Left forces which requires much more attention.