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Opinion

Opinion - News Analysis

Adivasis — the forgotten India

Most of the time, Adivasis are obscured from "mainstream" India. They come into focus momentarily when they organise, resist and assert their rights. Kalpana Sharma on their plight.

The brutal might of the state was in full display at Muthanga.

TWO HOURS outside Mumbai, India's burgeoning and prosperous commercial capital, there are people who have no electricity, running water, health care or education. Here children die of malaria, measles and diarrhoea, women die during childbirth. In 55 years, they have seen little progress even as Mumbai strives to become a global city.

The lives of the Adivasis living in the megalopolis' shadow is a stark illustration of the continuing neglect of tribal communities in most parts of India. If anything illustrates unequal development, it is the way the Governments, at the Centre and in the States, have dealt with these islands of neglect.

Most of the time, Adivasis are obscured from "mainstream" India. They come into focus momentarily when they organise, resist and assert their rights, as they have done most recently in Kerala. The rest of the country suddenly wakes up and looks at them. But the look is no more than a glance, and soon they become invisible again.

Whether in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka or Kerala, the struggle of tribal communities for their rights is inextricably linked to land and forests.

And their story dates back to the colonial times when the British either handed over their land to zamindars or declared it as forestland.

People who had survived for generations without the need to document "ownership" of land — or indeed, without even the concept of "ownership" — found they had no tools to combat this new twist to "development".

Most of the earlier laws relating to forests were designed to exploit forest resources for urban and other markets even as they allowed the Adivasis to continue to live within them.

The Forest Act of 1865, later amended in 1878, divided forests into Revenue, Protected and Village forests, each with their set of rules. But for the people who lived in the forest, these

laws essentially overturned their unstructured, undocumented and "symbiotic", in the words of B. K. Roy Burman, relationship with the land, the rivers and the forests.

Inevitably, in the post-Independence period, what began as minor skirmishes between groups of forest dwellers and those assigned the task of "protecting" forests escalated into mini-wars in different parts of India.

The issues remain the same: do people who have lived in and tended forests and the land on which they stand, have a right to continue living there or not? They do not, holds the Government, because this is "forest land" which must be conserved for larger ecological reasons. They do, hold the forest dwellers, because they have no other source of livelihood apart from the subsistence agriculture and sale of minor forest produce.

Although forest policies over time have been modified and amended to concede the rights of the forest dwellers, in practice the Adivasis have to struggle to establish even the rights they have been granted under the law. Thus, many of the conflicts that have arisen between the Adivasis and the Forest Department centre around the issue of access to "protected" forests. Where the Adivasis are organised, they have successfully negotiated these rights and guaranteed their access to forests.

Where they remain isolated, as they still do in many parts of the country, they have no means to battle the forest bureaucracy.

The people versus forests saga has been extended with the creation of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, areas that are considered essential if we are to conserve our biodiversity in flora and fauna.

Yet, these are the very areas where Adivasis have lived for generations. According to one estimate, of the 600,000 people displaced by 421 sanctuaries and 75 national parks, 500,000 are Adivasis.

In States such as Karnataka and Kerala, much of the tension between the Government and groups of Adivasis has revolved around the question of displacement caused by these sanctuaries and parks.

Apart from forests, the other development aspect that has been a huge blow to the ability of the Adivasis to continue living in their own environment has been the construction of large dams. Inevitably, the largest number of those displaced are Adivasis because dams are built on rivers that run through the forest areas where they live.

In the case of the Sardar Sarovar dam, this has been amply documented but the story is not very different for a number of other dams around which there have been struggles of resistance.

In the last two years in Bihar and Jharkhand there have been clashes between the police and groups of Adivasis resisting dams and the inevitable submergence of their villages and the forests on which they depend. In all these confrontations, people have been killed and injured and locked up for days. During the struggle against the Koel Karo dam, the police fired on an assembly of Adivasis in February 2001, killing eight persons. In Jharkhand, ironically a State carved out of Bihar to meet the aspirations of tribal communities, there has been a long-standing non-violent protest against the dam on the Subarnarekha river in west Singhbhum district. An estimated 5,000 families were to be displaced and 52 villages partially or wholly submerged. The Adivasis are agitating against further raising the height of the dam.

The latest manifestation of such resistance is the occupation by 150 Adivasis of the Narmada Valley Development Authority in Alirajpur, Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh.

According to the Narmada Bachao Andolan, "the Adivasis have been facing submergence since 1994, with last year's submergence being the most severe. More than 220 acres of standing crops were submerged by the submergence caused by raising the height of the dam from 90m to 95m in May. While they face such illegal submergence year after year, the Narmada Valley Development Authority and the Government have claimed all along that they have been rehabilitated! In fact, on paper these villages do not exist nor do the Adivasis".

Another arena for struggle is over the land being taken over for mining. In Rayagada, Orissa, on December 16, 2000, four persons were killed and 50 injured in police firing when Adivasis raised an objection to the extraction of bauxite from the Bapilimali hills by the Utkal Aluminium Industries.

In all such instances, land is acquired by the Government for mining operations but the Adivasis living on it are not adequately compensated. Inevitably, the inability of most Adivasis to establish ownership through the documentation demanded by the Government results in their becoming landless labourers.

Similarly, in Chhattisgarh in May 2001, the National Mineral Development Corporation sought to establish a steel mill at Nagarnar. When the Adivasis living on the land acquired by the Government for this purpose objected and resisted, the state responded with force. Hundreds of Adivasis were arrested and many were injured.

A landmark judgment on the question of mining in Scheduled Areas was delivered by the Supreme Court in 1997 in the Samatha v State of Andhra Pradesh case.

The Court held that the Government had no power to grant mining leases for tribal lands in Scheduled Areas. It also ordered the State Government to grant pattas to people living on the land which was to be mined. This was an important precedent as under the law, all minerals under the land belong to the Government, but the rights of the Adivasis living on the land was a grey area.

Despite the ruling, however, the Andhra Pradesh Government did not issue the pattas on the pretext that the particular panchayat was part of a border dispute with neighbouring Orissa.

However, when the Adivasis once again went to court and asked why pattas could not be issued when elections could be held in their villages despite the border dispute, the Andhra Pradesh High Court gave a ruling on January 9, 2003, "directing the respondents to entertain the applications made by the petitioners and other members belonging to Scheduled Tribes for grant of pattas and consider those applications with utmost expedience for grant of pattas in the revenue enclosures which are identified by the Revenue Department within four months from today".

These are but a few recent instances of the clash between the Adivasis and various State Governments. They illustrate the conflict over rights and resources that lies at the root of the confrontation.

Such clashes are bound to escalate as "development" reaches out to remoter areas, places which are inevitably the home of Adivasi groups that have lived undisturbed, and ignored, for generations.

Finding a way to resolve these differences is urgent, not just for the sake of the Adivasis, but also because a model of development that pays no heed to the most vulnerable, and forces them into penury, cannot be sustained in the long run.