

The *ADIVASIS* and their World Today

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Introduction

Jesuits, at least some of them, have seen a silver lining in the cloud when it comes to the holistic development of indigenous people all over the world. This silver lining grew brighter and clearer during the 35th General Congregation when Jesuits recognized that the subject of indigenous peoples is an important one. They then reflected on how they could accompany these groups of marginalized people as they move towards defining their identity and accelerate the process of their own development. My understanding and analysis are limited to Central India, and more specifically to the state of Chhattisgarh.

To begin with, it is important to have a clear understanding of the concept 'indigenous people'. The official term for indigenous people in India is 'Scheduled Tribes'. In most part of the country they are popularly known as *Adivasis*, meaning original inhabitants, a term that I prefer to use. There are many different *Adivasi* groups/communities in India but some of them are scheduled as Scheduled Tribes, which means that they are on an official government list. From time to time the President of India either schedules or de-schedules groups of people as eligible for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes list according to certain criteria, which are thought to be characteristic of *Adivasis*.¹

While in the eyes of the Administration and before the law *Adivasis* can only be those groups who are in the official Scheduled Tribes list, it must be recognized that there are many *Adivasis* who are kept out of the list even though they are *Adivasis*. This may be because these *Adivasis* are seen as 'Scheduled Castes' and not as tribes or genuine *Adivasis*. Being described as Scheduled Castes by the government means they are kept out for the Constitutional Provisions made for *Adivasis* or tribes. The government of India often plays foul by using specific terminology ('caste' instead of 'tribe') just to stop them away from taking advantage of the benefits provided for them by the Constitution.

¹A well established criterion being followed is based on certain attributes such as:-

- **Geographical isolation** - They live in cloistered, exclusive remote and inhospitable areas like hills, forests.
- **Backwardness**- Livelihood is based on primitive agriculture. Theirs is a low cost, closed economy based on low levels of technology, literacy and health. All this leads to their poverty. Their **distinctive culture, language and religion are different from the mainstream**. They have developed their own distinctive culture, language and religion in a community-wise manner.
- **Cultural isolation**-“They have very little contact with other cultures and people.” (http://labourbureau.gov.in/SE_GUJARAT%2006-07_CHAPTER%20I.pdf).

Adivasis: the most exploited and marginalized

Adivasis once lived in harmony with the Divine, with nature and with their fellow human beings. They considered their *Jal-Jungle-Jamin* (water, forest and land) to be sacred and they had an inseparable relationship with water, forest and land. The free flowing water in the rivers and brooks quenched their thirst and purified their bodies. The forest they lived in was a source of livelihood and shelter. The land they tilled produced grains and gave them their identity. Life without *jal-jungle-jamin* was unimaginable. They used nature only to meet their needs, not to satisfy their greed. Their experiences in life over the years led to a triangular relationship inasmuch as they reached the Divine through nature and their fellow human beings.

But they were often forced to retreat deep into the forests and hills as outsiders invaded their habitat. The harmonious relationship with nature started cracking when non-*Adivasis* invaded *Adivasi* land. They were taken as bonded labourers and forced to do things wholly against their way of life and ethos. For example, they were made to clear vast areas of their beloved forests for rulers who came from outside and for petty business people. The land which they had cultivated for years was taken away from them. Kings, emperors, colonisers and, now, the government came marching in to snatch away what was dear to the *Adivasis* and, in the process, destroyed their way of life. They who had lived joyously and fearlessly lived in the forests and hills were harassed and cruelly treated, totally subdued and made prey to all forms of exploitation. Fear set in. Is it any wonder that literacy levels remained low as they retreated further and further?

The world outside was advancing in science and information technology with unimaginable rapidity. The digital communication media was revolutionising the world. The forces of the market grew strong enough to affect policy by heads of States. Globalisation forces fascinate most human beings everywhere on the planet, and governments chose to modify policies to suit the rich North, bowing to the market. *Adivasis*, exposed to this chaotic world like everybody else, succumbed to its spell.

Traditionally, most *Adivasis* had engaged in subsistence agriculture in small plots of lands and been dependent on forest produce for a livelihood. The 'brave new world' ushered in by globalisation and the digital revolution hit the *Adivasis* hard, rendering their traditional means of production obsolete. They were caught unawares; these new forces seemed at first sweet but soon they found themselves being strangled. They certainly experienced the fast changes but they were unable to check and control their adverse impact. The young *Adivasis* were the most adversely affected. The *Adivasi* ethos, inherited through the ages, began to vanish.

Globalisation brought to the *Adivasi* world a culture of individualism that went against the grain of their communitarian and humanitarian culture. The community, which bound the people together, started losing ground. The end result has been skewed development among the *Adivasis*. Few of them are able to cope with the demands of the day; many are losing their purchasing power; their very survival is being challenged.

The forests they had lived in for centuries and which they had nurtured carefully, regenerating them over and over again, are today infested with government Forest Departments, wood smugglers, mega national and multinational companies, and extremist forces who take advantage of the dispossessed tribals. Trees are felled for selling and mining activities by stakeholders riding roughshod with power and money over the policies meant to favour the *Adivasis*. Some of them have even started felling trees themselves to earn a living.

What is happening to their culture?

Culture² is a dynamic process, changing and adapting all the time through forces that come from within and without. The change however should be such that a community adjusts to it without being destroyed.

The *Adivasis* had beautiful cultures, each tribe with its distinct traditions and way of life, but change in *Adivasi* culture came at an accelerated speed with invaders who rushed into their habitat and brought in an alien education. *Adivasi* children do not study their own history, geography or culture, but are taught an alien history and culture which has little to do with their experience of day-to-day life. Their precious cultural heritage has all but disappeared despite a strong innate value system which *Adivasis* inherit from their communities. While there are *Adivasis* who have drifted away from their moorings for various reasons, the core ethos remains and many fall back on the community once they realise that they have gone too far.

The habitat of the *Adivasis* has been repeatedly invaded and the cultural practices of the powerful newcomers imposed on them. The result is that it is difficult to safeguard their cultural identity; and their meaning system, their ethos, their rituals and cultural practices are slowly disappearing, their profound meaning lost forever.

The digital media has made a revolutionary breakthrough in the *Adivasi* world. First the television and compact discs took over; of late it is the ubiquitous cell phone. The new information gadgets fascinate the minds and

²Culture can be defined as “the sum of attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguishes one group of people from another. Culture is transmitted, through language, material objects, ritual, institutions, and art, from one generation to the next.” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/culture>: Browsed on February 19, 2010).

hearts of the young Adivasis and they have started to live in the world of the imagination. The gap between the young and the old has widened to the extent that it is difficult to bring the young and the old generations to a common platform for community-based action.

The *Adivasi* community is experiencing a dialectic tension between what is offered by the modern world and their own value system. A few have surrendered to the forces of globalisation and digital revolution, but there are many who are forced to reflect on their way of life today. There is a realisation that the community has been a shelter to all *Adivasis* irrespective of their ideology and way of life. There are many instances in the community of young people who have come back, like the prodigal son, to loving fathers. Realisations of this kind have made many people take life and community values seriously. Ultimately it is the family and the community that support and sustain life and value systems

The new socio-political and economic initiatives that strengthen *Adivasis*

Dr. Ambedkar was the Chairperson of the Constitution Drafting Committee. He was a *Dalit* and he had gone through all the pains and suffering of untouchability, exclusion and exploitation that a *Dalit* or an *Adivasi* goes through. Under his chairmanship, many constitutional provisions were made to safeguard *Adivasis*. The irony is that these Provisions for *Adivasis* have not been implemented in the last very many years. Now *Adivasis* are becoming aware of these provisions and fighting for their constitutional and fundamental rights. This awareness has certainly strengthened their hand.

There has been a continuous move by Brahminical ideologues to rename *Adivasis* as *Vanvasi* (forest dwellers). They have opened many *Vanvasi Ashrams* to instil Brahminical ideologies in the minds of the young. These *Ashrams* are meant only for *Adivasis*. The political leaders upholding Brahminical ideology are constantly poisoning the innocent minds of *Adivasis* through speeches and talks in which there is an undercurrent of Hindu fundamentalism. Once *Adivasis* start calling themselves *Vanvasis*, they may be deprived of all the Constitutional Provisions meant for the *Adivasis* because the Indian Constitution does not recognise the term '*Vanvasi*'. This would also create divisions among the various *Adivasi* groups. And above all, *Adivasis* would remain as they were in terms of development and awareness. *Adivasis* and others who want the holistic development of *Adivasis* oppose the imposition of such ideologies.

While the *Adivasis* have their own distinct way of life and their understanding of the Creator and religion, Christian missionaries brought in education, health care and some awareness along with faith in Jesus Christ. *Adivasis* who accepted Christianity have certainly progressed in life; they have

also resisted the supremacy of Brahminical ideology. Their progress has threatened non-*Adivasis* and Hindu fundamentalists who see the *Adivasis* slipping out of their grasp. This has led to their dividing *Adivasi* communities in the name of religion and they have had some success in bringing them into the Hindu fold. However, now more and more *Adivasis* are realising the fact that they are not Hindus but have a distinct way of relating to the Creator. This understanding is becoming a platform for them to re-examine their way of life and ethos.

Adivasis live in close proximity with forests and hills; they used to feel secure in the forest. This security was threatened when the cultivable land they had prepared over the years was snatched away by non-*Adivasis*. The deepening threat made the *Adivasis* retreat further into the forests. Today they are faced with an ironical dilemma: they are poor in their rich land. The government machinery and the mega companies have found out that immense mineral wealth lies below *Adivasi* land, and on this wealth they have cast covetous eyes. They are going ahead with mining at the cost of the *Adivasis*, as Memorandums of Understandings are signed each year between government and the mining companies to extract minerals. The *Adivasis*, understanding the adverse effects of displacement and loss of their very identity, have begun to come together to protest against these moves by government and private companies. These protests have been taking shape of *Adivasi* movements to safeguard their life and identity.

There are many *Adivasis* who are part of the Self Help Groups initiated by the government programmes or development programmes of Non-governmental Organisations. The very process of forming Self Help Groups has made them sit down in their respective groups to reflect and make action plans for their own holistic development. This process has made them think; and their mental capabilities have been enhanced. The outcome of this process is that *Adivasis* have begun to look at their way of life, culture and socio-economic conditions more critically. Self Help Groups came with the purpose of teaching small savings in groups through pooling financial resources to meet unforeseen eventualities and take up economic activities to better their means of livelihood. Self Help Groups have made a huge difference in the lives of the *Adivasis*.

Increasing Jesuit commitment and their 'work groups'

The Society of Jesus has been working with and for the poor and marginalized. Its commitment to the *Adivasis* is not new, but of late it has consolidated its realisation that the *Adivasis* are at the lowest level even among the marginalized. This realisation itself is a big leap towards *Adivasi* development. Now Jesuits will surely make a reference to the *Adivasis* in their

deliberations for setting priorities for missions, and this I hope will lead to more concerted efforts for their holistic development. The idea of having a 'Work Group' in every Conference to work for, and with, the *Adivasis* is really important if work among them is to surge ahead. Past efforts for Adivasi development by individual Provinces and Jesuits can be consolidated and broadened with the help of the work group. The only word of caution I would like to make is this: let this work group be active and mean business. Let this work group not become a fine task group of ideologies only. It is very important that the *Adivasis* feel that the Society stands by them to accompany them in the days to come.

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