

# Experiences

## SAPI: A Dalit Vision for a New India Joseph Xavier SJ

### Introduction

**S**outh Asian Peoples' Initiatives (SAPI) was conceived as a platform, a democratic and secular space in which like-minded individuals, groups, organizations and people's movements could work together. It was set up in 2004 in the context of the Mumbai World Social Forum by Jesuits in the social action ministry of South Asia. SAPI's vision is of a pluralist society that is democratic, egalitarian, and secular, that allows many cultures to flourish. It works with, and on behalf of marginalized communities: dalits, adivasis (indigenous peoples), women, unorganized workers, youth, children, refugees, minorities and other groups on the periphery. SAPI, comprising Jesuits and lay members, has been pushing the state to enact pro-people policies while opposing policies that are anti-poor. In this SAPI has been joined by civil society organizations. At the Ignatian Advocacy workshop held at El Escorial, Madrid, in November 2008, the advocacy work of SAPI was chosen as one of the possible case studies for presentation. Many questions were raised. Can a platform work? Is it feasible for a platform of the marginalized to engage in a 'high profile' exercise like advocacy action? My attempt here is to narrate one of the advocacy endeavours promoted by SAPI at the national level in India.

### The millennium context

In the post-globalization era, successive governments with left or right or centrist ideologies enacted policies addressing various segments of the population. With the onslaught of market forces, most new policies have led to what has been called 'development terrorism'.<sup>1</sup> That is, every 'new' policy has in effect meant a further alienation of the poor.<sup>2</sup> Challenges to civil society groups from the pro-market and religious fundamentalist lobby are legion.

### Understanding advocacy

Advocacy, as understood by SAPI, is more than critically engaging with decision-makers on behalf of the poor. It is political action with, and by the marginalized, amplifying their voices within the democratic framework, the

<sup>1</sup>A term used by Prof Amit Bhaduri to describe present day lopsided developmental models as promoted by multinational corporations and international business houses.

<sup>2</sup>For example a whopping 92.37 % of the workers today in India are in the informal sector, outside the purview of the existing labour legislation. A large number of the dalits and adivasis, who constitute about 300 million, are victims of the development policies of the State.

Constitution of India. This necessarily involves mass mobilization, strengthening collective bargaining power, and democratic and non-violent forms of struggles and campaigns. The thrust is towards pro-poor rather than anti-poor policies.

### **A political kairos**

I turn now to a concrete example of advocacy and the role played by SAPI in formulating a National Dalit Policy. To appreciate the struggle and political factors involved, I need to backtrack a little. To begin with, the term dalit includes adivasis (tribals) as well as the Scheduled Castes (formerly called untouchables). While the need for a comprehensive National Tribal policy was first mooted in 1980 by the State itself, it was only in 2004 that the BJP government, then in power, formulated the Draft National Tribal Policy, hoping to secure Tribal votes in what was an election year. But the ruling rightwing BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) lost the election in what was seen as a defeat of conservative upper-caste forces, their attempt to secure the Tribal vote bank notwithstanding. Civil society organizations heaved a huge sigh of relief as the Congress party now formed the new coalition government called the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The newly formed UPA government in 2004 circulated the same Draft National Tribal Policy prepared earlier by the BJP government and invited public opinion. The draft was rejected by the adivasi communities and civil society organizations, including SAPI,<sup>3</sup> on the grounds that the entire policy had been framed without considering social and cultural aspects, or the self-governance and communitarian ethos of the adivasis. The policy was dropped, but till date the new policy exists only in draft form. Dalit academicians and activists and civil society organizations are therefore working seriously to formulate a National Dalit Policy (NDP). SAPI and JESA in collaboration with other civil society organizations have taken the lead in this.<sup>4</sup>

### **The process of evolving a National Dalit Policy**

SAPI organized a second consultation in New Delhi from 17-19 September 2004 to examine the Common Minimum Programme of the UPA government, and the outcome was a press release on '*The Indigenous and the Marginalized Communities' Demand Beyond the CMP*'. This offered a critique of the government's Common Minimum Programme (CMP) from the perspective of the adivasis, dalits, women and minorities. Since many members of SAPI are from adivasi and Scheduled Caste communities, the need for lobbying for a

<sup>3</sup>SAPI members were part of this process.

<sup>4</sup>It may be noted that because of pressure from the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) of which SAPI was a partner, the UPA government passed two important pro-people legislations, namely the Right to Information Act 2005 and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005.

National Dalit Policy came up; this seemed to be a politically opportune moment to put pressure on the UPA government.

The top-down process of policy-making so evident in the rejected National Tribal Policy of 2004 has simply not been acceptable; thus it was decided that SAPI members should work for a few years at the grassroots, joining hands with dalit intellectuals, academicians, activists, organizations and movements so as to fire the imagination of as many as possible. This base of people's power would give SAPI an advantage while bargaining with the State. SAPI members decided to work at the state and regional levels in the first phase.

The beginning was in South India. The first NDP meet was organized in Bangalore in August 2005. The Dalit Conference of South India with 85 people belonging to more than 55 dalit organizations participated and formulated the Bangalore Declaration: A Dalit Vision for a New India. The vision was to create a casteless and egalitarian society adhering to the philosophy and ideals of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar. The document declared Brahminism<sup>5</sup> and neo-liberalism to be enemies of dalit political theory. The draft policy stated 'Ours is a policy of struggle; a policy of combat; a policy of hope; a policy of celebration and a policy of development.' The National Dalit Policy demanded the following:

- a. *Redistribution of Land and national resources as the land is the birthright of the dalits*
- b. *Dalit lives be given dignity and made secure*
- c. *Full implementation of Reservation provisions<sup>6</sup> as 'Reservation is our Constitutional Right'*
- d. *Access to free, compulsory and quality education*
- e. *Recognition of the contribution of dalit women in nation building.*
- f. *Denunciation of untouchability practices, caste system, communalism and capitalism-led globalization, and assertion of human dignity, equality, equal opportunity and dalit share in natural resources.*

This outcome of the Bangalore Workshop was taken with enormous enthusiasm by the participants to state-level dalit organizations to create public opinion and generate momentum. They also created a South Indian Forum for National Dalit Policy. The Bangalore Declaration was later translated into three regional languages and state-level workshops were facilitated by the members of SAPI. The need for a National Dalit Policy caught the imagination of many people. At every meeting the initiative of SAPI was acknowledged. SAPI committed itself to taking up this advocacy action to the northern, western and eastern regions of India and at the national level.

This was borne out when SAPI facilitated the process in Ahmedabad, Patna and Raipur, the state capitals of Gujarat, Bihar and Chattisgarh, with large participation from dalit organizations. Every zone came up with a draft

<sup>5</sup>An ideology which promotes, protects and upholds through religious sanctions a caste system based on the principles of hierarchy, discrimination and exclusion.

<sup>6</sup>The term reservation refers to affirmative action programmes in which quotas are reserved for dalits in educational institutions and government jobs.

National Dalit Policy capturing regional concerns, evolved from their primary experience of being dalit. The zonal draft policies were taken to the states for further discussion and to build a mass base. These zonal and state level processes added new dimensions such as dalit right to employment in both public and private sectors, to health care and participation in governance and redistribution of lands, both homestead and agricultural lands.

The outcome of the four zonal workshops and eight state-level workshops facilitated by SAPI, and the conclusions of NDP workshops organized locally by dalit organizations were taken up by the National SAPI forum for further deliberation. With inputs from dalit activists, bureaucrats, academics and politicians, the final document titled **A Dalit Vision for a New India** was prepared. This was released by an eminent Constitutional expert, Prof Ravi Verma Kumar, at the India Social Forum in November 2006 in the presence of over two thousand people. The policy, which emphasized economic rights as the basis, followed by political, social, cultural, gender and constitutional rights, was acclaimed by the speakers as a milestone in the process of dalit identity formation. Mr. Paul Divakar, Convener of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) said, "This policy intervention by SAPI is timely and appropriate. The demand for a dalit share in the national wealth is the key for dalit liberation". The members of SAPI later met parliamentarians, bureaucrats, planning commission members and academicians and explained the dream of the masses; they were assured that the issue would be discussed in an appropriate forum.

### **The way forward**

This document on National Dalit Policy is a matter of pride for the members of SAPI, as it was evolved by the dalits and by groups upholding dalit ideology, with the participation of over 2500 dalits belonging to 300 dalit and civil society organizations. This amplified voice for a comprehensive National Dalit Policy is no longer the property of SAPI alone. The process has also facilitated networking among many dalit organizations for the realization of a dream in which thousands of years of historical oppression, alienation and exclusion of over 200 million dalits will end. The policy might not yet have seen the light of day as of now, but I believe that it will not be long before it is enacted. The seed has been sown; the struggle continues. Should SAPI wait for a politically opportune time again or create one?

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