

Submission by Society for Threatened Peoples

a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

Language: English only
Universal Periodic Review
First session

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2007-11-20

India: Booming Economy Pushes Adivasi to the Brink

On 15th, August 2007 India celebrated their 60th anniversary of independence from the British Empire. At the same time the largest democracy on Earth is indulging herself in the unprecedented economic prosperity she has been experiencing in recent years. There has been however virtually no reason for the Adivasi, India's indigenous population, to celebrate. In spite of existing constitutional safeguards, for generations the Adivasi have been subjected to various kinds of discriminations. As a result, the Adivasi experience poor levels of health, education, food security and political representation, among other things. Together with these problems, which predominantly stem from inadequate laws or deficient implementation processes, the paramount issue remains the question of Adivasi land rights.

Most of the Adivasi tribes live in the forests of remote and mountainous regions in central India, the so-called "Tribal Belt". Most Adivasi predominantly rely on subsistence farming and minor forest produce for their livelihood. Unfortunately their land does not only contain their sites of worship and economic well-being, but also large deposits of natural resources like bauxite, iron ore and coal. Consequently their lands have been increasingly targeted for industrial development by the fast-growing Indian economy. Mining operations, industrial complexes (frequently clustered in Special Economic Zones (SEZ)) and the building of infrastructure (particularly dams) have already taken a serious toll on Adivasi land and threaten to drive their distinct culture, which is inextricably linked to the land itself, into extinction.

The facts are revealing. According to the Indian Government's Planning Commission from 2001 the Adivasi constituted 55.1 percent of the 8.54 million people displaced in India between 1950 and 1990. Less conservative figures are significantly higher. A report from the People's Union for Civil Liberties estimates that between 1950 and 1990 around 7.4 million Adivasi were displaced just in the state of Jharkand alone. This is supported with a well-known study by Walter Fernandez et al which puts the figure at 9 million displaced Adivasi, which is the equivalent to 40 percent of the total of 21 million displaced persons for the period 1950 and 1990. Owing to the enormous economic growth India has experienced since the mid-1990s, the total number of displaced persons as well as the number of displaced Adivasi has significantly risen and will – in the face of the booming economy's insatiable appetite for land and resources – continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

Particularly because of the construction of environmentally disastrous mega-dams, whose economic value has been increasingly called into question, are numerous Adivasi tribes and communities being displaced. Many projects across the country – most prominent among them the Sardar-Sarovar-Dam in the Narmada Valley and the Polavaram Dam at the Godavari – have driven hundreds of thousands Adivasi off their ancestral lands. Many more are likely to follow should India seriously pursue the megalomaniac "River-Linking-Project," the construction of a system of dams and canals which would connect all major Indian waterways to a national

water grid. Even though these figures of displacement alone may sound daunting, they hardly reveal the full scope of the problem. Even without being displaced the livelihoods of millions of people – among them millions of Adivasi – will be severely affected by changes brought about to their traditional environment by these massive infrastructure projects.

Although the construction of dams undoubtedly accounts for a vast proportion of displacement, other causes should not be underestimated. To attract foreign investment and investment by national corporate bodies, many state governments have recently been signing Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) documents. These warrant the establishment of industries which are often planned on the lands of the Adivasi. Since Jharkand became a state in 2000 the government has reportedly signed 42 MoUs. For projects envisioned for the mineral-rich Kolhan Region alone, 47,445 acres of land would be required and is likely to affect 10,000 families. The state of Orissa has also signed 42 MoUs in the period between 2002 and 2005, one of them being the US\$12 billion project of the Korean Pohang Steel Company (POSCO), which will cause the displacement of 4,000 Adivasi families.

The threat to tribal lands is augmented by the government's promotion of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) across the country. Often tribal agricultural land is intruded upon, despite government statements to the contrary. Following a recently-mooted plan, even the inception of SBZs in forest regions seems to be an option. In October 2006 the 375 SEZs either granted or still awaiting approval accounted for an area of 274,000 hectares. In November 2007 the number of SEZs with formal or in-principle approval had risen to 512. The policy of setting up SEZs was even touted as the "biggest land grab in the history of independent India" by the well-known environmentalist Vandana Shiva.

Another conflict regarding Adivasi land rights that deserves special mention is the permanent conflict with the forest administration which, referring to the Indian Forest Act 1927, the Forest Conservation Act 1980 and the Wildlife Protection Act 1972, regards the Adivasi as perpetrators and frequently tries to evict them from the forests. Between February 2002 and May 2004 more than 300,000 Adivasi were driven out of the forests.

Eviction or displacements from a traditional environment necessitate grave problems even under normal circumstances. For the Adivasi, whose culture is based on their special relationship with the animated nature of their ancestral lands, it does not simply result in a loss of livelihood, but of identity. With equal disregard for their culture and their constitutional and legal rights, the Adivasi were treated harsh in the past and are so in the present. In large segments of Indian society they are looked upon merely as an obstacle to industrial development, leading to many being tricked into giving up their lands or even forcibly evicted. But the pitiful treatment does not stop here. It is believed that only 25 percent of the Adivasi who were displaced between 1959 and 1990 received some sort of compensation for their loss of livelihood, even though in most of these cases the compensation is inadequate. Proper rehabilitation processes or job opportunities, which are normally envisioned before displacements take place, do rarely materialise. More often than not community structures are disrupted and the compensation in land or money is inadequate to build a new livelihood. As a result, many Adivasi migrate to the cities where – owing to their comparatively poor level of education – most of them end up in slums leading the desolate and destitute lives of unskilled or migrant workers.

Faced with these unenviable prospects, the levels of information and organisation among Adivasi have been continuously growing as well as their resistance intensifying. Unfortunately Adivasi protests in the forms of demonstrations and occupation of building-sites has repeatedly been met with disproportionate use of violence by police forces resulting in scores of injuries

and numerous deaths, such as the situations in Muthanga in 2003, Koel-Karo in 2004, and Kalinganagar in 2006.

Despite these problems it should be noted that, following the change in the Indian government in 2004, the Adivasi seem to be back on the national agenda, with even the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh taking notice. Among other things the Revised Draft National Policy 2006 has been formulated and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006 has come into force in January 2007. The latter was intended to improve the legal situation of the 4.3 million Adivasi who are currently living in 2,690 recognised forest villages. At some point in the legislative process it seemed as if the act could provide a breakthrough towards the recognition of land rights of forest-dwelling Adivasi by generally acknowledging the historic injustice done to the Adivasi, mentioning their importance for the protection of the forest environment and expressively recognising their right to live there. Unfortunately after numerous last-minute "editorial changes" this didn't completely materialize. Most notably is the debilitating provision that, in the face of conflicting laws, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006 does not take priority and will likely render it for the most part irrelevant. Also deserving mention is the fact that the Act only covers forest-dwelling Adivasi, not those who live nearby the forest and depend on it for their livelihood.

But even if the Act was not debilitated by the last-minute changes administered to it, it would still be likely to suffer from implementation problems, a disease ubiquitous to almost all of the programs, policies and provisions meant to improve the situation of the Adivasi. Sometimes this is a result of a lack of staff or finances, but most of the time it is predominantly for the reason that, when it comes to furthering the cause of the Adivasi, government and administration on all levels fail to show the level of commitment even vaguely resembling the one that is on display when it comes to assisting economic development or promoting business interests.

The lack of effort put forth to improve the state of the Adivasi is blatantly obvious from the statistics regarding their situation in the areas of education health, and nutrition.

According to the 2001 Census, the literacy rate of Adivasi is at 47.10 percent (males 59.17 percent, females 34.76 percent) and significantly lower than the national rate of 65.38 percent (males 75.96 percent, females 54.28 percent). Hidden behind these national figures are huge regional differences between relatively high literacy rates in North-East India in, for example, Mizoram (total 89.35, males 91.71, females 86.95), Manipur (total 65.85, males 73.16, females 58.42) and Assam (total 62.52, males 72.34, females 52.44) and abysmally low literacy rates in many mainland Indian states with large Adivasi populations, for example Jharkand (total 40.67, males 53.98, females 27.21), Orissa (total 37.57, males 51.48, females 23.37), and Bihar (total 28.17, males 39.76, females 15.54). Despite the 93rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution recognising the fundamental right to education, these literacy rates tell a different story. Further evidence for the apparent lack of serious interest in promoting education among the Adivasi are the numerous occasions on which available grants or funds were simply not even applied for by state governments. In May 2006 the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Justice expressed its concern that the number of educational complexes supported by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs had been declining since 2002-03 as well as the number of girls enrolled in school.

Equally problematic is the often deplorable condition of many health care facilities in tribal areas. The Joint Parliamentary Committee on the Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has recognised this problem on numerous occasions, but only rarely were remedial steps taken by the concerned authorities. In addition, regional hospitals are often hard-pressed to fill

their many job vacancies usually because no additional benefits or incentives are offered for the remotely-located position. In addition to the lack of doctors and a shortage of medicines, the National Family Health Survey II in 2004 drew attention to the basic difficulty of Adivasi in many areas to reach a primary health centre simply because of the vast distance needed to be traveled. Consequently women suffer most; the survey found that only 43.1 percent of women got an antenatal check-up and that about 80 percent gave birth to their babies at home.

In combination with the dire nutritional situation this lack of access to medical facilities accounts for the worrying mortality rate among Adivasi children reported by the Ministry of Tribal Health in its Annual Report 2005-2006, which at 84.2 deaths (per 1, 000 births) is significantly higher than the Indian average of 70 as well as the rates of other disadvantaged socio-economic groups. The mortality rate for children under the age of five (126.6) compares even less favourably to the national average (94.9), reflecting the poor nutritional situation of Adivasi children who are underweight at a rate of 55.9 compared to the national 47. But although children are most vulnerable to malnutrition and starvation, adults are also affected. High hopes were given by the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) which was launched in 1997 to benefit the poor while keeping the budgetary food subsidies under control. However, an independent large-scale evaluation by the Programme Evaluation Commission revealed serious deficiencies. Again implementation proved to be a major problem. Only 57 percent of the targeted households were actually covered by the scheme and no more than 42 percent of the subsidised grain reached its destination. At the same time 36 percent of the food subsidies were siphoned off the supply chain in one way or another.

As if all this was not enough, the Adivasi are increasingly caught between the lines of armed conflict. The Naxalite movement, an ultra-left wing opposition group claims to represent the poor including Dalits and Adivasi and demands the establishment of a proletarian state in India. Its activities have already spread to 15 states of mainland India. The group even controls many districts particularly in the so-called tribal belt and were described by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as the "single biggest internal security challenge" ever faced by India. The Naxalite movement is not led by Adivasi, although widespread disappointment and anger make their communities a fertile recruiting ground. Adivasi are reported to form a significant proportion of the Naxalite cadres. According to the Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR,) between January and September at least 625 people were killed. The conflict escalated in June 2005, when the government of Chattisgarh, with support from the federal government, began the Salwa Judum campaign, intending to ease the pressure off of security forces by employing Adivasi villagers to fight the Naxalites. Entire villages were armed for that purpose and found themselves under heavy attacks from the Maoists. Frequently the Adivasi are forced to take sides and fight their brothers and sisters. Since the start of Salwa Judum the number of human rights violations has significantly increased.

The Salwa Judum campaign is a prime example for the way they are seen in many quarters of the Indian society today. At best pawns in a game but otherwise more of a public nuisance or an obstacle to progress and industrial development. A change of mind is desperately needed through all segments of society. Otherwise laws will continue to be watered down until and implementation problems will linger on forever. However, with the Indian economy booming and the hunger for resources almost insatiable time is running out. The change of mind is to come soon or it will be to save the Adivasi culture.