

Adivasis

Profile

Adivasis is the collective name used for the many indigenous peoples of India. The term Adivasi derives from the Hindi word 'adi' which means of earliest times or from the beginning and 'vasi' meaning inhabitant or resident, and it was coined in the 1930s, largely a consequence of a political movement to forge a sense of identity among the various indigenous peoples of India. Officially Adivasis are termed scheduled tribes, but this is a legal and constitutional term, which differs from state to state and area to area, and therefore excludes some groups who might be considered indigenous.

Adivasis are not a homogeneous group; there are over 200 distinct peoples speaking more than 100 languages, and varying greatly in ethnicity and culture. However, there are similarities in their way of life and generally perceived oppressed position within Indian society. According to the official Census held in 2001, Adivasis constitute 8 per cent of the nation's total population, over 84 million people. Unofficial figures vary significantly but represent a much higher proportion of India's population. Adivasis live throughout India but are primarily based in the mountain and hill areas, away from the fertile plains. According to the 2001 census, the greatest concentration is in Chattisgrah (38%), Jharkahand (26%) Madhya Pradesh (20%), Orissas (22%), Andhra Pradesh (6%) Gujarat (15%) Rajasthan (12%), Maharashtra (9%) and Bihar (0.9%).

Historical context

Adivasis, as their name reflects, are the earliest inhabitants of the subcontinent and once inhabited much larger areas than they do at present. Little is known of their history, although it appears that many were pushed into the hill areas after the invasions of the Indo-Aryan tribes 3,000 years ago. Indigenous peoples were not integrated into Hindu caste society, but there were many points of contact. Indigenous religious beliefs contain many aspects of Hinduism (and vice versa); Adivasis traded with settled villagers on the plains and sometimes paid tribute to Hindu rulers. In turn some Adivasi rulers conquered and ruled over non-Adivasis and some Adivasis permanently settled and entered caste society.

It was not until the unifying political rule of the British from the late eighteenth century that the government made substantial inroads into Adivasi society. British rule brought money, government officials and moneylenders into indigenous areas, beginning the process of encroachment on Adivasi land by outsiders. As a result, there were Adivasi revolts from the mid-nineteenth century in several parts of eastern India, and this forced the administration to recognize the vulnerable position of Adivasis and pass laws to protect their lands from outsiders. These laws (some of which are still on the statute book) barred the sale of indigenous lands to non-Adivasis and made provisions to restore alienated land. However, in practice most of these laws were widely disregarded, and unscrupulous merchants and moneylenders found ways to circumvent them. These problems are still encountered by Adivasis today, although their opponents are as likely to be large companies and state corporations as small traders and moneylenders. Christian missions began to proselytize in some indigenous areas, where (in contrast to

Hindu and Muslim areas) they achieved a degree of success and also, most notably in the northeast, began a process of education and political awareness. Adivasis played little role in the events leading up to independence, and it was only in the north-east that they had enough political consciousness to make demands for separation or autonomy.

Constitutional status

Under the 1950 constitution Adivasis, along with so-called untouchables, became subject to special protective provisions. The vast majority of indigenous peoples were classified as scheduled tribes. Article 341 authorizes the President of India to specify 'castes, races or tribes which shall for the purposes of this constitution be deemed to be scheduled tribes'. The first amendment to the constitution passed in 1951 allowed the state to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes of citizens of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The central government has a special commission for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, which issues an annual report. These reports give accounts of illegal actions against Adivasis and makes recommendations to improve their position.

Political representation

There are reserved seats for scheduled tribes in Parliament and the state legislatures. In the two houses of Parliament, the Lok Sabha and the Rajiya Sabha, 7 per cent of the seats were reserved for members of scheduled tribes, and similar representation occurs in the state assemblies in proportion to the percentage of scheduled tribes in the state's population. However, since the scheduled tribe voters are always a minority (except in the north-eastern states where they are a numerical majority) in the reserved constituencies and in the legislatures as a whole, favourable legislation can be blocked by vested interests. Furthermore, the system does not encourage organization of scheduled tribes by separate parties but limits it to organization and representation by the major parties, especially the Congress Party. Governments usually have ministers from scheduled tribes, including sometimes cabinet ministers, specifically to look after the affairs of scheduled tribes. The Bhuria Committee was set up by indigenous MPs to secure the extension of the 73rd and 74th articles of the constitution, which devolve authority to the Scheduled Areas. It presented its report in January 1995. The Bhuria Committee Report has drawn mixed reactions. While many feel that the process initiated by the Committee should be supported, it has been criticized because its recommendations do not extend to many indigenous areas, and because of a lack of gender sensitivity. There have been very few attempts to found distinctive scheduled tribe political parties, apart from those in the north-eastern states. Perhaps the most notable example has been in eastern and southern Bihar, where an Adivasi regionalist movement known as the Jharkhand movement has been a factor since independence. The roots of this movement lie in the Santhal peoples of eastern Bihar and western Bengal, the scene of one of the early indigenous revolts against land alienation under British rule. Some of this area also contains India's richest mineral deposits and mining, and subsequent industrialization and deforestation have added to Adivasi grievances.

The Jharkhand Party was founded in 1950 and had as its main demands the formation of a separate state or territory in the traditional Adivasi areas of Santhal Paganas and Chotanagpur and areas in West Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. The party went into decline after its leader joined the Congress Party but was revived in 1973 when a new party, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), was formed, led by a charismatic Santhal leader who worked closely with and eventually also joined the Congress Party. This split the JMM into several smaller groups, but in 1987 a new co-ordinating organization, the Jharkhand Co-ordinating Committee, was formed, with over fifty constituent organizations. This group has led a number of bandh (strikes) and mass demonstrations in support of its demands and also tried to set up a parallel government, albeit with little success. Both the central and state governments have consistently refused to consider any concessions regarding the creation of a Jharkhand state, although

according to an agreement signed on 2 September 1992, the central and state governments formally agreed to grant a measure of autonomy to the Jharkand region. In December 1994 the Bihar state assembly passed the Jharkhand Area Autonomous Council Act, which envisages the formation of a Jharkhand Area Autonomous Council (JAAC) comprising eighteen districts in Bihar. Notwithstanding the establishment of Ministry of Tribal Affairs (1999) and legislative action in the form of Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights Bill) 2005, there has been negligible impact in securing the rights of land rights of the Adivasis.

Resources

Over 95 per cent of the scheduled tribes still live in rural areas, and economic exploitation remains their most acute problem. Less than 10 per cent are itinerant hunter-gatherers but more than half depend on forest produce for their livelihood, many in the form of the tendu leaf, used for the production of bidi (cigarettes). From the time of the British administration, there have been laws regulating the ownership and use of the forests, and today most forest land is effectively nationalized, with large areas contracted out to private commercial interests. This has progressively deprived Adivasi communities of rights in the land, and they can be fined or imprisoned for taking forest produce which has traditionally been theirs. The ostensible reason for state intervention has been to stop the destruction of forest land which has continued throughout this century. There are a number of reasons for deforestation, although it is often blamed on the Adivasis' shifting cultivation practices; one has been the increase in demand for firewood as fuel; another is the impact of commercial, sometimes illegal, logging. A serious threat to Adivasis is large-scale dam-building, for irrigation and hydroelectricity. A number of hydro schemes have been carried out since independence, and a constitutional and political war is currently being waged over the construction of the largest dam in the Narmada basin.

As with the scheduled castes, members of scheduled tribes are beneficiaries of affirmative action provisions laid down in the constitution, which reserve places in education, the civil service and nationalized industries. Affirmative action policies have led to a noticeable increase of Scheduled Tribes in government sector employment and in public educational institutions. However, any success of reservations have been uneven across sectors; while significant improvements are visible at the lower cadders of governmental services, there is a dearth of Schedule Caste representation at the higher echelons of public service and key governmental posts. Furthermore, the affirmative actions policies - strictly limited to public sector - have not improved the prospects of Schedule Tribes in the growing private sector. Even in the limited areas of positive advantages, Adivasis often face hardships and exclusion because of physical remoteness, poverty and prevalent social prejudices. Since few Adivasis finish schooling, most are unable to use the reserved places in higher education or the civil service.

Conflict

Some Adivasis have been organized by left-wing groups, known commonly in India as Naxalities, to press for higher wages and payments for forest produce. The Naxalite movement, which initially was a product of student-led insurrection in Bengal during the late 1960s and early 1970s, subsequently spread to regions of Bihar state, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. As a result, Adivasis risked becoming victims of both Naxalite pressures and government counterinsurgency campaigns. Police, forest guards and officials have cheated, bullied and intimidated Adivasis, and large numbers have routinely been arrested and jailed, often for petty offences. In such circumstances many Adivasis preferred to bribe officials in order to escape harassment, or else flee into the jungles.

Current issues

Adivasis continue to face prejudice and often violence from mainstream Indian society. They are at the lowest point of almost every socio-economic indicator. The majority of the population regards them as primitive, and government programmes aim at integrating them with the majority society, rather than allowing them to maintain their distinctive way of life. While the larger tribal groups and languages will survive as a result of numbers, the destruction of their economic base and environment poses grave threats to those who are still able to follow their traditional way of life and may result in the cultural extinction of many of the smaller Adivasi peoples. Although beneficiaries of India's extensive reservations, it remains the impact of the quota system upon Adivasis has remained negligible up until 2006. The quotas within higher education and jobs which require technical knowledge seem to have not worked in improving access so far. Quotas for Adivasis, for example, at the higher education levels remain unfilled. About 68 percent of Dalit and Adivasi children drop out before high school.

The Panchayat Raj (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996, was introduced in the late 1990s as a legislative means of promoting self-governance in rural areas through the creation of local village bodies. This legislation has helped adivasis to formulate responses to various local issues and to organise themselves at a local level by building local political institutions. The implementation of the Act needs to be strengthened further to help adivasis protect their interests and identity in various states across India.

There has been a lack of supportive role by the state to the Adivasi community when it has come to land re-distribution rights, rights of marginal farmers and daily wagers, rights of the tillers of the soil and rehabilitation rights. It needs to be stated that Adivasis constitute the poorest component across various states in India irrespective of the political make-up of the state governments. The Adivasi districts of West Bengal-Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia-are some of the poorest districts in India in spite of a leftist government in power in the state continuously since 1977. The nationalisation trend of the 1970s to build heavy industry close to the source of raw materials has further contributed to systematic displacement of Adivasis from their land. The districts in some of the other non-left states like Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, reflect similar socio-economic indicators as far as the adivasi population is concerned. The creation of Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Uttaranchal during the tenure of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has been a small step forward in restoring to the adivasis their sense of identity and their sense of existence. The state of Jharkhand was created to essentially give the right of political organisation to the adivasi community through the rights of a separate state. There is now a discourse for a reservation for the adivasi community in jobs and education at a state level. It though remains to be seen what reforms the governments in these states take to protect the interests of the adivasi community there.

One of the major reasons for the economic and social problems of the adivasi population has been their gradual displacement from land. Adivasis have been denied land ownership rights over the last century and their displacement from their land has made them reach a stage where they are fighting to retain their economic and social identity. Not only is the amount of compensation received by the Adivasis extremely small but also the number of adivasis who have been compensated is negligible. The reason is that legal obstacles are created to deny adivasis compensation rather than law being used to facilitate payment compensations as a sense of justice. One of the procedural impediments is that compensations are generally paid to individually owned land in law whereas Adivasi land is usually community owned or in the name of a dead ancestor. Amongst one of the few positive initiatives introduced by the current government are the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill 2005. The Bill recognises Scheduled Tribes as legitimate stakeholders in the management of forests. It aims to secure such rights for the Schedule Tribes as ownership of minor forest produce, grazing rights, habitat and habitation for primitive tribes and the community rights to traditional knowledge related to cultural and forest diversity. Notwithstanding these high ideals enshrined in the Bill, its legislative impact is yet to be established.

On the whole, however, the role of the State in 2006 has been extremely oppressive and the State has acted more as an entity that has repeatedly denied basic legal rights to Adivasis rather than helping them with compensation and rehabilitation for their land. There has only been a continuation of exploitative state policy where successive state and central governments have failed to secure the land rights and the ownership interests of Adivasi communities across India in the post-independence period.

One issue is though abundantly clear in 2006 following the rehabilitation issues raised by several civil society groups and rights activists in the light of the Narmada judgments (2000) and the recent drive towards industrial expansion - it is the onus of the government to re-examine the extent and scope of land reforms and establish the relationship of land to the adivasi community if their sense of displacement and problem of abject poverty is to be seriously addressed. The several cases of land disputes and the recent incidents of police firing on innocent adivasis protesting against land-grabbing by powerful corporations (as in Orissa and some other states) in 2006 have further exposed the brutal mechanisms used by big business against unarmed adivasis. They have also exposed the institutional and legal inadequacies in the system and the lack of trust the adivasis have in the Indian state that promises to protect them but practices exactly otherwise. It is clear that the absence of a more caring, responsive and sensitive state and the brutal use of force will only drive the adivasis to increasingly place their belief in violence and bloody causes as the Naxalite movement has espoused.