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TRIBAL INDIA TODAY : SOME CRITICAL ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

First of all I wish to thank EFCS for inviting me to deliver the KS Mathur Memorial Lecture. I feel honoured and overwhelmed. Late Prof. Mathur was my teacher and mentor and I have learnt a lot from him. I might have learnt more from him had he not passed away suddenly in 1977 at a relatively younger age. He was toying with many ideas at the time of his passing away but destiny had decided something else.

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The topic of today's lecture is **Tribal India Today: Some Critical issues and Questions**. I describe our tribal fellows as 'First citizens of India' whose well being is not only our constitutional obligation but also civilizational obligation.

The scheduled tribes and other tribal communities are facing the most difficult times in the post- independence era. In several ways they are facing existential problems. Here I would not be repeating the oft repeated and described serious and continuing problem of chronic indebtedness, land alienation, and displacement without proper rehabilitation, and our first citizens being legally dispossessed. Here I am confining my lecture to three issues- Language, Religion and religious identity and their peaceful resistance through constitutional means.

Knowing Differently

In the process of 'educating', 'modernising ' and 'mainstreaming' the tribal communities, the state policies have completely ignored that the tribal people have a wonderful and rich repertoire of languages and indigenous knowledge systems.

This is a unanimously held view that language is one of the greatest glories and achievements of humankind. It is indeed one of the greatest treasures of human civilization. It is the most important part of human culture

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and cultural expression. Language also gives any human group its cultural identity and preservation of all the components of culture is ensured through language.

The declining adivasi knowledge system is related with the systematic killings of the linguistic diversity. As rightly pointed out by Anvita Abbi (2012), we have to face the “bad consequences for homogenization of languages being undertaken in the name of ‘developing the tribes. Adivasis are being forced to forget their indigenous languages as education, even at the primary level, is imparted in the dominant state languages.” Tragically, the tribal knowledge, education, and language is being ‘stigmatized’ and the adivasis are being made to feel ashamed and they have stopped taking pride in their language. In this process their traditional knowledge is now easily forgotten. “By ignoring the linguistic human rights of education, we are depriving the tribes of building their intangible assets and capital” (ibid.)

In the wake of displacement from their habitats and violence/counter violence, a language first declines and then lost. Bastar is the classical example of this situation. Extinction of a speech, dialect or language means the loss of centuries old traditions and *Sanskars*.

Till 1960s, thirty six languages were alive in Bastar region. Every tribal community and craftsmen had their own language while Halbi was the language of administration. Gondi was dominant in forests. Even Gondi had several versions and variations. Now the number of its speakers is reduced to just around five hundred. In the wake of large scale migration, mechanization and market, a number of handicrafts have also become extinct along with the associated languages or got assimilated with neighbouring dominant languages. In a way, Bastar has become a ‘graveyard of languages’. Death of a speech means the extinction and disappearance of the associated culture, folk behaviour, identity and indigenous knowledge. Linguists of the world over are of the view that development of a human group or community is linked to the use of indigenous knowledge base which is stored in the native language. If we deprive the tribes of their base in their ancient and traditional culture and languages, how can they be creative and innovative- the two *mantras* of development. Instead of the wholesale replacement, what is desirable to be achieved is ‘modernization of tradition’. We don’t have to forget that those who think and know differently are to be respected and not to be denigrated. Perhaps that is what Nehru meant in his first point of Tribal Panchsheel - “The tribal people should develop along the lines of their genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them.”

This takes us to the old debate-Assimilation vs. Integration. Sociologists such as GS Ghurye and Gandhians such as Thakkar Bapa wanted our tribal communities to be assimilated with their neighbouring Hindu populations; G.S. Ghurye described them as ‘Backward Hindus’ and hence justifying their

assimilation. Such a coercive assimilation or acculturation goes against the spirit of Indian civilization and our constitution. When in this country a Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christians, a Telugu, Tamil, Oriya, Bengali and others have the right to live along their identities with honour and dignity enjoying cultural autonomy then why the tribal communities cannot exist with the same amount of honour and dignity as a Santhal, Gond, Bhil, Khasi and Mizo? For many of us India is not a melting pot of races and cultures but a 'salad bowl' where each ingredient though mixed up, still retains its identity and flavour. Thus, integration and *not* assimilation should be our commitment.

Land and Forests

The main reason behind tribal unrest and resistance is encroachment on their rights related with land and forest. Because of rampant and chronic indebtedness millions of tribal people have lost their land to the money lenders and *sahukars* and after independence land alienation has taken place largely due to industrialization and development induced displacement and sometimes by the forest department too. Thus, the tribal people are consistently subjected to land, water and forest alienation as a result of the mainstream invasions including mega-development projects and various other schemes. Here, it would not be out of place to mention two key provisions of the constitution:

Article 14: "The state shall not deny to any person equality before law or equal protection of the laws within the territory of India."

Article 46: "The state shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of people and in particular the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation."

At this juncture, it will be in the fitness of things to quote Oliver Mendelsohn & Upendra Baxi (1996) who, with reference to the plight of the *dalits* and the tribal populations, rightly comment that "while the state can often be conceptualized as a major part of the structure of social subordination, this is not to say that oppression necessarily arises primarily from the state rather than civil society, or that the state has a single and always oppressive character. Yet, if the political authority responsible for governance does not protect the weaker sections from exploitation, the exploited ones cannot be consoled with a plethora of protective and developmental provisions contained in the constitution."

The uneven distribution of wealth and power and the continued plunder of resources by the powerful enjoying the state patronage has created a situation which BD Sharma (1989) described as not only a 'dualist' but a three tier structure comprising of *India*, *Bharat*, and *Hindustanva*. The bulk of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes may be included in the lowest tier of *Hindustanva*. The most primary among all human rights is the right to life

and this does not mean the right to bare animal level subsistence. It means right to live with dignity and self respect. If the resource base of any group or community is encroached seriously and it loses command over their resources without being provided a better or even equal alternative, this sacrosanct human right gets violated.

The economic system and social system in a tribal area are indistinguishable. The former, in a way, may be seen as an extension of the latter. Most of the tribal communities heavily depend on the forces of nature which they propitiate by a variety of rites and rituals performed individually or in group or by the community as a whole.

The tribal communities have lived in intimate relationship with forests and their entire existence has been linked with forests due to historical factors. In fact there existed a 'symbiotic relationship' between them and forests. Forests, for many tribal communities, have been their abode and source of livelihood. Thus, it has been a unanimously held view that forest economy is tribal economy and vice versa. Not only their economic life but also the religious and religio-magical beliefs of the tribal people have been rotating round the forests. Many a flora and fauna have been their objects of worship. It has been seen that in many tribal communities any endangered species of flora, animals or birds are declared as *totem* and then, as per the religious beliefs, it cannot be killed or damaged. They have their 'sacred groves' in forests from which not even a twig of grass can be removed. This may also be seen as the tribal way of conservation of forest and environment since times immemorial.

During the colonial period the rulers took concrete steps to extend the authority of the state to forests and the first Forest Act of 1865 was promulgated followed by the Forest Act of 1878 which further tightened the state's control over forests. Then came the First Forest Policy of 1894. It envisaged, for the first time, the regulation of rights and restriction of privileges of the users in the forests. With this, the forest officials seriously appeared on the scene and claimed the authority to limit and regulate the traditional tribal rights over forests. The Indian Forest Act of 1927, in continuation of the measures already taken, was a serious attempt to regulate and curtail further people's rights over forest land and forest produce. This act created an extremely powerful and adequately protected executive consisting of forest officers of Indian Forest Service, State Forest Service, Rangers, Foresters, and Forest Guards. These officers enjoyed legal powers. For example, Section 64 of this Act stated that any forest officer without a warrant could arrest any person against whom a 'reasonable' suspicion existed of his motive to pilferage forest or forest wealth and his act was punishable with imprisonment. Obviously, this power was exercised against the forest dwellers and forest dependent communities arbitrarily to force them to submit and surrender before the authorities without murmur. A number of tribal revolts, minor and major, are testimony to the response of the tribal people against the ruthless and draconian laws and

authorities.

The first national forest policy of independent India, the National Forest Policy of 1952 was not a radical departure from the past. It brought only cosmetic changes inviting opposition and protests from all quarters. Some dubbed it as 'old wine in new bottle.' Then came the National Forest Policy of 1980. It was, at least theoretically, was a major departure from the past. One of the striking features of the new forest policy is its acknowledgement of the relationship of the tribal communities with the forests and it categorically stated that the rights and concessions enjoyed by them should be fully protected. Through the concept of Joint Forest Management, for the first time after the extension of state authority over forests, the forest department and the tribal people, were supposed to work together in the regeneration and management of forests. It also contains the provision of *Van panchayat* in which all the stake holders must have a say in forest affairs. The implementation of the provisions of this policy hit several road blocks and was not found satisfactory and neither it fulfilled the aspirations of the tribal communities. But, no doubt, there was some improvement in the state of affairs.

The struggle continued and finally an Act called the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act was enacted in 2006. It was popularly called the Forest Rights Act (FRA). It was the result of prolonged intense struggle of Adivasis and became operational with the notification of rules in 2008 which was later amended in 2012. As rightly described by CR Bijoy (2017), "this law remarkably attempts to finally liberate the forests, or at least a significant part of it, from the vice grip of a forest governance that treats forests as invaded lands and its people as a subjugated population. This colonial legacy stripped vast tracts of forests of its natural wealth and produced grotesque patches of tree plantations and called it afforestation. It earned disrepute to the forest bureaucracy as a ruthless force. FRA attempts to decolonize and democratise forest governance befitting an independent nation." Significantly, this constitutes a threat to the existing power structure. The forest bureaucracy is hostile to the very aim of rights being given to forest dependent communities while some politicised environmentalists are busy propagating that it will not be good for the forests and environment. They refuse to accept that the biggest stake holders in the conservation, regeneration and enrichment of forests are these forest dependent communities. Forests are their lifeline. Unfortunately, attempts are being made to dilute the Act before it has achieved any significant success.

Displacement: Dispossessing Legally

'Development' has become a nightmare for a large number of tribal people. Though it is an established fact that throughout history, rearrangement in human settlement patterns have been a 'companion of development' but the process should be just, humane and as voluntary as possible. Development

involves changes in land and water use patterns, and in some instances these changes require the people to be displaced. If involuntary, displacement is, to an extent, inevitable they must be carried out in a way that will protect the livelihoods of the displaced people. If this is not done, then some people shall share the gains, while others only in pains of development. This has exactly happened in case of tribal communities. Though the scheduled tribes constitute only about 8% of our total population, their percentage among the displaced and oustees is more than 50%. Obviously it is because of the fact that most of the tribal regions are very rich in natural resources- minerals, water, and forests. The major reasons for the large scale displacement are:

- (i) mining
- (ii) hydro-electric and irrigation projects
- (iii) super thermal and nuclear power plants
- (iv) industrial complexes
- (v) military installations
- (vi) test firing range or weapons testing ground
- (vii) sanctuaries and parks
- (viii) railways and roads etc.

Studies have shown multiple effects of displacement. Involuntary resettlement leads to increased stress both psychological and socio-cultural, and also heightens morbidity and mortality. Another unfortunate outcome is a feeling of alienation, helplessness and powerlessness. Moving away to new places is just unthinkable to the tribal communities as they are deeply attached to their ancestral lands. The word 'resettlement' does not exist in any tribal language. The widespread consequences of displacement include dismantling of production systems, desecration of ancestral sacred zones or graves and temples, scattering of kinship groups or network and family systems, disorganization of informal social network that provide mutual support, weakening of self management and social control, disruption of trade and market links, etc.

The more unfortunate part of the story is the case of multiple displacements. Even after having made to give this massive sacrifice, what the displaced people get in return? In most of the cases they have faced a situation where they hardly get jobs in those developmental projects, not even at semi skilled levels. When they find that the hydro-electric and irrigation projects get completed, whatever land that remains in their possession does not get any substantial irrigation benefits nor their villages are electrified to any similar extent. Moreover, whatever compensation they get in cash in many cases gets frittered away on unproductive items as most of the tribal

communities are not savings minded and may not handle or manage the cash judiciously. Thus, first they become landless and then penniless after losing their livelihood.

In most cases, the only legislation that is applied is the Land Acquisition Act which only made the state liable for cash compensation, in the process legitimizing the gross injustice and social violence. Significantly, the Act only recognised individual and not collective or community rights. What happens to Common Property Resources (CPR)? It is not compensated for neither given any alternative. That is why in the tribal areas of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh especially Bastar region the tribal leaders and activists may be heard raising such ‘inconvenient’ questions as, “Are we a colony of India?” If our land and livelihood is taken away in the name of ‘National Interest’ or ‘Public Interest’, are we not a part of the same nation or public? Who will protect our interests? and “Are we a sacrificial lamb at the altar of progress and development?” This is a case where such poetic expressions may be applied:

‘They made us many promises,
more than I can remember,
But they fulfilled just one,
They promised to take our land
and they took it.’

Had the tribal communities too been made a partner in progress these problems would not have arisen. The commitment has to be not just for resettlement but for rehabilitation which should have been an entitlement and not an act of reluctant generosity. Moreover, the cost of the project should always include the cost to be incurred on resettlement and rehabilitation. All these projects should be open for public debate. Implementation of any project which does not include satisfactory arrangement for resettlement and rehabilitation need to be stopped immediately.

Resistance and Violence

The above mentioned reasons provide the backdrop for the radical, extremist movements in tribal areas popularly described as ‘Maoist movement’, ‘Naxalite insurgency’, ‘tribal militancy’ etc. Long years of colonial and post colonial exploitation have resulted in growing pauperization, oppression and alienation of these people. The near wholesale loss of control over resources over nearly a century has impeded the development of a middle class within the tribal society. What we have today is a very thin stratum absorbed into bureaucracy or polity through provisions of reservation. Unfortunately, this stratum, generally speaking, is keen on disowning its own tribal identity and getting absorbed into the Hindu middle class fold. Now, most of the tribal

communities have an 'elite class' among them who are always ready to be used as 'legitimisers of state actions'. In most cases, the tribal masses are now alienated from their 'elite' yet the bonds of ethnicity still keep them united despite all these grievances. "If we look into this situation objectively we find that it is not a problem but the consequence of multiple problems faced by the tribal population from the colonial period up to now. It is not a sudden eruption and its origin and roots may be traced back to the colonial times that witnessed a number of tribal revolts, minor and major, in response to the oppression and exploitation"(Hasnain,2021).

The Expert Group of Planning Commission in 2006 came out with a report titled "Challenges of Development in Maoist Affected Areas." This report, from a state agency, is a first of its kind in the last twenty five years. It has applied an open approach rather than a security-centric one. This report also argues that land related factors play the most important role in the growth of Maoism. Pointing out that thousands of areas of land remain fallow, the expert group has asked the government to devise legal means to ensure that the landless get land. It also recommends that Forest Rights Act be implemented in full earnest in order to ensure people their land rights. It acknowledges that left radicalism has emerged as a result of deficit planning. Constant alienation has made people take up arms and it is time one understands the problem as not just a law and order problem but one whose foundations are socio-economic. The Report relates extremism to deeper faults in governance, land alienation, unemployment and inequalities in society. Maoist/Naxalite mobilization have got a lot of attention; all resistance movements by the tribal communities are being clubbed together by the state under the category of Naxalite/Maoist insurgency.

Given the numbers, the tribal voice will remain marginalized in national politics. Though many of us may not be approving the Maoists way of doing things but very few people can deny that the Maoist movement has brought focus back on the various issues related to the tribal population which the successive governments have conveniently sidestepped with their acts of omissions and commissions. Today the tribal cultures all over the world including India are 'wounded cultures' and it requires an honest and sincere healing touch to our 'first citizens. '

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