

Highlights of Meeting –

Adivasi / Indigenous / Tribal Visions And Concerns As The Essential Component In Charting Out The People’s Manifesto For South Asia Social Forum, Lucknow 2014

**17 October 2013 at Jawaharlal Nehru National Youth Centre, N.D. Tiwari Bhavan
(4th Floor), DDU Marg, New Delhi-110002**

From: 10.30 am to 5 pm

Organized By: South Asian Dialogues on Ecological Democracy (SADED)

No. of Participants: 45

Adivasi / Indigenous / Tribals

“Adivasis” - original inhabitants or the Indigenous Peoples of India belonging to specific territories. The name comes from the Hindi word “adi”, i.e., meaning from the beginning; and “vasi” means resident. This term was coined in the 1930s.

“Indigenous People” is a collective term referring to the native people who have close ties with the land they inhabit, and having cultural or historical distinctiveness from other populations.

Aanita Soni was the moderator of the meeting and welcomed all the participants.

Meeting highlights are given below:

- SADED initiated the dialogue on tribal issues with the scholars representing their issues and concerns.
- **Key Speakers:** Prof. Savyasaachi (Jamia Millia Islamia), Prof. Joseph Bara (Prof. Emeritus, Jawaharlal Nehru University), Mrs. Ramnika Gupta (All India Tribal Literary Forum), Dr. Ganga Sahay Meena (Jawaharlal Nehru University), and Anita Soni (Polish-born indologist and social anthropologist who is currently working with SADED) shared their rich knowledge with their deep concern on this theme.
- Contemporary developmental model, which is heavily based on the capitalist model of production, has severely affected *Adivasi* population. Protecting the cultural heritage and social practices, and shielding them from the exploitation by the mainstream, is a challenge which was accepted by all speakers. *Adivasis* are a debt-free community where individual entitlement of land and natural resources is not in practice. The notion of entitlement by the community as a whole is very important for them and it binds all of them together. In the contemporary era, where the term *indigenous* has a direct connotation for *Adivasis*, it was first used by ILO (International Labour Organization) for the native American labour with a definition of ‘marginalized and tortured by mainstream’. This historically significant

definition gives a clear understanding of the current context where mining industries are exploiting the natural resources and putting *Adivasis'* interests at the fringe. The basic notion of development, which denotes modern society as more developed in comparison to *Adivasis*, is challenging in itself when we see their enriched traditional knowledge base. Modern societies are looking toward *Adivasi* communities for their knowledge base, especially for their coherence by nature and their ethno-medical practices. Their traditional knowledge of forests, and flora & fauna is part of their livelihood practices. Knowledge of the medicinal properties of different herbs is extremely valuable and needs to be documented for the future generations.

- The speakers raised their concern for *Adivasis* on four diverse, interlinked spheres:

a) Traditional Knowledge of Flora & Fauna

Adivasis consider forests as an integral part of their lives as well as livelihood. Their survival mode of natural economy has helped them to understand its flora and fauna since centuries. It not only provides food, but fuel, shelter and their health care are also heavily dependent on forests. This enriched traditional knowledge, inherited from generation to generation, is currently under threat of modern society. To understand forests, one has to go deep inside it. *Adivasis* are aware that the ecology of the forest should not be compromised at any cost.

Adivasi society is based on equality and respect for all forms of life. They have a deep sense of interdependence between nature and human society.

Economy was never a prime concern by *Adivasis* over their main concern of *Jal, Jungle, Zameen*. Invasion by modernization has proved to be a challenge to this harmonious relationship. Modern market economy is exploiting the natural resources, and also disturbing the fauna of the surroundings.

b) Endangered Mode of Communication

In the Census Report of 1961, a total of 1,652 mother tongues were mentioned. Several hundred of these are no longer traceable. During the first half of the twentieth century, India reportedly lost about one-fifth of its languages; during the second half of the last century, we have lost about one-third of the remaining languages. If we continue to allow the dwindling of *bhashas* at this rate, it is estimated that over the next fifty years, we will see the extinction of most of the *bhashas* spoken by the nomadic communities and *Adivasis*.

UNESCO initiated the language atlas globally and found that out of a total 6,000 languages, 2,471 languages are in the endangered category (197 Indian languages are in this category). Surprisingly, all the languages in this category belong to the *Adivasis*. Languages are significantly linked with the existence of human beings, and the modern profit-oriented economy is endangering them while challenging the existence of *Adivasis*.

c) Issues of Governance

The Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution of India mandated the state to devolve certain political, administrative and fiscal powers to local governments elected by the communities and give tribal communities considerable autonomy. Concern has been raised over the non-implementation of these mandates which promises the ethnic security of the *Adivasis*. Forest Act, Land Rights Act and PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas

Act) all have some major limitations. The basic notion of entitlement/right on any entity which someone already has from many centuries is problematic in itself.

A high-level committee has been constituted to prepare a position paper on the current socio-economic, health and educational status of tribals that will also “suggest policy initiatives as well as effective outcome-oriented measures to improve development indicators and strengthen public service delivery to STs.” The committee is expected to submit its findings and recommendations in nine months, ahead of next year’s general elections.

d) Exploitation by the Market Economy

Western notion of development has raised a common concern - *whose development and who pays for it?* Exploitation of natural resources is heavily benefiting the modern society and severely damaging the *Adivasis*’ habitats. Moreover, they were the ones who worked in harmony with nature and once this developmental mode encroached, they became criminalized by new laws. Their social network broke down - to the extent that they became migrant unorganized sector labor. *Adivasis* do not exploit and do not want to get exploited either. They do not believe in accumulation of wealth and that is the prime reason of their self-sustenance.

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