

Highlights of Meeting - 'Towards National Tribal Policy'

11 January 2013 at N.D. Tiwari Bhawan (Delhi)

From: 10.30 am to 6 pm

- Session: I - "What Can We Learn From Adivasis?"
- Session: II - "Towards National Tribal Policy"

(NOTE: Prepared the summary of the meeting proceedings in English - the dialogue was in Hindi and I had to translate it appropriately for taking down the proceedings. DAYA LALVANI)

No. of Participants: 40

India has the world's largest indigenous population of tribal people, usually called 'Adivasis' (original inhabitants, i.e., those 'who live without beginning'). Adivasis practise forest-based community life inhabiting and sustaining wild forests as their homes.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Vijay Pratap started the meeting by giving his self-introduction, his association with SADED, etc. Today's meeting is organized by SADED Resource Centre – whose purpose is truth-seeking and promoting democracy. He explained that the reason why we are holding such a meeting today is to try and narrow down the gap between Adivasis and non-Adivasis.
- Adivasis have traditional knowledge (locally deep-rooted knowledge of the natural world); they understand and interpret the language and messages (distress signals, etc.) of the surrounding environment, the movements of the birds and animals, etc. With this inherent instinct, they are able to safeguard themselves from natural disastrous calamities.
- Their knowledge of ecological systems should be documented and not 'stolen', and put into a knowledge pool. From the Adivasi self-help groups – a cooperative of Adivasis can be formed for obtaining their knowledge of herbal medicines.
- All participants gave their self-introduction.
- Savyasaachi was unable to attend the meeting as a speaker, but conveyed his message thru Vijay Pratap: *"What do we learn from PESA and FRA? These appear to be in the interest of the people, but are in fact in the interest of the state capitalists. What then should be the structure of policy?"*

SESSION I : "WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ADIVASIS?"

- This session was moderated by Ashok Kumar Singh (SADED)

- **Rajesh Upadhayay**

- What can we learn from Adivasis? How can we improve our own society with the learnings from Adivasi culture?
- Nature and Adivasi civilization have an intimate relationship. There is much to learn from the Adivasi practices - there is a deep recognition of interdependence between nature and human society.
- Adivasis do not think about the future and live for today only (they do not have the habit of saving money for the next day). They live only to sustain their lives.
- Self-rule and self-governance should be encouraged for their areas. They have a desire for self-respect – if they are deprived of it, they want to commit suicide due to the injustice. They cannot be subjected to slavery - everyone should have equal rights.
- If all these points are implemented, we can improve their society.

- **Ambarish Rai**

- Adivasis are against neoliberalism, and their struggle has reached a high point. Several kisans have committed suicide. Adivasis fight for the rights of their natural habitats.
- They consider their *Jal-Jungle-Jamin* (water, forest and land) to be sacred and they have an inseparable relationship with water, forest and land. This case is now being diluted. They have no education, are very poor, and have no right to their land. The Adivasis are not yet given land entitlement under the Forest Rights Act, though they are eligible for it.
- There is an interface between the livelihoods and sustainable development of natural resource base among the Adivasis.

- **Subhranshu Choudhury**

- “What Can We Learn From Adivasis?” : As a Reporter (From Chhattisgarh – an Adivasi area)
- Subhranshu grew up in Chhattisgarh. He was living in a new colony – not within Adivasis. ‘Adivasi’ means *bichhara* – but actually, this is not *bichharapan*. Adivasi samaaj is a collective samaaj, where community is very prominent; for non-Adivasis, the family is more important.
- As a reporter, he has interacted only with the upper-class category. Subhranshu made mention about the book “Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English?” and made a counter-statement: “Is there any Adivasi reporter as of date?” (There are 10 crore Adivasis in India.)
- What did I learn from them as a reporter – my world turned topsy-turvy. My covering them as a reporter was from a Maowadi point of view. The Adivasis said that you all have become like machines – very mechanized; what you convey should be *lok tantrik*. We have reached a high-pitched level, but there is no conversation with the people.
- I have learnt from Adivasis – if you want a better future, it has to be *lok tantrik* – we should build better platforms and means of communication. We have become like machines – we have taken so much from nature, but what have we given in return to nature?

- **Narendra Bastar**

- Who decides who is an Adivasi; what are the criteria of Adivasi-hood?

- Ethnicity is not the criteria. How do you define it? According to the old *peedhi*, an Adivasi is – *jisko wan se prem hai – wohi Adivasi hai*.
- Now there are serious implications in Bastar. Those outsiders who came to Bastar (*barhai/lohar/traders/shop-keepers*) – started living in the Adivasi villages and mingled very well with the locals, but did not indulge in marriage with the Adivasis. Now there are rifts between the rich and poor Adivasis – Adivasis of means vs. Adivasis without means.
- The external people (corporates, Maowadi, etc.) what do they want to learn from Adivasis? Adivasis knowledge is limited – in the sense, they cannot count beyond 5, do not have modern skills for farming, do not have libraries. When they heard songs being played from my tape-recorder, they asked me what the gadget was, and I explained to them that I was listening to recorded songs. They were surprised, and asked me – why, you yourself cannot sing, that is why you are hearing pre-recorded songs? It was an eye-opener for me. Their life is spent out in the open nature - their house is just a night-shelter when they come home at night. I had to decide what I had to learn from them.
- Due to globalization, all kinds of local and foreign big companies are given place in forest areas, which is causing danger to the life of an Adivasi. Earlier, the Adivasis never searched for livelihood. Now they are finding it difficult to live in these conditions. Narendra met a family, who said that his children have no ‘skills’; (in my perception – but have sustainable knowledge) – hence, how can one work only as unskilled labour and support his family? Ultimately, he had to sell his wife to the ‘flesh-trade’. What tribal policies do we make? There is no Forest Ministry in the interiors. Adivasis have their own policies – they go to work only that much far out, so that they can return back the same night.

- **Sreedhar**

- As per the Forest Rights Act, the power to vest rights lies with the gram sabha alone. This is wrong.
- Earlier there was no waste; now there is division – 3 political parties – each not compatible with the other. Integrated community has become ‘divide and mis-rule’. The governance system has become debilitating.
- For Adivasis, the forest is a source of wealth; whereas according to non-Adivasis it is a resource.
- Schemes, intellectual property rights, knowledge of plants, knowledge of acquisition process – Corporates just need one lead to ravage modern government schemes and mechanism needs to be revisited – because Adivasis, who have no regular income, of what use is NREGA to them.
- We should do Ph.D. in herbal studies.

SESSION II : “TOWARDS NATIONAL TRIBAL POLICY”

- **R.P. Agarwal**

- In Punjab and Haryana, with the shift to modern culture – the soil has not been left worthy of tilling. In times of climate change, we should follow the traditional indigenous method of low energy consumption, etc. Community-living is not being followed in big cities.

- Samaaj-sansar : We should understand and follow that natural resources are our wealth and not just resources.

- **Vincent Ekka**

- Draft National Tribal Policy: 2013

- In this policy, we have not taken into consideration their *nitis*. Adivasis do not differentiate between ‘we’ and ‘they’. They refer to themselves as ‘*hum*’ (collectively). Their culture is one of sharing and respect for all. A lot of suggestions were given to the government - to implement in favour of Adivasis, but these were not incorporated in the Rashtriya Niti. These suggestions were given to bring the east at par with the west in respect of their development. If these suggestions are assimilated, they will thwart the conditions of others.

- Socio-economic upliftment: We can help them develop by providing better infrastructure (roads, etc.). In the Draft Policy, we should look at it from the perspective of the development of Adivasis and improve upon it.

- The National Policy should also take into consideration the Adivasi view – they can progress in their own method and this should be incorporated in the policy.

- **Amit**

- For 25-30 years he has been living in the remote areas of Alirajpur.

- Education is a weapon – it is not a liberating force. If we want to learn from Adivasis, we should stop trying to educate them; we are not worthy of doing this. We become arrogant with our education and think we can change them. We should invite more Adivasis to participate in our dialogues. Adivasis, too, have aspirations for leading a comfortable life like the non-Adivasis. They have a natural living style. What are we doing with the knowledge system of the Adivasis? We can use it to strengthen our own knowledge base.

- We should be fully committed to ensuring their welfare and empowerment.

- Language challenge – the people should be taught exactly that which pertains to their locality – otherwise they get the feeling that they are not as competent as the other people about whom they read. In the 1857 struggle, the name of Khaja Naik is not heard of, in comparison with Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi and Tatya Tope (Indian freedom fighters).

- Every science invention has a social aspect.

- The gender issues which are dominating in today’s society, have been taken in a very different viewpoint.

- Local knowledge should be put in our education curriculum. Economic development cannot take place by schemes – their *jeevan* philosophy should be put in our knowledge system.

- **Asit**

- We should focus on Adivasis’ demand for autonomy (instead of giving more attention to their culture).

- **K.K. Niyogi**

- In this globalization era, the Adivasis are being exploited in two ways :

- (1) By acquiring their lands - to extract raw materials and minerals from their areas.
- (2) Their human resources are being utilized as cheap labour.
- The struggle of the Adivasis to safeguard their rights is to be fought against the offensive of the Indian capitalist class as well as the global capital. Therefore, their struggle is to be united with the other struggling masses (workers, peasants, women, students, etc.).
- In a nutshell, the Adivasi struggle, for their dignity and emancipation, is linked with the democratization of the entire political economy.

- **Ashok Kumar Singh** (From Jharkhand)

- He has known Adivasis from a long time.
- Adivasi women were used as commodities – they had no rights to property.
- Instead of discussing the policies, etc., we should see whether the facilities are being actually passed down to the gram panchayat level.

- **B.K. Manish**

- He has studied in Tribal Welfare School.
- We have started a new type of dialogue for Adivasis on the National Tribal Policy (NTP). We do not have any NTP – only Drafts: (1) 2004, and (2) 2006. The NTP was sent to the Group of Ministers, but so far there is nothing further in public domain. We have to begin from scratch.
- We have already had discussions today on what we can learn from Adivasis.
- Tribes Advisory Council (TAC) are established in States having Scheduled Areas (Ref. Fifth Schedule). What is the purpose of a TAC? It is there from the last 30 years.
- Why is it important to discuss the NTP? We should take action against the historical injustices being faced by Adivasis. We have to return to those models which are sustainable. But if those are finished, where do we return to?
- How should the NTP be? The Vision Statement:
 - ❖ Willingness to recognize afresh the tribals on the basis of standard anthropological definition (viz., uncomplicated lifestyle, etc.) my help utilize the empirical evidence of tribal debasement and dispossession in 65 years since independence to break the shackles of the overly nationalistic approach which has dictated policies since 1935; then justifiably declare the ***true and functional tribal autonomy as the ultimate vision of NTP.***
 - ❖ In simpler words (and may be in a narrower sense) this means commitment by Union of India to ensure a holistic mechanism that allows ***genuine freedom for every tribal to choose between a traditional, mainstream or combination lifestyle.***
- The policy-makers in the ‘ivory towers’ are the biggest threat. Tribal autonomy is an attainable goal. Adivasis want peace. Policy-makers do not want peace for Adivasis. We have to promote acceptance for peace in policy-makers.

- **Dilip Singh Bhuria** (Bhuria Commission named after him)

- There are 650 castes among the Adivasis. The tribal area is identified. Several rules and schemes were made for them. The North-East is following the 6th Schedule, whereas other regions are following the 5th Schedule. There is insurgency in tribal areas.

- The panchayat system has been an integral part of the Indian village system through ages. Under the 73rd amendment act (an instrument of village development through gram sabha), we are trying to make rules for the Adivasis, to ensure effective participation of the tribal inhabitants in public affairs, including policy making and local self-governance, but they are uneducated.
- Adivasis are the most loyal people of India.
- Under the 5th Schedule, nobody can take away their land. We should inculcate awareness among the Adivasis.
- Govt. should learn from the fact that Adivasi women do not commit suicide, whereas in Delhi 6-7 women commit suicide daily.

OPEN DISCUSSIONS:

- Many of the participants shared their viewpoints and the general consensus was:
- Adivasis (an impoverished peasantry) are exploited by non-Adivasi elites, etc. (their land is being expropriated in the name of ‘development’, and we are destroying long-standing systems of survival).
- We must stand up for their cause so that their voice is heard; look at their problems from their perspective (and not from the lens of policy-makers); respect their rights/struggles; and ensure that their overall well-being is improved.
- Addressing these needs will be help in attaining India’s goal of ‘shared growth’.

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Names of some of the people who attended the meeting (among others):

Akshay Gupta	Ovais Sultan Khan
Ambarish Rai	Padam Bahadur Thapa
Ashok Kumar Singh (SADED)	Pisa Kiran
Ashok Kumar Singh (working in Bhil area for 20 years)	Pradeep Paralaya
Asit Das	R.P. Agarwal
B.K. Manish	Rajesh Upadhyay
Babulal Sharma	Rajni Kant Mudgal
Chhotan Das	Ramesh Singh
Daya Lalvani	Sreedhar
Dilip Singh Bhuria (Ex-Chairman Scheduled Tribes Commission)	Subhranshu Choudhury
K.K. Niyogi	Trisha
Mariano Sikka	Vijay Pratap
Narendra Bastar	Vijaya Priyadarshi (CSDS)
Niklas Toivakainen	Vijay Laxmi Dhoundiyal
	Vincent Ekka
	Viren Lobo

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