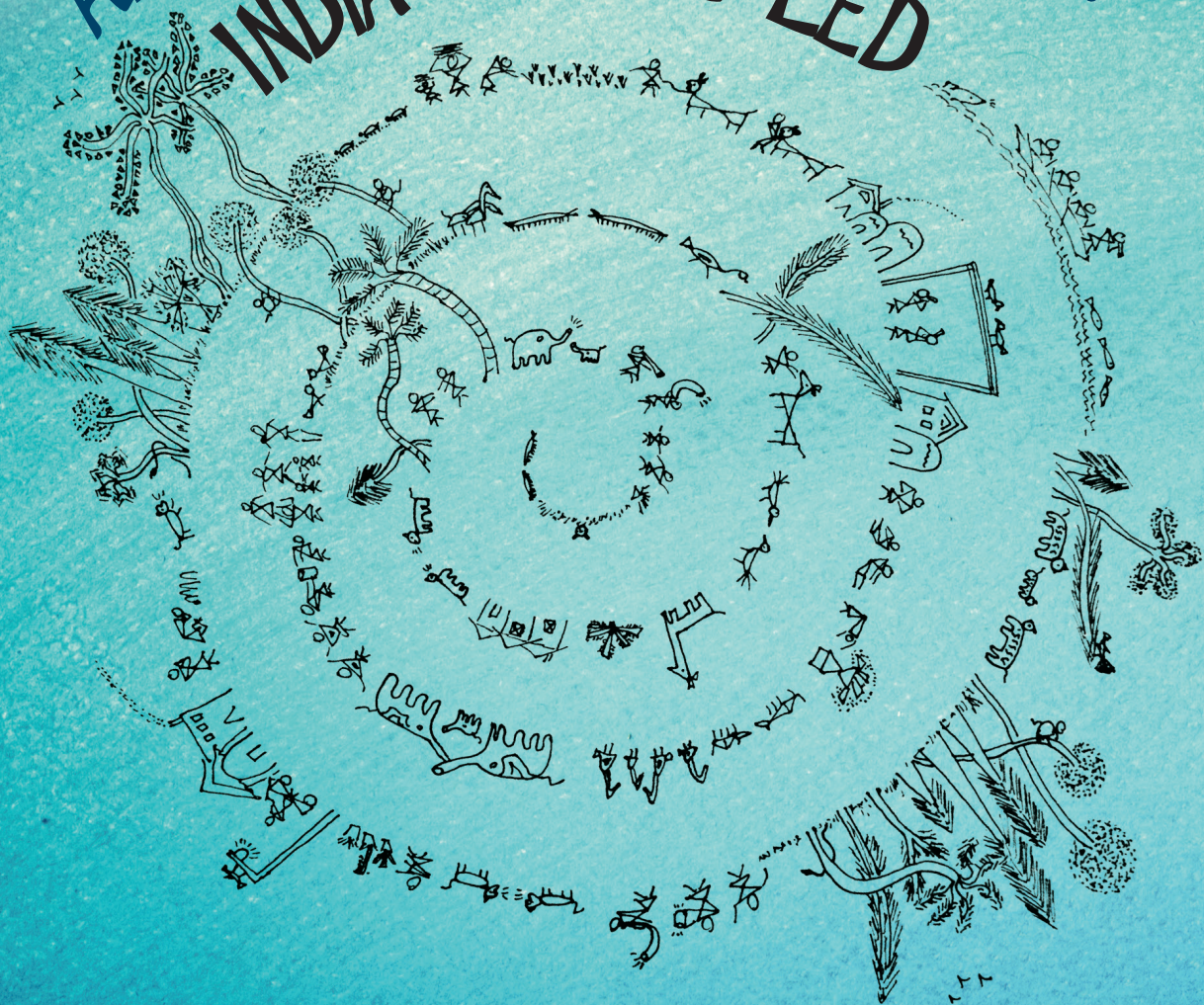


ALTERNATIVE FUTURES: INDIA UNSHACKLED



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Alternative Futures: India Unshackled

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SOCIO-CULTURAL FUTURES



A Vision for Adivasis

Gladson Dungdung

Summary

Adivasis are the indigenous peoples of India, constitutionally known as the Scheduled Tribes, who have unique identities, traditions, culture, ethos, and philosophies of life. The community is known for being casteless, classless, and equitable, with a community-centred economy, co-existence with nature, consent based self-rule, dignity, and autonomy. They do not rely on the natural resources merely for livelihood, but their identity, culture, history, autonomy, and existence depend on it. The Indian State denies their existence as the indigenous peoples, but it has made clear provisions in the Indian Constitution and introduced several progressive laws for safeguarding them, including their land, territory, and resources. Despite this, their rights are grossly violated and they are being alienated, displaced, and dispossessed from their land, territory and resources in the name of development, economic growth and national interest. In the above situation and circumstances, the adivasi community needs to envisage its future. The vision could comprise of five major aspects – social transformation, economic prosperity, political empowerment, cultural revival, and community centric development. The vision could be realized by the active participation of the community, the sound use of democratic institutions and Constitutional and legal provisions.

Introduction

‘Adivasis’ literally means aboriginal, original or first settlers, or the original dwellers, or the indigenous people of the land of the land (Dungdung, 2013). The term ‘adivasi’ was highly popularized by the adivasi scholar Jaipal Singh Munda during the Jharkhand statehood movement (Munda and Mullick, 2003). Undoubtedly, adivasis are the Indigenous Peoples of India (Dungdung, 2013). In the Indian Constitution, they are classified as the Scheduled Tribes (STs), and guaranteed certain special rights and privileges under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, Part XVI and Article 46 of the Constitution.¹ There are 705 individual adivasi ethnic groups notified as the Scheduled Tribes in 30 States and Union

Territories (Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), 2013). However, several adivasi ethnic groups are yet to be notified, in which case the percentage of the adivasi population would certainly go up. This would have a direct impact on the demography and politics of the country.

Unfortunately, the Indian Government had repeatedly declined to accept the existence of adivasis as the Indigenous Peoples of India in front of the United Nations' Working Group on Indigenous Populations. Nevertheless, on 13 September 2007 the Indian State became party to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was, of course, the first official admission of the adivasis as India's indigenous peoples. Finally, it was legitimized by the Apex Court of India on 5 January 2011, while hearing on an appeal (the special leave petition (Cr) No. 10367 of 2010 Kailas & others Vs State of Maharashtra), the Court said that the tribal people (Scheduled Tribes or Adivasis) are the descendants of the original inhabitants of India and as a group one of the most marginalized and vulnerable communities in India.²

According to the 2011 census, the adivasis are 8.6 per cent³ of India's total population, which is 104 million. About 85 per cent of them live in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal. About 12 per cent live in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, and Tripura and the rest 3 per cent live in other states (MoTA, 2013). The sex ratio for the overall population is 940 females per 1000 males, whereas the sex ratio of adivasi community is 990 females per thousand males;⁴ this manifests the status of gender based equality in the community, which is much better than the Indian society despite having more or less the same kind of patriarchal social order. Overtime, the self-dependent community has been almost compelled to become Government dependent due to various factors rising out of wrong governmental policies. More recently, economic liberalization, globalization, and privatization have created terrible impact in the social fabric, economy, politics, culture, and idea of community development.

This essay is an attempt to understand and visualize a conclusive and achievable vision for the adivasi community, based on an analysis of historical facts and the present day context.⁵ The vision would comprise of short term and long-term goals, to be achieved by the communities in democratic and participatory ways.

Historical Facts and Present Context

Adivasis have by and large been living in or around the forests with a rhythm akin to nature and thus their life cycle moves round nature. They do not merely depend on the

natural resources for their livelihood, but their sole identity, culture, autonomy, conscience, tradition, ethos, and existence are based on it (Dungdung, 2016). The 2011 Census data suggests that 89.9 per cent of them still live in the rural areas, and merely 10.1 per cent of them have shifted to urban centres.⁶ An adivasi legendary figure, Dr Ramdayal Munda describes the true characters of the adivasi community as ‘casteless, classless, based on equality, community based economic system, co-existence with the nature, consent based self-rule, dignity and autonomy’ (Munda, 2001, pp. 10). Regrettably, these inherent characteristics of the community are rapidly disappearing.

The adivasi economy could be termed as need based or community centric, with hardly any consideration shown in profit making endeavours (Dungdung, 2016). The rural market was more a place for sharing commodities than selling goods to gain profit. Most of the goods were produced by the community, for instance, oil from seeds, broom, mat, edibles, agricultural equipment, etc. Modernization, with all its positive impacts on one side, has become detrimental to adivasi communities by imposing on it the profit based economic system and thus all the ills of market dominant economy. Thus, the adivasis who produced to exchange goods for goods in the rural markets have been strangled by the profit based rural markets limiting them predominantly as consumers.

In the ancient period, the adivasis possessed undisputed ownership rights over the natural resources and they judiciously used these resources for their existence (Dungdung, 2013). Consequently, they enjoyed autonomy, peace, and prosperity. The situation changed rapidly with the incursion of dominant non-adivasi communities and turned worse during the British rule. On the one hand, the non-adivasis destroyed the adivasi civilization, denied them their indigenous identity and did not accept them as fellow human beings, and the British colonialists, on the other hand, used violence against the adivasis for grabbing their land, territory and resources and even listed a few of them as criminal tribes.

The British introduced a centrally organized administration, a judiciary and a police system. They also introduced the concept of private property as opposed to the traditional notion of collective usufructuary rights of the community. The communal resources were considered as the ‘eminent’ domain and taken over. Thus, forests and other individually unclaimed fallow lands were declared as the property of the state (Munda and Mullick, 2003). Gradually, the government enacted various policies which induced the marginalization of the adivasis. They were deprived from the natural resources merely for the government’s revenue yielding measures. The adivasi economy and identity was destroyed by imposing revenue on land and duties on the forest products.

It is a historically known fact that almost one hundred years before India's first recorded Independence struggle of 1857, the adivasis had revolted against the British colonial rule. This is the community that has a history of struggle for more than three centuries. At the very outset, the community resisted to be ruled over by outsiders. They had been freedom loving people and they valued their freedom to govern and to live as a community. To cite a few examples, the Paharia uprising of 1772, the Kol uprising of 1832, Bhumij Movement of 1832–33, the Santal Hul of 1855 (Horo, 2013), etc., were against the imposition of the idea of State on them. The community could not comprehend the concept of paying taxes for lands and forest products because they were fully aware that everything was from the bounty of nature. Nevertheless, the British government forced levy and taxes on them.

Unfortunately, even after Indian Independence the status quo remains the same. The Indian rulers were not different from the colonial rulers when it concerned the monopoly over natural resources. The vested interests, the methods of oppression, and the basic ideology remained the same (Anjum and Manthan, 2002). The adivasis' rights over the natural resources were snatched away through various legislations in the name of national interest, economic growth and development. The data suggests that '...from 1951 to 2004, over 37 million people were displaced in the name of development in India. Twenty six million were forcibly displaced due to dams and canals construction alone. The Government accepts a national figure of over fifty million arising from 'development-related-displacement' (JJDMS, 2004, pp. iii). Perhaps, only 25 per cent people were rehabilitated in some way and 75 per cent are still waiting for rehabilitation.

At the same time, there has been huge illegal land alienation in the community despite having special legislation for safeguarding their land. According to the Ministry of Rural Development (Government of India), 60,464 cases regarding 85,777.22 acres of illegal transfer of land were registered till 2001-2002 (MoRD, 2003). Out of these:

- 34,608 cases of 46,797.36 acres of land were considered for hearing and the remaining 25,856 cases related to 38,979.86 acres of land were dismissed;
- After the hearing, merely 21,445 cases of 29,829.7 acres of lands were given possession to the original holders and the rest remain with the non-adivasis.

Subsequently, 2,608 cases of illegal land transfer were registered in 2003–2004, jumping up to 5382 cases in 2007–2008 (Dungdung, 2013, pp. 123). which indicates that illegal land alienation is increasing rapidly.

However, India's war for natural resources continues even today in the name of cleansing the CPI-Maoist forces. This has resulted in gross violation of civil and political

rights of the adivasis. The cases of brutal killing, molestation, rape, torture, and false implications of innocent Adivasi men, women, girls, boys, and children are countless (Dungdung, 2015). At a very rough and minimum estimate, from 2001 to 2016, 2,000 innocent villagers have been murdered by security forces – 1,000 in Chhattisgarh, 700 in Jharkhand and 300 in Odisha. Similarly, at least 2,000 adivasi girls and women have been sexually abused by men wearing government uniforms – 1,500 women in Chhattisgarh, 300 in Jharkhand and 200 in Odisha.⁷ According to various reports,⁸ adivasis form the vast majority of 27,000 arrested as ‘Maoists’ and ‘encroachers on government land’ in these three States, under various laws, including Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, Prevention of Terrorism Act, Arms Act, Explosions Act, Criminal Law Amendment Act and Forest Conservation Act 1980 – 17,000 in Chhattisgarh, 8,000 in Jharkhand and 2,000 in Odisha. Ironically, the Indian State regularly refuses or ignores to take action against the actual perpetrators despite several commission reports having exposed the naked truth.

The adivasi community seems to be the most vulnerable and politically voiceless, despite political representation with forty seven members in the Indian Parliament and more than five hundred members in the Legislative Assemblies of several States, elected from the reserved constituencies to represent the adivasi community. However, due to compulsions of party dynamics the adivasi issues are hardly ever raised in the corridors of power. It seems clear that the community suffers from leadership vacuum. Most of the gram sabhas and other traditional bodies are also under the clutch of political parties. The community does not possess political power in the real sense due to lack of the politicization.

The colonial concept of civilization, and the Indian idea of mainstreaming and inclusion, has resulted in alienation of adivasis from their land, territory, resources, identity, culture, languages and ethos. The invasion of different communities into adivasis’ territories in different periods, and civilization and mainstreaming processes carried out by the colonial masters, and later, by the Indian government, after portraying the adivasis as uncivilized, backward, sub-human and so on, resulted in their cultural alienation. For instance, the Mundas started writing their surname as ‘Singh’ and started wearing the sacred thread similar to the Brahmins, to show their superiority among the adivasi ethnic groups.

Similarly, the Kherwar and Chero adivasis used ‘Singh’ as their surname to associate themselves with the Rajput. However, later, they realized it as a blunder, and made corrections to some extent. But by and large, the cultural alienation has continued. The

adivasis have alienated themselves from their cultural identity by not writing their surname in public places, changing their food habits, altering their lifestyle, making a shift from community to individual life, and from community based to market economy. Adivasis had once inscribed their name in golden letters in national hockey. Today, their representation is dwindling in games and sports, especially in hockey, which was their strength. To cite an example children tend to imitate cricketers and are seen playing cricket instead of hockey and football inside the forest.

The Constitutional provision of reservation, modern education system and mainstreaming processes, created a middle class in the adivasi community, which took the path of huge cultural alienation. This middle class started adopting most of the cultural practices of the modern Indian society. For instance, individualism is placed above community; discrimination is created on the basis of ethnic groups along the lines of caste, colour, status, race, and gender, and so on. The community is also alienated from land, territory and resources. The idea of adivasi development has taken a backseat. The traditional health system, education system and the idea of rural infrastructure creation through community cooperation are slowly disappearing. The worst is that the modern day health facilities, educational endeavours and rural development programmes have failed to enhance the life of adivasis.

The status of education and health of the adivasi community is among the worst in the country. According to the 2011 Census, the literacy rate is 59 per cent, with 68.5 per cent male and 56.9 per cent female literacy rate (Bagaicha Research Team, 2016). Quality education is a far dream in the Government run schools. The children of Naxal affected states are trapped in violence, highly knowledgeable about the latest weapons – AK-47s, SLRs, and various other kinds of gun, pistol, bomb, and landmine, which the security forces and Naxals use to target each other. But they hardly know anything from their text books. The students of class seven are neither able to read the text books of class five properly, nor can they solve mathematical problems of class three (Dungdung, 2015). The government run schools have become food serving centres and the teachers are busy with various government programmes with hardly any time to teach, leading to a high increase in dropout rates from class eight to ten – a staggering 70 per cent. In addition, much of the education in adivasi areas is run by non-adivasis, is not in the mother tongue, and does not relate to the cultural, ecological, and historical roots of adivasi lives.

The health status of adivasi children and women is pathetic, as shown by indicators in Table 1.

Table 1: Health status of adivasi children and women

Mortality rate	National average	Adivasis
Neonatal	39	39.9
Post-neonatal	18	22.3
Infant	57	62.1
Child	18.4	35.8
Under five	74.3	95.7

Source: MoTA, 2013.

Adivasi women and children suffer from high levels of anaemia and malnourishment. For instance, 85 per cent of women and 80 per cent of children of West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand are anaemic, and 64.3 per cent children aged below five are underweight (Alam, 2014). The availability of the health infrastructure in the adivasis' regions is another area of serious concern. Across India:

Health sub-centres required: 31,257

Operational: 27,958

Primary Health Centres required: 4674

Operational: 3957

Community Health Centres required: 1156

Operational: 998

Towards a Transformed Future

In the above situation and circumstances, the adivasis community needs to envisage its future for the next five decades or for a century. The vision could comprise of five major aspects – social transformation, economic prosperity, political empowerment, cultural revival, and community centric development. The vision could be realized by the active participation of the community, the sound use of democratic institutions and Constitutional and legal provisions.

Social transformation

The majority of the adivasis, from impoverished to the well-off, live under the stigma of being part of the adivasi community, resulting in the loss of confidence, mental

slavery, dependency, multiple alienation, and breakdown of the social fabric. It happened because the adivasi philosophy was neither scripted nor propagated though it is one of the most progressive philosophies in India. At the same time, the dehumanization processes continued. The adivasi community was or, in some areas, still is, in a much better position compared to the Indian society—something never highlighted. Instead, the so-called mainstreaming processes were carried out by the Government(s) as well as non-government organizations, especially the right wing fundamentalist forces, who intend to bury the adivasi identity.

Social transformation should take place in the adivasi community on the basis of its philosophy. The doctrine comprises co-existence and symbiotic relationship with nature, community life, liberty, equality, justice, rights, inclusive development, need-based economic system, consent based democracy, and fraternity (caring and sharing). Adivasis live with nature and care for its well-being. The concept of 'exploitation' has no place in adivasi philosophy; therefore, they do not exploit the natural resources but use it to meet their daily needs. Due to this, adivasi philosophy also addresses the ecological crises the world is facing. Liberty is a rich human value and it is one of the pillars of any form of progressive liberalism. Therefore, concepts of development need to be aligned with liberty.

Equality is another pillar of the adivasi philosophy. There are two parts in equality – general equality and gender based equality. The Indian social structure is largely based on caste, race, and gender inequality whereas there is no such concept of inequality in Adivasi philosophy. A poor person and a person from a well-off family can work together in the agriculture field, share a meal, dance holding each other's hands, drink rice beer and attend social functions in each other's families. Conceptually, there is no gender based discrimination in the adivasi community; therefore, both boys and girls are treated equally (though there may be exclusion of women from political decision-making). The happy consequence is that female foeticide and dowry based torture and killings are unheard of among the adivasis. However, the processes of mainstreaming have diluted this rich disposition by incorporating the concept of discrimination within tribal ethnic groups, to the detriment of the adivasi community. Therefore, the lofty concept of equality needs to be brought back into practice through the gram sabhas and other traditional institutions.

There is no concept of competition in the adivasi philosophy which encourages cooperation, caring and sharing, resulting in inclusive growth and development. The community does not care only for the protection of the rights of human beings but the intrinsic rights of animals are also taken care with required diligence. For instance, a hunting dog is given equal share of the prey and the adivasis do not consume milk to

protect the right to food of the calf. Besides, consent based democracy and need based economic system facilitate the adivasi community to maintain its co-existence with nature. Thus, the adivasis do not indulge in the evil of manipulation and exploitive practices as they hold cooperation as the mantra of their life.

The justice delivery is part of the adivasi philosophy. However, it has been suppressed by the introduction of the modern judiciary. The Indian State has officially accepted through the Forest Rights Act 2006 that historical injustice has been inflicted on the adivasis. Yet the injustice continues at the same pace even today. The modern judiciary system has failed in justice delivery to the adivasi community precisely because it is under the clutch of the people from dominant classes and the fact that the adivasis do not have the resources to fight a case. Justice is very costly and unaffordable. Within the given context, the adivasi community has to be educated to settle all its issues, as far as possible, within the community itself through the traditional judicial system, cultivating a broader perspective drawn from the customary, legal, and Constitutional framework.

The traditional judicial system of adivasis, which is known for delivering overnight justice, also faced heavy criticisms and was defamed as the kangaroo court for adopting illegal and unconstitutional punishment to culprits in some stray cases. But the overall picture has been bright as it has done tremendous work in delivering fair justice to the adivasis within matter of weeks at very nominal cost in cases related to land conflict, family dispute, marriage problems, cattle related dispute, etc. For instance, Parha Raja Simon Oraon of Bero block located in Ranchi district of Jharkhand is one such example, where justice is delivered to the villagers within three weeks. The adivasis of seven villages under his jurisdiction, do not go to court for any dispute. The traditional system needs to be aligned with the gram sabhas under the traditional self-governance system. The enforcement of the traditional judiciary system will also have a positive impact in the Adivasi economy and rebuilding the community solidarity.

The adivasi community needs to get rid of two major social evils – witch hunting and alcoholism. Both have heavily damaged the community reputation of being gender-sensitive and egalitarian. For instance, approximately 1500 adivasi women were brutally killed in Jharkhand between the years 2001 to 2016, as witches. Most of the victims were either widows or old women, who were really helpless. The adivasi community has to resolve to get rid of witch hunting through dialogue and critical awareness.

The excess use of alcohol is another social evil, which has heavily blocked the progress of adivasis. Many women have been widowed because of excessive of alcohol consumption by married men. Families have been broken and the lives of children have been put at

stake. The ill has affected the adivasi youth too, to the extent of destroying their career. Several kinds of liquor e.g. mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*) – used to brew a local variety of liquor, rice beer, etc., are part of Adivasi culture, which are offered to the deity as well as the ancestors during festivals, religious rituals, and social events. However, under the cultural tag, other local and several branded liquors have comfortably entered into adivasi community resulting in accidental deaths, abuses, killings, wife battering, and alienation from land. Therefore, there is an urgent need to curb alcoholism, which could be done by having a series of open dialogues in the gram sabhas and other traditional local bodies. Since the gram sabha is authorized under the PESA Act 1996 to prohibit the use of alcohol and have control over the local markets, gram sabhas need to be strengthened. The adivasi community should have a vision to rebuild it on the basis of its philosophy. In some parts of India such as some villages in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, there has indeed been a campaign by adivasis to stop or seriously regulate liquor.

Economic prosperity

The biggest economic challenge for the adivasi community is to protect the ‘need based economic system’ or ‘community economy’ from the organized attack of the market economy. There has been a constant attempt to submerge everything into the market economy, which has resulted in the centralization of the economy in the hands of a few people. Therefore, instead of handing over the economic resources to the private business entities under the government’s recent ‘cashless economy’ drive, the community needs to enhance its traditional ways of cooperation, caring and sharing of goods and services by keeping the concept of ‘profit’ away from the community and market, which will bring sustainability, equity and equal economic prosperity. At the same time, the rural markets need to be maintained as a place of sharing goods and services, which presently have become highly profit making centres. Instead of ‘cashless economy’ the community could play a big role in promoting ‘community economy’, which can address everyone’s needs and the emerging ecological crises as well.

The community needs to have control over the village economy through the gram sabha precisely because the village economy is fully controlled by the outside business class people, resulting in migration and trafficking of the adivasi youths. Therefore, the adivasis need to take up entrepreneurship as a challenge, which will facilitate in gaining back the control on village economy in the long run. At the same time, the community should produce and manufacture necessary goods to meet its needs instead of fully depending on the market for everything, and that is quite possible as the community has a long

legacy of production and manufacturing to meet its needs. For instance, the adivasis of Lathakhamhan village in Simdega district of Jharkhand produce brooms, mats, oil, etc., for their use and sell the surpluses in local market.

Ninety per cent of adivasi population still depend on agriculture, forestry and animal husbandry. However, due to the lack of irrigation facility, technical support and investment, the economy seems to be more or less stagnant. Therefore, the investment, technical support and availability of irrigation facility can make a huge difference. For instance, in Jharkhand, ninety mega dams, four hundred medium dams and 11,878 smalls dams are available – but the water doesn't reach to the agriculture fields of adivasis but has been provided to the steel and mining industries. The damage done by these dams is substantial and unjustified. But now that they are there, if the water of these dams is prioritized for village farms through small-scale canal and lift irrigation facilities, there would be higher production of crops. Similarly, the value addition on the forest products would strengthen the adivasi economy. The community should be given complete ownership on the forest resources, as envisaged (but hardly implemented) under the PESA and Forest Rights Act. The agriculture, fishery, horticulture, animal husbandry and forestry need to be aligned and converted into small-scale industries through cooperatives, which will enhance the village economy.

The Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) could play a big role in stabilizing the adivasi economy. Government of India should ensure the allocation of 8.6 per cent budget under the TSP from the central budget per annum as per the Constitutional provision under the Article 275. This fund needs to be spent on human resource development programmes, village development projects, welfare schemes, and economic activities (animal husbandry, traditional poultry, farming, horticulture, and micro entrepreneurship). The non-utilization, diversion and misuse of TSP funds are reasons for halting economic activities. The TSP should have a strong monitoring system with involvement of the community. The most important need is the transformation of the adivasi population from the State's 'burden' into self-reliant people. This could be done by maximum utilization of the TSP fund in imparting appropriate higher education, technical knowledge, and entrepreneurship skills to Adivasi youths, rather than displacing their own traditional and local skills and knowledge. This will create new opportunities towards appropriate economic prosperity, which, of course, should not be at the expense of the environment and local cultures. It would be a mistake to replicate the model of the mainstream economy.

Mining and industry are other vital areas where the paradigm shift is the need of the hour. The major minerals and other natural resources are located in the adivasi regions of

the country, resulting in heavy mining and industrialization, with hardly any benefit to the adivasis. Small-scale quarrying, in keeping with ecological sustainability, controlled by adivasis, and with benefits coming back to them in entirety, could be tried. However, large-scale mining and industrial activities have to be replaced by more decentralized economic options including rural, small-scale manufacturing, crafts, and agriculture based produce. In many parts of India adivasi populations have on their own or with help from civil society or government, managed to enhance livelihoods through the use of forest produce (e.g., in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, using the Forest Rights Act), through crafts and small-scale manufacture (e.g., Jharcraft in Jharkhand), or other means. Such activities will guarantee them livelihood possibilities from generation to generation. There would be a flow of economy into Adivasi villages, which will enhance their standard of living, health, education, nutrition, and so on.

Tourism could be another area of economic activity. Since, the adivasi regions are full of touristic hotspots with numerous waterfalls, natural landscapes with rising and falling hills, tourists could be easily attracted into the region, which, in turn, will create new economic opportunities. The Central and State Governments should provide the basic infrastructures like approach roads, communication facilities, enhancing the spot, along with availing drinking water and sanitation facilities. The gram sabha should be given ownership of these spots and the members trained in the art of tourism. Gram sabha will collect the entry fee from the tourists and also provide them the basic facility and security. The gram sabha can pay 10 to 15 per cent revenue to the State, 50 per cent on staff and rest could go to the gram sabha's fund. This will create new job opportunities for the adivasis and also strengthen the village economy; care will need to be taken that outsiders do not control the tourism economy, and that activities are not destructive to the environment.

Political Empowerment

Politics decides the future of any nation, society, and community today. However, the Adivasi community is not able to influence Indian politics for multiple reasons. There permeates the culture of silence in the community and a slavery mindset among the adivasi political leaders. Therefore, they are not able to use the democratic institutions to the advantage of the adivasi communities. The politicization of the adivasi community has not yet happened in a systematic way. For instance, there have been endless mass resistances against displacement across the adivasi regions in the country, there were also police firings and brutalities on the public protests, but whenever there is election of local bodies, Legislative Assemblies, or Parliament, the adivasis cast their votes in favour

of those political parties whose economic policies alienate them from land, forests, and other natural resources. The majority of the adivasi population becomes the traditional voters of any political party instead of auditing (and if necessary replacing) them on the basis of their performance, policies and programmes. Jaipal Singh Munda had brought the adivasi politics to the centre stage, but later, he was co-opted by the Congress Party. Thus, the status quo remains. Therefore, the culture of silence needs to be converted into the culture of critical questioning rising out of awareness and education, sharing information and imparting analytical skill. The politicization of the adivasi community will bring about the necessary change in the community.

The reestablishment of self-rule through the strengthening of gram sabha is another critical area of work. The gram sabha is said to be the most powerful body in the democratic system, which has been legitimized through various legislations like PESA, 1996, Forest Rights Act, 2006 and Land Acquisition Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013. However, in most of the villages, the gram sabhas have either become the political party centric institutions or the Government scheme delivery centres. The gram sabhas are unable to play a decisive role for the community. The common adivasis do not really practice their power due to lack of information, legal knowledge, and authoritarian attitude. Consequently, the political parties, corporate houses, NGOs, extremist groups and other vested interest groups have gained control over the gram sabhas. The people of each village need to be given critical awareness about the role, power and authority of the gram sabhas. If the gram sabhas are strengthened, the major issues like land alienation, corporate resource grab, trafficking, migration, etc., could easily be curbed. Adivasis can learn from examples like Mendha-Lekha village in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, which established self-rule more than two decades ago with the slogan 'Our government in Mumbai and Delhi, but we *are* the government in our village.' Demands can also be made for laws such as the Village Council Act of Nagaland, which empowers village bodies to take most decisions; most states have never extended such powers as per the intent of the Constitutional amendment legislated as PESA.

Historically, the adivasis had their own system of governance, which was free from the police system. The traditional system of governance still exists among several ethnic groups. For instance, there is Manjhi-Pargana system among the Santhals, Manki-Munda system among the Munda adivasis, Doklo-Sohor system among Kharias and Parha system among the Oraon adivasis (Pal, 2008). Though majority of them respect their traditional system of governance the imposition of the so-called modern democratic system has played down the importance of this. The voting system has overshadowed 'consent', which was

real democracy, where everyone had a say in the decision-making process. Presently, the traditional system of governance is restricted to social affairs and its political role has been curtailed. Consequently, the political leaders are riding over the traditional system of governance to secure their vote banks and also having control on the community. This needs to be reversed. The community should have control over politics through the traditional system of governance. It should play a vital role in selecting effective political representatives for the local bodies, Legislative Assemblies, and Parliament.

Political leadership building is another core area of intervention. Needless to say that there is a complete lack of the vocal, critical, analytical, inspirational, and trustworthy political leaders in the community. It is a big problem that 104 million adivasis have no credible voice in the Indian Parliament despite having forty seven political representatives. The major problem is that there is lack of perspective, lack of deep knowledge on issues and lack of skills to influence the corridor of power. There is also lack of research team and intellectual support to these representatives. Thus, the adivasi issues are not raised in the corridor of power. The adivasi community needs to build credible leadership, create an intellectual support group to the political leadership and create a centre, where political leadership could be trained.

Political unity is another thrust area that needs intervention. Although the adivasis can play a decisive role in the regional politics in several states, which can have a direct impact in the national politics of India, due to multiple divisions, they have totally failed. There are clear divisions on the basis of ethnicity, religion, and region as well. In particular, the division on the ground of religion has damaged the political unity of the community. The right wing Hindutva forces have harvested on the division in different parts of the country. The RSS and its allies have convinced sections of adivasis that the Christian adivasis are their main enemy. Consequently, they are engaged in religious conflicts and their votes are largely divided between mainline parties. This division has resulted in land alienation, corporate land grab, police brutalities, race based atrocities and other injustices. There is a crucial need of political unity among the adivasis, which could be on the basis of the identity of being an adivasi irrespective of religious beliefs and expressions.

However, the prime long-term political vision of the Adivasi community should be the establishment of autonomy in governance within Adivasi traditions, self-determination and self-rule. The President of India and the Governors of the states were made the custodians of Adivasis through the Constitutional provisions, and the district collectors or deputy commissioners were made watchdog of their land through various legislations but these legal authorities have totally failed in protecting adivasis' rights. This clearly

implies that the State has failed in protecting the rights of adivasis and also in justice delivery. Therefore, the only way to protect the adivasis' rights is by acquiring autonomy, self-determination and self-rule in the adivasis' territories within the Constitutional set-up of the Indian union.

Cultural revival

Cultural alienation is one of the major areas that need quick intervention. This could be seen in the deprivation of adivasis from their community life, identity, languages, religion, and sports, etc., the result of a well thought out design of 'mainstreaming'. Whatever the adivasi community possesses is tagged with negative terms like 'worst', 'impure' and 'wild'. These tags have been thrust in their minds, and convinced them that they need to join the processes of mainstreaming to become a 'civilized' human being. Such cultural alienation could be contained by a cultural revolution, by the propagation of the adivasi philosophy, to make them understand the actual meaning of being adivasis. The adivasi philosophy should be scripted as literature in different ethnic groups and in other regional languages, which will create pride in the adivasis. This transformation into pride could be done through social events, mass conferences and discussions. Gram sabhas or tribal councils and assemblies should be the centres for a cultural revolution which can reach to every family.

The first cultural alienation could be seen in the change of lifestyle. Community living is the foundation of the adivasi community but it has rapidly changed into individualism. Now the community centric activities have been shifted into individual centric, adopted from the so-called mainstream of the Indian society. The community centric activities need to be promoted even in the towns and cities. The community should be made critically aware about the impact of the market economy, which is forcing them to adopt the individual centric life style. The adivasi co-existence with nature needs to be brought back.

The second major alienation that is taking place is in the area of adivasi identity. The majority of adivasis see their adivasi identity as a stigma. Therefore, they attempt to hide their identity by not writing their surnames. For instance, the majority of adivasi youth using Facebook do not expose their surname to hide their adivasi identity. The adivasi women have started writing their surname like 'Devi' similar to the Hindu women. There are several adivasi ethnic groups like Kharwar, Gond, Chero, etc., use 'Kumar' for boy and 'Kumari' for girl instead of using their surname. The adivasis need to be made aware about the importance of their identity and its link with nature.

Third alienation could be seen in the alienation from traditional food. The food habit

has also changed very fast. The adivasi foods like millets, maize, cereals, double boiled rice, food items made of rice are called as food of the backward classes. Therefore, many adivasis have changed their food habits. For instance, the Chinese food items are served in marriage and other social functions instead of traditional food. The city-dwelling adivasi children do not want to eat the traditional food for its black colour and prefer to eat the white coloured food items. The racial discrimination has impacted deep alienation in the minds of adivasi children. The food habits could be restored by propagation of its importance, availability of nutrition in addressing several diseases. For instance, there are several herbs and cereals, which are used as vegetables and other food items, which are medicinal for blood pressure, diabetics, etc.

Fourth area of cultural alienation is Adivasi languages, which are disappearing rapidly.⁹ Several ethnic groups have lost their mother tongues and adopted Hindi, Bhojpuri, Oriya, Bangla, and other languages as their main language. At the same time, the city-dwelling adivasis, especially youth and children, do not know their languages because their parents did not teach them deliberately to get rid of the stigma of being adivasis. They encouraged their children to learn English and Hindi, and other regional languages instead. The language could be made alive only by using it. The adivasi children should adopt three tier languages – mother tongue, Hindi or relevant state language and English as the global language. This could be done through the traditional community learning centres and educational institutions. The mother tongue should be incorporated as primary language in formal schools also, and in later classes to learn state language, or Hindi, and English. Children should also be inspired towards creative writings like poem, stories, articles in their own languages, which could be published in local magazines and journals. Educational centres also need to be transformed to provide most relevant, enjoyable learning that is rooted in Adivasi cultures and ecology along with outside knowledge. Examples of this include Adharshila in Madhya Pradesh, Bhasha Adivasi Academy in Gujarat, Imlee Mahuaa in Chhattisgarh.¹⁰

The fifth major area is games and sports. Hockey, the national game of India used to be the integral part of the adivasi community. Jaipal Singh Munda was the first Indian captain, whose team won the Gold in the Olympics. Among nine gold medals India has won in the Olympics, eight medals go to hockey. However, cricket has taken over the fields of hockey, football, and other local sports. The youth need to be made aware about the importance of local games and sport, which can also provide them job opportunities. The community should organize annual games and sports festivals at the block, district, and state levels.

Additional areas for change are arts and music, of which adivasis have such an incredible wealth; and health, in which traditional adivasi knowledge and practices could be added to by modern medicine in an appropriate mix, practiced through community health systems. An example of this is the Tribal Health Initiative in Tamil Nadu.¹¹

Community centric development

The idea of inclusive development is part of the adivasi philosophy. The adivasi community follows the 'development' model derived from nature, where all the living beings have equal space and opportunity for growth (cultural, intellectual, and social). There is no space for competition, leading to inclusive growth. Therefore, the community centric development is much easier to promote. The focus should be on the development of basic infrastructure like construction of good houses, linking villages with proper roads, availability of well managed health centres, and properly administered primary school in every village, availability of electricity, pure drinking water, and sanitation facilities in every village. This could be done by the use of TSP fund with community cooperation and its involvement in planning, implementation, and monitoring of the rural infrastructure building. However, the community ownership needs to be put in place, which will facilitate in taking care and repairing of the rural infrastructure.

Besides, the rural infrastructure creation, quality services need to be provided in the villages especially in education and health services. Presently, there is lack of quality in the elementary education, the education centres have become food serving centres. Similarly, the health centres are defunct. The teachers, nurses, and doctors are paid without providing quality services to the villages. This needs to be changed with community involvement, making available quality teachers and making the medical staff accountable. The gram sabha should be given authority for ensuring quality health and education services, building on local and traditional knowledge and adding to it from outside.

Conclusion

Although the adivasis are the first settlers or indigenous peoples of India, who have a history of more than three centuries of resistance against the imposition of the idea of the State, alienation from lands, territories and resources, and imposition of western concept of development, have forced them to struggle for survival. The invasion of different communities into their territories pushed them to the margins and led to their alienation. Therefore, the adivasi community needs to envisage its future by designing both short and long term goals. The democratic institutions, Constitutional provisions, and laws could

be used to realize the short-term vision where the community needs to play a prominent role by activating and involving its traditional institutions.

However, in the long-term vision, there must be social, economic, political, cultural, and developmental transformation in the adivasi community. The community must regain its lost lands, territories and resources, where it should enforce the idea of self-determination, self-reliance and self-rule being the part of the Indian union. The vision of the community must be guided by its philosophy. And through this transformation, they can perhaps also help the rest of Indian society to become more equitable, just, and ecologically sustainable.

Endnotes

1. Constitution of India, published by the Ministry of Law and Justice (Government of India) in 2007.
2. The Supreme Court order on the SLP (Cr) No. 10367 of 2010, Kailas & others V State of Maharashtra.
3. See Census Report, 2011, Government of India.
4. *ibid.*
5. Based on the experience of the author, this article is primarily related to adivasi or tribal populations of central and eastern India, and does not deal with issues of such populations in other parts of India.
6. This data has been taken from the author's upcoming book (*Endless Cry in the Red Corridor*).
7. For instance, see JHRM (Jharkhand Human Rights Movement), 2012.
8. See also essay on Language Futures in this volume.
9. See www.vikalpsangam.org for details of these.
10. See details at <http://www.tribalhealth.org>.

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