

The Hindu

Having an ear to Adivasi ground



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It is important to go beyond the administrative convention of bracketing Adivasis into a single category. | Photo Credit: [S. Harpal Singh](#)

Policy framers must recognise their wide diversity in order to address their different problems

In November 2018, the Adivasis of Jhargram, West Bengal, were overtaken by an event while preparing for the Bandhna festival; seven adults of the KhariaSavar community died within a span of just two weeks. Their lifespan is approximately 26 years less than the average Indian's life expectancy. Their lives are full of uncertainties, and death is considered the most normal of happenings.

The dead were cremated without any autopsy being performed, and thus the cause of the deaths could not be medically verified. Other villagers were of the view that those who had passed away were suffering from tuberculosis. The opinion of the State authorities was this: "It was not undernourishment. They died of tuberculosis and excessive drinking." What is intriguing, however, is the factor of alienation that emerges from this.

Despite the village's proximity to several public offices such as the panchayat, block and district headquarters, being surrounded by other ethnic groups with better access to information, and even economically connected with relatively advantaged neighbours, the real reasons that caused the deaths hardly drew any public attention. Surveillance by the administrative authorities over the population in all other matters of their lives had failed to detect anything about the catastrophe until a few surviving inhabitants of the village made a plea to rescue them from hunger and diseases.

Misplaced views

The uncertainty of Adivasi life has a strong connection with the 'mainstream' view about them. In popular discourse, the socio-economic disadvantages of the Adivasis as compared with the rest of the population are often seen through a lens of benevolence. The views about the 'underdevelopment' of the Adivasis typically subscribes to this section of the population being the 'takers/receivers' of governmental benefits. Policies and practices rooted in this approach, fail, in most cases, to accommodate the question of the participation of the Adivasis in the ongoing processes of the nation as co-

citizens. This in turn not only deprives the Adivasis of the socioeconomic progress they are capable of but also results in a loss to the rest of the nation.

The rich moral, cultural and social values, and linguistic and other practice-acquired developments that the Adivasis have been nurturing throughout history could have added immensely toward strengthening our democracy. Mutual co-operation, decision making through discussion, peaceful co-habitation with others and with nature, age-old and time-tested practices of environmental protection, and other such high civic qualities observed by them could have added to the country's "democratic curriculum". However, the politics of dominance, economics of immediate gain, and a social outlook of separateness have charted a very different path for the Adivasis.

Study finds a knowledge gap

We were part of a study conducted by the Asiatic Society and the Pratiche Institute among 1,000 households across West Bengal ("Living World of the Adivasis of West Bengal: An Ethnographic Exploration" — <https://bit.ly/39yWWUb>). The study found that there exists, both in the public and academic domains, a wide gap in knowledge about this selectively forgotten and pragmatically remembered population.

Who they are, where they live, what they do, what their socio-economic status is, what their cultural and linguistic practices are, are all questions to which the prevailing answers are fragmented and vague. For example, in West Bengal, there are 40 Adivasi groups notified by the government as Scheduled Tribes (STs), but most people use the terms Adivasi and Santal interchangeably. Santal in fact, is but one of the 40 notified tribes forming 47% of the total ST population.

This knowledge gap leads to democratic denial for the Adivasis. The imposed superiority of the outside world has resulted in the Adivasis considering themselves as inferior, primitive and even taking a fatalistic view of their subjugated life. This pushes them to the margins, even making them abandon some of their socially unifying customs and cultural practices — particularly

democratic norms and human values that have evolved through a protracted journey of collective living and struggles for existence.

One outcome of this is the erosion of their great linguistic heritage (in some sections). However, Adivasi acceptance of the 'imposed modern' does not guarantee their inclusion in the apparent mainstream. Rather, the opposite happens. They are often reminded of their primitive roots and kept alienated. Again, pushed to the side by exploitation and oppression, marginalisation and subjugation, Adivasis, in many cases, cling to oppressive behaviours such as witchcraft which only make the label of them being primitive even more indelible. The vicious cycle of political-economic deprivation and social alienation continues to keep them subjugated to the ruling modern. A situation where they are a source of cheap labour and live lives where they are half-fed with no opportunities to flourish and develop their human capabilities seems unalterable.

Therefore, it is important to go beyond the administrative convention of bracketing Adivasis into a single category. Rather, policy framing requires mandatory recognition of their wide diversity so as to address the different problems faced by different groups — by community as well as by region. It is also important to abide by the general constitutional rules which are often violated by the state. In other words, the very common instances of violations of the Forest Rights Act, the Right to Education Act, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act — which affect them — have to be eliminated. The possibility of fair implementation of public programmes, however, is contingent to an agentic involvement of the communities concerned. Instead of being considered to be mere passive recipients, Adivasis must be respected as active agents of change and involved in all spheres of policy, from planning to implementation.

It is imperative that the entire outlook on the Adivasi question is reversed. Instead of considering Adivasis to be a problem, the entire country can benefit a great deal by considering them as co-citizens and sharing their historically constructed cultural values which often manifest the best forms of democracy and uphold the notions of higher levels of justice, fairness, and

equality — better than those prevalent in seemingly mainstream societies. By ensuring their right to live their own lives, the country can in fact guarantee itself a flourishing democracy.

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