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Subject II

Socio-Ecological Transitions in the Adivasi Landscapes

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First of all, I am grateful to ISAE for giving me this opportunity to be the rapporteur for a highly relevant theme. Personally, it provided an opportunity for rich learning. I am also thankful to the Convenor of the session, Binodini Sethi, the rapporteurs, namely, S. Behera and Subbhrajyothi Mishra, whose inputs have helped in the preparation of this final report.

The first aspect I would like to clarify and highlight is that as the chair of the theme, I had suggested using the term 'Adivasi' in place of 'Tribal' as the former goes with emancipatory connotation as against the pejorative meaning implied in the latter. I am thankful to ISAE President, Prof. D.K. Marothia, for appreciating and accepting the revised title of the theme proposed incorporating the term Adivasi.

In all, thirteen papers were submitted under the theme covering diverse issues pertaining to at least fifteen varied tribes and groups spread across thirteen states of India. While the concept note had raised a wide range of critical issues, the papers studied specific issues as per the researchers' interest yet covering fairly an extensive ground to explicate many of the crucial aspects relevant for understanding changing dynamics in Adivasi landscape. In their explorations, the papers have adopted diverse methods drawing upon literature-based review, primary survey, secondary data analysis, and case studies.

The concept note and the synthesis paper by the rapporteur had identified the following issues for discussion in the session: 1) What are the crucial changes in the social and cultural aspects of the Adivasis, including their identity owing to changes in their livelihoods and resource base (and vice versa)? 2) How do we ensure the protection of Adivasi customary and other rights lest they face further alienation and marginalisation? 3) What are the varied manifestations of the 'Adivasi Question'? How to resolve the 'Adivasi Question? What can be the unifying or common dimensions like class or identity relevant to addressing the 'Adivasi Question'? Can the 'Adivasi Question' serve as a useful framework for resolving the historical challenges facing Adivasis? 4) How can Adivasi agriculture be revitalised for sustainable livelihood? 5) What are the lessons for effective governance that can redress amicably the conflict of conservation versus livelihood in the Adivasi landscapes?

Having posed the research questions, the presentation of synthesis paper brought out why the study of Adivasis as a community remains important. The Adivasis are a highly diverse and historical groups who have been an integral part of our society. Their lives display certain strengths like close bondage with nature, a communitarian approach, and minimalism and conservation as a way of life which are highly relevant to human society. However, bulk of the Adivasis have been isolated, subjugated, and marginalized both in the colonial and post-colonial periods

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owing to encroachments of their terrain and infringement of basic and customary rights. Economically, Adivasi communities are in different stages of development which range from hunting-gathering type to settled agriculture to advanced organized sector activities, with a significant proportion afflicted with poverty and deprivation. Occupations of the Adivasis like jhuming, agriculture, and NTFP collection have all faced crisis because of several socio-economic changes. Dislocation and displacements of Adivasis have been rampant leading to the marginalization, conflicts and dissent. There are even threats of annihilation of them as Adivasi groups especially under capitalist development which is fast catching up in their landscapes. The promised transformation and modernization remain elusive for a significant proportion. Overall, it can be said that the 'Adivasi Question' remains unresolved.

Given the multi-dimensional nature of the challenges, for a more holistic understanding of the Adivasi issues, the synthesis paper suggested that redressing the 'Adivasi question' needs an integrated approach conceptually and empirically. The 'Adivasi Question' which encapsulates the diverse empirical challenges covering socio-cultural and economic issues can itself be used as a common conceptual framework to understand the diverse but interlinked Adivasi issues. Therefore, 'Adivasi Question' (akin to the agrarian question in the Marxian analysis) can serve as an analytical and conceptual framework combining at least three interrelated dimensions for a critical and integrated analysis of Adivasis issues. The first dimension covers the communitarian issues which concern the culture, identity and autonomy of Adivasis as groups; the second one is the economic dimension which includes the concerns of livelihood, peasantry, and class; and the third dimension pertains to ecological issues encompassing natural resources and their sustainability in the context of the Adivasis' rights and access over these resources. Any study of Adivasis cannot ignore these dimensions, and must combine them suitably for an integrated analysis. Hence, 'Adivasi Question' has been suggested as a multi-dimensional analytical framework for studying the Adivasis.

Coming specifically to the session, besides the synthesis paper, seven technical presentations were made. There was a vibrant discussion involving the audience and paper writers. The discussions covered diverse methodological, empirical and policy issues. Young researchers also received feedback and suggestions for further enriching their work. In terms of methodology, a major issue was about integrating Adivasi issues in the problems analysed be it about farming system of Apatanis or monocropping in the Adivasi dominated districts of Madhya Pradesh or about displacement owing to drinking water project in Maharashtra. The need for specifically looking at Adivasi specific issues was clearly felt. The issue of access to forests and nature of agro-forestry in studying farming system was highlighted. In studying farming system, the limitation of the application of the concept of cropping intensity for livestock was brought out. There was emphasis on relevance of capturing the diversity of NTFPs and its significance for the Adivasis. For macro or secondary data-based studies, it was suggested that evidence from micro studies on Adivasis be utilised to bring better insights into the problem from Adivasi perspective. The discussions also brought out the similarity of some of the issues

raised by papers across other states, be it about collectives for use of river water or the role of SHGs.

Overall, the major insights and conclusions emerging from the papers and the session are summarised below:

1. The Adivasi landscape depicts a picture of enormous diversity despite certain kinds of homogenisation occurring based on religion, economic development, and Adivasi identity. Neither attempts at 'mainstreaming' nor 'modernisation' have brought binding commonality among the Adivasis. Certain kinds of inter-group conflicts also endure with growing contention over dwindling resources. Access to and use of land is moving towards private use/ownership in Adivasi areas from the earlier communal management with the market forces gaining fast ground.

While limited educational attainments have constrained progress in human development, Adivasi areas also have susceptible to gender bias manifested in glaring male-female differences socio-economic conditions.

2. The well-known symbiotic relations between forests and Adivasis has been reiterated. Many of the policy regimes put in place to address issues of conservation and livelihood have given at best mixed results. Even as conflicts have erupted between the two goals in many instances making Adivasis to protest, some semblance of balance has been attained in few instances.

3. Agriculture supplemented by other means remains a prominent source of livelihood with a significant proportion of Adivasis donning the role of peasants. Given the constraints of small holder agriculture, Adivasis have tried to diversify into other sources to supplement the livelihood including NTFP collection. Much of the diversification is in the nature of self-employment and the informal sector jobs leading to proletarianisation.

4. Even as settled agriculture is now the major form with better-off Adivasi farmers generate modest returns to ensure their basic food security. But agriculture in general is plagued by low and uncertain yields constraining decent living not to mention HYV-based technology fostering monocropping.

5. Adivasis continue to languish in terms of their living standards and socio-economic conditions. Most are in a state of precarity owing to historical subjugation, continued deprivation and limited impact of policies.

6. Governance has emerged as crucial dimension both for sustainability of natural resources and economic development in Adivasi areas. Though conservation measures have aided in forest regeneration raising stakes of Adivasis, but they also have threatened livelihoods. Steps like FRA have failed to ensure adequately rights of Adivasis with land acquisition and displacement remaining contentious. Many policy-induced collectivisation efforts are observed with limited impact.

IMPLICATIONS

While the synthesis paper has identified specific policy measures suggested by the papers, some of the broader implications drawn for research and policy under the theme are as under: 1) Need for application of 'Adivasi Question' as an

integrated framework of analysis combining communitarian, class, and ecological issues; 2) More focused policy attention needed towards human development and gender-equity based on entitlements, education, and health; 3) Need for protecting the customary rights and autonomy of the Adivasis in true spirits; 4) Reducing scope for displacement and adopting effective rehabilitation as a right; 5) Strengthening decentralized and participatory based resources conservation measures; 6) Revitalisation of the Adivasi agriculture through sustainable practices and collective approach; and 7) Collectivization of resources and activities for a more broad-based and equitable development.

The larger society including researchers, policy makers and civil society must take note of the issues and implications identified here, and work towards ensuring the rights, livelihoods and dignity of these embattled yet important communities.