

TRIBAL WOMEN'S STRUGGLES AGAINST POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE EASTERN GHATS

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The tribal region of the Eastern Ghats, particularly in the north coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh and southern Orissa, has a history of political unrest and struggle for protection of basic human and traditional rights. Realising the need for a special rule and administration for these regions, the Indian constitution devoted the Fifth and Sixth schedules to the tribal areas. The Central Indian tribal belt comes under the Fifth Schedule, where tribals are to be protected by the state under positively discriminative laws in order to prevent exploitation by external societies.

However, the adivasis today are far from being protected against exploitation and violence. Control over natural resources and freedom of rights is so threatened by the state today that there is an entirely new phenomenon of political conflict emerging from the adivasi regions. The unscrupulous development policies and programmes of the state have a direct correlation to this emergence wherein the socio-economic fabric of life for the tribals is harshly being disrupted. This, from the other end, is being ruthlessly taken advantage of by other political forces and revolutionary groups which are reinforcing a reign of terror as a counter to state violence. In the midst of this mindless political violence suffers the worst victim – the tribal woman.

The paper presented here are a series of case studies which reflect the impact of macro development policies of the state and the resulting political conflicts, on adivasi women, who are the most marginalised section of the Indian society.

Adivasi Women's Struggles against Liberalisation and the New Economic Policy:

Most of the country's richest natural resources lie in forest areas inhabited by adivasi communities. The new economic policy envisages exploitation of these natural resources for commercial gains for the apparent 'economic development' of the nation. However, respecting the need for a social and ecological justice has never been the prerogative of the state when implementing these policies.

Liberalisation and Mining:

The abundant mineral wealth of the Eastern Ghats has been attracting the mining industry, both Indian and transnational with the economic policies from the nineties being most conducive to these industrial lobbies. Mining is the single largest industry in the country leading to largescale displacement and destruction of people and the environment. The state is leasing out tribal and forest lands to mining industries violating all laws and guidelines laid down in the constitution.

The story of Anantagiri and Kasipur:

Anantagiri mandal of Vizag district in Andhra Pradesh and Kasipur taluk in Raigada district of Orissa are two evocative examples of the combined might of state and industrial oppression on adivasi communities. Anantagiri mandal has a history of erratic and unscientific mining on a small scale. With the liberalisation of the economy, the state government opened up the tribal area since 1990 to largescale mining by giving leases to seventeen companies, the biggest of them being Birla Periclase, a company of Indian Rayon & Industries. These leases were given without the knowledge of tribals who had no clue as to the purpose of the projects, the extent of land to be acquired, rehabilitation, etc. In the case of Birla Periclase, the Border Roads Organisation (a wing of the Indian army) was brought in to lay a 90 feet wide road across fourteen interior tribal villages for transporting the mineral ore. Tribals were evicted from their houses and lands with a shockingly paltry amount of Rs.1000 – Rs.1500 as compensation and with no future assurance for their livelihood.

The most incredible form of resistance came from adivasi women who refused to part with their lands. In Borra and Volasi panchayats, the women who witnessed their standing crops being razed to the ground, drove out the companies from their villages. When the companies forcibly tried to enter the villages, the women blockaded the roads and attacked anyone who attempted to even remove samples of mine ore. However, the state government went ahead with the construction of the road with a 3,000 strong BRO working for almost four years.

Even before the mining project could commence, the very existence of the BRO for a prolonged period brought in social chaos and disturbance in an area where gender abuse was almost non-existent. It brought in alcoholism, young tribal girls were gang-raped many times and some tribal women from the roadside villages were converted to prostitution. The government, which does not have the competence to deliver its basic health services like immunisation in these areas, has made tribal women more vulnerable to lethal diseases like AIDS which it cannot address. The local officials have only hushed up cases filed against the offenders of such crimes, which clearly reflects their sheer apathy to gender justice.

In Kasipur block of Raigada district, the tribal women are opposing the entry of big corporations like Norsk Hydro, L&T, ALCAN, INDAL, etc. Here their struggle is against much stronger lobbies of multinational and national industries controlling state power. Tribal women have been beaten up and arrested for blockading their villages and for participating in public protests and rallies. The tribals have formed a struggle group called Prakritoko Sampadana Suraksha Parishad where women are actively participating in organising village meetings and mobilising the people to join the movement. There is constant police harassment, women are taken into police custody sometimes legally, sometimes illegally and there are cases against them awaiting disposal. The industries

use sophisticated methods of paying the political parties, which in turn provoke the police into unleashing terror in the villages.

Despite such violent tactics, the tribals, either in Anantagiri or in Kasipur, have not allowed mining operations to commence, having put in almost a decade of resistance. However, the macro industrial policies of the state are certain to result in largescale displacement as laws relating to tribals, environment, forests, land, industry are swiftly and silently being amended to the advantage of the industrial lobby without any remorse about the deteriorating quality of life to the tribals.

This deterioration in life, especially for adivasi women, is starkly visible in Orissa, which has witnessed decades of industrialisation and ‘development’ projects.

Development Projects and Adivasi Women:

In Koraput district of Orissa, hundreds of villages affected by big development projects like multipurpose dams and other industries like NALCO, HAL, etc, the plight of the tribal women displaced, even after two or three decades is a horrifying story. They are confined to crowded slums with leaking roofs, lack toilets or basic amenities, there is total loss of control over their resources and economy and are converted into a patriarchal and feudal society with new forms of physical and mental abuse. Many of these communities which experienced multiple displacement have migrated into the neighbouring hills of Vizag district in Andhra Pradesh. Here they are forced to occupy forest lands and confront constant harassment from the forest department for being ‘illegal’ podu cultivators. For the thousands of tribal women displaced by these large projects, there have been only two alternatives – either continue as criminals in forest lands or turn into prostitution. Many have had to choose the latter in centres of industry and tourism like Araku, Semliguda, Paderu, etc.

State, Caste Conflict and Adivasi Women:

In the past, caste exploitation was confined to the scheduled castes and the dalits. The problems of tribals were related more to government negligence in providing basic amenities, economic exploitation by non-tribals and laws interfering with their traditional way of life. We perceive a new trend in the form of caste violence towards tribals. This year a small tribal village in Vizag district was a victim to abuse and torture in the name of caste. This is not an isolated case, as unlike in the past, tribals are no longer insulated from external societies.

A village called PND’palem had refused to cooperate with the local liquor mafia to sell liquor in their village. The infuriated mafia got the local police to swoop down on the village, destroy their houses and drag the men and women to the police station. The tribals were illegally detained and inhumanly tortured by the police. The women were made to strip, were ruthlessly beaten up, forced to drink the urine of the tribal men and

abused in the filthiest of words ridiculing their caste and practices. One of the women succumbed to the torture and many are still suffering from severe injuries. There were no cases booked on the culprits or any serious action taken against the police officials on duty, inspite of the existence of protective laws like the SC/ST Atrocities Act.

Adivasi Women and Extremism:

Along with the history of unrest is a history of extremism in this tribal region. As development policies and laws often brought forth the antagonism of adivasi communities, extremism has been a dominating force in ensuring a state of political unrest. There is a disturbing trend emerging in this political milieu where spontaneous tribal movements and struggles are being suppressed by various political ideologies and revolutionary groups. What one witnesses is a complex and coercive situation for the tribals where they are caught in a vicious battle between the state and the counter state and they have no power of decision-making or freedom of expression from either of the powers. There are incidents, ad nauseum where tribals are locked up in police custody, tortured, maimed and spend a lifetime with 'criminal' records and insecurity. Many tribal women have also undergone this inhuman treatment in police custody. When the men are facing trial, the women have to mortgage their lands and livestock to obtain bails for their men and end up as the sole wage labourers of their families. The vicious nexus between police, politicians and lawyers in the agency areas has ruined many tribal families.

The case of the tribal women's movement last year in East Godavari district is a result of people's exasperation with political conflicts and violence. The women of Pedamallapuram who experienced decades of political violence and torture were finally vexed by the spate of extremist and police excesses. They had helplessly watched a series of violent activities in one single year, which led them to further deprivation. The only bus that plied to the area and the DR Depot (public distribution system) were burnt down, their pattas were turned to ashes when the office of the GCC was also burnt, and the government decided to shift this office to the town. All this was done in retaliation to the people's non-cooperation to boycott the elections. Tensions were created in the individual and personal lives of the tribals due to interference in internal social dynamics and traditional systems of law and order of the tribals.

Unable to contain their anger and political suffocation, the tribal women in a group of twenty villages, started a movement against state and extremist interference. They spearheaded a brave movement declaring their disgust at the state and the counter state and demanded that they be left alone – a movement which the men could never have gathered up the courage to lead. The extremists who could not digest such defiance coming from poor illiterate tribal women descended upon them in the dead of night, dragged them out of their huts, beat them up most brutally and killed two of the men as a warning to the women. The state government drew immediate political mileage of the situation by providing lip sympathy to the women and extending financial compensation without any attempt to punish the offenders. Such physical abuse on tribal women in the

most vengeful manner, speaks of the violence and serious degradation of human rights which is becoming an increasingly common game for political parties.

There is complete denial of democratic rights as the women cannot have the freedom to take up any independent non-violent campaigns for fear of bringing wrath to the extremists or are beaten up by the police on the pretext of supporting extremists and opposing 'development' projects. Thus liberalisation and privatisation has brought in a ghetto-like situation for the tribal women where the government is willing to forsake its social jurisprudence to pander to industrial lobbies like mining, to whom gender justice and equality are concerns of irrelevance. Any form of protest is considered as anti-social or anti-development by the state or suppressed by revolutionary forces if they do not prescribe to their ideology or strategy of combating liberalisation.

On one side the state government is building itself an image of being very gender sensitive especially with regard to marginalised communities like tribals, by launching fanciful welfare programmes for tribal women. Its political decisions and policies relating to the social sector on the other hand are covertly aimed at removing or relaxing laws that protect tribals and their resources. Relaxation or even repeal of scheduled area laws, privatisation of industry and also public health and education of the tribals are some of the serious political changes that are being planned and if implemented, could make tribal women more vulnerable to exploitation and violence. On the other side of the political/development spectrum we have various political, religious and revolutionary groups, NGO's, etc which champion the cause of tribals and their concerns. A vital question that all have forgotten is to ask the poor tribal woman what decisions she wants to make regarding her body, her needs, her rights and her freedom.