

NOT TO BE QUOTED  
THIS DRAFT IS BEING PLACED BEFORE THE PUBLIC FOR COMMENTS  
AND SUGGESTIONS

INPUTS MAY BE SENT TO

[gs.asiatic@gmail.com](mailto:gs.asiatic@gmail.com)

[kumar@pratichi.org](mailto:kumar@pratichi.org)

**Preliminary Findings**  
**Of**  
**An Inquiry into the Living World of the Adivasis in West Bengal**

An Empirical Study

Carried out by the Pratichi Institute and the Asiatic Society

**December 2018**

## The Context

Any discussion on the Adivasis, generally speaking, begins with a narrative of their deprivation. True as the diagnosis is, this primarily victim-centric approach involves a problem of narrowness: the deprivation of the Adivasis and the widespread disrespect for their cultural riches and human values not only work as barriers for these groups of people to flourishing – to being and doing – but also thrust upon the country a common deprivation caused by undervaluation of their wit and wisdom, and consequently a huge misfortune of self-denial.

That Adivasis of the country, including those residing in different parts of the state of West Bengal, have distinctive and time-tested value systems, celebrating autonomy, equality, and democratic norms, is a point that needs to be belaboured. And this is the approach that motivates this study. At the same time, focusing on their exclusion from basic social opportunities or their ‘unequal inclusion’ into a graded social order on most unfavourable terms remains the parallel objective of this exercise. In short, this analysis aims to value cultural pluralities and at the same time to celebrate shared humanity by recognizing equal human rights of all. This idea of celebration of equal dignity of all, and conversely sharing equal dishonour, is the essence of Tagore’s inclusive vision of humanity: “...All those you ever kept/ Of human rights bereft,/Or made to stand before you, while your hand/Drew them not to your breast; with each of them/You too must equal in dishonour stand.”<sup>1</sup>

The various social and environmental movements that Adivasis in this country have organized – in the past and in recent times – bear a mark of their distinctiveness, just as those led by Dalits in the country exhibit their own world views. There is a clear need for the so-called mainstream to seriously engage with these diverse and distinct ideas and values such that a collective understanding emerges about a life worth living and sharing. In this common pursuit of envisioning and realizing the idea of shared humanity, Adivasis must occupy a central position, by dint of not only their cultural riches but also their numerical strength in our country. Had they been able to form a country of their own, with a population of 104,545,716, according to 2011 Census, it would have been the 12<sup>th</sup> most populous country in the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tagore, Rabindranath (2004), ‘The Dishonoured’, (translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri), in *Selected Poems*, Chaudhuri Sukanta (ed), New Delhi: OUP

West Bengal has 5,296,953 Adivasis, 6 percent of the total population in the state, and form 5 percent of the total Adivasi population (104,545,716) in the country. However, as in the all India scenario, Adivasis of West Bengal are not only far behind the average population in terms of human development (poor literacy rate, abysmally higher reliance on low-paid agricultural labor, poor health status), but also appear to be more deprived than Adivasis in other states. For example, the all India average of difference between literacy rate among all population (73%) and the STs (59%), is 14 percent points, while the corresponding figure for West Bengal is 18 percent (literacy rate among all and STs being 76% and 58% respectively). Similarly, while the all India average proportion of agricultural laborers among main workers of the Adivasis is 12 percent point higher than that of all populations (Adivasis 24%; all population 12%), in West Bengal the corresponding figure (27 percent point) is more than double (Adivasis 49%; all 26%).<sup>2</sup> Again, the High Level Expert Committee on Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India<sup>3</sup> found that in terms of some of the important socio-economic indicators, West Bengal was lagging behind many other Indian states.

The general deprivations seem to be linked not only with poor implementation of the programs concerning the Adivasis, but also with the very framing of policies, which are often oblivious to the complex constitution of the Adivasi world. As at the national level, Adivasis in West Bengal are of diverse socio-cultural, linguistic and geographical backgrounds. Variations in socio-economic status of the Adivasis are even more striking: the broad spatial (inter-district) differences are further complicated by inter-group and intra-group variations. For example, the literacy rate of all Adivasis in the state is 58 percent (one percent point less than the all India average), but the inter-district figures range between 44 percent (Uttar Dinajpur) and 82 percent (Kolkata). Similarly, the inter-community literacy rates vary between 32 percent (Gorait) and 82 percent (Magh). Moreover, there are considerable spatial differences among members of the same group (for example, Santals). In the same line, while 49 percent of all Adivasis depend upon agricultural wage work for livelihood, the community-wise figures vary between 5 percent (Tamang) and 70 percent (Khond); in case of cultivation as the main occupation, the percentage ranges from 1 percent (Magh) to 43 percent (Lepcha), the average being 15 percent. In addition

---

<sup>2</sup> Census of India 2011, [http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/population\\_enumeration.html](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/population_enumeration.html)

<sup>3</sup> Government of India (2014), Report of the High Level Committee on Socio-Economic, Health and Educational status of Tribal Communities of India, New Delhi: Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Government of India

to spatial, inter-community, and intra-community variations, there also are huge differences between genders.

It seems that there exists – both in public and academic domains – a wide gap in knowledge about this selectively forgotten and pragmatically remembered population of the country. Who they are, where they live, what they do, what their socio-economic status is, what their cultural and linguistic practices are, are questions to which the prevailing answers are largely fragmented and vague. For example, in West Bengal, there are 40 groups notified by the government as Scheduled Tribes (STs), but most people use the terms Adivasi and Santal interchangeably, while the latter, in fact, is but one of the 40 notified tribes, forming 47 percent of the total ST population. Despite the wide-ranging inter- and intra-community socio-economic variations among Adivasi groups being reflected in the Census data, they have hardly found any attention either in public policy or in general discussions.

The epistemologically important and practically crucial requirement to develop a comprehensive understanding on the Adivasis brought the Asiatic Society and the Pratiche Institute together to conduct an empirical research. The results of the study, while adding to the body of knowledge, may have practical relevance for public action in order to pursue the goal of ensuring equal and dignified participation of the Adivasis in all spheres of life.

This report recognizes that the Adivasi right to a life of dignity will entail at once a social recognition of their valued cultural rights as well as a social commitment to ensure their access to basic social opportunities essential for their core capability empowerment. Correspondingly, this report remains watchful, on the one hand, of some of the visible trends towards a coercive homogenization of their cultural distinctiveness in the name of ‘development’; on the other hand the report attempts to express ‘constructive impatience’ with the widespread social neglect and injustice that exists in many parts of the country causing their basic capability deprivations. In short, this report acknowledges the appeal of the twin claims of ‘politics of recognition’ and ‘politics of justice’.

In this connection, the report also looks at the role of the state through a critical lens: on the one hand, the report seeks to focus on the areas of human development – for example, on public provisioning of basic education and universal healthcare, and social policies essential to

ensure livelihood and food and nutritional security etc.; sadly these are the areas in which the state often remains ‘under-active’. On the other hand, the report suggests, the state sometimes becomes ‘hyper-active’ in rewarding private interests at the cost of public welfare, through its extractive role as far as tribal lands and various forest resources are concerned. The ‘hands-on’ and the ‘hands-off’ functions of the state therefore have to be examined critically for a rounded analysis of Adivasi rights in our democratic polity. The research team, 50 percent of which comprised members from various Adivasi communities from across the state, finalized the sample with help of experts, developed the tools, discussed them with experts, had them pre-tested, and finalized in a training-workshop for the investigators, who collected information from 1,000 households from the sample districts of Puruliya, Bankura, West Medinipur (undivided), Birbhum, Bardhaman (undivided), Hugli, North 24 Parganas, Maldah, Darjeeling (undivided), and Jalpaiguri (undivided). The study followed a mixed-method approach consisting of quantitative and qualitative data collected through a survey format, and also through in-depth individual and group interviews and observations. Available secondary data and literature were also analyzed to our best possible ability and used to enhance the comprehensibility of the report. We present here some of the preliminary findings of the report so as to draw as much as possible from the deliberations expected from experts as well as general public following the publication of the report.

### **Accusation and Under-achievements**

The study finds a major contrast between the views of policy makers and implementers at different levels and the Adivasis we have interacted with during fieldwork. Most of the makers and implementers of social policies including politicians, government officials, school teachers, medical professionals (both trained doctors and unrecognized practitioners), health workers, and even social activists tended to see the socio-economic under-achievements of Adivasis as a result of the latter’s cultural insularity and indifference to taking part in the larger social processes. However, our field level communications reveal that notwithstanding maintaining, and often struggling to maintain, the rich cultural distinctions, Adivasis belonging to various communities were keen to share a common platform of socio-economic achievements. A clear reflection of the inclination towards ensured inclusiveness is the increased level of school enrolment; and it follows the general pattern of the country – children of weaker financial background tended to

get enrolled in government schools while their relatively solvent counterparts inclined to choose private ones (more on this presently). Of a total of 661 children in the elementary education age group (6-14 years), 94 percent were found to be in school. Of the 41 children in this age group, nine (1.4 %) were found to have never enrolled, and 32 ( 4.8 %) were reported to have dropped out. That despite several initiatives to universalize elementary education, some children among the Adivasis were still out of school is lamentable, and yet, one cannot miss noting the advancements made over time. Similarly, as regards medical care, in 98 percent cases patients sought treatment from persons or facilities practicing modern medicines (we are not going into the debate on traditional-modern conflict – the point to note here is the unfounded basis of the constructed notion of the Adivasis’ refusal to be part with the larger social processes). Aspirations for improved life can also be seen from the data related to child delivery: of 61 deliveries in the year preceding the survey only seven took place at home (in two cases with the help of trained *dai*).

### **Capability Constraints**

In contrast, the lower level of socio-economic achievements of Advasis were found to be linked more with the gaps in state – and other social – initiatives to meet the aspiration of the Adivasis to enhance their capabilities by participating in social processes. The state’s responsibility to correct the historical wrongdoings – shattering the Adivasi life by alienating them from their land, livelihood, social settings and cultural heritage –and make positively discriminatory arrangements to expand their choices, as understood from the field research, has not found its due in policy framing and implementation.

For example, 8 percent of the government primary school going children had to reportedly walk more than one kilometer to attend the school (this was at variance with the Right to Education Act 2009, which mandated that the distance of a primary school from children’s home should be within one kilometer). Compounded with other, more complicated problems, such as lack of teachers in Adivasi areas, teachers’ absenteeism and uncaring attitude towards Advasi children, the huge problem of comprehension owing to the difference in mother tongue and the medium of education, and so on, the very problem of access to schools made such barriers for the Adivasi children in general and girls among them in particular almost insurmountable and resulted, at least partially, in the rate of transition. While only 41 children

were found to be out of school at elementary level, the number shot up to 293 at higher levels. Deprivation in terms of quality education was reflected in other fields including health, employment, utilization of public services, and political participation.

Similarly, in the health sector, there appeared a huge gap in publicly delivered services. Of the 52 children above 12 months of age found in the survey the household respondents could show the immunization cards for only 36 (69%). While some said that they had misplaced the card, some could not even remember whether they were provided with one or not. Whatever be the case, the higher degree of non-availability of immunization cards (31%) indicates a weakness in the delivery of immunization. This was further corroborated by the fact that even a substantial number of those children whose immunization cards were available were not fully immunized: of the 36 children only 21 (58%) were – as recorded in the cards – found to be fully immunized. As regards public health facilities, more than half the households reported defecating in the open as 44 percent of them did not have toilets of any kind, and three percent of those reported to have possessed toilets said that they were not at all useable.

Again, nearly two third of the households had no drainage system at all; in addition, most of the available drainage arrangements were uncovered (only three percent had covered drains). It was no different in the delivery of healthcare: while 61 percent of the patients reportedly sought treatment from private allopathic practitioners (39% quacks, 19 % trained medical doctors, and 3 % private hospitals), the share of treatment sought in public facilities was only 34 percent. The indication of poorly performing primary health facilities reflected in the miniscule share of treatment sought in the primary facilities (1 % at the health sub-centres in or around the villages, and 7 % at the primary health centres (PHCs)) was further corroborated by the data on (a) difficulty of accessing such services (43 % of the villages surveyed had their nearest health sub-centre more than two kilometers away, and 51 % of the villages had their nearest PHCs more than five kilometres away), and (b) poor functioning of the facilities (with huge lack of staff, equipment, and empathy). How poorly equipped the PHCs were could be gauged from the fact that of 54 institutional deliveries, only three were done at the PHCs. Visiting the hospitals for delivery often appeared to be cumbersome and expensive, and yet, absence of facilities for child delivery in the vicinity forced people to take the prospective mothers to hospitals to avoid risks related with child birth. Reliance upon for-profit health services owing to the fragility of the

publicly delivered health facilities seemed to have multiple implications – pushing the households to further impoverishment and often getting sub-standard medical treatment.

### **Poor Living Standards**

Deprived of the basic constitutionally guaranteed facilities that could help reverse their historically constructed future, our study found the Adivasis living in perennial poverty and hunger, continued land alienation with an overreliance upon hard manual labor to survive, and facing multiple harassments by the state as well as the dominant society. Manifestation of a circular relationship of lack of opportunities to enhance human capabilities and material deprivations was clearly reflected in the work participation rate (WPR), which denotes the ratio of population engaged in earning related work. In the segments of population with distressed living standard, the WPR appears higher than the average. For example, while the average WPR for all India and West Bengal, according to the 2011 Census, were 39 percent and 38 percent respectively, the corresponding figures for the Adivasis were 49 percent and 47 percent. Our survey also found a similar pattern with the WPR being 53 percent, which meant that children and elderly people were also involved in earning, and that the rate of transition in education was low was in some or other way connected with this feature: forcing children of school-going age to discontinue their studies in order to fend themselves and support their families.

That a higher rate of work participation does not signify a better living standard is clear from the employment pattern: 55 percent of the total workers in our study were involved in manual labor (in both agricultural and non-agricultural sectors). Another 27 percent identified themselves as cultivators. In a setting where 23 percent of the households were landless and 88 percent of the agricultural households belonged to the category of marginal farmers, with very limited facility of irrigation – and hence, devoid of the scope of multiple cropping, the viability of cultivation as an occupation was rather limited. Further, many of the Adivasis were found to be fond of remembering their past by identifying themselves as cultivators, but a deeper probe revealed that in reality only a few could depend fully upon cultivation for survival; rather, most of them earned their livelihood from labor.

The forest has historically played a major contributory role in Adivasi life, but gradual deforestation and reduced usability of the existing forest coverage owing mainly to the denial of



rights have resulted in restricting the dependence of people upon forest for livelihood. Only 45 percent of the households relied upon the forest even for partial fulfillment of livelihood requirements. Nevertheless, there is still a small proportion of Adivasi households (3 %) for whom the forest still offers the main livelihood option – they depend upon collection and selling of forest produces. These households were among the most vulnerable –mainly from the most disadvantaged groups among the Advasis viz. Lodhas and Sabars. Dependence on the forest seems to have reduced owing to multiple problems: first, the implementation of the Right to Forest was found to be very poor. Of the total respondents (of forest dependent households located in villages) only 14 percent were aware of the existence of “the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006”, which legalized the Adivasis' right over forest lands. The absence of proactive measures to inform the population about the initiative was further aggravated by the poor implementation of the Act – even those who applied for legal title over forest rights were yet to receive it. In addition, some households complained of being harassed by forest officials.

Owing to poor level of education and resultant lack of scope of employment in the sectors that offered higher income, only five percent were found to be engaged in salaried works or other regular wage earning activities. Opportunities of working as hired labour are on the decline. This was due mainly to technological innovations on the one hand and poor implementation of public employment programs, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGEA) in and around the localities on the other. Work opportunities have also reportedly shrunk in the districts in mainland Bengal (Bardhaman, Hugli) where they had been migrating seasonally to find employment in the agriculture sector– a centuries-old tradition. This resulted in the young men migrating long term to distant states to work in construction sites, poultry farms, and other labor-intensive sectors.

While such migration ensured better income, the collateral implications were also reported to be much higher. For example, as an effect of demonetization, many of the youths who migrated to the work sites of other states lost huge amounts of money that their employers owed them in terms of wages. The employers simply refused to pay, and without any kind of state or social support, the workers had to come back home without any money. Health issues were reported to be another problem that migrants often faced: they had to pay for their medical

treatment when they fell ill, and, owing to the huge work load, poor work condition, and distressed living conditions, it was rather common for the migrants to fall ill. Another implication of the newly emerged pattern of migration seemed to have a direct bearing on the women. Traditionally, there has been a higher degree of Adivasi women as agricultural workers, and owing to long term outmigration of the young male workforce, burden on the women tended to have increased manifold.

Restricted income opportunity on one hand, and the declining scope of utilization of the natural resources on the other had added to the historically thrust upon problems of the Advasis—perennial hunger and sub-standard quality of nutrition. Nearly one third (31 %) of the surveyed households reported to have faced in the last one year preceding the survey the wrath of food scarcity in varying degrees. For example, while some households faced acute hunger only in some months (August–October), there are many cases of people having meals only twice a day. Also, in some cases, the adult members reportedly ate only once a day. As regards the food value, the diet for most Adivasi households contained mainly cereal; seldom could they afford to eat animal protein and pulses. Degradation in forest had severely reduced the availability of natural nutrients like mushrooms, birds and animals, and wild vegetables. Availability of fish and other mollusk and amphibians that met certain amount of protein requirements has also tremendously decreased due to environmental degradation (owing to indiscriminate use of pesticides, for example). Scarcity of food, added with poverty-born vices like alcoholism on one hand and the fragility of the public health system on the other seemed to have resulted in a much lower lifespan among the Advasis than their more privileged co-citizens. The number of deaths reported to have occurred in the surveyed households in the year preceding the survey was 52, among which 48 (92 %) were premature deaths, and only four of them were due to old age. The average age of the persons who had died in the surveyed households was 58 years – much shorter than the life expectancy at birth of West Bengal average (70).

### **Social and Spatial Variations**

As mentioned in the beginning, Advasis do not form a homogenous community – there have been myriad variations in land ownership, dependence on forest, literacy level, employment pattern, language, culture, and so on. Achievements related to socio-economic wellbeing were found to vary from group to group, and also from place to place among the members of the same

group. For example, the average figure of availability of toilets (51 %) was completely irrelevant for the surveyed Lodha households, none of which had any toilet facility. Again, although 12 percent of all the surveyed households was unable to afford food more than twice a day, the corresponding figure for the Lodhas was 47 percent. Shrinking of the traditional, nature-dependent livelihood on one hand and lack of other newer avenues for sustenance (agriculture, regular wage earning, service sector employment, etc) seemed to have influenced the Lodha and other similar groups negatively. Similarly, while the survey found the overall ratio of out of school children at elementary level to be 6 percent, it was as high as 28 percent among the Sabars. Likewise, the average extent of landlessness (23 %) was confounded by a much higher figure among the Tamang and Oraon households (73 % each). Aside from the inter-community variations, particular geographical and historical settings were found to result in wide spatial variations. For example, the average extent of landlessness (23%) sharply contrasted with the figures of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling (55%and 50% respectively). Again, while 20 percent of the total pre-primary children attended private institutions only, for Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri the figures were as high as 71 percent and 59 percent respectively. Similar trends were also seen at the primary level.

Poor delivery of the public education system on one hand and the trickle-down effect of the practices in the relatively solvent societies on the other appeared to have given way to an emerging shadow education system in the form of private tuition. Half of the total students pursuing elementary education were reportedly taking private tuitions – the ratio was much higher for the students enrolled in private schools. Interestingly, about one third of the enrolled children were taking private tuition from the Adivasis – mostly unemployed boys and girls. While demonstrating the weaknesses of the public education, the data on private tuition revealed a prospect. About one third of children were taking private tuition from the Adivasi youths meant that there were locally available resources which could be utilized in a meaningful way – making the youths involved in the primary and elementary schools through some innovative mechanism. Such utilization could at least to some extent meet the dearth of human resources in the schools attended by Adivasi children. At the same time, it could also solve to a large extent the problems of language and culture which cause a huge distance between the teachers and the students and often appeared to be an insurmountable barrier in the delivery of education through the public system.

The socio-economic variations were found to be extended to more complex areas, namely, politics, which, in turn, gave way to further marginalization. For example, relative political strength in certain areas, mainly in southern Bengal, and also in parts of northern Bengal, seemed to be able to resist land alienation, which was not the case in other areas like North South 24 Parganas. In some villages, lands cultivated by the Adivasis have allegedly been grabbed by local powerful lobbies to convert them into fisheries. In some areas inhabited by vulnerable groups, extra-economic coercion like beating, sexual abuse of women, making people work for low wage rates, were also reported. Also, in many areas, exploitation of relatively weaker Adivasis by comparatively powerful Adivasis was found to be common.

### **Need for Policy Changes**

Democratic denial and adverse participation have not only had their influences on the socio-economic underdevelopment of the Adivasis, but also seemed to have made a terrible fracture in their social psyche and organization. Continued insistence on the way of life upheld by the ruling sections as not only superior to the others but also underscored to be “modern” has more often than not had different – and disquieting – effect on the Adivasi mind. The imposed superiority of the ruling “modern” resulted in the Adivasis’ looking down upon themselves as inferior, “primitive”, and taking a fatalistic view of the subjugated life they are forced to live. While this pushes them to the margins of society and forces them to abandon altogether some of their socially unifying customs and cultural practices, particularly democratic norms and human values evolved through a protracted journey of collective living and struggles for existence, the helplessness owing to the “othering” thrusts upon them segregated insularity. One casualty, for example, of the imposed inferiority on the Adivasis is the erosion of the great linguistic heritage among some sections of the Adivasis. However, the acceptance by the Adivasis of the imposed modern does not guarantee their inclusion into the so-called mainstream; rather, they are often reminded of their “primitive” roots, and kept alienated. Again, pushed by the primitiveness of the ruling modern – exploitation and oppression, marginalization and subjugation – the Adivasis, in many cases, cling to some of the oppressive behaviours such as witchcraft, which makes the “primitive” label on them even more indelible. The vicious cycle of political-economic deprivation and social alienation continues to keep the Adivasis subjugated to the ruling modern.

Supplying cheap labor and living half-fed lives with no opportunities to flourish and develop their human capabilities are seemingly unalterable.

The context adds urgency to take up the Adivasi question in a dialectical manner: thinking anew about changing the policies following a half-century old insistence that Verrier Elwin made. He warned the Indian authorities in no ambiguous terms:

We cannot allow matters to drift in the tribal areas or just not take interest in them. In the world of today that is just not possible or desirable. At the same time we should avoid over-administering these areas and in particular, sending too many outsiders into their territory. It is between these two extreme positions that we have to function. Development in various ways there has to be, such as communication, medical facilities, education and better agriculture.

He drew a broad framework with five fundamental principles: Avoiding imposition, respecting Adivasi land and forest rights, building Adivasi agency for self-development, avoiding over-administration and work through the Adivasis' own cultural and social organizations, and judging the results “not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but by the quality of human character that is evolved”.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore important to go beyond the administrative convention of bracketing Adivasis as a single category. Rather, policy framing requires mandatory recognition of the wide social, cultural, economic and other diversities, so as to address the different problems faced by different groups – community wise as well as region wise. For example, it may require special initiatives to expand the educational opportunities for those who are at the bottom. Similarly, while it may be mandatory to improve irrigation facilities for the agriculturist communities among the Adivasis, it would involve a distinct program for the non-agriculturist groups who depend more on forest or other natural resources.

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 violation of the Right to Forest Act, the Right to Education Act, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and such have to be eliminated. It is not very difficult to identify the difficulties related to accessing the educational opportunities by the Adivasi children in general, and children of certain groups in

---

<sup>4</sup>Elwin, Verrier (1959), *A Philosophy for NEFA*, Shillong: North East Frontier Agency.

particular. They include difficulties of physical access, the problem of language and culture, and the contrast between so-called backwardness of these communities as imagined by the authorities and a very different objective reality, which upholds a plethora of cultural strength that can be fruitfully utilized while planning the educational initiatives. Utilization of the resources available in the form of Adivasi educated youths is just one of several ways that can be found.

Similarly, the terrible neglect in public delivery of healthcare must not be allowed to continue. Contrasting sharply with the general belief of the implementers, Adivasis tended to make use of the publicly delivered healthcare system, as and when available. Things can take a radically changed route by making the primary healthcare system, and other public programs, like education, employment, forest rights, and so on, effective.

The possibility of a fair implementation of the public programs, however, is contingent to an agentic involvement of the concerned communities. Instead of mere passive recipients, they must be respected as active agents of change and be involved in all spheres of policy—from planning to implementation.

Finally, it is imperative that the entire outlook on the Adivasi question be reversed. Instead of seeing the Adivasis as “problems”, the entire country can be hugely benefitted by seeing the Adivasis 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 than those which prevail in the so called mainstream societies. By ensuring their rights to live their own lives, the country can in fact guarantee itself a flourishing democracy.