

# Studying the socio-economic condition of the Adivasis in West Bengal: Report of a preparatory workshop

Organised by Pratichi Institute and The Asiatic Society

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India is home to 105 million Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes – ST) divided into 416 groups and form 8 percent of the country's total population (all figures from Census of India-2011). In West Bengal, with a total population of 5.3 million, Adivasis form 6 percent of the total population. In other words, Adivasis of West Bengal form 5 percent of the total Adivasi population in the country. Adivasis of West Bengal, as in the country, present a diverse socio-cultural, linguistic and geographical background. Variations in the 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 and 82 percent. Similarly, the inter-community literacy rates vary between 32 percent and 82 percent. Again for the same group (for example Santal), there are considerable spatial differences. The difference can also be seen in their occupational pattern across the state. In addition to spatial, inter-community and intra-community variations there are huge differences between the two genders.

Public discussion on the issues of Adivasis which is rare, and seldom takes into account these differences, which have serious implication not only for the development of the concerned population but also for the state as a whole. One reason that might have influenced the policy norms to focus on the average rather than the micro differences is perhaps the lack of a detailed picture of the Adivasis with a fuller discussion on the micro-level aspects affecting their socio-economic achievements.

This has motivated us to take up a wider as well as in-depth inquiry on the subject, namely socio-economic status of the Adivasis of West Bengal. The Asiatic Society and Pratichi Institute came together to undertake a comprehensive study titled “Adivasis in West Bengal: a socio-economic report”.

To this end, a research workshop held on 5 and 6 July 2017, and attended by two and half scores of participants including academics, activists, journalists and other concerned citizens was planned to identify the research areas and develop the research questions. The deliberations of the workshop are summarized below.

### **Knowledge gap**

Despite substantial presence of the Adivasis in West Bengal Society, there exists – both in public and academic domains – a wide knowledge gap about this selectively forgotten, pragmatically remembered population of the country. Who they are, where do they live, what do they do, what are their socio-economic status, what are their cultural and linguistic practices, are questions prevailing answers to which are largely fragmented and vague. For example, in West Bengal, there are forty Adivasi groups notified by the government as Scheduled Tribes (STs). But many people use the term 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. Wide socio-economic variations between the different Adivasi groups and within the individual Adivasi communities, despite shown in the Census data, has hardly found any attention either in public policy or in general discussion. Anthropological works related to individual communities, on the other hand, often tend to take an insular approach, ignoring the external influences and interactions. Similarly, the picturization of Adivasis in public domain largely relates to their living in the forests and adjacent hamlets, eking out their living by hunting and tending cows, keeping themselves reserved to the pleasure world of singing, dancing, and drinking. Their rich linguistic and cultural heritage, and their potential to interact with other societies in equal terms do not seem to have found any root among the so called mainstream societies. A widely prevailing belief that brackets the Adivasis with that of a nomadic life has hardly chose to base itself on objective reality; rather it has tended to take an easy – fictitious – route of distance and dominance.

### **Perspectives and domination**

The apparently artificial distance created between the Adivasis and “others” has, in fact, drawn heavily from the in-built sense of superiority of the latter. While at the bottom level, the Adivasi-non-Adivasi relationship is based on crude bodily exploitations (labour and sex, for example) and deceit (grabbing lands, cheating in economic transactions are to name a few), at supra local level (academic and other public discourses) the Adivasi is imagined to be objects of museology rather than being living humans with equal potential to flourish. This supplies

rationale for domination at both levels albeit in different forms. The crudities of direct exploitations can be, and is often, challenged with resistance movements of the Adivasis, and has found place in political-intellectual discussions; but, instead of going beyond and making a departure from this one-dimensional history by taking note of the changing socio-political and economic dynamics scholarly works often tend to be imprisoned in the stereotypical narratives of land alienation, displacement, forced separation from forest and other natural resources, and so on. The narratives have rightly attracted attention, and perhaps need more. The history of Adivasis in India is intertwined with deceit and exploitation, displacement and deprivations. However, this attention should not have held academic research back from dealing with other – often entwined – issues, namely, labour relations, migration, deprivation of legal rights, and public services. Unfortunate as it is, discussions based on historically constructed objectivity, has hardly made any substantial effort to change the course of future history placing the Adivasis potential to rebuild their life on their own.

### **Democratic deficit and further marginalization**

Dominant perspectives, drawn from and leading to, existing social relations based on democratic deficit have not only deprived the Adivasis from the moral and legal rights to land, natural resources, livelihood, and public support, but also, in turn, resulted in failure to draw from the Adivasi societies the deep rooted democratic values that insist on consensus rather than on first-past-the-post. In other words the casualty of violation of basic rights of the Adivasis are not limited only to the Adivasis – resulting in their pauperization and subjugation; it has also taken a huge toll in many ways: by making the entire Indian society deprived of (a) the democratic norms practiced by the Adivasis, and (b) their rich knowledge of social-ecology and survival strategies in adverse situations, and so on. Also, keeping one section of the society socio-economically dwarfed has had its affect on the entire country, as, it makes it falling short in total economic and social productivity, making the process of nation building distorted, if not false. Progress, be it social, economic, or political, invariably requires equal opportunity for all to participate in all spheres of life. But, despite being robust in some senses, while dealing with the Adivasi question India's social arrangements have so far been much unfair than just. Opportunities pertaining to acquire education, ensure good health, and participate in academic and policy discussions are almost non-existent. Absences of basic facilities like functional school with equitable delivery of education, in turn, results in obstructing the progresses that some of the public policies like reservation in jobs, education, and legislative bodies are expected to make. Paucity of educational facilities is manifested in different forms: from lack of schools, teachers to the difficulty of language and marginalization in school and higher education

premises. Inexcusable in itself, lack of educational opportunities have also their bearings on other public services, namely, healthcare, food security, employment guarantee, and protection of basic rights. To illustrate, there is a general scarcity of public facilities in the Adivasi areas; conditions are further aggravated by the poor functioning of the existing provisions; again, this is closely linked with lack of voice, which could find strength from educational achievements and be used to make the facilities functional. A vicious cycle of neglect, voicelessness, and further neglect thrust upon the Adivasis eternal marginalization and adverse participation. For example, Adivasi women form the bulk of illiterates of the country, and again they are made to contribute to the major chunk of agricultural labour force. Ironically, the results of this democratic denial – diminutive level of socio-economic achievements of the Adivasis – are often attributed to some imaginary cultural construct: “Adivasis are neglectful of education and health, superstitious, and backward looking”.

### **Alienation as a tool of subjugation**

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 modernity upheld by the ruling sections as not only superior to the others but also underscored to be “the modern” has more often than not had different – disquieting – effect on the Adivasi mind. The imposed superiority of the ruling “modern” resulted in the Adivasis’ looking down upon their own self as inferior “primitive” and taking a fatalistic view about the subjugated life they are forced to live in. While this pushes them to the margin of alien others, and 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 great linguistic heritage among some sections of the Adivasis. However, the acceptance by the Adivasis the imposed modern does not guarantee their inclusion into the so called mainstream; rather, they are often reminded of their “primitive” root, 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” mark on the Adivasis even indelible. The vicious cycle of political-economic deprivation and social alienation continues to keep the Adivasis subjugated to the ruling modern. Supplying cheap labour and living half-fed lives with no opportunity to flourishing the human capabilities are, as though, unalterable.

## Research for action

However, justice demands alteration – change towards inclusiveness in its fullest meaning, in every sphere of life. And, the first step toward achieving “just” change cannot but be a comprehensive understanding of the problems and prospects of the Adivasis question. The proposed research on the Adivasis of West Bengal can thus take into account specific areas of intervention, which would ensure equal and dignified participation of the Adivasis in all sphere of life. The broad areas of research and possible methods to conduct them as emerged from the deliberations are given below:

Condition of the Adivasis as found from secondary data - With inter and intra-community variations	Analysis of Census, NSSO, NFHS, and other publicly available data
Livelihood - Land -ownership pattern, Cultivation pattern, Productivity, Rights - Labour -Local, Migration, various kinds - Natural resources -Rights and practices	Quantitative survey; also qualitative interactions; studying oral and printed literatures, especially by Adivasis
Social achievements, opportunities, and constraints - Education, Health, Employment, Food security, Housing, other public services	Quantitative Survey; also qualitative interactions
Perceptions and Realities - Perception about self, Perception about others, Relationship with state and other powers, processes of othering, alienation, and marginalization - Perception of “ruling modern” – politicians, bureaucrats, social activists, academics, employers	Qualitative interaction
Internal dynamics - Within community, Between communities, Within family – gender relations, Between families – kinship structure, and greater village social structure	Qualitative interaction
Social and political structure - Individual and collective - Tradition-modern interface	