Adivasis in India:
ISSUES OF LIVELIHOOD AND LABOUR MARKET, PUBLIC ACTION AND MARKET SOLUTIONS

January, 2015

S. R. Sankaran Chair (Rural Labour)

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND PANCHAYATI RAJ

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The Adivasis communities in India in general and hinterlands in particular are most disadvantaged communities in terms of their socioeconomic status. They are poorest in terms of income and human development and face several types of vulnerabilities. The situations among the most vulnerable tribes are at rock bottom level. These communities lack access to resources and a majority of them are poor farmers and landless labourers and have to depend on forest and other common property resources for their livelihood. However, there has been erosion in the access to different types of resources. The productivity of their labour in whichever activity they engaged is low and/or the remuneration received is paltry.

In order to understand the labour market situations including the status of human resources among the Adivasi a two-day National seminar was organized by S.R.Sankaran Chair in collaboration with Council for Social Development at NIRD&PR, Hyderabad during 22-23 January, 2015. We are grateful to Professor C.H. Hanumanth Rao, Professor Virginious Xaxa and Professor Dev Nathan for giving the inaugural lecture, Key note Address and Valedictory Lecture respectively. This booklet contains those lectures.

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Lastly, I thank the NIRD&PR authorities for facilitating us in the organization of the seminar and publishing this booklet.

Kailash Sarap
Professor
S.R.Sankaran Chair

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Valedictory address at a 2015 Hyderabad conference, following Xaxa's keynote on the labour market and Adivasi, but unlike the later not taken up in Sarap and Motkuri's 2016 'Adivasis in India: resources, livelihoods ans institutions'

SCHEDULED TRIBES: MARKET-BASED DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY[3]

*Dev Nathan**

1. Introduction

It is indeed an honour to give this valedictory address at a seminar organized by the Sankaran Chair at the National Institute of Rural Development. It was a privilege to have known Sankaran, who was noted for his commitment to supporting the causes of the poor and showed that you can work for the people, irrespective of who your boss is.

Sankran was always trying to find ways to benefit people. In a manner, I would like to carry forward that quest intellectually, trying to see what scope there is for the scheduled tribes (STs), adivasis or indigenous peoples to retain what they value as their identity even while they are part of market-based development.

2. Development and Inequality

A complaint that one often hears when working with development projects among indigenous peoples in various parts of Asia is that their values are being lost in the process of development. Programmes and projects among the STs promote different forms of market-based development. A shift from cultivation

3 Valedictory Address, National Seminar on, Labour Market and Issues of Adivasis in India, 22-23 January, 2015 at NIRD&PR, Hyderabad.

* Institute for Human Development, India, Duke University, USA.

for self-consumption to cultivation for the market, an intensification of cultivation so that marketable surpluses can be produced, the collection and sale of non-timber forest products (NTFP) – these are some of the ways in which development is promoted among the STs.

Of course, such development is predicated upon the state's acceptance of certain rights of the adivasis – their property rights, whether individual or collective, over lands; their access to forests for collection of NTFP; and their rights to NTFP and minor minerals, such as sand or stone. These rights have been accepted, even if imperfectly and with a lot of bureaucratic hurdles, under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and PESA. Without such security of rights intensification of cultivation would be virtually impossible. At times, however, such security may be more de facto than de jure.

More recently, migration to work in cities, or even to the Green Revolution areas of North-west India, have also emerged as important avenues for income increases. The setting up of states such as Jharkhand, also led to a construction boom, a book which has trickled down to smaller towns. In fact, during the course of a poverty strategy study of Jharkhand for the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the IHD study team found that commuting migration to nearby urban centres for work in construction had replaced NTFP collection as the main source of cash income.

But these developments, while they have increased income of the STs have also brought certain negative developments with them. Not all benefit equally from the new opportunities. Those who get government or other regular jobs do much better. Those with more family members who migrate also do better. Those with more valley-bottom land, on which rice can be followed by vegetables, also do better. Overall, inequality has increased and eroded collective identities.

There have also been reactions to the increases in inequality. Recent case studies of witch persecution show that inequalities and jealousy have appeared as factors in witch denunciations. Police data, which are underestimates of witch events, show that the numbers of those killed have increased after the formation of the state of Jharkhand. There is reported to have been a similar development

after the end of apartheid in South Africa.

3. What Is Identity?

Given the growth of inequality in the course of development that has occurred, and the concern with indigenous culture, we need to start with the question what is identity? Some may argue that identity is a particular way of life, say, that of hunter-gatherers or swidden cultivators. It could also be taken as the use of certain technologies, such as hoe or plough cultivation. This would be a kind of technological determinism of identities.

There are certainly many correspondences between ways of life, technology and identity. People think of what they do as being their identity. And what they do is very much related to the technology they use. But it is not as though there is a one-to-one relation between technology and identity. Very similar rice cultivation is carried out, for instance, by peasants in India and China. Of course, there is also a very broad similarity in that these rice cultivation regions, have been the sites where states have come into being. They are also regions where patriarchy has been built. But within this broad bush historical similarity there are many differences of culture.

Further, it is also true that we live in a time of change and, that too, rapid change. Some livelihoods that do not provide adequate means of livelihood are being given up in favour of others that secure or at least promise higher returns. For instance, many adivasis are taking up jobs, often in government service or the public sector, but also elsewhere. Urban centres were not part of traditional adivasis ways of life, but now are very much part of it.

Do those who have become urbanized or taken up jobs and given up farming of any kind, do they, therefore, cease to be adivasi? I doubt if anyone would argue in favour of denying that such persons or families continue to be adivasi.

What then constitutes adivasi identity? I would suggest that identity in this context should be taken to mean what could be called the core values of a society or community. One could suggest that the following constitute core values of adivasi communities: a value for the collective, as against the individualism of the market; a belief system (animism) that is based on the culture-nature continuum, rather than the culture-nature binary that is characteristic of market societies; and a somewhat less unequal position of women, based on men not dominating

all the hierarchies in the family and community.

If we take the position that identity is constituted by the core values that a community or tribe generally accepts, then the question of identity in contemporary development becomes: can these core values be maintained even while undertaking market-based development?

4. Alternatives in Development

In placing the alternatives in development I modify the 2x2 matrix used by Hirschman (1982) in discussing approaches to the development of capitalism.

We compare two development paths, one of 'market-based development' and the other with an 'influential presence of indigenous forms'. Since traditional systems have been substantially modified, it would be difficult to think of any tribal system as being completely indigenous; which is why, I use the term 'substantial presence of indigenous forms'.

Figure 1 : Development Alternatives

Positive Effects	Negative Effects	Negative Effects
Market-based Development	**A** Specialization, scale and learning increase productivity, income and well-being	**B** Nature-culture binary; Depletion of resources and destruction of cultures; Growing inequality and male domination
Influential Presence of Indigenous Forms	**D** Nature-culture continuum; Preserving resources and culture; Limiting both inequality and male domination	**C** Norms that inhibit accumulation and individual initiative

Each of these two development paths has both positive and negative effects. In quadrant [A], the case of market-based development, there are shown the possible benefits of specialization and large-scale production, increasing productivity and both higher income and improved well-being. The negative effects, shown in quadrant [B], are the hegemonic ideology of the nature-culture binary, which is also related to the notion of human domination of nature. Other negative effects are the destruction of cultures, along with growing inequality and male domination.

The ideology of the indigenous forms-influenced path, in quadrant [D], continues to retain the notion of nature-culture continuum, where all living beings, and even non-living substances are thought to embody a spirit, or, in other words, to have some form of agency. Not being dominated by the market, resources and cultures could both be preserved; while there is limited inequality and limited male domination. On the negative side, however, in [C] indigenous forms inhibit both accumulation and individual initiative.

Each of these quadrants contains an element of truth; but they cannot be held in isolation from each other. The horizontal quadrants go together with each other; at present, two sides of a coin. Along with [A] there is also [B]; the market not only as enabling but also destructive. Supporters of the market often point to [A], its enabling character; but ignore [B] the destructive side of the market. Similarly, those who uphold indigenous forms point to [D]; but tend to ignore [C], the negative side of inhibiting accumulation and individual development.

In a similar fashion, there tend to beliefs across the diagonals. Those who hold [A], of the income and well-being benefits of market society, also hold [C], of the inhibiting effects of indigenous beliefs on accumulation and individual initiative. On the other hand, those who point to [B] the devastating effects of market-based development on nature and culture, uphold [D] the beneficial effects of indigenous belief systems based on the human-nature continuum, limitations to inequality and restricted male domination.

5. Alternative Modernities?

The interesting question is: can the two sets of verticals exist together? Could there be a society organized on indigenous beliefs against accumulation that is also destructive

of nature and resources? All production related to nature necessarily transforms it; which is why we talk of the co-evolution of humans and nature. But can such production, without accumulation, nevertheless destroy, in a significant way, nature? Yes, this has often happened in indigenous societies. Swidden cultivators-cum-gatherers are known to shift their location when some critical wild, i.e. uncultivated, foods or materials become scarce; or, when the productivity of cultivation goes down because of the depletion of top soil. There are also the dramatic examples of the North Indian hunter-gatherers who, in the pre-colonial or pre-Columbian period, had already hunted mega fauna to extinction.

So, there have been combinations of [C] and [B], with indigenous norms that inhibit accumulation co-existing with the depletion of resource and even the extinction of some species. Of course, the scale of the depletion and extinction are both quite different from what we see now in the Anthropocene (Steffen et al, 2011), but depletion and extinction did occur through the actions of indigenous societies.

What about the co-existence of [A] and [C]? Can there be an accumulative community or village that secures the benefits of specialization, increases productivity and yet simultaneously sustains beliefs in the nature-culture continuum and preserves resources? Also a market-based production system limits inequality and even proceeds towards gender quality?

This is the type of issue posed by the approach of alternative modernities. As Rajeev Bhargava points out, there is a need for "the recognition of alternative modernities that lie unnoticed because of the hold on our imagination of a simplistic, dichotomous framework that bifurcates our world into western modernity and indigenous tradition" (2010: 311). For modernity we can substitute the economic equivalent of a market-based or capitalist economy. Are there alternatives possible, other than the dichotomies of market-based and indigenous forms?

Let us first take the question of inequality, including gender inequality. To begin with, communities can relate to the market in more than one way. The usual way of dealing with the market is on an individual basis, with each individual or household selling on and buying from the market in an atomized manner. Such individualized market behaviour is often competitive,

as each seller tries to secure a market or maximize her sales. This, for instance, was noticed among suppliers of horse-rides as tourism services among the indigenous peoples of Yunnan in China. Initially all households competed with each other and brought down prices. Over time, however, they learned that combining and rotating the provision of horse rides would enable them to sustain prices and thus their incomes.

These are small-scale examples of suppliers from indigenous communities combining to control supply and thus prevent a 'race to the bottom' in prices and income. There are bigger examples of whole villages in China that have remained collective while they operate in the market (Dev Nathan and Govind Kelkar, 1997). There are many village-owned Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) in China and a few collective villages. Instead of distributing profits as dividends to a handful of share-owners, the profits are either accumulated or used to provide basic facilities such as housing, education, medical care and even food to all members of the village collective. Of course, there are strict rules about discipline at work and those who try to 'free ride' are punished.

These collective villages in China also have a reasonably good record in reducing gender inequality. Some of the village leaders and factory managers are women and many women are skilled workers.

Among some North American indigenous peoples too collective enterprises have been set up. It has been called a form of 'indigenous capitalism', where profits do not become the private income of a few but are shared among all owners.

What these examples show is that it is possible to have collectively-owned villages as enterprises that operate in a market system. As far as buying and selling operations on the market, the type of enterprise does not matter. An enterprise could be individually owned, be a joint-stock enterprise, a cooperative or even a collective. All such enterprises, irrespective of their internal forms of organization, can operate in the market. But to remain in operation within the market, enterprises will have to continue to earn a profit and carry out at least the investments that are necessary to take account of depreciation and equipment replacement requirements. In an increasingly competitive world economy they would also have to invest in increasing productivity or in

innovation so as not to fall behind competitors.

Adivasi communities too could set up similar collective enterprises to conduct their market economic relations. Such enterprises would have to overcome collective action problems and establish discipline among members. Besides cooperative, Indian company law also provides for the setting up of what are called "worker owned companies", where only those who work in a company can be share-holders.

Forming collective enterprises is then a way in which problems of income inequality and gender inequality could be dealt with. But what about the questions of the relationship with nature and that of the preservation of resources to make production sustainable? These are more difficult questions, since it means moving away from a short-term and a purely instrumentalist approach to nature. This is a challenge the world as a whole faces, as we come to grips with the geological changes (global warming, extinction of species, etc.) that humans have created in the Anthropocene.

Dealing with these problems at both global and local levels requires a change in mindset, in culture, and analysis in the approach to nature. From seeing nature simply as a resource, we have to recognize that whatever is created is the result of human-nature interaction, and that in the course of interaction there is a co-evolution of both humans and nature.

The indigenous peoples can be aware of their co-evolutionary relationship with forests. In addition their traditional world-views start from the inter-relationship between all species, all living beings, and even of relationship between living and non-living objects. In a way that standard market-based thinking does not, indigenous thinking acknowledges that human beings are just one species among many, and the inter-relations of species do not have to be those of domination.

Moving away from a dominating view of nature to one of acknowledging inter-relationships and agency of non-humans is a big step. While the world as a whole has still to fashion ways of thinking in this manner, indigenous spirit-based animism does have some pointers in this matter. Of course, it is a long way in actually being able to analyze problems in this way, but a beginning can be made.

To conclude, I would like to say that indigenous societies should explore ways of combining collective forms of enterprise with market-based development. This would help preserve or even develop values of collectivity, and gender and other equality. Simultaneously it would be necessary to see how to fashion a social analysis that starts from the position of human beings being one species among others that too have agency, even if not to the same extent as humans. Such a shift in thinking is necessary to be able to deal with the problems of the local and global environments that human interventions have caused.

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