

Webinar Proceedings

No. 3

Development and the Adivasis: Building on Strengths, Removing Barriers

Webinar Series on the Socio-Economic Impact of the Covid Pandemic



BAHÁ'Í CHAIR
FOR STUDIES IN
DEVELOPMENT

DEVI AHILYA VISHWAVIDYALAYA

Development and the Adivasis: Building on
Strengths, Removing Barriers

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In response to the Covid 19 pandemic, the Chair has organized a series of webinars on the social and economic impact of the pandemic on India's most vulnerable and marginalized populations in rural and urban areas. These webinars bring together some of India's best-known social scientists and development practitioners to share insights on the challenges facing these vulnerable groups and the steps that can be taken at the level of policy making and practice to address these challenges.

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Profile of the Speakers

Mr. Ashish Kothari is an environmentalist and a founding member of *Kalpavriksh*. Mr. Kothari has been active with a number of people's movements, including *Narmada Bachao Andolan* and *Beej Bachao Andolan*. He is the author or editor of over 30 books (including *Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India*; *Alternative Futures: India Unbacked*; and *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*), and over 400 articles.

Ms. Priyanka Jain is a Labour Researcher and Activist at *Aajeevika Bureau*, Udaipur.

Dr. H.S. Shylendra is a Professor of Social Science at the *Institute of Rural Management, Anand (IRMA)*. His areas of interest are sustainable rural development, rural livelihood systems, micro rural finance, and governance. He has published over 30 articles; co-authored 4 monographs and authored two books including *Diversification and Sustainable Rural Livelihood*.

Dr. Rahul Banerjee is a Social Activist and Secretary of *Mahila Jagat Libhaaz Samiti*, Indore.

Ms. Archana Soreng is a member of the United Nations Secretary General's Youth Advisory Group

on Climate Change. She is also a Research Officer
at *Vasundhara*, Odisha.



Background Note

Of the various populations in India whose economic life has been severely disrupted by the Covid pandemic, perhaps the most vulnerable have been the country's Adivasi—or indigenous—communities. Statistics show that a large percentage of the Adivasis are among the 'poorest of the poor' with Adivasi blocks across the country ranking low on almost all development indicators including education and child mortality. Various causes have been identified for their state of deprivation—physical isolation in remote areas and hills; limited access to education and health services; loss of access to land and forest-based resources despite the fact that they live in resource-rich regions (nearly half of those displaced in the country by development projects such as the building of dams or mining are Adivasis); poor coverage by development policies and schemes and the lack of a voice in decision making processes.

To these communities already subsisting in a state of precarity, the pandemic came as a devastating blow. Adivasis constituted a significant percentage of the nearly 80 million migrants who returned from cities

to rural areas during the lockdown imposed in response to the pandemic. They were also among those living in the most difficult conditions. With nearly half of the Adivasis living in rural areas subsisting below the poverty line, migrating for work is a necessity for survival. They are often hired by labour contractors who advance payments to them and keep them as bonded labour in poor living and work conditions. Studies have shown that Adivasi migrants are often paid less than other migrants and a significantly higher percentage of them live in open spaces or work sites. When the lockdown was imposed in late March 2020, millions of Adivasis found themselves abandoned by their contractors with no option but to walk back home.

The nearly 100 million Adivasis who make a living from the collection and sale of minor forest produce (MFPs) were severely hit by the lockdown which was imposed during the summer months which is their prime harvesting season. Nomadic and pastoral communities who depend on inter-district and inter-state travel for their livelihood and for providing fodder to their livestock were either unable to travel or found themselves stuck in other states/districts without access to rations or food. Apart from the loss of livelihoods, poor access to medical and health infrastructure has further imperilled their well-being.

Addressing the economic and social injustices faced by the Adivasis would require long-term interventions at various levels. On the one hand,

there is the need to create greater economic opportunities for Adivasis by strengthening their ownership, access and control over land and forests and by enhancing their livelihood prospects in areas such as non-chemical based agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry, fisheries, crafts and small manufacturing at the village level. The potential market for non-timber forest products which is estimated to run into billions of rupees and which remains largely unutilized can, for example, be tapped in a way that greatly benefits the Adivasi people.

For Adivasi people to take charge of their own progress and have a greater say in the framing of the development policies that affect them, the strengthening of their local institutions is essential. This includes institutions of governance that would provide the mechanism for the people's participation in decision-making processes and in fostering their sense of agency in responding to collective challenges.

The more substantive form of such participation would involve the Adivasis making decisions from a position of strength on the processes of modernization that effect their lives. Although the Adivasi people are not culturally homogenous and their identity should not be romanticized or essentialized, social scientists have identified certain broad features visible across Adivasi communities that are of value in building just, inclusive and

environmentally sustainable societies. These features include the collective control of natural resources, reciprocal and mutually supportive work systems, high levels of communal responsibility and a close spiritual attachment to nature. Similarly, many of the indigenous knowledge systems and practices of the Adivasis are of great value because they represent the learning of a people who over centuries have evolved a pattern of life suitable to a particular geographic and climatic setting, in harmony with the natural environment and embodying a set of spiritual values.

How such communities with the wealth of their artistic and cultural heritage, their traditional knowledge systems and their cultural and spiritual values integrate with the globalized world without losing their identity, being pushed into a position of exploitation or succumbing to the homogenizing pressures of processes of globalization is an immensely challenging question –one that can only be answered through a process of learning, institution building at the local level and capacity building. What would be needed are not just institutions of governance but also those for grassroots level research and knowledge generation. Institutions for rural research and technological development will need to be established that would allow the population to blend their indigenous knowledge and practices with scientific methods in evolving appropriate technological solutions to their developmental challenges.

Finally, creating an enabling environment for the advancement of the Adivasi people calls for the elimination of the prejudice that this population faces. Like every disadvantaged group, the Adivasi people face an invisible wall of structural and institutional prejudice that limits their possibilities of progress, normalizes injustices, and socializes its members into accepting a diminished conception of themselves and their potential. Social scientists have shown that prejudice plays a major role in excluding disadvantaged groups from key 'networks' that allow for social mobility. Discrimination causes market segmentation which leads to low returns on assets and limits people's access to services and credit. Those populations that face systemic prejudice tend to adopt a 'culture of poverty' or internalize stigma and stereotypes which become self-reinforcing.

As history has shown, the overcoming of such prejudice cannot be achieved merely by the imposition of laws, important as they are. It requires a fundamental change of consciousness in society as a whole where the oneness of the human family and the inherent value of the cultural diversity of each of its members is fervently cherished and upheld as part of a common collective heritage. The creation of such a consciousness and its manifestation in social relationships and in structures of society is ultimately a moral challenge that society as a whole will have to face and overcome. Both the state and civil society would need to work in tandem in

fostering the vision and the collective will needed to strive for such a profound process of change.

This seminar is the third in a series organized by the Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya University to explore the social and economic impact of the Covid pandemic on India's vulnerable populations in rural and urban areas. It seeks to bring together economists and development practitioners to achieve a better understanding of the implications of the pandemic for India's Adivasi people. It aims to explore insights on possible interventions at the level of development policy and practice that would help advance the pursuit of social and economic justice for India's Adivasis to its next milestone.



Webinar Proceedings

The Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore organised a webinar on September 19, 2020 titled, *Development and the Adivasis: Building on Strengths, Removing Barriers* to explore the impact of the Covid pandemic on the Adivasi peoples and the potential interventions at the level of development policy and practice that could advance their social and economic well-being. This was the third in a series of webinars organised by the Chair to shed light on the social and economic impact of the pandemic on India's most vulnerable populations. The need to focus on issues facing Adivasis was apparent given that this social group has been categorized as among the most disadvantaged in the country on almost all development indicators. Their state of precarity has only been further aggravated by the pandemic.

In terms of exploring possible interventions that could improve the conditions of the Adivasis, the webinar sought to frame the challenges facing this group through the lens of the principles of justice

and the oneness of humankind. Issues discussed in this online interaction included the provision of greater livelihood opportunities to Adivasis and increasing their ownership and access of those natural resources on which their traditional livelihoods have depended such as land and forests; reviving their traditional institutional structures for governance at the local levels; preserving indigenous culture, languages and indigenous knowledge systems and enriching them through interaction with other cultures and modern science; and overcoming the prejudice that this group faces through a more profound appreciation of the way diversity enriches and strengthens the underlying oneness of the human family.

The speakers of the webinar were Mr. Ashish Kothari, author and founding member of *Kalpavriksh*; Dr. Rahul Banerjee, Social activist and Secretary of *Mahila Jagat Lihaaz Samiti*; Ms. Priyanka Jain, Labour Researcher and Activist at *Aajeevika Bureau*; Ms. Archana Soreng, Member of UN Secretary General's Youth Advisory Group for Climate Change and Research Officer, *Vasundhara*, Odisha and Dr. H.S. Shylendra, Professor of Economics at the Institute for Rural Management Anand (IRMA).

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Mr. Ashish Kothari started the conversation by referring to the long history of social, political and economic subjugation that the Adivasi people have faced. Each time, the ruling dispensation has brought development to the Adivasi people not through an organic, consultative and inclusive process but rather in the form of ‘an imposition’. In the period since the independence of India from British rule, development in the form of a vision of industrialization and urbanization has been thrust upon them. It brought with it the takeover of their lands and forests as a result of which today Adivasis comprise 40 percent of the 60 million people displaced by development projects in the country. It further involved the imposition of a single governance model on the Adivasis throughout the country, ignoring their own customary forms of governance. Perhaps the most insidious form of this imposition, according to him, has been the erosion of Adivasi languages, cultures and knowledge systems through neglect or through deliberate efforts at cultural and intellectual assimilation.

In response to this subjugation, many voices were being raised to ‘mainstream’ Adivasi cultures, languages and knowledge systems. However, Mr. Kothari felt that such approaches were problematic since they tended to lead to homogenization. Instead of seeking to fit them into the ‘mainstream’, he felt that what needed to be recognized is that “there are hundreds of different small streams and they should co-exist”. Such approaches betrayed a paternalistic

attitude where it was perceived that Adivasi cultures, languages or knowledge systems were merely there to be protected and preserved as a token of the country's diversity. A more sensitive and understanding engagement with these cultures would seek to learn valuable lessons from them in areas such as their ability to maintain non-exploitative and harmonious relationships with nature and their social structures which emphasize service to the common good, cooperation and reciprocity.

In this context, Mr. Kothari shared a few heartening examples of civil society and community-led initiatives in the areas of governance, education and health care that were reviving traditional institutional structures and knowledge systems of the Adivasis and, wherever relevant, have been bringing them into articulation with modern knowledge systems. He shared examples of Adivasi-based local governance structures in villages which successfully strengthened the local economy through regaining access to forests and land. This resulted in the community's increased resilience during the pandemic. Not only was the community able to take in those migrants returning from the cities, increased access to forests had also improved their standing with regard to food security and nutrition.

Mr. Kothari called for more research to be carried out on such positive initiatives. As he put it, “researchers need to study in greater depth, the kind of community responses where the Adivasis are trying to solve issues, where they are trying to create collective systems of self-governance with their own economic and political thinking.... We need to know how have these efforts worked, what obstacles have they overcome, what processes of discussion and dialogue went into it, what kind of leadership enabled that to happen. This will inspire many more such initiatives across the country.”

He concluded by emphasizing the need to view the challenges facing Adivasi communities not in isolation but as part of a network of interlinked issues facing humanity as a whole today. He observed that even if the Adivasi people are empowered economically and are able to take charge of the progress of their communities, they still stand to face a severe crisis due to the impact of climate change which is caused by actions of people and governments all over the world.

Dr. Rahul Banerjee, the next speaker, continued this thread of the discussion by reasserting that while the specific challenges facing the Adivasi communities would continue to need particular attention, the broader global context of climate change and the spread of consumerist lifestyles that were

destructive to the environment needed to be concurrently addressed for these efforts to bear fruit. He described the current pandemic as the latest in a series of crises caused by the damage being done to the natural environment. He highlighted the irony that those who were least destructive to the environment such as the Adivasis were unfortunately the worst affected by the consequences of these environmental and climate-related crises.

Describing his many decades of work with the Bhil Adivasis in Western Madhya Pradesh, Dr. Banerjee emphasized the salience of communal work and service in their cultural, social and economic life. “When they want to do some work – it might be weeding on somebody’s farm or doing some soil conservation work – the entire community pools together their labour and then they do the work,” he mentioned describing this ethic. This emphasis on community service and collaboration, although ignored by the mainstream development field, were valuable cultural traits that naturally motivated the community to work for collective goals without considerations of individual self-interest. Dr. Banerjee mentioned that the various organizations that he worked for over the decades had learned to draw upon these unique traits of the Adivasi people in striving to achieve development goals. For example, he mentioned that in one of the Adivasis

dominated areas where he worked, the Bhil people have a tradition of resolving disputes democratically and without resort to conflict. This system was then disrupted by law enforcement agencies of the State which did not recognize or value these existing cultural practices of the Adivasis. In due course, the organization he worked with took up the task of reviving this tradition. Reinstating this tradition has had a profound impact on the villages in the area. Not only have potential situations of conflict been diffused but also the unity and solidarity of the community has been strengthened. This consolidation of their unity has helped them strive for collective goals - whether they be in claiming their rights to the forests, implementing laws against usury or resisting the exploitation of money lenders.

Another insight that he gained from his years working with the Adivasis was that their traditional community-level systems for administration were highly participatory and democratic in nature. These structures have unfortunately atrophied through neglect. However, if they could be revived and nurtured, he felt they would provide useful indigenous models of grassroot democratic institutions of governance. They could serve as an inspiration for other similar structures to arise in rural and urban areas.

In her address Ms. Priyanka Jain emphasized that to understand the challenges that the Adivasi people face, it is not enough to focus on the forests and land which were the original sites of their displacement and dispossession. Instead, attention needs to be focused on the labour markets which in the contemporary capitalist order had become the site of their ongoing exploitation.

She mentioned that the displacement and criminalization of the Adivasis started from the time when India was under colonial rule. Those dominant castes and classes that acted as brokers for the colonial extraction of resources from forests and mines are today the ones who continue to occupy positions of authority in relation to the social and economic life of the Adivasi people in the form of their money lenders and labour contractors. Thus, she observed that “the relation of subjugation can be seen to be continued from the social domain to the economic domain, merging the two, which makes response and resistance so much harder.”

Since a vast number of Adivasis today depend on seasonal and circular forms of migration for their livelihoods, it becomes important for efforts to improve their conditions to focus on the labour markets and ensure better terms of work for them. Adivasis, she noted, according to available government data, occupy the lowest rungs of this highly segmented labour market in India. They are paid the least of all categories of labourers and their

work conditions involve extreme exertion, exploitation and health hazards. With no social security from the State or their employers, Adivasi migrants, especially women, have to work many extra hours at their makeshift homes on worksites merely to cook food or to access basic amenities like water and toilets.

In the spaces that exist for the mobilization of labour such as unions or workers' movements, she felt that there is the need for greater representation of the Adivasis not only at the level of leadership or in terms of number of participants but also at the level of language, agenda and discourse. She observed however, that not much has been learned about this so far.

Another blind-spot that she referred to was the absence of references to Adivasis when it comes to policies and discourses on urban poverty and urban governance despite them being a significant percentage of the urban migrants who run Indian cities. The fact that a vast number of those who work in the construction sector are Adivasis is little recognized and receives almost no attention.

Having mentioned this, she added that despite the oppressive conditions that they face, for the young Adivasi life in the city has great aspirational value. As she put it, "We think slums are poverty. But for an Adivasi in a city, living in the slums is a dream come true. Living in the slums is like making it in

the city.” Thus, when the discourse on urban inclusion in India is opened to migrants from Adivasi communities, the story that is likely to be told will not only be of unrelieved oppression but also of the complex motivations driving Adivasis to life in the city.

Dr. H.S. Shylendra shared findings from his longitudinal study conducted over twenty-five years with a Bhil Adivasi village in Dahod district of Gujarat to track changes in the livelihoods of the village inhabitants over this period. He concluded from his findings that the condition of the Adivasis has remained relatively unchanged during this period with no major improvement in their income or living conditions. A threefold increase in population was witnessed during this period with a simultaneous decline in land holdings and livestock which has contributed to increased economic distress. With limited local work opportunities and negligible scope for employment in the formal sector, he explained that Adivasis relied increasingly on migration to towns and cities as a source of livelihood. He explained that most Adivasi families now have to rely on multiple sources of work to earn a subsistence income. With their meagre earnings from agriculture and animal husbandry, they are forced to rely on seasonal and circular migration to make their ends meet. Usually migration is the biggest contributor to the family’s income. This

explains the rise in the number of migrants documented in his study during the twenty-five year duration from 76 percent to 87 percent.

This transformation of “peasants into proletariats” has also increased the precarity of their living conditions with 75 percent of the Adivasi migrants living in open areas in cities with no security or access to basic amenities like water and toilets. The pandemic, according to him, has only exacerbated this precarity by causing job losses and reducing the demand for goods and services.

In terms of the way forward, he recommended the collectivization of agriculture and the formation of organizations such as Farmer Producer Organizations to strengthen the economic standing of Adivasis in rural areas. For those who migrate to the cities, he suggested that they be assisted by civil society organizations to get organized and mobilized to better bargain for their rights and demand access to various welfare schemes.

Ms. Archana Soreng, the Adivasi speaker on the panel, spoke of how young Adivasis often lack confidence in their own cultural and ethnic identity which she attributed to their sense of being overawed by the aura of prosperity and progress attached to an aggressively promoted vision of development. They often lack the tools to critically

analyze the image and claims put forward in the name of modernization. Yet, she observed that ironically the global discourse on development had come full circle and it had begun to acknowledge the value of Adivasi knowledge systems and practices in protecting and preserving nature and in showing the way to a more sustainable lifestyle that would help humanity address the challenges of climate change. This, she felt, could be a wakeup call for young Adivasis who were ambivalent to their own traditions, to recognize the value of their knowledge systems and culture and reconnect with them. This however would require the conscious initiation of an inter-generational conversation within Adivasi communities since one of the forms of disruption within the community had been the breakdown of communication between the older and younger Adivasis. A mutually-respectful dialogue would allow young Adivasis to learn about their traditional knowledge systems, languages and culture from the elders in their communities.

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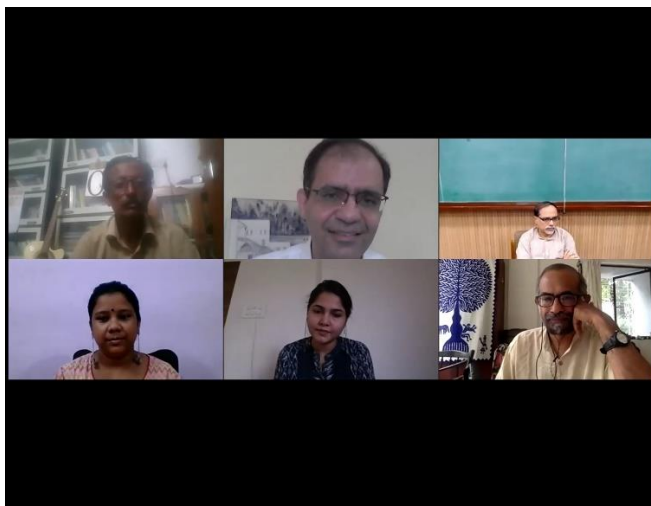
Despite the forces that continue to keep the Adivasi people in a state of economic and social percarity, this webinar made evident that there are many reasons for hope that positive change is possible. The work done by Adivasi communities and their local institutions with the catalyzing influence of civil society organizations made evident that in the face of the onslaught of exploitative and

exclusionary structures generating countervailing forces is possible. Through patient and persistent grassroots effort, indigenous knowledge systems and institutions can be revived and their unique contribution not just for the Adivasi community but for society as a whole can be made manifest. A way of life that is in harmony with nature, the organizing of community life based on collaboration and reciprocity, drawing on time tested Adivasi knowledge systems and practices in areas such as agriculture, health, art and craftsmanship – these are some of the contributions of Adivasi peoples being increasingly valued all over the world. By nurturing these indigenous cultures, practices and institutions and bringing them into creative articulation in modern institutions and knowledge systems of science, it has become possible for Adivasi communities to take charge of their own destinies, to resist forces that seek to exploit them and to strengthen their unity.

Although promising, these are only beginnings. The path forward will require the generation of much more knowledge about experiments that bear positive results in promoting the social and economic progress of Adivasi communities without causing the erosion of their identity or their large-scale displacement. Much will need to be learned about the process of combining Adivasi knowledge systems and practices with modern knowledge systems and technologies in a rigorous and scientific way. Spaces of dialogue need to be created within

Adivasi communities to foster unity of vision and the collective will for change. Similarly, these communities will need to develop and refine their discourse with the wider society – not as an exoticized community, a victim of oppression or a bundle of needs but rather as full and equal participants in the pursuit of the collective well-being of society.

Yet, to refer to the foregoing is not to downplay the crucial need for drastic interventions needed at the level of development policies to ensure the sustenance of their livelihoods, the provision of greater employment opportunities for Adivasis and the need for economic growth to result in greater investment in health, education, social development and infrastructure for this social group. Thus, to turn the tide of oppression against the Adivasis will require their own collective will along with a combination of enlightened and courageous policy making and creative and persistent endeavours from civil society organizations.



Clockwise from left to right: Dr. Rahul Banerjee, Dr. Arash Fazli, Dr. H.S. Shylendra, Mr. Ashish Kothari, Ms. Priyanka Jain and Ms. Archana Soreng.

Migration: Growing Dependence		
Particulars	1994	2019
1. % HHs Migrating	76.0	86.7
2. % HHs with female Migration	66.7	62.1
3. Migrants per household	2.2	2.9
4. Percapita Migration Days	141	119
5. Migration Income per HH	22,766	1,33,991
6. % of Migration Income to Total	-	68%
7. Seasonal Migration by Seasons		
One	32.0	19.0
Two	42.0	59.0
Three	26.0	22.0

Dr. H.S. Shylendra giving a presentation titled ‘Tribal Livelihood and Covid Impact: Which Way Forward?’



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