

Climate Change Fight Need Adivasi

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In India, the development has become a sacrosanct religion of which no question can be asked. Opposing environmentally destructive developmental projects makes one antidevelopment and antinational. Being an Adivasi Right Activists for over 30 years, I have experienced this myself.

The climate change impact is changing the narrative a bit. This can be witnessed in the support for Aarey tree felling issue in Mumbai: Media House to film personalities, politicians to common Mumbaikars, all have extended their support. Not only that, in an unprecedented move a letter by a Law student, about the felling of trees and arrest of 29 activists, was converted into a PIL and heard as a special case the very next day, despite it being a holiday. For Metro Car shed in Aarey Colony [forest], located in Goregaon Suburb of Mumbai, more than 2000 trees have been felled despite popular protest.

But, when I visited my work area in Madhya Pradesh (M. P.), I found, it is business as usual. After finishing a meeting with Adivasi activists of our organisation, I headed for Harda via National Highway No 59A to attend a court case (we were falsely implicated in it in 2007 for opposing large level illegal excavation in the forest). All along the way, I witnessed thousands of trees being felled for further widening of the highway. And, but for a cry of felling tree, I could hear no sound of protest, no camera, no sound bite, no reporter, no celeb, no court intervention. I find myself guilty of this silence. Despite our organisation being present in that area, we couldn't protest for two simple reasons: One, such protest means taking on the state with hardly anyone listening; in many earlier protests Adivasi have been to jail and still attending to the cases. Second, for jobless poor local Adivasi, the protest has become a luxury that they can't afford anymore; this tree felling in their backyard has come as a long-awaited job opportunity.

In the last five years, across the country, more than one crore trees have been felled in this manner. To be precise between 2014 and 2019 total of 1,09,75,844 trees were felled for development projects; of this, 26,91,028 were felled in 2018-2019 alone. This information was given by Babul Supriyo – Minister of State for Environment, Forest and Climate Change – in the Lok Sabha on 26th

July 2019. However, these numbers did not include trees cut for forest fire; this reply only includes the number of trees for which permission was given by the Ministry under the Forest Conservation Act. (

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Pressing demand of wood for shipbuilding and laying of railway lines forced the British to carve out forest out of Adivasi territory. This led to the creation of the Imperial Forest Department in 1864 and, in the next three decades, most of the Adivasi territory was brought under its ambit.

Some quotes from archives record will help us in developing an understanding. The report of Bombay Forest Commission 1887, Vol I, page 38, shows us how the forest was created in then Thane district (under which Aarey would fall) : **“Thus slowly and surely man after man and village after village was made to give up his or its rights in regular succession in favour of the contemplated Forests, and there by brought; upon himself or itself manifold inconveniences and hardships. and thereby became an unwilling instrument of his country's ruin.”**

And what was done to those forests can also be easily understood from the following para on page 43 of the same report: **“Government have traded in wood like merchants, and increasing their forest revenue have forgotten altogether the necessity of conservancy; and eventually its officers have thought of placing the whole blame on the innocent shoulders of the people at large”.**

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More or less the same has been the case across then British India. The first Adivasi to lose his estate to the creation of forest was, Thakur Bhabhoot Singh. He was Adivasi Chieftain of Harrakot, a very small Jagir, located in the Panhcmari foothills in Hoshangabad District of then Central Province and present-day Madhya Pradesh. His entire estate was confiscated in 1859 as a punishment for rebelling against the British. He was arrested in 1860; in 1861, hanged at Jabalpur Jail; and in 1862, his entire estate was handed over to the newly created Forest Department (till then the department was localized). After the enactment of the first Indian Forest Act of 1865, his estate was made into the first reserved forest of British India, named 'Bori' after one of the villages of his estate. (from page 3 of the revised Working Plan Report of The Bori Forest, 1909-19)

<https://ia802708.us.archive.org/11/items/revisedworkingpl00centrich/revisedworkingpl00centrich.pdf>

In the British era adivasi lost their territory to the creation of a forest, and in the post-Independent India they have been losing these forests to development. We forgot this history and remained selective in our protest; consequently, adivasi has lost all its interest in protecting the forest. It is high time to develop an alternative model of development, which does not come at the cost of somebody else's livelihood and dignity. This madness over development – which destroys trees, rivers, forests, flora & fauna – should be opposed at all cost not only in Mumbai but in distant Adivasi land like Betul as well. Unless Mumbaikars and Adivasi unite in their fight against destructive development projects, the fight against climate change would be futile. We mustn't forget: the forest is, where adivasi is; and adivasi is, where the forest is. There is another popular phrase: “you can take Adivasi out of forest, but you can't take the forest out of Adivasi”

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