

SECULARISM ALERT-2

Can a BJP Government Make Tribal India Shine?

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The release of the NDA government's Draft National Tribal Policy on the eve of the announcement of elections is not a coincident. With tribal Central India going the BJP way in the assembly elections of 2003, the BJP has only seized the moment to consolidate its tribal base. The outfits of the Sangh Parivar have been active in these regions since the 1930s and have built up an infrastructure that largely consist of shishu mandirs and vanvasi kalyan ashrams, the vehicles of Hindutva ideology in these areas. The Sangh Parivar has also been stressing that the tribals or '*adivasis*' were always a part of the Hindu society and were therefore to be protected from the conversion activities of the Christian Missions in these areas. In this regard it is particularly important to note that the first anti-conversion laws were enacted by Dilip Singh Judeo's ancestors in the state of Jashpur in the early 1930s. Thus the BJP's effort in pushing its Hindutva agenda amongst the tribals is not a new one, but has acquired a fresh thrust in the last five years since the BJP has come into power at the Centre. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs and Khadi and Village Industries Commission have been used by the government to dole out grants to those NGOs and voluntary sector organisations that are steadily implementing the BJP agenda in these regions. More than 85% of the funds of the Schedule Castes and Tribes Commission was given to NGOs associated with the Sangh Parivar in Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand. Thus it is not surprising to note that Draft Tribal Policy has identified the NGOs as major partners in implementing government programmes for tribal development.

The BJP's draft policy attempts to underline its differences with the Congress policy of the post independence era. The Congress's vision of tribal development was guided by Nehruvian principles that were embedded in a respect for cultural pluralism and a commitment to solve the problems of exploitation and underdevelopment in tribal areas. The Draft policy attacks this framework as being "long on generalities and short on specifics". In order to solve this problem the NDA government set up the Ministry of tribal affairs in 1999 with the flag bearer of the reversion campaign, Dilip Singh Judeo at its helm. But the creation of this ministry hardly solved any problems of the tribal people and they continued "to live below the poverty line and have poor literacy rates, suffer from malnutrition and disease and are vulnerable to displacement" as underscored by the policy itself. That the ministry and more specifically the minister himself was more interested in funding Hindutva activities and less in solving the real problems of the tribal India, was seen in the tape that showed him taking money for giving mining leases to a foreign company in tribal areas. The row that followed forced the minister to resign, but was significant as it reflected the real character of the BJP policy and politics in tribal dominated areas.

The aggressive Hindu nationalism of the Sangh Parivar is quite compatible with the BJP's policy of opening up the tribal economy. In the last five years most of this opening up has taken place for the benefit of the traders, big companies and foreign money who fund the activities of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram and Saraswati Shiksha Sansthan (an umbrella organization of all Parivar educational institutions). It is no coincidence then that the Shishu Mandir Trust is headed by one of the largest Marwari traders of Calcutta and its local branches are patronized by influential landholders and traders. Thus the activities of the Sangh Parivar have ended up strengthening, rather than dismantling the very forces that have been exploiting the tribal people since the advent of the British rulers in these areas. The policies of the NDA government in the last five years have only strengthened and aided this process.

Disinvestment of industries like BALCO and the privatization of land, water and forest resources as in the case of the Sheonath River, will only lead to the further deprivation, and unemployment of tribal people. The withdrawal of the state from key sectors has led to the reduction of state investment in infrastructure development. In this context, all attempts at the decentralized management of forests and forest produce collection have only strengthened the traders, industrialists and multi national companies who are appropriating the knowledge, labour and resources of tribal people for their own profits. The Draft Tribal Policy not only ignores these developments but is also an attempt to hide the real BJP agenda in tribal

areas. A vote for the BJP is thus a vote against the interests of the tribal people, whereas a vote in favour of the secular forces will strengthen their ongoing struggles and movements.

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