

'JAI ADIVASI' – SLOGAN OF TRIBAL DIGNITY

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“ ‘Jai Adivasi’ - who has put up this slogan here?” A minister of Gujarat government shouted in anger. “You are dividing the people”, the Minister accused the concerned persons and left Gurjarvani, an NGO institution in anger! Obviously the minister was disgusted by seeing a colourful ‘JAI ADIVASI’ slogan pasted on the entrance of Gurjarvani door.

This is the story of 2001, a few weeks after the traumatic earthquake in Gujarat. A Non-Government Organization (NGO) in collaboration with Gurjarvani was preparing a documentary series on the earthquake with a number of interviews to record the impact of the earthquake on different categories of people. The NGO had chosen the Gurjarvani studio for recording the whole programme. The Minister had also come to the studio for recording his views and opinions for the documentary.

After recording the interview for the documentary the Minister was getting out of Gurjarvani when his eyes struck on the slogan ‘Jai Adivasi’ meaning “victory to the tribals”. And he shouted in anger and in disgust “who has put up this slogan here?” Then, putting the blame on the Gurjarvani institution he added, “you are dividing the people.”

The Director of Gurjarvani was not there to respond to the minister or to explain the slogan. If he were present there too, he may or may not have known who has put up the slogan there. For, as his studio had recorded the minister’s interview, Gurjarvani studio has recorded umpteen audio-visual programmes of tribals, dalits (or the people of the oppressed community) as well as politicians and others.

The slogan ‘Jai Adivasi’ must have been put up by the tribals who visited the Gurjarvani studio or perhaps the Director himself must have put up the slogan. But it is worth looking deep into the slogan which has so much angered the Minister. As I see, what the slogan is all about is more important than who put up the slogan on Gurjarvani door. The idealism behind the slogan says much about the tribal people in Gujarat who are more than 15 per cent of the state population. The tribals form 8% of the Indian population.

After the Minister identified the slogan as one which divides the people, I did a little research into it and came to know one thing for certain. The slogan ‘Jai Adivasi’ was not one to divide the people but it did in reality brought not only unity and oneness among the tribals but the slogan also gave dignity and self-identify to the tribals in Gujarat while the Minister’s BJP and Sangh Parivar were positively trying not to recognize the Adivasis (tribals) as Adivasis but calling them ‘Vanvasis’ (forest dwellers); that is to say, the tribals are jungle people who are not cultured and civilized people!

The slogan ‘Jai Adivasi’ was coined by a group of seven organizations (NGO) of the predominating tribal district of Surat. The representatives of the seven NGOs came together under the aegis of the Organization for the Total Development of Adivasis (OTDA) at Surat in 1998 and after much deliberations coined the slogan ‘Jai Adivasi’. They say that the slogan gives

an identify and dignity to the tribals as tribals. So now the Adivasis greet one-another by saying with pride, 'Jai Adivasi'.

For centuries the non-tribal people in Gujarat and in the whole India have done everything possible to exploit the tribal people. The tribals' lands were taken away from them! They were deprived of their basic human rights! The non-tribals also destroyed the tribal culture by imposing the non-tribal culture on them.

Till today the tribals have remained subservient under the spell of the more educated non-tribal people. But now the situation is beginning to change. In the old bygone days the people of India under the influence of English and missionary education became aware of their identify and rights. This awareness awaked the reality of their slavishness under the foreign rulers, English empire and they started to fight against the foreign rulers for their freedom. Today under the influence of education and other welfare activities by missionaries and other NGOs the tribals are becoming aware of their human rights and exploitation by non-tribals. A concrete proof of this awakening and self-awareness is the slogan 'Jai Adivasi'.

As the tribal people were deprived of their fertile lands on riversides and their fishing they went to live in interior jungles and hilly areas. But the so-called cultured non-tribal people did not allow the tribals to live in peace in interior jungles and hilly areas. So the tribals were forced to give up their forest land without adequate and proper compensation. The tribals were made refugees as their forest lands were declared reserved. So they had to migrate to big and small towns and cities for their livelihood.

If one takes into consideration the tribal culture, one cannot fail but to note that the tribal culture is at the root of other cultures. The tribal culture is the oldest culture in the whole world! Hence the tribals, as the word 'Adivasi' indicates, are the original dwellers of the land. The tribals are lover and worshippers of nature. They have their own gods and goddesses. They worship their elders and their dead. In ancient times the tribals were known as "Bhils". We know Sabari of Ramayan times and Eklavya of Mahabharata times.

Today there is a systematic effort to destroy the tribal culture. Those who want put down the tribal people call them 'Vanvasis' instead of 'Adivasis'! They try to mislead the tribals with such fancy names like Vanvasi Kalyan Yojna (Adivasi Welfare Plan).

But this is a plot to deprive the tribals from their cultural identity and from their human rights. If the tribals are called 'Adivasis', then it means the recognition that they are the 'adi', the original 'vasis' inhabitants of this land and that they have the right to live in their own land! But if they are identified as 'vanvasis', then they are forest-dwellers, uncultured jungle people like the wild forest animals. This way the Adivasis are exploited even of their self identify and deprived of their dignity.

The tribals are aware of all these dangers to their identify and their human rights. The slogan 'Jai Adivasi' is a sure proof of the tribal awareness of these dangers and their own awakening to the realities around them. 'Jai Adivasi' is a slogan to bring awareness to the whole Adivasi community against their exploitation, injustice and all types of atrocities.

So there is no need of anyone to be afraid of the slogan 'Jai Adivasi' as one to divide the tribal people. Let the tribals maintain their identity and dignity. It is in the interest of everyone of good will that the tribals awake and claim their rights and dignity.

The People who exploit the tribals only need to be afraid of the oneness and unity of the tribal people. Those who are doing atrocities against the tribals certainly need to be afraid now. Those who consider the tribals as their slaves and make them work slavishly need to be afraid. The politicians who ignore or take them for granted need to be afraid. The shopkeepers who cheat the tribals need to be afraid.

The awakening and unity of the tribals are in the interest of all the people. The slogan 'Jai Adivasi' is a symbol of their awakening and their unity. This awakening and unity will strengthen their social and economic development. So not only Gujarat but the whole country will profit from the development of the tribal people.

In the eastern and western parts of Gujarat there are 75,00,000 Adivasi population. That is to say, there are 15% of tribal population among five crore people of Gujarat. Among the tribals there are 7 to 8 per cent people live Below the Poverty Line (BPL). Still not even 4 per cent are marked for the development of the tribal people in the state budget!

No one will profit in leaving the tribals in their poverty. The poverty and backwardness of the 15% people will badly affect the development of the whole state. The development and progress of the whole state are possible only with the development and progress of the neglected tribal people.

So all people of good will need to support the tribals in their efforts through the slogan 'Jai Adivasi' to fight against their exploiters and claim their rights and the respect as human beings as well as to establish their self-identity and dignity. This way through the unity and cooperation the tribals and the non-tribal people together can make sure the progress and development of the tribals and the whole state. 'Jai Adivasi'!

Lastly let us remember the words of South African Black leader Nelson Mandela. When he came out of the jail after being behind the bar for many years, he said: "We all live in one world neighbourhood. So in the sea of poverty if there are a few islands of riches and prosperity, no one can enjoy it in the long run." (contact the author: ciss@satyam.net.in)