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CPI(M) Policy Document on Tribal Question

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An important question for the democratic movement is the position of the tribal people in our society and the problems that they face. According to the 1991 census, 8.08% of the total population in India are tribal and they are 76.8 million (this figure would have gone up in the 2001 census). These eight crore adivasis consist of some of the most oppressed and exploited sections of our society. A large number of them are part of the proletariat working in mines, plantations and as contract labour. They also constitute an important section of the landless rural poor.

The updated Programme of the CPI(M) talking about the tribal people states: "The Adivasi and tribal people who constitute seven crores of the population, are victims of brutal capitalist and semi-feudal exploitation. Their lands are alienated from them, the right to forests denied and they are a source of cheap and bonded labour for the contractors and landlords. In some states there are compact areas inhabited by tribal people who have their own distinct languages and culture. The tribal people have been roused to new consciousness to defend their rights for advancement while preserving their identity and culture. Due to the threat to their identity and very existence and the callous policies of the bourgeois-landlord rulers, separatist tendencies have grown among some sections of the tribal people. Regional autonomy for protecting their rights in the areas which are contiguous and where they are in a majority is a democratic and just demand. The capitalist-landlord-contractor nexus constantly seeks to disrupt their traditional solidarity with some concessions to their leadership, denies their legitimate rights and suppresses them with brutal force" (Para 5.6)

It is with this perspective that we must look at the tribal question. The main problems affecting the tribal people are:

1. Land and their alienation from it

2. Forests and their access to it
3. Largescale displacement due to development projects
4. Status of women
5. Social Oppression
6. Lack of Educational Facilities
7. Language and culture
8. Autonomy and Constitutional safeguards

The Indian State, since independence, adopted a flawed approach to the tribal people. The Nehruvian notion being that the tribal people have a unique culture which should be preserved while bringing about the economic modernisation of tribal societies. Economy and culture were seen as two separate and different realms. Therefore, it was not understood that changes in the material life would necessarily bring about changes in the cultural life of the tribal people.

From the colonial period, the productive capacities of the tribal economy were destroyed because of the land and forest policies and their knowledge base was marginalised and destroyed. Most of the tribal people had thus to resort to unskilled labour for a livelihood and as they could not survive on this, they were made dependent on the welfarism of the State. The industrialisation in the post-independent period has heightened the pattern of industrial use of national resources of the tribal areas which results in an unequal exchange between the tribal and other areas.

Since successive governments refused to recognise this process which began under colonial rule, they concentrated more on welfare measures rather than on building up constructive and productive economic activity in the tribal areas. The bourgeois-landlord policies have resulted in a system where tribal people just provide cheap labour and raw materials to the rest of society. Deprived of modern education, they are unable to have access to better jobs as compared with the other sections of society.

The CPI(M) views the development of the tribal people as a process not separate from, but inter-dependent with that of the non-tribal people. The productive capacities of the tribal people must be developed and tribal knowledge and skills must be upgraded in order to enhance their social and economic status.

1. Land & Their Alienation

Traditionally in tribal society, land was not a commodity for sale. There was no concept of private property in land in most tribal communities.

The process of separating the tribal people from their land originated in colonial times and their right to ownership of the forests they lived in was never recognised. The introduction of the land revenue and money economy began this process. The first tribal revolts took place against this colonial exploitation. The first laws to protect the tribal land were passed after this unrest, such as the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act.

However, with capitalist development being stepped up, a continuous process of land alienation of the tribals has taken place. Laws have been ineffective. Through legal manipulation and other fraudulent means largescale transfer of tribal land has taken place to non-tribal people. This is a problem common to all tribal areas except some states in the North-East.

The laws enacted for protection of the tribal lands in the scheduled areas under the Fifth schedule of the constitution have not prevented alienation of tribal lands and largescale transfers. The loopholes in the laws, the connivance of the bureaucracy and the political authorities have subverted whatever legal safeguards existing.

Non-tribals are taking over tribal lands through methods such as mortgages, lease agreements, benami transfers, false title deeds in collusion with revenue officials, by marriage to tribal women or holding land in the name of their (bonded) tribal agricultural labourers.

Our basic demand is for restoration of the land so alienated, to the tribal people. They should have access to credit and technology. Science and technology should be used to develop a sustainable model of agriculture in tribal areas.

In this connection also comes the problem of jhum cultivation (slash and burn) which is undertaken by the tribal people. One quarter of the tribal people in the country have been doing this form of cultivation. The steps to shift them away from the jhum cultivation must be done in such a manner as to help them adjust to settled cultivation or sufficient rehabilitation in other occupations.

Land Reforms

To meet the demand for land, a central question is to implement land reforms and ensure the distribution of surplus lands to the landless adivasi families. In West Bengal under the Left Front government, distribution of surplus land to the extent of 11 lakh acres had taken place to 25 lakh families. Of this, nearly 5 lakh families are from the tribal people. In Tripura too, landless tribal households have benefitted from land reform. Further 7000 acres of land alienated from tribals were restored to them by the Left Front government. Since then, there has been no alienation of tribal land.

The struggle to restore land alienated from the tribal people by illegal means must be pursued. The existing laws to protect tribal lands from alienation

must be modified to plug loopholes. Firm action should be taken to check fraudulent means of transferring land with the collusion of the bureaucracy.

While conducting such a struggle both to tighten laws and to ensure their implications, we should also work out concrete measures to maintain the unity of the tribal-non-tribal peasants wherever conflicts arise. Small non-tribal peasant settlers on tribal lands should be given equivalent land elsewhere, or differentiation can be made between the bigger and smaller land holdings illegally acquired. But the principle that the tribal people must be restored the lands illegally transferred must be upheld.

2. Forests and their access to it

A big section of the tribal people have been traditionally living in the forests and their life and work is intimately connected with the forest. The forest laws have ruptured the organic link between the forest and the life of the adivasis. One of the tragic aspects of tribal life has been the alienation of the tribal people from their traditional habitat. Forests no longer belong to them but to the forest officials and contractors.

The disappearance of the forests and the degeneration of green cover is not because of the tribal people but because of the rapacious nexus of contractors-forest officials and ruling class politicians. The plunder of the forests and the cutting down of trees has been one of the inexorable features of capitalist development.

The Forest Act and its latest version, the Forest Conservation (Amendment) Act of 1988 treats the adivasis as interlopers and encroachers in the forests, rather than as an integral part of the forest environment. The degraded forest land is also not accessible to the tribal people. The deprivation of access to the forest and the tyrannical rule of the forest guards-bureaucratic nexus has led to tribal people not getting nutritious food which is their traditional diet and the sundering of their traditional way of life with all its social and cultural consequences.

Restoring the tribals access to forests is an important issue which we must fight for. Further, the minor forest produce which provide livelihood for the tribal people must be available for the tribals and they must own it. Cooperatives for marketing such produce have to be run by the government in cooperation with the tribals. Steps must be taken to protect the indigenous tribal knowledge of plants and their uses.

3. Largescale displacement due to development projects

According to an estimate, 15% of the tribal population have been displaced or affected by development projects. The uprooting of the tribal people from their homes and habitat for building dams and other industrial development projects has been one of the shocking scandals of post-independent India. It is a fact that we have not paid sufficient attention to this problem.

Providing monetary compensation has not been of much use. Not only was it inadequate, but the tribal people given lumpsum amounts of money could not use it properly. They were left with nothing in a short period of time. Even to make claims for alternative land they had no records of their ownership or titles in many cases.

The rehabilitation projects were flawed as the tribal people were put in areas which had no similarity with the habitat they were used to. They were given often rocky or barren land. Displacement has meant that the evacuated tribal people are driven to take up back-breaking jobs as construction labour working in brick kilns and other forms of labour in the unorganised sector.

Our Party must insist that in every case of displacement which cannot be avoided for essential development, a full and comprehensive rehabilitation package must be put in place and implemented before the project actually begins. The norms for such a package would need not just monetary compensation but an approach which takes into account all the needs of the displaced tribal people including their cultural requirements.

4. Status of women

By and large in tribal communities the status of women has been better than in caste Hindu society. This is reflected in the higher ratio of women to men in the population. Women in many tribal communities have equal status and rights in property. Women in many tribal communities are active in economic and social life. But these positive aspects have also got eroded with the penetration of bourgeois and semi-feudal values of the dominant society. The impact of these values and the media is now marked among the younger generation too.

Dowry instead of bride price and fall in the status of women is a result of these trends. With the increasing proletarianisation and divorce from their natural habitat, women are subjected to much more hard work such as fetching water or collecting firewood from great distances. Adivasi women

who go into the forests to gather firewood and forest produce are constantly subject to sexual harassment by forest guards.

A serious problem faced by tribal women is the sexual exploitation by contractors, landlords, bureaucrats and those who hold power in mainstream society. We must be able to address all these issues. We must stand for preservation and encouragement of equal status of women which exist in various spheres. We must oppose any retrograde practices against women which are either traditional, or, which have crept in. Against sexual exploitation of women also we must be able to build organised resistance.

5. Social Oppression

One of the worst features of socio-economic development under capitalism in India is the brutal exploitation of the tribal people. The traditional social forms of tribal life have broken down in the relentless march of capitalism, the cash nexus and the impact of the policies of bourgeois-landlord State. The old collective forms of tribal life with egalitarian features has been smashed by the capitalist and feudal onslaught. With no means of production, without the social and educational skills to face modern society, with the uprooting of their tribal social system, the tribal people have been subjected to ruthless exploitation by landlords, contractors and petty bureaucrats. In many cases, the adivasis work in serf like conditions. Large number of adivasis migrate from their homes to other areas and states to eke out a meagre livelihood. During this seasonal migration, they are bereft of any protection or benefits of minimum wages and labour laws. Bonded labour also prevails in many parts involving tribal labour. Protection given to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes under various laws are generally unavailable to the tribal people in the remote areas and they have no voice because they are not organised.

Impact of Liberalisation Policies

In the past one decade, the impact of liberalisation policies has been particularly severe on the tribal people. Firstly, the curtailment of the public distribution system and cutting of state of State funds for social sector have badly hit the tribal people. In the tribal areas in remote hilly and forest regions, the vulnerability of tribal people to hunger and starvation has tremendously increased with the collapse of the PDS. Most tribal people deprived of their traditional means of livelihood, land and forests, were totally dependent on cheap food through the PDS schemes. Reports of deaths due to hunger and malnutrition emanate mainly from the tribal areas, whether it be in Orissa, Maharashtra, Chattisgarh or Rajasthan.

Secondly, the deregulation and privatisation of mining and mineral sector is leading to the corporate sector both Indian and foreign entering this area which is mainly in the tribal regions. Already in Orissa, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh, the setting up of new projects to mine bauxite and other minerals has led to tribal people losing their lands. Their protests are met with brutal police repression. The trend of displacing the adivasi people for industrial projects is getting heightened. The State and the bureaucracy is not willing to adhere to the Samata judgement of the Supreme Court which has declared that in the scheduled areas (under Fifth Schedule), private industries or state enterprises cannot be set up without the consent of the adivasi people and such projects must be undertaken through cooperatives of tribal people.

Thirdly, the health and educational facilities provided by the State has deteriorated with the cutbacks in State expenditure and drive for privatisation. Unlike, other sectors, ordinary tribal people cannot avail of the more costly private education and medical facilities.

One of the major problems for the tribal people is the exploitation by money lenders. Once they get into the bondage of usury they are reduced to the plight of serfs. This bondage is the most degrading aspect of adivasi life today.

Going against the whole trend of liberalisation we must fight for sufficient credit to be provided to adivasis through cooperatives and bank loans so that the scourge of usury can be contained.

The State cannot abandon its responsibility towards development of infrastructure and fulfilling basic needs such as education and health in the tribal areas. The State's role is especially important as the tribal areas have the least number of roads and public transport, higher illiteracy and special problems of mortality and endemic diseases exist than in other areas.

Thus, the policies pursued by successive bourgeois-landlord governments and their all-round exploitation has led to a total alienation and a crisis in their identity. It is this threat to their identity which has a political dimension and at the root of the demand for a separate set up and protection.

The Communists should be able to see the deeper socio-economic phenomenon by which these most vulnerable communities are driven to demand a separate and distinctive position as against the dominant Hindu-caste society.

6. Lack of Education Facilities

During British rule there was no systematic plan to provide for education to the tribal communities except the work undertaken by the Christian missionary organisations. In independent India, despite various plans for imparting education, the reality is that the bulk of the adivasi community except in certain North Eastern states are outside the ambit of the formal education system. Even today in some areas whatever little educational facilities exist are provided by Christian organisations. Such neglect of education has led to the highest percentage of illiterates among the Adivasis and scheduled tribes.

7. Language and culture

The threat to the identity of the tribal communities has brought the question of their linguistic and cultural identity to the fore. The bourgeois-landlord State in India has paid no attention whatsoever to fostering their distinctive identity, culture and traditions except for bureaucratic exercises in promoting what is called as tribal folk culture.

There are major languages of the tribal people like Santhali and Bodo. Such languages must be given proper recognition including listing in the eight schedule of the Constitution. The Alchiki script is recognised by the West Bengal government. The Kokborok language is officially recognised by the Tripura state government. Similarly, efforts by tribal communities to develop their languages must be supported even when their numbers are small.

As far as the cultural aspect is concerned, the positive aspects of the traditional tribal culture particularly their egalitarian and collective ethos must be protected and encouraged. There are, ofcourse, certain regressive social practices in some parts which cannot be upheld as protection of tribal culture. Whether it is witch-hunting, or polygamy or depriving women of certain rights or superstitious practices and so on -- in all such cases, our work among the tribal people should inculcate consciousness to fight such practices from within the community.

8. Autonomy and Constitutional safeguards

The question of protection of identity and the interests of tribal people has led to various movements in the last two-three decades. This has assumed the demand for separate states such as Jharkhand or Bodoland. Our Party

stand has been that where tribal people live in contiguous areas and constitute the majority or the substantial section of the population, there should be regional autonomy provided. The CPI(M) pioneered the development of the Tripura Tribal Autonomous District Council in this regard. The present powers given to the autonomous councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution should be amended so that adequate powers may be devolved to them for the development of the autonomous areas. The question of providing for regional autonomy structures has to be popularised in all areas where found necessary to counter the separatist demands which break the bonds between the tribal and non-tribal people.

North-Eastern Region

The tribal peoples who inhabit the north-eastern region have a social, economic and cultural environment distinct from that of the adivasis in the rest of India. In all the north-eastern hill states (except Tripura and Manipur), the tribal people are in a majority. In states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, Christians constitute the dominant population. Unlike the tribal people in Central India, they are not subject to the ruthless exploitation of contractors, landlords and capitalists. The problems in the North-east are different. It is also more complex. There are a large number of tribal communities with distinct ethnic and social features. In some areas, there are inter-tribal conflicts. The entire tribal people suffer from the effects of the bourgeois-landlord rule from Delhi. Some of the common problems are the policy of neglect, failure to develop the region economically and insensitivity to the aspirations of the peoples of the region. An entrenched system has developed whereby a narrow elite section has profited from the Central financial assistance and the diversion of development funds. Such a corrupt ruling class, which is highly opportunist, has been nurtured from among the tribal people also over the decades.

In this background of discontent and thwarted aspirations, separatist feelings have grown and strengthened. The efforts to suppress separatism and insurgencies, devoid of a democratic perspective to effect all-round development of the region and failure to give due recognition to the nationality and cultural diversities have led to a situation of stalemate. The imperialist agencies have been using such a situation to fan separatist demands and ethnic-based conflicts. The tribal people's problems are therefore integrally connected with resolving the problems of political economy of the entire north-east. Only by fashioning of a federal, decentralised set-up with genuine autonomy for minority groups can the diverse aspirations connected with identity, language and culture be met.

The RSS & Hindutva Gameplan

In the recent years, the RSS has stepped up its work in the tribal areas. It seeks to counter the influence of the Church and Christian institutions. Through its front, the Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad, the RSS seeks to "hinduise" the tribal people who have their own religious beliefs and practices including native worship and animistic beliefs. The sinister plan is to inculcate Hindu chauvinist ideas including the caste system. This is motivated by the aim of putting Christian and non-Christian adivasis against each other. Such trends have been seen in parts of Orissa, Jharkhand and other places.

The RSS wants to coopt the adivasis into its brahmanical Hindutva fold. It refuses to recognise the tribal people as "adivasis" which means original people and terms them as "vanavasis" which confines the tribal people solely to the forests. By this, they negate history. Many of the adivasis today are descendants of those who were driven out of the fertile plains into the hills and forests by successive wave of settlers centuries ago. But the RSS seeks to impose the upper-caste Hindi order by relegating tribal people to "vanavasis".

The nature of institutions run by the RSS outfits poses a serious challenge to the secular democratic forces. The Party should take steps to work among the tribal people to counter the RSS influence politically and ideologically.

The CPI(M) has to foster the unity of the tribal and non-tribal people and counter the divisive forces. In certain areas, particularly in the north-east, some of the Church groups are fostering separatist tendencies with the sectarian aim of consolidating their religious influence. This is being used for divisive purposes and weakens national unity.

Unity of All Toiling Sections

The CPI(M) while taking up the special problems of the tribal people, will also work for forging bonds of solidarity between the tribal and non-tribal working people. Within tribal communities also class differentiation is taking place. The CPI(M) stands firmly for the cause of the toiling tribal people and establishing their unity with the rural poor of the non-tribal sections. The exploitation of the tribals by the semi-feudal and bourgeois classes cannot be fought back successfully without the broad unity of the oppressed of the tribal and non-tribal sections.

Conclusion

For the CPI(M), the tribal question is not just a question of protection of ethnic identity or defending the rights of a significant minority. It is also a class question. There are millions of tribal people who are the landless rural poor, the semi-proletariat or the working class. They constitute an important part of the proletariat in India. We have to organise them to fight for their rights as workers, agricultural labour and poor peasants. This can be done successfully by building the common movement alongwith the working people of the non-tribal sections. At the same time, we have to emphasise their special problems of alienation from their land, of their access to forests and its produce, of ending the brutal exploitation of the bourgeois-landlord classes and the contractors and protection of their identity, language and culture.

For this, wherever necessary, we must to set up mass organisations of the tribal people, a platform which can voice their specific demands and link them up to the general democratic movement. At the same time, we must ensure their participation in class and mass movements.

A Tribal People's Charter

The charter of demands for a better life for the tribal people should consist of the following:

1. Stop alienation of land belonging to the tribal people; plug loopholes in existing laws and take steps to restore land illegally transferred from adivasis. Register land records for tribal lands. In scheduled areas under Fifth Schedule, adhere to the Samata judgement of Supreme Court regarding use of land for industrial and commercial purposes.
2. Takeover surplus lands above ceiling and distribute them to landless adivasis along with other landless families. Provide irrigation facilities in remote tribal areas.
3. Amend the Forest Act in such a manner as to recognise the rights of adivasi forest dwellers to access and use of forests. People's participation in forests through community management should be introduced.
4. Forest produce must be accessible to forest dwellers and neighbourhood adivasi communities. The tyranny of forest guards must end. For marketing forest produce, cooperative efforts which are not bureaucratically managed but of the adivasis as producers of forest goods should be set-up.

5. No project industrial or developmental can be undertaken where displacement occurs without a comprehensive and sustainable rehabilitation package. Such a scheme must be put in place before any displacement or work on the project begins.

6. Women should have equal rights in land and other communal resources. Campaign to end practices degrading women's status must be carried out. The practice of dowry infiltrating tribal society must be countered. Practices such as witchcraft must be combated.

7. Provision of drinking water in remote hamlets must be a priority for ending hardships to tribal women in this regard. Sexual harassment by forest guards of adivasi women who go to forests for gathering produce and firewood must be strictly punished. Tribal developmental schemes should pay adequate attention for employment for adivasi women. Protection for women at work sites from sexual exploitation.

8. Enforce protection against money-lending/usury which exploits adivasis. Bonded labour and exploitation of adivasi men and women by contravening all labour laws must be effectively checked. Strict implementation of atrocities on adivasis under the Prevention of Atrocities on SC & ST Act.

9. The public distribution system should be revamped so that all tribal areas are covered with fair price shops and cooperatives. Instead of BPL cards, all tribal areas scheduled and non-scheduled must be covered by a universal system where all tribal families get foodgrains and other essential commodities at a subsidised rate.

10. Special composite educational programmes for tribal students should be promoted by the Central Government and all the state governments. Arrangements for setting up of schools in the tribal dominated areas with provision of vocational training and hostel facilities for the tribal youth should be undertaken.

11. Implementation of reservation of ST quotas in all categories of employment and education. Curb issuance of bogus ST certificates to non-tribals. Special allocation for public health facilities and setting up of primary health centres in the remote tribal areas.

12. Tribal languages and scripts should be recognised and developed. Santhali and Bodo should be included in the eighth schedule of the Constitution. Oppose moves to eliminate indigenous cultural traditions,

which foster collective consciousness and egalitarianism. Campaign against social evils, which are intensifying among the youth by penetration of bourgeois values of commercialisation, and degenerate sex and violence purveyed through the media. Foster cultural expression and creative folk arts based on the rich cultural forms of tribal communities.

13. Strictly, enforce constitutional safeguards for the scheduled tribes. Provision of autonomy under the Sixth schedule should be strengthened by amending the schedule. Extend provisions of Autonomous District Council to other states where compact, majority tribal areas exist. Under Fifth schedule, provide for democratic participation in the Tribes Advisory Council with elected representatives from lower units. Formulate effective laws to protect tribal rights in scheduled areas.
