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On

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Good Morning and Johar! My name is Rashmi Ekka and I am a member of the Oraon tribe from the Eastern state of Jharkhand in the Chotanagpur Plateau of India. Today we will discuss the issues plaguing the indigenous people of India.

So who are Adivasis? Adivasis are the Indigenous people of India. According to the 2001 census there are 85 million indigenous people who constitute 8 percent of India's one billion. If Adivasis are growing at the same rate as the rest of India, we are now closer to the 100 million indigenous people mark today. That would be approximately a third of the United States population. Also we are a significant percentage of Asia's 260 million indigenous people.

We collectively call ourselves Adivasis - the first inhabitants of India. The government recognizes us as Scheduled Tribes in the Constitution of India. With over 600 distinct tribes spanning the length and breadth of India, with as many different cultures and languages it is difficult for me to represent all Adivasis. However our problems across the country are largely the same. We live in the remotest parts of the country. We are isolated - economically, socially, politically and geographically. We are the lowest point of every socio-economic indicator.

1. Economic Challenges

- **Poverty** - Adivasis make some of the poorest people in the world. India's per capita income is \$1,265. In my state, where 30 percent of the population is Adivasi, the per capita income is \$99 meaning that an average Adivasi in my state earns only 27 cents a day. Poverty brings with itself a myriad of problems - the primary three being lack of education, lack of access to health care and proper nutrition and lack of economic opportunities.
- **Education** – Literacy among Adivasis (40.7 percent) is considerably lower by 12.9 percent compared to overall literacy of 53.6 percent in the state. Only 27 percent of

Adivasi women in my state are literate as compared to 54 percent literacy in women across the country. Only 50 percent of the total seats reserved for Adivasi students as part of Affirmative Action in Medical and Engineering Colleges are being filled. With low levels of education, employment prospects are few and far between.

- **Employment Opportunities:** 80 percent of Adivasis in Jharkhand are smallholder agriculturists who depend on rain to grow their food. Severe food insecurity haunts them each year as they are given to the vagaries of draught and monsoons. Because of low levels of education, Adivasi participation in various industries (steel and mining industry dominates in the region) are limited to manual labor with poor compensation and labor rights.
- **Food insecurity:** Food insecurity has had severe consequences on our children. Many of us did not receive proper nutrition between the ages of 6 months and 2 years and this has lead to physical and mental stunting. Many Adivasis are thus not able to live and grow to their full potential as they did not get enough nutrition. Malnutrition is high at 77 percent for babies and 68 percent for pregnant women. Infant mortality rate is high at 9.3 percent. My family in India, adopted an Adivasi baby girl, three year ago. Baby Riya's biological mother was severely malnourished and stunted. Because of this Riya was born with a very low body weight and even after receiving very good care, Riya's health has been a struggle and she often ends up in the Intensive Care Unit.
- **Health:** A recent tour report of the visit of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes to Jharkhand, noted a shortage of doctors (about 600) and para-medical staff. Very few hospitals are operating in rural areas. Diseases such as Tuberculosis, Goiter,

Hypertension and Alcoholism were commonly noted. Lack of proper health facilities and starvation is leading to the extinction of some of the smaller tribes. The Birhors who were 8,083 in 1991 had declined to 7,514 in 2001. The Savaria Paharias, 48,761 in 1991 were 31,050 in 2001 and the Paharias who were 30,421 in 1991 have declined to 20,786 in 2001. A Jharkhand Tribal Welfare Research Institute 2002 study shows 9 tribes in the state now constitute merely 0.72 percent from 0.90 percent in 2001.

- **Mass migration from Rural Areas to Urban Centers:** Another consequence of food insecurity is the mass exodus from the rural areas to the urban centers. The men take on jobs in mining, construction and other sectors and live in urban slums. Girls as young as 10 are trafficked into bonded labor. As domestic help they are often physically and sexually abused.
- **Trafficking of Women:** Every year thousands of minor Adivasi girls from the Jharkhand Region of Indian states like Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Orissa are trafficked to Delhi, Mumbai and other Indian metro cities into bonded labor. Adivasi girls often start their journeys being lured by promises of a better life. Once landing in the big city, they spend years working as bonded slaves with the “Job Placement Agencies” taking most of their salary since, these Adivasi girls are so naïve and completely helpless to raise their voice. Because of the social alienation of Adivasis, employers have no qualms in torturing Adivasi girls, and even sexually abusing them. Adivasi Girls are often forced to embrace the commercial sex trade as they are illiterate and have no other means of earning a livelihood.”

2. Social Challenges: Adivasis are not part of the Indian Caste System. Historically our status is hence that of a *mlechcha* or barbarian. As traditional forest dwellers and meat eaters we have been perceived as *rakshasas* or demons in the ancient books. We are considered to be *ati-sudra* meaning lower than the untouchable castes (known as Dalits of Scheduled Castes today). Even today, upper class Indian refer to Adivasis as *jangli*, a derogatory term meaning those “who are like wild animals”, uncivilized or sub-humans.

Adivasis have few cultural and social taboos. On the other hand, the mainstream population has several food taboos, more rigid cultural practices and caste-based occupational specialization. Widow burning, enslavement, hierarchical social ordering are generally not present in our culture. These cultural differences contribute to our social isolation.

This mindset severely handicaps our integration into India’s mainstream population. We are discriminated against on the basis of our ethnicity, our color, our language, our religious practices and our culture. Adivasis carry with themselves a heavy baggage of low self-esteem. Mainstream culture often reinforces the belief that we are not intelligent, not beautiful and cannot be successful. As recognized members of Scheduled Tribes we are beneficiaries of Affirmative Action, however the prevailing mindset impacts our everyday relationships with non-Adivasis and makes it difficult for us to find acceptance and success at school and the workplace.

The Government of India has granted us Affirmative Action in Education as well as Government jobs. Those few of us who have been able to have education and be successful in life owe it to the benefits of Affirmative Action. But as beneficiaries of Affirmative Action we face added discrimination in the school and workplace and have to live with the stigma of “not being meritorious enough” to be in that position.

3. Political Challenges: Adivasis have long struggled for a political voice at the National level in India. Even today, as a strong collective of nearly a 100 million people, we do not have any leaders with national appeal and influence. We have found some degree of success on a more regional level. However many of our problems related to regulations still remain.

- **Forest and Land Rights:** As noted by Adivasi Activist, Gladson Dundung, “Land and Forest are not only essential livelihood resources but also means of identity, dignity and social security for Adivasis. They have been living in the forest for ages and have the customary right over its natural resources.” In 2006, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act was passed. As traditional forest-dwellers we are now legally entitled to the resources from the forest which had been denied to us for decades. However the implementation of this Act has been less than perfect and forest dwellers are still susceptible to harassment, eviction, extortion of money and sexual molestation by forest officials.
- **Land Alienation:** According to the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908), the land of an Adivasi can only be transferred to a non-Adivasi by the prior permission of the Deputy Commissioner. There are many cases where Adivasis have been illegally alienated from their land because of poor implementation of this Act. It is estimated that Adivasis have lost 2.200,000 acres of land, since the Independence of India from British Rule in 1947.
- **Kokrajhar Incident:** Inhuman treatment and torture was meted out to Adivasis in the name of eviction in Kokrajhar district of Assam. More than 200 Forest Guards from the Bodo community torched 1,200 houses in 33 villages, in an act of ethnic violence on October 30th – October 31st 2010. The men were chased and fearing arrest they hid themselves. The food stock kept safe in the baskets and granaries were burnt, the

livestock was carried away as booty, and the utensils /cooking pots were smashed. The women who protested were molested. A total of 40 men were arrested. The Eviction Team also burned down 8 schools, and 2 churches. In total 1,200 families with 7,000 individuals are affected. Adivasis who live in Assam face additional sufferings as they are not recognized as Scheduled Tribes in the State of Assam. These Adivasis migrated to Assam from the neighboring states where they are recognized as Scheduled Tribes. Because of this lack of recognition, Adivasis in Assam do not have access to the benefits of Affirmative Action.

4. Geographical Challenges: Adivasis live in the remotest parts of the country. Only 26% of Adivasi habitats in my state have road connectivity.

- **Displacement:** Indigenous people the world over have a knack for settling down in lands that are rich in minerals, forest produce, timber and other resources. 40 percent of India's minerals including uranium reserves come from my state, Jharkhand. Jharkhand is blessed with iron ore, manganese, coal, limestone, graphite, quartzite, asbestos, lead, bauxite, zinc, copper and some gold among other minerals. As development has happened, Adivasis have had to pay the price. Every time a dam has been built, a mine has been mined, a factory has been set up, our land, our home has been taken away from us. Since 1951, 60 million people have been internally displaced in India because of development projects. 24 million of them are Adivasis. Most Adivasis did not receive proper compensation and rehabilitation, and without their land, rivers and forests they were often left with little means of making a livelihood.

With so many issues plaguing our daily lives, basic survival is in question for many Adivasis. Growing dissent has caused some to protest against the government using violent means. India's largest internal security threat –Naxalism – feeds on the grievances of the people she has let down. Your support will assist us in our journey to find solutions.

In closing I would like to say that India's Adivasis who come from over 600 different tribes are a people rich in their knowledge of the natural world. We know the magic of different plants and their medicinal properties. We have preserved the majority of India's bio-cultural diversity. We belong to our land, which is the source of our science, technology, way of life, religion and culture. It is the essence of our existence. As we approach a 9 billion people world which will be plagued with food insecurity, climate change and rising levels of pollution, the world can learn how to live in harmony with Nature from Indigenous People. Thank you! Johar!