

Draupadi Murmu: India's President is first a proud 'janajati'

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All of us are 'vasi' of this land. The people who live in forests are 'vanavasi'. The ones in the villages are 'gramavasi' while people living in towns and cities are 'nagaravasi'. In fact all the vasi put together are the 'janajatis of this land'.

New Delhi, July 26: Draupadi Murmu took oath as the 15th President of India on July 25, 2022. While taking oath, she said that for her getting primary education was a dream and she would as President of India focus on the marginalised.

Murmu interestingly referred to a term 'janajati' in her address. The word has an interesting history to it and OneIndia caught up with Bharath Gyan founders Dr. D K Hari and Dr. D K Hema to discuss this further.



Draupadi Murmu being sworn-in as the 15th President of India by Chief Justice of India Justice NV Ramana in the Central Hall of Parliament, in New Delhi.

While we say she is the first 'tribal' president of India, we should note that there are more apt words than the colonial, suppressive word 'tribal'. Fundamentally, tribal is a word that has come into parlance from colonial times to connote people living in forests and hills as lesser. We have unfortunately continued with this colonial term as well as the sentiment. As per our national pledge, we say, "All Indians are my brothers and sisters", which implies we are all equals, the Bharath Gyan founders point out.

The word 'tribal' has a negative connotation to it due to the violence, colonialism and the history attached to it. It is a word that was used by colonists to marginalise societies and stands as a reminder of the history of their oppression by the colonial masters. Hence, as Indians, who have borne much of the brunt of colonial oppression, we should refrain from using this word, Dr Hari says.

Another similar word used is 'Adivasi'. This again stems from a colonial mindset and implies that they are the first 'vasi' and all others are the later 'vasi'. 'Vasi' means inhabitants, residents. The term 'Adivasi' implies that those in the forests and hills were the indigenous people of this land and were there before the Aryans invaded India.

Implying that, all others in this land have come later as descendants from Aryans. Usage of the term 'Adivasi' thus inadvertently reaffirms the erroneous theory of Aryan invasion which means there were some indigenous people before, who were the original inhabitants of this land and all others have come, migrated in, later. 'Adivasi' connotes that somebody is earlier and somebody later. Since the Aryan invasion theory has been shown to be unscientific and debunked world over, the term 'Adivasi' too does not hold water, the author couple points out.

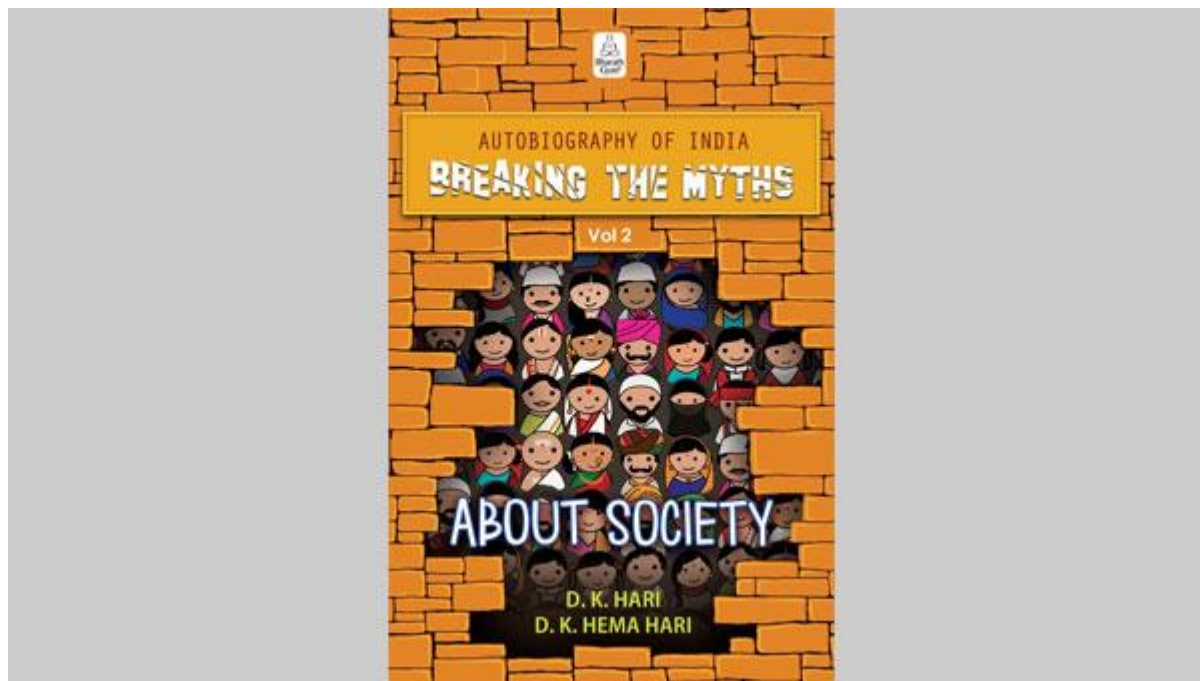


Dr D.K. Hari and Dr D.K. Hema Hari are authors of the book 'Breaking the Myths – About Society' which extols this idea in detail and can be found at www.bharathgyan.com

"All of us are 'vasi' of this land. The people who live in forests are 'vanavasi'. The ones in the villages are 'gramavasi' while people living in towns and cities are 'nagaravasi'. In fact, while 'Janajati' is commonly associated with only tribals today, all the vasi put together are the 'janajatis of this land'. "We are all 'janajatis' because all of us have taken janam (birth) in this land and are people native to this land. We are all citizens of this land that we call Bharata."

"Maharishi Vishwamitra in the Rig Veda has referred to the people of this civilization as 'Bharatam Janam'. This means citizens of Bharat. The idea of citizenship goes way back to the Rig Veda. All are equals, for the role they play in the 'vikas' of the civilisation. Be it any 'vasi', all have played an individual and collective role in the growth of the civilisation."

So, rather than the words such as 'Tribal' and 'Adivasi', we, as a people of India, will do well to use the more honourable term 'Vanavasi' even when we communicate in English. If the English language could borrow words such 'Loot', 'Coolie', 'Bungalow', 'Cash', 'Curry' etc. from the Indian languages, 'Vanavasi' can very well be used in English to aptly describe the people who have inhabited forests and hills for millennia. Tribe is after all a very generic term and can apply to any group of people.



Speaking of 'vanavasi', these are people who should be held in high regard, as they are the ones who have looked after the forest, hills and mineral wealth of the land for millennia. They have been the custodians of the forest, says Dr Hari while adding that the British wanted control of the forest land and mineral wealth for their colonial loot. This is why they dubbed them as tribals and disenfranchised them of their collective guardianship of the forest and mineral resources that were under their collective care.

The Santhal community to which President Murmu belongs, had revolted against the British for rights over their land.

There was a great Santhal uprising in 1855, just 2 years before the First War of Independence in 1857. Two Murmu brothers, Siddhu and Kanhu of the Murmu clan organized together, the vanavasi of the region near Rajmahal hills in present day Jharkhand and led that protest. Over 15,000 Santhal people were massacred in that rebellion which finally carved out the region of Santhal Pargana around the Rajmahal hills for this community and inspired the freedom struggle of India for Swaraj, the Bharat Gyan founders say.

At the time of Independence, after over 200 years of ravage by the colonial powers, India was left with just 18% forest cover.

Today, India has about 21.5% of forest cover and is yet to reach its set target of 33% forest cover by 2022. We must be thankful to those Vanavasi all across India who had sustained these forests across generations and had also fought valiantly to protect them. We should thank them profusely for, it is because of their sustainable living practices and guardianship across generations and millennia, that we have a forest cover over our land which is the source for many natural resources and the rivers that crisscross this glorious land.

Even 75 years after the British, we have managed to increase our forest cover only from 18 per cent to 21.5 per cent. To jump from 21.5 to 33 per cent of forest cover is a nearly 50 per cent jump and is a fairly uphill task. We will do well to involve the Vanavasi for their native skills. It will help in the quicker regeneration of the forest cover as well as restoration of the status of the Vanavasi thereby, making India a more sustainable country with better sociological as well as ecological balance to fight global warming at the grass root, rather forest cover level, say the authors.

The Vanavasi from being marginalized during the colonial period will come to the fore in line with new India's inclusive slogan of 'Sabka Vikas, Sabka Prayas'.

The outgoing President, Ramnath Kovind, in his farewell speech, had raised concern over global warming. The Hari couple highlight that, it is fitting indeed that the solution to this concern in a way, lies in the unique skill set of the Vanavasi community from which the incoming President Droupadi Murmu hails.

Hail the 'Vanavasi' of India.

Read more at: <https://www.oneindia.com/india/draupadi-murmu-indias-president-is-first-a-proud-janajati-3438928.html>