

Equity and Empowerment of Tribals in India

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The Tribals in India comprise more than 700 communities, accounting 8% not total population of the country. They have been marginalized and excluded historically. The British rule used divide and rule policy by categorizing the tribal areas excluded and partially excluded area. Since the tribals have been simple and dependent on land for their livelihood, non tribals were prohibited from buying land in tribal areas to check the land alienation from tribals. However, state could acquire any kind of land as it was rationalized as for the state purpose which was for public good. The Governor was the supreme authority as per the principle of eminent domain. Even after the independence the exclusion continued as the excluded areas were named as sixth schedule and partially excluded areas as fifth schedule in the constitution. As a result the state went on acquiring any private land in the name of public purpose and gave away to private parties like industries.

As the tribals lived in the midst of nature, their social, cultural, political and economic life centered on land, forest and water. With the modern state the symbiotic relationship with the nature could not be maintained as the natural resources were looked at as the source profit and not subsistence. Individual rights and ownership of the resources was introduced. The oral history did not carry any value. Without written evidence the ownership was not recognized. As a result many tribals became landless or encroachers of the land they had been cultivating for years. Community councils run as per their culture and tradition got replaced by modern judiciary and governance systems.

The modern society found this society as primitive, backward, isolated. Therefore those communities which are found i) primitive in traits, (ii) distinctive culture (iii) shyness of contact with the public at large (iv) geographically isolated, and (v) socially and economically backward are sanctioned as scheduled tribes by the President of India. As there is no specific definition in our constitution, it is an administrative and political decision. It means that a community could be de-scheduled when it is found that they are no more primitive and so on. What will be social status of this community? Will they be Brahmin or Scheduled caste? Their problem has been primarily considered a problem of low-level technology, stark poverty, illiteracy, ill-health, behaviour pattern conditioned by ignorance and superstition, lack of motivation to take advantage of the benefits of modern science and technology and so on. Hence, until the eight Five Year Plan(1992-1997) the tribal social formation has been considered to represent a stage in the evolutionary scheme of human social organization. The Ninth Five Year Plan shifted its focus from traditional welfare approach to rights approach through a process of empowerment viz: (i) Social; (ii) Economic Empowerment; (iii) Social Justice.

In different five year plans government has been implementing different programmes for the tribals. There has been some changes but far behind from the other population in terms of their literacy, poverty eradication, better healthcare and so on. The tribals have had the most important values of sustainable development. But the so called modernization and our paradigm of development has undermined the values of the tribal life and impose what we consider development.

Issues and concerns

It may be important to look at some of the important issues and concern while working towards achieving the MDGs with reference to the tribals.

i) **Strategies of Government initiatives on Tribal development:**

Protective measures

a) Prohibition Land Alienation

There are number of acts in different states to protect the land rights of tribals, to name a few, the Chottanagpur tenancy act 1908 in Bihar, Santhal Pargana tenancy act 1949, Rajasthan Tenancy act 1955, Andhra Pradesh Schedule areas Land Transfer Regulation 1959, Tripura Land Revenue Regulation Act 1960. Despite this, as many as 4.05 lakhs cases of alienation of tribal land covering an area of 9.17 lakh acres were registered in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan and Tripura in January 1999. Against this only 2lakhs cases were disposed of in favor of 1.56 lakh tribal families covering an area of 5.31 lakh acres (http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/10th/volume2/ch4_2.pdf).

b) Prevention of Boded Labour, disstressed migration

c) Prohibition of Money lending

d)Prevention of Atrocities

Development measures: participatory, accountable effective implementation of the Poverty alleviation programme, Infrastructure development, Health and Education, Socio- cultural programme (Outcome Budget).

ii) **Development Displacement**

The availability of vast natural resources like land, forest, water, minerals coincided with the habitation of tribals in the country. In order to achieve fast economic growth after independence, the state planned to go for the establishment of large industrial projects like large irrigation projects, hydro and thermal power projects, gigantic industries, mines, high ways, airports, etc. Conservative estimate of the all the displaced persons shows that between 1951 and 1990 about 21.3 million people had been displaced out of which 40% them are tribals. The industrial development brought the social and economic changes in the country and especially in tribal areas. One can argue that by industrial development the tribals are gaining economically as they get employment and other social services. However, what they gain out of it is minimal compared to what they sacrifice for it. Displacement, land alienation, deforestation, social disruption etc are the major prices the tribals have been paying for the establishment of many of these projects in the name of development of nation. As a result they have been deprived of their traditional sources of livelihood i.e. land, forest and rivers. The socio-economic dispossession due to displacement breaks down the life support system which results into the disorganization, alienation and insecurity in the lives of the displaced people and it creates a high risk of

impoverishment and pushes groups of people into a condition of transitory or permanent food insecurity. Thus state is alienating the resources from the tribals in the name of development.

Risk of Impoverishment:

1. *Landlessness*
2. *Homelessness*
3. *Joblessness*
4. *Marginalization*
5. *Food Insecurity*
6. *Mortality and Morbidity*
7. *Social Disarticulation*
8. *Loss of Access to Common Property Resources*

With the open invitation and concessions for mining and industries especially in Orissa, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh it is going to increase the number of displacement of tribals from their home and resources. There are 43 and 44 MOUs of extractive industries have been signed in Orissa and Jharkhand respectively. This leads to environmental degradation. The industrialization invites people from other regions to various business opportunities. This increases pressure on existing resources like land and forest.

Conservative estimates of displaced people 1951- 1990, in lakhs

Projects	ALL DPs			Tribals		
	Displaced	Resettled	Backlog	Displaced	Resettled	Backlog
Dams	140.00	35.00	105.00	53.00	13.15	39.45
Mines	21.00	05.25	15.75	12.00	03.00	09.00
Industries	13.00	03.25	09.50	02.60	0.65	01.95
Wildlife sanctuaries	06.00	01.50	04.50	05.00	01.25	03.75
Others	05.00	01.25	03.75	01.50	01.40	01.10
Total	185.00	46.25	138.75	74.10	19.45	55.25

Source: ISI, 1994

iii) Restrictions to access Forest resources

The tribals have always been associated with forest. The environmental and industrial interests have been superseding symbiotic relationship between the forest and tribals. As a result the tribals have been restricted in their access to forest resources as most of the forests are categorized either as reserved or as restricted forest. As a result they cannot collect many of the minor forest produces which use to supplement their food, herbal medicines and income from marketing of these produces. Many times they are exploited by the forest officials for collecting these produces. Though it has been difficult to establish the date of habitation of the communities of many of the tribal villages, they have been termed as encroachers of forest land and they have been evicted. There were about 5000 forest villages which are located in remote areas and are declared as revenue villages. The rivalry between forest and revenue departments has been resulting in the exploitation and negligence of these forest villages.

iv) Participation in Governance

The empowerment of tribals in actual terms can be realized only when the tribals themselves are bestowed with the right to participate in decision making beside being equip to find answers to their own problems. The Panchayats (Extension to Schedule Areas) Act of 1996 is a landmark in the process of empowering tribals. But non implementation of the act by most of the states, the landmark has remained as an ornament.

v) Migration: Large scale migration of tribals to urban areas in search of employment especially the tribal girls from Jharkhand, Chhatisgarh and Orissa are migrating to Delhi Mumbai and other cities.

vi) Participation of tribals in their Development: Many of our government programmes have failed because people have not been taken into consideration in planning and implementation. They have not been given opportunity to participate in decision making process for their own development. The tribal people have survived their environs for centuries without huge amounts of money being spent on development by governments or others and over the years they have refined valuable knowledge and problem solving strategies not only concerning agriculture, farming systems, natural resources management bio-diversity, but also in the areas of health and education and social organization and mobilization (e.g. by forming association and groups, savings, water use). Their knowledge and experience need to be tapped more systematically and blended accordingly with more technical knowledge suitable to the context and environment in which the people live and operate. By making use of tribal people's knowledge and experiences, development activities and projects will be relatively easier to implement and their impact is bound to be far greater.

vii) Perspective for Tribal Development:

Basically there are two operational ideologies- *harmony and conflict*- with which the small groups attempt to perform these roles. These are also referred as development versus struggle approaches. In harmony approach the emphasis is more on working for the development of the poor with the assumption that appropriate management, technology and idealism are the critical elements that can deliver goods. Development of the poor is believed to be possible without politics and reference to power holders. Collaboration with government, industry, rich people and institutions of the establishment are permissible. In the conflict approach it is believed that the root cause of the poverty and exploitation is the power structure of society and therefore what is needed is to mobilize and organize the poor to organize themselves against money lenders, traders, bureaucrats, politicians and the government itself. Such organizations work among the poor to bring about awareness and organize them at local levels to fight against corruption, injustice or exploitation.

There is debate whether to integrate them to the **mainstream**, keep them isolated or leave them on their own to change and develop as part of the evolutionary process

rather than imposing on them from outside. Many of the voluntary agencies begin their developmental programmes with abortive concepts of 'civilizing', 'modernizing' ' reforming without giving much thought to the tribal culture. Development workers in tribal areas who gain confidence of tribals and function like catalyst should be cautious so as not to destroy the tribal culture. A development which improves the social- economic conditions and strengthens the values of tribal people should be the aim of development agencies.

The tribals are being disempowered with the Hegemony of colonial ideology which undermines the knowledge, wisdom, culture, and governance systems practiced by tribals. They are not poor but being made poor in the land plenty.

If the NGOs have to be people centered, there should **move from charity and welfare to development and empowerment approaches** to bring about change among tribals. They have to be transparent and accountable in their functioning. At the same time in this age of globalization, the NGOs should make use of the Information technology to mobilize resources, network and partner for the cause of tribals across the globe.