

Indian Tribes: Problems and Their Solutions

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The word 'tribe' is generally used for a socially cohesive unit, associated with a territory, the members of which regard them as politically autonomous. Different tribes have their own cultures-dialects, life styles, social structures, rituals, values, etc. The forest occupies a central position in tribal culture and economy. The tribal way of life is very much dictated by the forest right from birth to death. It is ironical that the poorest people of India are living in the areas of richest natural resources. Historically, tribes have been pushed to corners owing to economic interests of various dominant groups. The tribes are a part of the Indian society and general problems of consciously changing or modernizing Indian society are applicable to them. Before independence, tribes enjoyed an almost untrammelled control over forestland and its produce for their survival. Forest offered fodder for their cattle, firewood to warm their hearths, and above all a vital source of day-to-day sustenance. The wonderful equation between man and nature demolished after independence with the encroachment of rapacious contractors on tribal land and the indiscriminate destruction of forest in the name of development.

A tribe is an Indian group which possesses certain qualities and characteristics that make it a unique cultural, social, and political entity. The nature of what constitutes an Indian tribe and the very nature of tribes have changed considerably over the course of centuries, but certain characteristics have remained. A tribe is viewed, historically or developmentally, as a social group existing before the development of, or outside of, states. Total population of Scheduled Tribes is 84,326,240 as per the Census 2001 which accounts for 8.2% of the total population of country. Majority of the Scheduled tribe population live in rural areas and their population is 10.4 % of the total rural population of the country.¹

There are as many as 573 tribes and sub tribes in India. They have been broadly classified into different classes, groups depending upon their present state of development and factors namely, mode of living in forest, shifting villages, forest villages, community villages and revenue villages.² They have got a heterogeneous cultural pattern with variegated economic condition and activities largely based on ecological settings and ethnic Environment. The basic economic activities of the tribes may be classified under the following heads.³ (1) Food gathering, (2) Pastoral, (3) Shifting hill cultivation, (4) Handicrafts, (5) Cultivation, (6) Trade and Commerce, (7) Labour.

The need for tribal development in India hardly needs any justification. Their primitive way of life, economic and social backwardness, low level of literacy, hackneyed system of production, absence of value system, sparse physical infrastructure in backward tribal areas and demographic quality of tribal areas coupled together make it imperative for a systematic process of development of tribes and tribal areas. The Indian tribal society is a unique society with diversity of nature and people. In our country, known for the extreme poverty of the masses, the tribes constitute the core of the poor. Poverty, poor health and sanitation, illiteracy and other social problems among the tribes are exerting a dragging effect on the Indian economy.

The Five Year Plans formulated the implementation of a series of investment-backed schemes and projects for the betterment of the conditions of the tribes living in the rural and urban areas. Many of the tribes with their forest-dwelling culture do not have the motivation or the skill of settled cultivation. As a result, their land has been alienated to their better endowed

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tribal neighbours or non-tribal's. There have been many tribal studies in India based on tribal economy, land alienation, socio-economic development, tribal culture etc.

It is highly imperative to have a look at these tribal studies by various Anthropologists, Research scholars, etc. A new trend in ethno methodology which came during the British period was a theory propounded by Verrier Elwin (1943)⁴ who suggested that tribes should be kept isolated in their hills and forests. Elwin's theory is known in social anthropology as 'public park theory'. He suggested that ordinarily the non-tribal people should not be allowed to enter into tribal pockets without permission of the state government. This system would guarantee the isolation of the tribes. G.S. Ghurye (1943)⁵ protested the theory of public park. He argued that the tribal's were nothing more than backward caste Hindus. They should be treated at par with the Hindus. Following Ghurye's argument, D.N. Majumdar (1944)⁶ took a slightly different position. His suggestion was that the cultural identity of the tribes as far as possible should be retained. He feared that if the isolation was broken the tribes would lose their ethnic identity. To maintain it, he hypothesized that there should be 'selected integration' of the tribes. While spelling out, he argued that not all the elements of civilization should be allowed to enter the tribal area. Only those which have relevance with tribal life should be permitted into such area. Such a policy would keep the tribes away from ordinary crowd. These all studies focus on the major issue of tribal problems and if we want to develop nation we should firstly solve the problems of the tribal peoples and make them a part of our society.

Over the last 20 – 25 years, the tribal community has been incessantly trying to draw the attention of the world's leading power blocks to save them from perennial miseries. The World Health organisation (WHO) has emphasised that indigenous people have higher rates of infant mortality, lower life expectancy and more cases of chronic illness than the non-indigenous populations in their home countries. It is argued that the indigenous people are among the poorest of the poor. They suffer from extreme discrimination and lead a life of misery and destitution. The development discourse, therefore, needs to concentrate on finding an effective strategy to mitigate these crises.

Some of the major problems which present day tribal people face can be sectorally divided as problems of poverty, health problems and social problems like lack of education, however, it is more pertinent to look at each categories in to greater details by carefully taking into account the nuances of a problem.

Problems with land alienation

Land as a prime resource has been a source of problem in tribal life because of two related reasons, first, Dependency, i.e. tribal dependency on land and second, improper planning from government agencies. Tribal people in India can be classified on the basis of their economic pursuits in the following way: Foragers, Pastoral, Handicraft makers, Agriculturists, Shifting hill cultivators, Labourers and Business pursuits . All of these occupations involve direct or indirect dependency on land. Land rights and changes in rules go unnoticed. Tribal are unaware or are made unaware about the rules which governs India's land rights. The tribal's do not have access to land records, not even the Record of Rights. This lends them to a higher probability of getting exploited, by the non-tribal's and in some cases by the local officials. Wherever lands are given yet the pattas are not given, or pattas handed over yet the land is not shown. There is a discrepancy in demarcation of Scheduled Areas. In some places it is village wise and in some places it is area wise. There should be a clear village-wise demarcation of the Scheduled Area to avoid ambiguities and exploitation of tribal lands.

Some of the tribal villages surrounding the Scheduled Areas are administratively called the Tribal Sub-Plan Areas, where land alienation is high and has numerous pending cases. Land restoration and issuing title deeds to tribals as per Land Transfer Regulation (LTR) Act should

be implemented immediately in all these areas. This issue has to be immediately addressed, since only land situated in those villages that fall within the Scheduled Areas enjoy the protection under the LTR Act 1/70 in Andhra Pradesh.

The Agency Revenue Divisional Officers serve as judicial magistrates and conduct agency courts in the Scheduled Areas. They are not knowledgeable of judicial matters and LTR, as they are posted from the Revenue Department. Because of their inexperience, numerous land alienation cases are pending in such courts. Some such SDCs are given charge of more than one district, or have to deal with both plain areas and scheduled areas, causing all sorts of logistical and experiential problems. They need to be trained in their LTR and judicial roles effectively. The revenue authorities (SDCs) are not restoring lands back to tribals even after High Court issued orders. The implementation of the LTR Act seems to be restricted to small non-tribal land holdings, while the big landlords with huge tracts of tribal land remain unaffected.

Lands are being taken over by non-tribals; while the tribals have no access to their ancestral lands. In fact, The Endowments department has plans to auction such lands to private bidders. These developments are in contravention of the Fifth Schedule and the LTR Act and therefore such moves should be withdrawn forthwith. Non-tribals are using Court stay orders, and even acknowledgements from the High Court to halt the restoration of lands in LTR cases. Steps need to be taken to ensure that stay orders do not stall the restoration process. One possibility would be to enshrine the LTR Act under the IX Schedule of the Constitution.

Non-tribals are taking possession of lands in Scheduled Areas by marrying tribal women. Most often, the tribal women, who are legal owners of lands and yields, become concubines and are denied all enjoyment over such rights by the non-tribal men. The children of a non-tribal father should not be given tribal status as most of the tribal groups in the country follow a patriarchal system of identity and ownership over property. It was felt that this system should be followed in the tribal area as well in order to prevent land alienation. Section 3(1) of LTR Act should be accordingly amended prohibiting transfer of land to children of tribal women married to non-tribal men.

Land alienation within tribes is a serious problem. A special protection should be provided for the local tribes by a process of categorization of tribes both for the purpose of preventing land alienation from lesser-developed tribes, and for a more equal distribution of reservations and other constitutional provisions.⁷ As commons are difficult to manage, tribal people have frequently been denied from their rights over land. Their compulsion lead to a situation where tribals purchased seeds and other components from local money lenders in loan which ultimately displaced them from their lands due to chronic indebtedness.

The unsatisfactory state of land records contributed a lot to the problem of land alienation. The tribals were never legally recognized as owners of the lands which they cultivated. The second form of land alienation is reported to have taken place due to 'benami' transfers. Another form of land alienation is related to the leasing or mortgaging of the land. To raise loans for various needs the tribals have to give their land as mortgage to the local moneylenders or to the rich farmers. Encroachment is another form of dispossessing the tribals of their lands and this is done by the new entrants in all the places where there were no proper land records. Bribing the local Patwari for manipulating the date of settlement of land disputes, ante-dating etc., are resorted to claim the tribal lands.

However, being the natural owners of forests and its adjoining lands the tribals are being deprived of their rights to own them. They have been relegated from their earlier 'self-reliant' status to a 'dependent' one. Coupled with the exploitation by the non-tribals, the State legislations also proved detrimental to their interests. Therefore to understand the root causes of

the land alienation process of the tribal communities its relationship with the changes in the socio-economic structures have to be understood properly.

Strong tribal movements and protests have resulted in Supreme Court's decision of forming 6th schedule and 5th schedule to protect tribal people from outsider's exploitation. Analysis of forest policies show historically forest has been seen as a commodity. It was a view primarily related to colonial administrators. In post colonial period forest is continued to be viewed as a commodity but there was substantive concern for forest protection. This protection initiative ultimately resulted in forest protection at the expense of tribal rights. Indian tribes have historical connection with forest. They are functionally and emotionally attached to the forest. Functionally they collect Food, Fuel and Fodder three most vital ingredient of their daily life. The Forest Charter, 1855 first time put restriction on the exploitation of forest by tribal people. Subsequently acts of 1878, 1898, 1927 and 1935 have systematically reduced tribal's access to and command over forest. While tribes gradually loose their access increasing commercial exploitation increased.⁸

After independence, the nature of the acts remained largely the same until 2006. When the demands of modern industries situated outside the tribal areas led to the commercial exploitation of forests. These became then an important source of revenue in the state, and to regulate the extraction of timber and other produce large forest areas were designated as "reserved" and put under the control of a government department. Tribal communities dwelling in enclaves inside the forest were either evicted or denied access to the forest produce on which they had depended for many necessities. Thus arose a conflict between the traditional tribal ownership and the state's claim to the entire forest wealth. Numerous revolts were the direct result of the denial of the local tribal's right in the forests which they had always considered their communal property. While they were forbidden to take even enough wood to build their huts or fashion their ploughs, they saw contractors from the lowlands felling hundreds of trees and carting them off, usually with the help of labour brought in from outside. Where tribals were allowed access to some of the forest produce, such as grass or dead wood for fuel, this was considered a "concession" liable to be withdrawn at any time. The traditional de facto ownership of tribal communities was now replaced by the de jure ownership of the state, which ultimately led to the exploitation of forest resources with total disregard for the needs of the tribal economy. However, in 2006 India reasserted tribal's access and rights over forest land on which they have depended for centuries.

Landlessness has been arguably the major cause of indebtedness among the agriculturist tribals in India. In India 58% of the tribal people Below Poverty Line with a high concentration in states like Andhra, Rajasthan, UP, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal. The land alienation with its long history has natural consequence of indebtedness, which further lead to dispossession of tribal land. The poverty, land alienation indebtedness and landlessness is working a cyclical way. Economically indebtedness is an outcome of deficit family income and social compulsions. Since ethnographic study has shows the self contained tribal life among the hunters and gatherers and their lack of concept of loan and interest, it is reasonable to believe that indebtedness is an outcome of interaction between non tribal and tribal people. The tribal's lack of education and understanding of loan and interests have provided the incentives to the non tribals to systematically exploit them.

Bonded labour

Slavery convention (1926) and International Labour Organisation (ILO) (1930) argue forced labour, bonded labour is to be defined on the basis of labour and services extracted from a person as a penalty where the person has not involved voluntarily. United Nations sees bonded labour as a special kind of forced labour (1956). However in India bonded labour is

characteristically more complex. Major reasons of bonded labour are– Link between caste, social structure and bondage, traditional feudal social relations and bonded labour . Small scale and localised quarrying and mining invite labourers from nomadic tribes and rural poor. They are irregularly paid and are made bonded without proper work place protection. Instances are reported from Haryana, U.P, M.P, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

India has a strong and substantivistic bonded labour abolition act of 1976. It recognises a) overlap between forced and bonded labour, b) contract labour and interstate migration issues, c) embeddedness within social customs. However, since states showed reluctance and it is challenging to identify bonded labours Supreme Court have tasked National Human Rights Commission for monitoring the implementation of the act.

Issues related to health

Malnutrition, as expected, is the most common health problem among tribals. In addition, communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, and STDs are major public health problems. Some tribal groups are also at high risk for sickle cell anemia. Generally tribal diets are seen to be deficient in protein, iron, iodine, and vitamins. According to the NFHS-3 survey ⁹ 47% of tribal women are having chronic energy deficiency (CED) compared to 35% among the general population. The most common diseases seen among tribals are respiratory tract infections and diarrheal disorders. 21% of children suffer at least two bouts of diarrhea every year and 22% suffer from at least two attacks of respiratory infections. ¹⁰ Tribals account for 25% of all malaria cases occurring in India and 15% of all falciparum cases¹¹ Intestinal helminthiasis is widely prevalent among tribal children (up to 50% in Orissa and 75% in MP). ¹² Skin infections such as tinea and scabies are seen among tribals due to poor personal hygiene. Sexually transmitted diseases are relatively more common (7.2% prevalence of syphilis among Kolli hills tribals of Tamil Nadu). ¹³The prevalence of tuberculosis is high, especially in Orissa. Sickle cell trait prevalence varies from 0.5% to 45%, disease prevalence is around 10%. It is mostly seen among the tribals of central and southern India, not reported in North-East, ¹⁴ the prevalence of tobacco use is 44.9% among tribal men and 24% among tribal women.¹⁵

Tribal people from their basic ways of living remote places and shyness of mixing with community at large frequently are worst sufferers of health hazards. The per capita health expenditure among tribal is higher than regular population. The available health infrastructure, i.e. number of health care centres, professionals, and distance is considered to be determinants of the quality of health care facilities available. However, many recent studies have shown that sometimes even if health care facilities are available tribal tend to depend on their traditional system .The World Health Report (2000)¹⁶ therefore have stressed on the importance of health delivery in health outcomes, also stressing on the awareness generation about hygiene and available health infrastructure. The role of indirect intervention where removal of chronic poverty and a culture change was thought to be the prime factor for improvement of health and hygiene.

At the time of independence the government system of health care was wholly urban centred. The rural areas depended on traditional faith healers and voluntary agencies especially those of missionaries. The importance of making health service facilities available at micro level with more emphasis on tribals. As a result the health issues are dealt by clubbing them together with nutrition, sanitation, family planning, health education, awareness generation etc. The village community health workers chosen by village people it now follows a decentralised agenda.

Education

Traditionally tribal communities have undergone drastic changes due to large scale migration, encroachment by outsiders and increasing vulnerability of the resources on which they have traditionally depended. Though many measures like scheduling of tribal areas, ceasing land transfer and recognition of the rights over resources is encouraged by the Government of India. Yet, tribal are facing problems of land alienation, displacement, indebtedness and bonded labour. Many of the problems are rooted from their increasing attachment with dominant culture and lack of basic competence in education.

Nehru advocated for adopting a non-isolation strategy for tribal but failed to build capacity for tribal to cope with challenges put forth by modern culture. The capacity building initiatives quite clearly must involve a high emphasis on the education sector, i.e. education for tribals to gain the power and self reliance and to cope with and transform their material reality. The universalization of primary education in India since 1950 is emphasised but yet remained underperformed. In recent decade a number of incentives are provided, e.g. Sarva Siksha Mission in 2003 – providing elementary education to all children in the age group of 6 – 14 by the year 2010. Mid day meal scheme 2001, which gives a mid day meal to school going children that dramatically increased the enrolment rate. However, in 9th plan special provision including pre and post metric scholarship and hostel facilities are initiated exclusively for tribals.

Solutions

Various solutions have been presented for dealing effectively with the tribal problems. The tribal problems have been approached from three viewpoints. They are as follows:

Assimilation- Assimilation is one of the ways of dealing with the tribal problems. Thus, according to this approach, we cannot deal with tribal problems on the basis of tribal culture and life but by changing them into the frame of new community. According to this solution advocated by the social reformers and voluntary organizations, assisting and encouraging the tribals to assimilate them with the mainstream of national life, can alone permanently solve the tribal problems. The Christian missionaries on the one hand, and the Hindu social reformers like Thakkar Bapa on the other, have been trying to assimilate them into Christian and Hindu community respectively. This approach has its own limitations .Complete assimilation is a difficult task. The tribals are not prepared to give up all of their traditional tribal beliefs, practices and ideas. Any attempt to impose the external cultural practices on them, creates in them guilt feelings, confusions and mental conflicts. This solution may even create economic, religious and moral degradation among them.

Isolation - Elwin have suggested that the tribals must be kept at a distance from the rest of the society. Keeping them in isolation in some “National Parks” or “reserved areas” would solve two problems:(a) the tribals would be in a position to maintain their independent identity;(b) they would be free from the exploitation of outsiders. The champions of this approach are of the view that sufficient time must be given to the tribals to assimilate themselves with the rest of the community. The limitation of this approach is that when once the tribals are kept in isolation they are likely to develop vested interests and keep themselves permanently away from others.

Integration- The third view, which is actively followed in the recent years, is that of integration. The policy of isolation is neither possible nor desirable, and that of assimilation would mean imposition. Hence integration alone can make available to the tribes the benefits of modern society and yet retain their separate identity. This view recommends the rehabilitation of the tribals on the plains along with the civilized people, but away from their native places

such as hills, mountains, forests, etc. This suggestion has also been criticized. It is said that this suggestion has been advocated to further the interests of industrialists and capitalists.

This solution is not appreciated on the ground that it may create economic and moral decadence to those who are separated from their beloved land to plains. Still, the policy of integration which aims at developing a creative adjustment between tribes and non-tribes has been supported by thinkers and writers like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1957 in his foreword to Verrier Elwin's "The Philosophy for NEFA", has laid down in five principles, that is, "Panchasheela", the policy of integration. The tribal "Panchasheela" as has been enunciated by him are as follows:

- (i) Nothing should be imposed on the tribal people. They must be allowed to develop along the lines of their own genius. We should try to encourage in every way their own traditional arts and culture.
- (ii) Tribal rights in land and forests should be respected.
- (iii) Attempt must be made to train and build up a team of their own people to the work of administration and development. Some technical personnel from outside will be of great help for them in the beginning. But too many outsiders must not be sent to the tribal territory.
- (iv) Over-administering the tribal areas or overwhelming them with too many schemes must be avoided. We should not work in rivalry to their own social and cultural institutions.
- (v) The results of the work must be adjudged by the quality of the human character that is evolved and not by statistics or the amount of money spent.

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Conclusion

The solutions to the tribal problems mentioned above, have their own merits and demerits. The modern culture must not be imposed on them. Only those elements of new culture which may vitalize them for material advancement must be infused in them. Tribal problems are simple but very delicate to handle. No solution can be experimented with before winning the confidence of the tribals. It is essential to establish a harmonious compatibility between the tribal mode of living and the material advancement of culture. The integration of the tribal society into the Indian society takes time, and it has to be promoted while retaining the good points of the tribal culture. Tribal people possess a variety of culture and they are in many ways certainly not backward. There is no point in trying to make them a second rate copy of ourselves. We should unite and integrate the tribes in a true heart unity with India as a whole so that they may play a full part in their life. And the last is to develop welfare and educational facilities so that every tribesman may have an equal opportunity with the rest of the fellow citizens who work in the fields, factories, and workshops in the open country and the plains.

The socio-cultural change among the tribal communities has no doubt empowered the tribals; however, their cultural identity is under severe stress. However, it is not too late to rise above the politics of exclusion and marginalization, to unearth and mainstream fast vanishing tribal traditions, in India. Perhaps its time to amplify long marginalized voices and awaken contemporary nation States to the realization that only through the establishment of such democratic, reconciliatory, gender friendly grass root tribal traditions could one create a more equitable, more just society and world order. The reality remaining that without rapid action,

these native communities may be wiped out, taking with them vast indigenous knowledge, rich culture and traditions, and any hope of preserving the natural world, and a simpler, more holistic way of life for future generations. However, it will only work if the winners support with the losers.

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