

PROSPECTS OF TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE CURRENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT: Often neglected and discriminated by the society, the tribal people have formed the backbone of an agriculture-based nation like India for long. However, with the advancement of times and science and technology, these people have started shrinking in number. As their existence grow tougher, so do their livelihood. But the scenario has been changing fast in recent times. The Government of India has been trying its level-best for the upliftment of these people. However, there is more to it than meets the eye. This piece discusses the simple livelihood of these people as well as the various factors that have affected these communities, in particular, the impact of environmental degradation and tribal reservation. This piece also throws some light upon the concept of modernity and the effect of „Global village□ on the cultural and local practices of the tribal community, while we also take a closer look at the status of empowerment of tribal women.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the 2011 census, tribal people constitute 8.6% of India's total population, thus more than 104 million people identify as tribal in the nation.^[1] A substantial number of Scheduled Tribes in India are recognized as tribal under the Constitution of India. As per the Constitution of the Indian Republic, a total of 645 district tribes pertain to the category of “Scheduled Tribes”. The Constitution of India, Article 366 (25) defines Scheduled Tribes as "such tribes or tribal communities or part of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to the scheduled Tribes (STs) for the purposes of this Constitution". In Article 342, the procedure to be followed for specification of a scheduled tribe is prescribed.^[2] However, it does not contain the criterion for the specification of any community as scheduled tribe.

An often-used criterion is based on attributes such as Geographical isolation: they live in cloistered, exclusive, remote and inhospitable areas such as hills and forests. Backwardness: their livelihood is based on primitive agriculture, a low-value closed economy with a low level of technology that leads to their poverty. They have low levels of literacy and health. Distinctive culture, language and religion: communities have developed their own distinctive culture, language and religion. Shyness of contact: they have a marginal degree of contact with other cultures and people.^[3]

While the north-eastern Indian states of Mizoram and Nagaland account for the highest percentages of Scheduled Tribes in India with 94.4% and 86.5% respectively, the figures go down remarkably in the north Indian states, particularly Punjab and Haryana with almost no percentage of Scheduled Tribes.^[4] “Adivasi” is an umbrella term for a heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups considered the aboriginal population of South Asia, including that of India.^[5] These societies are particularly predominant in the eastern states like Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal and the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

II. IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION ON TRIBAL POPULATION

Environmental degradation is a process in which the value of the biophysical environment is affected by a combination of human-induced processes acting upon the land. This, in turn, affects the indigenous people residing on the land which has been serving as their primary means of livelihood for centuries. They are dependent on the land and the forests, either directly or indirectly, for food consumption, means of earning, shelter and various other aspects which even include clothing in some cases.

There are a number of factors which might lead to the degradation or deterioration of an environment. A few of them are discussed here, as well as the reasons why those factors adversely affect the tribal population dependent on that land.

Excessive population pressure on land: India's population of over 1,300 million people is more than that of the whole world prior to the Industrial Revolution. ^[6] This leads to encroachment of roads and a huge density of population across big towns and cities, which in turn leads to townspeople and businessmen looking for fresher, greener and less populated. This migration causes commercialization of the land, leading to formation of industries and buildings on the land which then takes away the homes of thousands of tribal people who have inhabited those lands for centuries. Obviously they are compensated monetarily, but more often than not, the compensation is not sufficient enough. Moreover, they are then left with no other option but to migrate to civilized urban or semi-urban life which comes as an abrupt change in lifestyle for them, sometimes too drastic for them to cope up with. This causes them to learn newer languages, culture, etiquettes within a short period of time. In order to stay away from being discriminated or be victims of racism, they have to quickly get used to the more sophisticated human life in a society as compared to the simpler lifestyle they had spent on their lands. Often they struggle financially which leads to the Government implementing a number of schemes for them such as the Equity support to NSTFDC/STFDC, DBT Scheme for Post Matric Scholarship, Research Training: Grants-in-Aid to TRIs, Institutional Support for Development and Marketing of Tribal Product, Scheme of Development of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTGs), Scheme of Grant in Aid to Voluntary Organizations working for welfare, Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), Grants under Article 275 (1) of the Constitution of India, Pre-Matric Scholarship, Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Hostels for ST boys and ST Girls, Post Matric Scholarship (PMS), Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship for ST Students, National Overseas Scholarships for Scheduled Tribe Students. ^[7] However this does not take away the fact that despite getting more developed and progressed, they have been losing their identities.

Deforestation: India loses 1.3 million hectares of forests per year. The major cause of desertification or deforestation is the cutting down of trees. There are natural factors like forest fire too which contributes to deforestation, but the artificial causes far outweigh the natural ones. According to the National Remote Sensing Agency (NRSA), India had less than 11.4% of area under forest as per the 1992 observation. But the more recent satellite pictures show that the forest cover is now less than 10%. ^[8] This leads to a severe depletion of natural resources for food, clothes, shelter and other primary consumption requirements available to the tribal population inhabiting those forests, thus compelling them to migrate to civilized societies.

Erosion: Loss of vegetative cover has made land more susceptible to erosion. The erosion agents like wind and water have left vast tracts of land barren. Water erodes the top soil in India at an estimated rate of 12,000 million tons per annum ^[9], which increases in windy and dry places like Rajasthan. The loss of top soil depicts a permanent depletion of the resource base.

Pollution of land is caused by disposal of solid waste, refuse from domestic, industrial and agricultural sectors, several pollutants like chemical residues, fly ash from thermal power stations, non-biodegradable materials like plastic, rubber and glass, and chemicals like pesticides and fertilizers. Another major source of pollution is the creation of derelict land due to mining. Roughly 0.8 mha of land in India are despoiled due to open or surface and underground mining activities. ^[10] All these lead to devaluation and deterioration of the land which serves as a detrimental factor to the tribal people nearby.

In the immortal words of the great sage Gautama Buddha, *“A tree is a peculiar organism of unlimited benevolence. It makes no demands for its sustenance and extends generously its products of life activity. It affords protection to all beings, offering shade even to the axe-man who destroys it”*.

III. TRIBAL RESERVATION IN CONTEXT WITH THE CURRENT SCENARIO FOR MODERN EDUCATION AND JOB RECONSIDERATION

The tribal reservation can be broadly classified according to the different sectors. Reservations in elected bodies: Today, out of 543 seats in India's parliament, 47 (8.66%) for ST/Tribes. ^[11] Allocation of seats for Scheduled Tribes in the Lok Sabha are made on the basis of proportion of Scheduled Tribes in the State concerned to that of the total population. A similar percentage of exclusive seats has been provided for members of designated tribes in each state legislature. Local self-governments have, amongst others, tribe based reservation system in place. Thus, tribal people have had more of a say and representation in politics than they used to have in the past. This is a positive step in the right direction. The tribal people elected in the parliament can highlight the problems faced by their community and those problems can be addressed accordingly by both the respective state Government and the central Government.

Reservations in employment: A fixed percentage of India's government and public sector jobs are made exclusive for categories of people largely based on their tribe. The exact percentage varies from one public company to another, but it remains the same across government sector jobs. This is again a step in the right direction as it will allow the largely financially backward tribal people to be financially stable and self-sufficient. However, it becomes a luxury for people belonging to Scheduled Tribes and from commercially strong and well-off families.

Reservations in education: In India, many scholarships or student aids are available to people belonging to the ST category. Only about 0.7% of scholarships or student aid in India is based on merit. ^[12] The University Grants Commission (UGC) provides financial assistance to universities for the establishment of Special Cells for STs. ^[13] The cells help universities implement the reservation policy in student admission and staff recruitment processes for teaching and non-teaching jobs. They also help the ST categories integrate with the university community and help remove the difficulties ST individuals may have experienced. In 1982, it was specified that 7.5 per cent of vacancies in public sector and government-aided educational institutes should be reserved for the ST candidates. ^[14]

However, despite all these reservations, the amount of difficulties faced by tribal people is paramount. Many of the suicides in IITS are of ST categories. There is so much pressure put on the ST students that they can't cope. From a relatively simpler and humbler background, often they are thrown into a much more competitive environment and are expected to compete. In a place where the average IQ is said to be in the range of 140, it places enormous pressure on those who can't measure up. Often they get into jobs or educational institutes after securing much less marks as compared to the general category candidates. This places them in a position of vulnerability in terms of knowledge and mentality as their general category peers tend to be more knowledgeable and secure in that particular field. They are of course not to be blamed as on an average, they don't get the same opportunities and scope as general candidates. This leads to severe taunts and discrimination at their workplaces by other peers or in some cases, inferiority complex at their own inabilities which drives several candidates to suicide. Thus the reservation system tends to backfire and instead of serving as a means of “positive discrimination” which was the main purpose of its introduction, it works as “negative discrimination” only.

However, keeping all those theories in mind, the Government cannot do away with the reservation system at all and has to continue to support it as it is the one of the only means of uplifting the tribal people. But what the Government has tried yet failed to implement thus far is an effective manner of education to these tribal people so that they can compete with general category candidates on equal footing and thus never feel themselves to be inferior to others. Our country can never sit back and miss out on the precious talent that has been lost through the deaths of these versatile and often young tribal lives.

Thus the reservation system needs to be reconsidered in a way keeping in mind that the tribal people never feel discriminated against. The best method to facilitate that is either to make separate institutes for them or to provide solid technical education right at the grassroots level. The first option is not quite advisable though as it does not solve the problem of them not coming into contact with the general world. While the number of suicides might be decreased, it might also lead to a surge in racial discrimination against them since other people might look down upon them further because of the fact that they don't have too much contact with the outside world.

IV. CONCEPT OF MODERNITY AND IMPACT OF 'GLOBAL VILLAGE' ON THE CULTURAL AND LOCAL PRACTICES OF THE TRIBAL COMMUNITY

In order to blend in with the society in which they are living in so that they are not subjected to segregation, the tribal people, especially the youth living in cities, often tend to disregard their culture and traditions and adopt the city lifestyle. Sometimes it might also be the result of a conscious effort to Westernize or modernize themselves to cope up with the ever-so-fast changing world. While this is an encouraging sign as far as progress and development are concerned, it also leads to a severe loss in identity and uniqueness. The youth may sometimes abandon their old cultural and local practices. With regard to tradition and culture, it thus serves as a negative effect despite it fast-forwarding their progress. No doubt this is one of the major causes why their numbers are diminishing. No man or woman can truly be civilized unless he or she accepts his or her true identity. Sometimes, love marriages with non-tribal people also contribute to this, modernity and while it is a welcome change, it also leads to the person belonging to the tribal family to give up his or her traditions completely in lieu of accepting more progressive virtues. Needless to say, this also contributes negatively to the maintenance of culture and tradition amongst these communities.

“Global village” is a term which refers to a world perceived as a community connected by electronics and technology. ^[15] As mentioned before, the modern tribal people must remember the fact that they are basically from a background which was always more familiar with the earthly environment than the artificial world. However, with the growing advancement of science and technology, the youth are connected through each other via means of microblogging or social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp, et cetera. This further leads to them being much more tech-savvy, well-equipped with gadgets, forward-minded, outgoing and well-versed in English than they were before. But they also grow less attached to their roots and culture as a result and they might cease to participate in their local traditions. Thus it works as a detrimental factor in the context of preserving their local practices.

V. STATUS OF TRIBAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The status of tribal women is abysmal, to say the least, not unlike the overall status of tribal people. Sometimes, in order to get their quota of subsidized rice and wheat, the tribal women have to walk 15 to 20 Km once or twice a week to the nearest ration shop. But their allotment is often not sufficient enough even for a family of three. There are several instances of sexual assaults on tribal women by forest and mining contractors. State atrocities on tribal women are on the rise. Thus, the tribal women face formidable problems in raising their socio-economic status.

According to the National Population policy 2000, the tribal people need special attention in respect of basic health, reproductive and child health services. ^[16] Equally important for tribal women are the provisions for mobile clinics, information and counseling on infertility and regular supply of standardized medication. The Dhebar Commission (1960-61) has mentioned that the tribal leaders emphasized that the instruction in primary schools be imparted to them through their mother tongue. ^[17] Teachers chosen amongst them or tribal dialect knowing teachers may be appointed. Informal education, forest education and vocational courses need to get due

emphasis as well. More women animators need to be identified by the local specific communities for getting trained in development of educational means.

There are very few schemes put in place by the Government. However, enthusiastic and responsive political leadership and bureaucracy at various levels are crucial for the implementation of these schemes for the tribal women. Given their low socio-economic status, the tribal women can improve their livelihood by means of self-help groups as well such as the Priyadarshini program introduced in April 2011. ^[18] Besides gainful employment, they also need awareness and training programs conducive to their requirements.

VI. CONCLUSION

At the end of the day, it is very easy to write that the condition of tribal people is perfect on paper. But the reality is much different and the condition is far from good. Of course, that does not mean all hope is lost. There is always light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. The Government has been trying its best and it will continue to do so, regardless of which political party is at the helm. A nation can only move forward when the happiness and satisfaction of all people are taken into consideration. Tribal people have formed an indigenous part of India for centuries. It's high time they got amply rewarded for their faith in the land. And they will reap the benefits in the coming years. All the schemes and policies implemented by the Government are looking up and they will surely contribute to the well-being and development of these people.

In the continuous endeavor for development and education for the tribal people, we must not forget, as rightly quoted by the great poet Rabindranath Tagore, "*The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence*".

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