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THE ORIGINAL INHABITANTS OF INDIA : VICTIMS OF WRITTEN TRADITIONS

Dalits or Tribes

In the 77th Indian Science Congress held at Cochin in February 1990 a question was raised: Can we substitute the term 'tribe/*ādivāsi*' with 'dalit'? The argument was that the word 'tribe' is an administrative invention used by outsiders; 'dalit' is a more generic term depicting the deplorable conditions of a people who are at the bottom of Indian society. Opinions were divided; finally it did not get through; may be because anthropologists themselves are a part of the administration, forming tribes of their own. However, the question is valid and the debate is going on. The present paper restricts itself to a major portion of the dalits – the most original of the indigenous people of India – the tribes and their sordid story of continued enslavement and exploitation.

Etic View

In encountering the tribals, the non-tribals make use of certain categories of concepts. This analytical assessment about others is called the etic view. Thus the earliest written traditions in India perceived the original inhabitants as *dāsas*, *vānaras*, *rākshasas*, *nishadas*, *nāgas*, *yakshas*, *sabaras* and *kirāta*. This outside view assigned an inferior status to the natives. They were comparatively left free up to the arrival of the British.

The British too interacted with the natives in their quest for a unified India. They called the natives as tribes and it was put in black and white in their records and documents. Reviewing the different appellations used to categorize the natives, Jagnath Pathy remarked that "the first official designation was 'forest tribe' followed by 'primitive tribe' (1931) 'backward tribe' (1935) '*ādivāsi*' (1948) and then ST (1950)."¹ On the

1. Jaganath Pathy, "The Idea of tribe and the Indian Scene" *Man in India* Vol. 69, No. 4 (Dec. 1989), p. 352.

one hand the word tribe was an administrative abstraction of a large number of people having diversities in their ethnic composition, ecological setting, physical features, language, dance, music, art, cult and culture. On the other hand it denoted a political bias of the ruling class – that they were the ‘civilized’ and the rest ‘uncivilized’.

After the independence, the administrative abstraction together with the political domination gained an added momentum. The prejudices were perpetuated and institutionalized by the rulers. In the written Constitution a number of provisions and clauses were provided for the welfare of the weaker sections; but the execution of these provisions were deterred. The superiority of the ruling classes rose to new heights and depths owing to the caste/class consciousness and interests. The policies followed fitted to the very design of the exploiters – money lenders, petty traders, contractors, police, forest officials and excise people. These non-*ādivāsis* penetrated into the unknown lands in the name of free enterprise and integration. Although the term *ādivāsi* literally means the original settler or inhabitant, the outsiders perceived them as uncivilized. There are a number of cases in schools, colleges and universities where both the teacher and the taught treat the tribals as a laughing stock. ‘Mahipal Bhuria described the indignation he had suffered due to the illtreatment by the non-tribals. As a result of this he boycotted the classes for sometime and did not appear in the college campus.’² Many of the tribal students have narrated such harrowing experiences during the course of their studies. All, these expressions are caused by the outsider’s point of view.

Emic View

While the etic view presents the outside view, the emic portrays an inside view, how the natives perceive themselves. They never make use of the term tribe/*ādivāsi*; but they are proud to belong to a group – they are Gonds, Chenchus, Bhils, Nagas, and Madias. According to Kamaladevi Chadhopadhyaya, “Several tribes prefer to call themselves by the simple epithet ‘man’. The Mikiri use the term Arleng meaning man; the Garos call themselves Mande, Boro as Kacharia, the Kakayens as Singpho all meaning man. This was probably because they felt the names by which the people in the plains referred to them were derogatory. They chose

2. Mahipal Bhuriya, “Tribal Youth” Souvenir; Ramakrishna Mission, 1989 p. 183.

the simple but significant and dignified nomenclature – man.”³ Further, “the name ‘Koya’ may be connected with the name by which the Gonds still call themselves, ‘Koitur’ meaning man.”⁴ The HO, Oraon and a host of other natives too mean that they are people or communities following particular traditions. Thus there is a gap between the etic and emic points of view; the former is a well documented and prejudiced perception while the latter is the heritage of a living and vibrating culture. Both these perceptions play a key role in the pattern of interaction among different groups.

The Tribal World

The indigenous people constitute about four to five percent of the world’s population. They are divided into two thousand or more ethnic groups. A lion’s share of them are still enslaved and exploited; they are evicted from the cities of the present day; they are dispossessed through the tactics of written documents. They are waging a grim battle not only for co-existence but also for mere survival.

In India the position of the tribals is very precarious owing to the peculiar nature of the society. The graded inequality built into the social system coupled with the means and methods available at the beck and call of the ruling class have put them in the hot chamber. They form about 7.8 percent of the total population of India as per the 1981 census.⁵ As per the academic description a tribal is one who is enlisted so in the Presidential Order of 1956. That is to say it is based on a written list that the status of a tribal is decided. The administrators depend upon the government list to identify the tribals. If such names are not seen in the list the tribals won’t be recognized so. A few Oraons were denied the ST status because they mis spelt the word as Uraon. The authorities found that there is no Uraon in the list, they were not given the tribal status. These young men got disgusted with the office procedures and the formalities.

The tribal welfare programmes are chalked out on certain assumptions – that the issue is one of economic assistance. But the question remains

3. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, *Tribalism in India*; (New Delhi : Vikas), p. 2.

4. Begbie, L. F., *Gazateer of Chanda District* (1909), p. 98.

5. *Tribes Population* (Frontline, Oct. 3-16, 1987). The figures shown here depict the regional distribution of the tribals all over India.

how far these measures have become ameliorative. The experience of experts living among the tribals gives ample proofs about the marginalization of the tribals. For instance, Mr. P.K.S. Madhavan, the pioneer of Action for Welfare and Awakening in Rural Environment (AWARE) said, "The data I had collected through field-work gave me a shock. Though the government had spent about a crore rupees in ten years, the condition of the less than 5000 Chenchus on the Amarabad plateau had not yet improved by an inch. Finally I found what had happened to the money – 62 percent had gone to maintain the bureaucracy. The commission agents, middlemen and others had pocketed 31 percent. Just seven percent had reached the villagers and five percent was wasted away by them. Only two percent had really been spent on development."⁶ The story of the development of the authorities and the underdevelopment of the tribals is not at all new; it is an ongoing mechanism of manipulation and exploitation. The various Reports of the SC/ST Commissioners and other Commissions set up by the government have provided sufficient evidences as to the direction and orientation of the welfare schemes.

Deprivation of Community Land

Apart from becoming the victims of welfare schemes, the tribals also lost their precious land through the written documents. To the original inhabitants land is a part and parcel of their own selves. It is the land of their ancestors; of their spirits; it is a medium of communion – communion with the members of the society, with gods and spirits and with the nature as such. In some places the land is held together; the ownership is collective. The work is performed together and the produce is shared. Grigson in his enquiry about the problems faced by the tribals in Central India found that the Hill Marias in Kuakodi cultivated their lands in community in 1940s. He wrote, "Each penda is cut by a number of villagers with the approval of the Gaita, and the portion cut by each of them is roughly marked. Help is taken from village people who are ready to give help and at harvest, the produce is divided amongst the shareholders; those who helped to clear the penda are also given part of the produce A share sufficient for their maintenance is also given to the old and feeble villagers. A Hill Maria village, therefore, is a remarkable institution run on co-operative principles and it is surprising how these people living far off in the hills and cut off from the rest of the world

6. Madhavan, P.K.S. "Man Who Made the Meek Aware" *The Week*, Dec. 31, 1989.

manage themselves in so exemplary a manner."⁷ The tribals had possessed land; but there were no written documents to prove it. The British introduced the new Land Acquisition Act of 1894 and amassed the unrecorded lands. This gave rise to a number of uprisings in the tribal belts. Their predicament is well described by the SC/ST Commissioner in his 28th Report. According to him, "in the beginning all the tribal people as a rule were land owners eventhough their rights may not have been formally recognized. Therefore, the first impact of the extension of the formal system was to put a question mark of their rights over natural resources including the land. This incongruous situation has not been rectified anywhere eventhough its ill effects are quite well known. Now, the tribal people are at the mercy of others even for the recognition of their rights which they have traditionally enjoyed and for access to the resource which they have effectively managed through the ages."⁸ The introduction of the written records as a proof of the ownership paved the way for the expropriation of the tribal lands; the owners became tenants at will. Sir B.K. Bose wrote: "In many parts of the country the old landholding families, the natural leaders of the village communities have disappeared and their place has been taken by a class of people who in many cases are fitted neither by their character nor by their past traditions to have any fellow-feeling with the tenants, sharing in their joys and sorrows and helping them in their trials and difficulties."⁹ Hence, there is a gradual disappearance of the real owners of the land.

After touring the different tribal pockets of Mandla, the then Deputy Commissioner wrote, "Everywhere I go I find more and more evidence of the exploitation of the aboriginal by malguzars, traders, contractors and others. There is almost anarchy in the villages: the alien malguzar does just what he likes. If they do not agree he will impound their cattle, run cases against them in civil courts or even harass them with gangs of loafers hired in Mandla or Jubbulpore."¹⁰ The non-tribals in their hunger for accumulation of land cheated the illiterate tribals and possessed land. Mr. Noronha who made elaborate studies has described the process as

7. Grigson W. V., *The Aboriginal Problem in the Central Provinces & Berar* (Nagpur : Government Press 1944), p. 183.

8. SC/ST Commissioner's Report, Extracts in *Dalit Voice* (Dec. 16-31, 1989), p. 17.

9. Grigson W. V. *Ibid* p. 108.

10. *ibid* .. p. 19.

follows. "A Gond borrows Rs. 100/- from a Bania at 24 percent annual interest. Besides paying this interest he has to meet the rent of his holding and maintain himself and the family. One of two things happens. If he pays his interest he falls into arrears of rent and is ultimately evicted. If he does not pay the interest in due course the Bania attaches his cattle and movable property. Having no cattle, he cannot plough; the land is uncultivated; he cannot pay the rent, he is ejected." Further a detailed examination about the loss of land of the times brought to light certain other factors. "Most of the surrenders are in fact on account of arrears of rent. It is interesting to note that most of the surrendered land has gone from the aboriginals to Brahmins, though Kunbis, Mahars and Marwaris have had their share. No aboriginal has been given any part of the surrendered land."¹¹ Thus the exploitation of the tribal land was continued by fair or foul means; the tribals became victims because of their lack of interest in the written traditions.

Once the tribals were dispossessed of land, they were also pushed out of the forests. It was brought about by the enactment of the Indian Forest Act in 1927. The customary use of the forest became a privilege instead of right. For centuries the tribals were living in the forests and they have learnt to cope with the challenges of the ecosystem. They depended upon the forest for the very survival. For the food, drink, fruits, roots, tubers, leaves, grass etc. they relied upon the bounty of nature. But the Forest Laws became draconian and people were deprived of their sustenance. Elwin has depicted the predicament of the forest dweller: "He was forbidden to practise his traditional methods of cultivation. He was ordered to remain in one village and not to wander from place to place; when he had cattle he was kept in a state of continual anxiety for fear they should stray over the boundary and render him liable to heavy fines. During the year 1933-34 there were 27000 forest offences registered in the Central Provinces and Berar, and probably ten times as many unwhipped of justice. It is obvious that so great a number of offences would not occur unless the forest regulations ran counter to the fundamental needs and sentiments of the tribesmen."¹² In short he is not at home in his own country. In the name of scientific management of the forest, the State is exerting pressure upon the indigenous people and depriving them systematically

11. Ibid p. 56.

12. Ibid quoted p. 340.

of the forest resources. All the resources in the forests are plundered and looted by the outsiders, contractors, paper factories and other industrial concerns. The tribals do not get even the minor forest products. Middlemen pocket a substantial sum from the transactions.

The tribals are not beggars. But they are rich in giving and sharing what they have. Take any remote tribal areas; One can find enormous natural resources. For instance Bastar. The main resources and their areas are marked in the map.¹³ The iron ore is one of the best qualities available in Asia, the sale of which is bringing a substantial amount of foreign exchange. While the administration is gaining much, not even a small portion of it is marked for developmental programmes. This fact is accepted by the Chief Secretary of the State. He remarked, "It is a travesty of justice that while large amount of foreign exchange is being earned every year out of the iron ore extracted out of Bastar, not even a fraction of the value added by this largest mine of Asia has been spent on the development of Bastar."¹⁴ It speaks volumes about the deprivation of the tribals by non-tribals. The richness of the tribals who allow others to exploit their natural resources is to be appreciated. The state of affairs in Chhotanagpur tribal belt is also the same. A glance at the rich mineral resources at Jharkhand pin-points the following details:

TABLE : MINERAL WEALTH OF JHARKHAND¹⁵

Items	Jharkhand (%)	Rest of Bihar
Bauxite	32.4	nil
Chinaclay	28.7	nil
Iron ore	22.4	nil
Limestone	03.7	07.5
Manganese ore	00.6	nil
Pyrite	nil	100
Kyanite	100	nil
Quartzite	85.0	nil
Mica	60.5	5.3
Asbestos	58.5	nil
Coal	44.5	nil
Sand	37.5	nil
Fireclay	33.0	nil
Apatite	48.6	nil

13. Minerals of Bastar, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, M. P.

14. Sing Deo, R. C., *Bastar Development Plan*, M. P. State Planning Board p. 96.

15. Indian Minerals.

Compared to the rest of Bihar, the Jharkhand area is highly enriched with a lot of mineral resources. So the Jharkhand area has prospered whereas the Jharkandis have not developed. It was the 'dikus' who have benefitted out of the rich natural resources. As the region itself developed, a large number of tribals had to leave the place. During the first three five-year plans, more than 50,000 ST families in the Jharkhand area were uprooted from their homes to house big industries.

Displacement

Generally the tribals become the targets of big reservoirs, mega projects, wild life sancturries, mines, industries, etc. They are forcefully evicted using repressive measures. Many of the tribal families are uprooted because of this. Some of them may get alternate plots only if their possession is proved through documents. Otherwise there is no claim. Therefore, a large number of the tribals do not get any compensation. The trauma is quite tragic. The exodus from the land is not easy, because of the cherished memory of the ancestors and elders; it is also the abode of the various spirits etc. The custodians of the land have to quit the place in utter shame and indignity. The latest in this tragedy is the Narmada Valley Project. Again the burden of displacement falls upon the shoulders of the tribals. The Narmada Bachao Andolan led by Baba Amte and others are a welcome sign. It is a tragedy to observe that in a democratic set up, the decisions of eviction are imposed by the rulers upon the ruled using pressure. And the affected people have no voice at all. They are simply ignored, silenced and despised.

Paradigm of Development

It is in this context one has to find out the kind of paradigm used to measure development. The acquisitive and saving mentality and the growth of individualism have become the parameters of development in the modern society. It is called into question by the very life style of the tribals. The tribals enjoy life by tuning themselves to the stirrings of nature. They are the children of nature. They are satisfied with the minimum requirements. Besides, the question remains, what is the ultimate objective of tribal development? The answer is quite nebulous. To some, it is integration, to some others, it is bringing people into the main stream? but both these are vague terms and botherations. For a Bhil, the main stream is his own Bhilhood; it is different for a

Madia. In case of integration it is not a homogenous tendency; plurality is the very foundation of human cultures.

Besides, the tribal welfare measures should not be perceived from an economic point of view alone. Instead it is to be seen in a holistic way. The STs are to be accepted into the society as equal citizens; they need to be recognized in the national life. They were the earliest freedom fighters in India. They opposed both the Britishers as well as the exploiters. The Mundas took to arms in 1789, 1807, 1812, 1819-20 & 1831-32. The Kol rebellions of 1817 & 1832 was caused by the oppression of the aboriginals; the Santhal rebellion was from 1835-36 & 1854; a number of other uprisings have taken place in the tribal belts. Besides, there are a good number of people who speak the tribal tongues. But none of their languages is recognized by the government. Their music, dance and other cultural pursuits should find a prominent place in the national life.

Organized Deprivation of Education

The level of education of the tribals is very low. In spite of the educational policies and programmes in which the written documents play a vital role, there is no significant change in the literacy rate. The rate of literacy among the STs in 1981 was 16.35% as against 41.3% in the general population. For the females the literacy rate is 8.04% for tribals as against the 29.43% for the non-tribals. Often the schools are only in the registers. Seemingly there is a trend not to make available the facilities of education to be spread among the tribals. If all are educated, it may tell upon the interests of the ruling class. So the denial of education can be seen as a method to keep the lowest under the feet. Take the case of the ancient system of *gurukulā* education. It was not open to all; only the top castes had the privilege to study. Ambedkar has found a method in this systematic deprivation of education for the masses. He observed, "By the denial of education to the Shudras, by diverting Kshatriyas to military pursuits and the Vaishyas to trade and by reserving education to themselves the Brahmins alone could become the educated class—free to misdirect and misguide the whole society."¹⁶ This can be found true when the Britishers made the education public and open to all. The Upper Castes by hook or crook wanted

16. Ambedkar, *Unpublished Writings*, Vol. 3, 1987, p. 320.

to keep up the monopoly of education, thereby to perpetuate their command over people and resources. Breathing threats and unleashing oppressive measures they blocked and denied education to the teeming millions of the lower strata. They built schools using public money in the exclusive places like "agraharams, chavadis or temples."¹⁷ Thus an open system was also made exclusivistic by cunning and manipulation.

In fact the tribals have their own educational facilities and training. It has developed taking into account the whole life situation of the people. It is the ghotul system. The training in the ghotul is life-oriented. It is imparted to the youth of the society to shoulder the responsibilities of the society. It is very well described by Elwin, Grigson et al. However, it is not adapted to the pedagogy of schooling. While contacting a number of villagers in the Gadchiroli area, they expressed happiness over the methods of teaching done by the naxals. What the 43 years of welfare schemes couldn't deliver, the naxals gave within 43 hours, namely the skills to handle cash, counting of money etc.

Indigenous Movements

The continued deprivation and neglect of the tribal ethos have paved the way for nascent movements among various tribal groups. There is an emerging consciousness among various cross sections of the people to find out innovative means and methods to develop the people in their own idiom. The *Gondwana Darsan* is a magazine which highlights the cause of the tribals especially the Gonds. They are revitalizing their cultural heritage and Gondi Dharma through this magazine.

The demand for separate tribal states within the union of India was going on for a long time. It is getting voiced up at several forums. The latest is the clarion call made by the President of the All India Adivasi Development Council, Mr. Somjibhai Damor. 'He has asked for the setting up of eight tribal states in India. They are: Utterakhand, Bodo Pradesh, Matsya Pradesh, Bhilisthan, Gondwana, Jharkhand, Dandakaranya and Dakshinakhand. He has planned to form the eight states

17. Radhakrishnan, P. "Backward classes in Tamil Nadu : 1872-1988" in "EPW" Vol. XXV No. 10 (March 10, 1990), p. 516.

within a period of ten years and has threatened to take up the help of the naxals in case it is necessary.'

Conclusion

The tribals in India are waging a grim battle for survival. In the past they had to struggle for co-existence; now they have to fight for their survival, for their right to life. The forces that victimize them are all the written traditions of various times. These written religious traditions took away the dignity and social acceptability of the indigenous people of India. The British by mere written orders alienated them from the land and forests. After the independence, glorious tributes were paid to the STs in the written Constitution; special provisions and clauses were added to; new laws were enacted; but seldom they are put into practice. Almost all the policies, social institutions, education, courts, police, patwari and forest official are dependent upon the written traditions of the society. They are becoming fetters rather than elements of liberation. The only hope is the emergence of the tribals themselves being conscious about their rich heritage and cultural achievements.