

## SUBALTERN MOVEMENTS: PERSPECTIVE OF THE PRIMAL PEOPLE

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### I. Democratic Attitude

A group of university students from a city went to reside in a remote tribal village. Their plan was to spend there a few days. It was already evening when they reached the destination. The surroundings of the village were really enchanting and enthralling, that they decided to take stroll around the village and satisfy their curiosity. The villagers on the other hand, were inquisitive and apprehensive about these strangers. No one in the village knew these 'sahibs' in trousers and shirts; the village leaders were not informed about it according to the custom. The villagers deliberated upon it, and decided to call the village *Panchayat* meeting on the very next morning. When the students got up in the morning, they were asked to come and attend the meeting scheduled in the morning. They all went, thinking of some village problems. To their great surprise, they themselves were the topic of the meeting. The issue of their entry into the village was introduced by the Patel.

It was a highly sensitive situation. It would have exploded if the students had resisted to attend the meeting. When they were there, they could give their points of view directly; could acknowledge their lack of experience in the village context. This dialogue and interaction made matters clear; eventually they were well accepted in every house. Later it became very difficult for the villagers and the students to say goodbye to each other. The bond of friendship was so intense after the initial skirmish.

This is the real spirit of democracy lived out in the life of tribals of some villages. This mutual interaction and attitude of give-and-take emerge from a common, lived out experience; and not gathered from class rooms or books. Actually in Churchura village, the people are not erudite. But at the same time they are rooted in real democratic values and principles. They may seem, to an unformed outsider, to be primitive and uncultured, but at the same time their mental alertness, sagacity and practical wisdom may outwit

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others. In a dispute, they hear the offender first, will have a dialogue with him/her, and will try to find out ways and means to settle the issue. Indian tribal villages are still embodiments of the great democratic value of settling disputes amicably with discussion and dialogue. Among the tribals of the North-east of India, it is not uncommon that the people go on discussing for hours, sometimes even for days, to settle seemingly silly matters. Yet the process takes place and all are happy about the outcome. Once an agreement is reached, all abide by it.

## **2. Egalitarian Ethos**

The spirit of democracy is rooted in the equality of all. In tribal communities, there is the spirit of mutual concern and mutual help. People treat others on the basis of equality. Therefore, sharing of joy and sorrow takes place in the village context. Emotional tie, as that of a primary relationship, is strong. Sharing food and drink, work and worship, singing and dancing, all are attuned to the egalitarian ethos. Grigson enquired about the tribal problems in Central India. He was taken up by the life style of the Maria Gonds. Their village leader allots them an area for cultivation. But the work is done on a co-operative basis. When the produce is ready, a share is given to all those who laboured together. A share sufficient for the maintenance of the old and sick people are also set apart. Grigson concludes, "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 civilized world manage themselves in so exemplary a manner"<sup>1</sup>. Co-operation, sharing, community life and interdependence have become a way of life for them.

Again, the Andamanese toil and labour for the whole day gathering food materials. When they come back, all of them keep their collections in the common area. Each one takes something of what is available and enjoy the food in community. Among the Ashanti of Ghana, all the family members eat from a single plate and share whatever they have in common. Thus sharing is a part and parcel of the life style of some tribal communities, and this is due to the general norm of equality of all kinsmen and women.

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

### 3. Justice and Freedom

When a feast is celebrated in a Maria Gond village, the understanding is that fire should not be lit to prepare food in any house of village. All have to eat and drink from the common kitchen. Thus sharing and participation become the norm of community life and existence. In case there is a non-tribal who cannot eat the food prepared by them, the non-tribal is gracefully given a share of the edible items in a raw form, which they can cook for themselves. Non-sharing people are also considered as a part of the community; and the generosity of the tribals always outshines the exclusivism and superiority consciousness of the non-tribals.

The *Onam* legend prevalent in some parts of India unravels the egalitarian ethos of a people of the past. The celebration of *Onam* feast recalls the memory of a benevolent king Maveli (or Mahabali) in whose reign all the people were considered to be equals; there was no stealing, no telling of lies; all were honest, happy and contented. It was then Vamana, in the guise of a beggar, appeared requesting for a boon of three feet of land. The generous king immediately granted it; then Vamana became an extraordinary person, whose two steps measured the whole of earth and sky. Then he asked for the third measure of land. The king who was honest preferred death to the breaking of the promise and showed his own head for the third and last measure of land. And thus Maveli was pushed down into the netherworld by the treachery of Vamana. *Onam* is a nostalgic occasion when he revisits his people. This legend very well brings out the plight of honest people who are cheated by the exploiters. This is very true in the case of tribals whose land and properties are taken over treacherously by the powerful. By hook or crook, the exploiters pocket the benefits and make the tribals bear the brunt of ill treatment. B.K.Bose wrote about the land transactions as follows:

In many parts of the country the old land holding (tribal) 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<sup>2</sup>.

Fellow feeling and sharing mentality cannot come as added virtues, unless people's world-view is formed with certain values of egalitarianism. No

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2. Grigson, M.V., *Ibid.*, p.108.

doubt, these human qualities are highly developed among the tribals, partly due to their living in association and partly because of the ecological conditions.

Contrary to the common view that tribals were in isolation, Roy Burma says that tribals and non-tribals were in contact with each other. He gives an example:

Mahabharata narrates the story of Ekalavya, who achieved greater skill than that of Arjuna, one of the greatest heroes of the Epic. Ekalavya belonged to the Bhil tribe and was incapacitated from the operation of his skill through the guile of the Brahman preceptor Dronacarya, who had only an indirect role in the process of Ekalavya's acquiring superior skill. The Ekalavya legend symbolizes the historical injuries that the tribes of India suffered, because they were outside the social orbit of the powerful elites and refused to accept low position in the caste frame<sup>3</sup>.

It must have been the tribal resistance to accept the low level in the society that led to their going into the forests. They liked the freedom and justice in their own communities than that of any other mode of living. Life in the forest demanded new challenges and adaptations. Day in and day out they came into grips with the problems and issues of the forests. Slowly and gradually they became successful in their adaptive dynamics in the forest ecology. Learning from the book of nature, they became natural environmentalists of India. As long as the non-tribals and the Britishers did not question their forest life and livelihood resources, they were leading a very happy and peaceful life. Once their very survival bases were threatened by outsiders, they have organized various movements to resist them.

#### 4. First Freedom Fighters

Of all the people in India, the *Adivasis* were the first to fight against the Britishers. While non-tribals very often emulated the British, the tribals fought tooth and nail against the exploiters and manipulators. They waged war against all sorts of injustice heaped upon them. With their primitive technology, they might not have won the fights. But they could challenge the mighty forces. Their contribution is never recognized by the non-tribals in the history of the nation. It may be due to the prevailing prejudice among the general public against the tribals. In fact, for a tribal, freedom is a precious

3. Roy Burman, B.K., *Tribes in Perspective*. (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1994), pp.96-97.

possession; one cannot think of loosing it. That is why even when they knew that the British had power to destroy them, they fought and were ready to lay down their life than leading a life in bondage and unfreedom. They wanted to live in dignity and never wanted to be slaves of any power.

## 5. Identity Consciousness

The subaltern movements among the tribals revolve around their identity. They are a people just like any other groups; but they are perceived through coloured lenses, as if they were inferior, less developed, less civilized, etc. There are no scientific proofs for it. Yet the prejudices keep on perpetuating.

All over the globe, tribals face a challenge to their identity. It is mainly supported by written traditions of mankind. In the recorded history, tribals are given fictitious names and epithets perpetuating prejudices of non-tribals.

Whereas the tribals cherish the oral tradition; they are at home in it. This contrast has aggravated the issue of identity.

Today a tribal needs written documents in every need to prove his identity as a tribal. It is through a government document of Presidential Order that one is identified as a tribal. He should also possess official records of his landed property, the so-called *Patwari*, to prove the validity and authenticity of his land. His movements are restricted by the Forest Laws. If his rights are violated, he has to go to the police and lodge a written complaint. And these written documents are very often manipulated by non-tribal officers. Therefore, tribals generally crave for a situation where there is no *Patwari*, no forest officials and no police.

There is a general restlessness in the tribal belts of India. It is mainly due to the attitude of the non-tribals and the government policies which go against their interests. The government sees the tribals as a problem. The general public feels that the tribals are given too many privileges and reservations. There are a number of schemes and programmes for their development; but seldom they are implemented. Often the beneficiaries are the non-tribals. The officials and bureaucrats in charge of the tribals manipulate the funds allotted to tribal development schemes and enrich themselves. Various studies have proved such neglect and malpractices.

## 6. Fifty Years of Independence

In a national convention, Prof. Ram Dayal Munda, President of Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, highlighted the marginalisation of tribals in the post-independent era. He said:

The story of tribals in the last fifty years has been of movement from fertile plains to barren hills, to city slums. Nearly one fifth of the tribal population are literally on the roads. Tribal movements for economic justice, cultural rights and political autonomy have only evoked negative reaction. There has been intensification of oppression after 1947 at cultural, economic and political levels<sup>4</sup>.

Fifty years of independence has not yielded much to the tribals; rather they are impoverished and hapless victims of developmental programmes. Now the tribals are getting united to fight for their own survival as a people. And one of their leaders even demands to set up eight tribal states in India in the course of time. Somjibhai Damor, President of the All India Adivasi Development Council has put forward such a demand. These eight states are: Utterkhand, Bodo Pradesh, Matsya Pradesh, Bhilisthan, Gondwana, Jharkhand, Dandakaranya and Dakshinakhand. There are organized movements to realize this dream.

Various attempts within the framework of the Constitution are thought out by the tribals. Now there is an emergence of the tribal elites who question the status quo patterns. They revert to their own religious traditions and value systems. Many such revival tendencies are reported from different parts of the country.

## **7. Emergence of the Tribal Elites**

The emerging tribal elites start questioning the assumptions and conclusions of the non-tribals. Their reflections and articulations are firmly rooted in their life experiences. One such insider's view is provided by Kullu. Reflection on his own tribal heritage, he observes that non-tribals depict tribal culture and religion with their prejudices. They do not give a real and objective picture about the tribals. Even today quite many writers are labouring hard to prove that tribals are backward communities, their religion and culture are superficial imitations, etc. Kullu raises an important issue:

The question here would be whether such authors will ever begin seeing things from the opposite direction, namely, will they ever accept the fact that tribal elements are the original, so that the roots of modern Indian religions, cultures, languages, political systems, etc. are to be found among tribals?<sup>5</sup>

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4. Manda Ram Dayal in *SAR NEWS*, Vol.17, No.38: 1997, p.8.

5. Kullu Paulus, "Tribal Religion and Culture", *Jeevadhara* XXIV, 140 (March 1994), p.92.