

Tribal Development and Challenges in India

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Abstract: *The oldest inhabitant of the planet and protector of Mother Nature, the tribal community, is witness to changes through millennia. The repository of ancient knowledge, flora and fauna and closeness to environment helped them to survive and prosper through millennia. They have been referred as Scheduled Tribes (ST), Adivasis, Tribals or indigenous peoples. Tribals are spread across the length and breadth of the country with majority found in central and eastern parts of the country. From just few in numbers in Andaman & Nicobar Islands to millions in central India, the tribal diversity in India is varied and fascinating. The tribal community is in different stages of development and integration in the country. However, even after 75 years of independence, they are besieged with problems about basic necessity, education, health etc. Reports by various governments, non-government agencies and independent reporters have identified the issues of poverty, malnutrition, unemployment, low education, high dropout, health hazards and unsympathetic attitude of government towards the tribal community. The surge in developmental projects, increased industrialization and demand for minerals (abundantly found in tribal areas) has displaced millions of tribals without proper and adequate rehabilitation. The alienation from land, cultural-setting and natural surroundings has impacted drastically the well being of tribal community and created an identity crisis for them. The present paper highlights the issues faced by tribals, their protection and welfare and tries to interweave the tribal development with sustainable development goals.*

Keywords: Tribal communities in India, indigenous knowledge, displacement and rehabilitation issues, poverty, health challenges, sustainable tribal development

1. Introduction

The tribals are the original inhabitants who have revered, protected and flourished in the forests since time immemorial. The tribes in India showcase diversity in terms of numbers, ethnicity, religion, mode of development etc. They have been referred to as Scheduled Tribes (ST), Adivasis, Tribals or indigenous peoples. In fact, the range of actors covered by the homogenizing category of 'Scheduled Tribes' (STs) is wide and their activities varied, as might be expected from a population which comprises some 8.6 per cent of India's population at 104.28 million people, with 705 different communities listed under Article 342 (Government of India 2013:1). These include the populous Bhil, Gond, Santhal, Oraon, Mina, Munda, Khond, Bodo, and Varli communities, who together make up about half the total tribal population of India (Maharatna 2005: 38); the category also comprises 75 small communities described as a 'particularly vulnerable tribal group' or PVTG (previously called 'primitive tribal group) consisting of Chenchu, Kurumba, and Konda Reddy communities of the south, the Jarawa, Onge, and Sentinelese of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and the Lodha, Birhor, Korwa, and Bonda communities in the east. Sundar (2016) is of the view that the scheduled tribes may be differentiated into two broad nomenclatural swathes. In the four north-eastern states (Arunachal, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya), the scheduled tribes are in majority. However, the STs of the North-East constitute a mere 8.7 per cent of the total ST population of the country.

Eighty-three per cent of those one may call 'Adivasis' are concentrated in the swathe of 'mainland' India which runs from Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh (MP), Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh (AP) to West Bengal (Chakrabarty and Ghosh 2000, cited in Kijima 2006). Smaller pockets of STs in the deep south (Nilgiri Hills, Wayanad, Western Ghats) and north (Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh [HP]), and in the small

islands of Andaman, Lakshadweep, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli make up the rest. The tribal population in India represents diversity in terms of region, numbers, ethnicity, dialects, racial groups etc. Popularly associated with hill and forest landscapes, in fact, the majority have long been settled agriculturists (though they may also engage in shifting cultivation). They are the least urbanized social group, with 90 per cent living in rural areas (Government of India 2011). However, agriculture is usually part of a package that includes the collection of minor forest produce, fishing, hunting, craft making (e.g., baskets), wage labour, both around their villages and further afield in cycles of seasonal migration. Due to reservations, urban Adivasi middle class, which is the product of government employment, though small in number, is steadily growing.

Objectives:

- 1) To study the various problems responsible for lower level of development among tribals.
- 2) To assess the development deficits and suggest suitable remedial measures for development of tribal community.

2. Methodology

The methodology followed in this paper is qualitative and the data used are secondary in nature. This research paper has a descriptive and analytical research design to comprehend the challenges related to tribal development in India. The descriptive nature of study delves in analysing challenges faced by tribal community and identifies the probable remedies to counter the common challenges among the tribal population. This study extracts data from the sources like books, reports of various ministries, related scholarly articles, online resources, government policy documents etc.

Tribal policy since independence:

The tribes in India during the British rule were oppressed and exploited, some converted to Christianity under the influence of Christian missionaries while those who rejected their interference in their land, customs and religion were declared as criminal tribes. The post-independent India, witnessed debate regarding the exact role of government in protection and welfare of tribals. The 'isolation' policy advocated by Verrier Elwin suggested protecting tribal communities from negative influences of mainstream society and allowing them to preserve their unique cultures and traditions. However, it was criticized as it meant depriving tribals of benefits of modern development. G.S.Ghurye considered tribals as backward Hindus and advocated 'assimilation' approach for their complete absorption into mainstream Hindu society. This approach was widely criticized as a forceful and insensitive process threatening the very identity and existence of tribal cultures. It was seen that would lead to the loss of their traditions, languages, and unique social structures, and would likely relegate them to the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy. The 'integration' approach shaped by the vision of Jawaharlal Nehru was adopted by the government of India as its official policy towards tribals. The approach aimed at aiming to enabling tribal communities to join the national mainstream while preserving their unique cultural identity. The key principles of integration approach are popularly known as 'Nehru's Tribal Panchsheel'. This policy is primarily guided by the principles laid out in the Constitution of India and has been implemented through various laws, schemes, and administrative structures such as reservations, political representation, fifth & sixth schedule, Panchayati Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), Forests Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) etc.

Government's initiative for Tribal welfare:

The early development efforts were primarily based on the idea of community development program launched during the initial years of five year planning. The creation of Special Multipurpose Tribal blocks absorbed the initial welfare programs aimed for tribal community. The Dhebar Commission (1960) was a significant milestone, reviewing the progress and challenges of tribal welfare. The commission's report highlighted the issues of land alienation, indebtedness, and poor educational outcomes, leading to a more focused and targeted approach in subsequent plans. The insights provided by the report recalibrated the government's development approach from 'uniform' to 'specific' recognizing the unique characteristics of tribal community in India. The commission's recommendation on planning and development were more specific for solving the problems of land alienation, indebtedness, promotion of education, protecting tribal interest in forest and sectoral development. (Mohanty, 2002). During the Third Five Year Plan (1961-69) Tribal Development Blocks were set up to improve the conditions of tribal areas and to involve tribal people in the process of development with the aid of Panchayat Institutions as well. Priorities were in the order of economic upliftment, education, health, housing and communication. The Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-79) underlining the new approach introduced the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) strategy. The TSP required states to earmark a portion of their budget for

implementing integrated development framework focusing on education, health and economic upliftment of tribals.

Also, focus was given to Primitive & Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTVG) taking into consideration their special needs. The Integrated Tribal development Projects (ITDPs) were created as multi-sectoral projects for geographically concentrated tribal areas. These projects were intended to address the unique needs of different tribal groups within a specific region. The targeted approach of government started to bear fruit with steady developmental strides reflecting in critical human indicators among tribal community. The most important legislative measure to empower tribal communities was the Panchayati Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) This landmark act recognized the rights of tribal communities to self-governance through their traditional gram sabhas. PESA granted gram sabhas the power to manage their own natural resources, resolve local disputes, and approve all development plans in their areas, marking a crucial move from a welfare-centric model to a rights-based model.

Special focus is also accorded to ST students under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, Mid-day meal programme, Navodaya Vidyalaya, National Talent Search Scheme and the like (Planning Commission, 2008). Post-Matric Scholarships are open to all ST students whose parents' annual income is up to one lakh rupees, to facilitate students to pursue professional courses. National Tribal Policy (NTP), 2006 aims to provide a framework for the development of Scheduled Tribes through a multi-pronged approach focused on economic upliftment, education, health, and cultural preservation. The National Policy recognizes that a majority of Scheduled Tribes still live below the poverty line, have poor literacy rates, suffer from malnutrition and disease, and are vulnerable to displacement. It also acknowledges that STs in general are repositories of indigenous knowledge and wisdom. The National Policy also aims at addressing each of these problems in a concrete way. It lists out measures to preserve and promote tribal cultural heritage (2006, p. 259).

Welfare efforts by the government, various laws made in tune with the constitution, and active involvement of non-government organizations to uplift the tribal people has met limited success, as the desired level of development has not yet been achieved. In the light of above observations, the paper critically sets the following objectives.

Persistent challenges in Tribal Development: Tribals are the only community who are in constant interaction with mother nature and protector of environment. However, developmental policies and failure of the state to protect the interests of tribals have made them the most vulnerable section of human society. Their resource-based livelihoods, living in inaccessible and vulnerable environment and rampant poverty have steadily marginalized them from the society. They face numerous problems, ranging from the decades-old issues of land alienation and debt-bondage to the recently emerging issues of climate change and environmental degradation.

Land Alienation & Indebtedness: Land is the most precious of holding for tribals providing sustenance and respect and dignity at the same time. Land alienation among tribals is an important reason for their poverty. The transfer of land to external forces such as non-tribals and acquisition of tribal land by government for development purpose have deprived tribals of their livelihood and culture. Post-1947, the Indian state adopted an ambivalent approach - constitutionally recognizing tribal autonomy through Articles 244, 275 and the Fifth/Sixth Schedules while simultaneously pursuing aggressive resource extraction in tribal homelands. This paradox created what Baviskar (1995) terms "development-induced displacement", with over 25 million tribals displaced since independence, primarily for dams, mines and wildlife sanctuaries (Fernandes, 2008).

Kamal K Misra (2002) in his study reveals that tribal-to-tribal transfer of land accounted for 14.04%, while tribal-to-non-tribal transfer was 85.95%. The study identified eight different methods adopted for land transfers which deprived the tribals of their legitimate land rights. The study showed that prolonged indebtedness of the tribal households was the main cause of tribal land alienation. The collusion of official machinery, unawareness about tribal protection laws and less political organization among tribals have amplified the problem of land alienation.

With limited means of livelihood, low education, unemployment and rampant poverty, majority of tribals are trapped in debts. Debt-bondage made the tribals bonded labourers of moneylenders on their own lands (Verma 2017). As tribals borrow for their day-to-day needs, majority of borrowings is through unorganized sources and institutional sources (banks, financial institutions) have little or no role. Among unorganized sources, 72 per cent of tribal people were indebted to private moneylenders; and the remaining people met their credit and consumer requirements from shopkeepers, friends and relatives (Verma 2017). The debt trap engulfs the tribal families snatching away their land which is their main source of livelihood and they are forever caught in endless cycle of poverty, unemployment and marginalization.

Tribal Health: There is a consensus that the health condition of tribal people is very abysmal. This state of health is further complicated by their remoteness of the areas and inaccessibility makes it furthermore compounded and complex. Most of the tribals live in a hilly or forested area where illiteracy, tough physical environment, malnutrition, inadequate access to potable water, lack of personal hygiene and sanitation make them more vulnerable to diseases and as result of they have worse health indicators than the general population (Saha & Saha, 2018). As per the report, in India, 44% of tribal children under five years of age are stunted (low height for age), 45% are underweight (low weight for age) and 27% are wasted (low weight for height) (Shrivastava, 2018). Nutritional deficiency leads to diseases like endemic goiter, anemia, pellagra, and beriberi. Problems like in-sanitary food supplies, water contamination, and poor food intake reflect on the health status of tribals (Murthy, 2011).

Tribal populations are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition due to their traditional socio-cultural practices and low literacy level (Kapoor & Dhall, 2016). Though deaths due to undernutrition among these children are hardly uncommon, only a few catch the headlines. This situation is a reflection of multiple deprivations that the tribal population has faced over the years. Poverty rates among tribals are high (at 47% in rural areas and 30% in urban areas) and nearly every second tribal family is food-insecure, with low calorie and protein consumption 25% to 53% below the recommended dietary allowance (Arsenault, 2014). Health problems prevalent in tribal areas include endemic infectious diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, and diarrhoeal diseases, apart from malnutrition and anaemia (Swaminathan, 2014). Their dependency on the herbal treatment is due to unavailability of health care services in the village and nearby areas and their belief and conviction in the herbal treatment for centuries (Negi & Singh, 2018). A comprehensive policy integrating tribal's indigenous knowledge with modern medicine system will surely address the issues and challenges of tribal health.

Tribal education: The perspective adopted by the government towards tribal education is mainly responsible for perpetuating problems of low enrolment, high dropouts and high illiteracy among tribals. The educational policies intended for tribal education fails to adequately address the specific disadvantages characterizing the tribal population. Vaidyanathan and Nair, (2001) suggested that teacher motivation contributes more to teaching – learning process than teacher competence. Sujatha, K. (2002) revealed that though education was not a critical demand among Scheduled Tribes, government policy focused on education as the main avenue by which to integrate them into mainstream society.

Jha & Jhingran, D. (2002) have strongly advocated the use of the mother tongue or home language as medium of instruction in early stages of education. This assumes greater significance in the context of education of tribal children because their mother tongue is often quite distinct from the prominent languages in the state or regional languages and it is desirable to have a local teacher from the same tribal community. Studies have reported that the high dropout rates among tribal children are due to medium of instruction other than mother tongue of students, communication gap between teacher and students due to appointment of non-tribal teachers, lack of empathy and cultural insensitivity. There is need for a consensus among the government both at the centre and state regarding the common challenges facing the tribal population. The dual system of administration and ignorance about local tribal conditions and needs has not been able to alleviate the low educational status of tribal community. The problems related to medium of instruction, location of village, economic condition, parental attitude and teacher related problems need to be adequately and comprehensively addressed to overcome the challenges in tribal development.

Development induced Displacement: Development initiatives since independence have disproportionately impacted the tribals. The tribal areas are rich in natural resources like flora and fauna, mineral wealth, hydro power

and thermal potential and various rare earth minerals which are important for rapidly growing industries and technological growth. Development-induced displacement is displacement due the development projects such as dams, industries, and mines have forced displacement on tribal communities who are often forced to move from ancestral, resource-rich lands, leading to significant cultural, social, and economic disruption, often with inadequate rehabilitation. According to estimation, a total of 213 lakh people have been displaced by various development projects during 1951-1990 (Fernandes and Paranjpye 1997:15). Of the 213 lakh displaced people estimated; 25.5 lakh people have been displaced by mines, 12.5 lakh by industries, 164 lakh by large and medium dams, six lakh by park and wildlife operations and five lakh by other projects. More than 8.5 million tribals were displaced, which is 60% of all displaced. Development projects have done little to alleviate existing social inequalities. On the contrary, they have further aggravated the social structure in favour of the dominant classes.

The large scale development projects in tribal areas displace the tribals from their ancient lands and native homes depriving them of tangible and intangible assets, livelihoods and resource base. The dispossession trauma has inevitable social, cultural and psychological consequences that cannot be easily be compensated. The problem in operation and ineffective implementation of rehabilitation and resettlement policies hampers the efforts of displaced tribals to reconstruct their living conditions. Moreover, the displacement from their original lands to new location is in itself a challenge due to different culture and language and hostile attitude of the local population who considers tribals as 'intruders. Studies have found shifting to new location have adversely impacted tribal population with problems of low earnings, high landlessness, and reduction in common property resources (Pandey B et.al.1997). The oustees who bear the pain never share the gains of development. Thus, critics have argued that displacement caused by large development projects has actually resulted in a transfer of resources from the weaker sections of society to more privileged ones. The large development projects, particularly mega dams, create victims of development- mainly tribals and other weaker sections of the society.

3. Conclusion

The tribal policies though intended for overall development of the tribal community has not been able to achieve its intended purpose due to ignorance of tribal needs, culture, aspirations and dual administration. The need for proper laws, provision of infrastructure, timely inspection and review would help to counter the problems associated with tribal education and health. The enforcement and implementation of laws aimed at overall tribal welfare in true spirit of constitution will help the tribal population to be a part of the mainstream society and enjoy the fruits of development. Development is the need of the hour, however there is need to provide a redressal mechanism which displays fairness, transparency and accountability for the displaced communities. Allowing vulnerable people to negotiate, engage, and provide good remuneration packages will protect such people from short-term and long-term loss

or harm. A common effort by the government, civil society and tribal communities will help to overcome the challenges in tribal development and make the tribal community share equally the gains of development.

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