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LIVELIHOODS OF ADIVASIS IN INDIA

Continuing marginalisation

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India is home to more than 60 million Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes – STs, tribal people, also known as Indigenous people), spread out the entire country. About half of them live in pockets in the hills and forests with them as majority and the remaining half live in the plains, both rural and urban. Most STs in urban areas have settled in mainstream livelihoods like any non-tribal, barring a few traditional craftsmen. The STs in rural plains pursue mixed livelihoods, predominantly dependent on agriculture, wage labour and small artisanal activities around forest products. The STs in the hills and forests have livelihoods built around forests and other natural resources. The discussion here is focused on these STs in the hills and forests and their livelihoods.

Forest is the life line for millions of tribal people. It is so intertwined in every aspect of their lives that tribal people and forest are inseparable. Whether as deities whom they revere and celebrate, their music and instruments, the way their houses are built or the way they go about with their livelihoods, all vibrates with the spirit of life echoed in the forest.

Most of them have some land. They pursue sustainable and subsistence farming. They protect forests and biodiversity. They access non-timber forest produce including medicinal herbs for their local use and sale in the local markets. There are efforts to 'tap' the biodiversity for the mainstream. However, they are not able to realise even 25 per cent of the consumer rupee. Here and there, livestock-dependent livelihoods are also pursued. There are a few who still persist with hunter-gatherer living.

Critically, resource-rich tribal people are living a life of subsistence and hand-to-mouth existence. They are caught in the 'trap' of

moneylender-trader. As they exist in the margins of the mainstream, with social and cultural diversity and geographic remoteness, most mainstream resources elude them or come with extremely unfair terms. These include financial inclusion/formal credit, infrastructure, appropriate technology, information and knowledge, aggregated demand and supply, appropriate institutional architectures, local value-addition, access to consumer market and linkages.

True, there are multiple tribes and all of them do not go about their lives and livelihoods identically. True, their lives and livelihoods have been impacted by the mainstream policies, processes and influences. Consumption habits and food habits are changing. Trading-in and therefore, wage employment, commercial farming and seasonal migration are increasing. Literacy is increasing and the new generation is seeking alternative livelihoods outside and locally. Unemployment is increasing with changing landscape and pressures on land, water and forests. A new self-employed class is emerging within their ranks.

Along with Integrated Tribal Development Agencies/Projects, Tribal Corporations and Tribal Welfare Departments, National Rural Livelihoods Mission is unveiling special efforts to evolve and support perspective plans at the state level to augment and enhance the livelihoods of the STs comprehensively and significantly.

Livelihoods of Adivasis in India

Referred to as Scheduled Tribes in the Constitution, 700 tribal communities constitute more than 8 per cent of India's population (more than 100 million) and are spread across the country. The majority of them live in and around hills/hill slopes and forests and exclusive habitations, the remaining people live in the plains – urban, suburban and plain rural areas.¹ Major tribes include Andamanese, Bodos, Bhils, Chakma, Chenchu, Dhodia Tribes of Gujarat, Gonds, Koya, Khasis, Aboriginal people of Lakshadweep, Kurichiya, Kurumbar, Tripuris, Mizos, Mundaris, Nagas, Nicobarese, Oraon, Santhals, Todas, Maldharis of Gujarat, Cholanaikkan, Warli, Kisan Tribe, Dongria Kondh, Bonda, Kutia Kondh, Bishapus A'Mishapus etc.

Profile of tribal communities

STs (8 per cent of India) live on 15 per cent of Indian area spanning various geo-climatic terrains – forests, hills, coastal areas and plains. The largest concentration (about 70 per cent of Indian STs) lives in

the hilly areas of Central India (Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and, to a lesser extent, Andhra Pradesh); in this belt, which is bounded by the Narmada River to the north and the Godavari River to the southeast, tribal peoples occupy the slopes of the region's mountains. Another concentration lives in a belt along the Himalayas stretching through Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in the west, to Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland in the northeast. Other STs, the Santals, live in Bihar, and West Bengal. There are smaller numbers of tribal people in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, in western India in Gujarat and Rajasthan and in the union territories of Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It may be noted that some states like Mizoram, Nagaland, etc. are entirely (almost 90 per cent) tribal. Also, there are regions within the state, districts, subdistrict areas, and clusters with mostly tribal population; 187 out of 645 districts in the country are considered as tribal districts.

Tribal communities live in relative isolation of the mainstream. They live a simple life in harmony with their environment. They use low-level technologies and sustain natural resources. They have evolved their own distinct myriad ways of living, cultures, languages and religions. Their economy is predominantly subsistence and/or low-value economy. Given this situation, in order to protect the social, cultural and land rights of the tribal communities in Scheduled Areas, special provisions, policies and regulations are available in Scheduled Areas. These include prohibition of transfer of tribal land to non-tribals and restricted moneylending business.

Further, their indicators of 'development' are low – low nutrition, high mortality rates, low literacy etc. STs are amongst the poorest in the country. While most of them are considered vulnerable, half of the STs are considered below poverty line. Overall Literacy (47 per cent) and Female literacy (34 per cent) are way below the national averages. Infant mortality rate at 36 is way above the national average of 18. Thus the disparities between the tribal and non-tribal sections of the population cut across various development indicators. However, Gross Enrolment amongst STs, as in other communities, has been increasing over the years. Their education levels are going up and mainstream employment is increasing, albeit slowly. Interestingly, sex ratio among ST communities (977 females for every 1,000 males) is more favourable than the national average.

It is to be noted here that tribal communities in the country are at different stages of development – both across the tribes and within each

tribe. Some of them pulled themselves into mainstream ways and lead lives and pursue livelihoods no different from that of non-tribals. At the same time, there are some who have been pushed out (migrated) into mainstream ways and are struggling to cope with them. There are also certain communities, within STs, characterised by a stagnant or dwindling population, low literacy and hunter-gatherer subsistence. Seventy-five such communities, referred to as 'primitive tribal groups' (PTGs), have been identified and found to be more backward and left out of the mainstream than other ST communities. Certain tribal communities dwell in plain areas and pursue mixed livelihoods but predominantly practice agriculture. Some tribal communities such as the Lambadas of AP, unlike a typical tribal community, are at the forefront of development within the tribal communities and pursue livelihoods around farming and livestock and wage labour. Within all tribal communities, there are intra-community differences. All the members are not at the same level. Some are resource-rich and some are otherwise. Still, a significant proportion of STs are still dependent on forests for their livelihoods.

Livelihoods framework

In this context, this chapter discusses the trends (not going too much into the numbers) in livelihoods of the tribal communities with the help of the livelihoods framework. The livelihoods framework helps in understanding the elements (dimensions, capitals and contexts, with their interrelationships) and complexity of portfolio of livelihoods of a household/community and the support systems/ecosystem required for these livelihoods to be pursued/practiced. The livelihoods framework, when applied to a context, identifies gaps and opportunities and indicates scope for further interventions.

Livelihoods have four characteristics: income, expenditure (money, time and energy), employment and risk.

- A household earns income in various forms and through various means. Usually, the income of the household depends on the set of knowledge-skills-resources it has. Further, the income of the household need not necessarily be in the form of wages, it can come in the form of produce/goods and services as well that may meet the needs of the household and/or could be converted into monetary income.
- A household has to spend on basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter and water as well as other needs as education, health,

- transport and entertainment. Some expenses, such as marriages and organising other social gatherings, though not recurring are considered while analysing the expenditure of a household. Like income, expenditure also is not always in monetary terms. The payment to meet the expenditure can be through the produce/goods and services. Further, time and energy are also spent.
- Employment refers to the time or number of days a household is engaged in some activity or the other in the portfolio of livelihoods of the household. The employment depends upon its skill-set, resources available and the ecological and environmental context.
 - Risks are the vulnerabilities the household has to face in pursuit of its livelihoods. Risks are present in every livelihood activity but the degrees of risk vary. These vulnerabilities are accentuated by the environment, technological, financial contexts of the household. The impact of the risks on the household depends on the risk-mitigating strategies adopted by the household. For instance, even a minor illness can send a poor household into disarray as it lacks access to qualitative healthcare. Further, the local ecological context and lack of health insurance augments the impact of the illness on the household.

All livelihoods interventions aim to increase income, decrease expenditure, increase employment and decrease risks. In the framework, these characteristics are known as four arrows by virtue of the desired direction they are to move in.

Livelihoods of a household depend on resources or capitals which can be broadly classified into six categories – natural, physical, social, human, financial and spiritual.

- Natural capital refers to natural resources available to the household to carry about a particular livelihood. This would include land, water, forest, air, etc.
- Physical capital comprises man-made physical structures such as roads, buildings and also machines and appliances that aid humans in their work.
- Social capital entails the support one receives due to kinship/relationship with other individuals and institutions in society.
- Human capital essentially consists of the skills, knowledge, abilities and aptitude possessed by a person.
- Financial capital enables a household to obtain goods and also aids production (investment). There are two components of financial

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capital – stock (the amount of financial capital available with the household at any given point of time) and flow (the financial capital the household earns).

- Lastly, spiritual capital refers to the quest present in the household to seek better living conditions. This drive is essential for the other capitals to be tapped fully.

The livelihoods a household pursues are influenced by the availability and accessibility to these capitals, the variety of capitals at its disposal and also its ability to tap these capitals to its advantage.

Further, these capitals as well as the households exist in a context that affects the availability, accessibility and use of the capitals. The context allows certain activities and prohibits certain activities despite the presence of required capitals. Though the context is a unified whole, for the purpose of analysis, the context is understood in four interrelated spheres – Environmental and Ecological Context, Techno-economic, Distribution and Investment and Expenditure Contexts.

- The environmental and ecological context refers to the larger environmental and social context the household exists in.
- The techno-economic context is the technical know-how available with the household to tap the capitals effectively.
- The distribution pattern of resources, infrastructure, wealth, knowledge, etc. in a society also affects the livelihood choices of a household.
- The investment and expenditure patterns of the household affect its livelihoods. Investment in production, health, food, education, insurance, employment is relevant in this context. The investment may not yield immediate results but may aid the households in pursuing or sustaining its livelihoods in the long run.

When livelihoods are thus understood, it is easier to identify the grey areas in the livelihoods being pursued by the household and plan interventions accordingly. These, then, could be consolidated upwards for making policy decisions and interventions on one hand and launching major programmes.

Understanding major Adivasi livelihoods

Adivasi Livelihoods, or Livelihoods of STs, when analysed using the livelihoods framework, reveal how the social, economic and political

injustices meted out to them have adversely and irreversibly abetted the collapse of their traditional livelihoods and economy. According to the 2001 Census, 81 per cent of STs are engaged in the primary sector – this includes Non-timber Forest Produce (NTFP) collection, agriculture, livestock rearing, daily wage labour, etc. In fact, NTFP collection is significant in the portfolio of livelihoods for nearly 70 per cent of the tribal population in the country. Considerable number of STs also feed themselves through seasonal migration.

Thus, the Adivasi livelihoods triumvirate is NTFP, farming (agriculture, horticulture and livestock and agriculture wage labour), and migration. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is also providing some employment to the STs. Only a tiny proportion of STs are outside of these four livelihoods spheres. These include petty business, artisanal activities and service.

A primary study (carried out by us two years ago) in 15 tribal villages across five states reveals that the tribal villages remain remote and important service institutions like school, health centre, veterinary sub-centre, anganwadi etc., are not in the accessible distance to the people in 50 per cent of the villages.

Major sources of income of the select families include NTFP Collection, Wage Labour, Agriculture and Livestock rearing, MGNREGA and other activities in that order. However, about 30 per cent of the days in a year on which they are not able to do any work.

Men and women share responsibility in livelihoods activity. However, women work at least three to four hours more in a day when compared to men.

More than 50 per cent the expenditure has been on food and liquor.

NTFP collection

It is revealing to note that the 187 tribal-dominated districts have 60 per cent of India's forest cover (India has a forest cover of 23.28 per cent which is about 77 million hectares and the six major types of forests identified in India are moist tropical, dry tropical, subtropical, mountain temperate, alpine and subalpine). The entire forests (read:

forest areas) in the country have been classified into reserved forests (considered to be the most valuable as far as conserving forest and wildlife are concerned and more than half of the total forest area has been classified as reserved forests); protected forests (protected only to a certain degree and the government has property rights over it); and village forests (partly owned by the government and partly by people who inhabit these lands). The STs living near the forests have rights on the usufruct in all the forests.

The relationship between tribes and the forest transcends the economic sphere. Tribal communities have intertwined every aspect of their lives with the forest. Their houses are built of the locally available timber, the tools and implements they use are made from locally available raw material, and so are their music instruments. It is commonly acknowledged that tribal religions are a form of 'animism' distinct from other 'mainstream' religions. STs consider nature and its resources as their deities and their customs and rituals invoke elements of nature. The reverence tribal people render to nature is rooted in their belief that their lives and sustenance is dependent upon these elements.

Forests are unique ecosystems that host a multitude of products and services. Products include timber, herbs, nuts, seeds, fruits, flowers, etc. They also provide raw material such as twigs, roots leaves, etc. which are value-added to make products such as ropes, plates, brooms, etc. As for services, forests play a crucial role in regulating and preserving ecological systems. Forests have served as an abode of wealth for different communities – hunter-gatherers, NTFP collectors, shifting cultivators and modern timber-based industries.

For STs, they offer life support. They meet their basic needs (food, fodder, fuel-wood, healing ailments, shelter etc.) to a large extent. In addition, they provide income to them through the sale of NTFP (there are about 3,000 species of plants in Indian forests which provide NTFP), on which they have traditional rights. Traditionally, most of the NTFP collected was consumed by the collectors themselves. Over time, with the rise of modern economy, the collectors have also started to sell their produce in the nearest *shandies* (local markets) and use the money so generated to fulfil other needs by buying from the market. However, the income generated by collecting NTFPs is not directly proportionate to the labour spent and the risks involved in procuring them. Not even a quarter of the consumer rupee finally reaches the tribal collector. In spite of uncertainties and risks, poor gatherers resort to NTFP collection in the absence of better remunerative

opportunities, to meet their food, fodder and medical needs or as a seasonal and emergency activity.

It appears that the most disadvantageous factor for the STs is their lack of awareness of the market that NTFP actually has. Their ignorance is exploited by middlemen and industries that pay meagre sums for the labour and toil that the tribal people put into the procurement of the NTFP. The possibility of exploitation is further accentuated by the absence of a transparent, state-supported procurement system in most states barring Andhra Pradesh. Furthermore, the collectors are also unaware of the forms in which these products are marketable. Some of this exploitation could be partly attributed to the manner in which tribal people conduct business. It should be borne in mind that these are a people who have only recently done away with the barter system. Their business sense is dominated by necessity rather than profit. They generally sell only so much produce as is required for them to sustain themselves.

Yet another disadvantage to the collectors is that they lack access to the machinery/equipment required to do the value-addition to the NTFP to make it marketable. Most of the value-addition to the NTFP is done in factories and large production centres. Introduction of simple, manageable value-addition units in the local areas could go a long way in reducing the intermediaries between the collectors and the consumers. The introduction of such value-addition techniques to the tribal people should not disintegrate existing sustainable methods of collection. The market-awareness of the STs should not result in them fully exploiting the entire forest at one go. Instead, the traditional practice of taking only how much is necessary must be retained. Efforts towards enhancing the livelihoods of tribals should combine the best of modern technology with the sustainable ways of traditional methods.

It is also important to know that the quality lost at the beginning may not be regained later. Therefore, the sustainable harvesting of NTFP with care and quality consciousness produces NTFP that lasts longer and the core properties of the product remaining intact. Since the consumer pays for the quality and core properties, the collector would realise better returns on the NTFP. For instance, quality *gum karaya* collection has ensured increases in returns by five to six times (500–600 per cent) to the collectors.

A vast repository of knowledge regarding the uses of the NTFP rests with tribal people. Many NTFP products have medicinal properties. Tribal communities have recognised their properties and have used

these products to treat ailments for centuries together. Some NTFP products are used as raw material in modern production industries. A case in point is the use of gum karaya by pharmaceutical companies as edible adhesive in the composition of tablets and capsules. Cleaning nuts are used as an alternative to alum. The nuts are used to clarify water and further research has also revealed that they have the properties to dispose heavy metallic waste.

Ownership, Natural Regeneration, Sustainable harvesting, Local Value-addition, Aggregation, Moving up the value-chain directly, or through institutions and partnerships are the key elements of way forward in NTFP.

Farming

While there are some hunter-gatherers amongst them, agriculture is a major occupation among tribal communities, after NTFP collection. Most STs own small tracts of land on which they pursue sustainable and subsistence farming. Tribal communities cultivate crops that the soil and land in the area support, i.e. the crops they cultivate are not different from what non-tribal farmers cultivate in the area. Major crops cultivated by the STs include paddy, millets, maize, tubers, etc. Horticulture (cashew, etc.) is also not uncommon. Tribal farming practices are thought to be sustainable methods that make best use of local resources and preserve the local ecology.

There are still some tribal families/communities that are persisting with shifting cultivation or 'slash and burn cultivation' (known as podu and jhum - in different parts of the country). This practice entails cutting down trees in a certain part of the forest, cultivating crops on the land and then burning the tract after harvest. The land is left fallow for a while (five to 10 years), allowing it to recover or recoup. Shifting cultivation practices have come under criticism and are even restricted by the Forest Policy of 1956. Critics believe that the practice contributes to massive deforestation resulting in disturbing the local ecological system. However, there are contrarian studies to show the sustainable nature of this practice that also leads to protection of the local ecology. In any case, given the pressure on the forests and land, and the restrictions, the shifting cultivation has declined significantly.

For example, in January 2011, the FAO recognised the Koraput farming systems traditionally practiced by tribes in Orissa as a Globally Important Heritage System (GIAHS). The FAO stated that the farming system has helped in preserving numerous rice, millet, pulse varieties, medicinal plants and also the local ecological system. While recognising the significant contribution of the Koraput farming system in preserving the local ecology, the FAO has also sought to bring attention to the preservation of the farming system itself.

The Koraput case is not the only such practice employed by tribes in the country. These practices are fast reaching the brink of extinction, yielding to modern agriculture practices. In the wake of a market-driven economy, agriculture has been rapidly commercialised. Tribal farmers who traditionally cultivated crops only for consumption have been compelled to shift to cultivate cash crops for survival. The introduction of Public Distribution Systems (PDS) that does not cater to the staple diet (based on local minor millets and pulses) of the STs has resulted in their food habits undergoing major changes and has contributed critically in changing the cropping patterns of STs.

As part of farming system, the STs have also pursued rearing livestock for farming. Gradually, milch animals have come in. Apart from hunting animals from the wild, they have been rearing small livestock (sheep, goats etc.,) and birds for consumption and for local market.

The labour-sharing mechanisms that exist among local STs to meet their peaks in demand for labour for farming are giving way to wage labour. Aggregated lands with a few STs and non-tribals taking over lands seek wage labour. There are cases of buying the standing agriculture crops and horticulture crops in advance at very low rates and the tribal owners of the crops become the labour in their own land.

Sustainable organic farming (agriculture, horticulture, watershed management, medicinal herbs/plants cultivation, fisheries, kitchen gardens) for food security coupled with high-value product farming for market, local value-addition, aggregation and market linkages with institutions and partnerships are the elements of the way forward.

Seasonal migration and MGNREGA

With declining forest cover, not-so-good returns for NTFP and seasonality in NTFP, large sections of tribal communities look for new

livelihoods outside the traditional sectors as well as their traditional environment. Many STs, mostly without their families, migrate for work as wage labour in other areas (away from their home), in agriculture, in construction, in road work etc. Since the launch and implementation of MNREGA, STs have been taking up work under the scheme and the seasonal migration has seen some decline.

It is revealing that STs constitute about 25 per cent of the total MGNREGA workforce. It appears that many a tribal household, more than any other social group in the country, is looking towards MGNREGA as a livelihoods activity and is participating in the scheme. The danger here is that they are giving up their traditional livelihood(s) and become dependent on casual wage labour for sustenance. It is likely that they lose their skills, knowledge and maybe their traditional rights in the process. Their resources may be alienated and their access to commons may be denied. Also, the association of certain tribes with certain occupations may start to deteriorate leading to an erosion of the unique identity of tribal community.

Livelihoods for market

Through interaction with non-tribals, markets and education, the tribal communities have started to include new elements in their existing four livelihoods spheres and/or add new livelihoods activities. Dairying, Goatery, Poultry and Fisheries for market are growing in tribal areas. However, lack of established markets for their produce in local areas and proper support systems, including marketing mechanisms, is hampering their growth as viable livelihoods activities.

Tribal people also make handicrafts from locally available raw material (like bamboo). Traditionally, these handicrafts were used as implements or decorative items but efforts are being made to market these handicrafts. Presently, these products have a huge market in urban centres in India and internationally. Yet, as is the case with other tribal livelihoods, STs engaged in this activity too face market exclusion and are not able to realise a good proportion of consumer rupee.

Resource alienation

Resources, for STs pursuing their livelihoods, are fast being eroded or captured by non-tribals. Land is a major bone of contention between tribal population and non-tribals.

Most STs own land or have access to land. Only 21 per cent of STs are landless. The average landholding among STs is 1.14 acres but land alienation is reducing per capita land of the STs. Land alienation of STs is made easier with lack of clarity on land rights among the community. For the STs, the lands they reside on are theirs and are unaware of the legal procedures to be undertaken to ensure that the land remains under their custody. Manipulation of land records, *benami* transactions, leasing or mortgage, marital alliances with tribal women, adoption of tribal families by non-tribals are all rampant methods of encroaching the land of STs.

It is estimated that as many as 375,000 cases involving 850,000 acres of land are awaiting verdict. Besides land-grabbing done by private parties, large infrastructure projects have also been responsible for infringing on land rights of STs resulting in their displacement. Loss of land and resources is a big loss for STs.

The repercussions of physical displacement are dire and far-reaching. Not only are the communities left landless, they lose their familiar ecosystem (culture, neighbours, commons, familiarity etc.) and resources to carry out their traditional occupation(s). This breakdown in their livelihoods leads to food insecurity, disintegration of the established social fabric, etc. The psychological impact that displacement has on the victims can never be compensated in monetary/physical terms. Many can never come to terms with the impact of being totally uprooted from their ecological contexts.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 attempted to address the issue of ownership and the rights of forest dwellers over forestland. The act seeks to undo the 'historic injustice' meted out to the tribal population in the country by allowing them rights over the lands they reside on or currently practice agriculture on and letting them collect NTFP without any hassles from the local administration. Further, STs dwelling in the forest are to be given legal documents recognising their right over the land they dwell on. Even before the Forest Rights Act, efforts were made to ensure that tribal peoples administered the use of resources in the local area through Joint Forest Management (JFM) initiatives. JFM entailed the formation of a Forest Protection Committee (Vana Samrakshana Samiti - VSS) at the village level. The VSS protects the forest from depletion and destruction and in turn VSS gets the right on the NTFP and a share in income from the sale of timber from the forest.

It appears that the financial and economic contexts are extremely disadvantageous to tribal people. To start with, many of them reside

in remote and less accessible areas that do not have the required infrastructure. True, efforts have been taken to make these areas accessible through roadways, railways and telecommunications. Yet, this effort has resulted in the unprecedented entry of non-tribals into tribal areas, pushing the tribal communities up into further remote areas.

When it comes to access to financial resources such as loans, bank accounts, savings, insurance and remittances, it is the lowest in the country for tribal people. Added to this is the fact that most STs do not possess proper, government-recognised legal documents essential to open bank accounts, to take loans etc. The lack of will from formal financial institutions to cater to tribal people in general and the poor in particular is denying these communities access to much-needed credit. To worsen the situation, local moneylenders fill the vacuum left in the wake of absence of formal financial institutions. The moneylenders are often exploitative and charge high rates of interest and keep no record of transactions. Moneylenders often take away whatever little assets the STs own when the latter are unable to repay their debts. Moneylender-trader nexus ensures that the STs pay higher prices for their purchases and do not get due prices for their produce, apart from the high interest rates and consequent benami resource alienation in due course. All this is happening even with 'stringent' moneylending regulation. Further, financial exclusion of the tribal people also prevents them from having a sound insurance system essential to mitigate risks and unprecedented situations.

Even the self-help movement sweeping the country is taking its time to catch up pace in tribal areas.

In essence, STs are in the process of losing the advantage of rich endowment of natural capital and spiritual capital which they had on one hand, and they are yet to catch up to the levels of physical, human, institutional and financial capital that is required for a decent living. Building on the commons, collectivisation and savings-led financial capital are the key elements of the way forward.

Livelihoods continuum

As discussed earlier, all the tribal communities are not at the same footing and all the households within a tribal community are not at the same level and each of their livelihoods portfolios is unique and variegated. The livelihoods of the STs are in a continuum. Some STs have shifted entirely from their traditional ways of life and have assimilated into the mainstream like any other non-tribal. Such members of

the community are usually those who have had access to primary and higher education. Some others still persist in the hunting-gathering way of life. Some sections continue pursuing their traditional livelihoods along with other, non-traditional ones. But the general trend is that the tribal communities are moving away from their traditional ways of life and are fast taking to the juggernaut of being mainstreamed, although the terms are unfair to them. There is a new, rising class of self-employed service providers and entrepreneurs among the tribal people. Of course, there are some job holders too amongst the STs now. Younger generations in tribal communities who have had access to some school education are reluctant to take up traditional livelihoods and resort to wage labour, agriculture labour and migration, the only available alternatives.

Eroding tribal identity

Further, the increased literacy among tribal people has resulted in the transformation of tribal culture and social fabric. With government-aided education being in the official language of the state or in Hindi and not the mother tongue of the student, STs are fast losing their lingual identity. Of course, it may seem daunting to ensure that students are taught in their respective mother tongues (304 recognised tribal languages are spoken among the tribes), but education in an alien language is not the only onslaught on tribal identity. The reach of telecommunications and mass media too has had lasting impact on tribal identity. Mainstream cinema, music, culture is eroding the traditions of tribal people.

Eroding tribal identity combined with the tribal people not oriented psychologically and culturally to fight injustices that are being meted out to them is coming in the way of self-reliant and sustainable tribal livelihoods. It is sad to note we do not hear tribal voices speaking for their rights, justice and equity. This space is mostly occupied by the people from outside the community. Building responsive and sensitive community leadership in large numbers at various levels from within the communities is the key element in the way forward.

Special provisions to tribal communities

Under the circumstances, taking into account the vulnerabilities of the tribal population, the Constitution has made several social, economic and political provisions (enabling and empowering) to aid the

advancement of tribal communities and ensure that they are at a level-playing field with other communities in the country. The issue is how conducive an environment the state and the non-tribal population of the country have created for the tribal communities to pursue their culture, livelihoods and traditional systems economy, polity and society.

For instance, the Fundamental Right to Freedom provides for pursuing any livelihood one deems fit. This right does not seem to exist for many a tribal. STs are being pushed out of their traditional livelihoods and ecological milieu to pursue less dignified livelihoods, either in their existing habitat or away from their habitat. It is becoming clear that tribal people are not able to get over resource alienation and loss of their traditional livelihoods and move into new contexts and livelihoods smoothly.

Since the Fifth Five Year Plan, the Tribal Sub Plan (TSP, for areas with more than 50 per cent tribal population) for development of the area and the communities in the area, consolidated at state and national level, is being prepared based on the resources and funds. In a state, the funds for TSP are allocated in proportion to the population of STs in the state. The TSP is being implemented by District/sub-district Integrated Tribal Development Projects/Agencies (ITDPs/ITDAs). The Project Officer, ITDP/ITDA is a single-line administrator (all the departments in the area are responsible to the Project Officer and work in consultation and close coordination with the Project Officer).

The National Commission for Schedule Tribes is a statutory body set up in 1992. The commission's function is to look into the protection of the safeguards of the STs and report regularly to the president of India on the progress in their implementation. Similarly, the National Scheduled Tribes Financial Development Corporation (NSTFDC) was set up under the auspices of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The mandate of the NSTFDC includes identifying and supporting economic activities of tribal communities in the form of providing financial resources of upgrading existing skills and technology used by the tribal people. Tribal Cooperative Marketing Developing Federation (TRIFED) was set up by Government of India to market and ensure better prices for the produce of the STs. In each state, there is a Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation (TDCC) to help the tribal NTFP collectors to realise higher returns.

For example, one of the TDCC, Girijan Cooperative Corporation (GCC) of Andhra Pradesh (a federation of 45 primary cooperatives), provides support to tribal people engaged in the collection of NTFP at their doorstep and links them with potential markets. The GCC

provides necessary financial and technical support to help the NTFP collectors carry out their occupation without being exploited by middlemen and small traders. GCC also supplies daily requirements to mid-tribal families. GCC with its Rs. 100 crore annual turnover has been able to reach out to 4 million tribal families in the state.

National Rural Livelihoods Mission

The recently launched National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), the largest poverty reduction programme in the world, to support 10 crore poor families across the country with an outlay of about Rs. 200,000 crore [i.e. 2,000 billion] over 15 years, has specific focus on developing the perspective plans for Scheduled Tribes in each state to improve their livelihoods significantly so that they have a decent portfolio of livelihoods. Mobilising the tribal poor into self-help institutions around savings, credit and insurance, livelihoods collectives, social collectives, community-managed sustainable agriculture, health and nutrition etc., are the key elements in these perspective plans.

Further, NRLM works closely with other major flagship programmes/guarantees including MGNREGS, NRHM, Food Security (in the pipeline), RTE so that the NRLM-supported institutional structures create demand on the programmes to deliver for the STs.

Of the 187 tribal dominant districts, more than 60 of them are considered sensitive and a special support – Integrated Action Plan (IAP) – is made operational. The government is deploying three high-end young professionals – Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellows – in each district directly with District Administration, to help in implementing IAP.

Conclusion

Tribal communities are living in distress poverty despite rich natural resource, social resource and spiritual resource endowment. Their major livelihoods spheres – mostly around forests – include NTFP, farming, seasonal migration and MGNREGA. The proportion of the consumer rupee realised for their produce is extremely meagre. On the whole, they are subject to resource alienation (forests, commons and lands), financial exclusion and market exclusion. Their identity and cultural capitals are eroding, and there is an increased disruption in their social fabric. Thus, the STs are losing what they have (resource endowment) and are not getting on par with what the mainstream

could access in return or otherwise. That is the big irony. Change in the traditional diet, through Public Distribution System which is not tailored to the local tribal needs and preferences, has brought about a slow deterioration of health and nutrition among tribal people. Tribal health systems are 'fading' out. In the absence of access to quality healthcare, their health risks have multiplied.

Often we realise that we are getting back to the lifestyle and methods of STs as we pursue sustainable living. Tribal ways of living need to be appreciated and may have to be adopted if we are keen about addressing the various crises in our livelihoods domain – environment/climate, biodiversity, water, food, energy, health etc. When the crunch comes, we know that what matters the most is life – air, water, food, clothes, shelter and entertainment. All else does not matter. Therefore, we need to find ways to globalise time-tested tribal ways of living (with minor modifications, if warranted), instead of trying to pull them into exploding mainstream ways of living. Adivasis may be the original inhabitants of this land and need to have their ecosystem intact (better still, improved) so that they lead a life of dignity, contentment and peace, by pursuing their sustainable portfolios of livelihoods to meet their basic life needs directly or through realisation of a higher proportion of consumer rupee, commensurate with the real value of the products and services. Increased social, financial and institutional inclusion and support and reduced/reversed resource alienation would accelerate their prosperity for themselves, their next generations and for all of us.

Note

- 1 The discussion hereafter in this chapter is limited to the livelihoods of the tribes living in and around hills/hill slopes, forests and exclusive habitations.