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Tribal Development in India: A Sociological Analysis

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The tribal development in India has been a major concern of the Central and State Government, Voluntary Organizations, NGOs, Social Activists, Sociologist and Anthropologist. But even after more than five decades we are no nearer to the solution of the problem. Rather, things appear to be more muddled than before. Scheme by scheme have been conceived and implemented. Unfortunately most of them have failed. In most cases the tribal life has worsened. What was wrong in the process of tribal development? Where did it go wrong? Is our definition of development at fault? Our perception of the problem is erroneous? The programmes we have conceived and implemented are at variance with the target we have set? Do we have a target at all? I think all these have contributed their mite to the muddle. We are unable to find a single statement as regards the strategy of tribal development in India. No clear cut policy exists on this important issue, though millions of rupees have already been spent in the name of tribal development.

The major fault in the tribal development planning in India has been the clubbing together of all tribes, as if they constitute a homogenous cultural group. Nothing can be farther from the truth. The Scheduled Tribes exhibit a whole spectrum of human and cultural evolution – from hunter-food gatherer-fisher through shifting cultivation, pastoralism, marginal farming, to agriculture based on irrigation. It is native to think that they all have similar problems and that same or similar development schemes will be useful to them all equally. The problems of the Bhil, the Gond or the Sahariya are not the same as the problem of Kol, Baiga or Maria. The scheduled tribes of North-East and Madhya Pradesh are not at the same socio-economic level as those of Jharkhand, or Orissa, or Chattisgarh.

Providing reservation of seats in the Legislatures and Parliament may be beneficial to say, Bhil, Bhilala, Gond and Oraon, but it means nothing to the Bedia and other 44 tribes in the state. Reservation in jobs has been useful to urban based tribal group but is meaningless to thousands of other tribes in the country who resides in rural areas. The subsistence of scheme does not ensure its utility to all. On the other hand, those already ahead and less in need of these provisions do take maximum advantage to the detriment of their poorer tribal brethren. Almost all the special provisions for ST have benefited the elite tribes in the country and the rest have languished.

The concept of Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) tried to redress the balance in favour of the weakest section of the tribals. But here again, the lumping together of foragers and swindlers was a blunder. The two cannot be equated in socio-cultural terms, their problems are not similar. And socio-cultural factors cannot be ignored as has been proved a number of times with the total failure of all development programmes in 50s and 60s.

Not understanding the crux of the problem has led to a number of blunders already. A lot of time was wasted, immediately after independence on whether the tribals should be allowed to

“develop in isolation” or they should be “assimilated” with the other advanced section of the population. All the special provisions for the tribes are based on the assumption that all the tribes are equally deprived, disadvantaged and poor.

Another problem is, what is the aim of development? What precisely is being sought to achieve? What is the end? When, or upon attainment of what shall we say, yes the target of tribal development has been accomplished? Is it parity with the rest of the population? But which section of the rest? Even among the non-tribals there are many sections which are more poorer, deprived and exploited than at least the agriculturist tribes. That level is obviously not the target. Is it when all the tribals have a *pucca* house? About eighty per cent people do not have a *pucca* house. Every tribal family has a government job? It is not feasible. Every tribal household has a bike or a TV? Again which type of TV, Black and White or colour? Which type of bike? Indian or Japanese or any other? Or is it a car? Or computer? The point is that it is impossible for the government to provide technological parity. It is impossible for the acts and legislations to provide socio-political parity. And cultural parity is impossible anyway because it shall destroy the separate identity of the tribals. We do not know the target. And that is the crux of the problem. The development planners do not know what they are trying to achieve.

We know that development has not brought contentment in its wake. In fact the tribals have become more miserable as they have “developed”. They have been displaced from their traditional houses and their lands acquired for the construction of industries, roadways, railways, large dams, power stations, mines etc. The effort to provide education on the basis of common curriculum is the worst thing. They have acquired “knowledge” which is entirely useless in their life. Worse, it has raised their expectations of secure government job which they are not getting. The “educated” tribals are misfits in their societies. They are also unfits in the non-tribal society. They are left in the lurch after “education.” They are subject to similar high expectations and lower economic capabilities as the common middle-class in the country. And here lies the source of disenchantment with the whole development process.

In our view the best goal is the achievement of affluence. Here affluence means having more than enough of whatever is required to satisfy consumption *needs*. This satisfaction of needs may be arranged in the traditional set up itself rather than bringing the needy into the wider ambit of market economy with its own set of needs and desires and competitions which are entirely extraneous to the immediate goal. Thus, providing the foragers the education of biology and environment and setting-up of a forest-based economy is far better than to teach them the history of Ashoka the Great or Archimedes’s principle; and forcing them to become settled agriculturists.

In order to make a viable tribal development programme, therefore, there is an urgent need to reclassify the Indian tribes. This new classification should be based on the techno-economic parameters and relative advancements already achieved in the last fifty years. Programmes/schemes should be prepared for each of the class separately. These programmes should aim at achieving affluence rather than “development.” In this context the following points deserve special attention.

1. The scheme to integrate tribal economy with the rest of the economy. There is a qualitative, not quantitative, difference between a tribal-rural life and the urban-modern life. It is a quantum jump from one into another and finally culminates in total break with the past. The need is to provide scheme and facilitate opportunity to develop skills commensurate with the techno-environmental conditions of the group being developed. It

is neither feasible nor desirable to make every tribal group a part of modern market economy for which they are psychologically not ready.

2. Unemployment is a concept that comes with “development”. In traditional tribal setup nobody is unemployed. The term simply means that a person is unable to get the job *he wants*. By linking a traditional economy with the market economy and by creating degree-linked employment opportunity we have created the problem of unemployment in tribal society. Every degree-holder thinks in terms of government job rather than self-employment. This nexus needs to be broken if unemployment in tribal society is to be removed, which can be easily achieved with specific vocational training and a little economic and technical support.
3. Education needs to be revamped. Universal syllabus makes them ill-at-ease, and out of tune with both their traditional culture and modern economy. The tribes should be given the option either to continue in the common degree-based system or to get a vocational training in the traditional occupation immediately after basic literacy at primary or middle school level. This vocational training can be based on the techno-environmental conditions of the tribes and specific to their needs.
4. The forests are the original and permanent abode of the tribals – the two have symbiotic relationship. To a tribal, forest is not only a source of economy, it is also his native place where reside his gods and deities and his dead ancestors. The British, for their own commercial purposes, enacted forest laws and removed these rightful owners from their position as guardians and protectors of forests. Large scale deforestation took place. It is sad that in free India also the same policy, in fact even more stringent policy, is being pursued. The tribals are being made out as destructors of forests. This is entirely baseless. The same people have been living there for thousands of years and the forests were thriving. In just one hundred years we have lost the forests. The tribals live in forests and are the natural protectors. The forest laws only serve to make the ever-watchful people helpless while unscrupulous politicians and bureaucrats are making hay in collusion with contractors. Even for collection of Minor Forest Produce and medicinal plants they have to be beholden to the so-called forest guards and other forest officials. There is an urgent need to restore the forests to the tribals and their right to use the resources of the forests should be recognised. Only then will they be able to combat the illegal deforestation and restore the forests to their original level and at the same time the economic base of the tribal will improve drastically.

As things today, there is a marked emphasis in favour of already developed section – the settled agriculturist tribes – at the cost of least developed ones. Everywhere in the country the tribes show a great variation in the economic, social, political, educational and health spheres. They are also subject to differential treatment from the Government, NGOs, Sociologist and Anthropologist. As a consequence they have differential opportunities of development which affects their probability of survival in the present circumstances – the probabilities and circumstances that are not natural but man-made. It is important, therefore, to reclassify the Indian tribes, and institute new perspective and strategy for tribal development.