

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INCLUSION OF TRIBAL IN THE CONTEMPORARY INDIA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES



Dr. Akhilesh Kumar Dwivedi

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Editor



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THE MOST ANCIENT, YET THE MOST BACKWARD: UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CAUSES BEHIND THE DEVELOPMENT LAG OF THE TRIBALS

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Introduction

The serious debate on the Objectives Resolution in the Constituent Assembly of India lasted for one whole week in the month of December 1946. The Resolution proclaimed enthusiastically that India, which was going to be free within a period of less than nine months, would have her eternal future as an “Independent Sovereign Republic”. It was promised that this republic, through the well-thought-out provisions of its constitution, would ensure economic, social and political justice for all its citizens without any discrimination on any basis. It went on to promise that ‘adequate safeguards shall be provided for minorities, backward and tribal areas, and depressed and other backward classes....’(Constituent Assembly Debates, vol.1, pp.143-144). The mover of the Resolution, Jawaharlal Nehru, the then interim Prime Minister of India, invoked Mahatma Gandhi as

well as the French, American and Russian Revolutions with the confidence that the under-preparation republican constitution of the soon-to-be-free nation would achieve its egalitarian goals in full measure.

Among the notable participants in the debate were Purushottamdas Tandon and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee from the Hindu Right and Somnath Lahiri and M.R.Masani from the Indian Left. In between these two poles, the liberal political space was represented very cogently by Dr. B.R.Ambedkar himself and M.R.Jayakar, a leading liberal lawyer of the time. Hansa Mehta, the famous woman activist, also spoke during the debate. Obviously, the entire spectrum of the Indian political stands and opinions were given very vocal expressions. All underlined the need for universal justice and expressed hope and confidence that it would be achieved through the constitutional provisions, which were to be implemented in terms of equality before the law, as well as some affirmative actions.

The last speaker

The last man to speak on occasion was a former hockey player and lapsed (non-practicing) Christian named Jaipal Singh Munda, who introduced himself 'as a jungli, as an Adivasi (sic). While identifying himself and his people (the tribals of India) as the most ancient victims of the system of exploitation of man by man, he was ready to take Nehru and all others at their word, but not without going into history. Munda's intention behind turning the pages of ancient Indian history on that occasion was, perhaps, to wish earnestly that the history might not be repeated. Unfortunately, post-independence developments on the development front proved otherwise. A portion of his speech is highly quotable at some length for its history-consciousness as well as the hope for the future felt and expressed by the Indian tribal population at our inaugural moment as a free secular democratic republic with high hopes of justice for all. Very

significantly, by asserting his identity as a child of the Harappan civilization, Jaipal Singh linked the two ‘beginnings’ of India as a sophisticated civilization about four thousand years ago and as a post-colonial modern nation in the middle of the twentieth century to emphasize the urgent need for a radical change in the course of history. Let us ‘listen’ to him carefully: Sir, if there is any group of Indian people that has been shabbily treated, it is my people. They have been disgracefully treated and neglected for the last 6000 years. The history of the Indus Valley Civilization, a child of which I am, shows quite clearly that it is the newcomers. Most of you here are intruders as far as I am concerned. It is newcomers who have driven away my people from the Indus valley to the jungle fastness. The whole history of my people is one of continuous exploitation and dispossession by the non-aboriginals of India punctuated by rebellions and disorder, and yet I take Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, at his word. I take you all at your word that now we are going to start a new chapter, a new chapter of independent India where there is equality of opportunity, where no one will be neglected (Constituent Assembly Debates, vol.1, pp.143-44)

Today, after the lapse of over seventy years, the big question is, and must be asked, what has been the fate of Jaipal Singh Munda’s people, the Adivasis, during this period of time? This paper will argue that the tribals of India have not been able to get their due in terms of the desired level of economic development despite the constitutional provisions in place for this purpose. To put the fact of this deficit of development among the Scheduled Tribes of India in a sharp focus, an attempt will be made here to see the issue in comparison with the level of development among the Scheduled Castes, another marginalized section of our society. This comparative approach to the problem will try to find out the history-given socio-cultural causes which are responsible for the fact of the STs being the least developed section of Indian society. It is to be noted that this approach to looking at the problem must

not belittle the value of those findings and observations which hold the ‘external’ agents like official apathy, land alienation, arbitrary denial of forest rights, displacement by development projects, etc., responsible in a major way for the lack of development among the tribals. It can be said that the focus here on the ‘internal’ factors is a complementary attempt to fill a gap. Before looking into these ‘internal factors, it would be worthwhile to have a look at what were some of the important observations about the plight of the tribals. The eminent anthropologist Verrier Elwin, who headed a govt of India- constituted committee just a decade after Independence to have an authentic idea about the state of functioning of government schemes in tribal areas, concluded that ‘of the many tribal problems, the greatest of all is poverty’ (quoted by Guha:2007). Elwin charged the officials in charge of the concerned schemes with ‘lacking in any intimate knowledge of their people, and with having a tendency to regard themselves as superior, as heaven-born missionaries of high culture (ibid). The Dhebar committee, headed by U.N.Dhebar (Jaipal Singh Munda himself being a member) found that land alienation, denial of forest rights and displacement by development projects were the chief culprits behind the misery of the Indian tribals.

These findings were and remain valid even today to a very large extent. But on a closer study of the Indian tribal society in comparison with the Scheduled Castes of India, we see that the STs have not been able to avail of the benefits guaranteed to them through the constitutional protective discrimination in proportion to their share in the population of the country. To get a clear view of the situation, we have to see the relative positions of the STs and SCs in the three sectors, politics, service and education, and then try to focus on the socio-cultural causes responsible for the fact of the tribals lagging behind the SCs.

Politics

Prof. Virginius Xaxa, a reputed expert on socio-economic exclusion and marginalization who teaches Sociology at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati and has to his credit several studies and reports on tribals-related issues, in one of his articles published in the Economic and Political Weekly(EPW), writes that the ‘tribes have not been able to carve out a space akin to that of the scheduled castes in national politics. Even at the regional level, their presence is hardly noticeable (Xaxa: 2011). He points out there that the latter have invariably found much better representation in Indian political life as ministers and other positions like state governors through the years. He further makes the point that the former is yet to produce leaders and administrators equaling the stature of Dr.B.R Ambedkar, Jagjivan Ram, K.R. Narayanan and Kanshi Ram.

Service

A perusal of the data regarding the relative position of the two categories in government services reveals that the scheduled tribes have not fared as well as the scheduled castes in availing of the facilities of reservation extended to them by the government. The report of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for 1996-97 and 1997-98 can be cited here to get an idea of the differential relative share of the two communities:

Rank of Service	% of SCs	% of STs
Group A	10.15	2.89
Group B	12.67	2.68
Group C	16.15	5.69
Group D	21.26	6.48
Total	17.43	5.78

Education

As far as their shares in teaching posts at the university and college levels are concerned, the following designation-wise data published by the UGC is highly revealing:

Rank of Service	% of SCs	% of STs
Professor	0.96	0.33
Associate Professor	1.78	0.53
Asstt Professor	3.22	0.79

Relevant data show that, as in the case of service, the scheduled tribes lag behind the scheduled castes in respect of enrolment in institutions of higher education.

The Question and the Internal Factors

The question arises: what is the reason behind such an unacceptable situation? The answer is there is not one reason but a multiplicity of reasons and factors which act as hindering forces. As said above, the 'external' factors, like land alienation and displacement, etc., have been discussed in full length and measured by several committees and independent experts. As a complementary attempt in this regard, it is necessary to focus on the factors that are 'internal' to the tribal society of India in terms of history, culture and social structure.

Isolation v. segregation

We should keep the fact in mind that the logic of reservation extended to the two categories was different. The scheduled castes were extended reservation because they suffered disabilities arising out of their humiliating *segregation* from the dominant privileged community, whereas, in the case of the scheduled tribes, it was their *isolation* from that community that was thought to be the basis of protective discrimination for them. These isolated and segregated life modes of life, over a long period of

history, resulted in very practical living styles and cultural habits in terms of actual day-to-day living as socio-cultural beings. It meant that the sufferers of social segregation (the scheduled castes), though being outside the *varna* system, had been integral to the dominant Hindu community, whether in villages or in towns. It, in consequence, also meant that they had greater exposure to the larger society. In other words, the opportunities and benefits enjoyed by the higher castes, like knowledge, information, technology, decent employment, etc., were visible to them, though from a distance which was actually denial. The tribes, because of their living very far from the society having these things, suffered what we may call ‘the disadvantage of isolation. It can be said that this exposure in one case and its lack in the other triggered and did not trigger some very significant correlated tendencies in the respective communities. The SCs became very acutely conscious of the unjustness of the denial of access to the things which should be open to all human beings. Collaterally, this consciousness of injustice also gave birth, over the years, to various levels of caste intellectual leaders who articulated such consciousness in various forceful ways. Dr.B.R.Ambedkar was at the highest point of that very historical continuum of the articulation of the rightful claim over the things unjustly denied. The absence of equally strong articulators among the tribals, underlined by Prof.Xaxa above, might be due to the fact of the isolated mode of tribal life, which did not suffer from the humiliation arising out of the socio-cultural segregation suffered by the scheduled castes. Historically speaking, it should be noted that with the onset of colonial rule, the situation saw some feeble changes, meaning that some sort of contact with the larger society was introduced through the means of transport like roads and railways. This process of integration with the wider world received acceleration in the post-independence period through the growth of transport facilities aided by the development of trade, commerce and the market. The degree and level of integration

varied from tribe to tribe because, despite the popular perception among the non-tribal population, the tribals are not a homogeneous group. But the reality is that they could not fare much better in the field of availing of the opportunities provided by the government's constitutional provisions. The question is ----- why?

Social structure

The answer may lie in the other and more significant dimension of the tribal isolated life, i.e., the social structure in which they have been historically living and which has given them a particular cultural ethos. The chief characteristics of this structure have been smallness in scale, a great deal of homogeneity, high value to resemblance and little value to differentiation, and absence of division of labor with the consequent lack of a diversified range of skills, knowledge, income, wealth status and privilege. It must be clarified here that these characteristics of the tribal social structure should not be taken in a sweeping manner as absolute terms of defining it. Rather, we can say that these are very largely true of that society, a fact which has been responsible for affecting the tendency and capacity of the tribals to integrate themselves with the demand of the bureaucratic nature of the modern working Indian society. For example, the said features of homogeneity and resemblance should be qualified by the knowledge that the tribals have been homogeneous in their particular clan groups, though there are several such groups claiming and having their own unique cultural features. Likewise, the smallness of the tribal population should be understood as a relative fact of their life. They are small-scale when compared to the non-tribal Indian population. Their own size varies from over seven million in the case of the Gonds and Bhils to less than one thousand in the case of many tribal communities. An interesting fact in this connection is that there is no correlation between the population sizes of the different tribes and their

performances on literacy and learning fronts. In fact, it is inverse in the sense that the larger the size, the lower the rate of literacy, educational attainments and share in government jobs. In this context, the examples of the Gonds, Bhils and Santhals, the three major tribal communities of India, can be taken as an illustrative point to prove that the population size has nothing to do with development measured by share in the facilities extended by the government.

The characteristic of the tribal social structure, which manifests itself as the lack of heterogeneity in terms of socially sanctioned division of labor and occupation, and the resultant absence of the diversity of skill, class, access to power, and lifestyle, is the most important for our context of trying to find the causes behind the tribals lagging behind on the parameters of development. The uniformity among the tribals due to the lack of such diversity can be said to be the reason behind the non-existence of what is called ‘the reference point for emulation’ by them. Again the adverb ‘largely’ should be kept in mind because there have been some tribal societies with rudimentary levels of stratification mainly based on clan or lineage. They were not characterized by what we call status differentiation though certain privileges of some kinds were not altogether absent. This social structure was and is beautiful in its own way, as it saved the tribals from the historical experience of oppression and discrimination for centuries. Yes, the dominant non-tribal society exploited them, but this exploitation was economic and political in nature. It did not percolate down to the social and cultural level of tribal life. The beauty of the tribal way of social life has been underlined by a famous anthropologist B.K.Roy Burman as that of a type of society incorporating a world view of attaining fulfillment through communication and reciprocity between man and man and between man and nature; rather than being held together through institutional arrangements and market competition’ (Agrawal: 2019). As against this, we all

know that the scheduled castes underwent the common painful experience of multiple oppression, discrimination and exploitation at the pan-India level. This commonality of pain led them to develop a sense of historically wronged identity at the regional and national levels. Further, because of their being the oppressed part of the larger dominant society, they were able to create reference points of emulation from amongst themselves in addition to the models of 'good life' which they saw among the higher castes.

By way of conclusion, we can say that it has been the isolated traditional life of the tribals from which some factors flowed that became, over the long historical period, the causes of their lagging behind on the scale of development.

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