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TRAJECTORY OF TRIBAL RESISTANCE IN INDIA

Abstract

Tribes in the Indian sub-continent hold a historicity which is professed to be as ancient as the available references on the latter. However, the history of tribal struggle with external power since their first contact with the outside world is comparatively recent. Such a contact proved to be tragically over-whelming, devastating and unfortunate for the tribes, and led to emergence of various tribal uprisings in the form of revolts and movements of varying magnitude from time to time. The emergence of tribal uprising in India coincides with the time of widespread establishment of British empire in the country. Simultaneously, the foundation of exploitation of Indian tribes resulting in their discontentment and rebellion against government was too laid in the colonial period. Considering the question of the growth, development, quality of life and livelihood, technological advancement, equality and other issues among Indian tribes, we can find that their situation still remains poorly attended. In order to understand why and how it remains so, a recourse of their historical experience in the sub-continent becomes essential. Based on the review of literature and secondary data in the form of government records and published reports, the paper thrusts upon the outlook and understanding of tribes as a social group and discusses the trajectory and state of affairs of tribes and tribal movements in independent India.

Keywords: *Indian tribe, Tribal Resistance, Insurgency, Identity Politics*

Introduction

With India celebrating its 75 years of independence, it becomes imperative to reflect upon how far the nation has come not only in terms of economy, scientific development, technological advancements etc. but also growth, development and sustainability of human capital.

The diverse and vast nation like India, using a single, over-arching and uniform approach for dealing with elaborate ethnic variation, cultural plurality, and multiplicity of human groups, would result only in a disillusioned and a flawed meeting of needs and aspirations of the citizens. It not only calls

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for an intensive investment of political and administrative will but also a thorough contextual understanding as it is an essential constitutional prerogative of each citizen to have an equal share in the fruits of development (of their nation) irrespective of their ethnicity, caste, gender, geographical location, socio-economic standing etc. What has however been widely noted is that in pre- as well as post-independent India, groups and communities which were traditionally at the disadvantaged end of the pole (e.g. tribes, traditional lower castes etc.) even today largely remain vulnerable and have experienced only a gradual or marginal improvement in their over-all socio-economic, political, educational and health status.

Schedule Tribe (ST) population in India nearly constitutes about 8.6% as per 2011 census, of the total population in the country. The highest number of STs are found in Odisha (62), Karnataka (50), Maharashtra (45), Madhya Pradesh (43) and Chhattisgarh (42) (Government of India, 2014). Of the total ST population of India, the states with highest per cent share are Madhya Pradesh (14. 68%), Maharashtra (10.07%), Odisha (9.19%), Rajasthan (8.85%) and Gujrat (8.29%), according to 2011 census. The states/Union Territories (UTs) with highest per cent concentration of their total population being ST (according to 2011 census) are Lakshwadeep (94.79%), Mizoram (94.43%), Nagaland (86.47%), Meghalaya (86.14%) and Arunachal Pradesh (68.78%) (Government of India, 2014). The most populous tribes in the country are Santhal, Bhil, Gond, Mina and Oraon.

Now, considering the question of the growth, development, quality of life and livelihood, technological advancement, equality and other issues among Indian tribes, we can find that their situation still remains poorly attended. In order to understand why and how it remains so, a recourse of their historical experience in the sub-continent becomes essential.

Retrospective View on Indian Tribes' Struggle

Tribes in the Indian sub-continent hold a historicity which is professed to be as ancient as the available references on the latter. However, the history of tribal struggle with external power since their first contact with the outside world is comparatively recent.

Over here tribes had been living in a state of relative geographical isolation, largely concentrating in forest, hilly and mountainous areas, which were rich in natural resources. Tribal habitations had no or very little contact with outside world which traditionally resulted in their autonomous lifestyle, distinctive socio-cultural, economic, political and religious institutions, and exclusive customary practices and belief system, which were 'alien' to the mainstream.

Tribal communities had a close and symbiotic relationship with land and depended upon it for agriculture (mostly shifting cultivation). A similar

relation and heavy dependence was found upon forests for hunting and food gathering as well as used various forests produce for their survival. Forests also served as sacred groves for them, and were an intricate part of their belief system. Thus, sustenance, subsistence, health, and belief pattern of the tribes i.e., a cradle-to-grave arrangement as well as an autonomous life was provided to them by their natural habitat (Sutradhar, 2015). However, this isolated, autonomous and secured life of tribes was in due course disrupted by different external powers/rules which though varied in the pre- and post-independence period but resulted in a by and large similar vulnerable and under-dog position of the tribes.

Colonial Rule and the Emergence of Tribal Revolts

Verrier Elwin (1943, 1960) an expert of tribal studies, has described about the adverse impact of tribes' contact with outsiders, on their life and economy. Such a contact proved to be tragically over-whelming, devastating and unfortunate for the tribes, and led to emergence of various tribal uprisings in the form of revolts and movements of varying magnitude from time to time.

The emergence of tribal uprising in India coincides with the time of widespread establishment of British empire in the country. During the colonial expansion extensive changes were brought about at various levels, most importantly in the prevailing land systems, with new land tenure system i.e., tenancy systems being introduced in the late 18th century, which were extended in the tribal areas as well. This ushered the entry of the British sponsored class of intermediaries belonging to Hindu social organisation e.g. non-tribal contractors, landowners and moneylenders, as well as other British officers and sympathisers (including missionaries) in the tribal habitations, to help the foreign rule in maintaining proper functioning of the newly introduced tenancy system.

The new tenancy system introduced an ownership pattern, economy (cash/market based) which was in total opposition to the traditional one being followed by the tribes (Singh, 1972). Tribes which were once the landowners, having traditional and customary rights over their land, were now converted into tenants who were required to pay land rent/tax. This period also saw severe famines, which led to compounding of land tax to be paid to the British rule, inability to pay which led to their (tribals') borrowing of money from local non-tribal moneylenders resulting in a vicious cycle of usury and indebtedness, descending into generations on several occasions and ultimately turning many landless and debt-bonded. Sinha (1968) based on his work on Santhals, comments that tribes were "systematically dispossessed of ancestral land". Intermediaries, having the patronage of British rule made most and usuriously usurped the title of tribals' traditional land as latter were illiterate, had no understanding of the existing legal system (i.e. British courts), and lacked capital as well for court battles, resulting in their loss of land ownership.

Tribes' customary rights over the forest were also heavily thwarted. The initial efforts made in this direction by British government were, First Forest Act of 1865 which discussed about the regulation of collection of forest produce. The Forest Act of 1878 further limited the use and control of tribes over the forest, e.g. pasturing and even trespassing etc. were declared contrary to law. Still, the customary rights of tribes over forest were recognised to some extent. However, the First Forest Policy of 1894 regulated the customary rights of forest tribes by restricting their privileges over forest use and even their free movement in forest.

Thus, the first contact of tribes with outsiders, popularly called "dikus", proved disastrous as it was replete with exploitation and oppression. Retired army personnel were introduced in the area who lived on the outskirt of tribal villages to help contain any incident of revolt against the British rule. This prepared a burning ground for tribal uprisings across the country during colonial period.

Tribal Movements During Colonial Period and Their Consequence

Early tribal uprisings in India can be dated back to latter half of the 18th century during which Chuar, Halba, Chakma, Pahariya and similar uprisings took place.[1] The Chotanagpur plateau i.e., central India as well as eastern and southern India saw large-scale tribal revolts involving some major ethnic groups e.g., Kol, Santhal, Munda, Gond, Kondha, Bhil and Juang tribes. In north-east India, uprising among numerically large tribes e.g. Naga, Mizo, Khasi and Garo were noted which emerged mainly in the early 19th century.

Scholars invested in studying tribal movements have classified them in a variety of categories. Ghanshyam Shah (1990) in his elaborative review of social movements in India has dealt with classification of tribal movements by various scholars.[2] He however suggests that there remains a great deal of overlapping and inter-connectedness among various categories at times as any uprising, in order to take the form of a revolt, results from a cumulative impact of various factors leading to an unbearable situation for a group or community thereby resulting in a revolt.

Prabhu (1998) has critiqued that tribal movements arose not only an issue based on repercussions rather due to common class interests of the various exploitative sections having tacit approval from the state and its political economy, which had a cumulative bearing on the over-all socio-economic, political and religious life of the tribes.

A pertinent point which Shah (1990), drawing example from the works of Mahapatra (1972), Surajit Sinha (1972) and Singh, (1983), makes is that any tribe in order to organise a rebellion in the form of an assertive movement needs numerical strength and relatively less isolation. It is so because they have a practically higher chance of greater solidarity needed to present as a

united front against an indomitable rule (Sinha, 1968; Singh, 1983b). In the Indian scene, numerically small and isolated tribes were never able to come-up with any practically assertive rebellions. Large and well-organised tribal groups have thus remained at the forefront of major tribal movements over here and it is for this reason that many widespread violent tribal movements needed military subjugation even during pre-independence period.

Tribal movements in India during British rule resulted due to a variety of reasons. Guha (1983) asserts that British colonial powers' forest policies brutally and savagely destroyed the tribe-forest 'sacred grove' inter-dynamics for its own benefits. The traditionally held rights of the forest tribes, over the period of time, were curtailed through the development of such exploitative forest policies, management and legislations.

Rebellion among Santhal, Munda, Kol and Chuar tribes arose due to socio-economic exploitation of large and small scale agriculture dependent groups as a result of land alienation and heavy revenue imposed on them resulting in exploitation at the hands of outsiders/non-tribals commissioned by British rule in tribal habitations (Singh, 1972). These uprisings were largely mowed down by use of armed retaliation by British army. Mariya rebellion happened to keep the indigenous socio-cultural and religious beliefs and tribal identity intact. The Tana Bhagat (with Oraon tribe as the focal point) also had a similar appeal. Some tribes of central India, living in close proximity to Hindu castes had their elite taken over Hindu customs and practices in the process of 'sanskritising' themselves (e.g. Munda tribe) while sections of some other tribes took over Christianity (e.g. Santhal) in search of securing equality of status and to come out of the grip of varied forms of exploitation, which practically did not happen, instead developed further discontentment among them.

Among Muriya and Koi tribes the rebellion was a result of loss of customary rights over use of forest and forest produce. This however resulted in revaluation of existing forest policy by the colonial rulers.

Naga, Mizo and Khasi revolts rose for securing political autonomy as a result of secessionist tendency among these tribes. A.P. Sinha (1972) notes that tribes of north-east India have long raised their rebellion against the British rule in their area but were never a part of the mainstream national freedom struggle as autonomous and secessionist tendencies always prevailed among native tribals and Khasis were the first to revolt over here. Jharkhand movement was also on the same lines of securing autonomous status.

Siddha and Kanhu Murmu, Jatra Bhagat, Birsa Munda, Raja Jaggannath, Rani Guidallo, Chief Bisoi are some of the 'tribal heroes', lesser known in the mainstream, who drew immense reverence among their community and were treated as demi-gods. Sinha (1968) borrows Fuchs' (1965) term "Messianic Movements" for tribal movements having valourous central

figures i.e., a charismatic leader who could lead large scale rebellion.

The organised rebellion against British rule and its emissaries had serious implications which brought about changes at various levels including administration, political, policy formulation etc. The administrative outlook of the existing rule towards tribes became more serious, resulting in rethinking and distinct efforts being invested for administration of tribes.

Surajit Sinha (1972) points out that it was after recurring tribal rebellions and their crushing down by use of military might that the colonial rulers "initiated a series of protective legislations and administrative devices in favour of the groups officially labelled as 'tribals' and very soon 'tribe' as social category distinct from the Hindu and Muslim peasantry crystallised." It was now decided by the British rulers that for a better administration of tribes they should be reserved in special areas with a 'supposition' that they would be able to manage their life and livelihood well in segregation. In this direction, in the year 1874 Schedule District Act was passed in order to exclude specific areas from coming under the ordinary law in order to 'save' tribes from exploitation at the hands of outsiders as well as to keep them away from mainstream freedom struggle. The colonial rule did not want to add an increment to the already simmering freedom movement in the country thereby allowing only the representatives of British rule to enter into these areas, and declaring it as 'prohibited' for others. Thus, came the policy of "isolation" for tribal administration.

The Schedule District Act facilitated for the appointment of an officer for administration of the area, involving civil and criminal justice, matters related to revenue etc. The tribes were further isolated from the Indian mainstream and heavily populated tribal areas were converted into "excluded" and "partially excluded area" with no permission given to common Indians to visit them (including tribal areas of north-east India).

After major tribal uprisings in various parts of the country colonial rulers understood about the strength and vigour, tribes could invest in any revolt as in most tribal insurgencies British rulers won only after using an armed retaliation. Thus, pre-independence period in the later stages saw the use of approach of isolation for tribal administration.

Verrier Elwin (1939, 1960) on the basis of his extensive work among tribes, promoted the approach of isolation as he believed that the contact of tribals with outsiders has led to their extreme exploitation, making them vulnerable with a highly destabilised economy. He proposed the concept of "national-park" for tribes, believing that isolation with minimal outside contact can only save them. This approach was, however, criticized by A.V. Thakkar, a Gandhian, who asserted that tribes should not be treated as museum exhibits and left alone to deal with their situation.

Ghurye (1963) advocated the approach of assimilation of tribes into the Hindu fold. This approach was also criticised as assimilation of tribes would require them "to "melt" in the "mainstream", rather than living together but separately in everlasting relations of interdependence with other communities" (Srivastava, 2008). It would mean for any tribe to completely give up their culture, customs or practices, which in no condition is ideal. It was in much later stages that the approach of integration was adopted which even Verrier Elwin later subscribed to.

Tribes in The Post-Independence Period

Tribe as a social category

Before discussing the trajectory and state of affairs of tribes and tribal movements in independent India, it is pertinent to discuss about the outlook and understanding of tribes as a social group. Any effort invested to organise criteria or salient features to define a tribe only for the purpose of academic deliberation or use, will only provide a part view or understanding. It is for this reason that constitutional and legal standpoints are considered significant in many societies (Beteille, 1998).

Beteille (1998) points out that in India defining a tribe has remained ambiguous because of the early colonial preoccupation of describing them as 'primitive', 'aboriginal' or 'autochthon', based on their relative state of isolation, geography, level of contact with mainstream, economic activities and in most blatant case based on their belief pattern[3]. The idea however had been to place them at a particular stage of cultural development. This, nevertheless, served a very restricted purpose and more of a 'text-book' definition as in due course because of culture contact with neighbouring and outside world, the tribes were experiencing a continuous transformation, with many of them after long term contact adopting the Hindu fold while many became a part of peasantry and left their erstwhile non-cultivator or nomadic status (Xaxa, 1999; Srivastava, 2008).[4] There are cases of even those tribes who adopted other religious ideologies for a perceived emancipation from their miserable life condition (discussed earlier).

The approach of sovereign India towards tribes differs from the previous colonial rule but the ambiguity while defining a tribe or its salience still prevails. In an effort to bring about any 'concrete' difference in the life of tribes, the category of Scheduled Tribe (ST), having constitutional sanctity, was adopted in India soon after independence. However, even after several years of independence, at the level of draft national tribal policy itself it has been tough for the policy makers to get rid of a 'frozen picture' of tribes or 'value-loadedness' of assumptions or stigma associated with them, and the state has still not been able to defy the insinuations of "primitiveness" associated with tribes at a wider level even if done on paper (Srivastava, 2008).[5] Today, with nearly

8.6% of the total population of India (2011 census) and over 700 identified STs, there is still no discreet operational definition or set of criteria to define a tribe, in the absence of which the vision of proper mainstreaming of Indian tribes, keeping in mind their context specific needs, seems abjectly uncertain. It thus forms a burning ground for the simmering dissatisfaction among tribes and an element of suspicion they have for Indian state as there have been continued occurrence of instances when tribes or their welfare and development was brutally ignored by the government.

State, Development and Tribal Exploitation Post-independence

The foundation of exploitation of Indian tribes resulting in their discontentment and rebellion against government was laid in the colonial period. This period saw widespread revolts of various magnitudes along the length and breadth of the country. Socio-economic derailment of tribes was a very prominent adverse impact of British rule. Besides, the belief of tribes in formal administration as well as outsiders was reduced drastically as the administrative policies of pre-independence period used to govern them proved to be catastrophic. Their source of livelihood dwindled, survival reduced to inconsequence, their independent and autonomous lifestyle went missing, their social, economic, religious and political institutions drifted to periphery, thus in all a thorough subjugation of tribes happened.

Since 1947 with India attaining self-governance and Indian state becoming the instituted guardian of all its citizens, it was believed that the shadows of a tumultuous past of tribes would wane, which however did not happen. Rule changed but not the marginality or dismal position of tribes, or their ever-growing resentment against the state and its over-bearing policies for them as it largely focussed on the approaches of isolation and assimilation. Nature of exploitation subjected to them underwent only a slight alteration from past but the broad range impact on the life of tribes was similar as in the pre-independence period.

Post-independence period saw a major task of nation-building before the Indian state. This not only involved industrial and economic development and infrastructure building but also delivery of equitable justice and distribution of fruits of development to all groups be it mainstream or living in isolation. However, the initial major task was of generating the sources of development for which setting-up of industries was essential. This required space for setting-up industries, mining of available natural resources, construction of dams to counter instances of poor weather as well as to promote proper irrigation facilities for a successful agricultural outcome, setting-up of hydro-electric projects, strengthening communication infrastructure, and most importantly generating employment opportunities by developing and promoting human capital, as envisioned in the initial five-year plans. It was this urgent and indispensable need of rapid industrialisation to salvage the weak economic

condition of a newly independent nation that turned the needle of national level planning, policy and implementation of plans and programmes heavily inclined towards generating and securing mainstream economic development thereby bringing about a plethora of untold miseries for the tribes (Nathan & Xaxa, 2012).

State Sponsored Development: A Recipe for Tribal Miseries

It had been the worst stroke of destiny for the tribes that their habitation had been rich in various natural resources e.g. minerals, ores, forest wealth etc. This served as the ideal foundational ground for various industries and projects to be set-up there (e.g. Bokaro steel plant, Chittaranjan Locomotive Works etc.) (Vidyarthi, 1968). Such a development was perceived to lead to mainstreaming of tribes along with their rapid development which rather proved otherwise as they were now further exposed to non-tribal moneylenders, merchants, contractors and migrants which destabilized their livelihood and economy (Elwin, 1943).

Establishment of industries required clearing of large tracts of land and forest, away from human habitation or use. Forests being the mainstay of tribal economy were not an easy trade to make for the tribals as it not only provided food, timber, wood, fuel etc. to them but also held a cultural and symbolic significance i.e., a greater part of their total life depended on it (Guha, 1996). A huge share of their rights over forests was already lost in the colonial period and whatever remained was now jeopardised. Thus, the newly introduced state-sponsored development spelt doom for them.[6]

Cultivable land as well as forest cover traditionally owned and used by tribals was now acquired by state in the name of development by giving compensation in return and a promise of resettlement and rehabilitation. This however happened with only a small section of affected tribals in question, i.e., as less as a quarter of the total displaced could largely achieve a proper compensation (Dasgupta, 1964). Acquisition of land continued under the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894 (till post 2010) which was applicable for private land ownership as such those who did not qualify for it were not even considered project affected persons (PAPs) (Baviskar, 2019).

Efficient use and investment of capital was not in the general habit of tribals as they were more closer to self-sufficient subsistence rather market economy. They squandered the compensation money soon resulting them in working as unskilled labourer on their own land besides having no sync with formal work culture (Das, 1990). This led to widespread *development-induced-displacement* and a resultant marginalised life of affected tribes. It had its psychological impact over the tribals as well as they got uprooted from their motherland along with an adverse impact over their social institutions and undue harassment of their women and children (Narayan, 1988). [7]

Besides the development induced alienation of land and forest rights among tribes, another major reason was lack of proper and regular survey and settlement practices as well as a complicated system of land tenure. The tribal policy adopted by Indian state has remained less sensitive to tribal values as a result of which a retaliatory forced encroachment of forest land by the tribes in some areas has occurred, and legal battles coupled with violent conflicts with forest and other state officials with due support civil society have become frequent (Rao, Deshingkar & Farrington, 2006; Sen & Lalhrietpui, 2006).

Narayan (1988) suggests that in the course of nation building it has been the complex interplay of economic and political forces, along with failure of administrative machinery to keep the needs of tribals and their right-based rehabilitation into consideration that has led to their miserable condition and several tribal movements.

Rehabilitation and Resettlement: A Faltered State Practice

Rehabilitation and resettlement policy of Indian government over the years has been the weakest link and the major factor leading to various tribal movements post-independence (Rao, Deshingkar & Farrington, 2006). The basic factors leading to tribal movements in post-independence India have been alienation of land and forests among tribes who traditionally depended upon it, encroachment of the tribal habitat and their traditional livelihood sources by migrants and other better educated and technologically advanced outsiders having thick idea of market economy and serving as the controllers of the new development opportunities in tribal areas. This was coupled by state apathy and contentious policy and planning related to resettlement and rehabilitation of affected tribes, even though there had been formation of different governments at the centre over time (Sethy, 2016).[8]

Sen & Lalhrietpui (2006) while describing about the ineffective and contentious role of state in meeting the tribal needs have pointed out that "…earlier as part of its socialist nation-building processes and later as a part of its neoliberal structural readjustments, post-colonial India has set a poor track record". The burden of nation building and economic development was unwarrantedly put on tribes who bore the price of being 'nature-dependent'. Today in India a large number of "*Micro-level Movements*" can be observed, occurring against unsustainable industrialisation, mining operations etc. (Sethy, 2016).

In the decade of 90s when economic liberalisation was introduced in the country many tribal areas witnessed Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for mining and other activities leading to an even faster pace of industrialisation coupled with widespread displacement leading to a capitalist mode of development (Rout, 2015; Baviskar, 2019).

The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) which started in protest against

Sardar Sarovar Dam at its centre point, led to massive displacement of tribes, destruction of forest and cultivable land, with serious environmental implications.[9] The movement was not only against several small and big dams to be built over Narmada but also contentious process of compensation, and misplaced resettlement and rehabilitation of the affected tribes (Sutradhar, 2015). It posed a strong challenge to the state policies for allowing capitalist mode of development with insensitivity towards tribal plight and environment (Baviskar, 1995).[10] Contentious Polavaram hydro-electric project on river Godavari (Andhra Pradesh) is another example making the lives of native tribals (Konda Reddy tribals) miserable, with neither state or central government paying any heed to them.

Odisha which is highly rich in mineral resources like bauxite (iron ore etc.) witnessed unmindful mining projects set up in the areas of Sambalpur, Rayagada, Kashipur, Niyamgiri, Keonjhar etc. Such mining projects not only affected the tribal economy but also influenced the local environment adversely as large scale deforestation started since then over there.

Introduction of such development projects have led to severe protests and resistance movements by local tribes like Dongaria Kondha, Majhi, Santhal, Bhuiyan, Juang etc., some took over to even armed protests. It was noted that most tribals were denied compensation or proper rehabilitation by the government. Many local resistance groups were formed e.g. "Niyamgiri Suraksha Samity Manch", and similar ones, to revolt against such projects, in order to save the natural habitat as well to raise the demand for proper compensation, resettlement and rehabilitation of the affected tribes with the support of civil society (Vidyarthi, 1968; Sutradhar, 2015; Sethy, 2016). Srikant (2009) asserts that on one hand such unsustainable development projects have "become synonymous with destruction", and on the other they have brought the environmental and ecological concerns to the fore vis-à-vis development strategies of the state. Bhowmik (1988) and Baviskar (2019) critically point out that state efforts towards tribal development could not become a success as it had a capitalist mode leading to a 'trickle-down' of a larger part of instituted funds to the actual target group.

Tribal Resistance and Insurgency

Tribal exploitation has also resulted in separatist tendencies demanding autonomy and separate statehood. Case of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) as a tribal movement is a brilliant example in this context as it led to the formation of Jharkhand state (with non-linguistic base) having tribal domination, in the year 2000 (Tillin, 2011; Sethy, 2016). However, JMM today has a shrunken political presence because of a disillusioned leadership and weakening support of marginalised sections (Das, 1990; Kumar & Rai, 2009, Kumar & Panda, 2018).

Secessionist and separatist demands for autonomy have been a dominant feature of the north-east India as ethnicity remains the mainstay of tribes over here. Besides, their socio-cultural, demographic, geographic and economic marginalisation was supplemented by perceived discrimination, government policies and other factors (Ghosh, 2003).

Mainstreaming of north-eastern tribes had been a herculean task for Indian government and on several occasions made possible only by use of army as armed rebellion is common in the area (Nag, 2009). Movements making demand for a separate state have been a feature of many other north-east tribes as well. Besides this, several examples of unsustainable development projects being run in the area resulting in heavy deforestation, land alienation, large scale displacement, exploitation by non-tribals and outsiders, environmental degradation etc., are dealing a blow on the tribal life in a multidimensional way (e.g. thermal power projects, wild life sanctuaries etc.).

Long termed exploitation of tribes in the name of development at the hands of non-tribals and even state machinery has led to tribal movements with a bent towards left wing extremism. Guha (2007) laments that tribes are even more disadvantaged and deprived than their dalit counterpart as "…they have been unable to effectively articulate their grievances through the democratic and electoral process". Apathy of the state machinery has led to the increasing naxalite influence over the tribes though it has not proved to be a panacea for the long standing tribal grievances as was expected by the tribals.

In order to bring down the Maoist influence over tribal areas, the government evolved a counter-insurgency or a state-sponsored 'vigilante' mechanism called as "Salwa Judum" which has rather proved to be counter-productive as these personnel have indiscriminately devastated tribal villages, harassed tribal women and children arbitrarily, i.e. gross human rights violations have taken place with tacit state support, thereby escalating miseries of tribes and a raging civil war in Bastar and surrounding regions which later spread to southern states as well (Sundar, 2016). Its repercussion has been that naxal cadres have started eliminating any sign or personnel found associated with government (Guha, 2007). However, in the year 2011 the landmark Supreme Court judgement banned state-supported vigilante groups.

Identity Politics

Politics of identity surrounding tribes in India has a multidimensional expression. At a wider national level it attracts a 'common sense' understanding indicative of a single inclusive entity with negligible importance given to specific geography, historicity, ethnicity, socio-cultural or other factors, though difference from the 'mainstream' is surely recognised. On the contrary, at a micro level these implications become highly pronounced as they hold immense meaning to the members of each tribal group, providing

validity to the distinctiveness of each as that marks its identity.

Xaxa (2005) makes a sharp retort at the politics of identity of tribes. He has pointed that the nascent idea regarding tribal identity in post-independence period was formed by the prevailing political discourse with varying approaches of assimilation (right-wing bent) as well as those vouching for integration of tribes, which he suggests is an imposition of identity. He notes that education, continuous exploitation of tribals and the development induced miseries in their life has actually encouraged them towards reflexivity resulting in formulation of self-perceived sense of identity today.

Politics of identity has a greater role to play in tribal life. With India gaining independence and constitution of India coming into force, affirmative action and positive discrimination for tribal development, and ensuring tribal rights and social justice, have sprung up a compendium of issues.

Having a ST status carries constitutionally sanctioned privileges with it, which continuously drives tribal groups to attain it, by demanding it through organised movements based on their perceived criteria for qualification. It also carries a contentious aspect in cases when groups enjoying a reserved status in one state (or several others) do not have it in another. It results not only in a poor situation for such groups where they are 'unprivileged' but also develops a sense of resentment against the government. A case in point is of Koch Rajbanshis, a tea tribe of Assam (Pathak, 2010; Roy, 2014; Sharma, 2018). In Bihar and Assam, Koch Rajbanshis enjoy an Other Backward Classes (OBC) status, in West Bengal scheduled caste (SC) status and in Meghalaya they have a ST status. This has led to politicisation and assertion of identity and ethnicity for seeking equal rights and privileges (Sharma, 2018). Prabhu (1998) thus makes a pointed observation that today "tribal movements signal a shift from resistance to resurgence, towards ethno-development".

Another important case as to how politics of identity while pronouncing one kind of solidarity disrupts the larger solidarity and tosses up the true aim behind concretising and asserting identity for a greater cause has been noted by Kumari et al. (2021) in the Jaunsar-Bawar region, an identified 'Scheduled Tribe Area'. Local groups over here which identify themselves as traditional privileged castes enjoy the benefits of the ST status and dominate the local politics while those identified as Scheduled Castes, the actual needy, have been pushed to the periphery while standing a chance of availing the benefits of development.

Nonetheless, tribal identity has over the years experienced a vivid change. With greater and growing contact with mainstream, affirmative action, positive discrimination, education, state efforts, and secular processes like modernisation, urbanisation, globalisation, neo-liberal economy etc., the perceived stereotypes associated with tribes are not practically operative today.

Change being constant has affected and driven a sense of dilemma or "loss of identity" among many tribal individuals today. It is their culture, traditional history, customs and language that resurge the sense of 'real' identity among them, many of whom have otherwise experienced a transformative 'homogenising' influence over them due to previously mentioned factors. What has not changed though, to a great extent, is the general 'mass' outlook towards them even if lacking a practical merit. Continuous contestations of tribal identity of varied nature are thus a significant reality in the present times.

Inclusion of Tribes: A Reality or Distant Dream

Constitution of National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) (a constitutional body) under Article 338A of the constitution (89th Amendment) Act, 2003, Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA Act) 1996, Forest Rights Act (2006), article 342, V[th] and VIth Schedule of the constitution, fundamental rights as well as safeguard of social, economic, employment, cultural and educational rights, vested in the Indian constitution by way of various articles and acts are some of the important efforts and measures made for securing tribal development.

Report of the high level committee on socio-economic, health and educational status of tribal communities of India (2014) is a commendable work in tribal development (GoI, 2014). It mentions how state has worked towards development of tribes through several secular means but has invested least effort in safeguarding them from the elements of exploitation as exploitative land, forest, development and other state policies continue to make them vulnerable.

Even after several affirmative, legal and judicial provisions being formulated for securing justice for tribes, there general situation has not altered much and a life of 'subaltern' is lived by most till today. The primary indicators of development i.e., health, education, livelihood condition and status do not show any great improvement (GoI, 2014). Thus, it clearly indicates that a very slow paced development is taking place and their lived-life is still marginalised. However, a silver lining that shines bright in this dismal picture is that recently a member of the biggest ST in India was appointed as the head of Indian state. Still, it is a long way to imagine a substantial improvement in the tribal life in general.

Concluding Remarks

Serious neglect and deprivation, widespread poverty, poor health and educational status of tribes, exploitation and oppression by traders and money lenders, absence of an effective and sensitive administration are some of the main factors that have continued to plague tribal life since ages and even today.

In order to bring about practically viable tribal development, what is essentially required, as noted by anthropologists, sociologists, civil society members, social workers at large, is not a homogenous or an over-arching approach to deal with tribal situation. In order to integrate tribes well into the mainstream, a contextual and empathetic understanding and management of tribal issues and concerns is needed on the part of the state, without compromising the tribes' specific needs and aspirations under the garb of 'greater good or development'.

Notes

1   K.S. Singh (1985) has proposed a three-phase division of tribal movements in India based on their time of emergence. He identifies first phase between 1795-1860, second phase between 1860-1920, and third phase from 1920 till Indian independence. These phases correspond to different stages of establishment, expansion and occurrence of British rule in India.

2   Shah (1990) using Mahapatra's (1972) famous article "Social Movements among Tribes of India" has discussed about three main categories of tribal movements used by him. The first category is of "reactionary" movements, second of "conservative" movements and third of "revisionary or revolutionary" movements. He further includes Surajit Sinha's (1972) classification of tribal movements into a) Ethnic rebellion, b) Reform movements, c) Political autonomy movements within the Indian Union, d) Secessionist movements, e) Agrarian unrest. Next, he includes K.S. Singh's (1983a) four-fold classification based on i) Political autonomy, ii) Agrarian and forest based issues, iii) Sanskritization, and iv) Cultural movements for script and language. For the purpose of analysis Shah has himself classified tribal movements into (a) Ethnic movements; (b) Agrarian and forest rights movements; (c) Environmental movements (d) Involuntary displacement and rehabilitation movements; and (e) Political movements around the nationality question for a separate state.

3   In India tribes are commonly referred to as '*adivasi*', 'adimjati', '*janjati*' etc.

4   Srivastava (2008) points that the ambiguity around defining a tribe goes to the extent that certain communities which are classified as tribe in one state hold the status of caste in another.

5   In the year 2006 Government of India renamed the category primitive tribal group (PTG) to particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) to avoid any implications 'primitiveness' being attached to tribes.

6   Roy Burman (1982, 2006) a champion of tribal rights has continuously vouched for safeguard of the customary tribal rights over the forests.

7   Narayan (1988) has discussed about an exclusive Oraon festival named "Jani Shikhar" which came on the verge of extinction due to widespread displacement and development activities.

8   Beginning with the first dam project "Hirakud" set up in Odisha in 1950's, displaced over lacks of tribals from several hundred villages. In the decade of 60s Rourkela Steel Plant (Sundargarh district, Odisha) also displaced hundreds of tribal villages. In the following decades Cachar Paper Mills of North Cachar Hills district (Assam) reduced the tribe inhabited forest area, Tuli Paper Mills of Nagaland also acted

similarly. Establishment of several thermal power stations in north-east and other parts of the country also proved disastrous for the tribes. Various industrial plants in central and eastern India came up.

9   NBA involved native tribes, administrators, educationists and members of civil society e.g., Medha Patkar and baba Amte as lead figures.

10   In the light of NBA, in the year 1990, B.D. Sharma an IAS officer cum social worker wrote to the Supreme Court of India requesting the constitution of a commission named National Commission for Scheduled Caste (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) for delivering socio-economic justice to displaced and affected tribes by the Sardar Sarovar Dam project and their proper rehabilitation, and over-all protection of the rights of SCs and STs.

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