

## **THE IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION ON TRIBAL WOMEN OF INDIA**

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Tribal women suffered multilayered exploitation irrespectively of the context and the socio-economic space in which they found themselves. Forced into settled cultivation as a consequence of mega-development projects, and stringent forest laws that ended women's cultural engagement with its resources, women were converted into drudges performing multiple tasks on land with men left with very little to do. This paper will demonstrate the changing role of tribal women in the economic workforce under the onslaught of globalization and neoliberalism.

Globalization has thrown up new challenges for the fulfillment of commitments and realization of the goal of social development. Despite impressive growth in some areas, globalization has bred a sense of insecurity, especially in developing countries, and marginalized them from global economy. Globalization offers opportunity for social and economic development promoting full and productive employment and fosters social integration. But on the other hand, it presents serious challenges including financial crisis, insecurity, and poverty by marginalizing certain sectors of society, especially tribal women, and inequality within and among societies.

The term 'social exclusion' has been coined to express the multidimensionality of the poor and their debarment from the benefits of mainstream economic growth and development. The new economic approach to poverty alleviation takes into account this multidimensional aspect of social exclusion and attempts to build an alternative development strategy. This strategy goes beyond the conventional critique of economic management and income distribution and is based on 'bottom up' approach. This approach, which focuses on community level initiatives, cannot be thought of as a strategy unless there is a planned macro policy frame work. Poverty eradication has to be understood as more equitable distribution of wealth, more opportunities, guarantee of social justice and re-enforcing linkages between economic and social justice. Though poverty is not the cause of gender bias, a link between gender and poverty is visible among the poor and tribal women are the poorest of the poor.

Tribal forest economy is primarily a women's economy, and it is women who are most directly affected by the corporate exploitation of their traditional lands. All available laws –those relating to lands, forests, minor forest produce, water resources, etc. restrain people from using forests. Communities who live near or

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inside forests are evicted from the land they have lived on for centuries and reduced to a floating population. On the other hand, private interests have started a process of decimating forests.<sup>1</sup> Thus primary resources such as fuel, fodder and minor forest produce which were available free to villagers are today either non-existent or have to be brought commercially. The tribal women have to walk several kilometers to fetch potable water in order to avoid polluted rivers and rapidly-dying wells, or spending four to six hours hunting for firewood in deforested terrains. Disappearing grazing lands make their animal husbandry tasks even more difficult. The forest's yield of honey, spices, oil, gum, animal food and medicines is inaccessible because of guards. Governmental "development" programmes to have played havoc in poor people's lives. The construction of dams such as the Srisailem Dam on the Krishna river near Hyderabad; the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada river in Gujarat, threatens to displace thousands of (mainly tribal people) and were not compensated in any way.

The struggle of the tribal women has been about human rights to live in dignity and freedom to pursue a way of life and livelihood that is centered on a complex relationship fostered over generations with the entire forest landscape. The ancestral plural relationship that women hold with the forest space, is depicted by how this space is used in multiple ways: shifting cultivation, grazing, food production, foraging for wild fruits, vegetables, tubers and medicines, saving seeds and breeds, collecting fuel wood, forest produce and materials to build homes, worshipping their ancestors and gods and a space to celebrate and mourn. It is these "productive" and other "non-economic" interactions and relationship with the forest, that have been constantly contested, challenged and have come into direct conflict with the interests of the State since before independence and have intensified in independent India.

We should attempt to link land resource rights for tribal women as the central point of all the gender inequity making its entry in the tribal community, and we should not forget patriarchy can take various shapes and forms –from globalization 'thrust' to feminization of poverty to violence against women in the name of customs. There are hundreds of attempts being tried to create a better world for tribal women –from the tribal identity protection perspective, from women's right perspective, from the perspective of community control over natural resources, from labour rights perspective in this globalised economy. But still there is a society based on justice and this includes gender justice issues in tribal community.

Tribal people are losing control over their land and forest on the onslaught of globalization and the early communitarian systems of control, management and output sharing are disintegrating. The worst hit are women, whose status seems to decline in direct proportion to shifts from forest to land and the increasing influence of caste values in everyday life. Thus the participation of women in the local community in terms of politics and resource management, declines as we move from the foraging tribes (Birhor) to mainly agriculturist tribes (Santhal, Ho, Munda

and Oraon). Therefore, it can be argued that if full fledged patriarchy, i.e. control of women both within and outside the home, has not yet been consolidated, it is primarily because of the importance of forest-based gathering and women's control over income from this activity. Nevertheless, the root has set in deep.

### **Tribal Women in the Working Force**

Ethnographic literature shows that non-participation in the working force in the primary sector of economy is an indicator of social status. With improvement in economic condition women workers tend to withdraw from outdoor work in agriculture and allied activities. The younger women of these households, however, tend to go up for education they can join the tertiary sector of the economy or take up more prestigious occupations later on. Decline in the participation rate of women in a growing economy can therefore be looked upon as a transitional phenomenon to a certain extent.

It would however be a mistake to consider all declines in the participation rate as a mark of withdrawal on prestige considerations. Some decline is also related to the disappearance or reduction of the sex-specific occupation roles of women in the wake of rescheduling the resource utilization pattern or of introduction of technological innovations. For a correct appreciation of the dynamics of changes in the participation rates of the tribal female workers in different industrial categories, it would, therefore, be necessary to have an idea of the occupations traditionally pursued by the tribal communities and of the sex wise division of labour as associated with these occupations.

L.P. Vidyarthi has classified the tribal communities as (a) forest hunting type (b) hill cultivation type (c) plains agricultural type and (d) simple artisan type. B.K. Roy Burman elaborated the classification to cover (a) forestry and food gathering (b) shifting cultivation (c) settled agriculture (d) agricultural labour (e) animal husbandry (f) household industry and (g) miscellaneous occupations including industrial employment.

### ***Forest Hunting and Food Gathering***

Before the discovery of agriculture for thousands of centuries, man lived on hunting fishing and food gathering. The early division of labour was on the basis of age and sex. Males would engage themselves in physically arduous tasks of hunting and manufacturing the heavy stone implements for hunting; females would more frequently collect roots and tubers and edible leaves. Besides, they would generally prepare the food for the family or the horde. The Birhors are one of the most primitive tribes of India, living in the tri-junction of Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal. The Birhor are the gatherer-hunters.<sup>2</sup> They pursue quite a number of occupations, of which making rope and rope-products are the primary one. They also carry on hunting of wild game. Among them household is the basic unit for production and

consumption. In the normal set-up, the husband goes to the jungle for collection; the rope-making is a joint task of both males and females; and then the women hawk the ropes and rope-products in the peasant homes. For the disposal of the surplus in the weekly markets, however, the males and females go together. Birhor is patrilocal. In brief, the whole rubric of Birhor economy involves the extraction of forest resources on one hand and an essential economic interaction with the settled peasantry on the other. Besides household organization Birhor economy also involves band organization. A band is a group of interrelated households moving and camping together. The major economic activity at such level is the pursuit of hunting monkeys and other wild games. Birhor women have to directly play an important role and here without their participation the rope making activity could have, hardly, been perpetuated. In band organization women are needed to maintain the biological existence of the men folk.

Forests are intimately connected with tribal life and economy. To a vast majority of the tribal people, the forest is their well-loved home, their livelihood, and their very existence depends on forests. Collection of fuel wood is still widely practiced either for own consumption or to sell in the market. This is an occupation which is practically done entirely by the women. In view of the existing policies, the women have the major share in the context of exploitation of available forest resources.

Observations and field survey in different parts of India and in other developing countries show that a major part of women's workload all over the world is related to fuel collection and cooking, and among the tribals, it is entirely a women's job. Forests –the vital resource base for food, fuel and fodder are being denuded at an alarming rate. Tribals enjoyed the freedom to use forest products or hunt animals from times immemorial and this has given them a conviction that remains even today deep in their hearts that the forests belong to them. But the gradual extension of the authority of the government in these areas and the natural desires of the forest officials to exercise even closer control over the forest and use of forest products deeply disturbed the entire tribal economy. Under this situation, scarcity of cooking fuel means increased drudgery for tribal women. In fact in our study areas, barring the forest villages, in other villages, collection of fuel wood is almost half a day's work. The women and girls usually leave home early in the morning and come back in the evening carrying fuel wood on their heads. It was also reported by a number of tribals that previously the collection of fuel wood was a much less time consuming affair. Deforestation has thus subjected the tribals, particularly the females among them, to a greater workload. The irony is that women have become victims of a phenomenon not caused by them.

### *Agriculture*

The invention of agriculture, here taken to mean only the domestication of plants, is very likely to have been made by women.<sup>3</sup> Women were not exclusively involved

with gathering of plant foods, but they were much more involved in this activity than men. Further, the digging stick if gathering which becomes the hoe of early agriculture, was also an implement more in the domain of women.

Swidden or slash and burn cultivation is, as Ester Boserup termed it, a “female farming system”.<sup>4</sup>There is a complementarity and some joint labour by women and men. But men’s work is characterized by short bursts of intense activity (clearing and burning), while women’s work in cultivating the swidden fields is more of a steady, continuous type. In swidden there is no prohibition about the labour that can be performed by women or men. Though it is largely women’s domain, none of the tasks is privileged over others (as is the case with ploughing in settled agriculture). The technical knowledge of swidden agriculture, in terms of the utilization of microenvironments, micro sites, multicrops and multivarieties, is more knowledge of women, who do most of the post-clearing labour in swidden. But, at the same time, there is an increased role of rites and rituals in swidden. These rites and rituals are under the control of men.

In India, the majority of the tribal people, about 90 per cent are engaged in cultivation, including shifting cultivation.<sup>5</sup>These people are either working on their own land or as agricultural labourers in the fields of others. The population of agricultural tribals is also increasing. A tribal woman can participate in all the agricultural operations except ploughing.

Broadly, the different agricultural operations include ploughing, sowing, transplantation, weeding, harvesting and threshing. In the agriculturally backward areas, it has been noted that except for ploughing, which is essentially a male job, in all other agricultural operations, the females participate and traditionally, these are part of a female’s job. So, it is obvious that the participation of tribal women is more than the men in terms of different operations in major economic activity.

The situation in agriculturally developed regions is quite interesting. With the introduction of different modern agricultural implements, there is a definite displacement of the labour force. It has been noted that when human labour force is displaced, the males are increasingly performing the operations traditionally done by the females. Thus, in the actual situation, the unemployment of females has increased. However, even now a large numbers of labourers, mostly tribals migrate to the agriculturally developed regions during peak agricultural seasons when there is a great demand for labour force. Since there has been considerable development in cultivation, the males prefer to look after their own agricultural land and the females go to work outside.

Coming over to agriculture, weeding is primarily a work of females, harvesting is more frequently a joint endeavour. Threshing, dehusking and winnowing are more frequently women’s jobs. While ploughing is the monopoly of man, in the plough culture, the women’s, workload has by no means decreased. Very often

plough culture in rice-growing areas involves transplantation; this is mainly the job of the women.

In almost all the traditional peasant societies, cultivation by plough is considered to be the master operation in agriculture; all the other operations are linked up with it. This gives a decisive dominance to the man in the whole agricultural complex; the woman recedes to the background.

Technological change in agriculture has not radically altered the social arrangement. There are two aspects of technological change. These are, mechanization and introduction of high yielding varieties along with ancillary inputs, particularly assured water supply. Mechanization has reduced the workload of man in preparing the soil. Power-operated irrigation has also reduced the workload of man. But these two together have contributed to the increase in the total workload in agriculture. Where the time gap between two crops is short, mechanization has made multiple cropping possible. At the same time multiple-cropping along with the introduction of high-yielding varieties in rice-growing areas increases the quantum of work in sowing, transplantation, weeding, harvesting, transport and threshing. Almost everywhere the first three are predominantly works of the women; the last three are mixed operations. The position is slightly different in the case of wheat. There is no transplantation; and harvesting is partly mechanized. Thus, increase in the workload of the women in wheat cultivation is slightly less than that in the case of rice. Taking an overall view it can however be stated that while the new strategy in agriculture displaces the male workforce to some extent, it increases the workload of the women. But then cultural factors intervene. Owing to their inability to arrange the inputs required for modernized agriculture, the marginal farmers frequently lease out their lands to the big farmers, and then operate in the same fields as agricultural labourers. This creates a complication. Among many communities while it is not socially derogatory for the women belonging to small farmer households to work in their own fields, it is derogatory to work in the fields of others as paid labourers. The same cultural factor operates in a different manner in the case of middle farmers. As already mentioned, with improvement in economic condition, their women tend to withdraw from the workforce.<sup>6</sup>

Thus a scarcity of labour comes to prevail during the peak period. To meet the shortage, seasonal migration of labour from other regions takes place on a massive scale. While in some tribal belts the seasonal migrants are in fact mostly females, in the other parts of the country, large scale female migration as agricultural labourers is not possible because of different sets of cultural factors.

### *Industrial Context*

In India, women have a long tradition of working shoulder to shoulder with men in the productive system and tribal women are no exception. Besides management of

domestic affairs they are largely engaged in productive work in the agricultural field or in some form of domestic industries. With the menacing growth of population and consequent lack of sustaining capacity of land, large scale migration of both men and women took place from rural to urban or industrial areas in search of alternative occupation. After Independence several industries were established in different parts of the country, even in the remote tribal areas. This industrial development provided the surplus labour force including the tribals in the rural sector to get an alternative occupation and economic source near at hand. These labourers drawn from the rural sector constitute mainly the unskilled category of labour force in the industries.

If we take the case of tea gardens in North Bengal and Assam we find that large scale migration of tribal men and women took place from Chhotonagpur and Santhal Parganas to these areas in search of food and livelihood in the growing tea industries. In Jalpaiguri such migration started since 1873 and bulk of the immigrants were Oraon, Munda, Santhal, Ho, Kharia, etc. Gradually this tribal population settled in the region with families. They now constitute more than three-fourth of the total work force in the tea garden and are called as *madesia* by the local people, where the tribal workers of tea gardens of North Bengal had moved out of their traditional home and settled in the plantation area, in Singhbhum, Bihar, on the contrary, industries have moved into the tribal scene. In Noamundi, Barajamda and Gua of this district, a large number of iron-ore mines of varying sizes and proportions are in existence. Iron-ore in this area occurs in huge surface deposits and such open cast mining is restored to. Production in most of the mines is labour-intensive and is dependent primarily on unskilled labour force. A large number of tribal women are employed as unskilled labourers.

One of the significant consequences of involvement of the tribes in industrialization is the removal of a large section of male labour force from the primary sector, and dependence on women in maintaining the agriculture. The tribal labourers who comprise mostly the unskilled labour force in the industries consider land as the permanent security whereas the industrial job as a short-term security or temporary source of earning. As a result, majority of them continue to maintain agriculture and women are instrumental in maintaining this agro-industrial economic pursuit. When the wife is herself an industrial worker, her husband lives in his village and does agriculture. However, housewives who work in the industry cannot relinquish her household duties and they are generally overburdened.

Traditional role of tribal women as a viable economic force has not substantially been altered even under the impinging industrial order. But their involvement in the new arena of economic pursuits brings some socio-cultural barrier in their society. It is true that new economic set up i.e. industry is playing a key role in boosting their traditional economic condition but it also brings some disorganization like the introduction of immoral traffic, financial constraints due to dependency

on money lenders, a portion of wages is given as donation to local leaders, etc. Since they have a soft corner towards agriculture, absenteeism is marked in the industry during the peak agricultural season. In fact, these tribal women labourers are maintaining a link as unskilled labour force towards agro-industrial economic avenues. Their status in the economic arena of this industrial sector is almost equal to the men. Practically speaking, these women tribal labourers are more laborious than their male counter parts but they do not have any role towards decision making in the family and social control.

### **The Present Situation**

The tribal scene today is very disquieting –much more than ever before. Land alienation has caused immeasurable harm to the tribal interests, and is one of the major factors responsible for the tribals' marginalization in the socio-economic processes of the post-independence India. The dawn of the independence roused the hope of implementation of the oft-shouted slogan –all land to the tiller. But like all other hopes, this too did not take long to get belied. Therefore, the land question became the centre to almost all struggles that the tribals had waged in post-independence India. The fierce struggles that ensued failed to re dress the genuine grievances of the exploited toiling masses on account of the gang-up of money lender-landlord-administration against them. Another dimension of the land question pertains to its massive acquisition, in the name of development, by private and public industrial sectors which results in forced tribal displacements. No alternative schemes for the tribals are drawn of which could take care of their en block rehabilitation which does not result in disruption of their communal harmony and co-habitation.

The adivasi women's active role in movements to resist the State's attempts to restrict and regulate freedom, and contain temporal and spatial mobility within their territories and homelands, is a concrete expression of opposition to subjugation and control. Furthermore, these resistance movements are an integral part of the larger struggle against patriarchal institutions, and unjust forms of governance, and for gender justice. In this era of neoliberal reforms and globalization, women's resistance has taken an additional dimension in struggling against the appropriation of their territories and the forest by global and national capital markets. The deeper concern is that capital and governance is rapidly transforming their autonomous spaces and relationship with the forest, into "commodities" with a market value that can be traded, allegedly to "raise their incomes, eradicate poverty and empower women", whilst increasing the revenues of the government. From shifting cultivators, to pastoralists whose livelihoods banked on their access to forests to graze their animals, to internally displaced adivasi women forced to leave their homed and live as refugees in new forest regions, women have been victims of the brutal violence of the forest bureaucracy. In the last decade coinciding with the



neoliberal period of reforms, it has been the female shifting cultivators and grazers who have borne the brunt of this violence by the State to restrict and deny them access to the forest. Violence against women has taken several forms such as taking control of their resources, and displacing them from their means of production – the land, forest, water, and genetic resources, negation of their knowledge or its commodification, their spaces and power in decision-making. The development interventions of the recent past, in the name of ‘national interest’, have proven to be completely disastrous with respect to food sovereignty, gender justice and have completely failed as an approach to forest conservation.

### **Conclusion**

In poverty stricken tribal areas large scale migration has revealed the increasing movement of young women towards urban centers in search of work. Their living conditions are unhygienic, the salary is poor and tribal women are vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous agents. They have become the prime targets of sexual violation by managers, supervisors and even fellow male workers in the plantation industrial sectors. The trauma of increased workload affected their conjugal relationships. On the other side construction sites, such as mines and quarries, and industrial complexes spelt doom for the local adivasi communities with the influx of immigrant labourers. Thus, the State has identified women as key to implementing its neoliberal agenda and in doing so, attempts to restrict and regulate their freedom, confine and contain adivasi women within new boundaries.

### *Notes*

1. Estimates of annual loss of forests vary from 5.6 millions hectares to 20 million hectares, Times of India, 17.10.1986.
2. In the anthropological literature foragers are usually referred to as ‘hunter-gatherers’. This term however, reflects the over-importance given to hunting as the motor force of human evolution ‘man the hunter’ stories. It should add that this does not mean accepting the ‘women the gatherer’ model either.
3. The domestication of animals is also at times included in the domain of agriculture. There is also the well-known pastoral route to agriculture, as is characteristic of the Indo-Aryan tribes of the Rig Vedic period. But the tribes that are being considered in this paper were not pastoral. In this case, the domestication of animals followed the domestication of plants, and was a part of the later plough agriculture.
4. See Ester Boserup (1989).
5. It must be noted that slash and burn cultivation is still practiced in North-East India, parts of Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Kerala.
6. See B. K. Roy Burman (1984).

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