Transformation of Tribal People in India: Various Factors

Sanchita Bhattacharyya

Assistant Professor
Department of History, Netaji Subhas Mahavidyalaya, Haldibari, Cooch Behar,
West Bengal, India

Abstract

Tribes are indigenous people with their own tradition, language and lifestyle. Each tribal group is associated with a particular livelihood which determines their lifestyle. Forest is the life and livelihood of Indian tribes except in the cases of some nomadic groups. All the predominant tribal livelihood patterns like gathering of forest produces, hunting, shifting cultivation are forest centered. However, after independence, Sanskritization, education, industrialization, and globalization had a profound impact on tribal life and society. In this paper attempts have been made to study the various factors of transformation, and their impact, on the tribal society, to bring the social change.

Keyword: Sanskritization, Education, Industrialization, Globalization

India is an amazing amalgamation of various races and cultures, with a landscape as diverse as its population. Among more than 2,500 people groups in the nation, about 80% are considered unreached, though, the county has largest concentration of the tribal population in the world. According to 2011 survey census, 84.33 million persons were counted as belonging to scheduled tribes in different States or Union Territories in India constituting 8.2% of the total population consisting of 567 different tribal populations. In common parlance, tribes in India are perceived as 'different' socio-cultural groups living in isolation since the mythical Aryan invasion of the Indian sub-continent. Tribals are the most vulnerable sections of the population in India.

India is the home of a number of tribes i.e. group of indigenous people. The term 'tribe' was used by the colonial administration to codify or denote a group of people who were not fit to be categorized as 'Hindu' or 'caste'. Their very location and habitation, their indigenous linguistic and cultural traits, etc. led them to be referred to as backward and uncivilized, several other words like *adivasi, vanvasi, janjati,* are used to describe them.

A social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous with no specialization of functions, ruled by the tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognizing the social distance from tribe or castes but without any stigma attached in the case of caste-structure following tribal traditions, beliefs, customs, liberalization of natural ideas from alien sources, above all, consciousness of homogeneity of ethnical and territorial integration.

A combination of anthropological and historical analysis is required to uncover the various processes which have been active in the course of Indian history. With the help of such analysis we can understand one of the fundamental historical transformations that has taken place in India or more so in the entire South Asian subcontinent. The transition from tribe to caste is one such change. As a result of this process we see the formation of various social institutions such as private property, the caste system, the state and the patriarchal family. This transformation took a substantial amount of time period and went through a number of intermediate stages. This process was not just uniform and linear, in the sense of gradual and constant cultural growth and modification.

On the basis of religion, it is said that the religion of tribals is Animism and that of the people with caste system is Hinduism. The basic characteristics of animism are the beliefs that all animate and inanimate objects are permanently or temporarily inhabited by spirits; all activities are caused by these spirits; spirits have power over the lives of men; men can be possessed by spirits; and they can be influenced by magic.

Tribes and castes are also seen to be different in respect of the psychological disposition of members. Tribes are said to take direct, unalloyed satisfaction in the pleasures of the senses - in such areas as food, drink, sex, dance and song - whereas caste people maintain a certain ambivalence about such pleasures. Further, in the 'jati' society, the village is expected to be culturally heterogeneous, with each 'jati' following a unique combination of customary practices. Tribesmen, on the other hand, expect their society to be homogeneous - or, at least, not necessarily heterogenous.

NK Bose (1941) makes a reference to tribes being absorbed into Hindu society. A large number of anthropological works of the post-independence era still points to phenomenon such as tribes being absorbed or assimilated into Hindu society or tribes becoming castes. Tribes are said to have accepted the ethos of caste structure and to have got absorbed within it. Hence, they are treated as hardly differentiable from neighboring Hindu peasantry. Some of the well-known tribes in this category are said to be Bhils, Bhumijs. Majhis, Khasas and Raj-Gonds. In fact, much of the social anthropological discourse on tribes has been primarily couched in terms of tribes being transformed into castes.

Social change refers to changes that are significant - that is, changes which alter the 'underlying structure of an object or situation over a period of time' (Giddens, 2005:42). Thus social change does not refer to any and all changes but only such changes which transform things fundamentally (Giddens, 2003).

Indian society is marked by inequality, discrimination, exploitation, domination and deprivation. What is even more striking is the fact that such thwarting societal features are mostly based on the lines of caste, tribe, religion, language, region, etc. There is hardly any segment or dimension of life that are not characterized by one or more of such features. Tribals are one of the most exploited and deprived sections of the Indian society. All development indicators show them to be the most excluded from mainstream Indian society despite the fact that various kinds of policies and programmes have been pursued and executed for their social and economic upliftment in post-Independence India. Needless to say that exclusion from the fruits of development has adversely affected the quality of life of the tribal people (Xaxa, 2011).

Caste system is hierarchical in nature, it is an established fact that the *Bramhanas* and the untouchables occupy the two ends of the system, but there is found some sort of indeterminacy in between the two ends. It is also recognized that there are a large number of outlying groups who remained marginal to or

completely outside of Hinduism, they are the referred to as the tribals. It is however accepted that there is a general tendency for the lower castes to aspire for and make a claim to a higher position within the caste hierarchy; such a process is called Sanskritization (Singh, 1978).

Sanskritisation

The concept 'Sanskritization' was first introduced by Prof. MN Srinivas the famous Indian sociologist. According to "Social Change in Modern India" published in 1971. It means "a process by which a low caste or a tribe or other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology, and a way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, twice born caste".

Since acculturation or transformation of tribes into castes is attributed to the process of Sanskritization/Hinduisation, it is imperative at the very outset to examine the appropriateness of these terms and concepts. Sanskritization is seen as processes whereby communities lower down the social ladder emulate the lifestyle of the dominant caste of a region. By this process of emulation the lower castes would move up in the caste hierarchy.

Srinivas (1956) discusses various models of Sanskritization: cultural, varna, and local. The cultural characteristics play an important role in assigning low or high caste status in Hinduism. Some of the cultural characteristics are wearing sacred thread, observing endogamy, worshiping according to the methods prescribed in the scriptures, denying the consumption of liquor and meat, believing in myths and religious narratives, and following caste-based restrictions. The Hindu scriptures instruct the believers to follow these behavior and codes of purity and highness in their daily routine, and if a lower caste person starts following them, either willingly or forcefully, he/she is in a process of Sanskritization. The fifth varna and the lowest in the Varna system are *Antyaj* also known as Dalits or untouchables. When the lower varna emulates the lifestyle and ideals of a privileged varna, it becomes the part of Varna model or Sanskritization (Deliege, 1997). The local model of Sanskritization is based on economic power. So, the affluent class automatically becomes the master or dominant class, and the downtrodden and slum dogs look at them as a role model. The effects of Sanskritization are pervasive. The low caste people are inclined toward this process as they find it the easiest way through which they can elevate their social status within the confines of caste hierarchy (Dumont, 1970).

Industrialization

During the last four decades and particularly during the Plan periods, there has been an acceleration of mining and manufacturing industries. Forest resources have been gradually exploited, leading eventually to deforestation, in the hilly and forested belts of tribal India. Most of these industries came to be established in or around tribal areas because they were rich in mineral and other resources.

As the exploitation of mineral and forest resources was chiefly confined to Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, there was a rapid increase of urban population in these states. Demographer Bose (1962) writes that with a concentration of industries in these states, there was a relative shift of urban population from Indo- Gangetic plain to the hilly and plateau areas which offered new industrial and natural resources.

These tribals now-turned labourers have changed a lot. The traditional dresses have been replaced by those that came with modernity. Their occupational structure has changed, and it has important implications. A sense of mobility is gradually instilled in the community. Mobility becomes inter-generational as the children of tribal workers aspire to do better in life than their parents, by taking hold of opportunities offered by modernity.

Education

Modern forces have been actively molding the life of the tribals and changing them. Spread of literacy and formal modern education is one of the most important modern sources. The impact of the forces of change, however, is likely to be uneven because of the cultural variations among different tribal communities as well as the difference in the level of operation of these forces. Taking education alone as a force of change, we have to take into account the wide range of variation in the level of literacy and formal education among different tribal regions as well as among different tribal communities in the same region.

Though it is difficult to isolate education as a factor in social change, we may observe social changes that may the literate and educated tribals and attribute them to education.

Change in Tribal Economy

The line of change in tribal economy may be taken for the time being as from (1) forest hunting economy to forest hunting and agriculture, (2) hill cultivation to settled agriculture, (3) simple agricultural economy to multi-crop agricultural economy, labour and white-collar job and commercial economy, and (4) from artisan type to artisan-plus-marketing and so on (Vidvarthi, 1977).

Change in Polity

The traditional political activity of the tribals was confined to the institutions like the council of tribal elders, village head-man and village Panchayat. The introduction of the statutory' Panchayat and Panchayati Raj in the post-independence period have reduced the power of these traditional tribal institutions and have opened up the political process for participation of the tribals at local, state as well as national levels.

Globalization

One of the social processes that are globalization has made unprecedented change in the lives of indigenous people across the world, though the degree of exploitation and marginalization vary from state to states and tribal group to group. With the LPG (Liberalization, Privatization, Globalization) policies all those cushions have been done away with.

Globalization usually favors people with a lot of money, skills, and opportunities. It however may not be such a great thing for the poor, especially for tribals who have been the victims of unfairness manifested through the traditional poverty and economic disparities.

The impact of globalization is the worst for the tribal communities as they have no voice and thus they are easily swept aside by the invisible hands of the market and its operators.

Globalization has brought devastation to the lives of indigenous people all across the world despite the fact that the degree of oppression and marginalization varies from region to region and from ethnic group to ethnic group.

Tribals are typically thought of as the native inhabitants of mountainous terrains and dense woods. They are the earth's sons who live in isolation and far away from the rest of civilization. We know relatively little about many aspects of their lives. They are sometimes also dismissed as an illiterate group. However, the tribals have been affected by these large-scale socio-economic transformations that have taken place in modern industrialized civilizations.

Land is a very important component for tribal development. It occupies their source of livelihood. But the globalization trend has alienated tribals from their mainstay. The global economy has overburdened the tribals with various debts due to inadequate livelihood resources. The lack of education, purchasing power and lack of resources for engaging in gainful activity has led to indebtedness for tribal communities. The indebtedness of tribals pushes them into extreme poverty. The ethos of globalization has not only impacted the socio-economic conditions of tribal people but their cultural status also.

In a globalized situation, it is the market and not the community which is the focal player. The influence of Powerful transnational lobbies put pressure on the governments. This leads to transfer control over resources from Adivasis to private and global industry stakeholders, legitimate governments like India allowing themselves to undergo constitutional changes to the detriment of their constituent communities. While these laws clearly portray the need for protection of people and resources the new polices call for exploitation of resources at the cost of tribal people. Violation of the Fifth Schedule has occurred in many states where the Land Transfer Regulation Act was ignored while giving mining leases in scheduled areas to private companies. Private mining is also done.

Thus, it is evident that tribals have changed a lot culturally, socially as well as economically due to exposure to various forces which having benefited them in many ways have also brought a number of evils in their communities. Many tribals have come to be deprived of their rights over land and forests and in many cases they are being fleeced by money lenders, big landowners, traders, businessmen and others. The tribals must return to the core value system of their cultures by choosing a new set of progressive values other than consumerism and the selfishness which the process of globalization generates. Then only they would be able to participate effectively within the system upholding their distinct identity.

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