

Tribes in India: Issues and challenges
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Introduction

The Tribal people in India have a long history even before the arrival of the colonial government. The Tribal societies that existed prior to the colonial intervention had their own rights and duties within their autonomous sovereign framework. Apart from the encounter of the Tribal's with the various civilizations, there was also the influence of the foreign missionaries in the past and of the dominant society through the fundamentalist forces in the recent past. India has the second largest tribal concentration in the World. With such a large population, the uprisings are not very uncommon. From the pre-independence period to the post-independence, and to the contemporary era, tribal movements have been making their presence as their right to life has been, somehow, violated. However, with the change of time, nature of objectives of tribal movement has been changed to a great extent. This write-up tries to throw light on the changing nature of these movements and on the issue and challenges involves in it.

Who are tribes?

The Constitution of India defines scheduled tribes as 'such tribes or tribal communities or part of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities are deemed under Article 340 to the schedules tribes for the purpose of the Constitution.' The procedure to be followed for specification of a scheduled tribe is prescribed under article 342. However, it does not contain the criterion for the specification of any community as scheduled tribes. An often-used criterion is based on attributes such as:

- Geographical Isolation- Tribes live in cloistered, exclusive, remote and inhospitable areas such as hills and forests.
- Backwardness- their livelihood is based on primitive agriculture, a low-value close economy with a low level of technology that leads to their property. They have low levels of literacy and health.
- Distinctive culture, language and religion- Communities have developed their own distinctive culture, language and religion.
- Shyness of contact- They have a marginal degree of contact with other culture and people.

Magnitude and Geographical spread

A substantial list of scheduled tribes in India is recognised as tribal under the constitution of India. Tribal people constitute 8.6 per cent of the country's total population. One concentration lives in a belt along the Himalayas stretching through Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand in the west to Assam,

Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland in Northeast. In the north-eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, more than 90 per cent of population is tribal. However in the remaining north-east states of Assam, Manipur, Sikkim and Tripura, tribal people form between 20 to 30 per cent of the population. Other tribal people including the Santhals live in Jharkhand and West Bengal. Central Indian states have the country's largest tribes and taken as a whole, roughly 75 per cent of the total tribal population live there, although the tribal population there accounts for only around 10 per cent of the region's total population.

Besides, tribal people are found in Odisha in Eastern India: Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala in Southern India: in Western India in Gujarat and Rajasthan: and in the union territories of Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Constitutional Safeguards

There is a little doubt that Tribal communities continue to be the most marginalized group in India. Social indicators of developments tell that Tribal people have life expectancies that are decades shorter than the non-tribal are. So after the independence the government of India decided to provide them special safeguards through Indian Constitution. Constitutional provisions or safeguards for scheduled tribes can be divided into two parts- protective and developmental.

a. Article 15(4) and Article 16(4) provides special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or STs and protective discrimination respectively.

b. Article 17 abolishes untouchability. To give effect to this article, Parliament enacted Untouchability (Offences) Act of 1955. The Act was amended in 1976 and was renamed as the Protection of Civil Rights Act. Parliament passed another important act in 1989 to take measures to prevent the atrocities. This act is known as the Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes (prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 followed by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Rules 1995.

c. Article 23 prohibits human trafficking and beggar, and other similar forms of forced labour. Since the majority of bonded labourers belong to scheduled tribes, this article has a special significance.

d. Article 330 and Article 332 provides for reservation of seats for scheduled tribes in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies respectively.

e. Article 338 provides for national commission for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes entrusted with the power to investigate all matters relating to the safeguards provided to SCs or STs and to report to the President on the working of these safeguards.

f. Scheduled 5th of the Constitution deals with the administration and control of scheduled areas and scheduled tribes. It restricts the entry and ownership of land and immovable resources in tribal areas by non-tribes and outsiders.

g. Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006-

The Act recognises the following tribal rights-

- Tenurial security of land providing relief against the physical and psychological alienation of forest dwelling tribes.
- Livelihood in terms of ownership of minor forest produces including rights to collect, trade and process the same.
- Traditional and customary rights.

The enactment of the act is a historic step to remove from the forest dwelling the threat of eviction or removal from the forest land under their occupation.

Tribal Movements in India: Nature and Characteristics

Tribal uprising have been taking place since the British Rule in India. Those tribal movements contributed directly or indirectly to the independence movement of India. The important tribes involved in revolts during the period were Mizos, Kols, Mundas, Daflas, santhals, Nagas etc.

Some scholars like Desai and ram Chandra Guha have treated tribal movements after independence as peasant movement but K.S. Singh has criticised such approach because of the nature of tribal's social and political organisation, their relative social isolation from the mainstream, their leadership pattern and the modus operandi of their political mobilisation.

Tribal movements were not only agrarian but also forest-based. Some revolts were ethnic in nature as these were directed against who were not like aliens for such tribes. Factors like land alienation, usurpation, minimum wages, forced labour and land grabbing compelled various tribes like Munda, Santhal, Kol etc in many regions to revolt.

The management of forests also led some tribes to revolt as forests in some regions are the main source of their livelihood. The British rule introduced various legislations permitting merchants and contractors to cut the forests. These rules deprived the tribes of several forest products and made them victims of harassment by forest officials as well. This led tribes to launch movements during the period of pre-independence.

The tribal movements before independence can be divided into three phases: the first phase between 1795 and 1860, the second from 1861 to 1920, and the third

between 1921 and 1947. The first phase coincided with the establishment of the British Empire, the second with intensive colonialism during which merchant capital penetrated into tribal economy, and the third with participation in the nationalist movement and also launching of agrarian as well as some separatist movements.

Numerous scholars classify the tribal movements into different groups. Mahapatra has classified tribal movements in three groups: reactionary, conservative and revolutionary. Surjit Sinha has classified movements into five groups whereas S.M. Dubey, into four categories. However in general, post-independence tribal movements may be classified into three groups:

- i. Movements due to exploitation by outsiders e.g. movements of santhals and Mundas.
- ii. Movements due to economic deprivation e.g. movements led by Gonds in Madhya Pradesh and those of Mahar in Andhra Pradesh.
- iii. Movements due to separatist tendencies e.g. movements of Nagas and Mizos.

Further on the basis of their orientation, the tribal movements may also be classified roughly into four types:

- i. Movements seeking political autonomy and formation off a state such as those of Nagas, Mizos and of Jharkhand.

- ii. Agrarian movements.

- iii. Forest-based movements, and

- iv. Socio-religious or socio-cultural movements e.g. the Bhagat movement among Bhils of Rajasthan and Madhya, movement among tribes of south Gujarat or Raghunath's Murmu movement among the Santhals.

The leaders revolted against the British and exhorted their followers to drive out outsiders. After independence, the tribal movements were launched either for maintaining their cultural identity or for demanding a separate state.

Major tribal Movements

- Naga Revolution- It started in 1948 and continued to 1972 when the new elected government came to power and the Naga insurgency was controlled.

- Mizo Movement- it was a kind of guerrilla warfare which ended with the formation of the state of Meghalaya in April 1970, created out of Assam and Mizoram in 1972.

- Gond Raj Movement- It was a movement led by the Gonds in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. It started in 1941 demanding a separate state and reached its peak in 1962-1963.

- Naxalite Movement- It was led by the tribes of West Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Assam. Taking into consideration of all the tribal movements, it can be said that the tribal unrest and the resultant movements were mainly movement launched for liberation from oppression, discrimination, neglect and backwardness and a government which was callous to the

tribal's plight of poverty, hunger, unemployment and exploitation.

L.K. Mahapatra in his study of tribal movements based on a time sequence and the nature of stimulus in their existence noted certain general tendencies:

- Most reformists' tribal movements, although initiated by charismatic leaders, gradually led to rationalisation and institutionalisation, affecting structure but not always affecting basic changes.
- Tribal movements irrespective of their goal orientation invariably appeared among the numeric ally strong, usually settled agriculturists and economically well-off tribes.
- Primitive and small tribes directly look at large-scale conversion and separatist tendencies are marked amongst them.
- Given the geographical distribution, a pan-Indian tribal movement is unlikely to emerge.
- Democratic politics among tribes is fragmentary which in turn blocks the emergence of civil collectivism.

If we take consideration of various tribal movements, it is found that the tribes adopted two paths of achieving goals:

1. Non-violent path of bargaining and negotiating with the government and using a variety of pressure tactics without resorting to violence or revolts; and
2. Militant path of revolts or mass struggle based on developing the fighting power of the exploited tribal strata.

Conclusion

After so many years of independence, even in the era of inclusive growth, tribal movements are still occurring to and fro. It indicates that the government have not been able to take their interests into consideration while preparing developmental plans for the entire country. The government could not get success in fulfilling their demands; and in dragging them to the mainstream of the country.

Further it displays that the paths adopted by the movement- one oriented to reforms whereas the other towards structural transformation of the community- have not proved a complete success yet. The fact that tribes continue to be faced with problems and also continue to feel discontented and deprived, brings to the fore the conclusion that both the paths have not helped them to achieve their goals.

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