

A Study on Social Cultural and Economic Life of Tribals of Colonial Odisha

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ABSTRACT

The tribals believed to be the earliest settlers of India are generally called in Adibasis. Tribal population in many districts of Odisha is about 50%. India is the home for over 450 tribes out of which 62 live in Odisha. The tribal history is not just collection of facts and faithful documentation of changes but interpretation of issues by a sensitive mind with a histories determination, on economists sharpness and a sociology sts inquisitiveness. Now a days the tribal needed a large degree of agrarian sanctity protection and social assistance. In examination it would be found that the British authorities in fact had shown isolation.

KEYWORDS: Tribals of odisha, economic life, lifestyle, tribal population

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I. A STUDY ON SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC LIFE OF TRIBALS OF COLONIAL ORISSA.

The tribals, believed to be the earliest settlers of India are generally called the Adivasis or the earliest settlers. India has the second largest tribal population in the world next only to African Continent. In India the tribal population covers about 8.8% of the total population as per 2001 census. In Orissa they form 22.2% of the total population. Tribal population in many districts of Orissa is above 50%. India is the home for over 450 tribes out of which 62 live in Orissa.

India is a land of enormous diversities. It is frequently stated that there exists a binding unity called 'Unity in diversity'. While the tribes of India are generally seen as one of the ingredients of the variety of 'diversity', the degree and manner in which they are seen as part of the 'unity' is vague and varied. This generally centres round the so-called 'mainstream' and the tribal people continue to float like distinct patches of unmixable oil over the vast water mass. Nevertheless there has been a prolonged and distinctive coexistence of numerous tribal communities side by side with the mainstream. As such the tribes of India embody large diversities, each tribe differing from the other in many fundamental ways.

There is no single definition of the tribes. They are ordinarily and simplistically viewed as homogenous and primitive groups of peoples who are somewhat outside the mainstream of Indian civilization. They are neither eliminated nor quite absorbed into the mainstream. They are widely known as indigenous and autochthonous people.

The tribals are believed to have settled on the plains and river valleys of India before the Aryans. Compared to the Aryans they were in a lower stage of development. Many were still in a hunting-gathering economy, not knowing the use of metal and lived in isolated settlements. D.D. Kosambi writes that the tribals living within one kilometer of the Shantiniketan did not have any knowledge of Gitanjali or Nobel Prize. Scholars have been trying to comprehend and explain the nature of the slow process of tribal transformation. Since many of the over 450 tribes live in widely diverse conditions, a single explanation is not likely to be equally applicable to all.

When the materially and technologically less advanced economic base becomes precarious due to population explosion, displacement due to developmental plans or for any other reason the tribal population is either pushed further into deep and inaccessible forest or seek economic security through Aryanisation and Sanskritisation. Attachment to mainstream Hindu society and the gradual process of emulation of higher caste life style and spiritual norms have brought the tribals to the mainstream.

From a food gathering stage there was a gradual growth of political as well as social organization among the tribes. The growing need of protection from the enemies, animals and others brought in the leaders who were necessarily the ablest of all. He was to be chosen by the people as their Chief. It was essential for him to be an expert in military skills. This process heralded the emergence of kingdoms and republics in ancient

India. Each tribe developed its own administration and geographical distinction. Sometimes the regions come to be known after the name of the tribe. The name Bharat which was later accepted as the name of the country has been derived out of the name of a tribe. Even today we have tribes whose areas are known by the names of the tribes such as the Nagas and the Mizos.

For the Nationalists, the tribals are trendsetters. They always had strong dislike for the outsiders. Hence the history of the tribal communities are full of resistance movements; resistance against any foreigner. They can be neither grouped as secular nor communal. They have their strong religious belief and hardcore tribal belongingness. But they were never imperialists. They did not like to interfere with the life of others, much less conquer them.

There has been momentary flicker of tribal India in the Mahabharat and the Ramayan but only, so far as it somehow fits into the main story. In the narratives, the tribes appear either as pre-Hindu or as barbaric-quasi-human creatures. In the subaltern history the tribes are shown as being hopelessly entangled in the power play of the non-tribals. There may be exception but by and large this has been the approach of scholars towards the tribes in history.

The study of tribals can be roughly traced to the days after the British conquest. The resistance given by the tribal Chiefs to the British conquest made the British take special interest on the tribals for smooth administration. The British administrators, census officers and missionaries collected data on different aspects of tribal life. The government adopted a policy of conciliatory measures or if necessary coercive measures. The tribal reaction to this policy of the British varied between stubborn resistance and grudging acquiescence, depending upon the nature of the tribe.

The government laws often came in conflict with the cherished tribal tradition. The British officers were aware of it but paid scant attention. Later, they learnt through experience that the success of the tribal policy of the government requires reconciliation rather than coercion. Then came the policy to 'preserve tribalism' to the extent possible.

A study on the changing tribal culture requires an interdisciplinary approach but history provides the foundation. It is expected that the historian would assess the impact of changes on their material life, living standards and changing way of life.

The tribal history is not just collection of facts and faithful documentation of changes but interpretation of issues by a sensitive mind with a historian's determination, an economist's sharpness and a sociologist's inquisitiveness. The extensive data would require close analysis with an integrated approach. In the tapestry of tribal study, if history is the warp, sociology and anthropology are the wood. The study of the tribal culture in its synchronic and diachronic aspects, in which an anthropologist is interested would be facilitated by historical research. Culture is a continuing way of life. To trace the forces and record their impact is a historian's job.

The tribal culture has its own peculiarity, which pervades every aspect of life. The culture still draws fresh inspiration and vigour from the people and enrich them in turn.

The tribals have depended for centuries on the forest and mountain for existence as a principle of challenge and response. The rigor of climate have not driven them from their homeland nor obliged to abandon their way of life. Rather the recent deforestations have driven them further into the dense forest.

The problem is not one of rigid or obstinate adherence to beliefs even after they have been exposed or faith in them has been lost. The people are in fact very open and frank about their beliefs and will act upon them so long as their conviction lasts.

Hence they are simple, trusting, tough and hardy, convinced of the wholesomeness of its way of life and yet willing to change when faith and reason convince it that change is necessary. Different tribes present different cultural patterns depending upon the cultural chores on which they lay major emphasis. The Saora culture is more laden with ritual performance and religious practices. In contrast the Gadaba culture is centered round social life with particular reference to growing up sex and marriage. Some others give more emphasis on food seeking activities. All tribes love music but their musical instruments differ from tribe to tribe.

The process of brahminisation facilitated the acculturation of the tribals. This led to cultural assimilation. Many tribal deities were sanctified and identified with Hindu Gods and goddesses. Many tribal goddesses became the family deity of the ruling chiefs.

Jagannath the embodiment of Orissa culture and religion has been conceived as having tribal origin. The images still have the iconography of crude tribal origin. A section of the priests known as Daitas are tribals.

The British introduction of land rent and landlord tenant system among the hill tribes had a profound politico-economic effect. In the process land began to pass more and more from the tribals to non-tribals. Moreover, the newly created landlords looked down upon these tribals as uncivilized rate. At the same time with the process of assimilation some tribals got Hinduised and some Christened, European missionaries infiltrated into the tribal regions and played a vital role in changing the life style of the hill people. They harped on the social and cultural difference between the Hindu non-tribals and tribals. But in due course these emerged a minority educated elite class in the tribal communities. The tribal society passed through a process of

peasantisation, detribalization, sankritisation and christiansation. Under such a situation, series of tribal uprising took place in 19th and early decade of 20th century. Over the whole of India there were more than one hundred such rising.

Analysis of social change in rural India have been a favorite area of study for social scientists and historians both in India as well as the west. Such studies are spread over scholars from different disciplines irrespective of their ideological orientations. Jawaharlal Nehru realized that the tribal people could have integrated better into the Indian mainstream both in their own interest as well as in the interest of the large Indian Polity. Orissa stands first for its high percentage of the tribal population in India. Here the tribals can be seen as ranging from assimilated group who are distinguishable from the general population to real primitive groups living in hill tops.

Main resources of the tribals are forest products, toots and herbs. But due to the introduction of forest reservation laws in the wake of large-scale destruction of forests. They have been dragged to the lowest degree of pauperism, thus with regard to their economic distress it has very often been said, "while famine has been episode of a tribal history, scarcity has been the recurring condition". The tribal population has been harmed due to economic exploitation and alienation of natural resources. Coming in contact with non-tribals particularly the Hindu peasants, tribals have learned different methods of agricultural production. Some of the tribals are gradually exposed to new socio-economic forces with higher valuation and greater consumption, competitive spirit and faster development". Still they continued to remain socially distinct communities in contract to their neighbor. These people maintained their morale and will to happiness. Geographic factors also protected them and contributed much to their wellbeing. The Britishers introduced land rent system and land lord-tenant relationship among the hilly tribes which had a profound political, economic effect. In the process lands began to pass more and more from the tribals to the non-tribals. The tribals lost ownership rights over their lands and were converted to mere tenants. Moreover, the landlord looked down upon the tribals as an uncivilized race. At the same time in the process of assimilation some tribals got Hinduised or Christianised without causing injury to themselves and secured the benefits of Western civilization. This group of tribals only formed a small, privileged, a properties and educated section becoming the conspicuous emerging elite. At the same time the bulk of tribals continued to remain in utter poverty, ignorance and squator. Therefore the tribal community is not a homogenous community. The British opened a new channel of communication and established mines and industries in the heartland of tribals. It caused inroads into the tribal region and on the other hand brought socio-economic suffering to the illiterate backward tribes. The non-tribal migrants in the city and small traders and money lenders began to flank into the tribal fastness which had hitherto being avoided.

Though they developed culture contacts with the tribals, the non-tribals settlers on the hill acted as agencies for growth-less exploitation in draining the life and blood of the indigenous inhabitants. Further, under pressure of British trade and commerce, the non-tribal agriculturists began producing specialized cash crops with the help of tribal people.

It adversely affected the economic life of the trial community due to lack of opportunity and mass exploitation b the landlord. Moreover, when tributaries of Rajas of Orissa asked to pay their tribute in cash only, they were force to be alienated from the own land and those of the tribals. These Rajas demanded more from the tribal population. "The tribals also became the victims of temptation of alienating culture. The Transfer of tribal agencies to enjoy undisputed possession for a considerable period began with ownership having the adverse consequences. Economic distress of the tribals thus knew no bounds. Attitude of the British Government was a mixed one. So far as the interest of the tribal people were concerned, they landed themselves in uncomfortable situations caused through a shift in their relations with Hindu neighbors. It threw upon the doors of tribal areas to settlement by a band of people who came in only for money under the shadow of the protection of the British rule. Not only the British "Government interfered in the tribal life but also exercised a loose administrative control over their areas. Instead of supporting the tribals it helped the oppressing landlords princely chiefs of various princely states, police or forest officials including the middleman and the moneylenders who continued their exploitation. As a result of ill, the tribals were distributed very much not only economically but also socio-psychologically, as they in their isolated habitats sensitive to outside influence. These illiterate and economically backward people even also failed to take advantage of the British introduced laws and various legal measures though the law courts and in return they paid heavy price for laws with large portion of their lands to the non-traders. As an aftermath, confrontation between indigenous tribals and the immigrants acquired a massive proportion without allowing enough time to evolve a regional cultural synthesis and interethnic moral character. Side by side the European missionaries infiltrated into the tribal region and played a vital role in changing the life style of hill people. They taught them Hindu civilization was essentially backward, superstitious, caste ridden and oppressive in contrast to the benevolent Christian civilization. As an impact of it, a section of the tribal communities allowed the missionaries to spread literary and formal education for them. But in general, the high lender disliked it suspecting that Christian education would make their children idler in the agriculture fields. They looked to English education solely as a means to getting jobs of a clerk of forest

guard under the British. However, in course of time some of them accepted jobs of clerks, teacher as so on. Thus, there emerged an educated allied class though in a minority in the tribal communities.

Tribal unrest is caused mainly due to the changes relating to socio-economic and cultural life of the people and has also taken the forms of violence and political color at different times. Gradually, the movements turned into violent clashes and lot of infighting within the community and against the British raj. People of the hills were ignorant, superstitious and got excited with a simplest problem without understating the realities. They were unaccustomed to calculate consequences and acted as a general rule under impulses which movement causes. The evils of the British raj, revenue and judicial system, peculiar to the habit of prejudices of the wild people caused explosion in these regimes. Disorder in their society provoked violent reactions. Imposition of various illegal taxes created resentment among them. They stubbornly protested in raising their arms and voices against the aliens. When redress through normal official channels were not fruitful with mounting frustrations they took law into their own hands. The Kondhs and Sauras in the South West of Orissa, the polos and Bhuyians, Kumars, Santhals, Juangs, Mundas and Bengalis in North-west of Orissa revolted against feudal lords and British raj during the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. These revolts were collective protest of tribals against the conditions of economic exploitation and social oppression. The British government at first adopted the repressive measures and then initiated series of protective legislations and administrative devices in tackling the tribal situations. But the tribal needed larger degree of agrarian security, protection and social assistance. On examination it would be found that the British authorities in fact had shown isolation.

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