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TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Tribals are living in forests or hilly areas and are also called 'Adivasis'. They are engaged with occupations associated with forests and hills such as cultivating forest land, collecting and selling of forest products, hunting, animal husbandry, etc. Even though there is urbanization, many of these communities are unaware about the modern life. Due to the degradation of forests and government legislations related to forests, they have lost land. As such, the tribals are poor and Indian constitution grouped them under 'Scheduled Tribe' and providing many of the social welfare schemes. Each of the tribe has its own culture and rituals. It is noted that status of women in tribes is lower. Women are illiterate and under-educated. Many of the tribes are organizing child marriages. Few of the social evils such as Basavi are still in practice. Hence, the socio-economic status of tribal women is low. Due to the government programmes, the tribal women are gradually getting access to welfare schemes such as formation of Self-Help Groups, etc. Still it is suggested for the education of tribal women, so that they can achieve equality in the modern society.

INTRODUCTION

The tribals are also called as 'Adivasis' are living in forests and their main occupation was collection and selling of forest products, agriculture, etc. The tribals were used to cultivate their lands near forests. Tribals were inexorably drawn into the vortex of colonial capitalism, by way of their employment, often forced, in plantations, mines, and industries, or wherever British capital wanted to draft them into its service. There also developed an adjunct agricultural and economic sector dealing with cash crops and forest-produce dominated by the non-tribal Indian, landowners, forest-contractors, traders and moneylenders, often combined in the same persons and concerns, turning tribals, very often whole families, into bonded and attached labour. This fierce economic thrust resulted into more and more encroachment on tribal lands and increasing economic exploitation and cultural impoverishment (Kamat, 1981).

Due to the privileges given in the Constitution of India, the tribals were gained the education. As a result of greater geographical and occupational mobility tribals have moved out in sizeable numbers to urban and industrial centres and into new occupations. Although this is no doubt a significant change its impact is not very large relatively, and like the other backward non-tribals the tribals also tend to concentrate at the lower levels of Job hierarchy. It has been observed generally that the below-SSC tribals enter skilled and unskilled labour while the SSC holders and above seek clerical and similar jobs (Vidyarthi and Roy, 1977).

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In tribal society the religious, the economic, the cultural formed a composite whole; now they differentiate, separate, get modified. They differ characteristically from the vicissitudes through which the SCs are going, because the Hinduisation process often turns tribals into a caste in savarna (upper & touchable) society. In the process they lose many of the old tribal norms, (some of them more equalitarian

than those of caste society). Education, urbanisation and entry into new occupations hastens these changes, and also the formation of a new social stratification (Kamat, 1981).

The Scheduled Tribes are tribes notified under Article 342 of the Constitution, which makes special provision for 'tribes, tribal communities, parts of, or groups within which the President may so notify'. There is no definition of a tribe in the Constitution but one may distinguish some characteristics that are generally accepted: self-identification, language, distinctive social and cultural organisation, economic under-development, geographic location and initially, isolation, which has been steadily, and in some cases, traumatically, eroded. Many tribes still live in hilly and/or forested areas, somewhat remote from settlements.

Many stereotypes flourish about the tribal persona and tribal society. Many of the tribal people are undeniably economically under-developed, and the process of their marginalization can be traced to the intrusion of British colonialism, which quickly detected in the forest that was home to tribals, great potential for appropriation of resources. Exploitation of forest-lands by both the British and the zamindars resulted in the clearing of huge tracts for commercial crops such as tea, coffee and rubber and allowing contractors to fell trees in the very heart of the forest. These actions deprived the tribal people of their livelihoods because many of them were hunters and gatherers of forest produce. The interaction with the outside world brought the tribal people face to face with problems they were not equipped to cope with, such as alcoholism and sexually transmitted diseases. In the post-Independence period, while the Constitution protected the rights of the Scheduled Tribes and accorded them reservation in the legislature, educational institutions and government jobs, other 'development' activities, such as the construction of large dams or the sale of timber, led to the further marginalization of some tribes. The scenario is therefore a mixed one. It may be necessary to use natural resources to improve the living conditions of the people of the state, but it must be done in a manner that is sensitive to ensuring the protection of the environment, which provides a livelihood to tribal people.

As provided by Karnataka Human Development Report, 2005, the tribal population of Karnataka increased to 34.64 lakh in 2001 from 19.16 lakh in 1991. The decadal growth rate during this period is a high 80.8 per cent, caused not by a spurt in fertility rates but by the addition of several new tribes to the Scheduled Tribes (ST) category. The decadal growth rate is higher for females (81.9 per cent) than for males (79.8 per cent). The literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes, which was 36.0 per cent in 1991, increased to 48.3 per cent in 2001, while the state average moved up from 56.04 to 66.64 percent the female literacy rate among STs in 1991 was 23.6 per cent and it increased to 36.6 per cent in 2001. While it has increased at a faster pace than the male literacy rate (the increase during the decade was 13.0 percentage points for females and 11.8 percentage points for males) the gap between the ST male and female literacy rate declined only marginally, from 24.3 in 1991 to 23.1 in 2001, which is slightly higher than the gap between the male and female literacy rates for the total population (22.92 in 1991 and 19.22 in 2001). The literacy rate for ST women is the lowest in the state in comparison with all women as well as Scheduled Caste women. The literacy rate for rural ST women is a low 33.3 percent compared with 56.9 per cent for men.

It is noted that each of the tribe have its own social culture, traditions, religious characteristics and celebrations. Earlier, the scheduled tribes were deprived from education, as they are living in forests or scattered land, where there is poor facilities for education and organized employment. As such, their socio-economic and education status is lower. After independence, due to the reservation facilities, now the scheduled tribes are getting more education and employment opportunities. As a result, their socio-economic and educational status is improving.

TRIBAL WOMEN:

Surprisingly, when the population statistics of the scheduled tribes are analyzed, there is increase in the growth rate of females compared to male population among the scheduled tribes. But, it is noted that like other social groups, the women have got secondary status among the scheduled tribe. As such, there is gender discrimination in the tribal society. Due to such discrimination, there is lower status of women among the scheduled tribes. Even though tribes are rich in their variety of cultures in different parts of India, still it is backward. It is emphasized that the status of women among majority of different tribes is very low.

Majority of the tribal women are also engaged in tribal occupation and assisting their husbands in their work. Polygamy is still practiced by a few of the tribes. Further, remarriage is not permitted to the widows in many of the tribes. Child marriage is common in few tribes, which are living in forests and hilly areas. But, dowry is not prevailed in few of the tribes.

'Basavi' (or Devadasi in few communities) appears to be in the feminine counterpart of the 'Basava'. Basava is the Bull dedicated to the local temple. It is property of that God. Whatever it does in the village, it is not punished; even when it eats crop. It enjoys absolute freedom. The Basavi also is similarly placed.

She is the property of God and has the freedom to have relations with any man. The term literally means 'She-bull' and carries with it the import of 'pro-creator'. This name has been given because she raised progeny for the family.

Basavis are also used in Vachana, they are quite different from prostitutes. The practice of making Basavi of a woman is prevalent in few of the tribes. Parents who are without any male issue, instead of adopting a son in the usual manner dedicate a daughter by a simple ceremony to the God of some temple. She remains permanently in her father's house, inherits the property and performs the funeral rights and in all respects, she takes on the role of a son.

Due to urbanization, now tribal women are also developing in urban areas. They are getting educated. Further, the social rituals are also changed and replaced tribal culture. Generally, the tribal women living in urban areas are following the social rituals and culture as followed by majority of the other communities such as Lingayats. Dowry practice is prevalent in urban areas. The practice of Basavi is disappeared in urban areas due to legal restrictions. More and more women are getting benefits from social welfare schemes such as Self-Help Groups, etc.

On the other hand, majority of the female tribal population living in rural areas, hilly areas and forest areas are not aware of the civilization. As such, they face inequality in the society. Majority of the tribal females in these areas are deprived from education. As such they are neglected in the society. Basavi and polygamy practice is still prevalent. Due to their inhabitation, their health is neglected as the Hospitals and Health Centres are far away from their native places. The women and children are suffering from poor health and nutrition. Due to gradual increase in awareness of tribal women Self-Help Groups are formed by them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Tribal women are weaker groups in the society facing discrimination, inequality and suppression due to their social culture. The religious practices such as Basavi, Devadasi, child marriage, etc downgraded the status of women among the tribes. Even though tribal women are interested to get education, they can't afford to it as the schools are far away from their native location or suppression from the parents. Hence, it is essential for these women to participate in women empowerment activities such as formation of self-help groups, self-employment, etc. Further, it is also suggested to the policy makers to look into the problem and encourage the education of tribal women.

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