

Tribal Alienation in the Context of Current Development Strategies: An Assessment

***Dr. Gunjeet Kaur**

Introduction

Human civilization has advanced to a level where everyday affairs of life are managed and guided by the products of technology and for large sections of human populations, it is simply unimaginable to think of survival without the support of modern scientific discoveries. Interestingly, about 370 million people, about 5% of the world population, around the world in some 90 countries have chosen to lead a life which is deeply connected to their lands and natural environment. For many indigenous peoples, the natural world is a valued source of food, health, spirituality and identity. For them land is a critical resource that sustains life. They lead a life which is cut off from the mainstream and survive on such knowledge which is handed over from one generation to another. They have their reservoirs of traditional knowledge and own distinctive cultural practices and traits and often claim a deep connection to their lands and natural environments. Their way of life is unaffected by the discoveries of modern science and technology.

The current phase of development is guided by the spirit of economic liberalisation and as such the various development initiatives and the policies guiding them lay more emphasis on economic viability and sustainability rather than bother about issues like democratic decision making or egalitarian society. Although the governments like to talk about inclusive growth, in reality the people who are on the margins of subsistence are adversely affected, when any macro level activity is undertaken in the name of development. As Ramchandra Guha argues in one of his articles that the tribal people as a group have gained least and lost most from six decades of democracy and development in India. The failures of the state and of the formal political system have provided a space for Maoist and Naxalites revolutionaries to move into.

In this background, the paper brings forth the reality of the development initiatives from the perspective of the marginalised people, namely the tribals belonging to the state of India. The paper argues that the tribal population is disadvantaged and discriminated against in the current phase of development. The current phase of development is pushing them further to such margins where they stand to lose their identity.

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Brief understanding about the Tribal people

As per the UN report, the situation of indigenous peoples in many parts of the world continues to be critical: indigenous peoples face systemic discrimination and exclusion from political and economic power; they continue to be over-represented among the poorest, the illiterate, the destitute; they are displaced by wars and environmental disasters; the weapon of rape and sexual humiliation is also turned against indigenous women for the ethnic cleansing and demoralization of indigenous communities; indigenous peoples are dispossessed of their ancestral lands and deprived of their resources for survival, both physical and cultural; they are even robbed of their very right to life. In more modern versions of market exploitation, indigenous peoples see their traditional knowledge and cultural expressions marketed and patented without their consent or participation. Of the some 7,000 languages today, it is estimated that more than 4,000 are spoken by indigenous peoples. Language specialists predict that up to 90 per cent of the world's languages are likely to become extinct or threatened with extinction by the end of the century. This statistic illustrates the grave danger faced by indigenous peoples.

For centuries, since the time of their colonization, conquest or occupation, indigenous peoples have documented histories of resistance, interface or cooperation with states, thus demonstrating their conviction and determination to survive with their distinct sovereign identities. Indeed, indigenous peoples were often recognized as sovereign peoples by states, as witnessed by the hundreds of treaties concluded between indigenous peoples and the governments of the United States, Canada, New Zealand and others.

As per the 2001 Census of India, the Scheduled Tribes account for 84.32 million representing 8.2 percent of the country's population. Scheduled Tribes are spread across the country mainly in forest and hilly regions. The essential characteristics of these communities are:-

- Primitive Traits
- Geographical isolation
- Distinct culture
- Shy of contact with community at large
- Economically backward

Tribals form 8.2 per cent of the national population. Leaving aside the tribal States in the border areas some micro States and UTs, they form a substantial share of the population in eleven major States as shown in the following chart, each with more than 10 per cent of the State population and above one per cent of the national population of the tribals.

S. No.	State	State Tribal Population as % of State Population	% of National Tribal Population
1	Chhattisgarh	31.8	1.81
2	Jharkhand	26.3	8.4
3	Orissa	22.2	9.7
4	M.P.	20.3	14.5
5	Gujarat	14.8	8.9
6	Rajasthan	12.6	8.4
7	Assam	12.04	1.9
8	Maharashtra	8.9	10.2
9	A.P.	6.6	6
10	Karnataka	6.6	4.1
11	West Bengal	5.5	5.2
		Total	79.1

The 2001 Census figures reveal that the literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes is around 47.10 percent, as against the national average of 65.3 percent. They suffer from other social disabilities like poverty and poor representation in decision making structures.

Understanding Development

Development is construed as 'a process of enlarging people's choices'; of enhancing 'participatory democratic processes' and the 'ability of people to have a say in the decisions that shape their lives'; of providing 'human beings with the opportunity to develop their fullest potential'; of enabling the poor, women, and 'free independent peasants' to organise for themselves and work together. Simultaneously, however, development is defined as the means to 'carry out a nation's development goals' and of promoting 'economic growth', 'equity' and 'national self-reliance'. (Cowen, M. P., & Shenton, R. W. (1996). Governments usually attempt to legitimise its mandate to rule in the name of development. Development is mooted as a process which aims at universal human improvement.

Trends of Development

Two features mark the current phase of development in human civilization

- advancements in science and technology and
- primacy of capital in development.

The knowledge explosion has resulted in a very interrelated and interdependent world order. Success stories related to the various facets of human life, in one part of the world are being emulated in other parts. The availability and accessibility of technology has created a great divide in the world order and by virtue of such a technological divide some societies are considered superior and are in positions of assertion, directly or indirectly. This kind of inegalitarian relationship is not only limited to the macro (global) level structures but has percolated to the micro level structures as well.

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The Indian Scene

Indian economy has been experiencing relatively high growth rates consistently exceeding 5% in every decade since 1980 and at the same time it is also acknowledged that the income distribution has taken a turn for the worse since 1991. This reverses a trend of declining or stagnant inequality during the 1980s, when a growth spurt first occurred in India with a strong push from the state.

Speaking in the context of Indian society, there have been several such mega development projects which have adversely affected the life chances and opportunities of the local populations. Still such projects were allowed to continue as they accrued benefits for some distant category. The point of concern is that who is responsible for the loss of lifestyle, life chances and life opportunities for people who get alienated in the so called process of development which brings them nothing instead pushes them further into the well of poverty and other accompanied social disabilities.

The idea of development in the present phase of economic liberalisation is marked by capitalistic tendencies wherein maximization of profits in economic terms is one of the valued objectives in any development initiative, whether the initiative is conceived at the state level or at individual level. The whole idea of development revolves around economic profitability. The government in project assessment has failed to consider the pros and cons in a holistic manner

The paper discusses some case studies in this background, related to the development initiatives carried out in tribal areas.

Case I: Dongaria Kondha, a primitive tribe in the Niyamgiri Hills, Orissa

Dongaria Kondha, a primitive tribe in the Niyamgiri hills in Orissa, have been living in this habitat for the last 200 years and surviving on local agriculture, forest produce, fishing and hunting and their social and cultural practices are entwined with the local natural environment. In October 2004, the Orissa government signed an agreement with Vedanta Alumina, to mine bauxite deposit from the Niyamgiri hills jointly with the Orissa Mining Corporation (OMC). The state government has agreed to provide support to the company in its mining activity including the right to usurp land, water, and other natural resources. This usurpation of indigenous land is particularly harsh in view of the Dongarias' cultural and religious association with the Niyamgiri hills, which they regard as the most sacred land. For the Dongarias, the conflict with Vedanta has begun with the company taking away their territory. In such a situation, thousands of tribal people protested against the Vedanta Resources alumina refinery being set up in the Lanjigarh area and vowed to stop the project. Thanks to the activism of various groups at the global level, the project has been stalled as of now.

Case II: Polavaram Project

Polavaram project on the Godavari river is located in the scheduled area and is expected to affect 1.8 lakh people in tribal areas of West Godavari district and submerge large tracts of land in Orissa. Many tribes inhabiting this area fall in its submerger area and thus are on the verges of losing its age old ancient cultural heritage.

Case II The problem of Naxalism and Tribal Alienation

Tribal alienation from the policies of the mainstream is reflected in the growing incidence of naxalism. According to various sources, more than 6000 thousand people have been killed in naxal violence in the past 20 years. The movement started in 1967 in the form of a peasant uprising that occurred in the village of Naxalbari, located in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal and later on spread to Andhra Pradesh where guerrillas seized property, killed landlords and engaged in acts of terror. Although the authorities in West Bengal were successful in suppressing the Naxalite insurgency in 1972, the movement proved to be the inspiration for other actors interested in achieving social justice through violence. Today the Government of India has accepted it as the "single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by the country".

One of the reasons for the support of naxalism in the tribal areas is the imbalanced nature of development pattern adopted by the government. It is believed that displacement of tribal people from their lands is a necessary precondition for any development initiative. The sense of deprivation, a sense of loss and the frustration felt as a result of it leads to aggressive behavior among the tribals and explains to a great extent their sympathy towards dissent groups like naxals and Maoists.

Analysis and Conclusion

Rarely do we come across an example of land acquisition wherein the land of a rich person is acquired for the purpose of development. On the other hand we come across several such cases where poor and powerless people are displaced and dispossessed of their assets in the name of development. The whole edifice of modern development is based on the principle of exploitation of nature with the use of latest know how for the benefit of the whole. The story of exploitation starts from this point – who all form the whole. Exploitation of nature for maximising the comforts of the established categories seems to be the idea of development as per the modern world is concerned. The march of civilization in the name of development has proved to be hazardous for many such communities which had for centuries lived in peaceful coexistence with nature. The problem of the tribal people is that the system has not offered them much choices.

The whole edifice of development favours the mainstream and the concerns of the marginalised communities rarely find an expression in the development initiatives in their areas. They also lack the necessary skills to participate and represent their issues at the right platforms.

Way forward

As per the report of the UN, Indigenous people are entitled to their own institutions and self-governing structures to enable them to manage their own affairs and ensure that the development process is aligned with their own cultural patterns, values and customs. The natural resources, carefully nurtured and sustained by the tribals are exploited and the benefits accrued thus are not passed on to them. It further states that any development initiatives programmes involving the extraction of natural resources and mega-projects such as the construction of dams and transportation facilities on indigenous peoples' territories must consult the local populations and

incorporate their specific needs to advance their self-determination and their rights to maintain their distinct cultural identities, languages and connections with their traditional lands.

It therefore becomes pertinent for the governments—Central and State—to seriously undertake developmental activities whose benefits actually reach the poor, local masses. While formulating such developmental plans the local people should be taken into confidence. The participatory developmental activities will generate a sense of satisfaction among the tribals. This feeling of contentment will prevent the emergence of frustration and hence the growth of any kind of conflict. Education and other skills of the indigenous people should be enhanced to empower them to engage and participate in the various elements of development programmes and projects that affect them.

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