Tribal status of different states in India: with reference of Himachal tribes

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Abstract

India is one of the countries where twenty percent of the total tribal population of the world resides. Indian tribes are heterogeneous sub – groups. The distinct identities are results of the multifaceted diversities. Besides diversities tribal society of India has some common characteristics: less developed, culturally rich and strong passion to protect their distinct identity. There are significant differences among the tribes themselves in different parts of the country. Tribal groups represent different level of socio-economic development. They differ greatly in their numbers and complexity of social organisation and there are variation in their customs and institutions. It is almost obvious that the tribal community in India are extremely backward and poverty stricken. It is because a number of communities have continued in the pastoral or shifting cultivation stage of economy even till today. Agriculture in the tribal region has remained backward due to natural, technological as well as institutional factors. Tribal economic is intimately connected with the forests and their economy. The tribal population in India belongs to various stages of culture development. Though, tribal culture differs from tribe to tribe. Tribes constitute a small but important segment of Himachal society. There are descendants of the earliest inhabitants of the sub-continent.

Keywords: Customs, descendents, distinct, heterogeneous, significant, socio-economic.

There are 636 Scheduled Tribes notified under Article 342 of the Constitution of India, spread over different states and Union Territories of the country. Scheduled Tribes in India form the largest proportion of the total population in Lakshadweep and Mizoram followed by Nagaland and Meghalaya. Madhya Pradesh has the largest number of Scheduled Tribes followed by Bihar. Bastar district of Chhattisgarh consists of largest number of Scheduled Tribes. There are no Scheduled Tribes in Punjab, Delhi, Chandigarh, Pondicherry, Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir.

Features of Indian tribes

Over the last 20-25 years, the international tribal community has been incessantly trying to draw the attention of the world’s leading power blocks to save them from perennial miseries. Currently there are about 300 million indigenous people living in over 70 countries. They have come together to seek help from the UNO to put an end to their poverty as well as to social discrimination against them. In response, UNO has taken some decisive steps. Long before this international effort India had already made attempts to improve the condition of its tribal populations consisting of 461 groups, they constitute 8.6 per cent of the total population of the country, making for a total tribal population of 10,42,81,034 according to the 2011 census. Among them about 80 per cent live in the ‘central belt’ and across the states of Maharashtra, Madhya
Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa, West Bengal and Tripura in east. Remaining 20 per cent live in the north-eastern states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and in the Union Territories of Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep. A few of them live in southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Andhara Pradesh has the largest tribal population among southern states of the India, (Rath 2006: 16).

Tribals are mainly distributed in the forest areas of country through the ages. From time immemorial tribal communities constitute an important segment of the Indian society due to their living condition. In the past, they were isolated from others segments of Indian society. Forest and tribals have had a symbiotic relationship through the ages. They know better, and still follow their own customs practices as to which type of plant is to be cut and at which appropriate time of the year. Such as, all the tribals collect hill bamboo shoots during rainy seasons as a food item: but while collecting the same they invariably spare the healthy and robust ones and pluck weak ones, (Behura 1994:1-8).

Tribal people are characterized as isolated in ecology, demography, economic aspects, political organization and other social behaviour from other ethnic groups of India. The concept of the tribe as a socio-cultural organization is of great significant. It is needless to state that the habitat of the tribal communities are generally hilly, forest and other inaccessible tracts. In the past they remained isolated from others except having some economic interactions with neighbouring communities. Due to living in isolation in the natural surrounding they developed certain specific features viz typical cultural background, ecology, economy, language, identity, political system etc., (Sinha 2001:359).

Tribal religion in India seems to have a common feature that all being are endowed with a living spirit. Animal, plants, rivers, mountains are exception to this rule. Dead who have apparently left us are yet with us, and it is through remembrance of offerings that we have to renew our relationship with them on due occasions. Dead are again reborn as off springs in the present generations. All these practices are similar to Hindu religion. In the forest where some of the more isolated communities live, a few trees are never touched or cut, for they represents the primal grove, Pipal tree is also considered sacred and abode of Basudeo, a Hindu god. It is never cut down, (Thakur 1997:17).

It is almost obvious that the tribal community in India is extremely backward and poverty stricken (61.9per cent in rural areas and 35per cent in urban area, (GOI Planning Commission 2013). Tribal communities continue in the pastoral of shifting cultivation stage of economy even till today. Tribal economy is intimately connected with the forests. Forest regions are, generally, inhabited by the tribal communities who are lagging behind in the economic development as compare to the other communities in the country.

Agriculture sector in the tribal regions is under developed due to the tough terrain and poor technological as well as institutional development. Whereas the acidic soil certainly act as a constraint on increasing productivity by indigenous methods, inadequacy of irrigation facilities. Tribals are considered socio-economically weaker sections of the society as they suffered a lot at the hands of the local rulers, traders, colonial powers non-tribals and the like forces. They have adjusted themselves in their ecological and geoclimatic conditions throughout the country. They belong to the various linguistic, social, cultural and ethnic groups and attained various levels of socio-economic development. They are having some special salient features which make them unique. The cultural identification or way of living is still strong among them.

In fact, prior to the independence, British Government adopted a policy of isolation of the tribals. This policy kept them off from the main stream of the other Indian life and culture. Though
the preservation of the tribal culture was the idea behind this policy of isolation, this led to the
development of a cleavage between the tribal and non tribal communities, (Sahu 2001:1). Tribals
have been the victims of colonial domination, illiteracy, ignorance, caste prejudice, poverty and
isolation. When India declared independent, the question of the socio-economic development in
respect of the scheduled tribes came into being under Article 46 of the Indian Constitution to
prevent their exploitation by the other groups of the society. To tackle these problems, various
committees appointed by the Constituent Assembly (CA). On the basis of the reports of these
committees some special provisions have been made in the Constitution of India for the welfare of
the Scheduled Tribes. Government of India (GOI) initiated wide spread Tribal Development
Programmes (TDP) effectively since Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-79) under the new name Tribal
Sub-Plan (TSP) to improve their socio-economic condition, quality of life and asset accumulation,
(Fifth Five Year Plan). Long term objectives of the Tribal sub plan approach were to narrow the
gap between the tribal and non tribals. Improving the quality of life of the tribal communities. In
brief, the approach envisaged tackling of tribal problems by categorizing them under three
identified areas and groups:

a) In regions of substantial tribal concentration, an areas development approach is to be
combined with the focus on the tribal population and their problems.

b) In smaller areas of dispersed tribal population, where the Scheduled Tribes live merged
with the general population, a modified area approach on account of the truncated natured
of the habitat.

c) Certain extremely backward and smaller tribal groups living generally in pre-agricultural
level of the technology in accessible areas and facing the problem of their very survival
would be treated as a special category both within the areas of tribal concentration and
outside special group-oriented programmes would be formulated for them.

The three categories were brought under the Integrated Tribal Development Project
(ITDP), Modified Area Development Approach (MADA) Packets, and Primitive Tribe Projects
respectively, (Sahu 2001:127-128).

Health is intimately linked to these essentials of living. Health status of India’s tribal
communities is in need of special attention. Being among the poorest and most marginalized
groups in India, tribals experience extreme levels of health deprivation. Tribal community lags
behind the national average on several vital public health indicators, with women and children
being the most vulnerable. The maternal health show poorer nutritional status, higher levels of
morbidity and mortality (212 per thousand), and lower utilization of antenatal and postnatal
services among tribes. Under five mortality rates among the rural tribal children is still high. It is
double than the national under five mortality. Health problems prevalent in tribal areas include
endemic infectious diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, and diarrhoeal diseases, apart from
malnutrition and anaemia, (Swaminathan, 2014: No.209).

Seventy Five per cent of India’s tribal population defecates in the open and 33 per cent
does not have access to a clean source of drinking water. Insanitary conditions, ignorance, lack of
health education and poor access to healthcare facilities are the main factors responsible for the
poor health of the tribals. Government has provided for the establishment of Primary Health
Centers (PHC’s) in tribal areas for every 20,000 populations and sub-centers for every 3,000
population, quality health care is not available to the majority of tribals. Through some traditional
practices and superstitions persist, acceptance of modern medicine has increased in recent
years, but access to good care is the major issue. Levels of illiteracy are high, with 47 per cent in
rural areas and 21.8 per cent in urban areas being unable to read and write. Most tribal groups
are traditionally hunter-gatherers and not accustomed to agriculture—their diets, therefore, are now severely limited in fruits and vegetables as well as a good source of protein, (Swaminathan, 2014: Vol. 4).

Madhya Pradesh tribes

Madhya Pradesh is not only the largest state in India, but also has the biggest tribal population of the country. Since the state is located in the centre of the Indian Union, its borders are adjoining the tribal regions of bordering states. Geographically, the state extends more than 1000 kilometres from north to south and east to west. The vast area of the state and the sparseness of the population in the tribal regions make it more difficult and expensive to provide the same level of facilities and services as in other states of the country. Therefore, in spite of its large size and great potential, Madhya Pradesh remains one of the most backward states of the Indian Union.

State has been divided into five cultural zones. The western region, having highest concentration of tribal population, is predominantly inhabited by Bhil and Bhilala tribal in Jhabua, Dhar, West Nimar, East Nimar and Ratlam districts. The control region is predominantly inhabited by Gonds, Korkus and Baigas. The major concentration of the tribal population is in Mandla, Balaghat, Chhindwara and Seoni districts. The north-eastern region is predominantly inhabited by Gonds. Kol is another backward tribe inhabiting this region. The heavy concentration of tribal population is in Shahdol and Sidhi districts. The eastern region is rich in forest and mineral resources. The predominant, but population is that of Oraons, Gonds, Kanwar and Pahari-Korwas tribes. The southern region, which is popularly known as Maria-Muria track, with a sizeable population of Gonds, Halbas, Bhatras and Dorlas, (Nanaria&Vaishnavi 1998:85).

Madhya Pradesh is the largest state in India with vast physical and ethnic diversity. It has been the home of several primitive tribes of India and has the largest tribal population in the country. According to 2011 census the tribal population of the state is about 15.31 million out of 72.62 million which accounts 21.10 per cent of the total state population. The major tribes of the state are Abujhmarhia, Baiga, Bhil, Birhor, Bhatra, Bharia, Gond, Kamar, Pando, Korba, Gond, Pando, Kol, Oraon and Sahareiya etc. and distributed in different tribal zones. Majority of the tribes inhabit ants of or around the dense forest areas and their entire life is wholly or partially depend upon the forest resources.

Orissa tribes

Number of the tribal people in India is perhaps the largest in the world, after Africa. Half of India's tribal population is concentrated in the relatively underdeveloped states: Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. According to the 2011 census as much as 22.1 per cent of the total population of the State of Orissa belongs to the scheduled tribes, among whom about sixty different, ethnoculturally separate communities are recognized. There are districts like, Mayurbhanj, Koraput, Sundergrah, Keoughar and Phulbani, where the tribal population ranges from 40 to 60 per cent of the total population. The Concentration of the tribal people varies widely in the remaining districts, ranging from the low 3 per cent in Cuttack district to the high 28 per cent in Sambalpur district, (Kumar 1994:190).

The State of the Orrisa hosts more than 9.7 percent of the total tribal population in of the country. It consists of sixty two communities. About 45 per cent of the total area in the state is declared as scheduled area under the fifth schedule of the Constitution. Forest area in the state is 9963.30 sq.km constituting 38 percent of the total area. The districts of Sundergarh, Mayurbhanj,
Koraput and Raygada, five entire subdivisions, viz., Keoujhar Sadar, Champua, Phulbani, Balliguda and Kuchinda, one full tehsil, i.e., Udaigiri part of Suruda tehsil and five Community Development Blocks, namely, Nilagiri, Thumul, Lanjigarh, Gumma and Kashipur constitute the Scheduled Areas in Orissa. As many as 22 tribal dialects are spoken. Predominant tribal people are the Khond, Saura and the Bhuiya, Gond, Santal, Oraon and the Munda. In addition to the communities like Juang, Bhuiya, Dongria and Kutia Khonds and Langiasaora are included in the list of primitive tribes, (Pathy 2004:231).

There are 62 tribal communities in Orissa out of which 12 communities are declared as primitive tribes. 2011 census shows that among the ST population 4.77 per cent of the total workers work in the household industry 33.35 per cent are cultivators and 46.85 per cent are agricultural labours. The tribals, thus, mostly work in agriculture. Under Article 244 (fifth schedule) Orissa is covered under the 'Scheduled Area'. In Orissa the districts of Mayarbhanj, Sundargarh, Koraput, Rayagada, Nawaranpur, Malkangiri and parts of Balasore, Keonjhar, Sambalpur, Gajapati, Ganjam, Kalandandi and Phulbani are covered under 'Scheduled Areas', (Mishra 2010: 862-65).

In Orissa, Oriya is the predominant language spoken by more than 80 per cent of the population. It is the official language of the state. Literacy level is low, 16 out of 30 districts are below the state average literacy. Literacy rate of the ST in the state is 23.31 per cent.

**Bihar tribes**

Bihar occupies important place in the 'Tribal India'. In Chotanagpur plateau it contains a tribal belt covering some of the largest tribes of the country such as the Oraon, Munda, Ho, Santhals, etc. The tribal population of the Bihar is around 9 million (2011 census) which comes about 10.06 per cent of the total population of the state. Although Bihar is placed at the twelfth position in terms of the ranking of the states by schedule tribe percentage but in term of absolute number it is behind only Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. Of the total Scheduled Tribe population of the country the tribal living in Bihar constitute about one fifth segment. Most of these tribes inhabit Hazaribagh, Dhanbad, Singhbhum, Palamu and Santhal Pargana. Besides these, considerable tribal population is found also in Saharram, Bhabhua, Bhagalpur, Munger, Purnia and Champaran. Among the main and relatively known tribes come Munda, Oraon, Ho, Santhal, Kharia, Pahariya and Birhor, (Hasnain 2011: 151).

**Himachal tribes**

Total population of Himachal Pradesh according to 2011 census is 68,64,602 with a density of 123 persons per sq. km. The highest density in Hamirpur district which is 407 persons per sq. km. and the lowest is 2 persons per Sq. km. in Lahaul & Spiti district. About 90 per cent of the population lives in rural areas. According to 2011 census, the number of females per thousand males was total 974. Total scheduled caste population of Himachal is 17,29,252 which is 25.19 per cent of the total population. Scheduled tribe population of Himachal is 3,92,126 which is 5.7 per cent of the total population of the state, (Census of India: 2011).

Scheduled Tribes of Himachal Pradesh represent a marked difference in their way of life as distinguished from other communities inhabiting this region. Not only this even the life style of one Scheduled Tribe differ from the other Scheduled Tribes in other parts of the country. Scheduled Tribes of the Himachal Pradesh inhabit the inaccessible part of the region, the geophysical isolation of these tribal communities in sequestered in mountain valleys of the Western Himalayas. They have been isolated altogether from the main stream of the socio-cultural development of the mainland since centuries. Geographical factor has thus, been one of the main
reasons for the evolution of the localized socio-cultural customs and tradition of their own. Moreover, each Scheduled Tribe of this region can be identified with specific geographical region (Kinnaur, Lahaul & Spiti, Bharmaur and Pangi) and as such the area of their activities normally restricted to their particular limit. Nonetheless, there are some Scheduled Tribe communities like Gaddis and Gujjars who, although possess nomadic character, are associated with Bharmaur and Kilin areas of the Chamba district. They are always seen roaming with their quadrupled wealth in the pasture lands around Shiwalik and elsewhere. Some of the Kinnauras and Lahulas also established their secondary habitats in the Shimla hills and Kullu respectively in order to further their mercantile pursuits.

Historically each scheduled tribe in this region is a separate entity in itself. Such tribal communities settled in the particular geographical limit in the area at different times. Inhabitants of Kinnaur and Lahaul & Spiti districts are the earliest settlers whereas Gaddi and Gujjar made inroads to their present habitat recently during medieval period from the main land. Gaddis and Gujjars had been influenced by the predominating religious beliefs of that time and as such the religious sacraments are reflected in their marriage and other ceremonies. Since the native people of Kinnaur and Lahaul & Spiti remained away from the Brahmanic influence of the plains and as such secular character in their marriage and other social ceremonies reflects. Thus the time gap in the settlement of different tribal communities in the region had influenced the socio-cultural life of these people to a greater extent.

Ethnically also the scheduled tribes of the Himachal Pradesh are different from one and other. e.g. the Kinnaur and Spiti tribals are more akin to the Mongolian group of human race whereas the Gaddis and Gujjars found their resemblance with the people of main land. Likewise, Kinnauras and Lahulas are considered to profess the trademanship qualities of the Mongolian races and as such lead a settled life whereas, Gaddis and Gujjars are basically shepherds and as such are migratory communities. Thus, the ethnic characters of the Scheduled Tribes of Himachal are clearly visible in their way of life, (Kapur 1993:17).

Conclusion

The tribes constitute a small but important segment of the Indian population. These are descendents of the earliest inhabitants of the sub-continent. They contributed to the variety and riches of cultural forms in the country. Over the centuries they have preserved a distinctive style of life; in terms of quality life and cultural ethos. There are significant differences among the tribes themselves in different parts of the country. Tribal groups represent different levels of socio-economic development. They differ greatly in their numbers and complexity of social organization and there are variation in their customs and institutions.

About 55 per cent of the Scheduled Tribe’s population is concentrated in the east and central belt including West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and parts of the Andhra Pradesh. About 28 per cent are in the western belt consisting of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Dadra, Nagar Habeli and Goa, Daman and Diu. Only 6 per cent of the Scheduled Tribes population is found in the southern states of the Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Karla and Tamil Nadu, about 10 per cent resides in the North- East India. 0.83 per cent are Himachal Pradesh and 0.10 per cent in Lakshadweep and Mimicry islands and Andram and Nicrobar islands. It is estimated that where as the tribal area constitute about 20 per cent of the total geographical area of the country, about 70 percent of the mineral resources, bulk of the forest and water and hydel power sources, are located in these areas. Although, socio-economic the tribal areas are rich in
the resources; position of the tribes indicate their vulnerable position. It also reflects the gap between the general population and tribal development after seventy years of the Independence.

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