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Editorial

DEVELOPMENT WITH DIGNITY: A TRIBAL PERSPECTIVE

India is diverse country of hundreds of communities with different cultures, languages, ethnicities and religious affiliations. The indigenous communities, often referred to as tribals in India, are a group of communities that are most diverse in its socio-cultural traits and geographical locations, which add to the exotic mosaic of peoples living in the Indian sub-continent. Indigenous peoples in India comprise 705 ethnic groups notified as Scheduled Tribes (STs) spread across 30 States and Union Territories in India. In addition, there are hundreds of denotified tribes, nomadic tribes, semi-nomadic tribes and other tribes that have not been included in the Scheduled List. According to 2011 Census, the ST population was 104.3 million accounting for 8.6 percent of the total population of India.

After Independence, India embarked on a path of national reconstruction. In tribal dominated regions, the poor socio-economic conditions of the tribes were attributed to their geographical and social isolation. New means of communication, such as roads and railways, made tribal regions accessible to other parts of the country. However, these developments did not result in the improvement in the lives of the tribals. Access to tribal regions by road and railway resulted in the influx of non-tribal Indians into tribal regions leading to the alienation of tribal lands through force, fraud, forgery and usury. Non-tribal moneylenders advanced loans to tribals with exorbitant interest rates against land mortgages. Since tribals fell into the debt-trap, tribal land moved into the hands of non-tribals.

The Constitution made provisions to protect tribals by introducing articles 16, 29, 46, 244, 330 and 332. These articles made provisions for socio-economic development of tribals, affirmative action in terms of reservations in political institutions, state employment and higher educational institutions, promotion and protection of languages and culture, and special administration of tribal areas in the form of fifth and sixth schedules of the constitution. In spite of these constitutional provisions, land alienation and exploitation of tribals continued as these were attempts to integrate them into the national mainstream instead of respecting their unique way of existence.

Education is an important means of improving the socio-economic

indicators of a community. However, Indian education curriculum seeks to bring about unity and uniformity rather than take into account the rich diversity of language and culture of tribals. In addition, the curriculum seeks to “civilize” the tribals, who are perceived by Indian non-tribals as primitive and uncivilized. This has resulted in education being given in national and state languages, which are alien to tribals. Most tribals are unable to cope up with the Indian education system and drop out at an early stage. With poor educational attainment levels, tribals get caught up in the vicious circle of poverty and destitution.

The affirmative action measures such as reservations in government services have shown that the proportion of tribals in central government jobs is not only less than their proportion to the population in the country but also less than the stipulated 7.5 per cent in all categories of jobs. There have been several welfare schemes introduced by successive governments, among them is the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), which seeks to develop tribal dominated regions. It has been envisaged that the budgetary allocation of plan expenditure be equivalent to the proportion of the tribal population at the national and state levels. However, budgetary allocations for tribal development have always been less than half of what was envisaged. Besides, whatever amount has been sanctioned has hardly reached the tribals but has been diverted for other developmental works.

Development of a country requires industries, mining and other infrastructural projects. Since Independence, over 40 million people have been displaced by various developmental projects all over the country. Studies have shown that a large number of developmental projects were located in tribal concentrated regions and about 40 per cent of the people displaced by all these projects were tribals. This has resulted in uprising and peoples movements against any developmental project planned by the government in spite of the introduction of the new Land Acquisition law which guarantees the displaced peoples adequate compensation, resettlement and rehabilitation.

During the last two decades, there have been some progressive legislations to protect tribal land and traditional forms of governance. The Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996, commonly known as the PESA Act, ensures self governance through traditional Gram Sabha for people living in the Fifth and Sixth Scheduled Areas of India. In addition, The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 granted rights to tribals living in forests over land

and other resources, which were denied to them for decades due to colonial forest laws. However, the implementation of these laws have not been satisfactory resulting in a great deal of discontent among tribal communities. Seven decades after Independence, the socio-economic conditions of indigenous peoples in the country continue to be lagging far behind national average. There is a 20 percent gap between the incidence of poverty in the country and poverty among indigenous peoples. Similarly, there is a 21 percent gap between the national literacy rate and the literacy rate of tribal peoples. Other indicators such as infant mortality rate, child mortality rate and under-five mortality rate is very high among tribal population compared to the national average.

It is a matter of grave concern that in spite of several legislations, policies and welfare schemes for indigenous or tribal communities, they remain the most backward in almost all socio-economic indicators. Besides, most studies indicate that they are even more disempowered and impoverished today than they were ever before. This requires a deeper reflection on the development paradigm adopted by the country, especially in tribal-concentrated areas. This issue of Social Action tries to explore tribal perspectives of development that ensures dignity to the indigenous peoples of the country as enshrined in the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNRIP), which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007.

Neelam Tyagi expresses concern at the discontent brewing in the tribal belt of the country due to the non-implementation of the PESA Act in his article “Tribal Rights in India and the Impact of PESA: Issues and Challenges to Implementation”. He stresses the need to make this progressive legislation effective and suggests ways in which the law can be implemented in a way that benefits tribals. The article “Resettlement of Project-affected Persons (PAPs) in Coal Mining-Induced Displacement in India: An International Human Rights Law Perspective” by Maheshwar Singh attempts to understand the dynamics of displacement due to extractive industries such as coal mining in the light of the international human rights framework. He explores alternative models to deal with coal mining-induced displacement to mitigate the suffering of the tribal people. Abhinav Shrivastava’s article “Assessing the Impact of ‘Land Rights’ and ‘Use Rights’ under the Forest Rights Act 2006 on the Development of Tribes and Forest Dwellers” analyzes the implementation of the rights of tribals living in forests and ways of making it more effective. The article, “Relevance of Tribal Customary Rights: A Global Perspective” by Ram Chandra Oraon is an attempt to find out measures to safeguard the customary rights of tribals in India. Shreya Saha

analyzes how development projects have altered the entire demographic and economic profile of Bastar region of Chhattisgarh over the years in her article “Interrogating Development and its Consequences in the Gond Heartland, Bastar”. The article “Entrepreneurial Interest among Tribal Youth in Durg District, Chhattisgarh” by S. Lalitha and Rambabu Botcha is an analysis of entrepreneurial training programmes conducted for tribal youth. Finally, the article by Dhaneswar Bhoi and Neelima Lakra on “Educational Attainment among the Scheduled Tribes in India: An Analysis of Policies, Pedagogy and Practices” deals with the issues of education among tribal children and ways to address them.

There is a general consensus that the present paradigm of development in the neo-liberal economic order is becoming a growing threat to the habitat and livelihood of the tribal people in India. It is hoped that the articles will spur minds to look for alternative models of development that ensure the rights of indigenous peoples to live a life of dignity.

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