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A note on:

## Identity Crisis among the Tribes of Koraput( TRIBAL CONVENTION from 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> December-2006)

01. The layman's concept of tribals (even after he stays for some period in Koraput region) is that of a small group of people living in seclusion, accustomed to carefree and hand to mouth existence without any idea of saving for the rainy day and traditionally unmindful of the intricacies of modern life unless and until their traditional customs and taboos, mates and ethos and way of life are tampered with. This concept of tribal life and culture is a figment of the imagination of the age-old relations existing between tribals and their non-tribal neighbours; a myth as an empirical truth.

02. The present day tribals very rarely live in perfect isolation anywhere in the world. All of them are caught to some degree in the currents of cultural change that have been sweeping through every nook and corner. The degree of percolation of socio-economic process is mainly conditioned by the nature of communication and transport facilities available in Koraput region. With the rapid strides made by Community and Tribal Development Projects and Programmes ultimately led to creation of new economic opportunities and a shift in the age old cultural standards and value-attitude systems of the people of this region.

03. Early Europeans knew this region as 'Jeypore' country. When the Madras Government first took over the direct administration of the Jeypore estate in 1863, road communication was in a primitive condition and they opened the area in taking up road constructions. A bare valley between two ranges of hills was selected and the British administrative headquarters was shifted from 'Jeypore' to 'Koraput' in the year 1870. Roads, as is understood at present, were non-existent prior to 1863. *Lieutenant Smith*, the first Assistant Agent posted at Jeypore travelled to Jeypore by horse and bullock cart. In the year 1885, *Mr. H.G. Turner*, the then Agent took up the task, of completing the road from Jeypore to Vizagpattam via Padwa, Anantagiri Ghats (now called Aruku valley) which was commenced in the year 1863 and was known as Turner's Ghat. The present Salur-Jeypore road was first begun in 1866 and it was only in 1874, for the first time, carts from Salur could cross the Ghat (with difficulty) and were able to reach Jeypore. Railway extension from Paralakhemundy (Narrow gauge) to Gunupur was opened in 1931. The Raipur – Vizianagarm Railway line (Broad gauge) was opened in 1932. Dandakaranya Project started in 1958 in this region. The present Koraput Railway line; earlier known as the DBK (Dandakaranya Bailadida Kiribur) Railway line (broad gauge) is passing through 'Koraput' town and 'Jagdapur' then from Visakhapatnam (AP) and it was undertaken in 1962 and completed in the year 1967 connecting Bailadilla mines in Chhatisgarh to Visakhapatnam of Andhra Pradesh. Koraput town was connected to Rayagada by rail in the year to carry alumina from NALCO. It seems, all these roads and Railway lines were taken up only to facilitate the Government through their agents to transport Forest Product, Minerals, generated electric energy and to rehabilitate the Bengali displaced persons under the cloak of Koraput area development.

04. Prior to *Dandakaranya* Project i.e. till 1958 there were a handful of official functionaries and traders who were the only agents of plains culture, used to tickle down the precarious ghat roads and bridle paths. The introduction of community development programme and the Railway lines opened a new chapter in the lives of the tribals of this region. For the first time, the tribals tasted the fruits of directed change in the form of inter village fair-weather roads, improved agricultural implements, seeds, wells for drinking water etc. The laying of pucca macadamised roads and Railway lines facilitated for more extensive cultural contacts. The tribals are no more encompassed in the idyllic

surroundings of a shangrila having harmonious and undisturbed relation with the nature. Slowly the tribal began to incorporate certain material traits of plain people into their day-to-day livelihood.

05. The unfriendly developmental projects/ schemes in tribal areas, designed by *babus* started upsetting the apple-cart of existing social system resulting in cases of violation of tribe endogamy and family disorganisation. Gambling, prostitution, cheating, pick pocketing etc have also made their appearance among the tribes. Previously such violations of traditional norms used to be severely dealt with by the tribal council by ex-communicating the offenders and heaping all sorts of insults on them in order to make life unbearable for the culprit and his family in this society through ostracisation. Now-a-days such cases just end up with mild contemptuous remarks. Coffee and tea slowly replaced the traditional nutritious ragi gruel. Drinking illicit toxic liquor is also on the increase whereas they depended on healthy home brewing and distillation. Increased monetary transactions due to payment of wages in cash and the immoral activities of non-tribal workers served as catalisers in accelerating the process of social degeneration. The developmental schemes and programmes engineered for development of this region made them conscious of new opportunities and ways of life and at the same time subjected them to sacrifice their traditional institutions with great stress and strain. The balance sheet of Socio-Cultural and Economic gains or losses can be summarised as follows:

**1. The Positive side are:**

- (a) *Tribals who acquired skills during the execution of developmental schemes and programmes got employment in urban areas as skilled or unskilled labourers and yet up rooted them from their tamil or home anchors.*
- (b) *Some persons among the tribals have been motivated to strive for modern ways of life based on improved technology and have been able to stabilise their position, at the cost of neglecting their traditional vlaue systems.*

**2. On the Negative side are:**

- (a) *The programmes and the schemes have been like a capricious lover of the tribals, giving bountiful gifts for sometime and then deserting them with complete unconcern when the purpose is sewed.*
- (b) *The tribals who worked as casual labourers during the continuation of the programmes or schemes were left high and dry. The traditonal sources of livelihood no longer satisfies the need and at the same time the new hope which sustained them for sometime has disappeared like a mirage.*
- (c) *The most hard hit of all in the process has been the younger generation. A good number of them could successfully challenge the traditional authority structure of the society, because of the economic opportunities provided by the schemes.*
- (d) *The final result was - the younger generation unthinkingly discarded the traditions of the old. After a certain period the trauma of a guilty complex on the one hand and a superiority or inferiority complex of merely - 'being used' on the altar on the other hand goaded by these two complexes, compelled them seek escape in alcoholism, gambling etc. and other social vices.*
- (e) *In this milieu, when the economic motive is added, the slippery slope of degeneration easily takes them to the practice of cheating, pick-pocketing and other delinquent behaviour without any compuncions.*
- (f) *The same set of factors has also played an important role in creating a fertile ground for converting them into political iconoclasts of a sort to flourish in the area.*
- (g) *Over and above these, the traditional social restrictions in sex life were subjected to great strain due to the monetary and other allurements available during the execution of the Project periods.*

06. Taking an overall view, one cannot help feeling that the balance is heavily loaded on the negative side. But here a question arises, whether this negative balance is just another confirmation of the classical view of the harmful effects of contact between people of different levels of culture and technology or whether it is the result of inadequate planning and incomplete approach to the problem of (by the forcible induction of) development.

07 Further, establishment of industries for betterment of the people of this region seems to have been dealt with more as a territorial nexus than as an additional resource base. Its main purpose was to extract and exploit natural resource at one end and export for marketing at the other, but the human situation seems to have been considered more in terms of instrumental value than end value.

08. Now the tribal consciousness in relation to its own tradition and history and in relation to outsiders is taking shape as an important part of the subaltern consciousness of the region. The tribals

of Koraput region during the last four and a half decades have gone through the trauma of various domineering forces in the name of progress and development.

09. First, they were the targets of the '*missionary solution*' which detribalised their rituals, customs and morals; it was followed by a vigorous reaction of the forces promoting Hindu institutions, disturbing their indigenous ethos. Second, the British rulers followed the policy of segregation under the garb of 'protection' and 'Excluded' and 'Partially Excluded' areas; tribals were linked with primitiveness, and the task of defining their direction of change was delegated to colonial administrators, guided by the theory of '*isolation*'. Third, the Indian Government after the Independence, charged with the sentiments of '*national integration*', enshrined guarantees in the Constitution for the economic, socio-cultural and educational upliftment of Scheduled Tribes.

10. When the norms and values of one culture dominate the other (through subjugation, colonisation, acculturation and assimilation or in the name of development) these can generate dissonance between the two or result in the indistinguishable assimilation of one culture, weaker in demographic or economic terms, with the other. Feelings of resentment against outsiders and virtual rejection of the outsiders among a section of tribals indicate their uncertainty and a sense of helplessness, about their future.

11. Expressing ideals of the pluralistic heritage of India, a statesman of 1950's was pronounced as follows :

*"Every flower has the right to grow according to its own laws of growth; ..... to spread its own fragrance, to make up the cumulative beauty and splendour of the garden. I would not like to change my roses into lilies nor my lilies into roses. Nor do I want to sacrifice my lovely orchids of rhododendrons of the hills:"*

In the words of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru : *"there is no point in trying to make them a second rate copy of ourselves."*

12. Until quite recently, the exception has been that in the march of progress the tribal form would gradually weaken and give way to more advanced modern form of social cohesion. The sheer persistence and resilience of tribal identities in India raises certain issues of immense significance:

(a) Should the conceptual ground upon which the prevalent categorisation and understanding of the nature of the tribal identity is predicated be re-examined ? (It would indeed be an exceedingly difficult proposition for anyone to state that all the varied communities listed as tribes in the schedules fully conform to the notion of a tribal community in its classical sense)

(b) What constitutes the distinctive substance in the historical texture of relationships and sensibilities, in relation to tribal identity in India?

(c) What is the nature of reassertion of tribal identity in the modern context ? - And -

(d) What kind of possibilities does this reassertion make available for a serious reconsideration of the problem of ecology and human survival, as also the nature and role of the modern state and modern development ?

13. Meaningful consideration of these questions requires reappraisal of the awful grim details that touch upon the part and present of the struggle for livelihood and survival of tribal cohesions.

14. Such reappraisal would perhaps help, classify the cultural and institutional possibilities that could in some measure modulate the suicidal edge inherent in the modern predicament (Sharma : 1994).

15. In this scenario we may like to note that the political leadership in tribal areas has been a victim of the party system. When the tribal representatives get elected, they are quickly submerged in the main concern of the political party to which they belong; and in these, there is at best a nominal place for the tribal issues or else they become back-numbers in the modern world.

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SPREAD.

