

TRIBALS IN INDIA: A CROSS SECTIONAL STUDY

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I. Introduction

According to 2011 statistics, 8.6% of the Indian population is tribal. They are settled in six major areas 1) North Central India, 2) North East India, 3) South Eastern India, 4) Western India, 5) South India and 6) North India. Tribals are also referred to as Indigenous people or Adivasis (Forest Dwellers). There are nearly 450 tribal communities in India. They are involved in occupation like small-scale farming, shifting cultivation, fishing, forestry etc. They are economically exploited, culturally alienated, religiously discriminated, politically abused and socially stigmatized.

II. Types of Tribals

The tribals are basically categorized into two categories: Frontier tribes and Non Frontier tribes. Frontier tribes include the inhabitants of the North East Frontier states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. They constitute 11% of the tribal population in the country. The Non frontier tribes are distributed in Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. They constitute 89% of the tribal population in the country.¹

III. Brief History

The story of tribals goes beyond 3,500 years. They were living a harmonious life until the first colonizers known as Aryans around 1500 BC. Later they were exploited by the Muslim invaders as well as the Imperialistic British Christians. Though the external colonizers are gone, they continue to be subjected to “internal colonization” even today.

¹ James Massey, *Current Challenges and Church Response* (New Delhi: North India Church Review Publications, 1998), p. 108.

IV. Approaches to Tribal Issues

There have been traditionally three approaches to the Tribal issue:

1. Isolation – (let the tribals be in jungles and take care of themselves)
2. Assimilation – (let us ‘civilize’ and make the tribals like us)
3. Integration – (let us bring them to the mainstream of society)

V. Main Features of Tribal Life

1. Tribal Religiosity - Religion is the core of Tribal culture. They are animistic² and they worship their land and ancestors. There is no dichotomy between sacred and secular. Tribals also suffer from dehumanizing and enslaving forces such as fear of spirits and inferiority complex due to their historical suffering and conditioning.

2. Tribal Ecology - The lives are intrinsically connected to the Nature and any imbalance in the nature would destroy their lives too. The present-day activities of destruction of natural environment and depletion of resources of the earth are all factors that work against the tribal vision of life.

3. Tribal Concept of Land - The tribals consider land as a gift from God and themselves as custodians of land and nature, including hills, forests, rivers, plants and rocks.

4. Tribal Economy - Tribal economy is need based and not greed based. Greed according to their native wisdom is the biggest of sins.

5. Tribal Community - They have a strong sense of community. Tribal society is based on inter-relatedness, mutuality and sharing. The festivals, celebrations, folk songs and dance all strengthen their community bonding.³

² Belief that all natural objects and phenomenon (trees, stones, wind, etc) have souls.

³ Gnaana Patrick, *Leading Thinkers, Movements and Issues* (Madras: University of Madras, 2000), p. 176.

VI. Issues of Tribals in India

The major issues tribals are facing are four:

1. **Land**: The tribals are displaced from their land by the state authorities, companies and individuals in the name of setting up new industries, mines, big dams, urban centers and military operations.
2. **Forest**: The forest rights are violated by the construction of big dams and acquisition of land for commercial purposes thereby depriving the tribals of even collecting forest produce.
3. **Water Resources**: The tribals further face the problem of epidemic, loss of fertility of land and even shortage of drinking water.
4. **Identity**: Loss of egalitarian world outlook, loss of mother tongue, non recognition of their culture and breaking down of community life are negatively affecting the identity of tribals.

VIII. Models of Upliftment of Tribals

May I suggest a double pronged approach for the upliftment of Tribals.

- 1) **Charity Model** – The Government and NGOs need to help materially the tribals those who are hungry, thirsty, naked and alienated. There is also a need for medical clinic for tribals where they could be treated free or charge or at a minimal rate.
- 2) **Development Model** – Here we need to start schools for the tribal students where they are educated and these children in turn can bring great changes in their community. They also need to be given awareness about their political rights and about the diverse schemes the Government has for them.

Conclusion

The world is watching us and history will judge us. It is high time that tribals are integrated to the national mainstream and they are able share the resources of this nation and to partake in the nation building. We are called not to create just a society. We are called to create a just society.
