



TRIBES, FORESTS, AND ISSUE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: DILEMMA IN TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT (A STUDY OF GOND TRIBE OF MAHARASHTRA, IN INDIA)

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Abstract

In recent years, due to the global environmental crises, the issue of sustainable development comes into focus, which initiates new debates, discourses, and encounters in international as well as national politics. The whole discourse is round around the sustainability of the earth's environment and our involvement as well as an intervention within it. Thus, forest attracts global attention as a significant mean of sustainability, which invites societal involvement for its restoration and reforestation. In India, forests are interrelated with tribes as their habitat, the mean of their livelihood, culture, social structure and life-practices. Therefore, the issue of sustainability of the forest is directly associated with them. Gonds as a major tribal community of the Gadchiroli District of State of Maharashtra of Central India is vulnerable to various forest and development policies which implemented by state and non-state agencies. This paper, explore the dilemmas within the models of development and involved forest policies in the name of sustainable development.

This study used a qualitative approach with circular model and applied purposive sampling with the principle of theoretical saturation. Data was collected through several individuals and group interviews with Gonds, observation and studying the various existing models of development. The inferences of this study show that existing models of development are not much successful for the inclusion of tribes in mainstream society. Those tribal villagers got Forest Rights, are yet to be isolated and victimized by poor education, poor health and lack of occupational mobility. Those who aren't getting such rights remain economically poor, lose their cultural as well as socio-political rights and marginalised in society due to lack of occupational and communication skills. Though they are helping with state and non-state programs of the restoration of forests and reforestation, but they do not get the opportunity of inclusion; rather their undeveloped status is maintained through the forest policies for sustainability. Thus, the dilemma of tribal development is unresolved.

Key words: sustainable development, exclusion, inclusion, tribal culture, tribal socio-political rights

Introduction

The term sustainable development is coming into focus after the 1980s as global environmental problems arise due to development and UN General assembly explicitly called attention on two important ideas of the well-being of the environment that economies and people should inextricably link as well as sustainable development involves co-operation on a global scale. Costanza and Daly explained sustainable development in terms of Natural Capital, where a minimum necessary condition for sustainability is the maintenance of the total natural capital stock at or above the current level. While a lower stock of natural capital may be sustainable, society can allow no further decline in natural capital given the large uncertainty and the dire consequences of guessing wrong. This 'consistency of total natural capital' rule can thus be seen as a prudent minimum condition for assuring sustainability, to be relaxed only when solid evidence can be offered that it is safe to do so (Constanza et al. 1992:37). The United States also recognised the deforestation as a major jolt to sustainability. (UN 2008, Rogers et al. 2008). Therefore, forests, as an issue of the environment and sustainability of development get the central place after Rio Summit, where India is one of the signatories who committed itself for the conservation of forest.

In India, from the colonial period, the government has the sole rights to forests, including its products, and conservation too by 1865 Act, which was amended on 1967, known as Forest Act 1927 (Menon 2013:161). By this act, traditional dwellers of forests are losing their rights over forest and British Government set their control over it. Near-about 250 million people live in and nearby to forests, of which the near about 100 million are tribes. By taking them into consideration, The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, (which is popularly known as Forest Right Act or FRA) was passed unanimously by Parliament. This Act aims at giving ownership rights over forest land to traditional forest dwellers and tribes. This Act has been passed is at least a recognition of the historic injustice done to forest dwellers. Maharashtra state gives recognition to this Act.

Gonds are the major tribal community of Central India, in which Madhya-Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Telangana, and other states include. Gadchiroli (also spell as Garhachiroli) district of Maharashtra State is one of the Gonds dominated the region. In this district, various tribal villages are beneficiaries of FRA. Along with this FRA, 73rd Amendment of Indian Constitution which extend the more powers to Gramsabhas (village council) and Fifth Schedule of Indian Constitution make them capable of controlling to their village and forest-related issue. Although, due to this act, Gonds become the stakeholders of forests and forest products, and forest turns into a legitimate mean of livelihood for them. On one hand, they emerge as the conservators of forests and agents of sustainable development in Central India and on another hand; they isolated themselves from other developed communities as they were in the previous era. The governmental policies from Neharuvian era support to this perspective of isolation where the aims and objectives of tribal development draws on the line of preservation of their ethnic identity, ecology, language, culture, style of living, traditional practices, etc.(Raha and Das 1982, Singh R. 2000, Singh A. 1984)

Research methodology

This study has used a qualitative approach with circular model and applied purposive sampling with the principle of theoretical saturation for studying the subject in their natural settings. Data is collected from several individuals and focus group interviews with (Gond) tribal individuals, tribal activists, NGOs activists, Local Government Body Members and schoolteachers (who are in direct contact with these villages). Unstructured interviews are operated as these provide an opportunity for observation. This study critically evaluates the various existing models of development, which are operated in Gadachiroi District, viz. the model of Mendha (Lekha), Model of Khutgaon, and Model of Salhe.

Background of the population

Mendha (lekha), Khutgaon and Salhe villages have a tribal population who got the Forest Rights under FRA. Mendha (lekha) of Dhanora Block is known for its struggle for self-governance and FRA. An NGO, Vanarai has been working with the Gramsabha (Village-Committee) under the leadership of Devaji Tofa. Salhe, a small village of Korchi Block working under the guidance of an NGO, Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi in a leadership of a local individual, whereas Khutgaon village of Korchi Block is working under the leadership of Warkhede, a political leader. These villages got the FRA and have their own forests where they get bamboo and other minor forest product, by selling to it, they earn ample income.

Discussion

FRA and employment:

The issue of development is not a monotonic issue, but it has multidimensionality. The phenomenological approach gives us an opportunity to explore it from 'the within point' and multiple realities are coming out which not only shows us consensus but it shows us dissensus too. Tribe got the rights on forest after the long organised struggle with the government, in December 2006 as the 1927's colonial law was abolished. The various case studies are found on the web, which explores the economic success of Mendha (lekha). Govaji¹ (55) said,

After a long struggle, we secure the community forest rights. Now, we are participating in the management of forests along with the forest department and getting the rights of selling bamboo. As tribal, we are depending on these forests, and it is the only livelihood for us. Last year, we pay more than 70000 rupees to the government as tax. Our gramsabha has ample money and now we are capable of providing employment to our villagers at our village only.

Salhe, is not much rich as compare to Mendha, but community forest rights gave seasonal employment to them. Bhimsay (52), thought that due to forest rights, they get the means of livelihood. They sold tendupatta and bamboo, as well as cultivating some good bamboo species for getting more products. However, it is not sufficient for earn money. Whereas, Khutgaon villager, Narote (35), declared that after getting the community forest rights, their *gramsabha* becomes rich. They get the employment as they work for their *gramsabha*. They cut the bamboo; protect their forest and cultivating bamboos. All these activities are providing employment to them. Again, Govaji stated that

¹ All names are unreal. For maintaining unanimity real names are not disclosed.

By securing forests, we help to maintain the land of forest. Before getting the rights, we were only cut the trees or bamboo for our daily need, like firewood, barricading or for our shelters. Now, we are contributing to the growth of forests. The people from NGOs are told us that we help to the community by securing these forests. However, other than this, we see it as a mean of employment for us. We are not searching our employment out of our village, as our village is able to provide sufficient labour.

Khutgaon, a village nearby to Mendha (Lekha) has a different model of FRA where most of the decisions are controlled by the political forces. A villager Mohan (35) talk about FRA generated employment. He said,

..... though our (*political*) leader controls our *gramsabha*, and we don't know more about the money transaction involved in the business, ...we are satisfied that now we are not going outside the village, or at Gadhachiroli (a nearby semi-urban centre) for searching employment. We get sufficient employment and wages.

All these narrations praised their models of development for getting labour within the periphery of their village. Due to the FRA, they do not only get rights on forest products but also simultaneously, they get forest-related labour. They feel uncomfortable in non-tribal communities or out of their jungle-village, as they do not have the ability to communication with non-tribal communities as their tribal dialect (i.e. Gondi) differs from Local dialect (i.e. Marathi). Secondly, they do not have other employment skills for getting blue-collar jobs or not have education qualification for getting white-collar jobs in urban or semi-urban centres. The required life-skills of the tribal community differ from required life-skills of non-tribal communities and thus, they are not able to survive in the non-tribal community. It means that their socio-economic and cultural conditions are not allowing them for inclusion in mainstream development. Singh (2000, pp132) pointed out that very few tribal youth may get the job in public sectors or in open market as they not have the required abilities. They are more comfortable within their own habitat and thus, they search their livelihood within their geographical periphery only. Ramesh (36), a residence of khutgaon, said,

I fail in the third standard and do not understand Marathi and arithmetic. So, how I talk with other Marathi-speaking people? Once I go to Chandrapur with a person, I frightened while crossing the road. My village is better than the city. I love to live in my village only. All my relatives, my father, mother and brother are living in the same village. My son will be living in this village only.

Other tribals are also supported to this view. The villagers of Mendha are going outside to their village. Some persons are going up to the Mumbai², for getting training for skill work of bamboo. Four village-members are travelled in cities for different reasons. However, they are also not willing to go outside the village for another employment. Mahesh (23), said,

I am not willing to leave this village. I know I got the labour in my village only as we have sufficient forest. I learn up to the seventh standard and afterwards, I leave education, as I did not need it for getting forest-labour. I am doing labour work and I little-bit able to handle the computer of *gramsabha* also. Everyone needs an employment, and I have it in my village.

Ritesh (32) a tribal of Salhe village, share his views. He said,

I am going up to Nagpur³ for selling Jambu-plums. I am going in every season from last three years to sell these jungle-fruits in the market with my village-friend. However, I never think to settle outside to my village, as I am very comfortable here only.

The tribal villagers from Salhe, Khugaon and Mendha feel secure in their village only as many in-depth interviews, including women interviews are revealed it. They think that living in their jungle village is more secure and comfortable as they get labour in their village due to FRA. Tribals are safeguarding to forests as their livelihood is depending on it. They contribute to the sustainability of development. They are

² It is a metropolitan city and nearby 1000 KM away from Mendha. It is economic capital of India.

³ Nagpur is big city, 200 KM away from Salhe.

growing forests for getting further labour. However, the lifestyle and needs of tribals have been changing in the due course of time. Now the needs and wants are not depending on forest products as they previously had. They are not consuming or utilising these forest products in their routine life any more. However, they are collecting these forest products, such as bamboo, jambu-plums, mangos, char-seeds, *dink* (gum), *lakh* (shellac), etc. not for consuming, but for selling and getting money for buying food, clothes, utensils, tools, etc. They are remaining living in jungles. Chakravarty (2013) studies the mobility among Bodo tribal people, says that occupation, income, education, status, gender, race, environment, culture etc. are some of the determinants that help us to know the potential social mobility of a group of people. Among these occupation plays a vital role in determining social mobility. But these villages are neither shows any occupational mobility nor territorial mobility, though the income of these tribal gramsabhas (or people) is increased in cognisable amount.

FRA and education, health

Mendha (Lekha) is a well-known model of development where gramsabha gets forest rights and become rich by selling bamboo and other forest products. In these tribal villages, monetary conditions are satisfied but education conditions are poor. Rama (52), a tribal lady, said,

In this village, only one boy and two girls are going to colleges for their further education. In our village, we have a school, which provide primary education. Afterwards, students are going to the main village, a half kilometre away from here. But most of the boys and girls are left their school-education mostly after the sixth or seventh standard schooling. I don't know why these boys and girls do not have the desire to get the education. Even though, parents are also not much willing to teach them. My two sons are going to school up to the seventh standard, while my daughter leaves school after the fourth standard.

Govaji, a former head of the gramsabha shows his worries. He said,

Our village boys and girls are not interested in going at school. School teachers are coming to our home to convince them. But, it has no use. They are more interested in hunting the birds and working in farms and jungles. No one is wanted to go outside the village, not even for getting an education.

Rahul (15), Nisha (18) and Vishal (15) and other children tell their opinion in a focus group interview. They said,

We did not find any need to get the education. If I get the labour in my village, then, why am I going to outside my village for employment? Ultimately, we get an education for getting employment. (Rahul)

We are more comfortable in our village. At least, I feel much insecure in other town or city as I don't know Marathi⁴ and other people are not able to speak Gondi⁵. I am not willing to go outside my village. (Vishal)

People told me that town and cities are unsafe for girls. so I and my other village girls are afraid to go to other schools. My mother say, what can you do by getting an education? I do not want to get any government service as we do not have money to give bribe for that job. So what can I do by getting more education? (Nisha)

The Mendha Boys and Girls are not willing to get more education as they feeling secure in their closed-village. As they understand, the main object of education is getting a livelihood which fulfils in their village periphery without getting any education. Getting knowledge or getting a prestigious job or earn more money by another employment or earning power and authority are not on their agenda. Their struggle of life is closed in the cage of livelihood. They are undeveloped vulnerable communities and remain as vulnerable communities due to lack of education.

⁴ Marathi is local vernacular language

⁵ Gondi is a tribal dialect of Gond Tribe

Bhimrao (32), a teacher of the higher primary school of Khutgaon, explain the issue engaged in tribal education. He said,

The government provides many facilities to these tribal boys and girls for motivating them (for education). They have free-ship facilities. They get mid-day meal, free books and school uniforms, but they do not come to school. Parents said that we get sufficient income from selling bamboo. We are happy in our life. We are enjoying our life in these forests and we do not have any need to educate our pupils. I try to convince them, but they are not compelling to their children to come to school. Some parents understand me, but their pupils are following to other non-school going children. I am much worry about these tribal students.

Sharad (12), a sixth standard's tribal boy of Khutgaon School says,

My friends are running away from schools. Some boys are coming as we getting food here. But now, we have sufficient food at home. My father listens to the teacher and sends me to school. But other friends' fathers are taking them in the forest with them. Girls are going to farm or stay at home for helping to their mothers. Anil's father says that learning forest's work⁶ is more important than going to school. Forest gives us food and shelter. School (*education*) cannot give us anything.

Shruti (14), a seventh standard's tribal girl says,

What is the use of getting an education? I will not go to the city after my marriage. I will live in the village only. My mother says that womenfolk should learn the jungle work, farming work and cooking. And I think, she not fully correct, but(*She does not speak forward*). I am going to school regularly at another village. But my father is also not willing to educate me. Maybe (*pause*)..... Next year will be my last school-year.

Most of the school-going and non-school going children are saying that they or their parents are not interested in education as well as send them outside the village for any other employment or labour. Due to FRA, they get the Forest-related labour at their village. These are unskilled labour-work, but they get sufficient wages from it. They have very limited needs and wants, like clothes, food, liquor and their traditional entertainments, which do not require much resources or money. As like civil society, they are not more consciousness about democratic politics and administrative roles. So, lack of education is not a problem for 'them'. Kabita Kumari Sahu (2014) has diagnosed that the economic condition of tribal people is so poor that they do not desire to spare their children or their labour power and allow them to attend schools. However, in these three villages, gramsabha or tribal have good economic conditions, but they do not willing to educate their children as they assumed that the sole aim of education is only getting the employment, which they avail in their village only without any school-education. Nevertheless, availability of unskilled labour becomes the hurdle for their educational development or motivation for education.

The experience of Salhe is not different from other two villages. Korchi, a Block or Taluka place is just four kilometers away from Salhe, has a high-school as well as College. But, very few tribal students from Salhe village are taking admission in that school or college. Those take admission, are not willing to attend the school or college classes. Shailesh (46), a college teacher who teach economics in local college, shares his observation. He says,

Very few tribal students are interested in education. Their parents do not have the consciousness or understanding about the importance of education. They think, if they achieve the basic capability of reading and calculating, it's enough for them. They don't know the constitutional provisions and facilities which provided by the government for education to them. I tell them a lot about these things, but I am confused whether they get it or not. Many young girls and boys are engaging in collecting jungle products, but not engaged themselves in classes.

⁶ Forest work is a regular term for tribe. In forest work, they include food gathering, hunting, firewood collection, shellac collection, sowing saplings, log cutting, bamboo cutting, etc.

Shila (34), a lady school teacher is worried about their student's education. She says,

These tribal boys and girls are very shy and not communicate with us. They are interested in physical labour than mental labour.

These narrations are self-explanatory and supporting to above narrations extracted from tribal's interviews. The study of K. Sujatha explores the various hindrances in tribal education including socio-economic and cultural constraints. This study shows that beside these constrains, the lack of need of education emerges as one of the major constraints in education as their primary needs are fulfilled without any kind of education. Dixit (2006) suggest that the government should try to upgrade their skills through education for survive them in this modern society as education improves the mental ability of tribal and expose them to modern agriculture, occupations, skills, technology, etc. However, the illiteracy among the tribes is more and hence it is an important block in their way to development (Rathod 2009)

The health issues are changing from region to region. In Mendha (lekha) near-about 5 cases of the age group of 11 to 17 years are detected which have physical-psychological problems. The main cause, as school-teacher Bhimrao says, is malnutrition. These tribals depend on jungle food products like mahua, animal meat, pork, etc. Their social food habits are restricting them to accommodate them with nutritional food habits. Devaji, the pioneer of FRA claims that their food habits are very healthy food habits and have a lot of nutrients as these foods not have pesticides or chemical fertilisers. And thus, these foods are very pure products. These claims are generated from the essence of ethnocentrism and not supported by any scientific evidence. Shakuntala (72), a tribal lady, reject this claim. She says,

Whatever we ate in past that was our compulsion. We did not have other options. In our time, we ate *mahua*, *java*, *kutaki*, etc. We ate *mahua* and drank *ambil*⁷ as we did not have much food. But now, we have money, and we can buy the goods from the market. But, our people have the habit of this food. And thus, after having money, they cannot buy good vegetables or grains from the market.

Many interviewers, mainly interviewers above 40 years age group, accept that they are fond of their traditional food. The villagers from Mendha (lekha) and Khutgaon are fond of their traditional food, whereas, in Salhe, due to the intervention of 'Amhi Amachya Arogyasathi', an NGO working in the health sector, tribals are started to eat other vegetables, which has nutritional value.

Shakuntala proceed,

At my time, many people get weakness. I tell you truthfully that at that time, we didn't know many diseases. After getting the illness, we were approached to Vaidu or Baiga⁸, and he gave us medicine or did some magic. Now-a-days, we heard about many diseases. Many persons died after an illness if magic did not work. We had not got good food, good water and so, the life of our children is depending on our 'Dev'⁹ only. I lost my three children. Our people say that our jungle food is a good food, but I do not believe. If that was a good food, then why our people get diseases? And why our children died at an early age? Our food is satisfying our hunger only. But, it cannot make us strong.

These narrations are depicted the real situation of Mendha (Lekha) and Khutgaon. They believe that their food has medicinal value and their food is good enough for their good health. Ignorance about nutritional values of food and lack of education is the base of their belief. The whole tribal society is maintaining their food habits with this belief only.

⁷ A drink prepared by mixing small amount of grainflour with lot of water and boil it

⁸ Vaidu is a traditional medical practitioner, who use magic too and Baiga is a priest.

⁹ Ancestor (not God)

Conclusion and Remarks

After the signing of the agenda of sustainable development, parliament passed the act FRA for providing tribals' historical rights for which they struggled from pre-colonial period, by which these tribal communities are becoming the integrated parts of forest management with the government bodies. Though, these communities get the means of livelihood by using their traditional knowledge and skills which they have. In this process, they earn money and livelihood, but they lose mobility. In modern societies, education and health are two major parameters which are important in the process of inclusion in mainstream development and getting mobility. But, by FRA, they are again isolated from mainstream society and mainstream development. They are imprisoned themselves in their forests and simultaneously, their dependency on forests is increased. For them, the meaning of development is shrinking up to getting livelihood only. Thus, their inclusion in mainstream society and mainstream development get set back and their exclusion is enlarged. The gap between mainstream development and tribal development is increased as other aspects of development are being neglected. So, they are deprived of the overall development of getting the forest depending livelihood too.

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