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NGO INTERVENTION AND TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF THE NON GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE EMPOWERMENT OF THE SCHEDULED TRIBES OF THE DOOARS REGION OF NORTH BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

The heterogeneous communities of India that occupy a special position under the banner of scheduled tribes are a vulnerable group of people with their unique socio-economic and cultural diversities that which is now gradually being extinct due to multiple interlinked reasons, the most important one being economic insufficiency. To meet the daily requirements and to keep abreast with modernity, the socio economic acculturation with the outside world has largely left them unattended as Diasporas in between the middle of inequality, degradation and in turn frustrations. This has largely affected the status and position of the women folk of the scheduled tribe families often leading to a complete new dimension which is very much scary and dangerous if left unattended for long. The very essence of freedom, equality and the right to live with dignity sound alien to the tribal people of the rural areas of the country. In such a situation, alongside the state, there are multiple Non Governmental Organizations that work for the development and empowerment of the scheduled tribes. The Dooars region of West Bengal that falls to the northern part of the state is a home to many scheduled tribe communities, the status of which does not appear to be rosy even in this age. The researcher tries to make a serious attempt to study and question the role of the NGOs working in the area on the overall development and empowerment of the scheduled tribes

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of development in general and that of social development in particular entangled with the concept of empowerment of the marginalized groups has gained new meaning in the contemporary era specially among the social scientists, policy planners, development activists and the politicians at large. This has become pertinent specially with the flourishing of globalization and its direct impact upon the paradigm shift that has taken place in the development strategy of the state on the one hand, and that of the mobilization of the grassroots for the search of identity on the other. Such a paradigm shift has led to the massive increase in the number of the Non Governmental Organizations working in the marginalized sector and has also increased the avenues of fund management both in the national as well as in the international arena. The NGOs are theoretically witnessed to be working in the areas suffering from abject poverty, illiteracy and ill health, ignorance unemployment, uncertainty social segregations etc. The Scheduled Tribes of India are one such heterogeneous

community clubbed together under a homogenous group that is still found to be tightly grasped under the economic, social and political miseries of life. If we look into the Human Development Index (HDI) of the Scheduled Tribes with the background enlisted by the United Nations Organization, it is a pertinent fact that shows the Schedule Tribe communities of India to be at the lowest rung of the ladder.

To address the immediate needs of the Scheduled Tribes and other backward (underdeveloped) classes of people and such underdeveloped areas, post 1990's has witnessed the mushrooming of the third sector of relief and development in the name of the non-governmental organizations alongside the State to cater to the immediate as well as long term developmental policies addressed to these sections of the Indian population. The reason for allowing the non-governmental organizations to interfere in the development of such crucial areas in spite of the existence of a strong State has multiple reasons behind it out of which its grass root friendly approach is an added plus point to its existence. With the coming in of the non-governmental organizations in the field,

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the picture of development has definitely changed a lot. However, what is the kind of change that has been brought about by the non-governmental organizations on the lives of the Scheduled Tribes shall be taken up in this paper.

We intend to look into the role of the non-governmental organizations in the empowerment and well being of the Scheduled Tribes in our selected area which happens to be the Dooars region of North Bengal that is a home to many different tribal communities of the country. There are innumerable numbers of non-governmental organizations all claiming to be the staunch advocates of protection, development well being and empowerment of the scheduled tribe people, tribal women and children. However, to what extent do their claims match the ground reality is in itself a major challenge to be explored by any serious researcher. In addressing these questions, the researcher shall be taking the help of the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development as a Human Right and shall be analyzing things from this perspective. This is because the idea of development is often left blurred by ideological differences, differences of opinions and dimensions which often fail to give a strong parameter of what are the criteria of developed and what is to be considered as underdeveloped, and who is the authority that provides its stamp to anything as developed and discards the other as underdeveloped? Very often it has been witnessed that in addressing the debate of development and under development, the people on whom this debate is being conducted are never taken into confidence and given the right to choose the best for themselves. Therefore, it is important to take a closer look into the human rights of the scheduled tribes in order to get a clear picture about the developmental ladder and the position of the tribal people in this ladder.

Dimensions of Development

Though economic growth is an important component of development, yet it cannot be taken to be the whole of it. Other aspects such as human development, environmental development, capacity building and sustainable development, welfare based development and equitable distribution of wealth all of which are generated as the vectors of economic growth occupy a place of strategic significance in the understanding of the concept of development. Development in general terms means the use of productive resources of society to improve the living conditions of the poorest people. In its loose sense, development means a more of everything for everyone in the context of lot more for a few (Peet, R. 2005.) Stemming from Enlightenment notions of the use of the modern scientific mind for improving existence, development entails human emancipation in two senses: a) liberation from the vicissitudes of nature through advanced technology and b) self – emancipation i.e. control over social relations, conscious control over the conditions under which human nature is formed. In both senses development refers to economic, social and cultural progress including finer ethical ideals and higher moral values. In other words development means the improvement of the complexly interlinked nature, economy, society, culture and political conditions.

According to Anand Kashyap, Development of a society instead of being a monolithic and linear process of creating economic abundance is a holistic process of social

transformation from less creative to greater creative participation of its members at the individual and collective levels. Emphasis on creative participation implies minimization of disorderliness in social system and maximization of creativity so as to achieve a symbiotic transformation of *man-nature and society relationship*.

Development is considered to be an internal, social process taking place within every country, where the basic requirements of the people are fulfilled by the wise and durable application of the country's resources. Economically, the definition of development suggests the nation's fulfillment of people's needs, employment, and the improvement of national wealth. As a matter of fact, "Development Theory by itself has little value unless it is applied, unless it translates into results, and unless it improves people's lives" (Lewis T. Preston, Former President, World Bank, Quoted in Todaro 2000, p. 77). The Positivist school of thought begins with the understanding of the concept of development as something closely related to "Value Judgment". Very often the idea of development is regarded to be a normative issue, a synonym for improvement. Using the Marxian Analysis, one can regard economic development to be the base of all forms of development. Hence, the focal point of economic development is the economic condition of developing countries regarding economic matters and the development of policies that improve a nation's position economically, socially and institutionally. Consequently, social, economic and political aspects are included in theories of economic development, which apply different models related to different key concepts (Martinussen 1997; Roberts and Hite 2000).

Several definitions exist for development and offer different focal concepts. For instance, Modernization Theory stresses the cultural features of each society, such as political, religion and culture. On the other hand, World Systems Theory and Globalization seek to evaluate external relationships and to define different points in the development of countries.

NGO Intervention and Tribal Development

Due to the lack of success on the part of the governmental agencies in bringing about the desired output in the field of Tribal Development in India i.e. "to translate the constitutional provision into reality." (John K. Thomas, 2005) the new trend that was witnessed was the grand scale emergence of the Non Governmental Organizations in the Indian soil with the primary purpose of reaching out to those sectors where the government had failed to touch properly. The development of the tribal women happens to be one such important group that needs special recognition for which many NGOs are seen to be involved.

In most of the third world countries, the role of the government is very important in generating developmental policies for the people. Due to backwardness in education, social structure and awareness, participation of the public is not seen to be in the vanguard. The governmental policies have remained half way successful which created a vacuum for the emergence of a third front in the form of Non Governmental Organizations. These bodies have originated with a visionary approach of up liftment of the common people and in turn social service and nation building in the long run. This makes it clear that in order to understand the meaning of development; one cannot get a clear

picture without understanding the role of the NGOs in it. When we talk about the marginalized sections of the society, the debate remains incomplete without addressing the tribal issues especially with reference to the women folk of the tribal communities. The government to a large extent has been successful enough in achieving partial success in the mainstream development, yet there are groups of aboriginals called the tribal people whose holistic development has still been left to be a mirage.

The area of study that we propose to take up for our paper is the Dooars zone of North Bengal which is largely inhabited by the tribal communities working as tea plantation labourers, forest dwellers and other jobs in the unorganized sectors. The tribal women of the Dooars region basically sustain themselves by working in the tea gardens as plantation labourers, casual labourers in the in and around surrounding areas, as domestic workers in the cities and towns (especially in the non-tribal families), and as labourers in the metropolitan cities. In other words, it can be stated that the tribal women are basically seen to be opting for casual labour in the local areas and as domestic aids in the national front. Migration is seen to have taken place at an alarming rate. The dream to live a life with all the modern amenities at ones disposal, backed by illiteracy, poverty and misery often pushes them to migrate outside the local areas. Due to massive migration which can be better termed as disguised migration, the lifestyle of the tribal people and women in particular has definitely seen a change. Disturbing cases of molestation, rape, torture, domestic violence and complete disappearance has been witnessed in the area. However, it is interesting to note that most of such violation of human rights does not get registered in the court of laws. The basic reason behind such acts on the part of the families of the victims happens to be the lack of belief and trust on the law bearers. Those cases that had been registered in the police stations have not received the desired output, accompanied by constant harassments by the police force making the uneducated, unaware tribal families reluctant to protest against such crimes and human right violations.

In such a situation, we see the presence of many non-governmental organizations working in the area, registered in the required documents, advocating them to be the protagonists of tribal women's empowerment. The working of all the non-governmental organizations cannot be generalized on a single platform. This is because the functioning of every non-governmental organization is different from the other in terms of their work culture and their area of specialization. In spite of these differences of functional specialization, a researcher can definitely point out the seriousness and dedication of a non-governmental organization by looking into their functioning with the help a survey conducted in the area.

The Dooars region of North Bengal comprises up of three districts namely Alipurduar, Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri. This paper focuses upon the tribal areas of Samuktala, Kumargram, Godhadhar and Kalchini block of Alipurduar district.

The major non-governmental organizations working in the surveyed area are as follows –

Lok Kalyan Parishad, Dooars Lok Sanskriti Sanstha, Mechpara Dooars Welfare Society, Dooars Pratibandhi Samiti, Vasundhara Environment Welfare Society, Benoy Dream

Academy, Tufanganj Anwesha Welfare Society, Karuna Memorial Health Care society, Family Planning Association of India.

An in-depth field survey conducted in the area with some vital questions put forward to the respondents with regard to their understanding of development, the role of the state in development, the role of the non-governmental organizations in development of tribal women, the awareness of the tribal women with regard to the presence of the non-governmental organizations in the area and their overall functioning gives us a clear picture about the utility of the non-governmental organizations in empowering the tribal women of the area.

It is interesting to note that 70% of the tribal women deny about the presence of any beneficial non-governmental organization in the area. 20% believe that the presence of any such non-governmental organization does not prove to be of any help to them, while the rest 10% are positive in assuming that the non-governmental organizations are helpful in the overall development of the tribal women. From the above mentioned non-governmental organizations, 60% of the tribal women find the working of the following non-governmental organizations useful- Vasundhara Environment Welfare Society, Tufanganj Anwesha Welfare Society, Family Planning Association of India and Benoy Dream Academy.

CONCLUSION

Drawing firsthand information from the field about the working and the role of the non-governmental organizations has definitely been a herculean task for the researcher due to the obstacles of geographical barriers, reluctance of the respondents to open up and the clarification of false information from the true ones by the non-governmental organizations. In spite of these challenges, the survey conducted gives us a genuine answers to the queries present in the minds of any individual, thinking on the lines of the role of the non-governmental organizations in the empowerment of tribal women. Although the efforts of the non-governmental organizations cannot be ignored and discarded all together, at the same time, the desired result has not been achieved. In spite of their presence in the area for a very long time, the optimum target of sustainable development of the tribal people for their overall empowerment has remained half way out. There are plenty of cases of child trafficking, domestic violence, frauds, cheating, and disappearance of tribal women that have remained unregistered in the police stations but are in the notice of all locally. The role of the non-governmental organization stands to be challenged here. Why do they remain silent, unaffected and untouched in spite of the prevalence of such mishaps on tribal women is a pertinent question that needs to be readdressed.

As a matter of fact the non-governmental organizations have lost on their basic essence of people friendly approach. Most of the members of such non-governmental organizations have started imitating the commissioned bureaucrats in their attitude and approach. The manner in which they respond to the people of the rural areas and the tribal women is completely unethical. To share a small incident, the secretary of an NGO named Rural Aid whose name is Mr. Manik Dhar believes that such an NGO like that of his is the supreme authority that decides on the fate of the tribal women and children and that any form of

interview by any aware citizen of India be it a researcher is nothing but illegal to him. Such members are plenty in number in the surveyed area.

To combat these problems, the researcher feels that there is a serious requirement of audit and account department to conduct a surprise check in both the office as well as the field. It has been noticed that such cunning NGOs have their official documents all up to the mark. However, if we visit the field then their acclamations and assurances do not match the practical scenario.

Having said this, the researcher also believes in the system of reward. The government should reward such non-governmental organizations that have been working dedicatedly for the genuine cause.

No doubt the efforts of the government and the non-governmental organizations have been paying off, yet the desired target has not been achieved to its fullest. A lot needs to be done in the field of tribal development by the non-governmental organizations where a positive attitude and approach is very much required.

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