

TRIBAL AND FORESTS IN WESTERN INDIA

When we talk on the tribals in India, we are by all count talking on the poorest section of our Indian society. The tribals in India are by and large at the bottom of all progressive indicators such as economic, social, education, health, nutrition, housing, etc. This is reflected in all the human development reports in our country. As provided in Indian Constitution, admittedly, the central and state governments in our country have made sincere efforts through various development plan for last more than six decades to improve the conditions of the tribals, and yet, due to poor implementation of such plan and no much accountability shown by the implementers, the situation of tribals has not improved as much as we would expect. In many of our tribal districts in our country the Government spends Rs. 500 crore (USD 10.76 million) and more in each district on development interventions every year, but, the desirable improvement is prima facie missing. Everyone involved in the tribal development from planning to implementation have to explain as to what has gone wrong from planning to implementation. The government goes on increasing the allocations for the development of tribal people and tribal areas, but, conveniently ignore the accountability aspect of such huge public investment. I leave this opening remark on our tribals, their conditions and efforts for development at this juncture to focus on my allotted subject.

TRIBALS AND FORESTS

In Indian conditions, the tribals and forests are inseparable phenomenon and in general public understanding both are almost synonymous. The tribals are described as 'Vanvasi', means forest dwellers, clearly suggesting the relationship between the tribals and forests. Overwhelming majority of the tribals stay adjacent to the forest areas and most of the forest area in our country fall in the tribal regions and tribal districts. Historically, at one point of time most of our forest areas belonged to the tribals and the entire economic activities and livelihood of the tribals were fully dependent on the forests. In other words, the tribals belonged to the forests and most of the forests belonged to the tribals about 150 years back. This situation sharply and tragically changed after the nationalization of forests by the Birtishers, the process started with the Forest Act 1865 and the subsequent stringent provisions in the above Act in 1878, the tribals were totally dispossessed of their own forest land and the rights. This was the biggest blow to the tribal economy and their main livelihood. The tribals have yet not recovered from that blow.

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Strangely, the post Independence period has also continued alienation of the tribals from the forest land. The forest land with or without forest cover is owned by the Government Forest Department and the tribals neither own the forests nor they own the Forest Department. The tribals and Forest Department are usually found to be antagonist towards each other, if we have to describe the relationship in as mild words as possible. What hurts to the tribals and sensitive people is the attitude of forest personnels towards the tribals. At higher level the forest officials are found to be reasonably sensitive towards tribal people and their issues related with the forests, but, the lower level officers and staff of the Department are often found to be totally insensitive and high headed in dealing with the local tribals.

In the recent development, the concept of joint forest management involving tribal community has been introduced and being implemented for the forest conservation and protection. In another development in the form of constitutional amendment, aims to decentralize and strengthen local governance in the form of Panchayati Raj system by delegating powers to the Panchayati Raj Institutions from district to the villages. Both the development have been in the desirable direction mainly for the tribals and their relationship with the forest. However, in reality, both these developments have not yet yielded good results. The elected representatives and bureaucrats at different level have not responded appropriately to strengthen the Panchayati Raj system. At the top of all, confusion continues on the relationship between Panchayati Raj system and the Forest Department in the control, conservation and development of forests. For the Panchayati Raj system to become effective, the entire system need to improve and strengthen with accountability and transparency integrated in the entire system of governance, then only rural people, particularly, tribals, can expect to improve their lot and benefit from the policies and programmes.

The concept of Joint Forest Management is well conceived, but, again its implementation is done half heartedly. As largely observed, instead of equal partnership between Forest Department and tribal community, the Department dominates the partnership, often the Department behaving like 'rulers', treating tribal community as a 'subject'. It's a partnership between two unequals, and therefore, it requires very strong participatory approach in which the community has equal say in all the matters related with the Joint Forest Management (JFM). This has to be a community or people oriented programme and not Department oriented and Department dominated. In papers, seminars and talk, the Department and many others speak on equal partnership, but, on the ground it is absolutely the partnership between the two unequals. There is serious attitudinal problem between two unequals

The JFM is a popular word in the Forest Department everywhere in our country and almost everywhere large forest areas have been officially covered under this programme. What remains to be seen is to find out how many of such JFM are based on equal partnership with the equal say of the community, in this case the tribal community. There may be few very good cases of success, but, one sparrow does not make summer. The entire movement of JFM has to be not only wide spread, but, it should reflect the equal partnership.

TRIBALS AND FORESTS IN WESTERN INDIAN STATES

In this portion of the tribals and forests in western Indian states, I deal with three states, viz., Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. There is heavy concentration of tribals in all the three states. There are 34 predominantly tribal districts in these three states with the tribal population 26.81 million as per the census 2001. At the end of 2009, we can easily add 18 % in this tribal population as the rate of population increase among tribals is not less than 2 % per annum. Thus, there is now approximately 31.63 million population of tribals in three states at the end of 2009. It's a huge population. Percentage wise, the tribals represent 14.8 % in Gujarat, 12.6% in Rajasthan and 20.3 % in Madhya Pradesh, to the total population of three states, which again is a significant population ratio of tribals.

Similarly, the forest areas in above three states are also very significant. In Gujarat it is 14,946 sq. km (14,93,455 ha.), in Rajasthan 15,826 sq. km. (15,81,388 ha.) and in Madhya Pradesh 76,429 sq. km (76,37,050 ha.). In percentage to the total geographical area of each state, the forest area represents little more than 14 % in Gujarat, little more than 16 % in Rajasthan and little more than 29 % in Madhya Pradesh. Considering the huge geographical area of each state, the forest area is significant.

However, the bottom line is that the forest cover in form of trees is much less in all the three states. There are three categories of forests by virtue of density of forest cover. These are Very Dense Forests (VDF) ; Moderately Dense Forests (MDF) ; and Open Forests (OF). The VDF area is very insignificant at only 105 sq. km. in Gujarat ; zero sq. km in Rajasthan and 3,247 sq. km in Madhya Pradesh, as per the forest survey reflected in satellite imageries in 2003. The Moderately Dense Forest cover in three states is 3,642 sq. km in Gujarat, 2,335 sq. km in Rajasthan and 21,125 sq. km in Madhya Pradesh. The rest of the forest area is open forest. Percentage wise Very Dense Forest are less than 2 % in two states; Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, and nil in Rajasthan (in 2003). Whereas in all India level, percentage of Very Dense Forest is less than 2 % and Moderately Dense Forest is around 10 %.

The above facts clearly suggest that even though the forest area in the possession of Forest Department is significant, but, the forest cover is far from desirable. Particularly, the area under tree cover in the category of very dense forest is absolutely insignificant. It's a topic of serious research as to how much investments have been made by the government on forest development during post independence period and why almost half of the forest area is without tree cover. It's a story of failure of the Government and Forest Department in developing and protecting the forests for whatever reasons. Many studies have revealed that not only the forest cover has been constantly depleting, but, even forest land is getting reduced for various reasons, mainly for the development purpose and partly transferring ownership of the encroached forest land to the people under some policy decisions. It is very clear that in Indian conditions, unless the community around forest develops a stake in the forest, we cannot expect to increase forest cover. Even in case of encroached forest land transferred to the people on some ground, there should be stringent policy with strong monitoring that on such land people should grow only forests and not to go for agriculture activities.

As mentioned earlier, the performance of the Government and Forest Department in forest development has been dismal. Everyone is convinced even the honest forest officials are convinced that it would be almost impossible to bring forest cover in the entire forest areas of our country and above three states.

ALTERNATIVE FOR TREE COVER

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the government and forests are unlikely to succeed in bringing tree cover on the entire landscape of forest areas. Also, one another fact needs to be remembered that even if entire forest land is brought under forest cover, the country and above three states have to undertake massive plantation outside the forest areas what is now turned as TOF (trees outside forests). The forest land is not enough in above three states as well as in our country to have minimum of 35 % tree cover for ecological balance and to check as one of measures to the adverse effect of climate change.

The practical alternative lies in agro forestry, farm forestry including tree cover on presently so called wastelands in India, which ranges from 50 million to 250 million ha. as per different versions and statistics from different departments.

If we talk of tree outside the forests under agro forestry and farm forestry, there is enormous scope in our country and specifically in the tribal districts of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. In any tribal districts in above three states, atleast 25 % of the total land is more suitable for the tree plantation or agro forestry and farm forestry rather than agriculture. Tree crop on such 25 % private land would be much more beneficial to the people both in terms of economic gain and environmental benefits. The scope for such tree plantation outside forest in the tribal districts of three states is easily possible in 56,53,569 ha. of the land in three states. One can imagine the impact of such massive plantation outside the forest areas. With this 25% tree cover outside forest area and adding another 10 % of the forest area with tree cover, the requirement of 35 % of tree cover could easily be achieved, that too, in the most cost effective manner. Our own experience of tree cover outside the forest suggests that tree plantation, its protection and conservation is much cheaper than what the Forest Department spend.

In conclusion of this paper, I may re-emphasize that it is only through the tree plantation outside the forest area that this country will reach the desired level of tree cover. The policy makers and everyone thinking in the interest of the country, sustainable development and our future must give equal or perhaps much more higher priority for the tree cover outside the forest areas, particularly, this concept of tree outside the forest is most relevant and most profitable from every dimension for the tribal people and tribal regions in the entire country and three states of western India.

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