

Tribal Development through Panchayats: A study of Jorebunglow- Sukhiapokhari Block of Darjeeling District

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ABSTRACT

The tribals are the most backward ethnic group in India in relation to the main indicators of development: education, health and status income. Development and welfare work are easier through decentralized administration and local initiative with responsibility and power. Thus, Panchayati system is necessary for rural development in general and tribal development in particular. Therefore, the Panchayati Raj Institution has multiple roles to play. Some would treat it just as an administrative agency; others as an extension of democracy at the grassroots levels and still others as a charter of rural local self government. There is a necessity to evaluate the tribal development programmes in the micro level for identifying the emerging issues, problems and changes after its long run implementation for the upliftment of the tribal people to integrate them in the mainstream. This study attempts to look into the development of tribal community inhabiting in the rural areas of Jorebunglow Sukhia pokhari Block in Darjeeling district and the role played by the Panchayats in the development in the life style of the tribals.

1. Introduction

The term 'Tribe' is derived from the Latin word 'tribuz'. According to the Oxford dictionary, "a tribe is a group of people in a primitive or barbarous stage of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding them as having a common ancestor". The tribal people of India are termed as Adivasi (indigenous peoples), Vanavasi (forest dwellers), Pahari (hill dwellers), Adimjati (original communities), Janajati (folk people) and the like. It is significant that each of the terms either denotes their ecological, economic, historical or cultural characteristics. Of all these terms the most popular one is Adivasi, which co-notate their aboriginality or indigenouness while the constitutional term for them is Anushuchi Janjati, the scheduled tribe peoples (Vidyarthi, Rai, 1985) [1]. India has the largest concentration of tribal population in Asia and it has the second largest concentration of tribal population in the world, after that of the African continent.

The tribal population in India as enumerated by the Census of India, 2011 is about 10.43 crores, constituting 8.6% of the country's total population. About 87 percent of the total tribal population is concentrated in the central belt, covering 8 states viz. Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. As per 2011 census the total tribal population in West Bengal has been 5,296,953 constituting 5.5 percent of the total population of the state. The total population of the Darjeeling District as stated as per 2011 census, is 16,09,172 of which the Scheduled Tribes population is 397,389 which is 12.69 percent of the total population of the Darjeeling District and 4.63 percent of the total tribal population of West Bengal. [2]

The Constitution assures tribals of protection against exploitation, respect for their tradition and heritage, and assistance for the improvement of their socio-economic and educational status and yet they happen to be the most

adversely affected ethnic group. The tribals are the most backward ethnic group in India in relation to the main indicators of development: education, health and status income.

According to Mallick, development and welfare work are easier through decentralized administration and local initiative with responsibility and power. Directive Principles of State Policy gives importance to the Panchayats in this respect. Thus, Panchayati system has gained importance in rural development in general and tribal development in particular. The Panchayati Raj administration is aimed at restructuring of land distribution and better coordination of planning and programmes. In addition to land reform measures, implementation of various welfare schemes, rural water supply, housing, cottage industries and small scale industries and several important schemes on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have been under the direct responsibility of the Panchayats. Therefore, the Panchayati Raj Institution has multiple roles to play. Some would treat it just as an administrative agency; others as an extension of democracy at the grassroots levels and still others as a charter of rural local self government. [3]

The administrators and planners devoted so much of time and energy for macro, meso and micro level planning to achieve tribal development. The government had spent large amount of funds for various tribal welfare programmes but still tribal development remains as an enigma. Since the problems of the tribals are basically different in different regions of the country and in different areas of the region. There is in need for micro level analysis and immediate attention and essentially local solutions.

There is a necessity to evaluate the tribal development programmes in the micro level for identifying the emerging issues, problems and changes after its long run implementation for the upliftment of the tribal people to

integrate them in the mainstream. It is essential to know the economic, social and cultural needs of the rural people; to fill up the gaps between their actual needs and incentives offered by the government. It is against this background, that this micro research study was conducted in order to study Tribal Development in the rural areas of Jorebunglow Sukhiapokhari Block in Darjeeling District through Panchayats. This study attempts to look into the development of tribal community inhabiting in the rural areas of Jorebunglow Sukhia pokhari Block in Darjeeling district and the role played by the Panchayats in the development in the life style of the tribals.

2. Research Methodology

The research design in the study is descriptive as well as exploratory in nature.

3. Study area

Darjeeling District comprises of four subdivisions- Darjeeling Sadar, Kurseong, Mirik and Siliguri. From Darjeeling Sadar subdivision, Jorebunglow Sukhiapokhari Block was selected as it was found more rural than the other blocks i.e. Darjeeling Pulbazar Block and Rangli Ranglot Block. Jorebunglow Sukhiapokhari Block comprises of 16 gram panchayats

4. Data Collection

Data for the study was collected from both primary as well secondary sources. For empirical work and collection of primary data, survey method was carried out in study area. The main respondents of the study were tribal households both beneficiaries and non beneficiaries and officials of various departments who were directly involved in implementing developmental schemes at the grass root level. The secondary sources are official records, Gazetteers and Census Reports etc and the published books, journals and periodicals and research articles having a direct bearing on the area of research was also used.

5. Empirical findings of the study

This micro research study has been confined to the 16 gram panchayats of Jorebunglow-Sukhiapokhari Block. According to 2011 census the total tribal population of Jorebunglow-Sukhiapokhari Block has been 34,088. The tribals of Darjeeling District, even though they form a very small portion of the total population deserve attention not only as the early inhabitants of the land but also as a group which remains separated from the mainstream of economic and social development. Although many works has been done upon the tribals of this region, many of them were monographic studies and ethnographic description of the tribes. Here an attempt is made to examine the situation of tribals in Darjeeling hills and the role played by the panchayats for the development and upliftment of tribals living in rural areas. The study has also tried to analyze the impact of various development schemes implemented through panchayats in the socio-economic development of the tribes of the study area. The primary data were collected from a sample of 300 Scheduled Tribe respondents of the 16 gram panchayats of Jorebunglow-Sukhiapokhari Block of the Darjeeling District. Out of 300 respondents, 160 (53.3%) respondents were

beneficiaries of government sponsored welfare schemes, while 140 (47.3%) respondents were non beneficiaries. The 300 Scheduled Tribe respondents were interviewed with the help of both close ended and open ended questionnaire.

The tribals of the study area were very poor. The spread of education amongst the tribals of the rural areas, which is a very important prerequisite for any development work, is very poor. Apart from formal education curriculum, vocational-technical education among the tribes is essential for improving their economy and productivity which at present is also low. Mass education among the tribals has to be regularised and developed because education and health plays a significant role in overcoming poverty and increasing income. Also education imparts specific knowledge and develops general reasoning skills, and it also induces change in beliefs, values and attitudes towards work and society.

The majority of the tribal population in the study area depended on agriculture and labour. Most of them were tea garden labourer. The field survey revealed that there was unemployment among the tribal youths of the rural areas of the study area. Most of them are unskilled labourers working in agricultural and non-agricultural field. Agricultural production does not provide self-sufficiency. The need is to generate non-farm employment by and through the development of village and small industries. The idea behind this is to achieve better utilization of local resources, development of simple processes and technique. Through proper education, socialization and selection of appropriate technologies their barriers to development be broken.

The educational and economic development in the study area is very low and the populace is drowned with poverty, illiteracy and unsettled occupations. Income distribution is far from equitable. The field survey data revealed that a very majority of tribals living in the rural areas of the Darjeeling hills are not informed about the safeguards and privileges provided by the constitution of India to the Scheduled Tribes. The tribals of the region are not aware of their constitutional rights and privileges to which they are entitled. They are also unaware of the various benefit/welfare schemes from Government for the development of Scheduled Tribes. Their ignorance may be due to illiteracy and lack of education.

The poor tribal of the study area are not knowledgeable of the objectives of various welfare schemes like SGSY, NREGS, IAY, IGNOAPS, IGNDPS, IGNDPS, NFBS and the like, provided by the Government administered through panchayats. Even the tribal who were beneficiary to these schemes didn't know about the objectives of those schemes of which they were beneficiary. They only took money as governmental help and for self employment and poverty alleviation without knowing the objectives and guidelines of the welfare schemes/programmes. Lack of education may be the reason for their ignorance. Very few tribals living in rural areas knew about the objectives and guidelines of these welfare schemes. They received the information about the objectives and guidelines of these welfare programmes from their respective gram panchayat officials and party-panchayat leaders of their locality.

D.Sunder Raj observes that tribes at various stages in their evolution will need different strategies fine-tuned to their particular situation, only a genuine involvement of the people to be benefitted by these strategies can bring an equitable and sustainable process of development. Tribal's development and their participation have to go together and are essential for integrated development of the nation. In order to make the people responsible and responsive, involving them in all aspects of the development programmes was designed for their development.[4] According to Venkatta Kumar, participation of the stake holders (viz., farmers, women, youth, rural poor, artisans and tribals etc.) is the necessary prerequisite for successful achievement of any development efforts. Unless the participations of stake holders are achieved, whatever may be, it remained wasted. Community Development Programmes (CDP), National Extension Series (NES) were such programmes to be mentioned, which failed to achieve their respective objectives due to the lack of people's participations at that point of time.[5]

It is evident from the field survey data that tribals participated in the development/welfare programmes through labour only. There has been no contribution through money by any of the poor tribal towards the development/welfare programmes provided by the Government. Tribal didn't participate in development/welfare programmes provided by the Government through decision making, as to who would get the benefits, how the benefit should be provided and how much the beneficiary would get. The decision was either made by the gram panchayat officials or the local party leader. They made decisions, took the decisions and justified the decisions. They, the tribals only heard about decisions and participated in the meetings only to raise hands and voices in favour of the decisions, but did not say anything to counteract the decision and muddle the decision making process. The reason behind their non participation in giving decision might be due to less lack of education.

The poor tribals of the region were not getting adequate benefits and more facilities should be provided to them for, living lives with more certainty and for getting more employment opportunities. From the field survey I observed that the poor tribals of the region were not satisfied with the selection of beneficiaries to the development/welfare schemes. They said that depressed and poor families were least benefitted. It implies that the respondents tried to point out the procedural and substantive defects of providing benefits to the beneficiaries. In fact, those who needed, did not get benefit, and those who got the benefit, were devoid of their own, choices. Schemes were superimposed on the beneficiaries. Due to superimposition of projects the spontaneous involvement of the tribal people in development programmes becomes absent. It is evident from here before the implementation of the welfare/developmental schemes, the needs and the priorities of the area and the inhabitants living in that area should be carefully carried out by the planners and administrators.

The study also revealed that both the financial and technical help from the government to the tribals and other poor people of the study area was meagre and more facilities

should be provided to them for living lives with more certainty and for getting more employment opportunities. Moreover in the study area there is no special welfare programme for the tribals of the region. The welfare programmes which were administered in the gram panchayat and block were for rural upliftment and rural development. The tribals of the region were indirectly benefitted from these schemes. However, very few tribal beneficiaries have received assistance through these welfare schemes administered through panchayats in comparison to the total tribal population inhabiting in the panchayat areas. Moreover the beneficiaries belonging to Scheduled Tribe category under schemes like Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), which comprised of five schemes namely, Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS), Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS), Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (IGNDPS), National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS) and Annapurna Scheme were minimum. It implies that a special welfare programme for the tribals of the region should be administered.

Besides this wage employment (under NREGS), mere housing loan (under IAY) and old age pension (under IGNOAPS) did not make them self-sufficient. The strategy of increase in wage employment and provision of providing house building and house repair loans and also mere old age pension has neglected the entrepreneurial aspect and self-sustained development efforts on the part of the tribals of the region. Moreover wage employment through programmes like NREGS, produced negligible income generating asset for the poor tribals, but not sustained income generating asset. More programmes like Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) should be encouraged which generates self-employment.

Darjeeling being a hilly terrain, the characteristics and yardsticks based on which the scheme of SGSY is implemented throughout West Bengal does not hold good for hill Blocks of Darjeeling District. It has been observed that in order to cover remote areas in connection with sensitization, group formation and motivation in large amount has to be spent towards payment to private vehicles as these areas do not have a regular bus and local services. Lack of rural based NGOs in these parts of the hills makes the job more difficult since the officials of the scheme have to be sent several times before a quality SHG is formed.

Another most important problem realised during survey was most of the beneficiaries are poor. Due to their economic hardships and low economic background the beneficiaries mostly consume the loan and for this reason local banks were not interested in providing loans to the poor tribals living in the rural areas. It was realised from the survey that very few beneficiaries were able to generate income from the given schemes and welfare programmes. Majority of them did not utilise their loan amount for the actual purpose, some of them utilised their loan amount for other purposes different from the purpose for which their loan was sanctioned. This leads to inability to the repayment of loan. Non-repayment of loan is prevalent among the tribals and non-recovery of bank loans is a

menace. The poor tribals should be motivated and guided to utilise the funds and loans provided to them properly and for a purpose.

It is revealed from the findings of the field survey the study area lacks from entrepreneurial development among the tribes and is also facing the problems like lack of awareness, apathy towards government-sponsored programmes on the part of the tribal people, lack of coordination between various departments of the government, bureaucratic red-tapism etc on the part of the government and its institutions. The needs of the tribal people of the study area are not met as in the study area no welfare schemes specially meant for the tribes are not implemented. Few tribes have benefited indirectly through the schemes meant for rural development. More development and welfare schemes meant only for the tribals should be implemented.

B.D. Sharma opines that with the introduction of Democratic Decentralization following the recommendation of Balwantray Mehta Committee, the formulation and implementation of development programmes have been transferred to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Since the objectives put before the Panchayati Raj in the past were achieved only in the notional sense and social transformation did not continue with fast pace, therefore, society created a demand for the establishment of the new Panchayati Raj which may be highly responsive to social issues and problems. For development and welfare of the weaker sections, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, 73rd Constitution Amendment Bill focuses on the political structures and processes of rural India and participation of these disadvantaged groups in these structures and leadership and decision-making processes. The Ashok Mehta Committee [1978] strongly observed that of course there has been practice of co option /nomination of SC/ST members but they have been used by the domination factions on their own vested interest .Hence, under the new Panchayati Raj scheme special efforts was made to increase their number at all the three levels not through co option as it was done in the past but through direct election.[6] In 1993, the Panchayati Raj bill was passed in the parliament of India to empower the grass root level people not only to exercise their political rights but also to have share in the ruling. The rural people in Darjeeling hill have not been able to taste the Panchayati Raj system which is functioning in other parts of India since its inception in 1993. The main reason behind this is the creation of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in the year 1988 by bifurcation of the district of Darjeeling into two divisions. While the Panchayati Raj bill emphasised the three tier system of Panchayat in India with apex body at the district level. When the DGHC came into existence one of the subdivisions Siliguri of Darjeeling District was separated due to obvious political reasons which amounted to the creation of Siliguri Mahukuma Parishad. Important legal changes were made in 1988 through introduction of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Act, 1988, which changed the three tier structure of the Panchayats in the hill areas of Darjeeling district. In the hill areas of the Darjeeling District single tier panchayat system functioned till 2008 and presently it is defunct due to political reasons.

It is revealed from research that most of the people living in rural areas were interested in politics. The reason can be due to the present political situations of the region. The Darjeeling hills had undergone political agitation for the state of Gorkhaland many times. Earlier the Gorkhaland movement reached its peak around 1986-1988; which ended with the establishment of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in 1988. However the movement re-emerged once again with the formation of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) headed by Bimal Gurung from 2007. [7] Since the local masses participated actively in the agitation, so in the process also became interested in politics. The three years of agitation of the Darjeeling hills resulted in the replacement of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council by Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA)

Majority of tribals did not attend meetings of Gram Sansad/ Gram Sabha or any of such meetings held in the locality. Therefore it can be understood that the rural people rarely participated in Gram Sansad/Gram Sabha or any of such meetings held in locality, where the formulation of development programmes are decided i.e. who will take the benefits, how the benefits be percolated down and the overall decision making process. Party-panchayat leaders, gram sansad members, Pradhans, gram panchayat officials contributed in the control over the decision-making process. In Darjeeling hills the last panchayat election was held in 2000 and after the term ended in 2005 there was no election held. The Pradhans and other elected representatives to gram panchayats continued with their office till 2008. After the existing Pradhan and elected members resigned no panchayat elections was held as a part of boycott movement to the revived Gorkhaland movement under the leadership of Bimal Gurung. Therefore it was the gram panchayat official who more-or-less controlled the decision-making process after 2008 till date because of the absence of Pradhans who convened the meetings of the Gram Sabha and the Gram Sansad and other such meetings of the locality. Moreover the rural people were not aware of various development programmes and schemes given by the government. So even if they participated in such meetings they only heard the decisions and participated the Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha meetings to raise hands and voices in favour of decisions, but did not say anything that counteract the decision and muddle the decision making process.

It is observed that the tribals take part in elections because they do not want to alienate themselves from the mainstream politics. Though they cast votes during elections, they participated in elections only as a social duty. In Darjeeling Hills, last panchayat elections were held in 1995 and 2005. The empirical finding of the study implies that maximum of rural people do participate in voting during elections. Though a significant number of tribal voters turn out to the polling booths, most of them do not know the significance of voting, their rights and duties and their role in the political system. They are neither conscious of the electoral process nor aware of the role they should play in the society. They elect the candidates whom they support without keeping in mind the socio-economic background of the candidates, their leadership qualities and without being aware of principles and policies of their party. The local leaders and power seekers meet the voters at the time of elections and

influence and motivate them by providing them job opportunities, higher wages and money. Hence it can be concluded that the interest in politics is greater among the people of lower category, illiterates, cultivators, labourers than in that of medium and high categories and literate people. They are politicized, but not politically socialized in the real sense of term.

It is observed that the majority of the respondents in the study area are very much dependent on governmental help through panchayats as the way to growth and development. It implies that the panchayats constitute the foundation on which the entire edifice of rural development stands. The gram panchayats which function at the grass-root level and are in direct touch with the people, carry the responsibility of implementing various development programmes, projects and schemes at the village level, in terms of identification of beneficiaries, location of project sites etc. The panchayats are responsible for the adoption and implementation of schemes and measures for the development of agriculture, cottage industries, water supply, execution of any function assigned by the state government, and coordination and implementation of development plans, schemes, projects and programmes relating to the development policy of the state government at the block and district respectively and through various standing committees. Therefore, the implementation of rural development programmes through panchayats has produced desired results and the employment generation programmes have benefitted the local people by creating some useful assets and tackling poverty.

6. Conclusion

The following measures are proposed for improvement of living of tribal of rural areas of the Darjeeling Hills (rural areas of Jore-bunglow Sukhiapokhari Block of Darjeeling hills).

1. Tribal culture and traditions should be protected.
2. Priority should be given to the field of education, both formal and job oriented for the empowerment of the tribals.
3. In order to provide and enhance their income, employment opportunities should be created.
4. More welfare and development schemes/ programmes specially meant for tribals should be implemented in the Darjeeling Hills.
5. The number of beneficiaries belonging to the Scheduled Tribe category under schemes /programmes meant for general mass/ rural upliftment should be increased.
6. After the implementation of a welfare programme, the authorities should evaluate its implementation process. Local level (Panchayat level) monitoring cells for assessing the implementation of Tribal

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welfare scheme have to be constituted. The already existing panchayat level monitoring cells have to publish the yearly performance of the tribal welfare schemes.

7. More programmes like Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) should be encouraged which generates self-employment. Emerging small and local enterprises and cottage industries should be encouraged.
8. Incentives are to be given to the efficient and dedicated official concerned with the implementation of tribal and rural development programmes.
9. Since it is necessary to encourage the active participation of the tribals in the working of the Panchayati Raj institutions, provide them special training suited to their cognitive level. The government can also seek the help of the genuinely interested voluntary organizations to work among the tribals of the rural areas to improve their education, civic awareness, health awareness and standard of living.

To conclude, Darjeeling Hills has one tier panchayat system and the gram panchayat are defunct since 2005 when the last term ended and that there was no panchayat elections held in Darjeeling hills due to a arising political crisis i.e. Gorkhaland Movement. In 2011 GTA (Gorkhaland Territorial Administration) replaced the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, which was formed in 1988 and administered the Darjeeling hills for 23 years. The Memorandum of Agreement also included that "a three-tier Panchayat will be constituted by elections in the GTA region, subject to the provisions of Part IX of the Constitution of India. Notwithstanding anything contained in the West Bengal Panchayat Act 1973, or the West Bengal Municipal Act, 1933, the GTA shall exercise general powers of supervision over the Panchayats and the Municipalities". However, one tier panchayat system continues in Darjeeling hills. Moreover there is new expectation in future that there might be execution of a larger number and more effective schemes for socio-economic development and upliftment of the tribals living in the rural areas of the Darjeeling Hills through the new three-tier Panchayat system with its efficiency under the GTA.

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