

Tracing Contemporary Problems of Autochthon Paharias of Santal Parganas (Jharkhand) in Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Paharias are one of eight Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) categorized in Jharkhand and belong to the revised list of 75 Primitive Tribes of India. Once they had control over Rajmahal Hills and its adjoining regions and enjoyed freedom as they successfully resisted foreign intervention in Estates under their set up. But after migration of the Santals to their motherland during 1790-1850 with British encouragement they gradually shifted to hilltops of the Rajmahal Hills. Consequently they were forced to face a number of socio-economic problems for centuries. They were overlooked by colonial officials (1850-1947) and reduced to the status of abject poverty. Undoubtedly after Independence, a number of welfare measures were sanctioned and implemented, and crores of rupees have been spent but as it is reported that the socio-economic development of Paharias has proved nightmares. In this paper, therefore, there is an attempt to trace and assess the contemporary problems of the autochthons in historical perspective with an intention to pave the ways for their socioeconomic development.

Keywords: Santal Parganas, Paharias, Santals, Rajmahal Hills, Colonial Hegemony, Village, Tribe.

Introduction:

Historically the Paharais, “the descendants of the original inhabitants of the country”. Once had control over hilltops of Rajmahal Hills and ruled over it with its neighbouring region for centuries. Racially they have been a militant tribe and fought against civil and military officials of Colonial Administration in the region as they had continuously resisted medieval rulers. Consequently, most of governments overlooked and left them to their fate and the grace of almighty that led to their acute backwardness and poverty. The British colonists could not attract them to Christianity and also failed to control their historical nature of challenging foreigners. But with the establishment of Colonial hegemony and migration of Santals (1790-1850) into their homeland from adjoining districts with the encouragement of colonial masters, the tribe gradually lost their masterly position

over hills and forest with its products and reduced to hand to mouth status. Captain Walter Stanhope Sherwill’s observation disclosed how the autochthons suffered from the coming and settlement of Santals in the region and ultimately retired to hilltops of Rajmahal Hills. In field of education, employment, medical and health facilities, drinking water etc., the tribe miserably suffered for centuries and faced problems that threatened to their existence.

Methodology

The study is mainly based on the sources available in published books, journals, Field reports, Official reports and Field investigation and Spot Assessment etc. Booklets and Reports published by Dr. Ram Dayal Munda Tribal Research Institute, Morabadi, Ranchi (Jharkhand) formed as sources for the proposed study. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report 2008-09, Annual

Report 2012-13, Annual Report 2013-14 and Year End Review 2018 are important official sources for the study. Various Paharia villages in Santal Parganas have also been surveyed to find out the grassroots problems of the tribe and its dimension in ground perspective.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to trace and discuss contemporary problems of the Paharias related to with their socio-economic life. Apart from field surveys the subject matter is examined in historical perspective to disclose dimension of the traced problems of the tribe.

Root of the Problems

During Colonial hegemony (1757-1947), the Paharias were officially overlooked, as a result of this negligence and with other responsible causes and circumstances including natural calamities, the tribe miserably lagged behind in sphere of literacy, employment, health and medical facilities, demographical status and percentage etc., even they unbelievably suffered from lack of water and drinking water in contemporary times despite of implementation of welfare measures sanctioned and implemented for socio-economic welfare of the tribe. Hypothetically, the tribe must have been facing a number of problems that have threatened the existence of Paharias. In 1905, Birt-Bradley-Birt called them "the wildest and most backward of all the aboriginal tribes in Bengal". They are still most backward as they are far behind from the aspects and features of Contemporary Advancement.

Literature Reviewed

Revealing and assessing the socio-economic problems of the autochthons have been the underlying concern of the most of social scientists. Noted Indian scholars Narmadeshwar Prasad (1961), Lalita Prasad Vidyarthi (1963), P.C. Roy Chaudhury (1965), K.S. Singh (1985), Sachchindra Narayan (1986, 1988), S. Nath and D. N. Verma (1993), Satyendra Kumar Singh (1998), Chaturbhuj Sahu (1998, 2001) and other social scientists in their study discussed and analysed socio-economic aspects of life and culture

of Paharias, but most of the scholars did not properly focus on the problems of the tribe or completely overlooked it. S.N. Chopra pointed out tribal problems in brief but it is mainly on national scenario. (Tribal India in India: An Area Study, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1977) Christoph von Furrer-Haimendorf undoubtedly focused on tribal problems in India but it is a presentation in Indian perspective of six decade ago. (Tribal Problems in India in Tribe, Caste and Religion, Romesh Thapar, Editor, Macmillan India Ltd, Delhi, 1997) Since then the tribal world has witnessed various kinds of changes. Upadhyay and Pandey broadly discussed the problems of tribals in Indian context. Undoubtedly it is a nice attempt but there remains a need to point out the problems in respect of specific tribe. (V.S. Upadhyay and Dr. Gaya Pandey, Tribal Development in India, Crown Publications, Ranchi, 2003) Saksena also discussed tribal problems but the study is mainly from the views of noted social scientist D.N. Majumdar. (H.S. Saksena, Tribal Studies and Beyond, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2017) Recently in his essay famous senior historian Ramchandra Guha raised the issue of leadership not received by tribals as dalits got it under the leadership of Ambedkar. (Hindustan, Deoghar, 30 October, 2019) There is, therefore, a need to find out the problems of tribe in contemporary India.

Problems of Autochthon Paharias in Contemporary India:

In 1905 Bradley-Birt wrote, "...Here live the Sauria Maler the wildest and furthest back from civilisation of all the Paharia race Here in the vicinity from that day to this, they have remained as primitive and untouched as when they first made this land their own here the spirit of the twentieth century has found no place and nothing has entered in to mar the pristine simplicity of this jealous and exclusive people." Next five decades, the tribe suffered miserably from various kinds of problems when in 1954 the C.M. of Bihar was stunned to see their worse socio-economic condition on hilltops and for the first time sanctioned welfare measures for socio-economic development of Paharias. Since then various kinds of welfare

measures have been approved and implemented by Central and States governments and crores of rupees have also been spent for the purpose. Residential Schools, Ayurvedic Hospitals, Wells, Hand pumps, Irrigation Planning, Barbatti Cultivation, Sabai Grass Planning, Food for Work Programme, Fruit Tree Plantation Programme etc. are some important welfare measures. But a close look at the socio-economic status, literacy rate, gradual decline in their demography, displacement of the tribe etc. all obviously disclose that the tribe is in grip of various kinds of problems in contemporary times and these may be discussed under following heads.

Superstitious Nature

Paharias believe in spirits and supernatural powers, so they dislike others and aver various aspects of modern civilization in field of education, agriculture, medical and health etc. Undoubtedly we find changes in their outlook to some extent, but they are still superstitious by nature, a big bloc in their socio-economic changes.

Inaccessible Habitation

After migration of Santals in the region Paharias retired to the hilltops of the Rajmahal Hills, consequently they are cut up from the rest of society. Therefore, government officials face difficulties in approaching them for providing them welfare measures sanctioned for the tribe. The problem of communication to their villages is no less difficult and further added to their problems.

Lack of Water and Drinking Water

There is no facility of water and drinking water in most of Paharia villages so Paharias are mainly depended on wells, ponds, streams, rain water etc. for water and drinking water. When these natural sources of water are dried, the tribe has to fetch water from far off places. Undoubtedly, tube wells, taps etc. have been provided, even wells have also been dug, but most of them do not provide them with water as they are not working properly or wells have been damaged and need immediate repairing.

Medical and Health Facilities

In Paharia villages, health centres are opened and staffs are also appointed but these centres do not work properly and badly suffer from lack of supply of medicines. Paharias also complain that medical staffs do not do their duties properly and do not come regularly to the centres. It is also to be noted that Paharias much more believe in their traditional system of herbal treatment and do not take medicine and physician advice.

Unemployment

The tribe is mostly depended on agricultural and forest products, except these there is no source of livelihood for the tribe on hilltops. Therefore, it is necessary to provide them with small scale industries. Cattle rearing, Barbatti cultivation, gardening etc. projects should be provided to the tribe after giving proper training for the purpose.

Literacy Rate

The literacy rate among Paharias is very low as most of them are illiterate. It is one of major problems of the tribe and responsible for their poverty and backwardness. Literacy rate in Paharia community is perhaps lowest after Bihar. According to a recent observation literacy rate in Mal Paharias is 0.61% and Sauria Paharias 0.38%.

Political Backwardness

The pitiful socio-economic condition of the tribe was mainly responsible for their political backwardness. They were also overlooked by Political Parties. No Paharia could win any political election so far nor any Paharia is appointed in Rajya Sabha while the political leader of other tribals and non-tribals do not raise the problems of the tribe. Dr. R.K. Nirad, a noted senior journalist (Prabhat Khabar) in Jharkhand in his reporting on the tribe specially stressed on the political backwardness of the Paharias as one of biggest problems of the tribe and exposed the official hypocrisy in respect of giving them representation in local bodies or official committees. Dr. Nirad also pointed out that the tribe have been fighting elections from first Legislative Assembly Elections but not a single Paharia candidate could win

the election to reach the Assembly in undivided Bihar or Jharkhand. (Prabhat Khabar, Deoghar, 17 Dec. 2019)

Official Corruption

During colonial administration, a official posted at Bhagalpur was suspended on the charge of embezzlement of the fund sanctioned for welfare of the tribe. Since 1954, after approval and implementation of more than one and half dozens welfare measures, crores of rupees have been spent but change in their status is not visible consequently for more than a decade, the Paharias have been demanding Paharia Land consisted of most of parts of Santal Parganas.

Shifting Cultivation

Paharias in most of their habitat are still engage in shifting cultivation despite it is officially banned. It has caused a great loss to the tribe in the field of agriculture, one of the reasons for their backwardness and poverty.

Ineffective and Decline of Traditional System

Paharias are strongly attached to their old set up in spheres of education, agriculture, treatment and also to a number of superstitions and taboos. These have very adversely affected the tribe for centuries and also responsible for gradual decline in the population of the tribe. Ecological factor

Ecological imbalance is no less responsible for miserable condition of the tribe. Leases have been granted in their region for mines, crusher machines etc. Digging of mines and blowing up blasts near geographical habitat of Paharias have been destroying their natural habitat. Most of their villages suffer from pollution caused by digging of mines and blasts. Sachchidand and Anirudh Prasad rightly pointed out that "Poverty is the cause of environmental degradation as well as its effect." Unawareness of Official Measures for Welfare

As Dr. Nirad pointed out, Paharias are politically unconscious, they are unaware of official measures approved and implemented for their welfare. This gives an opportunity to the local official staffs, political workers and officials for implementing the

measures at their pleasure and convenience. This defeat the purpose of the measures while all engaged in implementation of the measures come together and exploit the tribe.

Deforestation

Undoubtedly, there are acts enacted and enforced by central and state governments for protection of their forest rights, but Jungle Mafias with the tacit connivance with and consent of leaders and officials have been allegedly engaged in cutting of trees of jungles for wood and other materials. Deforestation, in fact, is a big problem as it gradually damaging one of the sources of livelihood of the tribe.

Land Grabbing

Outsiders viz. Mahajans, contractors, zamindars, local political workers, businessmen all come together and exploit the tribe. Paharias under unavoidable circumstances borrow money from mahajans and businessmen who ultimately grab their agricultural lands in event of failure of return of loan money and its interest by Paharias. On paper, the owner is same but in practice it is under control of mahajans, zamindars and others.

Displacement

Displacement is an offshoot of globalization and tribal communities across the globe are its worst victims. Deforestation, loss of land, and also for in search of livelihood, the Paharias are forced to live their ancestral place to adjoining regions. In the name of development, the ancestral lands are taken by various agencies and contractors without proper compensation. Displacement, in fact, is a big problem of the tribe.

Human Trafficking

A recent report of UNO disclosed that the division is in grip of human traffickers. They even entrapped illiterate Paharia youths and successfully active in human trafficking in remote areas of Santal Parganas. Undoubtedly, central and state governments' officials, staffs, its various agencies and NGOs are alert and successfully checking the activities of human traffickers in Santal Parganas. Despite,

human traffickers are still active if reports published in print media are to be believed.

Decentralization

Recently decentralization has emerged as a big problem of the tribe because of conversion, nuptial relation with non-Paharias and bad effects of globalization and modern culture. During colonial rule, they were not converted but the recent conversion of Paharias to Christianity and impact of urbanization, modernization and westernization are against their traditional customs, rituals and beliefs.

Conclusion :

Thus above mentioned and discussed are major contemporary problems of the tribe that have threatened their existence and caused successive decline in their demographic strength as it is disclosed by Census Reports 1872-2001. Polygamous character of the tribe, a key role of Middlemen (Dalals) in day to day life of Paharias, exorbitant rate of interest on money lent by money-lenders etc. are some other contemporary problems of the autochthons of the Santal Parganas. During field investigation of Paharia villages in Santal Parganas, we realized that the tribe first of all need education and employment as well as knowledge of democratic set up and its political values. Unless these problems are properly solved in autochthonous perspective, the socio-economic development of the tribe will ever remain day dreams.

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