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Social Security of Tribals: A Disdainful Attitude of the Modern Society

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Abstract:

The concept of 'social security' has evolved through ages and has changed its meaning from time to time. The concept sometimes carries an opposite meaning between the tribal and modern society. The distinction between 'tribal' and so-called modern or 'non-tribal' society lies in terms of the outlook towards life and livelihood. The tribals prefer to stick to their own sense of values for years despite all the changes around as they put themselves in a more vulnerable position. The viewpoints of the modern society completely differ from that of the tribals. The word 'development' to the modern society means upgradation and satisfaction of the society in a broad sense but that unfortunately it seldom thinks about the groups of people who carry out their own style of lives and who are living outside the main stream.

Tribal society conceptualizes social security in its own indigenous way. Their concept hardly has changed its rudimentary meaning over years. These people are maintaining their life style and in their own sustainable manner.

The notion of non-tribal or modern society is otherwise. Conquer of new land, exploitation of natural resources to satisfy the growing population is the sole aim of these 'development' seekers. Their activities are however quoted as 'sustainable development'. Whether or not the processes are acceptable to all sections of the society are never looked after or cared for. Consequently the effects hamper the security of others and sometimes become harmful to them.

The attitude of modern society is often 'one-sided'. These self-imposed guardians often look down the tribals and approach from their viewpoints that endanger their living, livelihood and social security. Hence the 'provided security and development' of the modern society to the tribals is nothing but its 'disdainful attitude'.

The discourse concludes by taking example from mining affected Santhal tribal people from china clay and basalt quarry mining areas of Muhammadbazar block in Birbhum district. These Santhals who were basically cultivators were compelled to sell their piece of land and turn into landless mining labourers who are exploited from all quarters; particularly their women section.



Keywords: *tribal society and security, mining and quarrying, modern society, exploitation, sustainable development.*

Preamble:

In modern society 'social security' concept is not new. In traditional society the term used to carry a different meaning. The meaning, however, evolved with time. In developed countries it means "protection given by society to its members through a series of public measures from economic and social distress that otherwise would be caused by stoppage or substantial reduction resulting from sickness maternity, employment, injury, unemployment, invalidity, old age and death, provision of medical care and the provision of subsidies for families with children". In view of this, the social security means medical care, income maintenance and family allowance (Sankaran and others 1994).

The concept of 'social security' has evolved through ages and has changed its meaning from time to time. The concept has even different or sometimes carries an opposite meaning between the tribal and modern society. The distinction between 'tribal' and so-called modern or 'non-tribal' society lies in terms of the outlook towards life and livelihood. From the point of view of the core essence of the concept of 'security' one can hardly find any difference between 'modern' and a 'tribal' society. Each of them thinks that they are right in their own way. In a tribal society the people themselves formulate their own societal laws which sometimes are carried through generations. They think that their laws and lawful obedience can protect them from all evils and dangers in their small confined society. But from the standpoint of their number they are only minority groups. Moreover, as they prefer to stick to their values for years despite all the changes around they put themselves in a more vulnerable position. As the modern society completely differs in their viewpoints and looks forward to development which will upgrade and sustain their society, they seldom think about the people out of the main stream.

Basically the ideology of tribals is to remain restricted to their age-old notions and remain secured within their unapproachable piece of land. Tribal society conceptualizes social security in its own indigenous way. Their concept hardly has changed its rudimentary meaning over years. These people keep their kind of development in their own sustainable manner.

The notion of non-tribal or modern society is otherwise. Conquer over a new land, exploitation of natural resources to satisfy the growing population is the sole aim of these 'development' seekers. Their activities are however quoted as 'sustainable development'. Whether or not the processes are acceptable to all sections of the society are never looked into or cared for. Consequently the effects hamper the security of others and sometimes become harmful to them.

The attitude of modern society is often 'disdainful'. These self-imposed guardians often look down the tribals and approach from their viewpoints that endanger their living, livelihood and social security.



Hence the '*provided security and development*' of the modern society to the tribals is nothing but its '*disdainful attitude*'.

The discourse concludes by taking example from mining activity affected *Santhal* tribal people from china clay and basalt quarry areas of Muhammadbazar in Birbhum district in West Bengal.

Social Security of Santhals in Mining areas:

Population of India comprises a multitude of caste and tribal groups of different stages in social evolution of the mankind. '*Tribes*', in the Indian context refers to tribalism, which is *ethnic* (defined ethnically) as well as *political* (defined as *scheduled tribes*) (A. Ahmed, 2004). The numerical strength of the population of scheduled tribes is highly impressive – 84.32 million or 8.2% of the country's total population – according to the latest census count in 2001. In the words of A. Ahmad "*The tribes are far from homogeneous in cultural traits, social organization and modes of living. Not all the segments of the population of the scheduled tribes are exposed to dominant cultures of the regions which they are living today*".

Santhal Parganas district in Jharkhand is by far the most conspicuous as the habitat of Santhals. The name of the district itself suggests a strong concentration of Santhal population. Santhal populations in Santhal Parganas are closely related in many ways with its adjoining district Birbhum in West Bengal particularly in the Muhammadbazar block.

Fr. M. Murmu, in his note on Santals, opined that – '*The Santals are believed to be the best cultivators of land. In former times, they resorted to shifting cultivation but gradually became settled agriculturists. They cling to their land as their principal means of subsistence.*' *The economy of the Santals is primarily based on plough cultivation.* About 95% of the Santhals are involved in agricultural operations. Collecting, hunting and fishing were once very important sources of living but now they have been reduced to a subsidiary status. Animal husbandry is common but plays a comparatively minor role in maintaining the food supply. In fact, the Santhals depend mainly on paddy cultivation as their chief source of livelihood. In earlier stages, the majority of the Santhals were land-owners, but an increase in the population, the exploitation of money-lenders and landlords, harassment (illegal means of occupying their land), illiteracy, etc., have made a large number of the Santhals land-less, forcing them to earn their livelihood as day labourers. At present, nearly 80% of the Santhals are '*land-less*'.

In Muhammadbazar block, the proliferation of mining activities, particularly basalt mining, has not only made the tribals land-less but these people are also suffering from severe health hazards due to thick dust blowing out from the stone crushers. Most of them after a few years develop respiratory diseases. There is no health card/insurance facility or any other social security provided to them either

by the mine owners or by the government. As a result these sufferers are easily being fired out of their job. Mining, hence, has not only robbed their past but their future too.

It has been observed that the economic life, social organization and ritual performances of Santhals are interwoven mainly around agriculture. Being agriculturists, agriculture keeps the Santhals engaged for the greater part of the year. Agriculture to the Santhals is something more than just a means of livelihood. They are also conscious about the dangers in agricultural operations and are well aware of the fact that drought condition in any year or any destructive blight on the crops means hunger for all, while a good harvest means prosperity. Based on this kind of livelihood the Santhals used to lead a fully socially secured life in their own confined way.

Impact of Developmental Works on Santhal Life:

“Development is a process by which the members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in quality of life consistent with their own aspirations.”

Michael Carley and Ian Christie

Resource utilization is the key word for any developmental task of the modern world. Independent India, at the initiation of planning period, has launched umpteen number of projects / schemes for her development and growth both on regional and national level. Many of these decisions have left a deep impact on the life of the tribals in general. Particularly the secluded life of the life and life-style of the tribals are at stake now. The motive of most of these schemes is to modernize these people from the planner's view point caring a little about their sentiments, philosophy, culture and even did not bother to plead for a prior consent before acquiring a piece of land which belonged to them from their ancestral time and which is their habitat. In many instances it had not been taken into notice about their responses to these superimposed development programmes and the result remained unsatisfactory.

As a consequence, the effects are devastating on their life and economy. With the frequent interaction due to influx with the non-tribals a negative impact resulted. It was some kind of disturbance in the self-contained life of the tribals. It is mainly due to the intrusion of –

- (a) Non-tribal peasantry,
- (b) Cash-cropping,
- (c) Mining and quarrying activities,
- (d) Rapid industrialization,
- (e) Multipurpose river valley projects etc., the equilibrium of their life is not only disturbed but at places has totally been transformed. Certain government policies were also detrimental for them

and had even snatched away some of their legitimate rights. Corrective measures, in the later period, have tried to fill up some of the loopholes but many are still lying untouched.

In the years 2009 / 2010, in Muhammadbazar, a greedy grab on land and careless attitude towards the quarry labourers from the existing mine owners has generated a topsy-turvy situation which has turbulated not only the region within but also the chief administrative officials of the state government. Protest in all forms spilled over not only from the tribal workers engaged in the mining and crushing but from all quarters including the journalists, intellectuals, writers, social activists and common people as a whole.

It is high time therefore that the agitations and grievances of the inhabitants particularly of the tribal people based on issues like loss of agricultural land inherited from their forefathers, deforestation due to mining activities depriving them to acquire the benefits of forest products and an ousting from their natural habitat, a complete diversion from their traditional agriculture-based occupation, to carry a forced living of humiliated labourers, unhygienic and uncared for lifestyle (suffering from specific respiratory diseases without getting the benefits of medical insurance or accidental benefits), a sickly wage rate, a life devoid of educational benefits and certain modern amenities, lack of good transport and communication facilities and so on and so forth.

Mining and Quarrying in Muhammadbazar:

The history (time) and geography (space) of the Santhals and their socio-cultural character, as already discussed, would help us to realize their present position which is far deviated from their past. The deviation is from agriculturist – agricultural labourer – worker in mines and quarries; a change that was not desirable. Most of them are now landless, ousted from their forest homeland, compelled to plead to the mainstream ‘modern’ society for earning their hand to mouth. Developmental works, progress of civilization has severely exploited them by pushing them far below the BPL (Below Poverty Level) and leaving them battered both physically and morally. Tribal women are the maximum sufferers.

Birbhum District in West Bengal is endowed with varied natural resources, which are being spattered over its varied geomorphological backdrop. Apart from its unique cultural resources the district has some specific non-ferrous mineral resources like china clay, fire clay, coal, iron ore etc and basalt also has an economic value in certain parts of the district. Amongst all the minerals china clay holds the most important position in Muhammadbazar Block. Mining operations of both china clay and basalt are being carried out here since Pre-Independence period (before 1947) initially by indigenou and later by upgraded method. Both china clay and basalt are economically the most significant minerals.



Mining operation in this block, compared to other land related economic activities like agriculture etc., is viable to the people, as the terrain and soil character and the climatic condition which is unfavourable for year round cultivation have somehow restricted them to grow specified crops and that too not in abundance. Basically the Block is economically backward and good infrastructural amenities are yet to develop. Particularly in the areas of mining activities transport and communications are not at all satisfactory. Amazingly no railway line crosses the block territory even after sixty years of Indian Independence. It is only after the commencement of the '*Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana*' programme, which has been activated within the last couple of years that the State Highway – 8 has been upgraded to National Highway – 60. Even the blacktopped (metalled) roads are rare and the mining areas are connected with non-metalled cart tracks at places.

The proliferation and growth of stone quarrying and crushing industry and its profiteering nature has caused economic inequality. There arises inter and intra class stratification. The inter class stratification connects the owner of the stone quarry or the stone crushing units. Secondly, the intra class stratification means those tribal households who have given their land for stone quarrying on lease or in some other mode and are receiving less money or compensation. There are also the tribals who could manage to retain their land and another class who has been landless labourers and earn their livelihood as labourers of stone quarrying and mining units.

During the fifties the stone quarry and crushing unit in Pachami area was opened from private entrepreneurship. After that the Directorate of Mines and Minerals identified some mouzas (villages) under Muhammadbazar Block viz. Hatgacha, Pachami, Chanda, Nischintapur and Dewanganj with huge deposits of road metals (stone). During the 70-80s the government started distributing land measuring about 18-20 acres among the public for extracting road metals from those mouzas. As a consequence, a large number of stone crushing units mushroomed causing widespread tribal land alienation and its associated hazards. Trend is still continuing. As the demographic trend figures out that in 1951, agricultural and allied activities accounted 75.71% to 100%, which has declined as per census 2001 in the range of 23.94% to 30.71%. It has been also been found, on an average that the proportion of non-worker has been on declining trend. It may be due to two reasons, firstly, the participation of tribal women in outside work are high and secondly, stone quarry and crushing units have opened up a new source of employment. As per 1991 census, in the aforesaid mouzas, the stone quarry and crushing units account for 0.03% to 18.51% livelihood of the population.

To evaluate for the exploitation of the tribals, who are particularly Santhals here, it has been observed that particularly those have been transformed into stone quarries where previously they used to inhabit for generations, these seven mouzas are – Chak Raipur, Chanda, Pachami, Hatgacha, Dewanganj and Harinsinga. Other mouzas where the general population used to dominate are Kapasdanga, Haridaspur



and Nischintapur. In some of the non-tribal mouzas also the tribal population is growing at a rapid pace. This is probably due to the migration of tribal labourer from the adjacent Jharkhand state.

The clay quarries in Muhammadbazar are also facing the situation in almost the same manner.

These quarries and crushing units together are damaging and are causing profound environmental degradation and human ('*Santhal*') exploitation. The straight and simple and once glorious and courageous lives of them are now trodden under the miners' whim in earning of daily livelihood. Mining was never their basic '*natural*' occupation but this forced change of taking up an unusual operation has come up due to many reasons of which economic distress is the prominent one.

Some mining and quarrying related problems leading to social insecurity:

- Tribal women misuse in the form of sexual abuse, minimum or no proper housing facility for workers, education facility etc.
- Health hazard – no proper precautionary measures to prevent lung and respiratory diseases in doing these kind of jobs, no medical insurance, mine safety or compensatory schemes to guard against the future possibilities of any kind of mishaps at the time of mining operations.
- Absence of minimum living amenities like fuel, electricity, recreation etc to lead a proper decent life.
- Role of middlemen in labour supply and in controlling the wage rate pattern and the ultimate receipt of the labourer is an utter exploitation.
- Almost complete destruction of tribal culture, their indigenous knowledge, perception and family life in lieu of their loyalty. Instead modern social vices have slowly crept into their life.

With awfully poor literacy rate, in the tribal mouzas, poor health and sanitation condition, less than minimum infrastructural facilities and amenities, lack of electricity almost everywhere and a dull monotonous life devoid of any recreational facilities but with country liquor, low wage rate and high degree of pollution causing deathly diseases with painful sufferings, the tribals specially the unfortunate Santhals are still carrying on unethically even after sixty years of Indian Independence.

India government is trying to transform them from their age-old lifestyle and bring them under the so-called safe lifestyle of the main stream which they though vehemently reject.

How far and how long can they keep themselves away from the modern '*disdainful attitude*' in the name of '*sustainable development*' lies in the unknown bleak future.

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