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Tribal and Marginalized Communities

Constitutional Provisions, Laws and Tribes
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Rahul Banerjee

The Food Bill, Wild Foods and Adivasi People
Madhu Ramnath

**Community Resource Person:
Harbinger of Change in Rural Land Governance**
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Let noble thoughts come to us from all sides
Rig Veda

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Reflections on Marginalization of Tribes in South India

Ritambhara Hebbar



Biodiversity is integral to the livelihood strategies of tribes in south India. Their dependence on forests have contributed to the vast knowledge of the local biodiversity, which is critical to their survival and also of the ecosystem. There is an urgent need to reframe the terms of association with tribes on the issue of biodiversity conservation in order to realise a more sustainable form of eco-governance

STUDIES ON tribes in India have largely focused on central India, mainly on tribes inhabiting the Chotanagpur region and Chhattisgarh, to the neglect of tribes in other regions such as south India. South India is known to be relatively more developed than most parts of north India, with a better record of governance and public action. Ironically, in the process, tribes and tribal issues have taken a backseat and never really been in the forefront of social justice concerns in the region. The paper reflects on why this is the case. In the first section, I present some of the anomalies within the classification of tribes in south India that hides, more than it reveals, the cultural and economic interconnectedness of tribes across states. The second section focuses on the recent developments in the Western Ghats and the ensuing politics that has marginalised tribal livelihoods. In conclusion, I argue that the concern over biodiversity conservation of the Western Ghats cannot be at the cost of the tribal population and their knowledge systems that have thus, far contributed towards sustaining the biodiversity of the area.

Beyond Numbers- The Politics of Classification

Number of reasons have been attributed to the near absence of tribal politics in south India, one of

the reasons being that tribes of south India constitute a small percentage of India's total scheduled tribe (ST) population. A large concentration, almost 85 per cent of India's tribal population is concentrated in central India. North-east India accounts for about 11 per cent of the total tribal population and the rest 4 per cent are dispersed over north and south India. However, as per the census of India, 2011, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka scheduled tribe population constitutes 7 per cent of the state's population, which by no means, is insignificant. Tamil Nadu and Kerala constitute 1.1 per cent and 1.5 per cent respectively. Interestingly, all the four states have a large number of scheduled tribe groups when compared to its total ST population. Karnataka has 49; Andhra Pradesh has 33, while Tamil Nadu and Kerala have 36 and 35 scheduled tribes respectively. Karnataka has the second largest number of tribal groups (with Odisha having the largest number of 64) notified in any state within the country. Some of the prominent tribes are the Naikda, Marati, Jenu Kuruba, Coorgi (Kodavaru), and the Gond in Karnataka; the Malayali, Irula, Kattunayakan, Kurumans, and Kondareddi in Tamil Nadu; the Sugali, Koya, Yenadi, Yerukulas and the Gonds in Andhra Pradesh; and the Paniyan and Kurichchan in Kerala. Kerala is known to have 11 tribes with a population less than 500 persons, of which the Kota, Kammara, Kochu Velan and Konda

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Kapu have a population less than 50. Thus, despite the small percentage of tribes in south India vis-à-vis the rest of India, there are over 150 tribes in South India.

These estimates are confusing as many of these tribes are found in more than one state. Tribal communities like Kattunaickan and Konda Kapus are found in all the 4 states of south India. Tribes such as Arandan, Eravallan, Kadar, Kannikaran, Kochu velan, Kurichan, Kurumbas, Malai Arayan, Malai Pandaram, Malai Vedan, Mala Kuruvan, Mannan, Muthuvan, Palleyan, Palliyar and Urali are found in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Marati are recognised as scheduled tribes in Karnataka as well as Kerala. Tribal groups like Sholaga are found in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu while Koyas are found in Andhra and Karnataka. The Adiyar, Irular, Kammara, Koraga, Kota, Kudiya, Kuruman, Maha Malesar, Malesar, Palliyar, Paniyan are found in Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Yerava of Karnataka and the Adiyar of Kerala are the same tribal group. Karnataka lists both these names as two communities, while Kerala only recognises the Adiyars. Divided across states, these tribal groups have been reduced to a minority, who otherwise are larger groups inhabiting an area. For instance, Wyanad in Kerala, Kodagu in Karnataka, and Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu are adjoining districts that also have a substantial tribal population. These three districts are also known for their plantation economy. Tribes in these areas are culturally quite similar. They have been primarily plantation labourers, who also regularly migrate to neighbouring districts to work in the plantations. Landlessness and indebtedness among them is high, as the influx of outsiders into these areas has led to land alienation. The reorganisation of states in south India has weakened tribal social and cultural organisation and inhibited the consolidation of tribal identity and politics in the region.

A related issue that is typical to south India tribes is the politics of tribal classification. For example, Lambadas, a nomadic tribe found not just in the south, but also in states

like Rajasthan, have SC status in Karnataka and Scheduled Tribe status in Andhra Pradesh. Lambadas are now a politically important group in Andhra Pradesh, as compared to other tribal groups such as the Konda Reddies and the Kolams. Similarly, in Karnataka, communities like the Siddis and Hallaki, who have been locally and anthropologically recognised as tribes, were officially given the status of scheduled tribes (with area restriction, i.e. recognised as ST only within Uttara Kannada district) only in 2003. Another example is of the Sholaga and Soliga, listed as two separate communities in the Scheduled tribe list in Karnataka, but are two different names of the same community. In contrast, the Naikdas, a numerically dominant community and therefore, far more influential as compared to smaller tribes in the state, are a rather amorphous group. They collectively identify themselves

This confusion over tribal classification reveals the lackadaisical attitude towards tribes and their welfare. It evidences the lack of systematic research on tribes, their history and contemporary concerns. Likewise, tribal administration is characterised by a colonial mentality and hackneyed style of functioning. The absence of tribal politics in the region could be attributed to this continued and somewhat conscious neglect of tribes rather than to their lesser numbers.

as the Valmiki community, but have different names such as Beda, Bedar, Nayaka and Valmiki across Karnataka. Nayaka is also a title, found among various caste groups, even among Dalits. Over the years, they have emerged as an important group among tribes in Karnataka. Their status as scheduled tribes have been contested by other smaller tribal groups, who are now trying to organise themselves to collectively address this discrepancy within the enumeration of scheduled tribes in the state. This confusion

over tribal classification reveals the lackadaisical attitude towards tribes and their welfare. It evidences the lack of systematic research on tribes, their history and contemporary concerns. Likewise, tribal administration is characterised by a colonial mentality and hackneyed style of functioning. The absence of tribal politics in the region could be attributed to this continued and somewhat conscious neglect of tribes rather than to their lesser numbers. There is a need to reimagine tribal administration in south India, along the cultural and ecological lines which extend beyond state borders, so as to cater to the specificities of the challenges faced by tribes in the region.

Biodiversity and the Tribal Question

The Western Ghats is home to many tribes, who primarily derive their livelihood from forests. Shifts in land use patterns due to changes in forest laws have restricted access of local tribal communities to forests. However, there are still some tribes who practice shifting cultivation such as the Jenu Kurumbas, Bette Kurumbas, Uralis, Ulladans, Kannikar, Paliyans, Mannans, Muthuvans. The role of these communities, living in and around forests, towards maintaining biodiversity has been significant, which derive from the various forms of local customary arrangements for resource use and conservation. State policies, however, have always focused on restricting their access to forests, even as forests have been systematically diverted for non-forest purposes- i.e. for industrial and commercial utilisation, which has resulted in deforestation and loss of biodiversity. Due to continued exploitation of natural ecosystems, through large-scale commercial plantations, hydro and power projects, SEZs, mining, and tourism, the Western Ghats was declared as an ecological 'hotspot' in the late 1980s, and was included in the World Heritage List in 2012. It has now been declared as an ecologically sensitive zone. An ecologically sensitive zone refers to ecological zones which would serve as 'shock absorbers' or transition zones between high protection to

less protected areas (*Ministry of Environment and Forests' guidelines for declaration of eco-sensitive zones around national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, 9 February 2011*). Recently, the Ministry of Environment and Forests, through a notification under Section 5 of the Environmental Protection Act, 1986, has issued a notification dated 13 November 2013 prohibiting development activities/projects within the Western Ghats. These include mining, quarrying, and sand mining, thermal power plants, building and construction projects of 20,000 sq. m. area and above and/or with built up area of 1,50,000 sq. m. and above, and red category industries (industries that the Ministry identifies as highly polluting). The notification also lists villages across six states that fall within the ecologically sensitive area. However, the fate of the significant tribal population that lives within this area is uncertain. The conservation drive has been misused by environmental groups and the forest department to label tribal forest dwellers as encroachers. They choose to ignore the role of tribes in conserving and protecting the biodiversity of the region. This reproach has only worsened the situation of tribes, as they compete with various interest groups such as land mafia, environmental lobby, the forest department, Non-Governmental Organisations, and private commercial interests, for their survival in the forest. Environmental concerns only camouflage the larger politics over forests, as well as the exclusionary and colonial vision that it espouses.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, also known as FRA, brought hope to the large number of tribal forest dwellers in Western Ghats, as it sought to regularize land holdings of tribal and other forest dwellers on forest land, by giving them legal titles on the same. It also gave them the right to collect and use Minor Forest Produce, besides making them responsible for protecting and conserving the forest. It recognizes community rights on grazing in the forests, use of water bodies and MFPs, and other resources for daily use.

However, the evocation of the FRA has not helped matters. Gudalur, Tamil Nadu is located within the elephant corridor and is also the buffer zone for the proposed tiger reserve, both of which would lead to displacement of the local inhabitants that include tribes such as the Kota, Kurumba and the Paniya. The local organization had hoped to challenge the creation of the buffer zone for the proposed Tiger Reserve through FRA. However, cases have been filed in the Madras High Court by private forest owners and by conservationists questioning the implementation of the Act. FRA seems to have intensified conflict in tribal areas. There have been reported cases of violence and intimidation against tribal forest dwellers from Andhra

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Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Claims made by forest dwellers within national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and reserves have been shelved. These projects have directly violated tribal rights on land and disregarded the provisions of FRA. Number of organisations particularly in Andhra Pradesh and also Tamil Nadu have been actively working with local tribes to challenge random and undemocratic acquiring of land for development and environmental projects. One of the issues that has come up regularly is the

resistance from the forest department to the implementation of the Act. This was in any case expected, given that the forest department has been on an eviction spree since 1996 to reclaim forest land from tribal and other forest dwellers. There have also been cases against the Andhra Pradesh forest department for using Joint Forest Committees to claim community rights over forest land. The dominance of the forest department in the forest rights committees and the weak presence of the tribal welfare departments has also been a significant factor for the slow progress in the implementation of the Act.

Conclusion

Any discussion on the marginalisation of tribes, necessarily has to address their interface with the state apparatus as well as mainstream society. Marginalisation of tribes is a political process that implicates the establishment. Tribal departments in south India are perfunctory and forest departments, high-handed. While most tribal communities are aware of the FRA, they are uninformed of their rights. Lack of transparency has characterised the implementation of FRA in south India, with local tribes completely clueless on where to register their complaints of malpractice and neglect. Local tribal struggles and movements are crying foul over development and environmental projects that are marginalizing tribal livelihoods and habitats. Development and environment projects have presented tribal rights on forests and forestland as part of the problem. Tribes are, in fact, victims of a long standing politics in south India that marginalises them economically, politically and intellectually. Biodiversity is integral to the livelihood strategies of tribes in south India. Their dependence on forests have contributed to the vast knowledge of the local biodiversity, which is critical to their survival and also to the ecosystem. There is an urgent need to reframe the terms of association with tribes on the issue of biodiversity conservation in order to realise a more sustainable form of eco-governance. □

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