



TRIBALS: NOT BACKWARD, BUT SPECIAL

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ABSTRACT :

Indian tribal people are called 'Backward'. This paper argues that tribal people are not 'Backward' by pointing out that the characteristics which show tribal people as 'Backward' may not necessarily be putting tribal people in 'a worse state'. This paper will also draw upon Arundhati Roy's essay 'Walking With The Comrades' to argue that, in many ways, tribal people may be special. The paper concludes with a plea to look anew at the tribal question.

KEYWORDS : Arundhati Roy, Tribals, Backward, Tribal Question.

INTRODUCTION

When thinking of the Indian tribal people, a peculiar image comes to mind. Tribal people living in forests hunt for wild animals and pick up forest produce. Tribal people may also practice agriculture but that agriculture may be subsistence agriculture, meant primarily for self-consumption. Not only this, Indian tribal people lag behind on a number of key socio-economic indicators. The tribal people are poorer, less educated and live closer to nature. A lot of the western academia has called tribal people 'Savage' while Indian academia has not shied away from calling tribal people 'Backward'.

This paper is motivated to find out whether Indian tribal people are backward. There are two ways to answer this question, in a Weberian way (Weber, 1947). One way is to ask if there is an 'Objective Meaning' in which Indian tribal people are backward. The second way to answer the question is to look at the 'Subjective Meaning' which people may attach to tribal people. This paper will not argue that tribal people are not backward because the value-judgment about tribal 'Backwardness' is subjective or 'relative'; neither will it say that the question is only a question of 'standpoint' (Smith, 1987) or 'narrative' (Lacan, 1969).

This paper will argue that Indian tribal people cannot be called 'Backward'. Contra Nagel (1989), this paper seeks to take an objective view. First of all, this paper will argue why the argument that Indian tribal people are 'Backward' does not hold water. Then, this paper will argue, drawing upon Arundhati Roy's article 'Walking With The Comrades', that Indian tribal people can be called 'Special'.

'Backward' is a word of the English language that has many meanings. The Merriam Webster dictionary, among others, gives two meanings of 'Backward'. One meaning is 'toward the past' and the second meaning is 'toward a worse state'. There is a subtle difference between these two meanings of 'Backward'. Indian tribal people are 'toward the past' in more than one meaning of the term. They live on forest produce, practice subsistence agriculture and are occasionally cut-off from the developments taking place in the 'mainstream'. Given this state of affairs, tribal



people are 'Backward' as a matter of fact, almost by definition, in the first meaning of the word 'Backward'.

The second meaning of 'Backward' is that Indian tribal people are in 'a worse state'. Being in 'a worse state' necessarily means that tribal people, as a consequence of being tribal, are leading a life that is less valuable than the life of their non-tribal counter-parts. Unlike the previous meaning of the term 'Backward', this second meaning is not a statement of fact but a statement of value. This paper will argue that although tribal people are leading a lifestyle of the past, such life-style does not necessarily cause them to live in 'a worse state'.

Perhaps, Indian tribal people are economically less well-off than the mainstream in India. This does not mean, however, that Indian tribal people are necessarily in 'a worse state'. Not having a middle class salary and comforts associated with it may carry a stigma in today's Non-Tribal India but that may not be the case with tribal India. Perhaps, with a limited income comes a contentment that is quite natural. Tribal life is characterized by simplicity and a lack of clutter in houses. In tribal context, lack of wealth may not carry a big stigma.

Indian tribal educational attainment is perhaps significantly lower than the 'mainstream'. Such low attainment in formal education may not necessarily hamper the Indian tribal people. If tribal people continue to live in tribal communities, they may acquire most of the education they require for subsistence from their tribal community. That education may be quite grounded in their 'locale' and hence far more important for tribal subsistence than any education that has pretensions of 'universal significance'.

Most tribal communities live close to nature which in-fact may be a blessing. The tribal people may not want to go outside of their forests or away from nature into mainstream 'Civilization'. Tribal people may want to continue to live in the lap of nature. Given that forest dwelling tribal people have always lived inside the forest, they may find the outside world alien, a world with which the tribal people may not want to interact. The lack of such interaction may not always be a drawback to the tribal people, but a mark of self assurance.

The Indian tribal people, however, continue to suffer from a wide range of real problems. These problems include hunger, malnutrition and illness which can be easily treated. These problems have a real impact on the value of lives of the tribal people. Such problems, however, are also rampant among non-tribal groups in India because of limitations in public delivery of food and healthcare among the Indian population. The existence of the tribal community, as tribal community, does little to exacerbate the extent of these problems.

Low income among tribal people, in and of itself, may not be the problem. Inadequate income becomes a problem when people have to buy everything from the market. If tribal people can get most of their needs from outside the market, low income may not hamper their well being. If tribal people get their needs from non-market sources, that will ensure that tribal people are not in 'a worse state' (or Backward) because of low income. Public provisioning of goods and services can reduce dependence on the market.

Some people may insist that times are changing and not being like people in the 'mainstream' means that tribal people are in a 'worse state'. Such an argument assumes that being like people in the 'mainstream' is a good in itself, something that has to be appreciated without question. The tribal people may or may not necessarily be in a worse state if they do not live like the 'mainstream'. Whether tribal people should adopt the life-style of the 'mainstream' is a decision that the tribal people have to make for themselves, a decision that no one else can make for the tribal people.

The 'Mainstream' life-style is not necessarily one that tribal people may want to emulate. In fact, there is a lot of evidence which suggests that tribal people want to protect their own life-style. A researcher had an interesting anecdote to tell. The government built roads to tribal hamlets in a tribal area. The tribal people could have welcomed the same. Instead, tribal people in the area whose huts came near the roads actually moved their huts away from the road. At least, such tribal people want to move away from the 'Mainstream'. Distance from 'Mainstream' is not always 'Backwardness' imposed upon tribal people without choice.

Tribal people cannot be called 'Backward' in the sense that being tribal is essentially living in 'a worse state'. That does not mean, however, that tribal people are without qualities. In fact, tribal people have it in them to show the world that they have special qualities. In order to establish the special qualities of tribal people, this paper will take the help of an article called 'Walking With The Comrades' written by Booker Prize winning Author Arundhati Roy¹.

'Walking With The Comrades' is an essay which was published by Outlook Magazine on 29 March, 2010. The essay describes the Maoist movement in the forest of Dantewara in central India. Arundhati Roy describes how she fixes an appointment with the Maoist² forces in Dantewara and walks with the Maoists in the forests of Dantewara to understand the Maoist movement from the inside. Roy describes how the Maoist movement operates and also describes how the movement has (allegedly) become the face of resistance around tribal issues in Central India.

Roy (2010) argues that the Government of India has signed a number of 'Memorandum of Understanding' with corporations for the development of tribal areas which will involve extraction of natural resources from tribal areas. The government has (allegedly) begun a war against the Maoists which it calls the 'Operation Green Hunt'. Roy alleges that 'Operation Green Hunt' is advertized as a war against the Maoists but in actual fact, the operation is meant to secure tribal lands so that tribal lands can be given to the Private Corporations for development.

Notably, Roy argues that although tribal people in Dantewara form the fighting forces of the Maoists, all tribal people are not Maoists. Yet, the struggle being waged in the Jungle says a lot about the tribal people of Dantewara, according to Roy. In a period of darkness, when the tribal people are being assaulted through 'Operation Green Hunt', Roy salutes the humanism, exoticism and spirit of the tribal people of Dantewara. The remaining paper will take extracts from 'Walking With The Comrades' to argue that tribal people can be special.

This paper will call tribal people special for two reasons. (2.1) Tribal people are called special by Roy for the cultural spirit of tribal people, which is unique in many ways and 'different' from the culture of mainstream. (2.2) Tribal people are called special by Roy for the achievements of the tribal people against the state.

At one place in the 'Walking With The Comrades' Roy (2010) argues about the special nature of the tribal habitat. Roy says 'We walk through some beautiful villages. Every village has a family of tamarind trees watching over it, like a clutch of huge, benevolent gods'. Roy loses herself in the tribal spaces: 'There is nowhere else in the world that I would rather be. Who should I be tonight? Kamraid Rahel³, under the stars?'

Although tribal people are living under the shadow of armed conflict (mainly through Operation Green Hunt), tribal people's zest for life is characterized by the 'Bhumkal Festival' which is celebrated in the tribal heartland of Dandakaranya: 'The sound of drums has become really loud. It's Bhumkal time....I can hardly believe my eyes. There is a sea of people, the most beautiful, wild people, dressed in the most wild, beautiful ways.... They have feathered headgear and painted tattoos on their faces....' Roy goes on 'Each troupe has prepared its own dance. They arrive one by one, with huge drums.... As they dance, the dust rises. The sound of drums becomes deafening'.

¹ Arundhati Roy is an Indian writer who shot to fame when she won the Booker Prize in 1997 for her novel 'The God of Small Things'. After winning the Booker Prize, she has written on a number of issues. Her writings are persistent in their critique of the state and a celebration of people's movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

² In current parlance, Indian Maoists refer to a group called Communist Party of India (Maoist) which was formed by the 2004 merger of People's War Group and Maoist Communist Centre. Indian Maoists aim at the overthrow of the Indian state by armed conflict.

³ 'Kamraid Rahel' is a phrase which carries a special significance. 'Kamraid' (or properly spelt Comrade) is a salutation among most Communists in general and Indian Maoists in particular. 'Rahel' is a character in Roy's 1997 novel 'The God of Small Things'. Roy calling herself 'Comrade Rahel' signifies that she is one of the tribal people she is writing about in 'Walking With The Comrades'.

The 'Bhumkal' festival constructs the tribal people as special. The tribal people in Dantewara live under the shadow of violence being meted out by the state (mainly through Operation Green Hunt). Yet, judging by the celebrations at 'Bhumkal', tribal hearts are not poisoned by violence and tribal spirit remains un-conquered. Staring in the face of death and annihilation and singing and dancing all the while is what makes tribal people special. The tribal people are refusing to accept the upper hand of the state: 'This....signals their (tribal) defiance towards a civilization that seeks to annihilate them.'

The alliance of the zeitgeist of the tribal people in Dantewara with the Maoist movement is one way in which their special defiance is articulated. Together, it seems, the tribal people and Maoists are making a common cause, which makes tribal defiance special. This common cause is displayed at 'Bhumkal': 'A temporary monument, of Bamboo scaffolding wrapped in red cloth, has been erected. On top, above the hammer and sickle of the Maoist party, is the bow and arrow of the Janatana Sarkar'. All this symbolism is peculiar to the special culture of tribal defiance.

The nature of the relationship between tribal people and Maoist struggle is a special relationship, which turns tribal people into special creatures. Tribal people come across winners in a battle against the structures ranged against them. Roy (2010) narrates how tribal people in Dantewara benefit from the Maoist initiatives. Tribal landlessness and issues of injustice are (allegedly) solved by the tribal-Maoist interface. Please look at the following quotation.

Roy (2010) notes 'Between 1986 and 2000, the party redistributed 3,00,000 acres of forest land. Today, Comrade Venu says, there are no landless peasants in Dandkaranya.' The tribal people can win; the tribal people can be special. The tribal people, in Roy's narrative, are treating the Maoists as allies. Roy says 'The party began to turn its attention to issues of equity, class and injustice.... People were taking their problems to the party.' The tribal people are not denied their real state of problems by Roy. Tribal people are called self aware problem solvers, which makes tribal people special.

Tribal people are special because they go beyond the given. Tribal people do not follow the path laid down for them but make their own paths, as expressed in the courage and defiance of the Maoists. Maoists do not subscribe to the view that they have to toe the line of the state: 'These (Maoists).... don't pay much attention to things like state boundaries. They have different maps in their heads....they have their own paths. For them, roads are not meant for walking on. They are meant only to be crossed.' Tribal people are going to challenge the given, which makes tribal people special.

CONCLUSION

This paper began with noting that when we think of Indian tribal people, an image of primitiveness comes to mind. Further, this paper argued that although tribal people may fall behind a number of indicators of development, tribal people are not necessarily in 'a worse state' as a consequence of falling back on development indicators. The value of the life of tribal people should be looked into in the socio-economic condition of the tribal people. Tribal culture may not value particular things in the same way that the 'Mainstream' culture does.

This paper does not only negate that tribal people are 'Backward' but also gives a positive vision of who tribal people are. The researcher drew upon an article by Arundhati Roy called 'Walking With The Comrades' in which Roy points out that Indian tribal people living in the forests of Dantewara have many special aspects. These include various aspects of their culture (as symbolized in celebrations during the 'Bhumkal) as well as their indomitable spirit which fights against odds like state repression and state violence.

In conclusion, tribal life shall be protected because the tribal way of life is 'special'. The tribal way of life is peculiar and full of zest. Unless tribal way of life is protected or at the very least, allowed to continue, the speciality of the tribal people would vanish into thin air. These special qualities of the tribal people should continue to exist if the tribal way of life is to truly survive. Looking at the forces which aim at the assimilation of tribal people in the mainstream, trying to preserve the speciality of tribal people may be a tall order.

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