



ECONOMIC LIFE OF SABAR TRIBE OF PURULIA DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL: ITS IMPORTANCE IN ECONOMIC ORGANISATION FOR INTEGRATED TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The nomenclature of tribe as a category of people has appeared in both anthropological and non-anthropological literatures including ideological references quite frequently over a long passage of time. But nothing was done for them for integrating them to the mainstream of the society until the Constitution of India took cognizance of their affairs for their developmental attributes. The passage of democratic governance over seven decades has witnessed remarkable development in all spheres of Indian life and culture. However, the arena of tribal development with the concept of tribe both in terms of their inclusive and exclusive policies has remained unaltered over this passage of time. Hence, a reappraisal has been attempted through the present deliberation in anticipation of rethinking over the set paradigms. In this circumstance, the story of the Sabar community of the Purulia district, the westernmost district of the state of West Bengal comes to the fore as a glaring instance of and a vindication of our systemic failure and the serious flaw of our representative democracy to the fact that reveals a scenario of utter frustration insofar as the attempts to empower this community is concerned. As such, this community remains educationally, economically and politically backward. This all-pervasive picture of neglect bears embarrassing testimony to the absence of democracy and the right to development from the lived experiences of these tribal people for whom governmental intervention works only to intensify their helpless pathology of belonging to one of the "Criminal Tribes", the colonial legacy in the post-colonial situation. Seen in this context the present study has many relevant aspects and through this paper the researcher seeks to explore the current facts or status among the Sabar community with respect to the economic life of the Sabar tribe.

Keywords: Sabar Community, Economic Life, Sabar Tribe, Tribal Communities.

Introduction

The Socio-economic structure in tribal communities is markedly different from that of the non-tribals or advanced groups of people. They have a very simple technology which fits well with their ecological surroundings and conservative outlook. Moreover, their economy can be said to be subsistence type, they practice different types of occupations to sustain themselves and live on —Marginal Economy. The tribals of India belong to different economic stages, from food gathering to industrial labour, which present their overlapping economic stages in the broader frame work of the state economy. And the last important point to be emphasized is that a tribe is usually considered as an economically independent group of people having their own specific economy. The first and foremost characteristic of the tribal economy is the close relationship between their economic life and the natural environment or habitat, which is in general, the forest.

Tribal communities live in about 15% of the country 's areas, in various ecological and geo-climatic conditions ranging from plains and forest to hills and inaccessible area. Tribal groups are at different stages of social, economic and educational development. While some tribal communities have adopted a main stream way of life, at the other end of the spectrum, there are certain Scheduled Tribes, 75 in number known as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTGs), who are characterized by:

- Pre-agriculture level of technology,
- Stagnant or declining population,
- Extremely low literacy, and
- Subsistence level of economy.

Economic Life of the Sabar Tribe of Purulia District of West Bengal

- Small economy- The production and transactions of goods and services take place within small communities in a limited geographical area.
 - Reciprocal exchange- The exchange of goods and services is carried out on reciprocal basis, through barter and gift. The motive of profit is generally absent.
 - No surplus- The manufacture of consumer goods necessary for bare sustenance is usual. An economic surplus is rare.
 - Division of labour- Age and sex form the basic criterion for division of labour instead of professional training and specialization.
 - Tribal markets- The exchange of good or limited sale of surplus goods take place in periodical tribal markets which also serve as socio-cultural networks in maintaining inter village ties.
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- Simple technology- The tools are either made by the user himself or by local artisans living in the neighbourhood.
- Slower innovation- The rate of internal or induced innovation is very low, making the economic structure stable but unprogressive.
- Importance of family and kinship- The families in tribal societies are a unit of both production and consumption. The kinship acts as co-operative unit. In numerically smaller groups, whole community acts as a cooperative unit.

Characteristics of Economic Life of the Sabar Tribe of Purulia District of West Bengal:

Some of the characteristics of Sabar Tribe with respect to their economic life are as follows-

- Forest Based Economy;
- Domestic or Familial/mode of Production;
- Simple Technology;
- Absence of Profit Motive in Exchange;
- Community: as a Cooperative Unit;
- Gift and Ceremonial Exchange;
- Periodical Markets;
- Interdependence

1. Forest Based Economy

Sabar Tribal economy is embedded in and revolves around the forest ecology. Not only the tribal economy, but also the culture and social organisation are interwoven with forests. Forests constitute the major natural resource base for tribal livelihood in all the tribal regions of the country. Sabar Tribal economy depend on forests for fulfilling their basic needs. The tribals harness the forest resources with the help of simple implements without much technological aid from the outer world. They collect edible roots, fruits, vegetables, flowers, honey, insects, fish, pigeons, hares, pigs, etc., from the forests for their consumption.

2. Domestic or Familial Mode of Production

Family constitutes the basic unit of consumption as well as production in the Sabar Tribal economies of India. In the simple Sabar Tribal economy, all the members of the family together form the unit of production and directly engaged in economic process of production and consumption. The decision-making processes of allocation of labour, and produce are governed by the familial stipulations. The tribal household production is mainly geared for fulfilling their consumption needs rather for the market. Hence, it is appropriate to call tribal economy as subsistence economy. The division of labour in the tribal household is based on age and gender. The economic roles of Sabar Tribal generally depend on the member 's age and gender. The gendered division of labour is based on the primitive belief that women are physically weak. The boys and girls are allotted different jobs suited to their age.

3. Simple Technology

The development of Sabar Tribal economy depends upon the level of its technological advancement. Generally, it is held that technological advancement leads to economic development. Technology, involves the use of tools and implements in utilisation of natural as well as human resources for productive purposes. The tools and implements used in the productive and distributive process of tribal economy are generally crude, simple and indigenously developed without the aid from outside. The simple technology used by most of the tribes in the country involves tenuous manual labour, and higher degree of wastage and difficulty, which is appropriate to their subsistence level of production.

4. Absence of Profit Motive in Exchange

Maximisation of profit is the main goal of economic transactions that drives the modern capitalistic economies. But the profit motive is quite absent in the economic dealings in the Sabar Tribal economy. Two major institutional factors i.e., the communal nature of Sabar Tribal economy and absence of money as a medium of exchange are responsible for this. The mutual obligation and extension of free labour to the fellow beings result in no significant surplus at all. It is also because the exchange of goods and services takes place with barter system rather than money. Money as a medium of exchange is almost absent in the tribal economies of India. Hence, there is no scope for measuring the value of goods and services and storing the profit generated in the exchange process as wealth for posterity.

5. Community as a Cooperative Unit

Community works as a cooperative unit in tribal societies and economic activities are carried out in collectively as a group. According to Dalton (1991) the primitive economy is embedded in other community relationships. Dalton (1991) held that the factors such as low-level technology, small size of the economy and its relative isolation from outer world contributes to mutual dependence people sharing many social relationships. In fact, the economic activities of Sabar Tribal economy are embedded in their neighbourhood, religion, kinship and political relations. In economic interactions, each Sabar Tribal village community is considered



as cooperative unit. Most of them engage in common economic activities such as grazing the cattle, working in the shifting and settled agricultural fields jointly together. Their youth are jointly grazing the cattle and defend their village together. The adult men and women jointly transplant and harvest paddy in each other's fields on a reciprocal basis.

6. Gift and Ceremonial Exchange

Universally, reciprocal gift giving and hospitality to social intimates plays a vital part in tribal economies. According to Herskovits (1952) the process of distribution in tribal societies is part of non-economic relational matrix and takes the form of gift and ceremonial exchange. Each group, whether a family, a group of kinsmen, communities, villagers, or the tribe as a whole, implies appropriate norm of reciprocity. Another well-known social anthropologist Malinowski (1922) notes that the whole tribal life is permeated by a constant give and take. Every ceremony, every legal and customary act is done to the accompaniment of material gift and counter gift. Economic anthropologist Dalton (1971) holds that the tribal mode of transaction is that of reciprocity i.e., material gift and counter gift giving induced by social obligations of kinship. Among the Sabar Tribal economy, the degree or level varies from situation to situation and it is not equal. According to Service (1966) the mutual obligations vary at three standards, degrees or levels. The levels of reciprocity, according to him are general reciprocity, balanced reciprocity, and negative reciprocity.

General reciprocity involves the assistance given and taken back or returned, sharing, hospitality, gifts taken, mutual aid, and generosity. The expectation of reciprocity is indefinite, and unspecified in terms of quantity, quality and time. They are left to the convenience and ability of the donor and the recipient. Balanced reciprocity is the direct exchange and the return and the goods received should be of equal value. The barter system of exchange of goods and services is the best example of this degree of reciprocity. This form of reciprocity is considered as more economic, and less personal as compared to the general reciprocity. Negative reciprocity is an attempt to get something for nothing.

The generalised type of reciprocity can be observed among the agricultural tribes of Sabar Tribal economy. At the time of transplanting paddy, the close and distant relatives come together and help each other. On completion of this agricultural operation, the invitees are offered with food and drink as hospitality. Balanced reciprocity has been observed among the number of tribes especially in the case of economic transactions between the agricultural and artisan tribes. The third form of reciprocity i.e., the negative reciprocity observed to be non-existent among the intra-tribal or inter-tribal economic exchange. But it is the feature of exchange relations between tribals and non-tribals in the weekly markets. The tribals who visit the weekly market to sell their indigenous produce such as green vegetables, minor forest produces with the non-tribal businessmen. In return, they practically get nothing for their goods exchanged. In fact, the economic dealings with non-tribal merchants and moneylenders have contributed to indebtedness, bonded labour, land alienation and impoverishment among the tribal masses.

7. Periodical Markets

Market is a major economic institution that regulates as well as facilitates distribution of goods and services among the people all over the world. Yet, the anthropologists observed the absence of permanent market in the tribal societies. However, in the tribal areas, periodical markets and the system of barter exchange play a vital role in the economic life. These periodical markets, locally known as Bazar, Hat, Pithia, Shandies, etc., generally serve the tribal villages within the radius of 5-10 KMs. and function on a specific place, at regular intervals of time. In these markets, people of different tribes and caste groups come together and conduct their business transactions. Now a days, both barter and monetary transactions are observed to co-exist in these markets. Prof. Vidhyarthi has observed that the native (locally produced) goods such as food grains, local hand-woven cloths, baskets, etc. are exchanged in the barter mode while money is used in the transactions of non-native (produced outside tribal area) goods such as salt, mill clothes, readymade clothes, cosmetics, soaps etc. The periodical markets have significant impact on the tribal socio-cultural and economic life. They are facilitating cultural interaction among people of castes and tribes in addition to integration of tribal economy with the national and global economy. The weekly market plays vital role in integrating the tribal economy with wider national economy. It promotes innovation, monetisation of tribal economy. According to Sinha, the market is the hub of economic life in the tribal areas. It serves as a centre of redistribution for resources and material goods of occupationally diverse communities in the region.

8. Interdependence

The economic relationship among the Sabar tribes is often considered as one of interdependence while the spirit of competition is almost absent in the Sabar tribal economic life. The relationship between tribes, within tribes, or tribal people and non-tribal people are functionally interdependent. Economic interdependence among the tribes has been observed in different tribal zones of the country in variety of ways.



Economic condition of the Sabar Tribe- The present scenario

Sabar Tribal economy is very simple based on cooperation and collective efforts. Sabar Tribal economy completely depend on natural resources for their survival. Originally tribals of Purulia district are hunters and gatherers. Forest is the sole means of their economic activities. Non-Timber Forest Product (NTFP) is the life line of their daily economic activities. They directly use NTFP in the form of fruits, roots, flowers, seeds, honey, mushroom, and small animal like pigs, hen, cock, pigeon etc. to satisfy their daily want. They not only use NTFP to satisfy their physical needs but also use it to earn money by using various raw materials from the jungle. They build up their own small cottage industries such as basket making, spinning and weaving etc. Some tribes are also engaged in agricultural activities. Forest is the part of tribal life and is associated with their culture, tradition, values, religious belief. They are emotionally attached to nature. They use the natural resources according to their need, never exploit nature for future savings. The imperialist intervention in peripheral zone of the tribals has made a drastic change in self-reliance tribal economic system. In the name of development, thousands of trees are being cut down, rapid urbanization and industrialization resulting in deforestation. The indigenous people have not benefited from the developmental projects, while mainstream societies have prospered at their expense, pushing them deeper in poverty trap (Mahapatra 1991). Deforestation, rapid urbanisation and over exploitation of nature have greatly influenced tribal socio-economic life and compelled them to find out other sources of employment other than their traditional forest-based economy. It has been observed that presently many tribal people are coming out from their inhabitation to engage in some sort of professional work in non-tribal areas. They are engaged in construction industries, daily workers, domestic workers in households, driver, daily labourer, cook for mid-day meal etc. Now with the introduction of the project of MGNREGA they have got an opportunity to get guaranteed work with good remuneration. Now it is quite evident that neo imperial intervention has slowly but steadily not only influenced the tribal socio-economic status but forced them to adapt modern culture and technology and depend on capitalism.

Conclusion

The economic integration of Sabar tribal, market penetration, commoditisation and commercialisation, have contributed to economic decline of tribes. Economic decline of Sabar tribal people have taken place because many of the Sabar tribals have become indebted, alienated their land, some have become landless and/or bonded labourers. Economic modernisation in the tribal areas have had contributed to poverty rather economic development in the Tribal India. The non-tribal money lenders, merchants and at times forest officials have exploited Sabar tribals and many times deprived them of their land and livelihood, though there are constitutional mechanisms for their protection. In spite of implementation of Ten Five Plans, unfortunately tribals constitute the most economically marginalised citizens of our democratic republic. Sabar Tribal masses and their leaders have responded to their economic crises in ways of creative movements and struggles. In the wake of new economic policy, the fragile simple tribal economies are increasingly integrated with global economies having far reaching consequences of the livelihood and living conditions of the people.

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