

# Asian Resonance

## "Culture of Poverty" and "Poverty of Culture" in Tribal Society of India: A Sociological Perspective

### Abstract

The state of poverty among the down-trodden people in India, including the SCs and STs, is quite alarming, deep-rooted and pervasive. In the villages of backward areas where the Dalit and Adivasi people are the majority, about 90 per cent of them are found reeling under abject poverty line. Due to acute poverty, they are not able to fulfill the "basic needs of life" i.e food, clothing, shelter, health and education which are fundamental elements of human rights. Majority of them are illiterate and many of them suffer from hunger, mal-nutrition and endemic diseases like Malaria, Diaharia etc. Proper health care and better education is out of their reach. Massive unemployment or under-employment further propel them in acute poverty. This research paper based on a review of literature on tribal studies in India states that poverty is not only an economic phenomenon but also a social stigma. There is also a kind of "culture of poverty" as well as a "poverty of culture" which determines the poor standard of life in the tribal society of India.

**Keywords:** Culture of Poverty, Poverty of Culture, "Other Under Development", Poverty,

### Introduction

Indian society is predominantly agricultural. Majority of it's population live in rural areas. Though her population has crossed 110 crores in 2010-2011, the proportion of rural population in India has steadily, but not dramatically decreased over the decades mainly due to poverty, out-migration and urbanisation. In 1991-census, it was 74.29% and it has again come down to 72.22% in 2001 census and further below in 2011. In fact, poverty in rural India is very acute. Percentage of rural people in India below the poverty line has decreased mainly due to development intervention and people's initiative mainly out migration for works in urban areas. In 1993-94, 37.3 percent of its rural population was below the poverty line (BPL). It came down to 27.1% in 1999- 2000 and further to below 25% by 2011 in official records and various statistical reports of government. Paradoxically, though poverty has been reduced at the national level, it continues to be rampant at the regional and local levels. Actually, poverty, in terms of fulfilling "Basic Needs of Life" in widely pervasive and deep-rooted in many parts of rural India. Poverty is mother of all problems. It's consequences on the poor and mostly those people who belong to the backward communities is reflected in their "life style" and "standard of living" which can be well understood in terms of "Human Development Index" as formulated by the United Nations.

In reality, the state of poverty among the down-trodden people, including the SCs and STs, is quite alarming, deep-rooted and pervasive. In the villages of backward areas where the Dalit and Adivasi people are the majority, actually about 90 per cent of them in rural hinterland are found reeling under acute poverty. Due to acute poverty, they are not able to fulfill the "basic needs of life" i.e food, clothing, shelter, health and education which are fundamental elements of human rights. Majority of them are illiterate and many of them suffer from hunger, mal-nutrition and endemic diseases like Malaria, Diaharia etc. Proper health care and better education is out of their reach. Massive unemployment or under-employment further propel them in acute poverty. To view in terms of Amartya Sen's (1981) concepts, they are deprived of basic "entitlements" and also are short of "capabilities" to sustain themselves. Government



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# Asian Resonance

policies and programmes have failed to develop them. They are the people who are underdeveloped in terms of different indicators of "human development". Among the deprived sections of rural India who are poor, the tribal communities in the interior parts are considered as the poorest of the poor. They are socially and economically more backward than the Scheduled Castes. The primitive life style and abysmal poverty of tribals is considered as a drag on their socio-economic development. The relative decline in India's tribal population appears to be attributed to higher rate of mortality especially infant mortality rate and starvation deaths which is mainly due to their low standard of living, ignorance and acute poverty. Poverty and inequality is not only an economic phenomenon, but also a socio-cultural fact which can also be studied in terms of sociological concepts i.e., "Culture of Poverty" and "Poverty of Culture".

## **Culture of Poverty and Poverty of Culture as a Sociological Perspective to Study the Tribal Societies in India**

Culture is the backbone of human society. The genesis of human society correlates with the evolution of culture. Every culture has both functional as well as dysfunctional elements. But under emphasising positive contribution of a culture and at its cost, over stressing on its anti-progressive elements is also misleading. For instance, Emile Durkheim identified "collective effervescence" as inherent in the festivals or ceremonies and rituals of primitive culture and religion which is functional because it contributes to solidarity and sustenance of the primitive community or society. Where as Karl Marx stated that 'religion is the opium of the people' which means religion works like a drug and after consuming it a man forgets about the nature and root causes of his sufferings. Religion spreads "false consciousness" like a dark screen on man's eyes, as a result, man becomes a blind to see the reality in his life. Instead of enriching man's life, religion, as a part of culture, enslaves him and impoverishes his life.

Various facets of the tribal cultural life including religious ideology are directly or indirectly influenced by hegemony in their material life. This point revolves round the phenomena of acculturation, assimilation and modernisation of tribal communities in India. This issue of cultural hegemony has been analytically discussed by the Marxists and in particular by Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony'. The concept is to be understood in the context of Karl Marx's doctrine of 'Historical Materialism'. It refers to the ideal representation of the interests of the ruling-class as universal interests (Marshall, G. 1994 : 212). Marx believed that 'ideas of the ruling class are ruling ideas' which was in every epoch of human history. Where as Gramsci locates 'hegemony' (socio-cultural and political) within the role of the 'private' or non-state levels of superstructure, distinguishing this social hegemony from that of political and economic force, as the principal means of maintaining social order in modern capitalist societies. The concept of

'hegemony' (socio-cultural) has sociological significance to understand various problems of social inequalities (Femia Joseph, 1975).

A number of anthropologists like Sir James Frazer, Marcel Mauce, Evan Pitchards and others had studied such intricacies of primitive tribal religions of the world. Even ancestral worship as an offshoot of Animism which was of tribal origin, is most commonly observed by majority of religious communities in the world including India today. In due course of human history, different forms of taboos, strict norms or rules, values and ideologies have been frequently modified and imposed by the dominant elite over the subservient people through various means of cultural hegemony in order to rule over the society and accumulate material wealth from the land. Especially, the history of India has witnessed a long series of wars between races and dynasties which reveal hegemony not only in the political and economic sphere but also in the cultural sphere. Historians of ancient Indian history like D.D. Kosambi (1965), A.L. Basham (1954) and many others who studied political and economic history of India as well as anthropologists like Sir Herbert Risley (1908), J. H. Hutton (1946), B.S. Guha and others who studied racial history of India, all have somehow given little references to such kinds of cultural hegemony. In fact, socio-economic underdevelopment of the tribal communities in India has been deep rooted in the cultural dynamics of these ethnic minorities which could be explained through the concept "culture of poverty" as developed by Oscar Lewis during 1960s and 1970s, as a sociological perspective. Oscar Lewis, for the first time, systematically used the concept "Culture of poverty" on a study of Mexican slum dwellers. According to Lewis, poverty is in-built in a particular culture. That culture's characteristic attributes, like belief system and patterns of living, reinforce or perpetuate poverty of the lower classes, particularly slum-dwellers in Mexico. While interpreting poverty, Lewis identified some of the anti-progressive elements in that particular culture (Lewis O. 1976).

Oscar Lewis, in his concept "Culture of Poverty", provides a structural-cultural model of underdevelopment. According to him, "the culture of poverty" is not just a matter of deprivation or disorganisation, a term signifying the absence of something. It is culture in the traditional anthropological sense in that it provides human beings with a design for living, with a ready-made set of solutions for human problems and so serves a significant adaptive function. This style of life transcends national boundaries and regional and rural-urban differences within nations. Wherever it occurs, it's practitioners exhibit remarkable similarity in the structure of their families, in interpersonal relations, in spending habits, in their value systems and in their orientation in time (Lewis 1966/1976). In fact, such interpretation of Oscar Lewis is, to some extent, applicable to the deep rooted problem of

E: ISSN No. 2349-9443

# Asian Resonance

abject poverty in the tribal area of Melghat and other parts of India(Nayak 2012).

In a similar vein, an Arabian social scientist Mahmoud Dhaouadi had attempted to explain the state of socio-cultural and psychological in terms of his concept "Other Underdevelopment". Dhaouadi and others being highly inspired by Michael Harrington's concept "The Other America" (Harrington 1963), developed the label of "Other underdevelopment." When Harrington's 'Other America' meant the forgotten Blacks, Hispanics and other Non-White Americans' oppression by the larger dominant White American population, Dhaouadi's concept of the "Other underdevelopment" signifies the kind of underdevelopment, which is particularly wide spread and deep rooted in tribal areas of Third World Countries which have been peripheral zed in due course of time. Dhaouadi charges that the Western liberal capitalists and Marxist social scientists (including the dependency theorists) alike and their followers in the Third World itself have tended to confine themselves to the study of the socio-economic aspects of underdevelopment while, the "other underdevelopment"(Socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of underdevelopment) has been forgotten or underestimated by the modern mainstream dominant social scientists of the development studies. It raises enough scepticism about the genuine credibility of the enormous quantity of social science articles, books, research papers, reports etc. that do not seem to have seriously addressed themselves to development/ underdevelopment as a complex social reality where parts and sub-parts are organically interrelated.

Thus, as a critique to the mainstream approaches to development and underdevelopment, Dhaouadi's (1988) notion of 'other-underdevelopment' has highlighted two major dimensions : i) the cultural underdevelopment and ii) the psychological underdevelopment. The 'other underdevelopment', is therefore, a 'psycho-cultural' underdevelopment whose two dimensions interact each other. The cultural underdevelopment can be measured by three manifestations : a) Linguistic underdevelopment, that manifests in wide spread use of one or more foreign language in a given society; b) Underdevelopment of Knowledge and science, is defined as the wide-spread poor (underdeveloped) knowledge that Third World intellectuals and scientists of Western educational background have of their own civilisation and cultures and their contributions to science and knowledge; c) The Underdevelopment of cultural value system : is meant by the weakening, the erosion and the break down of the cultural value system of dominated Third World Countries as a result of their contact with the dominant West in the contemporary period, through the forces of modernisation. ii) While the psychological (i.e. personality) underdevelopment means here the 'deterioration' of the basic foundations of the psychological well being of the Third World's individual personality. This psychological state can be

measured by two major syndromes : a) the inferiority complex : As the average citizen of the Third World tends to manifest inferiority-complex (symptoms) towards the dominant West, and loss of faith or 'hope' in one's self, increased alienation and tension; b) The disorganised personality : the acute state of cultural conflict between the traditional cultural value system and it's modern western counterpart is bound to have certain negative side effects on the personality structure of the third world acculturised (to western culture) people. Znaniecki and Thomas (1958) had referred to this type of personality as "disorganised personality".

This aspect of underdevelopment is reflected in the sphere of tribal culture and language which is directly or indirectly linked to the political-economic or material underdevelopment of tribals and is the function of their gradual assimilation and acculturation (Nayak 2003, 2004, 2008). At the material side, the exploitation of tribals by merchants/traders, money-lenders, forests contractors etc. actually began with the British policy of unequal exchange. Moreover, social inequalities are manifested in various forms of exploitation of labour such as bondage, indebtedness, forced labour, and exploitation by forest officials and others. External interference in the form of government regulations, commercialisation of the economy and immigration of non-tribal people from the plain coastal region and from other parts of the bordering states have led to increasing exploitation of indigenous people. Today, in spite of tribal welfare measures, the same problems of under development continue with more serious dimensions (Pathy, J. 1987 : 45; Nayak 2008). This notion of "other underdevelopment" can also be applied to the "Poverty of Culture" of tribal communities in different parts of India including those of Melghat having their own cultural history(Nayak 2012). The concepts of "culture of poverty" and "poverty of culture" are not altogether contradictory each other. They are interlinked with each other in the context of tribal underdevelopment in India.

Today, majority of the tribes in India are found Hinduized. In fact, Hinduization of the tribes had been initiated during ancient period, perhaps since the ancient epic period of war between the Aryans and Non-Aryans. The epic scriptures have referred the tribes and their kings or gods with different terms. The stories and ideologies in epics were frequently made and modified by the dominant segments of society whenever and wherever, situation favored. The ancient Indian scriptures, scripted by the upper caste-class, also further provided legitimacy to this kind of domination and cultural hegemony. The tribal religion and culture was frequently suppressed or adopted and synchronized by the dominant mainstream society. A large scale conversion of the tribal people into the religion of the dominant people took place after every political upheavals throughout history. Thus, original religion and culture of the tribes in India is rarely found now-a-days.

In this context, the process of cultural dynamics of ethnic minorities in the history of India has either been treated in favour of the majority culture of a mainstream society (like the caste Hindu society) or the issue has been partly ignored by anthropologists and sociologists (Pathy 1987, 1988). In fact, the dialectics between the culture of tribal community and that of the mainstream Caste-Hindu society has gradually led the tribal people to enter into the caste Hindu fold which has been going on for many centuries and is still going on. The direction of such pattern of change is very much clear and predictable as most tribes are acquiring caste characteristics. The movement has greatly accelerated since communications have improved and external forces have impinged more closely" (Mandelbaum 1970 : 573-593).

The culture of tribal society in India had been earlier studied by social scientists in terms of "little tradition". The concept of "little tradition" has been developed and used by Social –Anthropologists and Sociologists like Robert Redfield (1947), M. Marriot and Yogendra Singh(1988). It refers to the cultural traditions of the small communities like the tribes as diversely spread in India. They are considered as "indigenous people" and original inhabitants of ancient India. Each tribe has evolved with it's specific social structure and cultural heritage. However, some scholars have attempted to relate or link these two traditions of culture in the history of Indian society. Some social-anthropologists like G.S Ghurey (1943) have even called tribal communities as "backward Hindus" because they have been Hinduised in due course of history. There are some categories of people like the backward castes are also considered as "Backward Hindus". Thus, the difference between the Hinduized tribes and the Hindu castes is only little noticeable.

Over centuries, the Adivasis have evolved an intricate convivial-custodial mode of living. Adivasis belong to their territories, which are the essence of their existence, the abode of the spirits and their dead and the source of their traditional knowledge, technology, way of life, their religion and culture. In the past, the Adivasis were in effect self-governing. In general and in most parts of the pre-colonial period, they were notionally part of the "unknown frontier" of the respective states where the rule of the reign in fact did not extend, and the Adivasis governed themselves outside of the influence of the particular ruler. The predominant external caste-based religion sanctioned and practiced a rigid and highly discriminatory hierarchical ordering with a strong cultural mooring. This became the natural basis for the altered perception of Adivasis by the 'others' in determining the social, and hence, the economic and political space in the emerging larger society. Relegating the Adivasis to the lowest rung in the social ladder was but natural and formed the basis of social and political decision making by the largely upper caste-class controlled mainstream society. The subjugated peoples have been relegated to low status and

isolated, instead of either being eliminated or absorbed. Entry of Europeans and subsequent colonization transformed the relationship between the mainstream communities and tribal communities of this region. Introduction of capitalism, private property and the spread of market broke the traditional economy based on use value and hereditary professions.

The nature of accommodation of other cultures and religions into Hinduism in the past was not the same as that is after independence. In the past, cultural development was taking place that incorporated both the natural dynamics and the assimilation of values, ideals, customs and life styles of other cultural groups. But after independence, a sort of forced cultural imposition has led to the disappearance or alienation of the tribal cultural and ethnic identities of their unique heritage and world view. Even it has also reduced the self-reliant community into a state of dependency on the majority society (Pathy, J.1987: 177). This state of affair of cultural marginalisation closely corresponds with the phenomenon of underdevelopment at the economic and political level, which has reduced the self-sustaining tribal communities into cheap labourers and cheap commodity producers (Nayak 2008).

Such a long time interaction between the two has led to changes in the cultural and structural complexes of both minorities and the majority. Some social anthropologists and sociologists like Jagannath Pathy (1987 : 157) who argued that baring some exceptions, available historical and contextual evidence rarely support the view that the minorities have been transformed into castes as such. If a smooth model of sanskritization as proposed by M. N. Srinivas (1952) or absorption of minority cultures (Bose, N. K. 1967 : 213-15), is true, then India should have a greater homogenous pattern of culture for it's centuries of intergroup interactions (Oraon 1965). Most social scientists totally underestimated the internal cultural dynamics and complex cultural exchanges of tribal minorities and their absorption by dominant cultures of mainstream society in order to establish political-economic hegemony. Hence the intellectual discourse on the cultural dynamics tends to be distorted or left as inadequate (Pathy, J. 1984 : 26-28).

Furthermore, the call for a socially homogenous country, particularly in the Hindi /Hindu paradigm have suppressed tribal languages, defiled cultures and led the ancient civilizations on the verge to end. Though Article 350A of the Constitution requires primary education to be imparted in mother tongue, in general this has not been imparted except in areas where the Adivasis have been assertive. NCERT, the state owned premier education research centre has not shown any interest. With the neglect of Adivasi languages, the State and the dominant social order aspire to culturally and socially emasculate the Adivasis subdued by the dominant cultures. The Anthropological Survey of India reported a loss of

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more than two-thirds of the spoken languages, most of them are tribal dialects.

Today, interestingly enough due to fear of losing tribal identity, attempts are being made to reinterpret and reorganise folklore's, legends, myths, supernatural and symbolic aspects like language and to revive historical and mythological accounts of tribal ancestry and culture, people-hood and shared past traditions (Pathy, J. 1987 : 175). For instance tribal language has been peripheralised or displaced since long which has partly caused marginalisation and destitution. Being socialised orally by their own dialects, tribals find much difficulty in responding to literacy campaign by the government and thereby to enter into job market outside tribal environment. Thus, recently language movements involving people of different dialects, linguistic groups have demanded reorganisation of their dialects at the regional level. A number of numerically large tribal communities like the Santal, Ho, Kandh and Saora in Orissa have tried to develop their own scripts with the help of their community leaders and some Christian missionaries (Mahapatra 1983). In fact, tribals are becoming conscious of their language identity (Pathy, J. 1987 : 179-175). Similar is the case with the Korkus in Melghat having lost their original Korku dialect and in this way, they have been alienated from their own original cultural heritage (Nayak 2012).

Even then, the forces of modernisation (through development of science, technology, education, mass-media and rationality) have served as a double edged weapon. On the one hand, these have facilitated the penetration of modern capitalism and market forces into the tribal economy and tribal territory, which has threatened the very existence of ethnic minorities especially the indigenous tribal people, on the other hand these forces have strengthened the hold of mainstream ideology and culture of the majority society. As a result, the tribals have been economically dispossessed, politically subjugated, socially suppressed and culturally alienated people in India. The original cultural heritage of the tribal communities through out India has not only been synchronized but also been marginalized mainly due to "cultural hegemony" or dominance of "Other Culture" of the mainstream society.

A serious issue that has emerged during the last 150 years or so refers to conversion of tribals into Christianity. For instance, a large number of people belonging to the Saora, Kandha, Paraja and Oraon tribes in Orissa and some of the Korkus and other tribes in Melghat area of Maharashtra have been converted to Christianity. The hidden fact is to reveal that the Christianized tribals in Melghat have been so sensitive and intelligent that they simply avoid to freely express their conversion perhaps with the fear that they may lose their benefits of reservation policies of government. Otherwise, they are to be considered as Open category people and thus, be deprived from all kinds of reservation benefits. In fact, the process of Christianization of the tribals started when the British colonized the tribal areas throughout

# Asian Resonance

India. Later on the Missionaries have penetrated into the tribal areas and have established their churches along with schools, hospitals etc. Provision of free medicine, education, dress and food to the needy tribals have encouraged the process of conversion (Nayak 2012).

In fact, the evangelised sections of tribals in any part of India are better educated than the non-Christianized ones including the Hinduized tribals. To some extent Christian rituals and festivals are indigenized too. Thus the conversion to Christianity could not fundamentally transform the tribal identity (Pathy, J. 1987 : 176). However, the case is different among the Hinduized tribals. The policy of integration of minorities into the Indian mainstream society actually amounts to forced acculturation into the caste Hindu fold that has given them a kind of subordinate position. This is likely to result in gradual extinction of ethnic and cultural identities in instalments (Bay 1984). The assumption that Hinduism is tolerant of intercultural differences was also considered as a myth by some scholars like Stephen Fuch (1965 : 286) and Oraons (1965). Stephen Fuch had studied the Korku tribe of Vidarbha Hills of Central India and the Gonds and the Bhumij of Eastern Mandal decades back (See Fuch 1960, 1965, 1988).

## Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to highlight on "how various problems of tribal communities in India can be critically studied with the help of a sociological perspective based on the concepts of "Culture of Poverty" and "Poverty of Culture".

## Concluding Remarks

Poverty is not only an economic phenomenon but also a social stigma. There is also a kind of "culture of poverty" as well as a "poverty of culture" which determines the poor standard of life in the tribal society. Massive ignorance influenced by lack of proper literacy, blind beliefs, rituals, superstitions, customs, traditions etc., which are a part of their culture is another causal factor of tribal underdevelopment. Their original cultural heritage is no more there in full Toto. Their ancient culture has been gradually alienated from them and thus, they have been assimilated or integrated into "other's culture". Language is a vehicle of every culture. But the tribal language or dialects are disappearing without their formal development. The tribal children, who are socialized through their mother tongues, find it very difficult to learn in "other's" language, even it may be regional or national or international. Teachers in schools are not recruited from the tribal communities. As a result, the tribal children feel disenchanting for modern education. Thus, there is higher rate of drop-outs in tribal areas. Thus, mere admission into primary schools does not serve the ultimate purpose of literacy or education. Furthermore, weak social organization, breakdown of their traditional joint families and kinship system is the result of forces like Hinduization or westernization or modernization which has also definite impact upon their existing socio-cultural and economic life. Finally,

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a combination of ignorance, underemployment, poverty, hunger and malnutrition along with traditional and poor health care practices have largely caused increasing infant/child mortality. In fact, the poor and desperate tribal people throughout India have been alienated and subjugated over the periods. Poverty and inequality in the tribal communities of India have been inbuilt into the social structure and culture of tribal societies which can be better studied with the help of sociological concepts i.e "Culture of poverty" and "Poverty of Culture".

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# Asian Resonance

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