

MARGINALISATION AND IDENTITY POLITICS:

THE TRIBAL QUESTION IN KERALA

Introduction

Marginalisation is a complex phenomenon in the present-day world and a critical concern of national and international communities. Its widespread occurrence is a consequence of several interrelated factors in socio-economic development which gain significance in the era of globalisation. In many Third World societies, people of the lower classes/castes [such as Dalit and Adivasi (tribal) communities in India] are pushed to the margins of society as a result of various historical and developmental factors. Tribal communities in India have been alienated not only from the development processes, but even from their own dwellings. As mainstream development processes tended to create social spaces of inequality, Dalit and tribal communities face marginalisation virtually in every sphere of social life. Insofar as the marginalised groups sustain a unique point of view shaped by their long-standing social position, the question of their 'self-representation' has become relevant in social research.

Since the mid-1970s, a number of tribal groups have emerged in India and tried to become effective instruments for political articulation and mobilisation. Consequently, a new political consciousness has been underway among the tribals, which is often referred to as 'identity consciousness' or 'identity politics.' Questions such as "who we are?" are often raised by such groups in the context of increasing marginalisation and alienation. Conceptually, identity politics is linked with marginalisation. However, the term identity politics is widely used in social sciences to describe phenomena as diverse as multiculturalism, women's movements, Dalit, Adivasi movements, civil rights, lesbian and gay movements, separatist movements and violent ethnic and nationalist conflicts in different parts of the world. Identity politics is assumed to be cultural because identity groups advocating for recognition of and respect for their cultural differences derive their distinct group identities from their cultural matrix. They assume that activists organised around status identities understand these identities with their associated cultures in essentialist rather than socially constructed terms. Hence, new theories of 'identity-politics' have shifted explanations from 'interests' and 'norms' to identities and solidarities, from the notion of the universal social agent to particularistic categories of concrete persons. The present study dwells upon the question of marginalisation and identity politics in the specific context of the tribal mobilisation in Kerala, a state which had earned much acclaim in the social development index.

Statement of the Problem

The emerging theories of New Social Movements (NSMs) provide a framework for understanding the phenomenon of marginalisation and the rise of identity politics among the tribal communities. It would be of great interest to study how the tribal movements in India have introduced a number of tactical and organisational innovations using the power of the media and the expanded circuits of communication, and how they speak to a new audience in a different way with a different voice. Obviously, the denial of civil and political rights, social repression, exclusion, and economic inequality were the defining conditions of most tribal communities in India.

The tribal communities in Kerala also continued to face marginalisation over decades. Consequently, they are forced to create a specific space for themselves (though they constitute a small minority of 1.10 per cent of the State's population). The fact that more than three-fourth of the tribes are landless and that their social conditions (in areas such as housing, health and sanitation, education, welfare etc) remained very much below the state average shows the extent of marginalisation.

Plausibly, the basic question of the tribal communities in Kerala today is land alienation. Kerala is a predominantly agrarian economy characterised by highly distorted distribution of land, and adverse land-man ratio aggravated the inequality in terms of income and wealth. The land and forest have been the vital sources of tribal livelihood but, over years, the tribal communities have been marginalised and alienated as a result of the policies pursued by successive governments in Kerala. It has created a miserable condition for them who were devoid of human dignity and minimum amenities such as food, shelter, clothing etc. In spite of the Constitutional guarantees and legislative measures, put in place from time to time by the Union as well as the State governments, the tribal communities continued to suffer from the dispossession of their valuable lands. Why this has happened in a state like Kerala, which has seen various democratic movements and progressive/revolutionary politics for the last century, is a critical question that needs to be addressed in the study.

A Profile of the Problem

Tribals are called 'Adivasis' (original dwellers) in India who have been living in the subcontinent from unrecorded time, and possibly driven them into the forests by more aggressive newcomer actors. ~~Currently, the tribal population of India accounts for nearly 8 per cent of the total population.~~ The Indian Constitution contains elaborate provisions for protecting the rights of tribal communities and for the promotion of their interests. The Constitution envisages a two-way approach to the tribal question: one is to protect them from various levels of exploitation and the other is to promote their development at all levels. However, in spite of all constitutional guarantees and legislative measures, the tribal communities continued to remain marginalised. The scenario in Kerala is illustrative of this.

In Kerala, there are 35 tribal communities. Among them Mala Arayans, Paniyans, Kurumans, Kurichyars and Irular are majority in number. Land is the mainstay of tribals and more than 90 per cent of them depend on agriculture and allied activities. Land is the only tangible asset of the tribals and, therefore, they have an emotional attachment to the land. However, over years, the land has been alienated, largely because of the expanding interests of the settlers from other parts of Kerala. A watershed in the history of the tribal demand for the restoration of their land was the 1975 legislation for restoring alienated land to the tribals. But it could not be implemented in the state due to the pervasive influence of the settlers. The alienated land has been, mostly, in the hands of non-tribes. This has apparently set the stage for political mobilisation of the tribals in the state.

Admittedly, successive governments in Kerala became a party to the perpetuation of injustice against the tribal people. This provided a historical context of the emergence of identity politics among the tribal communities which they effectively used for political mobilisation. The discontent among tribals was visible since early 1990s. A section of the tribals who were disappointed with the mainstream political parties formed an organization called Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) led by C.K. Janu. It was an organisation functioning among the tribal communities in Kerala. AGMS has been able to bring the plight of tribals to the limelight and set off a large-scale agitation, mostly in an unconventional way. The Muthanga struggle (in the Wayanad district of Kerala) in February 2003 was a culmination of the adivasi frustration over the failure of successive governments in the state to restore Adivasi land. The Adivasis had put up huts and other shelters in the area and announced that they would start cultivating the occupied area. Even after weeks of their occupation of the forest land, the government chose to remain silent. Capitalising the aggressive mood of the local people and the agitating Adivasis, the police launched its operation on 19 February resulting in human loss and considerable destruction. For more than 1000 Adivasis living in the area for a month and a half, it was a day of horror. Muthanga was a turning point for the tribal mobilisation in Kerala. The Adivasis not only deployed unconventional tactics to highlight their marginalisation, but effectively utilised the power of the media and the expanded circuits of communication.

After one year of the Muthanga incident, AGMS became Adivasi Rashrtiya Maha Sabha (ARMS) and put candidates in the Lok Sabha elections. ~~The establishment of ARMS seemed to have opened a new history in the Adivasi struggle. It revealed the political consciousness of Adivasi communities in Kerala with respect to the declaration of tribal habitations as Scheduled Area under Scheduled V of the Article~~

244 of the Constitution. It may be noted that no Adivasi habitation in Kerala has been declared Scheduled Area till this date, thus denying the enjoyment of this most vital and specific part of the Constitution by the Adivasis of Kerala in stark contrast to their counterparts in other states in India. Obviously, this paved the way for the political mobilisation of the Adivasis in Kerala.

Research Questions

The present study problematises the following questions:

1. Does marginalisation have any structural linkage with identity politics?
2. Is the tribal question in Kerala a manifestation of the internal dynamics of marginalisation?
3. Has marginalisation of the tribal communities led to identity politics, thereby propelling the political mobilisation of Adivasis?
4. Does the Adivasi struggle in Kerala represent the characteristics of new social movements?

Objectives of the Study

Within the overall framework of new social movement theories, the study seeks:

1. to conceptualise the problems of marginalisation in the context of the struggles of the indigenous peoples;
2. to comprehend the dynamics of identity politics in the background of the marginalisation of tribal communities;
3. to situate the tribal question in Kerala against the backdrop of the internal dynamics of marginalisation;
4. to examine the tribal land alienation in its socio-historical context; and
5. to analyse the dynamics of political mobilisation of the Adivasi communities in Kerala.

Hypotheses

1. Marginalisation appears to have a pervasive impact on the identity and the living conditions of the tribal communities.
 2. Identity politics seems to have a structural linkage with the alienation of marginalised tribes in Kerala.
 3. The Adivasis in Kerala have ostensible underprivileged position manifesting itself in the social indicators of housing, health, education, sanitation, welfare etc. which remain very much below the state average.
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4. The Constitutional safeguards and legislative measures put in place from time to time are apparently ineffective in protecting the interests and living conditions of the Adivasis of Kerala. This seems to have triggered identity based political mobilisation among the Adivasis

Chapter scheme

The thesis is divided into five chapters, besides an introductory section as illustrated below.

Chapter 1

MARGINALISATION AND IDENTITY POLITICS: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.

Chapter 2

THE TRIBAL QUESTION IN KERALA: SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.

Chapter 3

THE TRIBAL QUESTION AND LAND ALIENATION: CRITICAL ISSUES

Chapter 4

POLITICAL MOBILISATION OF ADIVASI COMMUNITIES IN KERALA

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Methodology

The study has been carried out in a historical-analytical mode employing both theoretical and empirical data. Empirical data used in the study are based on an extensive field research conducted among the tribal communities.
