

Grass Root Activism and Tribal Apathy: A Study on the Oraons

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The rational understanding of the problem of the tribal people and of the causes of the failures of many of the welfare schemes clearly points to the fact that not only the Government but the target groups are equally responsible for not being able to enjoy the constitutional facilities. It is true that five decades after the demise of the British rule have gone but appropriate and suitable governance, to extend the benefits of these welfare schemes, to the right persons, has not yet been found out in India. It is true that a sympathetic and impartial, dynamic and upright administration is the crying need of our country, but the problem requires analysis from another angle also. Bordoloi (1989) opines that various development strategies were undertaken in this country but attention was not given to each tribal community separately. There is some validity in this analysis but it is not the only cause. To grasp the problem properly one should keep in mind the peculiar customs, practices and values of the tribal societies on the one hand and their personality structure on the other. Bakhle (1980) correctly distinguishes between the "problems of the tribals" and "problems with the tribals". The former, in his view, are external problems which the tribals face in the social, economic and political fields. But the latter is no less important. These are the internal problems related with the psychological aspect of the tribals. The external problems of the tribals are very much related with these internal problems and therefore tribal mind, in our opinion, with all its distinctive features, is the main hindrance to tribal development. Now what are the most important characteristics that can alone distinguish a tribal mind? Perhaps no one will deny that these are their deep-rooted indifference and lack of initiative.

The reasons which have made the tribal cultures almost static and have reduced the tribals to a state of indifference are mostly historical. There is a great consensus among the anthropologists that the ancestors of our present day tribals were the original inhabitants of our country (Das, 1953; Bhowmick, 1994; Mondol,

1997), who, for centuries, remained far away from the din and bustle of the so-called mainstream of society. In course of time they developed not only a culture, conservative in nature but also developed a personality structure, immune to any kind of change and characterized by ignorance, blind-faith and superstition (Deogaonkar, 1992). As a result two qualitatively different types of society were emerged, which are often described as two worlds - one of ours and the other of theirs. Anthropologists not only agree that among the tribals the sense of integration with the rest of the Indian society is very weak (Sachchidananda, 1992) but they often differentiate between 'Indian India' and 'Tribal India' (Meghe, 1980). The root of tribal apathy should be analyzed from these perspectives.

Another important point, closely related with the mostly secluded life of the tribals and with the peculiar features of tribal society, is that due to the large scale illiteracy their aspiration level is very low, which not only restricts their life chances but helps to make them satisfied with the stereotyped life, generation after generation. It is true that the shackles of poverty and the buffets of exploitation can not destroy their philosophy of life and sense of aestheticism. But when the question of nation - building is top of the list the tribals instead are required to be integrated with the mainstream of population. Since the independence many welfare schemes have been formulated with this mission, placing more and more emphasis on the initiation of the grass root activism through the participation of the tribals in these programmes, keeping in view their general apathetic attitude. Now what is the relation between grass root activism and the success of social welfare programmes? Let us define the concept first.

Grass root activism is the activeness of the common people, who do not take part in decision making, to secure their social, economic and political rights and facilities or, to organize themselves for the general interest of the community or group. For this reason contemporary

sociologists often consider that lack of grass root activism is a sufficient cause to hinder the development of a community in particular and of a nation in general. Democratic decentralization as a state policy has become a subject matter of administrative discourses as a result of the practical realization that if people at the grass root level are not empowered in the real sense they will not be active and mere implementation of welfare measures will be ineffective. Here the basic argument is that empowerment is a component part of grass root activism in the sense that people's participation is the effect of grass root activism and the cause of empowerment.

Grass root activism → People's participation → Empowerment

But if empowerment is defined as the power to make decisions and to control one's own life (Stein, 1997), it is not easy to ensure, particularly in tribal society, which requires consciousness of the people that can be brought about only by formal education.

The secret of the failure of many tribal development programmes lies in the fact that it could not mobilize the people who are largely illiterate, poor and were long been detached from the administrative procedure.

There are exceptions also. Those who have come close to the educational institutions and are more exposed to mass media, as a consequence of their frequent urban contacts, are in a better position definitely. Bhowmick (1994) rightly mentions that the tribal people are not permanent crystalline structures belonging to one state of development. The Oraons under study are not too backward and have to some extent been influenced by the culture of the neighbouring relatively advanced non-tribal communities. They are not the original inhabitants of this district and most of them have come from Bihar. Some families also have flocked to Nadia from Murshidabad, Birbhum and Midnapur districts of West Bengal. But, at present, they are settled and have adjusted themselves to the socio-cultural life of the district. In order to find out grass root activism, the nature of participation of these people in panchayat and in various governmental programmes has been analyzed. For this purpose one hundred Oraon families from 4 villages, viz. Gholia (West),

Banamalipara, Gholia (North) and Suntra under the Chakdaha Police Station of Nadia (West Bengal) have been studied. Let us describe some aspects of this migrant community. The rate of illiteracy is high particularly among the females of this Oraon community; 64.79 per cent females under study are illiterate. But the rate is comparatively low among the males (32.30 per cent). Presently there is one graduate male. Along with this low educational level, the Oraons suffer from the problem of lack of occupational specialization.

Nadia is predominantly an agricultural district. After coming to this area they engaged themselves in different types of work including railway construction and indigo plantation. But in course of time they were solely dependent upon agriculture. Most of the respondents of the present study are agricultural labours and they earn Rs.20 to Rs.25 per day. Though due to increased economic opportunities some of them have accepted other occupations, the majority of the males and females are unskilled and have little scope for any other occupation than agriculture. All these factors have led to an acute poverty in their society. Even in the threshold of the 21st century, the per capita income of the Oraons is Rs.354.59.

Total Literacy Campaign

As said earlier, the Oraons came to this district from outside and established their settlements in different remote villages, sometimes besides the bank of the river Churni. These places were full of jungles and wild animals. However later on they came into contact with the general people of this district and started participation in various socio-political institutions. Since 1950's many welfare programmes have been implemented and the tribals have sometimes responded satisfactorily. For example, in order to eradicate illiteracy and to impart education among the people, living in dark, Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) was launched in October 1992 by the *Nadia Zila Sakshrata Samiti*. It was a voluntary service-based programme which aimed at imparting functional literacy to the people. The learning centres, established for this purpose, started opening from January, 1993. But unfortunately the programme was stopped after a few months due to Panchayat Election

(May, 1993). Naturally the Total Literacy Campaign could not fulfill its objective and only two females benefitted from this (Table 1). In fact, this programme could not attract the tribal people.

implemented by the Government of India to protect the children from polio. Polio is an infectious disease in which the spinal cord becomes inflamed and which often leads to paralysis. At

Table 1: Total literacy campaign: people's participation

Village	No. of illiterates (excluding 0-5 years)		Participants		Non-Participants		Total	
	M	F	M %	F %	M %	F %	M %	F %
Ghola (West)	13	26	38.46	61.54	61.54	38.46	100.00	100.00
Banamalipara	19	34	5.26	14.71	94.74	85.29	100.00	100.00
Ghola (North)	16	28	56.25	53.57	43.75	46.43	100.00	100.00
Suntra	25	50	32.00	40.00	68.00	60.00	100.00	100.00
Total	73	138	31.51	40.58	68.49	59.42	100.00	100.00

M = Male; F = Female

Family Planning

The married Oraon females, belonging to the age group 15-49 years, have participated enthusiastically in Family Planning Programme. In this connection it should be mentioned that India was probably the first among the developing countries to set up Ministry of Health and Family Planning in 1951. This is now called Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Since 1951 the Government of India as well as various state governments are trying to implement Family Planning Programme, among the people, living in rural areas, with its popular slogan 'Small Family Happy Family'. Table 2 depicts the participation of the married females in the Family Planning Programme. Although most of them (78.72 percent) depend on operation some married women also use medicines for family planning. However it is clear that these tribal women are aware of the usefulness of small families.

Pulse Polio Programme

Similarly Pulse Polio Programme has been

Table 2: Participation in family planning programme

Village	No. of married women (15-49 years)	Family planning method		Total %
		Do not use %	use %	
Ghola (West)	17	47.06	52.94	100.00
Banamalipara	14	42.86	57.14	100.00
Ghola (North)	26	34.62	65.38	100.00
Suntra	30	56.67	43.33	100.00
Total	87	45.98	54.02	100.00

first the target group was the children belonging to age group 0-3 years. Later on the upper age limit has been increased to 5 years. But adequate campaigning in the villages was not launched before the programme as it was done in urban areas to get easy publicity. Therefore, many tribal families were not informed and those who were informed did not give much importance to it. Naturally the level of participation was much lower than was expected. Table 3 indicates that except in the village Banamalipara, in other villages the majority of the children were not given medicine for polio in that programme.

Politics

It is evident that these Oraons do not stay in total isolation. They participate in various programmes and come one step closer to the mainstream of population. In course of interaction with others, they have also developed political awareness and started participation in

Table 3: Participation in Pulse Polio Programme (in per cent)

Village	Not given		Given		Total	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Ghola (West)	50.00	66.67	50.00	33.33	100.00	100.00
Banama lipara	-	16.67	100.00	83.33	100.00	100.00
Ghola (North)	83.33	57.14	16.67	42.86	100.00	100.00
Suntra	50.00	44.44	50.00	55.56	100.00	100.00
Total	55.00	44.00	45.00	56.00	100.00	100.00

M = Male; F = Female

politics. Panchayati Raj institution has enabled these tribal people to be involved in decision making process. The tribals also participate in the formation of local panchayats and elect their representatives. But table 4 shows that a few Oraon males are interested to be involved in politics, whereas no female has been found in this sphere.

Table 4: Participation in politics (in per cent)

Village	Not involved		Actively involved		Total	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Ghola (North)	94.12	100.00	5.88	-	100.00	100.00
Banama-lipara	89.47	100.00	10.53	-	100.00	100.00
Ghola (West)	92.31	100.00	7.69	-	100.00	100.00
Suntra	82.14	100.00	17.80	-	100.00	100.00
Total	88.89	100.00	11.11	-	100.00	100.00

M = Male; F = Female

There are three reasons. Firstly, these people are very poor and have no scope to be engaged in any other affair other than the acute struggle for survival. Secondly, their educational level is very low; they can not even imagine to make a political career. These tribal people are simple, stereotyped, less energetic and less ambitious. Thirdly, politics does not ensure any material benefit to them.

But they are aware of the existence of the major political parties of the state. They also have developed a clear political preference. Some of them (even those who are not involved in active politics) attend the meetings or processions organized by their favourite political party, though often the adult males and females are forced to attend political meetings. But they are not aware of the ideologies or the role of their favourite party in the larger politics. Like others, the adult males and females of this community enjoy their voting right and except a few all of them participate in the panchayat election (Table 5). Though the females do not participate actively in politics, most of them casted their votes to elect their representatives in 1993 panchayat election. It is interesting to note that the people, who were long been outside the mainstream of population, take initiative to include their names in the voter's list.

Table 5: Participation in the panchayat election (in per cent)

Village	Casted Vote		Refrained from Voting		Total	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Ghola (West)	90.91	80.00	9.09	20.00	100.00	100.00
Banama-lipara	92.00	80.95	8.00	19.05	100.00	100.00
Ghola (North)	91.89	80.77	8.11	19.23	100.00	100.00
Suntra	89.19	94.87	10.81	5.13	100.00	100.00
Total	90.91	85.85	9.09	14.15	100.00	100.00

M = Male; F = Female

Thus the Oraons who were once uprooted strangers, have started, very slowly, participation in the governmental programmes and political institutions. Consequently, they have moved one step forward in the tradition-modernity continuum, though till now they are backward and have a very insignificant role in the planning process. If they are to remove the curse, from which they are suffering, in the next century, only governmental assistance is not sufficient. The people will also have to come with a new mentality to reconstruct their own society through more and more participation in various fields, as only grass root activism can ensure social security and administrative justice.

KEY WORDS Grass Root Activism. Decentralization, Participation. Empowerment. Tribe.

ABSTRACT Contemporary social scientists often consider grass root activism as one of the viable solutions of the relative backwardness of particular segments of the society. The state policy of democratic decentralization was a radical one in the sense that it aimed at increase grass root activism through the empowerment of the common people, not excluding the tribals. But it is a common experience that the tribals prefer to maintain some distance from the non-tribals and their simplicity, poverty and lack of social consciousness have reduced them to a state of indifference in most of the cases. This paper attempts to throw some light on the level of participation of the Oraons of Nadia District (West Bengal, India) in politics and in various mass programmes implemented by the Government.

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