

BOOK REVIEW

Bhupinder Singh and Neeti Mahanti (eds.), on behalf of Jigyansu Tribal Research Centre, 1995. *Tribal Education in India*, New Delhi. Inter-India Publications, pp. 176, Rs. 245/-

During the annual nerve wracking exercise of enrolling students for the undergraduate and graduate courses in my university, I along with my colleagues face a dilemma. When there are tribal applicants we feel that the reservation policy is a good thing, but when a tribal appears before us divested of all the "positive" cultural attributes of his society, we feel somewhat sorry and contemptuous of the individual who is perceived as pompous in seeking to rise above his society, or in plainer words, his class, and wonder whether the cleverer of the tribals are not making too good of a bad thing - the reservation policy. Somehow it is expected that an educated tribal must devote all his learning, acquired at great cost in terms of time and effort, to the upliftment of his poor, backward brethren. It is ironical that we do not impose such standards of behaviour on ourselves or expect that we shall by pass our personal aspirations. This is one side of the coin - the attitude of pity, contempt, of having unrealistic aspirations and enveloping all this is the gratifying knowledge of our tolerance and largesse. The other side of the coin is the actual experience of tribals of formal education which is seen to be a real hindrance in the aim of education for all. Education as is available to the people is found to be inadequate, unrelated, unpalatable and unassimilable. In this scheme of things the tribal is ignored and side-tracked. His actual felt needs, or aspirations and expectations are rarely explored and yet we assume the responsibility of making decisions for the tribals in the name of development (See Bhupinder Singh's paper - *Issues in Tribal Education*).

Whose problem is it anyway - it seems more ours than theirs. How fair is it to impose the burden of our intentions on to shoulders which we believe are already bowed down. We go round and round in an effort to package a "humanitarian" system that we believe will meet the de-

mands of the tribes, convinced that large scale generalizations are possible and that positive results in one are going to be reflected or will serve as models, in other areas. The Christian missionaries have been by and large successful in the spread of education among various sections of the tribes. They have managed to bridge the gap between the tribals and the mainstream, even if they were armed with a firm faith in discipline and education (formal) as the path to salvation. That in the process they swelled the ranks of Christians, may be a serious fall out, but is only secondary given in the quality of life (in our terms) that a section of the Christian tribals have. In fact we are alarmed at the extent of success because we fear to think of religion reeking of communalism and sectarianism being used as a means. The anxiety of tribal parents regarding missionary schools and their intentions is if policy makers who have been questioning the validity of letting the missionaries have easy access to populations who are backward and downtrodden (See T Lakshmaiah's paper based on a comparative study of educational facilities, problems and impact). In spite of the success of their endeavours, no research is available on the experience of tribals with missionaries or vice-versa, nevertheless we accept that education under religious constraints is suspect.

Looking at the educational facilities provided by the government, one sees the paucity of infrastructure, the inferiority of standard, the lack of involvement of teachers, their gross dereliction of duties and last, the heavy burden of a gigantic syllabus (See Lakshmidhar Mishra's paper - *Physical and Pedagogic Infrastructure - Equity in Education and Participation in Democratic Institutions, Social, Economic and Political Affairs*). Formal education system also requires many years of an individual's life but it possesses many strengths as we have gathered from our collective experience. Thus the system cannot be discarded as bad but its implementation leaves much to be desired, and it is here that we need a sincere, thorough supervision, monitoring and inspection and improvement in

infrastructural facilities. Not one paper in the volume details the steps to be followed to achieve this. That a greater cost outlay is necessary where money is translated into real work and not just publicity or where accountability can be enforced are the goals that are needed to be set.

The economic need is incipient in the urge for education and these seems little possibilities of convincing the tribes when they ask what lies at the end of the various stages of education, one stage leads to a higher stage and there seems no end to the preparedness for employment. Thus, many years of economic unproductiveness is not easily comprehensible to people who are in a subsistence level economy. Meeting education head on or in any manner whatsoever leads to failure and frustration also because of the common-man perceptions of the tribes as being illiterate, inferior, backward, not contributing to national growth and a social blackmark. This kind of perception is not just restricted to the common man, it seems also the way planners, policy makers, even social scientists and NGOs perceive the tribes. As long as we continue to think in terms of their inferiority, the problem remains ours, not theirs, and the ways to solve the problem are more problematic.

Let us change our perspective - if we consider education as a means of making more organized adjustments to life situations, of being able to lead a harmonious community life, of having a non-hierarchical social stratification without the strife of aggressive competitiveness, then surely the tribes are not making a bad job of it, certainly better than what many of us have made with the tensions of our ever increasing aspirations and competitiveness. But if education means the ability to read and write and comprehend written material which has been the goal of the literacy mission, then the question that arises is what this prepares the people to expect out of such an education, considering the value tribes impose on learning from primary sources rather than from secondary sources which may be too esoteric and alien to the ambience of their culture. May be education needs to be couched in different terms not only for the tribals but for those who need alternatives, that means not one more system but more packages suited to time, place and persons. What the literacy mission

have achieved is at best a sop in the name of development.

To come back to the relation of economic need and urge for education, it would be fruitful if we looked into the reasons why the middle class takes to education like a duck to water. Education for the middle class is the only means of livelihood there being no primary sector or the surplus of the upper classes to sustain them. The other factor is that employment is increasingly linked to qualifications. Where do the tribals stand as far as these two factors are concerned? Extremely capable of hard manual labour and an economy traditionally linked to the primary sector the tribals do not find the impetus for education. For the tribals to take to education, new conditions need to be created so that the tribals are motivated to respond in a goal seeking manner.

Why not design knowledge is as attractive a manner as possible keeping its pristine beauty alive and arousing a thirst for knowledge, why not link knowledge with life rather than livelihood and keeping the commercial fall outs in the background. After all, education is a mechanism that sets off chain reactions of ideas which compel us to give shape to the ideas. Mere learning does not achieve this. Let the figure emerge strong and distinct from the background. It may, take longer but it is going to be thorough. It is not an easy task to link tradition with modernity, a deep respect of tradition is a prerequisite, it is not enough to reiterate that knowledge evolves continuously, it is more important to identify the links in the chain and keep them flexible with skill and practice. There can be no such thing as instant development, but every little effort will cumulatively cause change.

The book under review is an outcome of a workshop on "Tribal Education in India" held in 1993 under the aegis of the Jigyansu Tribal Research Centre, New Delhi, an NGO engaged in the task of welfare and development of this disadvantaged and underprivileged section of the society. The contributors include educationist(s), social scientist(s), anthropologist(s), social researcher(s) and NGO(s) (all in the singular in reality), thus promising a wide array of expert ideas not only restricted to the theoretical or conjectural frame of reference, rather there is a

positive attempt to present issues in tribal education in a realistic state-of-field manner. The book is somewhat repetitively dedicated to the UN and its declaration of the decade of the indigenous people (1994-2003). The appendices include afterwards by Boutros Boutros Ghali, UN Secretary General, write-ups on UN responses to indigenous people's needs, excerpts from UN resolutions regarding the declaration of the decade. The appendices could have included, to be more relevant, the report of the rapporteur of the seminar which would have given us a feel of the trend of discussions and reactions of the seminarists to each other's ideas.

The volume promises significant contribution to the field of tribal education, it treads delicately the balance between ideas and practicality, only it suffers from lack of originality because it treads the beaten path. It presents our point of view and reflects the standards, which we are not sure of, but set for others to live upto, nor is there much in-depth conceptualization regarding the skills the tribals need to develop if at all they are to be educated in our terms.

The issues that could have been addressed are (1) what are the perceptions of the tribes regarding education-they may be as varied as one individual to another or from one tribe to another, from one place to another; (2) What are their expectations; (3) How can they be equipped to link their traditions with modernity; (4) How can they develop mechanisms to adjust to changed perceptions about self and community in the event of exposure to formal education, and plural interaction and the changes in the primary sector; and (5) what are their cognitions about an actualized individual.

There can be no instant solutions, at least solutions that are going to last the ravages of time. If we expect that the flames of our zeal will selectively annihilate what we consider waste and that collective perceptions will drastically change with only good intentions as our weapon, then we have understood history wrong.

It is a pity that such sterile seminars go by the name of intellectual deliberations. A recent issue of the journal "Seminar" entitled *Voices from the Field* highlights these issues of funding agencies, role of NGOs and the gap in the life styles of the aid giver and aid taker which compounds the problem further. Surely all our education can produce something more creative. I would like to present a pen picture of a small Santal village which has evolved its indigenous NGO which first implements the programme and then asks for funds, they find it possible to make ends meet because a life style of the NGO staff is not a prerequisite condition, nor infrastructural facilities required. With limited and sometimes pooled resources they organize short study tours for their school going children and youth, make provisions for them to stay in a hostel like place where tuition is provided as are books and other materials. They have made a conscious choice of formal education as a means of being integrated not with a view to employment but self actualizing. They realize that to enter formal education, the tribal needs to gradually enter the system, without wasting the precious extra years for which reason it has turned to 'Rudolf Steiner's model as well as some of the practical experiences of people working with street children in urban centres. It believes in exposure to a variety of experience and interactions so that the thinking machine inside us is fired. It may be remarked that this is a tiny experiment and one that may not improve on limitation in other parts of our country-but if only set our sights lower than the national canvas, may be change in pockets will cumulatively cause bigger change in a ripple effect.

On reading the present volume, reviewing it become secondary instead through this I have taken the liberty to sharing my thoughts on Tribal Education.

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