

Development and Social Inequality among the Birhor: A Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of Chhattisgarh, India

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Abstract

The relationship between anthropology and development has been vigorously debated, ever since Malinowski advocates a role for anthropologist as policy advisers to African colonial administrators and Evans-Pritchard urging them instead to do precisely the opposite and distance themselves from the tainted worlds of policy and 'applied' involvement. Objectives of the present article are to investigate various aspects of development and social inequality among the Birhor tribe of the Chhattisgarh and to visualize the prospects of development through the Birhor's perceptions. The information and facts have been collected by using group discussion and non-participant and quasi-participant observation methods. The data, thus collected, was verified through focused group discussion, involving hamlet head, Panch and the randomly selected Birhor natives. Targeted Birhor tribe is miles away from the 'light' of 'Development'. They are devoid of basic amenities, such as food, cloth, house, education, health, energy, communication services, transport facilities and so on. Employment opportunities are almost negligible. They face social exclusion from non-Birhor society (Tribal and Non-tribal) in matters related to food distribution especially during community feasts. Women are further subjected to social exclusion during their menstruation period and delivery episodes. Cultural practices of these types are not congenial for their proper mental development.

Keywords: Development; Social inequality; Birhor; Particularly vulnerable tribal groups; Chhattisgarh.

Introduction

Development's in its modern sense first came to official prominence when it was used by United State's President Truman in 1949 as part of rationale for the post-war reconstruction in 'underdeveloped' areas of the world, based on provision of international financial assistance and modern technology transfer. Development was thus primarily perceived in terms of economic growth. There has been growing recognition side by side, that economy growth in isolation cannot assure development. Simultaneously, other related issues, like redistribution of income and assets, human rights and social welfare and the sustainable stewardship of environmental resources need to be addressed for sustainable development of a community. The Human Development Index

(UNDP, 1990) attempted to address some of these issues by including gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, life expectancy and a measure of educational attainment [1]. Literally, development is a gradual progress. In western countries it is mainly considered as an economical process in which the main aim is to achieve overall improvement in living standard that is reflected in corresponding increase in both production and consumption. But for the developing nations, the development is maximum special gradual working processes and logical along with issue of making an effort. The main focus of strategies is not money and economical status but social outlook and organisational values, social values, health, security, recreation, politics, government and laws. Thus, developmental equality and poverty free modern society is the visionary standard of progress.

Development refers to a process of change through which an increasing proportion of a nation's citizens are able to enjoy a higher material standard of living, healthier and longer lives, more education, and greater control and choice over how they live. Development is generally believed to rest on rising levels of labor productivity, achievable through the application of science and technology coupled with more efficient forms of economic and managerial organization. Virtually all government leaders profess commitment to promote development from this perspective. Leaders, policy makers, and academicians, however, have serious disagreement over the relative importance of technical, economic, and political barriers to development and hence about priorities in achieving it [2].

The relationship between anthropology and development has been vigorously debated ever since Malinowski is advocating a role for anthropologist as policy advisers to African colonial administrators and Evans-Pritchard urging them instead to do precisely the opposite and distance themselves from the tainted worlds of policy and 'applied' involvement [3]. Major issues which call for an anthropology of development include the social and cultural effects of economic change and the social and cultural effects of development projects. Although the study of economic change has not attracted the desired attention, several anthropologists, individually, have focused their studies on the social and cultural effects of economic change [4].

Human society, tribal or non-tribal, is mutable in the sense that it is transforming in different aspects of our day to day life, from time to time. These changes could be both, negative or positive. Favorable modifications in the society are viewed as development. The gradual development of this type in various fields initiating prosperity and quality life in response to concrete efforts and policies are widely accepted as a principle of development.

The effective yardstick of development is the extent to which it percolates to common man through infrastructure resources instead of making human resources income based conventional comparison. Income is still used as effective standard to measure human resource development. However, it should not be used, exclusively for measuring development. Development in modern sense implies not only extensive quantitative and qualitative economic changes but also involve various related spheres, namely, social, political, administrative, health, education etc.

Though gradual change is development in simple meaning, all transformations cannot be termed

as developmental changes. Irregular coincidental changes are certainly not developmental changes. Any ethnic group or society is developed one, if it has undergone organised and planned changes in economical, political and social aspects. Human society, tribal and non-tribal, may be considered progressive, in case it reflects continuous changes in different spheres of life. Progressive increments may be accepted as development or even as indicator of development in case its underlying efforts are oriented towards welfare of society.

The increasing steps can be accepted as development and it can be considered as indicator if the efforts for development are oriented towards welfare of society. Its extensive format is being accepted. Instead of income based elementary comparisons human resources and by ensuring effective reach of infrastructure resources can be effective standard. Even then income is also a source of measuring the human development but only income based development cannot be measured effectively. Extensive meaning of development is mainly the qualitative and quantitative changes in economical, social, political and administrative status. In simple form of meaning of development is changes but in all types of transformations, it cannot be said that there is developmental changes. Improper combination of transformations cannot be called as developmental changes. In my view, any group or society's economical, political and social aspects is considered to bring in planned and systematic change, then it can be stated as development [5].

Aims and Objectives

1. To investigate various aspects of development among the Birhor tribe of the Chhattisgarh.
2. To identify the prevalence of social inequality among the Birhor tribe of Chhattisgarh.
3. To visualize prospects of development through the native's perceptions.

Methodology

The People: The Birhor constitutes one of the indigenous peoples (tribal) group out of the 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), previously known as "Primitive Tribal Groups" (PTGs), specifically identified for protection and development. The Birhor are distributed in states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Their

maximum concentration is, however, witnessed in M.P. and the forest area of Chhota Nagpur Plateau area, geographically and population wise, respectively. They invariably reside in small villages or hamlets with limited but clear-cut geographical isolation. As per the Census 2011, Birhor tribal group falls under a minimum and limited population tribal group category with a population of around 17,241. Out of which, 93.31% (16089) reside in rural setting while remaining 6.69% (1115) constitutes urban population [6].

The Area: The present study is essentially qualitative and descriptive. For the purpose, two Birhor hamlets, namely, Ruwanphool (Ruwanphool Gram Panchyat, block Dharamjaigarh, district Raigarh, Chhattisgarh) and Janakpur (Dhengurjor Gram Panchyat, block Bagicha, district Jashpur, Chhattisgarh) are purposively selected.

Tools of Data Collection: The information and facts have been collected by using group discussion non-participant and quasi-participant observation methods. The data, thus collected, was verified through focused group discussion that included, hamlet's head, *Panch* and the randomly selected adults of the targeted tribal group. They were finally analyzed by deductive method.

Result and Discussion

Status of Development among Birhor

Evaluation of Basic Amenities

Food: Number of Birhor families in the considered hamlets, Ruwanphool and Janakpur, are found to be 15-20 and 23-30, respectively. The land holdings are small without any irrigation facilities. As a result, agricultural yield is too low to meet their yearly food grain requirements. Under "*Antyodaya Scheme*" run by Government of Chhattisgarh, each family member gets 7.0 kg rice per month at subsidized price of Re 1 per kilogram. This scheme is proving boon to these families as earlier they were unable to consume foodgrains, twice a day. However, they are unsatisfied with the quantity and quality issues of rice, distributed under the scheme. Prevalence of 78.7% malnutrition among the Birhors reflects the magnitude of problem [7]. As they are not self-sufficient in agriculture, they still depend on forest produce to a great extent. Current forest policies and fast pace of deforestation pose new challenges to Birhor community due to shrinkage of many consumable wild plants as well as because of gradual extinction of small animals, such as, snails, crab, small fishes, birds, rats, squirrel etc.

Clothes: Dress, one wears, is closely related to one's economical status as well as with cultural values, traditions and prevailing trends. Basically, a person wears dress to protect oneself from seasonal weather changes. The sight of Birhor person wearing jeans, pant and shirt is occasional. Quantity and quality of such dresses, however, is very limited. In general, they face shortage of clothes all-round the year. They particularly lack warm clothes and blankets during winter season, as result of which vulnerable section of population, particularly small children and old people get exposed to pneumonia, which at times proves fatal.

House: Their houses, invariably Kuchcha ones, are scattered over hamlets. They are small ones with one-two rooms. Their traditional huts, *Jhala*, are more inhospitable as most of household activities like, cooking, sleeping, taking food etc. are performed at one place. The place is not kept cleaned. Besides, they are not protected from insects, snakes, scorpions etc. Dirtiness and immediate environment of their houses reflect their ignorance of association between cleanliness and good health.

Education: Village Ruwanphool Birhor tribal settlement does not have any arrangement for school education. But in the name of settlement one primary school is situated outside the village, which is around two kilometers from actual settlement of Birhor tribe. Between the Birhor settlement and the school there is a natural rivulet. During monsoon period with the rivulet overflowing, cut off the Birhor settlement with other village parts. This means that during monsoon period, the whole Birhor settlement remains isolated as there is no mode of transportation available for them. So, the issue of free movement of children is out of reach. Even in normal weather condition, the distance of school from their house is still a challenging task for younger children. Due to which they are not able to attend the classes on regular basis. Even though the mid day meal like school is necessary for their regular attendance in classes. Similarly, at Janakpur in the Birhor settlement, situation is bit different. A school exists near their house, but the problems prevailing in this school is different from Ruwanphool School. Here the children attendance is regular to school but then the arrival of teachers to school is a bigger barrier. It is the big rivulet which falls between actual village and Birhor settlement. During the monsoon months, it overflows and to cross it there is neither bridge nor any boat service due to which the teachers are unable to reach the school. In absence of bridge or any kind of boat service, they are unable to reach

school. Construction of bridge over stream would resolve the issue.

Health Services: Health centers are conspicuously absent in both Birhor dominating hamlets, under consideration. Nearest health centre for inhabitants of Janakpur Birhor hamlet is located 16-18 km away. It is located at farther distance of 30-40 km in case of the Ruwanphool Birhor hamlet. For this reason, inhabitants depend upon their traditional healer, "Dewar" (ethnic community religious medical specialist) for treatment of their health ailments. At times, on advice of "Dewar", they consult Quack doctors for treatment of their health issues. The government health workers do not visit these Birhor hamlets, regularly due to their location in tough geographical terrain. As a result, infants and small children of these Birhor hamlets do not receive vaccination dose, as per prescribed schedule.

Energy: In both studied Birhor hamlets, there is no power supply. In Ruwanphool Birhor hamlet, electrical polls have not reached, till day. In Janakpur Birhor hamlet, on the other hand, electrical poles have reached but power supply is yet to start. The situation of power supply status of these Birhor hamlets in 21st century is hard to explain in light of the fact that Chhattisgarh is one of the power surplus states in the country. In these villages the cent- percent women collect dry woods from forest for using as fuel for cooking purpose. In both studied villages with exception of one Birhor family, none has even a bicycle. Under these circumstances, utilization of petrol and diesel are meaningless words for inhabitants of these hamlets.

Communication Services: In both the studied villages, the Birhor ethnic community members do not have any radio, television, mobile phone, post office, newspaper, magazines or other reading material to know about the outer world and its developments. One side, the dream of 'Digital India' is being publicized but on the other side the Birhor ethnic tribal settlements are completely denied of any sort of communication.

Travel and Transportation mode: The cultural alienation among Birhor has also given them geographical isolation which they consider as a supportive mode. It is their own selection for such an existence. If the government desires, it can do many things for them. The claims and promises can be more than what is achievable. In the name of approach road, there is presence of small narrow path that is just used just for walking on foot. During the monsoon period, situation becomes critical as they take their natural form. In such a situation, the settlement/village gets separated from the main

land. In the name of mode of transportation, only one Birhor family in Janakpur Birhor hamlet has a cycle. Use of motor vehicles and motor cycles is quite rare. The main mode of their transportation remains walking.

Sources of Employment: Sole source of employment for the inhabitants of studied Birhor hamlets is limited to 'Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act' under which they get jobs and associated wages. Very few of the Birhor community members are seen in the town in search of jobs.

Effect of Developmental Programs

Despite differences of opinion on quality, implementation procedures and success claims in regard to various welfare schemes among policy makers, evaluators and academicians, the effort needs to be appreciated as they have brought some relief to beneficiaries.

"Indira AwasYojna" is one such scheme which freed the nomadic ethnic group from leading such a life. They were leading a nomadic life because they did not have permanent house to stay in for longer period. Due to acute economical backwardness, they could not even afford semi-permanent houses. They used to make a temporary shelter known as 'Jhaala' and stay there till they wish to live. Once they decide to shift, they dismantle the previous 'Jhaala' and carry all shiftable material to new location to be re-utilized in new 'Jhaala'. Under this scheme, they are now provided financial help to construct permanent house. With this money, they construct one or two roomed houses and start settling at a place, permanently. Some Birhor families are still not benefitted by this scheme. Some of them have even constructed houses using local material, to settle at one place adjacent to houses made by their relatives, under scheme. This way the scheme has helped them to settle at one place, thereby, replacing their traditional practice of living nomadic life.

"Antyodaya Scheme" is also another scheme which has transformed them to reside at a place leaving their nomadic tendency. Since start of scheme, settlement has expanded in terms of community members. As per provisions of scheme, it does not cater to the complete food/nutritional requirement of the family. It is a boon for those families who were not consuming even one full meal a day, earlier. With hope of getting rice every month, they start living at one place in the settlement and started engaging themselves in local works.

'Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act' is a scheme which not only provides job but also motivates one to reside at a place, permanently. The benefit of scheme is, however, restricted to those who are permanently residing in a settlement by registering in the master-roll.

If one speaks of negative impact, then one can accede to the fact that there has been increase in blending of culturalisation and outbound-culturalisation of Hindu cultures, as a result the new generation is slowly getting cut off from their cultural heritage. The present generation does not have any knowledge regarding the 'Pendra' song or regarding the 'Damkach' dance. In the forest, variety of valuable medicinal plants exist about which they are ignorant. Birhor are using their various parts, namely stem, tuber, flowers, fruits, leaves etc. to just gratify their hunger. Even the young generation of Birhor is unable to identify such plants and leaves. Any such forest resources are vital not only for their very existence but also for the total human civilisation. However, the young generation cannot be faulted entirely for not having deep knowledge of their heritage or for deforestation as ultraviolet radiations and climatic changes triggered by urbanization, industrialization and greed for more and more luxurious life have play key role in extinction of forests.

Expectation and Hopes of Birhor or Prospects of Development

The Birhor people are found to have diversified demands and expectations about their development from the government and outside world. They demand full benefits of "Indira Awas Yojana" for all remaining members of their community. They also expect toilets in their premises, under Cleanliness Program of the government. They wish to have cooking gas (LPG) in their kitchen under "Ujjwala" Scheme. They demand construction of streets ('Khandjha') and permanent roads in their villages to improve transport facilities. In terms of water sources, they would like to have more ponds and handpumps in their villages. In order to improve their agricultural income, they demand good quality paddy seeds and irrigational facilities from the government. They expect benefits of old age pension scheme for their senior members with a provision of annual up gradation to adjust impact of inflation rate of corresponding year. They hope to be covered under smart card facilities. Finally, to have un-interrupted contact with the outside world, they are demanding the construction of bridges on streams and rivers, flowing through their villages.

Despite the keenness of Birhor community to develop in all walks of like, the government should focus on making them self-independent, economically. They are multi-talented persons in their traditional occupations, namely, rope making, basketry as well as in carpentry. If the government comes forward with a scheme to modernize their traditional technology, it will go a long way to make them self-reliant. Their traditional source of income is through sale of ropes made out of wild creeper (Mohlain). The money, thus collected, is used to meet both ends. Over the years, market demand of these ropes has been gradually reducing in favor of plastic ropes, resulting in the crisis of their livelihood. They tried to cope up the situation by changing the raw material of ropes, replacing wild Mohlain creeper by plastic threads, obtained from plastic sacks. Market responded positively to the change as demand of these ropes gradually increased. However, their profit margin is much less in comparison to ropes made from wild creeper as they have to purchase plastic sacks to get plastic thread required for making ropes. If government comes out with a scheme in which Birhor families could be provided plastic thread, free of cost, their profit margin would increase considerably. Side by side, there is needed to expose them to basketry art and modern carpentry which will add value to their goods. These efforts would go a long way to improve their economic status and self-dependence.

Social Inequality

Inequality within Ethnic Community

Birhor ethnic community does not consider themselves as 'Hindu' as their culture and religious background is totally different from that of Hindu. In recent years, the Birhor tribe has been gradually shifting from their nomadic life to permanent mode of settlement. Their hamlets/settlements happen to be located in neighborhood of Hindu and other tribal communities. Under the influence of such cultural contact, the Birhor community gradually adapted to cultural practices and belief system of their neighbors. Despite of the cultural amalgamation by Birhor tribe, they are still not accepted by Hindus and other tribal communities as equal neighbors. Prominent reason for discriminating the Birhor tribe is connected to their consuming flesh of monkey in past. Monkeys are believed to be closely related to the God Hanuman, worshipped by Hindus. Despite of the complete abandoning of practice of hunting monkeys in the State of Chhattisgarh, the Birhor people are still

treated as un-touchable by neighboring Hindu and other tribal communities. They are not invited in major life ceremonies, like, birth, marriage or death. If invited, they are not treated at par with other communities. They are provided raw food items and not served cooked food. As a result, their active participation in community feasts is not assured. Besides, their entry is banned in kitchen and storage rooms of houses belonging to Hindus and other tribal communities.

Gender Inequality

The Birhor women enjoy better status in many respects as compared to so called cultured and urban Indian women. They have freedom to choose their life partner and to take divorce without any stigma attached to it. Widow Remarriage is permissible among them. They participate in all final rites, performed after death of a family member. All decisions of home are taken in consultation with them. Their status is, however, not good in certain aspects. They have custom of bride value ("*Vadhumoolaya*") that groom family pays to bride family. It is given to bride's father and is to be returned in case she decides to remarry. Amount paid is on the higher side in comparison to their economic status. Paying of bride price is perceived as winning or purchasing her. In anthropological literature also, bride price type of marriage is referred as marriage of purchase ("*Kraya Vivah*"). Existence of customs like bride price, though protect women from evils of dowry system, are harmful for their self-respect and dignity.

The statement of winning the woman or purchase is being said because the complete amount of "*Vadhumoolya*" (Bride value) is given to the father of bride, who keeps it for himself. Thus, such a process is being termed as similar to that of purchase. The bridegroom who pays the complete amount of 'Bride Value' keeps total control and claim over his wife because if any married woman wants to remarry, then as per the tribal traditions she has to pay the total amount of 'Bride Value' that had been taken from her first husband, back to him. Because any man for marriage has to pay the 'Bride Value' only when he is marrying any marriageable girl for first time, not for a woman who has been already married.

Besides, Birhor community practices certain taboos, under which procreant women are prohibited from performing certain activities. Lactating women during first three months after delivery are not permitted to cook food or to touch utensils. They are prohibited from entering into

worship room, store room and kitchen during these months. The custom has positive function as far as her regaining of normal health and care of infant is concerned. However, keeping women away from socio-religious life for such a prolonged period of three months could be a painful and torturous experience for them. Treating anyone on the basis of his specific physical condition as untouchable and suspending his natural rights, in principle (philosophically or theoretically), it is totally unwarranted and unjustified, but seen from the practical utility point of view it saves one from grave health hazards (dangers of life). In the event of such eventualities, such practices and norms (as life savers) should be cherished and preserved [8].

Conclusion

The Birhor tribe is found far away from the '*light of Development*'. Basic infra-structural facilities, like, streets, roads, electricity etc. is missing in the selected Birhor settlements, Ruwanphool and Janakpur. They remain cut off from outside world during rainy seasons in absence of bridges on streams and rivers flowing through the region. Educational facilities are limited to two primary schools. Students of one school and teachers of the other school face serious difficulties in reaching schools particularly during rainy seasons. The studied Birhor inhabitants are found living in small Kuchcha houses that lack basic amenities, such as electricity, drinking water, toilets and so on. Their poor economic condition does not allow them to meet both ends meet or to afford enough clothing. In virtual absence of positive development, superstitions, taboos, traditional un-productive economic activities, dependence on magico-religious medical practitioners for treatment, use of intoxicated food and so on are not only continuing but are flourishing.

The government welfare schemes are functioning at slow pace. Benefits of "*Indira Awas Yojna*" are yet to reach to most of the Bihors families. Antyodaya Scheme needs to be upgraded as per the nutritional requirements. MGNREGA scheme need further push to assure year-round jobs. There is wide gap between what various government welfare schemes have delivered, so far and high expectations and aspirations of tribal communities. Unless Government comes up with tribal specific schemes and gear up its machinery to narrow down the gap, the tribal development remains a dream.

Upon Birhor, by non-Birhor society (Tribal and Non-tribal) is behaved like social exclusion on

the food matters during the feast. Certainly it is a mental trauma for them. Similarly, the Birhor women is faced social exclusion during their menstruation and delivery, this is also a pathetic situation for them. In this way, the Birhor women are faced double thunderclap of social neglect.

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