

Dignity, Not Charity

Empowering tribal communities

Joe Madiath With Deborah Nelson

As long as tribal communities continue to live under conditions that prevent them from asserting their basic humanity, all talk of their human rights will remain meaningless.

Through my work as executive director of Gram Vikas, as Orissa based development organisation working in partnership with tribal people and other marginalised groups, I have witnessed almost 30 years of human rights violations. Yet I have not lost the capacity to be shocked by the variety and degree of injustice suffered by these people.

I recently completed a survey of Madanguda village which is located in Kalahandi, a region that is commonly referred to as the 'poverty basket of India'. The survey revealed that every one of the 40 households in the village was in debt to Gramy Bank for sums of between Rs. 5,000 – 10,000. Funds for these loans had been made available by the Government of India in order to help tribal people acquire much needed income-generating resources such as bullocks and goats, as well as help them to reclaim land. Of the original money, each family had received only between Rs. 1,200 and Rs. 2,000 six years ago. The balance of the money was siphoned away by bank officials and other government authorities, who led the people to believe that the funds they had received were a type of 'grant' from the government and would not have to be repaid. These corrupt exploiters then disappeared from the scene, leaving the people defenseless when the loans were called back by the bank. Ineligible for future loans, the people in Madanguda village are now permanently in debt, without credit and unable to earn a secure livelihood – the very condition which prompted the loans in the first place. They have been drawn even further into the vortex of poverty which has been engulfing their people for generations. The cruel irony is that these tribal people are being victimised by the same institution which was supposed to help them improve the quality of their lives.

Human rights will not exist for tribals as long as they are living under conditions which prevent them from asserting their basic humanity. Although the government has paid, and continues to pay, lip service to the tribals' right to health, shelter, education and economic justice to be almost universally denied – to devastating effect. 'Liberalisation' and 'globalisation' are the current buzzwords in national economic policies, yet there is little sense in which either of these concepts has had any effect on the poverty which afflicts the majority of the nation's tribal people. What are the true causes of this poverty and what can be done to address them?

Original Inhabitants

It is impossible to understand the plight of tribal people without considering the fundamental question of land rights. Tribal people are also referred to as 'advasis', meaning 'indigenous' – a term

which acknowledges the fact that the tribals were the original inhabitants of the lands they currently inhabit. For centuries they lived in harmony with the forests, relying on them for food, shelter, fuel and the practice of their religion. But beginning with the Aryan invasion, and continuing, through the time of Indian kings and the British Raj, to the present, these people have been systematically marginalised from and robbed of their land. Their peaceful way of life and belief in community ownership of land has made them especially vulnerable to acts of aggression.

During the British Raj, certain prime forests were demarcated as property of the crown and prioritised use was reserved for the British, even so, the tribals enjoyed unrestricted use of most forestlands. It is only since Independence that they have been threatened with complete loss of land rights and, along with them, everything they have ever known.

Today there is no forestland and, by extension, no aspect of tribal life which does not come under the asphyxiating jurisdiction of the government. It is a bitter irony that the tribals, living in forests maintained, and perhaps even planted, by their ancestors, do not have even the right to collect the smallest forest product without permission of the government. Unless they have obtained a permit, it is illegal for tribals to take small timber from the forest to construct a house for themselves; unless they get a permit, they cannot take stones from behind their house to make a well for safe drinking water, nor can they take thatch to build a roof without getting permission from a government official. Tribals cannot lay claim to even the trees that grow in their backyard.

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Over-regulation of forest by the government has had a devastating effect on the economic self-determination of the tribal people, as well as on their dignity. Through state and private monopoly control in Orissa, 3 products, including fruits, flowers, seeds, leaves, honey, herbs and roots, are registered as Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP), leaving no part of the forest freely accessible to the tribal people who are considered 'encroachers' and treated as labourers on, not shareholders of, the land. After collecting produce from the forest all day and selling it to state-owned or controlled agencies, a tribal labourer does not even collect sufficient wages to feed a small family.

Higher Stake

The questions of land rights and fair wages is central to any consideration of human rights for tribal people. The very least that the government can do is to amend its policies to allow for the unrestricted collection, processing and sale of NTFP by the tribal people. In addition, it would be in the best interest of the government, the tribal people, and the environmental health of the forest, to work out a profit-sharing and land maintenance agreement for all timber products. Tribal people, who have lived on the land for centuries, have a higher stake in protecting and maintaining it than the business and administrative interest who currently control it.

It is especially discouraging to contrast government treatment of its weakest and most marginalised subjects with its policy towards business. The paper industry can lease an hectare of government forestland for less than Rs. 100 per year. A tribal must pay as much as Rs. 35 for the use of just one stand of bamboo. In order to make a few bricks, a tribal must get ten different forms of permits and permission from the government. Billion dollar industries have been started with less red tape! The harassment of uneducated and easily exploited tribal people by forest officials is rampant. Bribes of money, goats, and chickens are common currency against the forest officials' threat to 'register a case'.

While government presence is an inescapable hindrance in the tribals' attempt to eke out a living from the forest, it is noticeably absent when it comes to fulfilling their need for basic health, sanitation and education. In Orissa's Rayagada block, the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) is 210 per 1,000 births. In **India, Economic Development and Social Opportunity**, Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen point out that in 1991, the IMR in Ganjam district as a whole was 164, the worst in India, and that this compares unfavorably with the poorest of the sub-Saharan countries of Mali, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau.

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In 1996, 216 children died in the Thuamul Rampur block of post-measles complications. According to government PHC records, all the children had been immunised against measles. In reality, none of them had been immunised. Gram Vikas brought this matter to the attention of higher authorities. The story was then picked up by the newspapers, as a result of which the doctor in charge of that block received 'disciplinary action'. While the matter was being investigated, one of the inquiring officers chided Gram Vikas, pointing out that the doctor in question 'could have lost his job'. Lost his job? What about the 216 children who lost their lives? Is this a human rights violation? Isn't it closer to murder?

The government has been similarly negligent in providing education opportunities for tribal children. Few schools have been built and fewer are running. It is common practice for government instructors to receive salaries for jobs in tribal villages to which they never report. When tribal people make the all-day hike necessary to register complaints against these teachers, they are told by government officials that 'the teachers can not reach the village because it is too far!' the government officials accept some 'compensation' from the absent teacher, the teacher continues to collect a salary, and government 'schools' in tribal villages remain empty.

Formal Education

Recently, there has been a trend towards advocating non-formal education for tribal people. This will merely perpetuate the current situation, in which unscrupulous exploiters from the majority culture 'skim the icing' from the development cake and uneducated, uninformed tribal people are helpless to stop them. Nothing short of good quality, formal education for all tribal people will

enable them to advocate for their basic rights and begin to redress the power imbalance which keeps them weak and marginalised.

Many of the most costly development efforts initiated by the government in tribal regions – irrigation, hydroelectricity, and mining – do nothing to improve the quality of life in these regions. Irrigation and hydroelectric projects bring water and electricity to the plains and the cities, not to tribal villages that frequently suffer partial submersion as a result of these projects. When lands are torn up for mining, there is no gain accruing to the tribals – the benefits are again reaped by others.

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There are tribal villages that have received no development assistance from the Indian government since Independence. What does Independence mean to them? In many cases, government officers are as corrupt and exploitative as the moneylenders and liquor merchants they should be protecting the tribals against. But there are also many excellent government development officers. It is a shame that the areas which have the greatest need for honest and committed workers are instead serviced by so many corrupt and incompetent ones.

At Gram Vikas, we hear a lot about the ‘privileges’ afforded to the tribals in the form of job quotas and special schemes and concessions. Why is it that these ‘privileges’ are so carefully scrutinised while the ‘incentives’ and tax breaks given to business by the government remain unquestioned? I am convinced that if tribal people were allowed their basic rights, especially the right of fair trade and the freedom to collect and process forest products in an environmentally sustainable manner, no special ‘privileges’ would be necessary.

It is time that India accepts responsibility for the plight of the tribal people and begins to focus on the real instruments of development. If the government is to practice development as if poor people really mattered, it must engage in a rigorous re-examination of its current policies. Is there fairness and justice for tribal people? If not, the government must renegotiate the terms of development with tribal people. The government should be an ennobling institution, creating the conditions for dignity, not charity. The tribals are one of many important pillars of Indian society. By continuing to chip away at this pillar, India is weakening the edifice of its society as a whole.

Joe Madiath is the executive Director of Gram Vikas, based in Berhampur, Orissa;

Deborah Nelson teaches in the United States and is currently working as a volunteer at Gram Vikas.