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COMMENTARY

Culture and Development, an Experiment with Empowerment

Ganesh N. Devy

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Abstract. The Adivasi Academy has been implementing a comprehensive cultural approach promoting the Adivisi community's empowerment in different fields such as culture, education, healthcare, agriculture and economy. The Adivasi community had been facing lack of access and marginalization partly due to the British colonialism; during which many cultural misunderstandings related to communities' and tribes' costumes occurred. Through notably active campaigns, trainings for local people and highlighting cultural conservation, the Adivasi Academy has achieved many positive outcomes namely major policy debates and community's self-reliance. All these show that cultural parameters can play a key role in development. Such comprehensive cultural approach could be replicated in other community contexts in order to foster development and to fight against social exclusions.

Keywords. Empowerment, community, culture, Adivasi, India, colonialism, Criminal Tribes Act, CTA

Introduction

I intend to present in this paper the experiments carried out at the Adivasi Academy, Tejgadh (Gujarat state, India) towards the empowerment of the Rathwa tribal community in western India and some of the nomadic communities such as Vadi and Chamtha by foregrounding the art and culture of the communities as a means to their empowerment. The assumption behind these experiments was that economic marginalization of a given community can be much better understood by placing the economic and issues in a comprehensive cultural perspective than by looking at them in purely economic terms. The empowerment experiments began with the belief that the strategies adopted require to situate the immediate material reality within the residual effects of histories of marginalization or discrimination. This paper proposes that for making any development intervention genuinely sustainable, the synchronic (material) as well as the diachronic (historical) perspectives need to be brought together. It also proposes that the sustainability of an intervention will be ensured by enhancing the community's capability to internalize the twin perspective. This paper tries to underscore that the process of internalization of the inter-relatedness of the two dimensions by the community is necessarily an irrational process, and it manifests in the community's imaginative forms of

expression.

The experiment relates to two social groups: the communities listed in the official records as the Tribes of India, and the communities inscribed in the colonial Indian history as the 'Criminal Tribes' (these are not to be confused with the Tribes mentioned in the former category). These latter were 'notified' as 'criminal' during the colonial period (1871 Criminal Tribes Act: Devy, 2007: 14-20; Schwarz, 2010: 9-10), and subsequently 'denotified' (1952-56) soon after Independence. They are now known as 'Denotified and Nomadic Tribes' (DNTs). The total population of Tribes – also described in the government terminology as Janjati, or known popularly as Adivasis (the indigenous)-- is approximately 90 million, that of the communities notified during the colonial times as 'criminal tribes' is projected at 60 million(Devy, 2007) though their exhaustive Census has not been carried out for the last eighty years. Both these are getting rapidly pauperized and stand at the tail end of the human development index within the Indian context. The figures for their illiteracy, child mortality, food insecurity, indebtedness, non-profitable migration, non-access to credit, and to formal education and healthcare are uniformly higher than the overall national figures for these categories of disadvantage (Devy, 2007: 128).

The Historical Context of 'Criminal Tribes'

The British colonial rule in India was not only a political and economic enterprise; it was also an experiment in restructuring a complex society. For the first two centuries of colonial contact, beginning with the arrival of the East India Company at Surat in 1600 to the establishment of the Asiatic Society in Bengal towards the end of the 18th century, the colonial imagination had great difficulties in understanding the complex weave of the Indian society. Out of these difficulties arose many misconceptions and myths about communities and social conventions. At times these were as comical as the idea that India is a country of snake charmers and magicians. But in many instances the wrong reading of the society resulted in untold human misery. This very same 'knowledge' formed the basis for formulating law during colonial times. The story of the communities known as 'denotified' is without doubt the most mind-boggling tale of inhuman collapse of compassion.

During the 1830s, the colonial government appointed William Henry Sleeman (1788–1856) to prepare a list of instances of assaults on wayfarers in central India (Dash, 2005: Chapter II & III). He took to this task with an amazing devotion and produced a voluminous list of violent episodes. The list would not have amounted to much had it not been for the turn of events during 1857 in central India. In the wake of the battles fought and lost by the Indian states, all isolated and potential groups of soldiers, and even those who were likely to be in the supply chain for them, came to be seen as candidates for the Sleeman-list. Later, it was this list that became the basis of the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act (CTA).

Once the traditional occupations of the nomadic and semi-nomadic communities were brought under the scanner, the colonial government provided for their being officially declared 'Criminal Tribes'. The government's powers to declare a community 'criminal' were made arbitrary to the extent that the question of inclusion of a given community in the list was taken completely out of the judiciary's purview. After this, even an attempt by any member of the community to move out of the district without informing the local authorities became a punishable offence. The act of questioning the notification in any form too came to be seen as a criminal offence. The colonial government's right to detain such communities and to do whatever the government decided to do with their lives came to be seen as a lawful right and duty of the government officials. The officials were charged to prepare Registers of Criminal Tribes; and once a register was prepared for a given district, even the very same official was not allowed to make any deletions in it. The nature of the declaration was made entirely non-negotiable and absolute. The victims of this draconian law were given no legal reprieve. The onus of proving that they were not criminal fell on them, but they were left with no rational argument since their being born in a certain community itself was seen as a crime. The persons belonging to these tribes had to spend their entire lives proving to the authorities without any specific reason that they were not criminals. Thus, life itself became a trial for them without any let up whatsoever. The communities 'Notified' under the Act acquired the form of some 'social raw material' for use in empire-building. The members of these communities came to be used in the colonial construction projects of railways and factories. The law provided for the authority to bundle up and shunt them as and where they were of use: "Any tribes, gang or class, which has been declared to be criminal, or any part thereof, may, by order of the local government, be removed to any other place of residence" (Devy 2007: 140). Even children were not viewed with any special sympathy. The government decided that the Superintendent of the specific settlement was to be asked to function as the 'mother' for the children. The infamous CTA asked for forced 'isolation' and 'reform' of the communities listed. These included coin makers, entertainers, migratory peasants, stray wandering groups, nomadic communities, long-distance traders and such others. The CTA required creation of 'settlements' as reformatories with 'strict procedures'. These procedures kept becoming increasingly inhuman. Forced labour became the daily fate of the inmates. The CTA of 1871 went through several revisions, every revision bringing in new forms of 'punishment' for being born within the listed communities. The last of the CTA was passed in 1924. By then a total of 191 communities had been brought under its purview.

The Loss of Forest

About the same time as the CTA was getting formulated, the colonial government produced another list of communities under the caption 'the Tribes of India'. These were the communities that had come in conflict with the British rule on the issue of imposition of the government's sovereign authority over the forest areas. During the 1860s, the British had created a Forest Department, primarily to provide good quality timber for building railways and naval ships. The forest dwelling communities in India opposed the colonial takeover

of their forests (www.vanashakti.in/evolution). They neither cared for the colonial government nor did they understand the idiom of the British law. Not surprisingly, most of these conflicts were often violent and involved armed clashes. Since the political idioms of the conflicting parties were radically divergent, it became difficult for the colonial rule and its diplomacy to forge treaties with the forest dwelling communities. Communities located at all such areas of conflict were bundled together by the colonial government within the term 'tribe'. Soon after the need to conceptualize 'tribes' became clearer, a sophisticated machinery of scholarship was put in place to enumerate, describe and define the Indian tribes. The historical, linguistic and cultural differences among these communities were so vast and complex that it would have been impossible for any rational scheme of sociological classification to place them in a single conceptual category. While all this was happening in India's political history, already a branch of Orientalism in Europe had emerged in the form of Anthropology, perhaps more appropriately 'savageology' (Devy, 1998: 110) Some of the attributes discussed in 'savageology' were applied to the Indian 'tribes', and tribes came to be seen as necessarily primitive. By the end of the 19th century, the concept of tribe and the notion of criminal tribes had received acceptance even among the educated Indians--writers, journalists and lawyers. As a result, when the 1891 version of the CTA was enacted, or when in the following year the register of forest codes was prepared,(Devy, 2007) there was no evident protest from any quarter. By the turn of the century, the tribe had come to stay as an unchallenged category constitutive of the primitive in Indian society.

Marginalization and Language

In the pre-colonial Indian epistemologies of language, hierarchic segregation in terms of a 'standard' and a 'dialect' was not common. Language diversity was an accepted fact of life. Literary artists could use several languages within a single composition, and their audience accepted the practice as normal. Great works like the epic Mahabharata continued to exist in several versions handed down through a number of different languages almost till the beginning of the twentieth century. When literary critics theorized, they took into account literature in numerous languages. Matanga's medieval compendium of styles, Brihad-deshi, (Devy, 1992: Chapter II) is an outstanding example of criticism arising out of the principle that language diversity is normal. During the colonial times, many of India's languages were brought into the print medium (Devy, 1992: Chapter III). Writing was known and scripts such as Modi and Nagari were previously in use. Paper too was in use since the Thirteenth Century as a vehicle for written texts (Devy, 1992: Chapter III). However, despite being 'written', texts had been circulating mainly through the oral means. Printing technology was introduced in India during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. With it, new norms of literature were introduced, privileging the written over the oral, and bringing in the idea that a literary text needs be essentially mono-lingual. These ideas, together with the power relation prevailing in the colonial context, started affecting the stock of languages in India. The languages that had not been placed within the print technology came to be seen as 'inferior' languages. After Independence, the Indian states were conceived as 'linguistic states'. If a given language had a script and printed literature, it was granted a territory as a separate state within the Union of India. Languages that did not have printed literature, even though they had rich traditions of oral literature, were not given such states. The State language became the medium of school education. A special Schedule of Languages (The 8th Schedule) was created within the Indian Constitution. In the beginning it had a list of fourteen languages. At present the list has twenty-two languages in it. It became obligatory for the government to commit all education related expenditure on these languages alone. The languages spoken in India far outnumber the languages included in the Eighth Schedule. Most of these languages are spoken by the Adivasis and the DNTs and are on way to a rapid extinction, if not already gone.

Cultural Intervention

When I started noticing during the 1980s the alarming disparity between the development of other classes and communities, on the one hand, and the development of the Adivasis and the DNTs, on the other hand, I felt drawn to exploring the link between denial of access to the means of development and the 'structural aphasia' imposed on the marginalized languages. Towards this end, 'Bhasha', which means 'language' or 'voice', was founded in 1996 as a Research and Publication Centre (henceforth referred to as Bhasha) for documentation and study of literature in the Adivasi languages. The ultimate horizon of obligations for Bhasha at the moment of its inception was to document and publish fifty bilingual volumes of Adivasi literature. Little did I know as its founder that beyond the horizon many new worlds were waiting for it!

Within months of commencing the work on the fifty-volume series, many Adivasi writers and scholars approached me with the idea of starting a magazine in their own languages aimed at the Adivasi communities and to be read out rather than for individual reading. Bhasha accepted the idea. The magazine was called 'Dhol' (the drums), a term that has a totemic cultural significance for the Adivasis. We started using the state scripts combined with a moderate use of diacritic marks to represent these languages. The response to the magazine was tremendous. More Adivasis approached Bhasha, and asked for versions of Dhol in their own languages. In two years' time, 'Dhol' started appearing in ten Adivasi languages (Kunkna, Ahirani, Gor Banjara, Bhantu, Dehwali, Pawari, Rathwi, Chaudhari, Panchamahali Bhilli, Dungra Bhilli, respectively). When the first issue of Chaudhari language Dhol was released at the Padam-Dungri village in South Gujarat, it sold 700 copies in less than an hour. This was a record of sorts for a little magazine. Inspired by the success of the oral magazine, our Adivasi collaborators started bringing manuscripts of their autobiographies, poems, essays and anthropological studies of their communities which they wanted us to publish. Subsequently, in order to highlight the oral nature of Adivasi culture, we launched a weekly radio magazine which was relayed throughout the Adivasi areas of Gujarat and Maharashtra. All these initiatives together gave birth to a

small but focused publishing and book distribution house, which now works under the name 'Purva-Prakash', and is the first community owned publishing programme for Adivasis and DNTs. Purva-Prakash has been self-supporting though not so much a commercial venture as a cultural and literary platform for intellectual concerns, and a forum for expression in people's own languages.

Oral literature, unlike written literature, is not an exclusive verbal or lexical art. It is inevitably intermixed with song, music, dance, ritual and craft. So, Bhasha was drawn to the craft of Adivasi communities, initially in western India, and subsequently from all over India. This resulted into Bhasha's craft collection and craft training initiatives, further leading to the formation of an Adivasi craft-cooperative under the name 'Tribals First'. The objects one identifies as craft are not produced in Adivasi communities for aesthetic pleasure alone. They are invariably an integral part of their daily life. Often, such objects carry with them an imprint of the supernatural as conceived in their myth and imagination. The shapes, colours and the forms of these objects reflect the transactions in the Adivasi collective unconscious. Often, one overlooks the fact that the metaphysical matrix of the Adivasi thought process differs markedly from the philosophic assumptions of the dominant cultural traditions in India. Therefore, sometimes simple concepts and ideas, which look perfectly natural and secular, can provoke Adivasis into reacting negatively, and even violently.

Development Challenges

I learnt the hard way that there is a common source for the dominance of the red colour in Adivasi art, and for their utter unwillingness to donate blood even when a kinsman is in dire need, namely, the supernatural belief that the domain of witchcraft is red in colour. Medical sciences maintain that a certain genetic mutation, required in order to fight malarial fevers, has made the Adivasis prone to the Sickle Cell disease (Tapper, 1999). On learning about the Adivasi trauma, we decided to check the statistics of the Sickle Cell anemia in Gujarat where Bhasha was most active. Blood testing of the Adivasis is a challenging task. So we decided to draw up mathematical models, and at the same time composed an extensive family-tree through a survey that took us over two years to complete, to isolate certain localities, villages and families that could provide clues for coming up with the most reliable projections. We found that nearly thirty-four percent of Gujarat's Adivasis have been 'carriers' of the genetic disorder, and for about three and a half percent of the population the Sickle Cell disorder is 'manifest'. This means, at least in principle, about two hundred and ten thousand of Gujarat's seven million Adivasis are likely to not attain the age of thirty (Devy, 2003). What is even more saddening is that the available healthcare system has not been sensitive to the epidemic scale of the gene disorder; and in most instances it remains inaccessible. As a result, Bhasha decided to launch its healthcare programme under the title 'Prakriti'. Obviously, we did not wish to create large hospitals but rather a small and functional clinic. To this end, we started training local persons as community health workers so that the patients in the 'crisis'

situation could be identified and provided immediate relief locally and referred to urban hospitals for further treatment. Thus, beginning with aesthetics, we came up to anesthetics.

Often, shortages caused by the larger economic forces push a social sector from its subsistence-farming character into becoming pauperized labour providers. The acute food shortages faced by the Adivasis in Kalahandi and Koraput in Orissa, and their mass migration to the mining districts in other states are not exceptional stories. Though their main occupation is agriculture, Adivasis have been under-nourished throughout India, and sadly enough starvation death is not uncommon among them. In 1999, Bhasha decided to set up food-grain banks for Adivasi women to address the issue of food security. Initially, we had decided to follow the government model of food grain banks; but we realized that they had come to be seen by Adivasi villagers as charity distribution events, and so we chose to set up the grain-banks without any government contribution and entirely through local participation. Our consideration at this stage was that no effort towards reducing the Sickle Cell incidence was likely to succeed if it was seen in isolation from the question of forced migration and food-insecurity. Food-security and healthcare form, for Bhasha, a single concern.

A year earlier, in 1998, we had decided to establish the DNT-Rights Action Group. It was the first national campaign ever taken up for the cause of the DNTs. In this campaign we moved the National Human Rights Commission and various Ministries of the Central Government to abolish the Habitual Offenders Act and to provide a rights protection mechanism for the DNTs. Bhasha's energetic campaign for the DNT rights received an overwhelming response from the denotified communities. We had opened up a long festering wound. As a leader of that campaign I had to give a very serious thought to turning the anger and frustration among the demonized, brutalized and politically vandalized DNTs into a constructive energy. In order to contain the anger, I decided to use the most ancient method of getting people angry without making them destructive, which is 'theatre'. My experience of handling the violence within the minds of these communities has left me profoundly convinced that theatre is probably the most powerful cultural means of sensitizing communities about the mutual entanglement and dependence of economic, social and cultural rights of several competing and clashing social sectors. Bhasha has now its own theatre group 'Budhan' named after a DNT killed while in police custody. (Devy, 2003; Schwarz, 2010). Apart from the Budhan Theatre, we have so far successfully established four annual cultural festivals in as many locations of Gujarat, one of which is Dandi– the place made sacred by Gandhi's salt-satyagraha. Adivasi and nomadic performers go to these four locations on their own and people from several states participate in thousands. These 'melas' (festivals) are now there to stay. The DNT rights campaign of Bhasha resulted into setting up of a National Commission by the Government of India. Additionally, a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) was created by the Prime Minister's Office. I chaired the TAG and prepared a comprehensive report for the government which was used for bringing in a new legislation and a comprehensive social security scheme for the DNTs.

Economy and Culture

Ever since the Adivasis were brought under the provisions of the Colonial Forest Department, their access to forest produce has been continuously diminishing and they have depended merely on rain-fed cropping. These historical legacies have forced them into a chronic indebtedness. At the same time, the rising costs of seeds, fertilizers, fodder and electricity, as well as the need for educating children have multiplied the cash needs of the Adivasis. Unlike the caste Indians, who first earn and then spend, the Adivasis like to spend first and then earn, just enough to meet those expenses. As such, their need for short term borrowing has increased over the years. The repayment of loans is very rarely defaulted by them, even when no written contracts are signed. In fact, these needs and habits should have been seen as a great opportunity by the formal banking sector, which is barely in existence in the remote and inaccessible Adivasi villages. The credit delivery is almost non-existent, and it invariably takes a third party intervention to make the system work. For a majority of the Adivasis institutional banking, requiring complicated documentation at every stage, is an alien notion. On the other hand, the procedures of a private money lender are easily understood by the Adivasis though the interest rates are exorbitant.

When we noticed in 1999 that the interest rates ranged between 60 to 120 percent, we took up the task of setting up micro-credit Self-Help-Groups (SHGs). Our challenges were far too many: getting the Adivasis to understand and accept the formal bank institution as an economic person was a challenge of some magnitude; but even greater was the task of educating the bank employees on their own schemes, the micro-credit policies of the NABARD (National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development) and the economic concerns of an NGO such as Bhasha. The trickiest question was the peculiar social character of the private money lender. These are extremely influential among Adivasis, and they maintain extremely complicated and not easily terminable accounts with their clients, a system that treats cash, land, grains and labour as inter-convertible currencies. Not surprisingly, therefore, the money-lenders teamed up against Bhasha's SHGs as soon as the Adivasi farmers stopped going to them for loans. I felt quite amazed when some of the SHG members started bringing in currency notes, all new and serially numbered, to pay off the bank loans they had received barely a month ago. On enquiring, we found that the money-lenders had been distributing these notes liberally to whoever was prepared to step out of the SHG.

The unease of the money-lenders continued to increase as Bhasha's Micro-finance programme cut into the private credit market. There were moments when I felt that we should get into a dialogue with the money-lenders in order to circumvent the conflict and to introduce an ethical element in their operations. But I had a naïve hope that the formal banking system may quickly step in and grab the opportunity. The money-lenders continued to feel threatened and destroyed. Their fury expressed itself in March 2002, when the Hindu money lenders bribed, coaxed and threatened a pliable section of the Adivasis into making violent attacks on the families and properties of the Muslim money lenders. Several hundred houses were burnt down, hundreds were injured, many lost their lives, and the livelihoods of thousands of Adivasis and Muslims were adversely affected (Devy, 2003). At the height of the riots we felt that perhaps the money-lenders may succeed in restoring once again their stranglehold on the Adivasi economy. But, we found that more Adivasis started forming SHGs after the riots. In 2011, the total number of SHGs formed by Bhasha was at 2200, involving about 25000 families and with a credit worthiness of over 80 million rupees (approximately two million USD.)

Training the Community for Development

Bhasha has been providing training for the management of the groups, directing them to establishing viable occupations for getting increased income, and enabling them to form small and easily manageable federation of the SHGs. The new occupational avenues we have opened before the Adivasis include honey cultivation, specialized gum-tree plantation, brick-making and masonry, craft training and organic cropping. In the matter of setting up of micro-enterprises by putting to use the credit available, the minimum guiding principle we have followed is that the activity should not lead to migration to the urban centres. Therefore, we have been focusing more on the agriculture based value-addition activities.

Over these years, I have noticed a great hunger for learning among the Adivasis. Contrary to the popular impression, the Adivasis do want to send their children to schools. Their aspirations are belied because the primary education in the Adivasi villages is burdened with its own numerous structural problems. I have noticed that given a set of dedicated teachers even in the tiniest Adivasi hamlets, children shape up as potentially excellent university entrants. Therefore, at Bhasha, we decided to take up a programme of helping Adivasi children by establishing, in about eighty villages, support schools, to help those who have missed schooling altogether, or those who lagged behind in their school studies. Bhasha Trust established the Adivasi Academy at Tejgadh in 1999. Since 2000, we have been teaching the young men and women of the area a subject that we have named 'Tribal Studies", by which we mean "The study and understanding of how the Adivasis perceive the world." The attempt is to make our students reflect on their own situation, motivate them and to put them onto the great task of empowering the Adivasi villages by helping them to be self-reliant. The Academy offers short term training in micro-finance, and Diploma courses in Tribal Rights, Food-Security and Development, Publication and Rural Journalism and Tribal Arts and Museum Studies. The students are required to go out in the villages and set up SHGs, food-grain banks, water banks and promote the use of solar energy and organic farming. Based on their experience of field work, the students are required to write dissertations.

Conclusion

Over the last two decades, the Adivasi Academy has carried out several experiments in the area of Adivasi development. It has initiated major policy debates in relation to the economic, social and cultural rights of the DNTs and the Adivasis. However, the vision inscribed in these experiments has always been that of the communities themselves. The campaigns and the enterprises were more oriented towards generating the process of self-reliance rather than achieving quantitative success. There has been a conscious attempt at recovering the cultural memory of the nomadic and Adivasi communities, and investing it into economic and social dynamics in such a way that culture could be 'monetized'. These experiments have, from time to time, faced the orthodoxy of funding agencies in that the 'projects' that could not promise a direct economic output were rarely supported by them. This has, however, been seen by the Adivasi Academy as an opportunity to become self-reliant rather than as a stumbling block in 'development'. It is therefore that the Adivasi Academy has not stopped functioning even for a day despite long spells of having no external funding support. Irrespective of the nature of the interventions, each and every intervention has been fully owned by the Adivasi and the DNT community for which it was conceptualized. This is probably the most significant and 'valuable' feature of the Academy's experimentation. It can therefore be replicated in the context of any community in the world which faces lack of access and marginalization. Similar experiments elsewhere, taken together with the learning at the Adivasi Academy, will help us in developing the precise method of working out the conversion between economic capital and social capital.

Note

Information about Criminal Tribes Act 1871 is available in the unpublished report by the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) on Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (2006) appointed by the Ministry of Social Justice, Government of India. The author was the Chairperson of TAG and the author of the TAG Report. The population of Denotified and Nomadic Tribes can only be estimated on the basis of the 1931 Census which was the last census to have clearly enumerated all nomadic and semi-nomadic communities in India. The estimate of 60 million is based on the field research done by the DNT Rights Action Group from 1998 to 2007 culminating in the drafting of the TAG Report. The Government of India has accepted the TAG recommendations to carry out a DNT Census and modified the Census 2011 exercise to include community-wise enumeration of the DNTs.

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