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Tribal Youth in Transition: Higher Education, (Un)-Employment and Social Change

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Abstract:

Educational policies addressing the economic development of tribes have transformed their livelihoods to some extent, but more significant are the changes in their aspirations. The modern world is diffidently approving the tremendous potential in their unique heritage and indigenous knowledge, yet Tribal recourse into the modern higher education system is perceived as the only means to fight their way up the dominant culture. This creates a growing contradiction in their self-identity. Amongst these paradoxes, tribal youth who become higher educated emulate the 'modern educated' lifestyle. But changes are not uniform across states, clans, regions and areas leading to the formation of their differential world views.

This paper employs in-depth interviews with tribal higher educated youth in the left-wing extremism affected areas of Jharkhand and uses Albert Hirschman's theory of *exit, voice and loyalty* to understand three distinct means of trade-off with the modern education system and tribal lives.

Paper: <u>The Issue</u>

Pravi narrates his childhood experience to me:

"Humko apna poora bachpan ma se duur rehna pada. Baba ko shauk tha accha se padhai kare. Bachpan me toh bahut mann kharab hota tha, lekin abb lagta hai fayda hi hoga aage." (I spent my entire childhood away from my mother, in a town, where my father kept me for better education. Yes, it was harrowing, but I am hopeful of a good job now).

Pravi is one of those innumerable tribal youth demanding their share of development benefits after higher education. However, the employment scenario for the marginalized population in India is grim. The growing inequalities in access to education, employment, and income remain a concern, despite the increasing GDP[1]. Youth' wait' in a 'limbo' position for their chances of translating acquired educational capital into a commodity for the job market[2]. The gravest concern lies for the marginalized groups, the likes of Pravi. Compared to higher educated Dalits and Adivasis, data reveals

that other castes have more professional or merchant/sales/clerical occupations. The scheduled tribes show an improved participation rate in higher education over other vulnerable sections in the urban areas. Yet tribal unemployment rates, compared to other groups, remain constantly high[3]. Data also shows a trend of mismatch between the proportion of higher educated tribals viz-a-viz formal employed[4]. Hence, while higher education is known to confront disparities, it may also act as a space where inequalities prevail along class, caste, gender, religious and regional lines.

Objective, Rationale and Methodology

This paper capturing the tribal social changes is a part of my broader empirical research. I examine the different factors influencing the participation and transition of tribes from higher education to employment in the urban districts of Jharkhand (a state with 26.3% tribal population). The results are derived from intensive in-depth interviews, in several stages, using a semi-structured interview guide with 20 female and male tribal youth, at least graduates and employed in the formal sector or unemployed. Additionally, I conducted respondent socio-economic profiling (questionnaire method), observation (in natural settings during the interview for their demeanour, linguistic skills, preferences, beliefs, and behaviour), Focused Group Discussions, and Key Informant Interviews for data triangulation.

Results and Analytical Framework

The results indicate, though educational policies addressing the economic development of tribes have transformed their livelihoods to some extent, more significant are the changes in their aspirations, belief systems, communal life, and self-identity[(Figure 1)]. Tribal youth try to negotiate between emulating the 'mainstream *elite*' lifestyle while seeking to remain a 'tribal' at heart. This paradox has been analysed using Albert Hirschman's theory of 'exit, voice and loyalty[5].' He observed a wide range of possible actions by individuals associated with any firm, organization, or state in the times of its decline. Arjun Appadurai uses this concept to understand people's behaviour as ambivalent towards cultural norms and not comprising of mere 'loyalty.' A unipolar view of social change can lead to confusion while planning for any community or group[6]. For example, employed respondents in my research have complained about 'employer's biases' and discriminatory practices in colleges based on their ethnicity. As a result, their perception of '*tribalness*' is negatively affected, and they prefer to 'exit,' assimilating themselves to the mainstream. Unfortunately, the modern education system not leading to employment opportunities stirs anxieties amongst the tribes leading them to choose between exit and loyalty.

Amongst the unemployed respondents, a greater struggle is seen. Primarily guided by traditional norms, 'loyalty' disillusions the scheduled tribes to continue suffering under the patronage of the elite. While education helps them surpass several social barriers, their fatalistic attitude, fear of 'ethnocide' is a barrier to gainful employment.

Between 'exit' and 'loyalty' is 'voice'- an informed dissent. For example, educated Adivasis are voicing for proportional representation of scheduled tribes in state employment. Voice is not merely a reflection of the material 'wants'; it is an attempt to stress their ethnic identity against 'isolationist' educational strategies. It is one of the most favourable outcomes of the education system and needs to be encouraged- as agency of the tribes. This research outcome has furthered my doctoral research on tribal agency in higher education.

Conclusion

Freedom that Amartya Sen talks about emerges out of this voice[7]. The education system needs to focus on providing the indigenous with the means to understand their past and analyse their present for creating a future, by recognising their voices for a strengthened agency.

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Figure 1: Tracing the Trajectory of Change