

Rethinking Tribal Development through Participatory Planning –The Birhor Experience

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Abstract: Tribal communities need to be treated as ethnic entities with uniqueness in all facets of their life, living and livelihood. Development initiatives need to recognize this ethnicity in all its phases of intervention, inclusive of prioritizing, planning, implementation and even the analysis of the outcome. Will such a methodology for human development be feasible? Following the framework of Amartya Sen's capability approach can 'development' be redefined as (i) participation and involvement of the community in prioritizing their needs and thereafter (ii) expansion of individual capabilities through provisioning of such priorities and opportunities? The research paper will pivot around this central question.

Key words: tribal community, awareness, choice, participation, institution

1. Introduction

"...The development of these people is very much more than mere implementation of the works programmes. It involves social processes to be set in motion, through a correct grasp of their culture, traditions and current problems. ..." (Sachchidananda 1960)

The tribal population in India has been in the glare of publicity historically from the development perspective. The approach for an appropriate development policy for the community has been at the crux of the debate for ages. Ever since Independence the policy of 'protection and integration' or assimilation of the tribal community with the general population in phases has been the development approach of the government. The tribal community had an inherent efficiency to adapt and ensure survival in any ecological setting. But the development programmes, intervention by private organisations coupled with aggressive ensnare of the market economy have brought about both spontaneous and induced changes that silently transformed their socio-economic milieu and above all their mind set. Neither could the community stiff up their resilience to care for their ethnic boundary nor did they banish their ethnicity completely and hurl themselves in the market economy. A part of the community tried their best to mould, adjust and get themselves badly accommodated within the fold of market mechanisms, though such transformation had been a slow process. The remaining others were frustrated with bewilderment, as they realised their inability to adjust to the changing scenario. But the aggressive ensnare of the market economy coupled with welfare-

oriented development programmes silently transformed the tribal socio-economic milieu. The traditional non-market principles of allocation, distribution, transaction, reciprocity which bonded the tribals in an ethnic community were smoothly replaced by preference for private ownership, laws of inheritance and competition. Political democratization, neo-liberal reforms, intrusion of consumer culture catalysed the ongoing transformation as a dynamic process in the tribal society. Nevertheless they have been surviving, struggling relentlessly to adapt and attune with the mainstream concept of 'development'.

There has been conceptual transition in tribal development policy also. Anthropologists interpreted tribal development as programmes targeted for induced changes for fulfilment of desired objectives (Danda 1989). Such programmes failed to bridge the tribal-nontribal development gap that existed historically (Basu 1989).

There has been a conscious shift ".....from a dedicated focus to tribal welfare, to the concept of development as 'empowerment'....." (Nayak 2012) that challenged their traditional communitarian culture. Exposure to free market social relations transformed the community into a 'desire'- based 'consumer' society trying best to re-orient for achieving their immediate wants (Haug 1986). With low entitlement to participate in the market mechanism, such a policy shift from 'need'- based development approach to a 'desire' based one have resulted in poverty and backwardness. The 'desire' of the community to follow the mainstream people was frustrated by their incapability to participate in the market mechanism. Added to it was the limited role of state in the contemporary development planning process augmenting their impoverishment all together. The debate regarding their 'development' no longer focuses on 'segregation' or 'assimilation' right now. The situation calls for rethinking the concept of development and the role of institution that would blend the elements of mainstream modern life with their indigeneity thereby facilitating their transition for a better living.

Tribal development need to be contextualized as a subset of this bigger set of tribal transformation. The study has been aimed to concentrate on this point.

1.1 The context

The Bihors of Purulia, West Bengal have truly been the 'people at the periphery'. Being an offshoot of the Mundas of the Chhotanagpur plateau, till recently they led a nomadic life depending exclusively on the forest for food, livelihood and shelter. The forest formed an integral part of their culture and tradition. The Ministry of Home Affairs identified these people as 'Scheduled Primitive Tribe' during the Fifth Plan and thereafter, time to time the government took planned initiatives for the development of this community.

According to the West Bengal Scheduled Tribe Community Census Data of 1991, the Bihors constitute only 0.02% of the total tribal population of the state, there was 855 persons in total. In West Bengal they are mostly concentrated in Purulia district where 271 persons reside in four Gram Panchayat of Baghmundi, Balarampur and Jhalda-I blocks of Purulia. Development planning in West Bengal, or even in India, has attempted to foster social and economic empowerment of the tribals by ensuring and promoting food security, health, education, employment and income. The Development Assessment Report on the PTGs of West Bengal, 2005-2006 depicted a detailed analysis of utilization of the government fund sanctioned and spent for the development of the Bihors. Till 2005, Rs 61,01,000 has been sanctioned while Rs. 56,83,701 were already spent till 15.12.2005. Fund was allotted for construction of houses

(49 units) & sanitary latrines (43 units), providing drinking water facilities, schemes for agriculture & irrigation, construction of community halls, preparing approach roads within the village and most importantly for distribution of 22 goatery schemes (Rs 3,30,000) and 23 piggery schemes (Rs. 5,25,665).

But such sanctioning and utilization of fund were not successful enough to bring significant changes in the life and living of the Birhors. Beyond all these official statistics, research and developmental efforts, the Birhors lived on vulnerably. Their living demonstrated a sorry state of planning. Their standard and mode of living indicated that 'development' had been a remote target yet to be achieved. They needed apt intervention. At this backdrop a research initiative was undertaken to identify (i) the causes of their backwardness and (ii) their need, besides initiating a process of 'holistic' development with a sustainable long run perspective for them.

1.2 The research question

Tribal communities need to be treated as ethnic entities with uniqueness in all facets of their life, living and livelihood. Development initiatives need to recognize this ethnicity in all its phases of intervention, inclusive of prioritizing, planning, implementation and even the analysis of the outcome. Will such a methodology for human development be feasible? Following (Sen 1999) can 'development' be redefined as (i) participation and involvement of the community in prioritizing their needs and thereafter (ii) expansion of individual capabilities through provisioning of such priorities and opportunities? The research study pivoted around this central question. An intrinsic form of 'social exclusion' has isolated the tribe from the contemporary social order, mode of living and perception. How can 'development' be defined for this primitive tribal community? How can such 'development' be initiated? How will the community respond to such initiatives? Given the strong theoretical linkage between institutions and economic growth, the study explored the functioning of institutions as vehicles of access to information, preference formation, collective decision and better translation of development endeavours.

1.3 Objectives of the study

An intrinsic form of 'social exclusion' has isolated the tribal community from the contemporary social order and world view. At this backdrop a special programme was undertaken to study the 'development' and / or underdevelopment perspective of the community. The main purpose was to delineate the factors that have been impeding the community to participate in the development programmes spontaneously. The main objectives of the study were:

- To underline the *distinct* social boundaries of the community that set it apart from the mainstream population
- To assess the *perception* of development, empowerment and/or awareness of the tribals
- To study the knowledge, perception and participation in the functioning of *institutions* in the community

These were supposed to be the benchmark for initiating a development framework with a sustainable long run perspective, for ensuring well-being of the community. These had been the central questions while undertaking the research study.

1.4 Research methodology

Instead of listing the achievements and failures of the government initiatives against the stated goals, the study aimed to identify why the initiatives have been failing in practice. Collective enquiry followed by experimentation with the revealed knowledge and information was undertaken through a participatory action research framework. Starting from December 2013 till June 2018, the study was planned and executed in a unique manner beyond the conventional questionnaire based survey and research method. Initiated with a collaborative enquiry through informal repeated interaction both at the household and community level, the research revealed facets of backwardness as well as welfare opportunities of the community which remained unobserved or overlooked. Thereafter development schemes were planned at the community level, most importantly by the people and with active support from a number of government departments few of which were immediately implemented on an experimental basis.

The paper is organized in the following manner. The second section elaborates the process and outcome of the participatory action research method that has been followed as the basis of the research study. Based on the findings of the enquiry process the third section itemizes suitable development interventions discussed and designed at the community level. The fourth section details the outcome of the development initiatives undertaken. The fifth section concludes with submission for redefining the concept of 'tribal development'.

2. A Collaborative Enquiry

Repeated interaction beyond the conventional questionnaire based survey and research was adopted from the outset. It was clearly understandable that unless the tribe people exchange words, their thoughts and perception, no intervention would be possible. Therefore, instead of treating them as mere beneficiaries of governmental planning, they were deemed as partners with equal stake to make the forthcoming programmes successful. Personally the author visited every house in the village and initially stayed with the families for long time to ensure interactive acquaintance in order to get them slowly acquainted with the development motive and approach. Chatting with the womenfolk while collecting water from the village well or on their way to bathe in the river, casual discussions with the elders in the evening gradually smoothened the interaction process. A rapid stock taking of the previous programmes and their versions of failure and shortcomings were carried out as the first step of reconnaissance. In spite of the language barrier the people were found to communicate their disadvantages, viewpoints and expectations amazingly. This revealed a unique pattern of life and living of the Bihors that the government had never before considered important to look into. There had been a valid reason for the failure of the earlier programmes which if reviewed thoroughly would have highlighted the inherent constraints of this tribe community.

2.1 Threatened Livelihood:

Originally they were forest dwellers (just 30 years back). They have the traditional expertise in rope making and that too from the *Chihor Lata*. At present neither do the Bihors find *Chihor Lata* in abundance due to rapid deforestation, nor do what their prepared ropes fetch a good price in the market. They use plastic cement bags as substitutes for *Chihor Lata*. Also besides being cultivators they have started earning as wage labourers. In spite of their inherent expertise in rearing livestock and the government providing piggery & goatery schemes there was just a

few houses in the village with animals. Also schemes for making rope from the babai grass distributed to 28 families turned ineffective. Appropriate combination of income generation activities needed to be designed and allotted to each family, so that they get an assured flow of income round the year.

2.2 A Zero – Balance Concept of Living:

These people were surprisingly found to have no concept of ‘future’ and therefore no planning initiative. Even they were not aware of their needs. They were needed to be made sensitized about the proper use of money. Rather, they should have been taught and tutored about a regular thrift practice.

2.3 Poor Standard of Living:

Life expectancy of these tribals has been significantly low. The causes behind such low expectancy needed to be enquired comprehensively. Food habits, nutritional status, burden of diseases, health seeking behaviour and health service facilities available to this population needed to be studied family-wise to ensure long and healthy life for these people.

2.4 Growing Indifference for Education:

A majority of Birhor children could not access schooling facilities (above primary level) because of their low level of awareness. The families considered their children to be more important as earning members. They have an even lesser perception, incentive and initiative to provide formal education as a prerequisite for their child’s future.

2.5 Alcoholism:

More often than not, the Bihors earn money on a regular basis. But consuming alcohol has been customary and an integral part of their culture and tradition. In this respect it must be mentioned that the alcoholic drink that they used to prepare earlier from the *ChihorLata*, was much less alcoholic than what they purchase now from the local markets. What has been more harmful is that, often they stay without food day after day but consume alcohol every night without a break.

Based on these observations and also that lump sum fund being spent by the government in successive phases, it was concluded that:

- Further intervention for development was needed through thorough discussion with each and every family of the community. They must be sensitized and made aware of the threats to their existence as well as the initiatives undertaken. Unless an attitude of utter co-operation was developed among the people no planning would be worthwhile. The entire community also was in need to be sensitized to have a sense of ownership, responsibility and accountability for the income generation schemes or grants. These tribals being community-oriented, collective interference was assumed to be more acceptable rather than individualistic approaches.
- Keeping in view the earlier dismal experiences of rearing livestock (22goatery schemes amounting to Rs. 330000 and 23 piggery schemes valuing Rs. 525665) , a strict monitoring system was in need to be instituted. Particularly important was provisioning an appropriate animal husbandry and veterinary service for all the beneficiaries. The families were to be sensitized about the long run benefits of rearing livestock. Given their acute poverty, the families have been observed often to be allured by the immediate low market price rather than

planning for a long run earning opportunity. A sustained and continuous source of a minimum subsistence earning may help wither away such tendencies.

- Prior to suggesting and designing contemporary livelihood opportunities, like preparing sal-leaf plates, providing training and giving driving license to unemployed youths, building up irrigation facilities etc, the authority should discuss and consult with the targeted beneficiaries to know about their eligibility, ability, willingness and most importantly their knowledge of the future prospect of the activities they plan to undertake. These forest-dwelling people were found to have an inherent acquaintance with the forest and so any sort of livelihood opportunity centered on forest may be more acceptable to them.
- Awareness in regard to the role and contribution of education for economic upliftment, at the community and individual level, was necessary. Interventions were necessary for (i) improving and provisioning education particularly after the primary level, (ii) sharing the cost of education and (iii) designing incentives for accessing education.
- Health, in general needed to be prioritized for ensuring better living. In this regard, apart from bringing together all the information (as stated earlier) adequate planning must be made for: (i) monitoring the ICDS centre within the village and encouraging more enrolment and better coverage of the mother and child care programmes, (ii) regular contact with the local doctor to remain aware of the health related problems, medications and other health requirements, (iii) involving the government health facilities available to design and implement special programmes for this community, and (iv) formulating community medical schemes.

Last, but most important, an integrated beneficiary level planning and that too with a long run perspective including most exhaustively, all the dimensions of social and human development, is required immediately, to save these people from extinction.

With these observations and inferences the Bihors were visited time and again. The author stopped at the house of each family and discussed particularly, with the mothers about their awareness, orientation, expertise, and most importantly their need. The preference and constraints for suitable adoption of income generation schemes, e.g., animal husbandry schemes varied among the families. It was identified that the families required to be aware of the suitability of the place where they would keep the animals, besides collecting food for them, arranging for their daily care and all such niceties to keep the animals alive and healthy. Again no unique thumb rule could be suggested to assess the requirement and feasibility of all the families as a whole. Each family had its own set of constraints and preference. But, unfortunately, they were not conscious of their inadequacies. They needed to be sensitized about every detail of rearing the animals. However, any planning for ensuring long run benefit from the schemes must target family specific intervention. What was indeed worth mentioning was their common eagerness for better living. Each family was in need of proper individual supervision and monitoring. They required to be tutored recurrently about the methods for reaping long run benefits from the stock of animals provided under any government scheme, lest they would sell them off at the early stage to earn money. All these necessitated ensuring an adequate and compulsory veterinary service for all the beneficiary families prior to providing the livestock as a pre-condition for effective implementation of the animal husbandry schemes. Next to this, the mothers who were subsequently planned to be provided with income generation schemes, ought to be introduced with a regular and routinized saving practice, if at all the families were aimed to be put on the path of economic development. Along with the schemes planned, a range of intermediate financial assistance, specifically loans amounting to

Rs500-Rs 2000 for three-six months period at cheaper interest rate for either rope making, agriculture, poultry or whatever they feel suitable, was planned to be provided to each family to help them earn their daily subsistence during the gestation period for the animal husbandry schemes.

3. Action learning

Based on these observations a workable guideline for successful implementation of the development schemes was suggested on an experimental basis:

- (i) Individual communication with each family was supposed to foster a sense of accountability required for any worthwhile intervention for development. At the same time the community in total, was needed to be sensitized to have a sense of ownership, responsibility and accountability for the income generation schemes or grants.
- (ii) The concept of 'saving' was required to be introduced among the beneficiaries as an integral and a compulsory part of scheme implementation in order to make a sustainable endeavor.
- (iii) A strict monitoring system needed to be instituted. An individual from among the Birhors was to be identified and appointed by the LAMPS as Sahayak who would be entrusted to look after proper implementation of the programmes.
- (iv) Particularly important was installing an appropriate veterinary service for all the beneficiaries with the assistance of the Block Livestock Development Officer (BLDO). An additional veterinary service-facilitator (Prani Mitra) from among the Birhors should be trained up to ensure a day-to-day support and care for the animals.

In between the process of developing acquaintance, analyzing the state of underdevelopment and understanding the crux of the problem, a series of allied activities were undertaken which were supposed to foster development in a broad sense. Keeping in view the acute shortage of water for irrigation, drinking and other household activities, two specific programmes to reap the benefits of the prevailing monsoon in agriculture and forestry were planned and carried out.

3.1 Agriculture & land development initiative:

Unlike the other tribes the Birhors did not have the competence, adaptability and planning for cultivation at least for their subsistence living. The other tribes in their neighbouring cultivable areas who cultivate in the similar rain fed condition with a high chance of a late- drought somehow managed a good harvest. Surprisingly, the Birhors never dared to cultivate any crop other than paddy, though they rarely had a good yield. Rice, being the only food (a handful of rice boiled in a pool of water, *mar-bhat*) somehow or other they were used to either cultivate paddy in their own land or obtain it as payment for their labour in other's cultivable land.

Necessary technical information, training and seeds were provided for (a) cropping on the boundaries of the paddy fields, (b) cultivation of arhar, soyabean, groundnut as an interim crop along with paddy and (c) creating kitchen garden in the adjacent land to the dwelling house. The women in the village were given the plan to maintain a seed bank at the SHG level to ensure cultivation on a regular basis every season.

3.2 Social forestry:

The Bihors were essentially a hunting-gathering community, prior to their rehabilitation. A greener environment was thought to give them a feel of their forest life. 800 saplings from the Department of Forest and 300 saplings from the Department of Horticulture were provided to them in phases. The Self Help Groups in the village were engaged in sharing the responsibilities for looking after the plantations as well as distributing the benefits among the villagers.

3.3 Analysing health seeking behaviour :

The Bihors were observed to live upto a maximum age of 40-45 years. A few among them who availed the block hospital facilities, felt the service inadequate. The private medical treatment had been a costly matter and hence beyond the reach of the maximum populace. In case of acute illness they are used to go to the faith healers but such treatments often turn to be fatal. A thorough medical survey carried out by the doctors of Health Service Doctors' Association, Purulia slowly initiated a fresh sense of healthy living among the community. The doctors enquired their status of health family-wise, occurrence of disease, pattern of treatment if at all they availed, particularly to identify the cause of their frequent premature death.

4. The outcome

The Birhor women were organized in seven Self Help Groups. After completion of the official formalities, proposals for suitable animal husbandry schemes for the group members were forwarded for financial assistance under the Adivashi Mahila Shashaktikaran Yojana (AMSY) of National Scheduled Tribe Finance Development Corporation (NSTFDC), under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India. A loan amount of Rs10,000 was granted at 3% rate of interest to each applicant or each Birhor family. The Birhor women utilized the loan amount in 3 - 4 instalments. Decisions regarding withdrawal and deposition of money had always been a collective decision, though its utilisation varied among individuals.

After a period of continuous intervention and monitoring for two years each family was found to have livestock (cows, pigs, goats or lambs) on an average worth Rs. 7,000/- to Rs. 10,000/-. Almost all the women had their own savings, approximately ranging from Rs.500/- to Rs. 2000/-.

A remarkable transformation took place smoothly in due course.

- A significant reduction in alcohol consumption was observed particularly as a result of desperate women intervention.
- Eagerness for providing education to children was conspicuously visible.
- Formation of a *sholo anna* committee, for decision making at the village level was a significant development.
- Above all, the Bihors, particularly the women articulated a unique level of awareness, confidence and happiness in every sphere of their life.

Parallel to these initiatives the sholo anna committee also proposed a series of development activities to be undertaken phase-wise by the district administration.

Agricultural development:

- For re-excavating the existing tank in the village necessary scientific treatment (to lower the high rate of seepage) was proposed to develop a sustained storage of water. Incidentally the tank excavated by the government in an earlier water harvesting / agricultural development programme had no catchment area.
- A supplementary river lift irrigation in the local Kudlung river, that being the only nearby perennial source of water supply, was suggested to enable cultivation of rabi crop in a large area, which remained so far rainfed and monocropped.
- It was also in the plan to construct a *bundh*, on the adjacent Tuangara stream, would ensure additional irrigation facility to the far-off plots in the rabi season.
- For supplementary irrigation in the rabi season it was proposed to bore dug-wells (6 in the first phase and 4 in the second phase), strategically to cover the entire stretch of land.
- Providing a tractor, paddy, thrasher, hand tractor and pump sets for delivering water to the remote fields was also planned to assist the unemployed youths of the village to earn their livelihood.

Restructuring the dwelling houses:

The plans for the dwelling houses are required to be modified to the convenience of the Birhors. At least one verandah, one shed for cattles/ goats, a smokeless chullah, a few shelves were needed to be added to the existing plan.

Growing eagerness for education:

Most often the children did not continue education beyond the Ashram school, situated in the village. Even if they got admitted, they could hardly cope up with the Class-V standard, although the parents were then, sensitized to provide formal education. A tutorial home if organized in the village was expected to help in bridging up this gap. Already, 5 Birhor children were admitted to an unrecognised residential feeder school to Ekalavya school. A quota for admission of 5 Birhor children to Ekalavya school per academic session was proposed to be reserved. A literacy centre for about 100 adult Birhors if set up may facilitate development.

Day Care Creche :

As the Birhor men and women leave home almost every day for earning their livelihood, the children roam about in the fields without care. To ensure minimum nutrition and proper care, a crèche was planned to be set up in the village.

Other developmental activities:

The Birhors had a total land ownership of 25 acres, though the number of families increased to significantly. They had a very small piece of homestead land other than their cultivable plot. One piece of land at the middle of the village, belonging to a tribal family of the adjacent village, was thought to be purchased, if possible. This was expected to help further planning at the village level.

Future plans

- Mobilising the women to undertake long term savings/ insurance policy for their children
- Training up of the youths (all within 18-20 years) of the male Self Help Groups in the village, as the fore-runners of modern concepts of development
- An alternative source of entertainment (traditional musical instruments) to be provided to reduce alcoholism
- Introduction of mushroom cultivation (initially in ten families) for own consumption
- Installation and compulsory use of latrines at the household level
- Introduction of smokeless chullah at each house

It has been the local notion that these people lived on trees and in houses made of Chirhor leaves. Even they did not know about cooking and eating rice. Till today hunting in the forest has been a significant part of their joy and sorrow. After the rehabilitation programme in the 80s, the tribe suffered and survived all the odds, adapting to live within a concrete room, zero entitlement to participate in the market, lack of agricultural knowledge and even social exclusion. They hardly had any successful government intervention in spite of regular flow of funds. Neither did the administration think about implementing a special development package beyond the conventional planning procedures well-suited and designed recognizing the natural, behavioral and social constraints of the primitive tribe. The tribe underwent a peculiar form of 'development' where neither had they been capable to retain their historical past living and behaviour nor did they learn to lead a social life unlike the Santals or such other local tribes. The local Panchayat, block administration remained completely ignorant of the specific developmental needs of the Bihors as exclusive and different from the rest of the tribal population. They needed to be mainstreamed.

5. The lessons learned

Beyond all the research and planning efforts and their expected outcomes, the tribal community was surprisingly observed to undergo an immense behavioural and attitudinal change. An informal approach was adopted rather than a designed concerted intervention, targeted exclusively for promoting 'development'. The study elucidated two 'gaps' in the development planning process for the marginalized communities. First, the community is capable enough to define and identify their underdevelopment and/or development issues. Second, their participation and interaction is necessary for any intervention to be effective. Day by day they were observed to get familiarized and above all interested in organizing Self Help Groups, conducting meetings, participating in training workshops, planning their own agriculture and irrigation needs, regularizing the ICDS in their village and such other related activities which they felt necessary for their better living. As time passed, a slow yet definite variation was witnessed in some aspects of their living. Their confident and encouraging attitude revealed a new example in development planning for the tribal community that may have been yet thought about. Initiatives for inclusive development should match and emerge from the grass root level recognizing the context, diversity, values and ethos of the beneficiary community. Keeping in view the distinct social boundaries of the community, tribal development should be redefined as the facilitating process for individual choice formation through collective action. Rather than as a general scheme adopted and implemented by the

administration, 'tribal development' need to be considered as a 'concept,' a subset of development planning with a few distinctive features which are crucial for implementation and its success thereof. In summary, the Birhor experience illustrates a virtual gap between the policy makers' perception of 'tribal development' and the hard reality in existence that stifle these backward communities to reap the full benefits of government planning.

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