Woes and Worries of the Tribal Women in Punjab

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In the present era of modernization and development each and every society is trying hard to move up the scale of these parameters of a modern society and reserve a berth for itself in the slot of the developed and civilized nations of the world with a high score on the HDI (Human Development Index). Unfortunately despite claims of shining India and an emerging power in the world, the plight of women in general and tribal women in particular is still a matter of serious concern. In a recent survey India lags far behind most of the neighbouring countries, leave aside the developed ones on the scales of women development and empowerment.

The state of Punjab is no exception on this count of female backwardness. Most disturbing is the lowest sex ratio in the country and increasing incidence of foeticide and crime against women. It is a matter of shame for the so-called advanced and progressive Punjabi society when tribal respondents remark: "We do not kill our daughters." The number of tribal women per one hundred tribals was 98.2 according to the 1971 census—a ratio indicating good stability and balanced composition of sexes for healthy growth and survival. In this respect, the Indian tribals are at an advantage which is to be envied by the general Indian population (Pratap C. Dutta: *Female Population of Tribal India,* p. 7*).*

The reference is in the context of tribes staying in the state of Punjab. There are seven Denotified Tribes or Vimukt Jatis -Bauria, Bazigar Banjara, Bangala, Barad, Gandhila, Nat and Sansi. Their latest count according to the *Census of India 2001* stands at 436,809 persons. The Bazigars have the highest population (208442) followed by Sansis (105337) and Bauria (102232). The Nat (1071) and Gandhila (3283) have the lowest population. Most of these tribes have populations distributed more in the rural areas though some like Nat are largely urban. All Jatis have their areas or districts of concentration though these may be distributed fairly well in other parts of the state as well. But some of them do not have a single person at certain places.

The British Empire had declared these tribes criminal under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1872 that was later modified in 1911. According to David Arnold, 'the Criminal Tribes Act was used against "wandering groups", nomadic petty traders and pastoralists, gypsy tribes, hill and forest dwelling tribe, in short, against a wide variety of marginal who did not

conform to the colonial patterns of settled agricultural and wage labour.' (1985: 85) The Criminal Tribes Act remained enforced even after India's independence on 15 August 1947. Finally, the derogatory tag of 'criminality' was removed from all such tribes of the country on 31 August 1952. Now they are called denotified tribes or *Vimukt Jatis*. It is ironical that the tribes of Punjab along with others celebrate this day as the day of their 'independence' and not 15th August. However, in Punjab, this independence did not promise any special facility to educate these people to bring them into the mainstream and the state government has hardly any programme to rehabilitate them with guaranty of livelihood.

The Denotified Tribes or Vimukt Jatis had been struggling since long to acquire the status of Scheduled Tribes. The State Govt of Punjab adopted and implemented all the safeguards provided in the constitution. In pursuance to Amendment Act 1976, (No. 108 of 1976 dated 18th September 1976) of the Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi the Punjab Govt declared the following 37 castes as Scheduled Castes in the state of Punjab:

> Ad-dharmi, Od, Pasi, Parna , Pherera, Sanhai , Sansi, Bhedku, Manesh , Sansoi , Sapala , Sarera, Sikligar, Ganadhik, Gadeil , Kabirpanthi, Julaha, Sirkiband, Balmiki, Chura, Bhangi, Bangali, Barar, Burar or Berar, Batwal, Bauria, Bewaria, Bazigar, Bhanjara, Chemar, Jatia Chemar, Rehgar, Raigar, Ramdasi, ravidasi, Charal, Dagi, Darain, Deha, Dhaya, Deha, Dhamak, Dhagri, Dhangri, Siggi, Dumna, Mahasa, Doom, Gagra, Khatik, Kori-Koli,Marija, Mareche, Mazhabi, Megh, Nat, Sanhal (N.N. Vyas) ,

They have formed numerous state and All India level organizations to spearhead their struggle at various levels. Some of the main organizations are All India Denotified Tribes (Vimukt Jatis) Sewak Sangh, All India Tapriwas & Vimukt Jatis Federation, Uttari Bharat Vimukt Jati Sangh, All India Nomadic Tribes Sangh, All India Tribal Communities Dal and Punjab Scheduled Tribes Dal. These federations have been celebrating 31st August as their independence day. They organize such gatherings in an attempt to bring more and more people in their fold to strengthen their struggle.

They do not know much about their history but one thing they are sure about is their Rajput ancestry, a warrior upper caste people in the hierarchical caste system. Most of them trace their ancestory to Maharana Pratap of Chittor in Rajasthan or Jaimal and Phatta. They claim that in order to survive they migrated from their native place and took shelter in the jungles as they lost the battle to Akbar. They disguised themselves by changing their dress and language etc. Instead they developed a coded language as Akbar's men chased them all

over A few of them came to Punjab as well. They fondly narrate that when they moved out from their native place they had taken a vow neither to live in the concrete houses nor to sleep on the cot (as most of them sleep on floor) till they regain their lost kingdom. (Harinder Kaur 2010)

Now their habitation is always away from the local population mainly on the deserted places, vacant plots or along the roads or railway tracks. Even when physical distance is not large, socially they remain isolated and make compact settlements. A local respondent has aptly summed up the trait of Gandhila tribe which is true of others as well: '*Eh sungad ke rehende ne*.' All these tribes used to have their distinctive settlements in terms of size and shapes but now homogenised under the spell of tarpaulins and polythene sheets. Some of them do have concrete (*pucca)* houses as the government has also allotted them small plots under such schemes of the government of India as the *Indra Awas Yojna* and advanced them some money too for building one room houses but most of them live in *kullis* or *jhuggis* (huts) made of bamboo etc.

The plight of tribal women is manifold. At the very first place they are at a great disadvantage of being tribal and above that that they are women. No doubt the tribal society does grant them equality and freedom greater than the larger rural Punjabi society that is quite conservative character especially with regard to women. But one can easily notice great complexities and contractions in the Indian tribal groups. While on one hand women are far more independent and free in certain isolated pockets, on the other they have been subjected to certain types of inequalities and oppression. The social structure and culture of these tribal groups is in a state of transition. The contact of the tribals with the outside world, the gradual process of acculturation and assimilation has, to a great extent, played a decisive role in determining the status of women. (Damina, 153). With the onset of modernization, the tribals in general and their women in particular have been pushed into poverty and drudgery as their traditional life style and occupations have been drastically affected. The theories and policies looking forward to women empowerment also suggest and tag it to their economic independence, their gainful productive engagement and not their labour spent on domestic chores howsoever useful these may be for the whole family including the man, the patriarch who alone is considered the bread winner. Starting from Marx down to the present day scholars, all toe the same line.

Ester Boserup's study *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970) has argued this point forcefully and since then that study is always quoted in support of women's independence and empowerment. Following the same logic and policy of their empowerment, when we look at the state and fate of the tribal women in Punjab, we notice that they have been disempowered further over these years. The tribal women in India have maintained the long tradition of working shoulder to shoulder with men in almost all areas of the productive system at various stages of economic development. They have maintained this pace even in the sphere of industrialization. But the industrial sphere has put the burden of the economic role more on tribal women as the new order formally separates the two types of work roles which, at times, create problems of adjustment. The discussion below shows that all tribes specialized in certain occupations and crafts for their livelihood. They would collect the raw material from the neighbouring forest, make a useful item of domestic and otherwise use from it. Take it to people, near and far in the cities or the countryside and receive something in return as its price in the form of grain or money etc. It kept them gainfully engaged in productive work and life. The earnings, howsoever meager, combined with other activities of hunting and gathering were able to sustain them over generations for centuries. And there was a well balanced division of labour for work at home and outside between men and women, young and old. The tribal women not only looked after the domestic chores but also did economically productive labour both within and outside their house. It is instructive to note the traditional occupation of a Punjab tribe called **Bazigar Banjara** as noted by B.P. Singh (2010):

> Men used to go for hunting and fuel wood collection. They took sheep/goats or cattle for grazing in the forest. They also collected honey from there. They were also known for '*tokra* meat' as they carry mutton in a *tokra* (basket) on their heads and sell from village to village. One *ser* (sear) (equivalent to a kilogram) of meat was exchanged for five *ser* of wheat or maize grain.
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> The *saf (*mat*)* and *chik* (screen) of reed were also made by them and exchanged for food items. Some rich people would also invite their men to make *sirki* (hut of thatch) in their houses. They would reward them suitably with a sheep, a goat or a even a cow when they had done a good job. The majority older people in the community are still carrying out this traditional occupation. The cutting of *sanna* grass or hemp, Crotolaria junica was done for making a *sirki.*

They also make brooms for domestic use from *kahi* grass, Saccharum spontoneum. Women would carry brooms on their heads for selling in the villages and cities. They would get some grain, wheat flour or *gur* etc. in return. They also sold needles, *suian* (small) and *gadhuiani* (large) for long stitches on quilts; bangles and small toys etc. making melodious calls for drawing peoples' attention. They have a clear prominent voice. They keep on repeating: '*Koi suian, gadhuian layo bhaine; koi damkade, bhamirian le layo; koi bhamirian bachiyan layi; koi vangan charah lo; koi surkhi lo; le lo bhaine.'*

In the words of an old respondent: ***'Is kabile da loon-tel toran vich bazigar aurtan da bahut vadda yogdaan si.'*** That is, the women of this tribe had great role in running their households. It is true even now. According to another respondent: ***'Sara din pindan diyan galian napdian, Bazigarna sham tak apne tokre khali kar ke, dane-phake naal bhar ke hi murdian ne. Mardan nalon vi kayi vaar vadh kma lendian ne.'*** Literally, the Bazigar women return home with basketful of grain in the evening after selling their goods from village to village. Many a times they earn more than their men (husbands). Their women visited households in the towns or villages on occasions of marriage or the birth of a son. They would dance there as a part of giving congratulations to the family *(vadhayian dendiyan ne)* and received some grain or *gur* in return. This happened when they left the nomadic existence and got settled in villages. Then they had *jajmans* from whom they used to get *laag* (payment of service in *jajmani* system) on festive occasions too. (emphasis added)

The case of other tribes is same even if they specialized in different occupations. For instance, **Barads**' main occupation was making *kanghis* (combs) for Adharmi *julahas* (weavers) who used these to weave *khadar* (coarse cloth) on *khaddis* (handlooms). Other household items like *jude* (small brooms), *maanje, innu, charmakhan takle dian* are made by Barad women. They sell these things when they go on *pheri. Jude* and *maanje* are used to clean the floor whereas *innus* are padded loops to protect the head while carrying load. After migrating to the present Panjab nearly two centuries ago, they started making *chhaj* (winnowing fans) and *chhabrian* (baskets) for the agricultural households. Later they switched over to making *murhe* (sitting stools made of reed) and *saf* (mattress). Women also sell bangles, *mehndi* (hinnah) and hairpins etc. mostly in Adharmi localities and obtain grains, wheat flour or money in return. (Harinder Kaur 2010)

The case of **Nat** tribe is also no different who specialize in entertaining people through acrobatic shows like rope-walking or bending over a bottle etc. Such shows are thrilling and send a chill through the spectator's spine. After the show they collect money or donations in kind as well. An interesting feature is that young boys and girls are engaged in these shows the latter being in majority. It is a treat to look at the feats of slim and trim girls. The shows however are organized and compeered by men but behind the show training and much work is rendered by women. An elderly lady also accompanies them when they move from place to place displaying their acrobatic skills. The trainer lady however does not come to the stage. The troupe typically consists of an elder lady along with various children, both boys and girls, ranging between 4 to 14 years of age. The girls in the troupe are trained by this lady. After marriage, the girls stay at home and only those move with the troupe who train and help the younger ones. So, practically the whole family moves together from place to place for earning livelihood. (Kumar 2010)

Gandhila is another denotified tribe where besides household work women are also engaged in making brooms from date palm (*Phoenix sylvestris*) leaves. The leaves collected from the trees are treated and made into brooms by women sitting at home. Once ready, these are taken by men for selling. Earlier they used to take these brooms on donkeys to different villages and used to return home after 4-5 days. Now they use bicycles. They mentioned, 'May be, because we were taking brooms an donkeys for selling that is why we were called Gandhila.' The relation of equality and status of Gandhila women is aptly summed by a Jutt Sikh male: 'When they go out, both husband and wife go together and walk together and whenever there is any conflict with other people, their women are always ahead of men, fighting in the front.' (Malkit Kaur)

The women did enjoy status and respect in the tribal communities definitely more than the larger mainstream caste society. For instance, Ibbetson and Rose (1883, rpt. 1970) have commented on the hold of the women in the Sansi tribe: "The Sansis are much under the influence of their aged women and the traditions cherished by them are a great obstacle to the reclamation of the tribe. Women whose sons have been imprisoned, died in jail or executed are said to boast of the fact." Sansis had been traditionally living in larger groups in which the joint family had been an important unit. The authority structure in the joint family was based on the patrilineal principles. The male father or the eldest among the brothers was invariably head of such joint families. But unlike other groups the position of women in this unit was prominent especially in the cases of criminal activities. If the male members of the family were executed or jailed then women folk will take over the responsibility and they were commanding the equal respect like male members.

One thing special about the women of this group is that they prefer collective and team work instead of individual work, for instance they do not work in the houses of Jat farmers like women of other lower caste groups. Where ever the Sansis have tried their own agriculture venture on the basis of contract, their women have been participating in the fields to help their male members. According to an elder Sansi respondent: "*Sadian jananian Jutt jimidaran de gharan vich kamm karn nalon khetan vich kamm karna jiada changa samjhdian ne.*" That our women prefer to work in fields instead of working in the houses of the Jutt farmers. (Bhatti 2010)

The point I wish to make here is that with present mode of modernization and development of Punjabi society their traditional occupations have become redundant and they have been rendered helpless with regard to learning modern skills. Thus these tribes have been badly hit on two counts and the worst affected are women. One, the **depletion of forests** and the government's rights on the forests have bereft them of the raw material that was made into useful commodities. It also reduced their dependence on forest for game and other food and fuel wood so very essential for their livelihood. Two, **education** the very mainstay of mainstreaming people for modernization and employment or gainful productive engagement has become illusive.

(i) **Forests:** The failure of the 1857 Indian struggle for independence against the British allowed them to treat the people and its resources for the benefit of the colonial empire. The Forest Department was established as early as 1864 and by the stroke of a pen the whole forest land was made the property of the government. The traditional rights of the tribal and other communities stood withdrawn. Furer-Haimendorf (1982: 80)writes:

> While they were forbidden to take even enough wood to build their huts or fashion their ploughs, they saw contractors from the lowlands felling hundreds of trees and carting them off,… Where tribals were allowed access to some of the forest produce, such as grass or dead wood for fuel, this was considered as a "concession" liable to be withdrawn at any time. The traditional de facto ownership of tribal communities was now replaced by the de jure ownership of the state, which ultimately led to the exploitation of the forest resources with total disregard for the needs of the tribal economy.

Commenting on the British exploitation of the Indian forests, Ramchandra Guha (1994: 22) writes:

> Whereas the first century of British rule was characterized by a total indifference to forest conservancy, by 1860 Britain had emerged as the world leader in deforestation, devastating its own forests and the forests of Ireland, South Africa, northern United States, and parts of coastal India to draw timber for ship building, iron smelting and farming. In India, a generally hostile attitude to forest preservation was reinforced by the belief, widespread among colonial administrators, that forests were an impediment to the expansion of agriculture and consequently to the generation of land revenue.

Guha continues:

> The edifice of colonial forestry was inherited by the government of independent India, and immediately put to work in the service of the state's primary goal of rapid industrialization. The national forest policy of 1952 underlies the continuity of colonial and post-colonial policies: upholding the "fundamental concepts" of its predecessor, the forest policy of 1894, it reinforced the claim of the state to exclusive control over forest protection and production.' (Ibid: 29)

The independent Indian government's policy is no less different from its colonial predecessor. The forests under state control are leased out to the contractors who let the hell loose on its produce without any regard for the people surviving on these. Furer-Haimendorf cites the case of a south Indian tribe:

> For the Chenchus, the destruction of bamboo in their habitat will be catastrophic. They depend on bamboo not only for the construction of their huts and for making many of their utensils, but above all for the manufacture of baskets and mats, which they traditionally sell or barter for agricultural produce. It is no exaggeration to say that the depletion of the stocks of bamboo in the forests of the Amrabad plateau would make the area virtually uninhabitable for its original denizens. The fact that the prospect of such a development is by no means a figment of the imagination is demonstrated by the fate of other forest dwellers of Andhra Pradesh, whose life has been totally disrupted by a forest policy unmindful of the rights and needs of tribal population. (Furer- Haimendorf: 84)

There is no change in the government's policy since then rather paradoxically it has become more extensive and intensive in tribal peoples' exploitation. The recent coal

scam running into billions has only benefitted the companies in Chhatisgarh and Jharkhand.

The present rules governing the forest in Punjab are a result of the Punjab Forest Act of 1927 which does not allow anyone to take anything out of the forest for sale in the market since it is the property of the government. The Act defines the 'forest produce as anything found in or brought from the forest'. The forest guards keep watch on any infringement of the forest property that technically speaking is also applicable to the grass as fodder for cattle not to talk of the fuel wood or timber. There had been many protests by the activists of the rights of the tribal people elsewhere against such provisions of the Act but little came out of them till 2006 when the distinction between the major and the minor produce was made and the local communities were given the right over the latter. In 2006, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) for the first time defined minor forest produce as including bamboo and *tendu* and many other things. It also gave tribals and other traditional forest dwellers the 'right of ownership, access to collect, use and dispose of minor forest produce, which has been traditionally collected within or outside village boundaries.' (Narain 2010)

The issue is neither settled nor the problem solved with the declaration of the Forest Rights Act. Sunita Narain writes:

> As my colleagues found when they traversed the country's tribal districts, the right exists only on paper. Of the 2.9 million claims settled under the FRA, only 1.6 per cent pertained to community rights. Worse, virtually no right of any community has been recognised for minor forest produce. They noted the missing right was deliberate. Governments across the tribal districts ensured no information was ever provided to people that this right was available. The technique was simple: the form issued to people to ask for rights left out this provision. (Ibid) Such developments have resulted in the loss of the forest cover that has made the tribal people paupers. From a respectable way of earning their living, howsoever bare subsistence that might have been, either by selling forest products or items made from them.

(ii) **Education**: The impact of development could have been visible if this community had been given to education. A study by the Institute of Development and Communication (IDC) has reported the literacy rate of some of these tribes is as low as ten percent. Their children hardly go to high school, for the following reasons as explained by numerous

respondents.

- Since they are nomadic, schooling of their children is not possible.
- Their traditional primary occupational skills are neither taught nor supplemented by the modern education hence of no use to them.
- Most of them are now given to begging or collecting kabad or doing some other unspecialized and menial jobs for which, as of now, they do not need any education.
- Even if educated, their wards cannot get employment since they neither have *sifarish* nor money for payment to the concerned authority.

Had the state taken care to provide them modern education and ensured different welfare measures **reaching them** the impact of development could be visible more clearly. Let me wind up the argument with a long quote from Singh 2010:

> Modernization of economy and society is a lofty idea indeed but it has proved very fatal for all types of tribal communities since they were devoid of the means of modern education central to the project of development. Its dangerous effects could have been mitigated to some extent had the Punjab Government been more concerned with inclusive development that had hitherto been lopsided. It not only favours the privileged and entrenched classes but high corruption and pilferage of grants too is responsible for the present plight of these communities. Not many studies are available but one conducted by the Institute for Development and Communication (IDC), Chandigarh in 1996 was an attempt to see the impact of government's welfare schemes on the depressed castes.
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> Of the seven Denotified Tribes it included only four (Bangali(a), Bauria, Bazigar and Sansi) in its sample. Of the 13 depressed castes ten per cent owned a house out of which 2.4 per cent only were *pucca,* i.e. made of bricks and cement. 97 per cent households were landless and 84 per cent were living below the poverty line. A community wise break up shows that 80 per cent Bangali(a), 96.7 per cent Bauria, 73.8 per cent Bazigar and 92 per cent Sansi live below the poverty line. (IDC 1996, Table 2.3 (a): 12) The overall literacy rate of these castes is 20.4 per cent only while that of the Denotified Tribes among them is abysmally low. Bangali(a) and Bauria have ten per cent each, Bazigar 12.31 per cent and Sansi 14 per cent only. (Ibid. Table 2.5: 14)

Thus these people are caught in a vicious circle of not getting out of their traditional occupation due to lack of modern skills and are coerced to begging because of lack of education since they cannot acquire it because they are nomadic and poor. Furthermore the state and the central government's various policies for their upliftment, particularly with regard to education are not reaching this community to convince them about the benefits of modern formal education. Though the Right to Education has recently been included in the list of fundamental rights of the people of India but these people are hardly aware of such rights and provisions.

Thus as a result of this lopsided and fractured development these people including women have been coerced to come to streets for begging or collecting *kabad* from morning till evening to make both ends meet for the family. Their traditional skills have been made redundant and unproductive while they were debarred from attaining the newer skills for various reasons. Consequently these people including their women are taking up odd jobs and of unskilled wage labour especially in the agricultural sector and the grain markets. During harvest season these women are actively and collectively engaged collecting grains for their family consumption besides the wages.

The worst thing that still bothers them most is the tag of criminality attached to them from the colonial times. They are still so scared that when we approached them for this research they would plainly refuse to be tribal. 'We are Scheduled Castes.' On further probing and insistence only they would concede their true identity. One senior respondent confessed: 'We do not know when some case pending against us may be opened up by the police.' Whenever there is crime the tribal women and Sansi women in particular are interrogated by the police. They are the victim of the police's first doubt. Sometimes ago three women of Sangrur district were branded tattooing *jebkatri*, the pick-pocketer on their foreheads. No doubt these women may be indulging in petty thefts at public places but the cause of their action must also be appreciated and the onus lies on the larger society that has made them worthless.

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