



Tribal Folk Culture: Struggle for Survival

KEYWORDS

harmony – nature – urbanization – education

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ABSTRACT *India has traditionally been the home of different cultures and people. Among the diversified population, a significant portion is comprised of the tribal people. The distinctiveness of the tribes lies in their rituals, culture, beliefs and above all the harmony in which they survive in unison with nature. Tribal communities lag far behind the general population so far as the standard of living is concerned. But then they have a very rich heritage of culture. They have their own religion, language, gods and goddesses, dressing, festivals, and food habits. Some of them are patriarchal and some are women oriented. The post independence era saw the tribal passing through great changes due to modernization and urbanization. The tribal people are clinging to their identity despite the external influence that threatened the tribal culture. The change that the tribal culture is passing through has both welcome and unwelcome impacts.*

India has traditionally been the home of different cultures and people. Unity in diversity is one of the most prominent features in the people of India. Among the diversified population, a significant portion is comprised of the tribal people, the original inhabitants of the land. The distinctiveness of the tribes lies in their rituals, culture, beliefs and above all the harmony in which they survive in unison with nature.

Tribals constitute 8.14% of the total population of the country as per the census 2001. Tribal communities lag far behind the general population so far as the standard of living is concerned. But then they have a very rich heritage of culture that never stops fascinate the non-tribals. They have their own religion, language, gods and goddesses, dressing, festivals, and food habits. Some of them are patriarchal and some are women oriented.

Culture can be defined as the sum total of a multifaceted way of life shaped by history, immediate and distant ancestry, reflections, responses, values, religion, language and attitudes. Culture whether folk or classical, oral or literary evolves through time. The tribal folk culture too has evolved through the passage of time sometimes for better and, in some regards, for worse.

The post independence era saw the tribal passing through great changes due to modernization and urbanization. The tribal people are clinging to their identity despite the external influence that threatened the tribal culture.

Cultural change is the change in knowledge, attitudes, ideas, behaviour, religious beliefs, and value system of individuals who compose the community or the society. Thus cultural change is a multi-faceted process. The change that the tribal culture is passing through has both welcome and unwelcome impacts. Following are some factors responsible for the cultural changes in tribal people of India:

- Statutory provisions in the Constitution of India
- The spread of education among tribals
- Expansion of communication and transport

- Industrialization and urbanization
- The Christian missionaries
- Occupational mobility
- The indifference of the young tribal

Statutory provisions in the Constitution of India have brought a lot of changes in the social, cultural and economic life of tribal people. Through some provisions in the Constitution, the government tried successfully to eradicate the educational backwardness from the tribal groups.

Education is a vehicle of social change. Through the spread of education, the tribal came in the contact with urban culture that forced them to evaluate their own traditions and customs. With modern education came modern values which have clashed with the age-old traditional values of tribal society.

The spread of the means of communication gave tribal an opportunity to interact with both tribes and non-tribes. Scientific and technological advancement have brought about changes in attitudes, beliefs, and even traditions. The circulation of newspapers, television and now the internet via smart phone has literally shaken the very roots of the tribal culture.

Infrastructural facilities such as the construction of roads and bridges over rivers have cut down the physical distance between remote villages. The roads broke the isolation of the tribal people bringing them in contact with the urban world. However, the result of contact with the outside world has not always been positive. It had many negative impacts on the traditional settings of the tribal society. In this context the famous anthropologist Verrier Elwin may be quoted, who writes from the logical point of view on Arunachal tribes, as follows:

Roads, of course, can be a curse as well as a blessing to the tribal people. In some places, they have been the means of corruption and exploitation. They have brought new diseases, moral decline and cultural decadence. They have made it easy for the money-lenders, the rapacious merchants, the liquor venders, the lawyer's tent to penetrate deep into the hills and forests. They can bring money

in, but they can also take money out. They have helped to destroy the handloom industry by the import of cheap bazaar cloth; they have brought vulgar and inferior goods to the very doors of the people.

The factor that has most influenced the socio-cultural set-up in the tribal areas is its fast pace of **urbanization**. Urbanization has allowed and attracted the tribal living in remote villages to seek jobs in towns and thus a large number of tribal populations have migrated to towns. There, they came in contact with the urban culture. The obvious change can be seen in the dressing of the tribal. We can see the tribal women dressing themselves in sari-blouse and salwar-kameez. The food habits of the tribal have also been affected by the urban culture. The fast food has entered their menu. The farming and the use of nutritious grains such nachani and kodri has been decreased and wheat has gained dominance.

The Christian Missionaries have also left their marks on the tribal culture. The direct effect of their activities can be seen in the number of tribal converted to Christianity. Tribal religions are no longer in practice and dominant religions like Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism have taken their place. The Christianity opened the door to more advanced community and exposed the tribal not only to the mainland Indian community, but also to the international community by establishing schools in tribal areas. While Christianity opened the door to international community, it robbed the tribal of their specific tribal identity.

The Christian missionaries were the pioneers in introducing modern medicine to the tribals. Formerly, the tribal used to cure diseases with their amazing knowledge of herbs available in the jungles they lived in. With the introduction to the allopathic medicines by the missionaries, this art of naturopathy is lying on its death bed today.

With the spread of modern education, a new economic class emerged. The educated tribal are absorbed in government employment and thus engaged in non-agricultural activities. They left their traditional agriculture and allied occupations and moved to urban and industrial areas. With the spread of educational opportunities, more and more young people are entering into the field of job market, leaving their ancestral villages. Tribals are gradually losing their sentimental attachment of their land and villages.

Urbanization and **occupational mobility** have made the tribal ignore agriculture that has been for ages their main profession. Formerly, the tribal were independent for whatever they ate. The organic farming of the old practice has maintained and enhanced the fertility of land. Today the use of fertilizers and pesticides has decreased the productivity of land.

The new tribal generation has become **indifferent** to the preservation of their rich culture. The exposure to education and the outer world has blinded them and they just don't find their age-old culture "cool" enough to be preserved. They have fostered a mistaken assumption that anything urban is higher and the accepted norm and that anything tribal is uncultured. The tribal ethics of simplicity and solidarity has been eroded. The age old customs and traditions have been tampered in the name of modernization and development.

Because of this indifference, many tribal arts have come on

the threshold of extinction. Music and dance have always been the most significant aspects of tribal culture. Folk songs play a vital role in the social life of a tribe. There are songs for every occasion and for many activities of daily routine. For example, the songs sung during farming activities lightened the tedium of the job and created enthusiasm in the singer. Folk songs are the mirror to the beliefs, traditions and lifestyle of a tribe to which they belong. The young tribal, impressed by the urban culture, are reluctant to learn them. The traditional music and dance have been replaced by the filmy songs and dance.

The young tribal are not interested in making and playing their traditional tribal musical instruments such as toor, tarpu, flute, bronze plate known as "thali" etc. Very few of them are aware of their duty to preserve and pass on this rich heritage to the next generation. The day is not far when such instruments will be found only in museums.

Apart from dance and music, many other crafts such as bamboo work, limpan-art etc. are also struggling to survive. RCC structures have replaced walls made of cow-dung that have been beautified further with designs called "okari" or hand paintings. Plastic items being cheap, available and long-lasting, have replaced things made from bamboo.

The young tribal celebrate their tribal festivals in modern way. The rites performed on various occasions such as birth of a child, wedding and death of a person etc. have been changed.

Thus, it is evident that tribal have changed a lot culturally, socially as well as economically due to exposure to various forces which having benefited them in many ways have also brought a number of evils in their communities. Many tribals have come to be deprived of their rights over land and forests and in many cases they are being fleeced by money lenders, big landowners, traders, businessmen and others.

In spite of this, we cannot support ideas of scholars like Verrier Elwin who advocated keeping tribals in partial or full isolation. Verrier Elwin strongly advised that these people should be allowed to maintain their traditional and original tribal life as far as possible. While we do not want tribal culture to be destroyed, at the same time, we do not want that tribes should remain 'backward' and not be benefited by industrial development, occupational mobility, education and benefits of welfare schemes. The isolation and the segregation of the tribal have made them suffer poverty, illiteracy, exploitations for ages. They have every right to come out from this nightmarish experience.

It is necessary for the educated and conscious section of the society to preserve the traditional heritage by modifications, as per the need of the time thereby minimize the damage on the social and moral values in the society. Had it not been for a few dedicated researchers, the tribal folk culture would have died long ago.

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