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HUMAN RESPONSE TO ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN TRIBAL VILLAGES OF RAJASTHAN

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Environment plays an important role in shaping economy, and culture of a society. In order to sustain their lives the people respond to the surrounding environment and develop a reciprocal system of interaction, out of which certain patterns of economic, social and cultural relationships among them come into existence. Extent of the environmental impact on these patterns, as determined by the mode of human response of technology varies from place to place and hence the economic, social and cultural systems of various complexities. In a primitive society where technology is simple and crude, a close impact of the environment on the economy is easily discernible. The technological level of the human response bears capacity to alter the environment and, therefore, the human response has to successively keep on seeking re-adjustments to the sequence of such alterations. This reciprocal system brings occupational differentiation and socio-cultural transformation, as well as holds possibilities for planning the sustainable development in the given environment. What human trials and adjustments, their socio-economic consequences and possibilities, therefrom, for future development are emerging in the wake of the environmental alterations in the rural areas specially in tribal villages of Rajasthan? The question is being attempted with reference to the three Bhil Villages of Udaipur district, namely, Pai, Alsigarh and Aad, constituting a gram panchayat- the lowest tier- of the three tier system of panchayati Raj in the State. An understanding of the traditional situation is derived from historical sources and a few interviews, with the persons in the situations. The data about the present situation are gathered through observations and interviews during the years 1993 and 1994 in the three villages under study.

THE TRADITIONAL SITUATION

The three villages located in the south of Udaipur city constitute a unit of the Griwa Block of the district. The physiography of the area is characterized by hilly terrain, ridges and undulating land. There the Bhil habitations with widely dispersed hamlets form a peculiar settlement pattern. The majority of houses is built on hill tops or slopes and the land around the house is cultivated. The houses are built with the nearest available material, i.e., wood, earth and stone. Forest and agriculture have been the two major sources of livelihood of the Bhils since the distant past. There have been, however, changes in the mode and extent of their exploitation of the

natural resources. At present they are settled agriculturists, but not long ago shifting cultivation was very common among the Bhils (Erskine 1908 : 42-43). Besides, they enjoyed greater freedom in the exploitation of the forests. About 150 years ago the forests of this region were beautiful and thickly wooded, but injudicious felling of trees by forest contractors and burning of the forest for cultivation by the Bhils damaged forests predominantly (Ibid : 52).

The Bhils - forest - dwellers since ancient times - had been undoubtedly, the masters of the forests in which they lived; free from any external intervention in their affairs. When their authority was questioned by the Rajput kings, out of the three Bhil inhabited districts (Girwa, Magra and Kotda) of Mewar, the last could not be won. Even in Girwa and Magra, there were upsurges against the contemporary rulers and the Bhils continued to realize taxes from the people passing through their territories. The Bhils concern regarding the forest can be well appreciated in the light of the fact that in the past, owing to simple and crude agricultural operations, their dependence on the forest for livelihood was very great. In pre-independence period Bhumia and Girasia Chieftains granted leases to contractors from Gujrat (1908 : 52). After independence the Forest Department of the State Government auctioned the forests to the contractors who ruthlessly cut down trees of all kinds. In 1962 the contractors received contracts related to No. 1 and No. 2 forests of pai, but they cleared even No. 3 Forests sparing no tree-green or dry. The pai people had earlier, evolved a code regarding the exploitation of the forests: the green and not-full-grown trees will not be cut, and a certain portion of the forests would not be touched at all. But the villagers too, who used to go to the distant places to join the labour camps of the forest contractors, happily joined their hands with the contractors against the forests ignoring their own code. This impelled them to a situation of scarcity of even fuel wood, building material and grass (Doshi 1974: 38-39).

THE HUMAN DYNAMICS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Obviously in the traditional situation the Bhils of the region not only received shelter, security, freedom, livelihood and life style but also fulfilled almost all their needs. With the increase in their population and gradual coming of the settled agriculture, burning of the forests under the mode of shifting cultivation and overgrazing of the forests by increasing number of animals respectively, kept on widening the scope of the damage to the forests. Cutting of the trees for cash by the townsmen of Udaipur further accentuated the problem. When all such internal factors of the Bhils were cumulatively mounting pressure against the forests, even then the existing community codes regarding the exploitation of the forests functioned for a sustaining and regenerative eco-system. But it was the contractors and the government of both pre-Independence and post-Independence-driven by commercial and revenue motives respectively and the people themselves,

with their whetted lust for cash, who at last jointly brought the forests to the brink of extinction. Today, even the unapproachable and the higher reaches have been encroached upon by the people spilling over the brims of the main phalas (Sectors) and up-phalas of these villages. Khiladi, kimri and Dhindhwar of pai, and Nala of alsigarh have no communication links with the main phalas and the outer world except long and perilous foot tracks. Forests and agriculture no more remaining the main source of livelihood, they have come to feel the crisis of fuel, fodder, food and land. In pai, the reckless exploitation of the forests has brought the villagers and the state Government, both in an interesting situation of inter - and intra - conflicts. The Forest Department of the State Government and the Pai villagers are embroiled in a 30 years old conflict over the construction of a boundary wall at the higher reaches to preserve the scant forests. In view of the villagers' resistance, the department has from time to time shifted the wall construction to still higher reaches, but the continuous pouring in of the people still in the higher reaches has further complicated the conflict. About the one-fifth of the population settled by encroachment on the land and a sufficient section of their sympathizers from the main phalas adamantly resist any move to uproot them from the lands. But a significant section of the village itself which, due to the encroachments, has been deprived of their approach to the forest produces and foresees employment opportunities in the wall construction, is in conflict with the co-villagers settled in the forests. A third section of the villagers is in favour of demarcation of the plots of land with their responsibility to protect the trees afforested in the plots and their rights to utilize fodder, fuel and other produce. Then, the Lok Vikas Samiti a cooperative society formed by the villagers to be affected by construction of boundary wall took up the matter to the High Court of Judicature, Rajasthan at Jodhpur and got the construction stayed in 1987.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

The dynamics of the environmental alterations and the series of human adjustments have brought a significant socio-economic transformation in the villages. The solely primary sector-based traditional tribal economy is now replaced by an economy differentiated into the occupations from all the three sectors - primary, secondary and tertiary.

The primary sector has differentiated into the two occupations : agriculture and sericulture. The agriculture still practised almost by all the families (99%) of the villages, is now the sole occupation only of a meagre number of the families (3%). Therefore, the agriculture, though not the only occupation, is a major occupation supplemented by one or more occupations from all the three sectors. The sericulture the cash crop initiated by the Tribal Development Department - has significantly come to stay as the allied occupation of the agriculture among a small number of the families (4%) with water facility. In the wake of cash incomes, a small size of the families (3%), has combined shop-keeping and trading in local agricultural products with agriculture and other occupations from all the sectors. The

tertiary sector is the sector massively entered and differentiated enough into a variety of services and labour. Only a few families (3%) have the occupation of service-government or private-combined with the agriculture and/or other occupations. This may be explained in terms of the low rate and level of education in the families of the villages. The labour in construction works, factory or shop, is almost indispensable for the most of the families (92%) and is found combined with the agriculture in a very great number of the families (88%). Except a few, almost all the people from these villages are daily commuters. Owing to scarcity of water and land as well as frequent failure of the rains, they cannot depend on the agriculture only, while there are few other occupations to be relied on. Therefore, they cannot escape engaging in the labour for the most part of a year. In a broad sense, the tribals of these villages, passing through the massive enlourmentization, are fast joining the class of the poor and exploited in India (Desai 1977 : 20-21). The enlourmentization bears causes for reduced participation of the members in the family, lineage, clan or village affairs and replacement of the traditional collectivity-orientation by the self-orientation which may be a source of inter-personal tensions and conflicts but with no effective social structures.

THE DEVELOPMENT POSSIBILITIES.

A few possibilities may be derived for sustainable development from the socio-economic analysis of the environmental alterations in the tribal villages. As is evident that the agricultural structure despite all the environmental as well as the socio-economic changes continues to be the major occupation of almost all the families of the villages, it is better to search new potentialities in the occupations allied or analogous to this structure. Agriculture in itself well represents an eco-system in the three dimensional relationship of man, plant and animal. The plant and animal stand in a relationship which the man manipulates to yield the maximum. In managing this relationship in the best possible way, the man has to create some supportive structures of human relations such as the cooperative societies, the government structures and the other. The people of the villages have since long been yielding the crops and rearing the cattle and poultry simultaneously. And it may be due to this that the sericulture has come to stay in the villages as an allied occupation of the agriculture. The supportive structures like the sericulture centers of the Tribal Development Department in each village and in Pai the Adiwasi Mahila Sahakari Samiti Limited are helping the villagers to understand and manage the new three-dimensional relationship. This experience may be extended to a good number of families in the villages if the supportive structures can manage water in a reasonable way. The second possibility is the afforestation which also carries the man-plant-animal relationship. The Pai imbrogio is the pointer to the new mode of management of their relations, that is the villages may be held responsible for protection of trees in the demarcated plots and be given right to have fodder, fuel and other produces. Poultry farming is the third possibility which, too, defines the man-animal-plant relationship. A large number of the families of the village has their poultry also along with the agricultural life. This may be

developed in a modern way just by creating supportive structures. All the four occupations and possibilities-agriculture, sericulture, afforestation and poultry farming represent only the different combinations and permutations of the same three factors, i.e., man, plant and animal. If these are carried out through suitable supportive structures in the villages they will prove to be mutually sustaining and regenerative and compatible with tribal culture, economy and identity in the villages. Moreover, the supportive structures managed by their own people are more effective in disseminating and sustaining the innovations. In Pai, the local woman in the Adiwasi Mahila Sahakari Samiti Limited have gained good level of confidence in making of sericultural implements and reeling of silk yarn, whereas the sericulturists have the assured disposal of the crops through it.

SUMMARY

The socio-economic consequences of the destruction of the forests are visible in the massive enlourmentization and pauperization of the people in the tribal villages of Rajasthan. However the continuing structures of agriculture holds the key to the possible sustainable development through sericulture, afforestation and poultry forming in the villages. To realize these possibilities the supportive structures are a necessity for the people in the tribal villages of Rajasthan.

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