

Dysfunctional on the Dispossessed

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About 9% of the country's population comprises scheduled tribes, with over 700 communities, of which 75 are 'primitive tribal groups'. Yet, we found on a number of field trips to Andhra Pradesh, conditions among scheduled and primitive tribes differ according to policy whims, and little else.

In a village in Vijanagaram district, we found two distinct tribes living side by side: Kondavara, a scheduled tribe, and Savara, a primitive tribe. The Kondavara reported some cultivation rights over half an acre to three acres of rain-fed land on hilly terrain but with no clear land title. But all 81 households were covered under the NREGS with ₹100 as wage, and worked on land improvement on their plantations cooperatively. They worked for wages in the nearby plains and participated in market exchange.

The Savara, being a 'primitive tribe', were under the Integrated Tribal Development Authority (ITDA). They were provided with employment on daily fixed wages to work

in the forest, but only for a few days in a year. According to the Savaras, the NREGS wages offered worked out to less than ₹20 per day and they were disillusioned with that.

The private wage this community got in the village was as low as ₹70 for men and ₹40 for women. They reared small ruminants and cattle. Savaras rarely travelled to other areas and their marriage linkages were found to be within a 10-km range amongst their own tribe. Although some land on the hills was assigned to them, they did not report clear ownership and the land could not support cereals. The scheduled tribe also occupied better, plain terrain for their homes. The primitive tribals lived on rocky hill slopes in rudimentary dwellings.

Exactly opposite trends were noted on a visit to a tribal village cluster in Prakasam district, a resettlement of the primitive Chenchus, Yerakala and Sugali, and to another cluster of non-primitive communities. The ITDA could provide one acre of land to about half of the resettled primitive families and also semi-finished single-room residential quarters, but with-

out kitchen and toilet.

The resettlement had drinking water and electricity. Men undertook bamboo-cutting and honey collection under government programmes, women also collected minor forest produce like medicinal herbs and roots. This settlement was serviced by a Girjan Society that purchased the forest produce for a given price, and were also covered under the public distribution system. We also found girls and boys educated and trained to become teachers, but with without any jobs.

The neighbouring settlement was occupied by non-primitive inhabitants living there for long. This was bereft of facilities and services available to the resettlement. Women here were not allowed to collect the minor forest produce, therefore they made baskets. The men got some bamboo on the sly from the forest. Many were in police custody for having done so.

Neither state agencies nor the ITDA had covered this settlement for the provisioning of welfare schemes, and programmes like NREGS and SHGs were absent. To my understanding, this bunch of 23

households lived a highly-vulnerable and deprived life.

In the first example, primitive tribes were found to be extremely vulnerable compared to non-primitive groups. In the second case, it was the non-primitive group that was found to be on the verge of penury.

This is due to shortcomings in policy implementation. How, why and who make these differentiations between the communities and for what purpose is not very clear. However, in the first example, the freedom and choice that the non-primitive group had, to travel and visit the plains for work and market had empowered them.

In the second example, since the primitive groups were resettled from within the forest, they were showered with benefits, while the original dwellers in the same location were left to fend for themselves.

Overall, the ST areas suffer from a lack of services like education, health and employment. Even tribal hostels for girls did not have running water and adolescent girls were seen using brooks and streams nearby for bathing and washing.

While qualified girls and boys belonging to primitive tribes remain unemployed, all government functionaries including teachers were non-tribals, commuting from the plains to work. They were seen travelling daily to work on modern motorcycles. It was also found that many inaccessible locations are bereft of institutions and personnel.

These are areas covered under the 'Schedule 5' policy established in 1950, directly overseen by the Governor of the state with the help of 'tribal advisory councils'. The tribals are easy to identify and live in clusters of their own and policies to effect group equity should be easy to implement.

But the reality is otherwise. The government seems to be running an enterprise with bonded primitive tribal groups that can be subject to 'bonded labour laws'. It also appears that in the name of protecting these communities, opportunities are denied for them to access the fruits of modern development.

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