Starvation among Primitive Tribal Groups

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The Indian state’s policy regarding primitive tribal groups amounts to a “first wreck and then rescue” programme.

This article is in response to and in continuation of Reetika Khera’s commentary on “Starvation Deaths and ‘Primitive Tribal Groups’” (EPW, 27 December 2008), which discusses the ineffective efforts by the government to provide food to these starving communities through various schemes.

This may be the right time to share the research on the primitive tribal groups (PTGs) which was carried out at the research division of the National Commission for Denotified and Nomadic Tribes. The author’s main interest in these groups stemmed from the fact that some government reports and other sources repeatedly indicate that these communities were, and still are, to a very large extent, nomadic. This prompted questions as to why these communities came to be termed PTGs, and what were their traditional means of livelihood and subsistence.

The PTGs are a subgroup identified for special attention by the government within the larger category of scheduled tribes (STs). The identification of ST itself is done on the basis of the following characteristics: (i) primitive traits; (ii) distinctive culture; (iii) geographical isolation; (iv) shyness of contact with the community at large; and (v) backwardness (Standing Committee on Labour and Welfare 2002). It was recognised by the government in 1975 that there were certain communities even within this vulnerable category which were at a much lower level of development compared to the other ST communities, and that the major share of funding went to those communities among them who were more assertive (ibid: 1.2). Hence certain groups were identified for the first time in 1975-76 (and then some more again in 1993) within the ST category, as the “poorest of poor amongst the STs” and were called PTGs (ibid: 1.3). The criteria fixed for identification of the PTG were: (i) pre-agricultural level of technology, (ii) very low level of literacy, and (iii) declining or stagnant population (ibid: 1.4).

This meant that a community, in order to be declared a PTG, had to have three additional “characteristics”, apart from the four identified for declaring it a ST. The critical ones amongst the additional three were their declining or stagnant population and the so-called pre-agricultural level of technology, which in effect referred to their shifting cultivation practices. These

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communities were said to be extremely vulnerable and “who lived in not only far-flung regions but in remote and inaccessible areas” (ibid: 1.5, 1.6, 2.10).

**Declining Food Sources**

On systematic scrutiny, it was found that almost all the communities coming under the category of PTGs used to be, and still largely remain, not only nomadic (in spite of “settlements” in which some might have been provided housing by the government) but also shifting cultivators and hunter gatherers.²

The communities which are today called PTG by the government are the ones who have been slowly and painfully dying of severe malnourishment as their traditional sources of nutrition and subsistence have been taken away some decades ago, as a result of the forest and wildlife protection policies of the government. Shifting cultivation – which is practised not just in the north-east, but also in Bihar, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, and marginally in Karnataka (Bose 1991), along with hunting/gathering practices ensured a regular supply of food to a large number of communities. Income from trading items and their derivatives obtained from the forest also allowed these communities to buy food for cash, which is now prohibited.

Forest laws have led to such communities being subjected to intense hunger for the following reasons:

(a) Depending on the altitude, shifting cultivators used to and still try and grow maize, vegetables, potatoes, ginger, chillies, rice, millets, pulses, beans, sweet potatoes, oil seeds, yams, millets, mustard, sugar cane, sesame, pineapples, citrus fruits, bananas, jackfruits and so on.

(b) Small game like fowl, rabbits, deer, peacocks, hogs, monkeys, etc, used to be an important source of protein for a large number of hunting communities.

(c) Bark, roots, tubers, corns, leaves, flowers, seeds, fruits, sap, honey, toddy and other forest produce was a regular source of nutrition for gathering communities.

(d) Fish in ponds and streams in the forest also used to be a traditional source of protein.

(e) Lack of access to pasture land for grazing animals owned by a number of these communities has led to a decline in the population of cattle which used to be the main source of milk and meat for nomadic communities which kept cattle.

Shifting cultivation has been dwindling over the years, the main reason being the restrictions put on the practice by the state. Madhu Sarin (2003) explains the process in the following way, “Blanket notifications declared all kinds of lands as state ‘forests’ including areas inhabited by ‘primitive tribal groups’ and lands under shifting cultivation by tribal communities. Fallow shifting cultivation lands were declared reserve forests and the rights of tribal cultivators over the limited cultivable land left with them were not recognised. Such acts of omission and commission over half a century have left millions of people without any formal land titles. Periodic pronouncements about granting property rights to shifting cultivators mostly remained unimplemented.”

Hunting was curtailed under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, but an amendment in 1991 banned it entirely. The minor forest produce gathered by these communities is now severely restricted. Establishment of parks and sanctuaries has meant that communities have been evicted from the places where they stayed for generations, and now have very limited access to hunting, forest produce and fishing within the forest.

It is important to mention here that the government has been made adequately aware that because of its forest policies the PTGs are suffering. A standing committee looking into the development of the PTGs informed the government in 2000 that their “rights in forests and on forest produce are not adequately protected. The enactment of The Forest Conservation Act, 1980, The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and various policies of central government, etc, have failed to protect the traditional rights of the PTGs in the forests... The Committee noted with concern that in the name of implementation of Conservation Acts, and in the name of public interest, orders are obtained from Courts which result in the eviction of tribals from their traditional abodes” (ibid).

A Planning Commission document of the same period also mentioned that “A decline in their (PTGs’s) sustenance base and the resultant food insecurity, malnutrition and ill-health force them to live in the most fragile living conditions and some of them are even under the threat of getting extinct”.³

However, at the level of the state governments, the pressure to observe forest conservation laws is strong, so that another standing committee on Madhya Pradesh reports that “The tribals of Abhujmar are...
totally dependent on forests for their sustenance. They some time resort to shifting cultivation. In order to rehabilitate the shifting cultivators (Madhya Pradesh) government has made special efforts from time to time. The state government has constituted the ‘Abhujmar Development Agency’ for carrying out the evolutionary process of development of tribals.... Shifting cultivation is now a rare phenomenon in the State of Madhya Pradesh. It is restricted to very few pockets of Abhujmar of Bastar” (emphasis added).

**Lengthening the PTG List**

It is of some interest and concern to note that from being 52 in number in 1975 when PTGs were first conceptualised within the ST category, the number of such communities, spread over 17 states and one union territory, went up to 75 in 1993. It can now be asserted categorically that it is not because new communities with these characteristics were “discovered” between 1975 and 1993. It is because more and more communities became eligible to join the list as a result of their fulfilling the important criterion of declining or stagnant population. This decline has happened because of slow and painful starvation deaths among these communities over some decades now. Just because no more additions have been made to the PTG list since 1993, it does not mean that there are no more communities which fulfil the criterion of stagnant or declining population. Even if the earlier three criteria were followed, a number of more communities will now be found “qualified” to be PTGs.

However, the real point here is that the criteria that the government follows leave out a large number of similarly vulnerable communities, sometimes quite indistinguishable from the PTGs. These criteria are, to recapitulate, first, that the community must belong to the ST category, second, it must be practising pre-agricultural technology (its members must be shifting cultivators), and most important, they must face the threat of actual extinction. Obviously, these parameters are not the only way of judging the very serious incidence of starvation deaths among communities which are affected as badly by the same laws as the declared PTGs.

There are communities who fulfil all the above three criteria, but are not close to extinction (yet). Then there are those who are hunter-gatherers, like the Pardhis, facing a severe food shortage, but who may not be investigated because they are not shifting cultivators. Moreover, starving communities may not necessarily belong to the ST category. Although in acute distress precisely because of the current forest policies, they may belong to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) or scheduled caste categories, and so do not come under the PTG scanner. Some communities may also be dependent on forests or forest animals without hunting them for food. Communities like the Saperas, Kalandars, Madari or Bahelias. Categorised as OBCs, they entertained people with animals like snakes, owls and other birds, monkeys or bears which were taught to perform tricks. Now that their occupation has been banned under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986, they are also starving for want of alternative means of livelihood (Ahlawat 2001).

Similarly, Bawarias are a scheduled caste community, and an official Project Tiger report mentions that the Bawaria “...a traditional nomadic hunting tribe... resort to hunting in times of distress. On an average, more than 70% of the Bawaria families interviewed faced food shortage crises and 21% of the families had taken to hunting to tide over this crisis”.6

**Hunting to Ward Off Starvation**

This also means that these communities continue to illegally hunt out of sheer desperation so as to postpone absolute starvation. It is said that the “Bawariyas, like the Mogiyas, a former hunter-gatherer tribe, kill animals mainly for bush meat”:7 Again, “Mogiyas.. largely depend on the forests and its by-products for their survival and hunt everything from the tiger to a monitor lizard, including leopard, sambar, spotted deer, wild boar, partridge and hare, for meat...” Pardhis in Bhopal confided to this author that since “wild animals were nationalised” and as they are not able to manage with ragpicking and begging, they make occasional forays into the nearest forest to catch some feathered game for food.8 Shikligars in Punjab were recently found to be eating the endangered monitor lizard to keep away hunger pangs (Tandon 2004). Mankadias of Orissa continue to catch monkeys for food (Banerjee 2000). This means that the government’s policy of keeping these communities out of the forests is not working, and ends up putting them in jails as offenders against forest laws, or subjecting them to acute harassment by forest officials.

These communities are sometimes forced to hunt the same wild animals meant for consumption by the middle class “privilegentsia” and wildlife tourists, who regard this meat as exotic food. This increasing market demand has also been impinging on their traditional sources of nutrition (Jha unpublished).

**Sahariyas vs Wild Animals**

The Sahariyas of Madhya Pradesh used to be semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers as well as shifting cultivators. In a recorded instance, members of this community were moved out of the Madhav National Park in Madhya Pradesh in the late 1990s and this is what a news magazine says: “(Sahariyas were) dumped upon a stony, non-irrigated tract of land near the highway, away from a river they had access to in the forest, which they used for farming and drinking for themselves and for their cattle. During the non-farming season, they used to collect and sell tendu leaves, herbs and honey to supplement their diet. Each family had cows and goats. While moving, the villagers set their cattle free near a temple in the forest as they already knew that they would not have access to grazing land in the village they were going to be resettled” (Zaidi 2005). Similarly, from the Kuno Wild Life Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh, a large number of Sahariyas were relocated during 1998-2001. Since the community had limited grazing lands near their new resettlement site, their cattle stayed in the sanctuary (Johnsing 2004).

As a consequence of being deprived of multiple traditional sources of food, by 2006 the media reported that large-scale malnourishment and starvation deaths had begun to take place in this semi-nomadic community in the relocated villages (Zaidi 2006). However, it is sobering to record that the tiger began to breed...
again in Kuno Sanctuary, “largely supported by the 5,000-6,000 cow cattle left by the resettled Sahariya tribes” (Johnsingh 2004). In fact, it was hoped that with the cattle left behind by the Saharayas there may not only be more tigers in the future, but with this large enough prey base the lion might also be introduced into the sanctuary. The abandoned crop fields of the Saharayas also underwent transformation. The fruit and leaves growing there now supported the jackal, chinkara, sloth bear, nilgai, the feral cattle and “many ungulates” (ibid). The latter are critical for the tiger and the lion to survive and breed in the sanctuary. In the meanwhile, the dying Saharayas, even after being relocated on a site outside the Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary, continued to make an attempt to hunt in the forest for food.10

The tragedy of starvation deaths among shifting cultivator/hunting gathering communities has been in the making for some decades, but has got intensified in the last few years with cumulative effect of malaise and malnourishment from which these communities have been suffering for years. Over a generation or two, chronic malnutrition begins to give way to large-scale deaths. The state should expect that as it goes ahead with its forest and wildlife conservation strategies, the number of communities who will suffer the fate of the current ptgs, both within and outside the category of ptgs, will increase. Currently, the State’s strategies and skills at conserving human life seem much inferior to its strategies for conserving wildlife.

NOTES
1 This Commission was set up by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, 2006-08. It has since wound up.
2 “During the course of evidence, the committee pointed out that PTGs are mostly shifting cultivators’ and they could not get permanent land even after 55 years of independence” (ibid 5.13).
3 Numerous sources confirm the fact that people grown through shifting cultivation, the world over, including India, is supplemented by hunting and gathering.

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