

Threat of Globalization to Indigenous Peoples' Culture and Identities in India

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Abstract

The paper brings out in detail an analysis on how the western centric globalization with its huge profit motives has resulted in the loss of culture and identities of indigenous people in India. The developmental policies that the government of India taken up aftermath of globalization to meet its demands has created a big divide between haves and have-nots, the latter were being the indigenous people. The peculiarities of indigenous people in their socio-economic, cultural and political life and how their distinctness has been eroded in the wake of globalization have been meticulously explained.

Indigenous peoples in India are popularly known as tribes, *adivasis* (first settlers), aboriginals and *vanajatis* (forest dwellers). They settled in India much before the advent of Aryans and Dravidian invasions and are considered to be the

original inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent (Sarkar & Dasgupta, 2000). Social scientists and anthropologists have used various terms to describe these people. Some scholars designated them as 'primitives' and some other like Gillin and Gillin defined them as a collectivity of local groups having a common area, who use similar language and have a common culture (Upreti, 2007). Indigenous people of India derived their origin from six main races viz. Negritos, Proto Astraloids, Mangoloids, Mediterraneans, Western Branchycephals, and Nordics that came to India in ancient times. Indigenous people are distinct in their socio-economic, cultural and political life compared to the mainstream people. Their distinctness is marked by their remoteness in living in far-flung forest areas, hilly tracts, inaccessible areas where the absence of modern transport and communications is clearly visible. They lived in diverse eco-settings and have been classified by Vidyarthi (1981) in to seven cultural strata based on their ecosystem, traditional economy, belief in super natural power and recent impact. These are: (a) forest hunting, (b) primitive hill cultivation, (c) plain agricultural type, (d) simple artisan group, (e) pastoral and cattle herders, (f) industrial, and (g) urban workers type (Sarkar & Dasgupta, 2000).

India has the largest concentration of indigenous people in Asia and second largest in the world (Upreti, 2007). There are more than 3000 such indigenous communities having different dialects found in different parts of the country. The government has recognized only 576 of them. The government of India refers to indigenous people as 'Scheduled Tribes' and their population according to 2001 census is 84.33

millions corresponding to 8.2 percent of the total population (Census, 2001). The recognized communities are grouped into plain tribes and agency tribes (primitive tribes) in order to facilitate special provisions for primitive tribes. Indigenous people in India are historically marginalized and live in extreme poverty. The majority of indigenous people live across a region stretching from the state of Gujarat in the west to seven states in the north east India, with the highest concentration in central India (in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Maharastra, and Chattis Garh) (Upreti, 2007).

They are isolated and discriminated in every walks of socio-economic, political and cultural life. In fact, for outsiders they appear to be rigid, stubborn, and unwilling people to give up their cultural ethos and religious lifestyles. But there is nothing wrong in safeguarding their culture as they are very strong in dogmas and rituals and high self respected people indeed. Before the advent of Aryans and other invasions by non-Indian kingdoms the indigenous people were happy and content in their life as they treated forest as their mother goddess, depended on it for their livelihood, embraced nature and protected it. They had their own political systems and kingdoms with chieftain as their head and strict rules and regulations. All these peculiar features have been eroded in course of time after the advent of modernized Aryans, who brought modernity to Indian subcontinent and eventually acquired tribal kingdoms, looked upon them as uncivilized and barbarous people. Further, they lost their identities and their sufferings got intensified during the British Rule and the same was reinforced in the era of globalization,

liberalization and privatization.

Impact of Globalization on Indigenous People

Globalization is a buzzword. It is a multi-dimensional process constituted by complex and contradictory interactions of global, regional, and local aspects of social life. “Globalization is like prism in which major disputes over the collective human condition are refracted: questions of capitalism, inequality, power, development, ecology, culture, gender identity, population, all come back in a landscape where globalization did it”(Nederveen, 2009). It is marked by both consensus and more by controversies.

Globalization is all embracing, yet carries with it fears among people such as erosion of identities, culture, and losing control of lives to heartless and faceless mega corporations and markets (Legrain, 2002). The origin of globalization which is an invention of global capitalism in 1980s and 1990s has brought remarkable changes in social, economic, political and cultural aspects across the world in general and India in particular. The thrust of globalization is on integration and internationalization of regional economies, cultures and political institutions and brings all the cultures and economies under single unified entity i.e. ‘global’. It emphasizes on free movement of goods, ideas, cultures and traditions across the world. This process of integration has profound effects on the cultures and identities of less developed countries as it is tilting towards the western and American dominance. The economies and political institutions of developed countries are far superior to underdeveloped countries and hence their

cultural domination prevails on less developed. Globalization is more than just about economics. It is not only about the ratio of exports to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) but also about culture, society, politics and people (Rangarajan, 2007). Globalization destroys cultures and identities in many ways.

India embraced the idea of globalization in 1990s with its new economic policy and structural adjustment programs. As such innumerable industries, irrigation projects (dams), companies and educational institutions both local and global have been established all over the nation. These developments may have contributed immensely for the development of the nation but along with that it has given rise to several human rights issues, which are as important as the development of the nation. Huge tracts of land (both form and waste land) have been acquired and the green forest cover has been cleared for the sake of establishment of developmental projects (particularly large dams, mining activities and steel plants). As the forests and mountains are the most viable physical features for these developmental initiatives, the worse sufferers are indigenous people (popularly called as tribes in India) who live in forests and mountain areas. Since these indigenous people are backward in all walks of life (political, economic and social) due to their distinct identities and isolated lifestyle and existence. The lack of education and political power make them more vulnerable to government initiated developmental projects which in no way beneficial for them. Globalization always serves the interests of corporate bodies, private capitalists and corrupt political leaders and eventually creates a huge divide between the rich and poor.

Indigenous people in India present a significant degree of social, cultural and ethnic diversity. Globalization is not merely a question of marginalization for indigenous people it is a multipronged attack on the very foundation of their existence and livelihoods. In the name of 'public interest' and 'national development' the innocent indigenous people sacrifice all the minimal resources under their possession and move to the towns and cities in search of livelihood. This kind of discrimination is against the spirit of democracy. The problems and sufferings they face in the towns and cities are so horrendous for indigenous people that cannot be explained in terms. They lose their culture, identity, customs, and dignity and adjust with the mainstream culture and end up as wage labourers, rickshaw pullers and confine to slums for living.

In the forests, they live a life of dignity and self-respect with whatever little they have without altering the nature and over exploitation of resources. They make their living by making beautiful varieties of baskets; toys etc. with forest products and sell them in the market. This simple living is lost due to globalization that results in the manufacturing of modern goods, modern culture, and modern education. Globalization with its chief motive of rapid profits has a huge toll on the identities of indigenous people in India. Why should people across the world madly embrace an idea that emphasizes on common culture, common identity, or cosmopolitanism etc.? What is wrong if people preserve their distinct identities, dialects, culture etc. and grow along with their tradition? Indigenous people have lost all these valuable and rich cultural identities in the wake of globalization. Globalization has

pushed them farther more backwards rather than contributing anything for their growth and development.

To meet the demands of globalization building of dams for irrigation purpose and initiation of mining activities have been given immense priority by the government of India. These two initiatives together are perceived as juggernauts for having adverse effects on indigenous peoples' identities. Starting from the Hirakud Dam in the state of Orissa in 1940s to the present ongoing major projects like Polavaram Dam in the state of Andhra Pradesh, there are around 3600 Dams built in India since independence. As the areas inhabited by indigenous people are rich in mineral resources their lands have been acquired for mining and establishment of steel plants and industries without giving any consideration to their voices and concerns. Kennedy (2011) points out that "the state cares more about minerals lying below the ground than the 'adivasis' (indigenous people) living below it" (Kennedy & King, 2011). The consequent effects of displacement due to land acquisition for developmental projects spread to generations. The problems such as disrupted community life, profound psychological trauma, change of environment and loss of traditional means of employment etc. are some of the crucial problems of indigenous people due to developmental projects.

Despite agitations by numbers indigenous peoples against land acquisition, Governments at both central and state level are aggressively going ahead with it. To mention a few instances, the government of Andhra Pradesh has signed with Jindal group for bauxite mining in Vishakapatnam district showing blind eye to the protests by

indigenous people (The Hindu, 2005). Very recently, Orissa state government has been pushing ahead for acquiring land for Posco steel plant amidst huge protests by indigenous people. PSUs (Public Sector Undertakings) like NMDC, Steel Authority of India Ltd. and Coal India have been established in the state of Chattisgarh, which is very rich in minerals but spend only 3 percent of their profits for the local area development, instead of spending 20 percent as per norms (The Hindu, 2010). This kind of differential attitude towards indigenous people accounts for gross violation of their rights.

According to the research finding for the period 1947-2000 the total number of development induced displaced and others economically deprived of their livelihood without relocation is more than 60 millions (Fernandez, 2007). Amongst them only about one third have been resettled in a planned manner and for the rest of the people there is no evidence of resettlement. If we look in to some of the states regarding resettlement of displaced people it gives a clear idea about how the injustice has been done to the victims of displacement. In Orissa only 35.27 percent of displaced have been resettled (Fernandez and Asif, 1997), in Andhra Pradesh 28.82 percent (Fernandez, 2001) and in West Bengal a meager 9 percent of 3.7 million displaced have been resettled (Fernandez, 2006). Apart from this even where rehabilitation was done, it was not done in the proper meaning of the term as rehabilitation means bringing to the former condition i.e. providing all that is lost viz. land, house, common property resources and facilities to safeguard their cultural aspects. Amongst all the victims of displacement indigenous people constitute more

than half. In India, majority of people take displacement for granted because most of the displaced are powerless and poor indigenous people (Fernandez, 2007).

Loopholes in Land Acquisition Act and Rehabilitation Policies

The colonial 'Land Acquisition Act 1894' is the only existing law for land acquisition in India. It shows how negligent and indifferent the government towards indigenous people in India. It was only in 1980s after a long gap of more than a century that the need for rehabilitation came to lime light in the wake of several protests by civil society organizations, NGOs, and indigenous peoples' organizations. The Land Acquisition Act of 1894 only specifies how the land could be acquired with payment of compensation in cash and does not take in to consideration the entitlements of indigenous people for resettlement and rehabilitation. Rehabilitation implies bringing to the former condition. But, as the indigenous people mostly depend on Common Property Resources like forests, grazing fields, water etc. these are not given due importance while drafting a rehabilitation policy. Even the law in India considers only the individual entitlement as one's own property and the Common Property Resources are exclusively under the domain of states authority.

The most serious issue to be considered here is there is still no uniform rehabilitation policy in India. Only few states have framed their own rehabilitation policies. These policies are framed without taking into consideration the views and aspirations of indigenous people who are the main

victims. Further, the policies look so sound on the paper and when it comes to implementation the officials turn a blind eye and there is no proper mechanism for redress of grievances. Policy is concerned more with protecting the interests of big business rather than livelihood security of the indigenous people (Fernandez, 2004). In the preamble of the National Rehabilitation Policy 2006 certain specific safeguards were mentioned but the main lacuna is that the preamble is not an actual part of the policy. The affected people have no say in determining the dam site. There is no mention of specific court of law for redress of grievances in the policy. The principle 'eminent domain' is invoked to acquire land. And there is no provision for land for land in the policy. Land will be provided only if government land is available. Hence, there is no concern for deprived people particularly the indigenous people in India and all the government policies are framed in such a manner that they serve the interests of only the rich and private business people.

Police Harassments and Killing of Indigenous People

When there is a clash of interests between different sections of the society, the claims of the weaker sections without any political clout are ignored (Subbareddy, 2006). It is painful to note that whenever the indigenous people protested for their rights and claims they met with serious response from state authorities like they were beaten up, shot and some of them were put in jails on false cases. To mention a few cases- in January 2006, 12 persons of indigenous community were shot dead while protesting against the acquisition of their land for the construction of a steel plant

in the state of Orissa. In another instance, 3 members of indigenous people were killed in a protest against bauxite mining in Rayagada district of Orissa in December 2000 (Balagopal, 2007).

In the state of Andhra Pradesh people met with police harassment and arrests while protesting against Polavaram dam project in January 2007; Police also fired at the agitators in Bhadrachalam in Khammam district when they asked for stopping of survey works for the construction of the dam (Umamaheswari, 2007). In another incident in February 2011, 2 people were killed in police firing in Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh while protesting against establishment of a thermal power plant (The Hindu, 2011). Likewise the list of police killings of indigenous people goes on; it is an un-ending process and keeps the spirit of democracy at bay. Such has been the states attitude towards the indigenous people since independence. It ranges from neglect to disregard of constitutional obligations for indigenous people (Sharama, 2006).

Darwin has rightly said that 'might is right'. It is truly applicable in the case of indigenous people in India. Being innocent and powerless they have paid the price for globalization induced developmental policies in India. In its hunger for internationalization, globalization has inflicted innumerable sufferings on indigenous people and affected their distinct culture and identities. Is it possible to stop globalization? It is difficult to answer but it is high time that all the national and

international instruments for the protection of indigenous people, their culture, economy and identities should be re-shaped and redefined for justice to be justified. By doing so, the spirit of democracy and humanity will indeed be realized.

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