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Whither Tribal Self-Governance? Developing the Tribals of Non-Tribal Areas

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The Focus

Development was the catchword of the 20th Century and it continues to be so in the 21st Century. Reduced more or less to connote the achievement of higher levels of economic affluence¹ it symbolises the decisive goal of contemporary human civilisation; conscious efforts to catch it have become commonplace. So powerful it is among the plethora of conceptual categories denoting the goals of human civilisation that it is now dictating the terms of civilisation. Such human goals as progress and welfare have been subsumed by the goal to achieve development. Therefore, whenever we speak of working towards the development of such categories as the women, the children, the elderly, the villagers and the tribes we mean achieving their material well-being. Thus in post independence India, the conscious efforts to bring about development conceived as desired economic transformation ended up in providing some economic assistance to the 'under developed' or the 'less developed' sections of the population².

It was soon realised that economic assistance was not the be-all and end-all of the developmental strategy given the powerlessness of the target groups. Thus a second dimension has been added to the discourse of development, i.e., political empowerment. The self-governance or the de-centering the power from the centre to the periphery and from the dominant to the subjugated, became the second dimension of the discourse. The policies and programmes aimed at achieving development in the tribal areas through self-governance embodies in it these two dimensions of developmental discourse.

Both these dimensions, the economic and the political, are necessary, though not sufficient, steps to achieve the well-being of the tribal

population in the tribal areas. Collective actions by the tribal people themselves and the voluntary actions by the aid agents become easy due to the concentration of the tribal population in such areas.

How to achieve the development of the tribal population in the non-tribal or the erstwhile tribal areas? This article, while addressing the issue of self-governance and development of the tribal population in the non-tribal areas, shows the necessity of de-linking both development and self-governance from territory and identifies some other dimensions of development of the tribal population such as history, everyday life, voluntary action and emancipation.

The analysis is done through the case of a tribal category in a non-tribal area, namely, the Koragas. In this exercise, we notice that neither development conceived in economic sense, nor self-governance aimed at political empowerment in the democratic way are goals. They are but two consciously designed means to achieve humane living conditions for the tribal people. The goal is emancipation; liberation from living conditions which are hardly ever human.

Methodologically, the article is influenced by the efforts of recent social scientists to make their practice relevant and meaningful to the lives of the people who are being studied. As we are aware, the conceptual frames and theoretical orientations, hitherto considered efficacious are being replaced by new categories. Nowadays, instead of talking about 'development' we talk about 'participatory development' and in the place of 'social research' we strive to pursue 'participatory social research', and what has been hailed in lieu of 'objective social research' is 'partisan social research'. While indicating a clear philosophical and methodological transformation in the social sciences, these categories have broadened the scope of social sciences and contributed to the blurring of the distinction between theory and research, researcher and the researched, and intellectual thinking and socio-political practice.

The advocacy by the anthropologists and activists of the implementation of self-governance to ensure development in tribal areas and researching the modalities involved indicate that anthropology is now becoming sensitive to the lived-in socio-cultural reality of the people whom they are studying. This article squarely is the outcome of such sensitivities.

At certain points, autobiographical reflections of the researcher do figure in. In fact this article is a preparation for an anthropological journey into the lives of the Koragas of an erstwhile tribal area.

The sub-themes of the article are: a) profiling the Scheduled Tribes of South Coastal Karnataka, b) internal colonisation, stigmatisation and marginalisation of the Koragas, c) tribal development: competing perspectives and elusive reality, d) self-governance for development in tribal areas or wither tribal self-governance, and f) voluntarism for emancipation.

Profiling the Scheduled Tribes of South Coastal Karnataka³

Geographically, the South Coastal Karnataka comprises of the whole of the erstwhile Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka state. On the 25th of August 1997 the district was divided into two, Dakshina Kannada with Mangalore as the capital and Udupi with Udupi as the capital. Spread across the area of 4,559 Sq.Kms. the population of Dakshina Kannada according to the 2001 Census stood at 18,96,403. The geographical area of Udupi is 3,575 Sq.Kms. and its population was 11,09,494.

The most recent sources of information on the castes and communities living in South Coastal Karnataka are the Reports of the Backward Classes Commissions, popularly known as Havanur Commission (1975) and Venkataswamy Commission (1984). The population of major castes and religious communities and the Scheduled Tribes according to these reports is given in table 1.

The Scheduled Tribes of the area were a microscopic minority according to both of the reports and a comparison tells that their population is declining. The Koraga, the Kudiya or the Melekudiya and the Marathi are the three Scheduled Tribe categories who were less than three percent according to the second report. Among them the first two are the most ancient inhabitants, some may prefer to call them the autochthones of the region and the third are the migrants from Goa to South Coastal Karnataka during the 13th, 14th and the 15th Centuries. All the three tribes are listed in the Constitution of India and are therefore entitled to enjoy the benefits of the reservation policy. The tribal population of these two districts are spread all over the eight talukas, with varying degrees of concentration of some tribes in some

Table 1: Population of Major Castes and Religious Communities in Dakshina Kannada in 1971 and 1984

Caste/Community	Havnur Commission (1971)		Venkataswamy Commission (1984)	
	Persons	Percentage	Persons	Percentage
Bilava (Idiga)	301727	15.56	425688	17.56
Brahmin	174476	9.00	227347	9.38
Bant and Nadava	197868	10.20	281000	11.60
Devadiga (Moili)	49088	2.53	75637	3.12
Vokkaliga (Gauda)	72749	3.75	142958	5.90
Scheduled Castes	99687	5.14	143673	5.93
Scheduled Tribes	63596	3.28	72353	2.99
Other Hindu Castes	542667	27.98	529006	21.83
Muslims	237802	12.26	309251	12.76
Christians	187570	9.67	201100	8.30
Jains	11947	0.62	15173	0.62
Other Religions	138	0.01	129	0.01
Total	1939315	100.00	2423315	100.00

Sources: Havnur (1975: 6-96) and Venkataswamy (1986: 54-55) quoted in D'Souza (1993: 9)

areas. These tribal communities differ among themselves in racial features, language, social organisation, economy, religious beliefs and practices, customs and traditions. These tribal communities are living in a once tribal area, i.e., South Coastal Karnataka.

Originally a soldier tribe, now the Marathis are the most forward among the Scheduled Tribes (Kamalaksha 1994: 43). They were very near to political power (Ibid. 43) and literacy rates were high among them. When land survey and land settlement took place in the 1880s, the Marathis acquired cultivable hill-slopes and forests areas. There were also tenants who occupied cultivable land on rent from the Brahmins, Bunts and the Jains. Due to their relative forwardness, after independence they were the first to reap the benefits of the Protective Discrimination Policy and other tribal welfare measures. Among the members of this most forward Scheduled Tribe category, the traditional social and cultural organisation is maintained by the norms of self-governance dictated by the council of the elders.

The Malekudiyas are the smallest Scheduled Tribe category in South Coastal Karnataka. The exact size of their population is not available. They live in the forested hill slopes of the Western Ghats. Before the emergence of Coffee Plantations they were hunters and gatherers. At present they work as labourers in Plantations, a few are informal assistants to the Government Forest Officials. And like the Marathis, a few of them are cultivators. Their interaction with the majority population has contributed to improving their economic position. The governmental programmes aimed at tribal development such as assistance in building housing colonies and separate schools and hostels for their children are contributing to upward economic mobility.

These peace loving people have their own traditional council headed by Gurikara or Buddhivanta. The differences are sorted out and the socio-cultural norms were reinforced by the Gurikara (Kamalaksha 1994: 37-40). Living within the Indian democracy, in terms of socio-cultural organisation they are ruled by themselves. Their problem is not self-governance, for they have traditional self governing institutions. The migration of forward peoples into their territory, their backwardness in the new economic organisation enforced upon them by the internal colonisers, stigmatisation and less rewarding occupational background are the impediments in their social climbing. In terms of the degree of backwardness the Malekudias stand in-between the Marathis and the Koragas.

Regarding the population of the Koragas, the Census figures do not tally with other sponsored surveys. According to the 1981 Census the total Koraga population was estimated at 9,449. Among them 4,713 were men and 4,726 were women. According to a Report of the Samagra Gramina Ashrama, a voluntary organisation, Kaup (Udupi Taluka) in 1991 the total population of the Koragas was 16,422. The Peer Committee Survey of 1993 puts the figure at 17,000 (quoted in Vasudevan 1998: 88-90). According to a recent estimate by the Government of Karnataka the total population of Koragas is around 19,000 (<http://www.ambekar.org>). These figures show that the demographic picture of the Koragas is not very clear.

They are spread across the length and breadth of South Coastal Karnataka. A few troops are living also in the Kasargod district of Kerala State and Kodagu district of Karnataka State. Considering the

stigma of untouchability associated with them, the Colonial Government of the Madras Presidency included them in the category of Scheduled Castes. But after independence they have been included in the category of Scheduled Tribes. As even to this day in their every day practices the caste Hindus consider them as the inferior even to Panchamas or the Chandalas and treat them as outcastes, some social activists are pressurising the government to classify the Koragas as 'Primitive Tribe'.

Internal Colonisation, Stigmatisation and Marginalisation of the Koragas

Compared with the modern standards and life styles of an average Indian, the Koragas live an unenviable life. In their own home-land they are aliens. In the nation-state where the practice of untouchability is a crime, they are treated as untouchables. Their small number, sparse geographical distribution, and socio-cultural and economic backwardness have made them ill-suited to compete in the mainstream democratic politics which is always a number game. The new mantra of 'self governance in the tribal area' has no relevance for them. They have an internal community self-governance that has no continuity with the external democratic institutions. In spite of living geographically near the majority non-tribal population for several centuries, why still an unfathomable civilisational gap prevails? To answer this question let us have a glimpse of the socio-cultural and geo-political processes the Koragas subjected to.

Since antiquity, the Koragas are the victims of the tripartite processes of internal colonisation, stigmatisation and marginalisation. To discern the role of these processes in the making of the contemporary 'leaderless life-world' of the Koragas let us first look into an oft quoted chronicle⁴ that narrates the murder of the alleged leader of the Koragas by the caste Hindus several centuries ago. While narrating the story of the Brahminical ascendancy in the region, the chronicle alludes to the roots of the above mentioned processes.

The chronicle is about the internal colonisation of South Coastal Karnataka by the caste Hindus much before the beginning of the Christian Era. While scholars disagree on its historical authenticity, there can be no second opinion about the fact that it was written by the caste Hindus, for only they had the knowledge of letters and they were not the original inhabitants of the land. They were colonisers.

See a version of the chronicle as retold by Thurston (1975: 427-428, originally 1907).

“...all traditions unite in attributing the introduction of the Tulu Brahmins of the present day to Mayur Varma (of the Kadamba dynasty), but they vary in details connected with the manner in which they obtained a firm footing in the land. One account says that Habashika, chief of the Koragas, drove out Mayur Varma, but was in turn expelled by Mayur Varma’s son, or son-in-law, Lokaditya of Gokarnam, who brought Brahmins from Ahi-kshetra, and settled them in thirty-two villages”.

It is very curious to note that many caste Hindus state and believe that they came over to this land from some other locations in India. Except the Mogers, the fisher-folk of the region, all others have their mythologies stating their origin somewhere else. While this pre-modern migration theory is not based on rigorous social historical investigation, it surely draws our attention to the colonisation, conquest and absolute degradation of a category of people. And astonishingly, the crux of the rationalization for the degradation has survived in the societal memory as it is evident in the oral and literary traditions. Let us look into one such account found in Thurston (1975: 427-428 originally 1907). Comparison of this otherwise ‘less scientific’ or impressionistic account with that of the contemporary empirical reality tells us that the present is only slightly different from the past.

“... another [legend says that] a neighbouring ruler treacherously proposed a marriage between his sister and Habashika, and, on the bridegroom and his caste-men attending for the nuptials, a wholesale massacre of them all was effected. Angarawarma, then returning, drove the invading army into the jungles, where they were reduced to such extremity that they consented to become slaves, and were apportioned amongst the Brahmans and original landholders. Some were set to watch the crops and cattle, some to cultivate, others to various drudgeries which are still allotted to existing slave-castes, but the Koragars, who had been raised by Habashika to the highest posts under his government, were stripped and driven towards the sea-shore, there to be hanged, but, being ashamed of their naked condition, they gathered the leaves of the nicki bush (*Vitex Negundo*), which grows abundantly in waste places, and made small coverings for themselves in front. On this the executioners took pity on them and let them go, but condemned them to be the lowest of the slave divisions, and regarded with such intense loathing and hatred that up to quite recent times one section of them, called *Ande* or *pot* Koragars, continually wore a pot suspended from their necks, into which they were compelled to spit, being so utterly unclean as to be prohibited from even spitting on the highway; and to this day their women continue to show in their leafy aprons a memorial of the abject degradation to which their whole race was doomed”

The marginalisation and stigmatisation were the aftermath of the internal colonisation. The re-emergence of the subaltern power was to be checked once for all. In one of the versions of Gramapaddati (Holla 1924: 22-23) we get the following decree. "After the assassination of Hubbashika most of his soldiers too were killed. The remaining and the women and the children were given to the Brahmins as holeyalus or untouchable slaves". In the same chronicle the twelve year non-Brahmin and non-Kshatriya rule has been described as one of terror and as a result once conquered, the supporters of the erstwhile ruler had to be perennially subjugated. "From that time onwards the Holeyalus had to repeatedly get beatings from their Brahmin masters, would get food only after day's work, they cannot own land. They should always be under the control of their masters. They should live their life of indenture throughout" (Ibid. 23).

We do not know whether the Koragas and their King Hubbashika were really cruel during the ancient times. At least now they are docile, ignorant, harmless, and honest. What Saletore wrote a few decades ago (quoted in Vasudevan 1998: 32-33), "tribe noted for their honesty and straight dealings...well known for their truthfulness and whose word has become proverbial", is appropriate even today.

In the case of Koragas, the defeat was the permanent one. This has resulted in stigmatization; branding and stereotyping them as unclean, polluting, destined to be poor. Thus the economic problem of poverty is contingent upon the socio-cultural processes of the region. The culture of the region evolved an agrarian production system in which the Koragas could never even get a rented piece of land, whereas the other downtrodden castes could do so if the caste Hindu masters wished to rent out. In his preface to Chomana Dudi, one of his renowned novels, Karanth (1971: ii) writes:

"In our society the untouchable Holeyas are divided into such categories as Mera, Bhyra, Ajila, and Mari. Among them the Mari Holeyas are in the lowest rung of the hierarchy and they are not allowed to do cultivation. Many avoid even their shade. They have to live either on left over after feasts held by various castes or on dead cattles and buffaloes or depend on very menial jobs. In the northern part of our district they are even today not employed as labourers. However, in the southern part they are employed as agricultural labourers".

The stigma is clearly visible in the occupational distribution of contemporary Koragas. They are mostly employed as sweepers and cleaners in the Panchayats, Municipalities and Hospitals. We see that the past is the justification of the 'inhuman present' marked by continual marginalisation and stigmatisation of a community. Therefore, given the concern for preparing better future for a community that has dehumanised past and marginalised presence, who came first to the land is not important. What is important is to crush the burden of the past and reorient the present towards qualitative transformation in the future. Call it development, welfare, liberation, or emancipation. Is this possible with mere economic assistance and political empowerment? Before attempting to answer this question let us revisit two schools of thought in social anthropology that pervaded the tribal discourse in India for almost a century.

Tribal Development: Competing Perspectives and Elusive Reality

Whenever the issue of the development of the tribal population surfaces the philanthropic, academic and welfare concerns, the category that is referred to is the tribal population now living in a particular area, by and large away from the mainstream society, culture, polity and economy. The famous dialogue between Ghurye and Elwin (Singh 1996: 34-46) regarding the tribal question in India was about the tribals living in the tribal areas. The British officials and the western anthropologists found out a clear cultural and social distinction between tribals and non-tribals and advocated their isolation and pointed welfare measures⁵.

Ghurye (1943, 1980) on the other hand put forward a nationalist thesis and contradicted the isolationist perspectives. He proposed that the tribes are the backward Hindus and they are very much the part of Indian civilisation. (Bose 1994: 168-181) while elucidating the Hindu method of tribal absorption noted the linkages between the two categories, presents an economic thesis. It is 'the Brahminical way of acculturation'. First a tribal group acquires the monopoly over some occupations and gets converted into a caste. Then they will remain the members of that occupational category throughout. Their cultural traits and social organisation are never destroyed. Similarly the tribals are not allowed to follow the culture of the Brahmins though the tendency of the tribals was to remodel their culture more and more closely in

conformity with the Brahminical way of life. Thus this balkanisation, first in the realm of occupation and economy and its extension to culture and society, is the cause of backwardness.

The 'interaction thesis' of Bose and Ghurye have been supported by the findings of later researches. The data gathered by Singh's the People of India (1992) project suggest "very close interaction and sharing between tribes and non-tribes. The cultural traits held in common between them are as high as 86-90 percent. His [Ghurye's] position on backwardness has been supported by various measures undertaken by the government to redress the problems".

Political empowerment of the tribals through self-governance wherever they are in majority (such areas are to be designated as tribal areas) is indeed one such step. However, this particular step is the outcome of growing consciousness among the tribals that they are different from the other forward Indians. "While the Census with its definition of Hinduism has generally designated most of the tribes as Hindus, tribal communities have maintained and have of late been increasingly asserting their autonomy, cultural distinctiveness, sense of identity, all of which are in fact sharpening with modernisation" (Singh 1996: 46). Now the tribal discourse has grown beyond isolationism and acculturation thesis to include identity struggle, mobilisation, political empowerment economic development. All these new dimensions are associated with the concern for emancipation. Presently, the Indian tribal reality is very elusive due to such factors as the varying nature of tribal and non-tribal relationship, diverse levels of economic development, regional character of the process of tribalisation and obliteration of the geographical boundary between the tribal and non-tribal areas.

Self-governance for Development in Tribal Areas or Wither Tribal Self-governance?

Each tribal category is a case by itself. Elusiveness becomes all the more sharp in the case of such categories as Koragas who were the victims of marginalisation and stigmatisation. Even after the launching of emancipatory struggle by the social activists such as Ullala Raghavendra Roa, Karnad Sadashiva Rao and others a century ago, not a single powerful leader has emerged from among them. Therefore,

self-governance should be understood and implemented in a very different sense in the case of the Koragas. Such a ramification can facilitate crushing the burden of the past and reorient the present.

The provisions for tribal self-governance prevalent at present in India are found in the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996. It was hoped that the implementation of the Act will strengthen the tribal people's struggle on issues of natural resources, mega projects, displacement and self-governance. This Act not only accepts the validity of customary law, social and religious practices and traditional management practices of community resources but also directs the state governments not to make any law which is inconsistent with these. The Act recognises that every Gram Sabha in the scheduled area will be competent to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs of the people, their cultural identity, community resources and customary modes of dispute resolution. Every Gram Sabha will approve the plans, programmes and projects for social and economic development before they are taken up for implementation (Mukul 1997: 928-29). Summing up, it can be said that the Gram Sabha in a scheduled area is empowered to work for the development without compromising the aspirations to preserve separate cultural identity and heritage.

The evaluation of the implementation of this Act is not the aim of this article. Therefore, it can only be said that the development of the tribals of the non-tribal area, the Koragas in case here needs an altogether different approach. For them it is not the recovering or the preservation of the old identity or tradition. They are unfit for any kind of self-governance as long as they live under the burden of the past.

Voluntarism for Emancipation

As rightly observed by Vasudevan (1998: 14-15) the Koragas are a primitive tribal community, in its pristine definition, but with a difference. They live in villages along with other communities, which belies the belief that theirs is an isolated life. They are related to the villagers through a strange form of distance and stigma.

They are the scavengers. Even now when a cow or a buffalo dies the message is sent to the Koppa, where the Koragas live. They remove the hide, horns, and bones of the carcass and sell them. I have seen this when I was young. They accept the left over after feasts held by

various castes. I have seen this practice too. The picture of Koraga men, women and children waiting outside the compound of the house where the feasting was going on was a common sight a few years ago. When I was young we used to watch with curiosity the process whereby the Koragas used to categorise the left over and pack it up. These and other practices are now banned. Now the caste Hindus do not serve them with the left over. Of course, both the parties are unhappy with this.

There are several other aspects of the tradition such as illiteracy, landlessness, alcoholism and improper housing. Voluntary actions to liberate the Koragas from the clutches of the inhuman aspects of tradition, though started a century ago, until recently were due to the initiatives of the enlightened and philanthropic non-Koraga activists. Some of them are Kudmal Ranga Rao, Karnad Sadashive Rao and Fr. Camissa. All of them had recognised that the liberation is possible mainly through education. Kudmal Ranga Rao, for example, started Schools for the children of the Koragas and housed as many as 56 families of Koragas in the land bought for them in Mangalore. This was at the end of the 19th Century. At present, some individuals and voluntary organisations are running alternative educational institutions for the Koraga children. The members of such organisations argue that given the extreme form of disadvantage of the community, special and focused programmes of action are a must (<http://www.deccanherald.com>, Friday, September 28, 2001)⁶.

The growing voluntarism among the Koragas themselves is a recent phenomenon. Now the Koraga Abhivridhi Sanghas are being formed in the various talukas of the region and press for special assistance from the government. The public resources are being pumped in. The Minister for Social Welfare has announced an investment of Rs. 3,00,00,000 (Rupees Three Core Only) towards the welfare of the Koraga community. He has also promised that around 1,500 Koraga families would be provided gainful employment during the current year and over 350 families would be provided with houses with assistance from Housing and Urban Development Corporation.

How this huge amount is spent? Whether an average Koraga is empowered to get whatever is earmarked to him by the state committed to her/his welfare? When will she/he be totally equipped to run the

race towards development. The discourse of self-governance and development of the tribals of non-tribal area will acquire newer dimensions and will be prolonged. The prolonged processes of colonisation and marginalisation can only be matched with similar processes of emancipation.

NOTES

1. When we classify the nation-states of the world into a) First, Second, and the Third World, b) developed, developing, and the underdeveloped world, and c) Northern and the Southern World, we take the higher level of economic affluence as the measure of development.
2. The successive popular governments have been launching many programmes aimed at ameliorating the economic position of the weaker-sections of the country. A recent example from Goa can be cited. With an intention to achieve the welfare of the destitutes of several categories a new welfare scheme was launched on October 2, 2001. According to this scheme each beneficiary will get a pension of Rs. 500/- per month.
3. In his study of historical aspects of urbanisation in Western Coastal India, Rao (2000: 57) uses the phrase 'South Coastal Karnataka' to refer to those areas that form the southern coast of Karnataka (from Byndoor to Mangalore) as distinct from northern coast of Karnataka (from Bhatkal to Karwar).
4. In various versions of the Gramapaddati, a chronicle narrating the geo-politics and consolidation of the caste order of the region originally in Sanskrit, we get a description of the power-conflict between the caste Hindus and the out-castes. Vasudevan (1998: 22-48) provides a critical examination of the reference to Koraga's and their King in the Gramapaddati. He also analyses the views of such scholars as S.A. Saletor, Ramappa Vormika, U.R. Rao and Buchanan.
5. However, Singh (1996: 45) recognises that Elwin's writings during the last one and a half decade of his life showed an understanding of the underlying processes of Indian history, society, culture, and politics, linking up tribals and non-tribals. This was a move closer to some aspects of Ghurye's position.
6. Shri Devadasa Shetti is doing pioneering work for the Koragas by providing non-formal schools and training the Koraga youth in vocational courses. An Voluntary organisation devoted to the empowerment of Koraga children is Spoorthi Dhama situated in Kundapur taluk in Udupi District. Today the centre has as many as 135 children ranging from Class I to X.

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