

Tribal Poverty and Governance Issues in Maharashtra

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Introduction:

Tribal development is known to be a priority area for the government, with separate administrative and budgetary provisions, including a tribal sub-plan. There have also been landmark legislations in India in the last two decades, such as PESA and FRA, which seek to recognize the rights of tribal people and provide them a mechanism of self-governance. However, inspite of various programmes and schemes, which are progressive in principle, scheduled tribes continue to be one of the most deprived social group category in India, across a range of socio-economic indicators. There are important policy research gaps in this regard towards understanding the processes which lead to persistence of poverty and deprivation among tribal people, an analysis of which is vital for effective policy interventions. These policy gaps may be addressed through an understanding of the lacunae in tribal development policies and administration and through micro-level studies seeking to understand the constraints faced by the most deprived tribal people, which are preventing them from coming out of poverty. This article briefly outlines some of the governance issues in tribal development in the context of Maharashtra, which has the second largest tribal population in the country. It then provides a case study of poverty and deprivation among the *Katkari* tribal group, which is recognized as a particularly vulnerable tribal group in Maharashtra.

Tribal Development and Governance Issues in Maharashtra:

The tribal population in Maharashtra constitutes 9.35% of the total population in the state. This consists of 47 tribal communities, including three communities recognized by the government to be particularly vulnerable tribal groups. As is the all-India pattern, scheduled tribes in Maharashtra constitute the most deprived section of the population and in some indicators scheduled tribes in Maharashtra are even placed below the all-India average for scheduled tribes. In a spatial context, it is the tribal districts and tribal talukas that rank at the bottom in terms of various human

development indicators. For example, the Maharashtra Human Development Report 2012 has documented that Nandurbar and Gadchroli, which are tribal districts, are the bottom ranked districts in terms of the human development index. Similarly, in terms of a 'Taluka Development Index' computed as part of the report, the bottom 15 talukas in the state are all tribal talukas. The disparity between the tribal and non-tribal population in the state is indicated by the finding that in the undivided Thane district, 5 talukas were part of the top 15 ranked talukas in the state, while the adjoining 5 tribal talukas in the same district were part of the bottom 15 ranked talukas in the state (Government of Maharashtra, 2013). These statistics raise issues regarding identifying the structural lacunae in tribal development policies and administration, which are resulting in a continued state of deprivation for tribal people. Though the issues involved are extensive, various policy studies in the context of Maharashtra have sought to document the key aspects involved (Government of Maharashtra, 2013; TISS, 2015; Mutatkar, 2004). These may be outlined as follows:

- (a) More than half of the tribal population in Maharashtra lives outside the scheduled areas and they are unable to benefit from many tribal development policies and programmes.
- (b) The population and distance norms of various institutions are not suitable for the geographical challenges of tribal areas.
- (c) Tribal people are not aware of various programmes and schemes intended for them and even when aware face great difficulties in getting benefits.
- (d) The tribal development department is itself severely constrained in terms of its powers, expertise and manpower.
- (e) There is a lack of co-ordination and convergence between the tribal development department and the sector departments.
- (f) There is a problem of centralization of powers in the administrative and financial structure of the tribal development department.
- (g) Planning takes place on the basis of expenditures and not outcomes and the planning process is not linked to social indicators.
- (h) There is a tendency for the tribal sub-plan in Maharashtra to be used as an alternative to the general budget as a source of funds.
- (i) Despite the mandate of PESA, the functioning of TSP does not provide for participation of the Gram Sabha and various tiers of Panchayati Raj in the planning process.
- (j) Tribal people are not informed about the provisions of PESA and there has been very little attempt to initiate a process of empowerment in this regard.
- (k) The presence of group-Gram Panchayats in tribal areas has hampered the functioning of

PESA, with the role of hamlet as a unit of action for decision making yet to be realized.

- (l) The progress in implementing FRA has been slow, with the basic problem being that the onus of proving the claim has been put on the village communities without empowering them. Except in Gadchiroli, community rights have not been recognized in other districts.
- (m) The potential of the Tribes Advisory Council has not been fulfilled as per constitutional aspirations. Its meetings are not held regularly and the content of the meetings when held is unproductive.

The above issues indicate structural problems in tribal development policies and administration in Maharashtra. These issues have also been taken note of by the Tribal Cell of the Governor's office in Maharashtra, which has been activated in recent years. Recent media reports of malnutrition related deaths of tribal children and deaths of tribal students in Ashram schools have led to a personal intervention and suggested policy measures from the Governor of Maharashtra.

Case study of *Katkari* tribal group:

In addition to the macro-level governance issues relating to tribal development, from the perspective of trying to understand the processes underlying tribal poverty and deprivation, it is also important to draw on field-level insights and the perceptions of the tribal people themselves, particularly with regard to the most deprived tribal groups. It is known that there are variations in socio-economic level across ethnic groups even within the scheduled tribe category. Some of the most deprived ethnic groups within the scheduled tribe category are identified as 'particularly vulnerable tribal groups' by the government. These groups represent some of the most deprived sections of Indian society. From a development intervention perspective, it is therefore important to understand the constraints faced by people from these ethnic groups, which prevent them from coming out of chronic poverty.

The *Katkari* tribal group is one of three tribal communities recognized as a particularly vulnerable tribal group in Maharashtra, the other two being the *Madia Gond* and *Kolam*. However, the *Katkari* are known to be more deprived as compared to these other particularly vulnerable tribal groups. Census of India (2011) data indicate that they have the lowest proportion of cultivators among all tribal groups in Maharashtra, as also the lowest literacy rate.

This section describes a profile of deprivation among the *Katkari* tribal group, based on a field

study in a *Katkari* hamlet in Palghar district, Maharashtra (Mutatkar 2010), and also based on further field visits to the same region (between July to September 2014). The profile of deprivation includes their living conditions, livelihood pattern, food consumption pattern and health status, educational status, position in social hierarchy and socio-economic relations with other groups, perceptions of government schemes and institutions and their perceptions of development. The profile of deprivation is described by way of the broad pattern regarding these aspects as indicated during the field study and during the further field visits.

The *Katkari* households in the field study area were observed to be living in either a *kuccha* house, or a *pucca* house constructed through a government scheme. There were no instances of a self-constructed *pucca* house. They did not have any sanitation facilities and engaged in open defecation. They were dependent on a well for drinking water. However, people in the hamlet also used water from open ditches particularly in the monsoon months, for other household purposes. They used wood for cooking fuel and had no electricity connection, though a facility for the same did exist in the area. A high cost of installing electricity meters as well as the irregular and erratic tariffs, which resulted even if an electricity meter was installed, acted as a disincentive to people from obtaining an electricity connection. Households therefore depended on kerosene lamps, to be used sparingly during meal-time at night. A notable feature of the houses was that they had no fitted doors. When asked the reason for this, a woman replied that “there are no doors, because there is nothing to steal”. This was an indicator of their intensity of poverty. It was observed that the houses were bare from inside, with no consumer durables, except for a couple of utensils, some clothes hanging on a rope and hunting and fishing equipment, indicating this to be one of their sources of livelihood.

The *Katkari* in the field study area were observed to be a predominantly landless group and dependent on wage labour for their livelihood. When asked about the reason for their landlessness, a key informant among them replied - “Our people were historically never attracted to agriculture, since in agriculture you get returns only after a period of time, as compared to wage labour, where you get daily returns. By the time we realised the importance of agriculture, it was too late and all the land had already been taken up by others”. The livelihood profile of *Katkari* households in the agricultural season was therefore that of agricultural labourers. They worked as agricultural labourers for other landed scheduled tribe ethnic groups in the area, with the male members working as attached labourers (known as ‘Gadi’ in local language, implying farm servants), and women as daily wage labourers. Even children worked in activities such as cattle grazing and as

soon as they become physically capable to do labour work, start working as agricultural labourers.

Rice was the main crop cultivated in the field study area along with other crops such as *ragi*, *udid* (pulses) and *khurasni* (local variety of oilseed). Due to an absence of irrigation facilities, agricultural activities were dependent on rainfall and there was no double-cropping in the area. Due to lack of adequate livelihood opportunities in the region, the *Katkari* seasonally migrated in search of livelihood. The periods of seasonal migration were that between the cultivation and harvesting period for rice and then in the post-agricultural season. The migration pattern was that of migration with children. The *Katkari* people themselves described this to be migration for survival or migration for food, as compared to migration for cash, where usually only the male workers migrate. The migration in the post-agricultural season was typically that of longer duration with most households leaving after the rice harvesting operations and returning only in summer, before the onset of the next monsoon season. During this period they usually work for private contractors in a variety of activities such as construction, stone-breaking and in brick kilns. They stay at the work place during these months, which may be in a temporary shelter constructed by them or in under-construction buildings, with unhygienic living conditions especially for children. Children who are physically capable also assist their parents in the labour work.

The borrowing pattern of the *Katkari* was for consumption purposes by way of credit-labour market interlinkages through attached labour. This borrowing was either in the form of cash or by way of foodgrain, in situations of food shortage. The food consumption pattern was that of food purchases in piecemeal quantities before every meal. This was due to their economic inability to purchase in bulk quantities and was an indicator of the extent of their poverty. During the field study, it was observed that a *Katkari* woman was asking a shopkeeper for one rupee worth of edible oil, to which the shopkeeper replied that edible oil of only one rupee worth does not exist and cannot be sold. The field study indicated that the *Katkari* depended on the public distribution system (PDS) for their food grain requirements and purchased all the commodities available viz. wheat, rice and kerosene. Their coping mechanisms for food shortages included liquefying and grinding the food, so that it will last for a larger number of people; consumption of wildy grown food, especially in the monsoon period; borrowing of food; and seasonal migration. Data on anthropometric indicators obtained from a voluntary organisation indicated that three-fourth of children in the hamlet were undernourished. Morbidity among the *Katkari* was reported to be highest in monsoon, which was also the agricultural season, when absence from work due to any illness results in loss of wages for the daily wage agricultural labourers. The *Katkari* people also reported work related injuries due to

wage labour activity, particularly in stone-breaking work, which took place without any protective equipment. As a result, people reported splinters of stone having penetrated their body, and even their eyes in some cases, resulting in severe injuries. People also reported lack of health care facility in the region, especially specialised care for women and children.

The *Katkari* hamlet was exclusive in terms of its demographic composition and social interaction with other tribal groups was limited. The *Katkari* were regarded as lowest in the social hierarchy by other scheduled tribes in the region, with people from other groups even refusing to accept water and food from them. The social atmosphere within the hamlet was characterized by an addiction to drinking and gambling. The *Katkari* themselves attributed their initiation into these vices as a result of a life of continuous struggle and misery from which they perceived no escape. It was observed that the *Katkari* had a narrow geographical spread of kinship networks, with no permanent migration from anyone in the hamlet. Their exposure to the mass media was also very limited. As a result they were not even aware of people from their own community living in neighbouring districts of Maharashtra.

The education levels among the *Katkari* indicated that the maximum education level in a household was below middle school level in two-third of households. The gross enrolment ratio indicated that only about half of the children in the school-going age groups were actually attending school, with not much difference between boys and girls in this regard. Qualitative data on perceptions regarding education suggested that the *Katkari* were unable to relate education of their children to their immediate survival concerns. An ascribed status of wage labour also contributed towards a perception of no utility of education. There was a lack of any success story regarding completion of education and education as an instrument of upward mobility, in a familiar cultural setting of *Katkari*, which adversely impacted their capacity to aspire. Most of the *Katkari* children attending school were doing so in the *Zilla Parishad* (Z.P.) primary school in the hamlet, and not in *Ashram* schools, which are residential schools set up by the government for tribal children. Qualitative data indicated that this may be due to socio-cultural constraints in enrolling children in *Ashram* schools, as a result of social discrimination from children belonging to other scheduled tribe ethnic groups. Other constraints to education among the *Katkari* included an opportunity cost of wage labour of children; school dropout or low school attendance due to seasonal migration; peer group effect of other dropout children; neighbourhood effect; and structural problems related to quality of education in the government primary school. The landed farmers of other ethnic groups from surrounding hamlets were exclusively dependent on the *Katkari* for their labour requirements.

Education and the upward mobility of the *Katkari* tribal group was against the interest of such farmers, as they perceived it would lead to a shortage of labour.

The government provides numerous programmes and schemes for tribal development, which are supposed to give priority to particularly vulnerable tribal groups. In this context, perceptions of the people regarding government programmes and schemes become important to understand. The field study and subsequent field visits to the region indicated that the *Katkari* have not been able to take benefits of government public work programmes. During the field-study (when the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) was yet to be implemented in the region), *Katkari* households reported access to the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) only in stone-breaking activity and not in agriculture related work. They perceived that the number of work-days available in the EGS was too little to address their livelihood concerns. Delays in receiving wage payments was also perceived as a drawback of work in the scheme, due to which people preferred to work for a private contractor. Further field visits indicated that the NREGS was now in operation in the area, but for the *Katkari* households this was not yet a dependable livelihood option. This was because of their perception regarding the uncertainty of the timing and duration of works if provided at all and also their past experiences in delays in receiving payments, due to them not yet having a bank account. They were not yet aware of the demand-based nature of the scheme based on a rights approach and did not have confidence in this scheme being better than their past experiences of working in public works programmes. It was perceived by the *Katkari* that government schemes are biased in favour of the landed households. They cited the example of the EGS, where only landed households were eligible for horticulture schemes, or of the well irrigation scheme where a household was eligible only if it possessed a specified minimum quantity of land.

The *Katkari* were categorised as *Antyodaya* under the government's poverty classification. The ration card of the PDS, certifying them to be *Antyodaya* and the tribe verification certificate, certifying them to be scheduled tribes were perceived by them to be the most important documents required for their survival. They perceived that the PDS has weakened over time, since earlier it used to provide pulses, edible oil and sugar, which was no longer provided. The field study indicated that the *Katkari* people were disempowered in the local power structure and not represented in the local Gram Panchayat. It was perceived by *Katkari* people that government schemes intended for them were diverted elsewhere and taken advantage of by people from other scheduled tribe ethnic groups, including those landowners for whom they were working as attached labourers.

It was observed during the field study that there was no *Anganwadi* in the *Katkari* hamlet and it was located in a nearby hamlet of another scheduled tribe ethnic group, inspite of that hamlet having lesser population. Recent field visits indicated that *Katkari* hamlets in the region now have mini-*Anganwadis*, however these do not even a space of their own and its activities remain confined to distribution of occasional morning food supplements. The *Katkari* people reported various constraints in accessing *Anganwadi*. In the agricultural season, there tends to be low attendance of children, since parents are engaged in wage labour and there is no one to accompany children to the *Anganwadi*. There is also low attendance of *Katkari* children after the agricultural season, due to the migration pattern of seasonal migration with children.

During the field study, key informants and local leaders from the *Katkari* community, expressed their own perceptions regarding their development. Some of the key quotes in this regard are given below and provide insights into various aspects such as the causes of their poverty, inter-generational transmission of poverty and also the required interventions.

- “ Our forefathers were engaged in occupation of catechu (*kath*) making, then we started making charcoal from forests working for private contractors, now we break stones for a living. We have always led a life of dependency on others”.
- “People from other ethnic groups call us backward. But without land and without education, how can we come forward?”
- “Some people from other ethnic groups have lot of uncultivated land. Even if our families were to be given one acre each, we would have something to live by”.
- “Education is the only way for the landless to come out of poverty”.
- “ There should be a separate *Ashram* school for *Katkari* children”.

The profile of deprivation among the *Katkari* tribal group, based on a case study, thus indicates the range of social and economic processes because of which they have remained trapped in chronic poverty. They continue to lead a life of deprivation in various dimensions, inspite of various tribal development policies and programmes.

Conclusion

This article has sought to discuss the processes underlying poverty and deprivation among tribal from two perspectives. First, from the perspective of the structural issues in tribal development

policies and administration with respect to the state of Maharashtra and second, from the perspective of the most deprived tribal people themselves. A major gap in tribal development policies and administration has been that there has been an absence of micro-level planning, which would incorporate the emic perspective. Tribal people continue to be viewed from the lens of a provider-beneficiary approach, as passive beneficiaries of government interventions. It appears from the policy literature on tribal development in the context of Maharashtra, that the potential of legislations such as PESA and FRA is yet to be realized in the state. The focus of tribal development policies and administration has been on an area development approach, rather than a human development approach and an inter-sectoral coordination in policies and implementation. What the poor require by way of interventions are relief interventions to address their immediate survival concerns and sustainable development interventions to help them to come out of poverty and lead to a reduced dependence on relief interventions. Development interventions for the most deprived tribal groups may need to be viewed from this perspective.

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