

Status of Tribal Women in India :Some Observations

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ABSTRACT

It is portrayed generally that the socio-economic status of women in tribal society comparatively better than non-tribal but what the real scenario is, like other social group they are oppressed, sexually harassed and dominated some way or other. This theoretical paper tries to focus the challenges and situation meted by them in urban society as well as in their own so called free liberal society. In this connection the article also attempts to highlight the issue of witchcraft, the most painful brutal form of violence against women in tribal society.

Key Words: Status of tribal women, tribal marriage, ghotul, gender inequality, witchcraft.

The mentality of the people of urban Indian society regarding the tribal people is very low and demeaning that does not require a huge knowledge to understand this. It should be mentioned here that they are considered as primitive, barbarian, savage, wild, silly etc. The Santhal Rebellion during 1855- 1856 gave rise to a separate Santhal regime and this was the threshold from where a difference was created between the tribal and the urban society. This has given the tribal population a sense of incompetence and unworthiness. The oppressed, exploited and deprived poor tribals believe that the urban population would never consider them as humans with equal rights. Their culture is depleting day by day due to poverty even their identity is in danger.

If this is the scenario and the tribal society is treated in this manner, it is very hard to distinguish the situation meted to the tribal women, the marginal

of the marginalized section of society. The tribal women are prone to sexual harassment in their society as well as in the urban areas where they venture for work. The tribal women are considered as sex symbol, black beauty, who could be used in any possible way, could be mocked and ridiculed and could be stripped of her pride in public. Basically the sexual freedom in the tribal society can never be granted by the urban society. The tribal women are thought to be chaotic and accustomed to free sexual intercourse. Therefore, when they travel to far off places for the need of employment, they are prone to sexual harassment and sexual exploitation. The biggest surprise is that this problem of sexual exploitation and harassment of the powerless and defenseless tribal women goes unnoticed by the society and no adequate measures are taken to protect them. One of the reasons for this type of dealing could be the timid

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nature of the tribal women who are always fearful about their social defamation and not filing a complain of such types to the eminent authority or the police. Though there is no assurance that she would not face similar kind of harassment when she goes to lodge a complaint to the police station. I would like to quote a statement given by a tribal woman here -

"All of us live in fear of rape. In cities and villages girls are told not to go out after drinks, never to go into deserted areas, always to be under the protection of men. Many of us are not raped because we have bartered our freedom for protection..... For most of non-tribals in the area, tribals are sub-human creatures, whose land is to be usurped, whose possessions are to be looted, who can with impunity be laughed at and pushed aside. As for tribal women, they are prostituted, raped, beaten and discarded: objectified in every way."¹

Some evidential documents of such types of torture made by non-tribal people can be produced here. Traditionally, though all the lands of the Santhal Parganas belonged to the tribals of those areas, they did not have any official papers to prove it. Therefore, the bordering areas of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa got prone to infiltrations and outsiders not belonging to the tribal class took possession of the lands, because the tribal people did not have official documents regarding the same. To protest this type of forceful acquisition of land in the year 1977 Jharkhand Mukti Morcha was established and the peasant movement of '*dhan katai*' started. But to maintain the law and order in those areas the Central Reserve Police did lathicharge and firings and killed innocent tribal men and women. Rape

was one of the method which was used to suppress this movement. This is very demeaning because rape is not used to suppress a particular person or a community or a group but is used against a particular gender. Here it has to be noted that women are not directly involved in any kind of violence or movement. She is used as a bait out here to take revenge upon a particular community or a group and to insult the men of that particular group or community.

Another incident took place in the month of March in the year 1979. In the village named Pakadiya, the police continued the treachery for three consecutive days wherein killing Santhal men and raping and molesting the Santhal women took place. Similar incidents took place in villages of Kerowar, Bakhada, Phulowadiya, Gangarampur, Digghi, Vishaha and Rajau to stop the movement of "Dhan Katai". Many villages were burnt. The tribal men fled from their areas but the tribal women were looted of their jewellery, injured by lathicharge and each one of them was raped by the police. The description of the helplessness of the tribal women faced during that time could be found in the women movements documents.

"Item by items their jewellery was stripped off. Their houses were broken into, their vessels stolen and their grain stores plundered. What the CRP did not want to steal they smashed. Almost all the women were raped – sometimes by two, sometimes by three and a few by five men."²

Two of the incidents of rape that took place in the village of Phulbani in Odisha could be mentioned here. In the Sevashram Vidyalaya a tribal girl student of standard three was raped by her teacher who was a non tribal. Though the school authority and the child's parents complained this

case promptly but the case was registered only on 11th January 1989. The second incident is that of a tribal woman, who was a daily wageer, being raped by two drunk tribal men, who were her neighbors, on 27th June 1984 at 1.30 am. She reported this matter to the police immediately who first refused to take the case. Later the police did lodge the complaint but instructed the tribal lady not to do any medical checkup to prove the rape. Lastly she was given Rs 100 as compensation against the rape case and was denied the justice that she deserved. The rapists were thus allowed to live a prestigious society life and was not punished for the crime they had committed. In the criminal law of every country rape and molestation against women by the police or the armed forces fetches the highest amount of punishment but its implementation faces difficulty. This is due to the reason that the people in power commits the crimes and thus it becomes next to impossible to go against them. Other than this, illiteracy of the tribal women, their ignorance of their rights and law are the factors which causes hindrance in implementing the punishments. Another reason is poverty. The cost incurred to carry on the legal case is beyond the capacity of the tribal victim. The corrupt legal system is also responsible because some officials take bribe and even conceal the evidence .

Now the question arises whether the tribal women are really secured within their own society. Do they lead a respectable and dignified life? According to the general consensus, the tribal women enjoy a lot more freedom than the non tribal women in India. We get an example of this freedom in respect of the dowry system prevalent in the tribal society. The tribal boy has to pay dowry to

the girl and her family before the marriage ceremonies take place. At a glance we could say that this custom helps in women's independency and saves them from all the ill treatment meted due to the dowry system of the Indian society. But at the same time this gives rise to a bad custom – female infanticide. Here we could give an example of the customs followed in a village called Khond in Orissa. The khond tribal of this region kills their female child after birth. This is due to the khond custom where women of this tribe enjoys the freewill of leaving their existing husband and getting married for the second or the third time. In this type of cases the husband is liable to get his dowry amount back and the father of the bride is bound to pay him the amount. Sometimes by doing so the father of the bride turns bankrupt, and thus this type of bad custom is followed. This is why the tribal of the khond society killed their female born after birth, though this custom has reduced in recent times.

This could not be denied that the tribal women enjoy freedom regarding marriage as well as economic status compared to other women of the society. For example, in West Bengal the tribal women are sharing equal economic position with the men folks, So it is difficult to differentiate them in this ground. Thus, economic differences could not be counted as a specialized area. They are equally involved in jhum farming, permanent agriculture, cattle rearing, handcrafts and gathering forest resources. They not only work professionally, but the whole responsibility of running a household is also upon them. Cleaning the house, taking care of their children, seniors and pets, all belong to them and they fulfill them with great expertise, which is due to the influence of the patriarchal society.

Basically capitalism and patriarchy use the labour of tribal women sometimes without pay and sometimes with nominal wages.

Generally in the tribal society marriage takes place in two ways. Either they are arranged with the consent of the tribal women or the tribal couple elopes and later gets the consent from the adults of the family and society. In both the cases, the consent of the woman is mandatory, but other than this, marriage also can take place in exchange of money, by capturing women forcefully or by buying them from their parents. Since in tribal society having sex before marriage is not illegal, the so called virginity of women doesn't carry much value or importance. It could be mentioned here that sexual proximity before marriage is one of the customs in the tribal society which is called Ghotul or the dormitory club. The Onrao tribals call it Dhumkuria whereas the Munda tribals call it Gitiora. Other than this, the festivals of Sohrai and Sarhul of the Santhal tribes allow free sex before marriage. During these festivals tribal women can have sex proximity even when she is not married and if she gets pregnant the man is responsible to marry her. Now if the man refuses to marry her, she is married off with some other man and the dowry is not claimed by the girl's family.

But in spite of these facts, there is no doubt that the tribal woman's life and sexuality is dominated by the patriarchal society. When a tribal woman has an extramarital affair, it is said that the husband's right is violated. In the Onrao tribal society, if a woman leaves her husband and goes on to marry another man, the woman's parents have to return the dowry amount to the exiting husband. On the contrary if the man of this tribe is sexually

unsatisfied with his wife, he could keep a parallel relationship with another woman, by marrying her or by staying in a live-in-relationship. Men belonging to the Ho tribal community has the right to keep two wives. The first wife takes care of the permanent agriculture whereas the second wife looks after the household chores. Therefore in both the cases women are exploited for labor.

Similar to the non tribal society, the tribal societies also impose some rules and regulations for their women which demean them socially as well as emotionally. They are not allowed to plough, to hunt, to construct a tent or barrack just to maintain the economic hold of men in the society over the women. Ironically though they are prohibited from the above mentioned work, they are intermittently involved in them. For example the field has to be ready to be ploughed and the women take care to that and then only the men could plough. The patriarchal tribal society imposes a lot of instructions on their women, but the matriarchal tribal society ignores it. In the case of Santhal, Onrao and Kharia tribes there is no such rules that the women cannot plough. Actually there is no scientific reason behind these types of rules. The only reason is to maintain a hold over women by the men in the society. Now if a family does not have a male member, all these jobs are done by the women naturally and therefore these so called rules are baseless there.

The worst form of oppression towards women in the tribal society is denoting them as witches and hunting them down and then burning them alive. This too is an example of the patriarchal hold and its violence prone attitude. It is not the mere influence of tribal religion alone, but more the

fulfillment of the interests of male society to dominate women in all respect, give rise to such custom. Out here it is very important to understand who could be called a witch? A witch is a person who does black magic and has some supernatural powers with which she could harm others. The existence of witches is found in the poverty stricken backward tribal society of India. The tribals belonging to the Bhil tribe, Dubla tribe, Nayak tribe, Kankona tribe, Chodhar Tribe, Dhodiya tribe, Ghamit tribe, Dhanka tribe etc has a strong belief in witchcraft. Other than these tribes of Muriya, Ho etc believes in the wizardry. Some years back, the Indian government declared that every year there are around 202 cases of witch hunt being registered in India where the witches are killed. This has two significance- firstly, there are laws but not being implemented properly and secondly, in each of the state the witch killing is much higher than what is reported because only one or two out of six hundred cases gets registered.

Basically in the tribal societies of India the witchcraft is a gender biased custom which is prevalent because of the patriarchal hold and it is inculcated into the tribal religion. Wizardry or witchcraft was a revolt against the prevalent customs of the society and so it had to be dominated to maintain peace and discipline in the tribal society. Since the religion of the tribals were once influenced by women and later both men and women were the part of it, the patriarchal tribal society inflicted witchcraft as a fierce tool against the women to dominate them.

In the Santhal society, the witchcraft is found in some folklores where it is intermittently twined with their religion. The folklore states that once

upon a time all the men of the village gathered and stated that their wives abuses them. They wanted a solution for the same. So they went to the lord of the jungle Maran Buru and prayed for relief. The jungle god promised them that he would teach them to tackle the women and asked the men folk to visit him on a particular night. The women of the village came to know this, and on that particular night all the men were made to drink alcohol and they fell asleep. The women disguised as men went into the jungle and the jungle god taught them the wizardry and even gave them the power to destroy the men. The day after all the men of the village went to Maran Buru and narrated to him what had happened the previous night. The jungle god realized his mistake and taught the men how to distinguish those ladies who knew the art of witchcraft.⁵

The significance of this type of folklore is— Firstly, women had learnt the wizardry by falsehood that was not their right and Secondly, even the God helped the men to dominate the women in what so ever way possible. This is depicted in the tale by stating that the men were given the powers to hunt the women who knew witchcraft. These men were later called as Ojha, Dewra, Janaguru or Jaanguru.

Therefore in the tribal society, the hierchy of the men was established by the repressive governance in which the division was such that the women was stated as a witch and the men as witch hunters. Basically this system is very fruitful social method to control women in the society. In the Santhal society, the wizardry or witch craft flourished because women were not allowed to take part actively in the religious rituals of their family and as well as the community rituals and idol worships. The family rituals are performed by the

father and then followed by his sons. Whenever the santhal women try to worship secretly or follow religious ways secretly they are noted as witches and killed. Therefore the tribal women are deprived from following their religious ways by the men of their society. This states that one class of people (men) clearly deprives and dominates the other class (women) just to fulfill their egocentric ways and turns the other class into a vegetative state where she is not allowed to do anything by her own wish without the consent of the other class.

The second issue which is prevalent along the witchcraft is the right to own land. Previously men and women together did the jhum farming and possessed equal land rights. Gradually by the advent of the patriarchal society, the men became the sole owners of the land. This became prevalent from those times, the time of plough farming when the son became the heir to the fathers property. Those societies where women had a hold over the ownership of land, huge clashes happened between the two classes and we could find the rise in witch hunt in these areas through which the dignity of women is injured badly. By doing so they consistently hit the woman's conscience to make her weak and unstable. But in those tribal societies where patriarchy prevailed, the witch hunt was minimum because women out there was already a second class citizen. This may be the reason why witches are not found in a Hindu society as because it is a strong patriarchal society. In tribal societies women still enjoys a lot of authority and hence they have been inflicted with black magic, wherein they are deprived of the law of land by the men. In reference to the above fact, it could be stated that Munda tribal society has rapidly changed into a

patriarchal society which means the hold of women in that society has drastically gone down. Due to this we find there very few cases where the women has been denoted as a witch. But the custom of having witch is still prevalent in men and women here.

In some patriarchal tribal society the women have the right to possess land in some cases. In exceptional cases unmarried daughter, wife and a widow could hold property. In the case of widow, if she has a son, who would grow up and become the head of the family, she is allowed to own the land, take care of it, do farming and earn from it. But if she dose not have any children, then she is prone to be tortured by the relatives who would try to get her land by force. She would be ripped of her right to hold the property in her name. It becomes very easy to deprive her of her rights on the property which belonged to her husband. Research shows that women who are convicted as witches are generally old and unprotected. Therefore it could be stated here that the custom of wizardry or witch craft is found in the tribal uneducated society not only due to superstition, but also to fulfill the selfish wishes of some male members of the society who conspires against the old uneducated female members of the society. For example, near by Kolkata in Kakinada Jute mill, a man who was suffering from schizophrenia had chopped off his male sex organs and genitals. His young wife took him to the hospital for medication and after returning from the hospital, men and women from the neighborhood denoted her as a witch and tried to kill her with daggers and choppers. This type of action could be due to two reasons. Firstly, because she was a young women and her husband was not

in a state to fulfill her sexual desires, so she might be interested on the neighborhood men. Secondly, the neighborhood men may be inclined to her sexually since all knew that her husband was incapable now. The situation was so severe that she fled with her husband and took refuge in the hospital where he was treated.⁶

In the year 2012, two such cases were reported in Assam where two witches were hunted and killed. The first one took place in at Sagaria in Sibsagar where there were some wet lands. In the slums near this wet land a youth died and his death was said to be inflicted by a witch. Some villagers insisted an old lady called Phuleswari Salwa to announce herself as a witch and take the responsibility for the death of the youth. When she denied the allegation she was bitten up badly the whole day and was then burnt alive. The second incident took place in Shontipur in the Misamari area. Laxmi Gaur a resident of Milanpur area was similarly convicted of being a witch and was tortured inhumanely. Later on she was buried alive by the villagers.⁷ There are many organizations working against this witch hunt in the tribal areas. For example, the Janarth Adibashi Vikas Sanstha in Maharashtra, Andha Sraddha Nirmulan Samiti in Raipur etc. We are surprised to state that in some states there are laws against this witch-hunt too. In 2005 a law called Tonhi Satna Virodhi Adhinyama was passed in Chattishgarh which was against this witch hunt custom. Similar laws were passed in Bihar around 1999 and in Jharkhand around 2001. According to this law, anybody who is convicting a lady as a witch would have to face imprisonment for three months and a fine of Rs 1000. Anybody torturing a women by stating her a witch would have to face an

imprisonment of six months and a fine of a couple of thousand rupees. Though these laws prevail, it is not implemented properly. To get rid of this witchcraft from the tribal society, it is required to educate them and to inculcate scientific way of reasoning amongst them . It is also required for the police to be alert and whenever such type of cases are reported prompt actions should be taken as well as convicts should be punished so that such crimes are reduced in number.

We cannot deny the fact that the patriarchal society has a very important role to play in these circumstances. A tribal woman can easily be convicted of being a witch. The prominent male members of the tribal society convict the tribal lady to be a witch and give judgment against her. Therefore it could be stated without doubt that witch hunt is nothing more than gender violence against tribal women. Similar to the non tribal society, if gender equality is not maintained in the tribal society and not practiced , the bad customs like witch hunt against the tribal women would be very hard to eradicate.

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