Tribal Resistance in Post-Independence Odisha

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INTRODUCTION

Odisha, the land of Jagannath and a colorful region with the blue Ocean lapping its eastern shore in foaming tides and the land studded with verdant green hills, was not only famous for her trade and commerce, culture, fine art, architecture and sculpture but also known for its rich history, revolutionary freedom movement, sacrifices and brave resistance movements confronting foreign rules especially British colonialism and the development induced displacement process during Post-Independence era. This paper is an humble effort to highlight about the tribal resistance in post colonial Odisha and their main reasons. It will also focus about the tribal people of Odisha who have not yet given proper recognition and justice due to displacement and development projects. They have been neglected in different sectors of the society and to protect that they have been resisting against the rulers over the years. As result of protest movements, construction of many projects has been delayed or withdrawn raising questions of economic viability. Thus protest movements have forced the respective governments to reconsider the problems of displacement and take necessary measures to address these problems.

(A) Objectives of the Study :-

i. To examine the nature of the tribal resistance and its outcomes in Odisha.

ii. To assess the magnitude of displacement and role of the state Government in the process of industrialization.

(B) Tribal Communities of Odisha :-

Odisha occupies an unique position in the ethnographic map of India for having the largest variety of tribal communities. The major tribes of Odisha are Kondh, Gond, Santhal, Saora, Bhuiyan, Paraja, Koya, Oranon, Gadaba, Juang and Munda. They have been living in the forest, hills and naturally isolated regions for generations. Forest based resources are essential to the social and cultural existence of these tribal people.

Odisha has the largest varieties of tribes i.e. 62 in number including 13 Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) as well as the third highest tribal population numbering over 9.3 millions, accounting for about 9.7% of the country’s total tribal population and constituting 22.85% of the state’s total population as per 2011 census. These tribals live across the length and breadth of the state and are found in all the districts in varying numbers.
(C) Tribal Resistance Movement In Odisha :-

Tribal resistance in Odisha, presents a wide spectrum. By temperament, they are simple, innocent and nature-loving people. In cultural complexities, economic backwardness and political primitiveness, they are differentiated from the rest of the people. They have their own social, cultural and religious identity. Any attempt of the Government and Administration to make an inroad into the tribal society by way of reformative and correctional changes, is bound to be resisted by the tribals with their individual and collective might.

They had resisted against the British authorities and have revolted against democratic elected government. They launched movements against their oppressors in their respective regions and revolted against them because of their exploitation in the form of encroachment on their land, eviction from their land, annulment of the traditional legal and social rights and customs, against enhancement of rent and tax, for transfer of land to the industrialist and against displacement. On the whole, these movements had social and religious overtone. But they are and were directed against the issues related to their existence. They are mostly affected and worst sufferers in industrial and mining projects of the state.

1. Tribal Resistance in pre-Independence Odisha :-

Odisha has a strong tradition of people’s movements since the time of Gandhi and before. After occupation of Orissa in 1803, the British deeply humiliated the aboriginal tribes by the oppressors viz, landlords, money-lenders, traders, the kadars (contractors), government officials and Christian missionaries. The British treated the tribals as a separate groups, kept them under formal control and supervision; enforced their laws and regulation on them, implemented oppressive revenue system; interfered in their traditional privileges and imposed new socio-economic and political order. These activities of the British government grew unrest among the tribals who had started relentless rebellions against the land-grabbers and oppressors. They violently challenged the Zamindars, formed alliances against the Kings; conspired to overthrow the British and demonstrated ample courage in battling caste supremacism.

During Pre-Independence era, the tribal resistance movements in Odisha had constantly targeted foreign interventions via expropriation of their lands that threaten to result in economic distress.

The British Policies disturbed the traditional tribal system. They changed the land system of the tribals who reduced to the position of tenants. Many of them forced to retreat farther into the hills. Belated legislation to present alienation of land by the tribal people failed to halt the process.

The introduction of modern means of communication and transportation, converted the self-sufficient tribal economy into the market economy. The tribals were integrated with the outside world. The customary system of justice was replaced by the new legal system which was not suitable to the tribals. All the oppressors who were introduced by the British in Orissa and known as “Dikus” by the tribals, invaded the tribal regions; disrupted tribal traditional way of life; extracted exorbitant amount of rent from the tribals; evicted them from their land; assaulted physically and forced to sell out their belongings,
children and wives to meet the requirements of
the landlords and money-lenders.

Colonialism also transformed the tribals' relationship with forest. The forest policy (1884) of the British curtailed the customary rights of the tribals to use the forest produce. The tribals used forest for food, fodder, fuel and raw materials for their handicrafts. The development of the communication system and introduction of the administrative system ruined the natural economy of the forests and deprived the tribals from their traditional means of livelihood. The forest law forbade shifting cultivation and put severe restriction on the tribals for use of the forest and their access of forest products.

The natural calamity like famines which occurred in the later half of the 19th century worsened the condition of the tribals. The continuous increase in the prices of the essential commodities made their conditions unbearable.

Abolition of feudal and Semi-feudal form of land ownership alienation from land; annulment of their traditional legal and social rights and customs; encroachment on their land; indebtedness; exploitation of middlemen; denial of access to forest and forest products; enhancement of rent and extortion by policemen, forest officials, government officials led to series of tribal uprisings in the 19th and 20th centuries. On the whole, these movements had social and religious overtones.

The tribals responded to their exploitation and oppression in the form of revolts and movements i.e. Santhal Revolt of 1855, Ghumsar rising (1834-1856), Bhuinya rising (1868 and 1890), Sambalpur revolt (1827 to 1864), Nayagarh uprising (1849-52), Kantha uprising of Kalahandi (1882), Gangapur uprising (1895), Munda Revolt led by Birsa Munda (1895-1901), Tribal movement in Midnapur (1918-19), Santal movement in Malda (1924-32), Tribal and National movement in Orissa (1921-1942) and Tribal movement in Assam (1873).

In these movements the heroic role played by some distinguished tribal leaders like “Laxman Naik of Koraput, Ratan Naik of Keonjhar, Dora Bisoyee and Chakara Bisoyee of Ghumsur, Veer Surendra Sai of Sambalpur, Nabaghan Kanhar of Boudh, Modri Kalo and Nirmal Munda of Gangapur, Sadhu Jani and Dunai Jani of Banapur, Tama Dora of Malkangiri and Rendo Majhi of Kalahandi, had sacrificed their lives to liberate mother India and Odisha from the British imperialism and injustice. Odisha is proud for these tribal leaders who fought tooth and nail against the British Raj. We are also highly indebted to the tribal leaders of Odisha for their contribution, devotion, patriotism and sacrifice for mother Odisha.

These movements were directed against the issues related to their existence and launched under the leadership of their respective chiefs popular in their respective regions. Although these movements initially began on social and religious issues and against the oppression of the outsiders, in course of time, they merged with the National movement and with the non-tax campaign. The tribals fought against their enemies with their traditional weapons i.e. bows, arrows, lathis and axes; looted government offices; murdered oppressors and burnt their houses.

Most of the movements were ruthlessly suppressed by the British authorities. The Government forced the tribal to adopt British policies; introduced protective administration in tribal areas; passed Scheduled District Act (1874) and categorized the tribal areas as excluded areas in the Govt. of India Act of 1935.
2. Tribal Resistance In Post –Independence Odisha:-

After Independence of India on 15th August 1947, the tribal people of the Gadajat or Princely States had launched vigorous agitation for securing responsible government; merger of the states and formation of new states with the province of Odisha. The tribal movements in Nilagiri (1947); Mayurbhanj (1949) and Kharswan movement (1948) were very significant. Due to these movements, all the 25 princely states merged with the province of Orissa in 1947 and Mayurbhanj in January 1949.

The Jharkhand movement under the leadership of Mr. Jaipal Singh in 1952, for the formation of the Jharkhand state, was a great tribal movement in Orissa and Bihar. The tribals of Mayurbhanj supported it and desired to form a new state named “Jharkhand”.

A parallel movement is going on in western Odisha, called “Kosal movement” (1991). However, this movement has not acquired the necessary characteristics as popular support and effective leadership. Yet the presence of sub-regional stirrings cannot be denied.

Unfortunately, even after 68 years of Independence, tribals have benefited least from the advent of freedom. Although independence has brought widespread gains for the vast majority of the Indian population, Adivasis have often been left out and new problems have arisen for the tribal population with the tripling of the population since 1947. Pressures on land resources, especially demands on forested tracts, mines and water resources have played havoc on the lives of the Adivasis/tribals. A disproportionate number of Adivasis have been displaced from their traditional lands due to development projects and many have seen access to traditional resources under-cut by forest mafia and corrupt officials who have signed irregular commercial leases that conflict with rights granted to the Adivasis by the Indian Constitution.

Contemporary Orissa is witnessing a wide number of Micro-level movements struggling against Industrialization, big dams, and other similar development projects i.e. mining, formation of cities, wild life sanctuaries, road and infrastructure development projects. These are not only harming people in general but also marginalizing especially adivasis. They are worst sufferers in industrial and mining projects of the state and lost their home and hearth, livelihood and means of living permanently.

The basic issues behind the tribal movements in Orissa after Independence are forest alienation, training and Job deprivation due to influx of the outsiders, displacement due to development projects, cultural sub-mergence, unbalanced development and curtailment of tribal people’s traditional sources of livelihood.

Over the decades, because of denial of rights over shifting lands, restrictive forest policies, loss of land, the practice of shifting cultivation, a major source of tribal people’s livelihood, has declined. The forest-related policies of the government too has severely curtailed the tribal people’s access to forest and forest produce. Deforestation associated with various development projects i.e. mining, dams and sanctuaries etc, have adversely affected tribal people’s livelihood resources. In addition unfair trade practices of traders, middlemen and forest contractors have resulted in tribal people not getting remunerative prices for sale of non-timber forest produce (NTFP).
Faced with dwindling sources of livelihood many tribal people have become indebted to local non-tribal money lenders; involved in Naxalite Movement; migrated from state in search of works and started struggles against development projects.

Recently the state has witnessed increasing tribal resistance and protests against state encroachment on their land rights and destruction of their livelihood. Besides, they are not only economically exploited by different non-tribal exploiters but also their culture and language are destroyed by the local feudal lords.

As a result, the tribals have organized heroic struggles in Malkangiri and Raigahar of Rayagada district in Muniguda Block, led by the different mass organizations of Adivasis and in Narayan Patna Block in Koraput led by “Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangh” (CMAS). The people of “KBK Region” have started resistance against big dams and industrial projects which are uprooting their livelihood. In Kashipur Block in Rayagada, “Prakrutik Sampad Suraksha Parishad” is leading a one-and-half decade old struggle (1993) against Utkal Alumunia. The Dongaria Kondhas of Niyamgiri hills of Rayagada and Kalahandi districts are struggling against the bauxite mining project of “Vedant” under the banner of “Niyamgiri Suraksha Samity Manch”. Adivasis also resisted against “Upper Indravati project” in 1992 but it did not survive due to police suppression. The farmers of “Lower Suktel” in Bolangir district are fighting against a big dam. The Adivasis of ‘Deomal’ are fighting against the proposed bauxite mining in Koraput. However the mines and metal factories have left a trail of devastation on mountains, forests, rivers and tribal communities.

The tide started to turn in 1987 with success of the “Gandhamardan Movement” (1987) which stopped bauxite being mined on a mountain range in western Odisha. Since then other movements have stopped, a “Missile Firing Range” at Baliapal, “Tata Steel Plant” at Gopalpur and “Tata Shrimp Monopoly” on Chilika Lake. In Panchapatmali in Koraput the local Adivasis are resisting bauxite mining by Hindalco and others.

Most of districts, except Jajpur and Angul, are predominately tribal and they have been evicted from their traditional habitats through predatory mining. Thus they are putting up stiff resistance to mining in Niyamgiri, Deomali, Khandadhar, Kashipur and Keonjhar.

Displacement is the most important cause of the tribal movement in Orissa during post-independence era. Most of the displacement took place in the area of Adivasi districts of west and South Odisha especially in Sambalpur, Sundargarh, Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj due to construction of the large dams, mines and factories. It indicates that Adivasis are the biggest losers in the anti-People development policies by central and state government. Of those, Hirakud, the first dam in Odisha near Sambalpur, was set up in 1950’s. It has displaced about 285 villages. Above 1,60,000 people have been displaced due to that dam. The “Upper Indravati Reservoir” financed by world Bank in 1990s had displaced 99 villages and 40,000 people. NALCO’s Damanjodi refinery in Koraput has displaced 19 tribal villages and 3000 people from Panchapatmali. The “Upper Kolab Dam” has displaced at least 16,000 people from about 60 villages. Gandhamardan movement was started by tribal and others against BALCO in 1985. This movement stopped this project. Tribals of
Kashipur in Rayagada started movement against INDAL and ALCAN in 1940’s. Adivasis of Kashipur have continued their movement against Utkal refinery. Police suppressed their movement in December 2000, and killed 3 people. This incident is known as “Maikanch Firing”. Majhi and Kondhs of Niyamgiri in Korapat are opposing “Vedant Alumina” Ltd. at Lanjigarh in 2004. The mining movements in Keonjhar by the tribals i.e. Bhuiyan, Juang, Munda, Santhal and Kandha in 1994 is another tribal movement against cultural invasion, migration, violence, deforestation and displacement.

The Adivasis of Korapat also started resistance movement against “Kolab and Machkund Dam” and “Hindustan Aeronautics Limited” at Sunabeda in 1960s and against Nalco Alumina Refinery and Mines at Damanjodi and Indravati Dam in the 1980s and 1990s. These projects had displaced large number of tribals who are working now as casual and manual labourers in different Industries.

Rourkela Steel Plant set up in 1960s in Sundargarh district after independence displaced hundreds of Adivasis villages. “Rengali Dam” also displaced more than 250 villages in Sambalpur and Dhenkanal districts.

Though Odisha Govt. suppressed all movements against Rourkela Plant, the NALCO and HAL Plant in Korapat, NALCO Power Plant in Angul-Talcher region and forced tribal to move, it could not check the Gandhamardan and Baliapal struggles in the 1980s. The Baliapal movement against “National Missile Testing Range” which was started in 1985 and continued till 1989, forced the government to withdraw its project. The Gandhamardan movement in 1983 against BALCO forced the government to cancel this project.

After 1990, the Govt. of Odisha allowed private capitalists to start their industries in mineral rich districts. Recently tribals people of Kalinganagar in Jajpur district are resisting the Tata Steel Plants. Presently the “Anti-Posco Steel Plant Movement” in Jagatsinghpur has faced resistance in view of the large scale displacement. It signed agreement (MOU) with Govt. of Odisha in 2005 for a massive steel mill, a port and a township in Jagatsinghpur district. The movement led by PPSS (POSCO Pratirodha Sangram Samiti) remained strong and firm on the ground despite constant provocation and repression by the state and Pro-Company elements. For this movement the POSCO has decided to transfer its project to other state of India. Though the Govt. of Odisha has constantly been trying to set up this project and to fulfill the wish of the affected people of this area, failed to stop and reduce the discontentment among the people of this area.

Naxalism and Maoism are also another significant resistance movement since independence in Odisha. They have increased their presence in the northern and southern regions of Odisha, where tribal people form the majority. They have not only established their power in the western Odisha but also in the coastal Odisha. Rayagada, Korapat, Malkangiri, Kalahandi, Sundargarh, Keonjhar, Jajpur, Nabarangapur, Mayurbhanj and other tribal districts are the Naxal stronghold in Odisha. They are mobilizing and involving poor tribals in their groups and waging war against government, industrial and infrastructural development projects.

**Conclusion:**

Above movements indicate that tribals of Odisha are the greatest loser and fighting against industrialization, displacement, exploitation and unemployment. Due to development projects
many displaced tribals are left destitutes. The threat of displacement; loss of livelihood and environment are the most basic reasons for emergence of resistance movements against state and private companies. Local organizations and Maoists are providing leadership and cooperation to the tribal movements against state. These movements have exposed the pro-business and pro-corporate tilt of the state both federal and provincial. The scale of displacement for Adivasis is something worse than before independence – dispossession from their ancestral land.

Though the development Projects are necessary to develop the economy for the nation and State (Odisha) but it is the responsible of the Government to make rehabilitation less painful; specific Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R and R) policy for project to project and take proper measures for all project affected persons especially the tribal people at all levels. Displacement should be avoided or to be as minimum possible. The displaced people should be provided land based rehabilitation along with replacement cost of land rather than market determined price for the acquired land. Besides rehabilitating / relocating the displaced STs in colonies or other suitable locations, their food security should be guaranteed with provisions for agricultural land and water supply. Mining activities should not be a potential threat to the health and livelihood of these poor and vulnerable groups who have little mobility. Moreover, adequate and sufficient rehabilitation provisions should have been guaranteed for the rehabilitation and relocation of the indigenous tribals.

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