

Educational Empowerment of the Tribal Women of Odisha : A Study of the PTGs of the Nuapada District of the KBK

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Literally the term 'empowerment' implies 'to invest with power'. It is defined as the ability to influence the behaviour of others with or without restraint. Generally it is a socio-political process but particularly it is an individual item of self development. It also means taking control of one's own life. In present context education is seen as the most important element for growth and prosperity of a society, of a state and of a nation. Hence, the education which invests power in somebody else for growth and prosperity is called educational empowerment. In other words when an individual or a body of individuals provided with such knowledge which enhances the ability for self development or all-round development needed to lead a meaningful, dignified and civilized way of life is called educational empowerment.

It is known from various statistics that STs are the most deprived and marginalized in term of education-the key to full-fledged development-therefore they are in the last rung of the social ladder. The PTGs are at the lowest even among the tribals. Education in its real sense is the pursuit of truth. It is an endless journey through knowledge and enlightenment. Such a journey opens up new vistas of development of humanism of which the tribals in general and the PTGs in particular are ignorant, poverty-stricken and deprived due to difficult living conditions in hilly

terrains. It is said that their lives are like earthen pots which may break in any moment.

The National Policy on Education 1986 mentions thus: "Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortion of the past, there will be a well-conceived edge in favour of women. The national system will play a positive, interventioning role in the empowerment of women. It will develop new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision makers and administrators, the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women's studies will be promoted as part of various courses and educational institutions encouraged taking up active programmes to further women's development".

According to Shri APJ Abdul Kalam, there still exists unequal accesses to educational resources owing to various factors. Shri Kalam says, there are three types of families in Indian villages (i) advantageous and lucky ones who feel every importance of educating the young ones at the expense of everything, guide them at all critical stages due to their financial status and stability; (ii) uninformed and ignorant class of

families who might realize the importance of education but are unaware of the opportunities in time nor the procedures and ways to realize these opportunities for their children and iii) weaker class- these category of families do not realize the value of education and hence for generations together their children are neglected and continue to live in poverty. PTGs are in the third category where generations together are deprived and neglected when glanced through the educational status. Other than the PTGs who reside in plains are comparatively educationally little better off.

Now question arises, what is the necessity of educational empowerment to the tribals and therefore the PTGs? In what way this will help them override persistent and chronic poverty? What is the educational scenario among the women section of the PTG and in what way help them overcome day to day problems which make them so backward? The educational empowerment shall try to achieve the following: i) to be aware of their own situation and position; ii) to set their own agenda of progress and development iii) to create space for themselves in the mainstream life; iv) to gain skills for better employability and better interaction with the external world; v) to build self confidence and self esteem; vi) to solve their day to day own problems and vii) to develop self reliance by discarding dependency system.

According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India there are seventy five PTGs in India spreading over sixteen states and one Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar islands. Out of seventy five there are thirteen (from serial no.45 to 57) PTGs in Odisha namely chuktia-Bhunja, Birhor, Bondo, Didayi, Dongria Kond, Juang, Kharia, KutiaKondh, Lanjia Saura, Lodha, Mankardia, Paudi Bhuan and Saura. Out of thirteen, Chuktia-Bhunja tribe is the only officially recognized PTG.

Another widely accepted group as a PTG is **Paharia** or **Kamar** are by scholars, journalists, social activist, intellectuals even Govt. of Odisha (vide their Letter No.14713/SSD, dated 19.04.2008). The Paharia or Kamar tribe has all the features which a PTG ought to have like declining population, use and practice of pre-agricultural technology, hunting (various Forest Laws prevent now), living in very remote areas having very poor infrastructure and administrative support, low level of literacy, economic backwardness and insignificant numbers (as per the Government of India definition). There are few other attributes to call a human group as primitive like earliest settlers', common name, territory and language, strong kinship bond with endogamy and distinct taboos, unified system of socio-political organization, distinct custom, moral codes, religious beliefs and rituals (Dr. F. Deo-1983). Along with this, their very existence depends on jal, jamin, jungle and jantu (animals) as advocated by the advocates of various social movements and tribe rights activists. Yet the Government of India has to include in the approved list of Schedule Tribes even after 64 years of Independence and decades of struggle by the local NGOs and Paharia themselves. They are in the OBC list now as the enumerator of coastal district mistaken 'Kamar' as the ironsmith although they were having same status with their kith and kins of the MP and now the Chhatisgarh, before the inclusion of this part to Sambalpur district from the Central Province (The Focus, Vol-1, October-December 1983). Specially they reside in the west Odisha districts of Bargarh, Balangir, Kalahandi and Nuapada. According to a report prepared Sajag and SVA 2001, there are 1545 families- Nuapada having the highest 1079 numbers followed by Kalahandi-300, Balangir-150 and Bargarh 16. According to Kamar Vikash Manch, Nuapada(2008), total Paharia population is

7000. Their average family size is 3.93 below than the district average of five. They spread over almost all the five blocks of the Nuapada district. However their largest concentration is found in the Boden block i.e. 335 households followed by Sinapali-313, Komna-306, Nuapada-163 and Khariar 161- thus having a total HHs of 1278, (Lokdrusti-2007). At present their main occupation is traditional bamboo making and burn and slash cultivation (Podu as locally known). Due to ever decreasing forest resources and strict forest laws, their survival is at stake. Thus it seems their rights over natural resources are almost having shrunk. Routinized smugglings and illegal trafficking of valuable woods, MFPs and other herbals (Rasna, Palo or Tikhur) further aggravate their living conditions (Frontline, Volume 23-Issue 26, Dec 30, 2006-Jan. 12, 2007). There are only 165 marginal farmers that too having very poor quality of forest lands and the rest 914 are landless. Again out of 1079 HHs 929 HHs are homestead landless. All HHs are in BPL category. According to a local NGO "it would be better if we call them total landless in terms of cultivable and homestead land. Few patches of land they own are either forest or revenue lands. Crops they produce hardly support maximum a quarter of a year". Sajag, another local NGO writes in its report "most of the Kamar families starve for food for 30 to 90 days (p-12). When we look at the vital statistics prepared by the Sajag and SVA, figures are horrible. Life expectancy of male and female are 58 and 55 respectively when it is 62 for average Odishan. Similar is the death rate scenario among them. Under five mortality rate is as high as 128 compared to district's 64. Rate of early marriage is still rampant. For the KBK it is 60%. Deliveries are made at the 90% of homes. They are still unaware of Government -funded Janani Surakshya Yojana. Awareness about HIV/ AIDs among them is almost zero.

According to 2001 Census the Literacy rate among the Paharias is meagre 5.37% compared to state's Tribal literacy of 37.40% - whether this figure has touched double digit in 2011 Census is to be seen. Compared to males' 8.25% females' is 2.50%. When we analyze Matric to higher education standard till date the figures are like this-

Education standard	Male	Female	Total
Matric	07	01	08
+2 Arts	02	00	02
+3 Arts	01*	00	01

Source- Sukal Paharia, Kamar Vikash Manch, Nuapada District, 2011.

It is to be noted here is that the male person who graduated from the Government Autonomous College, Bhawanipatna in +3 Arts with Honours in Geography was fully sponsored by a local NGO right from Class-I to Graduation. And the only female who has passed Class-X is the wife of the above person. He is leading the Kamar Vikash Manch to claim their tribal status before the Government of India.

Encouraging feature of the Paharias is that female members outsmart male members in male-female ratio i.e. 1000:1024. But in literacy, female are outnumbered far behind by the males although their literacy percentage is meagre among them. Therefore there is nothing called feel-good-factor- neither for male or for female. Female educational scenario reflects a very dismal picture. But future seems to be hopeful. Before 2003-04 there was two primary schools with world of negligence. Here the Paharia concentration is higher at the plateau above about 3000 feet from the sea level. Only two legs allow one to walk through the forest

and hilly terrain to reach to Patdarah and Kathfar as there is no motorable road. In the same session seven numbers of EGS schools were opened which continued for few years only to convert those schools into Project Primary Schools after the implementation of Right to Education (RTE, 2010) in Odisha. A study shows an encouraging facts of girls students enrollment of 50% among the Paharias (Plight of Primary Education in an Exclusive Primitive Tribe Region in the context of RTE: A Case Study of Kathfar and Patdarah of the Nuapada District 2011, by Padma Lochan Barma).

The enrollments of girls students were found 15.25% to 37.50% higher than the boys in 50% of the primary schools in two exclusive Paharia villages. But the discouraging fact is that soon after puberty, parents do not think it proper to send their girls to schools and in anticipation prepare them for an early marriage, which is still largely prevalent among them. This is a cause of serious concern and challenge for all of us for educational empowerment of the Paharia in general and women in particular.

The official recognized PTG is the Chuktia- Bhunjia of the Sunabeda plateau of the Nuapada district (serial No.45 in the Government of India List). The abode of this tribe is the Nuapada district where around 75% of the Bhunjias live in and in the Raipur district of the Chhatisgarh. They belong to the Dravidian racial group. Russel and Hiralal are of the opinion that the very word Bhunjia implies one who lives on Bhum or Soil or earth and is means who are dependent on it. Hence a Bhunjia is one who depends on earth for his/her survival. However local myth says that they were earlier called as 'matia' (mat means soil and ia who comes from soil) which means their origin comes from the soil, same as mentioned above. This tribe is categorized

into Chuktia Bhunjia and Chinda Bhunjia on the basis of anthropological root. If we are to go by Russel and Hiralal then the Chuktias are of Halba and Gond origin. They speak a dialect of Hindi which is closer to Halba or a form of Chhatisgarhi. According to Sir George Grierson, Halba is practically the same as Baigani. According to another source, the word Bhunjia may have been derived from the Binjhvars- a Hinduised offshoot of the ancient Baiga tribe. But ultimately their root can be traced back to these three tribes namely- Baiga, Gond and Halba. The Chuktia practices strict observance of the rules of ceremonial purity. In case other than his caste brethren or even their married daughter touch on the kitchen, then and there that is abandoned or burn altogether and newer one is built. In Nuapada district Chuktia-Bhunjias are confined to Sunabeda plateau, full of forest and secluded bordering Chhatisgarh state and the Chinda Bhunjias are scattered over plains and live with other caste groups. While the former staying away from the mainstream life in solitary areas, maintain their tribal culture and practices and solidarity in tact, the later are in close proximity with Hindu caste groups and are in the advance stage of acculturation.

When we look at the demographic figure of the Chuktia-Bhunjia, according to 2011 Cenus total population is 11276 of which male constitutes 5709 and female 5567. Main concentration is found in the Nuapada district of Sunabeda Plateau where there are twelve numbers of revenue villages and many numbers of hamlets and population around 7142. Apart from this, their presence can be felt in the district of Sambalpur, Dhenkanal, Keonjhar and Baleswar. Their decennial average growth rate is above 20%. Present literacy rate is 34.86% of which male and female literacy are 51.52% 18.27% respectively (CBDA, Sunabeda). Sex ratio among them is

1000:1018 which is quite high compared to 1991's dismal 975:1000. Their settled villages vary in size which ranges from 8-10 HHs to 50-60 HHs. They live in thatched houses- made of mud and wild grass. Mundane point of view which determines present status in society is very poor. Their usual household items are mats, earthen ware pots, hunting weapons, fishing traps, digging sticks, sickles, axes, few cooking utensils, daily use clothes, bamboo baskets- only the necessities of life and no comfort items. Each according to his or her needs and each according to their capacity reflect the egalitarian nature of their lives. According to CBDA (Chuktia-Bhunjia Development Agency- State Agency)'s Micro Project Area, where twelve numbers of revenue villages are there and Chuktia-Bhunjia are in majority, all the HHs are under BPL. Land holding pattern shows that there are only marginal farmers having less than 2.5 acres of land to 5 acres. Qualities of lands are absent, only upland and stony even barren land can be seen. As for the Paharia, agricultural yield hardly support a quarter year, same is the case with this tribe too. To ensure Kharif crops there are 9 numbers of WHSs and 3 numbers of diversion wires which has the potential to irrigate 50 acres of agricultural

lands. Their dependence is largely on forest resources which is fast depleting. There are 519 claimants under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 to the Government of Odisha to settle their land rights. Under the welfare schemes of the Government of Odisha, 46 are in Madhubabu Pension Scheme, 14 are in Widow Pension, and 2 are in physically challenged category and 144 in OAP scheme. At present there are 5 electrified villages and only a health centre to cater to the health facilities. In emergency cases patients are rushed to the Komna Community Health Centre, 65 KM away from the Sunabeda plateau.

When we look at the total literacy figures of different Census Years, they are yet to be educationally empowered and in case of women, still lot remains to be done. 2001 Census says female literacy is just 13.61 %, which are less than half compared to their Gonds counterparts and little higher compared to Paharia tribe. When compared to total women tribal of the state it is meagre and compared to state's women total it is negligible. It is like who is best among the worst. The following table shows the comparative educational status of the Bhunjia and their Gond counterpart.

	1961			1971			1981		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Bhunjia	9.62	1.62	5.50	9.94	0.77	5.10	15.84	1.29	8.50
Gond	19.41	2.23	10.80	23.16	13.15	13.50	31.38	6.33	18.70
	1991			2001			2011*		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Bhunjia	4.78	4.78	13.79	44.52	13.61	29.03	51.52	18.27	34.86
Gond	10.76	10.76	24.02	63.27	30.81	47.04	NA		

Source-Data Hand Book, GoO, 2006, SCSTRTI, BBSR and *CBDA, Sunabeda.

To be on par with the Gonds, it will take more than decade as figures show, to be on par with total women literacy of the state it will be decades or so. Hence road ahead is long and uphill task. What is needed is acceleration of functional literacy campaign aggressively with a committed band of volunteers. In the present context literacy is minimum knowledge of writing, reading and doing Maths. In this parameters there is long way to go. But, at large, literacy means something greater. Educationally it is more than an idea of self development, of capability enhancement and humane living with all the necessities of life.

In a study entitled “Factors affecting Land Alienation and the Literacy rate among the Bhunjia and the Kamar Tribe : A Comparative Study of Odisha and Chhatisgarh” undertaken by SBKK, Chindaguda in the year 2007-08 reveals that “out of 3104 population 2047 or 66% are illiterates. In some of the study villages it is overwhelming 90%. And this was the most alarming area of their study. It further mentions in spite of ambitious programmes like Sarba Sikshya Abhiyan, DPEP and EGS and now the Right to Education under implementation we have villages of 90% illiterates. Similarly, the female literacy was found as high as above 90%. In 40% of the studied villages 100% illiteracy was found. The study ascribes teachers’ absentism, lack of infrastructure, lack of interest by the parents as the causes of this state of affairs. These are the stumbling blocks on the way of the socio-economic development of the PTGs of the District and ultimately putting them to the vicious circle of poverty.

In these context unless and until educational empowerment of the PTGs- Paharia or Kamar and the Chuktia Bhunjia of the Nuapada district is prioritized, put greater emphasis to aggressive female literacy by the state, their socio-economic status vis-à-vis others will be difficult to realize. Ultimately empowering the PTGs in general and their women section in

particular will help achieve their own agenda of progress, gain skills for better employability, create space for themselves, build self confidence and self esteem for the community, bring solutions to their everyday problems and get involved in the national mainstream. More important at the personal family level on the part of women is to have enough knowledge for providing potential human capital to the society and nation at large.

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