GLIMPSES ON IDENTITY, CULTURE, RESOURCES AND RIGHTS OF VJ/NT

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INTRODUCTION

It was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who told us that, when a slave is made aware of his slavery, he would rebel against it, and further gave us a slogan to “Educate, Agitate and Organise”.

Mahatma Jotirao Phule, the first Indian rebel, and social revolutionary, who opened the gate of education for the Shudras and Ati-shudras of India for the time after thousands of years; and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who awakened the Dalit-Nomadic masses about their rights and gave them an identity; taking inspiration from these great human beings, I struggled to obtain some fundamental information about Dalit VJ/NTs.

This is an humble attempt towards this end. I am sure that the wise scholars gathered here today would appreciate my attempt and give a consideration to my thoughts. I also thank the organizers of this National Convention of Adivasis and Nomadic Communities, who offered me an opportunity to express my thoughts on the subject of VJ/NTs.

History

The Hindus have produced three sub-human societies of 1) Nomadic and criminal tribes, 2) Scheduled Tribes, and 3) the Untouchable castes. This obnoxious fact denotes the meanness of Hindu culture. They created a huge group of people living on crime by depriving them of all decent means of livelihood. The main reason is their aim of keeping the indigenous population of India deprived of all rights, keeping them divided and subjecting them to extreme exploitation. Thus we see the adivasis forced to live in the forest, the untouchables and chandals forced to live outside the village boundaries, the nomadic and the criminal tribes forced to stay in forests, hills, open lands and outside habitations. They must cook their food on three stone hearths, drink the water of nullahs, streams and rivers. Their only property should be dogs, donkeys, pigs, goats, lambs and poultry.
Chaturvarna

The Creation of Man is not through the mouth, arms, trunk or legs of anybody named as ‘God’, contrary to what is mentioned as the beginning of Chaturvarna. The Darwinian thesis of Evolution of Species has been accepted now all over. Those who believe in God and religion should note that the only reason for the progress of humanity is intelligence of man.

Rig Veda

Rig Veda had only three varnas, the fourth one of Shudras being added by the Purush Sukta at a later date. Untouchability started much later. It was based on varna/caste and not on class. Caste is not only the division of labout but the division of the labourer.

The various castes originated much after the mixing of various races in India as propounded by Dr. D. R. Bhandarkar in *Foreign Elements in the Hindu Population*.

Nagas

Dr. Jyoti Prasad Jain has rightly pointed out tht the original civilization in the whole of India was that of the Nagas or Dravidas, the former being the cultural or racial name and the latter being the linguistic name. They spoke Tamil, from which all other Indian languages originated.

Peshwai

According to *Peshwa Rojnishi*, Vol. 8, pp 311, during the Brahminic Peshwa rule in 1771-1772, in the reign of Sawai Madhav Rao, it was necessary to obtain the consent of the Peshwa himself or of Nana Phadnis for awarding death penalty to anybody. But in case of the accused Ramoshis, Mangs, Bhills such a consent was not necessary, and they could be executed even on mere suspicion.

The Conspiracy

It can surely be seen from the references quoted that the main object of the Brahminic conspiracy is to keep the *mulnivasis* divided and exploit them to the fullest extent.

A great Dalit literary figure Anna Bhau Sathe had aptly remarked tht the earth does not rest on the head of a serpent; it rests on the palm of the working shudras.

Riseley and Ghurye both have said that the nomadic tribes are the indigenous people of India. Bhikshu Chaman Lal mentions that all the nomadic gypsies of the world originated from India.

The Hindu civilization and culture has slapped may harsh rules on the nomadic criminal tribes in the name of religion. For example, among the Pardhis, banjaras, Kaikadis, and the Bhill tribes it is considered a sin and an irreligious act to construct your own house. They are enjoined to keep moving. They should not have a permanent chullah (hearth) but must cook on three stones; the household grinding mill (*jate*) must not be fixed in the ground, should not
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drink water from a permanent well, they should drink water only from a flowing stream or a river. These rules and regulations, in course of time, became part of their life and their religion.

Nomenclature

Denotified are called castes whereas nomadic are called tribes. Why is this discrepancy? Both of them should be called tribes.

Rituals

As a matter of fact there is no religion that applies to them. Roaming is their religion. They are really secular. They are forced by the higher caste Hindus to follow the Hindu rituals, ceremonies and festivals. The festivals like Diwali and Vat Savitri and rituals like yajnas are all Hindu rituals and festivals. The Nagavanshi Nomadic tribes’ real festivals are Nag-panchami, Pola, Holi etc. The deities of VJ/NT are Satwaii, Mari aai, Khandoba, Biroba, Yellamma, etc.

Present Situation

Classification of Nomadic Tribes according to occupation

1. Tribes useful to village life like Beldar, Ghisadi, Jadi-butí Vaidyas
2. Tribes wandering for entertainment of the villagers
3. Tribes wandering on mercy of the people like Mari-aai bhaktas, masan-jogis, bhutya, chitra-kathis, etc.
4. Food gatherer tribes like Banjara, Labhan, etc.
5. Pastoral tribes wandering in search of fodder for the animals.

Dr. V. H. Mehta has described the nomads as “Grass tenders and cattle breeders” and nomadism as ‘regular seasonal cyclic movement of groups for sustenance. According to food supply it may assume different forms depending upon geography and climate. There are nomads who hunt and who collect food as well as pastoral and even agricultural nomads. Nomads are usually found in small kin bands. There are not only grasslanders but also those taking to Nomadic title at will on account of economic insecurity and lack for social adjustment.”

Why the nomadic tribes took to crime?

No man is criminal by birth. By environmental features he becomes criminal, as opined by Prichard.
The nomadic tribe sustains itself on its own profession. When that is not enough to feed him, he resorts to stealing. He is compelled to steal grain, crops, fruits and the like. This brands him as criminal. This deprives him of chances of employment and forces him more towards crime. And crime brings punishment, may it be by the laws of Manu or by the British.

The cruel punishments by the traditional Law of Manu were based on the caste. T. V. Stephen, a British officer, took advantage of that and brought in an Act in 1871 and the whole tribes as such were declared “criminal by birth”. These people were deprived of all the sympathy which even animals and cattle get. They were put behind barbed wires till after Independence. To what extent the social structure based on caste can degrade human beings can best be seen by the examples of criminal tribes, nomadic tribes, Adivasis and untouchable castes.

The Life of Women of Nomadic and Criminal Tribes

To serve the husbands under all circumstances and lead a life of slavery is the lot of all women of these tribes. That women are inauspicious is the verdict of the religious scriptures.

Previously, the women from Wadar tribe were not allowed to wear clothes covering breasts. Women of Banjara tribes required to return to the ‘tanda’ before sunset. Unmarried girls of Paradhi tribe after puberty were required to get out of the house only after blackening their faces.

About 75% of girls even now are married in childhood with consequent ill effects. As these people wander all around there is no security to life and modesty of women. The village goons and police look at them with amorous motives.

The men of these tribes beat dwomen on trivial grounds. Previously most of the caste panchayats were convened for the sake of women.

The woman of these tribes is hard toiling and supporting the family with hard labor just as her husband. She suffers extreme discrimination and atrocities from the society. She becomes stronger, more hardy, tenacious and bold than other communities because of her exposure to all adversities of life in the open.

DEMANDS

Lalu Prasad has introduced kullad in Railways as a form of employment. Similar facilities shuld be made available to all VJ/NTs.

Mobile Ration Cards

Mobile Ration Cards should be issued to Nomadic Tribes so that they could purchase commodities from any shops in the vicinity of their temporary camps during their travels.

On the Boards for VJ/NT, the members should be from their own category.
The Aashram Shalas and Vasti Shalas should be given to VJ/NT category.

VJ/NTs should be taken as untrained teachers as ‘Shikshan Sevaks’.

**Handicrafts**

They should be given promotional facilities for their handicrafts and market should be found for their products.

**Bank Loan**

The conditions imposed on VJ/NT for obtaining a bank loan are improper and not possible to be met with by them, e.g. two guarantors in Government service, a bank cheque book, etc.

Mere suspicion should not lead to harassment of whole caste or tribe

Criminal Settlement Act 1908 was repealed on 13th August 1949 after Independence. But there is no provision of punishment for those who are following this Act even after its cancellation. Those officers who ignore the fact of cancellation of the Criminal Tribes Act and come to arrest the VJ/NT persons on the basis of mere suspicion should be taken as offenders under SC/ST Atrocity Prevention Act and dealt with accordingly.

**Reservation in Private Sector**

India has always had reservations since the days of the ‘Purush Sukta’, perhaps the first declaration of Reservation on Caste Basis. And these were always based on caste. If admission to army was not based on caste, India would not have been slave for centuries.

Reservations should never be based on economic status because the poverty is not the CAUSE of social exclusion but is the RESULT of social exclusion in the form of caste.

Secondly, an individual’s economic status can change. Thirdly, there are practical difficulties in proving the economic status of individual and so the weak may suffer. Lastly, in India infested with rampant corruption, it is easier to purchase a false ‘income certificate’.

When such Government concerns which employed people from Reserved categories were sold out, the question of reservation in private industries became more acute and urgent.

**How are they Private Industries?**

It is now a well settled principle that the under-privileged castes are entitled to reservations in the State-owned establishments. When we say ‘private sector’ we mean the corporate sector, and not the private businessmen, private partnership firms or even so called ‘private limited’ companies. We are talking only of the public limited companies. The Company is not ‘Private’ in any sense of the word. It is public by name, by definition, by concept, by convention and
even by law. It is a Public Limited Company and I fail to understand why it should ever be called a ‘Private Sector’.

Its share capital is from the PUBLIC, the huge amounts of loans are from the PUBLIC financial institutions including Government institutions. It is all PUBLIC money they are using. Thus their capital and all resources are public and they thrive on PUBLIC funds. They get PUBLIC lands from the Government, many times acquired from the poor peasants and even Adivasis. They get PUBLIC water, and even do not build their own approach roads and culverts but want the public agencies to foot the bill for the roads meant entirely for their exclusive use. They never pay attention to local environmental laws and cause so much pollution that after a few years the judiciary has to intervene.

Indian industry remained not only conservative but casteist, as rightly observed by Kanch Ilaiah, who has asked, why is it that dalits, tribals and OBCs could not, on their own, make it to executive positions in Indian industry in any significant number, even after 56 years of Independence.

They say if reservation are introduced, competitiveness will suffer, as if they are vry efficient and competitive now. This is great insult to Dalit Bahujans to question their merit, which has been amply proved for generations. It is proved in battlefields, in factories, in Railways, in banks and everywhere that they are given opportunities. The workers in factories are doing good jobs. They are mostly SC, ST, VJ/NT, OBC etc. But these are not elevated to lower, middle or upper-top management cadres.

**Housing and Rehabilitation**

Because of the nomadic life many problems ae faced by the VJ/NTs, such as social, economic, educational and political.

Their rehabilitation involves providing them with a residential house as well as agricultural land for their livelihood.

The arid Government land available outside the villages and also the land that has become available because of Land Ceiling Act can be given for tilling on the condition that it cannot be divided or sold, mortgaged or transferred in any way, not even as tenants.

The land which was being used for keeping them under barbed wires can also be used for their rehabilitation. Residential co-operative housing should be used to provide them residential tenaments, establishing separate a Housing Board for providing easy loans.

Measures should also include help for cottage industries like poultry farming and like. Let the Government establish two villages for VJ/NT in each Tehsil from State funds.
Certificates

Certificates issued by the registered NGOs working for VJ/NT or by Chief of tribe of VJ/NT should be treated as authentic proof, to get the Caste Certificate from the Collector, SDO or Tehsildar, or these VJ/NT people should be given Magisterial powers and be treated as competent Revenue Authority.

EGS

Unemployed VJ/NT members are being refused employment under Employment Guarantee Scheme. They should be taken under the scheme.

Awakening

There is need for awakening to a great extent for the people of VJ/NT themselves. For example, there is a rule of the Caste Panchayat of the Paradhi community that their caste members should not undertake any service. Such Panchayats should be prevented from making any rules.

Act Necessary

An Act should be framed on these lines to prevent atrocities to VJ/NT people on mere fact that they are from this particular caste, or that they are beggars. Such Act may be based on the lines of Protection of Civil Rights Act 1976 or VJ/NT should be included in the same Act.

Lokur Commission

In 1965 Lokur Commission was formed which said that among the VJ/NT, both the signs of tribal structure and untouchability are noticed. And also nomadic and criminal attitude are two additional features. Therefore these VJ/NT people should be included among the Scheduled Tribes. More information should be collected by VJ/NT NGOs and Government should be made to accept this demand.

CONVERSION AS SOLUTION OF ALL PROBLEMS

Let us adopt Buddhism

All said and done, the real solution to all the problems of VJ/NT seem to be the religious conversions. Dr. Ambedkar had said that he was born as a Hindu but he would not die as a Hindu, and got converted to Buddhism with his followers in 1956. We are watching the situation of the situation of the Dalits of Maharashtra who, under the leadership and guidance of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar made tremendous progress in life. We also see that the communities in the same category of Dalits who did not convert could not make much progress.
We can wipe out the anathema of begging and crime by conversion. It can give us an opportunity to mix in the social and National mainstream. It can give us stability and self-respect. Buddhism is the most appropriate religion for the purpose, in my opinion. It could give us happiness, prosperity and peace because of the teaching of humanity based on scientific tenets.