

Transition of indigenous Tribal women

Introductory Note:

An article written by Dr.R Balasubramaniam, Founder & Chairman of GRAAM, on Transition of indigenous Tribal women of H D Kote Taluk in Mysore District. It talks about the tribal women becoming budding social entrepreneurs. It has been published in Star of Mysore English daily.

STAR OF MYSORE

Saturday 28th October 2017

Page-12



Voices from the Grassroots

By Dr. R. Balasubramaniam

A path-breaking transition...

Fourteen saree-clad women in a busy shopping mall in Mysuru are not normally noticed by too many people or they do not make headlines. One can agree that this is not breaking news or something that one talks about. But what makes it special is that these women were all in their early thirties and were indigenous forest-dwelling tribal women from more than a hundred kilometres away. They were at the mall to launch their ragi-based food products made in a factory that they owned and operated, located far away in Jaganakote Haadi tribal colony on the fringes of the Bandipur Tiger Reserve in H.D. Kote Taluk.

One would wonder how this would be when compared to the many successful women entrepreneurs around the world. The achievement of these shy and timid indigenous women sounds insignificant when one compares them with the successful women entrepreneurs running large corporations, employing thousands and generating crores of rupees in turnover. But those who know and understand the path traversed by these indigenous tribal communities, who have travelled over the last 70 years since our independence, will be able to appreciate the enormity of the attainment of these women.

These women are from the Jenukuruba, Kadukuruba and Yerava tribes belonging to different Self-Help Groups. They operate under the name of 'Prakruthi Food Products.' What made this visit of theirs special was the confidence with which they were presenting the products (branded as 'Health Enrich') to the people visiting the mall on a crowded Saturday evening.

Coming from the backgrounds that they did, this was not just a manifestation of their being empowered but of shifting the entire paradigm of how the world sees indigenous tribal communities. Centuries of operating in a traditional hunter-gatherer economy with little or no appreciation of the demands of the 'market' have placed the tribal communities at a tremendous disadvantage. Before the onslaught of 'development projects', large dams and forest conservation laws, these tribals lived an existence that was both sustainable and minimalistic. Their skill sets were more than adequate to ensure that they had a place to live in and food to eat.

Being suddenly uprooted from their traditional habitats and relocated outside their comfort zone of a forest, these tribals are today at crossroads that they have never experienced before. They can neither go back to the forests nor have the skill sets to cope and thrive in the modern world. It is in this backdrop that the achievement of these tribal women is worthy of celebration.

From being first-generation learners to being people exploited by the system, these women come from mostly



landless families that have been uprooted twice in their parents' life time — by construction of large reservoirs and by the formation of National Parks. Both these times, the State never truly compensated them nor provided them any sustainable rehabilitation. Insensitive government machinery with no formal policy for rehabilitation and resettlement had left their families to survive on their own.

The present plethora of government schemes are designed by bureaucrats sitting in the State capital with little or no understanding of the anthropology, culture, traditions or current status of these indigenous tribals. What is needed is not 'top down' programmes of either the State or humanitarian NGOs but 'bottom up' creation of opportunities that can fulfil the current aspirations of these people.

Development planners must not just acknowledge tribal voices but must engage actively to seek them out and get them to articulate their true needs. They need to understand that unless one builds on the human and social capital of these communities, economic mobility will only remain a far-fetched dream.

What these tribals want are not doles from a patronising State or NGO but the skill sets, knowledge and space to participate as equals in a system that has been consistently denying them that. They do need the social safety nets of affirmative action and special development assistance for the initial take off but beyond that are other social needs — good healthcare, contextually relevant and culturally appropriate education, livelihood opportunities, political voice, financial and social inclusion, and more importantly the recognition as equal partners in their progress.

They need to be recognised as the custodians of local natural resources and made partners in any development projects that are undertaken in their traditional

habitats. Beyond the romanticising, they also need the knowledge and skills to integrate and compete in today's market-driven economy. They need to learn to survive not on the doles of a welfare State, but to live with the dignity and self-esteem that they have been traditionally known for and lived with.

And these women have begun the journey and are assuring themselves of a steady income all through the year based on their own enterprise and effort. They are a beacon light for other tribals and serve to demonstrate what can be done if they make up their minds to create a balanced reality for themselves — a position that enabled them to accept their landlessness not with a resigned helplessness but to look for other possible avenues. Along with this growing empowerment came their decision to source their raw materials only from local farmers, to provide nutritional supplements to malnourished children in their communities and to differentially price their products so that other tribal and rural women could afford it.

What began as an adventure to acquire skills and knowledge to seek social and economic mobility has the potential to become a harbinger of sustainable change that can be made applicable across the country. These women may have come to terms with their challenges, but have refused to tone down their aspirations. And this is what led them to seek out the benefits of modern life with retention of traditional values, helping make choices driven by an empowered existence rather than being dependent on Government schemes and NGO programmes.

More info about their ragi-based products is available at www.healthenrich.in

[Dr. R. Balasubramaniam is a development activist and a public policy advocate. He is the founder of Sivami Vivekananda Youth Movement and can be reached at dirbaia@gmail.com]