

Challenges And Opportunities In Inclusion Of Asur Community As Socially-Economically Disadvantaged Group

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ABSTRACT

In a diverse country like India, it is a big challenge to ensure equal access to the outcomes of the development. India has been making notable progress but still there are various social groups who are socially and economically disadvantaged and backward. Some such groups are Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Class (OBCs). For the present study, the investigator has chosen one such community who are for time long are living in disadvantaged condition. Among 40 ethnic groups of Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal, Asur is a small non-Aryan tribal community sparsely distributed at Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar and Alipurduar District in North Bengal at present. Here they are inhabiting with Oraon, Munda, Santal and Garo as neighbours whose culture has had a visible impact upon them particularly in their religious beliefs and practices. They became socially and economically disadvantaged since they have been forcefully migrated by East India Company from the Chotonagpur plateau to North Bengal. The Asur people had a primitive culture and livelihood of iron-smelting and when they were brought to North Bengal they started involving in working as tea garden labour, forest collector, land labour and animal rearing practices. They gradually lost their own indigenous culture as well as their unique identity as powerful, highly intelligent and destroyer of enemies as described Sayanacharya in Hindu mythology. In this context, the present investigator has tried to make an analysis of their socio-economic condition and educational situation and in the light of National Education Policy, 2020 how this community can get access to become included in mainstream education so that their social and economic development can be facilitated has been discussed in this paper. Also, few suggestive measures have been recommended to resolve their present challenges in social inclusion in all respect.

Keywords: *socially and economically disadvantaged, primitive culture, iron-smelting, social inclusion*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the era of artificial intelligence and digital technology, the issue of equity and inclusion is a highly discussed topic in a developing country like India. It is not that social inclusion is a new challenge, but truly this phenomenon is as old as human civilization. The principle of inclusion is underlined in the process of exclusion. Historically, religious movements like Bhakti movement in the 8th to 12th century and later during 15th to 17th century provided strong critique of the principle of exclusive and orthodox social order. Also, the Veersaiva movement in the South and Nanak, Kabir, Ravi Das provided strong indictment of the existing social order and brought a new social philosophy of openness. Then coming to Islam, with its strong emphasis on a new social order based on equality, too brought openness which was further advanced by the Sufi orders into a sense of togetherness. Religious reforms were integrally connected with social reforms. Since the nineteenth century, the attack on the hindu social order and its practice of exclusion of lower castes by the Christian missionaries is continued still today and this makes the ground for the movement of social inclusion in different way.

Social inclusion brings social and economic development of a country and the ultimate goal of socio-economic development is to ensure that all sections of the whole society would be able to be a part of the development process. All must have equal access to the outcomes of development and equal opportunities for upward social and economic mobility.

Undoubtedly, we can say that India has been making notable progress but the goal of reaching the development outcomes is yet to be attained by all. There are many groups in the society who are still discriminated both socially and economically and are not able to participate freely and fully in the developmental process and reap its benefits. These groups are designated in terms of sociology are

Disadvantaged Groups such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Class (OBCs), minorities and women. For the present study, one such disadvantaged group, Asur Community enlisted in the Scheduled Tribes in India has been chosen and their socio-economic and educational condition have been fabricated in the eye of investigator.

II. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ASUR COMMUNITY

Among 40 ethnic groups of Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal, Asur is the first community in this list. According to 2011 Census data, 3864 Asur people with 1909 male and 1955 female are living in West Bengal and out of these, 3529 are sparsely distributed at Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar and Alipurduar districts in North Bengal at present. There they are inhabiting with Oraon, Munda, Garo, Santal, Nepali as neighbours whose culture has had a visible impact upon them particularly in their religious beliefs and practices. But in many respect, Asur people have been distinguished from other community culturally, socially and educationally.

According to Risley, Asur tribe of Lohardanga and Eastern portion of Sangula lived almost entirely by iron-smelting. They had a resemblance with Ashur in Assyria where it means 'powerful people'. In the Rigveda, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, Upanishads and Epics of Hindu sacred literatures, Asur occurs in many places. In Markandeya Purana and Devi Bhagvat, Asur are found in the name like Mahishasur, Nishumbha, Chanda, Munda and many more. Sayanacharya had described them as 'powerful' (*Balavan*), 'highly intelligent' (*Pragnavan*), 'destroyer of enemies' (*Shatroomam nirasitah*), 'giver of life' (*Pransyadata*) and so on. Evidences prove that present Asur are the descendents of the Vedic Asura.

According to Dr. A.C. Haddon, the Asura were primitive leucoderm people who absorbed with indigenous meloderm race and developed a civilization of their own. Being finally vanquished by Aryans, they were driven away from the Indus Valley and moved towards the north-west. So, they migrated to Chotonagpur and started living in the Netarhat plateau of chotonagpur which was the home of numerous tribes for several hundred centuries. The plateau is formed of crystalline rocks and has its summit capped by great masses of stone trap or laterite resulting from the decomposition of basaltic beds of the Deccan trap formation. From the rocks, the Asur people used to extract iron ore for iron-smelting which was their principal industry for several centuries. In three divisions namely, the Bir Asur, the Biriya and the Agaria, were living on these Pats. They also practiced a form of cultivation similar to Jhum cultivation on the Pats or level hill tops. The personal appearance of the Asur is quite as distinctive as that of the Santals, Ho or Oraon. However, in build, the Asur adults are stout and muscular and of medium stature. They have high cheek bones and broad nose sometimes sunken at the root. The colour of the skin is a tawny brown often with a shade of chocolate brown.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the present socio-economic status of Asur people.
2. To study the present educational status of Asur people.
3. To find out the opportunities and challenges in social inclusion of Asur as compared to other communities.

IV. METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of studying the present social, economic and educational status of Asur communities, the investigator has visited different villages, namely, Kalkut Basti, Garam Basti, Majherdabri tea estate, Damanpur, Satali tea estate of Alipurduar District, Tulsipara tea estate, Kurti tea estate, Carron tea estate, Jiti tea estate of Jalpaiguri district along with Kalkut Primary school and Garam Basti Primary school. Primary data had been collected by the method of interview with the help of semi-structured questionnaire. Interview was conducted with teachers of primary schools, NGO personnel and village representatives. Focused Group Discussions with village men and women had been arranged in some cases and random survey from door to door was made for observing their houses and also living condition.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Description of Socio-Economic Condition

It has been observed that different villages have different kind of socio-economic condition. Places having tea garden and forest near to village show three kinds of economic structure-

- a. Forest based economy
- b. Tea garden-based economy
- c. Agriculture based economy

Asur women are working as labour at nearby tea garden in the morning till afternoon 5pm on daily wage basis of Rs 202 for plucking 24kg of tea leaves. Men are working in the tea factory as labour and few are engaged in farming, forest material collection, fishing, cattle rearing. Many young Asur boys are working as migratory labour in various industries particularly construction work at Gujrat, Kerala etc. others are working in 100 days work under central government job scheme for rural development. in the morning,

hardly men and women have been observed at their home, because by dawn they all together used to visit nearby forests for collection of woods. Only by afternoon they are found with their children at home. Children with their siblings are seen in going to primary school in the morning on walking or by hired toto. There is total 18 houses of Asur with nearly 70 to 80 population present at Kalkut Basti as compared to 72 houses of Garo, 22 families of Oraon, 10 families of Santal, 6 families of Munda and 2 families of Nepali belonging to Scheduled Tribes. No non-tribal family has been found at Kalkut forest basti. No government employee or independent businessman has been found there.

It has been observed during the door-to-door survey that the condition of their houses is not so well-built. Houses made of mud with tin roof have two rooms as retiring room and one separate room for kitchen and cattle shelter. Toilets and water facilities are present but in bad condition which are separately built beside the main building of their houses. At the back of their house, they have a place for storing woods daily used for fuel. No LPG connection has been found in any houses.

Regarding marriage system, negotiating marriage and love marriage, both are practicing by Asur people now-a-days. The remarkable observation in case of marriage is that Asur girls are getting married with higher tribes like Oraon, Munda etc. They are ashamed of using their title "ASUR". Only in case of negotiation marriage, they are continuing their own title. Many have been found transformed into Christianity from Hindu religion.

B. Description of Educational Status

The level of achievement in overall education is not well for both boys and girls. As compared to other community, very few Asur children have attended primary school. 3 boys have qualified Higher Secondary and 2 girls have passed Madhyamik Education. 3 became graduate in BA in Distance mode. Drop out rate is very high after class 5.

C. Opportunities and Challenges in inclusion of Asur People

Various governments have been making efforts through constitutional directives and amendments, committees, commissions, national policies and programmes since independence to strengthen the level of education and social status for the socially and economically disadvantaged sections of India. Asur are not exceptional one. Some opportunities are:

1. Scheme of pre-matric scholarships starting from class I onwards for children of SCs and STs.
2. Post-matric Scholarships for getting higher education from government institutions.
3. Special education Development programme for girls belonging to schedule castes and schedule tribes having very low levels of literacy.
4. Provisions of hostel facility for boys and girls of STs.
5. Reservation in recruitment of teachers from STs.
6. Provision of primary school and informal education centers given by NGOs in tribal habitation.
7. SCs and STs are the main focus groups covered under Literacy Drive.
8. NCERT, New Delhi has developed and published many textbooks in tribal languages and prepared teaching and learning materials.

Despite, these opportunities for STs by governments, some important challenges they are still facing in getting access to these facilities. Some of these are:

1. Poor communication because of forest and river.
2. Far away distance from main city makes difficulties in getting facilities of medical and educational institutions.
3. Poor socio-economic structure because of landlessness, illiteracy and no working skills.
4. Attack of wild animals and damage done in every day and night.
5. Suffering from low self-esteem and backwardness in mind and behaviour.
6. Very few are recognizing education as an essential commodity for the upliftment of their condition.
7. Children are left behind at their home when their mother and other women are going to forest for collection.
8. Many inhabitants are migrated to south states for searching job.
9. No remarkable development has been done for tourism and cultural programme by tribal people.
10. Lack of teachers in primary schools and no teachers from their community.
11. Children are facing language barrier. In schools, they are studying in Bengali or Hindi medium which is not their mother tongue.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Asur of Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri Districts have been living in these areas since the establishment of tea garden by East India Company. From that period, they had changed their occupation from iron-smelting to tea garden labour. They realized their backwardness as compared to other neighbouring tribes like Oraon, Munda, Garo. This realization has dawned upon them because of cultural contacts with other groups of people as well as social workers who go to them for the purpose of ameliorating their condition. Changes have been

noticed in their dress, in household utensils and even in their languages. Again, the process of detribalization is going on in many places and they are destroying their own indigenous cultural heritage. More interventions should be needed from government as well more awareness campaign need to be arranged by local authority, Forest Department, Tribal Welfare and Development Department, Education Department and NGOs.

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