

## SHAPING OF TRIBAL IDENTITY AND CONCEPT OF SELF-RULE IN GUJARAT

### **Executive summary:**

The study ‘Shaping of Tribal identity and Concept of Self-rule in Gujarat’ aims to explore the interface of socio-cultural and developmental identity of tribals in Gujarat and its interrelation to self-governance.

The main objective of the study is to collect and document political, economic, legal, educational and religious processes, which has contributed in shaping identity of tribals, mainly on their worldview, social structures and cultural practices. Similarly to document differences between their traditional system of *panch* (system of governance and justice delivery mechanism) and the present democratic system of Panchayati Raj and PESA to articulate the concept of ‘self-rule’ or ‘local self-government’ of different tribes in different geographic areas.

The research methods used for the study are explorative, participatory and observation based (during field visits). Mainly focus group discussions (FGD), Observation, Interviews, and Participatory learning and action (PLA).

Internally, contrasting the conventional view, almost all tribes visualizes and defines their identity in narrow periphery of specific tribes rather than broader category of ‘Adivasi’ or ‘scheduled tribe’. Some tribes trace themselves to non-tribal upper caste clan. However, the views differ sharply with subsistence economy, that is, agriculture based livelihood and forest dependent economy. There is a divide among tribes that live in north and southeast regions of Gujarat.

A section of educated and financially capable tribal families are striving to create a space in upper caste Hindu social set up. Contrarily, different tribal organizations are struggling to establish indigenous rights and identity. There is a strong sentiment among tribes to retain social life and values. The internal hierarchy among various tribes plays a critical role in defining all the tribes under the umbrella of ‘Adivasi’.

Economically, as the exposure increases with non-tribals as well as from individual to community level, internal aspiration of an individual to develop and mainstreaming is observed. The development programmes designed by government or NGOs for economic development of the tribals has shown national and international linkages. Most of these programmes are largely market based; thus arising the contradiction between traditional tribal societies versus global market. More remarkably, the claim to natural resources and constitutional safeguard justifies themselves to retain and nourish tribal identity. Thus, the evolution of tribal organizations and their struggle to protect tribal identity has also an economic interest. Tribal communities are confident in distinguishing themselves from non-tribal on the line of resources. Their aboriginality and hence, sovereign right to natural resources especially forest and forested land has a powerful claim. The loss of guaranteed access to resources (mainly forest based) and increase in commoditization of forest produce has transformed tribal society, which is now striving to have stability through collection and selling of minor forest produce (MFP). Apart from external forces there is an internal force which dragging tribal society in to market competition. Shrinking of natural sources and desire to create space in mainstream society are perhaps the determining factors. The exposure to market based economy also led to a process of privatisation of formerly communal land (as common property), devolution of ownership from common land holding as a village or community to family or to an individual. Based on private resource holding, safeguarded by market has contributed to rise of ‘big’ man and ‘big’ families; and that has internally distorted traditional cohesiveness in tribal society.

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Politically, Two parallel streams of political power games are visible in tribal context; one actively competes for political power vis-à-vis non-tribal, and the other, is internal party politics. The former is resulting in negotiation, lobbying, alliance and gambling with non-tribal power players and accumulating energy of tribalism.

The later facilitating penetration of political nationalism and dividing tribal society on political interests. The politico-religious forces are synergising to accelerate the reform process from within the tribal society and in many cases reorganizing tribal and non-tribal society in the common interest of political faith and Hinduism. In this process, in many cases, tribal political leaders are emerging mainly as products of demand and politicking.

However, root of social transformation of tribal society is lying in their development perspectives. Inductions of non-tribal social and religious institutions, academic institutions, market, *panchayats* and administrative infrastructures are influencing tribal social life to great extent. Due to dominance of mainstream Hindu culture through social institutions, the educated and economically well off tribal sections were aspired to upward mobility and to create space in this social set up. However this aspiration often ends with blind imitation of non-tribal society.

Government, on the other hand, certify Hindu identity of tribal. Most of the tribals get certificate as 'Hindu adivasi' or 'Hindu Dungi Bhil adivasi' and follow this pattern. Government programs on forest development do not respect symbiotic relationship of tribal people with forest. JFM designed by Central Government and spirited by the capital gain for tribal community. Development programs introduced by state and NGOs encourage individual growth through market opportunities.

Most of the NGOs working with tribals for their development are mainly playing the role of trainer to fit them in market economy.

The NGOs focusing on right to basic amenities like drinking water, health services, houses etc. and creating livelihood opportunities also get trapped in right to survival.

These services are being provided through institution building that is trained to deal with the market. These institutions are striving for development through market opportunities rather than safeguard of forest rights.

The policy of forest conservation is creating conflict between tribals and forest department. The issues of conflicts with the Forest Department moves around cultivation of forestland and access to major forest produce. Forestland issues are mainly related to access to farming, ownership, transfer of ownership, mortgage or collateral for loan, security, border of separation of revenue and forest land, grazing land versus forest land etc. These conflicts arise with individual, village as a whole and with gram panchayats.

The components of self-rule were explored in the light of both, Panchayati raj Act and Panchayati raj Extended to Scheduled Area (PESA). Except three talukas, the tribal panchayats should be operated under PESA. But, government is not implementing PESA in Gujarat. All the panchayats are being operated under Panchayati raj Act. The exploration of self-rule components under PESA is therefore theoretical in nature.

The provisions and functioning of Panchayats under Panchayati raj Acts has limited scope for tribal development. The tribal Panchayats are confused to the zig-zag and cumbersome bureaucratic system and its control over PRIs. The politicians and bureaucratic are purportedly taking advantage of the situation and contractor raj is prevailing in tribal areas.

The state amendments of PESA are not at par with the central Act. It has given some power to Gramsabha on MFPs in the forest areas under its jurisdiction, provision of consultation with taluka panchayats during land acquisition, 50% reservation for tribal candidates in all tiers of panchayats, control over water bodies and Bombay land revenue code, 1879 has been amended to protect scheduled tribes. But there is little functional and financial autonomy to village level institutions in the state version of PESA.

The PESA is not clear in many of its provisions and makes vague stipulations. The bureaucratic control, land and forest issues and autonomy of Gram Panchayats are some of such key areas highlighted in the study.

A case study of Motidabas village in Dang illustrates how an initiative taken by Gram Panchayat to execute PESA, its nitty-gritty and uncooperative role of bureaucracy. Articulating various concerns in implementing PESA, especially the bureaucratic control over Gram Panchayats. And how, despite a clear instruction in PESA for least intervention/interruption by the government officials, the bureaucracy continued to overpower decisions regarding Gram Panchayat and its development rather than supporting an effort towards self-governance and self-reliance.

The Panchayat has no role to play in planning and coordination process of any land acquisition initiative; this important section of the Act maintains status quo and superimposition of the bureaucracy, leaving no room for practical action towards self-governance and self-reliance.

Similarly, exclusion of cane and bamboo from the definition of Minor Forest Produces (MFPs) and lack of clarity on ownership of MFPs PESA have almost killed the concept of ownership and control of local resources by Gram Sabha.

Finally, the functional autonomy of Gram Panchayats and Gramsabha is also not clear in PESA. Many of powers envisaged in PESA are executive and judicial in nature, e.g. enforcing prohibition of intoxicants and control over money lending etc. But, neither PESA directs the State authorities to delegate such powers to Panchayat nor the State government has developed any administrative arrangement so that Panchayat can entertain powers provided by PESA. PESA envisage power to Gramsabha to control institutions and functionaries in all social sectors.

There are many village institutions operating at village level parallel to village panchayats almost in entire scheduled areas, viz. Van Samiti, Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMC), Village Education Committees (VEC), Watershed committees etc. But Panchayats have no coordination with parallel institutions and they are no way accountable to Gramsabha or Gram Panchayat.

The study looks beyond Panchayati Raj and PESA to explore the potentiality of self-rule on the ground of local realities. This is found that Panch is an effective justice delivery system and powerful institution in handling socio-cultural affairs. But keeping its feudal nature of operation and intra and inter tribe hierarchy the system in mind Panch needs to be incorporated in modern thinking and institutions, especially Panchayati Raj Institutions for local self-government of and for tribals.

Similarly tribal society constitutes around social cohesiveness of a particular tribe or sub-tribe unlike a village based on belongingness to particular geographical boundaries. Thus, if 'self-

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rule’ or ‘local self-government of and for tribals’ is executed at the village level i.e. on the basis of geographical locations, this will over-rule the harmonization of socio-political feature of tribal society with administrative system and this ignorance, in fact, has impinged seriously the idea of self-rule.

Further, the tribal society in Gujarat is under rapid social transition and hence the customs and values are also changing with time at faster pace. Most of the tribal families are struggling to survive, as they are confused between the role and capability of traditional management systems versus modern, legal and politicized systems for natural resource management. Therefore the implementation of PESA and similar Act in the state need timely review and should introduce new provisions keeping the social transformation in mind.

Whether the panchayati raj act or PESA, the institutional arrangement for PRIs in tribal areas left some serious confusion. The definition of village in a widely scattered population or mix population with non-tribals situation is dismal. Non-recognition of panch and bureaucratic control over gram sabha is creating conceptual hollowness and leading to the total failure of self-rule in Gujarat.

Finally, from the people’s point of view repeatedly reported ignorance, indifference, disappointment and pessimism regarding Gram sabha, which is considered to be a backbone of PR. For most of the tribals, gram sabha is a mere formality and panchayat is working as an office of state administration, not as a village institution. Tribals are assigning gramsabhas as ‘government gramsabha’ and organizing their own ‘local gramsabhas’ parallel to it.

The prevailing situation of tribal self-rule in Gujarat is a serious concern, which leaves no place for the people for whom it meant. Therefore, civil society must analyze and understand the process of formation of modern nation-state that sporadically eliminating or absorbing smaller and weaker cultural entities. Tribal culture and values would hardly survive without the control over territorial resources and self-development and increasing realization of the dehumanizing consequences of welfare system.