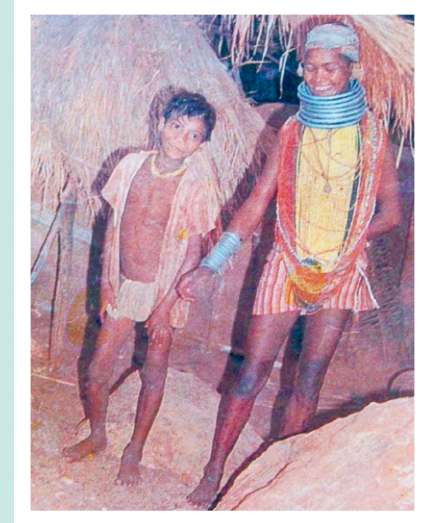


# The rise and fall of 'tribal' development in Orissa

Prasanna Nayak discusses the nature and history of strategies undertaken by the Indian government to proceed the development of 'tribal' communities in Orissa from the 1970s onwards. Examining the very nature of pursuance and the impetus for achieving results, he reveals two distinct phases in 'tribal' development in the state, and calls for an analytical and empirical approach to future practice.

Prasanna Kumar Nayak



Above:  
Bondo couple  
1980, Muduliparha,  
Malkangiri,  
South Orissa.

ALREADY IN THE EARLY 1970S, at a time when 'tribal' development received new impulse from the Indian government's 4th five year plan, many development activities in the field of horticulture, animal husbandry, agriculture, health and education, as well as the construction of roads, buildings and dug-wells were undertaken in rapid succession in the 'tribal' areas of Orissa. Political will for making tribal development a priority continued with the 5th Plan, from 1974 onwards, with activities reaching a peak in the early nineties, the end of the 7th Plan. At that time, I was making frequent trips to different 'tribal' areas in the north, south and west of Orissa. What impressed me most during my extensive field visits was the host of activities pursued by the field officers and staff of development agencies and the schoolteachers in residential 'tribal' schools, and their concern for and commitment to the 'tribal' people. Added to that, the frequent supervision and monitoring of the activities and assessment of progress by government officials was really quite noteworthy. Despite lapses and many shortcomings in the execution of the development schemes it remained satisfying to observe that there was discipline in the government machinery of development administration.

Among the 'tribal' development success stories in Orissa from that period are the orange, lemon, ginger and banana plantations, as well as the high yielding rice cultivation in Ramgiri-Udaygiri areas, home to a large population of Lanjia Saora. The orange, ginger, banana and pineapple plantations in the Niamgiri areas where mostly members of the Dongria Kondh 'tribe' live were also very successful development schemes. The same can be said of the cultivation of vegetables in the hills which gave people the opportunity to earn cash in addition to pursuing their traditional subsistence agriculture on the hill slopes. Cash crops and vegetables were also encouraged among the 'tribal' villager's adept at plough cultivation on the plateaus, plains and terraced fields. They were also trained to raise bovine animals. Orissa's 'tribal' schools were well managed, and provided a congenial environment for their pupils. Teachers worked hard at teaching and shaping these children with a spirit of dedication. The children responded with good performances and examination results were satisfactory. Although there were severe public health issues in most of the 'tribal' areas, primary health centres (PHCs) were established and free medical services were available for 'tribal' people. At the same time, road networks were developed at a rapid pace, facilitating the communication and transportation of development input to many villages. Dug- and tube wells were installed in most of the villages and many families availed themselves of the benefits of irrigating their land. It can certainly be argued that the quantum of infrastructure work and economic development activities undertaken during the seventies and spilling over into the early eighties resulted in significant progress and lasting development in the 'tribal' areas of Orissa.

Initially, the pursuance of economic development programmes and the modus operandi of the development agencies were in no way disruptive to the socio-cultural and community life of the 'tribal' people. Instead, development personnel were enthusiastic about their development goals and engaged with local people when problems arose. Politically, these 'tribal'

areas were relatively quiet. The development policy plan, the project personnel, people and politics seemed to be in harmony with each other! The result of the development activities undertaken in 'tribal' areas was a slow and steady progress with tangible results and lasting effects.

However, there were some frustrating results and negative consequences too, largely attributable to introducing multiple development schemes. The areas where people were receptive to development intervention reaped the benefits of development. They not only produced more, they also developed purchasing power and moved from bartering systems to the market and money. Taking advantage of their transition, shopkeepers and traders flooded these areas, applied their tactics and manoeuvred to siphon away the development benefits for themselves. In the competitive market, the 'tribals' could not withstand the market pressure and succumbed to exploitation by tradesmen. Nevertheless, the standard of living of these people clearly rose, and, at the individual level, some were able to change their lifestyle. The irony is that in the process of developing the 'tribes' the development personnel were lacking an empirical understanding of the situation and deeper knowledge of the 'tribal' socio-cultural system. At the same time, without the theoretical and analytical skills required, they were unable to recognise the economic differentiation existing in 'tribal' villages. For example, some families were landless and poor while others belonged to the land-owning group. They took 'tribal' societies to be an ideal community practising some sort of primitive communism. The end result was that the majority of the benefits of development went to the well-to-do families, who were able to win the confidence of the development staff. The hiatus between the better off and the worst off widened further.

The neo-development strategy of the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) in the 1970s had been designed on the basis of an ambitious review of the early approaches to 'tribal' welfare in the post-independence period. Although the anthropological perspectives of tribal development had been given due consideration, the area approach coupled with demographic determination played a major role in formulating the TSP strategy. Macro-coverage of the tribal area, delineating Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs) on the basis of survey and sampling and implementing economic development programmes in haste –without paying adequate attention to the felt needs of the 'tribal' villages in keeping with their cultural and human resource bases –clearly had its limitations. The desire to tackle development and achieve development goals sooner rather than later prompted the development strategists to insist on rapid actions at whatever cost. As their optimism in this regard shrank, they shifted their attention from covering one section of 'tribal' people to as many sections as possible, thereby making it explicit that they had covered the entirety of the 'tribal mass'. It gave the practitioners a great feeling of satisfaction. Without taking a pause to evaluate this development undertaking or to sort out the problems that had arisen from such an approach they continued and extended this trajectory, introducing yet more multiple packages for the benefit of a few. Showing the number of beneficiaries and calculating the money spent at the end of a scheme was assumed to be evidence enough of their development achievement. Information on quantity dominated that on quality.



Above:  
A Bondo girl weaving  
her waist cloth *Nodi*  
with her traditional  
loom.



Above:  
Bondo woman being  
treated by visiting  
medical doctors  
during a 'health camp',  
1980, Muduliparha,  
Malkangiri, Orissa.

*What impressed me most during my extensive field visits was the host of activities pursued by the field officers and staff of development agencies and the schoolteachers in residential 'tribal' schools, and their concern for and commitment to the 'tribal' people.*



Above:  
Goats supplied to the widows and lone parent wives of husbands held or sentenced for committing homicide 1979-80.



Above:  
Bondos visiting a Public Health Centre 1980, Muduliparha, Malkangiri, Orissa.

Below:  
A Bondo woman shaving another.



#### What happened next?

The 1990s witnessed a relatively quiescent period in 'tribal' development. The development schemes and programmes were implemented less enthusiastically and with less rigour. In the initial phase of the TSP, the newly recruited field staff (most of them from the coastal districts) were young and unmarried. They were curious to work in the hinterland and to pursue development programmes at a participatory level, getting personally involved. No family burden meant that they could work long and tirelessly in the field. In later years, however, these same people married and had children. Inevitably their attention turned towards their families. After having been in the field for between five and 10 years, they had grown accustomed to the area and had acquired the necessary skills for living among the 'tribals' and the local people. But as these field workers grew older, they lost the zeal and zest they once had for development work. After 10 to 15 years in the field they were further discouraged when the project funding was curtailed, often to the extent that there was only enough money to cover staff salaries. But these staff found themselves with less work to do. Consequently, many development workers started looking for ways to earn extra income. They joined the local people in trade and business. The field officers and their superiors were eventually transferred. Supervision and monitoring of the development projects became lax as those appointed to replace them were devoid of the spirit and enthusiasm to take up any challenge. What's more, neither merit nor any suitable selection norm was followed any more for the recruitment and posting of officers and staff in the field. Frustration was the order of the day and postings in 'tribal' areas were discredited.

Having reached a climax in the late eighties, the buzz of development activities pursued in 'tribal' areas slowed to a faint hum and, in fact, moved at a pace that registered no positive impact. Worse still, it can be argued that the impact was negative. The people's expectations were belied resulting in widespread disillusionment. Out of disgust, they rejected the changes they had previously accepted. In some cases they resorted back to their traditional means of subsistence and in other cases, while they did not regress, they did not move forward. The woes of 'tribal' people multiplied. They felt increasingly insecure as they no longer received the same level of support and protection from the development agencies and they no longer retained the strength which they had once derived from the traditional community-based institutions. It didn't take long for businessmen to arrive in the area and take advantage of the situation. In the face of exploitation, the 'tribal' people seemed to lack the courage to counter the moneylenders and traders.

Today, most of the development schemes that are in operation in the 'tribal' areas of Orissa follow a set pattern without making any breakthrough. A visit to any rural governmental development office and its activities in the field today will reveal just how casually things are being managed, as if the energy has drained away. The phase of acceleration is now over. Development institutions are languishing. Infrastructures built in the recent past remain unused serving no purpose anymore. The only signs of life to be found around the agricultural and horticultural farmhouses and sapling centres are the security guards watching over them. There are hardly any farming activities anymore. 'Tribal' schools give the impression that there is no schooling environment and that there is sickness everywhere. There is utter negligence at the level of the schoolteachers who are estranged from their authorities. In short, there is no concern and no commitment. People no longer receive the required services from Primary Health Centres (PHCs) which are crippled by absenteeism among doctors. Roads to villages have become potholed and years go by before they are repaired. In many areas roads that had been constructed as a part of the development efforts served little or no purpose to ordinary people.

Looking back, the first phase of neo-development action clearly benefitted 'tribal' people. Infrastructure facilities were created and their areas improved appreciably. Development was visible. Today, people have much less faith in the development agencies and their managers. Moreover, in recent years the 'tribal' situation and scenario have become increasingly politicised, creating a situation which is very difficult for the agencies to handle. People are feeling the difference between the first phase of agencies' attachment and empathy for the people and the second phase of detachment and apathy. This strikes a discordant note and quite often results in scuffles between the agencies and the people.

#### Towards a future development strategy: research scientist as practitioner?

The depicted scenario of change inside the governmental development machinery from its zenith in the 1980s to its nebulous remains is a matter of grave concern today.

The conduct of everyday affairs in development offices needs much greater attention. The 'tribal' leaders who are at the helm of affairs, the machinery of development administration and the 'tribal' activists have to rise to the occasion and reformulate the 'tribal' policy and redesign the development strategy for the tribal areas and the people. A major re-think is essential at this juncture. A new philosophy has to grow, be propagated and practised. Round table discussions across party lines and professional orientations need to be held and development formulae ought to be evolved. Bias and bossism have to be checked. Impressionistic assessments and individual prescriptions should not be weighed in terms of the status of the person providing them, and automatically put into practice. Rather, observed and relevant knowledge from the field has to be considered first. The science of development must take precedence over vested interests. Facts should be brought to the fore. The development variables and the social and cultural correlates must be examined in the context of the specific 'tribe' and the 'tribal' area, taking into account the human resource potential, techno-economic skills, available natural resources and cultural excellence of the people; schemes should be formulated and implemented accordingly. The facts of 'tribal' societies cannot be collected mechanically by filling out schedules but by closely interacting and keenly observing the people and their interpersonal relationships. The problems of the people have to be examined scientifically and solved analytically.

In order to develop micro-areas and micro-societies in the present context it is imperative to observe that they have been changing; their dependence on natural resource bases is decreasing and their propensity to market orientation is increasing. Anthropologists as micro-social scientists participate in the change processes of the groups they study and, by virtue of their training and orientation, are sensitive to the needs and values of their fellow human beings as individuals or as groups. They have the capacities to turn experiences, impressions and bias through introspection and discussion into knowledge. Looking from below implies that the realities are being seen most critically, and thus scientifically. It is not a question of anthropology's relevance but of its responsibility. In our context, an anthropologist should render his knowledge to help the people he studies and the country as a whole. He cannot just watch and see planners trained in other disciplines making all kinds of mistakes. It is his duty to intervene, advise, and direct since he has the theory and the method to give valid suggestions that can stand the test. There is a need to study the values, social organisation and other aspects of 'tribal' culture before embarking upon any form of change if we want to avoid costs of all kinds. The anthropologist's observation technique and his understanding of the interrelations of social institutions have important contributions to make to development. Practice is the proof of theory and this precept should be borne in mind.

The social scientist has a moral responsibility to caution the development agents and agencies to handle 'tribal' development conscientiously, rather than casually. Better, the scientists should take up the challenge, go out into the field situation, from where they can acquire knowledge, and use it then and there to benefit the people concerned. Should the sponsors of 'tribal' development wait any longer to endorse this new agenda?

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