Adivasis Culture in Maharashtra and Its Changing Scenario

Anil R. Bankar

Assistant Professor of History and Assistant Director, IDOL, University of Mumbai, Mumbai, (M.S.) India

ABSTRACT:

The adivasis are the aboriginal natives of this country. Since the ancient civilization they developed their own culture. After the advent of Indo-Aryans and Mongolians, they overpowered by the Aryans. Therefore, they migrated into the forests, hills, and the more inaccessible areas out of apprehension of external attacks. Hence, adivasis decided to take refuge to safe places like hilly and forest area in order to save their life. While living in the hilly and forest area the Adivasi (Native) people are completely dependent upon the forest and natural resources. They believe that nature is their god, therefore they trust on nature. The hilly and forest areas are far away from the urban centers. Therefore, they are less contacted with the developed communities and their modern lifestyles. However, when British government implemented forest act forcefully and automatically forest area became prohibited and restricted area. Therefore, it was adversely affected adivasis lifestyle which was mostly dependent upon the forest area. Thus, some Adivasi communities migrated and got connected with the civilized societies. Hence, the transformation process started among the adivasis. This paper aims at focusing on the cultural transformation of tribes particularly in Maharashtra and their identity crisis. These cultural heritage need to be preserved and all other healthy practices should be continued. But the elite Adivasi communities are adopting dominating cultures and practicing their festivals, rituals, worshiping of their gods. Apart from this, they are also influenced by the western cultures. All these factors are bringing out significant changes among the scheduled tribes, but the pace of change is slow and the pace of change is different in different communities. When we look at the total Adivasi scenario, we must notice that the Adivasi communities are living in different geographical locations. Therefore, the acculturation process has not started at different tribal locations. Their acculturation and cultural transformation started in the peasantization tribal belt and very less in the hilly and remote area due to their isolation and less contact with civilized cultural groups. Therefore, the Adivasi who are settled at the remote, hilly and forest areas are still practicing their traditional (ancestral) culture in Maharashtra but socially and culturally they are practicing modern democratic values. Those Adivasi communities are getting connected with the urban cultures; hence, they have adopted their dominant cultures and their belief systems.

Key Words: Aboriginals, Adivasis, Apprehension, Transformation, Acculturation, Forest Act, Democratic Values and Peasantization

Introduction:

The adivasis are the aboriginal (natives) of this country. Since the Ancient period they developed their own culture. Subsequently, the dark days started with the advent of Indo-Aryans and Mongolians. When the Aryans overpowered them, they migrated into the forests, hills, and the more inaccessible areas out of apprehension of external

attacks. They fired the entire urban towns and plundered their wealth. None including the children, old and pregnant women escaped from their attacks. [1] Therefore, these innocent people decided to take refuge to safe places like hilly and forest area in order to save their life.

By and large, it is held that the people who are presently living in the hilly and forest areas are the real and original natives of this country. The history also records that since the ancient and medieval periods the numbers of separate adivasi states existed in this country till the independence of India. North- East, Middle, South, West and North India has been covered by the adivasi states; Gondavana state, Nagas, Khasi state, Jawhar state, Bodos states, Bhilwad state, Halba states, Santhals and Dodda states are some of the evidences of the adivasi states in India. These adivasi states were culturally developed. Villages and small towns of the states were self-sufficient.

Concerning cultural transformations of the tribes, G.S. Ghurye, the eminent sociologist and scholar, has observed that the adivasis of northern, western, and middle India have left the least doubt and some of the adivasis are hinduized to the extent that they have been assimilated with different castes at different levels in the caste system. [2] It has also been observed that Christianity also has a tremendous impact on the religious life and their belief system. [3] Thus, the aboriginal and native tribal culture has undergone a sea change due to the multi-religious influences on the tribal culture. However, it is also evident that the indigenous people of this country still adhere to their ancestral and original culture and hence, they are described as 'Adivasi' or 'original settlers' of this

country. Later in the post independence period, the Constitution of India, Article 366 (25) has clearly defined about Scheduled Tribes: "Such tribes or tribal communities or part of groups within such or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to the Scheduled Tribes for the purpose of this constitution." However, it does not mention the criterion for specification of any community as scheduled tribe. The criteria used for the term ST are based on geographical isolation, backwardness, distinctive culture, language, common features, religion and shyness of contact **(Lokur committee, 1965).** The government of India has recognized by the adivasi groups and renamed them as 'Scheduled Tribes' (Census, 1981). This paper aims at focusing on the cultural transformation of tribes particularly in Maharashtra and their identity crisis.

Concept of Culture:

Culture is nothing but a way of life in which group of people or society live together, think, feel, discuss on various social religious issues and celebrate various festivals and rituals among the particular community or at the universal level. The constituents of the culture thus are said to be belief system, faith, rituals, thoughts and feelings of a group, folklore, social systems and institutions.

(**Singh, 1987:22**) attempts to define culture as: "The culture is a broad concept it includes languages, literature, and the life style of the people, the system have acquired autonomy of their own". In short, it is evident that **culture is a way of life people live**; no cultural element can be eliminated from human life. Therefore, the life of adivasis in India and particularly

Maharashtra is necessary to examine closely.

Adivasi Culture:

The adivasis have been traditionally a part of Indian civilization.[4] But adivasis culture has its own features which is not similar to any other cultures. Therefore, it is a unique culture. The reference about the adivasis has been found in Vedas, Puranas, Mahabharata and Ramayanas. They were called in different names like, *Vanyajati* (Castes of Forest), *Adimjati* (Primitive people), *Janjati* (Folk people). Apart from these, the terms, Vanvasi and Girijan, are also used for the Indian adivasis. During the British period the term 'Tribes and 'Adivasi' were developed. In the year 1943 Verrier Elvin, a British Officer, suggested that tribal should be kept isolated in hills and forests and non-tribal people should be restricted for entering into tribal pockets without permission of state government. Therefore, adivasis were kept isolated from the civilized society. But if we find the modern democratic values like equality, fraternity, brotherhoodness, respect to the women's and equal status and many more values which we find amongst the adivasis Indian culture is a composite culture which includes different religions, castes and geographical locations. Because of these aspects, Indian culture has created strong cultural heritage. The attention needs to be drawn to Maharashtra which is culturally an important region of India because even if there are various cultural groups located in this region, each individual group has its own culture.

It becomes essential to take a historical review of the development of the sub-regional cultures and their contribution in the making of the unified cultures of Maharashtra. The formation of sub culture took place over a period of time when different Adivasi communities and non-adivasis came into contact. The influence of dominant over the submissive resulted into cultural assimilation, integration and acculturation. The Hindus and Christian missionaries are continuously working at the root level in the Adivasi areas and helping them for essential education and medical services,[5] while providing them the basic facilities and services in the remote and hilly Adivasi areas, both dominating communities won their confidence and affection. This sympathetic understanding helps the Christian Missionaries and Hindu organizations for conversion among the adivasis. In Maharashtra most of the Adivasi area has been influenced by Christianity and Hinduism. Thus, proselytism had profound impact on the Adivasi culture.

Fuchs Stefan has pointed out another striking feature of Adivasi culture is that **it has attained the clear balance between nature and culture**. While living in the shadow of nature, they have developed their own culture. Adivasi culture is reflected through their songs, art, architecture, drama, festivals and rituals; still they are the true children of nature.[6] **Nature and nurture plays an important role in the development of the Adivasi culture**. Nature is the god gift for the Adivasi people. Everything they are getting from nature. These people lives in the hilly and forest areas, therefore, they are totally isolated from the civilized society. The studies of adivasis in Maharashtra are initiated by early British administrators and the organizations. Irawati Karve, an anthropological

researcher in Maharashtra has given a clear picture of geographical distribution, demographic setting, culture and the contemporary tribal situations in Maharashtra.

In 1952, then the Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru expressed his views about tribal culture in his panchasheel. He says, "Tribal culture is something different from the others; there are lots of good things in their culture. Tribal dance, songs, festivals, and their ethics and morality give us happiness. It is a high level culture".[7] Therefore, all of us can learn from them. (Thomar and Tribhuvan, 2004) discussed the important features of the Scheduled Tribes. According to them tribal people follows primitive methods of occupation such as food gathering, hunting and occasional fishing, drinking alcohol is linked with their ritual and ceremonial life, shyness as regards to social interaction with civilized societies is yet another characteristic and love for dance and music is the silent features of their culture.[8] These are the common features of all tribal communities. According to Census 1981, there are 47 tribal communities situated in the different part of the Maharashtra state and out of those 17 tribal communities anthropologically and population wise are more important.[9] Bhill, Mahadev Koli, Gond, Warli, Konkana, Katkari, Korku, Kolam, Gamit, Thakar, Pardhi, Andh, Malhar Koli, Pardhan, Dhanka and Dhor Koli are prominent tribes in Maharashtra. In the process of cultural transformation few of the adivasi communities are culturally transformed due to the following responsible factors which are needed to be explored.

Responsible Factors for Cultural Transformation among the Adivasis:

The factors responsible for the transformation of ADIVASI culture are broadly of two types: Traditional and Modern process.[10] The *traditional process* has brought changes in respect of dominating groups through the concepts like Hinduization, Sanskritization, Tribe-Caste continuum, Revitalization and different Movements. While the *Modern process* has change is seen through urbanization and industrialization in some parts of the tribal belts in India.

The traditional factors has influenced on cultural life of adivasis and their daily activities. In the post independent period, the constitution of India has given safeguards to the adivasis, and also the government has introduced various developmental and welfare schemes under the broad concept of the scheduled tribes. This was directly benefited to the agriculturally and educationally developed Adivasi communities for their upliftment. As a result, the process of cultural transformation took place among the adivasis.

In this process a person or a group are always getting contacted with the other civilized groups or society for the various purposes in terms of cultural programmes, rituals, marriage ceremony, festivals, belief systems, job, different works and market places. Through this interaction and contacts with civilized culture the transformation process started among the adivasis. In this process, a person or groups can be adopt a different culture willingly and practiced it as per his own interest or sometimes it happens forcefully by the dominating groups. Thus, it had

made a significant change in the socio-cultural life of the adivasis.

In Maharashtra particularly the adivasi belt of Sahyadri and Satpura mountain ranges and some part of Gondavana region are more affected by the dominant Christian and Hindu cultures. The Adivasi communities in Maharashtra inhabited at foothills and slopes of Sahayadri, Western Ghats and Satpura mountain ranges. Mostly their lifestyle depends upon the forest resources for their daily needs; their main occupation is agriculture, hunting, fishing, Vithbhatti (kiln) and cultivation. The tribal community in Maharashtra has been situated into four parts according to their occupations and socio-economic status.

1. Adivasis situated in the remotest and hilly area
2. Adivasis situated in the rural area
3. Adivasis situated in the semi-urban area
4. Adivasis situated in the urban area

According to their socio-economic background and their isolation, they have neither been integrated in the mainstream society, nor are they able to retain their autonomy and identity. The census report of 2011 says that about 92.6 per cent of the adivasis are living in the rural area of the country.[11] In the post independent period urbanization was took place very slowly, but after the creation of Maharashtra state in 1960s, the process of urbanization became faster than the earlier period. According to the census of 1961 the ratio of urbanization among the scheduled tribes was 2.7 per cent and in 1991 it increased up to 7.4 per cent.[12]

Due to various development projects, which have displaced tribal people, have opened up tribal areas, leading to influx of people from outside the tribal region seeking employment in industry, mine, transport, government services, trade and commerce.[13] This has resulted in creating urbanization of Adivasi area and the condition of Adivasi people became worst. Consequently, the percentage of Adivasi populations declined in Adivasi area. Even today the status of Adivasi could be described as 'ecological refugees', the term used by Guha and Gadgil (1995) for the sense of mass of people being displaced by the climate and environmental changes. The adivasis have lost access to the forest produce and at the same time they have not been able to increase the productivity of their lands through water and other resources. Due to seasonal migrations of Adivasi communities, the landlords and politicians are taking disadvantages of the Adivasi lands. Palghar and Thane districts are peripheral regions of Mumbai. Therefore, the rapid urbanization influenced on the Adivasis and their socio-economic and cultural life.

Changing Identity of the Adivasis:

In order to point out that due to the urbanization, industrialization and various welfare schemes of THE governments. There are many significant changes taking place among the Adivasi culture and their routine life. They brought new occupations mainly, mining, quarry, construction works, transport, trade and commerce and government jobs. In this way, they stand for their traditional "style of life". They have considerably changed in their economic occupation and material life.

Universally it is accepted that **change is the law of nature** by this natural law, Adivasi communities have also change

their identity. They have improved their educational status, languages, standard of living and health; they are nurturing their children's with providing good education facilities; they fulfill their basic and materialistic needs; and they control over the alcoholism and superstitions. Their belief on science and technology is the positive change among the transformed adivasis. But in the process of cultural transformation, the culturally transformed Adivasi communities are losing their cultural heritage. Music, dance, songs, art, handcrafts, rituals, social practices like dowry system, traditional marriage ceremonies and festivals are unique characteristics among the Adivasi culture. These cultural heritage need to be preserved and all other healthy practices should be continued. But the elite Adivasi communities are adopting dominating cultures and practicing their festivals, rituals, worshiping of their gods. Apart from this, they are also influenced by the western cultures.

All these factors are bringing out significant changes among the scheduled tribes, but the pace of change is slow and the pace of change is different in different communities.

 Conclusion:

The usual social change was taking place in all Adivasi communities. The process of social change was faster among the settled tribes who were in frequent interaction with their neighboring peasant communities and in some cases with the urban population. The settled Adivasi communities were certainly ahead of others in respect of standard of living, their culture and social conditions. But in the process of social change among the primitive Adivasi communities who are living in remote, hilly and forest areas does not take place because they are totally cut off and isolated from the main stream society. When we look at the total Adivasi scenario, we must notice that the Adivasi communities are living in different geographical locations. Therefore, the acculturation process has not started at different tribal locations. Their acculturation and cultural transformation was started in the peasantization tribal belt and very less in the hilly and remote area due to their isolation and less contact with civilized cultural groups. Therefore, the Adivasi who are settled at the remote, hilly and forest areas are still practicing their traditional (ancestral) culture in Maharashtra but socially and culturally they are practicing modern democratic values. The modern values like equality, social justice, equal status to women's, no caste hierarchy system in adivasis, no dowry system practiced in adivasis, even they don't believe on sati and other evil practices which are still existed in the so called civilized societies. Therefore, no one can say that adivasis are not civilized. They are more civilized and more democratic rather than the so called civilized societies. The majority of Gonds and Warlis, Katkari, Korku, Kolam, Andh and Thakar Adivasis are practicing their traditional cultures. But those Adivasi communities are getting contacted with the urban cultures; hence, they have adopted their dominant cultures and their belief systems. In this group, the Mahadev Kolis, Bhills, Konkana, (less number of Thakars, Gonds and Warli's) have adopted dominating cultures and their belief systems.

References:

1   Deshmukh, P.R. (1966): Sindhusanskriti, Rugved va Hindu Sanskiriti, Pradnya Pathshala Mandal, Vai, P.88-89

2   Ghurye, G.S. (1963): Tribes in Maharashtra. Popular Prakashan, Bombay,P.11

3   Vidyarthi, L. P &Rai B. K. (1985): The Tribal Culture of India. Concept Publishing, New Delhi, P.453

4   Joshi Vidyut (2000): Cultural Context of Development, an article published in EPW,Vol.35, No.35/36. (Aug.26-September 8, 2000), pp.3168.

5   Savatikar, N.R. (2014): Perception Regarding Conversion and Social Change among Scheduled Tribes, an article published in The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention, Volume 1,Issue- 2,p.2, ISSN:2349-2031

6   Fuchs Stefan (1991): Life is a Dance, Songs of tribes of India, Asian Folklore Studies, Vol.50, No.2, p. 385- 388.

7   Gare Govind, (1997): Adivashinche Prashna ani Parivartan, Amrut Prakashan, Aurangabad, Page No.29.

8   Thomar & Tribhuvan (2004), Development of Primitive Tribes in Maharashtra: Status, Continuity and Change, TRTI, Pune, p-5

9   Gare Govind (2000): Maharashtratil Adivasi Jamati: Samajik Va Sanskiritik Magova, Continental Publication, Pune, Introduction P-2

10   Vidyarthi, L. P &Rai B. K. (1985): The Tribal Culture of India. Concept Publishing, New Delhi, P.454

11   Census of India (2011): Source, Registrar General, Government of India.

12   Census of India (1991): Source, Registrar General, Government of India.

13   Report of HLC (2014): On Socio-Eco, Health and Educational status of Tribal Communities of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, p-296-97.