



Paradoxical Understanding of Tribal Vulnerabilities: Lessons from the Field

Suranjita Ray

Professor, Department of Political Science, Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi.

E-mail: suranjitaray@dr.du.ac.in

Abstract: The study of Kalahandi district of Odisha explicates the experiences of the vulnerabilities of the tribal people to increasing poverty and landlessness as major consequences embedded in the socio-economic and geo-political history of the state. Despite the claims of 'inclusive development' and transformation towards 'New Odisha' in recent years, the spatial location of systemic deprivation in certain regions, communities, and social groups reflects the class character of the state, which not only privileges the neoliberal policies of the market economy but also prevents its intervention in the redistribution of basic productive resources that can alter power relations.

Keywords: Paradoxes, Vulnerabilities, Systemic Deprivation, Redistribution, Inclusive Development

Received : 19 November 2024

Revised : 02 December 2024

Accepted : 16 December 2024

Published : 29 December 2024

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Suranjita Ray (2024). Paradoxical Understanding of Tribal Vulnerabilities: Lessons from the Field, *Society and Culture Development in India*, 4: 2, pp. 377-387. <https://doi.org/10.47509/SCDI.2024.v04i02.11>

Introduction

Ahead of the 2024 elections, political parties appeased the voters through claims and counter-claims on the fulfilment of the electoral promises. The revised parameters of development privilege a capitalist economy that promises to secure higher economic growth. The robust Gross Domestic Product growth rate of 7.6 per cent by the National Statistical Office for 2023-24 and the decline of poverty to below 5 per cent by the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) for 2022-23 have become important declarations for the government to assure a 'Viksit Bharat' (developed India) by 2047. It is important to reiterate that, though economic growth is a necessary and powerful instrument of development, it does not necessarily lead to the development of all. While a capitalist/market-oriented economy privileged by the neoliberal state by nature is inimical to equality as it results in the accumulation of wealth in fewer hands, political parties across the ideological

spectrum reinforce the campaign for 'inclusive development' in a capitalist economy. The slogan '*SabkaSaath, SabkaVikas, SabkaVishwas*' (together with all, development for all, trust of all) by Bharatiya Janata Party guarantees development through a series of flagship programmes and schemes.

The government of Odisha has also popularised many of its development schemes that promise '*Ama Odisha, Nabin Odisha*' (Our Odisha, New Odisha). The general and assembly elections in 2024 have compelled the Biju Janata Dal government to promote, preserve, and protect diverse cultures at the panchayat level to create a new Odisha as an empowered Odisha. It has rejuvenated schemes for farmers, Dalits, Tribals, and women such as KALIA Yojana (Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation), BALARAM Yojana (Bhoomihina Agriculturist Loan and Resources Augmentation Model), Biju Swasthya Kalyan Yojana (healthcare services), *Biju Pucca Ghar Yojana* (housing schemes), and Swayam Scheme (interest-free bank loans to encourage entrepreneurial ventures). To hoard itself against the criticism of its recent decision to allow the tribals to transfer their land to the non-tribals that favoured the big mining firms, the government withdrew its decision. It has also withdrawn around 48,000 cases against the tribal people for violating excise and forest laws. Its proposal to buy minor forest produce at a Minimum Support Price and to form a commission for preservation and promotion of tribal languages were seen as measures to appease the tribal community ahead of the elections. The last decade has seen Odisha as one of the fastest-growing economies, with a growth rate of 7.8 per cent compared to 7.1 per cent at all India levels in 2022-23 (Odisha Economic Survey, 2022-23). There has been a decline in poverty from 29.34 per cent in 2015-16 to 15.68 per cent in 2019-21 (India National Multidimensional Poverty: A Progress Review- 2023, NITI Aayog).

It is important to understand that despite the convincing attempts of the reconfiguration of state-market negotiation, which argue that higher economic growth in the market economy leads to a decline in inter-class, inter-group, and inter-regional inequality, increasing protests against deprivation of basic rights by various sections of society, in particular, the farmers, Dalits and tribals across the country need to be seen in juxtaposition with the success stories of the market economy. These protests have not only brought many contentious issues to the fore, but also have spelt out eloquently and concisely the construction of structures of dominance and processes of control which have strengthened and gained legitimacy over the years resulting in increasing vulnerabilities to processes of alienation of land rights, displacement, indebtedness, migration, poverty and hunger.

Several studies find that the benefits of growth and prosperity have remained confined to the urban cities of the coastal region of Odisha. The paradox of development has become more conspicuous today than it was in the past, as the south-western districts remain economically underdeveloped and poor¹. The dominant class, invariably from the upper caste in the coastal region has largely hoarded the benefits of development. It is significant to understand that the districts with a high share of Scheduled Tribe (ST) population record significantly low levels of development in health, basic amenities, education, economic, and overall social well-being (Odisha Development Report, 2020). While districts in the coastal and industrial belt of north-western regions such as Khorda, Cuttack, Jagatsinghpur, Ganjam and Puri have ranked higher in basic amenities, the south-western districts namely Boudh, Nabarangpur, Kandhamal, Mayurbhanj, Subarnapur and Malkanagiri have ranked much lower (Ibid). Despite the claims of the government that increased investment in health, education, diversification of production structure with effective market linkage, development of skills, multifaceted intervention with the 5T (Teamwork, Transparency, Technology, Time, and Transformation) governance model and sustained inclusive growth have seen a 'New Odisha' (Odisha Economic Survey, 2022-23: 24), the Kalahandi, Bolangir, and Koraput (KBK) region seems to remain a perennial site for debate and discussion on poverty and hunger.

The study on poverty amongst tribals in Kalahandi district of Odisha finds that despite a plethora of development programmes and schemes ranging from short-term relief measures to the Long Term Action Plan (LTAP), the vulnerability of the Tribals to various manifestations of hunger and distress persists. While, the development reports take cognizance of the increasing vulnerabilities of the tribals that lead to alienation of land rights, displacement, indebtedness, poverty and hunger, the state's perspective delineates a common epistemological space which understands 'increasing vulnerabilities' as the cause. This perspective is contested by the narratives and testimonies of tribals in the interior villages of Lanjigarh and Thuamul Rampur, Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) blocks in Kalahandi². They explain in lucid and clear terms the everyday experiences of vulnerability as a process and a consequential effect of the structures of power relations. Juxtaposing the perspective of the state with that of the tribals, explain the paradoxes. The study helped us arrive at a congenial yet paradoxical understanding of vulnerability. Paradoxes became central to our understanding, hence the title of the paper - *Paradoxical Understanding of Tribal Vulnerabilities: Lessons from the Field*

Methodology

The findings from the field study in Kalahandi are based on the structural-political approach, which privileges an understanding of the social, economic, political and cultural history of a region as an enormously empowering methodological tool to analyse the underlying structural and political causes of the increasing vulnerabilities of particular sections of society. The first section of the paper is on the narratives of the tribal people, which explicate the multiplicities and complexities of power relations rooted in class, caste, gender, ethnicity, and their intersections. An intersectional analysis becomes important as they draw on each other to develop strategies of dominance and control. As the experiences of vulnerability by the tribal people of Kalahandi dispute the perspective of the state, the second section contests the political role of the state in perpetuating the crisis of understanding the underlying causes of vulnerability. The study of Kalahandi signifies that poverty alleviation programmes are largely relief measures. The third section suggests the need for possible state interventions in land rights that can alter power relations to ensure freedom from poverty as a political right.

The Vulnerability Trap

The narratives of the tribal people of Kalahandi explicate the structures and processes that result in deprivation, which are systemic and reflect a genealogy of historical, social, economic, political, and cultural reality. The strategies to appropriate land, other productive and non-productive assets, extraction of labour, exchange relations, practice of mortgaging and experiences of hunger and poverty are inextricably and necessarily linked. They are mutually reinforcing processes and contribute to the everyday experiences of vulnerability. Therefore, it is critical to address the root causes rather than the symptoms of increasing vulnerability.

Understanding the complexities of power relations in the particular context of a society is essential. The overall position in the existing hierarchical social class-caste structure and semi-feudal agrarian relations contribute to the vulnerability of tribal people. These relations need to be explained in terms of land holdings and exchange relations, which have led to alienation of land, labour, and the produce of one's labour. The testimonies of villagers explain the processes of cumulative deprivation entrenched in the structures of ownership, control, and entitlement of basic productive resources, such as land, forest, and water. An explanation of the historical processes of impoverishment, disentanglement, exploitation, and famishment reveals the formal and informal arrangements and relationships between different

categories of landholders and between landless and landholders, creditors and debtors, contractors, and labourers through which many transactions involving land, cultivation, credit, and labour are carried out. It is important to understand that the exploitative relations between the creditor and the debtor are not solely guided by economic factors. The debtors invariably belong to the tribal communities and lower castes, and the creditors are landlords, *the kedars* and moneylenders who are from the upper castes. Power relations are not always a result of conflict but are determined by a complex of processes whereby active consent on the part of the population to specific exercises of power over them is secured. Power is exercised to ensure that conflicts over the mutually exclusive satisfaction of wants never arise. In several villages, we find that the *Mahajans/Goantias* (moneylenders) are rescuers of the landless and indebted tribals. The former are able to influence the processes to such an extent that even when the latter are not able to satisfy their wants, they actually do not question the prevailing structures of dominance and control. Thus, they are vulnerable to the 'vulnerability trap'.

The distinctive characteristics of vulnerability of the tribals emerge as effects of the realms of dominance, violence, subjugation, and struggle. The narratives of women become important as they explicate the 'feminisation of poverty and hunger'. Over the years, women engaged in the processing and trading of rice have lost such sources of earnings to private mill owners and traders. Hired wage labour that replaced the communal system of labour increased distress for the elderly women. We also see the trend of a consistent decline in cultivators and a corresponding increase in agricultural labourers, land alienation, and landlessness. An analysis of the institutions and practices of control, determines the processes of the social, economic, political and cultural conflicts resulting in alienation, deprivation, marginalization, impoverishment, exclusion and underdevelopment of the tribal people. Paradoxically increasing vulnerability is the result of cumulative distress experienced by the tribals due to denial and deprivation of control over their productive and livelihood resources, pushing them to the margins of survival. Vulnerability is a construct and not a given condition. The constructions of the landed as a powerful class and the landless as a periphery class are mutually constituted. Therefore, it is significant to revisit some of the narratives that expound on the everyday living experiences of poverty, hunger, and deprivation. Such experiences are not occurrences that are abrupt and unforeseen. They need to be explained in terms of their continuity. The everyday experiences of vulnerability have been normalised as everyday living to the extent that they no longer remain important concerns. The interventions of the state have not only failed to break the established

configuration of dominance and privilege of the 'powerful class' but also dispute its role as a 'neutral arbiter' between conflicting power relations. The study finds that the nature of the state itself makes the conditions conducive to sustaining the interests of the dominant class. The structural-political approach reiterates that power relations, which are embedded in the political economy of the region need to be understood. It is critical to acknowledge the political forces that perpetuate the crisis in understanding the underlying causes of vulnerability. This situation is not new and has been discussed in various studies at different levels. But, the political importance of the problem compels constant discussion.

Since understanding vulnerabilities cannot be divorced from the experiences of the vulnerable, understanding vulnerability from the vantage point of the latter becomes important. Weaving the narratives together has enabled us to reformulate the perspective of understanding vulnerability, often based on existing literature on development policies. The more we draw our understanding from the narratives, the wider the gap between the cognisance of vulnerability by the state and the tribals. The persistence of the vulnerabilities of the tribals to distress, deprivation, poverty and hunger raises serious concerns about the nature of the state's intervention and its narrow understanding of such experiences. Despite the positive responses of the state to pressures from public criticism and the fear of defeat at the polls that saw the transition from mere reliefs to long-term policy reforms on development programmes³, successive governments for more than two decades have not been able to ameliorate the conditions of destitution and prevent chronic deprivation, poverty, and hunger. The phenomenon of vulnerability is extremely complex and cannot be explained by a linear approach in terms of a simple cause-effect relationship or even by a combination of these relationships. The convergences and divergences between the perceptions and explanations of the state and the victims become important. They need to be understood as sites of political debates, conflicts, and paradoxes. Arguably, the structural-political approach dismantles the polarising conversations to transcend the boundaries of conventional debate.

Contesting the State's Perspective

Despite major anti-poverty initiatives in the Kalahandi region since mid-1990s from the LTAP and later the Revised LTAP for the Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput regions popularly known as the KBK Plan, the employment generation programmes, housing facilities, mid-day meals, distribution of food grains to ration card holders, micro-credits, and health care schemes that provide short-term reliefs,

the state has no means to map the distress conditions in terms of distress sale of land, labour, produce, distress migration, and indebtedness. The legal and institutional apparatuses are not equipped to respond to the persistence of vulnerability, which is the result of cumulative distress caused by depriving tribals of their access, ownership, and control over resources of livelihood. While, the Panchayati Raj Institutions aim at transferring power and authority to the local people at the grass roots to involve them in planning and implementing socio-economic development programmes, we find that they are still being manipulated by the dominant landowning class, which invariably belongs to the upper castes. Conversely, while reservation at the panchayat level has broken the psychological barrier around the identity and role of tribals and tribal women in particular as they assert their rights as panchayat members in several villages, we find that participation in the Gram Sabha is only ensured when people are democratically conscious of their rights. The developmental state has been instrumental in perceiving citizens merely as passive recipients and beneficiaries of development policies. Despite democratic transitions, the inclusionary rhetoric of development has resulted in the exclusion of the underprivileged and marginalized, thus reinforcing the class character of the state. Though the panchayats represent aspects of the local political dynamics, they function as administrative agents of state policies. They have come to play the role of implementing agencies for poverty alleviation schemes and do not address the structural causes of poverty.

The study finds that the approaches of the state to secure entitlement, livelihood, empowerment, basic rights, capability-building, participation, and inclusion have their limitations in terms of rights, equality, freedom, and justice. The emphasis on higher growth and land appropriation serves the interests of the large farmers, non-agriculturists, and corporate houses, resulting in aggravating the agrarian crisis and consequently increasing farmer's suicides. An agriculture policy that facilitates greater mechanization, commercialization of the agriculture, and entry of big corporations through contract farming will further deprive small and marginal farmers, leading to increased alienation of land, and landlessness. In the context of blurred boundaries between the interests of the dominant and the ruling classes, the possibilities of altering the disadvantageous living conditions of the underprivileged seem to be eroding. It is significant to extrapolate that the political class has been able to graft on the institutional power structures that have seen the resurgence of the hierarchical state.

Though the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Mid-Day Meal (MDM), *Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana* (SGSY), Odisha Tribal Empowerment and Livelihood Programme (OTELP), Western Odisha Rural

Livelihood Programme (WORLP), and National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) are important interventions, we find that they are largely relief measures. We find that the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) to provide work and minimum wages to all who demand work has not benefited the villagers. While the government has launched a plethora of programmes such as '*Ama Krushi*' '*Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana*' (RKVY), Odisha Millets Mission, besides *KALLA* and *BALARAM*, which promise financial support to the sharecroppers and lessee cultivators to facilitate an increase in farmers income, ironically, the agrarian policies have facilitated greater mechanisation and commercialisation of agriculture. The campaign for '*Ama Odisha, Nabin Odisha*' (Our Odisha, New Odisha) has seen Odisha as a preferred destination for national and global investors as the acquisition of land for mining, dams, power plants, highways, SEZs, and other development projects gets compliance with the state. The two-pronged strategy of the government to enhance the capability of the poor through its rights-based approach, as well as its alliance with the economically dominant class to privilege the interests of the corporate world, have added to the paradoxes of development. The practicing politics of symbolism of instituting statues and memorials of tribal icons, celebrating various tribal festivals, and exhibiting and assimilating tribal art and culture, declaring 2023 as 'International Year of Millets' and the 'First Citizen' as a representation of the tribal women, has buried larger critical issues that are the underlying causes of deprivation, marginalisation, backwardness, and underdevelopment. Thus, the growing paradox of development reflects the duality of the strategies of the state.

A Way Forward

Reconceptualising vulnerability became critical in the context of its persistence amongst the tribal people in spite of interventions by the state. Despite the revised parameters to measure development, the underlying causes of vulnerability and disempowerment have not been prioritized. While the journey of tribal people's struggle gives meaning to the unheard voices that engage with multiple methodologies that privilege the vantage point of tribals across diversities with distinct identities, concerns, and experiences, the state has emerged strong enough to not only campaign for the corporate development agenda that facilitates the interests of the hegemonic class but has also co-opted some of the critical issues resulting in the decline of radical politics. It is therefore important to understand the increasing depoliticisation of social movements.

Without dismantling the structures of inequality and oppression, the vast majority of tribal people will continue to remain victims of the processes of marginalisation and disempowerment. It is pertinent to address the underlying causes of denial of ownership and control over livelihood resources. The demand for land rights by small and marginal farmers, landless people, tribals, and Dalits and the demand to protect fertile land, water, forest reserves, and mineral resources from unprecedented land grabs and land acquisitions in the name of development across the country need to be prioritised in the political agenda of the state. One of the important proposals to reduce agrarian distress is to consolidate land holdings alongside land development activities to enhance farmer incomes. While it is critical to plug the loopholes in the implementation of development programmes, structural change in an agrarian economy demands intervention by the state in land rights and land relations, to ensure that the deprived have access to the means to cultivate the land and make provisions to check land encroachments and prevent alienation of land. Besides ownership of land, they should have access to the market and credit system, which will save them from moneylenders, landlords, middlemen, and traders. Prevention of agrarian crises should not just be concerned with containing farmer's suicides. Elimination of destitution needs to be considered in the context of three objectives: regaining control over land and other productive resources, regaining control over one's labour, and regaining control over the produce of labour.

There is a need to conserve and regenerate the forest eco-system for a sustainable livelihood. A coherent policy for enhancing the status of forests alongside the agro-ecological system by integrating patterns of land use, including forest land, irrigation, and pastures, is therefore important. Inclusive development will only be possible if the underlying causes of the distress conditions in terms of the sale of land, labour, produce, distress migration, and increasing indebtedness are addressed. Empowerment can only be ensured if tribal people are not passive recipients of policies or their beneficiaries but have the freedom to choose, bargain, decide, negotiate, challenge, and provide alternatives to the development strategies imposed by the corporate state. The structural-political approach reaffirms the need for a resilient wave of tribal assertion to contest the strategies of the state for the development and empowerment of the tribal people. Therefore, in addition to social capital and human capital, the political will to build the political capital of the deprived and marginalised becomes important to empower them to intervene in the policy decisions that affect their livelihood. The deprived and vulnerable should exercise their political right to alter the conditions that lead to the 'vulnerability trap'. They should have the right to self-determinism. Only then can Kalahandi and

similar situations elsewhere become a symbol of democratic transitions rather than being a symbol of backwardness, underdevelopment, deprivation, distress, poverty, and hunger. The practice of democracy will remain incomplete without such structural transformations. Therefore, understanding the vulnerability of the tribals needs to be liberated from a fixed delineation and preconceived notion outlined by the neoliberal state those campaigns for a market economy.

Notes

1. Odisha has three main regions based on their location. The coastal belt districts at the bank of the Bay of Bengal are Balasore, Bhadrak, Cuttack, Jajpur, Khorda, Jagatsinghpur, Kendrapara, Puri, Nayagarh, Ganjam and Gajapati. The south-western region comprises Boudh, Phulbani and KBK districts (Kalahandi, Bolangir, Koraput, Nuapada, Nabarangpur, Rayagada, Sonepur, Malkangiri). Bargarh, Sambalpur, Jharsuguda, Sundargarh, Deogarh, Dhenkanal, Angul, Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj are situated in the north-western region.
2. The few villages we visited in the two tribal blocks of Lanjigarh and Thuamul Rampur during the last two decades are Madanguda, Malijubang, Bundel, Belipadar, Umer, Maskapadar and Gopalpur villages of Lanjigarh block as well as Amthaguda, Pollingpadar, Bhejiguda, Kaniguma, Tentulipada, Ghumer, Sapmundi and Taragaon in Thuamul Rampur. These villages were selected keeping in mind their location and socio-economic background.
3. The Long-Term Action Plan (LTAP) which was later Revised LTAP and Biju KBK Plan since the 1990s, saw a series of welfare and special developmental programmes.

References

- (2019) 'The Malaise of Starvation Deaths' in *Mainstream Independence Day Special* VOL LVII No 35. 17 August. ISSN: 0542-1462. Page Number 37-39. ISSN: 0542-1462
- (2016) 'Kalahandi: Reliving the Callous State' in *Mainstream* Vol- 54, No. 37. September. Page Number 17-19. ISSN: 0542-1462.
- (2017) 'Agrarian Crisis that Killed Farmers in Odisha' in *Mainstream Annual* Vol- 56, No. 1. 23 December. Page Number 21-28. ISSN: 0542-1462.
- (2018) 'Odisha: Revisiting the Anti-Posco Struggle' in *Mainstream Republic Day Special*, Vol- 56, No. 6. 27 January. Page Number 33-37. ISSN: 0542-1462.
- India National Multidimensional Poverty: A Progress Review- 2023, NITI Aayog, Government of India, <https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-08/India-National-Multidimensional-Poverty-Index-2023.pdf> visited on 10th April 2024
- Manoranjan Mohanty, G N Trivedi, Suranjita Ray and N Sukumar on 'Landlessness and the Marginalized: A Study of Kalahandi, Bhojpur and Chittoor' in Social Development Report 2010, Council for Social Development, Oxford University Press, p. 224-242

- Odisha Development Report, 2020 <https://www.cysd.org/release-of-odisha-development-report-2020/>
- Odisha Economic Survey, 2022-23; Planning and Governance Department, Government of Odisha, <https://finance.odisha.gov.in/sites/default/files/202302/Odisha%20Economic%20Survey-2022-23%20%28Digital%20Version%29%20Final.pdf>, visited on 12th April 2024
- Ray, Suranjita (2004) Politics of Hunger: A Case Study of Kalahandi. Ph.D Thesis, University of Delhi, Delhi.