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Book Review by Vibhuti Patel


Rekha Talmaki has made a serious and commendable effort at conducting survey based research on socio-economic status of tribal women in Valod (South Gujarat) where committed Gandhian workers have dedicated more than 5 decades of their lives in village development activities based on Gandhian principles. Her personal field visits have played crucial role in bringing new insights and analysis with gender lens. She has examined tribal women’s predicaments in the context of status of women in India in general where main factors in determining socio-economic status have been income, education and occupation. She has provided an exhaustive literature review focusing on occupational life, health profile of tribal women and tribal women’s status in the family decision making. She has also evaluated the situation to find out to what extent Gandhian ideology of Anyyodaya is implemented vis-a-vis tribal women, who are the poorest of the poor in the economic ladder and at the bottom of the pyramid.

The author has rightly used a conceptual framework of social exclusion that includes socio-economic parameters of inequality, poverty, social exclusion in India. She has provided definition of tribe. She has highlighted indicators such as working status and demographic aspects of tribes in Gujarat as well as size and distribution of scheduled tribe. She also reveals that sex ratio of tribal women in Gujarat is relatively higher than the rest. The question is, does that indicate they enjoy better status in socio-economic, cultural, educational and political lives? Social geography of Surat reveals volatile changes due to industrialization, urbanization and globalization. In what way have these factors affected lives and survival strategies of tribal women? The author has made an honest attempt to answer these mind boggling questions.

With the help of questionnaire for tribal women that was administered on 498 women respondents from 11 villages selected as sample who were falling in the category of 18-59 years age group, for Gandhian institutions working among them and for financial institutions, nationalized and cooperative banks, the author has tried to analyse various development efforts. She has revealed that large number of Halpatis or Dublas is found very prominently in Surat district. They are very poor, because they do not get permanent employment. They are very good in taking care of animals. SUMUL and local milk cooperatives encouraged them for animal husbandry and since then they have started keeping cattle and other animals for milk production It emerges from this study that the tribal communities, particularly women have been excluded from the main stream economic development for the last so many decades. The study was conducted to find out the socio-economic status of tribal women in Valod. Though their improved status is showing positive changes, it is also necessary to pay attention on many other aspects for the better & overall development of these women.

The most attractive feature of this study to bring to the fore efforts of veteran Gandhians such as Shri. Babubhai Shah, Smt. Savitaben Chaudhari and Smt. Dashiben Choudhari. Popularly known as Dasharib, the eminent Gandhian and freedom-fighter, who was born in 1918 in a tribal family (as she told) has been the role model for all tribal women in the region. At present she is residing in Vedeghi. She took part in the freedom struggle and taught reading and writing to Smt. Kasturba Gandhi. It can be a very good example of
how these tribal men and women were actively participating in the freedom struggle. After independence, also, Dashariben devoted her full life to educate people.

The author states that women in Valod perform various income generating activities. They are either engaged in agricultural activities or in Papad Udyog or in dairy production prominently. Very few women in this sample, i.e. 11, are engaged in Anganwadi activities and only four women work in government jobs. Those women, who are involved in agricultural activities, are also involved in Papad Udyog or in milk production. For example, Halpati women are basically agricultural labourers but they are doing well in dairy production. Women do not possess any land but those who are members of Self Help Groups are managing livestock and are having their own accounts in the banks. They are owners of those animals, who give them not only economic self-sufficiency but also make them empowered. Their economic status has been improved only because of Lijjat Papad and Milk Co-operatives. More than 50 per cent women also know the market value of their product. Women’s leadership in micro finance has been marked feature of the activities of Gandhian institutions in the region. They are active in Vedchhi Pradesh Seva Samiti (VPSS), Valod; Lijjat Papad Grihaudyog, Sampooran Kranti Vidyalaya And Gandhi Vidyapith- Vedchhi. Traditional agriculture sector could not give them better economic status and social status as well. However, because of the above mentioned occupations their economic and social status has improved in the last two decades. There are only 11 women working in Anganwadi, but today along with Papad Udyog and Milk Co-operatives, Anganwadi activities are also increasing as Sakhi Mandal are emerging with the help of Anganwadi workers.

Decision making, economic status and empowerment always go hand in hand. More than 70 per cent women told that their status has changed drastically. They see themselves in a different perspective and are thinking about the empowerment of their own daughters and well-being of the entire family. More than 50 per cent women said that, improvement in the economic status gives them status in the family and in the society. Remaining women, though their status has not been improved, are well aware of their future. They wish that their future would be good. They do not want their children to suffer as they have suffered. They demand good educational and job facilities for their children. They want good educated husbands for their daughters. The habit of alcohol is still persisting in tribal communities; hence mothers want good non-addicted partners for their daughters.

It is so encouraging to note that respondents from Vedchhi want to do something for their community and village. Respondents from Ranveri want their daughters to be educated, so that they would teach their children. It shows that, women from all the villages are well aware of their status. They have understood the importance of education. In the sample, there were very few widows, but nearly 50 per cent women said that there should be some special schemes only for widows. Those women, who stay below poverty line, want to improve their economic status.

Educational process among tribals started with Vedchhi Movement and was later on flourished by late Shri. Jugatram Dave, Founder of Swaraj Ashram – Vedchhi in 1930. Udyogwadi Unit started in 1954 and various programmes were undertaken by late Shri Babubhai Shah. Separate women’s section was started in Udyogwadi Unit. Women started getting guidance, income generating activities and vocational training from this Unit. Lijjat Papad Unit provides occupation based on self-sufficiency. All these institutions make women empowered in Valod.
Self Help Groups, milk co-operatives, increasing participating of women in political activities, agitation against deforestation and alcohol by Self Help Groups, educational status of women and their children, accessibility to all kinds of infrastructural activities, improved decision making capacity in all important aspects, knowledge and use of contraceptives show positive changes in the socio-economic status of tribal women in Valod. This improvement has not taken place overnight. Gandhian ideology definitely played a very important role in this respect. Self Help Groups are emerging on a very large scale in Valod taluka. Development from the grass-root level, a dream of Gandhiji, is now coming to reality.

It noteworthy that author’s recommendations emphasize investment in tribal women’s education, vocational training, meaningful participation of tribal women in local self government bodies, anti alcohol efforts and prevention of domestic violence among tribal families thro’ collective efforts and social intervention.

I congratulate Ms. Rekha Talmaki for her praise worthy efforts and hope that readers from wide variety of backgrounds social scientists, political activists, researchers, policy makers and women’s organizations will deliberate on the issues raised by this book.