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## SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND DISCRIMINATION OF KORAGA TRIBES OF KERALA

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### Abstract

*Social Exclusion and discrimination leads to refusal to accept the participation of members of a social group or a section of society. Consequence of discrimination ends in deprivation. In India exclusion is embedded in societal interrelations and institutions that exclude, discriminate, isolate and deprive some groups on the basis of group's identities like caste and ethnicity. Tribal people are the most marginalized population everywhere in the world. Among the Tribals in India, the Primitive Tribal Group, now named as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group are the most backward. Koragas of Kasaragod suffered a lot not only due to social exclusion and discrimination but also of the outcome of social evils and deprivation from time immemorial. Koragas are the most subjugated particularly vulnerable tribal groups and on the verge of extinction. They suffer from extreme deprivations of basic needs like land, housing, water, sanitation and social and psychological needs. This paper made an attempt to understand the forces of exploitation and societal interrelations which lead to social exclusion of people with respect to Koraga society.*

**Keywords:** *Social Exclusion, discrimination, deprivation, caste, Tribal people, exploitation*

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### Introduction

Social exclusion and discrimination have become the central focus of discourse in India today. Social exclusion and discrimination refer to the process and outcome of keeping social groups outside power centres and resources. As long as excluded individuals and social groups remain silent there is no conflict. But the moment they articulate their exclusion and demand their constitutional and human rights, those who have subjected them to exclusion unleash a reign of terror on them. They are both individual and collective processes, and take place in an interactional process. Exclusion and discrimination take different forms in different societies. They adapt and change themselves according to changing social reality.

The term 'Social Exclusion' is ambiguous, multi-dimensional and can be defined and interpreted in different ways in different contexts in different times. The term 'Social Exclusion' was coined in France in 1974 to refer to people who are labeled as social

problems. But gradually the narrow view of it changed and it refer to process of social disintegration as a result of long term process of transformations in the structure and organization of economic life. Social Exclusion means denial of equal opportunities which leads to inability of an individual or a group to participate in the basic political, economic and social functioning of a society.

The development of the concept of 'social exclusion' or 'social inclusion' can be traced back soon after the American and French revolution. The ideology of freedom, justice, equality and fraternity became the dominant ideology after the revolution and that lead to develop the concept of 'social exclusion'. But it became the proper shape in the later part of 20th century only. In fact the term was coined by Rene Lenoir of France in the 70s. He published his famous book "Les Exclue" which means 'excluded'. He passed law for the persons with disability, when he was Deputy Minister in the government of Jacques Chirac. Lenoir's identified the marginalized groups like poor, handicapped, suicidal people, elderly people, abused children; drug addicted etc and he included them as socially excluded groups. The concept of 'social exclusion' received good popularity in France.

### **Meaning of Social Exclusion**

The question what does the term 'social exclusion' actually mean or who is socially excluded or even what is the basis of social inclusion? The society offers a bundle of essential rights to the individual to explore his/her potentials or to enjoy his or life to its fullest. In other words, we can say that the process which helps the individuals to attain the full membership of the society. Those basic social rights or process can be access to power, status, wealth and income. Without the access of those social rights the individual can't be the full member of the society and thus in absence of any of those rights he/she gets excluded from the society. There are numbers of occasions where the member of any society is denied to access power, status, wealth and income. We can divide those occasions into segments like caste, class, ethnicity, gender etc. Denial to those rights on the ground of those segments leads to an inequality in the society and the social inequality eventually social exclusion. Amartya Sen classified the social exclusion into active and passive forms. In case of active social exclusion the individual is directly debarred from taking part in any social process or his/her right is revoked by the state. We can take the example of migrant workers; their civil and political rights are directly denied by the state. And thus they are not eligible to be the full member of the society. On the other hand passive social exclusion comes through a process where no deliberate attempt is made to exclude the individual from the society or denied to be the full member of the society. But the existing set up nullifies his/her right to become a full member of the society. We can take the example of poverty. Due to poverty the individual remains outside the political and other civil rights.

### **Social Exclusion in the Indian Context**

In India exclusion is embedded in societal interrelations and institutions that exclude, discriminate, isolate and deprive some groups on the basis of group's identities like caste and ethnicity. "The fundamental characteristics of caste system fixed civil, cultural and economic rights for each caste, with restrictions for change implying 'forced exclusion' of one caste from the rights of other caste, or from undertaking the occupations of other castes"<sup>1</sup> Exclusion and discrimination in civil, cultural and particularly in economic spheres such as occupation and labour employment. In the economic sphere denial of economic opportunity operate through markets and non-market transactions. Discrimination can occur through what Amartya Sen would describe as "unfavourable inclusion "that would reflect in discrimination in the prices charged and received by discriminated groups who can get lower prices for the goods that they sell, and could pay higher prices for the goods that they buy. Some cases they may face discrimination from participation in certain categories of jobs such as people engaged in unclean occupations are being excluded in from inside household jobs.

Developmental approaches from 1950 and 1980 focused on social and economic development and less concerned with civil and political rights as well as the high quality process. This shows that there was the absence of human rights based approach. Participation, local ownership, empowerment and sustainability are essential characteristics of high quality process. In the broader perspective, social exclusion is not a developmental issue, but a human rights issue and requires a more comprehensive and process- oriented response. The relevant issues like poor access to all resources which determine the level of income, the low earnings of SC and ST, low unemployment rates, low level of literacy rate educational level, low standard of living and poor socio-economic development lesser participation in decision making which affects their life. Koragas are excluded from achieving equality of access to goods and services, to get assistance to participate in the mainstream community and society, participation in decision making, virtuous social, cultural and religious groups, friendships, relationships, participating in active social life. Social exclusion prevents disadvantaged groups from interacting freely and productively with others and taking part in the full economic, social and political life of the community.

Social exclusion offends against human dignity, denies fundamental human rights to the marginalized and leads to socio economic deprivation and inequality and instability. Every forms of social exclusion affect the socially excluded group such as untouchables eg. Koragas, who earlier worked as cleaners. They lived and still living segregated settlements even now. Social segregation is an institutionalized form of social distancing expressed in physical separation. Social exclusion is built into the

social structure and it contributes to the formation of attitude of a society, and attitude in turn contributes to the maintenance of social structure.

Since Social exclusion is about domination, discrimination and deprivation, those who benefit from it do not want to introduce any change, while those who are discriminated against, who are supposed to be inferior, incapable, less meritorious and lower are not in a position to mobilize and organize to alter the existing social system. They do not want to remain in the dehumanizing social order but fear that they may be subjected to repression if they resist exclusion and discrimination. There are differences in the perceptions of dominant castes on deprived and the perceptions of tribals about their own identity. The dominant castes negatively perceived that tribals are dirty and filthy. Studies have shown that tribals are deprived of regular supply of food; they consume food as and when available. Tribals perceived themselves that they are capable but get no opportunities, they are hardworking but do not get the fruits of their labour, they are culturally talented, sensitive and emotional.

Any individual may be excluded on any pretext at any juncture but no provision or procedure is prescribed towards inclusion. As a man may lose his position in the caste, so a caste may lose its position in the society. Fear of exclusion has worked wonders on the caste system that it still continues even today. Tribal population of India is around 70 million and most of them suffer from geographical and social exclusion, high poverty rates and lack of access to appropriate administrative and judicial mechanisms.

### **Koraga Tribes**

Tribals have preserved their culture, tradition and ethnic identity to contribute to the astonishing cultural diversity of our country. The criteria of geographical isolation, distinctive culture, primitive traits, pre-agricultural level of technology, less than five per cent literacy, stagnant rate of growth, shyness of contact, economic backwardness coupled with discrimination and exploitation are generally considered relevant among the primitive tribes. Among the 75 Primitive Tribal Groups in India, five PTGs Koraga, Cholanaikkan, Kattunayakan, Kurumbar and Kadar are in Kerala. Koragas found in Dakshina Kannada, Udupi and Kasaragod districts.

The ethnic and anthropometrical features reveal that the Koragas are aboriginal Dravidian tribe. Thurston thinks it probable that "they were in fact the aboriginals of the region who were dispersed, dispossessed and turned into slaves by the influx of Aryans from the north of India"<sup>2</sup>. Koragas, an old primitive tribal group has been marginalized and thrown in to the lowest bottom of the social ladder and brutally exploited through Ajar practice by the so called mainstream society. The subjugation continued for centuries and the submerged group were not able to rise or even unable to make a voice for their basic rights.

Koragas were considered as untouchables by the main stream of social group. The subjugated groups became castes forced to perform less desirable menial jobs like

sweeping, cleaning of excreta, removal of dead bodies, leather works. It is also said that the Koragas were enslaved around 6th A.D. Since then, they were slave labourers and sent to forests. The District Gazetteer of Dakshina Kannada reveals that till the beginnings of the 20th century, the Koragas were treated as slave labourers in weekly fairs and yearly fairs in the district. The price of a male slave was three pagodas (equal to Rs. 14) and of 5 the female slave 5 pagodas.

Koragas are the most subjugated particularly vulnerable tribal groups are on the verge of extinction. They suffer from extreme deprivations of basic needs like land, housing, water, sanitation and social and psychological needs. Even though many developmental activities have been implemented to improve their living conditions, they continue to lag behind the general community in the case of education, health, employment and social mobility. M.V.Rao reiterated that "some groups of people of the Indian sub-continent had to traverse a long path through prehistoric periods with many bitter experiences of stresses and strains for their social stability"<sup>3</sup>

Koragas became PTG in 1986, until then included in ST. They have own traditional beliefs and practices, language or dialect, unique and distinctive culture, traditions, customs, myths and rituals, deities, arts and performance. "Indigenous people clearly distinguish themselves from the other segments of society by way of historical and structural features as well as their self –identification. Their cultural distinctiveness is often based on language, social organization, religion and spiritual values, modes of production, as well as laws and institutions."<sup>4</sup> The ethnic and anthropometrical features reveal that the Koragas are aboriginal Dravidian tribe. Economy of Koragas.

"Tribes underwent change not only in their relationship to land, but also in their relationship to forest...They were dependent on the forest for their food, shelter, instruments, medicine, and even clothing...they preserved it, as it was their life support system"<sup>5</sup> This dependency on the forest for their livelihood creates an equally strong attachment to the forests. Koragas lost rights on forests and their fertile lands got alienated as result of developmental programmes. Being landless they earn their livelihood through basket weaving, scavenging and begging. Basket weaving is the major source of subsistence but under threat because of deforestation and land alienation. They have to walk kilometers through dense forests to get creepers, bamboo rattan, twigs of various species and coconut palms without making damage to the trees. They collect raw materials from the forest region of Sullia and Sampaje of Karanataka State. As they had no license or legal permission to collect the raw materials from forest, they depend on the mercy of the forest officials. They spent 7 days to 10 days to procure raw materials. Even though they prepare baskets of different sizes and varieties, difficulty in getting raw materials, lack of demand and problem associated with marketing are obstacles in continuing it as a major economic activity. This occupation is not enabling them to meet their basic amenities of life as its price ranges only from Rs 8 to 50. Sometimes, they sell it for lesser price.

"The development schemes have been able to break the stagnation of the closed tribal society to some extent and have been able to introduce innovations and new ideas in the tribal communities. But ... the change in the tribal way of life is not distinctly felt"<sup>6</sup>. Koragas are forced to live on parched hill slopes, which is not suitable for growing food crops. They subjected to impoverishment and exploitation as they pledged land to money lenders and living as wage earners. Banks do not give loans to tribals because they do not have documents for their land. As a result of external interferences, they have lost their self respect and facing crisis in preserving cultural identity. Koragas are facing challenge in the sense that they find difficult to communicate with authorities, are not getting enough attention by the Government of Kerala since Kasaragod lies in northern most part of Kerala, but the Koragas in South Canara region of Karnataka are having lands for agricultural purposes, building houses and youths get training for skilled work.

Now Koragas are facing a serious threat to their existence because of widespread fatal diseases, malnutrition, poverty and unhygienic living conditions. They are experiencing even negative population growth due to rising mortality rates. Mal nutrition, poverty, diseases and deaths are very severe among Koragas and contributing to their extinction. They are frequently affected by T.B, fever, typhoid, asthma, anemia and skin diseases. These are combined effect of poverty, lack of employment, land alienation, failure to provide forest rights, loss of traditional agriculture, loss of indigenous food and lack of alternative nutritious food. Throughout the year the Koraga families will not get enough food to eat hence they eat the defiled food. They store the leftover food after drying in an earthen pitcher to be taken during the lean period.

The Koragas are regarded as the lowest among the backward castes. The belief that they are the lowest human creatures had made them thoroughly inward looking and fatalistic. Since the caste Hindu does not mix with them, they are forced to have their own colonies on the outskirts of the villages. Even in the cities their colonies are segregated from that of others. The interaction of Koragas with the members of other castes and communities is restricted.

The belief that they are the lowest human creatures had made them thoroughly inward looking and fatalistic. Since the caste Hindu does not mix with them, they are forced to have their own colonies on the outskirts of the villages. Even in the cities their colonies are segregated from that of others Their interaction is restricted. In the past, the Koragas were prohibited from entering the streets of other castes. Koragas can visit others localities to remove the dirt from streets and to beat drums and oxen race during social and religious functions. For rendering these services, they are entitled to collect some leftover food and old cloths. Due to poverty, Koragas are forced to eat the leftover food from the plantain leaves thrown during marriages and functions. They are practicing this custom from a very long time and even today they are eating this

defiled food. Because of inhuman treatment against them and subjugation, the Koragas have become mild, docile and fearful.

### **Conclusion**

Historically, tribals faced various kinds of exclusion, discrimination, denial and oppression. Their condition was and is pathetic because they had been denied human rights and are also the victims of untouchability. Untouchability is a social institution that legitimizes and enforces practice of discrimination against people born certain castes. The Koragas have remained tradition bound and superstitious. The belief that they are the lowest human creatures had made them thoroughly inward looking and fatalistic. The society at large also exploited this and made them ever dependent and exploitative. People doing impure occupations like removal of dead animals, removal of human waste, cleaning streets, doing sanitary works are regarded as permanently polluting or doing impure occupations. The people born in these castes were regarded as untouchables on the basis of birth, with the establishment of caste system in the Indian society. They were not allowed to use public roads, wells, temples and schools. Thus the concept of untouchability is based on purity and pollution. The provision in the Constitution and law are secular and equal but the customary rules of the caste system and the institutiton of untouchability are based on the principle of inequality in social, economic, cultural and religious sphere. People continued to follow the latter, because it provides immense privilege and serves their social, political and economic interests. Social exclusion is still practiced throughout India in many forms means avoidance of physical contact has disappeared but behavioral attitude prevailling. It can be observed in actual behavior in the ideas and beliefs, and feelings of individuals' exclusion. It is dwelling deep in the minds of the people.

There has recently been a growing awareness that exclusion is multiple and cumulative. Those subjected to exclusion suffer many forms of exclusion simultaneously and this has a collective impact, resulting in further discrimination. For instance, a dalit or tribal girl is excluded due to caste and gender. If she is rural-based she faces further exclusion. If she is differently-abled, she suffers even more exclusion. This crucial aspect of exclusion needs to be understood and accepted for any kind of meaningful intervention in the lives of the excluded.

Various social groups are excluded on the basis of caste, class, gender, disability, ethnicity, age, location, etc. They are excluded from opportunities, outcomes of development, freedom of mobility, resources, citizenship in polity, and membership in society. Those who propagate such a social order defend and maintain the status quo. And the excluded social groups, in turn, internalise the principles, practices and institutions that legitimize and enforce such a social order. Therefore, change is resisted by both excluding and excluded social groups.

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