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Tribals prefer traditional way of governance over Panchayati Raj

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Ahmedabad "What would you like to see for your tribe in the next 10 years?' the professor asked.

Lakhmara, a tall young tribal from the Garasiya tribe in Rajasthan stood up, cleared his throat and said: "Ten years from now, we want our tribe to be free of the Panchayati Raj system and return to our traditional way of governance. The Panchayats only create divisions and enmities in the community."

Tribals youths from the five states of western India nodded in agreement. Youths from eight communities, four of them classified by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs as Primitive Tribal Groups, had come to Gandhinagar last week for a 5-day leadership training programme organised by Sony Pellissery, a professor from the Institute of Rural Management (IRMA), Anand; and Actionaid.

The tribes included the Garasiyas of Rajasthan, Bhils of Rajasthan and Gujarat, and Korkus from Maharashtra. The four 'primitive tribes' included the Koragas and Jenu Khurba tribe of Karnataka, Kathodis of Gujarat and the Sahariyas of Madhya Pradesh.

The Ministry of Tribal Affairs had identified 75 tribal communities as Primitive Tribal Groups on fixed criterion of pre-agricultural level of technology, very low level of literacy and declining or stagnant population.

The unanimous consensus among the tribals was that the Panchayati Raj System was inferior to their traditional tribal law. Besides, it involved the intrusion of outsiders like the police and the political parties. Lakhmara said: "Whenever there is a crime or a dispute, some people go to the Panchayat, while others go to the police. The people are divided. Under our own system, we reach on a conclusion through consensus. The present system relies on majority rule, and can be easily influenced by political parties." Mathadi, a Koraga youth, said, "The Panchayati Raj System is not our favour."

According to the 1981 census, there were only 1,098 Koragas in the world, living in the forests of Kerala and Karnataka. In a 1996-97 survey by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, their numbers had increased to 1,349.

But apart from their dwindling population, the Koragas also face other problems as they try to assimilate into the mainstream. "Our women now stay at home and do household work because the men think that way. They think non-tribals are superior, and they copy the wrong things," said Mathadi.

As part of an exercise, the tribal youths were divided into groups according to the states they belonged to, and asked to write what they thought were the positive and negative changes they saw and the challenges they faced. The group from Rajasthan wrote they were losing their "moral concepts" while the group from Gujarat wrote "there is more violence". The group from Madhya Pradesh wrote there were "negative cultural changes."

But on the positive changes, most agreed that the women were being empowered; education was picking up, and health services were better, though there was scope for improvement.

But all agreed that the Forest Rights Act, 2006, was not being implemented properly. The problem, they said, was that it was still difficult to get "patta certificates" and that the land revenue system did not recognise community-owned land. "Many people of the Jenu Khurba tribe in Coorg were shifted out of the forests because they had no land records. But even after the Forest Rights Act, they still work in the coffee plantations and get very bad pay, without electricity and housing. Some sleep among the coffee plants," said Mathadi.

The group from Gujarat, mostly from the southern district of Dangs, wrote, "The quality of agricultural land is becoming worse."

Shreemati, a Sahariya woman from Madhya Pradesh, who brought along her toddler, said: "If I could decide on the development that took place where we live, I would talk to the people before starting a project."

But most tribal youths kept harping on the cultural aspect of their tribal lifestyle. Lakhmara said: "At this time, there are lakhs of people in Ambaji. The goddess there is ours. They stole her and now when we want to pray our own goddess, we are asked to convert."