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Self-Sufficiency: A Shibboleth?

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A few weeks ago I wrote in *Jharkhand Mirror*, *Arunachal Times*, *e-pao* and in *Asia Mirror* that the practice of segregation (quarantine) and social distancing have their origin in tribal traditions. Even the concept of Janta curfew, as I found, has its origin in *Jan* (tribal) tradition. The present strategy of ‘self-sufficiency’ which was declared by our Prime Minister at the time of COVID-19 crisis and has always been our strategy of national development, sometime implicitly while at other explicitly is also an ideology in tribal tradition. Those who study tribes know that a ‘tribe’ is a synonym of a ‘self-reliant community’. Falling back to a strategy of the yore with determination at the time of COVID-19 crisis therefore needs a scrutiny in the context.

First, a tribe is relatively a closed society; its openness being inversely related to the extent of its self-sufficient pursuit. Hypothetically a hundred per cent tribal community is example of an absolute isolated community. Though scholars have not found such an absolute isolation, still a tribal community is characterised as an isolated category. Does present strategy of self-sufficiency suggests for a relatively isolated economy in the era of globalisation? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that 10% of GDP is earmarked for the self-sufficiency package. Undoubtedly, GDP reserves a space for India’s partnership in globalised economy. Self-sufficiency is a strategy to recover the economy from present crisis and put it in order for a takeoff.

Second, each tribe is self-sufficient. Incidence of barter exchange used to take place in a limited spatial scale in few items and by few individuals. How can we think of self -sufficiency in the context of the present Nation? Which component of the nation has to be self sufficient? In this context it is to be mentioned that self sufficiency bears meaning vertically beginning with Panchayat through Block, District, and State to the Nation. Self-sufficiency considered from tribal sense of understanding stands for social justice and it promotes the good of all equally. A macro strategy and top down approach to self-sufficiency would have bottlenecks in the process of equitable participation to achieve growth and justice.

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Third, a tribe is not a sectoral economy. It operates at a subsistence level and all sectoral activities are institutionalised in social process. In our present context it is desirable that village economy becomes self sufficient; semi-urban centres and urban centres in an administrative division (Block or District) along with the rural area/Panchayat become self-sufficient with regard to agricultural, industrial, technological and service needs. But the present self-sufficiency package is all about institutional financial self-sufficiency. Of course this will impact the individual users of financial service and release multiplier effect. But how far equality will be ensured and self-sufficiency achieved across the social categories and divisions (Panchayat, Block, etc.) is a big question. In this package, rural sector production base is conspicuously absent. Perhaps a clear cut strategy in this regard is desirable, for as Ganhiji believes,... only through them (village industries) we shall arrive at the economy of permanence in the place of that of the fleeting nature we see around us at present.' What was true in his time also has relevance in our context.

Fourth, the needs of a tribe are based on minimum and undiversified wants. It is not a waste-economy. Self-sufficiency has meaning in production by the masses, not in mass production. But the self sufficiency strategy lacks in this perspective as it concentrates on tackling financial crisis, a new meaning to the concept of self sufficiency.

However, self-sufficiency is conceptualised in terms of financial self-sufficiency. It a timely step in the context to meet the COVID-19 created crisis that has affected the financial sector due to breakdown of production. The package is meant to bail out the economy immediately and create effective demand by injecting finance in to the system. Self-sufficiency should be understood in this perspective only. The achievement depends on how it works, for as Bertolt Brecht would like to warn us, 'The finest plans have always been spoilt by the littleness of them that should carry them out'.