

Assessment and Recommendation regarding the tribal people of Biligiri Rangana Hills

1. Assessment

1.1 The present situation

1.1.1 Adults

The traditional life of the Soliga people of B.R.Hills has changed very much due to external influences. They have been provided with houses and even with solar panels to produce electricity. Coffee plants have been introduced, and coffee beans are processed for trade. At the education centre, tribal people have been trained to work with weaving looms, as well as to process turmeric and honey for sale.

These changes are very problematic with regard to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; e.g. Article 3 (Right to Self-Determination), Articles 8 and 31 (Protection of Indigenous Culture). The Declaration is in effect since 2007.

The Soliga life-style has profoundly been changed. Instead of traditional huts, people now live in more or less globalised houses. Instead of living on hunting and gathering, the Soliga are now attached to the economical system of producing, selling and buying. Especially problematic is the abolition of the traditional visual appearance. People define their identity by the way they present themselves. Therefore, introducing clothes leads to the deletion of the cultural identity. By training the tribal people to produce saris on their own, similar processes are being triggered like in Europe during the time of the Industrial Revolution: Taking part in the production fosters the new identity; the money earned can partly be spent to buy the products, which then supports the further production etc.

However, as clothing started less than a generation ago, there are good chances for revitalisation in accordance with Article 11 of the Indigenous Rights Declaration.

1.1.2 Children

More than five hundred tribal children are presently attending the boarding school at B.R.Hills. Being away from their families, the social ties are being weakened, and the transgenerational passing-on of culturally specific knowledge is interrupted. Generally, submitting the children to an externally defined curriculum violates Article 14 of the Indigenous Rights Declaration (culturally specific educational system).

Clothing in general, and school uniform in particular, lead to the deletion of the children's cultural identity. The particular cultural background is replaced by emotionally loaded elements of national identity, as the nation is stressed very much in the pupil's cognitions, be it with nation-related pictures and graphs at the building-wall or with songs glorifying the nation. The children are not supported in their personal development with regard to their own search for truth, as no ideological and religious alternatives are given to them. This is particularly problematic under the aspect of the United Nations Conference on the Freedom of Information (1948).

1.2 Prospects

Without intervention, the Soliga culture will soon be lost. The descendants of the Soliga culture will then have the right to sue the state for compensation (Article 28). Making use of their right to revitalise their culture (Article 11) will be the more difficult, the longer the present processes continue.

Because we have learnt from many other examples, it is easy to predict where the actual processes lead to. By becoming more involved with the economical system, men will be attracted to other places to work there as cheap labour. Children, if educated in a globalised style, will often prefer not to return to their place of origin. As families decay and financial situations are precarious, but desire to consume is stimulated nevertheless, women are prone to also go to cities and become prostitutes or to do other humiliating jobs. Those children, who are not looked after properly, often end up as street children; if they are lucky, they are picked up by missionaries, who then take care of them. However, there are much more street children than missionaries, so that the chances of receiving that support are also small.

The involvement with the economical system also leads to a different use of the land. Instead of living from the forest by hunting and gathering, people will try to maximise their income by exploiting the land. This is usually done by logging and selling the timber. If plantations are installed in the deforested areas, the land often becomes barren very soon. Using fertilisers might lead to a short-term effect, but also advances the land degradation, as chemicals are being accumulated in the soil. The exploitation of other resources also leads to destabilisations of both the culture and its contexts, because it is always connected with the installation of an externally induced infrastructure than disables the continuation of a stable culture-environment system, as it has existed for thousands of years until the onset of the present destabilisations.

2. Recommendations

In order to halt the destructive processes and to rescue the culture, the following recommendations are given:

Measures need to be taken to reconstruct and strengthen the indigenous identity. Since destabilisation is already advanced to a certain degree, that reconstruction cannot be done instantly. The people concerned will have to gradually experience acceptance and respect.

The starting point for reconstructing and stabilising the tribal culture should be a territory for which it is strictly defined that every person in it has to follow the rules of the traditional visual appearance. Doing this without compromise is extremely important, because any aberration would undermine the semiotic system of the indigenous culture as a whole.¹ For translating the stabilisation process into action, it is recommended to do the following steps:

a) Do some research of ethnological data, historical photographs and other material in order to gain maximum insight to the situation before external influence and to reconstruct the visual appearance as exactly as possible.

At this point, the distinction of the different areas of culture has to be clarified. Reconstruction is restricted to the visual appearance of the people and their housings, because:

- i – It can be based upon facts such as historical photographs;
- ii – Reconstructing cognitions, ideology and religious beliefs would only be arbitrary;
- iii – These less communicable issues are less important for the collective identity than permanently visible signs;
- iv – The individual defines his or her identity primarily by his or her visual appearance;
- v – Controlling what people should know, think or belief would be a violation of Human Rights; rather, Freedom of Information has to be ensured.

b) A territory has to be defined where a traditional settlement is built as exactly as possible. Every person, who enters this territory, has to take off his or her clothes and appear according to the custom before the external influence. For this reason, lockers have to be installed at the entrances to that territory. Equal rights for all have to be ensured. Visitors, regardless of their position, have either to obey to these rules or keep out of the territory.

The installation of such a territory will have different effects. Providing a place where the memory has become reality again, such a territory is of major importance for the cultural self-confidence of the tribal people. And for visitors, integrating into such an authentic setting is a unique experience, which even has the potential to innovations in tourism, as respect and acceptance are paid through the own behaviour.

¹ Compromises could even worsen the situation. With regard to body semiotics, accepting that women cover the breast despite the former tradition would not only point out that exception, but even stress a psychological mechanism of denying essential positive concepts related to motherhood, female self-confidence, feeding, comfort, cosiness and shelter.

c) Spending much time in the reconstructed, authentic indigenous setting then need to be part of the pupils' curriculum. Moreover, the pupils should also receive traditional knowledge of plants, animals, hunting and gathering in their tribal villages.

Elders should be encouraged to pass this knowledge on to the children in the way as they received it themselves from their (grand)fathers/mothers. It should be considered that at school, the school uniform could by and by be reduced and replaced by a traditional appearance, and that gradually there should be less boarding and more teaching in the villages in order to comply with the UN Declaration:

Article 14

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

B.R.Hills is an ideal place for reconstructing the indigenous culture, because it is situated in a protected area, where there are less interfering factors than there are in many other, unprotected places with tribal peoples. This situation offers a great chance that should be taken.

S.A.C.S. will be happy to answer questions with regard to translating the Indigenous Rights into action.

With kind regards,

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