India's Tribals - Trapped by The "Civilized"
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Every seventh human being in the world is an Indian and seven per cent of all Indians are categorized as tribals. But the generic term tribe, in the Indian context, covers a wide spectrum of cultural ethos, patterns of social organization, and value systems. Tribalism also represents different levels of techo-economic development. It would be erroneous to assume a cultural homogeneity in this category. Nor can we envision a one tribal future: we have to contemplate diverse tribal futures.

The evolution of Indian society involved the amalgamation of several racial linguistic groups. The skeletal remains of the Indus Valley Civilization (approximately 2.500 BC-1700 BC) provide evidence of the presence of proto-Australoid. Mediterranean. Alpine, and Mongoloid racial elements. With the advent of the Indo-Aryans, there were confrontations with the Kol (also known as the Dasa and Dasyu) of the proto-Australoid ethnic group and the Kirata of the Mongoloid group. These conflicts were followed by a process of fusion. Many tribal groups were incorporated into the Hindu fold at different levels - most of them in the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. But some also entered the ruling classes or resisted assimilation and retreated into remote hills where they could preserve their distinct identity. Some developed links - however tenuous - with the rest of the society. The tribal groups face economic and cultural problems of great complexity. Some tribes even face extinction. Most of them are numerically small and have declining populations - e.g., the Great Andamanese with a population of only 28, and the Onge with only 98, and the Sentinelese, numbering 80 - 100. In a second category, are small primitive groups of food gatherers and slash/burn cultivators. In a third category are larger tribes consisting of marginal agriculturists and wage earners, some of whom also have specialized crafts. Finally, there is the tribal peasantry which includes erstwhile tribal chiefs and rulers.

A policy of compensatory discrimination notwithstanding, there is seething

discontent and turbulence in tribal areas. Reservations in legislative bodies, education, and government jobs, along with massive outlays for tribal development do not appear to have produced the desired results. Insurgent and violent movements characterize a large number of tribal pockets and belts. Unless effective efforts are made to contain this unrest, the unity of India will be threatened.

The reasons underlying widespread tribal discontent can be quickly listed: cultural arrogance of the majority, economic exploitation, rapacious administration, loss of control of natural resources (forest, land and water), and misdirected and erring development. The development strategy failed because it did not provide for real needs of the diverse tribal groups, was culturally insensitive, lacked ecological wisdom, imposed priorities and unwanted reforms and failed to mobilize popular participation. Many of its schemes resulted in massive uprooting without satisfactory resettlement plans. In the process, tribal self-esteem was bruised and their dignity hurt. A trust betrayed has led to anger and frustration. Sailing direction must he reset it the country desires harmony and progress.

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