

COMMENTARY

**CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS:
THE BIRHOR OF HAZARIBAGH AND
TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA**

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Introduction

In recent years, ethnic plurality has attracted more and more notice as a characteristic of the Indian population. Over the years, however, the issues this recognition has given rise to have become more intricate and complex. Development among so-called tribals or *adivasis*¹ is one part of the current debate. In this commentary, I try to analyse problems of development in this context in general, and with reference to the Birhor of Hazaribagh, Bihar, India as a specific example.

The Context

In their accounts, chroniclers of ancient India tend to present rulers as humane and committed to the social and economic equality of their subjects. Little mention is made of the brutality inflicted upon the lower classes and castes, who mostly lacked any organized forms of resistance. The rise of Buddhism and subcultures within the broader scope of Hinduism, and the ruthlessness with which they were

1. Literally 'original inhabitant' and usually glossed in English as 'aboriginal, aborigine'.

dealt with, bear witness to this sort of oppression. Buddhism offered at least a notional social equality. Of much greater appeal, however, was Islam, the religion of the ruling classes from the twelfth century. Later, Christianity introduced the values of a still higher level of social and economic equality. Hinduism reacted to these challenges by tightening the traditional social and economic restrictions of the varna system. As a result, all through the centuries, yet more groups of people have been peeling themselves away from the fold of Hinduism.

However, the case of the indigenous ethnic communities the British first called 'aborigines', 'animists', and finally 'tribals' is somewhat different. These communities had been left relatively untouched up to the end of the Muslim period, compared to the lower castes embedded in the fold of Hinduism. The large forest tracts of India, into which the indigenous populations were finally pushed, are geographically so widely distributed and so peripheral to mainstream life that they served as effective buffer zones limiting intergroup conflict. At least up until the nineteenth century, this marginal location may have saved them to some extent from the kind of annihilation that was perpetrated in Tasmania and the Americas by immigrant Europeans.

The Question of Definition

According to the spirit of the Indian constitution, a 'tribe' is identified in terms of ethnic background or origin. At the same time, communities inhabiting a territory declared a 'scheduled area' are also treated as scheduled tribes (i.e. as tribes listed in a schedule to the constitution, who are thereby entitled to reserved quotas in respect of parliamentary seats, university places, and government jobs). 'Tribe' as a concept, however, has undergone a major transformation over time. The meanings of 'tribe' and 'tribal culture' originating in Vedic literature were lost through exposure to European concepts. A new notion of tribe has been transplanted instead through the British system of education in India, giving rise to the question whether any scientific concept can be society- or culture-specific.

Under the patronage of the British colonial rulers, anthropological analysis in India tended to reflect the historical experiences and social realities of Europe. In fact, the distinction between *adivasis* and non-*adivasis* in India was never as sharp as that made between Europeans and Africans in the colonial period. British definitions of 'tribe' therefore reflect a sort of prejudice, as if the members of a tribe were queer and exotic, living an isolated life without any contact or communication beyond their territory. The implication that the tribals represent a primordial state of life way behind in the scale of evolution was strengthened and perpetuated through such definitions. This European point of view is entirely unrealistic and lacking in objectivity. For an Indian, a tribal is very much part of his or her larger social and cultural whole, someone with whom a degree of

identity is shared. A multiplicity of identities is a common experience for the peoples of India. To Indians, therefore, *adivasis* do not represent 'other cultures' as much as Africans or American Indians do to Euro-Americans. Since British rule, however, India's characteristic approach to the understanding of indigenous peoples disappeared in favour of accepting the Anglo-Saxon attitude. The British policy of segregation created a wide gap between the tribals and the rest of the Indian people. Tribal communities remained on the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder.

The Question of Integration

The result was an ambiguity regarding tribal development in India. The majority of Indian scholars do not consciously maintain any distinction between the two. From an operational point of view, tribal development can be conceived as a continuous process involving both spontaneous and induced changes—in other words, both endogenous and exogenous changes—resulting in a steady process of differentiation. The emphasis here is on the ongoing nature of the process and the mechanism of differentiation, which, when put together, make the course of evolution seem uninterrupted. Tribal development, on the other hand, places all the emphasis on programmes of induced change for the fulfilment of definite objectives. Here the emphasis is on the process of adoption that is created by the new situation of induced innovation as well as on adaptation to concomitant and resultant changes.

Tribal transformation and tribal development can both be comprehended in terms of social, cultural, political, and economic attributes. In India, the creation of linguistic states, disregarding the ethnic identity of the indigenous peoples, resulted in each state trying to impose its language and culture, directly or indirectly, on these peoples. The project of national integration essentially attempted to assimilate the *adivasis*. There was a widespread neo-colonialist understanding that tribals would develop alongside the majority linguistic populations in each state, with the assistance of the latter.

Economy, as the expression of techno-cultural efficiency in the exploration of and adaptability to a given ecological setting at a particular point of time, is one of the key factors regulating the 'lifestyle' of a people. With the passage of time, changes in the ecological setting of techno-cultural activity are to be expected. Any transformation in the economy is therefore subject to either ecological disturbance or an alteration in techno-cultural efficiency or a combination of both. We shall see later how this has especially affected the Birhor.

Since independence, the problem of tribal development has received considerable attention, and various programmes have been launched by the government through Five-Year Plans. The gap in development between different communities

found recognition in the constitution of India, where Article 46 reads: 'The state shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.' This statement was followed by serious debate regarding the approach to be taken towards tribal development. One group of administrators was in favour of the British policy of segregation. This 'National Park' theory stemmed from imperialist attitudes towards the people of colonized countries and advocated keeping tribals marginalized from the mainstream developmental process in the name of preserving their tradition and culture undisturbed. Another group advocated the complete assimilation of tribals to the rest of the society. The inherent risk in this approach is that at any point of development, the socio-cultural practices of others may be imposed on tribal communities and result in a loss of tribal identity.

Eventually, the state settled for a policy of integration in terms of five principles, known as the tribal *panchsheel*. These are:

1. That tribals should develop along their own lines and that outsiders should avoid imposing anything on them. Their own traditional arts and cultures should be encouraged in every way.
2. Tribal rights over land and forests should be respected.
3. The government should try to train and build teams formed from tribal people to carry out administrative and developmental tasks. Some outside technical personnel will no doubt be needed, especially at the beginning, but introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory should be avoided.
4. These areas should not be over-administered or overwhelmed with a multiplicity of schemes. Government should rather work through and not in rivalry with tribal social and cultural institutions.
5. Results should be judged not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but by the quality of human life that is created.

Plans and Projects for Tribal Development

In spite of progressive increases in plan outlays over the years, tribal development has clearly not been sufficient. The real achievements so far have been very discouraging; at the end of the Third Five-Year Plan in 1960, the Dhebar Commission reported indebtedness, land alienation, bonded labour and the activities of money-lenders, traders and contractors, who were still playing dominant roles in tribal economies and societies. The Seventh Plan itself recognized that not all scheduled tribal families who had been assisted by the government had crossed the poverty line.

A multitude of organizations for tribal development, such as the Tribal Sub-Plan, Multipurpose Tribal Blocks, Multipurpose Tribal Development Projects, Tribal Development Agencies, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Corporation, and Large Agricultural Multipurpose Societies (LAMPS) have been set up in tribal areas over the years, all quite against the spirit of *panchsheel*. Special institutions have also been created for investment and nationalized banks entrusted with special responsibility to look after the financial needs of the tribal regions. It has been estimated that not more than twenty per cent of total expenditure on tribal development through such organizations actually trickles down to the people for whom it is meant. This is mainly because of a lack of coordination between, for example, the state-level Tribal Development Corporation and the national-level Tribal Marketing Organization.

The entire thrust of present development planning in tribal regions is welfare-oriented and philanthropic. The plans were formulated by outsiders and the problems viewed from their perspective. All this reflects a persisting colonial attitude in the form of greater emphasis being given to family-oriented development than to infrastructural development. As development proceeds, the tribals tend to become assimilated into the mainstream. However, because of geographical, ethnic, and other barriers, this fusion process is often slow and full of contradictory twists and turns. The tightrope balance with which officialdom tries to steer a path between the assimilation of indigenous people and the maintenance of their cultural distinctiveness leads either to the deliberate encouragement of 'backward' features in their economy and culture or to letting them stagnate indefinitely while 'progress' is foisted on them by outside forces. At the same time, planners and administrators arrogate to themselves the right to impose their will and understanding on the indigenous communities in a paternalistic fashion in the name of tribal development. As a result, tribals have been pushed further into poverty, with the status of agrarian dependants.

To illustrate this failure, we may examine the estimates of the 32nd (1977-78, revised) and 38th Rounds (1983) of the National Sample Survey. These reveal that the number of people below the poverty line has declined by about 12.5 per cent in rural areas. However, distinguishing within the rural population, the relevant figures are about 7.6 per cent in the case of scheduled castes, 7.1 per cent in the case of scheduled tribes, and 15.1 per cent for the 'other castes'. Thus the rate of decline is more than double among the latter than among the scheduled tribe population. Moreover, the process of land alienation, which began during British rule, still continues today, despite the fact that several laws have recently been enacted to prevent such transfers of land from tribals to non-tribals. The process of land dispossession has been accelerated by the establishment of industrial units, dams, and the extraction of minerals in tribal areas. Generally, dispossessed tribals have either turned into day-labourers locally or joined metropolitan labour markets as unskilled construction workers. In the 1961 census, 49 per cent of tribal workers were cultivators with their own land and 29 per cent were agricultural

labourers; in 1971 the corresponding figures were 28 per cent and 49 per cent. This trend is discernible in all tribal regions.

A Case-study: The Birhor

The Birhor are a wandering people engaged in hunting and gathering. They are found in their greatest concentration in Hazaribagh and Palamau districts, southern Bihar. Their entire sustenance comes by hunting and trapping wild game with nets and snares in the fast dwindling forests. Birhor women make ropes and nets from the fibres of a special creeper called *chop*, as well as gathering roots and herbs from the jungle. Many of these products have medicinal properties. Much effort is expended merely on survival. For hundreds of years, close interaction with nature had determined the Birhor life pattern in terms of the nature and quantity of food, the size of a food-gathering and -consuming group, the material of dwelling units (called *kumbas*), occupation, and even social organization.

A Birhor's attitude to nature and life is best exemplified by his *kumba*, a dome-shaped hut made of *sal* leaves about six feet high with a single opening about two feet high. The *kumba* remains well insulated during the often severe summers and winters of Hazaribagh and is wind- and waterproof. Most of all, it is a test of a Birhor's manhood to be able to make his own *kumba* before he is allowed to marry.

From the very beginning of development, the Birhor have opted out of the modern economic system and retreated deeper and deeper into the forests. However, as we have seen, the forests, which were the very basis of their survival, have been gradually and systematically depleted over the years. This process too began in the British period, when contractors were allowed to exploit forest resources through land leases granted by the administration. Even then, till about 1905, when the Land Survey was made, most forest areas were under tribal occupation. Later, when the Indian Forest Act was passed, most forest areas were taken over by the Forest Department. Today, as more areas are auctioned off to forest contractors, and with the loss or restriction of traditional rights to use the forest for firewood, hunting, and gathering, the Birhor have become poorer and have sunk deeper into debt. Landless, and denied their traditional rights to the forest, they have been forced to erode the basis of their common property resources.

In recent years, the Birhor have faced severe problems of adaptation environmentally as well as socio-economically. Faced with the stark reality of rapidly degrading forests, selected Birhor *tandas* (settlements) were adopted by the government as the focuses of community aid. An Action Project was organized in 1975. Later, in 1980, in a bid to settle them in a specific area, the Birhor were given land, and brick and mortar houses with asbestos or tin roofs were provided for each family unit. However, this 'resettlement' not only went against Birhor

cultural values and broke up traditional social support systems, it also failed to yield any permanent results. Sickness levels rose, domestic violence increased, and several older couples left the colonies in favour of their former nomadic lifestyles. The lack of sensitivity to Birhor culture on the part of administrators has caused the failure of many such projects. A group of people who have traditionally been master-hunters with a keen sense of scent and hearing and an intimate knowledge of forest flora and fauna have thus been turned into 'victims of development'. In some cases, rising expectations have changed perceptions of life, and young males have migrated, alone or with their families, to nearby urban centres. There was no official examination of the root of the problem, which could only be prevented by protecting the ecosystem to sustain the Birhor's livelihood and at the same time making available to them the benefits of development, such as better nutrition, health care and education.

Conclusion

Since the nineteenth century, the natural wealth of southern Bihar has been exploited in many ways. Since the British began administering the area, history has also been marked by tribal resistance and rebellion. Several agrarian revolts during 1831–2, the Kol rebellion of the 1830s, and the Santal uprising of 1857 are notable among them. These movements were basically directed against the *dikus* (outsiders, especially high-caste Hindus), who had penetrated the area as money-lenders, businessmen and officials. The British began with the exploitation of forest wealth and went on to open up coal mines, which in turn gave rise to heavy and light industries. The first workers in these mines and factories were tribals and semi-tribals who took up mainstream occupations along with their families. When facilities increased, safety measures were developed, pay scales improved, and mechanization initiated; but *adivasi* labour was pushed out of the modern sector. Even today, not a single executive position in any industry or mining enterprise is held by a tribal, let alone the ownership of such enterprises.

The indigenous communities of southern Bihar are today caught between two worlds: fifty years of independence have given them little power or choice in determining their own lives. So far, modern development has pushed them further to the margins of mainstream life. Each new 'development' project—large dams, industrial complexes, urban schemes, mining sites—has caused large-scale displacement of *adivasis*, who have borne the brunt of environmental degradation.

In the case of more isolated communities like the Birhor, greater interaction with the mainstream world has only turned them from self-sustaining communities into groups of scavengers. The initiatives taken so far by the government have robbed them of their traditional cultural skills and materials without helping them learn new skills or improve on the old ones. Rising aspirations produced by

greater contact have simply been channelled towards consumer items, mostly things having little or no impact on either their standards of living or the quality of their lives more generally.

Private and public sector industrial 'development' has led to the wholesale expropriation of tribal land without any thought being given to the rehabilitation of those who have been displaced. With the alienation of tribal land, the erosion of indigenous cultures has accelerated. Tribals have mostly been bypassed by modern society, and even where they are a part of it, they have achieved a position only on the very lowest stratum.