Economic&Political WEEKLY

Interrogating Integration

The Counter-Cultural Tribal Other

The correspondence between a negative ethnic identity and a marginalised social status is crucial for any interventionist strategy that seeks to empower people to break out of the poverty trap. For tribals this implies integration in the larger society, but not necessarily with a loss of their distinctiveness. By isolating the tribals we stymie both their contribution and their challenge to society.

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I
Clarifying the Issues

The colonial government's official approach to the tribal welfare was mainly ameliorative, and intended to protect them from outside exploitation by isolating them, as in the "Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas Act" of 1936. Verrier Elwin in 1939 even suggested "the establishment of a sort of National Park" for tribals [Elwin 1939: 511-19]. Such isolation, if possible in today's world, would amount to an enforced primitivism on tribal reservations, somewhat like the enforced captivity of animals in a zoo!

However, after independence the government's policies towards the tribals were no longer isolationist but designed to combine "the twin elements of protection and development. Seen in the perspective of the third world, the Indian strategy of tribal development, in spite of its limitations, could be described as a unique experiment" [Singh 1985: 250].

In 1959 Nehru in his Foreword to Verrier Elwin's *Philosophy for NEFA* [Elwin 1959] set out the basis of the national policy on tribal development. This has remained its Magna Carta, its 'panchsheel' till today: (a) people should be allowed to develop on the lines of their own genius and nothing should be imposed upon them; (b) tribal rights on land and forests

should be respected; (c) induction of too many outsiders into tribal areas should be avoided; (d) there should be no over administration of tribal areas as far as possible, and (e) the results should not be judged by the amount of money spent but by the quality of the human character that is involved.

Following Nehru's 'panchsheel', the idea now was not assimilation by either the Hindu or the colonial mode, but integration into the national mainstream, where their distinctive identity would not be lost, but would make its own unique contribution to the 'unity in diversity', that is India. However, as often happens in our "soft state" the gap between policy and performance is enormous.

By the Sixth Plan governmental agencies had set up a massive infrastructure to implement its programmes: 181 Integrated Tribal Development Agencies, 245 Marginal Areas Development Agencies, 72 projects for primitive communities, covering about 75 per cent of our tribal population [Burman 1992: 11]. Though these have made a real difference to the tribal situation in comparison to its pre-independence days, in relation to the other groups in our society today "they remain the most backward, underdeveloped and, next only to the scheduled castes, the most exploited community" [Singh: 1985: 254].

Moreover, the development achieved has been most uneven between and within tribes. Thus while some groups have made spectacular progress, others are still in the food-gathering and/or shifting cultivation

stage. And even within the tribe, with protective discrimination and special facilities, a small elite has developed, 'a creamy layer' as it is now called, with its own vested interests and the capacity to exploit their own less fortunate fellow tribals. This only stratifies a once egalitarian society into classes. All too often these tribal elites are co-opted by other non-tribal ones, even at the cost of larger tribal interests.

Now there would seem to be two main reasons for this failure of government policy other than inadequate or inconsistent implementation. The first is the very model of development adopted, i e, a top-down one, that perpetuates unequal exchange relations between social groups and geographic areas, and marginalises the poor and the powerless. The development debate in the last decade has resulted in an effective critique of this model, though planners and politicians are slow to abandon it because of their own vested interests perhaps. For the tribals the top-down interventions have been disastrous.

The second reason for the failure of government policy with the tribals is more pertinent to our discussion here. Tribals have long been at a severe disadvantage when the outside world has intruded into their society, whether this was the colonial government or the national state. The clash of cultures that the development process introduces often leaves them worse off than before in many ways. They certainly do need protective discrimination to booster their capacity to absorb these developmental changes more effectively. But any paternalism, however benevolent, only serves to perpetuate further the unequal social relationships between tribals and non-tribals. So in spite of good intentions, the way is paved to an internal colonialism that reproduces many of the most ugly features of the older external one.

Stephen Fuchs distinguishes various responses of the tribals to their critical situation in contemporary India [Fuchs 1992: 50]. The one of rejection and regress into isolation will only leave them "practically condemned to total extinction". (ibid) Only a few, if any, of the nomadic forest tribes would opt for this. By far the largest proportion of them are "ready to

change their tribal ways of life and to go along with the national mainstream". (ibid) But they would not want to lose their tribal identity. What they do seem to want is integration, and not assimilation. But there are also tribals who look "for another alternative, in the hope of saving their tribal identity and independence" (ibid) These are generally from among the larger, more geographically concentrated tribes. Some of these movements have even sought to secede from the Indian union, as in the north-east, others have fought to express their solidarity in a tribal state within it, as the Jharkhand in Chhotanagpur.

These movements are of course only the extreme expression of what many more tribes experience, though they are unable to mobilise themselves in response to it. For "one of the major roots of tribal solidarity movements may be traced to their ecological-cultural isolation, economic backwardness and a feeling of frustration about a lowly status vis-a-vis the advanced sections"[Sinha 1990:177]. What our tribals, then, seem to be looking for is an integration into our national society, which will respect their "cultural autonomy" [Goodland 1982: 28] even as it gives them their economic and political place in the sun. Surely this is not an illegitimate or an unreasonable demand.

Understanding Development

The crux of the matter is the kind of development that our society is undergoing and how our tribals are to be integrated into, and not be assimilated by it. The development we strive to achieve must be distinguished by three characteristic features: an equity, that opposes all exploitation and inequality; a sustainability, that is ecologically sensitive to, and respectful of the environment; and a participation of people in both, making the decisions that affect their lives and implementing them as well. Indeed, it is the people's participation at all levels that will be able to make the developmental process, equitable and sustainable as well.

Moreover, such an understanding of development makes possible the 'cultural autonomy', which will make all the difference between integration and assimilation for our tribals. Since tribes at various stages in their evolution will need different strategies fine-tuned to their particular situation, only a genuine involvement of the people to be benefited by these strategies can bring an equitable and

sustainable process of development. This precisely is what the 74th Amendment to the Constitution on tribal self-rule has promised, but governments still have to deliver on it.

Now in the clash of cultures involved when differing modes of resource use come into competitive contact, one resolution to the conflict has been "*the path of extermination*, ...In this scenario, the earlier modes are more or less wiped out" [Gadgil and Guha 1992:109]. This has generally been the path of Europe, and its encounter with the non-European peoples.

> The alternative pattern, which we call the path of selective incorporation, better fits the history of the Indian subcontinent prior to its colonisation by the British. In so far as the history of India exhibits the far greater overlap and coexistence of different modes of resource use, one can qualitatively distinguish the Indian experience from the European and the new world paradigm of eco-cultural change. (ibid)

Thus in the Indian experience,

> two complementary strategies, of leaving some ecological niches (hills, malarial forests) outside the purview of the peasant mode, and reserving certain niches within it for hunter-gatherers and pastorals, helped track a distinctive path of inter-modal cooperation and coexistence. (ibid)

Here the less resilient modes survived but were subordinated to the more dominant ones. In traditional Indian society such institutionalised hierarchy was acceptable to all groups. But as this changes, another more democratic basis for cooperation and coexistence must be found, unless we want to perpetuate "homo hierarchies", into the present millennium.

Today the clash of tribal and non-tribal cultures in our country is harsher and deeper because the changes our people are undergoing are more rapid and comprehensive than ever before. These major and rapid social changes are associated with: (a) loss of self-esteem; (b) increase in actual and perceived role conflict and ambiguity; (c) increase in the perceived gap between aspiration and achievement [Goodland 1982: 25].

The resulting anomie has precipitated reactionary and revivalist responses in many sections of our society. The aggressive fundamentalist religious movements sweeping our land today are evidence of this. Surely the tribals are the more vulnerable to rapid social change and so the more susceptible to a self-destructive anomie.

Efforts to mitigate and buffer the negative consequence of developmental change have certainly been made. "India is one of the few countries in the world with elaborate systems of preferential treatment for ascriptively defined groups,"[Pathy 1984: 163] especially for the scheduled castes and tribes. But after almost half a century of independence, they still have a long way, to go to catch up with the mainstream, especially the smaller weaker tribes.

The tribal question, therefore, raises fundamental issues for our society: of social equality and economic equity; of ecological sustainability and peoples' participation; of cultural autonomy and democratic integration. For "the tribal problem cannot be isolated from the broader national problems. Its solution will have to form part of the overall strategy for the regeneration of Indian society and polity" [Dube 1992:32].

For in India national development cannot be separated from tribal integration, or for that matter from the marginalised minorities in our society. Our own future is more closely bound up with theirs than we perhaps realise. For as Ashish Nandy paraphrases

> the ancient wisdom implied in the New Testament and also perhaps in the Sauptik Parva of the Mahabharata: 'Do not do unto others what you would that they do not unto you, lest you do into yourself what you do unto others' [Nandy 1983: 31].

II
Tribal Integration

Tribal minorities are distinctive ethnic groups in a subordinate class position. The issue to be addressed in their regard is one of overcoming their minority status and affirming their tribal identity, or rather remedying the first by mobilising the second. In other words, integrating tribal people into a culturally pluralist, economically egalitarian society, and not assimilating them into an ethnically uniform, class-stratified state. But integration has not always been the official policy with regard to our tribals nor has it been understood in the same way by all concerned or at different times.

In the colonial period there was a policy of isolation, but this was not in fact effective. The needs of the colonial state, its paternalism notwithstanding, were often satisfied at the cost of the tribals. The many tribal revolts, and even more so their

forcible suppression, is ample evidence of this. The deteriorating terms of exchange between the tribals and the outside world, epitomises the relationship between the two: neither autonomous isolation nor egalitarian integration, but a deculturated assimilation at the lower end of the class strata that were being formed wherever the colonial political economy penetrated.

Today it is no longer possible for tribals to retreat into isolation, even if this were desirable, which we think not. For this approach to the tribals seems to assume a static identity, often idealised by non-tribals.

Among the Indian anthropologists, who urged the tribals' entry into the national mainstream, many have advocated their assimilation into non-tribal society, much the same way as the 'Hindu mode of absorption' did earlier. Thus Ghurye wanted an "integrative assimilation", that would make the tribals "part and parcel of the Hindu Indian polity that is slowly but surely arising" [Ghurye 1963:211]. He even would have tribal languages, which tend "to counter-balance to some extent the speeding up of the process of assimilation," replaced by the Indo-Aryan languages. (ibid) There are others, who would not go along with such a 'Hinduisation' of the tribals, but would still want to "give up the idea of integration altogether and think of helping the tribals to detribalise themselves" so as to be indistinguishable from other people in the region [Chattopadhya 1972: 491].

What the assimilationists seem to suggest, then, is overcoming tribal minority status by sacrificing their ethnic identity. But our experience in the field is contrary to this. For one thing the potential of a positive identity to mobilise the group is lost, and the process of assimilation leaves the tribals with a negative self-image and a deteriorating socio-economic status.

Since independence the government of India's tribal policy has not been assimilationist but it has tried to follow the 'panchsheel' proposed by Nehru in 1959. However, the development it has pursued has been more dangerously disintegrative for the tribals than genuinely integrative with internal autonomy and economic equity. For, as a group of eminent scholars at a seminar on "The Tribal Situation in India" asserted in their concluding statement:

> integration must be sharply distinguished from assimilation which means complete loss of cultural identity for the weaker

groups.... integration is a dynamic process which necessarily involves mutual give-and-take by the various sections of the national community. [Singh 1992: 631-32]

Integration, then, depends very much on what kind of society our tribals are being integrated into. Is it the caste hierarchy of our traditional culture, or the class stratification precipitated by our present political economy, or the pluralist-secular, democratic-socialist ideal sketched in our Constitution? It is only this last that can accommodate the kind of tribal integration we envisage, one which will salvage both their identity and dignity. For in the caste hierarchy integration must mean a loss of their tribal identity, in a class system they are confirmed in their minority status. And yet, since caste is very much a factor to be reckoned with in our culture, just as class is in our economy, any realistic approach to integration must take cognisance of both these.

Tribal Contribution

Hence a dynamic process of tribal integration must not only preserve their cultural autonomy, but also mobilise them to participate in their own development, which in turn must be both equitable and sustainable. Needless to say, it is the smaller, poorer tribes that are most in need of such development and most deprived of it too. But, if dynamic integration is also to be a two-way process, in which tribal dignity and identity is respected and preserved, then it must be sensitive to their contribution to the larger society as well. This has not always been conceded so here we mention only a few convincing instances.

With regard to sustainable development of forests and other eco-sensitive regions, Gadgil and Guha point to two paradoxes, with regard to the ecological impact of different modes of resource use: [Gadgil and Guha 1992: 52] the greater the distance, of the users from the resource the greater the ecological impact; the faster the development of scientific knowledge, the greater the environmental degradation. It would seem obvious that the people who live close to and accept their dependence on the environment are better able to live in harmony with it, than those who want only to exploit it from a far for commercial purposes.

The experience of the joint management committees (JMC) for forest development has much to teach in this regard. Indeed,

in marginal lands, "unlike tribal societies, both agro-industrial groups and peasant farmers have shown themselves almost totally unable to manage sustainably and produce effectively in such environments." (Goodland 1982: 13) Moreover, in preserving the precious and precarious biodiversity of the planet, "indigenous knowledge is essential for the use, identification, and cataloguing of the biota" (ibid: 14). What our tribals do represent

> therefore, is a significant economic opportunity for the nation, not a luxury. They are at the forefront of knowledge of the management of marginal environments and can contribute to the national society. Sustainable exploitation of eco-systems often considered marginal is becoming increasingly necessary for national societies and the world as a whole. Capitalisation on these unique strengths is highly desirable for economic development (ibid: 15).

It might seem ironic, but it is now becoming more apparent though still somewhat reluctantly admitted in conventional circles, that given their accumulated experience and collective traditions, tribal "religion and custom as ideologies of resource use are perhaps better adapted to deal with a situation of imperfect knowledge than a supposedly 'scientific' resource management" [Gadgil and Guha 1992: 53]. Our frantic pursuit of an ever higher 'standard of living', has not lead to a corresponding improvement in our 'quality of life', but has rather compromised and even undermined it. Such contradictions challenge us to a new understanding of development in which we have much to learn from tribal societies, especially with regard to a cultural basis for a sustainable relationship to our environment.

III
The Tribal Challenge

However, it is not only at the margin or the periphery of a society that tribals have an important and valuable contribution to make. For tribal non-consumerist solidarity provides an alternative to the competitive consumerism of the non-tribal world. This is a moral challenge we cannot afford to ignore, in view of the pervading crises, which have riddled our society. For the tribal 'other' interrogates us in more ways than we are willing to admit. More often than not, intentionally or otherwise, we end up ignoring the question they pose, or

worse, suppressing the counter-cultural 'other' in the vain hope that the questioning will then cease!

Redfield and Singer have explained how the development of urbanisation homogenises society by coordinating and systematising "the norms provided by the Great Traditions", together with "the weakening or supersession of the local and traditional cultures" [Redfield and Singer 1971: 349]. When, social crises demand change, it is the 'little tradition', which has not become inert, that in fact "may retain a greater vitality and disposition to change than the systematised Great Tradition that gets 'located' in special classes and urban centres." (ibid: 359)

Often enough it is these marginal groups that have posed a substantial challenge for a revitalisation and regeneration of the larger society. Here it may well be the distinctive cultural traits of a tribal group rather than its relative size and influence that may pose the more incisive question, the moral challenge to the 'other' in us in search for an alternative way of life. For in spite of the apparent difference and distance between these two worlds, there is the real possibility of creative communication. For "in every tribal settlement there is civilisation; in every city is the folk society" (ibid: 343). Indeed, at a deeper level, the tribal nomad in the forest-hills may have more relevance to George Simmel's 'Stranger' in the metropolitan cities than may appear superficially at first. [Levine 1971:143].

Strategies for Action

In attempting, then, an integrative response to the fundamental issues of the tribal question, we do not pretend to come up with neat recipes and time bound programmes. However, we can attempt to stretch the general outlines of such a response.

If the unequal exchange that marginalises these tribals is to be reversed, then they must not be left in isolation, not even in the mistaken notion of preserving their tribal identity. This only marginalises them still further. For ethnic identity is dynamic, not static, and precisely because of this, it can be mobilised to create a people's movement. Once we accept this, then the real issue is not preserving a static culture, but rather one of promoting a cultural autonomy, that will allow them to redefine their identity without in anyway further compromising their dignity. It is their

human dignity that must become the focal point of constituting a dynamic tribal identity and the integrating axis of their response to redressing their minority status.

For, if the downward spiral in which the tribals are caught, is to be reversed, then the very developmental model that we are pursuing and into which we want to integrate them, needs to be challenged. Our unwillingness to do this, adds up to a refusal to face the tribal question in any depth. It is precisely such a refusal that will not only compromise the tribals, but marginalise all disadvantaged groups as well, and eventually negate our vision of a just and equitable society itself. On the contrary this very commitment to integrate such diverse but disadvantaged groups into our society can force us to question and reorient our development process sooner rather than later.

However, any effective action strategy to mobilise tribal ethnicity, must be careful not to negate or fight shy of class consciousness. This will broad base the tribal response by bringing it into alliance with similarly placed disadvantaged groups in our society. It will also prevent tribal movements from fragmenting themselves into their different component tribes or getting stratified into classes across tribes and/or within the tribe itself. This is indeed a very real danger. We already have seen an intimation of something similar in backward caste movements that have time and again in specific instances turned hostile to the scheduled and other lower caste groups. The inability of tribal leaders to put together a sustained and unified tribal movement in the country is also evidence of stronger tribal sub-identities being manipulated against the larger interest of the tribals themselves, whether intentionally or otherwise.

What exactly the contours of such a tribal movement will be, it is not clear now, and certainly it is not for an outsider, or non-tribal to attempt to put this together prematurely. However, if the general direction of a viable movement is to be chartered, then our conclusions would seem to point to the need for mobilising a dynamic and adaptive tribal identity, with a class consciousness that will redress their minority status, and forge linkages with similarly disadvantaged groups.

For this they must demand a cultural autonomy, which has for so long been effectively denied, as well as a reversal of the unequal exchange relationships, which have till now marginalised and exploited

them. Together this will have the potential of questioning our models of growth and contributing to a new paradigm of development. In fact the response our society gives to the tribal question, will be a touchstone of the authenticity of its own democratic integration.

However, in urging such a stance it is not our intention to romanticise the tribal way of life. Rather we believe that like every human identity, tribal ethnic identity too must be dynamic and actualise the human potential that is present in every human group. The danger however, in romanticising them is to condemn them to a primitivism, that we ourselves are only too reluctant to embrace, except in the security of our academic fantasies!

IV
Conclusion

There is an intriguing image that comes to mind when we confront the dilemma that the tribal question poses for us. Ecologists have come to realise that biodiversity is the best guarantor of survival. This applies to the genetic pool of a species, as also to the species within a 'biome', or biotic area. For as commercially exploited species, like mass produced agricultural crops, become more and more uniform to meet the increasingly standardise preferences of a mass market there is a corresponding uniformity and loss of diversity in the genetic pool of the seed. This makes it highly vulnerable to mutant strains of pests and virus and parasites, the natural enemies that attack it. Thus genetically designed species become increasingly vulnerable to the mutant predator. In other words, these species becomes less resilient and more vulnerable, to the environment. Mono-cropping only accentuates this danger even further, putting at risk not only the species, but the whole biotic area as well.

To regenerate the species to cope with its changed environment one has to go back to the original genetic home where the species still survives in the wild. These are called Vavilovian centres, after the Russian scientist, Nikolai Ivanovich Valvilov, who first discovered and described them. [Gore 1993: 131] The genetic pool is richer here, and genes, resistant to the new pestilence can be identified and spliced into the enfeebled crop to make it vigorous and marketable once again.

If we assimilate the tribals into our society, we do away with any possible

contribution or challenge they may be able to make to our society as tribals, and though we may devalue their contribution now, are we sure we will never be in need of it in the future? And if we leave them isolated, 'natural, wild and free', are we not freezing them into a time-warp as 'objects' in a 'gene pool' to be 'used' by us, if and when we need them?

The response we are urging here is to reject both these alternatives. For we do value the contribution and challenge they make to us already now. Our unsustainable, polluting consumerist society needs this constructive critique from a counter-cultural 'other'. Assimilation or isolation of our tribals cannot do this.

The correspondence between a negative ethnic identity and a marginalised social status is crucial for any interventionist strategy that seeks to empower people to break out of the poverty trap. For tribals this implies integration in the larger society, but not necessarily with a loss of their distinctiveness. Precisely in keeping their identity will they make their special contribution to the mainstream society, and challenge it to a deeper human authenticity. But by isolating the tribals we stymie both, their contribution and their challenge to our society. Perhaps this is not entirely an indeliberate way of coping with the unsettling 'other', the outsider, the stranger, whose 'design for living', is in so many ways contrapuntal to our mainstream way of life.

What we must struggle for together with our tribals, then, is to achieve an integration that will address the fundamental issues of the tribal question, issues that concern all ethnic minorities in our country as well: social equality, economic equity, ecological sustainability, people's participation, cultural autonomy and democratic integration. If we are pointing to a utopia which is many giant leaps out of our reach just yet, then we can at least begin to grasp, what the small steps we must take already now to make a more integrative response to the larger tribal dilemma. [EPW]

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