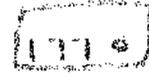


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TRIBAL MOVEMENTS AND POLITICAL REALITIES
PROBLEMS OF CONCEPTUALISATION¹

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The Making Of A Myth

The Eleventh Edition is the definitive edition' he said. 'We are getting the language into its final shape-the shape it is going to have when nobody speaks anything else... In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it ... Even now, of course, there is no reason or excuse for committing thoughtcrime. It is merely a question of self-discipline, reality control. But in the end there won't be any need even for that. The Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect! (from *George Orwell, 1984*)

Till late eighteenth century travel accounts like that of Bernier (1620-1688) were the only source of European understanding of the Indians. With the beginning of the colonial administration the need to collect detailed knowledge about the people of India and their social systems became imperative. Along with the inquiries into revenue systems from late eighteenth century, ethnographic inquiries too had begun. In 1807 the Court of Directors of the East India Company made a formal decision that such knowledge would be "of great use in the future administration of the country" (Vidyarthi, 1968, ii). To this effect Francis Buchanan was appointed by the government to inquire into the conditions of people in India. Although his writings were not so well known in Europe, those of other administrators were. Based on such scanty knowledge from India and elsewhere the first grand theories like those of Maine (1822-88). Morgan (1818-81), Tylor (1832-1917) were developed, just as were the writings of Marx on precapitalist systems.

¹ Based on a detailed article of mine published serially in *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 7, 14, 21, 28 and June 5, 1988.

Bernier relieved European writing from the universal use of the Biblical streams of human migration in differentiation of human societies. Race emerged as a concept. But the objective approach was soon subsumed by theories which developed in the context of colonisation of the world by the Europeans. Innocuous categories became explanatory variables for the theories of 'progressionism' and 'evolutionism.' The popular notion that developmental and cultural achievements were determined by the racial origins of people found support, in some form or other, in the theories of Darwin (1731-1802), Lamarck (1744-1802) and particularly of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). Its reflection is found in later ethnographic inquiries. Unlike the Directors of the Company mentioned earlier, the Asiatic Society in 1866 asked the government to furnish the list of *races* in India. For Buchanan the term 'tribe' was only an English word for groups with common ancestry, to be used as 'regal tribe' to describe *kshatriyas* or as 'chauhana tribe' to introduce a subgroup of rajput caste. But in the use by Dalton (1872) of expressions like 'wild tribes,' 'pastoral tribes', 'agricultural tribes' or 'mixed and imperfect tribes' along with such terms as 'aborigines', 'primitives' there is a markedly noticeable evolutionary categorization. The evolutionary race theories, which in Europe were used to justify the supremacy of the white races, were extended through these efforts to introduce a notion of differential evolutionary achievements even among the colonised people.

Two other developments had contributed significantly to this development. The invention of the camera added a visual dimension to racial categorization enabling detailed comparison of physical traits even from a distance. For an elaborate scheme of racial categorization the colour of the skin alone was not sufficient. Already other criteria were being developed which finally found their scientific pretensions in anthropometry. In 1879, Baron Ujfalvy initiated anthropometric researches in India. Later Risley, Thurston, etc. undertook the exercise and in the 1931 Census the work was done on a very large scale.

In the Indian context however, physical traits soon gave away to another criterion. The readily noticeable indigenous criteria of differentiation in terms of religion and castes were more appealing than races to administrators, interested in collecting 'useful' information. From the beginning of the

Census operations opinion was divided whether to collect information on castes. Presumably, the more scholarly administrators favoured the use of only the more 'scientific' category - the races. However, practical sense prevailed and the scientific 'racial' bases were given to caste distinctions by establishing correlations between the two in various ways. The distinctive Indian connotation of the term 'tribe' emerged in this context. It was used to meet the contingency that arose when all the communities could not be fitted into the major religion and caste diversity. Rationally speaking, the existence of such unclassifiable categories only mean that not everyone in India embraced the major religions or the caste system, for whatever reason. But under the influence of the caste-race equation and the dominance of progressionism and evolutionary paradigm in the intellectual atmosphere of that era, the non-conformism with the identifiable mainstreams could only be explained as savage behaviour. This was the beginning of internal racism in India.

With respect to castes the term 'tribe' became well-defined. Gone were the days of Dalton when agriculturists and pastoralists too could be called tribes. But at the same time, the pretension of rigorousness assumed hereafter in the use of the term impressed others towards universal comparability. In sociocultural achievements Indians who did not accept the caste system were placed not only at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder within India but also were considered at par with others marked as 'tribes' all over the world. Internally, it gave a moral ascendancy to Hinduism/caste-system/Brahminism over the non-conformists. In the imagined indigenous evolutionary scheme acceptance of major religions or the caste-system was identical with absolute progress; the non-conformists were robbed of the pride with which many might have resisted the advent of the obnoxious caste system in the past centuries. Indeed, caste theorists like Nesfield and Ibbetson produced whole histories of Indian civilisation out of the blue with deviousness and success enviable to Brahmin preachers of the past.

Simultaneously, another indigenous dimension was being added to the concept. The philological similarities between Sanskrit and European languages noted by W Jones in late eighteenth century was quickly appropriated by the racial theories. By the early nineteenth century the existence of an 'Indo-European' race was postulated. A migration story helped explanation of Vedic literature as

a glimpse into early Indian history. But a more significant contribution was in bolstering the ego of Indian intellectuals. What great pride it was to be distinct from other colonised people and sharing a common ancestry with the great white races of Europe. They too felt like accepting a bit of the white man's burden, be it within the confines of their subcontinent. The problem was to identify the downtrodden who needed the helping hand. The superiority of the Aryans claimed in the Vedic literature had already given rise to movements like the Arya Samaj. But with them Arya was a culture, not a race. The identification of Anaryans came in a roundabout way, through 'scientific' discourse inspired by the west. At the insistence of Max Mueller (1861) Indo-European was equated to Aryan. Lassen (1876) produced a workable format for the races in India basing on the hypothetical migration of the Aryan race, while Dalton (1871) used the Aryan-Nishad dichotomy of ancient Sanskrit literature to identify Nishads as forest tribes residing there since the remote past till his day. Dalton's historical context was a continuous conflict between aborigines and pastoral agricultural tribes in India. Risley rejected it with a monochromatic view of Aryan immigration and expansion. In addition, the exhaustive nature of Risley's work under the Census along with his anthropometric exercise paved the way for 'scientific' identification of the non-Aryans. If there was any deficiency in the caste theories in ascribing superior genes to the mainstream (as emerged from these exercises) of the Indian population, the Aryan race theory succeeded in recovering that.

Thus by the beginning of the twentieth century the term 'tribe' had come to imbibe many different ideas most of which are condemned and controversial today. The fangs of Spencerism, Lamarckism, Social Darwinism as well as Aryanism were exposed to the world through the rise of Nazi ideology. The Risleyian theory has been repeatedly disproved by archaeological discoveries beginning with the Mohenjodaro excavation, latest being the discovery of the existence of rice cultivation in Nagaland millenia before any possible Aryan immigration. Because of the dearth of evidence even after so much of explorations, Indian historians today are divided over the factual basis of Aryan migration theory. The vague nature of the boundary between recognised tribes and castes has repeatedly been indicated by anthropologists themselves (e g, Ghurye, 1959) while some other anthropologists (e g, Singh, 1985) have lately mustered evidence to show that social evolution in India has at times taken the course of 'tribalisation' from Hindu/Brahminic norms. The

assumption of immutability which formed the basis of anthropometry is now open to question. Nevertheless the whole set of theories still survive with vigour and deeply strain the image of 'tribe,' as we shall show later.

From Concept To Application

In this century the mass propagators - Christian missionaries, social workers and political activists — took the term, and along with that the prejudices and the conjectures, to the masses. It is by them that the indigenous terms 'adivasi,' 'adimjati,' Vanavasi,' 'girijan/ 'paharia' etc. were created. Although most of these terms are of Sanskrit etymology, as yet none of these have been found in any previous record. The first two terms relate to the concept of 'tribe' through the Aryan myth while the others are ecological. Nevertheless, they don't mean all the hill people or forest dwellers, but only those enlisted in the scheduled tribes list, no matter that many of the 'girijans' live in the plains. Pejoratives like 'jungle' or 'kaliparaj' might have been old folk terms. But these were more adjectives than ethnic terms.

Exhaustive listing and categorisation of different communities had begun in 1866, in compliance with the request made by the Asiatic Society. The Census was the culmination of that effort. In situations where different communities have lived side by side for hundreds of years developing comparable social practices, noticeably distinct regional practices appearing exotic to people of other regions may emerge in due course. But how to demarcate between them internally in sharp divisions like caste and tribe? Faced with this complexity, the administrative and Census officials produced drastically different lists in different years declaring some communities as tribes only to exclude them in the next period and then revising the revision again. They also adapted themselves to the reality by permitting differences in evolutionary achievements. Numerous categories like 'aboriginal tribe', 'aboriginal, forest and gipsy tribe, 'backward tribe, 'primitive tribe, 'forest tribe, 'forest and hill tribe, 'indigenous tribe, 'Hindu primitive tribe', 'forest and primitive tribe, etc, were devised for this purpose. Individual communities were included and omitted from one Census to another. In

between, government notifications and popular demands added further confusion. The logical outcome of this vain effort should have been rejection of the criteria. But circumstances pushed it to the other extreme. While granting provincial autonomy to India in 1935 the British had made a provision that certain 'depressed communities' of India require special protection, e.g. in the form of reservation of assembly seats. In view of the ensuing election to the provincial assemblies a list of 'backward tribes' in each province had to be released in a hurry. All the incomplete exercises and complicated sub-categories had to be bulldozed to release an official list of 'tribes in India' in 1936. This list was included without substantial change, in the Constitution of India after independence, and is known as the list of scheduled tribes.

It was the enlightened nationalist leaders who were the worst victims of the scientific pretension of the divisive propaganda recorded above. Till the thirties political developments among the tribes were not viewed in any way different from those in the rest of the country. Many leaders of these communities were working hand in hand with the nationalist leaders. Suddenly they learnt that they were never integrated/assimilated with the rest of Indians. It is only after this period that overtly ethnic tribal organisations began to emerge in India. The regional name, Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj, was changed to Adivasi Mahasabha only in 1936, 'Adivasi' being an overtly ethnic term.

History has always been written with the preoccupations of the later period. Tribal movements of nineteenth century were identified as 'tribal' long after their occurrences only when the term 'tribe' came into existence. In the Santhal Rebellion or in the Birsa Movement of late nineteenth and early twentieth century, some other communities too had joined hands with the tribals, write current historians. If Santhal and Munda had not been differentiated in a hundred years of sustained colonial effort the same rebellions would have been depicted as regional peasant revolts, in which some numerous communities predominated, as is true in the case of any peasant movement.

Although there were some changes in the list of scheduled tribes in 1956 and 1976 there has not been any substantial change. It needs a gigantic effort to effect any change in the list. The President of India alone has the constitutional power to declare communities as scheduled tribes. Even the

state governments are not able to effect any change being guided by local experience. Halba is a recognised scheduled tribe. In September 1967 the Maharashtra government had declared Halba Kosthis too as scheduled tribes. The government had to withdraw the move in a short while at the direction of the centre.

It is difficult to understand why, in extending the protective provisions in the constitution, a need was felt to categorise them *also* as caste and tribe. A schedule enlisting the communities would have been sufficient for that purpose and would also have been justified since neither the constitution nor the government did ever define the terms caste or tribe. The inclusion of these spurious categories, not the protective provisions, have retained the ground for racial distinctions introduced in nineteenth century and modified since then. To exemplify that one can quote a *post-facto* definition given by a person no less than the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In his report for the year 1952 he noted eight common features of scheduled tribes: (i) dwelling condition — they live in forests and hills; (ii) ethnic origins — from Negritos, Australoids or Mongoloids; (iii) language ~ tribal language; (iv) religion - 'animists' worshipping ghosts and spirits; (v) mode of production ~ primitive, hunters, forest-gatherers, etc; (vi) -carnivorous in food habits; (vii) naked or semi-naked; and (viii) fond of drink and dance. Not even a fifth part, of the notified scheduled tribe population would fit these criteria. Mathur (1972) termed it a typical case of fiction-creation by the government officers" . "Perhaps in a romantic mood, the exotic aspects of tribal culture were magnified... The most important and conscious tribal groups in the country today... in fact present an altogether different picture. Christianised Khasi, Mizo or Munda are heavily modernised and many of them would consider their nontribal neighbours as primitives."

Not only Mathur but many anthropologists — the community of scholars who have first-hand knowledge of the scheduled tribes -- have noted the discrepancies. But many more have succumbed and have been apologetic, even defenders of the concept. Roy Burman (1966) justified the selection process as being guided by the 'historical images' of the, communities in question. Really! Recall the discussion above about communities in Chotanagpur. Whose perception, among, these conflicting images of the same communities, was *the* historical image that Roy Burman mentioned?

Indeed, it is the other way round. It is the scheduled tribes list which creates a certain historical image, which in turn lends strength to the enlistment exercise. To that the anthropologists have their not so-modest contributions, followed by historians, social scientists and administrators opting to write or comment on the tribes. Niharranjan Ray (1972) with his remarkable power of observation had noted, " in the whole body of historical data at our disposal there is hardly anything to suggest that these communities of people (presently scheduled tribes and non-tribes) belonged to different social and ethnic categories altogether". And yet, to qualify it for an Introductory Address to a seminar on 'The Tribal Situation in India' he had to exert himself to develop a theory of the emergence of the distinction, through Aryan invasion and the *jati system*. The opening line of the presidential address to the Indian Anthropological Society by H K Rakshit runs, "The descendants of the early inhabitants of India are largely included in the population of scheduled tribes in the country" (Rakshit, 1980:97). When the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations proposed that the scheduled tribes in India be considered as one section of 'indigenous people' the government of India categorically opposed that on the ground that the "scheduled tribes are not the only descendants of the original inhabitants of India". Sure, many will agree. But Rakshit's statement too will be summoned as an authority whenever it suits the government.

The anthropologist often take a defensive stand that every definition in any science has limitations. True, but how scientific is a definition which drags even such scholars as those mentioned above, into pitfalls. The superbly knit trap complete with physical traits, cultural achievements, fictitious history and mythical isolation is so very effective that one way or the other everyone falls victim of it. I have purposely presented here excerpts from only the best of our scholars. If they were not able to escape the trap the condition of others less careful can be imagined. In less than a century social scientists have incubated the racial theory laid by colonial administrators to a gigantic monster. Today the thought-process of every Indian is swallowed by it. All over the country school children learn about the head hunting culture of the Nagas and the high level of education of Malayan's. They would not even dream that both are equally educated and equally modernised. The first impression is never challenged. At a much later stage an authority no less than Romila Thapar would inform them (1978: 217) that "the most frequently used word for

plough is *langala* which is of Munda origin". And then after just three pages (p 221) she would opine, "The Munda-speaking groups until recently were hunters and pastoralists with, at most, digging stick agriculture... Were the Sudra tribes those who in the initial stages did not accept the new agricultural technology or did not apply it?" Students of Thapar would become administrators and social workers for tribal areas — in all likelihood efficient and committed ones. At the root, however, they will have a distorted appreciation of the technological abilities of 'tribes' and accept the new white man's burden. This is indeed, a dangerous implication of the cultivated myth.

In the past, the distinct ecologies of the hill regions, like those of the coasts and deserts, necessitated distinctive adaptations from those of a mainstream dominated by the people of valleys and plains. Each of them accepted from the others only those which suited them and each group considered their own technology and culture superior to the others'. The dependence of the hill people on the forest earned them the contemptuous name 'junglees'. In all likelihood, the 'junglees' were indeed proud of that associations and hated the monotonous existence and unhealthy living conditions people faced in the lower plains. Both of them were proud of their distinctive ways, until the racial-colonial theories came to adjudge one of them as superior. That was more than just an evaluation; it paved the way for a massive devastation by undermining the viability of one technology and culture. Usually it was enough to use their image to push any kind of programme that anyone in the authority tried to sell. Forests were declared reserved to cut off their access. Mineral resources were plundered. Water resources of these regions were committed to the lower valleys. Land alienation for modern industries became a staggering phenomenon. But in industries they were thought fit only for low ranking jobs. Deprived at home they migrated elsewhere to provide cheap labour. The sympathisers provided misplaced patronage. They propagated that the scheduled tribes have been exploited for thousands of years overlooking that this is merely a contest for control of resources and creation of cheap labour. The environmentalists dreamt that tribals were protectorates of forests and were disgusted when that did not happen at every small experiment where they were given a chance. The myth is not a mere cultural blunder - it was a forceful legitimisation of discrediting every act by these communities.

The Intellectuals And The People

Moral and intellectual leadership, said Gramsci, is a more effective form of domination. No one suspects that the committed scientists have any vested interests. No one feels that the protective policy has been vitiated by spurious characterisation. Even the affected people accept it. Under its influence the non-scheduled tribe autochthones imagine that their ancestors had come from outside the se areas and they link their interests with outsiders. The scheduled tribes tend to think that anyone out of the list are 'dikus' who have no business to be here. The anthropologists exaggerate the difference between neighbouring communities. It is adapted in revivalism among the tribes in course of self-assertion and its reverse, acculturation among the rest. The local people of the region fail to identify themselves as one to develop a common struggle against regional exploitation. In the 'thirties the Adivasi Mahasabha suddenly found that half of the people they were fighting for were not adivasis any more. Later historians discover when the Adivasi Mahasabha had "opened their gates" to the non-tribals (e.g. Sharma, 1972). From within the jumble of authoritative descriptions the present generation of adivasis will not know that their predecessors had never practised any such closed-door policy. It was governmental diplomacy in collusion with the social scientists that forced the earlier leaders to loose half of their supports.

Moral and intellectual domination, unlike political suppression, relies on the willing acceptance of suppressive ideas by the people themselves. It does not appear as a domination at all, but as 'leadership'. It becomes far more difficult to discern the oppressive scheme. But still, with growing experience of struggle, people come to the realisation. In course of their struggle over the last fifty years, in some of these areas, like in Jharkhand, the people have partly succeeded in understanding the vicious nature of the dominance. They realised, in the words of B P Kesari, convener of the Jharkhand Samanvaya Samiti (co-ordination committee), that "The main ' drawback of the Jharkhand movement since its beginning has been the lack of intellectual supports".

For quite some time with their limited resources they have tried to challenge the wide and acknowledgedly scientific propaganda. There are many local intellectuals who, with limited

scholarly training but with unlimited zeal, are trying to discover the facts. Their contributions do not always meet the highest methodological standards. Nevertheless, in the basics they often exhibit more scientific insights and consistency than the established authorities. There was intense and diverse literary (including script development) and cultural activities in this area in late eighties and early nineties which were not always separated from political activism. For the activists this is a gruelling task. If only the concerned social scientists would have been a bit more factual and scientific, the myths would not have developed to such proportions. If at least some of them would have come forward to clear the rubbish, the work would have been much simpler. After all, a trained historian would need much less time to collect material for a brief history of Chotanagpur. Thereby they would have helped not only the regional movements but also the overdue task of correcting Indian history, relieving it of its racial intonations.

There were a handful of criticisms from the anthropologists themselves. But they feel rather helpless. Unable to effect any change in the situation, some, like Aiyappan (cited in Naik, 1968:74), say in frustration: "If the administrator wants a clear cut definition... we should tell them that we don't have it". Some others meet their commitments by sparing inclusion of qualifying remarks in their texts while dealing with tribals and tribal situations. Probably the best concerted effort was that of Pathy. In his youth he had ridiculed his fellow anthropologists for accepting that "a tribe is a tribe which is included in the list Scheduled tribes" (Pathy *et al*, 1976). A more mature Pathy (1984) however, came out with a Marxist definition of 'tribes'. By his own admission, however, the definition includes only one-tenth of the Scheduled Tribe population. Should the anthropologists abandon the rest? So much of junk has accumulated that decades of effort will be necessary to clear it. To the scholars that itself is a discouraging fact. There are very few who would even try.

But there is a spin off in intellectual sphere from popular movements. Years back an African scholar had said: when they were colonies the anthropologists alone were interested in them. After they became independent historians and political scientists have begun to take some interest. For Africa this is absolutely true. This is partly true also for Indian tribes. Consequent upon the regional autonomy movements in this region both historians and political scientists have started taking some

more interest. The superbly knit pseudo-scientific theory may still baffle them. But they may also show a little more awareness of the reality. We have to wait to see what happens.

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