

## The Dilemma of Tribalism

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*[Indian tribes are sovereign nations within the United States—The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, The State of the Native Nations, at 37.]*

The above information sounds lucrative; but don't rush to American consulates for visa. There is more to it.

The incumbent regime of India faces resistance from the Naxal-Maoist movements. Official response of the government is two-fold, stick-and-carrot. The hawk one is for all-out assault to terminate the rebellion. The dove suggests immediate cease-fire, dialogue, and mutual re-conciliation. Inevitably a middle-path seems apparent: combine both hawk and dove in appropriate sequence and intensity.

The current objective of the Naxals-Maoists is to 'liberate' the Compact Revolutionary Zone (CRZ) which expands from Nepal through Bihar in the North, to Dandakaranya region (forest areas of Central India), and Andhra Pradesh in the South- the prime habitat of tribal population. "The entire course of Indian history shows tribal elements being fused into a general society", Kosambi wrote. 'Indian development was in its way more 'civilized' than in other countries.' Why is then so much of anxiety in India about tribes than anywhere else?

### **DOCTRINES OF REBELLION**

The young, independent India, in the mid-1950s, announced two foundational aspirations of social reform, and economic resilience. The nation would usher in a Socialistic Pattern of Society, and rise in economic achievement.

The Perspective Planning Division of the Planning Commission projected that within 10 years the average national income would double, self-sufficiency in food-grains achieved, and full employment assured. In the event the mid-sixties brought a horrible period.

Ravaged by drought and wars the nation was in a crisis. An American ship carrying wheat (under the PL 480 programme) for the starving Indians, halted mid-water not far from the Mumbai port : the external power coerced India to bend its economic policy as directed.

At this juncture, a political upheaval was taking shape in a remote village—Naxalbari in West Bengal. Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)—CPI(ML)—was formed in 1968, announced on May 1, 1969, in Kolkata. The party raised the slogan 'Naxalbari Zindabad'. Hence the common name : Naxal.

About that time in China, Lin Biao rose to political prominence. He had been at the forefront of Cultural Revolution. In 1949, as the General-in-Command, he led the People's Liberation Army into Beijing. Finally, Lin was the Chinese Communist Party Vice-President and the constitutional successor designated by Mao Zedong. Soon power struggle would upset his aspirations. Chinese Communist Party disowned Lin's version of Maoism. In 1971, he died in a plane crash in Mongolia, under suspicious circumstances. CPI(ML) had been inspired by Lin's thesis on Maoism. With the downfall of that interpreter of Maoist doctrine the party was in disarray.

Several leftwing extremist groups including CPI (ML) and Maoist Communist Center of India (MCC) among others merged in 2004 into a new entity : Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist) to be cited here by its acronym, namely, CPIM.

At the present stage of India, the central objective of the CPIM's to establish a *New Democracy*, as enunciated by Mao in 1940<sup>1</sup>, 'directed against imperialism, feudalism, and comprador bureaucratic capitalism'. This political revolution will be accompanied with a *New Democratic Society*. 'The immediate aim and programme of the party is to carry on and complete the already ongoing and advancing New Democratic Revolution in India as a part of the world proletarian revolution by overthrowing the semi-colonial, semi-feudal system.'

The current task is to arouse and organize for agrarian revolutionary guerrilla war in the countryside especially in the remote countryside, and to build up the people's army and the rural red base areas through guerrilla warfare. The protracted people's war will encircle the cities from the countryside and finally capture them. Hence the countryside will remain as the 'centre of gravity' of the party's work, while urban work will be complimentary to it.

CPIM is now unanimous that Maoism is the higher stage of the ML (Marxist-Leninist) philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Marxism-Leninism-Maoism is the ideological basis guiding its thinking in all spheres of activities. The party has reaffirmed its commitment to the classical Maoist strategy of protracted armed struggle not for the seizure of lands, crops, or other short-term goals, but the seizure of power. It is a political-power-first approach.

### **NEW SOCIETY**

'For many years we have struggled for a cultural revolution as well as political and economic revolution', Mao wrote. He accepted Lenin's formulation : 'economics is the base and politics the concentrated expression of economics'. And he added the active role of culture in this dynamics. Any given culture is in conformity with the politics and economics of a given country. And they are subject to a two-way reciprocation. *Any given culture in turn has a tremendous influence and effect upon the latter*. This observation is a unique contribution of Mao in the field of materialist interpretation of history.<sup>3</sup> CPIM appears oblivious of its nuances.

In his report on the peasant movement in Hunan in 1927 Mao indicated the social situation of China and outlined the strategy to deal with it. A person is usually subjected to the domination of three systems of authority : politics, clan or caste, and the supernatural religion. The communist party would not directly intervene into the social affairs related to clan, caste, or religion. Its propaganda policy in such matters should

'drew the bow without shooting', but show the people the path to take. It is for the people themselves 'to cast aside the idols, pull down the temples'.

The party would enlighten the people's consciousness through education, instruction, and persuasion, not annihilation. Religion is not a private, personal privilege; it affects a wide range of societal spheres. The party would not be indifferent to faith and practice of religion.<sup>4</sup>

Marxian literature has debated on two apparently contradictory concepts : on the one hand, the impersonal dynamics of class struggle : on the other, human potentiality, agency, and need. In one view, the central category of Marx's philosophy is human freedom and creative activity. The problem for a socialist society is how to realize human nature by producing a more humane world. Marx implies the underlying factor of human nature by his concept of the forces of production, which necessarily involves developed labour-power competence.

We presuppose labour in a form that stamps it as essentially human. By nature, man has a *creative intelligence* : 'the architect raises his structure in *imagination* before he erects it in reality' (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> He raises his structure of society in imagination before he proceeds to join the movement to reform the given society. The imagined structure drawn by creative intelligence varies from one person to another.

It is therefore conceivable that in the societal field the received opinion of the people may be false, and some other opinion may be true. Or the conflicting doctrines may share the truth between them. Popular opinions are often true, but seldom or never the whole truth. If the people are not allowed to express their opinions the truth will not, for lack of a free market in ideas, come to light; there will be no scope for spontaneity, originality, genius, for mental energy, for moral courage; civilization cannot advance. Society will be crushed by the weight of collective mediocrity.

The fifteenth-century Renaissance in Europe was the epoch of the *individual* : 'the development of a universal capacity to think of yourself, in a fundamental way, as an individual', distinct from being just the member of a family, group, clan or tribe. An individual was now viewed as a repository of all that human beings had achieved, 'a point of unity for all that had been thought and done by man, within the mind restored to consciousness of its own sovereign faculty.' This was a static concept of the nature of man, harking back to the past, accumulating heirloom. By the nineteenth century, a dynamic conception of man emerged : 'man figured not as an essential starting point but as a destination, less given to a set of intrinsic qualities than the goal of an epochal and never-to-be-completed process'. If there is a 'human condition', it is the condition of being always unconsummated. Man is not a simply unchanging entity at all but a sign of change, a site of continuous transformation. The process of man's progress is endless. An 'individual' is a carrier of that eternal movement, a site of great continuous becoming, a person worthy of dignity and respect.

Every individual, not excluding the tribal one, deserves full opportunities to realize his potentialities he desires, to be a part of the general society of the country, and to have access to the universal civilization. This kind of *progress* of the individual would be conceivable if tribes are not confined in the so-called 'scheduled areas', and lulled by the bait of mere *aranyer adhikar*, the rights to forest resources.

## MURMUR IN THE RED CORRIDOR

The so-called “red corridor”, alias the Compact Revolutionary Zone (CRZ) in CPIM idiom, spreading along the east coast of India from the foothills of Himalayas to the tip of the peninsula, is now a high-tension area that attracts civil-society tourists. One of them has discovered a secret : ‘Actually, the Maoists are tribals.’ Problem is, the government is not sure of who the tribals are and how many are there. The census counts only the ‘scheduled’ tribes (whatever it means), but leaves out the non-scheduled ones.

The first colonist who entered the United States in 1513 was a Spanish explorer. In 1924, the natives were granted US citizenship. In 1975, they were given the power of *Self-Determination*. Now there are 562 federally recognized tribal governments of ‘Native American *nations*’ which are sovereign within the US. Their territories are marked as ‘reservation’ which is fairly equivalent to the expression ‘scheduled areas’ in the Constitution of India.

Just as states like New York or California in the US have certain powers of jurisdiction within their boundaries, so tribes have governmental powers within their boundaries. While under the US law tribes (and states) cannot exercise powers such as raising an army or issuing currency, they possess powers to determine their respective forms of government (e.g. craft constitutions), define citizenship, make and enforce laws through their own police forces and courts, collect taxes, regulate the domestic affairs of their citizens, and regulate property use (e.g. through land use policy, permitting, environmental regulation, and the like).

Despite all that political powers, the pace of assimilation of tribes in the general society has been slow. In the 18th century George Washington observed that the natives were equal but their society was inferior, he encouraged the ‘civilizing’ process in order to absorb them in the US society at large. Next century, boarding schools were established for the children. But the experience often proved traumatic to the students, who were forbidden to speak their native language, taught Christianity, denied the right to practice their native religions, and in numerous other ways forced to abandon their native identities and adopt European-American culture.

Three issues are prominent. To begin with, far from forming a united ethnic group, the Native Americans are splintered into several hundred *ethnic-linguistic* groups. Second, economic status of the Native Americans is grim. They rank at the bottom of nearly every statistics : highest teen suicide rate among all minorities, highest rate of teen pregnancy, highest high school drop out, lowest per capita income, and unemployment rates between 50% and 90%. Major barriers to economic growth include the following: disadvantage due to distance from markets, and lack of access to capital. Third, isolation of the natives from the general society of the United States has hindered their comprehensive progress. It is significant that the native tribals who live on or near reservations and other tribal land areas tend to do worse in socio-economic terms than off-reservation tribals do. India would benefit by taking note of these three factors in particular : (a) the importance of language in nation building ; (b) the role of economics ; and (c) the call for social assimilation.

(a) From the experience of Native American nations it transpires that political power by itself is not enough for a nation. World history is eloquent that the role of political

power had often been overestimated. Russia's historic Bolshevik revolution indeed failed within less than a century; the Chinese communists diluted Maoism to the point of submission to capitalism in less than three decades. Economy and culture are the basis of society, upon which polity stands. Politics can be fragile, erratic, or destructive.

The Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) began with an original list of 6748 tribes or communities. Its 1985-92 survey identified and studied 4635 communities in 3581 villages and 1011 towns. Enunciation of 'scheduled' tribes in the 1991 census shows only 461 scheduled tribes, which is less than seven percent of the total number of all tribes 6748 scheduled or nonscheduled.<sup>6</sup>

Some three-thousand-five-hundred years ago as little as five Aryan tribes of the Caucasus region migrated to India. How could such a small group of immigrants eventually conquer the mind and heart of the innumerable natives of this ancient land of a huge subcontinent? The Aryans dissolved so many isolated primitive communities and their beliefs so as to create the pre-condition for a new type of society from the remains. They demolished barriers between numerous primitive, conservative, peasant groups, each of which had separately preserved its archaic tools and customs. The barriers so torn could never be effectively recreated because the Aryans left a precious means of communication, a simple language distributed over a vast region. The Arabs 2000 hundred years later showed a parallel action—including the linguistic change—upon a different social level.<sup>7</sup> Emergence of Bangladesh is an iconic evidence of man's commitment to language.

Tribes in India are not a homogeneous community. They differ widely among themselves in their dialects, regional variation of languages, incomprehensible to each other. Facility of communication among them is limited and rarely used. If the social story of Native Americans is an indicator, the CPIM, if and when in power, would find it a hard task to bring together thousands of tribes into a viable entity.

(b) Marx never himself employs the specific formulation 'economic determination', but he talks so persistently through his mature work of 'economic structure', 'economic base' and 'economic form' in relationship to other factors of the socio-historical progress, such that it 'determines' them. Economic determination does not necessarily mean impersonal or anti-humanism. Marx recognizes human nature : human potentiality, agency, and need. Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* write : 'One of the most vital principles of Communism' is its 'empiric view, based upon the knowledge of human nature'.

The aspiration of communism by both Russia and China had been disrupted in part due to their-economic failure resulting from rigid state control of the economy, exclusive domination by an impersonal state, and disregard of human nature. Economy has its distinct rules and dynamics, but it is not oblivious of human beings : after all, the *forces of production* are products of creative intelligence of man.

Economic landscape of the red corridor is rich in natural resources, but short of productive agriculture, industry, investment, human capital (education, skills, technical expertise), and the means to develop it. Hence, the red corridor, under CPIM, would have to export those underground resources which are exhaustible. And investment capital would be imported under the terms and conditions dictated by foreign colonists. That kind of an economy can hardly be independent or a harbinger of socialism.

(c) A human society, formally, bears some comparison with the universe. In the space of the universe celestial bodies such as planets, stars, and galaxies orbit in paths described by Newton's law of gravitation. So do humans too, in a way. They act and react among themselves and move around in the social space. An application of Newton's law of gravity on society has proved in theory, with mathematical logic, and supported by empirical evidence that : 'Interventions in a closed environment [e.g. gang, ghetto, slum, remote village] that attempt to change the social position of an entire *network* [of people] *simultaneously* and, as a consequence, to alter the expectations of the individuals in the network about the neighbours' behaviour, can be quite successful in generating major social change' (emphasis added)<sup>8</sup>. That is to say, intervention in a close environment can bring about a social reform if the substantial majority agree. By contrast, it follows that selection of a few individuals, from among hundreds of tribal candidates, to give them opportunity for education, training, and job opportunities would tend to disconnect them from their community, and would have no filtering effect upon the tribal population at large. It might create a 'creamy layer' which would be an isolated elite group among the population.

It transpires from Newton's theory that the tribes living at the periphery far away from the hub of the general society, would continue to maintain their distance from the hub unless a sufficiently powerful impulse like trade and commerce comes to attract them towards the centre. Records of the Native Americans bear evidence of this proposition.

### REVENGE OF HISTORY

'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of tribal struggles', says someone with apology to Marx and Engels. 'The most civilized nations of modern Europe issued', wrote Edward Gibbon, 'from the woods of Germany; and in the rude institutions of those barbarians we may still distinguish the original principles of our present laws and manners.'

The tribes who have taken up arms against the state of India do not respond to the description of a 'class' in the text-book sense. Mankind is a huge joint family; its members quarrel for the share of accumulated assets. 'The transmission of acquired characteristics, which is rejected by [Darwin], is the very foundation of social progress. History is progress through the transmission of acquired assets from one generation to another'.<sup>9</sup>

Athenian democracy was built with bricks of slaves, and cemented with a xenophobic contempt for non-Greek-speaking 'barbarians' as virulent as the jingoism of any imperialist. Gibbon attributed the decline and fall of the Roman Empire to the triumph of barbarians and religion. All throughout history, barbarians had overthrown the entrenched civilized gentry; and human civilization seems doing well, nonetheless.

The tribes of India today had been at the bottom of the families of mankind for too long, not less than two millennia. Maybe, if past is any guide, their time has now come.

The government of India proposes to grant the tribes *aranyer adhikar*. the rights of forest resources. But is it enough? Also, government promises them *panchayat raj*, under the *Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act* (PESA). But tribes are way

behind all other communities of the country in almost all areas. This sounds like the American policy of handling the natives with offering self-determination which failed.

The insight of Newton's theory of gravitation, applied to society, has shown that only a comprehensive attempt to bring meaningful improvement to an isolated group would be effective, provided all members of the group are given access to the larger society. Provisions of Schedule 5, Constitution of India, seem to thwart the liberation of tribes from the bondage of remote tribe-habitated forests to the freedom and lights of modern civilization.

Anthropological Survey of India, *The Scheduled Tribes* (1994), mentions an original list of 6748 tribes; but it reports a study of only 461 of them. What about the rest of them? Where are they?<sup>9</sup> Probably, the missing 6287 tribes have moved outside the forests. Given the experience of Native Americans in reservations, cited above, India's tribes who had emigrated from forests are doing better than those who are confined in the distant forests do.

As against Lenin's Russia and Mao's China, the unique specific element of India is the presence of a massive underclass of impoverished tribes and lowly castes. Russia and China had seen no form of apartheid menace.

The tribal question is a complex issue in India. The tribes are not a stereotype proletariat in India ; they fit better in the first two categories of three main epochs, i.e. savagery, barbarism, and civilization as of the Marxian literature. At the moment the tribes as a whole are not engaged in class-struggle. It would be counter productive for them to get involved in party politics of the country at the moment. The prime objective of the tribes, all of them together, is to reclaim their legitimate place in the general society of India. Much like the slaves providing bricks to the construction of the ancient Athenian democracy, the Indian tribes had long been the virtual slaves toiling to erect the Indian democracy.<sup>10</sup>

#### **NOTES :**

1. Mao Zedong, *On New Democracy*, 1940.
2. Works of Marx fall into two categories: universal, and particular : in other words, general, and specific. The Marxian universal or general is about all mankind across time, e.g. *Capital*, *Critic of Political Economy*, or *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. The particular or specific is concerned with a given group of people at a given time, e.g. 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', "The Class Struggles in France. 1848-1850". To put it another way, the former is a genus, and the latter its species. It was in the light of the universal form of the materialist interpretation of history by Marx that Lenin comprehended the specific stage of Russia in particular, and developed the ideology and strategy for the revolution. That is to say, if Marxism was the genus, Leninism was a species of it. It can, therefore, hardly be claimed that the latter was the 'higher stage' of the former; for the two belong to separate, incommensurable dimensions. By the same token, to consider Maoism as the 'higher stage' of Marxism-Leninism is arguably controversial. A revolutionary party in India ought to draw lessons from the concrete cases of Leninism, Maoism, as well as other doctrines, and keep in view the specific characteristics of the country. Only then the party would be capable to produce the ideology and strategy for India. For short periods in restricted localities, a dead end, retrogression, or evolution by, atrophy are possible, while they cannot stop the progress of mankind as a whole which Marx considered in his universal treatises.
3. 'Any given culture (as an ideological form) is a reflection of the politics and economics of a given society, and the former in turn has a tremendous influence and effect upon the latter;

economics is the base and politics the concentrated expression of economics'. Mao Zedong, *On New Democracy*, 1940.

4. 'A man is usually subjected to the domination of three systems of authority : (1) the state system (political authority), ranging from the national, provincial, and country government down to that of the township ; (2) the *den* system (clan authority), ranging from the central ancestral temple and its branch temples down to the head of the household : (3) the supernatural system (religious authority), ranging from the King of Hell down to the town and village gods belonging to the nether world, and from the Emperor of Heaven down to all the various gods and spirits belonging to the celestial world". The Communist Party's propaganda policy in such matters should be : "Draw the bow without shooting" just indicate the motions. 'It is for the peasants themselves to cast aside the idols, pull down the temples. It is wrong for anybody else to do it for them'. The gods and goddesses are indeed miserable objects. Mao Zedong, *Report on Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*. 1927.
5. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I. at 178.
6. Ranjit Sau, *The Foundation of Democracy in India*, at 159. 183-84; idem, Non-Scheduled Tribes. '*Economic and Political Weekly*', letter to editor. 33 (41). August 19. 2006. at 3550.
7. D D Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, at 84-85.
8. George Akerlof, 'Social Distance and Social Decisions'. *Econometrica*, 65(5), 1997" at 1020.
9. Edward H. Carr. *What Is History?*, at 151. Carr adds : A tribe, 'a class, a nation, a continent, a civilization, which plays the leading role in the advance of civilization in one period is unlikely to play a similar role in the next period, and this for good reason that it would be too deeply imbued with the traditions, interests, and ideologies of the earlier period to be able to adapt itself to the demands and conditions of the next period.'
10. A brief history of the lowly strata of society, viz. scheduled castes, and of outcasts off the society, i.e. tribals, is as follows. Peace and trade during the Gupta period (AD 300-500) had stimulated village settlements by private enterprise; rural economy thrived. Meanwhile, the urban nouveau riche. so fond of Mediterranean coral, exotic wines and slaves for household service, concubines and entertainment, the art and craftsmanship of Roman-Greek world, exhausted the country's foreign exchange reserves . A critical shortage of coin-money for domestic business transactions was inevitable. To solve the currency problem the crown took an ingenious step of assigning caste-balanced artisans to every village such that barter exchange within the village would do. Each village was allowed its precisely required number of blacksmiths, carpenters, potters, and other artisans, not exceeding 12 in total. Each artisan was entitled to a certain portion of harvest from the peasants. Every village thus became self-sufficient, cash-free, and disconnected from other villages and the rest of the world. As a result, the caste system was sealed firmly across the villages. The economy became stagnant under the rigid caste rules, being incapable of absorbing additional hands. Unemployment mounted. Caste-groups prevented the mastery of finer technique. Very few could, because of caste, skin cattle, tan the hides, or work in leather, all low occupations. Some tribesmen might become basket-makers, without learning how to weave cloth or spin yarn. On the other hand, given the social structure, not every village could support a whole guild of blacksmiths, leather-workers, or bark-weavers. The jobless unfortunates headed towards the wilderness of forests or hills and turned into wretched tribals ever since. □□□