

Tribals, Indian State & the Urban Elites

M N Majumder

The *book under review is on the most burning topic of the day by an eminent authority on the subject, who is now about 87 years old, merits careful study by all Indians to fix up their ideological stance. Dr Sharma, a mathematician by training was of the 1956 batch of IAS and his concern for the tribal people began in Baster, the largest tribal tract of the country where he was posted as the Collector and District Magistrate. He resigned from the IAS in 1981 when differences arose on vital issues of policy. He became the Vice-Chancellor of NEHU (1981-86) and then occupied the highest constitutional position concerning tribal people as the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) (1986-91). Dr Sharma is an activist in the tribals' struggles and wrote some twenty books on them. His books are worshipped in all tribal households. The present book summarises all the necessary constitutional and legal documents. He has written this book because "I consider myself duty-bound to place some of the bitter truths before the nation that are buried in the files". The book is of 100 pages plus 28 important annexures of similar length.

Of the total present Indian population of some 120 crores, the tribals constitute some 8 to 8.5 percent, numbering 8 to 10 crores, which is steadily declining. Of the 744 (1950 data) tribes most of them live scattered mainly in the Central Indian forests and hills eking out a subsistence existence through primitive agriculture, food gathering, animal husbandry and rural handicrafts. Most of them are illiterates, of poor health and marginalized.

The innocent simple tribals bereft of education and exposures to the outside world do not know anything of the wider world. They are all simple, honest, freedom loving people who obey their Village Councils (Gram Sabha). Land in the perception of tribal people, is not a commodity: It is Mother Earth that sustains not only the man but the entire living system. "Mava Nate, Mava Raj" (in Gondi) (Our Village, Our Rule) and Jal Jangal Jamin Hamare Hain (Water, Forest and Land Ours) are the most powerful and universal slogans. These slogans gave expression to the innermost feelings of the tribal people, about their 'des'.

But the urban elites are so used to the colonial indoctrination that the concept of Central and state Governments, administrative system, maintenance of law and order by police force and judiciary, tax collection (direct and indirect) all seem normal and natural.

In tribal societies there evolved over centuries a social order, ethos, disciplines, beliefs spontaneously among peoples that made them, easy going, peaceful and contented. They do not have any need of centralized police force. They manage their own affairs quite well. Many a tribal people in our country did not have the system of centralized police. The writ of police in many North Eastern States (Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal) is now

limited to the highways only. Tribals of those states waged continuous fights against the State even in pre-independence days.

All independent countries, which did not suffer the trauma of colonial rule, have a system of governance where the police is responsible to the community. In England the police is answerable to the county. In USA the police is accountable to the county. But in India many a tribal people did not have the system of centralized police. The main ideological conflict between the tribals and the state is the simplest Central Adibasi question :

God created the Earth

We are children of God

Pray, where from has the government appeared!

The same feelings pervade all non-European peoples in all continents. In all non-European countries social, economic and cultural evolutions occurred in their own ways consistent with their climate and geography which were smashed by the European plunderers equipped with superior technology in arms and transport and social organizations. Wherever the Europeans conquered they were motivated with greed; lust for personal accumulation, fierce competition and brutality. These shattered the prospect of a happier and healthier future for mankind.

TRIBAL TERRITORIES AND THE FIFTH SCHEDULE OF THE CONSTITUTION

Of the 8 to 10 crores of tribals of some seven hundred ethnicities more important ones are :

The Bhils occupy the trijunction of Rajasthan, MP and Gujarat. The Gonds are spread over the states of Chhattisgarh, eastern Maharashtra, northern AP and southern Orissa. The Oraons and Mundas are located in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and northern Orissa. Santhals are in the states of Orissa, Jharkhand and W B. No area was Scheduled (Fifth Schedule of the Constitution) in W B, Tripura and the entire southern region comprising the states of Kerala, Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Goa.

UPPER CASTE DOMINATION

The tribals are immensely freedom loving. They love their land and forests. Tribal revolts galore in history. Most of them have not yet come to light. Those during the British rule have entered into history. The Ramayana and Mahabharata wars might be the wars between the ruling upper caste Hindus and the Dalits. Ravana (not Rama) is still now worshipped in many places in South India and Duryodhana has many temples in North Indian hills. Kancha Ilaiah in his powerful book (Why I am not a Hindu, 1996) have argued that Rama represented the upper caste Hindu and Ravana, Bali represented the Adibasis. The Kauravas (hundred brothers) stood against the brahminical dharma but were defeated through the machinations of Krishna and superior arms of Arjuna. Laksman's cutting off the nose of a beautiful Adibasi girl Surpanakha and Dronacharya's machination of deskillling the Adibasi Ekalavya is well known. Throughout the centuries the upper caste Indian Hindus' shrewdness and brutality are too numerous. In

addition to all these the British Government in 1871 enacted the heinous Act of "Notified Criminal Tribes in British India" which is unscientific and against natural human justice. This act only became denotified in 1952. The Indian independence was actually a transfer of power in a conspiratorial way where the Tribals had no place, nor even any knowledge. The constitution was framed by a Constituent Assembly that represented less than 10 percent of the Indian population with conspicuous absence of the tribals. The constitution did not represent a break with the colonial past. Seventy five (75) per cent of the constitution can be said to be a reproduction of the Government of India Act, 1935.

After independence some legisla-tions and programs were initiated by the Govt. that are given in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution and subsequently in the Tribal Sub-plans (1970s) and the ideal self-governance frame as in PESA—Provisions of Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. But progress in ensuring Tribal Sovereignty and rights as implied in these Acts have not advanced at all. The State Governors who have been given enormous constitutional powers have made little efforts to protect the tribals. Instead the bureaucracy, the politicians both of the State and Central in collusion with big capital - both foreign and Indian - are ruthlessly spoiling the waters, forests and lands, even forcibly evicting them, herding them out in concentration camps with the help of armed harmads of "Salwa Judums".

All in the name of "Development" which is virtual loot and plunder of valuable ores and minerals of iron, aluminium, manganese, tin, gold, diamonds. Names of big companies like Vedanta, Ambani, Esser, Jindals, Tatas, POSCO have become quite familiar through the media. The number of Indian billionaires now number around 60. While on one side the permanent loss of very important natural wealth is occurring at the same time Indian Environment and Ecosystems are being permanently spoilt. The so-called Maoists and Naxalites are fighting against the state and big capital, the state has launched operation Green Hunt etc. and these cause daily waste of thousands of crores of Rupees and loss of valuable lives on both sides, the State's paramilitary forces and of the tribals. The writings and speeches of Arundhati Roy, Gautam Navalakha, Himansu Kumar are revealing. The Salwa Judum is reminiscent of Ku Klux Klan of USA which now are reappearing in USA after 2006. "Salwa Judum" (purification Hunt or Peace March) in Gondi language is an illegal militia organized by the Chhatisgarh State plus the upper caste rich Indians to evict the tribes and force them to live into concentration camps.

GREED, POSSESSIVENESS & CUNNING

The European explorers and colonizers who plundered, enslaved and massacred simple innocent natives of the Americas, Australasia, Africa and Asia were, impelled by greed, inhumanity and unparalleled cruelty. Some excerpts from "A People's History of the United States : 1492-Present" by Howard Zinn (2005) are revealing :

The climate and geography of Europe were so hostile (particularly from 12th to 19th century) that many people found it very hard to survive there. Many people desired a convenient sea route to India and China for trade and the Spanish

king Ferdinand and queen Isabella sponsored the voyage of the Italian navigator Christopher Columbus who sailed out and landed on the West Indian Island of Arawak in 1492. The "Arawak men and women, naked, tawny and full of wonder, emerged from their villages onto the island's beaches and swam out to get a close look at the strange big boat. When Columbus and his sailors came ashore, carrying swords, speaking oddly, the Arawaks ran to greet them, brought them food, water and gifts

These Arawaks of the Bahama Islanders were much like Indians on the mainland, who were remarkable for their hospitality, their belief in sharing. These traits did not stand out in Europe of the Renaissance dominated as it was by the religion of popes, the government of kings, the frenzy for money that marked western civilisation and its first messenger to the Americas, Christopher Columbus.....

The Arawaks lived in village communes, had a developed agriculture of corn, yams and cassava. They could spin and weave, but they had no horses or work animals. They had no iron, but they wore tiny gold ornaments in their ears....

The Indians, Columbus reported, "are so naive and so free with their possessions that no one who has not witnessed them would believe it. When you ask something they have, never say no. To the contrary, they offer to share with anyone" Columbus believed.

"Gold is a treasure, and he who posses it does all he wishes to in this world and succeeds in helping souls into paradise". The aim of Columbus and his men were clear : slaves and gold. In two years through murder, mutilation or suicide, half of the 2,50,000 Indians on Haiti were dead ... by the year 1515, there were perhaps fifty thousand Indians left. By 1550, there were five hundred Spanish conquest brought about the downfall of the Aztecs (Mexico) and of Maya (Central America) and Inca (S-W America) civilizations.

Total control (by the Spaniards) led to total cruelty. The Spaniards "thought nothing of knifing Indians by tens and twenties and of cutting slices off them to test the sharpness of their blades....Two of these so-called Christians met two Indian boys one day each carrying a parrot; they took the parrots and for fun beheaded the boys".....

"What Columbus did to the Arawaks of the Bahamas, Cortes did to the Azatecs of Mexico, Pizarro to the Incas of Peru and the English settlers of Virginia and Massachusettes to the Powhattan and the Pequots".

The same attitude, same mindset continued for centuries which caused the almost total extinction of the Red Indians. In 1886 Roosevelt said:

"the only good (Red) Indian is a dead (Red) Indian".

About 200,000 Australian aborigines were killed by the white settlers in the socalled Abo- \ Hunting between 1816 to 1930.

Does the attitude of the present ruling elites of India towards the Dalits, Bahujanas, Tribals are much different ? Tribals often need borrowings and rich money lenders offer these gladly at exorbitant interest rates. Since the tribals are "men of words", they remained virtual slaves for the whole life and after them their children remained slaves. Accumulated interest exceeded many times the borrowed sums. Indian Democratic Republic could abolish these at the national level only in 1975.

During the transfer of power in 1947 Indian tribals were never consulted and in the framing of the constitution the tribals had no voice. Most of the tribals do not have any conception about Nation, State Government, Constitution, Laws, Administration, Citizenship etc. Even most of them do not know that the name of their country is India. They know their Gram Sabhas whose dictat everybody obeys. The most powerful and universal slogan among all tribals is:

"Jal, Jangal, Zamin Hamare Hain"

Notwithstanding constitutional safeguards the tribals are systematically being evicted, their population is steadily depleting. Taking recourse to the alien concept of Eminent Domain River Valley Projects, Public Sector undertakings are constructed at the cost of the tribals. Now the process of extraction of natural wealth is continuing at accelerated pace taking recourse of the same concept of Eminent domain. Now the natural question has arisen :

Are the profits of POSCO, Vedanta, Ambanis, Tatas, Jindals, Esser, De Beers, ACC, Riotinto are of Public Interest ?

Extraction Rs.1000/-, Return of Rs.15/-

Sharma has given a rough estimate of the fate of the public money as follows:

"The bitter truth is that Delhi collects rupees 1,000 insidiously from rural India, retains 900 out of that for its 'alakapuris' (the city of gods) and sends remaining 100 to Rural India, out of which only 15 reach the destination. The tragedy is that dog-like fights begin for that 15, the strongest among them runs away with the booty".

PANCHASHEEL OF TRIBAL AFFAIRS

The Panchasheel principles adopted during the Nehruvian era contain some welcome principles. The first three of them are :

- (1) People should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them. We should try to encourage in every way their own traditional arts and culture.
- (2) Tribal rights in land and forests should be respected.
- (3) We should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work of administration and development. Some technical personnel from outside will, no doubt, be needed, especially in the beginning. But we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory.

JUSTICE NOW, IMPLEMENT NOW

Sharma concludes by suggesting that the agenda in the wake of "Peace now" must be "Justice Now" and "Implementation Now". He has given an emergency agenda which are consistent with constitutional provisions, United Nations Resolutions and Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The natural rights of the tribals are upheld unequivocally by the ILO too.

SHARMA WRITES IN CHAPTER I

"The tribal people in India are associated with respective territories. They manage all their affairs as members of a virtual "Village Republic" in accordance with their customs and traditions. They depend for their livelihood on the natural resources of their habitat. Even though the individual ownership frame is spreading largely as a superimposition by the state, land even

now is not property. The traditional frame of "community ownership and individual use" (COIU) is still in vogue amongst many communities especially in the North East A simple tribal lives in the present, unconcerned about the future. There is no future tense in many tribal dialect. Theirs a subsistence economy with heavy dependence on forest and water resources that have been endowed by nature in plenty. The tribal is a 'man of word' and 'proud about the same'

To address the tribal as 'poor' is the worst abuse and insult for a person who is highly conscious about his dignity. He is not poor, but deprived and disinherited. "The tribal people are the most democratic people on the earth", asserted Jaipal Singh in the Constituent Assembly.

Thus the primitive agrarian community of the tribals based on cooperation and common property in the land is a potent form of social organization, which could lead directly into higher forms of social organization, without having to go through the phase of capitalistic production system. In later years of his life Marx endorsed such possibility (See Eric Fromm ; Sane Society, Ch. 7).

EMERGENCY AGENDA

Concluding Sharma has drawn up an "emergency agenda" :

In place of "Peace Now" must now be replaced with "Justice Now" and "Implementation Now".

The first two of the agenda merit even Civil Society's consideration and action :

1. Establish "Eminent Domain" of the Community in place of the State, over land, water, forest and mineral resources as envisaged in PESA Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996.
2. Freezing MoUs and reviewing all deals with deference to Community's command over Resources.

Here is a warning from one of India's former Presidents, Shri K R Narayanan to the nation on the Republic Day message on 26th January, 2001 : "Let it not be said by future generations that this great Republic in a hurry to develop itself is devastating the green mother earth and uprooting our tribal population. We can show the world that there is room for everybody to live in this country of tolerance and compassion Let it not be said by future generations that the Indian Republic has been built on the destruction of green earth and the innocent tribals who have been living there for centuries" . □□□

***Unbroken History of Broken Promises**

Indian State and the Tribal People

by B D Sharma

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write to : freedom.press2010@gmail.com /

sahyogpk@gmail.com