

Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India

The initial discourse on tribal identity was shaped by those who advocated integration of tribals as citizens of a nation state and others who sought their assimilation into the Hindu fold. But identity definition for the tribals in the early post-independent years has been largely a process from without. While the state made efforts to draw tribals into the national sphere, other elements, chiefly right wing groups, advocated measures that would restore to the tribals their ancient heritage. It is in more recent times, with the advent of education and the threat posed to tribal ways of living by other dominant groups and demands imposed by development, that tribal identity articulation has been a process directed from within the tribal community, spearheaded by a growing middle class. Such articulation has not merely been in the form of demands for some degree of political autonomy but has also seen initiatives to ensure the protection and development of tribal language, customs and culture.

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Differences have been hallmark of Indian society. These differences have been acquired through long and protracted historical processes. The marks of difference have been diverse and varied but the major ones have been primarily located around those of caste, language, religion and region. To these principal marks of differences the new one of tribe was added during the colonial period. Prior to the colonial era the use of a generic term to describe tribal peoples was, on the whole, absent. Even if there were terms such as 'jana' as against 'jati' [Ray 1972], they did not have the kind of generality that the term 'tribe' came to acquire during the colonial and post-colonial period.

The use of the term 'tribe' to describe people who were different from those of the mainstream civilisation has been viewed as a colonial construction [Beteille 1995; Singh 1993]. There is no doubt that the use of the category 'tribe' to describe people so heterogeneous from each other in respect of physical and linguistic traits, demographic size, ecological conditions of living, regions inhabited, or stages of social formation and level of acculturation and development was put forward by the colonial administration. The need for such a category was necessitated both by the concern to subsume the enormous diversity existing into neat and meaningful categories for classificatory purposes as well as for administrative expediency. Hence although the tribe as a category and as a point of reference may be treated as a colonial construction, the image and meaning underlying the category was far from being a colonial construction. Indeed there was much resemblance between connotations of the term tribe and the idea and image that so-called civilisation has constructed of groups and communities that came to be designated as tribes during the colonial period. The term tribe since the 16th century has referred to groups/communities, which lived in primitive and barbarous conditions of living. It is in a similar vein that the Sanskrit and Hindu religious texts and traditions and, in the process people with civilisation described

and depicted tribes. Bara takes the point even further when he states that the pre-colonial depiction of the tribal people of India as 'dasyus', 'daityas', 'rakshakas' and 'nishadas', when juxtaposed with the mid-19th century western racial concept, rather advanced the aspect of bestiality attached to the concept [Bara 2002:125].

Language and region, each on its own, is an important mark of differences but they tend to coincide with each other in the Indian context. In fact, the two together have been the driving force behind the reorganisation of the society and polity in India in the post-independence era. Region and language, though important, however, do not tell us anything about the inner workings of the society and polity that they embody. What is even more striking is that despite differences on the basis of language and region, the societies so marked are enormously similar in their societal characteristics – religion and caste being predominant among them. Indeed, religion and caste cut across regions and languages and to that extent constitute the common thread across the diversity of language and region [Dumont 1998]. It is this commonality, which has come to be the principal unit of sociological study and discourse in India. This partly explains why language and regions have not become a rallying point for sociological deliberation and analysis. The analysis of region and language was not unimportant but these aspects were embedded in the institutions of caste and religion. It is against this commonality of the Indian society that tribes in India have been posited and constituted by sociologists and social anthropologists in India.

The commonality has been so pervasive and persuasive that even the colonial ethnographers could not escape its influence when they began conceptualising tribes in the Indian context. Thus, to the colonial administrators cum ethnographers, tribes came to be constituted as peoples who practised animism or tribal religion. In such conceptualising, the colonial administrators placed tribes as those outside of the historical and textual religions

and their social organisations. Of course, other grounds such as primitive conditions of living, living in isolation, etc, were not altogether left out but they followed more as a corollary from the first postulate.

In anthropological literature, tribes in general have been defined in terms of the distinctive features of language, culture, territory and government. However these have not been brought to the centre stage of sociological discussion. Beteille in his essay (1960) has, of course, discussed these issues and pointed to the kind of inadequacies these present in the Indian context. However, a combination of these features as a starting point for a new analysis was not pursued. As stated earlier, tribes came to be conceptualised residually, in terms of the contrast with the general/universal features of Indian society than the particular features that they embodied. This is not to say that the particular features were overlooked but they were not at the centre stage of their conceptualisation. For people at the grass-roots level, however, it was not so much the common features, viz, caste and religion that mattered. Rather it was language and culture, now often referred to as ethnicity, which mattered the most and was hence the most pronounced marker of distinctiveness. Tribes in the regional context were invariably posited against the dominant regional community, which also happened to be a distinct linguistic and cultural community. This is evident from the fact that tribals are addressed by their ethnic/tribe names, which generally correspond with their distinct language/dialect. Yet, this aspect of the labelling of tribals has been overlooked in sociological discourse on tribes. In the attempt to differentiate on the basis of general/universal features (albeit in a limited sense), what was overlooked was the differentiation on basis on which people themselves differentiated.

Recognition of Differences as Types

The Social Science Perspective

That there is difference between tribes and the wider Indian society is largely accepted. Indeed, the difference has been taken as the starting point for understanding the growth and expansion of Indian society and the nature of social transformation in tribal society. However, sociologists/social anthropologists are far from agreed upon the ways of conceptualising the difference. The overwhelming majority sees the difference as one of structure. In this view, the difference between tribes and the larger Indian society is one of type and not of kind. Thus tribes have invariably been seen as lying outside the larger Indian society. To put it starkly, tribes were seen as not being a part of the civilisation and therefore outside the structure of the larger Indian society. And yet they were seen not as isolates but in constant interaction with so-called civilisation at least in the case of those in the fringes of the larger Indian society. Hence tribes and tribal societies have been seen as undergoing changes due to the process of acculturation arising from their contact and interaction. The acculturation has been viewed in terms of tribes becoming a part of the larger Indian society. Thus, Kosambi (1975) refers to the growth and expansion of Indian society through fusion of elements between tribes and what constituted then, if one may say so, the larger Indian society. Bose (1941) drew attention to the process of how tribes were attracted to the larger Indian society by drawing themselves

into the social organisation of its production system, which invariably provided protection and security. This was how, according to him, tribes got absorbed into the larger Indian society. He called it 'the Hindu method of tribal absorption'. Srinivas (1977) talks of the process of sanskritisation by which castes lower down the hierarchy emulate the lifestyle of the castes above it. Although sanskritisation has been mainly used to understand the process of social mobility within the caste hierarchy, it has been extended to understand the process of transformation even in the context of the tribal society. Sinha (1962), too, points to the process of sanskritisation and Hinduisation but to him these take place invariably within the framework of state formation.

Now in this understanding of Indian society and its social transformation tribes as entities with a distinct language, culture, custom, tradition and above all, social organisation, are at least recognised. Indeed the difference acts as the point of departure of the analysis and understanding of the transformation of tribal societies. It points to how tribes, as they come in contact with the larger Indian society, tend to lose their distinct identity and get absorbed into the larger Indian society. In this line of thinking tribes are thus left with no distinct identity and space of their own due to the process of social transformation among them. If at all they have an identity, then they have an identity only as a caste within the overall organisational and hierarchical structure of the caste system.

Denial of Differences as Types

G S Ghurye and the Right Wing Political Thinking

However in another strand of thinking, the difference between tribes and non-tribes, as recognised by scholars mentioned earlier, is overlooked. This is not to say that difference as such was not recognised. Rather what was not recognised was the difference of a type as articulated by most of the social anthropologists. The lineage to this line of thinking can be traced to G S Ghurye's writing on tribes. Ghurye in his book *The Aborigines 'So-called' and Their Future*, made arguments in justification of describing the tribes as Hindus; the expression he used was the 'backward Hindus.' The book, since it was first written, has come into print under several editions and under a new title called 'The Scheduled Tribes'. He divides tribes into three sections; those that are properly integrated, loosely integrated and those not more than touched by Hinduism. Referring to the last, he says, that the only proper description of these people is that they are imperfectly integrated classes of Hindu society and that they are in reality backward Hindus. He makes this argument on the ground that there was much similarity between Hindu religion and the animistic tribal religions and that the two could not possibly be distinguished from one another. This point so made was based not on fieldwork but on the observations and comments of some of the census commissioners between 1891 and 1931 where they had expressed their dissatisfaction over the fact that tribes were described as animists. It is, of course, an open truth that Ghurye made his observation on very inadequate data and very selective use of the comments and observations of the census commissioners [Ghurye 1963:1-22].

Indeed, Ghurye's conceptualisation of tribes as 'the backward Hindus' set the tone of a future line of thinking on tribes in India.

It found very strong resonance in the report of the Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Committee. The committee, more popularly known as Niyogi Committee after the chairman's name, was constituted to look into the activities of the Christian missionaries in regard to conversion to Christianity by tribes in undivided Madhya Pradesh. The committee by citing from Ghurye's book reiterates the point made by him [Niyogi 1956:27-29]. Since then the view that tribes are Hindus has become a popular refrain among the right wing Hindu social and political activists. The position is aggressively reiterated and articulated by the Sangh parivar in its discourse on tribes in India. Indeed this has become the dominant pattern of thinking about tribes in India today.¹

By bringing religion at the forefront of the conception of what constitutes tribes, the ideologues of this position and the Sangh parivar show marked continuity with the colonial tradition. And yet there is a departure in a certain respect from that tradition. In colonial literature, tribes were no doubt characterised by their distinctive religion but they were also seen in conjunction with other dimensions especially their isolation from the larger society. The latter view entailed that they were a society unto themselves and hence constituted a different society vis-a-vis the larger society. What is new as far as the advocates of Hindutva are concerned is that they have begun to conceive tribes solely in terms of religion. Yet, even here the proponents of Hindutva represent a position, which is different from the colonial point of view.

The colonial tradition classified tribes as animists, a pointer that they belonged to a religious tradition other than that of the major religions of India. The advocates of Hindutva, however, conveniently overlook this fact and categorise them as Hindus. They have, however, not stopped there. In view of their new orientation to the conception of tribe, they have begun denying the status of tribes to those who otherwise belong to the same ethnic group, speak the same language, share the same social organisation but practice and adhere to other than the Hindu religious traditions. Such an articulation, hitherto dormant and latent, has come into surface in the recent attacks on tribal Christians in India. As media coverage on attacks on the Christians details, it was time and again, forcefully and aggressively articulated by the activists of the Sangh parivar that the tribals cease to be tribes once they became Christians. It was also argued that they must identify themselves as Christians and not as tribes, when they apply for jobs and other benefits from the government. The implication is that when they become Christians, they cease to be tribes and therefore ineligible to apply for state benefits as tribes.²

Now such a conception of tribes not only goes against the general anthropological understanding of tribes but also against the basic conception and spirit underlying the Indian Constitution. Individuals belonging to certain groups have been identified as tribes not because they belong to particular religion but because they belong to a group or community, which has been enumerated as scheduled tribes in the Indian Constitution. These groups or communities are categorised as scheduled tribes not because they practise a particular religion but because they constitute a particular community distinct from the dominant regional community. They generally speak their own languages; have a distinct social organisation and a way of life that is quite different from that of the regional community.

It is a paradox that the historical and anthropological understanding of tribes, which is so dominant in social science literature, has had little role in impacting the thinking of the people, including the intelligentsia, about tribes in the post-independence era. Indeed, the political and administrative practices about tribes is coloured more by general thinking than that stemming from social science inquiry. The dominant social science thinking on tribes moves in one direction and the dominant political and administrative thinking and practices in another. This is contrary to the way anthropology had functioned under colonialism. Anthropology had then been seen as a tool in the pursuit of the colonial interest and was therefore regarded as the handmaiden of the colonial state. In the post-colonial phase, however, the role of anthropological writings, in shaping state policy and strategy towards tribes, notwithstanding the presence in the state administration of noted anthropologists as advisors or administrators, has almost been negligible unless it has been convenient to the dominant political thinking about the tribes. The state policies and administrative practices towards tribes in respect of language, culture and religion are, for example, contrary to anthropological understanding and pronouncement on the subject. These issues have been taken up later for discussion.

Challenges to Social Science Concepts and Theories

The thinking enunciated by Ghurye and advocated aggressively by the Sangh parivar has far-reaching implications on the way tribes have been discussed and understood in social science inquiry so far. That it will also have a significant bearing on the future course of policies and programmes on tribal question in India can hardly be denied.

The categorisation of tribes as Hindus leads to difficulties both conceptual and empirical. To begin with, whether tribes are to be treated as Hindus is a debatable question. There are both similarities and differences in the religious practices of the Hindus and tribes. The protagonists of Hindutva have, however, conveniently overlooked the differences. Even on similarities, it is not tenable to treat tribes as Hindus. The similarities have been drawn based on two sources. One is the influence of Hinduism on tribes and the other is similarity due to the fact that both are, to a greater or lesser extent natural religions [Bose 1941; Elwin 1960; Ghurye 1963].³ There is no doubt that there has been much give and take between the two religions. However the influence of Hinduism on tribes, though present, is not an adequate ground for describing tribes as Hindus. The other aspect that is alluded to is the dimension of natural religion. As a natural religion, tribal religion shares many attributes in common with Hinduism as with the religious practices of tribes in Americas or Africa as well.⁴ Yet, it is doubtful if the religious practices of tribes in Americas or Africa can be described as Hinduism or that these tribes can be alluded to as Hindus. To categorise tribes as Hindu in India therefore smacks of cultural and religious expansionism. Just because there are some similarities, tribals cannot be denied their distinct identity and autonomy. It is important to note that religion does not only include practices. It also includes ideas and beliefs. However this is completely glossed over even by the sociologists and social anthropologists in their discussion and analysis of tribal religions. That tribes

have their own world view is not granted any place in such deliberation.⁵

Secondly, if tribes are to be regarded as Hindus then the whole historical process depicted by the historians to understand Indian civilisation is open to contest and even rejection. The same would be the case with the conceptual apparatus of Hinduisation, acculturation, assimilation, absorption that has been developed and used to understand the dynamics of Indian society. Hinduism is intricately linked with the structure of caste and it is not so much against religion as against caste that the social organisation of tribes has generally been posited in social science literature. This makes it impossible for a tribal to be Hindu and a member of a tribe at the same time. He can be Hindu only at the risk of losing the tribal status. The two cannot go together. He can of course acquire a new status but that is of caste rather than that of tribe. That is, how social scientists including historians and anthropologists, have viewed social change among the tribes [Bose 1941; Sinha 1962,1987; Kosambi 1975]. The implication is that in social science literature tribes and Hindus are two incompatible entities at least at the point of departure for analysis and understanding. However, it is precisely this view that the right wing political thinking has been questioning. Thus social science inquiry on the one hand and the dominant political thinking on the other seem to be at loggerheads with each other with regard to how tribes are conceptualised and understood. While this is so, it is worthwhile to note that the social science literature does not deny the process of Hinduisation and their eventual transformation as Hindus. However, this process is viewed as the end point and not as the starting point that one encounters in Ghurye's formulation (1963).

Constitutional Provisions

Recognition of Differences

The difference in conceptualisation gave rise to two conflicting views in regard to the policy to be adopted towards tribes in India. These have been more popularly identified as either the policies of isolation or assimilation. The former is attributed to Elwin though many colonial administrator-ethnographers also largely shared it. The latter is associated with Ghurye. The two positions were of course connected with the conception of tribes that was espoused but did not exclusively draw on that understanding. There were anthropologists who shared Ewin's conception of tribes but did not necessarily argue the line that Elwin did. Nor did they partake in Ghurye's viewpoint. It is generally believed the two subsequently abandoned their respective positions and argued more in favour of integration than isolation or assimilation. It is of course somewhat puzzling that Ghurye should have advocated the policy of assimilation given the conception he had of tribes. To argue that tribes were not non-Hindus, as he advocated, entailed tribes as being an integral part of the larger society. In a sense, then, the advocacy of assimilation seemed redundant. His avocation was more of a ploy to counter the position being articulated by Elwin.

In the first few decades after independence, the dominating tone of deliberation among scholars, administrators, social workers and the politicians on the tribal question has been to facilitate their integration with the larger society. Since then national leaders, planners, academicians and bureaucrats have been

talking of the state policy towards tribes as one of integration. It is a different matter that there exists no formal statement or document in regard to policy to be adopted towards tribes in post-independence India.

The state policies and attitudes towards tribes could, however, be discerned from the kind of provisions laid down for tribes in the Indian Constitution. The special provisions for tribes among other things included the provision of statutory recognition, proportionate representation in legislatures, right to use their own language for education and other purposes, the right to profess the faith of one's choice or freedom of faith and development-economic and social-according to their own abilities. The Constitution had also clauses that enabled the state to make a provision for reservations of jobs and appointments in favour of tribal communities. Alongside such provisions, the directive principles of the Constitution required that the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections in society, including tribals, be especially promoted. Besides, there were provisions in the Constitution that empowered the state to bring areas inhabited by tribes under the fifth or the sixth schedule for purposes of special treatment in respect of the administration of tribal people.

Now if one reads the provisions contained in the Constitution for its citizens and the special provisions meant for the tribes carefully, one finds that the provisions made therein point to an approach that may be sociologically described and captured by the term 'integration'. The provisions in regard to reservations in education, employment, political representation and the administration of the tribal areas as well as the provisions laid down in the directive principles of the Constitution, for example, aim at bringing tribes closer to the larger Indian society. At the same time, the Constitution has provisions, which aim not only at protecting and safeguarding their language, culture and tradition but also to promote them. In this sense, the overall thrust of the Indian Constitution towards tribes is one of integration rather than assimilation. Although the meaning of integration may be understood in different ways, the underlying assumption is that it provides space for diversity, unlike assimilation, which extends no such space. The conception of assimilation entails that the small minority must give up its culture in favour of the dominant majority. It is a paradox that notwithstanding constitutional provisions no official document exists where the policy of integration is explicitly stated or discussed. Yet, integration is often chanted as tribal policy in India, of course not without reason. After all, as noted down earlier in the discussion, the Constitution does make provision for the protection and promotion of tribal languages and cultures. Of course, often the national leadership, planners and administrators take the principles, Nehru enunciated in a foreword to Elwin's book (1960) entitled *A Philosophy for NEFA*, 'as statement of the national policy towards tribes'. It is rather intriguing that national policy has to be sought in a book rather than in an official government document. The ambiguity of policy is, of course, advantageous for the state. The state can deploy it, as and when it finds it convenient. Further, it is doubtful if principles enunciated by Nehru could be taken as the national principles. After all, these principles never formed the guiding spirit of tribal development for mainland India. It was at best a guide for the development of north-east India especially the sixth schedule areas and the erstwhile NEFA. Indeed, it would not be out of place if one was to treat Nehru's principles as nothing more than the

explication of the rationale underlying the provisions of the Constitution's sixth schedule.

Constitutional Provisions vs Actual Practice

What is stated in the Constitution, laws and statutes is one thing and what actually happens is quite another. Often there are gaps between what is stipulated and promised and what is actually done. Such gaps are more pronounced in situations where the beneficiaries happen to be small, backward, inarticulate and dominated, as has been the case with the tribals in India. Their future is, therefore, contingent upon the benevolence of the larger Indian society especially its leadership. Often, however, the leadership has not shown such benevolence. Tribes, after all have never been put or seen in the same footing as members of the larger society in terms of their access to rights, whether civil, political or social. They have been seen invariably as those who have had to make place for the larger society and the agencies that spearhead their interest, viz, the state.

Despite lofty ideals proclaiming the protection and welfare of the tribal people in the Indian Constitution and also legislation, the actual developments have moved in the direction opposite of what has actually been promised. Indeed, the achievements of the state in this have been relatively more pronounced in the direction of extending civil and political rights to tribes vis-a-vis the larger society into which they have been drawn. The gains have been thus more in the direction of bringing tribes closer to the state and larger Indian society through measures such as reservation in politics, education and government employment. However, the lack of achievement has been most striking precisely in the domain that aimed at protecting tribal culture and tradition, so crucial to the ethos of the integration that scholars and administrators eloquently refer to as the national tribal policy. The protection of their lands and the life support system has been poorly implemented but at least there has been some symbolic effort in this regard both in terms of legislation and implementation [Singh 1986].

It is obvious that the spirit of the Constitution recognises the distinct cultural features of tribes especially in respect to language. Therefore, it talks of protection and promotion of this aspect. At the same time as a part of the integrating process into the larger Indian society and polity, tribes are conferred citizenship rights. As citizens, tribes too had fundamental rights like members of any other group. Tribals, therefore, have a right to freedom of expression and faith as a part of their civil rights. And yet, the actual social reality has often denied such rights. I shall illustrate from the contexts of tribal language and religion. According to Article 29 of the Constitution, a cultural or linguistic minority has the right to conserve its language and culture. The article provides protection to scheduled tribe communities to preserve their language, dialects and cultures. It also says that the state would not by law enforce upon it any other culture or language. Further, Article 350a provides for facilities for instruction through the mother tongue at the primary stage of education. Yet, no effort whatsoever has been made so far by the federal state or the provincial states towards safeguarding tribal languages, let alone promoting them. Education in all provinces/states, even at the primary level, has been imparted in the language of the dominant community. There were, of course, instances in states like undivided Bihar where primers

were prepared in some tribal languages for pedagogic purposes in the mother tongues but these were allowed to rot in government godowns.

One may argue that the Constitution has given tribals certain rights. Hence, it is left to the tribals themselves to take care of their culture. As far as the state is concerned it will not come in the way and it may even give assistance in the form of grants and infrastructure. Well, if this is so it is perhaps too much of an expectation from communities that have poor literacy levels. At the same time it is worth noting that governments have been far from neutral in regard to language or languages. The dominant regional languages has been actively supported and promoted by the respective state governments. However, a level playing field does not exist for tribal languages despite provisions in the Constitution. At the same time, regional politics has worked more in the direction of giving tribals a regional identity shaped by the dominant language speaking people, often at cross purposes with their cultural orientations. Looking at the tribals' access to resources/facilities, whether in politics or employment or education, they are invariably excluded on the grounds that they belong to a different ethnicity. In short, in certain contexts or for certain purposes, the thrust is towards absorption, which entails their inclusion into the dominant society. In other contexts or for other purposes the difference is not only maintained but also covertly employed to deny, to discriminate and even to segregate them from securing access to a wider social and cultural relationship. What obtains is strategic deployment of difference.

The domain of religion is another area where the distinctiveness of tribes is denied by the state. As observed earlier, one of the important criteria used for the delineation of communities as tribes was religion. Generally tribes were identified and delineated vis-a-vis the larger Indian society, which practised primarily Hinduism but there were adherents of other religions as well. In contrast, tribes were described as those who practised animism. However, those who practised animism also represented different kinds of social organisation, languages, customs, traditions and social practices. These were implicit and not explicitly articulated in the delineation of tribes.

Since the inception of separate religious electorates in 1909, the politics of religion has gained momentum. There has been an increasing articulation among Hindu organisations to return everyone of doubtful status as Hindu. Hence tribes were being mobilised by these organisations to enumerate themselves as Hindus rather than as animists or as practising tribal religion as was the case in the earlier census exercises. A synoptic and insightful view of this politics vis-a-vis tribes is available in Sundar's account of the Indian census [Sundar 1999:109-110]. The enumeration of tribes as animists and the classification of tribal religion continued until the 1941 census when it was replaced by those of 'tribal origin'. However, soon after independence, both 'tribal origin' and 'tribal religion/animism' as the basis of enumeration was done away with. Instead, tribals began to be enumerated as Hindus if they were not adherents of other major religions. Indeed, one may say that this is the post-independence method of tribal absorption. In the earlier method of tribal absorption, whether conceived by Bose (1941) or Kosambi (1975) or Sinha (1962, 1987) or even Srinivas (1977), the agency was with tribes and to that extent they had the freedom to be or not to be absorbed. Bose (1941) described the method of tribal absorption as the Hindu method. The Hindu method continues in the post-independence era but with a difference. That is, in the

earlier method, the absorption took place by means of economic cooperation and security and to that extent the absorption was voluntary. However, in the post-independence era, the absorption has been through the state's administrative practices, which gives no choice to the tribals of pronouncing their religion (tribal religion) in terms other than those of the major religions. A non-violent coercion has thus been built into the absorption process.

Articulation of Difference and Identity

The dominant line of thinking in social science inquiries recognises difference as the hallmark of a distinct tribal identity. However, the interaction with non-tribes poses the problematic of coming to terms with difference. The interaction, as discussed earlier, eventually leads to their absorption into the larger society. At the administrative level, notwithstanding constitutional provisions towards protection and promotion of the tribal languages and cultures, the unstated state administrative practices both at the federal and state levels have been geared towards their absorption into the larger society. This has been most evident in practices pertaining to tribal languages and religions. The former has been under the jurisdiction of the states and hence forms part of the regional states' administrative practices. The domain of religion lies in the jurisdiction of the federal administrative structure and practice. The decision to enumerate tribes as Hindus by abandoning the earlier practice of enumerating them under 'tribal religion' category was taken at the federal administrative level. Paradoxically, the decision coincides with the adoption of a Constitution, which provides safeguards to tribes in regard to their language, culture and tradition. Such administrative practices at the central and state levels were the result of the larger regional and national politics. Regional politics aimed at consolidating its regional-linguistic and cultural identity by absorbing tribes into it. The national politics, on the other hand, aimed at consolidating the Hindu national political identity, which has aggressively and coercively been articulated since the 1930s.

Notwithstanding attempts at absorption both by central and state level administrative practices for the last 50 years, the attainment of constitutional objectives is still elusive and apparently is going to be even more elusive in the future. That this is so, is evident from the kinds of assertions that we have been witnessing among tribes in different parts of the country today. Of course, such assertions are not even. They vary in extent as well as in degree. Whereas they are pronounced in some regions and among some tribes they are markedly absent in other regions and tribes. However, what is noteworthy is that assertions are on the rise and are at the forefront in the political arena. They can be seen at different levels but are the most discernible in respect of land and forest, language and culture issues as well as identity and autonomy. In a way the assertions of different kinds and at many levels are the result of the increasing social consciousness of differences and identity among tribes. Interestingly this stating of identity is taking shape at a time and phase when tribal society is becoming increasingly socially differentiated.

The differentiation within tribes is visible in all directions. One can, for example, see it in respect of landholding, which was not the case earlier. Most tribal societies have now become differentiated into the landless; agricultural labourers owing some land; marginal farmers small farmers; middle farmers and even rich farmers in a limited sense [Shah 1992; Pathy 1984]. In terms of occupation they are now differentiated into cultivators,

agricultural labourers, industrial workers, white-collar/salaried workers and even shopkeepers, traders and transporters among some tribes like the khasis, jaintias, mizos, etc. Tribes are also differentiated in terms of access to education, income/wealth and political power and so on. Even at the religious and cultural level one can see much differentiation among tribes today. Such differentiation is not so much due to forces from within as from outside. For example the agrarian differentiation, viz, differentiation in regard to access to land is more due to land alienation arising from fraud, deceit, indebtedness and also state-sponsored projects leading to large-scale displacement of tribes from their lands and resources [Singh 2002; Fernandes and Paranjpye 1997]. Again occupational differentiation has been largely due to state policies and practises especially reservation in the sphere of education, government employment and political power [Xaxa 2001]. Such differentiation at work is, however, still small and limited. At the same time, small though they may be, social differentiation has caused considerable fragmentation of tribal society. The social solidarity that tribes once enjoyed has come under stress and strain due to differentiation along the axes of religious, political/ideological, economic and social divides.

Despite fragmentation of tribal society due to social differentiation, the assertion of tribal identity is on rise. This has been largely due to the emergence of a middle class within tribal society. With the emergence of a middle class, the issue of culture, tradition, livelihood, even control over land and resources as well as a demand for a share in the benefits of the projects of modernity has become an integral part of identity articulation among tribes. In the not-so-distant past, the emerging middle class had moved in the direction of acculturation into the larger society through such processes as sanskritisation and Hinduisation. Through such processes the distinctiveness of tribal society and hence its identity was put at stake. However, now one can discern a reverse process, which has more to do with alternative avenues of social mobility and social change among tribals. This was mainly due to opening up of the opportunities presented by modern education and modern occupation [Orans 1965].

The emergence of the middle class is largely the result of the spread of modern education among the tribals for this has made possible their entry into government and non-government services. Tribes were ably aided into this through the provision of reservation, which were available not only for employment purposes but also in higher education and politics. These measures and avenues made possible the emergence of the middle class [Datta Ray 1983].

Now the increasing assertion of tribals seen in recent years is due to the cleavages and conflicts between tribes and non-tribes, which have become sharper in the post-independent years of India's development. In the early phase of tribes' encounter with non-tribes in the early colonial period, conflict between tribes and non-tribes had invariably assumed the form of a revolt, a rebellion and insurrection. Tribal society then was homogeneous and also had a strong sense of solidarity. The alien rule and its presence were considered illegitimate and hence had to be overthrown. However, with the consolidation and expansion of colonial rule in the tribal regions, the winds of change began to blow also among the tribals. The process of change began to move in all directions.

As pointed earlier, tribes had seen earlier only one kind of change, which was in the direction of absorption into caste society. British rule did facilitate increased contacts between

tribes and non-tribes because of improved means of communication as well as the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation. All the same the change in this direction had a limited scope. Rather, the British rule in the tribal areas also opened up space for change in another direction. In the process, the changes in the direction of caste and therefore Hinduism experienced a setback, if not a total halt. This was so mainly because Hindus were no longer able to provide protection to tribals that Bose (1941) had considered to be so important. Instead, it led to the domination and subjugation of tribes on the one hand and their oppression and exploitation on the other. Instead of becoming cooperative, Hindu practices now appeared competitive and exploitative vis-a-vis the tribals.

There were other factors that arrested this development as well. Of these the administrative and political concessions extended by the colonial state and the spread of modern education introduced by the Christian missionaries, often with the help of the colonial state, were the most decisive. While with the Hindus, the interaction was now fraught with cleavage and conflict; the relation to the Christian missionaries was seen as holding out potential. The Christian missionaries sought to address the problems created by the movement of the Hindu population into tribal areas. It was, therefore, hardly surprising that in several instances, tribes were attracted to the Christian faith. By posing the issues of exploitation, oppression and domination and by addressing matters of health, disease, education and language, Christianity heightened the contrasting identity of tribes as against those of the larger society, especially the caste Hindus. It is, therefore, not surprising that Christian missionaries have been accused of depriving the 'aborigines' of their Hindu heritage or obstructing the natural absorption of tribes into Hinduism.

The problems faced by tribes during the colonial period in the form of the loss of control over land and other resources due to alienation of land to non-tribes and the state-sponsored displacement projects has continued unabated in the post-independence period. In addition, tribals have been confronted with other problems as well. While the post-Independent India made well-meaning provisions and legislation for the protection, welfare and development of the tribal people, actual practices have belied this hope. On the contrary, tribes today experience deprivation, oppression, exploitation and discrimination in almost all fields of life. The government response to the problems of tribes has either been lukewarm, indifferent or even hostile. Such an experience has been most strongly felt by the emerging middle class. That explains why there has been increasing assertion of an identity among tribes that now have a sizeable middle class.

Underlying the new mobilisation is the discriminatory treatment meted out to tribes by the dominant population or the state, which actually acts on behalf of the former. Hence there has been an increasing assertion by tribals for rights and control over land and other resources in the form of mobilisation against alienation of land and state induced displacement projects. What we have been witnessing is the articulation for greater political power in the form of a struggle for autonomy, which has more often than not moved in the direction of a demand for separate state either within the Indian union or even outside of it. The articulation of identity has, however, not been confined to the autonomy movement. It is visible in another direction as well. The promotion and revitalisation of tribal languages and the creation of primers, literature and even introducing the tribal language in primary

schools has been voiced. Connected to it is the search or development of a script as has been the case with the santhals or the Tripuri speaking tribes in Tripura. The choosing of the script from among scripts tribals are familiar with has also formed a part of identity articulation as with the Bodos of Assam.⁶ The identity articulation has more to do with the drawing of distinctions between tribes and non-tribes with a view to gaining more economic and political powers, howsoever limited it may be. The movement connected with language and tradition on the other hand, is primarily concerned with enriching the content of the identity created in the process of interaction between tribes and non-tribes.

The articulation of identity is again most pronounced among tribes where an educated middle class has emerged. However, the consciousness evident in such articulation is not the consciousness of tribe as a category but consciousness of being a people different from the others and especially the dominant regional community. The identity manifest in this latter kind of articulation is one of being either a santhal or khasi or bodo, who are at the more general level, described as tribes. Whereas the articulation of tribal identity has taken a more generic name such as the naga, kuki, adivasi, etc, when it concerns securing political rights.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding constitutional provisions of securing the development of the tribes without violence to their languages and cultures, actual social reality has been quite the contrary. There has been aggressive incorporation of tribes into the language and religion of the dominant regional community. Yet, in respect of providing tribals' access to the fruits of development, such incorporation has been on the whole avoided and even resisted. Over and above this, the access they had over land, forest and other resources has been usurped without any tangible benefits in return. These constitute the structural settings of identity politics among tribes in India.

Identity politics among tribes have generally been described as the politics of tribal identity, but such a description is a misnomer. Apparently there is a rupture between the way tribal social consciousness is represented by the tribal people themselves and the way it is represented by scholars, administrators and others. The latter invariably describe tribal identity as the means of describing these people. However such articulation/expression of identity is not coterminous with the consciousness of the tribals. Tribals often have no idea of the category of scheduled tribes or its Hindi or regional-language counterparts, such articulation is a part of legal and administrative practices. The articulation of a tribal identity also related primarily to the state and its resources or the benefits that it may make available. Hence, it emerges more in the context of tribal peoples' relations with the state, facilities of reservation and other form of affirmative action. In the domain of social and cultural life this does not enter as part of the consciousness. Hence tribal consciousness is more a middle class consciousness than the consciousness of tribals at large. ■■

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Notes

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- 1 During the attack on Christians in Dang district of Gujarat in November-December 1998, the activists of the Sangh parivar made forcefully this point in the television programmes telecast on the subject
- 2 This point too was made during discussions in the television programmes.
- 3 The similarities have been shown and discussed in the census report by the colonial administrators in the census reports. Ghurye quotes them profusely in his work on tribes.
- 4 Terms used to describe tribal religion in India are the same as used in the context of tribal religion in other parts of the world. The classical anthropological works point to it.
- 5 Most of the scholars who have talked of tribes' transformation to castes have done so more on the basis of practices/rituals than their world-view or belief system.
- 6 Script developed by the santhals is known as Ol Chiki. Kak-Barok is the script developed and used for the Tripuri speaking tribes of Tripura. Among the Bodos, there is an increasing articulation for the use of Roman script in place of Assamese to mark off their distinct identity.

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ALLAHABAD BANK

Faster Growth, Higher Profitability and Enhanced Efficiency

Allahabad Bank, the oldest joint stock bank of its kind in the country, was founded in Allahabad on April 24, 1865. It grew from strength to strength, reaching the present network of 1,944 branches and business of Rs 57,508 crore.

The bank pulled through many years of crises, including the great global depression. In 1920, the P and O Banking Corporation made an offer of affiliation with a bid price of Rs 436 per share. In 1927, the bank went into the fold of Chartered Bank. The bank was nationalised on July 19, 1969 along with 13 other banks with a network of 151 branches and deposits and advances of Rs 114 crore and Rs 82 crore, respectively. United Industrial Bank was amalgamated with the bank in 1989. Taking cue from financial sector reforms, Allahabad Bank laid thrust on technology, efficiency, profitability, customer service, risk management, non-performing assets management, diversification, etc, apart from strengthening internal control system and house-keeping. In October 2002, the Allahabad Bank offered its initial public issue of Rs 100 crore of 10 crore shares.

Total business of the bank more than doubled during last five years from Rs 23,076 crore at March 1999 to Rs 47,865 crore as of March 2004. Total business grew significantly by 22.9 per cent during 2003-04 with deposits and advances growth of 23.6 per cent and 21.5 per cent, respectively. The spurt in business can be attributed to accelerated retail credit expansion through its designated retail banking boutique channel, faster expansion of rural credit, product innovation and marketing and technology-backed customer services.

The bank booked a net profit of Rs 463.38 crore and operating profit of Rs 876 crore in 2003-04. The net profit of the bank has zoomed by more than 200 per cent during last three years. The boost in profitability is due to quality asset portfolio, optimisation of operating expenses and focus on fee-based income generation. The endeavours of the bank for generation of fee based income in recent years include offering cash management services, depository services and bancassurance under tie-up arrangement with various institutions of repute.

Technology and networking has been focused to modernise banking services, reduce transactions cost and facilitate timely flow of information. Allahabad Bank has 1,092 mechanised branches and extension counters and 91 ATMs as of now.

The bank has decided to go for Centralised Banking Solution (CBS) and has drawn up plan to ensure that all the branches participate in CBS directly or indirectly. It has established Link from Payment Gateway to RBI for ensuring Real Time Gross Settlement (RTGS). Leased lines have been established in nine cities for offering Structured Financial Messaging System (SFMS). During the nine-month ending December 2004, the net profit and operating profit of Allahabad Bank amounted to Rs 462.47 crore and Rs 851.58 crore, respectively. The net NPA's declined to 1.48 per cent while capital adequacy ratio stood at 12.11 per cent as at December 2004. Return on assets was 1.46 per cent and earnings per share amounted to Rs 17.79.

The 140-year old Allahabad Bank has the innate strength to stand the test of time. In this era of competition, the bank is striving hard to achieve global competitiveness.