

# The Tribal Question in India

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*The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of tribal struggles.*  
--Anonymous, with apology to Marx and Engels.

World's first flower of democracy bloomed in ancient Greece, in the wake of a military innovation. The manufacture of weapons had advanced considerably. The city-states now had the technology to equip large armies instead of relying on a small aristocratic squadron of charioteers. They began to deploy heavily armed infantry replacing the old-fashioned warriors who had fought in single combat. Warfare could no longer be the privilege of the nobility. Henceforth anybody who could afford to equip himself with the requisite weapons (*hopla*)—be he lord or farmer—could join this prestigious troop, regardless of rank or birth. With the hoplite army, a new equality was born.

Hoplite fighting was distinguished by the phalanx, a tightly packed body of men, standing shoulder to shoulder, eight deep. Each soldier held his circular shield to protect his left side and gripped the right shoulder of the man next to him. The hoplite army was a people's army: the citizenry had become an army. The hoplite reform transformed Greece and laid the foundations of deliberatively constituted democracy. A farmer who fought next to a nobleman in the phalanx would never see the aristocracy in the same way again.

In 510 BC, Sparta attacked Athens. Led by Cleisthenes, son of a tyrant, the Athenians expelled the invaders, and installed him as city magistrate. Within three years startling reforms were introduced. Cleisthenes abolished the traditional myriad of *tribes* and reassigned everyone to ten units often, thereby transforming a tribal city into a city-state that grew into the strongest military, commercial, artistic, and intellectual power along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Virtually the same reform would produce even more astonishing results for the Mongols on the steeps of Inner Asia, near two thousand years hence.

Members to the people's legislative council were elected annually from the middle classes, and could hold office only twice in their lifetime. As a result most farmers, artisans, and merchants would serve on the council at some point, and thus become citizens in an entirely new and meaningful way. This was the most egalitarian polity yet devised, and it had an electrifying effect on the Greek world. That was the first organized form of democracy in the world. Who did it? The reorganized *tribals* of Athens did it over two-thousand-five-hundred centuries ago.

The anthropology and history of tribes had been composed largely by appointed scribes at the service of colonists. By their emphasis on the destructive aspects of a tribe's campaign, and their neglect of its contribution to trade, discovery, and the political and cultural institutions of the countries affected, chroniclers produced a picture at once incomplete, lurid, and distorted. As a result the common conception of tribal life, even now remains hazy, if not confused, hence polarized—idyllic at one extreme, wretched at the other.

India today confronts challenges from a radical insurgency commonly known as *Maoist* (Communist Party of India (Maoist)), or *Naxal* (after the armed

struggle beginning in Naxalbari, West Bengal, 1967) centered at present in the forests that are mostly home of tribals. So the insurgency is regarded as virtually a *tribal* uprising, adding apparently a new chapter in the annals of tribes across the globe, being not a campaign to conquer land or colonize the natives, but an ambitious struggle to capture political power and achieve social and economic justice for all.

In this article, the curtain rises with a global scene of the tribes which are among those who have paved the way for the modern civilization. The next scene shows the variety of contributions made by some tribes in India, and some others who are now isolated and branded as 'tribals'. With this comprehensive perspective, one should look at the current events flowing from the tribes' unrest in India. What to do now, that is the question before the government, the people, and the Naxals.

### **MAKERS OF CIVILIZATION**

*The most civilized nations of modern Europe issued 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.*

—Edward Gibbon.

The term 'tribe' in English derived from Latin *tribus* referring to the original tripartite ethnic division of the Roman state. Many anthropologists use it for societies organized largely on the basis of kinship. Here in India, officially, 'a tribe is an administrative and political concept.'<sup>1</sup> What is missing in this approach is the social and economic aspect of tribehood.

To comprehend the nature and variety of tribes a sample of six has been taken : three of Europe, viz. Vikings, Goths, and Vandals; two from Asia, viz. Scythians, and Mongols : one from America, viz. the Natives of the United States. The first five are the epitome of ingenuity, creative destruction, and domination: the last one is a victim of brute power and exploitation. What makes such difference among them?

*Vikings* : England was founded by tribes—Germanic and Scandi-navian—since the 5th century AD. This island owes its name to a Germanic tribe, the Angles. Explorer, warrior, merchant, and pirate, the Viking of Scandinavia, colonized wide areas of Europe between 8th and 11th centuries. He sailed most of the North Atlantic, reached south of North Africa and east Russia, Constantinople and the Middle East. The Viking landed in North America, and set up a short-lived settlement in Canada. The three centuries of Viking dominance is remembered in history as the Viking Age. Geographically, the Viking Age may be assigned not only to Scandinavian lands (modern Denmark, Norway, Sweden), but also the adjacent territories under North Germany.

It was the pressure of history, geography, and economics, and their religion and seafaring arts, which made the Vikings distinctive in their day. The population had outgrown agricultural potential of their Scandinavian homeland. For a coastal people with superlative naval technology, it made sense to expand overseas in the face of youth bulge effect at home.

Trade between western Europe and the rest of Eurasia suffered as the Roman Empire fell in the 5th century. The rise of Islam in the 7th century had affected

trade with the western Europe. By opening new routes the Vikings profited in many ways including commerce.<sup>2</sup>

*Goths* : Barbarians of “the woods of Germany”. Goths and Vandals are arguably the senior cousins of Vikings; the three had their roots in Scandinavia. They had worshiped in the town Upsal of Sweden at the same temple of three principal deities: the god of war (Thor), the goddess of fertility, and the god of thunder—a religion adapted to the climate and the people. Goths and Vandals are cited by chroniclers more often for their “barbarianism” in combat than their continuation of Roman culture in Late Antiquity, and their long-lasting kingdoms in North Africa.

Goths launched one of the first major invasions of the Roman Empire in 262. By 271 the force was defeated, and some of the survivors were settled within the empire, while another part joined the Roman army. The Goth nation would rise again and plunder Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. They sacked Rome in 410, and came to rule most of the Iberian Peninsula, only to yield to the Muslim Umayyad invasion in 711.

*Vandals* : During the late 5th century, Vandals entered the late Roman Empire and looted Rome in 455. Although their pillage did not exceed that of the other invaders of ancient times, the modern writers blamed the Vandals for the event. This led to the coinage of ‘vandalism’, meaning senseless spoiling, especially defacing of artworks.

The Vandal conquest of the North African coast was a strategic move, to raid the Mediterranean Sea, much like the Vikings. They built a fleet to plunder the Mediterranean.

This brief narrative of the three tribes shows that success in a project affecting other peoples requires certain comparative advantage, superior capability. Three main elements, trade, piracy, and land-king, had been Norse activities long before the Viking Age. The quick-in quick-out Viking raids could hardly been possible until the Scandinavian shipwrights had brought the sailing-ship to a higher degree of excellence. For the long Atlantic voyages, the first requisite was the mariner’s ability to fix his latitude. The advanced technology of the Vikings gave the sun’s midday latitude week by week throughout the year. This or similar information recorded on so simple an object as a marked stick would give the mariner an indication of his then latitude as compared with a known place. Any observation of the midday sun, or if need be of the Polar Star, even by so crude a method as the measurement of a shadow cast at noon or the calculation of the Star’s height above the horizon expressed in terms of one’s own arm, hand, or thumb was a fair guide of latitude, which on the western voyages was more important than longitude.

*Scythians* : Horse-riding nomadic pastoral, Scythians were an ancient Iranian (Persian) group of tribes who arrived from Caucasus. Asians knew them as Shaka. India today has two systems of dating, one the familiar Gregorian calendar of BC/AD and the other based on the Shaka era which is reckoned to have begun in India in 78 AD. Shakas receive numerous mentions in Indian texts including the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Shakas segmented into a variety of junior kingdoms, i.e. satrapies, readily assimilated to Indian society, and made lasting impression. Rudradaman, the

Shaka king in north-west India, staunchly upheld *dharma*, possibly in imitation of Ashoka, with whose Edicts he happily shared rock-space. It was this Satrap-king who ushered in an unprecedented and great comeback of classical Sanskrit inspired as it was by his memorial being inscribed in classical Sanskrit rather than the conventional forms of Prakrit, Magadhi or Pali. Arguably, the Satrap's use of Sanskrit was a method followed to endear a ruler of foreign descent to the indigenous ruling class, 'to mitigate the lamentable choice of parents on the part of the Satrap (a Shaka king).' To be sure, the Sanskrit inscription soon became accepted by the rulers in Sumatra, Java, Indo-China, and other parts of Indianised south-east Asia. The employment of a prestige language lent distinction and authority even to the non-Indic dynasties.<sup>3</sup>

*Mongols* : Nurtured in the harsh winds of barren steppe, Genghis Khan built the Mongol Empire in the early 13th century. Unaware of the ancient Greek history, in the wilderness of Mongolia he had virtually replicated the model of tribal reform as of the classical Athens under Cleisthenes, cited above.

His army subjugated more lands and peoples in 25 years than the Romans did in four hundred. In nearly every country the Mongols conquered, they brought an unprecedented rise in cultural communication, expanded trade, and a blossoming of civilization. Vastly more progressive than his European and Asian counterparts, Genghis Khan abolished torture, granted universal religious freedom, and smashed feudal systems of aristocratic privilege. Grown up in a world of excessive tribal violence in Mongolia, he left behind the epic story of how the modern civilization was made.<sup>4</sup>

*Native Americans in the US*: In the 1995 US Census the indigenous tribes expressed preference to be known as Indians or American Indians, rather than the assigned particular name, Native Americans. To them, India is, not a tribute from the country of India, but derived from the Spanish expression *En Dio*, meaning "in God." The first colonist who entered the US was a Spanish explorer in year 1513.

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 within the country. These tribes possess the right to, among others, form their own government, to enforce laws (both civil and criminal), to tax, to license and regulate activities, to zone and to exclude persons from tribal territories. Limitations of tribal powers of self-government include the same limitations applicable to states; for example, neither tribes nor states have the power to make war, engage in foreign relations, or issue coins (this includes paper currency).

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 with a view to assimilate them to the general society. 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 and denied the right to practice their native religions, and in numerous other

ways forced to abandon their native identities and adopt European-American culture.

Far from forming a single ethnic group, the Native Americans are divided into several hundred ethnic-linguistic groups. Gambling has become a leading profession. Although many tribes have casinos, the impact is widely debated. Some tribes feel that casinos and their proceeds destroy culture from the inside out.

Economic status of the native Americans is grim. They rank at the bottom of nearly every statistics: highest teen suicide rate of all minorities, highest rate of teen pregnancy, highest high school drop out, lowest per capita income, and unemployment rates between 50% and 90%.

A classic report of the Harvard Project mentioned the barriers to economic development of the tribes. An incomplete list is as follows: lack of access to capital, poor natural resources in their territories, disadvantage due to the distance from markets and the high cost of transportation. And tribal culture gets on the way. "A general lack of education and experience about business is a significant challenge to prospective entrepreneurs."<sup>5</sup>

The six sets of tribes narrated in this section displays diverse propensities and varying degrees of success in their endeavors. One thing, though, is common : the real unbiased history of the tribes has not yet been written in full. Among all those sets, one shall see presently, the last one bears a good deal of conformity with the one that is going to be analyzed. The American Indian tribes and the South-Asian Indian tribes would look much like cousins in the book of history. Both were forced to serve as slaves, and both are not yet assimilated in their respective general societies.

### **A MODEL OF ANALYSIS**

*The entire course of Indian history shows tribal elements being fused into the general society—D D Kosamhi*

The pastoral Vedic age yielded to the agrarian era. The first major village settlement was promoted under state control. Chanakya, also known as Kautilya, the prime minister in the imperial court of Chandragupta Maurya in the late 4th century BC, described in his treatise *Arthashastra* the procedure of mobilizing the tribes to be herded into crown villages to toil on farmland as virtual slaves. "Agents provocateurs should gain access to all the tribes; discover the possible sources of jealousy, hatred, contention, among them; should disseminate the seeds of progressive dissension. Let those of higher rank, within the tribe, be discouraged from eating at a common table with, and marriage with, those of lower standing. Tribesmen of lower rank should, on the other hand, be instigated to insist upon commensality and intermarriage with the lower. The lesser should be provoked to claim equality of status in family and prowess. Public decisions and tribal custom should be brought to dissolution by insistence upon the contrary."

This episode of inhuman exploitation of tribes in ancient India resembles the fate of their American counterparts, more than two millennia later. In the 19th century, the incessant westward expansion of the United States incrementally compelled large numbers of Native Americans to resettle further west, often by force, almost always reluctantly. By the pressure of the Indian Removal Act of

1830, as many as 100,000 Native Americans relocated to the West, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands.

The next step in India would ossify the caste system and make the tribes destitute ever since. 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 stricture, 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.

History moves at three levels : (a) the one which is almost changeless, the history of man in relation to his natural surroundings ; (b) the second, a movement of gentle rhythms, of groups and groupings, which is the traditional social history ; and (c) the third, the history of not so much of man in general as of man in particular. In other words, history is shaped by the forces of nature, the structure of society, and the role of individuals. This formulation is a contribution by French thinkers, who consider it as a model of the Total History. Comparative reference among tribes can be better organized in the framework of Total History.<sup>6</sup> For example, the pathos of the tribals of India and those of the US had certain similarities in part because the social orders in the two countries had been arguably comparable in terms of the exercise of authority by the rulers. If the European colonists imposed their religion upon the American natives, the royal authority of the Maurya Empire in India had done about the same on the tribes in the labour-camps of crown villages.

### **DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESS**

*Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that all the great glories of man are mine.*

—Rabindranath Tagore.

The tribal insurgence inspired by the Naxals and Maoists is officially marked as the most serious internal threat to the security of the state of India. The rebels have declared their battle against the incumbent political regime.

But what would they replace it with; what would be their social, economic, political stance; all this is kept obscure, unknown to the people at large. An armed campaign that stands on mere negative ground, and is reticent about its positive aspects, if any does not bode public credibility. Power might flow from the barrels of guns, but it would find itself exhausted in no time once bullets fall short. Man does not live on politics alone.

To tame the adversaries, pundits and the government both offer a two-prong strategy : *Panchayat Raj*, and *Development*, in the *jangal mahal*, the forest habitat of tribals. To begin with, 'the historic, revolutionary pro-tribal legislation' the Panchayat (Extension of Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) was intended to bring a fresh air of democracy nourished with the tribals' active participation and enthusiasm. Far away from the centre of power and civilization, the thatched huts of the aborigines in jangals would flicker in dim light.

But the record of Native Americans dose not corroborate. They were granted even the power of Self-Determination, together with the rights on par with those that are enjoyed by federal states such as New York and California. Despite the enormous political mandates, the tribes languished in remote, isolated, introvert localities: bereft of markets, schools, colleges, universities, and above all, the scope of belonging to the universal civilization.

What is meant by *development* in this context? In the lists of government projects, development is measured by : construction of roads, digging tube-wells, building schools, hospitals, and the like—all these materials informed by a page of the 'materialistic interpretation of history.' the one that leaves out the individual human beings, which is the third element in the design of the Total History.

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.<sup>7</sup>

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.

Help every tribal child to become a poet, doctor, engineer, musician, postman, football player, or accountant, or a master of another profession of his or her choice. In this respect, the 5th Schedule of the Constitution of India seems restrictive to the possibilities of tribals. The tribes of India are fragmented, scattered, overburdened with innumerable dialects, lack of dialogue among themselves, and unfamiliar with the outside world. Don't keep them blind, tied in the darkness of the proverbial, primitive 'cave' of Plato.

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