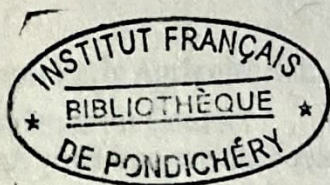


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The Other Indians

ESSAYS ON PASTORALISTS AND
PREHISTORIC TRIBAL PEOPLE



Shereen Ratnagar

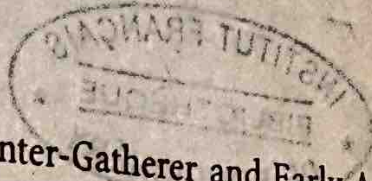


Three Essays
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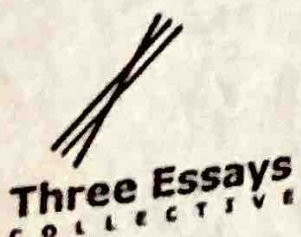
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OUR TRIBAL PAST

It is a privilege to speak for the Champa Foundation at a function that celebrates the lives of Amiya and B G Rao and their fifty years together in pursuit of the values that they set for themselves and nurtured, regardless of their place within or outside the official scheme of things. In the last few months,¹ the tribal people of the Narmada valley have had to face the bitter reality of the Supreme Court judgement; new states have been added to the Union to be managed, it appears in one case, by not tribespeople but multinationals and consultants' firms from Boston; I have chanced on the unthinkable degradation of Bhil women being subjected to trial by ordeal; and a spate of horrors has yet again been perpetrated on persons of the De-Notified and Nomadic Tribes in Maharashtra.

This paper is on tribes as a kind of society, and the glimpses of tribal life and its origins that the archaeological remains of very early periods can afford. Although prehistoric tribes must remain anonymous, archaeologists can discuss these early societies without reference to caste, peasantry, or mainstream civilization—the latter had not yet taken their shape. I will thus argue that the tribe has a reality in its own right and not as a creation of states, or something acquiring its identity from without, as 'not this' or 'not that'.

The notion of the 'tribe' is clouded with uncertainty today. Some people who are zealous about political correctness see the

term as pejorative, implying backwardness. Some believe that tribalism is an invention of British colonial rule.² Some find little difference between tribes and castes, or between tribal people and peasants. Academics, activists, state agencies, well-meaning postmodernists in the West, and academics, it appears to me, have contributed to major misunderstandings that have been carried over into education materials and popular perceptions.

The focus in this paper is tribalism as a level of social organization that pre-dates stratified class society. Tribes are characterized not by this or that race, habitat, or religious practice, but (in my understanding) by the bonding fabric of kinship and the joint ownership of the natural resources from which they make their living. Jointly held resources comprise agricultural land, wells, forest trees and game, river water, river fish, etc. There is no private property in these. Simply put, among the Meenas of Rajasthan it is the *thok* or patriline that owns agricultural fields, not individuals or even families. Bhilala villages in the hills flanking the Narmada valley are organic communities in that members have direct access to land, all members of the local lineage enjoying this right; they are united by kinship (common descent); and, with minimal occupational specialization, are in many ways self-sufficient.³ Among the Pathans, jointly owned land is periodically re-allotted to members, so that groups of families may shift to new lands, and the institution is known as *wesh*.⁴ Associated as it is with the ancestors, jointly held tribal land is, instead of a commodity, inalienable and all members by birth have rights to a share. Title to such land is a matter of prestige, not just a source of livelihood. A group that holds joint title to a tract exercises its sovereignty.⁵ Today, few tribes occupy coherent areas, speak their own language, or participate in a homogeneous economic structure, material culture, or set of social practices. Since the colonial period (if not earlier),

with states recognising individual ownership rather than lineage tenure of land, the fabric of kinship has been torn; tribal people have become individual owners or tenants, often indebted to landlords and money-lenders. Forest legislation has deprived many tribes of a traditional livelihood. Large-scale displacement in favour of tea plantations or irrigation projects has caused the fragmentation of groups, and scores of tribal languages have, in the last century or so, been obliterated. Sometimes only adherence to an ethnic identity survives. But this does not mean that in the social sciences the category of tribal society has to be junked.

Kinship bonds and joint tenure are logically interrelated. It is in the ideology of descent of all members from a common ancestor that closeness is expressed, and the morality of kinship makes it feasible to hold resources as a collective. Sometimes it is mutual aid in field labour (ploughing and sowing), such as the *lah* tradition of the Bhils, that is important: kinsmen take their ploughs and oxen to help one another, the host feeds his helpers, and is aware that in his turn and at the appropriate time he owes labour to others.⁶ In short, kinship is the relations of production.

Belief in descent from a common ancestor does not mean that tribes can be identified genetically, as our British rulers were prone to think. Common ancestry can be real or fictive. It means that no member is deprived of access to his/her group's resources, which were tended by the ancestors and have deep ancestral associations. And no member can dispose of these resources for private gain, or pump out water so that neighbours' wells run low. Individual rights are, as B.K. Roy Burman put it, 'embedded within communal rights'. In addition, as L.K. Mahapatra writes, the rules of joint ownership while not recorded in writing are known to all members of the group, and are recognized as legitimate. Such rules are not necessarily unvarying—rights of usage may be granted to

neighbours.⁷ Within the structure of kinship and communal tenure, social interactions are marked by relations of duties/obligations, respect/command, or senior/junior. (The bonds of kinship do not, however, confer equality on all members, as Xaxa states.⁸)

Not all tribespeople could ever be equal in industriousness, perseverance, ability, or social skills, and some are bound to be wealthier than others. But neither this nor distinctions between members on the basis of age or gender by itself makes for hierarchy or class divisions. The owner of the largest herd of cattle in a tribe would still have to adhere to existing norms of usage of pasture; so would any tribal chief. Success in agriculture does not give a tribal family special rights over the labour of others. Like others, chiefs provide food for those who labour for them. Thus there are no ruling elites, no states,⁹ no surplus extraction, no formally constituted institutions of dispute resolution.

Should we call our forest dwellers—or any other rural group—indigenous people (the twentieth-century term is *adivasi*)? I would say that to claim that the Aryan immigration of the second millennium BC was a watershed that divides indigenes from colonizers is fraught with problems. In no way can we prove, for example, that the Mahars are the aboriginal settlers of Maharashtra. There has not been uninterrupted settlement at the same villages since prehistoric times in any part of the country. Instead, we have archaeological evidence for abandonments of not only villages but entire regions; there would have been migrations and the colonization of new lands through the ages. Second, claims that forest dwellers are indigenous to their area disregard the fact that ethnic identities change over periods of time, and often imply that the forest dwellers have not changed since the stone ages—and that may be more pejorative than the nomenclature 'tribe'. (Of course the fact that the previous government had given up the term *adivasi*

and opted, for obvious reasons, for the term *vanavasi*, has little to do with archaeological or historical research.)

That there is no marked visible or structural distinction between tribespeople and peasants, as both struggle at the subsistence level, with household production, is true, but this applies to the ground realities of the present period. Peasants by definition live in a larger world dominated by urban centres and surplus-extracting elites, but not so tribal society.

When the concept of tribe is dismissed as a colonial construct, a pejorative with connotations of backwardness, the reason may be confusion arising from the state's definition of its Schedule of Tribes. This is often mistakenly read as the official definition of what is a tribe.¹⁰ Just as, to be included in the Schedule of Castes, a caste must have suffered untouchability and 'its resultant disabilities', so too, the Commission on SCs and STs says a group is included in the Schedule of Tribes if it has tribal origins, a 'primitive' way of life, habitation in remote and inaccessible areas, and is 'generally backward in all respects'.¹¹ By these criteria the state was creating an administrative category, a category of inclusion of groups in need of positive discrimination and protection.¹² It was not defining tribal society! Thus those who identified themselves as Hindus in the Census of 1931 were excluded from the Schedule of 1956, even though it was known that they were tribal. In fact in the 1901 and 1911 Censuses, tribes were distinguished as groups with common descent from a real or fictive ancestor and united by kinship, occupying a contiguous area, and not necessarily endogamous or associated with a specific occupation. (Caste, in contrast, was then understood as groupings marked by occupational specificity, endogamy, and commensality.)

Certainly state intervention has a shadowed history that may go back to the beginnings of the nineteenth century, when the

British were unnerved by the ferocity of the armed rebellions of tribal forest dwellers, in contrast to the docile middle classes. Perhaps that is why tribes were viewed from the start as a law-and-order problem, as 'wild' and 'primitive'. Indian administration has taken note also of the fact of the separation of tribes from mainstream society. Far from being a function of some imagined necessary habitat in remote forests,¹³ separation is probably logically connected with an egalitarian social structure and ideology. In Satish Saberwal's dictum¹⁴ (in the tradition of Dumont), it is only hierarchical societies that can organize themselves when social differences exist.¹⁵ Romila Thapar finds embedded in the *Ramayana* story a contrast between the kingdom based on agrarian wealth, with its cities, craftsmen, horses, and kingship on the one hand, and life in the forest, without fields or castes, merchants or craftsmen. She suggests that the latter represents tribal life. With migration, colonization, and the inexorable advance of agriculture and the agrarian economy, it is the kingdom that triumphs, together with the values for which it stands.¹⁶

However, just as the criteria for inclusion in the Schedule have been mistaken by scholars as the state's definition of tribal society, so too this separate existence has been misread as life in isolation. Devy points out that scholars have for long failed to realize that today's tribal population in India is 'basically bilingual' and consequently assimilates external influences even while developing mechanisms of response to the outside world.¹⁷ Decades earlier, Elwin had remarked on the tradition of commemorating carved wooden pillars to the dead, that has spread across central India. Elwin's description of the tradition of painting house walls among the Saoras of the Eastern Ghats (Orissa)¹⁸ has striking parallels with the 'Pithora painting' tradition amongst the Rathwa Bhils of Baroda district, observed today. In both areas, the occasions that

call for painting are similar, the execution of figures is referred to as 'writing', and painting accompanies shamanistic ritual. It is the painting styles, the aesthetic, and the pigments used, that differ.

B.K.Roy Burman stresses that it is the 'structural distance from the main body of the people of the country' that has enabled many tribes to remain unassimilated.¹⁹ The point is neither isolation nor backwardness, but tribes not being politically obliterated even as they were open to the influence of technologies or cult practices from the mainstream, or indeed influencing the cults of the latter. Deliege²⁰ comments on the vastness of the category 'Bhil', lacking a single language, material culture, or origin myth to give it unity. He suggests that what is important is that being Bhil sets people apart from caste society and peasantry: whether it is the Vindhyas or the Satpuras, he finds, Bhils have reacted and related to peasant society in the same way. It is their independence and separateness, even under Rajput state authority, that counts. The legend of the *tilak* made by a Bhil elder on the forehead of a Rajput at the time of coronation may not have been the literal truth, but appears, he says, to underline Bhil independence or autonomy under Rajput rule. (Nandini Sinha found that the inscriptions of the Guhilas of Mewar do not corroborate the relationship symbolized by the *tilak* legend. But Bhils were co-opted by the early medieval state of Mewar as warriors, mine labour, charcoal producers, and guardians of the forest paths, and the absorption of deities like Vindhyavasini in the royal pantheon of Mewar may be symbolic of the role of Bhil-Guhila interaction in the process of state formation.²¹) For her part Baviskar refers to basic differences between Bhil and Hindu beliefs, the economic self-sufficiency of Bhil villages, and the persistence of bride-price.²² Most important, while Bhils emulated some Rajput customs and accepted some Hindu values, they did not accept the

Brahmin as superior, and did not opt for Brahmanical rituals.²³ In this context, it is important to give attention to the distinction Xaxa has drawn between 'Hinduization' and 'Sanskritization'. A subtle point he makes is that tribal transformation can move in the direction of peasantry without loss of those attributes that characterize tribes.²⁴ In what follows, we take up Xaxa's suggestion that tribes be studied in their own right and not just with reference to mainstream Indian society.

For prehistorians tribal society represents a stage of social evolution that took its shape in the neolithic 'revolution'—the transition when, any time after about 9000-8000 BC, and in various phases and places in western Asia and South Asia, diverse groups took to cultivating crops and taming and breeding animals, thereby ceasing to rely exclusively on hunting, gathering, foraging, and fishing for their food. Agriculture increases the carrying capacity of land: by one estimate, one hunting-gatherer requires an area that can support 10 to 20 agriculturists. So more dense population is possible. Equally important is the sedentism that goes with agriculture.

Hunting, fishing, and the gathering of wild fruits, nuts, and roots which constituted the economy of the world for tens of thousands of years until about 9000 BC here or 5000 or 1000 BC there, is marked by the periodic movement of the camps of small groups of families. Basic household production is supplemented by occasional co-operation between families for the hunt of a large animal, or the setting up of a camp. It is characteristic of hunter-gatherer society that such interfamily co-operation is discontinuous, and the hunting teams *ad hoc*: when today's team regroups a few days later, there will be some change in members.

So too, a dry-weather camp near a permanent water hole will not be inhabited by the same families returning to it each year. And when disputes arise, a family can move and begin to collect and hunt with another group. Thus this is a social form marked by fission-fusion-flux, logically connected with the absence of storable food, shift of habitations in tune with changes in natural vegetation and fauna, discontinuous co-operation, and an 'immediate returns economy'. This is not tribal society.²⁵

When plough agriculture together with animal breeding and herding were instituted, the village came into existence, sedentism being a function of (a) the higher carrying capacity of the land and (b) the delayed returns from plough agriculture. After sowing, a crop has to be fenced, tended, watered, and weeded for months, until the harvest. Cereal agriculture gives storable food, that can be consumed in the months between one harvest and the next. Moreover, wheat, barley, rice, and millet require to be processed before cooking, so that house and village now acquire—besides pottery—permanent and immovable fixtures like threshing floors, storage bins/pots, querns, and grinding stones. (Such fixtures are in fact archaeological indicators of tribal or agricultural societies.)

The new social form—at the opposite end of the spectrum from hunting-gathering²⁶—was built on bonds that endure down the generations. One generation draws benefits from the previous generation's agricultural labours, its ditches and wells, its animal breeding, its nurture of the forest, and its management of the grain store. And important bonds across the generations are also built by inter-family co-operation during the sowing, ploughing, harvest, and threshing. Agricultural societies flourish when co-operation is continuous. Groups of families are organized as collectivities on an enduring basis, even as the family remains the unit of production and consumption. The results of co-operation never being

immediate, the descent group and the content of relationships down and across the lineages take shape and give tribal society its form.

In pre- and proto-historic India, there were dozens of such early societies. Common to them are small villages, simple material culture, a limited range of tool types, mostly one-room huts, a few crafts like the production of pottery and clay figurines, and diverse food procurement strategies.

Archaeologists have given little attention to Indian prehistoric cultures as tribal. Instead, recent ethno-archaeological work has become fixated on contemporary 'tribes' as living representatives of the Indian stone ages. The New Archaeology that came to us from America insists on observation of current practices, so that we would understand how the archaeological record is created. We would understand pottery debris if we observed a potter at work today, and the rate at which pots were discarded at the wheel or got broken in the kiln—and then the quantum of debris excavated in one locus could give us an idea of the total output of a prehistoric potter. Observation of hunting and animal-butcherer practices gives us information about the animal bones we can expect to excavate at camps or villages. Unfortunately the accent in Indian ethno-archaeology has instead come to be on tracing as many similarities as possible between past and present artefacts/practices, be it pottery techniques, functions of artefacts, or pit dwellings. Continuities have been emphasized over formation processes of the archaeological record. That this approach to tribal culture as fossilized is objectionable—and politically inscribed—is not understood. And so little have archaeologists thought about tribalism itself, that the criteria for inclusion in the Schedule (mentioned above) are used to define tribes.²⁷ 'Backwardness' and 'primitive' techniques are said to be intrinsic to tribes, not the result of mainstream domination or exclusion.

Let us move on to prehistory and explore tribalism so as to give it content and shape, without recourse to any 'Other' as a backdrop. What kinds of tribes were there, with no hierarchical structures to assimilate to, or remain separate from? I will give thumbnail sketches, for that is all that excavated data allow, and then indicate a few patterns that emerge.

First, neolithic and chalcolithic ('copper-stone') cultures inhabited a variety of landscapes, and there is no essential connexion between 'forest' habitat and tribal life. Economies comprised combinations of agro-pastoralism, hoe agriculture, and plough agriculture, with substantial inputs from hunting, fishing, and collecting. There would also have been groups of pastoral nomads who did not live in villages and left scant archaeological remains. Flourishing tribal ancestor cults (to which I shall revert presently) of the iron age are also archaeologically attested.

In the valley of Srinagar, in neolithic settlements approximately contemporary with the Harappa civilization, people first lived in pit dwellings and later in above-ground houses, using, surprisingly, no tools of flaked stone—the latter are ubiquitous at early Indian sites. While the plants and animals bred were wheat, barley, cattle, sheep and goat, obviously derived from the plains of northwestern India and Pakistan, there were also exotic traits like stone harvest knives and bone harpoons that are recognized as traits of the Chinese neolithic sites. The Kashmir neolithic is thus a curious combination of some South Asian and some Chinese and Central Asian culture elements,²⁸ and we can tell that 'isolation' is not an issue, even in early times with rudimentary transport mechanisms.

Regarding social life, we find an interesting feature at the famous site of Mehrgarh, one of the earliest farming villages in South Asia. Here, rectangular houses as well as compartmented structures were in use from the beginning. Over time, compartmented mud structures comprising usually two rows of, say, five very small cells each, flanking a central corridor or row of rooms, increased in number. With no fireplaces or kitchen refuse, and no smoke stains on the walls as in the dwelling houses, these appear not to have been residences. They were probably built as community structures, perhaps granaries (a few charred grains and grain impressions in the mud plaster of the walls were found) and/or locations for craft production. (In later strata at the site, perhaps significantly, instead of group granaries there are large storage jars set in the floors of individual houses.) Also remarkable in the context of the scale of community endeavour were the terraces and retaining walls built (from 5000 BC onwards) to support the houses that stood on a sloping mound. According to the excavators these walls were originally of 'colossal' dimensions: the remains of one reinforcing wall is almost 3 m thick and 30 m in extant length. Another retaining wall still stands to a height of seventeen mudbrick courses.²⁹

All over peninsular India in the iron age of the first millennium BC, megalithic memorials and graves were raised for the dead with massive stones, even though housing was confined to one-room pole-and-thatch or mud huts. It is significant that it was the dead who were 'housed' in structures of permanent stone, not the living. Stone graves were collective, containing the excarnated remains of several men, women, and children. There is not only collective burial, but dozens, even hundreds, of collective stone graves are sometimes found in one cemetery. Collective and secondary burial, emphasis on the group rather than the individual,

and on the dead rather than the living, indicate that cults of dead ancestors had spread and flourished across the peninsula among several tribes.

Typologies of the megalithic monuments ('passage chamber tombs', 'dolmenoid cist circles', urn burial cemeteries, etc) have been carefully made,³⁰ which lead to the question whether different tribes developed their own funerary architecture and rituals. With more than 300 stone cists of a particular form, the site of Brahmagiri in northern Karnataka, for instance, could have represented the formal funerary-cult centre of a particular tribe or clan. Boulder circles around each monument may mark the locus of rituals, and separate the world of the living (the profane) from the world of the dead (the sacred ancestors). Perhaps also, these sites served as territorial markers. In commemorating its ancestors, a group recalls/re-states/guards its lines of legitimate descent. It explicates who is a member and who is excluded, thereby making the lineage/clan/section a sharply defined group. Such mechanisms become necessary when groups contest lands amongst themselves.

Speaking of death and funerary ritual, in a little-known post-Harappan culture in southern Punjab (the Cemetery H culture known at Harappa and at several unexcavated sites in Bahawalpur, Pakistan) occurs a cemetery remarkable for the quality of the urns that took the remains of the dead (some of these are exhibited in the National Museum). The urns were large, even two feet high, round or ellipsoid, and covered with inverted 'saucers'. A beautiful glossy red and adorned in runny black paint with peacocks, animals, sun and moon, these urns perhaps narrated mythologies—and this is an outstanding instance of what could be called 'non-verbal communication in preliterate societies'. Significantly, Sankalia found the workmanship of the pottery to be of a higher standard than the earlier Harappan pottery, although

the 'Cemetery H people' lived in poorly constructed and small huts on the now-deserted mound of Harappa.³¹

Not all known neolithic and chalcolithic cultures of South Asia were 'the developmental stages' of complex social formations or civilizations to follow, and deserve our consideration in their own right. Significantly, cultures like the Cemetery H that succeeded the Harappan were spread over small areas and lacked the fine buildings, art, writing, and technology characteristic of the Indus cities. Obviously, after the disruption of urban life and bronze-age states, there was a reversion to dispersed tribal life.

The reader may object that I am only assuming that all these early preliterate cultures with simple technologies were tribal. But it is not just analogies with living groups that lead to this correlation; there is also the internal logic of various social structures—we have seen the logical connexion between the coming of agriculture and tribalism. Just as all archaeologists accept that early to late stone age sites represent band-level societies of hunters and gatherers, so we can interpret neolithic sites as tribal, and Harappan sites as remains of an urban, state-level, society. If we were to follow postmodern trends and reject the tribal character of chalcolithic or early iron age societies, moreover, we would have to assume that they were special instances of class, caste, or state-societies—and that would mean that social stratification is inherent in human culture. This latter approach, part of the ideology of late capitalist academia, is unacceptable to me. Only two phenomena are intrinsic to human life, the family and language. Further, when archaeologists avoid the social formation issue altogether, they end with facile and embarrassing analogies with twentieth-century institutions and life

(even referring to domestic servants, or to the East India Company factories).

Between about 2,300 BC and about 900 BC, and in the area between northern Karnataka-Andhra Pradesh and eastern Rajasthan, there were several archaeological 'cultures': the southern neolithic, the Kayatha culture (in Malwa and on the upper Chambal system), the Banas culture (near and northeast of Udaipur), the Savalda and Malwa cultures (the latter spread over teak- and sarai-forested Malwa, on the lower Narmada and Tapi rivers, on the Godavari-Pravara system, and south to Inamgaon on the Ghod near Pune), and the Jorwe culture (stretching from the Narmada to the Tapi, Godavari-Pravara, Ghod-Bhima, and Nira rivers).³² These are distinguished from one another mainly in the kinds of fine pottery that were in use for eating and drinking, offering food, and ritual. Each of these was a stable cultural form in that, at least as manifest in its material remains, it endured in some places for three, at others for eight, centuries. This in spite of the fact that the villages were especially small—Navdatoli on the Narmada, Sankalia thought, had a starting population of less than 200.

At a few sites these archaeological entities or cultures occur in stratigraphic sequence. But while there is a general chronological succession, there are also spatial overlaps of these cultures, and we cannot attribute the origins of one culture entirely to its predecessor. Also, we find fuzzy boundaries between the material cultures of these archaeological entities. (It is not easy, in any case, to equate an archaeological culture with one tribe/clan.) But the marked technological similarity in the kinds of stone tools, house forms, and cooking places (oval pits with clay columns or two- or three-

arm clay *chulahs*) indicates contact and exchange of ideas across the regions. Let us now consider technology.

Most of the sites of this area have produced tools flaked out of fine-grained rocks, thin and sharp-edged tools in various forms for different uses. Experiments have shown that such tools can be used not only for cutting joints of meat or peeling vegetables or scraping wood, but even for cutting small blocks of teak. The tools of tree felling and land tillage were adzes, axes, and hoes made of coarse-grained stones first struck into shape and then rubbed on rocks to produce an even surface and a sharp and straight cutting edge. Like the flaked tools, these too took many forms. Experiments have shown that it can take about five hours of grinding with one's entire body weight on a tool, to get one with smoothed surfaces.³³ And to produce the requisite thinness of cutting edge was a matter of practice and skill. (We often find ground stone axes out in the countryside rather than in house remains, and obviously they were discarded, or left behind for future use, where they were used, in forest or field.) Agricultural technologies in western India also included the use of fixtures such as storage bins or lime-coated pits, pottery storage vessels set up on stone supports above mud platforms in the houses, and massive querns or grain grinding stones, and pestles.

House construction, too, was by simple techniques, the round house being the easiest kind to roof over, but the rectangular shape also in existence. Walls were of wooden or bamboo posts, or of mud or mudbrick, with or without pebble foundations. Floors were plastered with rammed mud or cowdung, and sometimes covered with flat stones.

Crafts were few, mainly the production of pottery of various sorts at each site, a small proportion decorated with painting. There was occasional shell cutting and making of simple ornaments of

shell, clay, or stone. (If there were fine wood carving or basketry work, we would of course not retrieve it.)

Technology is not, however, reducible to tools and crafts. We could say that the subsistence technology evident in these cultures is as complex and sophisticated as that of the Harappan civilization or the early historic period. There were many cultigens. For example in the Malwa and Jorwe cultures, paleo-botanists identified about 13 crops. There were *rabi* crops (wheat, barley) and *kharif* crops (*mung*, *jowar*, *rice*), west-Asian cereals (wheat and barley) as well as South Asian domesticates like the drought-resistant *ragi*. Besides cereals the people grew protein-rich legumes (*mung*, *mussoor*, *urad*, *khesari*, etc.) that contribute to nitrogen-fixation in the soil—in fact legumes of a greater range than grown in the region in recent decades. This is circumstantial but sound testimony to intercropping, which is ecologically much more sound than monocropping. In the Bhil village of Anjanvara, Baviskar noted up to 15 different crop plants in a single field.³⁴ Animal bones indicate that cattle were bred for meat and milk, as also sheep and goat.

The people of Inamgaon near Pune hunted many animals for their meat—blackbuck, four-horned antelope, *sambar*, *chital* deer and hare. So too, birds. All this and the recovery of seeds of *ber*, wild dates and *jamun* show that the thorn forest was a food resource of central importance. And the bones of river fish, and the shells of mussels, turtles, and crabs are also present. For Central Indian pre-tribal cultures too, Zarine Cooper found, river resources appear to have been of major – if not central – importance. The Pondo, a little known group living in the vicinity of Jabalpur – Raigarh, collect about 24 varieties of tubers, sweet and bitter; the leaves, flowers and shoots of about 26 trees, 16 varieties of fruit, and, in the monsoon months, 16 varieties of mushroom.³⁵ The hill people around the Narmada valley eat more than 25 kinds of river fish.³⁶

Further, it has been found that at Inamgaon not only flaked stone tools but the cores from which they were fashioned and the waste flakes resulting from flaking, are present in most houses. While counts of cores and blade tools on house floors indicate that often blades were flaked off outside the house—in the field or forest, presumably—this nevertheless means that all families were equipped with the tools and weapons for the hunt. This puts in question the dichotomy many scholars create between the agrarian sector and the forest; finding the one receding before the other in different historical periods. It is more likely that the forest has always been integral to village economies and that slash-and-burn or shifting cultivation, especially, has never been an exclusive land-use form.

As we shall see in another essay in this volume, the small chalcolithic village of Inamgaon lay in the famine belt of Maharashtra but was inhabited for some 800 years: this is like finding a present-day village to have been continuously occupied since the time of the first Delhi Sultanate. We suggest more than one reason, in the pages to follow. Inter-cropping would have preserved soil fertility; also, if rains failed in one or other time to the detriment of a certain crop plant, other crops, sown later or earlier, would survive. Subsistence diversity, which I have mentioned, would have enabled people to survive agricultural failures. There would also have been tribal institutions such as sharing, mutual help, and community scheduling.³⁷ Joint tenure is substantively different from the ownership of private property. As stated, individual rights are embedded in collective rights; the right of use is never absolute; clan/tribe and family are both owners, and, as Mahapatra emphasizes, the crucial issue is the mode of access to resources and the concept of sharing fairly.³⁸ Moreover, tribes do not cease to have rights over lands that lie unused. The absence of

the market system would have meant absence of the vicious spiral of indebtedness that ruins farmers when crops are bad.³⁹

Professor Sankalia viewed the chalcolithic cultures of Malwa and Maharashtra as the result of gradual colonization, by people who had learnt the cultivation of millets, wheat and barley, and to herd cattle and sheep, elsewhere. The important point is that these colonizers often settled on black cotton soil tracts and would have had to learn its unique water-retentive properties that make *rabi* cropping possible inspite of absence of late rains (black soil can hold water even up to February), and its fallow patterns, again unique.

That these early societies were not isolated is indicated also by bits and pieces of excavated finds. At Kayatha there are strings of stone beads that appear to be of Harappan workmanship, and the copper bangles and axes there may also be of external origin. *Shankh* and other shells picked up from coastal beaches occur at Inamgaon near Pune; so too gold (in all likelihood from Karnataka). At Navdatoli on the banks of the Narmada occurred a couple of beads of lapis lazuli (its origin lies in Afghanistan) and also a coral bead (coral was procured from coastal regions). A coral bead occurs at chalcolithic Prakashe also. In fact it cannot be a coincidence that chalcolithic Navdatoli was established on one of the few available north-south crossings of the Narmada, just as Prakashe, one of the largest of the chalcolithic sites, lies on one of the few crossings (ferry points) of the Tapi river. Both sites lie on a major north-south route that would be important in centuries to come. The name Navdatoli, in fact, indicates the existence of an old village of boatmen.

When we pursue the finer details it becomes difficult to separate out the chalcolithic cultures as distinct entities. In Maharashtra it is not only a general colonizing movement from Malwa that we find. There are also elements of the southern

neolithic culture, for instance, pottery, a distinctive stone axe form, and the burial of infants in urns placed mouth to mouth on their sides under the floor of a house. It is the fine pottery that distinguishes the Malwa culture from the generally later Jorwe culture, this pottery being sometimes less than 10 per cent of the total pottery excavated. This fine painted pottery was probably the major indicator of ethnic identity within a (generally uniform) techno-complex. But while Malwa and Jorwe fine wares are stratigraphically consecutive at many sites, they actually occur in the same house at Navdatoli. At this site, Lustrous Red Ware of Kathiawadi vintage, and Black-and-Red Ware of the sort used in Ahar near Udaipur, also occur in the houses, together with the local wares. The excavators considered all the different wares, however, to have been produced locally. So such 'mixture' is surely significant. If we could guess that pottery production were women's work, a daughter thus learning from her mother, and if post-marital residence was on the whole patrilocal, we could dare to suggest that at Navdatoli some residents had more than one wife, and they came from different tribes.

None of our excavated village settlements is ever walled in. And there is little other than stone projectiles that lends a military character to our prehistoric cultures. This is in marked contrast to the later historic periods, when peoples like the Bhils often lent Rajput rulers armed militias and guarded their hill passes and made forest roads safe for trade. We have said that in prehistory no 'Other', against whom tribal identity and autonomy were asserted, would have been present. It is only in later history that pastoralist chiefs would have had the scope to become the leaders of bands of armed warriors distributing loot or even become rulers of larger areas.

Rudolf Heredia often insists that the margin appears only when you draw up the page. And this may be why we have scant evidence in the prehistoric period for the emergence of tribal chiefdoms: little scope for raiding, and no external power to prop up the position of an emergent chief.

In summary, I have indicated the historical moment when tribal organization comes into being — tribal life has not been with us since “time immemorial”! A more crucial aspect of tribal life, which I have found is not always given due importance, is community ownership of natural resources. We do not find a field-forest dichotomy; instead the two were integrated to make for secure subsistence. Even though, through history, theoretically it is the political separation of tribes that counts, not cultural isolation — we cannot say that in prehistoric times tribes found their identity in their structural distinctness from class society, or that this form materializes only in juxtaposition to the state. There is thus no question, in the context of this paper, of assimilation *versus* separation. In prehistoric times tribal people were obviously not driven out into unproductive regions, to the ‘margins’: instead, they made successful adaptations to those very regions. Tribal institutions and subsistence diversity appear to have made possible long sedentary occupations of villages, but there is also evidence for abandonments, migrations, and the colonization of new lands.

State formation processes did occur in many cases in medieval and early modern times. In east-central India and in the north-east, and in Bastar, tribal rulers became the feudatories of the subcontinental powers. Land grants were given to brahmins and brahmanical rituals were adopted to legitimize ruling houses. Brahmins were made administrators.⁴⁰ Such processes of establishment of tribal ruling dynasties, however, were obviously dependent on external recognition and support. In the case of the

Gangetic delta country, the extension of rice agriculture into erstwhile forest was possible only when local tribes were organized by Muslim *pirs* and *shaikhs* to labour for several years on forest clearings and the newly formed village communities adopted several Islamic institutions of social control and revenue extraction.⁴¹ For the rest, we have found that prehistoric tribes, in the absence of state societies against which they asserted their identities or worked out their histories, did not have an inbuilt or necessary momentum towards political complexity.

City life and writing are not characteristic of tribal life, not because certain groups were inherently 'backward', but because tribal society lacks the elites and social hierarchies and institutions of governance that create the need for written records and make possible the social complexity and division of labour that is the essence of urbanism. In the world, literacy has appeared in particular social circumstances where particular kinds of state institutions have emerged.⁴²

On the one hand we could infer that only rarely in history have groups moved out of the structural limitations of their social structures, and we should cease to romanticise the subject of our study. On the other hand we could point to the sophistication of subsistence systems (and of course small populations) and suggest there were no compulsions to change. Whichever way we thought, it would not lead to the conclusion that tribal life is intrinsically backward. If further argument is necessary on this point, the reader is referred to Mukkulika Banerjee's study⁴³ of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement of the Pathans (1930-1947).

Virginus Xaxa rightly states that it is high time we studied the Bhils as Bhils—that is, as a community—and not with reference to caste or the state or acculturation. With individualization, few tribal social institutions survive today. But there are many Indians

who have been living as tribes. Shall we just shrug this off because the term is troublesome to some academics?

Notes

¹ This talk was given in December 2000. A revised version appeared in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 31 nos. 1-2, 2003, pp. 17-36.

² Perhaps the most forceful expression of this view comes from Susana Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand*. Delhi: Sage, 1992, pp. 49-76. Devalle nevertheless refers to indigenous or adivasi groups in Jharkhand (whose ancestors, she says, were the *dasas* and *dasus* of the Vedic period), and to lineage- and community-based society. The mistaken category called the tribe, she says, is in reality an ethnic group. She does not give weight to pre-colonial systems of collective land tenure. In the view of Jaganath Pathy, 'What is a Tribe? What is Indigenous?' *Vikalp*, IV (1995), pp. 33-8, too, the concept originated in colonial oppression and has a negative connotation. Pathy goes so far as to say that the term is used pejoratively in academic discourse also.

³ A. Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 92-4, 113-15.

⁴ M. Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the North West Frontier*. Oxford: University Press, 2001, p. 30.

⁵ N.S. Jodha, 'Common Property Resources for the Rural Poor', pp. 150-89, in R. Guha (ed.), *Social Ecology*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, points out that in peasant society too, common property resources, often neglected in current research, are the resources that provide a buffer against drought and rising prices and help the poorest rural families to survive, even though the returns on labour on such lands are not high.

⁶ Baviskar 1995, p. 116; R.S. Mann, 'Cultural-Ecological Approach to the Study of the Bhil', pp. 117-26, in R.S. Mann (ed.), *Nature-Man-Spirit Complex in Tribal India*. Delhi: Concept, 1981.

⁷ L.K. Mahapatra, 'Customary Rights in Land and Forest and the State', pp. 84-96, in M. Miri (ed.), *Continuity and Change in Tribal Society*. Shimla: IAS, 1993. (pp. 86-7, 91).

⁸ Virginius Xaxa, 'Transformation of Tribes in India', *EPW*, 12 June 1999.

⁹ In my analysis Bronze-Age polity of the third millennium BC is an instance of newly-formed elites ruling over societies that were still tribal in organization. This model draws much from the "tribal states" of Africa and the notion of the Asiatic Mode of Production. When tribal tenure exists and there is also a superimposed ruling elite, the structure takes on the features of both tribe and state. Yet this does not mean that we throw out the concept of the tribe altogether, or alter the definition adopted above.

¹⁰ Thus J. Pathy, in 'What is a Tribe?' (1995) objects to the criteria of the Schedule of tribes and asserts that these do not apply to the majority of tribes included in the Schedule.

¹¹ Vimal Chandra, *Lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes: With Clarifications*. Delhi: Saini, 1981, pp. 5-6.

¹² Perhaps it needs to be said that the most persecuted of tribal groups, the Denotified Tribes (pastoralists, craftsmen, snakecharmers, acrobats, etc) enjoy no protection or positive discrimination, not even on paper. Only in Maharashtra are they entitled to job reservations. Susan Abraham, 'Steal or I'll Call you a Thief', *EPW*, July 3 1999, pp. 1751-3.

¹³ The Bedouin of Arabia, who represent almost the classic case of all that is 'noble' about tribal society, inhabit one of the emptiest deserts in the world.

¹⁴ Personal communication.

¹⁵ J. Goody, 'Marriage Policy and Incorporation in Northern Ghana', pp. 147-83, in J. Goody, *Comparative Studies in Kinship* (Stanford: University Press, 1969), states that when there is no social hierarchy, there is no room for major cultural differences, and 'immigration means rapid assimilation' and 'homogenization'. According to him, only those acephalous tribes survive incorporation in a state who are ever ready to take up arms to defend themselves. They sustain their separate identity largely through endogamy and through strategies of minimal interaction with society at large.

¹⁶ Romila Thapar, *Exile and the Kingdom*. Bangalore: Mythic Society, 1978.

¹⁷ G.N. Devy, 'Introduction', pp. ix-xvii, in G.N. Devy (ed.), *Painted Words*. Delhi: Penguin India, 2002.

¹⁸ V. Elwin, *The Tribal Art of Middle India*. London: Oxford University Press, 1951, pp. 90-7, 186-9.

¹⁹ B.K. Roy Burman, 'Tribal Population: Interface of Historical Ecology and Political Economy', pp. 175-216, in M. Miri (ed.), *Continuity and Change in Tribal Society*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1993, pp. 176-78.

²⁰ R. Deliege, *The Bhils of Western India*. Delhi: National Publishing House, 1985, pp. 14-54.

²¹ Nandini Sinha, 'Bhils in the State Formation of Mewar', pp. 287-304, in Dev Nathan (ed.), *From Tribe to Caste*. Shimla: IIAS, 1997.

²² A. Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*, pp. 88-96, 103-5.

²³ R. Deliege, *The Bhils of Western India*, pp. 49-50, 108.

²⁴ V. Xaxa, 'Transformation of Tribes in India', *EPW*, 12 June 1999. Perhaps, I suggest, it is when 'individualization' occurs, when lands are registered by state authorities in the names of individuals—that joint tenure ceases and groups cease to have genealogical depth, while the bonds of kinship slowly wither away and tribes take on the character of a peasantry.

²⁵ Exceptions are some hunting-gathering-fishing Indian communities on the western coast of the north American continent. They are fully sedentary because of the role of fishing in the economy.

²⁶ Social evolution is not fashionable today. Postmodernists and others, in mistaken notions of justice and in opposition to racism, abhor hierarchy even as they live in conditions of advanced capitalism. Yet I am not embarrassed by the concept of social evolution, which says that in the course of culture change some societies get transformed into new levels of organization, inevitably more complex structures with more parts/segments that require a more developed integrative mechanism. Evolution is not equated with the 'march of progress' or the 'triumph of reason' and all would insist that tribes cannot be called 'primitive'. But that does not mean that tribal life does not have its limitations. More important, it is the core features we have described that are common to tribes at all periods and places.

²⁷ See for example, B. Allchin (ed.), *Living Traditions*. Delhi: Oxford and IBH, 1994. Especially p.125.

²⁸ B.M.Pande, 'The Neolithic in Kashmir', *The Anthropologist*, 17 (1970), pp. 25-41.

²⁹ G. Quivron, 'The neolithic Settlement at Mehrgarh', pp. 59-65 and A. Samzun, 'The Early Chalcolithic: Mehrgarh Period III', pp. 66-71, in M.Jansen, M.Mulloy and G.Urban (eds.), *Forgotten Cities on the Indus*. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1991.

³⁰ See A. Sundara, *The Early Chamber Tombs of South India*. Delhi: University Publishers, 1975; B. Narasimhaiah, *Neolithic and Megalithic Cultures in Tamil Nadu*. Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 1980; S.B.Deo, *Problem of South Indian*

Megaliths. Dharwar: University Press, 1973; L.S.Leshnik, *South Indian Megalithic Burials: The Pandukal Complex*. Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 1974.

³¹ H.D.Sankalia, 'The Cemetery H Culture', *Puratattva*, 6 (1972-73), pp. 12-19.

³² The discussion that follows is based largely on B.K.Thapar, 'Prakash 1955: A Chalcolithic Site in the Tapi Valley', *Ancient India*, 20-21 (1964-65), pp. 5-167; H.D.Sankalia, B.Subbarao, S.B.Deo, *The Excavations at Maheshwar and Navdatoli*. Poona and Baroda: Deccan College and M.S.University, 1958; H.D.Sankalia, S.B.Deo, Z.D.Ansari, *Chalcolithic Navdatoli*. Poona and Baroda: Deccan College and M.S.University, 1971; H.D.Sankalia, 'Ecological background of the Chalcolithic Cultures of India', pp. 132-165, in K.Kennedy and G.Possehl (eds.), *Ecological Backgrounds of South Asian Prehistory*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973; Z.D.Ansari and M.K.Dhavalikar, *Excavations at Kayatha*. Poona: Deccan College, 1975; M.K.Dhavalikar, H.D.Sankalia, Z.D.Ansari, *Excavations at Inamgaon, Volume I*. Pune: Deccan College, 1988; M.K.Dhavalikar, 'The Living Past: The First Farmers of Maharashtra', pp. 87-105, in G.-D. Sontheimer (ed.), *Folk Culture, Folk Religion and Oral Traditions in Maharashtrian Culture*. Delhi: Manohar, 1995.

³³ V.Shinde, 'An Experimental Study of the Technology of Stone Tool Manufacture', *Bulletin of the Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute*, 47-48 (1988-89), pp. 311-17.

³⁴ A. Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*, 1995, p. 139.

³⁵ R.K.Sinha, 'A Note on the Nature-Man-Spirit complex of a Tribe (Pando)', pp. 69-115, in R.S.Mann (ed.), *Nature-Man-Spirit Complex in Tribal India*. Delhi: Concept, 1981.

³⁶ A. Baviskar, op. cit., p. 141.

³⁷ We may also refer to tribal delayed-returns systems of water harvesting. The Maldhari nomads of the Banni in Kutch have mastered the collection of rain water in shallow depressions in such a way that it forms a layer of potable water above the brackish subsoil water. This system gives water for up to four months. These are obviously community projects, directed and organized by community elders or chiefs. A. Agarwal and S.Narain (eds.), *Dying Wisdom*. Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment, 1997, pp. 146-9.

³⁸ L.K.Mahapatra, 'Customary Rights', 1993, p. 87.

³⁹ In the understanding of the Supreme Court, however, being ousted from their ancestral villages will give tribal people of the Narmada valley a chance to 'enjoy the fruits of science and technology' and make 'a higher quality of life' for themselves. It is 'not fair' that they continue in the same conditions as before.

⁴⁰ Surajit Sinha ed., *Tribal Polities and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North-Eastern India*. Calcutta: K.P.Bagchi, 1987.

⁴¹ R. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

⁴² See also T. Patterson, 'Archaeologists and Historians confront Civilization, Relativism and Poststructuralism', pp. 49-64, in A. Dirlik, V.Bahl and P.Gran (eds.), *History after the Three Worlds*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994.

⁴³ *The Pathan Unarmed*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.