

# Tribes as Indigenous People of India

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*Defining 'tribe' has conceptual as well as empirical problems for the academician. But this term of administrative convenience has now been adopted by the tribals themselves to mean the dispossessed, deprived people of a region. There is no claim to being the original inhabitants of that region, but a prior claim to the natural resources is asserted vis-a-vis the outsiders and the dominant caste. The tribal identity now gives the marginalised peoples self-esteem and pride.*

THE idea of 'indigenous people' is an issue of considerable contention in India today. This was hardly so till a few years ago. In fact, social workers, administrators, politicians and even scholars widely used the term to refer to a certain category of people. They hardly felt any unease in the use of native equivalent of this term, viz, 'adivasi'. Ghurye had of course some reservation to the use of such terms; the expression he used was 'so-called aborigines'. Again it is they who took the term along with all the prejudices and conjectures to the masses. That is how the identity of adivasis has entered into the consciousness of the tribal people. The identity that was forced upon them from outside precisely to mark out differences from the dominant community has now been internalised by the people themselves. Not only has it become an important mark of social differentiation and identity assertion but also an important tool of articulation for empowerment.

## *The term tribe*

The Anthropological Survey of India under the 'People of India Project' identifies 461 tribal communities in India. They are enumerated at 67,583,800 persons constituting 8.08 per cent of the total population as per the 1991 census. The share of the scheduled tribe population to the total population in 1971 and 1981 was 6.94 and 7.85 per cent respectively. The question of tribes in India is closely linked with administrative and political considerations. Hence there has been increasing demand by groups and communities for their inclusion in the list of scheduled tribes of the Indian Constitution. That partly explains the steady increase in the proportion of the scheduled tribe population in India especially in the period between 1971 and 1981.

There has been more concern with the identification of tribes than with their definition. This does not mean that lists have been drawn without any conception of tribe whatsoever. There did exist some conception. This was obvious from the

use of criteria that were adopted. These ranged from such features as geographical isolation, simple technology and condition of living, general backwardness to the practice of animism, tribal language, physical features, etc. The problem however lay in the fact that they were neither clearly formulated nor systematically applied. One set of criteria was used in one context and quite another in another context. The result is that the list includes groups and communities strikingly different from each other in respect of not only size of the population but also the level of technology and other characteristics. Indian anthropologists have been acutely aware of a certain lack of fit between what their discipline defines as tribe and what they are obliged to describe as tribes. Yet they have continued with the existing labels.

The early ethnographers were not very clear about the distinction between caste and tribe in India. The 18th century writings, for example, showed synonymous use of the term tribe with caste. Later it was even used in a cognate manner as one could see in the use of phrase 'caste and tribes of India' by Risley and many others in their writings. Efforts to make a distinction between the two began to be made after initiative was taken to collect detailed information about the people for the census. The census officials were however far from clear with regard to the criterion of distinction. It is with the 1901 census that one finds a mention of criteria howsoever inadequate that may be. It defined tribes as those who practised animism. In the subsequent censuses animism was replaced by the tribal religion. Although the criterion so introduced was highly unsatisfactory, it continued to be used widely and extensively.

It is only in the post-independence period that more systematic effort was made towards distinguishing tribe from caste. Though the distinction between the two was made in both colonial and post-colonial ethnography, the relation between

the two was differently conceived in the two ethnographies. In the colonial ethnography, the concern shown by the British administrators-scholars was to mark off tribe from caste. Hence tribes were shown to be living in complete isolation from the rest of the population and therefore without any interaction or interrelation with them. In contrast the main concern in the native ethnography has been to show close interaction of the tribes with the larger society or the civilisation. Both Ghurye (1963) and Bose (1975), for example, stressed the nature of interaction between tribes and the larger Hindu society and the ways in which tribes have been drawn into the Hindu society. They stressed similarities between the two societies. Sinha (1958) even goes to the extent of viewing tribes as a dimension of little tradition that cannot be adequately understood unless it is seen in relation to the great tradition.

In view of such conception, tribes have come to be primarily studied in relation to features and characteristics of the larger society. The focus is on how tribes are getting absorbed into the larger society, the so-called mainstream, by becoming caste, peasant, class and so on. With such conceptualisation, the identity of the tribal group or community is indeed put at risk. This is because of the way tribes have been conceptualised in anthropological literature and the reference with which tribal society in India is studied.

Tribes are primarily seen as a stage and type of society. They represent a society that lacks positive traits of the modern society and thus constitutes a simple, illiterate and backward society. With change in these features on account of education, modern occupation, new technology, etc, tribal society is no longer considered to be tribal. If transformation is in the direction of caste society then it is described as having become caste society. If the reference is peasant then it is posited as the peasant society and if the general direction of transformation is social differentiation, then it is described as differentiated or

stratified, and thus ceases to be tribal society. In the process it is forgotten that tribe besides being a stage and type of society is also a society alike and similar to any other kind of society, say the Oriya or the Bengali. But it is precisely this that comes to be denied on account of the changed situation. Of course it is true that the tribes are not of the same stage and type as Bengali or Oriya societies. There is then something clumsy about the use of the term tribe in describing the Indian social reality.

### *Concept of indigenous*

Such conceptual and empirical problems inherent in the use of the term tribe or tribal society could to some extent be overcome by the use of the term indigenous but not without giving rise to other problems. The term indigenous or its equivalent has been used in anthropology to describe groups called tribes for quite some time. Its use now has however gone beyond the discipline of anthropology. The international agencies are increasingly and extensively making use of this term and concept in their deliberations and discussions. With this the term has come to occupy wide currency in general as well as in the other social sciences literature. In the deliberations of the international agencies, the term was used for the first time in 1957 [Roy-Burman undated]. It gained wide currency after 1993 with the declaration of the year 1993 as the international year of the indigenous people.

In 1957 the general conference of the ILO adopted a convention concerning protection and integration of indigenous and other tribal and semi-tribal population in independent countries. The convention framed general international standards for facilitating government actions towards protecting and promoting progressive integration of these people into the respective national communities (Convention No 107). By 1985 the ILO felt the need to revise the convention on account of changes in attitudes and approaches towards these people worldwide. The ILO had earlier proposed integration as the desired objective but this was no longer being seen as appropriate. This was so because the international organisations and increasing number of governments were moving toward greater recognition of the rights of indigenous and tribal people to retain their specific identities and to participate fully in the planning and execution of the activities affecting their way of life. Accordingly the ILO adopted a revised convention (No 169) in 1989 after the expert committee appointed by the ILO gave its recommendation and the same

was passed in consultation with other international bodies.

The context of the discourse on the indigenous, initiated by the ILO and later accepted by the UNO thus basically hinged on the twin concepts of 'need right' and 'power right' of a certain social category of people all over the world. This category of people were progressively being marginalised and dispossessed from their sources of livelihood and were vulnerable to cultural shock and decimation of their collective identity.

The ILO convention referred to above and the Working Group on Indigenous Population set up by the Human Rights Commission of the UNO speaks of the indigenous population as follows. They are those tribal and semi-tribal population that are regarded as having their descent from the populations which inhabited the country or the geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of the conquest or colonisation by Europe. They are in addition also those who irrespective of their legal status live more in conformity with their social, economic and cultural institutions than with the institution of the nation to which they belong [Roy-Burman undated; Pathy 1992b]. The semi-tribal population are defined as those who are in the process of losing their identity but not yet integrated in the national community.

Thus there are three aspects which are central to the conceptualisation of the indigenous people. First, the indigenous are those people who lived in the country to which they belong before colonisation or conquest by people from outside the country or the geographical region. Secondly, they have become marginalised as an aftermath of conquest and colonisation by the people from outside the region. Thirdly, such people govern their life more in terms of their own social, economic and the cultural institution than the laws applicable to the society or the country at large. What is important here is that the notion of indigenous people, despite sharing attributes in common with the people described as the tribal and semi-tribal population, is seen as different from the latter in the sense that the indigenous are invariably marked out as a distinct international entity. That is, the indigenous are invariably seen as victims of conquest and colonisation from outside the region; hence the outsiders are easily identifiable.

### *Tribes as indigenous*

The term indigenous people, though of recent coinage at the international level, has been in use in India for a long time. In fact, the social workers, missionaries

and political activists have been using the term 'adivasi', the Indian-language term for the indigenous people, freely to refer to the tribal people since the turn of the present century. The term, in conjunction with other related terms such as aborigines, autochthonous, etc, has also been extensively used by scholars and administrators in their writings and reports. The term was used mainly as a mark of identification and differentiation, that is, to mark out a group of people different in physical features, language, religion, custom, social organisation, etc. Even Ghurye (1963:12) who otherwise talks of tribes as backward Hindus and has reservation about the use of the term 'adivasi', refers to them as the aborigines. He writes, "when the history of internal movements of peoples is not known, it is utterly unscientific to regard some tribe or the other as the original owner of the soil. It is possible to contend that even if the tribes are not aborigines of the exact area they now occupy, they are the autochthonous of India and to that extent they may be called the aborigines."

Thus hardly any unease was felt by scholars in the use of the term to refer to these groups of people. No effort whatsoever was made to dispel the myth associated with the term then. The term however did not remain confined to only the scholars, administrators, politicians and social workers; it percolated down also to the people. Indeed, it is social workers, political activists, administrators who took the term and along with it all the prejudices and conjectures to the masses [Sengupta 1988:1003]. The term thus came to be widely used to refer to the tribal people. It was hardly questioned, let alone debated. So long as it had not assumed a political dimension, it had remained an accepted term of description and designation of certain category of people.

It is only with the internationalisation of the rights and privileges associated with it that the use of the term indigenous has come to be critically examined or even challenged in the Indian context. The sense in which the term was used earlier and the sense in which it has come to be used today are definitely not identical though they overlap in some sense. Today, aspects of marginalisation are built into the definition of indigenous people. Only those people that have been subjected to domination and subjugation have come to constitute the component of the indigenous people. Yet the use of the term adivasi (indigenous) to designate certain category of people and not the other category clearly reveals that these aspects

were not altogether lost sight of. It may be noted that even earlier the term was used to delineate people who were backward and cut off from the mainstream civilisation. The basic mark of differentiation was between those who were part of the civilisation and those who were not. Hence the use of the term *adivasi* to describe tribal people seems to have some validity even in the sense of marginalisation. Historical antiquity may have been a more distant criteria, but the most immediate and proximate seemed to be the fact that they were not part of the civilisation. In a certain sense then there was the aspect of marginalisation that was taken note of while designating a group as *adivasi*.

This seems all the more obvious when we take the other aspects of the Indian society. The coming of the Aryans has been invariably taken as the decisive historical factor to determine the original people of India. Yet not all the original people have been called the indigenous people. The groups speaking languages belonging to the Dravidian linguistic stock no doubt have been considered the inhabitants of India before the coming of the Aryans. Yet they have never been described as the indigenous people, mainly because they do not constitute the marginalised groups. The government of India had in fact placed no objection to the use of the term when it was deliberated upon in the ILO convention in 1957 and was tied to covenant 107. This was so because the term then had not raised such issues as empowerment and rights; rather it had articulated the need of integrating the indigenous and tribal people into the larger social and political system. By contrast the focus had shifted from integration to one of rights and empowerment by 1989. And no sooner had the issue shifted than the argument ensued that a category such as this does not hold in the Indian context.

#### *Arguments against*

Much of the discussion questioning the indigenous people's status in India has centred on the complex historical processes of the movement of the population and their settlement in the subcontinent. It is said that unlike in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand with a recent history of conquest, immigration and colonisation in India identification of indigenous people is not easy. Rather there have been in India waves of movement of populations with different language, race, culture, religion dating back centuries and millennia. Even groups or communities described as tribes have not been

outside of this process. Given this, how far back should one go in history to determine people who are natives and who are immigrants. Indeed any demarcation is going to be arbitrary and hence extremely contentious. And indeed so has been the case as we can see from the discussion below. It is also maintained that the communities described as tribes have been living in close proximity with the non-tribal people for over centuries leading to much acculturation and even assimilation into the larger Hindu society. The Indian experience, it is stated, is different from that of the new world where it was marked by conquest, subjugation and even decimation. It is hence argued that it is not only the point of departure that is problematic but also the Indian experience.

It is with the people described as tribes that the term indigenous people has generally come to be associated in India. It is assumed that they have been the original settlers of what geographically constitutes India today or at least people who inhabited the region before the coming of the more dominant sections of the Indian society, viz, the Aryans. They are said to belong to social groups other than the Aryans and speak a variety of dialects belonging presumably to two main linguistic families, viz, the Dravidian and the Austric. The plausibility of groups speaking Tibeto-Burman languages is not altogether ruled out from the purview of the status of the original inhabitants in India. These groups have generally been described as *adivasi* or the original people by social workers, missionaries, political activist's scholars and administrators since the beginning of the present century. Ray (1973:124-25) writes, "The communities of people of today whom the anthropologists call tribals, happen to be the indigenous, autochthonous (*adivasi*, *adimjati*) people of the land, in the sense that they had long been settled in different parts of the country before the Aryan-speaking peoples penetrated India to settle down first, in the Kabul and Indus valleys and then within a millennium and half, to spread out in slow stages, over large areas of the country and push their way of life and civilisation over practically the entire area of the country along the plains and the river valleys."

The question that is of central importance here is (1) whether groups designated as tribes have been natives of India and non-tribes immigrants; and (2) if they have not been natives whether their settlement is prior to that of the arrival of the major social group, the Aryans. Most of the scholars are of the view that tribes

could hardly make legitimate claim that they are the only natives of India. They cite observations made by scholars, howsoever conflicting they may be, in support of their position. Hutton for example is of the view that only the Negritos may be considered as the original inhabitants of India though they do not have any marked presence now. He considers groups belonging to the Austric, Dravidian categories, etc, as much outsiders as the Aryans. Guha is also cited for making similar observation in the context of Austric speaking people [Shah 1982]. But more authoritative sources on which such claim is questioned are the traditions of the tribes themselves as they speak. Dube (1977:2) writes, "it is difficult to speak of 'original' inhabitants, for tribal traditions themselves make repeated mention of migration of their ancestors. There is considerable evidence to suggest that several groups were pushed out of the areas where they were first settled and had to seek shelter elsewhere. And there are several groups, now absorbed in Hindu society, which can make an equally tenable claim to being original or, at any rate very old inhabitants". Beteille (1998) makes similar observation on the point under reference.

There are two substantive points that have been made here. One is whether one can speak of tribes as the original people especially in view of their migratory movement. This is indeed an important argument and cannot be brushed aside. The other makes reference to the claims that may be made by groups that have been absorbed into the Hindu society. The latter suffers from a certain flaw. Firstly, it is hypothetical. The second is that the groups lose the right to make such claim by virtue of their choice to get absorbed into the dominant, viz, the Hindu society.

If the issue of tribes as natives is questionable, is it so also with the second question? That is, are all tribal groups the inhabitants that settled the territory before the coming of the Aryans, the assumed cut-off point for demarcating the indigenous people in India? Whereas this is more or less the case, it cannot be said with certainty for all the groups described as tribes in India. It is said that there are tribes in India especially in the north-east whose settlement in the territories they inhabit today is an even later phenomenon than the settlement of many non-tribes in other parts of India. The Nagas for example are stated to have come to India around the middle of the first millennium BC first to Tibet and later to the territory where they live now, a period later than the coming of the Aryans. The Mizos are said to have

settled in the territory where they live only in the 16th century. The Kuki settlement is considered even later than that of the Mizos. In contrast to this, the non-tribal groups like the Bengalis, Gujaratis, Oriyas, etc, have a much longer history of settlement than these tribes. Given this, it becomes indeed problematic to say that all tribal people in India are earlier settlers than the Aryans and therefore tribes are indigenous and non-tribes non-indigenous.

There is a need to make distinction between settlement in the context of country (India being the reference point here) as a whole and settlement within its parts or regions. In the discourse on indigenous people, the two aspects are either ignored or mixed or even interchanged. An argument valid at one level, for example at the local level, is often used to substantiate the argument at another level, such as the country as a whole. The Santhals may have settled in the territory where they live now, the Santhal Pargana or its adjacent areas, in the beginning of the 19th century. They may have even settled there later than the Bengalis. But that in no way negates the fact that their settlement in India is prior to that of the groups commonly referred to as the Aryans such as the Bengalis or Gujaratis. But to claim indigenous status on this ground is not so simple as one can see from the discussion that follows. Conversely, the settlement of the Mizos in the country called India may have been a later development than those of the Gujaratis or Bengalis, but the fact remains that they are the original settlers of the place where they live now.

It needs to be mentioned here that the tribal groups in India are not solely comprised of the Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic speaking groups. A very large number of the tribal groups in fact belong to the Tibeto-Burman speaking groups, many of whom can hardly be considered indigenous if the arrival of the Aryans is taken as the cut-off mark to decide who is indigenous and who is not indigenous. To restrict the terms indigenous to refer to only those groups of people who had entry prior to those of Indo-Aryan group would be to exclude many tribal groups of the Tibeto-Burman family from the status of indigenous people. There are also tribal groups like the bhils that speak languages of the Indo-Aryan family. This poses the problem of their identification as indigenous people. Yet it is generally held that the groups so referred have been drawn into the languages they speak through the process of interaction and acculturation with the Indo-Aryan speaking groups. In terms of their culture and

physical features, they are however still considered different from the Indo-Aryan population [Hermanns 1957:23].

What this means is that people identified and described as tribals are not to be necessarily treated as indigenous and that there are tribal groups which could be treated as indigenous and others which could not. In contrast many groups and communities especially those belonging to the Dravidian language speaking group such as the Tamilians, Telugus, Malyalis, could stake a claim of being indigenous people by virtue of the fact they have been inhabitants of India prior to the coming of the Aryans. They are however not recognised as tribals and share few attributes in common with the tribals who stand dispossessed, exploited and marginalised. Rather they constitute a part of the dominant national community. In terms of other criteria that go to make up indigenous people, viz, marginalised status, loss of control over resources, etc, they can hardly be considered for the indigenous people status. The congruence between the term and the concept on which the tribal activists defend the application of the term does not stand valid in all situations.

There is still another ground on which the indigenous claim is contested in the Indian context. It is generally held that the Indian society is made up of a number of castes and groups and that many of these have been formed out of the process of fusion of various groups and communities including tribes. This is all the more true in case of the regional linguistic communities such as Bengalis, Gujaratis, Oriyas etc. In view of this, it may become necessary that a segment of the same community be identified as indigenous and another as non-indigenous.

#### *Arguments for*

The extension of the term is however strongly defended by activists and other scholars both tribal and non-tribals. This is done not so much on the basis of original settlement as on some other consideration. They, of course, trace the history of tribals in India much before the coming of the people who have been described as Aryans. They ask why tribals, whose ancestors lived here for some thousands of years prior to the Aryan invasion, a fact that can hardly be disputed, should not be considered indigenous people so that certain positive international instruments are made applicable to these marginalised and deprived social groups. But the case is made more forcefully on another ground. Pathy (1992:8), for example, writes that tribals in a way have been victims of conquest

and colonisation and hence share all the attributes of the colonised people such as ethnic identity, loss of control over customary territorial resources, cultural annihilation and powerlessness. He makes the case despite his recognition that insisting on original settlement in a territory is problematic and unreasonable.

But then even the issue of colonisation and colonised status remains far from resolved. First of all we do not have detailed and well researched historical material on the nature of relations or encounter between groups that are designated as the indigenous people and the other social groups for the periods preceding the coming of the British. Hence it is difficult to say anything with certainty about the nature of relations between the two types of social groups. In general the relation between tribes and non-tribes has been described as one of mutual coexistence rather than one of subjugation and domination at least until the advent of British rule. In fact, this is the other important ground on which the term indigenous people is contested in the Indian context. It is said that most of the studies of the history of Indian civilisation show that the growth and expansion of Hindu society was a prolonged and complex process of assimilation. And the nature of interaction between the two has been broadly described as one of peaceful coexistence rather than one of conquest and subjugation [Bose 1941; Beteille 1998:189].

Such a nature of interaction between tribals and non-tribals has also been endorsed by a scholar who otherwise talks of an aggressive absorption into the Hindu society with the onset of the colonial rule [Desai 1977:24]. Pathy (1992a:51) himself elsewhere talks of a symbiotic relationship between the tribals and the non-tribals rather than one of colonisation and conquest. He writes, "majority of the so-called tribals of India had developed class structure over a long period of time and therefore had interactions with the other communities. Up to the time of colonialism, it was largely not a relationship of domination and subjugation." Not only is determining original settlement in the territory problematic, but also the question of colonisation and subjugation as one can see from Pathy's observation. This means that the question of indigenous people could only be raised from the period of the arrival of the British and the subsequent process of colonisation and subjugation in India. If these processes are taken as the point of departure for demarcation of indigenous people, then the issue of original settlement that is so central to

the notion of indigenous people becomes redundant in defining indigenous people.

In fact the whole exercise of identification of groups and communities as tribes during the colonial period was to a great extent contingent upon the differences tribes displayed in relation to the larger society. Thus tribes were by and large considered as those outside civilisation. This means that they not only remained outside the politico-administrative structure of the larger society or the kingdom, but also outside the general social organisation and worldview of the larger society. In short they continued to be distinct because they escaped colonisation and subjugation. Where people were subjugated they became part of the larger social organisation and failed to maintain their distinctiveness. Whether they lived in hills, plateau or forest and lived by hunting, food-gathering or practised slash and burn cultivation followed from being outside civilisation. Beteille (1986:316) has forcefully brought this out. He writes that where tribe and civilisation coexist, as in India and the Islamic world, being a tribe has been more a matter of remaining outside of state and civilisation, whether by choice or necessity, than of attaining a definite stage in the evolutionary advance from the simple to the complex. The Indian practice of regarding as tribes a large assortment of communities, differing widely in size, mode of livelihood and social organisation cannot therefore be dismissed as anomalous. They are all tribes because they all stood more or less outside of Hindu civilisation and not because they were all at exactly the same stage of evolution. In short they are described as tribes and therefore even as indigenous people because they escaped colonisation and subjugation processes.

The use of the term indigenous people to refer to the tribal people is defended on yet another ground. It is argued that unlike antagonists who tend to take note of only historical realism, we have also to take note of critical realism. They state that irrespective of the place and time of origin or their occupation or their present habitat in India, there are certain communities, which until recently maintained practically autogenous sources of legitimisation of cultural and social processes and were accentuated by the ideology of a self-regulated economy and had only marginal articulation with the external political structures. Their indigenous identity cannot be brushed away by juxtaposition of non-meaningful occurrences in space and time in systemic terms [Roy-Burman 1992:24].

Such claim is difficult to establish today. Not only have the tribal communities been brought under uniform administrative and legal structures under the British but they have also been drawn into the politico-economic process of the larger society especially in the post-independence period of economic development. There are very few tribes which have escaped such processes. The actual empirical reality is then too complex. It is not at all surprising then that elsewhere Roy-Burman (1983:1172-74) writes, "even many of those with the simplest technology were integrated with the wider society". In short the use of the term indigenous to describe tribal people in India is fraught with difficulties. It does not reflect an empirical reality but is more of a political construction.

Though the question of indigenous people has been generally discussed in the context of the country as a whole, the discussion in the Indian context has also been drawn in relation to the regions or territories within the country. It has generally been observed that there have been so many migrations in and out of the region in the past centuries that no particular 'jati' can have genuine grounds for making a claim to be the original inhabitants [Beteille 1998:189; Hardiman 1987:15-16]. In discussion of indigenous people in India it is important that we do not mix the problems obtaining at two levels. Often the problem at the level of the country is used to make case against tribes being indigenous at the regional/local level and vice versa. Posing the question of tribes as the indigenous people in relation to territories within the country rather than the country as a whole indeed gives rise to problems of somewhat different nature.

Movement of populations belonging to different race, ethnicity and linguistic groups including those described as tribals from one place to another is something that has been in process within India over the centuries. Thus the groups which may be indigenous with respect to the country as a whole may not be indigenous in respect of their settlement in a given territory. It may also happen, that the same group is indigenous and not indigenous at the same time. The Oraons, Mundas and many other tribes living in Jharkhand, for example, may have legitimate claim to be called the indigenous people in respect of their settlement in the country called India prior to that of the Aryans or even in respect of their settlement in Jharkhand, but it is not certain if they can claim to be indigenous in Assam or Bengal where they

have moved in the course of last one century or so. Indeed their claim of being indigenous is strongly contested in these places. Nowhere is this more true than in Assam where the migrant tribals' claim to be the indigenous people is being disputed by such tribal communities as the bodos, mishings and others who have a much longer history of settlement in the region than the tribals from Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, etc. If however one takes India as a whole, then these migrant groups have a much longer record of settlement than the tribes in the north-eastern region. The tribals from this region have also moved in large numbers to Andaman Island and have settled there as cultivators after reclaiming land from the forest and in the process dispossessing the native Jarvas from their territories.

#### *Adivasi consciousness*

In the context of India as a whole, identification of indigenous peoples is indeed problematic. The problem emanates from the fact that the population movements and experiences in India have been different from those of the new world. It is true that the movement of population even in the new world has been, like in India, of different race, language, region, religion, culture, etc. In the new world however these groups did not come to establish or have special relations with a given territory or region in the course of their movement. In India the movement of the population was somewhat different. Here different communities came to develop distinct and definite association with certain territories in the course of the history of their movement.

Whether those especially associated with a given territory are indigenous to the territory or area they live in is a question that will always be contested. What however has come to be accepted that they have developed special relations with the territory in question. These territories, the communities in question have considered as their own as against those of other communities. They considered themselves to have prior and preferential if not exclusive rights over the territory where they lived either on account of their prior historical settlement or numerical and other dominance. Following this they aspired to promote and protect the interests and welfare of their community and confer on the members of their community special rights and privileges. It was aspirations such as this among the members of the community that led to the desire to have a state of their own. And after having realised this, they tend to promote the

interests of their members by means of state patronage of various kinds.

The people living in their respective territories have thus come to see the states to which they belong as the culmination of the yearning of the members of a particular territory to have a homeland of their own. The Bengalis for example have a very strong sense of attachment to Bengal as Tamilians to Tamil Nadu. There is in this an indication of the recognition, implicit though it may be, that certain people have prior right over others in the territory that they occupy. This is almost like saying that they are the original inhabitants of the territory that they inhabit. It is therefore not a coincidence that the dominant communities hardly feel the need to articulate issues in terms of rights of indigenous people. They have states of their own and therefore territories too. It surfaces only when they feel threatened from the movement of the population from outside the community. The threat is felt either on account of fear in the rise of number of members from outside the community or loss of control of power, economic and political. Nowhere is this identity with land or territory more crudely manifested than in the son-of-the-soil theory that has

been raised from time to time by the dominant regional communities in India.

In short, people of India representing different languages, physical features, cultures, mode of social organisations, etc, identify and relate themselves in a special way with a given territory or region in the country. Attempts have been made to provide theoretical understanding to such developments in India. In doing so scholars have invariably made use of such concepts such as nation and nationality. In the context of India, the two concepts refer essentially to the internal political arrangement of the Indian union comprising a number of linguistic-territorial state units and components with a variety of regional pressures. At the same time there has always been some kind of check-list of the objective criteria whereby a nation or nationality could be defined [Vanaik 1988]. And in both of these conceptions, the element of territoriality assumes a central place.

The paradox is that whereas such privileges and rights are freely recognised in respect of the dominant communities in India, the same is denied to the tribal communities. In the process they are progressively getting dispossessed of their

control over land, forest, water, minerals and other resources in their own territory and are increasingly subjected to inhuman misery, injustice and exploitation. If their status as indigenous people of India is problematic, and the problem indeed is both empirical and conceptual, the least the dominant regional communities could do is to recognise the priorities of rights and privileges of these people in the territories and regions they inhabit. It is the non-recognition of these rights and privileges by the dominant sections of the Indian society that has led to increasing articulation of the idea of indigenous people by the tribal people.

It is in the absence of such powers and rights that a new form of identity, viz, identity of adivasis or indigenous people is crystallising among the tribes of different parts of India. The term that was initiated mainly a point of reference or description has become an important marker of identity articulation and assertion today. The designation or description of tribes as indigenous people had not emerged from self-identification or description by the tribal people themselves. It was not a part of positive identification and evaluation by the tribes. Rather the

## INDIA AND WEST ASIA

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outsiders had imposed it on the tribes. The identity that was forced from outside has now been internalised among the tribes. Today, it is an important mark of identity and consciousness of the people, an identity that evokes a sense of self-esteem and pride rather than a sense of lowly and inferior society that often goes with terms like tribe or tribal. The people now use it to identify and define themselves. It is in relation to the identity of adivasi that tribes are increasingly differentiating themselves from the non-tribal population at least at the grass roots level. The declaration of the year 1993 as the international year of the indigenous people has only sharpened this identity for identity, since then carries certain rights and privileges with it.

Further, the identity being expressed now by the term adivasi is indeed an expanded identity cutting across tribes bearing different names, speaking different languages or dialects. It also goes beyond groups and communities or parts thereof that are listed in the Constitution. It is to be noted that there is an important gap in the sense in which the term tribe is used and understood by the tribals and in the sense in which it is understood by others, especially the administrators, lawyers and academicians. For the latter, communities are tribes only if they are so listed in the Constitution. Tribes on the other hand do not view tribes in the sense of politico-administrative category. Rather they view them in the sense of belonging to the same community irrespective of whether a group or segment of it is listed or not listed in the Constitution. And by virtue of this bond of emotion they are also adivasis or the indigenous people though the Constitution does not recognise them as the tribes.

In many parts, the category has even taken political overtones. In Chotanagpur, for example, as early as 1939 it assumed the form of a demand for a separate state of their own for the adivasis. Even the organisation formed to spearhead this movement, viz, Adivasi Mahasabha, drew its inspiration from being described as the original people. Such a political overtone is not confined to Chotanagpur alone. It is catching up in other parts of India as well but more prominently in the tribal regions of central and western India such as Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan. It has already given rise to a number of organisations at local and regional levels that have been articulating the issues of the tribes in terms of the status of the indigenous people. There are organisations which are actively articulating the issue

of the indigenous people at the national and the international levels.

The adivasi consciousness and the articulation of indigenous people status is not so much about whether they are the original inhabitants of India as about the fact that they have no power whatsoever over anything (land, forest, river, resources) that lies in the territory they inhabit. This is despite being the original inhabitants of India in relation to the others. The consciousness and the articulation are basically an expression of the yearning to have or to establish a special relation with the territory in which they live. It is the same kind of yearning that the various dominant communities of India articulated in the period before independence or after independence. That this is so becomes obvious if one maps the tribes or regions where such sentiment is strongly articulated. It is a fact that the issue of this identity is more strongly articulated in central, western and southern India than in north-east India. This is because in the north-east people exercise some power over their territory. The scenario is just the opposite in other parts of tribal India. What this indicates is that the assertion of such identity is stronger where there is greater degree of marginalisation and powerlessness.

There are however differences in the way this new identity is being conceptualised at different levels. The social workers, administrators, scholars and social scientists have generally used the term in the sense of only the original inhabitants. The adivasi ideologues too primarily use this term in the sense of the original settlement, as this was the sense in which the outsiders described the tribal people. The aspect of the marginalised status that evolved in course of historical development has been added into it now. There are others, especially the radical scholars, who conceive it only in relation to particular historical development, viz, that of the subjugation during the 19th century of a wide variety of communities which before the colonial period had remained free, or at least relatively free from the control of outside states. This process, it is argued, was accompanied by an influx of traders, moneylenders and landlords who established themselves under the protection of the colonial authorities and took advantage of the new judicial system to deprive the adivasis of large tract of their land. Adivasi is hence defined as groups, which have shared a common fate in the past century and from this, has evolved a collective identity of being adivasis. It is not meant to imply that adivasis are the original inhabitants

[Hardiman 1987:15-16]. The use of the term 'adivasi' in the sense in which it is used by radical scholars hardly takes note of the sense in which people, either outsiders or the tribals themselves, use it. Not all who shared a common fate in the past century, in fact, identify themselves as the adivasis. The caste Hindu population howsoever deprived it may be invariably avoided being called adivasi for it was tied to the loss of status.

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