

Tribal Movements in India

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Edited by

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TRIBAL MOBILISATION IN SOUTHERN INDIA

P.K. Misra

THE TRIBAL population of the four states of South India namely, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamilnadu, referred to in this report as the Southern Zone—is rather thin in comparison with the tribal population of other zones. The total tribal population of this zone is 8,12,200 which is 0.9 per cent of the population of the zone and 0.15 per cent of the total tribal population of the country. The population of the tribes in each State of this zone and their percentage in terms of the total population as per the 1971 Census is given in Table I.

TABLE I

<i>State</i>	<i>Scheduled tribe population</i>	<i>% to total population</i>
1. Andhra Pradesh	1,657,657	3.8
2. Karnataka	231,268	0.8
3. Kerala	269,356	1.3
4. Tamilnadu	311,515	8.8

There are 83 tribal groups in this zone but only a few of them have a population of more than one lakh. Some of the big tribal groups are the Koyas of Andhra Pradesh (they are the largest in this zone) with a population of 2,85,226; the Malayali in Tamilnadu (1,59,426); the Irula in Tamilnadu (89,025); and the Paniyan in Kerala (49,562). It is observed that

the larger tribes are found in Andhra Pradesh whereas the tribal groups in Kerala, Tamilnadu and Karnataka are relatively smaller in size. Another distinct feature of this zone is that several of the tribal groups have been living on food-gathering and hunting till very recently. In fact there are some groups which still continue to subsist on food-gathering. The Chola Naickens, who by now have become quite well known, are one example. They number only around 281 (Ananda, 1976). They live in caves and have no implements for hunting. Similarly, some Jenu Kuruba groups live by food-gathering, and till recently several of them were observed living in bushes. But in this zone, the Chola Naickens are perhaps the only people who have managed to keep themselves away from the expanding economy and culture of the 'civilized world'. It has been possible for them to do so because they withdrew to the most inaccessible and inhospitable areas. Others, like the Jenu Kurubas, did try to withdraw but the area they lived in itself came into the orbit of expanding economy followed by the culture brought along with it. Wherever the tribals have become part of this expansion process, with only a few exceptions, they do so by losing control over the resources and thus becoming dependent on the alien culture. It is observed that in this zone, as elsewhere, the tribals lost their land and other resources, and live by selling their labour. Though their labour is of critical importance to the expanding economy, they as a people become marginalized. This process is perhaps more acutely felt in this zone than elsewhere.

In spite of the fact that some of the most primitive groups live in this area, anthropological literature about the tribals in this zone is conspicuously poor. There are only a few full length monographs available on the tribes of this zone though some of the tribal groups, like the Todas and Kotas, have attracted the attention of social scientists the world over.

On the basis of their population, the tribes of this zone can be divided into several geographical pockets. One such pocket is the tri-junction of Tamilnadu, Karnataka and Kerala in the Western Ghats. The other major pocket is in the northern most parts of Andhra Pradesh bordering three states—namely, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa.

There are some minor pockets too. The geographical location of these pockets, whether big or small, shows that they all lie near State boundaries, in the forests or in the hills. The larger pockets show a more intensive combination of all these factors. The location of these tribal pockets is not a mere historical accident. People possessing poorer technology have been pushed into outlying inhospitable areas the world over. Whenever there is a confrontation between the people of higher technology and the people of lower technology, one of the alternatives for the latter is to squeeze themselves into the interiors of the forests or to go up into the hills. But the march of civilisation keeps on clearing the forests and climbing the hills and in that sense the tribal populations in such places eventually get exposed, so to say. But in spite of physical exposure, the tribes remain socially farthest from the centres of civilization and also from cut-off points of network of relationship which are the main integrative principles of civilizations. Thus, in this sense, the tribal populations stand at the periphery of civilization. But this process becomes incompatible when it comes to the realization of material benefits—both raw material and cheap labour are required for the expansion and prosperity of a civilization. As indicated earlier, the economy of the tribals living in this zone is fast changing but if we take into account how they lived even a decade earlier, we find each tribe has made interesting and varied adaptations to the environment and the people around it. In this zone, a good number of the tribals—like the Chola Naicken and the Jenu Kuruba—depended upon food-gathering. Some combined food-gathering with hunting like the Koyas and Chenchus. Others combined it with some handicraft like the Betta Kurubas and Urali Kurubas who, besides food-gathering, were engaged in basket making and pottery and blacksmithy. Then there were groups like the Mullu Kurumba who engaged in cultivation but derived a fairly large amount of their food through hunting and fishing. Then there were groups like the Kuruchia who had always been settled cultivators but supplemented their diet with hunting.

At the level of social organization also, we find interesting variations. The polyandrous Todas are too well known to

need any elaboration. All the tribes found in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu, are patrilineal and patrilocal but some of the tribes in Kerala are matrilineal. Some of the tribes which are now patrilineal appear to have been matrilineal at one time; for example the Mullu Kurumba are patrilineal and patrilocal but their clan inheritance is through the mother. However, the clan system in their case is becoming functionless. Similar evidence is available for the Mala Ulladan.

There is another interesting feature of the tribes in this region and that is the notion of pollution. Through the concept of pollution and various other symbols, particularly dress and language, each tribal group maintains its separate identity and also a relative distance in respect of the neighbouring population. The system of maintaining distance as found in some of the regions, has been compared with the hierarchical arrangement of the caste system (see Gould, 1967; Reddy, 1973 and Misra, 1972). Maintenance of relative distance does not necessarily determine hierarchy. It is indicative of mutual relationship. However, it can lead to the development of hierarchical characteristics if there is an input of power.

In this resume, I will concentrate mainly on the tribal pocket situated in the western ghats at the tri-junction of Tamilnadu, Kerala and Karnataka. The tribes of this pocket can be considered as belonging to three regions. One is the region of the Nilgiris; within this region itself there are distinctions between the tribes which live on higher levels and the tribes which live at lower levels. It is reported that the lower levels at one time were effected by a high incidence of Plasmodium malaria. The second is the Western slope of the Nilgiris, close to the borders of Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Kerala, which is referred to as the Sultanbateri region, named after the important towns of this region. The third adjoins the second region but is close to the border of Karnataka and Kerala and is known as the Manantody region after the important town of the region.

The Nilgiri Region

In the Nilgiri region live the Todas, the Badagas, the Kotas,

the Kurumbas and the Irulas. The Todas occupy the higher and westerly plateau area, the elevation of which ranges between 6,500 feet to 7,500 feet. The Badagas occupy the eastern half of the Nilgiri plateau which is heavily cultivated by them. The elevation of their settlement ranges from 4,900 feet to 7,300 feet. The Kotas live at almost the same elevation as the Badagas and have only six settlements. The Kurumbas and the Irulas are found on the lower slopes of the Nilgiris at elevations varying from 1,500 to 5,000 feet (Hockings, 1974: 207). The Badagas are reported to have migrated from the Mysore plains to the Nilgiris in the latter half of the sixteenth century. In 1602, there were only about 500 Badagas in the Nilgiris living in three villages but they now number 1,04,000 and are spread over 370 villages. Most of these villages are located in a zone between 5,000 and 6,500 feet, the upper reaches of which touch the Toda settlements and the lower, the Kurumba settlements (Hockings, 1974). In other words they pushed the Todas to the upper regions which was too cold for their millet cultivation and they forced the Kurumbas down to an inhospitable malarial climate.

A review of the growth of the population of the tribal groups shows some interesting results (Tables 2 & 3).

TABLE 2

Tribes	1901	1961	Increase	
				% Annual
Todas	807	714	- 11.62	-0.19
Badagas	33,152	84,823	+148.36	+2.45
Kotas	1,267	833	- 34.25	-0.57

TABLE 3

Tribes	1901	1971	Increase	
				% Annual
Todas	807	930	+ 15.24	+0.22
Badagas	34,150	104,000	+204.52	-2.92
Kotas	1,267	1,188	- 6.23	-0.09

The Badagas have grown rapidly while the Toda and Kota populations have gone down if the Census data from 1901 up to 1961 is taken into account. The Census figures for the Kurumbas and Irulas are consistently available. However, if we take the data up to 1971, the Todas also show a positive growth rate suggesting that in the ten-year period (1961 to 1971) the welfare measures undertaken among them have had positive results. But the Kotas still show a minus growth rate. If proper records were available the Irulas and Kurumbas perhaps would show a downward trend in numbers, at least up to 1961. Their decline in numbers could be expected because of the material climate of the area they lived in as also the large-scale persecution suffered by the Kurumbas in particular. The decline of the Todas was mainly because of the venereal diseases that affected them, a gift of the European settlers. But the decline of the Kotas is inexplicable. However, the important point is that the Badagas, who were a refugee population, have not only significantly risen in numbers but have also expanded and occupied most of the hospitable land in the Nilgiris. The growth of their population can be explained by the fact that not only were they producing their own food but they also generated a surplus which enabled them to buy up more and more land and expand. Their expansion led to the impoverishment of all groups, particularly the Irulas and Kurumbas as they were the weakest.

These groups lived in economic and social symbiosis: the Todas as pastoralists, the Badagas as agriculturists, the Kotas as artisans and the Kurumbas as food-gatherers and sorcerers. The Irulas were somewhat aloof from this symbiosis. However, though they provided their specialist services and goods to each other the exchange was not equitable. The Todas considered themselves to be the purest. They ate vegetarian food. They did not allow any of the other groups to come near their settlements. The Kotas, the Kurumbas and the Irulas were considered to be the most unclean. They ate carrion. The Kurumbas were particularly despised because they practised sorcery. The Kotas were employed to play music during the death ceremony of the Todas and the Badagas. Each group tenaciously maintained its cultural

identity despite interaction at the economic and social levels. The complex Toda rituals and social organization had no parallel in Kota life. The similarity between the Kotas and the Badagas did not go beyond dress and housing.

But all this has undergone a sea-change now. The exchange of services and goods between these communities based on the traditional relationship has given way to the impersonal market mechanism. There is no social interaction between them at the group level. In fact there is open antagonism between the Todas and Badagas, and the Kotas and Badagas. The Kurumbas and Irulas have never been a constituent in the power structure of the Nilgiris and they are not so even now. The Kurumbas were a persecuted people though they have some respite now as the people's attitude towards superstitions is changing.

The Todas have lost not only their pre-eminent position as also their grazing land, but their numbers are too small for any meaningful mobilization. The Kotas are similarly restricted in numbers. They lost their craft with the opening up of the area and also the land. The Kurumbas and the Irulas have been absorbed as wage-labourers in plantations and private farms or have been left to fend for themselves. It is the Badagas who have been rising from strength to strength. Their mainstay has been agriculture which received a further impetus with the introduction of potato, and now the latest capital intensive techniques of growing this crop has been made available to them. They participate in modern industry and a large number of them have become successful entrepreneurs. They have also taken to modern education and in this respect they took advantage of their backward class label. They are active politically and because of their large numbers and being concentrated in one place their viability as a political group is recognized in political circles.

There are some Christians among them but after independence their number has been falling; there have been very few conversions since then. The majority of them are Hindus but unlike the peasant castes in the plains they have not bothered to establish their identity in the caste hierarchy. They have by-passed the phenomenon of 'Sanskritisation' and instead they strive to 'modernize' themselves. In the

process the phenomenon of class dynamics has emerged among them. There are successful entrepreneurs among them as also owners of middle range industries. The large and medium size farm owners among them use capital intensive techniques to increase productivity with an eye on the market. A middle class is emerging among them and a substantial number of literate Badagas having obtained jobs in governmental and non-governmental establishments. But the base of Badaga society is still formed by a large chunk of people who are small or marginal farmers or landless labourers who have become progressively pauperized by the very nature of development. Thus, the Badagas have come a long way from their original refugee status, thence to a tribal status with a place in the regional inter-tribal relationship, and finally to a modern group with emerging tendencies of class dynamics.

The Sultanbateri Region

In this region live the Chettys, the Mullu Kurumbas, the Urali Kurumbas, the Kattu Naickens and the Paniyans. We find almost the same position here as in the Nilgiris—each tribe is endogamous, each observes specific commensal relations with the others, each has a specialized occupation and a notion of purity and pollution. It is also noticed that the Chettys, who are now mostly landowners, have started claiming to be a Hindu caste. The Mullu Kurumbas, who used to be hunters, now mostly depend on wage-earning. The Urali Kurumbas, the craftsmen of the area, gradually gave up their trade because of the penetration of the market into their region. The Kattu Naickens, who were food-gatherers, now find that the forests do not provide them with enough food and have taken to wage earning. The Paniyans used to work as serfs and continue to live by their labour. Our guess is that a similar demographic pattern would pertain to this area as to the Nilgiris if systematic data for each tribe was available. Analyzing the present situation it is clear that only the Chettys and the new settlers have an upper hand in the region as they produce surplus food and have other resources which allow them to invest and expand, advance money on credit and have control over men

and materials. All this, as discussed earlier causes pressure particularly on those who do not have the means to produce their own food. They are natural prey for those who are anxious to multiply their surpluses. Their pauperization and eventual decay is a logical corollary. But in this region also, the ten-year population record of the Paniyans and Kattu Naickens (1961-71) show an upward trend, suggesting that the welfare measures undertaken for the Scheduled Tribes have produced some positive results. The rise of the Chettys has not been as dramatic as that of the Badagas because the Chettys had to face stiff competition from new and more enterprising Muslim and Christian settlers in the region and they did not have the advantage of cash crop like potato which the Badagas had.

Both the Chettys and Mullu Kurumbas claim to be Hindus but without claiming particular status in the caste hierarchy. The twice-born group of Kshatriyas is missing in the South Indian caste situation, and hence the new groups entering the fold of the caste system can best join as clean Shudras. The term Shudra is not an enviable one and it is increasingly becoming impertinent to refer to any one as a Shudra. Therefore, the tendency is to gloss over the *varna* status and instead to seek status via 'modernization' and wealth, and through adopting prestigious rituals. This is what the Chettys and Mullu Kurumbas are striving for.

The Manantody Region

In this region live tribes like the Jenu Kurubas and the Betta Kurubas on the Karnataka side and the Kattu Naickens, the Urali Kurumbas, the Adiyans, the Paniyans and the Kuruchias on the Kerala side. Of all these groups, the Kuruchias are traditionally the only settled agriculturists. The records show that for their heroic participation in local wars, the Kuruchias were given gifts of land and money by the local kings (Varier, 1976). The records show that they fought against the British in 1812 and thereafter they were mercilessly punished (Ravindran, 1976). They are exclusive group and live away from all tribal and non-tribal groups. Except for the Namboodris, they consider all other people

differentially polluting. They do not allow any one to enter their houses or work in their fields. They are settled agriculturists and have a joint family system. Their property is held by the family. The Mullu Kurumbas consider the Kuruchias as being superior but the Kuruchias have not sought any particular identity in the Hindu caste hierarchy except that they have a minimal interaction with all those whom they consider polluting. Unlike the Badagas and the Chettys they have not given up their tribal identity and traditional practices and remain a close-knit group. There are differences of wealth in the community but it has not led to the emergence of classes among them because the property is not individually owned. All labour and capital investment is on land which, on account of several constraints, cannot be expanded beyond a certain point, while their social norms, particularly these concerning pollution, prevent economic diversification. Though they do seek to improve the productivity of their land by using modern agricultural techniques, hardly any efforts at modernization are noticed in other spheres of activity. Only a few among them have gone in for higher education. On account of their social norms, they have been able to prevent alienation of their land.

The two regions Sultanbateri and Manantody just described are contiguous and at one time must have been substantially rich in forest and natural resources. But now this wealth is divided among three states and the people living in these areas have been accordingly separated. Not only this, but the states concerned represent three different culture zones. The three main languages spoken in these States are Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada. In olden times, the tribals living in this zone must have been in close interaction with each other. This was possible because each culture area reached a cut-off point near about this zone and one can guess that demarcation of boundaries must have been vague in olden times. However, all this has changed now. Large chunks of forest have now been cleared and three dominant cultures have physically expanded up to be the State boundaries from their respective sides, however it is minimal from Karnataka side—plains people with higher technology came and settled into the region. Plantation, an entirely new

economy with new values made deep penetrations into this zone. The forest dwellers were uprooted, restrictions on their movement were imposed, their foraging economy was interfered and they were also lured to part away with the forest resources and the land they owned. The State policies on forest also interfered with their way of life. They became refugees on their own land.

The pace of penetration has quickened more particularly in those areas where big reservoir dams in the forest regions have been planned. The consequences of 'Statewise' penetration has been, (i) even though a tribe is, culturally, economically and politically homogenous, owing to demarcation of State boundaries the homogeneity is broken and a section of the tribe is made to integrate with the culture of State where it resides. Its political activities are relevant to that State. (ii) except for the Kuruchia all other tribals lost land to the settlers and plantations in their respective regions. Most of the tribals now work as daily wage earners. (iii) The artisans like the Urali Kurumba and the Kōta lost their trade but the Betta Kuruba received impetus to enlarge their craft as demand for baskets has increased but they are now facing acute shortage of raw material. (iv) The traditional economy has broken down and with that the traditional form of interaction between the groups has become extinct. The traditional pattern of social relationship thus has become meaningless yet the traditional values persist. This has made the groups more exclusive than before. The small tribal groups thus remain divided, restricting horizontal mobilisation. (v) The groups like the Jenu Kuruba and to some extent the Paniyan had taken entirely a different path and that is to withdraw themselves from outside interaction including development agencies, as far as possible.

Politically, it is the Badagas in the Nilgiris and the Kuruchias and Mullu Kurumbas in the other two regions who are active. It is not mere coincidence that the three land-owning groups should also be politically active. The Badagas tread on thin ice —while they have 'prospered' in Tamilnadu and have greatly benefited by the absence of the higher caste in the region, they are very much against the Tamil settlers in the Nilgiris, the latter being a potential threat to their interests. Their culture

and language is distinct from that of the Tamils and hence they fight against the Tamilization of the Nilgiris. Here lies the basic contradiction. The average Badaga is conscious of as to what objectively determines an individual's status and hence makes serious efforts to accumulate property and 'modernize' but at the same time he is forced to realize the contextual and culture-based situation which gives rise to 'communal' politics. The interplay of these opposing forces is in the best interests of those who have been able to amass some wealth for themselves. When participating in the wider arena such people tend to take radical postures and do not seem to give any weightage to traditional practices but back in their home regions they become champions of the traditional inter- and intra-group relationship.

The young leadership of the Kuruchias and the Mullu Kurumbas realize that they cannot become politically important because of their small numbers. Some efforts have been made by different political parties to mobilize them across tribal boundaries. However, these efforts have not been sustained. A number of young people belonging to these communities are full of enthusiasm but lack proper leadership. The young men are fully conscious of the exploitation they and their communities have suffered but feel frustrated as they cannot do anything about it for want of money and the lack of education among them. But it appears that they have not been able to cast away their traditional values and objectively analyze their situation. While they realize the necessity of tribal unity, one of them said during a discussion on this issue: 'It is not possible to bring them (tribe X) into our fold because they are so ignorant and dirty. We do not allow them to come near our water sources.' Their leaders have a clear assessment of their strength and have learnt the modern art of 'politics'. Those who have come up socially, 'float' by aligning themselves to one or other factional group while those still at lower level keep their importance alive by solving individual problems.

This review of the tribal situation in most of the southern part of the country apart from some pockets in Andhra Pradesh, shows that political mobilization has not proceeded beyond the take-off stage. This is intriguing particularly in a

region like Kerala where political consciousness can be said to be the highest in the country. Further, regionwise investigation and in-depth analysis is required to fully understand this phenomenon, particularly when the objective conditions for mobilization exist. A social worker who has worked among the tribals for last thirty years said 'Even the most backward, submissive tribe like Paniyan do show their utter annoyance on outsiders interfering with their life when they are sure of some support. Otherwise in spite of being subjected to greatest humiliation the adaptation to which they have taken recourse is to lead a life of their own and not to allow the outsiders to penetrate to their social, cultural, and ritual life'.

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The Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) conducted a survey of ongoing tribal movements in different parts of the country in 1976 and organised a Seminar in September that year to evaluate its findings. Among those who presented papers were anthropologists and other scholars including historians, sociologists, political scientists and administrators. Besides there were tribal scholars who provided the insiders' views and also social workers. All these papers were divided into two volumes: The first volume contains twenty-four papers on the north-east and the second volume has twenty-five papers on movements elsewhere in the country.

The ASI survey identified movements seeking political autonomy and formation of a state, agrarian and forest-based movements, socio-religious movements and movements based on script and language. The best organised of the movements of the first type is the Jharkhand Movement which is discussed in terms of its historical development, ideology, structure and regional dimensions. While few agrarian struggles were reported from the northern and southern parts of India, as many as five agrarian and forest-based struggles, which are closely linked, were reported from central India. However, it was socio-cultural movements that held sway in this area. Five Bhagat type movements were reported, which highlighted some aspects of the Sanskritisation processes. More important was the set of four cultural movements based on script, language and religion seeking to assert and define tribal identity. Down south and in the islands, the tribes are too primitive, isolated and numerically small to organise movements on their own; however incipient processes of political mobilisation were found at work among some of them.

K.S. Singh, a senior member of the Indian Administrative Service spent many years serving among and studying backward communities in central India. He held several important assignments including the directorship of Anthropological Survey of India. Author of the well known work *Birsa Munda and His Movement in Chotanagpur* he edited a large number of books on Indian tribes.

He was general editor of the multi-volume People of India series of Anthropological Survey of India. He died in 2006.

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