



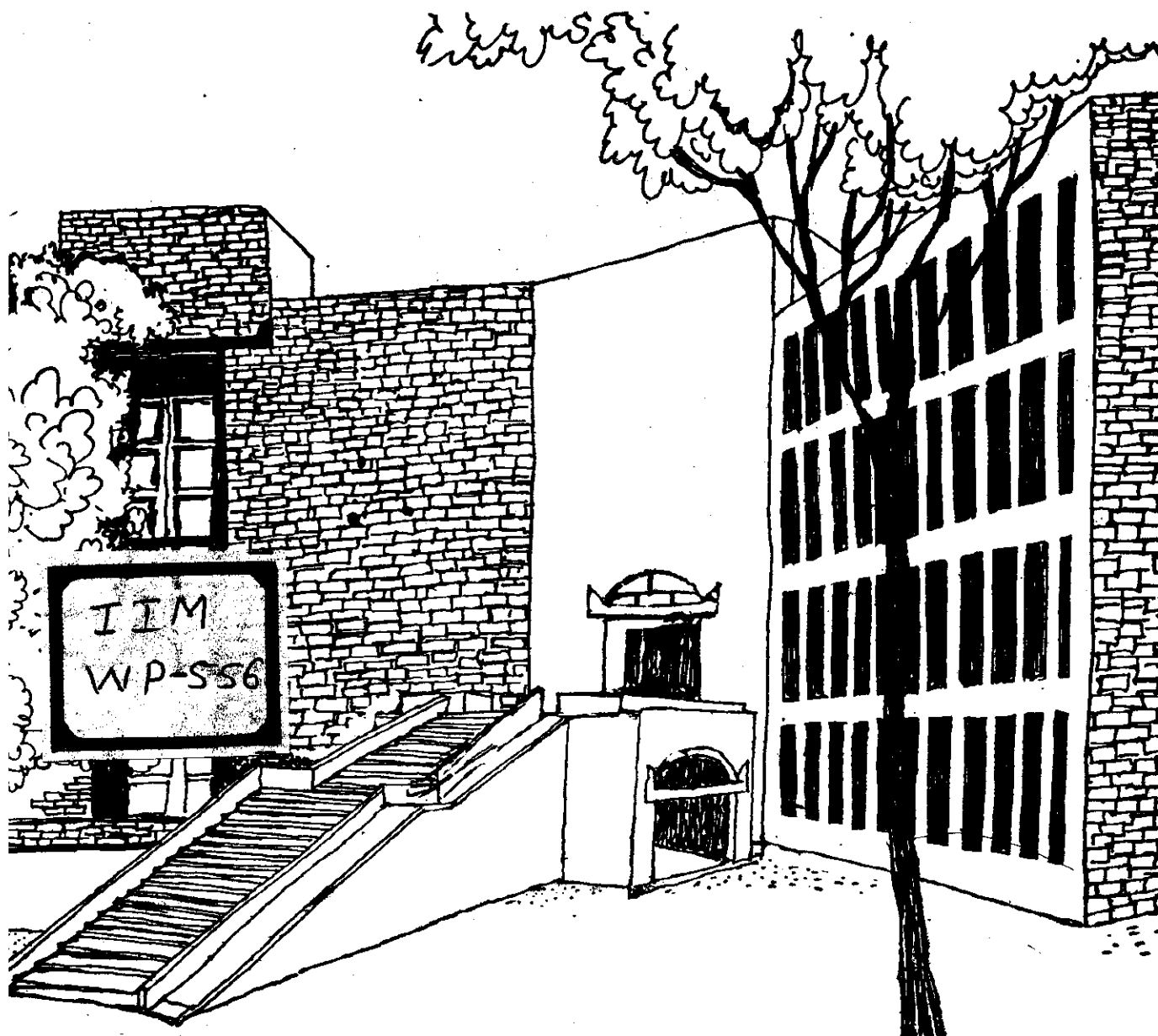
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ETHNICITY - THE INDIAN SITUATION

By

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ETHNICITY - the Indian situation

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The term ethnicity has a special connotation for a country like India where no pejorative overtones are applied to it. Like several other ancient civilisations, India can boast of a continuity of history dating back to several thousand years. History writing has never been a strength of the Indian thinkers and many accounts we gather of the past are found in the recorded chronicles of travellers and warriors of other countries. Though the written accounts are not too many yet we glean evidences from archaeological sites and racial characteristics. The Harappan Civilisation (c 5000 BC) was a highly developed civilisation with its own language, town planning, trading, costume jewellery and pottery making. We also have evidence of manufacture and use of baked clay bricks instead of stone for building houses.

We have recorded and unrecorded evidences to indicate that over the centuries a large number of invaders violated the borders of this sub-continent. In sheer geographical area it expanded and shrunk several times. The compositions of the populations changed and so did the religious faiths. Even now, India has the second largest Muslim population in the world; next only to Indonesia. Before the advent of Islam and the Islamic conquests, Alexander marched to North-West India and before he returned a large number of his soldiers settled on the Indian soil.

In many countries ethnic groups are synonymous with a feudal outlook. In our environment we accept ethnic groups as a part of the social fabric and due importance is attached to their 'ways of life.'

An ethnic group is defined as "a distinct category of the population in a larger society whose culture is usually different from its own" (Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences, 1962). How are these ethnic groups formed? Some reasons offered by earlier historians is that ethnic groups may be found in a society as a result of the gradual migration of either the whole population or parts of the population such as religious refugees. It could also be the result of military conquests when soldiers settled permanently in the area of conquest.

According to the Dictionary of Social Science the term ethnic group denotes a social group which, within a larger social system is accorded a complex of traits which it exhibits. Some of these traits may be drawn from the religious, linguistic or from the geographic origins of their forebears. This term is most frequently applied to any group which differs in one or several aspects from other groups. Ethnic as an adjective is often used interchangeably with religious, racial, national, cultural and sub-cultural. A sharp contrast can be noted between usage in the last thirty years and that of earlier parts of this century. The term ethnic has its derivation from the Greek 'ethos' meaning tribe or race, but ethnic group has come to be more closely associated with ethos or custom (A Dictionary of the Social Sciences (ed.) Gould J. and Kerb W., 1964).

The tribe is a system of social organisations which includes several local groups, such as, villagea and districts. Normally this includes a common territory, a common language, and a common culture. The term tribe implies a large element of solidarity based on strongly shared sentiments. Such solidarity becomes contractual in nature as the tribe becomes more organised. Tribe is similar to nation. The line of distinction is the

commonality of language and culture which characterizes tribes but not nations. As primary ties diminish they are replaced by secondary ties and these characterize the nation.

In common parlance the term 'tribe' denotes an aggregate of people living in a primitive condition - the unnecessary moralistic tones used here can be avoided by the use of the expression 'tribal society' (International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences, 1968).

The tribal situation in India constitutes a varied picture. As per the 1971 census, the scheduled tribe population numbered 3.8 crores constituting about 7% of the country's total population. With the Amendment Act of 1976, doing away with area restriction within a state the number is estimated to reach the 4-crore mark. Speaking 105 languages, they have been concentrated mostly in central India across the states of Orissa, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan. Tribes in these states put together represent 78.7% of the total tribal population. The maximum percentage of tribes is in Madhya Pradesh amounting to 24% (Report of the Working Group on Tribal Development During Sixth Plan). Looking at the various Census reports since 1891 we find that the tribal population varies from census to census. This is because the tribes were enumerated under different names such as people having a tribal form of religion (1891), animists (1901), tribal animists or tribal religion (1911), hill and forest tribe (1921) primitive tribe (1931), tribe (1941) and scheduled tribe (1951, 1961, 1971).

The 1951 census marked a complete departure from the traditional recording of individual tribes in pursuance of the policy of the government of India to discourage community distinction based on caste and the only relevant

information which was enumerated was if the persons belonged to a "Scheduled Tribe" group. The data in this respect give the total number of tribal population and nothing else on an individual basis. At the time of the preparation of the 1961 census it was realized that the special detailed tabulations of the individual tribes, as also of their social, economic, demographic and educational details are essential as these were expected to serve as the benchmark data for future evaluation, particularly in the context of the concerned efforts being directed towards ameliorating the conditions of the Scheduled Tribes.

POPULATION GROWTH IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

Category	1951	1961		1971	
		Population	Increase %	Population	Increase %
General	36,11,51,669	43,90,72,582	21.58	54,79,47,829	24.66
Scheduled Tribe	2,25,11,854	2,98,79,249	32.73	3,80,15,162	27.00

Source: Vidyarathi and Rai, 1977.

According to Prof. Majumdar tribes are endogamous organisations with a single social structure and a self contained economy. There is minimal contact with other groups. They manage their own affairs and are governed by their own social norms. This of course represents an ideal type. Tribes in India may not satisfy all these conditions as they are subjected to massive forces of change which has led to their transformation. Many of these tribes have adopted customs of their non-tribal Hindu neighbours and so are indistinguishable from them.

The unique treatment accorded to the tribes by the Indian government has led to labelling them as "scheduled" tribes. Tribal areas were isolated for administrative purposes by the British rulers. These areas were also isolated in terms of communication and infra-structure. Infra-structure was encouraged to the extent of building roads in order to exploit the forest produce. On the eve of independence it was decided that these tribal communities should be put in a separate schedule; 'Excluded' and 'Partially excluded' areas were enlisted in two schedules. A similar classification was adopted under the Indian states when they got merged with the Indian Union. It is the communities included in the Schedules to the Presidential Order of 1950, as amended from time to time which are today known as Scheduled Tribes. Dr. Sharma (1984) points out that it is not possible to go into the merits of these lists as there are some communities included in the list who have lost all tribal characteristics and there are communities which are not included in the list but have all the characteristics of a tribal society. Furthermore the problem of objective classification has become more complex with the national effort for fast economic development for all areas and people. There are certain communities which on account of their education or majority status manage to reap the maximum benefits from these development programmes and rise in socio-economic status. But it is these communities who begin to appreciate the nature of privileges associated with scheduling and are clever enough to hold on to their formal classifications. In some cases they begin to form an upper crust in the tribal society thereby slowing down percolation of benefits to the lower strata. What ought to happen is that as these communities move up economically they should cease to enjoy the privilege then the number of communities having tribal characteristic

would decrease and finally there will come a time when none in the nation would be distinguishable on the criterion of being located at a different stage in the scale of development.

Tribals in India have been exposed to many potent forces of change. Some of these forces are the British rule over India and specifically their approach towards the tribals, industrialization, towards urbanization and the governments policy of upliftment of the tribes. The most important factor of change was state action. Provision of reservation in legislature and services, special steps for educational development and large scale economic measures for the upliftment of scheduled tribes have contributed a good deal to transformation in tribal society. We can see briefly the impact of these changes on their economic, political and religious institutions.

The economy of the tribals is of the subsistence type. However no sweeping generalization can be made of their economy as tribes in India belong to different economic stages ranging from food gathering to participation in industrial activity. To a certain extent tribes are an economically independent group having their own division of labour and specialization, gift and ceremonial exchange, trade and barter etc. The major tribes of India practice agriculture as their primary source of livelihood. However they cultivate at subsistence levels and are characteristically unable to meet their minimum needs. A number of tribes subsist on crafts and cottage industries like basket-making, tool making, spinning and weaving, metal work etc. Some other types of economies followed by tribes are cattle herding, folk artistry and working on a casual basis in industrial and agricultural occupations. Of recent past the tribal culture in India is passing through a phase of economic change. Factors contributing to this change are education,

the link between tribal markets with urban markets, the emergence of co-operatives, commercial banks and labour unions. A commercial aptitude is also developing amongst the tribes which shows itself in the emergence of tribal money lenders, a change in the cropping pattern from cereals to cash crops and an open sale of minor forest produce as a means of cash economy. Another significant factor contributing to this trend is the policy of reservation of jobs followed by the Indian government.

The traditional political field of the tribals is confined to institutions like the council of village elders. The village headman, the village panchayat, the union of villages, and the tribal chief represent a temporary body of selected villagers generally coinciding with clan elders to look into cases is either a hereditary post or subject to villagers' opinion if and when required. The village Panchayat is a body headed by the village headman. The 'panchs' are elected by the villagers directly. In the union of villages a regional panchayat is headed by a regional head. The tribal chief is a hereditary post of supreme judicial authority at the tribal level.

The introduction of British rule disrupted tribal solidarity. The collection of revenue, establishment of central policy system, judicial system and a policy of extreme isolation in some regions eroded tribal authority. The tribal political system also received a jolt in the hands of the christian missionaries. Apart from securing their religious aim the missionaries also sought to secure justice for the converts among the tribals by organizing village committees etc.

In the post independence period the inauguration of the Panchayati Raj system gave a set back to the traditional panchayat. The headman was now elected and any villager could seek election. The introduction of community development programmes meant that people close to the officials found ample opportunity to become local leaders. Education programmes increased the number of educated youths who started taking active interest in village politics. Elections on all India level also affected them and the result was the growth of factions and parties in the villages and the formation of regional political parties etc. Taken together, the British policy of land rent system, introduction of middle men, police and judicial arrangements and consequent launching of different religious, agrarian and political movements by the tribals, the new democracy set up in the Republic of India, expansion of educational and developmental programmes have combined to give birth to the emergent contemporary political life of tribals.

Tribal problems have been politicized. They look for solutions to their problems through the mechanisms of the political machinery. However there is a growing realization that tribal political culture is more oriented to sub-national tribal identities than to a broader national identity.

Industrialization, and urbanization while exposing the tribals to a new way of life has also had a debilitating influence on their life (Sachidananda, 1980). For a long time tribal communities survived with a reasonable standard of health in their natural habitat. But large scale poaching and denudation of the forests for commercial purposes has taken a toll of the natural diet of the tribals. Increasing pressure of population and depletion of natural resources has further added to this imbalance. Pushed on all sides by advanced communities some of them are facing special health problems and are in a precarious state of existence.

Land alienation amongst the tribes through the chicanery of landlords and money lenders is fairly common. This coupled with low productivity of land and primitive mode of agriculture have led to their pauperization, Stephen Fuchs (1972) has tried to establish a direct correlation between landlessness and criminal propensity among the Bhils of Malwa and Alirajpur.

Evidence for this increasing landlessness is depicted clearly in the 1971 census where the percentage of cultivators to workers fell from 68 to 57.6 while that of agricultural labourers went up from 23 to 33.

Industrial development is taking place along many parts of tribal under due to the existence of large mineral resources in these areas. Sachidananda (1980) feels that local communities have benefitted little. Tribes had to move out of their land as the industrial complexes required land. Those who were agriculturists turned into paupers. He cites Das Gupta's (1977) study of the 'Impact of Industrialization on HO' based upon the experience of Jhinkapani where limited opportunity for employment leaves the worker with strong attachments to agriculture. Workers maintain close ties with the village and agriculture. Land continues to be a source of security and all the savings are invested in the purchase of agricultural land. These workers tend to show low commitment to industrial work. Thus modernization may challenge traditional ties but it cannot overthrow them completely. Tribal culture is resilient and adapts to changing situations.

The statistical treatment of religion in the Census of India 1961 presents a very clear picture of the religions of tribal India. The tribals have reported altogether 59 religions in which they believe. A large majority of them are Hindus (89.39%), 5.53% profess Christianity and a negligible percentage believe in Buddhism (0.89%), Islam (0.21%),

Jainism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism (all three together 0.34%). About 4.19% of the tribals claim to have a distinct tribal or Adivasi religion (Vidyarthi and Rai, 1977).

Since the bulk of tribal communities have existed for centuries in close interaction with the Hindu social order the process of Hinduization is inevitable and long standing. Hinduization has been a gradual process and except in certain cases does not involve any formal conversion.

Sanskritization is a similar process and begins with the simple claim of the group as being members of the Hindu society (Sachidananda, 1980). This process involves giving up of unclean, non-Hindu habits such as beef-eating, (cow and its progeny are sacred and much worshipped animal among the Hindus) rearing of pigs and fowl and their consumption. It also means giving up their belief in tribal gods and adopting the Hindu deities and ritual. Some tribes also go upto the extent of giving up matrilinear inheritance and adopting the patrilinear complex. By this time the tribal language is also given up (Sachidananda, 1980). Tribes incorporated into the Hindu social order do not necessarily have to occupy the lowest rung. Sasmal in his Ph.D. dissertation showed how the Bauri of West Bengal have achieved their near Brahmin status by observing mourning for eleven days, putting on the sacred thread, accepting Vaishnavism and going on pilgrimages.

Christian missions belonging to various denominations have been working in tribal areas and have succeeded in converting them. The first impact was felt among the Khasis of Meghalaya in 1813, the Orans of Chotanagpur in 1850 and Bhils in Madhya Pradesh in 1880 (Vidyarthi and Rai, 1977). Christianity has provided the first model of Westernization to the tribals in the shape of the church, western education and above all western values and morals.

Thus we see that tribal communities in India are in a state of flux. The picture of a primitive aborigine living in isolation does not hold true any longer.

Until British rule tribal societies experienced little interference from outside. Since British rule and especially after gaining independence there has been a conscious effort by the government for the upliftment of the tribes. These approaches to the tribals may be separately considered in the context of pre-independence and post-independence periods. Historically there have been 3 main approaches (Vidyarthi and Rai, 1977).

- 1) Policy of Segregation
 - a) In pre-independence Period
 - b) In Post-independence Period
- 2) Policy of Assimilation
- 3) Policy of Integration of the tribes in regional and national settings.

The foremost policies adopted by the British rulers, as indicated already, were to isolate these people from the general mass and separate the tribal areas from the purview of normal administration. This isolation led to much exploitation by non-tribal money-lenders, contractors, zamindars and middlemen. In 1936 Elwin (1939) advocated for the establishment of a sort of a National Park of the tribals and advised that their contact with the rest of the world should be minimal.

In the early period of independence, the government of India continued to adopt the policy of isolation but in a slightly modified form. The partial exclusion of largely tribal areas was followed by a special welfare measure. The very fact that certain areas are delineated as scheduled areas and tribal areas is an example of isolation.

Assimilation of the tribes with the larger Indian culture is an ongoing process. It is a gradual and almost inevitable process and has resulted in the Hinduization of many tribes.

The ultimate way in which the tribals were approached was an integrational one. The late Jawaharlal Nehru (1958) gave a "Panchsheel" i.e., five fundamental principles for the tribal upliftment.

- i) People should develop along the lines of their own genus and we should avoid imposing anything on them. We should try to encourage in every way their own traditional arts and culture.
- ii) Tribal rights to land and forests should be respected.
- iii) We should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work of administration and development. Some technical personnel from outside will no doubt be needed especially in the beginning. But we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory.
- iv) We should not overadminister these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through, and not in rivalry to, their own social and cultural institutions.
- v) We should judge results, not by statistics or the amount of money involved but by the quality of human character that is evolved.

After independence the Constitution has given the tribes a number of safeguards considering them to be the weaker section of the population. At first a period of ten years was allotted to achieve this goal, but as the problem proved to be too complicated to be solved in a decade, it is still being continued. A number of articles of the Indian Constitution provide

proper safeguards for the tribal people (Vidyarthi and Rai, 1977). Many of these articles are of a general nature and incorporate non-tribals too, like Article 15 which enjoins that there will be no discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste sex or place of birth. Some specific articles related to the tribals are Article 46 on the basis of which the state should promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and in particular of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. Article 244 empowers the President to declare an area as a scheduled area either under the Fifth Schedule and (or) the Sixth Schedule separately. Under the Fifth Schedule, the governor has been vested with the authority to modify state and central laws and to make regulations for the peace and good government of Scheduled Areas. Some other provisions are the appointment of ministers to look after the tribal interest exclusively (Article 164), grants from Union to certain states (Article 275), reservation of seats for Scheduled Tribes in the House of People (Article 330) and in the Legislative Assemblies of States (Article 332), reservation of seats and special claims to services and posts (Article 335), provision of special officers for them (Article 338) control of the centre over the administration of Scheduled Areas and the Welfare of Scheduled Tribes (Article 339). Article 342 is devoted exclusively to Scheduled Tribes.

From time to time the government has constituted different commissions to analyze the welfare work of the tribals. Some of these are, Backward Classes Commission (1953-55), Study Team on Social Welfare and Welfare of Backward Classes (1958-59), Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission (1960-61), and Committee on Untouchability, Economic and Educational Development of Scheduled Castes (1965-69).

For promoting the welfare of Scheduled Tribes and tribal areas at the state level, the Constitution (Article 275) provides grants to the states for implementing the developmental programmes. For this purpose the central government had provided special funds in each Five Year Plan for the welfare of Scheduled Tribes.

The plan-wise amounts spent for the welfare of Scheduled Tribes and its percentage to total plan outlay is presented in the table below:

AMOUNT SPENT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF
SCHEDULED TRIBES UNDER FIVE YEAR PLANS.

(Rupees in Crores)

Plan Period (Five Year Plans)	Total Plan Outlay	Amount spent for development of Scheduled Tribes	Percentage
1	2	3	4
First Plan	1,960	19.83	1.0%
Second Plan	4,672	42.92	0.9%
Third Plan	8,577	50.32	0.5%
Fourth Plan	15,902.2	80.89	0.4%

Source : N. Venkatanarasinha and S. Ravinder, Kurukshetra, Vol. XXXI,
No. 16, May 16-31, 1983.

It can be clearly seen that the percentage of amounts allotted for tribal welfare programmes gradually decreased from plan to plan.

During the period of the First Plan, 4,000 schools were established, about 2,400 miles of roads, bridle paths and hillpaths were constructed, tribal labour was organised under 653 Co-operatives, 350 grain banks were

organised. In short, education, economic development and communication received almost equal priority with expenditure ranging from 4 to 5 crores; medical facilities came next and administration there after.

Till the commencement of the Second Plan the tribal welfare programme was more humanitarian in content, meant to ameliorate their indigent condition.

A developmental orientation was clearly discerned in the Second Five Year Plan. Special multipurpose Tribal Development blocks were introduced in a few areas predominately introduced by tribals. After reviewing the working of these blocks, a composite team headed by Verrier Elwin, recommended a more flexible approach. The SMPT blocks were renamed as tribal development blocks. These tribal developmental blocks put special emphasis on agriculture, communications, education, public works and credit supply.

In the Third Five Year Plan, steps were taken to bring the tribal under Tribal Development Blocks. After the failure of the tribal development block approach, the government felt the need for a comprehensive and integrated strategy. Hence the special programmes of integrated Tribal Development Agency was started in 1971, in the second half of the Fourth Five Year Plan in tribal areas of Srikakulam district in Andhra Pradesh, Singhbhum in Bihar and Ganjam district and Koraput district in Orissa.

An area-wise approach was followed in the Fifth Plan. Sub-plans were prepared for tribal areas. The first exercise in this is to demarcate the tribal areas based on the tribal population. Three tribal zones were envisaged.

- 1) Zone of tribal concentration of 50 per cent and above
- 2) Zone of dispersed tribal population below 50 per cent
- 3) Extremely backward and isolated communities.

The Sixth Plan envisaged that the entire tribal population should be covered by tribal developmental programmes and the gulf between the level of development in the tribal areas and the surrounding areas should be reduced by the end of the Sixth Plan. By 1989 the problems of the tribal communities should be solved.

It is evident that the problem of the tribals is a complex one.

Tribes in different parts of India are passing through an accelerated process of change. A phase of transition marking the meeting of the two worlds traditional and modern, is in the process.

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