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ABORIGINES OF INDIA

The following address was originally delivered to the Council for Aboriginal Rights in Victoria. It is reproduced here by kind permission of the author, who is vice-president of the Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League.

THIS SUBJECT is not an esoteric one for specialists: it has so many similarities with the Aboriginal situation in Australia that it is of particular importance to anyone interested in Aboriginal affairs in this country. There are 25 million Aborigines in India, living in 567 tribes in every State; and 25 million people, even judged by Indian standards, is a sizeable minority. They live in tribal communities, as Australia's Aborigines were wont to do, and their work is largely undifferentiated: that is to say, all the men may till the soil in a particular area, and all the women weave and look after the household. Their economy is simple and most live at subsistence level or lower on a rice and vegetable diet.

These Adibassi (the Indian word for Aborigine) were the original Dravidian inhabitants of India who were pushed back about 2,000 B.C. into the hill country by the Aryans and then by the Turko-Afghans, the technically superior invaders from the north, just as the Europeans who entered Australia gradually pushed the Aborigines into the harsher back-country.

The general population of India, though heterogeneous, is over 80% Hindu. The Adibassi, coming from totally different stock, have kept very much to themselves and surprisingly little miscegenation has occurred. There is, therefore, no problem of part-Aborigines and fringe-dwellers such as we know here. Those from the south, particularly, have a similar cast of features to Australian Aborigines, who are thought to have originally migrated through south-east Asia to Australia, where the rising of the sea-level isolated them. The Indian Aboriginal women do not wear saris but usually some form of skirt and blouse, and both men and women favor a lot of cane and wooden jewellery, hand-made. In religion, too, they differ radically from the Hindus, being Animists—those who regard the spirit world as manifesting itself in natural objects—and have no system of castes or untouchability. But,
being casteless, they are regarded by the Hindus as being in the same category as Untouchables (as, indeed, are Europeans).

Christian missionaries have been in the field for over a century, so a substantial minority are Christian, though sometimes the "conversion" has been superficial and is linked with the higher material standards the missionaries bring with them.

Section 275 of the Indian Constitution is concerned with what are known as the Scheduled Tribes: those who have been officially listed as tribals and who get many of the specific privileges afforded also to Harijans or "children of God"—as Ghandi called those who, before Independence, were dubbed Untouchables. Under this Section, laws have been passed which discriminate in favor of the Adibassi, since the government recognises that a minority community which, for historical reasons is economically backward, requires special assistance. These special laws may be considered in four main categories:

1 Areas where tribals predominate can only be represented in the Lok Sabha or lower house of Parliament by tribals.

2 Every effort has been made to raise Adibassi living standards by encouraging those who can benefit to take up secondary and tertiary scholarships which are freely available to all tribals who qualify. (For instance, all tribal matriculants are entitled to free university places). Tribal bishops, lawyers and doctors are encouraged to return to their own people after graduating, in order to set an example and help those about them; though there is no coercion in this. The success of the scheme is proved by the large numbers of professional tribals one meets, who are working in their own area.

3 Adibassi, unlike the rest of the population, do not pay income tax, regardless of income. Again the government has realised the difficulties facing people emerging from an economically simple, self-contained community into the more individualistic and complex society about them.

4 Tribal reserves are owned and administered by elected tribal councils, who are free to split them into blocks for sale to individual Adibassi, but may not sell them to non-Adibassi. Funds for their development and technical assistance are made available by the government, but the people themselves decide in what form the land is to be developed. Some tribes have opted for co-operative farming (for which interest-free loans are available for implement-buying), others for co-operative buying of equipment and/or selling of produce only, while yet others run small
farms on entirely individual lines. Decisions about these and other matters of community interest are decided by the village council, or Gram Panchayet, elected by adult franchise. Noted Indian anthropologist, Dr. Verrier Elwyn once commented, “Tribal programs must be community programs, not administrators’ programs. We must build on the past, and not make a sudden break with it; and the emphasis of all planning should be on self-reliance.”

Payment in all jobs in which there is an award is equal to Adibassi and all other groups alike.

One could say of the majority of Indians that, like Australians, they have had no contact with the Aboriginal population and are not particularly interested in them. However, among most officers of the Department of Tribal Affairs, from the Commissioner of Scheduled Tribes in Delhi to a humble village worker “out in the District” there is an element of pride and enthusiasm which is refreshing to encounter, pride in the indigenous culture of “their” tribals (with whom they readily identify), and enthusiasm in helping with the sometimes meagre resources available.

Tribal people themselves are trained in large numbers as officers of the Department of Tribal Affairs, at all levels, on the assumption that they, knowing the local language and customs, will be more suitable. All departmental officers, whether tribal or otherwise, are given a minimum of three months’ special training, which includes courses in local culture and customs, and principles of Community Development.

Villages are grouped together as Development Blocks, of which there is one to every thana or police district. Typical of such Blocks is the one in Simdega, in the state of Bihar. This consists of 96 villages and 65,000 people. It is headed by a Block Development Officer whose function is to plan economic and social development for the area and to co-ordinate the work of government officials working in the Block. Under him are engineers and area planners, who advise on roads, bridges, wells and houses. Wherever possible, materials and a choice of plans is given to the local villagers, who are encouraged themselves to execute the plans, under expert surveillance if need be. Also, there are medical officers, hampered by the vast areas they have to cover to administer both preventive and curative medicine (there is one fully trained doctor to every 6,000 of the population in India, one to every 600 in the Soviet Union); and hampered, too, by having to frequently double up as veterinary surgeons. Agriculturalists, working within the community development idea, advise
on stock improvement, use of fertilizers, irrigation and the myriad problems of small lot-holders operating poor soil without capital. To every ten villages, there are three field workers, whose main job is to make personal contact with the wants of villagers and to act as a bridge between the Adibassi and officialdom. They comprise a social worker, a gram sevaka (literally: village service) and a karamchari or revenue officer who sees that land boundaries are respected and other legalities are observed. These three work on an informal basis, as a liaison between people and government.

The Department of Tribal Affairs is a Union Government agency, with offices in all States. The States officers' function is to advise on the problems of that particular area and to spend funds allocated from Delhi. Curiously enough, State officers' main problems seem to centre around spending funds allotted, rather than obtaining them, since they are constantly beset by lack of communication and of shortages: shortages of agricultural equipment, of building materials, of even the simplest nails and screws; and, too, there are problems of villages which are periodically completely cut off by the monsoon in a surrounding sea of mud.

Annually, there is a check on tribal programs by senior officers of the Department, who administer a questionnaire to officials in various areas. The sort of questions that are asked include:

Of the facilities provided, how many were used, by how many people?

What methods are adopted to consult regularly with the people? Are these satisfactory?

What are the main needs of your area? How have you arrived at this conclusion?

By how much per capita has income been raised in your area last year? If the answer is “not raised,” why not?

and many others, aimed at ensuring efficiency of administration and a high level of consultation with those administered.

The main drawback of the Community Development plan in India, a most serious one, is that so far it has only reached 65% of all villages. The “poverty, passivity and over-population” which the Abbe Dubois observed in 1800 are by no means yet overcome.

It is a part of Indian Government policy that all minorities be encouraged to maintain their separate culture, not as a method of holding them back, of keeping them as museum pieces, but of maintaining cohesion of group spirit, a pride in the achievements of their people. In the case of Adibassi, this assistance comes in various forms:
1 Government-paid scribes are employed to record myths and legends of the tribes. These are published in well-printed, well-illustrated books which are on sale at city bookshops. Though many tribals are illiterate, they are aware of the existence of these books, and of their government sponsorship.

2 All-India Radio has a permanent team out in the field, recording tribal songs and music for preservation purposes and also to play in frequent sessions on the radio.

3 Traditional arts and crafts are encouraged and an attempt is made to steer a course between a Woolworths-type degradation of traditional art forms and a stultification of artistic expression. Aeroplanes and other appurtenances of every-day modern life appear in design; traditional woodwork is turned to marketable objects such as toys and candlesticks, school pillars and doors; and a District Officer will wear a tie which has been locally designed. Both in tribal areas and in the cities the Government maintains Tribal Museums which only exhibit the best pieces of craft and art works; pottery, carving, jewellery, painting. The honor of having work so displayed is considerable and the effect is to make artistic standards competitive, and so, higher.

4 Similarly, dance groups of the various tribes practice throughout the year for their public performance in the open air in Delhi as part of India's Independence Day which has been celebrated each January since 1947, and is attended by the Prime Minister and many local and overseas dignitaries. In this National Day ceremonial the Adibassi play a prominent part.

The attitude among officialdom is one of humility, of trying to assist Adibassi along the lines they wish to pursue. The elected Panchayat or council existing in every village, has every facility for communication with Block officers, at the planning level, at the execution level (where projects for the people are usually carried out by the people concerned, if necessary under expert supervision) and channels of communication to the Government allow for complaint over what has been achieved and what has not been achieved. This constructive approach to the problem of tribals is fostered by the six Anthropological Institutes dotted over India and also by the attitude of the late Prime Minister Jawarhalal Nehru, who stated in New Delhi, on 9th October, 1958: "Tribals should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them."

The illiteracy rate among tribals is high (in West Bengal, for instance, 90.8%, as against 64% for the rest of the population), despite active government assistance with scholarships; their tradition is against it, areas in which they live are often without a
school building or a teacher, a big majority of today's parents are totally uneducated and do not value formal education. But it is official policy to teach children in their own language for the first four years of schooling so that the big step from home to school environment is bridged more easily, and also to inculcate the idea that their own language is something of which to be proud. Hindi, the national language, is introduced after fourth grade and, in secondary school, English, too, becomes a compulsory subject.

It cannot be stressed too emphatically that the whole of India suffers from under-development of the economy and therefore intense poverty among the big majority of the population, whether tribal or non-tribal. There are tribals as well as non-tribals who suffer from severe malnutrition, homelessness, diseases that are easily curable were facilities available, a tiny cash income or none at all. In the words of Sir Hugh Casson (English "Observer", January 1960): "In between these brave islands of endeavour washes a great sea of poverty and people." The figures speak for themselves:

Only one family in 4,000 has an income of more than $400 per month.
Per capita income is $72 per annum.
Half the population live on less than ten cents a day, including the food they produce.
Only 10% have an income of more than twenty cents a day.
Life expectancy is 42 years.

It has proved impossible for India to pull herself up by the bootstraps. Massive investment is required to build up secondary industry and to render agriculture more productive, and there is not a big surplus of production to set aside for this purpose. Investment has only been running at the rate of 11% in India, as compared with an average of 10-15% in Western (developed) countries and 25% in socialist countries. The only way out of the dilemma of misery and starvation, made worse recently by bad seasons and crop failures, appears to be massive aid from the developed countries, which can be invested in heavy industry.

But though the aid rendered to tribals is nothing like enough in quantity, the quality nevertheless remains admirable and gives us, in Australia, something to ponder over in the Aboriginal situation, when a country so beset as is India with almost every conceivable problem—economic, social, cultural, political—can yet plan and put into effect such an enlightened policy of tribal advancement.