Chapter 2

Tribe, Tribal India, Tribal History

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to present a general profile of Tribal India. The chapter begins with the concept of 'tribe' and shows how it has undergone changes through the ages and then it gives an outline history of Tribal India.

Tribal peoples form a major segment of the world population. They are found all over the world. They are called by different names such as 'primitive,' 'tribal,' 'indigenous,' 'aboriginal,' 'native,' and so on. India has a large number of tribal people. According to R. C. Verma they "constitute about 8.08% of the total population. They would be about 6.78 crores out of the total population of 83.86 crores according to [the] 1991 census" (1). The major tribes in India are the Gonds, the Bhils, the Santals, the Oraons and the Minas. They live in different regions in the forest as well as in urban areas, and mostly speak their own languages. The states of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and the Northeastern Region have a larger concentration of tribal population. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are also inhabited by several tribes such as the Great Andamanese, Sentenelese, Onges, Jarwas, Sompens, and so on.

The tribes, according to Verma, are "the autochthonous people of the land who are believed to be the earliest settlers in Indian Peninsula" (1). They are called
Adi\text{v}asis, meaning the first settlers. Prior to the caste system, people were divided into different tribes. At that time, each tribe was a homogenous and self-contained unit without any hierarchical discrimination. Each tribe had a chief for its protection. Gradually, the chief assumed political and military power and was recognized as the ruler. Thus, there emerged the republics and monarchies. Tribes were associated with large kingdoms. Each tribe had its own system of administration. There was decentralization of authority among the tribes. The traditional tribal institutions were vested with legislative, judicial and executive powers. The ‘Maniki’ and ‘Munda’ system in Singhbhum and the ‘Manjhi’ system in Santal Pargana are examples of tribal institutions. As pointed out by R.C.Verma these “are headed by tribal chiefs who exercise considerable influence over social, economic and religious affairs of their respective tribes”(1).

According to The Oxford English Dictionary the word ‘tribe’ is derived from the Latin term ‘\textit{tribus}’ which was applied to the three divisions of the early people of Rome. The term however has gone through a lot of changes. It meant a political unit consisting of a number of clans. A tribe occupied a definite geographical area. Permanent settlement gave a geographical identity to a tribe. For that reason, tribes were often named after the area. Our country is named after a tribe called ‘Bharata.’ Even today states like Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura are named after the Mizo, Naga and Tripuri tribes respectively.
With the growth of nationalism in Europe, the term ‘tribe’ came to denote a race of people living within a given territory. Western writers in India known as Orientalists followed by anthropologists and sociologists used this term with the same connotation and argued that the tribes of India belonged to three stocks—the Negritos, the Mongoloids and the Mediterranean. The Negritos are believed to be the earliest inhabitants of the Indian Peninsula, but they have almost disappeared. Some believe that they are still found among the tribals of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, known as the Onges, the Great Andamanese, the Sentinelese and the Peniyans. The Mongoloid race is represented by the tribal people in the sub-Himalayan region. They may be divided into two categories, namely the Palaeo Mongoloids and the Tibeto Mongoloids. The Palaeo Mongoloids are represented by the tribes living in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur. The Tibeto Mongoloids are represented by the tribals living in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. They are believed to have migrated from Tibet. The Mediterranean people form a bulk of the tribal population and are generally known as the Dravidians. Verma says: “Dravidians are again divided into two parts [groups]—Kolarians who speak a dialect called Mundari, and the Dravidians proper” (3). It is believed that with the advent of the Aryans, there was a protracted struggle between the Aryans and the Dravidians, then referred to as the ‘Dasyus.’ The conquered Dravidians were reduced to a servile status and regarded as ‘Sudras.’ A section of the Dravidians who escaped defeat and did not surrender to the Aryans continued to maintain their independent existence in the remote hills and forests. They are believed to be “the forerunners of the various tribes in India” (3). This has been
discussed in detail in the following section, which attempts to present a tribal
history.

Tribals have a long and rich cultural past. Their history goes back to the pre-
historic period. Unfortunately, because they lack a written tradition, it is difficult
for historians and anthropologists to chronicle their past. It is said that even the
subsequent history of the tribals upto the Aryan invasion is shrouded in obscurity.
Some stone implements of prehistoric man have been discovered. However, there
has been no discovery of skeletons of the people who used these implements. By
studying the human fossils anthropologists are not able to conclude whether India
had a prehistoric period. However, according to Nadeem Hasnain: “it has now
become an established fact that the aboriginal tribes in India are, in most cases,
survivals from the later prehistoric groups” (23). The Aborigines of India do not
form a uniform race. They come from various regions of Asia and they belong to
various races, as mentioned earlier.

Our knowledge about the origin and subsequent history of the numerous
tribes is vague. However, their story of glory and decline can be reconstructed. The
invention of script and the commencement of written records are helpful in this
regard. Some scholars believe that the builders of the Indus valley civilization
might have been the aboriginal people. Their extinction is attributed to the
disastrous alteration of the course of the Indus river resulting in destructive flooding
of settlements and silting of fields. Another explanation put forward by Stephen
Fuchs is that “the Aryan invaders might have destroyed the centres of Harrappan
civilization and killed or dispersed its population. The discovery of unburied skeletons on the steps of a building in Mohenjodaro seems to support such an assumption” (qtd. in Hasnain 8). There is scanty information about the people who were destroyed. It is also not clear from the archaeological excavations whether they spoke Dravidian languages.

The ancient scriptures of the Vedic period contain some references to the tribals. The Vedic period witnessed the pouring in of the Aryans from the Northwestern parts of India and their fighting against the non-Aryans. We read in these scriptures that the God Indra was invoked to smash the forts of the 'Dasyus.' He is described as casting his dart on the 'Dasyus' to establish Aryan supremacy. He is described as having killed both the 'Dasyus' and the 'Samyus.' Goddess Saraswati is again credited with having killed the Parvatas, a hostile tribe who dwelt on the banks of the Paushni. We are told that Vishnu conquered the bull-jawed Dasyus in his battles and together with Indra destroyed Sambara's cattles. As Hasnain says: "The Asuras who captured the city of an Aryan sage Dabhiti were defeated by Indra and dispossessed of their booty" (25).

In the later Vedic period (1000 to 600 BC), the fusion of the Aryan and the non-Aryan continued: "The process of Aryanisation of the tribals and tribalization of the Aryans was on" (Kosambi 27). The two epics The Ramayana and The Mahabharata refer to the tribals as ‘Sudras,’ ‘Ahiras,’ ‘Dravidas,’ ‘Pulindas’ and ‘Sabaras’ or ‘Saoras.’ ‘Sabari,’ who was a tribal woman, is shown in the Ramayana
as having offered fruits to Rama. In the *Mahabharata*, Ekalavya, who was a Bhil boy, had to offer his thumb to Dronacharya as the fee for having secretly watched and learnt the arts of war from Dronacharya while the latter was teaching the Kaurava and the Pandava princes. The *Mahabharata* contains many such references to the tribals. The Mundas and the Nagas claimed to have fought on the side of the Kurus against the Pandavas. Bhima’s son Ghatotkacha who showed his valour in the war, was born of his tribal wife. Arjuna married Chitrangada, a Naga princess.

During the earliest phase of the historical period, small tribal pockets were subjugated by invaders. Ajatasatru destroyed the tribal republic of Vaisali. Alexander wiped out tribal pockets on the Northwestern border. Texts such as *the Dharma Sutra* (600 to 300 BC) and *Manusmriti* (200 BC to 200 AD) mention the old process of fusion and assimilation of the tribes. These so-called mixed castes were the supposed progeny of miscegenation between the male of one caste/tribe begotten of the woman of another caste. The ‘Nishadas’ in these texts are cited as an example. Hasnain says: “The Chandalas, a tribe, were absorbed into Hindu society and assigned the task of removing dead bodies of animals and human beings as also whipping and chopping off the limbs of criminals” (27). Thus the process of downgrading of the tribals continued. The tribes in this process of assimilation started being assigned tasks of the lower order, which might have gradually led to the creation of the lower caste referred to as ‘Sudra.’
The tribes however, did not lead an isolated life. As Hasnain points out, their participation in sub-Puranic and epic traditions of myths and folktales gives evidence that they were not an isolated lot. One can see the impact of epic heroes/heroines such as Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Ravana, Bhima, etc., on some of the tribes in central India in their myths and lore. The present day Gonds call themselves children of Ravana. In the same way, ancient Sanskrit literary works such as Panchatantra, Kathasarita Sagara, Vishnu Purana, Kadambari, and Harsha-Charita give descriptions of the tribals which clearly show interaction between the tribal and the non-tribal traditions.

During the feudal period (400-1000 AD), the tribal areas were invaded by the non-tribals. During this period, the process of Sanskritization affected the tribal chiefs. The Brahmin priests prepared suitable genealogies for themselves and the ruling Brahmin class spearheaded the process of Sanskritization as expressed and popularized by M. N. Srinivas. Srinivas says: “Sanskritization may be briefly defined as the process by which a low caste or tribe or other group takes over the customs, rituals, beliefs, ideology, and style of life of a high and, in particular, a twice-born (dwija) caste. The Sanskritization of a group has usually the effect of improving its position in the local caste hierarchy. It normally presupposes either an improvement in the economic or political position of the group concerned, or a higher group self-consciousness resulting from its contact with a source of the ‘Great Tradition’ of Hinduism such as a pilgrim centre or a monastery or a
proselytizing sect.” (The Cohesive Role 56-57). As Virginous Xaxa points out:

“Though M.N. Srinivas had the so-called lower class in mind when he coined this term, it can be extended to the tribals as well. This process of social change is also termed as “Hinduization” (Xaxa 1519).

With the advent of Muslim invaders in the 11th and 12th centuries, some Rajputs who did not submit to the invaders penetrated into tribal areas and established their rule, replacing the tribal chiefs. Thus, the Parmar Rajputs expelled the Cheros from Shahabad, and the Chandels replaced the Bhuinya in the South Monghyr district of Bihar.

During the Moghul rule (12-18th century), the tribal chiefs and the Hindu rulers in tribal areas of Central India and Bihar were forced to show their allegiance to the Turko-Afghan and Mughal rulers. In 1585 and 1616 A.D., the Moghul Muslim army marched into Chotanagpur and defeated the Raja of Khukra. Similarly, the tribal areas of Assam were also subjugated by another Muslim general.

During this period, a number of tribes were converted into Islam in the Northwest frontier region. The Gond dynasty which had its ‘Garha’ near Jabalpur and ruled the region for more than two hundred years also faced defeat at the hands of the Muslim and Maratha rulers. The loss of their power compelled the tribes to convert to Islam, but some of them still retained their identity. The Muslims of the
Lakshadweep Islands and the Siddi Muslims of Gujarat are the best examples of such conversion. R. C. Verma points out that “when the Moghuls invaded South India, they forced the Banjaras, an enterprising tribe of Northwestern India to employ their cattle for transporting their supplies. That is how the Banjaras migrated to Andhra Pradesh and other adjoining areas in the South”(4). However, the oral narratives of the Banjaras offer very different reasons for their migration. M. Gona Naik in his book in Telugu: *Sugali Samskruthi Bhasha Saahityalu* records this fact.²

Some Muslim saints worked and preached among tribal people. Pir Syed Shah Kamal and Pir Syed Mohammed worked among the Nats and the Kols respectively. The tribals were also influenced by some streams of the Bhakti Movement. Some became followers of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu when they came in contact with him during his travels. The Bhuiyans of Jharkhand, for example, completely gave up their tribal traits and became Hindus. Tribal authority was substantially eroded by these interactions. The economic base of tribal societies withered under the Zamindari and other colonial systems of administration that came into force after these contacts and assimilations.

Apart from the Moghuls, the other groups who disturbed the tribal regions were the Persians, the Greeks, the Sakas, the Huns and other hordes of nomadic invaders who came periodically from the Northwest.
With the advent of the East India Company, the British penetrated into tribal regions. They used forest produces for their business. Ramachandara Guha and Madhav Gadgil in their essay “State Forestry and Conflict in British India” (1989) show how the British used forests for commercial exploitation. Trees were cut down for timber. Forestland was used for tea, rubber and coffee plantations. Train lines and roads were built in forest areas. Routes from forest to sea coasts were built to transport goods. In another article entitled “The Making of the 1878 Forest Act” Guha points out the following:

The early years of the expansion of the railway network, c. 1853 onwards, led to tremendous deforestation in peninsular India owing to the railways’ requirements of fuel wood and construction timber. Huge quantities of durable timber were also needed for use as sleepers across the newly laid tracks. (66)

The Grand Trunk Road, which was built through tribal labour, helped in business, and there was an inflow of outsiders adding to the population. The so-called outsiders dominated the tribals in many ways. Most of the tribal families lost their agricultural lands and lived in a state of starvation. The tribals were also victims of a host of middlemen who operated between the new rulers and the tribals. Among the outsiders, there were merchants and moneylenders who exploited the tribals in different ways. The stories and novels of Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Devi give us a glimpse of the nature of tribal exploitation, though they were written in
recent years. It is worth quoting an example from Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* (1946) where he shows how the outsiders deceive the tribals:

A tribesman comes to the Sahukar for a loan of *mandia*, and the Sahukar agreed to let him have it. The deal is closed and, as the man is about to go, the Sahukar asks him: 'Have you taken your grain?'

'Yes, Sahukar,' the man says.

'How much are you taking?,' the Sahukar asks again.

'One Putti'

'All right. Now go and tell my clerk that you are taking a putti of *mandia*. He will write it down in his books.'

The loan is entered in the clerk's ledger.

'Have you informed my clerk?', the Sahukar asks again.

'Yes, Sahukar.' The man prepares to leave.

'Wait,' the Sahukar says, 'You haven't informed my wife. She is inside the house. Go and tell her. And tell my servant also.'

The poor Kondh or Paraja has to inform three other persons, besides the Sahukar himself, that he is borrowing a *putti* of *mandia*, with a fifty per cent interest.

And each time one entry is made.

Next year, the borrower returns with a putti and a half of *mandia*, which should clear him of the debt.

'Is that all?' the Sahukar asks, looking at the pile of the grain.
'Why, Yes, Sahukar. I took one putti from you, and the interest is half a putti.'

'One putti! Are you mad? You took one putti from me, one putti from my clerk, one putti from my wife, and one putti from my servant. How many puttis is that?

There, count: one and one and one and one makes four. And the interest of four puttis ? Two puttis. So you should have brought six puttis in all; instead of which you have brought only one and a half. Why, even the interest is more than that! Do you understand?'

'No, Sahukar,' the bewildered tribesman says.

'But you must be right'.

And the poor man is hooked. A 'goti' is born. (Mohanty 121-122)

This passage is indicative of the cunning with which the outsiders grabbed tribal land and property. This led the tribals into lives of misery and deprivation. The penetration of the outsiders had cultural implications as well. When tribals came into contact with the non-tribals, they internalized new cultural elements mostly of the higher caste at the expense of their indigenous culture. This process is very close to the processes described by M.N. Srinivas in his thesis on Sanskritization. The term has just been explained in the early part of this chapter.

The Christian missionaries also came in with the patronage of the government. They spread Christianity among the tribals, and helped them with health care and education. Christianity preached less complicated beliefs and rituals
and egalitarian principles as opposed to the caste-ridden Hindu society. It did not appeal to the tribals immediately but slowly they embraced it. After the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, Christianity got official patronage and spread speedily among the tribals. Joseph Bara who has made a case study concerning this issue with reference to the tribals of Chotanagpur region rightly points out that the Mutiny of 1857 temporarily jolted the official zeal. The specific tribal situation of Chotanagpur made the colonial rulers give the missionaries a signal to go ahead in full swing. This was part of a mission to civilize the most backward populations where the missionaries would prove expedient. Bara gives an instance of how a government official supported the missionary activity. For instance, as Bara points out:

[...] Chotanagpur had an extraordinarily zealous official in E.T. Dalton (first as deputy commissioner of Ranchi and then as commissioner of Chotanagpur from 1857 to 1875) at Ranchi. Having realised the need of special treatment of the tribals in the scheme of colonial ‘civilisation’, Dalton acted as a patron of the mundas and the oraons, and western education was one of his priorities.... Soon he found in the Christian missionaries, who were fast expanding their operation, a good companion which effectively meant placing the colonial government’s educational responsibility on the missionary’s shoulder. Thus, the western education and the Christian missionaries became a single vehicle as far as the tribals were concerned. (786)
Mahasweta Devi's novels, which are concerned with tribal history, capture this episode quite realistically. This aspect will be discussed in detail when we analyse her novels in chapter seven.

The missionaries, with the patronage of the government, spread Christianity among the tribals and helped them with health care and education. Unlike Hinduism and Islam, Christianity spread widely in the tribal regions with the patronage of the British government and established a firm footing there. The result was a feeling of discontent and unrest among the tribals. At this stage, a number of movements took place, which raised protesting voices against the oppression and exploitation by landlords and British rulers who in general, stood by the side of the landlords. Notable among them are the Kherwar movement (1871-80), the Birsa Munda Movement (1874-1901), the Bhil Rebellion (1879-80), the Sardari Movement (1881-95), the Bastar Uprising (1910-11), and the Tana Bhagat Movement (1920-35). Mahasweta Devi records some of these movements in her novels—which are discussed in chapter seven. However, it is useful to discuss some of these movements in detail here. The Santhal Insurrection took place as a reaction to the atrocities of the outsiders. The non-Santhals who resided in this area got tribal land through some deal, and the tribals had to pay rent to the Hindu chiefs. In the beginning, the Santhals did not pay rent to the Hindu chiefs, but due to penetration of their regions by outsiders, they began losing their lands. Initially, the Santals did not pay much attention to the 'dikus' (aliens), but when their traditional economy began to be shattered, they stood against the administrator and the landlord. Around
1885, the Santal Insurrection, which was locally called ‘Santhal hul,’ broke out. But it was put down by the British troops. Specific reform measures were introduced in the Damin-i-koh and other crucial parts. More powers were given to the administrators over tribal land alienation and indebtedness issues. The old regulations in force in the plains of Bengal were no longer operative in the Santhal Parganas.

The new regulations that were imposed upon the Santhals meant that the authority of their headmen was eroded, and that the Dikus did pretty much what they liked. They frequently increased rents on land holdings without any notice or consultation. With the new judicial system, the Santals were reduced to the status of serfs. They started their protest in 1871. Two Santal brothers, Sido and Kanhu, came to the forefront providing leadership for mass uprisings. Their objective was clearly stated: “we should slay all the Dikus (aliens) and become rulers of ourselves… We should only pay eight annas (fifty paise) for a buffalo plough and four annas for a bullock plough, and if the rulers (both British and Indian aliens) did not agree we should start fighting…” (qtd. in Srivastava 13).

Another tribal movement which gained much popularity among the tribals was the Birsa Munda Movement (1874-1901). Ranchi and the Santhal Parganas were in the grip of exploitation in the closing years of the nineteenth century. The domination of the ‘dikus’ still continued. Around that time the Christian missionaries were also active in this region. There was a feeling of discontent and
unrest among the tribals. At this stage Birsa, a Munda youth, organized his people to raise their voice against the oppression and exploitation by the landlords and the British rulers. Today the Munda and other tribes of the Ranchi district hail Birsa as their God. They call him Birsa Bhagwan. Mahasweta Devi’s novel, *Aranyer Adhikar*, is based on this movement. Like the Mundas, the Oraons of this region also launched a powerful movement known as the Tana Bhagat Movement. The Oraons had seen oppression and deprivation at the hands of the local Zamindars and policemen. Jatra Bhagat, an Oraon, proclaimed that he had a vision of Dharmu or God. He had received a revelation for the other fellow Oraons. His message swept over the country, and people from far and near began to come for his darshan. His followers gave up worshipping spirits (ghosts) and stopped animal sacrifice. People gave up non-vegetarian food, wine, tobacco and group songs and dances. They were asked not to pay rent to the Zamindars and not to work for the aliens. Jatra warned his people in strong words that if they did not obey his orders they would soon perish. Acting upon Jatras’s advice people began refusing to work for the landlords and disobeyed rules and regulations imposed by the British rulers who in turn issued orders for the arrest of Jatra and his close disciples. Jatra was imprisoned. After completing his term in jail, Jatra lived for a short period. The followers of Jatra are called ‘Tana Bhagats’ because ‘tana’ means pulling together. Jatra was trying to pull together all Oraons into his fold. Apart from these movements in the Chotanagpur regions, uprisings also took place in other parts as well. The Bastar Uprisings that took place in Central India in 1910-11 is such an example. The monopoly of the outsiders has been cited as the main reason for this uprising. K. S.
Singh quotes a letter sent by B. P Standant, Chief Secretary and the Commissioner for the Central Provinces to the Secretary to the Government of India, Forest Department, Shimla. The letter cites the following reasons:

[...] the inclusion in reserves of forest and village lands, highhanded treatment and unjust exactions on the part of Forest Officials, maltreatment of pupils and parents by school masters in order to extort money, forcible collection by school masters of money to purchase supplies for Tahsildar and Inspector, purchase by school masters of supplies at one-fourth of the market price, similar acts by the State Police, with the addition that they exact begar and beat village servants to compel the cheap supply of grain, the demand of excessive begar by the Tahsildar and non-payment for supplies in connection with the camps of officials, the exaction of excessive begar by Malgujars, interference with the rights of manufacturing intoxicating liquor, a practice of officials of getting houses built by begar, even compelling the labourers to feed themselves, exactions by the lessees of villages... and general oppression on the part of officials. The petitioners add that this oppression began with the advent of Rai Bahadur Panda Baijnath, that they had petitioned him without result, and that their present object was merely to ensure that some one should come and hear them. (qtd. in Singh, *Tribal Situations* 178-179)
Singh further says:

It was a total revolt. The outburst was accompanied by murder, arson, looting and general savagery, it was a regular revolt against civilization, against schools, against forest conservancy, against the opening up of the country by Hindu settlers, in short it was a movement of Bastar state for Bastar forest dwellers. (179)

It was during the colonial period that the tribals were studied by scholars and designated as ‘tribals.’ A number of administrators and anthropologists who were engaged in studying the tribes provided classified information about the tribals and their population. In the Census Report of 1891, V.A. Bains, the Commissioner of Census, classified the castes according to their traditional occupations. As Verma records: “Under the category of Agricultural and Pastoral castes; he formed a sub-heading called ‘Forest Tribes.’ In the Census Report of 1901, they were classified as ‘Animists’ and in 1911 as ‘tribal animists’ or people following tribal religion” (5). In the Census Report of 1921, they were specified as ‘Hill and Forest Tribes’ and in the 1931 census they are described as Primitive Tribes. The Government of India Act specified them as Backward Tribes. However, the Census Report of 1941 classified them as ‘Tribes’ only. Thus, the term ‘tribe’ was designated by the British for these people. In an essay entitled “The Idea of Tribe in the Indian Scene” Jagannath Pathy explores the origin and politics of using the term. He states that before India was colonized, there was no equivalent indigenous word for the English term ‘tribe’. The Sanskrit word atavika jana simply denoted an
agglomeration of individuals with specific territorial kinship and a cultural pattern. The so-called tribes were called nations and people. The so-called tribals called themselves people and others as outsiders. It was used to dominate and oppress the peoples and nations. Another term ‘noble savage’ was coined to divide the struggling people. The word indicates economic and political relations between the so-called tribal and the civilized capitalist world. It also denotes a special kind of social origin and a stage of evolution in human history. During the colonial expansion, the British faced opposition from non-Aryan and non-Muslim people. At that time “tribals were characterized as food gathering communities and animists and shifting cultivators were added to the list of tribes” (Pathy 347). This is how the term came into existence. Even the classification is arbitrary. It is pertinent here to mention that the line between the tribe and caste is very arbitrary. For people who are classified as tribe in one region are known by caste in other regions.

It is worth mentioning the major debates that concern tribal development. K.S. Singh foregrounds the nature of the studies done by the British in this regard. He states:

The ethnographers took a placid and synchronic view of tribal society. Their view was inspired by the then model in anthropology. Tribal communities were treated as isolates, tribals as Noble Savages, and their primitive condition was described as a state of Arcadian simplicity. (Singh, “Colonialism” 400)
The anthropologists looked at the Sanskritization of tribal chiefs in negative terms and held the view that it was not good for the tribals. They also rationalized and justified the British rule. The administrators however, took a diachronic view of the tribal society and described the pattern of changes in the agrarian system, which suggested that primitive people were not immune to the impact of colonialism. There was a proposal by two administrator-anthropologists, J.P. Mills and G.H Hutton to keep the tribal areas under the direct control of British administration (Singh 1984: 405). The nationalists, on the other hand, expressed their apprehension saying that the new constitution of fully excluded areas was an imperial design to separate the tribals from other communities and thus weaken national unity. The Indian National Congress at its session held at Faizpur felt that “this was yet another attempt to divide the people of India into different groups” (qtd. in Singh, “Colonialism” 407). The isolationist school of policy makers comprised anthropologists and British members of the I.C.S of which G. H. Hutton was the arch-exponent. However, it was Verrier Elwin who got identified with the isolationist stance in the pamphlet the Loss of Nerve published in 1941. In this pamphlet, he recommended isolation of the tribals and suggested that the administration should be so adjusted as to allow the tribes to lead their life without interference from outside agencies. He said in conclusion:

I am not one of those who advocate a policy of absolute isolation, but I do urge a policy of isolation from debasing and impoverishing contact. The aboriginal cannot remain as he is—but is it necessary for him to pass through a long period of degradation before he emerges
as the civilized man of the future? Could we not keep him in his innocence and happiness for a while till “civilization” is more worthy to instruct him and until a scientific age has learnt how to bring development and change without causing despair? (qtd. in Singh, “Colonialism” 408).

In another pamphlet, *The Aboriginal*, Elwin reiterates his thought:

I advocate, therefore, for the aboriginals a policy of temporary isolation and protection, and for their civilized neighbours a policy of immediate reform…The essential thing is not to uplift them into a social and economic sphere to which they cannot adapt themselves, but to restore to them the liberties of their own countryside […] But whatever is done, and I would be the last to lay down a general programme, it must be done with caution and above all with love and reverence. The aboriginals are the real *swadeshi* products of India, in whose presence everyone is foreign. These are the ancient people with moral claims and rights thousands of years old. They were here first; they should come first in our regard. (qtd. in Singh, “Colonialism” 408)

He was attacked by “A.V. Thakkar, who propagated the idea of assimilation of the tribes instead of isolation” (Guha, “Savaging” 2382). Elwin later denied having been an isolationist. He explained that his idea was of “a *temporary* isolation
for certain small tribes, but this was not to keep them as they were, but because at that time the only contacts they had with the outside world were debasing contacts, leading to economic exploitation and cultural destruction” (Elwin, “The Tribal Perspective” 17).

He said that he had condemned the policy of isolation. But the confusion arose out of the inept phrase, ‘the National Park,’ that he coined in the late thirties to underline the need for the protection of the tribes against exploitation. As there were negotiations for transfer of power, the administrators and anthropologists were active to ensure the protection of tribal interests. As Singh mentions:

Sir John Hubback prepared a note on the Backward tribes. He was of the opinion that the British interest in tribal affairs should continue even after the transfer of power. Hubbock also suggested the formation of a group of anthropologists, and administrators and missionaries which would do more for the hill tribes than an anthropological dictator of the kind suggested by Elwin. Sir John Hubback and Sir Kenneth Fitze who had served in Western and Central India showed concern that with the transfer of power the missionaries would not be able to do good work. They were also critical of Elwin’s aim to Hinduize the tribes. The Secretary of State was also critical of the isolationist stance. (Singh, “Colonialism” 410)

In all these debates tribals were nowhere in the picture. They were the objects of the critical gaze. The Adibasi Mahasabha and its leader Jaipal Singh did not attract any notice. K. S. Singh writes: “Hubbock was of the opinion that Jaipal Singh’s
influence did not extend beyond the Mundas" ("Colonialism" 412). Thus, the
British felt that the tribals were their responsibility and the former formulated
policies for the tribals. The principle of partial and full exclusion was later
embodied in the Indian Constitution. Constitutional guarantees of protection had to
be combined with programmes of rapid development which did not find any place
in the colonial framework.

After Independence, the government chalked out a number of provisions to
safeguard the interests of the tribals and their development without hampering their
culture. It is pertinent here to mention Nehru's views on this issue. His policy was
to approach tribal life with respect. He said: "The Tribals may be allowed to
develop on their own genius and we should not impose anything on them" (qtd. in
Verma iv). He wanted them to advance, but at the same time not "lose their artistry
and joy in life and the future that distinguishes them in many ways" (qtd. in Elwin,
"The Tribal Perspective" 220). The Indian Constitution adopted by the Constituent
Assembly on 26 January 1950 visualized a policy of progressive acculturation of
tribal communities. Thus the former policy of their isolation and segregation was
finally abandoned. According to the constitutional provision certain tribes were
listed as Scheduled Tribes and special facilities were to be provided for their uplift
and education. The main criteria adopted for specifying certain communities as
Scheduled Tribe include, as Verma points out:

(i) traditional occupation of a geographical area, (ii) distinctive
culture which includes whole spectrum of tribal way of life, i.e.
language, customs, traditions, religious beliefs, arts, crafts etc., (iii)
primitive traits depicting occupational pattern, economy etc. and (iv)
lack of educational and techno-economic development. (Verma 6)

There was a suggestion by Jaipal Singh that the term ‘adibasi’ should be used
instead of ‘Scheduled Tribe’ but Dr. Ambedkar, Chairperson, Drafting Committee
of the Constitution, said that “the word Adivasi is really a general term which has
no specific legal de jure connotation. Whereas, the word ‘Scheduled Tribe’ has a
fixed meaning, because it enumerates the tribes” (7). It has to be mentioned here
that all aboriginal people are not included in the list of Scheduled Tribes. Verma
says that there are about 360 Scheduled Tribes (sub-tribes being many more)
speaking more than 100 languages.

Tribals have come a long way. Their situation has been changing. With the
facilities available to them, their situation is improving to some extent. Some of
them are in public positions as doctors, engineers, academics, legislators and so on.
They are becoming aware of their reality. Some of them are engaged in research
studying what has been said about them. Therefore one has to be careful in using
terminology. The fact that terms like ‘tribals’, ‘primitive’, ‘native’ etc. as Edward P.
Dozier says, “are often placed within quotation marks and indicate the shaky and
unsure ground upon which they rest as designation for the societies which are
studied” (195).
From the foregoing account it seems safe to infer that tribal history is marked by struggle and subjugation by outsiders. These are some of the views available on the tribals from sociological accounts but to complete the picture it would be pertinent to look at a few literary texts in order to know how imaginative perceptions of the tribals have contributed to understanding. The following chapters are devoted to this exploration.
Notes

1 These divisions are made by scholars like H.H. Riseley, B.S. Guha, D.N. Majumdar and others.

2 The Banjaras are called Lambadas in Andhra Pradesh and Sugali in Karnataka.

3 The British Government decided on a policy of segregating tribes into special areas where their lives and interests would be adequately protected. An Act was passed in 1874 to specify tribal areas into scheduled regions. In 1935 provisions for special treatment of tribal areas were incorporated by constituting partially excluded areas. In the subsequent years up to 1947, a number of acts and regulations were promulgated.