CHAPTER - I.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF TRIBAL LIFE

Introduction

It is not uncommon for the sophisticated people of the modern world to think that the easy life style of the simple tribals is inferior to and less civilized than theirs. In the pre-independence days, some protagonists of Pakistan argued against allowance of sufficient constitutional and legal rights to the tribal community on the ground that their civilization did not reach the level sufficient to warrant enjoyment of such rights. The contention of the protagonists has been conveyed to the readers of 'India Divided' by Dr. Rajendra Prasad in the following words:

"Twenty nine lakhs\(^1\) or 26.7 percent of the total population are tribal people who are unfit to live a civilized state life and in all constitutional discussion they have to be omitted. Constitutional rights of minority should belong to the civilized section of the population, who are either Hindus or Muslims numbering 80 lakhs.\(^2\)

But tribal life, in general, is characterised by simplicity, hospitality and benevolence. We should not forget that "they are our own kinsmen and nontribals can learn many good lessons from their way of life.\(^3\)

1. The figure indicates the quantum of tribal population in Assam during the 1940's.
Mr. Masani, in his famous 'Our Growing Human Family' speaks of the Negros of the Hottentot tribe in Africa, eating raw flesh of wild animals. If any member of this tribe, when alone, has been able to kill an animal, he raises three loud calls inviting all his fellow tribals who can hear him, to share with him the flesh of the animal, he alone has killed.

Thus it can be safely remarked that the tribals are not lacking in the basic human quality i.e. fraternal co-existence among themselves.

It is important to note that there are some common elements of a distinct cultural trait among the different tribal communities. Also it is not difficult to trace a commonness in the economic life-style. To understand a particular section of the tribal community belonging to a particular region like Barak Valley, therefore, one needs to go into the tribal pattern and mode of socio-cultural and economic life of different tribal communities in the world.

We have made an attempt at bringing into our analysis the life and living of as many tribal communities as the accessible documentary evidences have made feasible. This will help us in penetrating into the problems of a particular tribal community which is specifically aimed at, in this present research work.

Tribals—an Integral part of the Country's population:

The culture and civilization of a country where various communities with their distinct cultural traits live, develop as a result of the assimilation of various culture and civilization. In a society where both tribals and non-tribals live together, its culture and civilization can be enriched only through the evolution of a composite culture.

The Indian subcontinent has the second largest tribal population in the world. Many of the tribal communities have been living in this country even since what we call the Pre-Aryan period. We come across the names and descriptions of various tribal communities in the ancient Indian literature which includes the Vedas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Rig-Veda speaks of the Asuras. The tribal groups such as the Nishadas, the Grdhrajs, the Sabars, the Nagas and the Yaksæs etc. are also spoken of in the Ramayana. The Mahabharata also refers to the Kiratas, the Mundas etc. In the Bhagawat Purana, there is a story about the origin of the Kols, the Bhils and the Mushhars.

Many of the tribal communities in India are now living in the jungles, hills or in the isolated regions. But in the earlier period, most of them lived in the plains. In order to save their culture, heritage and identity, they left the plains and settled themselves in isolated jungles and hills far away from
the areas where there are now nontribal settlements. Sometimes they had directly or indirectly been forced to leave the areas they were living in. According to L.P. Vidyarthi and B.K. Rai, the tribals in India in the early historical period appeared to have lived in a state of internal movement, cutting across the country and their movements were generally guided by the river valleys, and destinations were the hills and forest region of the country. During the medieval period the tribal people inhabiting different parts of India were either disturbed by the then Mohammedan rulers or regional rulers or both. In support of this view, Vidyarthi and Rai have put forward some historical facts as to how and why the tribes like the Bhils of Western India or the then Banjaras of northern India took shelter deeper into the hills or migrated to some other regions.

But inspite of the fact that the tribal people had to leave the areas where they once had been living and migrate to different regions distant from those inhabited by plains people, they are an inseparable part of Indian nation. Indian civilization and culture is, to a great extent, typified by the confluence of tribal and nontribal socio-cultural streams though both the tribals and the

6. ibid, page 35.
7. ibid, page 34-35.
nontribals have retained some of their original distinctive traits. Thus we find in India an uninterrupted co-existence of unity in diversity. In other words, the people inhabiting this country, though diverse in some respects, can be considered to belong to the same society or community. It is aptly remarked, "Each section of .... population contributes to the making of the nation in the same manner as each flower helps to make a garden."

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Basic Elements of Tribal's Social Life:

All men are social animals and the tribal people are no exception. They have their families as the basic units of a society. Besides family, they have such social units as linages, clans etc. Tribals practise their religion, observe their festivals and wedding ceremonies, totem etc. Youth dormitories form a special element in the structure of the tribal society. These features go a long way to make a tribal society markedly different from a non-tribal one.

Family Unit:

On the basis of composition, tribal families may be grouped into two classes, viz., (i) Nuclear and (ii) Extended. A detailed discussion on this aspect will be made in Chapter-V with special reference to the plains tribal community in the Barak Valley.

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From the point of view of the types of marriage, tribal communities may be described as belonging to two groups: (a) Monogamous and (b) Polygamous. A great majority of the tribals are monogamous in their family lives. However, there are a few tribes in which the practice of polygamy is allowed. There are two types of polygamy: (a) Polygyny and (b) Polyandry. Polygyny is a kind of polygamy in which a man has two or more than two wives. In a polyandrous community a woman has two or more than two husbands. Polygyny is practised by the Nagas of the Himalayan region, by the Gonds and the Bagas in the middle India, and by the Pulayas, the Muthuvans, the Uralis, the Kanikarras etc. in South India.

Polyandry is found in practice among the Khasas of Uttar Pradesh and also among the Todas of the Nilgiris.

A great majority of the tribes in India follow the rule of patriliny in the matter of inheritance, descent and residence. But some of the tribes, such as the Khasis and the Garos of Meghalaya, the Kadars, the Kanikkars, the Mannans, the Kuridriyas etc. of Kerala and on the borders of Tamil Nadu, as well as the tribes of Lakshadweep follow the rule of matriliny. These societies are matrilineal in relation to inheritance, descent and residence.

Thus the family is the basic unit of tribal society and, so far as forms and functions of the families are concerned,
families in different tribes are often found to differ from one another.

Clans:

The most important element which keeps different clans of a tribe closely connected is the system of marriage which does not allow the husband and the wife to belong to the same clan. Thus marital relation between the different clans of a tribe keeps them tightly bound to each other on one hand and stipulates a code of disciplined intra-clan social life on the other.

Lineage:

The lineage is also a socially binding unit determining how the leadership should be provided. It also determines the rights to be enjoyed and duties and responsibilities to be discharged by the leaders and other members of the tribal society. "The lineage is made up exclusively of provable blood relatives i.e. all the members are demonstrably descended from a common ancestor or ancestress."9

Youth Dormitory:

The youth dormitory in Tribal India is an integral part of their culture. The youth dormitories are of three types i.e. for the boys, for the girls and for both jointly. It is the training centre where the youths are trained in different fields like dancing, singing, social works etc.10 Such dormitory has got its different names.

in different places, e.g. Dhumkuria of the Orans, Ghotul of the Murias, Morungs of the Nagas, Darbar of the Juang, Dekachang of the Garos, Kinchku of the Angamis and Nodrang of the Dimasa Kacharis.

**Different system of Marriage:**

As it has already been said, the family is the basic social unit of every community and the tribal communities are no exceptions. Marriage is the unique male-female relation which results into births and the existence of family unit. This is the fact that makes the discussion about the type and the system of marriage an important one in the study of the social aspect of any community. Different tribal communities have different types of marriages. According to Mazumdar and Madan, tribal marriages may, broadly speaking, assume two forms, viz., (i) regular and (ii) irregular. The regular marriage is negotiated and arranged by parents or guardians. The irregular marriage is one that takes place against the wishes and option of the parents of the bride or the bridegroom or without the consent of the parents of the both. According to Mazumdar & Madan, there are eight ways of getting wed. These are (i) Probationary marriage, (ii) Marriage by trial, (iii) Marriage by purchase, (iv) Marriage by service, (v) Marriage by exchange, (vi) Marriage by mutual consent, (vii) Marriage by intrusion, and (viii) Marriage by elopement.

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In Kuki society, probationary marriage is prevailing. A young man can live with the girl for some weeks together to prepare him for the marriage. If the couple do not agree to marry each other, then the boy paying cash compensation to the girl's parents can get rid of the liability of the girl.

With the application of Indian Penal Code, the system of marriage by capture has lost its tradition and currency.

In case of 'Marriage by Trial' the young man before marriage requires to display his courage and capacity. This type of marriage is still prevalent among the Bhil society of Gujrat.

Marriage by purchase is found among many tribes of India. Bride price is the common feature in the wedding ceremony all over tribal India. This is, however, a painful customary element in their Social life. Bride price is considered something like paying money to purchase a commodity. Some authorities view it as gift. Among the Gaddis, in the sense of purchase and sale, this type of marriage is still in vogue.

The poor who can not afford to pay bride prices, generally go for 'Marriage by Service'. The bridegroom-designate serves his would-be-father-in-law as house servant for a particular period.

When two families mutually exchange girls between the two for their marriage with the grooms belonging to the counterpart households, the method is known as marriage by exchange. This is another
device of avoiding bride price payment.

In case the young boy and the young girl fall in love with each other and they prefer to flee away from the Village to stay together in another Village or a jungle, as the case may be, the consequent marriage is known as 'marriage by mutual consent.'

When a girl forces an unwilling young boy to marry her and refuses to leave his house, the type of marriage is known as 'marriage by intrusion.'

Again, when a young man falls in love with a maid and elopes with her in the jungle or another village for a few days, the type is known as 'marriage by elopement.'

RELIGIOUS LIFE:

Religion plays a vital role in the socio-economic system of the tribe. It is important to note that in the tribal society, religion and magic are somewhat inter-related. So far as religion is concerned, the tribes believe in the existence of super-human powers and the malevolent spirit of the supernatural powers which causes disease, death etc. The names of the spirits vary from one tribe to another. According to the tribal beliefs, the spirits have various shelters so that one might dwell in a tree, another in a mountain or a river or some waterfalls, while some might dwell near the house or some at a distance. Again, a common belief is that there are spirits - one to guide the destiny of agricultural crops, one to lord over cattle, while another still to guide rainfalls and so on. In every tribal community, it is believed, a limited number of super-natural specialists can control the evil spirits by offering sacrifices to the deities. Normally, the
sacrificial objects range from eggs to buffalos. In addition, country liquor is offered to the spirits in almost every occasion. The liquor is the part and parcel of the tribal's socio-religious life. The sacred specialists in different tribes are branded in different names. For example, among the santhals they are Naek, among the Mundas and the Oraons they are known as pahen and the Barmans in Cachar call them Hojai.

Again, the tribals, in general, worship the ancestral spirits annually once, and also they do the same more than once in a year when they face economic hardships etc.

The religious feasts and festivals provide them a scope of enjoyment in different forms like dancing, singing, sporting etc. The drinking and feast over burden them often with heavy debts which they can hardly have their escape from.  

Festivals are mostly based on the principal sources of livelihood. Such tribes as dependent primarily on agriculture for their livelihood, observe most of the festivals during the agricultural season and, hence, their festivals may be essentially viewed as agriculture oriented. For example, at the different phases of Jhum cultivation, Ao Naga performs different ceremonies or worships. After clearance of the forest, they worship for good crops. After burning and felling trees or cutting the jungles, 'Phunjung' ceremony takes place and a fowl is offered to please the deity for good crops.

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After sowing seeds, the observation of "Moatsu" festival continues for six days and after harvesting, "Tenten" ceremony for six days. Again, the principal occupation of the Todas of the Nilgiris is animal husbandry. They are buffalo herders and "their religion is also centred round the buffalo."  

**Political Structure of the Tribals:**

The political structure of the tribals varies from tribe to tribe. While some tribes have hereditary Chiefs, others have their elected ones. Thus some elements of monarchy as well as democracy are found to be prevailing. The Headman or Chief of the village acts as a spokesman to the outsiders, takes active role in settling village disputes and takes a leading part in celebration of village functions or ceremonies and also in village welfare activities. There are some tribes in Africa who have no rulers of their own, but the members of the tribe unite against external aggression and settle their internal differences by arbitration.

**Economic Life of the Tribes:**

In their economic life, the tribals engage themselves in various kinds of activities. Some tribes depend on hunting and collection of food from jungles for their livelihood. Members of some other tribes are agriculturists by occupation and their methods

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of cultivation are Jhumming, terracing or the same as applied by other plains people in settled agriculture. There are still some others who are engaged in animal husbandry, small scale industries, musical and dancing performances and snake charming etc. The earning pattern of the tribal is intimately related to their socio-cultural life.

The Rajis of Uttar Pradesh, the Juangs in Orrisa and the Hill Maria Gonds of Baster in Madhya Pradesh depend mainly on food collection, hunting and fishing for their livelihood. So far as their occupation is concerned, the Chenchus and the Yanadis of Andhra Pradesh, the Kadars and the Kurumbas of Malabar in Kerala and the Onges, the sentinalese and the Nicobarese in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands also belong to this group. In Africa, "the largest food-gathering population ....... is the pygmies in the Ituri forest on the borders of zaire and Uganda." 15

There are many tribal people whose principal occupation is hill-land cultivation or shifting cultivation. This type of cultivation has, in different regions, different names like Kurwa or Khallu in Santhal Pargana, Jhum in North - east India, Podu, Rema, Bringa, Gudia, Dongar-Chas in Orrisa, and penda, Dahiya, Bewar. Dippa and Marhan in Madhya Pradesh. Again, in Andhra Pradesh, this system of cultivation is called Kondapady. The Juangs depend for their livelihood chiefly on shifting

The Garos living mainly in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, the Khasis inhabiting the Khasi Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya and the Mikirs in Karbi Anglong district of Assam live by the destructive system of cultivation which they call Jhumming. 17

Besides the above mentioned tribes, the Tripuris, the Halams, the Riangs, the Chakmas and Mogs living mainly in Tripura, the Nagas of Nagaland and nearby areas, the Malers and Souria Paharias of Santhal Pargana, the Hill Kharias and the Birjias living in Bihar, the Saeras and the Kuttia Khonds inhabiting Orissa, the Kamars, the Baigas, the Maria Gonds, the Dhoras, and a few Bagatas living in Andhra Pradesh and the Male Kudias in Mysore in South India also live by growing crops in the Jhumming method. The method of cultivation is briefly described here.

The members of every family first select the place of hilly or forest land where they want to grow their crops. They clear the land covered by trees and undergrowths in the beginning of January. Then the place is allowed to dry for a few months. After that, they burn whatever remains on the surface of the land in the post clearance stage. Just before the monsoon, the seeds are sown, broadly spread and dibbled. The ashes the land gets after burning

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16 Bose, Nirmal Kumar; 1972; Some Indian Tribes, National Book Trust, New Delhi, India, page 39.

becomes manure. The next phase is the phase of harvesting and storing. This phase begins in September and ends in November-December. As the peasants grow different crops like ginger, millet, cotton, chilly etc. in the same plot, different crops are harvested in different periods. Digging sticks, khantis, spades, sickles, axes, khurpis etc. are some of the instruments used in the Jhum cultivation. With the growing number of population, this method of cultivation is now regarded as wasteful and uneconomic. In the North-east India, about five lakh hectares of forest land are under Jhumming. The law of Diminishing Returns is in its sharpest application in this cultivation. Three or four crops are grown at the same time on the same soil and, consequently, the second crop will not be a full one. After cultivation of the Jhum land for a period of 1 - 5 years, land has to be abandoned because it becomes barren for a number of years to come. Jhumming has been exerting a negative impact on the tribal economy and hill ecology of this preponderantly Tribal belt. This system is responsible for soil-erosion, floods, climatic changes and destruction of many rare species of flora & fauna.

Seminar (18-19 June, 1976) organised by North-east India Council for Social Science Research resolve that,


"shifting cultivation has to be replaced by an improved form of land management." Terracing, an alternative to Jhumming has been evolved as a result of sincere research work of Indian Council of Agricultural Research, failed to attract even 1 percent of 30 lakh tribal population. Terracing method is only popularised among the Tribals of Arunachal Pradesh and among the Angamis.

There are other groups among the Tribals who maintain their livelihood chiefly from the settled agriculture. They are the Lalungs, the Rabhas, the Bodo-Kacharis, the Barmans of Assam; the Mundas, the Bhumis, the Oraons, the Hos, the Gonds etc. of middle India; the Bhils, the Minas, the Thakurs, the Korkles, the Dubla etc. of western India; the Ko-yas of Andhra Pradesh, the Malayalis tribes of Tamil Nadu and many others.

Animal husbandry is the main source of livelihood among some tribes. The Rabari of Gujrat, the Gaddi of Himachal Pradesh, and the Huns of Punjab have a traditional bond with their flocks.

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20. NEICSSR: Shillong, 1976; Shifting Cultivation in North-east India, page 110.
22. The difficulty of Terrace cultivation, says Kamaleswar Sinha, "all hill areas did not lend themselves to terracing equally well. Terracing meant labour, a suitable hill side and the possibility of irrigation. When these were not available, it was obvious that the tribes could not be pursued to take up terracing and must continue Jhum." (Sinha, Kamaleswar; 1970; Meghalaya, Triumphs of the Tribal Genius; Publication Division (ISSD), Delhi -6.)
Pradesh or the Toda of Tamil Nadu, the Gajjars of Himachal Pradesh, the Bhots of Uttar Pradesh are more dependent on animal husbandry than on agriculture. In the eastern Siberia (from the Yenisei river to the Kamchatka Peninsula) Tungusic-speaking-people known as Reindeer Tungus are reindeer herders. These reindeers are milked and used as mounts and pack animals. These reindeer extend the hunting range of Tungus as "it can carry a load of 175 pounds swiftly over terrain that would be very difficult or impossible for a horse." The life of 'Karimjong' tribal group of arid or semi-arid region of North-east Uganda in Africa is centred round cattle. Besides food, the cattle helps them in many other ways. Their hides make clothing and blankets, their horns and hooves containers of various kinds; their serota make bags, their urine is used to cleanse vessels made of wood or of gourds, and to wash human hands, particularly in the cattle camps where there is seldom enough water for this. It is mixed with mud for the floors of huts, it is used to curdle milk, most of which is stored in that form.

24. Bose, Saradindu; Agriculture in Tribal India (in) NICD: Hyderabad; 1975; Integrated Tribal Development Planning, page 52.
A few tribes in India maintain their livelihood by snake-charming, dancing, singing, conjuring and by showing magic tricks. In this group mention may be made of the Kalbelias of Rajasthan, the Dommaras of Andhra Pradesh etc.

Besides, about 4 percent of the total working tribal population are engaged as non-agricultural labourers and a negligible percentage of them is working in different offices, hospitals, factories, and business enterprises.

**Dynamism in Tribal Life:**

Change is inevitable in every society. An unchanged society is virtually dead. Like other societies, with the passage of time, Indian society is also passing through a phase of socio-economic change. So far as tribal society of India is concerned, there have emerged many changes in the life and living of the tribal community, more specially, since independence. However, the degree of change is not uniform for all the tribes; in case of some tribes the change is rapid and for others it is slow. The change comes through different channels in their lives. Firstly, the various important centres like markets, fairs and religious places where tribals and non-tribals meet and exchange their ideas, establish a contact between them and the non-tribal culture, manner and customs may influence, in varying degrees, the tribal life. Secondly, religion is another factor responsible for their socio-economic change. In India, Christianity is said to be potent agent of change.
tribal life. Most of those tribals who have been converted into Christianity, have lost their old traditional beliefs, ideas, values etc. Thirdly, for industrial development, the abode of the tribals i.e. forests have been cleared in many places and industries have been set up. As a result of this development, the tribals have been compelled to work as labourers in the industries to maintain their livelihood. This happened to the tribes in Chotanagpur and many other places of India. It is also noteworthy that the denudation of forest has resulted in a serious ecological imbalance that has affected every section of the society. Fourthly, to make use of the various opportunities offered by the government for their socio-economic upliftment, the tribals have been coming in contact with various government offices and getting acquainted with the various virtues and vices that go with the sophisticated administrative machineries. This demonstration effect was absent from their life when they were living in the deep forest almost totally isolated from the rapidly changing world outside.

Besides these, urbanisation, modernisation, education, communication etc. are responsible for bringing about an immense socio-economic and cultural change in the tribal society.

Under the impact of such changes, one tribe or even a group of that tribe have been isolated from their original stock and inhabitance geographically, economically, culturally,
and socially, Though, therefore, many of the original traits of the tribal life are lost by the time, yet a harmony of culture is distinct among them. That is why, it is very often observed that some of the festivals, customs etc. of a particular tribe is similar to those of the others.