

TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE NORTH-EAST

Since the post-World War II years when development became a focus of concern within the western social sciences literature, the concept itself and the perspectives in which it has been cached have undergone a series of dramatic changes.¹ Initially the concept was interchangeably used with 'growth' today, today, the two are clearly distinguished. Growth has more limited connotations and is generally delineated by such quantifiable indices as GNP or per capita income. Development on the other hand implies a kind of structure change in all aspects of society.² They means certain core processes of change whereby a society or part of is transformed to the economic sphere from subsistence production to mass production from predominance of primary sector to secondary and tertiary sector from use of animal and human power to inanimate power in production, distribution, transport and communication. In the social sphere it entails a process of high social differentiation and specialisation with respect to institutional structure and individual activities where role recruitments are based on performance rather than on ascription.³ At the political level, it means diffusion of power to o\ever widening groups of society while being beneficiaries of the political process and the source of legitimacy of the sovereign authority. Culturally, it involves spread of literacy. Secular education and complex of intellectual institutional system for cultivation and advancement of specialised skills. Knowledge and outlook. Finally, at the intellectual level, it refers to faith in the rational explanation of physical and social phenomena.⁴

Once these core processes of change subsuming under the concept

of development, scholars are generally agreed. But they are far from agreed on the nature and content of development. The popular view of development is in terms of progress towards a complex of welfare goals such as reduction of poverty, unemployment and diminution of inequality.⁵ However for a large number of scholars this is possible only through the absorption of traits, attributes and institution characteristic of the capitalist society. Indeed they view societies moulding socio-economic change long non-capitalist lines as not worthy of examination and analysis. It may therefore be observed that there is nothing like development per se but development either along the capitalistic line – with private ownership of the means of production and production for profit and market as the main axis of the entire social structure of the developing society or the socialistic line with public ownership and production for assessed needs of the people as the main basis of the development activities.⁶

Northeast: The Regional Setting:

The northeast region comprises of seven states i.e., Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. The region has an aggregate area of 255,037 sq. k.m. which is nearly 8 percent of the total geographical area of the country but its population of more than 16.61 million (1981 Census) account for only 3.88 per cent of the total population of India.⁷ Population growth in the northeast however has always been higher than the national averages ever since 1901. The northeast as a whole has a density of 104 persons per sq.km. which varies from as low as 7 per sq. k.m. in Arunachal Pradesh to as high as 253 in Assam.⁸

Most of the area of the northeast earlier formed part of the composite state of Assam. The population in Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya (1971 Census) being respectively 98.10, 93.00, 89.12 and 83.07 per cent. Their composition in Assam, Manipur and Tripura was 10.75, 31.93 and 31.63 per cent respectively.⁹ However; this tribal population is far from uniform in terms of their dialect, culture and customs. Historically the bulk of this region constituted separate autonomous territory of chieftainships. They were annexed into British territory at different phases of the British rule beginning from the early part of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ With this there came about some extension of British administration into the territories. Yet, the region remained by and large isolated within itself and from the rest of the country all through the British rule, mainly an account of lack of communication networks and the policy of inner line regulation adopted for the administration of tribal areas. In the post-independence phases of economic development the government's attitude towards the northeast was in no way different from that of the British colonists.¹¹ The result was a simmering discontent among the people of particular. With this, the government's attention was naturally drawn to the problems of the northeast. Today serious attempts are being made by the governments both at the centre and the states for the speedy development of the region. Yet, the pace and direction of development is far from satisfactory and is causing grave concern among the scholars administrators and politicians. There is therefore a need to reflect upon the problems and perspectives of development – pursued in the north-eastern states and union territories.¹²

Political Ideas and Organisations of Central Indian Tribes:

The tribes of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa constitute the largest tribal belt of India. These tribes share certain traits of political organizations based on clan solidarity. The village headman assisted by a Council of Elders oversees the administration of the village. The decision of this Council is reached either through consensus or majority verdict and the headman has no power to overrule the majority verdict.¹³ The Oraons, Gonds and Bhils are three numerically most important tribes of this zone. The Oraons have developed Parha organization which is a confederacy of a number of neighbouring villages with a central organization known as the Parha Panch. Each Oraon Parha consists of a number of villages; one of the villages is called the Raha (king) village, another Dewan (prime minister) village, a third Panrey (clerk of crown) village, a fourth the Kotwal village and so on. Such of the villages as have got no such denominations are known as Praja (subject) village. Raja village is the head village, of the Parha. Every village of the Parna has its own distinctive flag and other badges which may not be used by any other village. Maintenance of law and order and the settlement of disputes between villages is also the function of the Parha Council.¹⁴

The lowest political authority among the Santhals and the Malers is the village headman called Manjhi. He and the village elders meet and talk over the villages affairs. The headman is entitled to certain gifts at weddings and other feasts and holds rent free land.¹⁵ The Manjhi is both civil and moral authority. In his civic functions he is assisted by a sub-headman, the Paranik. Among the Mundas the village headman is known

by the same, i.e., Munda while his religious counterpart is called Pahan. About twelve villages constitute a Patti or Parna and the man who heads it is known as Manki who is usually the most influential of the village headmen forming a group. The Munda and the Pahan are hereditary offices.¹⁶

The basis political unit of the Gonds is the village community.¹⁷ The village headman is called Patel, Mandal or Bhoi. He is assisted by some elders of the village in settling the village affairs. Though the king of Bastar, Hindu, does not command any political authority over the Gonds, yet he has been the centre of spiritual veneration of all the groups of the Gonds. An interesting aspect of political organisation among the Bison Horn Moria is that the priest responsible for religious rituals and ceremonies and the medicine-man are more influential than the village headman.¹⁸

Political Organisation of South Indian Tribes:

This tribal zone is very important in view of the fact that this is the abode of some of the economically and technologically most backward tribes of the world.¹⁹ Most of the tribes of this zone live in small groups dispersed in forests or on the outskirts of villages of the cultivators. Usually they live a life of their own and try to avoid conflicts with and interference from outsiders. They want to be left alone.²⁰

The tribes of Andaman and Nicobar Islands are still living in gathering-hunting stage of economic development.²¹ though most of them are nomadic groups yet they roam about within a definite geographical zone. Every local group consists of 5-10 families and

every group has its own headmen. These local groups live and act independently. However, during special hunting sprees or certain festivals they unite temporarily. The headmen of the local groups take care of the affairs of their respective local groups. Among some other nomadic tribes there is no such institution as a headman of a settlement.²² The heads of the single families simply come together and settle the affairs of the group whenever problems arise and decisions have to be taken. Thus the Allays and Aranadars have no headman. Affairs of the community are discussed at a gathering of elders whose decision is binding. Those who disagree simply leave the group and join another one. Among the Kadars, another food gathering tribe, the hereditary institution of the headman has ceased to exist.²³

Among the Adiyars of Kerala, the office of the headman is hereditary. If a son is unsuitable for the office a nephew may inherit it. The headman has a special title but he is not an autocratic ruler, he only presides over the meetings of the elders at which affairs of the community are discussed. His sanction is required, however, for any important undertaking, a marriage or divorce and he presides at funeral ceremonies.²⁴