CHAPTER II

INDIAN TRIBES: THE LOCATIONAL SETTINGS

1. CHARACTERISTICS OF TRIBAL REGIONS

The tribal areas all over the world may generally be carved out from the hilly, forested and inaccessible parts of the land. In India too, it is noticed that the aboriginals are generally found living in the forest and inaccessible areas. They have considered forest as their natural home (Burdhan, 1973: 36). Tribal areas have been marked out by nature as distinct geographical units, in most cases, contiguous and compact territories (Burdhan, 1976: 25). These areas have also been identified as "bridge and buffer zones" (Royburman, 1974). The tribal regions and backward regions of India are by and large coterminous. Illiteracy, hunger, poverty and social stagnation coincide with these regions (Burdhan, 1976: 17). These regions remain away from the main focii of population agglomeration and seem to have suffered from varying degrees of isolation (Ahmad, 1985: 65). Partly because of their out of the way location tribes had restricted interaction with the non-tribal people which has resulted in the continuation of the old tribal culture in varying degrees of intensity (Ahmad,
1985: 66). Geographically speaking the tribal regions happen to be the most inaccessible parts of the country. The tribal people in the sub-Himalayan region, the north-east and the Andaman Islands have retained their identity. On the other hand, the Central Indian tribes and the tribes of South India have been subjected to varying degrees of assimilation through the process of interaction with the non-tribal cultures of their surrounding areas.

Despite the inhospitable nature of terrain, the tribal regions are endowed with the vast wealth of resources. They possess stores of minerals, forests and water resources. These resources are considered crucial to the economic development of India. These regions became the main source of raw materials and bases for giant industrial projects. Irrigation projects, steel plants, and heavy engineering factories, mines and other undertakings have sprung up in the tribal regions (Burdhan, 1973 : 43).

2. TRIBAL POPULATION AND ITS SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The population of tribes in India has been continuously increasing from 30.17 million (6.87 per cent) in 1961 to 38.02 million (6.94 per cent) in 1971 and to 51.63 million (7.76 per cent in 1981). The tribal segment of population is
far from homogeneous. They are found at different stages of socio-cultural and economic development and different levels of political consciousness (Ahmad, 1985 : 65). They belong to different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. When compared among themselves they reflect numerous inter-tribal differences in the levels of development, participation in different spheres of national life and in their levels of social and cultural integration.

Despite many differences the underlying unity may, however, be seen in the contexts of tribal culture and tradition and economic and political demands as well as their tendency towards the nature of concentration and clustering in few enclaves in the hilly and forested areas in the country (Raza et. al., 1977 : 2).

The tribal social system, patterns of relationship and values are consequences of ecological system (Gupte, 1983 : 159). There are number of social and religious rituals connected with land which establish emotional ties between the tribals and their land. Thus, land is much more than merely a source of livelihood to them. Their social life is highly organized and complete in itself. Though the clan is exogamous, they are in general monogamous (Verma, 1977 :
They have a rich tradition of culture which is deeply entrenched in their social fabric. This sense of belonging among the tribes is because of their unique nature of socio-economic and social control system (Majumdar, 1983: 13). Besides, they are also very conscious of their identity and heritage.

In their mode of living the tribes are dependent on food gathering, hunting, pastoralism, shifting agriculture which in many areas has been replaced by sedentary agriculture. The Santals, Mundos, and the Oraons, for example, depend primarily on settled agriculture. On the other hand, there are tribes who move from forest to forest in search of subsistence (Verma, 1977: 20). Such movements were initiated by ecological pressure/push and climatic change (Verma, 1977: 161). The continuous changes in their habitat usually assumes cyclic pattern. The Birhors, the Hill Marias, the Banjaras, etc. are examples of such groups who live on the outskirts of forest and depend upon forest produce. The food gathering and hunting economies have made their life semi-nomadic. In a nutshell, the life of tribal people is primarily directed towards the raising of food either by cultivation or by gathering roots and fruits from
the forest or by hunting, trapping or fishing (Verma, 1977: 30).

Agriculture is the mainstay of the tribal economy. The tribal economy is unisectoral and is no longer self-sufficient and still continues to be based primarily on land and forest with which they have symbiotic relationship. They generally occupied the rugged terrain and infertile land. Almost complete absence of irrigation and use of primitive technology in agriculture resulting in the low yield per acre. The shifting type of cultivation (Jhum) and dry upland cultivation are carried out on the large scale. Settled agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for overwhelming majority of the tribal population.

3. CLASSIFICATION OF INDIAN TRIBES

The tribal communities in India range from the primitive hunters and gatherers of forest produce to the urbanized and industrial wage-earners (Raza, et. al., 1977: 1). For example, some of the Santals and Mundas or Oraons of Bihar have achieved a certain degree of advancement in education as compared to the tribes like the Kharias or Bhuiyans though all of them live in the Chotanagpur region. Uneven development has further accentuated the process of
horizontal and vertical division, as well as created an elite group of people within the tribals (Burdhan, 1976 : 25).

Bearing above facts in mind it will, of course, be a distortion of the facts to consider all of them as a single homogeneous group. According to Burdhan the tribes of India may be classified into four broad divisions:

a. the first group may be termed as Primitive tribes including those communities who confined themselves to the original habitation in remote forests and inaccessible hills and still retain their distinctive primitive patterns of life;

b. the second group consisting of semi-tribal communities including those who have more or less settled-down in rural areas near or in the forest and have taken to relatively improved type of cultivation and other allied occupations;

c. the third group is known as acculturated tribal groups who have settled in the plains or in the semi-urban areas and are engaged as labourers in mines and
different vocations in industry and crafts. These groups of tribals have gradually abandoned their traditional way of life and adopted the cultures of the regions in which they live;

d. the fourth group of tribal people is assimilated tribals who have migrated to cities and urban centres during the last few generations and have become the part and parcel of the urban society. Politically, this group of tribal population is much conscious and playing key roles to bring the tribes of India on one platform for achieving their political demands.

4. IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENTAL ACTIVITIES

The impact of urbanization and industrialization may be noted on the fast-moving political and socio-economic events inducing rapid changes in the outlook of the tribal people in the region. Every tribal community is waking up and becoming conscious of identity, culture, language etc. The pace of change varies and the stages of development are different among different communities. Higher education and technical education among them are breaking down the barriers between tribals and non-tribals. As a result, there
is arising: a new sense of tribal solidarity on the national plane.

The tribal regions have been by and large brought under the influence of external forces only marginally. Thus, tribal communities developed a mode of living linked to the ecological conditions which have favoured the survival of their way of life with marginal modifications. While on the peripheries these communities have gone under rapid changes, "The tribal areas by and large remained under the impact of more or less perpetual stagnation." (Raza, et. al., 1977:2).

After independence, India entered into an era of overall economic growth and the tribal regions however, could no longer remain outside the ambit of the developmental process as new planning strategies and the democratic processes slowly infiltrated and exposed them to a varied set of influences both negative and positive (Ahmad 1985:67). The growing contact of the tribals with the non-tribal society and the resultant impact of the exogenetic forces have brought two consequences in its wake. In the first place, "these inroads into tribal societies are bringing about a transformation of the tribal social order
on a scale unprecedented in their history. Secondly, their exposure to the non-tribal socio-cultural milieu and their cognition of the new social opportunities available in India, have generated new urges and aspirations in a large section of tribal population” (Raza et al. 1977: 3). In a nutshell, the major problem in the tribal regions arises out of the two different cultures (tribal and non-tribal) coming into contact resulting a situation of cultural conflict between them. For example, the tribals used to have a high value for their words whereas the formal agreement have little significance in their system. On the other hand, the new economic system emphasizes high consumption, acquisition and competition which are alien to the tribal people. The tribal communities were managing their own affairs but the modern system has made traditional organizations weak. The alienation of tribal lands for a variety of reasons has resulted discontentment and consequently a large number of rural workers whether agriculturist or artisans have lost their very means of production and thus to be reduced to the position of wage earners at the mercy of middle men (Ghurye, 1963:202).

In the beginning, the tribals were in a state of ecological equilibrium with their environment. The
developmental programmes disturbed the equilibrium because of over-exploitation of the natural resources which affected adversely the fauna and flora of the region. It is also evident that the people of neighbouring areas intruded the tribal regions in search of land with high technology and pushed the native people into the interior and hostile environment which posed serious problems to their survival. The scanty resource were not sufficient for the tribal population and as a result they were driven to urban and semi-urban areas. This has, in course of time, led to a certain degree of disintegration of tribal society and a section of them who moved to the urban centres, have lost vestiges of their original tribal culture (Burdhan, 1973: 9).

The ecological system in the tribal regions of India has been changing for obvious reasons. Emerging ecological system here is urban or semi-urban, where the life style is rural oriented. It is neither fully urban nor fully rural. As a result, there has been many adjustments and readjustments and mixture in life styles, beliefs and people's culture (Gupte, 1983: 159). But the fact is that most of them still have their traditional cultures and
confined to inaccessible and inhospitable areas in the country.

5. INDIAN TRIBES: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

India has been rightly described as a 'melting pot' of many ethnic stocks and cultures from pre-historic times (Hasnain 1983: 7). During the much later stage of history, the nomadic pastoral tribes invaded from the north and north-west in larger groups in waves and Tibeto-Burman from across the north and north-eastern borders of the country (Ray, 1972: 10). It is very difficult to arrange the people and cultures of India in the chronological sequence due to its magnitude and complex nature (Hasnain 1983: 7). Therefore, reconstruction of tribal history and the processes and patterns of tribal settlement in India becomes further difficult but fascinating task (Pathy, 1984: 44).

Attempt have been made by many anthropologists and ethnographers such as Hutton, Risley, Guha and Mujamdar to reconstruct the tribal history of India. They have not been convincing precisely because history does not provide sufficient materials and thus most of the studies are based on myths and folklores and insufficient hazy data
(Mukherjea, 1962 : 1). Some of them still have been looking for the people who were the real autochthons. Based on Hutton's finding, the Negritos were earlier inhabitants of India whereas Ghurye feels that the aboriginals of India have come from outside and cannot, therefore, be considered the real autochthons of land to which they belong (Ghrye, 1963: 11). The sacred books of the Hindus such as Ramayana and Mahabharta have traced the existence of indigenous population. In the Puranas, the indigenous people have been termed as 'Nishada' and have been described as black as charcoal or crow. (Dalton, 1982: 121). Datta believes that the aboriginal tribes of India may be considered the indigenous autochthons at least in the sense that they had been long settled in different parts of the country before the Aryans invaded India (Dutta, 1986: 5).

At present Austric speaking tribes of India, according to Majumdar, belong to the earliest of the races of this sub-continent. It has, however, been accepted that the proto-Australoids (from whom Austric tribes of India descended) were the earliest inhabitants of the land (Majumdar, 1958: 46). Proto-Australoids, according to Guha, are similar to the aborigines of Australia as far as their physical characteristics are concerned (Guha, 1944).
Chatterjee has opined that the oldest population of Indian sub-continent must have spoken the Munda or Kolarian (Kol) or the Austro-Asiatic languages (Chatterjee, 1963: 14). The Austro-Asiatic dialects of India have been wonderfully preserved by the tribes scattered over a vast geographical regions which led Grierson to assume that the aborigines must have belonged to the Munda forms of speech (Grierson, 1967: 28). This hypothesis was also supported by Schmidt (1933), Gait (1970), Hunter(1877) and Dalton (1910).

Sir Herbert Risley claimed that the Mundas are the earliest inhabitants on the Indian sub-continent and can be considered as genuine autochthons (Risley, 1915: 46). Contrary to this, Rai Bahadur S. C. Roy opined that the Proto-Australoids cannot be considered autochthons of India because they came from outside and inhabited at the southwestern foot hills of the Himalayas and then they crossed the Yamuna and the Ganges and moved on towards the central provinces, Bengal and Assam and spread even to Burma and Cambodia (Roy, 1970: 20-23).

The foregoing hypotheses reveal that the tribal history of India may possibly be reconstructed from the origin of the Munda tribes. References from the Sanskrit texts could
be given in support but the lack of scientific data do not enable to study the issue scientifically. One can easily form a vague surmise on the basis of vague materials furnished by the early Aryan myths and Puranic traditions but they leave us wondering. (Mukherjea, 1962 : 7).

6. DISTRIBUTION OF TRIBES IN INDIA

The tribal population constitutes a fairly sizable proportion of India's total population. The share of the tribal population, however, varies from region to region, presenting a complex nature of the tribal situation in the country. In some regions their share is high while in others they form only a small proportion of the total population. For example, in the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Mizoram the scheduled tribes constitute more than 80 per cent to the total population in each while on the other hand in Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala their share does not exceed more that 2 per cent. About two-thirds of the total tribal population of the country are, however, concentrated in five states of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar Gujarat and Rajasthan only.

The patterns of spatial distribution of the tribal population at the state-level reveals that there are nine
states and one union territory in which the tribal population constitutes less than 10 per cent of the total population. On the other hand, there are states of north-east India (Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram) and two union territories (Lakshdweep and Dadar and Nagar Haveli) having significant share of the tribal population ranging from 70 to 94 per cent. The tribal percentage varies between 11 and 28 in the remaining states and union territories of the country (table-2).
TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF TRIBAL POPULATION TO THE TOTAL POPULATION 1981

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Percentage of Tribal Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>7.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>5.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>8.31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gujarat</td>
<td>14.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Himachal Pradesh</td>
<td>4.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>22.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>9.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>27.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td>80.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>4.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaland</td>
<td>83.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>22.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rajasthan 12.21
Tamil Nadu 1.07
Tripura 28.44
Uttar Pradesh 0.21
West Bengal 5.63
Arunachal Pradesh 69.82
Mizoram 93.55
Sikkim 23.27
Andaman & Nicobar Island 11.85
Chandigarh --
Dadar & Nagar Haveli 78.82
Delhi --
Goa, Daman & Diu 0.99
Lakshdweep 98.82
Pondicherry --
It is relevant to mention here that the study undertaken in 1977 by Raza et al., at the district and taluk levels revealed that "about 31 per cent of the total tribal population in 34 districts where it constituted more than 50 per cent of the districts population. In a similar way 28 districts with the tribal percentage ranging from 20 to 50 accounted 33.4 per cent of the total tribal population. Only 19 per cent of the tribal population lived in 39 districts in which percentage varied between 10 and 20. On the other hand, only 8.3 per cent of the tribal population was found living in 27 districts where it accounted for 5 to 10 per cent to total population. The remaining 8.5 per cent of the tribal population was scattered in 175 districts lying mostly on the periphery of the traditional tribal homelands. As many as 57 districts had no tribal population at all" (Fig.2).

They have further observed that "the analysis of district-level data fails to bring out the magnitude of tribal concentration. As one goes down to the level of taluk/tahsil/anchal, the pattern of tribal concentration becomes sharply defined. For example in Assam, 12.7 per cent of the tribal population lived in 5 taluks of Mikir and North Cachar hills where the tribes form more than 50 per
Fig. 2
cent of the total population. As many as 35 taluks in Madhya Pradesh accounted for about 53.1 per cent of the state’s total tribal population. A little above 69 per cent of the tribals of Gujarat was concentrated in 29 taluks while in Orissa 27 taluks had 57 per cent of the entire tribal population of the state. Karnataka and Kerala, however, had no such taluk where the tribes had a majority. In all, what emerged out of this study was that about one half (46.77%) of the scheduled tribes of the country lived in 332 taluks in which they were in absolute majority. However, this analysis does not portray a realistic picture of the tribal pattern of concentration which emerged far more powerful at the village level. The fact is that the tribal concentration is further accentuated at the village level, and it is quite likely that even in taluks where the tribals do not otherwise constitute in the clusters of villages which are largely exclusively tribal in composition" (Raza et. al. 1977:10-13).

The pattern of the tribal concentration reveals that the predominantly tribal states and union territories such as Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Lakshdweep and Andaman and Nicobar Islands have a very meagre share in the total tribal population of the country. On the other hand, it is
interesting to note that Bihar and Madhya Pradesh together account for more than 35 per cent though the tribal population in these states is 9 per cent and 20 per cent respectively. The concentration index does not exceed more than 10 per cent anywhere except in the case of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa.

Raza and others study at the district level needs to be mentioned here which shows that "there are only 152 districts out of the total districts in India in which the share of tribal population varies from 1 to 4 per cent. The remaining two-thirds of the districts constitute an insignificant share of the tribal population. There are 30 districts in which more than half of the tribes of India resides. About 45 per cent of the remaining tribal population live in another 122 districts. Ranchi and Santal Parganas districts of Bihar and Koraput of Orissa together account for a little over 10 per cent tribal population of the country. These 3 districts along with 5 other districts of Singhbhum, Valsad, Surat, Bastar, and Mayurbhanj account for 25 per cent of the tribes in India" (Raza, et. al., 1977 : 10-13). Finally it can be concluded that tribes in India live in clusters with more or less in majority in few districts only (Fig. 3).
INDIA
CONCENTRATION OF TRIBAL POPULATION - 1971
PERCENTAGE OF TRIBAL POPULATION IN A DISTRICT
TO TOTAL TRIBAL POPULATION OF THE COUNTRY

Fig. 3
7. PATTERN OF INTERACTION AND CHANGE

Traditional societies all over the world are changing because of the contact with the outside world. Similarly, the tribal population of India has also been undergoing a variety of socio-economic and political changes particularly the last two centuries in the wake of rapid industrialization and urbanization (Bhardwaj, 1977:148). But the momentum of these changes is inevitably slow because of deep-rooted beliefs in old customs and traditions of the tribes in India (Ali, 1973). In fact, the process of interaction and assimilation between tribes and non-tribes started with the advent of the Aryans in India (Kosambi, 1956:65). But this pre-industrial interaction was very much restricted in nature and scope because the Aryans pushed the autochthonous to remote areas (Gupta, 1977:161). The tribal isolation in India was first broken by Mughal emperors who tried to develop somewhat stable interactions with local peasantry (Misra, 1977:97). During the British period, the process of interaction accelerated due to the conversion of tribes to Christianity. This period was also marked by a faster trend towards incorporation of tribal language and cultural traits into the Hindu peasantry (Sinha, 1972:414). The process of interaction between
tribals and non-tribal groups acquired a new dimension in India after independence. With the introduction of adult franchise, the community development programmes and democratic decentralization, extension of roads, etc. the government of India tried to bring these people into the mainstream (Gupta, 1977: 162). The opening of industrial complexes in tribal areas brought trbials and non-tribals face to face (Bose, 1971: 46).

A number of external forces such as economic, administrative, legal, religious and political have successively affected the tribal areas. They have influenced the tribal life directly or indirectly. The changes produced by them have not followed a uniform course and the impact of change differs from area to area and from tribes to tribe. In some regions, the process of contact and consequent changes have been smooth. At the other places, it has produced contrary results (Bhardwaj, 1977: 148 and Royburman, 1972: 43).

7.1 REGIONAL PATTERN OF INTERACTION AND CHANGE

In the following paragraphs an attempt has been made to analyse the patterns of interaction in the different geographical regions in India. To begin with the north-east
India, interaction between tribes and non-tribes has not been frequent because of geographical isolation. In areas of religion and language the effects of interaction are quite substantial, leading to assimilation and integration. Similarly, the progress of education, plantations and trade have increased interaction between the tribes and non-tribes. As a result, there is an increasing use of Hindi, Bengali, and Assamese especially in urban centres (Royburman and Thukral, 1970: 27-30). For reasons of history and geopolitics the tribes of the region continued to be in competition and conflict with non-tribes, leading, in some instances, to hostilities.

In the sub-Himalayan region, the historical relations and the patterns of interaction have been such that the tribes were in the process of least acculturation. In the areas of language and religion one observes minor changes due to limited interaction and relative isolation. Sporadic interaction of Bhotias and Gaddis with the non-tribal people has been known for centuries which led to the reciprocal borrowings of cultural traits. Close interaction between tribes and non-tribes in the region seems to have led to the development of a composite mosaic of cultural entities of the tribes within the Indian civilization. Nevertheless, the
tribes are gradually becoming a part of the larger political system.

The tribal region of central India, on the other hand, has been exposed to the frequent movements of non-tribal people into the tribal homelands throughout history. The pattern of interaction varies from cooperation to competition to conflict and presents a varied spectrum of socio-economic and technological order of life. Hinduism has had a considerable impact on economic, social, religious and linguistic spheres on the tribes (Datta-Majumdar, 1956: 53-54). The tribes in this region have shown willingness to come within the fold of national culture, and have integrated into the broader Hindu system of India.

In western India, the pattern of interaction was one of conflict during the pre-independence period because of exploitative attitude of the non-tribes towards the tribes. After independence it seems there is more cooperation. In the field of language and religion, there is certain degree of assimilation of the tribes into the non-tribal culture.

The pattern of interaction in the southern region of India is different from the central. The tribes in this
region first welcomed the non-tribes who lived with them but this changed into hostility when exploitation crossed the tolerance limit (Moorthy, 1972). In this region, the pattern of interaction between tribes and non-tribes seems to be exploitative on the part of the non-tribes. The increasing dependence of the tribes on the non-tribes has led cooperation between them leading to the assimilation of the tribes into the Indian civilization (Agrawal, 1977: 127-340).

From the above discussion, it is clear that the tribal population of India has been in almost continuous contact with neighbours. From time to time some groups moved out from the hills and entered the plains, where they were absorbed in the villages and the caste system (Mathur, 1972: 459). In this way a section of tribal population slipped off from their indigenous culture and came closer to Hindusim. The various forms of the Bhakti movement played an important role in bringing the tribal communities to the Hindu fold. Many tribals in India have thus merged with the Jati or caste system, occupying a low position in the hierarchy (Bose, 1971: 25-26). The extent of acculturation on the linguistic level is as much remarkable as the extent of miscegenation on the ethnic level. It becomes clear from
the fact that none of the tribes of western India speaks a non-Aryan speech (Sachchidananda, 1972: 169 and Bhattacharya, 1972: 196).

The larger tribal groups like the Bhils and Gonds, for example, are more amenable to change over a period of time for a variety of reasons. On the other hand, smaller groups such as hill Marias of Bastar district and Onges of Nicobar Islands have lesser possibility of accepting change as a natural phenomenon. The very existence of a small group depends on its extreme cohesiveness (Sharma, 1977: 24). Contrary to this, the process of assimilation of smaller groups like Bokasa, Baigas, etc. into larger ones has been steadily going on (Ghurye, 1963).

REFERENCES


