Tribes constitute a unique feature of Baghelkhand which is a land of kaleidoscopic diversity. Exploitation of the natural resources of the region and its recent socio-economic changes have brought to them a new dimension of tussle and struggle. A large share of forest and mineral wealth is extracted from the tribal areas, but tribals themselves remain largely unemployed and are not able enjoy its fruits. Majority of tribals are engaged in agriculture and related activities. But, agriculture alone is unable to improve their socio-economic condition, and thus, most of them are caught up in a vicious circle of indebtedness and land alienation.

Field studies have indicated that there has been an unplanned and haphazard development in the region. There is need for the formulation of a national policy on the development of agriculture in the forested, hilly and rugged terrain of the tribal dominated areas. Side by side, tribal handicrafts and cottage industry should also be developed for their socio-economic uplift. The Government has taken some steps in this direction, but much is yet to be accomplished.
In this context, the present researcher has studied the habitat of the tribals of the region and has come to the conclusion that there should be a permanent committee to screen, evaluate and co-ordinate efforts of developmental planning in the tribal areas.

The present work deals with the tribal habitat. The subject matter is discussed under three heads, 'Physical Basis', 'The Economic Base' and 'Tribal Welfare'. The Physical Basis of the region is discussed in six chapters. The first chapter is 'Historical Background', dealing with the region's historical ups and downs during four periods of its history, namely, ancient period, medieval period, pre-independence period and post independence period. These periods mark a sequential development of the tribals, resulting from their changing relations with the physical, biotic and cultural environment from the remotest antiquity of the palaeolithic age to the present scientific and technological era. The historical events which have taken place in this area are intimately linked with the socio-economic changes. The region was part of Vindhya Pradesh from 1948 to 1956. Its name is derived from that of a Rajput clan called the Baghelas which is believed to have settled in the area.
In the second and third chapter, relief, geology and minerals, drainage system are discussed. The region, with hilly and rugged terrain, is situated on the east and south of the Son river. It is covered with dense forests. The habitat of tribals comprises the districts of Sidhi, Shahdol and Surguja. The region lies between 22°21' to 24°21'N and 81°20' to 84°22'E and covers an area of 46,897 sq. km with a population 3.96 million. Baghelkhand may be described in general terms as a secluded basin. On the east of the Maikal Plateau and north of the Chattisgarh Basin lie two important coal basins of the Lower Gondwana Age - Sohagpur Basin in the west and Surguja Basin in the east, separated by Deogarh Hills. The rim of the Surguja Basin consists of Archean metamorphic rocks in the east, coarse sandstone of the Upper Gondwana rocks in the north and isolated flat topped mesas, while laterite cappings, locally known as "pats" rise above the floor of the basin. The Mainpat (1,152 m), however, stands in the south of the basin. The Jamirpat in the east represents a penneplain at an elevation 1,000 m, above which monact rocks rise another 200 m. On the north, the Deogarh Hills formed by Gondwana sandstone are considerably dissected and all the rivers which flow northwards across the region.
appear to be of the superposed type. The Rihand is a typical example.

The third chapter deals with the climate of the region which is of a typical monsoon type. The scorching heat of May is modified, in places, by extensive floral cover. The region receives average rainfall of more than 125 cm and which increases as one goes eastward. For example, Ambikapur has 16.25 cm of rainfall, Dharamjaigarh 162.0 cm and Naitrahat (on the border of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh) 160.0 cm. The average temperature of the above mentioned towns is 35.5°C in the month of May and in the north-south of the region, the temperature is 40°C. Average temperature in January remains in between 10°C and 12.5°C.

The fourth chapter throws light on its drainage system. The important rivers of the region are Son, Mahanadi, Gopad, Banas, Koil, Kanher and Rihand. The basins of these rivers have rich alluvial covers which serve as the cultural cases in the vast rugged stony and forest clad terrain of the region. The general dendritic plan is locally distributed by the rectangular pattern on the Bijawars in Sidhi, the trellised pattern on the steep slopes such as of Agori uplands, and more localized
radial, annular patterns. Over such a land, exposed to
denudation since early times, the youthful features of
topography, the behaviour of streams and their distribution
seek their explanation in the successive tectonic
activities, within or outside the area, which have affected
it in varying degrees. The recent event, i.e. the
Himalayan orogeny, is responsible for it. Otherwise this
area, planted several times, would have had a more
sensible topography now.

The patterns of flora and fauna are discussed
in the fifth chapter. The distribution of flora and
fauna vary according to rainfall and the nature of the
soil. Vegetation ranges from grasses and thorny trees to
deciduous trees of commercial significance like teak, sal,
baldu etc., in the region both in small pockets and in
considerable stretches. Considerable acreage has been
maintained under reserve category while over 25 per cent
of those on the slopes are classed as protected forests,
as their further exploitation might have accentuated
soil erosion in the areas. Because of the exploitation
of forests, the fauna like tigers, wolves, jackals, spotted
deer etc. are fast disappearing.

The sixth and last chapter of this section
deals with agricultural lands and soils of the region and
the problems of soil erosion. Sandy red soil is spread over large area of the region. Generally, agricultural lands are located in the fertile river valleys. The agricultural lands in tribal areas, categorized in respect of their elevation, are tanar (upland) and don (low land). These fertile lands are being eroded due to haphazard exploitation of forests and this is a matter of great concern.

The second section i.e. 'Economic Base' comprises the seventh, eight and ninth chapters. The chapter on the economic status of tribals describes various tribal groups according to their economic activities. These groups are those consisting of prosperous cultivators (Gonds, Oraons, Kawars etc.) and those living from hand-to-mouth which include the largest number of tribals, among whom the condition of Baigas, Kols, Korwas is most miserable. Their economic activities are: forest produce collection, working as labourers in Public Works Department gangs, or in construction work rikshaw pulling etc. Others work as landless labourers and mine labourers. They also depend upon nearby forests for their livelihood.

The eighth chapter, entitled 'Agriculture', discusses the methods of cultivation, and livestock rearing and songs, dances and festivals relating to the various
agricultural operations. Nature here is not a kind mother and mere sustenance has to be earned by the sweat of the brow. Holdings are small, fragmentation is excessive and alternative source of income are few. Different stages of agricultural operations are marked by different folk dances, songs and festivals. For example Sua, Shaila, Karma, Ganga Dashehra etc. They show a marked correlation between culture, economy and environment. The main crop of the region is rice, and 30 to 65 per cent lands come under its cultivation. Jowar, wheat, kodon-kutki, gram, maize, tur, ulsi til etc. are the other crops. Methods of agriculture are age old. Herd rearing is common with agricultural activities but it is based on quantity instead of quality. There is need for modernizing agriculture in keeping with their environment and culture.

The ninth chapter is on Cottage Industry and analyses the problems of the revival of the dying tribal handicrafts and cottage industries based on local resources and labour. A Large number of landholdings do not provide food for the whole year. In the past, the tribals prepared some items of handicraft for their personal use and the surplus was sold in exchange of money or bartered in the local market to supplement their incomes. These handicrafts have gradually been losing their importance because of
mill made articles. At present handicrafts and other manufacturing activities are bidi rolling, rope making, medicine making, preparation of wooden articles, liquor, basketery, tusserworm rearing, tile making, gur making, iron smithy, dairying etc. There are several sellers markets in the tribal areas but these are characterized by great variation in selling and purchasing prices, monopoly of non-tribal traders etc.

The roads both kuchcha and pucca and railway lines have been laid to transport the mineral and forest resources of the region. Most of the roads are unbridged and in rainy days hilly and forested tribal areas are cut off from the outside world for long periods.

The third section 'Tribal Population and Welfare', contains the tenth and the eleventh chapters. The tenth chapter is entitled 'Tribal Population and Tribal Villages and Settlements'. There are 18,23,274 tribals living in different parts of the region, which makes about 46 per cent of its total population. Density of the tribal population is determined by socio-physical factors. It ranges between 77 persons/sq. km (Manendragarh) and 13 persons/sq. km. (Bharatpur). Economically active tribal population is 1,73,943 or 43 per cent of the total number of workers.
The present researcher, for his convenience, divided the main activity of workers into three—(i) cultivators, (ii) agricultural workers, and (iii) other workers or non-agricultural labourers, the respective numbers and percentages of each in the year 1981 being 4,94,671 persons (62 per cent), 1,18,540 persons (30 per cent), and 6,678 persons (8 per cent). A large number of tribals are engaged in agriculture. The number of cultivators is gradually decreasing because of poverty and land alienation. As a result of this, they are becoming landless and are forced to work as agricultural labourer and a few of them are engaged in secondary and tertiary activities.

Due to high rate of illiteracy among them, the tribals are facing many socio-economic problems. There are 2,924 primary schools, 265 secondary schools, and 50 higher secondary schools in the rural areas of the region; but only about 8 per cent tribals are literate and they are still far behind their non-tribal brethren in this respect.

There are 6,203 villages in the region accommodating 17,85,252 tribals. A rural settlement in tribal areas is a group of dwellings in their typical form exhibiting a definite relationship and fine adjustment to soil, topography, climate and water supply which determine the
nature of a settlement in the region. Generalization are not possible and patterns of settlement cannot be explained only in terms of a few isolated factors. During the course of village surveys the present researcher observed the importance of such cultural factors as sense of security, migration, ethnic composition, traditions, socio-economic bonds, clan solidarity, irrigation facilities, co-operation in agriculture, methods of cultivation, size of holdings and lease system. These settlements are of dispersed type, with cluster of compact and semi-compact settlements. The roofs of the houses are made of tiles with kuchcha walls. The economic condition of a tribal determines the size and material of his house.

The eleventh and last chapter deals with welfare measures and the impact of Integrated Tribal Development Programmes in tribal areas. In the chapter suggestions have also been made for the improvement of the socio-economic condition of the tribals of the region.

Welfare programme for the tribals started during the colonial period. In pre-independence period the welfare programmes were designed mainly to facilitate the spread of Christianity. But after independence, a realistic approach to their development was adopted, keeping in mind
consideration of national integration. With the advent of the Fifth Five Year Plan 'Integrated Tribal Development Programmes (I.T.D.Ps) strategy ushered in a new era of tribals welfare. Tribal areas for these programmes are evaluated on the basis of the concentration of tribal population or their isolation and backwardness. About 60 per cent of the tribal area of the region is covered by these programmes, which includes Kusmi block of Sidhi district, Sohagpur, Pushparajgarh tahsils of Shahdol district and the whole of Surguja district.

The conclusion deals with the crux of the tribal problem which is essentially one of requirements of food and livelihood for which the tribals mainly depend on forest resources and agricultural produce. The chapter ends with a number of suggestions for the betterment of the tribals of the Baghelkhand region. It stresses that the focus of the Government should be on the preservation of forests, improvements in agricultural techniques, irrigation facilities and soil conservation. To augment their meagre income from agriculture, the Government should also foster agriculture and forest based cottage industries and tribal handicrafts. The most crucial catalytic agent for the implementation of tribal welfare programmes is
education. Though there are a good number of primary and secondary schools in the region, the tribals lag far behind their non-tribal brethren in education. Therefore, a mass level programme of the eradication of illiteracy among the tribals should be launched. The tribals should be encouraged and given financial help for this and angan-bari schools should be increased in number in the hilly, forested and inaccessible tribal areas.