

Concept of 'Tribe' in the Draft National Tribal Policy

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In the last four years, two drafts of the National Tribal Policy have been released by two different central governments. This essay, begins with a comparison of the two and then carries out a critical analysis of the second version. Whilst the draft covers almost all aspects of importance that concern tribal societies, what it lacks is the "tribal voice". Throughout its length runs the "we-they" distinction – the distinction of "givers" and "receivers". We hear the voice of bureaucrats, planners, and development specialists, which constitutes the dominant discourse on tribes. The article argues that the tribal issues should come more to the centre of our discussions in contemporary India than remaining at the margins, as is the case today.

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The Draft National Tribal Policy (NTP) was released in February 2004, during the tenure of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. Then, on 21 July 2006, under the direction of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, another draft was circulated, which was called the "Draft National Tribal Policy (a Policy for the Scheduled Tribes of India)".

1 Introduction

Important differences exist between the two versions of the draft, released at different points of time by different central governments. The first one was considerably short and did not cover all the areas of importance to tribal societies; for instance, the forced migration of tribespersons to non-tribal areas, or violence in pockets of tribal concentration. Although, throughout the text, it submitted that its aim was to bring tribes into the mainstream of Indian society, at the end, it titled a section "assimilation", which, in fact, delineated the steps in which integration could be achieved. The approach of assimilation, which argued that tribes should "melt" in the "mainstream", rather than living together but separately in everlasting relations of interdependence with other communities, was debunked a long time back. Neither was assimilation ethically right nor empirically possible. Therefore, when anthropologists saw the draft of the policy mischievously ending with "assimilation", they were unsurprisingly taken aback. Perhaps, the authors of the draft committed a faux pas by using the term assimilation, though they certainly did not think in terms of "dissolving" the tribal identity in that of the outsiders.

2 Definition of Tribe

One of the major issues in tribal studies today, and it is clear from the draft as well, pertains to the "definition" of "tribe" (from

now on, whenever the term draft is used, it refers to its second version). Many of us think that since we are concerned with communities of people classified as scheduled tribes (STs) and there is less ambiguity about this term, although some communities classified so may not deserve the appellation of tribe, not much will be gained by getting bogged down into the ever-polemical and inconclusive issues of the definition. As per this argument, our concern is with the "scheduled tribes", and not with "tribes"; the former category includes about 700 communities, according to the draft, which notwithstanding their inter-cultural differences share the same relation of deprivation with respect to non-tribal people.

The other view is that in India, the continuities between tribes and castes are so much that it often becomes difficult to distinguish (or separate) one from the other. Not only is this the experience of contemporary students of tribal societies, but was also of the census enumerators in the late 19th century. Often, communities were arbitrarily listed as tribes (or castes), and this decision was left to the perception of the local community by the individual enumerator. There have been cases of communities classified as tribes in one state and as castes in another.

Tribes and Castes: Identities

The presence of the continuities between tribes and castes did not imply that there were no differences between them. The differences existed, and there were "real communities" that approximated (and, in some cases, were the ideal types of) the textbook definition of tribe. However, a large number of communities, classified as "tribal", dwelt in close proximity to "caste" communities, having long-standing relations of exchange with them. These relations have obviously contributed towards a myriad of similarities between them, thus bringing castes and tribes closer, leading to a deviation of both the social formations from their ideal definitions. The important point, however, is that albeit these similarities, the tribes have tried to maintain their respective identities, and so do castes. The conclusion from this observation is that it

is not a worthless exercise to think in terms of the social and cultural indices that constitute a tribe in relationship to a caste. The blurring of the social categories does not imply their complete merging. Tribes and castes constituting as two types of the social formation is still a relevant point of departure to understand contemporary India, and therefore the matter of definition should not be skirted.

The draft notes that the criteria the Lokur Committee has evolved for declaring a particular community as a ST are: (i) an ensemble of primitive traits, (ii) distinctive culture, (iii) geographical isolation, (iv) shyness of contact with the outside world, and (v) backwardness. Immediately after delineating them, the draft notices that “even all these broad criteria are not applicable to Scheduled Tribes today” (p 2). On page 21, it says: “The criteria laid down by the Lokur Committee are hardly relevant today. For instance, very few tribes can today be said to possess ‘primitive traits.’”

‘Primitive Traits’

Two questions emerge at this juncture: first, which of the above criteria are relevant today for defining a tribal community, and which of them have become defunct? Second, what is meant by “primitive traits”? Which characteristics of a community deserve to be designated as primitive? For instance, is honour killing or polyandry a primitive trait? Many of the traits that are found in the so-called primitive societies, because of which they are also called primitives, may also be found among the contemporary affluent and patriarchal societies. Ironically, when these characteristics are found among the latter, they are not called primitive. In the context of definition, we need to use concepts that have an operational value, i.e., they are given an empirical content, and with their help, we are able to classify societies as objectively as possible.

The word primitive to be used for certain kinds of societies came into vogue in the latter half of the 19th century during the colonial era. The Victorian scholars were interested in finding out the stages through which human society had passed before it reached its then extant state. It was also thought that the non-western societies (of Africa, Asia, Oceania, Latin America) of that time were the “remains”,

“survivals”, “social fossils”, and “vestiges” of the prehistoric ages, and their intensive study would illuminate the past of the Victorian society. The term primitive was, therefore, used in a temporal sense.

One expected that the decline of evolutionism would also imply that the word primitive would not be used for non-western, simple and preliterate societies. In the era of post-evolutionism, they would not be viewed as remnants of the past, but rather as contemporaries of the western world. The fact that they practised foraging, were preliterate, had a small population and a simple technology, and changed less in comparison to the wider world, was because of their isolation and the homeostatic equation they maintained with their habitats, and not because they were survivals of the past ages. Using the word primitive for our contemporaries is paradoxical, and it justly deserves elimination from our vocabulary for defusing simple, preliterate societies.

Alas! It did not happen. Classical evolutionism was debunked, but certain terms it popularised (such as primitive, savage) continued to be used for simple societies. It is unsurprising then that the Lokur Committee defined a tribe in terms of the primitive traits, without realising that the word primitive is undeservedly used for contemporary communities. Moreover, the draft also notes that: the words – such as primitive, backward, savage – used for describing tribal communities are pejorative. The draft, at one place, notes that the value-loaded and disparaging terms used for defining tribes “need to be replaced with terms that are not derogatory” (p 2). At another place, it notes that since the criteria that the Lokur Committee has put forward have lost their relevance today, there is a need to identify other “accurate criteria” (p 21). One expected that the draft would give some suggestions in this regard, but it leaves it to the future deliberations on this subject. However, in the beginning, it tries to offer a definitional perspective on tribal communities, which deserves a few comments.

3 A Frozen Picture

The draft notes that tribal communities:

are known to dwell in compact areas, follow a community way of life, in harmony with

nature, and have a uniqueness of culture, distinctive customs, traditions and beliefs which are simple, direct and non-acquisitive by nature (p 2).

Anthropological writings, popular articles, and coffee-table books on tribes reinforce certain images in which they wish to project them. These writings and pictures earnestly wish to captivate the readers’ attention, thereby promoting their sale. For serving this interest, it would be better if they succeeded in capturing the “bizarreness” of tribes, showing them as headhunters, tattooed, cannibals, practising some strangest forms of marriage and with their family, cooking, disposing of their dead, wearing more of jewellery than clothes, and living in compact pockets, having least communication with the outside world. These are the images in which non-tribals wish to see their tribal brethren. Therefore, notwithstanding the changes of vast scale and magnitude that the tribal society is experiencing all over the world, the irony is that the writers on the tribes (and their photographers) wish to keep them “frozen”, in the representations of “oddities”, as “romantically different and bewitching” as they could be. Not only that, we have also come across cases where tribal leaders and entrepreneurs try to preserve certain aspects of their traditional culture (calling them “pristine”), for it has a roaring marketable value. Cultures are showcased for the market.

The above quotation from the draft is another example of a frozen picture of tribes. Contrary to this, empirical studies point out that no more are tribal communities in “compact areas”. The “community way of living” has also broken down. Tribal families are moving out of their areas in search of jobs, and sometimes they have to travel thousands of kilometres to reach a suitable location where their never-ending struggle for survival begins. The hold of their respective communities over their lives has weakened, as they are unable to protect the interests of the tribal family and they are not able to provide them a living with dignity. Tribal territories now have residents from various shades of life and strata, who not only make fun of tribal customs and practices, but also take advantage of their

powerlessness and gullibility. For giving way to several development projects, almost 40% of the persons permanently displaced from their native habitats are tribal, who are now dispersed in different parts of the country, painfully searching for opportunities to get two square meals.

The draft notices that tribes are scattered “over all the States/Union Territories, except Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, and the Union Territories of Pondicherry and Chandigarh” (p 2). While these three states and two union territories do not have the native communities scheduled as tribes, a large number of tribespersons from other parts of the country have moved to these metropolises where they work as domestic and shop servants, rickshaw-pullers, loaders and coolies, vendors of newspapers and magazines at traffic signals, and many of them have ended on the breadline, as beggars, destitute, sex-workers, organ-sellers, and even petty deviants and criminals. The harrowing experiences of these people – of underpayment, being ridiculed, scourges of dehumanisation, the constant beatings and abuses they receive from their employers and law-enforcing agencies, the sexual exploitation their women and children undergo – have yet to be ethnographically captured.

The tribal migrants are permanent. No economic and social resources are left in their native places to which they can hopefully return for survival. What reigns there is poverty, but the cities to which they have migrated at least guarantees their basic survival, at least they would not die of hunger. The draft should have thought about these people, whose number in the metropolises is multiplying every year, but no census is available on them. Their native areas are either being sacrificed at the altar of development or have become almost irrevocably impoverished because of ceaseless crop failures and unfavourable ecological factors. In the name of “development for national interests”, the tribes have been the biggest – and the most muted – losers. Today, when the cities, metro- and megapolises, are swelling with the unremitting streams of enduring tribal migrants, it becomes all the more important that the interests of these people are

vouchsafed forever. It would be possible when the tribal world is viewed as perpetually in dynamism rather than a closed, stable, and frozen entity, and special schemes and laws are devised for safeguarding its interests.

4 Understanding Tribal Culture

Tribal culture today cannot be described as unique. Half a century ago, one could still speak a little authoritatively of the culture of a tribal community, in contrast to the culture of their neighbours. The anthropological monographs produced during the first half of the 20th century were a good example of tribal exoticism, where it was clear that a tribal community could be studied without referring to the outside world. The skein of thought running through these studies was of anthropological holism – a tribal society was a “complete society”, and not “part-society with part-culture” as was a peasant society, and therefore, it could be studied in isolation from the wider world with which it hardly had any networks and linkages.

Although this was the typical anthropological practice, I am quite sceptical of the view that when anthropologists explored the tribal world, it was a complete isolate. Even then, it had relations of reciprocity, or of raiding and attack, with other communities in their neighbourhood. An understanding of their relationship, thus, was essential for an understanding of either of them. However, as these communities dwelling the same space were of the same scale and followed by and large a similar economy, the differences between them were not as pronounced as were between them and the fully settled agricultural communities or the townspeople. Changes in the ways of living were surely surfacing because of inter-neighbourly relations. Innovations made in one were being carried to the other, where they were modified, adapted to the local reality. Cultures were always porous, but the changes were so minor, and also minutely visible, that they were almost relegated to the backseat. Against this backdrop emerged the perspective of anthropological holism and structural-functional approach, yielding certain notions about tribes which were far from being true.

Neither are tribal traditions and beliefs “simple” nor are they “direct”, as the draft says. Tribal cosmologies are highly complex, requiring an intensive anthropological study. So much are they embedded in the unconscious mind of their authors that they require a detailed study, uncovering each of its layers one by one till one reached the basic principles of their organisation. It seems to me that those who have characterised tribal beliefs as “simple” have at the back of their minds the evolutionary ideas – the tribal societies are simple and in course of time, become “complex”. They are “juveniles” of the evolving human society; hence, everything they have (technology, material culture, ideology, beliefs and practices) is simple and direct. The stereotypes about which I spoke earlier are further reinforced by the terms and expressions we have used for them.

Value-Loaded Assumptions

One of the greatest services we may render to a proper and realistic understanding of tribal society is by refraining from using value-loaded assumptions, irrespective of whether they are positive or negative, such as the ones the draft notes: tribal way of life is “woven around harmony with and preservation of nature” (p 3); tribespersons have “innate skills” (p 12); they have “innate communitarianism, the ethos of caring for, and sharing with others” (p 13); they have “egalitarianism, concern for the environment” (p 20). What is being submitted here is that various institutions may be built on the basis of these characteristics which are innate to tribespersons; for example, the institution of tribal cooperatives and the credit system may be constructed on the values of community-living, caring for others, and sharing the gains with co-villagers (p 13).

Here, it may be pointed out that these traits generally attributed to the “collective personality” of tribals have also been given to non-tribal, peasant and rural people. How they become the diacritical characteristics of tribespersons is stated nowhere. Do we ascribe these properties in general terms to traditional societies, and since tribals happen to be one of its examples,

that they also have them? In that sense, these characteristics certainly do not become the diagnostic traits of tribal societies.

Moreover, they are not more than a set of assumptions about tribes transmitted with each generation of anthropological writings. We have always thought in terms of dichotomies: what tribals have the non-tribals lack. So, if tribals (as a type of traditional society) have community living, the people on the opposite pole are “individualistic”; if tribals conserve their environment, their polar opposite indulges in wanton destruction; if tribals respect their elders, the non-tribals reject them as “unwanted species”; if tribals have subsistence economy, the non-tribals have market-oriented economy. This mode of dualistic thinking has damaged our understanding, since it has not taken into cognisance the fact that the characteristics attributed to a society falling in proximity to one pole in juxtaposition to the other may in fact be present in the other. Each society is a fair mix of a variety of characteristics, of which some are accentuated at a particular time because of its habitat, available opportunities, interaction with other societies, the role of the externally situated political state, and the ideology of integrating societies or leaving them as they are. If tribes did not have the concept of money at one time, it was because they did not need it, and also they were not a part of the monetised economy, but once they became, they have learnt the principles of its operation and value. Such conceptions widen the gap between “what used to be” and “what is”.

Negative Attributes

Tribes had internal feuds, raids, plundering, institution of slavery and public killing of slaves, body mutilations, repressive laws, harsh punishments, lack of individual freedom, destruction of property, and all those practices that would make one think de novo about the image of tribal folks as “noble savages”. Neither did they lack competitive spirit nor were they egalitarian. Many spatial movements of the sections of tribes owed their genes to internal differences and persisting conflicts between them. By colonising

newer territories, sub-tribes of a tribe became autonomous tribes, with different names, although in cultural terms, they continued to share several similarities with the parent tribe.

My submission is that the contemporary tribal reality is different from what the draft tries to present by taking an easy recourse to the stereotypes that anthropological and popular writings have time and again reinforced. Its suggestion is that for defining the tribal society, “more accurate criteria need to be fixed”, but I think it will be possible when we think anew, transcending the popular discourse and images about tribes. I do not think that contemporary tribes want to see them in the mould in which anthropologists have depicted them from the colonial times. Unfortunately, although anthropologists have tried their best, they have not been able to dissociate the concept of tribe from the lurking of primitivism, which, as a matter of fact, is the focus of attention having great commercial and marketable potentiality. Oddities sell. If being peculiar and bizarre brings money, why should not one be?

5 Stigmatisation

The draft notes the diversity of srs and their increasing number over time. That each tribe has a set of specific needs, requiring a specific programme for its development, is undisputed, but then, there

are certain needs that all tribes have, and therefore, they must be incorporated in every programme for tribal development; for instance, the alleviation of poverty, restoration of cultivable land to them, safeguarding of their rights in forests, protecting them from exploitation and oppression by usurpers of their land, money-lenders, liquor vendors, etc.

However, certain tribes are victims of problems, which perhaps they do not share with other tribes, emerging out of their historically conditioned existence, leading to their stigmatisation, that require very special schemes and change in mindsets of people. We have here in mind the examples of de-notified communities, and nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes. I think that most writers on tribal issues (and so does the draft) forget de-notified communities. Their sufferings and episodes of de-humanisation are heart-rending. Being victims of the “stigma of criminality”, their community suffers as a whole for the prohibited deeds, in case committed, by one of their members, or even when the deed was not committed by any one of them. The so-called “nomadic” and “semi-nomadic” communities suffer from the same stigmas. The erstwhile relations of synergism the nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists had with peasant and farming communities have now become one of hostility

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and antagonism. The agriculturists want to drive them out of their areas the moment they see them. No more are they considered useful depositors of animal manure, but a nuisance to the germinating or standing fields. The result is that each year conflicts – often bloodied – take place between peregrinating pastoralists and peasants, and the intensity of these conflicts is becoming more and more serious with the passage of time.

The draft, under its Section 20 titled “Scheduling and De-scheduling of Tribes”, inserts two points (20.8 and 20.9) on nomadic tribes. The observation that they occupy the “lowest position” in society is not correct. In fact, they are placed at the middle levels of caste hierarchy, and in some parts of India, are quite respected for their occupation as well as demeanor.

For instance, the Rabari of Gujarat are considered to be the “trustworthy confidants” of Rajputs (Srivastava 1997). They have the same image in Rajasthan, although they are not included in the list of sts. While it is true that many of them do not own or possess land rights or house titles, it is not quite right to say that they are “constantly on move” and do not have “any single place or state of domicile”. The usual pattern among them is that they return to their permanent abodes (located in one or the other states of India) after the grazing expedition, just before the onset of monsoon rains, and after the harvest, they restart it, usually after the festival of lights (Diwali). Each of these communities belongs to a village, where it has its dwellings. It may also be noted that among these communities, not every one moves: women, old, infirm, and diseased people, and children continue to live in their permanent habitations. Even when the graziers do not return to their villages with their animals, since they are too large in number to be herded back, and they continue to move around for the entire year in the grazing lands, their relations with their villages remain intact. Herdsmen are periodically replaced; some return to villages for an errand or agricultural work. Furthermore, as conflicts between pastoralists and agricultural communities are intensifying, more and more able-bodied men are being entrusted with

the tasks of managing the migratory herds. Women are being more and more withdrawn from these migratory groups.

When revised, the draft should take up the problems of the de-notified and nomadic and semi-nomadic communities in separate sections, rather than including them under a section, as it has done now, where they do not deserve to be placed. One of its main purposes should be to focus on the interests of the communities which are marginalised among the tribes in general.

6 Primitive Tribal Groups

Section 12 of the draft deals with the primitive tribes or primitive tribal groups (PTGs), a list of 75 sts, created in 1973, which are supposed to be more *backward* than the others. The following criteria have generally been used for their classification, (i) pre-agricultural level; (ii) dwelling isolated and remote habitations; (iii) small number; and (iv) near-constant or declining population; (v) low levels of literacy; and (vi) economic and social backwardness. Regarding the criteria for their identification, the draft notes that they “suffer from lack of specificity”. Should they be redressed, and an attempt made to evolve specific and operational criteria?

With respect to this question, the draft submits that there is no need to undertake this attempt, since presently, there is no proposal to add any more communities to the list of primitive tribes. But, if tomorrow a need to identify some more primitive tribes comes up, then we should have with us the criteria ready for our task. Whether or not the need exists now, the concepts in currency must be properly defined, even when they first came into existence they were not defined properly or the criteria by which they were defined were remote from being specific. One of our expectations from the draft was that it would offer working definitions of the concepts used in understanding tribal communities rather than just admitting that the criteria used so far lacked specificity and operational value.

Prejudices and Nomenclatures

Further, the draft suggests that since the word primitive has “derogatory overtones”, it must be changed. Retaining the

same acronym, PTGs, it suggests that these communities may be called “Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups”, although it also submits, for reasons not given, that this change in name “may be merely cosmetic” (p 15). Does it mean that in spite of this change in name, the same images would continue? Does it mean that nomenclature will not exorcise the prejudices forever? In a one-day seminar that the Indian Anthropological Association had organised on 24 April 2006, B K Roy Burman had proposed that because of the pejorative connotation, the term “primitive tribes” should be changed to “vulnerable tribes”. Reacting to his proposal, my submission was that vulnerability is a relativistic condition. Each community is vulnerable to internal as well as external forces, however its strength to withstand them varies. Moreover, we lack universal criteria to measure the degree of vulnerability.

The main idea behind the list of primitive tribes is that these communities demand special attention from the state because they lag far behind the other sts in the indices of development. They are “more vulnerable to hunger, starvation, malnutrition, and ill health”. One may refer here to the analogical (or, rather euphemistic) distinction that Bhupinder Singh (1990) has made between two types of tribal communities: first, those that demand the “first-aid treatment” (which means little help); and second, those which require “hospitalisation” (i.e., proper intensive care). The primitive tribes, he thinks, fall in the second category. Incidentally, he also proposes that they may be called the “primary tribes”. I think the idea behind the nomenclature is far more important than the name. Unfortunately, when we discard one term, we look for an alternative of an equivalent length – so, the acronym PTGs should remain, although the words may change, as the draft has proposed, or the term primitive tribes is replaced by primary tribes. All terms have limitations. And concepts are not vacuous, which means that each one of them projects a particular image (and also, carries a set of stereotypes). Whether we use the term “particularly vulnerable tribal groups”, or “primary tribes”, or think of any other equivalent, the images behind them remain the same.

In addition, we should also note that the words that replace those which presumably have derogatory overtones in course of time come to acquire their own sets of stereotypes and disparaging notions, and thus become equally laden with derogation. For instance, when the word tribe replaced the earlier words such as primitive or savage, it was thought that the former was value-neutral and free from prejudices; but with the passage of time, it has also acquired its own images, some of them in continuity with those that were associated with the earlier terms.

The same images would surface in the minds of people when they are questioned about the earlier terms used for tribes such as primitive, savage, rude, or non-civilised. And, these images may continue even when we replace the word tribe with words like “simple” and “small” society, or certain local words such as *janjati*, *adivasi*, *jana*, *adimjati*. Some words used in India for tribes – like *vanvasi*, *vanyajati*, *girijan* – are already tainted for they point towards their forest and mountainous existence, and thus all those stereotypes that are concomitant with forest and mountainous living are also associated with tribes. That is why, whichever word replaces tribe will in course of time come to acquire a set of stereotypes and prejudiced images. So, whether we call them primitive tribes or particularly vulnerable tribes will not make much difference, since the images associated with them will scarcely be dismantled. Perhaps, K S Singh’s suggestion (cited in Bêteille 2000: 169) to call tribes (or scheduled tribes) not tribes but by a value-neutral term community (*samudaya*), a term that can also be used for the scheduled castes or any other social category having some kind of a collective living, is worth considering, for this word is free from the load of preconceived images except that of sharing collective sentiments.

My suggestion here is that we should definitely drop the word primitive, since it is a condition, with a temporal meaning, but not replace it by any other term, because of the likelihood of its acquiring the same derogatory images over time. Rather, we may call the existing list of

primitive tribes, or more tribes that may perhaps be added to it tomorrow, simply as one of “tribes requiring urgent attention from the state”. I think this is our basic idea behind the concept and the list of primitive tribes.

7 Tribe Categories

The draft divides the existing primitive tribes into two categories, depending upon their respective degrees of isolation (p 15). This attempt is made to draw attention to their specific needs so that culturally-rooted and holistic programmes may be devised for them. In the first category are included those which are “insulated from the surrounding populations and are placed in isolated ecological environments”. Its examples are the Jarawa, Sentinelese, Shompen, Cholanaicken, etc. The second category includes those tribes (such as the Birhor, Chenchu, Jenu Kuruba) which are “located on the fringes of ‘mainstream’ population and have some contact with them”.

The first category of the PTGs is termed the “heritage group”. No such succinct term has been improvised for the second category. Although captivating, the term heritage group should be avoided, for it points towards their evolutionary status, as if they are remnants of the first kind of humans who inhabited the earth. In biological terms it also implies that they are carriers of the primordial (and uncontaminated) genetic stock. It should not be forgotten that the image the term heritage group generates would inspire both anthropologists and geneticists to invade their areas for researching the evidences of pristine traits.

Moreover, it is utopian to imagine that the so-called heritage groups are insulated from the outside world; they certainly are not an “island unto themselves”. Studies show that communities such as of the Jarawa and Cholanaicken have come in contact with their neighbouring populations, and gradually these contacts are increasing. Often, the Jarawa come out of their forests to the Andaman Trunk Road, demanding tobacco and items of food from the travellers. With respect to the Sentinelese and Shompen, though contacts of the type which have been established with the Jarawa have not yet come

into existence, they definitely know about the external world and have been periodically receiving gifts from visitors to their islands, who happen to be from administrative and research services. Efforts are untiringly being made to bring these hitherto insulated communities out of their cocoons. Against this backdrop, how far would it be justified to regard these communities as *cut off* from the extraneous world?

A Single Approach

As said earlier, the two categories of the PTGs that the draft makes have an implication for their respective development programmes. For the PTGs of the first category, the proposal is for group-oriented approach, which would include the conservation of their habitats, lifestyles, and traditional skills. For the second, it would be a mix of the approaches of group-orientation and area-development. In other words, it would lay emphasis on economic programmes. Undoubtedly, the problems of more isolated communities are different from those relatively less isolated, but this difference is basically a matter of degree. The communities are placed on a continuum – more isolated communities become less isolated over time. Therefore, we need to evolve a single approach that combines the issues of the development of the group with that of the area, rather than separating them as has been done in the draft.

The draft rightly notes that data on the PTGs is inadequate. Asking the respective states to compile data on the PTGs will not be enough. The Anthropological Survey of India should take up the challenge of collecting and analysing intensive data on each of the PTGs. The funding agencies (like Indian Council of Social Science

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Research, University Grants Commission, Indian Council of Medical Research) should give grant for working on these communities, and also promote the publication of unpublished research reports on them that may be lying in libraries and research organisations. In addition, university anthropology departments should give priority to the study of the PTGS. Collectively we would be able to generate data required for formulating plans for the survival and development of these communities.

8 Conclusions

The goals of the tribal policy document are: to improve upon the quality of life of tribal people; to see that the benefits of development reach them and all tribes develop equally, so that there is no hierarchy among them; in spite of these massive changes taking place among them, the tribal culture should remain, so balance is obtained between development and culture; and finally, the part (the tribe) should be integrated to the whole (the mainstream, the total society).

A policy should be holistic; it is a total document, covering all aspects of the lives of people. Irrespective of the social sector to which it concerns, a policy should provide a road map for development and should delineate the guidelines for work. Being a model for action, it is a formal declaration of intent; that is why it must be written down so that it is a constant reminder, and it also sanctions that one does not deviate from the goals collectively agreed upon. Embodying the values of society, although charted out by the government, it is for the other institutions (and their personnel) to implement it. They have to develop sensitivity to tribes and the work to be carried out among them. Unless the policy is translated into action, it will be nothing but a sheet of paper, an academic and literary exercise, and an end in itself.

Defining Operational Terms

The draft begins with, as we noted earlier, a dilemma, which is to strike the right balance between protecting tribal culture, values, and identity, on the one hand, and ensuring their integration to

the mainstream, on the other. But which concept of the mainstream do the authors of the draft have in mind is stated nowhere. It is well known that mainstream is a multi-meaning concept, and its empirical connotation differs from one community to another. Or, does the term mainstream mean the modern institutions, such as the educational system, healthcare system, income-generational practices, secular and democratic systems? Moreover, the areas where the tribes are in majority, or in tribal states, they constitute the mainstream. Mainstream is such a pivotal concept in the entire discourse that its meaning cannot be left to the imagination. Rather, it must be discussed threadbare, so that any misconceptions that people across the country have about it may be laid to rest. The draft should clearly state what is meant by the term mainstream, and if it is difficult to define it in operational terms then it may be dropped, and we should think in terms of the institutions that should be strengthened to help tribal communities, elevating them to the level of the general population. At no step should the tribes feel that certain values and practices are being imposed upon them.

With respect to preserving the tribal culture, a pertinent question is: "Who is interested in preserving the culture?" Here, rather than the outsiders deciding which aspects of their culture should be preserved, and which changed, it is for the community to take decisions pertaining to these questions. People might like to discard some of their practices, though these might have been central to their culture at one time. People also know, and they do not need an outsider to tell them this, that over time some of their customs and ways of behaviour become anachronistic; they need to be weeded out. To assume that people are conservative and wish to cling to their past practices, or are closed to rational thinking, is blatantly wrong. In fact, this assumption has grotesquely contributed to the paternalistic attitude the outsiders (particularly, bureaucrats) have for tribespersons. In the orientalist construction, the *other* is frozen, unmoving, and non-rational. The orientalists (and some anthropologists) have time and again subscribed to this image, for it has quenched

the academic romanticism of the outsiders. The other is enigmatic in this discourse.

The Tribal Voice

But, the reality is not this. Tribes have themselves done a lot for their own improvement – they have led movements for environmental protection, saving their cultural and human rights, throwing the exploiters out of their territories, regaining rights over their lost land and other resources, closing liquor shops in their area, curbing practices of conspicuous consumption, and putting a full stop to all those practices that reduce their respect in the eyes of others. In other words, people are themselves capable of having a critical and introspective look at their cultures, and changing it endogenously. They know that in course of time, some strands of their culture would be lost, once and forever, and they would never regret this loss. This dynamic reality of tribal living is missing in the draft; what it lacks is the "tribal voice"; what one hears is the discourse of the bureaucrats. Throughout the text runs the "we-they" distinction; what *we* (the outsiders) think about what *they* (the tribes) want; and what *we* think tribes should be given. That is why the draft may not give confidence to the tribal people, notwithstanding its good intentions and suggestions.

In order to improve upon it, to make it closer to the tribal heart and mind, one in which the tribes discover themselves, their images, aspirations, and soul, it is imperative that their reactions and responses are sought and incorporated. The tribal issues should be made public; only then the public awareness will increase. We wish to attract private companies to invest for tribal infrastructural development, but it would only be possible if they have a sympathetic understanding of tribal societies. Tribal issues need to be centred and discussed at length.

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