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## IMAGINING THE 'TRIBE' IN COLONIAL AND POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

**ABSTRACT** In the context of the changing nature of India's relationship with her tribal or Adivasi population, this paper seeks to analyze the construction 'tribes' in colonial India and how these came to influence contemporary India's understandings of the category. Arguing that state policies are actuated by myriad ways in which target populations are defined, conceptualized and represented, this paper seeks to trace the contentious categorizations and multiple identities that have been imagined for, thrust upon and assumed by such communities since colonial times. It thus critically explores and engages with a range of ideologies that informed and shaped independent India's tribal policies.

**Key words:** Adivasi, Scheduled Tribes, British colonialism, post-colonial India

## INTRODUCTION

Smacking of evolutionist notions and long discarded in other parts of the decolonized world, the problematic category 'tribe' is still retained and enjoys acceptability in the Indian social and political discourse. Conceived of in colonial times, the notion of 'tribe' as the 'primitive other' indicates a people distinct from 'mainstream' Hindu and Muslim population, and characterized by egalitarianism, a primitive subsistence economy, radicality, autonomy and isolation – in other words, the marginalized and politically excluded 'others' of the modern.<sup>1</sup> While today the term 'tribe' is increasingly replaced by expressions such as: Adivasi, Scheduled Tribe, Indigenous People,<sup>2</sup> the idea of exceptionalism has strengthened and often erases the heterogeneity of their historical experiences – even though recent research highlights the historical linkages and relationships involving these communities with other groups.

The idea of exceptionalism also endorsed the notion that 'tribes' as a distinct – and vulnerable – segment of the Indian population required the state's protection through special legislations. Introduced by the British colonial state, and both challenged and corroborated by opposing interest groups over the years, such legislations were reiterated in the constitutional provisions in post-Independence India. Debates on tribal/Adivasi subjectivity have been resurrected today in the context of the state's development agenda. While state policies are framed on the basis of certain assumptions and understandings of such communities, the state also actively seeks to popularize and push its own characterization of different groups and their relationships with others. These multiple understandings have helped to shape the diverse identities and contentious categorizations that have been thrust upon, as well as assumed by 'tribal' communities since colonial times. Thus today we have a wide range of terminologies and definitions – each with its own cultural baggage – which have determined the nature of state intervention upon tribal life. This article explores and engages with a range of notions and ideologies – from the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial rule till the 1950s – that informed and shaped India's 'tribal' policies. It argues that despite its intention of formulating new policies for ensuring a just and equitable development of 'tribal' communities, the post-colonial Indian state has remained trapped within a conceptual-ideological-political predicament whereby it replicated much of the colonial rhetoric and colonial era representations of such communities.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Banerjee, "Culture/Politics: The Irresolvable Double-Bind of the Indian Adivasi", *The Indian Historical Review*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2006), pp. 99-126.

<sup>2</sup> Often used interchangeably, these terms have very distinct genealogies. See B.G. Karlsson, T.B. Subba (eds.), *Indigeneity in India*, London 2006, pp. 1-9.

## COLONIAL REPRESENTATIONS

There is today a rich scholarly debate on the colonial construction of a 'tribe' in India. Some scholars argue that the identification of sections of the conquered populations as a 'tribe' and caste formed part of the colonial state's 'legitimizing ideology',<sup>3</sup> while others underscore the role of indigenous agency in this respect, stating that together with European notions of race, the colonial discourse on the tribe in India had also been informed by prevailing concepts and values among dominant caste groups within India.<sup>4</sup> The former group of scholars consider such categorizations as a 'conscious colonial project' of creating a racial ethnography that was appropriated and internalized by Indian elites, both to justify an Indian hierarchy as well as to assert parity with the European upper classes.<sup>5</sup> However, historical evidence emphasizes that British colonial attitudes towards the 'tribes' were neither monolithic nor fixed and tended to differ significantly both in space and over time.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the English East India Company's government only had a marginal interest in the 'tribal' world, which figured in official perceptions as the backdrop for counter-insurgency measures. The political disruptions caused by the gradual intrusion of the Company into these interior regions drew British attention to the 'tribal question' which was perceived to be a law and order problem. In many regions, especially on Bengal's western frontier, indigenous rulers sought British assistance in quelling their recalcitrant subjects. Aiming to set up a system of loose control over the region with the help of local collaborators, the British sought to implement a system of 'indirect rule' through subjugated local feudatory chiefs who were recognized as lawful rulers, with the indigenous population, their subjects. At this initial point of contact, the British understanding of the latter was largely influenced by the prevailing notions that existed among the local Hinduized ruling groups, and pivoted around the notion of 'difference'.

These ideas of difference, in fact, also formed an essential component of the Enlightenment project in Europe and hence were readily accepted by British bureaucrats and military officers. As Metcalf points out, to be 'enlightened' the 'other' had to be shown as 'savage' or 'vicious'.<sup>6</sup> Archival evidence bears ample testimony to such portrayals. The Ramgarh Magistrate, for instance, described Hos of Singhbhum as a 'dreadful pest' and as 'the lowest kind of Hindoos' who, in their manners and customs, were 'little removed from savages'.<sup>7</sup> Thus 'tribal' people were distinguished from the 'mainstream'

<sup>3</sup> S.B.C. Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity. Culture and Protest in Jharkhand*, Delhi 1992, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> V. Damodaran, "Colonial Constructions of the 'Tribe' in India: the Case of Chotanagpur", in B. Pati (ed.), *Adivasis in Colonial India. Survival, Resistance and Negotiation*, Delhi 2011, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> S. Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1201-1991*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 2-5.

<sup>6</sup> T.R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, Delhi 1995, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ramgarh Magistrate to Bayly, 30 June 1817, Bengal, *Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, no. 39 of 29 July 1817, West Bengal State Archives.

Hindu and Muslim population by what was depicted as their characteristic wildness. These very attributes, moreover, linked them, in British eyes, to other 'primitive' people, particularly in Africa, with whom they were perceived to have shared similar characteristics.<sup>8</sup>

Over the years, as tribal uprisings continued, British perceptions changed. Enquiries into the origins of the rebellions convinced the government of the distinctiveness of these regions and the vulnerability of the 'tribal' people to powerful adversaries against whom they needed protection. Thus the British claimed the role of 'liberators' of 'tribals' from oppression and the exploitation of indigenous rulers – now projected as the natural enemies of the 'tribal' people – as well as from non-'tribal' outsiders, the *dikus*, i.e. moneylenders, traders and landlords. In many cases, the 'tribal' people were portrayed as having been 'stateless' and totally independent of any form of control by the indigenous political system. A system of direct rule was thus introduced in some of these anomalous 'tribal' zones of administrative exceptionalism in Bengal.<sup>9</sup> These zones were recognized as non-regulation regions, where ordinary regulations pertaining to other parts of British India did not apply. The administration of these districts was placed under an officer, the political agent to the governor general, and the ruler–subject relations hinged upon paternalism and personal rule.

The new government policy, which continued even after the Company's rule was replaced by the Raj, came to be characterized by isolationism, protectionism and improvement.<sup>10</sup> According to Uday Chandra, the imperial project of primitivism, i.e. a 'type of liberal imperial ideology of rule that justified the subjugation of populations and places described as wild, savage or, simply, primitive,' formed the fundamental principle of an 'imperial ideology of rule.'<sup>11</sup> For proponents of primitivism, protection implied not only the defence of the economic rights of the tribal peasant, but of 'imagined... aboriginal ways of life in a modern age' as well. The primitive, 'savage' subjects had to be nurtured, trained and guided to progress and civilization, since, being child-like, they were incapable of pursuing their self-interest. In this scheme of things, it was colonial knowledge which determined what constituted the subject's primitiveness, culture and tradition as well as governance and reform. The colonized subject, therefore, was the subject not only of colonial authority, but also of colonial knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

In course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of 'tribal' particularism was further refined with an increasing emphasis on racial difference. In this we can trace the growing influence of the new discipline of ethnology in Europe which was specifically concerned

<sup>8</sup> T. Shaw, "On the Inhabitants of the Hills Near Rajamahall", *Asiatic Researches*, vol. 4 (1798), p. 93; R.G. Wallace, *Memoirs of India*, London 1824, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests. Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India*, Delhi 1999, pp. 76-120.

<sup>10</sup> S. Das Gupta, *Adivasis and the Raj. Socio-Economic Transition of the Hos, 1820-1932*, Delhi 2011, pp. 114-118.

<sup>11</sup> U. Chandra, "Liberalism and Its Other: The Politics of Primitivism in Colonial and Postcolonial Indian Law", *Law & Society Review*, vol. 47, no. 1 (2013), p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> B. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge. The British in India*, Princeton 1996.

with the study the 'dark-skinned savages' and which explained the contrast with Europe in terms of differential development among races. Linking the tribal present with Europe's past: i.e. arguing that the former were trapped in a primitive stage of development through which Europe had passed a long time ago,<sup>13</sup> mid-19<sup>th</sup> century scholar-administrators like: E.G. Man, W.W. Hunter and E.T. Dalton sought validity in their reconstructions of tribal history and described tribes as the aboriginal autochthones of India. Using Sanskrit texts they portrayed the racial difference between the 'nobler' Aryan races and that of the 'aborigines' who had been reduced to slavery.<sup>14</sup> Dalton similarly contrasted the superiority of the Aryan culture against the primitiveness of the pre-Aryan 'Asuras' who were, according to him, the ancestors of the 'Kolarian tribes', i.e. the Munda, Santal and Bhumij.<sup>15</sup> He also suggested the existence of early Sanskritic categorizations between aborigines who had made certain advances in civilization and hence were to be conciliated and accorded respect, and those who were despised as brutish savages.<sup>16</sup> The Dravidian ancestry of the aboriginal Indian population was first outlined by the missionary Robert Caldwell who claimed that the Dravidian people predated the Aryan invasion of India, having originally entered the subcontinent from the northwest.<sup>17</sup> Tracing the origin of the Gond languages in the north east of India Bishop Hislop spoke of two waves of pre-Aryan migrations into India, both from the north-east and the north-west.<sup>18</sup>

The issue of racial particularism appeared to receive scientific legitimation after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 which irrevocably tied together human evolution with notions of race. This altered perception is reflected in the works of H.H. Risley who carried out the first large-scale ethnographic survey in Bengal. Published in two volumes as the *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891), the project had a two-fold objective: to draw the attention of European ethnologists to the 'barbarous or semi-barbarous customs' that still survived in India and to gather knowledge of indigenous societies in order to facilitate administration and legislation. Armed with rigorous anthropological training and tools, Risley sought to apply the methods of contemporary European anthropology, particularly anthropometric measurements, in the classification of the 'races' of Bengal. Tribes were now seen as a different and inferior race, a conclusion which could be 'proven' scientifically.

Gradually, the rigid compartmentalization of identities occurred with the introduction of the Census with the intention to 'know', 'classify' and 'count' the Indian

<sup>13</sup> T.R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj...*, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> W.W. Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal*, London 1868, p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> E.T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta 1973, p. 123. For a discussion of how Sanskrit texts portrayed adivasis, see R. Thapar, "The Image of the Barbarian in Early India", in idem, *Ancient Indian Social History. Some Interpretations*, Delhi 1987.

<sup>16</sup> E.T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal...*, p. 122.

<sup>17</sup> R. Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages*, London 1856.

<sup>18</sup> For details see, G. Smith, *Stephen Hislop: Pioneer Missionary and Naturalist in Central India from 1844 to 1863*, London 1888.

population.<sup>19</sup> The Census operations served to validate the official classifications of 'tribes' and 'castes' and to harden the boundaries between different social categories on a country-wide scale. The Census of 1872 specified categories such as 'Aboriginal Tribes' and 'Semi-Hinduised Aboriginals', to distinguish between communities which evinced no signs of Hindu influence and 'pure' groups, which did. With the Census data in hand, the British government also arrogated the right to determine and define who were the 'true' aboriginal 'classes'.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the experience of three Census operations, the colonial government put forth an 'official definition' of 'tribe'. In the words of H.H. Risley: *A tribe as we find in India is a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which as a rule does not denote any specific occupation; generally claiming common descent from a mythical or historical ancestor and occasionally from an animal, but in some parts of the country held together by the obligations of the blood-feud than by the tradition of kinship; usually speaking the same language, and occupying, professing, or claiming to occupy a definite tract of country. A tribe is not necessarily endogamous.*<sup>20</sup>

This definition was formulated at a time when the general map of India's racial composition had already been outlined. The Census of 1881 proposed the theory that the population of India developed from two hostile, conflicting races, the Aryan and the non-Aryan and therefore lacked any kind of cohesive nationality. While this largely pertained to central and southern India, the northeast was shown to have had a somewhat different trajectory, where indigenous communities represented a third category which descended from the 'great wave of Mongoloid immigration southward'.<sup>21</sup> It was stated that since the Indo-Aryans did not penetrate these areas till long after their own original traditions had been lost, the northeast constituted a discrete space, requiring separate legislation.

These perceptions were reflected in administrative innovation. Several regulations were framed for the administration of 'tribal' areas, which asserted that 'tribals' were a segmentary polity and could not be assimilated into the mainstream Indian society. The Scheduled Districts Act of 1874, for instance, was based on the principle that normal laws should not automatically apply to 'tribal' areas. This act came to inform the notion of 'Backward Areas' in the Government of India Act of 1919, which further complicated the earlier concept of 'non regulation areas'. As Amit Prakash has shown, Backward Areas involved two types of spaces: first, those which were so backward as to be excluded from the scope of the constitutional reforms and where responsibility of administration lay with the governors and not on elected governments, and secondly, those with representation through nomination.<sup>22</sup> The policy of segregating different

<sup>19</sup> A. Appadurai, "Number in Colonial Imagination", in C.A. Breckenridge, P. van der Veer (eds.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament. Perspectives on South Asia*, Philadelphia 1993, p. 318.

<sup>20</sup> H.H. Risley, E.A. Gait, *Report on the Census of India, 1901*, vol. 1, part 1, Calcutta 1903, p. 514.

<sup>21</sup> J.A. Baines, *General Report on the Census of India, 1891*, London 1893, p. 140.

<sup>22</sup> A. Prakash, *Jharkhand. Politics of Development and Identity*, Delhi 2001, p. 49. As Prakash shown, under this system it was found in 1830 that the whole of the Assam Backward Area was represented by one nominated member, a Welsh missionary, in the provincial legislature. See p. 83, fn13.

communities was continued through the Government of India Act of 1935 which provided for 'Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas' for the administration of 'tribal' regions. T.G. Rutherford, the last British Governor of Bihar, asserted that protective legislation in 'tribal' areas could only function effectively in the hands of sympathetic, paternalist officers with the aid of missionaries.<sup>23</sup>

## THE QUESTION OF HINDUISM

The priority to religious identities given by the Census in identifying social categories had the outcome of creating 'a concept of religious community more detailed and more exact than any existing prior to the creation of the census.'<sup>24</sup> The period between the 1920s-1940s was fraught with complex contesting debates revolving around the question of Hinduization and the place of various communities in the Indian body politic, the political context of this ideological turmoil being provided by the Communal Award of 1932 and the steady evolution of the Two-Nation theory broached by the Muslim League.

While the Census officers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century raised the question of who is a Hindu, no satisfactory answer was provided then. In his report on the Census of 1881, the Census Commissioner of Bengal, J.A. Bourdillon stated that: *No answer in fact exists for the term in its modern acceptance denotes neither a creed nor a race, neither a church nor a people, but is a general expression devoid of precision, and embracing alike the most punctilious disciple of pure Vedanta, the Agnostic youth who is the product of Western education, and the semi barbarous hillman ... [who] is ignorant of the Hindu theology as the stone which he worships in times of danger or sickness.*<sup>25</sup>

This inclusion of the 'semi barbarous hillman' within the category Hindu was reinforced by nationalists and Hindu zealots who wished to widen the base of Hindu identity by including groups which had hitherto not found any space within it. In his pamphlet entitled *Hindutva* published in 1923, Savarkar talked about the original unity that underlay the cultural diversity of Hindus, a community divided into many castes and sects, but irretrievably tied together by invisible bonds of blood. For Savarkar, all 'tribes' and caste groups clamouring for special status and recognition of their identities— all 'Santals, Kols, Bhils, Panchamas, Namasudras' — were Hindus.<sup>26</sup>

Since the late 1930s, the debate on the status of 'tribes' sharpened with the political assertion of 'tribal' communities and the emergence of independent 'tribal' organizations particularly in Chotanagpur in western Bengal. In fact, it was here that the term

<sup>23</sup> K.S. Singh, *Tribal Society in India: An Anthro-Historical Perspective*, Delhi 1985, p. 248

<sup>24</sup> K. Jones, "The Negative Component of Hindu Consciousness", in G. Oddie (ed.), *Religious Traditions in South Asia. Interaction and Change*, Richmond Surrey 1998, p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> J.A. Bourdillon, *Report on the Census of Bengal. Statistics*, vol. 1: 1881, Calcutta 1883, para. 178.

<sup>26</sup> C. Jaffrelot, "The Idea of Hindu Race in the Writings of the Hindu Ideologues in the 1920s and 1930s: A Concept Between Two Cultures", in P. Robb (ed.), *Concept of Race in South Asia*, New Delhi 1995, p. 341.

Adivasi, meaning original inhabitant, first made its appearance in 1938.<sup>27</sup> In the following years, the notion of the Adivasi as a collective identity for people with a long history of oppression and displacement, yet connected to India's national history, acquired well-defined contours as is evidenced by the leader of the Jharkhand movement, Jaipal Singh's speech in the Constituent Assembly in December 1946: *As a jungli, as an Adibasi I am not expected to understand the legal intricacies of the Resolution. But my common sense tells me that every one of us should march in that road to freedom and fight together. Sir, if there is any group of Indian people that has been shabbily treated it is my people. They have been disgracefully treated, neglected for the last 6,000 years. The history of the Indus Valley civilization, a child of which I am, shows quite clearly that it is the newcomers — most of you here are intruders as far as I am concerned — it is the newcomers who have driven away my people from the Indus Valley to the jungle fastness. The whole history of my people is one of continuous exploitation and dispossession by the non-aboriginals of India punctuated by rebellions and disorder...*<sup>28</sup>

Here we have a freely reconstructed 'history' legitimizing political ends, and above all, a new and extended understanding of Adivasi – a people who could trace their ancestry to the most ancient, pre-Aryan period of Indian history, therefore constituting the original, indigenous population. At the same, this definition claims an experience of victimization and displacement 'for the last 6,000 years', resulting in the transformation of the ancient civilizers into jungle dwellers. That Adivasis of India were descendants of the non-Aryan autochthones was a commonly accepted fact in Indian intellectual and political life of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the colonial writings on the subject since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>29</sup> For instance, S.C. Roy, widely regarded as the first Indian ethnographer, represented 'aborigines' as the 'descendants of the untouchable *dasas* and *dasyus*, the *nishadas* and barbaras of ancient Hindu India'<sup>30</sup> while the anthropologist Biraja Sankar Guha identified tribals as the proto-austroloid people of India whose ancestry was traced to the Indus (i.e. Harappa) civilization.<sup>31</sup> Jaipal Singh does not mention the British colonizers as part of the long chain of oppressors; instead, he continues and builds upon the colonial trope of the non-tribal outsider as the chief enemy of the Adivasis. Their distance with the mainstream community, or in other words, Adivasi exceptionalism is clearly indicated. Above all, the Adivasi here is a homogenous identity, all heterogeneities having been erased in this self-definition.

<sup>27</sup> D. Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi. Adivasi Assertion in Western India*, Delhi 1987, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Constituent Assembly Debates, cited in R. Guha, "Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, no. 32 (2007), p. 3305.

<sup>29</sup> For details, see S. Das Gupta, "History or Tradition? Exploring Adivasi Pasts in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Jharkhand", *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, vol. 91, supplemento 2 (2018).

<sup>30</sup> Idem, *Adivasis and the Raj...*, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> B.S. Guha, *The Racial Affinities of the People of India* (=Census of India 1931, vol. 1, part 3), Delhi 1935.



## DEBATING ASSIMILATION AND ISOLATION

Meanwhile, during the 1940s, in the backdrop to the Constituent Assembly deliberations, the debate on the identity and status of aborigines had spread over from the political arena to Christian missionary circles. While certain previous assumptions were upheld, as for instance the concept of the racial difference of aborigines / Adivasis / 'tribes' from the rest of the Indian population, with the approach of India's independence the terms of the discourse veered towards the issues of their assimilation and integration. The idea of assimilation was propagated by all ranks of nationalist writers, from those espousing the Hindu cause to the Gandhians. Indian sociologists like G.S. Ghurye critiqued the distinction between caste and 'tribe' and regarded 'tribals', whom he termed 'Backward Hindus', as part of mainstream Hindu culture who needed to be totally assimilated.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, A.V. Thakkar (or Thakkar Bapa as he was popularly known), the Gandhian social worker, credited with having coined the term *adivasi*, was an ardent advocate of assimilation. He advocated passionately that aborigines should share privileges and duties on equal terms share with 'civilized communities' of the country. Isolation, he argued, would strike at the root of national solidarity.

Missionaries like Verrier Elwin and British scholar-administrators like W.G. Archer and J.F. Hutton, on the other hand, upheld the isolationist and protectionist approach. Elwin considered colonial rule and Hindu landlords equally responsible for uprooting 'tribals' from their indigenous production system and placing them within the peasant production network. The conditions of the 'tribals', according to Elwin, were worse where they lived in a Hindu majority area. Elwin insisted on a program of development through protective measures, an approach that came to be known as the 'national park' approach.<sup>33</sup>

These debates continued in the Constituent Assembly in the context of devising appropriate statutes and policies of the overall development of independent India. The Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, Minorities and Tribal and Excluded Areas of the Constituent Assembly argued against the policy of having Excluded/Partially Excluded Areas stating that it had very little practical value in terms of development, and adding that 'if the hill tribes are [to be] brought up to the level of the rest of the population the strongest measures are now necessary'.<sup>34</sup>

Thus the assumptions of the Constituent Assembly did not differ much from colonial assumptions regarding the backwardness of 'tribal' people. The state's role in 'civilizing the savage' came up repeatedly in the speeches of the members. Voicing his opposition to the tribal scheduled areas, H.V. Kamath reiterated, 'I am sure that all of us

<sup>32</sup> G.S. Ghurye, *The Aborigines - 'So Called' and Their Future* (=Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics Publication, no. 11), Poona 1943.

<sup>33</sup> V. Elwin, *The Loss of Nerve. A Comparative Study of the Result of the Contact of Peoples in the Aboriginal Areas of Bastar State and the Central Provinces of India*, Bombay 1941.

<sup>34</sup> *Interim Report of the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas (Other than Assam) Sub-Committee*, Delhi 1947, p. 5.

visualize the day when they will be brought up to the level of the adjoining neighboring provinces and will be integrated with the Provinces and States that lie contiguous to them.<sup>35</sup> As can be seen, the dominant discourse also echoed the colonial state's vision of a paternalist state promoting and directing 'tribal' welfare and uplift.

While accepting the fact of Adivasi backwardness, their representative Jaipal Singh did not see this as an intrinsic attribute of being 'tribal', but as the outcome of centuries of exploitation by outsiders, which he argued, necessitated special treatment for Adivasis in the Constitution. According to Amit Prakash, Jaipal Singh's demand for reservations for 'tribals' despite his commitment to the unity of India, with its implication that 'tribal identity was part of the Indian identity, yet separate from it', in fact constituted an early sign of 'subnational identity'.<sup>36</sup> Another strand of the incipient Adivasi discourse, represented by Yudhisthir Mishra, sought to differentiate between the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, arguing that the latter were worse off and would need more time than the Scheduled Castes to 'play on a level field with other communities'.<sup>37</sup> The dominant discourse of the Constituent Assembly debates spoke of assimilation of 'tribals' within the Indian polity, discarding the 'salad bowl' approach which permitted Adivasis to retain their autonomy. Nonetheless, there was consensus across the political spectrum on the need for reservation for Scheduled Tribes and Castes.

It was this program which came to be incorporated in the Indian Constitution. Embodying the Fabian concept of the State as 'redeemer/provider', the Directive Principles of State Policy provided for active state support for economic and social groups which suffered from exploitation and discrimination. The Constitution specified the categories of people who were to be defined as 'Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe' (Articles 341, 342). Enlisting the rights and privileges of the 'tribal' communities, the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution provided for protection for 'Scheduled Tribes' in the 'partially excluded areas' of central India and autonomy to the 'excluded areas' of the north-east respectively. The resulting framework was characterized by a three-pronged strategy to improve the situation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, consisting of protective arrangements (i.e., measures to enforce equality, to provide punitive measures for transgressions, to eliminate established practices that perpetuate inequities, etc.), affirmative action (which provides positive preferential treatment in allotment of jobs and access to higher education as a means to accelerate the assimilation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes with mainstream society), and economic development. It was hoped that such a strategy would help to bridge the wide gap in social and economic conditions between the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes and other communities.

The Constitution, however, did not specify what it meant to be a 'Scheduled Tribe', what were the specific attributes which would render people eligible for such

<sup>35</sup> *Constituent Assembly Debates: Official Report*, 9 (part 1), New Delhi 1949.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72. For an analysis of Jaipal Singh's speeches in the Constituent Assembly, see A. Prakash, *Jharkhand...*, pp. 74-79.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

protection. Instead, there was an unstated acceptance of the provisions of previous colonial legislation in this regard, notably the Government of India Act of 1935. Along with those 'schedules', and indeed with the term 'tribe' itself, the underlying notions were also implicitly derived, accepted and firmly established.

## CONTINUATION OF THE DEBATE IN THE EARLY YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

A third component, the idea of integration, was added to the debate on assimilation versus isolation in the decade of the 1950s. One of the chief proponents of the latter was Jawaharlal Nehru, who critiqued both the assimilationist and the isolationist approaches. In 1955, after the Constitution was adopted, Nehru enunciated his belief against forced assimilation in the following words: *I find that so far we have approached the tribal people in one of two ways. One might be called the anthropological approach in which we treat them as museum pieces to be observed and written about. To treat them as specimens of anthropological examination and analysis ... is to insult them ... The other approach is one of ignoring the fact that they are something different requiring special treatment and of attempting forcibly to absorb them into the normal pattern of social life. The way of forcible assimilation or assimilation through the operation of normal factors would be equally wrong.*<sup>38</sup>

As the first Prime Minister of the newly-independent country, the task of integration and consolidation had his first priority. Together with political and economic integration, Nehru also laid emphasis on psychological integration: tribal people had to feel that they were, above all, Indians. In a speech delivered at the opening session of the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Areas Conference held in New Delhi in 1952, he had stated: *After the achievement of independence, the basic problem of India, taken as a whole, is one of integration and consolidation. Political integration is now complete, but that is not enough ... we must approach the tribal people with affection and friendliness and come to them as a liberating force. We must let them feel that we have come to give and not to take something away from them. That is the kind of psychological integration that India needs.*<sup>39</sup>

Nehru's proposal was formulated through the so-called 'Panchsheel' or five fundamental principles of 'tribal' development, conceived together with Verrier Elwin. Published in the tract entitled *A Philosophy for NEFA*, it outlined a methodology for the 'psychological integration' of the 'tribal' people whereby they would 'progress in their own way', with no imposition or compulsions from the outside, with measures for progress being 'worked out by the tribals themselves'. 'Tribal' rights in land and forests were to be respected along with traditional arts, culture and social institutions. The 'tribal' people were to be trained in modern administration and outside help and influx of

<sup>38</sup> J. Nehru, "The Tribal Folk", in *The Adivasis*, Delhi 1955, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

outsiders into 'tribal territory' was to be kept at a minimum. The emphasis was to be on evolving a high 'quality of human character'.<sup>40</sup> The Panchsheel was thus the means to integrate the hill tracts of Assam which were home to over a hundred 'tribal' groups which had only a very restricted contact with the rest of the country. As Nehru once pointed out, *they never experienced a sense of being in a country called India and they were hardly influenced by the struggle for freedom or other movements in India. Their chief experience of outsiders was that of British officers and Christian missionaries who generally tried to make them anti Indian.*<sup>41</sup>

Nehru thus attempted to reconcile the two apparently contradictory principles of protection of the 'tribal' population and their particularities, and their integration in the national society. In his liberalism, Nehru reflected much of the colonial tendencies. Even in the measures proposed for NEFA, we find Nehru lumping together a vast mass of people with different customs and histories as a homogenous unit to be uplifted through the efforts of a wise and paternalistic state government. Moreover, the degree of self-government and autonomy he proposed, was restricted to the Sixth Schedule areas of Assam. Fearing that such provisions might ignite separatist movements in that area or elsewhere, Nehru made it amply clear that they did not in any way entail secession from India or independence in any region. This autonomy was not extended to central India and movements for Adivasi autonomy, for instance, the Jharkhand movement, were labelled as secessionist.

While Nehru recognized the autonomous identity of 'tribes,' simultaneous attempts at assimilation through claiming Adivasis as Hindus continued throughout the 1950s. In doing so, new identities, not of Adivasis with claims of indigeneity and rootedness, but of Vanvasis (or forest dwellers) and Girivasis (hill dwellers) were sought to be created, categories which would lend themselves more easily to a Hindu identity. In 1951, Balasaheb Deshpande founded the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, described in its website today as 'a mission of national renaissance'. This was organized under the auspices of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) to counter Christian missionary activities and conversions in these areas. Deshpande argued that it was conversion to Christianity that had alienated 'tribals' from their cultural and national moorings, and that even after Independence missionary activities continued under the protection of Nehru. Although the RSS critiqued Nehru's relationship with Christian missionaries, it is interesting that at a certain level both Nehru and the RSS shared a quite similar outlook regarding the influence of Christian missionaries in fostering 'anti national' sentiments.

The Kalyan Ashram aimed to bring within its umbrella Adivasis from both central India and the north-east, and thereby erase 'tribal' exceptionalism. To do so it utilized Indian mythology, and thereby sought to impose a uniformity over a diverse population marked by regional specificities and differences: *Hanuman, Vali, Sugreev, Shabri, Kevat were Janjati heroes of Ramayan. Nal, Neel, Jambavat are the engineers who built Ram Setu, some 17,50,000 years ago. Rukmini, wife of Lord Krishna belongs to Idu*

<sup>40</sup> Idem, "Foreword", in V. Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA*, Shillong 1959.

<sup>41</sup> Idem, *Letters to Chief Ministers*, vol. 3: 1952-1954, Delhi 1987, p. 150.

*Mishmi tribe of Arunchal Pradesh. Ulupi and Pramila are Janjati girls married to Arjun, the great warrior of Mahabharata. Bheels fought for Rana Pratap and Mawale were the cheiftains (sic) of Shivaji's army.*<sup>42</sup>

In common with earlier trends, the Kalyan Ashram professed a civilizing mission to Vanvasis 'at par with the rest of the society'. Again, in a language very similar to that of Nehru's, they declared their intention to engage in their objective giving them 'due respect to their way of life, religion and culture, rites and rituals.' The mission was to be achieved through education, healthcare schemes and cultural activities – a thinly disguised form of Hinduizing propaganda to erase the impact of 'foreign culture and tradition'.

## CONCLUSION

The lofty ideals enunciated by Nehru of 'tribal' integration largely remained confined to paper. As subsequent fact-finding committees revealed, policy statements were not matched by commensurate action at the ground level. As early as 1960 the Verrier Elwin Committee reported that the scheme of Special Tribal Blocks primarily benefited non-'tribals'. By the 1960s, 'tribal' development was already stated as a 'problem' as can be seen in the report of the Dhebar Commission of 1961 which reiterated the need to fully integrate Adivasis with the mainstream. A major problem remained in the fact that the Constitution had not provided a precise working definition or clearly-defined principles governing the classification of 'Scheduled Tribe'. Hence the term came to signify different connotations to different people. This was pointed out in 1966 by the Shilu Ao Committee. The formulations proposed for Scheduled Tribes also involved the imposition of a uniform pattern of development irrespective of the stage of development of the people and the special conditions of the region. Despite the newly-independent state's endeavour to create an Indian citizenry and erase differences between disparate people, the end result was the attempted appropriation of the subjectivity of the tribal citizens –which would soon be contested through uprisings and constitutional means in various parts of the country. In this, the post-Independence scheme remained a derivative discourse as well.

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<sup>42</sup> <<https://web.archive.org/web/20131030140806/http://kalyanashram.in>>, 16 October 2017. Also see, S.N. Saxena, *Wide Wings of Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram*, Delhi 2004.

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