

We Are All Tribals

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The most civilized nations of modern Europe issued from the woods of Germany; and in the rude institutions of those Barbarians we may still distinguish the original principles of our present laws and manners.

—Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

The Times of India (16.02.2010) reported : 'Drawing flak from its policy on Maoists, the Centre told the Supreme Court that despite its sincere efforts to solve the problems confronting tribals, the rebels are not shunning violence. But the government does not really know who the tribesmen are and how many are they. To it, 'a tribe is an administrative and political concept in India.'¹

The census counts only the so-called *scheduled* tribes; it skips the non-scheduled ones. Officially, scheduled tribes comprise 8 percent of India's population. The *non-scheduled* tribal population, I have estimated, is of equal number.² Together, the two groups add up to 16 percent of our demography.

Furthermore, we have as many as 400 tribes of nomads or semi-nomads, with a population of 150 million, i.e. another 8 percent of our populace. These people are bereft of rights to land, housing, and even citizenship; they have no facility for education, healthcare, or job.³

THE GENESIS

The term "tribe" and the academic curriculum of anthropology emerged under imperial impetus in the 19th century as the colonialists engaged in commerce and sometimes in warfare with the natives. They assumed that tribal peoples had no history, except the one following the imposition of rule by modern outsiders, which resulted in 'cultural contact' and therefore some dynamics into the static life.

The ethnographer then tried to reconstruct the customs, by subtraction, as they existed before the recent cultural imports. And these customs were then declared to have existed from time immemorial up to the imposition of colonial rule. The proximate orientation of the ethno-graphy was to serve the empire.

Bui wasn't it the forest-barbarians of Germany, sea-pirates of Scandinavia, desert-tribes of Arabia, steppe-nomads of Inner Asia (the arc running from Manchuria through Mongolia and Turkestan to Tibet) among others, who had laid the foundation of modern civilization, well before the European empires came into existence? If yes, they did, then why are the tribes in India in a measurable condition?

The ancient tribes of Germany were wretchedly destitute. Bereft of cities, letters, arts, or money, they found some compensation in the enjoyment of *liberty*. The form of their government was a democracy, tempered and controlled, not so much by general or positive laws as by the occasional ascendant of birth or valour, of eloquence or superstition. These barbarians acknowledged not any supreme chief, but chose magistrates in general assembly with equal regard to birth as well as to merit. They respected only those duties which they imposed on themselves.

The religious system was dictated by their wants, their fears, and their ignorance. Some tribes professed the doctrine of transmigration of souls, others imagined a paradise of immortal drunkenness. All agreed that a life spent in arms and a glorious death in battle were the best preparations for a happy future, either in this or in another world. Their climate, their want of learning, of arts, and of laws, their notion of honour, of gallantry, and of religion, their sense of freedom, and thirst for enterprise, all contributed to form a people of military heroes.

Nurtured in the harsh winds of barren steppe, Genghis Khan founded the Mongol Empire in 1206. His army subjugated more lands and peoples in 25 years than the Romans did in four hundred. In nearly every country the Mongols conquered, they brought an unprecedented rise in cultural communication, expanded trade, and a blossoming of civilization. Vastly more progressive than his European and Asian counterparts, Genghis Khan abolished torture, granted universal religious freedom, and smashed feudal systems of aristocratic privilege. Grown up in a world of excessive tribal violence in Mongolia, he left behind the epic story of how the modern civilization was made.

Genghis Khan's grandson, Kublai Khan introduced a paper currency intended for use everywhere and attempted to create primary schools for universal basic education of all children in order to make them literate.⁴

Long, long ago, from the foothills of Caucasus, five Aryan pastoral tribes ('*pancha janah*' in the *Jataka*) migrated to India. Their greatest historical achievement was the demolition of barriers between numerous primitive, conservative, peasant communities, each of which had separately preserved its archaic tools and beliefs. Thereby they introduced new relations of production on a large scale. The barriers so torn could not be effectively re-erected because the Aryans left a priceless means of interaction, namely, a simpler language distributed over a vast region.

Arabs, 2000 years later, showed a parallel action—including the linguistic change—upon a different social level.

Organised, armed tribal warriors displayed their valor in the Ram-Ravana war narrated in the epic *Ramayana*. What happened to those battle heroes?

HERMITS AND 'HEREDITARY CRIMINALS'

India is nostalgic about the aeon age ago when Sanskrit *slokas* emanated from the hermitages of sages, in remote forests. For at least five hundred years, before committed to print, the ten thousand verses of the *Rig Veda* were learned by heart and handed down by word of mouth in those seclusions.

Today, 'forest-dwellers' are called 'tribals'. In 1871 the British Government declared the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) with the authority to notify certain tribes 'hereditary criminals'. Nomenclatures might have changed in the mean time : but our mentality does not seem to have altered.

A brief history of the lowly strata of society, viz. scheduled castes, and of outcasts off the society, i.e. tribals, is as follows. Peace and trade during the Gupta period (AD 300-500) had stimulated village settlements by private enterprise; rural economy thrived. Meanwhile, the urban nouveau riche, so fond

of Mediterranean coral, exotic wines and slaves for household service, concubines and entertainment, the art and craftsmanship of Roman-Greek world, exhausted the country's foreign exchange reserves. A critical shortage of coin-money for domestic business followed. To solve the currency problem the crown took an ingenious step of assigning caste-balanced artisans to every village such that barter exchange within the village would do. Each village was allowed its precisely required number of blacksmiths, carpenters, potters, and other artisans, not exceeding 12 in total. Each artisan was entitled to a certain portion of harvest from the peasants. Every village thus became self-sufficient, cash-free, and disconnected from other villages and the rest of the world. As a result, the caste system was sealed firmly across the villages. The economy became stagnant under the rigid caste structure, incapable of absorbing additional hands. Unemployment mounted. Caste-groups prevented the mastery of finer technique. Very few could, because of caste, skin cattle, tan the hides, or work in leather, all low occupations. Some tribesmen might become basket-makers, without learning how to weave cloth or spin yarn. On the other hand, given the social stricture, not every village could support a whole guild of blacksmiths, leather-workers, or bark-weavers. The jobless unfortunates headed towards wilderness for ever and turned into "tribals" ever since.

The discriminatory factor between primitive tribals and modern civilized people is that the former are 'without writing'. Anthropological research has confirmed that notwithstanding the cultural differences among the several parts of mankind, the human mind is everywhere one and the same and that it has the same capacity.

One might say the thought of tribals 'was entirely, or is, determined by the basic needs of life' by the bare necessities of living. Or, the core difference between primitive thought and modern thought is that the first is entirely informed by emotion and mystic representations.

Another aspect is: People, who do not use writing, use more of their *sensory* perceptions and have developed certain mental capacities of observation that we have lost. They aim to reach by shortest possible means a general understanding of the universe, a *total* understanding. The merchant navigators of Mohenjodaro-Harappa sailed to Mesopotamia through Bahrein for trade. A tribe was evidently able to see the planet Venus in full daylight. With the potential they had, they could have advanced the quality of their mind, but it would not be needed for the kind of life and relationship to nature they had.⁵

UNIVERSAL CIVILIZATION

'The entire course of Indian history shows tribal elements being fused into a general society.'⁶ We are all tribals—of this vintage or that. Mankind has given itself the universal civilization; we are not to be constrained by mere *aranyer adhikar*, the rights to forest land. We, the tribals of today or of yesterday, now demand full access to the world of universal knowledge. In the words of Rabindranath Tagore:

Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that all the great glories of man are mine.

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