

# The Status of Tribal Children in India: A historical perspective

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# Foreword

Children below the age of 18 years account for nearly 40 per cent of India's population. It goes without saying that enabling all children to realize their full creative potential is critical for sustaining India's economic growth and accelerating human development. Not all children have benefited equitably from the remarkable progress and transformation that the country has witnessed in recent years. Tens of millions still face basic challenges of survival and healthy development.

Children are first and foremost individuals, born with indivisible and inalienable human rights. They also belong to families and communities that need to have access to resources and services, as well as capacities to ensure realization of their rights. Policy approaches are needed that address both the income and non-income dimensions of children's deprivations. Continued neglect of material, human and psycho-social dimensions of child well-being can prevent children from living a full life and from making informed decisions later on in their life. India too would miss out on the dividends that can accrue from a full expansion of children's capabilities.

The Institute for Human Development (IHD) and UNICEF are partnering to offer a platform for examining different dimensions of child rights. Experts and commentators were invited to explore the impact of development policies on children and women and suggest alternative approaches to the elimination of children's deprivations. They have explored how best to ensure that all children benefit from equal and non-discriminatory access to basic social services. They have looked at ways of capitalizing on the demographic dividend, creating fiscal policy space for investing in children and strengthening the legislative and institutional framework for protecting children.

These contributions are being brought out as IHD - UNICEF Working Paper Series *Children of India: Rights and Opportunities*. We hope that the series will contribute to enriching public discourse and strengthening public action to promote the rights of children.

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# The Status of Tribal Children in India: A historical perspective

Virginus Xaxa\*

## Summary

Tribals are one of the most exploited and deprived sections of the population in the Indian society. In all indicators of development, they remain the most excluded despite the fact that various kinds of policies and programmes have been pursued for their upliftment in the post-Independence India. Needless to say that exclusion from fruits of development has adversely affected the quality of life of the tribal people. Tribal children are no exception. In this paper, an attempt has been made to identify and understand the multidimensional problems of the tribal children in India. In order to do that, the paper situates the problems in a historical perspective and the context of the larger question of the political economy of development. In doing so, the aspects of social and cultural practices and patterns of socialisation at work have not altogether been left out. The key argument the paper makes is that efforts made to improve the life of the tribals through various development programmes has been of no substantive consequences as they have been simultaneously tied up with another process of development that have invariably worked on appropriation of tribal land and forest - the life support system of the tribal population. As a conclusion, the paper explores some possible ways in which the problems of tribal children can be addressed.

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# The Status of Tribal Children in India: A historical perspective

## 1. Introduction

Indian society is marked by inequality, discrimination, exploitation, domination and deprivation. What is even more striking is the fact that such thwarting societal features are mostly based on the lines of caste, tribe, religion, language, region, etc. There is hardly any segment or dimension of life that are not characterised by one or more of such features. Even children have been unable to escape the all-pervasive effects of such features. Tribals are one of the most exploited and deprived sections of the Indian society. All development indicators show them to be the most excluded from mainstream Indian society despite the fact that various kinds of policies and programmes have been pursued and executed for their social and economic upliftment in post-Independence India. Needless to say that exclusion from the fruits of development has adversely affected the quality of life of the tribal people. Tribal children are no exception. In this paper, an attempt has been made to identify and understand the multi-dimensional problems of the tribal children in India. The paper analyses the problems with a new approach, lending a historical perspective in the context of the larger question of the political economy of development. This helps to probe into the status of the well-being of the tribal population prior to and after their incorporation into the larger political and economic structure. The key argument the paper makes is that efforts made to improve the life of the tribals through various development programmes have been of no consequence as they have been simultaneously tied up with a parallel and contradictory process of development, which invariably worked on the appropriation of tribal land and forest - the two main sources providing the life support system to the tribal population in India.

At the outset, I would like to mention that working out this paper has been far from easy and smooth. The factor that proved to be a major constraint in this process is the paucity of literature on Indian tribal children. I have hence tried to develop this paper based mainly on inferences and extrapolation of literature on tribal society in general. Long years of personal observation of and association and experience with tribal societies also came of help.

The paper, to begin with, provides a profile of tribal situation in general and tribal children in particular. This it does by discussing their status in relation to their economic well being, education and health. Having done that the paper raises the pertinent question of how and why the tribal population has continued to remain in this poor and deplorable condition in spite of six decades of concerted effort by the state to induce tribal development at all levels. Much of the discussion thereafter is aimed at grappling with this problem and developing a perspective within which tribal problems in general, as well as the problems of tribal children could be located and examined. This substantive segment of the paper is divided into four sections. The first part engages in the current format of explanation, in terms of which tribal development has been generally understood. In a bid to provide an alternative to the above, the paper makes a plea for lending a historical perspective to the nature and types of tribal problems. This has been discussed in the second section. The third section deals with the larger question of national and regional development with which the issues of tribal problems are intricately related. The fourth section probes into the social and cultural practices of child care and child rearing in tribal society. The final section explores possible ways in which the problems of tribal children could be effectively addressed.

## 2. Status of Tribal Children

On the eve of Independence, a large section of the tribal communities which came under colonial rule in different phases, lived in relative isolation from the rest of the Indian society. If at all this isolation was broken, it was more in terms of land, labour and the credit market, which were predominantly exploitative. As for infrastructure such as education, health, agricultural development, irrigation and road networks, tribal communities, however, remained completely neglected. The state in which they found themselves during Independence was primarily attributed to their social and geographical isolation. In fact, the use of the category

‘tribe’ has greatly shaped the discourse on tribes in India. From this angle, the critical issue is their isolation, both geographical and social. The onus of the problems of tribes is squarely put on their isolation and economic, social and cultural features of their societies. While this has been the dominant view, exploitation of tribes by non-tribes, especially in the form of alienation of land from tribes to non-tribes has not altogether been overlooked. It is against this backdrop that the state’s agenda towards tribes in post-Independence India needs to be understood.

The various measures taken up for the upliftment of the tribal people are usually divided into three categories: (i) protective, (ii) mobilisation, and (iii) developmental. The protective measures include constitutional and legislative rights that safeguard the interest of the tribals. Keeping this in mind, laws have been enacted in almost all states where tribal population exists, for protecting tribal land rights and stopping the forcible transfer of land from tribes to non-tribes. In the post-Independence period, legislations have also been enforced for restoration of tribal land rights. Protection is also provided in terms of providing special administration in the tribal areas. In administrative parlance such areas have been referred to as the 5th or 6th schedule areas (Articles 244 and 244(a)) of Indian Constitution. The fifth schedule has provision for special legislative power of the governor, governor’s report and most importantly the tribal advisory council. The sixth schedule has provision for autonomous district council and hence it provides scope for self-governance. The sixth schedule in general is at work in the northeastern region and the fifth in other regions of India where tribes either in a district or parts of a district form a majority. ‘Mobilisation’ refers to the reservation extended to the tribals in domains of politics, government employment and educational institutions. In each of these spheres a certain percentage of seats are earmarked for the scheduled tribes. ‘Developmental’ measures aim at programmes and activities that are initiated for promoting the welfare and development of the tribal people. As a first step to developmental initiatives, special multipurpose development projects as supplement to the community development projects were introduced in the tribal areas. This strategy was continued with some modifications here and there until the Fifth Plan period. The Fifth Plan is taken as a landmark in the process of post-Independence tribal development. Not only did it made a marked shift in policy perspective from welfare to development but also introduced the new concept of tribal sub-plan (TSP) and integrated tribal development projects. The plan entailed a separate budgetary head for the purpose. The immediate objective of this strategy was to eliminate the forms of exploitation that existed in the tribal

areas and accelerate the process of development. The tribal sub-plan thus primarily focused on area development with focus on improving the quality of life of the tribal communities. Its main components were the Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP), Modified Area Development Approach (MADA), pockets and primitive tribal group projects. Over and above this, 74 primitive tribes which required special care for their development, both at the level of planning and implementation, were identified.

Under the broad strategy of tribal sub-plan a number of schemes have been introduced from time to time with a view to uplift the condition of the tribal people. Broadly the schemes fall under two categories – economic and social. Social development has been pursued along two lines – education and health – which take up the issue of women and children as well. For promotion of education, in addition to introduction of schools at various levels, several schemes have been worked out to give a boost to education among tribal children. Some of the key schemes have been residential schools, vocational education, scholarships, book grants, free uniforms, mid day meals, etc. In the sphere of health, emphasis has been laid on extending and improving health infrastructure such as PHC, CHC, etc. as well as prevention and control of communicable and non-communicable diseases. Many of the schemes under health and education exclusively deal with women and children's issues. Employment and income generation, credit and market support mechanism, skill and vocational training are some of the activities geared towards addressing specific economic issues to make way for overall economic development.

The development schemes under the TSP have been at work for about 36 years now. Yet the results are still very depressing. In 1993-94, the proportion of tribal population falling below the poverty line was 51.14 per cent, as compared to 35.97 per cent for the country as a whole. By 2004-05 the share of tribal population living below the poverty line had declined to 46.5 per cent, as compared to 27.6 per cent for the total population living below the poverty line (Mathur 2008). Thus, although there has been a decline, the level of poverty in the tribal population is still much higher than the national average and the gap between the two continues to be one of the major issues of concern in poverty discourse in India.

The same is the case with regard to other social indicators such as education and health. In 1991, the literacy rate of the scheduled tribes was 29.60 per cent as compared to 52.21 per cent for the general population. The gap between the two was as high as 28.09 per cent. By 2001, the literacy rate for the general population had jumped to 65.38 per cent as compared

to 47.1 per cent for tribal population. The gap between the two has been somewhat bridged but the difference of 21.71 per cent is still a significantly large one (Government of India, 2007). The picture is no different in the area of tribal health. The percentage of institutional deliveries was mere 17.1 in the case of tribes as compared to 33.6 for the general population. As for ANC checkup, the figure was 56.5 for tribal population, and 65.4 per cent in case of the general population. The incidence of anaemia, too, is more among tribal women than other women (ibid.).

Such a state of development in tribal society is a combination of various factors that have a bearing on the well being of tribal/*adivasi* children. Malnutrition is one malaise afflicting the tribal children. Poverty, low literacy, unsafe drinking water, poor environment, lack of sanitation, lack of basic health services as well as traditional beliefs and customs add to malnutrition among tribal children. Widespread malnutrition exposes these children to infection and infectious diseases, resulting in high mortality among them. Infant mortality among tribals was 84.2 in comparison to 67.6 per 1000 for the general population in 2002. Child mortality was 46.3 in comparison to 29.3 for the general population. The figure for under-five mortality among tribals was as high as 126.6 per cent as compared to 94.9 per cent for the general population. The percentage of undernourished children (weight for age) was 64.9 in case of tribes; the figure being 51.8 for the general population. Childhood vaccination (full immunisation) reached a mere 26.4 per cent in comparison to 42.0 per cent for the general population (ibid.). Tribal people also scored low on health indicators. Health indices like birth-weight, life-expectancy at birth, infant mortality rate, prevalence of various diseases have been pointers to it. The tribal population is also affected by chronic energy-deficiency in school going children, adolescent boys and girls and women of reproductive age. Around 70-80 per cent of the tribal population seem to suffer from various stages of anaemia – mild, moderate or severe (ibid.).

Even in the sphere of education, the status of tribal children is far from satisfactory. Enrolment is still a problem. However, over the last decade, enrolment of tribal children has increased progressively, clearly winning an edge over other social categories in enrolment in primary and upper primary sections. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), defined as percentage of enrolment in primary (I-V) and upper primary (VI-VIII) to the estimated child population in the age group (6-11) and (11-14) respectively, indicates a gap of 10 per cent in the case of boys, 15 per cent in case of girls and about 12 per cent for both boys and girls as per 2001-02 data (ibid.).

The GER is taken to bolster the claim for progress made in expanding school education in India. But enrolment is a very unreliable basis for assessing the degree of access to education (Dubey, 2009); the important figures are those for attendance and drop-outs. The enrolment of tribal children in school is not that low, but drop-out figures are still very high.

The issue of drop-outs is the most serious as far as tribal children's education is concerned. The percentage of drop-outs at primary, upper primary and secondary level was as high as 52.3, 69.5 and 81.2 respectively as compared to 39.0, 54.6 and 66.0 for the general population in 2001-02. In 2002-03, drop-out rates had declined by mere 1 per cent at all three levels. The data on drop-out rates for the period 1996-97 to 2002-03 indicate a decreasing trend and hence an improvement in the status of school-going tribal children at all levels. All-India drop-out rates fell during 1996-97 to 2002-03 by 5.3 per cent for all children in classes 1-5 and by 5.2 per cent for tribal children. For classes 1-10, drop-out rates for children all over India fell by 7.37 per cent during 1996-97 to 2002-03. In case of tribal children, the figure for the same period was 3.92 per cent (Government of India, 2007).

The important question is why attendance is low and drop-out rates so high among tribal children. These issues have been attributed to poor curriculum and syllabus, deficient pedagogy and negligent teachers in case of the general population. Parents too, are held accountable for drop-outs and poor quality of students (Dubey 2009). Now, if this is the case with the larger population in whose language and ethos, school education is imparted, whose history and culture, the school curriculum and syllabus represents, even teachers belong to same cultural group as the students, then imagine the state of tribal children for whom education imparted at all levels is alien to their life, history and experience.

The vital question is how to explain this poor and deplorable state of social development among the tribal population. Can it be placed in a perspective so that we have a better understanding and analysis? The paper aims at providing this perspective. As an attempt to build this perspective, it is important at the very outset to analyse the problem against the backdrop of history.

### 3. Prevailing Explanation

Development programmes meant for tribes, it is argued, fail to reach them, as they live in geographical isolation. They have thus remained excluded from the fruits of development. This in a sense is a continuation of the discourse that had been the guiding spirit of tribal policy in India. Lack of infrastructure such as schools, health centres as well as personnel is one set of critical factors in terms of which the poor social development indicators among tribal communities have been discussed and studied. This argument is often linked to the argument of inadequate resource allocation for tribal development. However, even with an increase in resource allocations since the Fifth Five-Year Plan beginning in 1974, the material conditions of tribals have failed to improve proportionately.

The ineffective implementation of the programmes is seen as another line of argument by which the issue of social development among tribals could be meaningfully explained. In this discourse, the thrust of the solution lies in accelerated and effective implementation of state-sponsored development programmes and schemes, whether these pertain to livelihood/income-generation activities or education or health or communication facilities.

The third set of arguments is built around the traditional socio-cultural aspects of tribal life. If tribals suffer from low income and poor educational and health status as well as various kinds of diseases, these conditions are often attributed to their tradition and lifestyle. A way out is discussed in terms of adoption of new ideas, knowledge and values. This is the modernisation perspective, which has been a globally popular theory put forth while discussing modernisation of traditional societies. This is an argument, which is applicable to the Indian society as a whole. However, this has been sharply analysed only in the context of the tribal society, as if the rest of the Indian society has already reached the required state of modernisation. While there is some relationship between the lack of development and traditional social structure and culture, this aspect needs to be further probed and carefully examined. After all, lack of development may not be so much due to their social structure as the overall cultural framework and the value system of the state's development process. The framework of development is after all not so alien in the case of the larger society, as it is in the case of tribes. For example, language and curriculum of education imparted to the larger population, including scheduled castes is not alien in case of wider society but is so

in the case of tribal society. The same applies to the personnel involved in the development and administration of tribal people. Groups other than tribes do not suffer such constraint and hence the process of social development in the case of tribes is far from smooth. That partly explains why the impact of development programmes initiated by the state or external agencies has been slow and protracted. Hence, either there is a need to reorient and restructure development in tune with tribal ethos and tradition or add a more humane dimension to the approach to tribal development if the traditional perspective alien to tribal society is to be discarded.

While there is no denying the truth that certain aspects of traditional social structure and culture do constrain development programmes, it is equally pertinent to ask why even after over sixty years of a national reconstruction process, there is still a large tribal population unconnected with development projects or why there has been poor implementation of programmes and its delivery mechanism in tribal areas. This is a question which needs to be analysed and explained. Much of the answer to this lies in the relation between tribes and the larger society, especially in the regional context. The larger society has always viewed tribes as groups which are alien to their society, hence resulting in an over all indifference towards their cause and development. Rather the relation between the two historically and even today is one of appropriation of resources of the tribal community by the larger society. This has not been adequately factored in addressing the question of tribal development by policy makers and administrators.

#### 4. Historicising Transformation

The British government drew tribes out from their isolation and incorporated them into the larger political and economic framework. It is not that tribes did not have such encounters earlier. Many tribes in different parts lived under alien political suzerainty at some point or other. The suzerainty ranged from a symbolic gesture of loyalty to the payment of tribute/tax to the political authority. The extension of the British administration was, however, different. It introduced new laws and regulations – both civil and criminal – in tribal areas.

It set up an administrative structure that was alien. Like in many other parts of India, the British imposed upon the tribes the notion of private property and landlordism, in place of lineage or community based ownership of land. This led to large-scale eviction of tribes from their land and installation of non-tribes in their place. In places where tribes still had control over land, massive transfer of land took place from tribes to non-tribes through such measures as fraud, deceit, mortgage, etc. Over and above, the colonial state took upon itself the right to exercise control over the forest, thereby denying tribes the right to collect fuel and other daily necessities of life, for which they were heavily and traditionally dependent on the forest (Singh 2002; Bosu Mullick 1993).

Much of the discussion on development of tribes, including issues of children, tends not to lend a historical perspective and in the process tends to ignore placing it in the context of a wider political economy. How the larger economic, political, social and cultural processes impacted tribes, is a question that has received little attention. To understand their impact, it is important to situate and assess their development status prior to their being incorporated into the wider economic and political structure. This is important as the wider social structure has invariably been tied with the loss of their life support system – which includes land, forest, water and other natural resources. This has had adverse effects on tribes with a bearing on their condition of living and health. Hence, it is important to capture facts pertaining to the material and social well being of the tribals (nature of poverty; health status – fertility, infant mortality, child mortality, morbidity, gender difference; and diseases suffered, however limited they may be, prior to their integration into the wider economic and political structure.

Unfortunately, there is paucity of literature on the subject for the phase under reference. The colonial literature on tribes is either to do with land and revenue settlement or labour and credit situations or with the customs and traditions of the tribal people. Even anthropological works have been little concerned with the material and social well-being. Rather, they have been more concerned with the study of tribal social structure. In the process they provided a systematic account of tribal social institutions such as family, kinship, as well as their economic, religious and political structures. They also provided accounts of tribal culture – material and non-material. In dealing with material culture, they gave an account of their houses, tools, implements, dresses, ornaments, etc. This gives some idea about the condition of their life and being (Hutton 1921; Furer-Haimendorf 1933; Roy 2004). Even when anthropological literature provided a description of the condition of tribes, it has been done more in terms of landlessness, indebtedness, bondage, wages, etc and not so

much in terms of hunger, poverty and access to food, quality of diet and nutrients of food consumed, health status such as longevity and the rates of mortality, morbidity and birth. Accounts on illness and diseases are also marked by absence. Further, even the discussions have been largely qualitative and hence one is unable to gauge the extent and magnitude of such problems in the society (Elwin 1986). As noted earlier, tribal society was marked by a rather low stage of development and hence their life was broadly marked by bare subsistence. The houses they lived in and the clothes they wore were elementary and simple. Yet it is important to probe if the deprivation they suffered then was of the same order and type as they have begun to suffer after being incorporated into the wider world.

The standard of life of tribals who lived within their traditional social system may have been low on quality but poverty in the form of hunger deaths was generally absent. If at all there were starvation and hunger deaths, they were more on account of natural calamity and the community as a whole suffered. In fact, tribes as a whole suffered substantial decline in their absolute number during 1891-1901, 1911-1921, 1921-1931 due to famine or epidemics in mainland India (Maharatna 2005). Otherwise survival has not been a problem in tribal society and there has been a general increase in the population. In fact, the proportion of tribal population had increased from 2.26 to 3.26 per cent during 1881-1941 whereas the Hindu proportion had steadily declined from 75.1 per cent to 69.5 per cent during this period. This difference, according to Davis, was due to high fertility of the tribal population as compared to the Hindu population. This was probably more due to relatively low mortality rate among the tribal population compared to those of the mainstream population (ibid.)

Now, fertility and mortality rates are used as important indicators for ascertaining the health status of a population. These are in turn related to the nutritional status. Mortality rate has already been referred to in the earlier discussion, which points to lower mortality rate among tribes than the general population. More direct evidence to such a point of view, however, comes from a region like Nagaland, which has been one of the least integrated tribal regions in India. It is worth to note that Nagaland for several years has had the lowest death rate in the country even though modern health coverage and status of potable water supply was extremely unsatisfactory (Roy Burman 1993: 213). Even in case of mainland India, this is what Maharatna has to say: "As tribes are generally less modernized and have less exposure to modern health provisions, they can be hypothesized to experience a higher mortality as compared to the mainstream. However, because of greater intimacy with the natural environment in a primitive habitat with less crowding and pollution, as well as because of

healthy life style pattern and practices such as child care and use of indigenous herbal/natural medicines, tribes could be expected to experience a (relative) mortality advantage” (Maharatna 2005:134).

In fact, whatever, information we have on the nutritional status of tribes in their traditional setting has been positive. Information points to remote areas as being healthy in many important respects like environmental health and food intake. This has been possible because of their easy access to forest and forest resources, which has come to be denied since the colonial rule. Caloric intake of many of the traditionally food gathering tribes is entirely from collections made by them from the forest. Even settled agriculturist tribes derive a substantial amount of nutrition from jungle products. Tribes, in fact, subsisted for generations with a reasonable standard of health, because the forest provided them with food, such as fruits, leafy vegetables, honey and fish, and medicinal plants that they have been using for treatment of diseases and maintaining health, and are today the source of modern medicine. Tribal children are not only familiar with all the biological species around them, but they also understand perfectly well, the ecological and symbiotic relationship between the various forest components (Roy Burman 1993).

## 5. Political Economy of Development and its Implications

Tribes, as observed earlier, were societies unto themselves with a distinct territory, language, culture and a political and economic demarcation of their own. By virtue of existing as a self-contained unit they held control over the land and forest in their territory. The arrival of the British drastically altered all such relationships. Traditionally, these resources were either individually or collectively owned and the tribals had usufructuary rights over these. But due to the policies and measures pursued during colonial rule and its continuation in post-Independence India, there has been steady erosion in the control and use of these resources by tribes. Despite much protective and even restorative legislation to stop land alienation in the post -Independence period, there has been little success to this effect. Of course the major source of land alienation in the post-Independence period is not so much the

encroachment of the non-tribals into the tribal land as is the process of development that the Indian state has followed during the period. The large scale industrialisation and exploitation of mineral resources and the construction of irrigation dams and power projects in the tribal areas during the period have been the single most factors that have uprooted more people out of their lands than the transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals on an individual basis. Assessment of displacement over a decade ago points to the fact that more than 85 lakh (8.5 million) tribals have been displaced, constituting over 40 per cent of all persons displaced in the country as a whole. In the light of such a scale of displacement, it is estimated that the extent of land acquired during the colonial period was a fraction of what has been acquired in post-Independence India (Government of India 2007).

Tribes underwent change not only in their relationship to land but also in their relationship to forest. Tribes were greatly dependent on the forest for their day-to-day needs. They were dependent on the forest for their food, shelter, instruments, medicine and even clothing in some cases. But as long as tribes were in control of the forest offering them an unrestricted use of forest and its produce, they had no difficulty meeting these needs. The entry of the British however drastically altered this relationship. To the British the forest was an important source of revenue and commercial exploitation. Hence the forest policy that was enunciated by the British introduced state control over forest resources and imposed curtailment of rights and privileges of the tribal population over them. The policy pursued by the British was continued in the post-Independence era of economic development with even stricter regulation and enforcement. All these were justified on the ground that these were necessary for wider and national public interest. However, this had/has serious consequences on access to basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, etc. for the tribes.

Both displacement and denial of access to forest, especially the former have impacted children in a significant way. Displacement has invariably led to dislocation of the sources of livelihood; resulting in food insecurity for the family. Even in the face of rehabilitation and resettlement, this problem has persisted. Needless to say this adversely affected children's nutritional status and their health. Displacement also uprooted them from their traditional habitat and environment and pushed them to an environment they were not only unfamiliar with but often even hostile, resulting in social and psychological adjustment issues. It even disrupted the schooling of school going children and more often than not, acted as the factor of their discontinuation. Even in the case of restriction of access to forest, tribal

children are affected though not as severely as in the case of displacement, since tribal life, even if based on settled agriculture, is intricately intertwined with the forest.

No state in India illustrates the aspect of development in the form of industry, dam, mineral exploitation etc. better than Jharkhand and Orissa in the east. And yet the two states have the highest percentages of tribal people living below the poverty line. In 1993–94 in the state of Orissa, 71.26 per cent of tribals lived below the poverty line. In Jharkhand, which was then part of Bihar, the share of tribal people living below the poverty line was 69.75 per cent (Government of India, 2001). In the case of literacy, the percentages were a mere 27.5 in 1991 and 40.7 in 2001 in Jharkhand. The corresponding figure for Orissa was 22.3 in 1991 and 37.4 in 2001. The picture was no different in the sphere of health. Orissa had an infant mortality rate and an under-five mortality rate of 79 per cent and 136 per cent respectively, as compared to the all-India tribal averages of 62 per cent and 96 per cent for the year 2005-06 (UNICEF 2010). In contrast, where such development has been relatively absent, such as in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh in mainland India or north-eastern India, the share of tribal people living below the poverty line is significantly small (Government of India, 2001).

## 6. Diseases Arising from a Larger Development Pattern

Developments in tribal regions have primarily taken the form of dams, irrigation, industries, power projects and more importantly mineral exploitation. Such developments have led to far reaching environmental degradation in tribal areas. Rivers and streams on which tribes have been so much dependent for their daily living have dried up. Others that have not dried up, have got highly polluted from industries and mines. The air they breathe has also been drastically affected because of these development projects. Dust, smoke and harmful chemicals emanating from industries, thermal projects and mineral extraction sites have opened up ways for a polluted environment and diseases, which were hitherto unknown in the region. Infectious diseases like malaria, dysentery, diarrhoea, tuberculosis and various nutrition deficiency diseases such as leprosy, anaemia, goiter and blindness have been on

the rise. In fact, malaria, dysentery, followed by polio, leprosy, diarrhoea and filariasis are quite prevalent among children up to four years of age leading to high infant mortality rates, various disabilities, low efficiency, etc. Respiratory diseases have been reported as widely prevalent in tribal areas where cough is a common element. Such diseases get compounded in case of girl children and aged women because of their use of firewood while cooking in traditional chullhas. What is important to note here is that much of the diseases with which the tribal population is currently faced with, stems from the change in environment arising from development projects in the tribal region. In fact, efforts at improving the health status of the tribal population are often countered or neutralised by environmental problems caused by such development projects.

## 7. Children and Armed Conflict

The problem of poverty, unemployment, deprivation, exploitation and domination experienced in tribal society has led to a movement for liberation from such condition in these societies. In this struggle for liberation, which has at times taken the form of armed conflict between insurgents and state armed forces, common people including children have invariably been drawn either as participants or victims. Insurgent groups recruit children, who then have to go through rigorous training of combat warfare and hard life quite early in life and then engage in war with the state armed forces. At times even the state armed forces recruit children as militia, to fight insurgent groups. The latter is most evident in the war against the Naxalites in Chhattisgarh. In instances where children have not been recruited into combat forces, they have been used in varying ways both by the insurgents and state armed forces as aids in their war against each other. Often this results in harassment and violence (physical and mental) from both the warring parties. Children, have however, suffered the most as victims. Not only have they found themselves orphaned due to their parents death but are also physically assaulted, raped, burnt and even impaired either by the security forces or the insurgents. Often they have found their habitat destroyed and are confined to camps without adequate food, water, sanitation and schools. Such things

have, however, not been only due to war between state armed forces and insurgent groups but due to conflict between two tribes as well. The latter has been one of the recurring forms of conflict in North-East India with far reaching implications for communities in conflict, including children. Examples of some such conflicts are the one between some Naga and Kuki tribes in Manipur in not too distant a past, Boros and Santhals (of course not recognised as scheduled tribes in Assam) in Boro areas, and Dimasas and Mars in the North Cachar Hill district of Assam in more recent times.

## 8. Social Differentiation and its Implications

### **Class differentiation**

The tribal societies have been by and large characterised as egalitarian societies. However, differentiation and discrimination based on age and sex did exist even within the tribal society. The dispossession of the tribals from their land, which began during the colonial period, ushered in a new process of social differentiation in the form of proletarianisation, which led to the emergence of the middle class in tribal society. Those proletarianised were pushed to seek employment as agricultural labourers in the agrarian sector or move to new sectors such as quarries, coalfields, plantations or emerging towns as workers. Wages earned by them have not only been low but also erratic on account of the nature and type of employment resulting in large-scale employment of children as cheap labour. Such employment has pushed a large number of boys and girls away from the school. They are also exposed to the hazards of work quite early in life. Family income is far from adequate as employment is non-existent for other adult members of the family. This has resulted in malnutrition and various kinds of disabilities among the children. Children also suffered disabilities due to poor hygienic and living conditions in colonies or settlements they inhabited.

The entry of tribals into modern white-collar occupation has been possible because of their exposure to modern education. It was the Christian missionaries who introduced modern education among the tribes. However, the growth of the educated middle class in the tribal

areas was staggered. The post-Independence period saw a swelling in the rank of educated tribals because of the spread of education, including higher education. This was partly so due to the government initiatives and partly due to growing consciousness among the tribes regarding the value of education. At the same time the provision of reservation extended by the State to the tribal groups facilitated their entry into modern occupations especially in the government departments and state run enterprises. As a result a new middle class has grown among the tribal communities. The growth of this middle class has however been far from even. It is generally more pronounced among the larger tribal communities than those with a small population. Also, it is more pronounced among communities and regions exposed to Christianity than the others. The middle class among tribals like the middle class in other communities have adequate income and hence do not suffer from the kind of deprivation and other related problems that the tribal population in general does.

### **Religious Differentiation**

Besides differentiation along the lines of class and occupation, there have been other kinds of differentiation in tribal society. One such differentiation is the movement of tribes in the direction of caste through such processes as sanskritisation (adoption of life style of the upper caste population by tribes) and hinduisation. In fact, studies on the sanskritisation process among tribes do point to certain changes, which affect children as well. Roy Burman, drawing upon the studies of many scholars during the period between 1930s and 1960s demonstrated how tribes, with sanskritisation, are opting for early marriage as a matter of prestige and discouraging widow remarriage as well as divorce and separation. This has also resulted in sex biases in favour of boys and various kinds of discrimination against the girl child and women (Roy Burman 1988; Sachchidananda1988).

The other kind of differentiation has been the move to Christianity. The movement to Christianity entailed observance of not only new rules and practices but also abandonment of old ones. Even though converts retained much of the features in common with those of non-converts and maintained some continuity with their traditional social structure, the changes following conversion brought about a rupture in the relation between the converts and non-converts. This no doubt partly stemmed from the religious teachings of the new religion but much of it was rooted in the style of life that the converts imposed upon

themselves. In this they were greatly aided by the missionaries. The missionaries discouraged and even prohibited converts from socialising and mixing with the non-converts. Through such exclusive living, the converts completely isolated themselves from the rest and formed an exclusive group. This had a bearing on children as well, as they too avoided their counterparts in other groups, resulting in stereotypes, growing prejudice and even antagonism against each other. With Christian children taking maximum advantage of the modern education that the Christian missionaries have introduced in tribal societies, such feelings and attitudes got further aggravated. The gap between Christian and non Christian children widened.

### **Communalisation and its Bearing on Children**

Of late there has been considerable communalisation of politics in the tribal region. The seeds of communal politics have moved into schools in the form of text books and other kinds of ideological indoctrination. Hatred, prejudices, misinformation against members of other religious persuasion – especially Christianity and Islam – has been systematically pursued in schools run by the RSS and its affiliates like VHP, Bajrang Dal, etc. Alongside this process, there is also the process of saffronisation of the Adivasi mind and culture. Distinctiveness of tribal culture, custom and identity is being systematically kept out of school text and curriculum. If at all they have a place, then it is tinged with the interpretation of Hindutva ideology. Tribal tradition and customs are presented as low and demeaning and are taught to be discarded. In turn they are exhorted to absorb values and traditions associated with the Hindu culture and tradition (Sundar 2009:133-140; Kumar and Prakash 2009:174-177) Such indoctrination and socialisation have become the breeding ground of communal identity and communal politics in the tribal societies. Communal violence witnessed in the tribal region in more recent times has its roots in the socialisation that has been taking place in schools run by the RSS and its affiliates (Chatterji 2009).

## 9. Social and Cultural Practices and Socialisation

Besides the larger question of the political economy of national development and the dimensions of social differentiation, an inquiry into the aspects of values associated with children and the traditional social and cultural practices concerning their care and rearing would illuminate the understanding of issues and problems surrounding the tribal children. As observed earlier, tribal society was until recent times, undifferentiated except one based on age and sex. Hence society as a whole held the same values and the same social and cultural practices with regard to child care and rearing. Even after the emergence of social differentiation especially in the areas of class and religion, tribals do share cultural values and practices specific to their own society and culture. Division of work based on sex was important and hence the family from the very beginning socialised their children into roles, norms and values associated with such division. As a result certain jobs came to be associated with men and others with women. Generally work confined to the household such as cooking and cleaning and child rearing, were considered as predominantly women's work. In contrast, work carried out outside the household such as clearing land/forest for cultivation, ploughing, hunting, etc. were considered as exclusively men's work. There were others like fetching firewood from the forest or even water, which could be carried out by both men and women.

However, the burden of such work fell more on women than men. Invariably, women had a heavier burden of work than men, in a traditional setting. Not only were they engaged in routine household work but also in work that went outside the household, including various kinds of work associated with agriculture. Such division of work could also be seen in the rearing of children. In general it is women, who are primarily engaged in all routine work associated with the nurturing of children. Men hardly partake in it. It is only on emergency that their role could be discerned and this is more to do with either arranging medicine or calling medicine men.

Differentiation based on age and sex was also reflected in the sharing of food. Customarily, men eat first and hence have the privileged share in food. Women in the process have to be satisfied with whatever is left over after men have eaten. If there is enough food in the family then there is no problem even if women ate later. However, if there is shortage, women

do suffer. This means that men do stand privileged. And so has been the case with boys in comparison to girls, especially as they grow in years.

That the tribals marry early may be true but it needs to be placed in the context of history and tradition.. Early marriage in tribal society has been more due to contact with the outside world, especially the larger Hindu society, where early marriage has been perceived as a value-addition and status symbol. To stretch it to a phase when they had not been socially and culturally drawn to the larger society may be far fetched. Most tribal societies traditionally had the institution of dormitory, which was separate for boys and girls. Dormitory played an important role in socialisation from adolescent to adulthood. Although boys and girls had the freedom of meeting and knowing each other, there were norms and values in terms of which they were guided in their behavior, including that pertaining to their sexual life. Further, there was less likelihood of an early marriage in the traditional set up. Although marriage by love and elopement did have a place in tribal society too, arranged marriage was the normal and dominant practice. In arranged marriages, processes could be initiated only after it had been ascertained whether the boy and the girl were in a position to meaningfully contribute towards the maintenance of the family in terms of their work and labour. Further, arranged marriages had to go through a procedure of various customary practices, which was more often than not, a protracted process. All this protracted the marriageable age of both boys and girls in the traditional setting.

An important feature of traditional tribal society was the absence of reading and writing. It was only during colonial rule that this tradition of reading and writing was established. in tribal society. In this, the Christian missionaries played a pioneering role. They introduced a new and modern system of education in tribal society, which opened up avenues of new knowledge, skill and employment in tribal society. Prior to this, knowledge, skills, roles, norms, values, traditions, and customs at work in society were passed on to children through the process of socialisation. Knowledge, norms, values and traditions that were passed on, pertained to different spheres of life and activity. This included among other things, reproductive health practices, ways to nurture and raise children and the role of the husband, the wife, other family members and the community at large in this activity. In this process of socialisation, two agencies played a critical role. One is the family and the other the youth dormitory. Youth dormitory was not conducive to ethics and moral values that the Christian missionaries preached and hence they strongly disapproved it. Under their influence, the institution had a natural death. However, new youth organisations came

up under the influence of Christian missionaries' influence. Though, they were primarily church-based, these organisations engaged in activities affecting the community and also acted as an important agency of socialisation.

Modern education in tribal society was not only a new but also an alien phenomenon. Not only was the language of reading and writing alien, but what came to be taught too, was alien in tribal society. Even those engaged in imparting such instruction were strangers to tribal society. This partly explains why tribal children found education far from attractive. The high drop-out rate in tribal society is to a great extent linked with this phenomenon. In fact, the percentage of tribal children crossing such barriers has been small and those who have been able to, have moved to occupation other than agriculture and have been the pillar of the new middle class in tribal society. Much of the tribal population engaged in white collar jobs belongs to the section of the first generation literate, which in spite of being exposed to modern education and occupation, represented a very strong sense of tribal identity. The same cannot be said of the second generation school-going tribal children. Their aspiration, outlook and attitude have been quite contrary to their parents. They have an aspiration to rise socially but this has much to do with their attraction towards material well being and not so much with the well being of their community. In terms of attitudes, however, they display an easy attitude and a liking for short cut methods, quite contrary to the attitudes of their parents.

As modern education was alien to tribal society, so was the modern health system. Traditionally, there was no health infrastructure system in the form of health centres, doctors and nurses. And so was the case with the modern vaccine system against diseases. The extension of such health system has been instrumental in the control of epidemics, which caused large scale death in tribal societies, prior to the introduction of modern medical facilities. In view of the general lack of a modern health and medical infrastructure system in tribal areas, it has been difficult to reach a meaningful conclusion with regard to attitudes and behaviour of the tribes towards the modern health system practices. The available literature however points to the lack of knowledge about personal hygiene and reproductive health care practices. In fact, many of the diseases they suffer are traced to these problems in the tribal society.

## 10. Key Argument

The problems faced in the process of development of tribals, including tribal children, are not so much due to the failure to give a boost to development programmes in tribal areas due to inadequate resource or ineffective implementation, or even due to barriers caused by certain tribal traditions and their social structure. The larger question of development in the form of large scale development projects such as dams, irrigation, power plants, roads, railways, industry and mineral exploitation has been facing a much bigger stumbling block. This form of development invariably involved the appropriation of tribal land, forest and other natural resources. This process began under colonial rule and has continued in the post-Independence era, except that in this era the process wears the garb of national and regional development. The benefits of this development, which Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first Prime Minister, described as the temples of modern India, did not accrue to the tribal people. Rather, tribal people were deprived of their livelihoods and left without any alternative avenues of employment and food security despite their rightful claim to a special constitutional provision for their protection and special affirmative action programmes for their economic and social development. The state has displayed the latter as a post-Independence sign of tribal development. In close introspection, however, affirmative action for the development of tribes tended to be no longer affirmative action, as it did not tend to lift them from the given social base in which they were traditionally located. Rather, affirmative action has been pushed alongside a process that pushed them to a situation worse than their original position by encroaching and appropriating their resources, thereby further worsening their vulnerability. Hence, there is nothing affirmative about affirmative action programme in case of tribes in India. Rather, there is an in-built depressor in the way development has been pursued in tribal India, other than in the North-East. Unless this is corrected, development will continue to perpetuate underdevelopment and deprivation of the tribal population.

## 11. Way Forward

Although there is extensive literature on tribal society and culture, there is not much data available on subjects such as tribal children. Hence there is an urgent need for a sustained and systematic research on issues concerned with the tribal children. It is not possible to enumerate them all here. However, as a first step, certain themes and issues could be taken on a priority basis. As has been discussed above, much of the problems that tribals including children now face lies in the nature of integration or development that has been pursued. In fact, development that appropriates tribal land and denies access to forest resources that they have traditionally enjoyed, threatens their very source of livelihood. In the light of such corroding development, any benefit that may accrue from various state initiated tribal development projects either in the economic sphere or social sphere, gets neutralised. As a consequence, they continue to remain where they were or move to a far worse situation. This paradox needs to be systematically and empirically probed and examined further so that appropriate policies and programmes for tribals and tribal children could be drawn up.

Much of the knowledge we have about tribals on issues such as starvation, poverty and their extent, as well as on health (fertility, life span, mortality etc.) and diseases, is largely based on phases of tribal history, which is marked by assault on their life support system. In order to assess how the larger process of development and change has impacted their lives – in the spheres of economic, social and health infrastructure - it is important to have knowledge about those issues prior to their incorporation into a wider political and economic structure. Unfortunately, we have no clear knowledge on these issues till today and no effort whatsoever has been made on this front. This is an issue that needs to be addressed for a better and historical understanding of the tribal situation.

We also do not have much knowledge and understanding on reproductive health care practices as well as those of personal hygiene among tribal communities in India. There is a void in the literature on this issue, which needs to be addressed as a priority research area.

The issues surrounding tribes and tribal children are not only to be addressed in terms of research but more importantly in terms of practical action. Tribal children suffer from various health-related deficiencies. This has been referred to, earlier in the discussion. Such problems

are understandable where there are no health care facilities. However, the problem persists even where such facilities exist. This demands a solution, which combines diagnosis and prescriptions. Mere prescription as has generally been the case with the general administrative approach will not help. Diagnosis means understanding tribal social and cultural values and practices and the way it aids or obstructs the programme of development action. That explains why sympathetically disposed administrators have been more successful in tribal areas. This also explains why missionaries have been more effective than the government machinery.

The issue of literacy and education demands attention of a somewhat different type. In this case, it is not so much the case of effective delivery as the package of education imparted to the tribal children. In fact everything associated with education – the medium of instruction, culture and content of education and the teachers themselves tend to be alien to the tribal children, resulting in high dropout rates at different levels of schooling. This is aggravated by the fact that there is a strong absence of the culture of education in the tribal society. Creating such a culture is the need of the hour.

Thus being the case, it is strategically important that the community is sensitised, empowered and mobilised. One of the best ways of doing this is by empowering the gram sabha, an assembly of people, which has been given legal recognition under the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. By this act, people themselves in the form of gram sabha and gram panchayat have been given an opportunity to work out their own development. This is an important step forward and can play an important role. However, its role till now has remained underutilised and unexploited. It is important that this is brought at the centre of social development initiatives in tribal areas. However, to make the gram sabha and gram panchayat effective in their work, it is important that the capacity of these institutions is effectively built and strengthened.

It is equally important to note that tribes vary among themselves in terms of the size of their population, language, culture, modes of making a living and the regions they are located in. Of the tribal groups, some are relatively better placed on the graph of social development indicators in comparison to others. It is difficult to generalise as to who has done better and who has not. In general, North-East India has fared well on the chart of social development indicators in comparison to mainland India. However, there has been considerable unevenness within each region. In both regions, however, the groups with a

smaller size of population have been the most vulnerable. Again, tribes who make their living primarily from food-gathering-cum-hunting and a tradition of shifting cultivation have not fared well in comparison to those dependent on settled agriculture, especially in mainland India. Within tribes following a pattern of settled agriculture too, there tends to be much variation. Generally tribes with a large population such as the Gonds, Bhils and Santhals have not done as well as those with a medium sized population such as the Oraons, Kharias and, Mundas. Tribes with a strong Christian missionary presence and influence in them have been on the whole better placed on the charts of social indicators of development than tribes without such presence and influence.

Besides the unevenness in customs and traditions among different tribal groups, there is also unevenness within a particular tribal group. This unevenness is evident in social exclusion based on gender. Not only are women denied the right to property, inheritance and share in the decision-making process within home and outside, they are also discriminated from the access to a fair share in the fruits of the development process, such as in the areas of education and health. That explains why the literacy rate is so low among tribal women. In terms of health indicators too, girls/women are more vulnerable than boys/men. This is an issue which needs to be addressed squarely.

What this means is that groups, tribes and regions need to be prioritised in programmes of action taken up for the development of the tribal population. Programmes of action taken up to address issues often lack a holistic approach. For example, those addressing specific problems of children meet with failure as it is often carried out without any reference to the larger needs of the families or communities to which they belong. This means that new pedagogic practices require to be evolved in order to execute various developmental programmes. In doing so, good practices that exist in the society may turn out to be very handy. In case of tribal societies, for example, there are two striking aspects with regard to caring for the child and nurturing the young. One is the prevalence of breast feeding and the other is the tradition of kin/community care of the children. It is the kin care that explains as to why it is rare to find destitution and begging among tribal population, including tribal children. Equally important in this respect is the emphasis on ethics of work, which the children internalise quite early in life. Things have however begun to change because of displacement due to development projects and lack of rehabilitation and resettlement of displaced population.

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