TRIBAL AUTONOMY AND LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEMS

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Summary

The article would focus on the efforts of tribes at evolving strategies to restore their life support systems in the midst of the heterogeneity that characterizes their lives. It concentrates on India in general and the Ho tribe in the Chotanagpur region in Central and Eastern India as a case study. The context is government policy on tribes in India and the recent legislation, i.e., the Panchayati Raj Act, 1996 that debates on the issue of tribal autonomy and life support systems. The article argues that the legislation is unable to accommodate the diversity in tribal life and works on the stereotype of tribes as the

homogeneous, "primitive" other, which would only hasten the processes of peripheralization of tribes and their life support systems. The last section documents one experiment at restoring life support systems in a Ho village in West Singhbhum, Bihar. Such experiments not only redefine the contours of the notion "tribal autonomy" but also restore the tribes as "agents" vis-à-vis their life support systems.

1. Introduction

The last century is characterized by large-scale environmental destruction. However, it is only in the last few decades that processes of environmental destruction have been viewed critically (see for instance, McKibben 1990, Merchant 1992, Rifkin 1991, and Worster 1997). This is in recognition of the fact that the world is faced by ecological crises. The crises lie in the inability of the modern, industrial world to limit its demand on nature and, equally, in the limit to nature's capacity to fulfill the ever-increasing demands of the modern, industrial world.

It is in this context that EOLSS' definition of life support systems is significant. According to EOLSS, Life Support System is "any natural or human engineered system that furthers life of the biosphere in a sustainable fashion". The thrust is on preserving the life of the biosphere, conserving global natural resources and restricting unsustainable consumption patterns that threaten the natural environment and, through it, human survival.

The definition prioritizes systems of environmental management that sustain the life of the biosphere. Those systems alone qualify as life support systems. Any system is sustainable in so far as it can maintain a process or a state indefinitely, not only in one generation but also over generations. The modern forms of environmental management, then, fall short of these requirements. The definition, thereby, excludes from its purview modern forms of environmental management as well as modern understanding of human-nature relationship on which the former is based.

The search for life support systems has turned the world's attention to peoples who, till now, had been at the backwaters of civilization. Tribes, all over the world, have been elevated on to a pedestal for their ecological sensitivity. This situation is ironical. Tribes, who were once considered as primitive, naïve, inferior and incapable of cultured existence owing to their proximity to nature, are at present exemplars of human-nature co-existence.

Yet, at another level, this search for life support systems among "primitive" tribes was imminent. Tribes were reminders of the inability of humans to take control over the vagaries of nature and exploit the wealth of natural resources available to them. For it is only through the reign of the human mind, through discoveries, inventions and technological advancement, that humans could comprehend and control nature. This objectification of nature as the "other" laid the foundation for humans' conflict relationship with nature and the will to subordinate and exploit nature for human advancement. Tribes, or peoples close to nature, who did not share this understanding of human–nature relationship, were termed as "backward," "ignorant," and "superstitious".

They were the "other" who had to be incorporated into the "progressive," "advanced," and industrial world.

Over the century, interventions in the form of industrialization and modernization have been explained off as an interest in helping tribes overcome their inferior, peripheral position. However, the prime reason has been to gain access to the rich natural resources available in tribal areas. Tribes have been, par excellence, victims of the processes of industrialization all over the world. (According to the Inter-Commission Task Force on Indigenous Peoples, 1977, tribes would control most of world's ecosystems but now are confined to "regions of refuge" and have "official rights to only 6% of the planet's surface").

Tribal history as well as contemporary tribal life is marked by series of movements against such processes of objectification and marginalization. Tribes in India are no exception. [In India, tribal communities, which are enumerated under the provisions of the constitution, are known as "Scheduled Tribes". A "Scheduled tribe" is a political and an administrative category. Article 342 of the constitution enlists, on approval from the President of India, scheduled tribes in relation to the matters of the State). The total population of scheduled tribes is 7.76%; the central belt (including Chotanagpur) of the country has the largest concentration of scheduled tribes followed by the western region of the country, which is 55% and 26% respectively.] The tribal population of northeast India is 10%, and in south India, it is 6%. These movements have raised concern over the state of the environment. In demanding rights over land and forests, tribal movements have sought to rescue the vestiges of their knowledge systems and life support systems.

Both tribes and nature were "objectified" earlier as objects of reform and now are considered as objects of redemption. This search for life support systems, then, does not break away from the dichotomies of self and the other, subject and object, culture and nature but sets itself along the same lines. The assertions of tribal autonomy, on the part of tribes, are efforts at restoring themselves as "subjects" and "agents" in relation to their lives and life support systems. They have been as much victims of the ecological crises as the rest of the world. Similarly, they have not been "passive recipients" of the modern processes that have marked their lives as evident in the series of resistance movements among them. They are faced by a similar dilemma as the world of to how to cope with the diversity of modern influences among them. There is, then, among them, a blurring of the distinction between self and other, unity and diversity, subject and object.

2. The Debate on Tribal Autonomy and Life Support Systems

Recent efforts at retrieving rights over land and forest in India have been initiated through a campaign for tribal self-rule. The concern for tribal self-rule came into focus on the issue of democratic decentralization and establishment of institutions of local self-government through the panchayati raj system. The parliament of India, in 1992, passed the Panchayati Raj Act through which 484 000 elected panchayats were constitutionally recognized as local bodies of self- government. The Act was automatically extended to tribal areas.

In accordance to Article 243M of the Act, the provisions of the legislation do not apply to Scheduled and Tribal Areas. Article 243M states that Part 9 of the Constitution, which empowers the state legislatures to make laws with respect to the constitution of the Panchayat, shall not apply to scheduled Areas under the fifth and the sixth schedule of the Constitution. Scheduled Areas cover most tribal areas and are areas that have special rules with regards to its general administration. The areas covered under the fifth schedule is supposed to be governed by a Tribes Advisory Council at the state level, primarily comprising of tribal member of the legislature, and in consultation with the Governor. Thus, in these areas, there is a strong presence of the Centre in administration. The sixth schedule enlists selected tribal areas of the North- East. The Autonomous District Council, an administrative level lower than the state, are the bodies of self- governance in these areas. However, its power is restricted, as it requires the consent of the central government for translating any constitutional bill into a law.

The Act was challenged in Court by an activist group in the State of Andhra Pradesh and was declared as unconstitutional. (A member of an activist organization "Gondwana Sangharsh Samithi" and three other persons belonging to the scheduled tribes in 1992 filed the case). The Parliament set up a committee to suggest changes in the Act in order to make it suitable to pass a fresh legislation for Scheduled and Tribal Areas. The Bhuria committee was set up in 1994 under the chairmanship of Dileep Singh Bhuria. The committee submitted its report in January 1995. The Panchayat (extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act was passed in December 1996. All the states in India had to pass laws on Panchayat systems in Scheduled Areas (covered under the fifth and sixth schedule) along the lines of the Act, within the following year. The constitutional and administrative crisis created thereof has led to a debate among politicians, administrators, social activists and social scientists on the question of tribal self-rule. This debate is not of recent origin and is a recurring one. "Tribe" as an administrative category has been a problematic one in India. The ambivalence over the political and administrative status of the category "tribe" can be traced back to the time of Indian Independence. At the eve of Indian Independence, tribes were the focus of a heated discussion. The discussion was about their future in Independent India.

The debate can be summarized in the views of G. S. Ghurye and Verrier Elwin. Elwin (1943) put forth the theory of the "noble savage". In tribes, he sought the "uncorrupted" life of nature, which had been given up for the pleasures of the "civilized" corrupted tastes. Thus what he loved most about tribes were those features which were absent among the "civilized". Therefore, he was of the opinion that they should be left in a state near to nature without any contact with the "civilized" world. Tribes were reduced to a category of a homogenized "other" of civilization.

G. S. Ghurye (1966) upheld the nationalist perspective and disagreed with Elwin. According to him, the strict distinction between tribes and the mainstream or caste society is not applicable in India. He placed tribal groups on the lowest rung of the tribe–caste–class continuum, a conceptual paradigm to understand the processes of change in tribal life. For Ghurye, the continuum suggested a movement from pantheism to a higher form of religion, from tradition to modernity, from a base and a crude way of life to a life morally and ethically superior. He termed them as "backward Hindus". They had similar features to those found in lower forms of Hinduism. Tribes, then, were

the "other" of high culture, Sanskrit traditions, and had to be integrated into mainstream society to hasten the process of evolution among them.

The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, sympathized with Elwin's views. He advocated the "Panchsheel" or five principles meant to serve as a guide for introducing any legislation in tribal areas. Jawaharlal Nehru evolved five fundamental principles of tribal development. It gives us a broad idea of the spirit with which he sought to administer tribal areas though it was specifically brought out in relation to the administration of the north- east region. These principles were:

- People should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them. We should try to encourage in every way their own traditional arts and culture.
- Tribal rights in land and forest should be respected.
- We should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work of administration and development. Some technical personnel from outside will, no doubt, be needed, especially in the beginning. But we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory.

The main intention was to protect tribes from the mainstream society and allow them to develop in their own terms. But his vision for the rest of India was of a strong, industrialized and developed country. (The latter took precedence over the former and the processes of industrialization initiated by the British to tap the rich natural resources in tribal areas were reinforced with renewed rigor. This took a toll on the environment and, simultaneously, relegated tribal life support systems to the margins).

The pursuit of these two visions, independent of each other, reflected itself institutionally in the separation of economic planning from social justice and welfare; industrial development from tribal development. The Government of India has, since 1947, introduced a number of programmes and projects in tribal areas with the intention of ameliorating the conditions of tribes but has been unable to stop their marginalization. We should not over- administer these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through, and not in rivalry with, their own social and cultural institutions. We should judge results, not by statistics or the amount of money, spent, but by the quality of human character that is evolved. Tribal development programmes have been, at best, attempts at minimizing effects of development processes without being critical of the latter. (According to B. K. Roy Burman (1989), 89 to 90% of the funds allocated for welfare schemes among tribes are spent on maintaining the administrative structure through which these schemes are implemented). Problems of displacement, migration, land alienation and unemployment are a product of the devaluation of tribal life support systems.

This contradiction also expressed itself in protest and resistance movements at the level of the community against the policies of the State (Desai 1979). Tribes have been the focus of discussion time and again during critical circumstances. Discontent among tribes along border areas and in the interior tribal areas has resuscitated the contradiction between the policies of the modern State and the position of tribes in it. It was "their new self-consciousness, consciousness of their social, political, and

economic rights, and privileges" as an "other" that has forced discussions on tribal self-rule over the years. However, there has been a tendency to treat tensions among tribes as problems of nation building, related to national integration of all peripheral groups; and the social and economic uplifting of depressed classes in the country. The report, in this context, does not divert from the norm.

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Biographical Sketch

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