

In Search of the Tribes in Northeast India

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'Tribe' refers to 'a band of people organized under a chief' or 'a set of people lumped together'. Initially, none of the Indian languages including the mother of most Indian languages, Sanskrit, had a distinct term denoting the 'tribe' as in most of the European languages. Of course, there were references to the colour of the individual's skin, but it was rarely referred to any social segment at large with the exception of the 'Kiratas'. The reason for this omission is very simple to understand. Conceptually, ancient Indians did not mention 'tribes' as a distinct set of people from the rest. Of course, there were vocational, geographical, locational and even sectarian groups referred to, but rarely a social group was termed in 'racial' context as it is today. The tradition for such an ethnic distinction in India is hardly two hundred years old. The entire country was exotic for the British rulers of India to begin with. They were intrigued by the social stratification in Mughal India and, in fact, many of them tried to emulate what they considered the best among the Indians at the time for a pretty long period of time. For the first hundred years or so of the British rule over India, the British prided themselves to be addressed as the 'nabab'. Once they settled down to rule the country, they were faced with the problem of evolving a strategy to cope with the Indian social phenomena. And here, emerging academic expertise of Ethnology came handy to the colonial rulers, and many of them tried their hands on quasi-historical reconstruction of social evolutionism and diffusionism. In such an exercise, 'information' was invariably collected out of context by untrained hands and grand 'universal theories' were proposed as scientific basis of the White man's racial superiority.

Many Englishmen had a weakness for proselytisation to Christianity. They tried to convert the high caste Hindus and Ashraf Muslims but did not meet with the desired results. Then they turned to the communities on the social margin of the Indian society and found many of them away from the

great traditions of the Hindus and the Muslims. Needless to say that the Christian missionaries were licensed to concentrate on the frontier communities as a strategy for their missionary activities. Still, conceptually, 'tribes' and 'castes' were not differentiated from one another for a long time. The 'Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857 appeared to be a turning point in the Indian administrative history in more than one way. By then, travellers, adventurers, missionaries, explorers, traders and administrators had joined the ethnographers on 'reporting on queer, exotic, barbarian and savage tribes' spread across the globe within the British Empire. Ethnographic investigation proved to be a boon to the colonial administrators for collecting data on life and lore of the colonized peoples so that they could rule over them more effectively.

Coming to the Indian situation, it was Alfred Lyall, who initiated a debate on the nature of the Indian society in post-1857 period (Owen 1973: 223-243). And it was agreed as a policy to show India as a divided entity between castes, tribes, races, regions, religions, languages, food habits, dresses and what not, and it was made loud and clear that India was just a geographical entity held together by the British might. Moreover, it was presumed that it was in their colonial interest to show India divided in various ways enumerated above. The census operations, district gazetteers, 'People of India' series of publications and tribal monographs were used to show the variety within India with ethnographic support and purposefully collated write-ups were touted as scientific treatises. Then came the British administrative policy in distant areas inhabited by the turbulent tribes in the form of special dispensation to the frontier tracts. These tracts were turned into 'backward areas' in the Government of India Act, 1919, which came to be known as the "Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas' as per the Government of India Act, 1935. Colonial administrators and some of the Christian missionaries were conspiring to carve out a Crown Colony in North East India and Upper Burma in the second quarter of the twentieth century on the eve of the Indian independence. With a view to fore-stalling such divisive moves, the Constituent Assembly of India came out with provisions of the 'Sixth Schedule for the tribes' of North East India in the Indian Constitution, applicable since 1950. It was to be a time bound provision for the upliftment of the Scheduled Tribes, which has since then been extended for an unspecified period. The paper proposes to review the situation briefly and report on the status as to how the tribes are backward compared to 'others'; how do they fit in the classical definition of the 'tribe'? And if they do, do they deserve special dispensation granted to them? What about the National Tribal Policy

drafted and circulated by the Government of India and the reaction of the 'national assembly of tribes' held in Delhi?

II

All through eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, British scholars did not distinguish between 'tribes' and 'castes' in Indian social situation. While what came to be known as tribes were invariably termed as savage, barbarian, primitive, wild, etc. and there were references to 'Brahmin tribes', Rajput tribes, Jat tribes, Muslim tribes, etc. there was hardly any difference between castes and tribes in those days. Events of 1857 led to a racial polarization in which the British went all the way to establish the white man's racial superiority. Incidentally, this also marked the beginning of ethnological investigation all over the world. Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859 followed by his *Origin of Man* and Louis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* in 1877. The age of geographical discoveries, scientific explorations, and a number of technological inventions preceded this. Australia, Latin America, Africa, and the bulk of Asia were already divided among the European Imperial powers. Science was the key word of the age; 'progress' was the *mantra* of the period; and the white man of Anglo-Saxon extraction was taken to represent the apex of human civilization. "That was also the heyday of the museums. Science teaching was focussed around show cases exhibiting specimens classified by types - fossils, rocks, insects, stuffed birds, caged animals in zoo - fixed entities, changeless, everlasting" (Hugh-Jones and Laidlaw 2000: 84). There was also a new movement to spread botanical gardens all over the world, which did not only have scientific motives, but also commercial ones. Morgan's evolutionary formulation with its three-fold subdivisions (savagery, barbarism and civilization) was taken to be the final truth.

Human beings were 'objectified'; they were to be scientifically measured and photographed as specimens representing a type; their indices were to be established so that generalizations (principles) could be made. Edward Tuit Dalton reports in his *Descriptive Ethnography of Bengal* how a grand design of ethnographic mapping of India for the sake of scientific understanding was proposed in 1868. It was proposed that two specimens of every Indian community (as their nominated representatives) were to be sent to Jubbalpore, at the centre of India, to be measured and photographed with a view to developing an understanding of the Indian peoples. Unfortunately

for the sake of the British science, the Chief Commissioner of Assam spoiled the game. He informed his superiors in Calcutta that he would not risk a rebellion on hand, as his specimens might die on their way to or from Jubbalpore because of the hot climatic conditions between his domain and the place of proposed ethnographic fair in Central India. The Imperial government could not dare to risk such an adventure and the ethnographic fair could not be held on time. However, E T Dalton was asked to complete the descriptive ethnography on the basis of his own data, reports from administrators, missionaries, explorers, travellers and, in fact, any body, who could volunteer to report and photograph the subjects. And that is how Dalton's famous *Descriptive Ethnography* was compiled, which became a model for the future *Peoples of India* volumes (Dalton 1872).

In course of time, such volumes were published on United Provinces, Punjab, Bombay Presidency, Madras Presidency, Central Provinces and Berar, and Rajputana. The first population census of India was conducted in 1872, for which British ethnographers' help was sought in formulating the questions to be asked to the respondents. Since then, India is one of the few countries of the world, which has regularly conducted census operations every ten years. From the beginning, anthropologists were associated with its operations. Herbert H. Risley was the Census Commissioner for 1901, who in course of time published *Castes and Tribes of Bengal* and *Peoples of India*. John H. Hutton was the Census Commissioner of 1931 operation and his data on castes and communities are still considered as the most authentic and used by governments and political activists. It was J H. Hutton, who used the 'Scheduled Castes' for the communities known as such today and identified seven attributes for a caste to be so listed. The volumes on different 'provinces' were written for British administrators in a rounded manner; locations from where the data were collected were not mentioned; differences in practice were ignored within a community and efforts were made to show the distinctions between the communities. Administrators, missionaries, explorers, adventurers and petty government officials provided the data for these volumes. It is interesting to note that data on origin, food habits, religious beliefs, social practices such as marriage, dress, ornaments, industry, tools and implements and even hair-do of the communities were described to show them different from 'others'. Similarly, the photographs of the community specimens were taken from front and sides, besides sex-wise indices.

From the volumes on the 'provinces' the British descended to the level of the districts by writing district gazetteers. Apart from ethnographic

details on the communities, the gazetteers included place names, distance from one place to another, roads and communications, and even location of the dakhungalows. It is apparent that these volumes were compiled as handy information books for the travelling administrators, who were transferred frequently. Coming to the North East Frontier India, then known as Assam, communities were turbulent, hostile, raided settled habitations and were head-hunters. Like the North West Frontier Agency (NWFA), it was also considered to be difficult to be administered. For that they had evolved a two-pronged strategy: conversion to Christianity and an indirect but effective administration under 'political officers' in the hills, who were drawn either from armed forces or police service. The then Governor of Assam, Bamfylde Fuller, ordered a series of publications known as 'Ethnography of Assam' to be written by competent administrators and missionaries with long exposure to the tribes and such volumes were first edited by Major P R T Gordon and then by Dr. John H. Hutton. These monographs had a common pattern: general characteristics, domestic life, laws and customs, religion, folklore, miscellaneous, language and appendices. Over a dozen monographs written by the scholar-administrators and missionaries were published on important tribes, beginning with P R T Gordon's *The Khasis* in 1904 and ending with J P Mills' *Lotha Nagas* in 1937. In this way, Khasi, Garo, Lakher, Lushai, Angami, Sema, Rengma, Ao, Mikir, Cachari, Lotha Nagas, etc. were covered by these monographs. In fact, these monographs became the most authoritative source of information on these communities, as these were invariably the first written documents on institutions, practices and customs of the respective tribes.

In the year 1873, an Inner Line Act was passed by which tribes residing in the hills were prohibited from crossing an imaginary line to the plains. Similarly, any non-tribal missionary, explorer, traveller, businessman, wood-cutter, hunter, and honey collector was to seek written permission from competent authorities to enter such designated areas. The British intention was to safeguard the tea plantations in the plains from tribal raids. Similarly, they intended to provide security to the non-tribal entrants to the hills from the tribes and tried to see that they did not exploit the 'simple' hill communities. The Governor of the province was to administer such areas at his discretion. Present day Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram came under such dispensation. The Government of India Act, 1919 declared these areas as 'Backward Tracts' and kept them under the special power of the Governor separate from the legislative purview of the provinces. In 1935, these back-

ward tracts of Lakhimpur, Sadiya, and Balipara frontier tracts, Naga Hills District, and Lushai Hills District were termed as the 'Excluded Areas' and the Garo Hills District was clubbed among the 'partially excluded areas'. It may not be out of place to inform the readers that the Government of India appointed J P Mills, a bureaucrat trained in anthropology, as the first Tribal Advisor to the Governor of Assam in 1940s, followed by another bureaucrat, Nari K Rustomji. And for the last ten years, 1953-1963, it was Verrier Elwin, who advised the Governor of Assam on tribal affairs. Once the Constituent Assembly met for drafting the future Constitution of India, it made the provision for listing such excluded and partially excluded areas under the 'Sixth Schedule' with special dispensations.

Tribal communities attracted attention of Indian social reformers, political activists and the Hindu ascetics from western India. On the basis of their faiths, customs, institutions and living in the contiguous hilly tracts, especially in the western peninsular India, these good-doers termed the tribes as the 'backward Hindus'. On the other hand, the British administrators, missionaries, and anthropologists found the tribes in a different world altogether and as such they were to be treated separately. While the former charged the latter to have considered the tribes as museum specimen, the latter found the former absorbing the tribes under the discriminative caste-ridden Hindu system. In this context, the acrimonious debate between assimilative G S Ghurye and missionary-turned-Congress-activist-turned-ethnographer, Verrier Elwin (Elwin 1943) is relevant. Ghurye charged that Elwin followed an isolationist policy about the tribes, maintaining them as museum species for study by anthropologists (Ghurye 1943). This was a charge Elwin vehemently denied but pleaded for a slow pace of development for the tribes so that they could absorb the shock of change smoothly. It is to the credit of independent India that a rational, human and scientific tribal policy for the integration of tribes was evolved by the two great humanists, Jawaharlal Nehru and Verrier Elwin. In course of time, this policy came to be known as "Tribal Panchsheel", which contained five related aspects of tribal development and administration (Elwin 1964). The framers of the Indian Constitution were aware of the British-inspired feeling among a section of tribes that they would not get justice from the Congress regime, once the former left the Indian shore. Furthermore, they gave a commitment that in the future democratic set up the weaker segment of society such as the tribes would be accorded special dispensations to catch up with the 'others'.

III

Tribes were accorded special treatment along with the Dalits in the Indian constitution by providing special measures for their representation in the policy making bodies, creating avenues for their socio-economic advancement and taking care of their over-all welfare. They were listed for such a treatment initially for a period of ten years, which was later extended indefinitely. As resources were limited in early 1950s, welfare measures were also modest. Now, the measures for tribal welfare have increased in quantity and quality and, consequently, the quality of their life has improved, though one must hasten to add that tribes continue to remain one of the least developed segments of the Indian population. And the question still remains: Who are the tribes? What makes them distinct from other populations? Are the 'Scheduled Tribes' what anthropologists consider as tribes? Anthropologists, who have specialized on studying tribes, have advanced many definitions, which have created problems in evolving a universally acceptable definition of the people (Beteille 1974: 61-74). Beteille examines some of the definitions provided by leading anthropologists and shows that most of the definitions are either contextual to the 'tribe' under study or they refer to a list of characteristics found in the 'tribe' studied by a particular author. So much so that even the most standard and obvious source of definition gives about half a dozen meaning of the term 'tribe'. *The Oxford English Dictionary* provides the definition of 'tribe':

- (i) As synonymous with family, lineage, or even community with defined territory.
- (ii) As 'an organization of peoples along ethnic lines'.
- (iii) As 'an administrative category as in Solon's Athens'.
- (iv) As 'a political division of people as in ancient Rome'.
- (v) As 'merely a geographical or a territorial category as in the Bermudas'.
- (vi) As 'a community of peoples claiming common descent and generally practising endogamy.
- (vii) As 'a simple society guided by a headman or a chief. (Beteille 1974).

However, the inability of anthropologists to provide a comprehensive and universal definition of 'tribe' does not necessarily display their academic

inadequacy. It is also pertinent to realise that the extent, spread, variety, level of technology, and sophistication of culture are all responsible for making it difficult to define them in an acceptable way. Take the scenario from vanishing Red Indians to Arunta, Onge, Birhor, Santal, Angami, Khasi, Monpa, Bhil, etc: Is it humanly possible to include all of them in a single definition? Thus, we are forced to accept a working definition of tribe as a more or less homogenous society with a common tradition, language, and culture.

For the policy framers, the above anthropological predicament of defining the tribe was of no help, as various pressure groups were in no mood to wait for an ideal definition of tribe. They acted on the second best option they had. The Indian policy makers were aware of the 'tribal tracts', excluded and partially excluded areas. Then there were hill districts. All these regions were known to be abodes of tribes. There also were census reports in which communities were enumerated by castes and tribes. It became obvious that by 1931 census, the distinction between tribes and castes had become an issue of some importance. Tribes came to be viewed more and more in religious than in ecological terms. "If a group could be shown clearly 'Hindu' in its religious beliefs and practices, it was a caste; if it was (an) 'Animist', it had to be treated as a 'tribe' (Beteille 1974: 63). Indian society in 1940s presented a confusing array of hierarchy, economy, religiosity and ecological expanse. Demand on the political economy of the time was so pressing that special provisions had to be made. It is instructive to know that prior to terming 'tribes' as "Scheduled Tribes" in the Indian Constitution on the pattern of the 'Scheduled Castes' these communities were variously termed by the British administrators as 'primitive tribes', 'aboriginal tribes', and 'backward tribes'. However, "before promulgating the list of the Scheduled Tribes in 1950, the State Governments were requested to suggest tests for determining as to which of the tribes should be treated as Scheduled Tribes. The criteria suggested by 14 State Governments were mentioned in Appendix IV of the First Report of the Commissioner for SC & ST 1951. They offered conflicting views. However, the following appeared to be the features common to the tribes in various States: (I) tribal origin, (ii) primitive way of life and habitation in remote and less easily accessible areas, and (iii) general backwardness in all respects" (Tripathi undated). Thus, what construed as political management in the form of 'Scheduled Tribes' has to be seen in relation to the then existing politico-economic scenario of the country. Thus, it is difficult to identify a single way of satisfactory classification of 427 tribes originally listed as 'Scheduled Tribes' in 1950. The present writer

is not aware of any community being de-listed from the above, but the current list of such communities has 698 entries.

IV

The notion of Scheduled Tribes has an image of being economically backward, but it does not mean that all of them are equally and similarly backward. There are extremely vulnerable communities from economic point of view such as Birhor of Chotanagpur. Then, there are Vaisnavite tribes like the Nocte, while others are Buddhists, Christians, nature worshippers and even Muslims. They are spread from extreme north of the country, Ladakh to Andaman Islands in the south and east in Manipur to west in Rajasthan. Some of the tribes are located in only one small corner of the country, while others are spread in many states. There are tribes who number in millions and others run into hundreds. From cultural point of view, some of them have a tradition of very rich heritage and others have a simple form. Way back in 1950s, the Anthropological Survey of India conducted the 'Cultural Traits Survey of India' (Bose 1961). Some three decades later, it mapped the country from cultural and social points view through its massive project titled 'Peoples of India' and published series volumes on various states. From political points of view, Scheduled Tribes were organized in states, principalities, chieftain-ships, elders' councils, village panchayats and some other forms of administration. Sum total of the arguments is that except being listed as socially and economically the most backward communities in the country, the Scheduled Tribes have very little in common.

Coming to the North East region, its geography and recent history have conspired to give it a distinct regional identity, the region of seven sisters: Arunachal, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. All these states have sizeable presence of Scheduled Tribes within their limits. Four of them - Arunachal, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland - have more than 60 percent of their population as Scheduled Tribes. Consequently, all the parliamentary seats in these states are reserved for Scheduled Tribes. Similarly, all the seats in state assemblies except one in Arunachal, Mizoram and Nagaland and except five General Seats in Meghalaya are reserved for the Scheduled Tribes. Out of 30 seats in the Indian parliament from the region, two-thirds are reserved for them. These four tribal states are located on the international borders and tribes live in their distinct territories, which are traditionally exclusive to them. Moreover, the Indian Constitution has

guaranteed practice of their customary rights within their territories, which means no act of parliament will be automatically applicable to these states. These states get 90 percent grant-in-aid for their maintenance from the Central government. All of them have their universities funded by the Central government. With the exception of Arunchal Pradesh, literacy rate in tribal states is higher than that of the national average. In comparison to their demographic size, they are reasonably well represented in all India services compared to their counterparts from other states. The elite among them is highly westernized in their style of life and they normally imbibe western values with ease. It is their tribal sense of defiance against adverse circumstances, recent colonial history and locational advantage of being on the international boundary that give them extra advantage to negotiate favourably with the Central government.

Most of the Scheduled Tribes of North East region are small in size. That is why none of the three largest Scheduled Tribes - Bhil, Gond and Santal - is from North East and their problems are basically different, as these large tribes live side by side with the hierarchical Hindu society. Commenting in a different context, a perceptive scholar has the following to record: "The tribes of Central and Western India are completely different from tribal communities in North East, where there is better education and other facilities and indeed, where tribal political elite have been in power for 50 years, as in the case of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills, which became Meghalaya in 1972. One could remark that so-called primitiveness of the tribes is more in the Fifth Schedule states (outside the North East region), where education, political awareness and empowerment as well as health facilities are extremely poor and income levels at the bottom. The mainstreaming of these groups, where their lands have been taken over by plains settlers and others, has not really helped them very much. Indeed, it has devastated their culture, their environment and their social standing as well as their economic status" (Hazarika 2004).

V

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) proposed to formulate a National Tribal Policy (NTP) in 1999. They prepared a draft policy framework and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, released it for larger consultation early in 2004. "The National Policy recognizes that a majority of Scheduled Tribes con-

tinue to live below poverty line, have poor literacy rates, suffer from malnutrition and disease and are vulnerable to displacement” (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2004). The draft aims at each of these problems in a concrete way. For tribals’ formal education, they desired to introduce Sarva Siksha Abhiyan. With a view to improving the health of the tribes they intended to introduce allopathy at the cost of inexpensive tribal and indigenous medicines. On displacement and resettlement, the NTP did not promise any relief. About 5000 forest villages were to be converted into revenue villages as per the draft, creating possibilities for exploitation of this extremely vulnerable segment. It is proposed to grant tenure system on the land meant for shifting cultivation. No guarantee has been proposed against land alienation from the Scheduled Tribes. Patronizing steps have been suggested for the upliftment of the ‘Primitive Tribal Groups’ (PTGs). Tribal Advisory Councils are to be strengthened in the Scheduled Areas. And “with a view to tribal assimilation into country’s mainstream, geographical isolation shall be minimized through development of roads, transport and means of communication and provision of concessional travel facility.”

On September 21, 2004 a national assembly of ‘Tribal, Indigenous and Adivasi Peoples of India’ met in New Delhi and rejected the draft National Tribal Policy out-rightly and noted that the language of the draft was offensive, patronizing and derogatory to their traditions. In a declaration the tribal assembly recorded that “the draft lacks consistency and is not clear on the recognition of rights to ancestral land and natural resources of the tribal people. The draft does not guarantee enough protection against forced relocation and eviction, and adequate provision for rehabilitation. There is also no recognition, protection or promotion of their customary laws, practices and their governance systems; nor of their approach to health and system of healing” (Asha 2004). The most important omission in the NTP is silence on the increasing alienation of the tribal people from their land and livelihood systems. The Tribal National Assembly identified two non-negotiable principles for their future: fundamental respect of differences and recognition of the natural, socio-economic, cultural and political rights of the tribal communities. It has very little to offer to the self-contained tribal systems against the onslaught of the forces of globalization. The Government of India, confronted with the opposition, promised on October 15, 2004 to come out with an alternative: “The government will soon formulate a policy for welfare of tribals in the country and is currently examining various suggestions on its draft” (*The Asian Age*, October 16, 2004).

It is patently absurd to treat the 67.8 million strong Scheduled Tribes representing 8.08 percent of Indian population spread among 698 communities as a single category and recommend a policy to be implemented. In fact, many of the tribes are as 'advanced' and 'developed' as the so-called mainstream societies. And that is one reason why the language of the draft has been termed as offensive and derogatory. If the Ministry of Tribal Affairs is serious about a National Tribal Policy, it should first separate the states falling under the Fifth Schedule from that of the states covered under the Sixth Schedule and make specific recommendations for each state. Similarly, there used to be an Island Authority in 1980s with a view to understanding the specific socio-cultural problems of people and territories falling in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian sea. One would like to know what happened to the recommendations of that Authority. Issue of the Buddhist communities listed as the Scheduled Tribes from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh is entirely different. Same is the case with the small and divided frontier tribal communities located on the eastern international boundaries of the country. Their problems have further been aggravated by their locational disadvantage. What type of policy 'specifics' can be recommended for the rainforest-dwelling tribes and nomadic desert tribes of Rajasthan?

VI

The Scheduled Tribes of North East region are at a different level compared to their counter parts from Central and Western regions of the country. With the exception of problems of transportation and communication, they are better off in every branch of life compared to even the general population elsewhere. They ruled over four states and have produced innumerable chief ministers, a number of Governors, ambassadors, one speaker to the Lok Sabha, one Chief Election Commissioner, one chairperson of the Union Public Service Commission, and many other dignitaries, who have played significant roles in the Indian national life. They have been able to carve out an image of their own on the national psyche. With the exception of Tripura, rest of the six states of the region has successfully wrested Central universities from the Union Government. They have more per capita medical doctors, engineers, contractors and politicians than other Indian states. It does not mean that every tribe of the region has developed or transported to a much higher standard of living by availing the various state-sponsored provisions. However, it is argued that after more than five decades of preferential treatment accorded to the Scheduled Tribes of North East India, it is impera-

tive to take stock of the performance of the relevant constitutional provisions. Has the preferential treatment accorded to the tribes produced the desired results? Have some of them benefited out of the policy of reservation? If yes, who represent the 'creamy layers' among them and how long should they continue to avail the advantages of the constitutional provisions supposedly granted to the under-privileged communities? Should there be a mechanism to identify and de-list them or should it be left to their conscience and wisdom? In case these provisions have not rendered desired results, should such a policy continue indefinitely at an enormous cost to a poor country like ours?

I have a four decade long association with North East region and nearly three decade long experience of living among the warm, frank, chivalrous, self-effaced, proud and hard working tribesmen of the region. I have been a witness to their struggle, success, failure, achievements, lapses, sorrows and celebrations to a certain extent. I have also some exposure to the tribal life of the Central (in and around Ranchi, where I studied) and Western India (in and around Ahmedabad, where I worked), where the bulk of such people live. I have had the privilege of working among the two largest tribes of the country, Santal and Bhil. There are individuals among them, who have excelled in many walks of life. But I am not yet able to persuade myself to identify common grounds between Santals and Angamis. They stand in contrast to one another, and they are not exceptions. I feel that a comparison between the tribal situation in Northeast and elsewhere in the country is urgently due to take stock of the direction in which constitutional provisions have worked. As a citizen of the country, all of us should be aware of the cost-benefit analysis of the preferential treatment accorded by the Indian Constitution.

In this paper I began with the problems of defining the 'tribe' and talked about the colonial context of the term and the British ethnic policy in India. Second, I talked about the role of anthropology as a tool to understanding the tribes and approaches to tribal problems in India. Third, I have talked about the Draft National Tribal Policy and reaction of the tribes against it. And lastly, I have found the tribal situation in North East India entirely different from the tribal world of the Central and Western India. I do not hesitate to say that I find it difficult to accept many communities from the North East region in the list of Scheduled Tribes along with others from elsewhere in the country. For example, what is common between most of the tribes of Northeast and the tribes of Andaman Islands (Great Andamanese

numbering 40, Jarwas numbering 250, Onge numbering 150 and Sentinelese 100 in 2001 census of India)? Or, for that matter, Birhors of Jharkhand and Gujjars or Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh?

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