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## Tribals in India: A Challenge to Theology

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**Abstract:** After studying the same set of Indian tribals twice, the first time in the 1940s and again three decades later, the Austrian anthropologist Haimendorf<sup>1</sup> was stunned by the difference thirty years had made to them. During the first study these communities were self-reliant, their economic status was better than that of many of their Hindu neighbours, and women among them enjoyed more freedom than their high caste counterparts did. But by the 1970s, they required poverty alleviation programmes. So the scholar asks: “Why do these communities that were self-reliant till recently need poverty alleviation programmes today? Why have women among them suffered more than the rest?” The theologian will then be a partner with the tribals and other marginalised communities in the search for a pattern of development that combines industrial development with a social infrastructure. The categories which have till now been excluded from the benefits of development have to be given priority in the form of education, health, nutrition and other inputs that can help them to encounter other groups as equals and not as suppliers of cheap raw material and labour as they are today. The livelihood of the tribals and their value system can be the starting point in this common search.

**Keywords:** Adivasis, Tribals, Tribal identity, Forest, Ecology

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## **Tribals in India: A Challenge to Theology**

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After studying the same set of Indian tribals twice, the first time in the 1940s and again three decades later, the Austrian anthropologist Haimendorf<sup>1</sup> was stunned by the difference thirty years had made to them. During the first study these communities were self-reliant, their economic status was better than that of many of their Hindu neighbours, and women among them enjoyed more freedom than their high caste counterparts did. But by the 1970s, they required poverty alleviation programmes. So the scholar asks: "Why do these communities that were self-reliant till recently need poverty alleviation programmes today? Why have women among them suffered more than the rest?"

One can ask similar questions about other recent events like the Narmada Bachao Andolan's efforts to create public opinion against a project that will deprive over a lakh persons, two thirds of them tribals, of their livelihood,<sup>2</sup> the Jharkhand movement in Chotanagpur,<sup>3</sup> the anti-land alienation agitation in the South, the Bodoland struggle in the Northeast and similar conflicts elsewhere.

These and other struggles have brought into focus the impoverishment of Indian tribals through deforestation, displacement and other types of dispossession. They have come to symbolise

many other struggles elsewhere in India against the type of national development that dispossesses the tribals and other eco-system dependent communities. They pay the price of national development whose benefits reach another class. Even the benefits of the poverty alleviation programmes that are planned after impoverishing them reach only the money-lenders and the middlemen. The struggles also symbolise the tribal search for a new identity at a time when they are feeling alienated from their habitat because of the threat to the natural resources around which they had built their cultural, economic, social, religious and political structures.

Their marginalisation as well as struggles are a challenge to the Indian theologian if theology is understood as a search in the footsteps of Jesus who exercised His ministry in Galilee, considered the land of the despised, barbarous, gentile people.<sup>4</sup> In the present paper, therefore, we shall make an effort to study this search for a new identity in the context of the ongoing dispossession of the tribals, and reflect on it in a spirit of faith.

### **1. Forests and Tribals**

The first feature of tribal culture is that their communities are natural resource, or more specifically, forest dependent. A large number of them lived

in a culture of community property resources (CPRs), not individual *patta* land. Around 90% of the 70 million Indian tribals are forest dwellers. This habitat of theirs has, for centuries, met most of their food, medicinal, fodder and other needs. To ensure its renewability and protection, they developed a culture of sustainable forest and other natural resource management. Their customs, myths and social control mechanisms were geared to keeping a balance between human needs and ecological imperatives. Their natural resource management system attended both to intra-generational and inter-generational equity.<sup>5</sup>

In theological terms, this culture symbolises respect for and preservation of the creation of God, to the benefit of all His people, not for the overconsumption of a few as is the case today. Their impoverishment is also a witness to the fact of environmental degradation being an integral part of today's unjust national and international economic order.<sup>6</sup> Their marginalisation, that ensues from this order, turns the tribal issue into an ethical challenge.

This change began with the colonial Government declaring forests State Property. This legislation deprived the forest dwellers of all legal rights over their livelihood and over their habitat of several centuries. It turned forests into a source of revenue for the State and of timber for the railways and ship building. This process of alienation of their livelihood has got intensified after independence in the name of national development. While continuing to be a source of revenue for the State, forests

became a raw material for industry to produce consumer goods for the middle class. In an industrialisation and GNP (Gross National Product) growth based pattern of development that downgrades social justice and the environment, the industrialist was provided all possible subsidies. Little attention was paid either to the tribal or to the forest.<sup>7</sup> Its result is that between 1952 and 1980, India's forest cover came down from around 70 million hectares to about 35 million hectares. Today all the forest and non-forest tree cover is put at around 13%.<sup>8</sup>

Thus began the vicious circle of tribal impoverishment, indebtedness, land alienation, bondage and destructive dependence on the forest. Since forests were their habitat, before the arrival of the commercial elements the tribals were not adequately in contact with the world outside, and were not equipped to encounter the "mainstream" formal economy. Some of their communities belonged to the first generation of a monetary economy. As such, they were unable to cope with the sudden change that descended on them with the industrialist entering their area. So their encounter became one between power and powerlessness.<sup>9</sup> They thus came to be indebted to the money-lenders and merchants who accompanied the industrial agent. In many cases they lost, and, in others, mortgaged their land to the money-lenders.<sup>10</sup>

A large number of them became bonded labourers. Consequent upon their marginalisation, many resorted to destructive practices such as cutting trees for sale as firewood or for timber

under contractors. There has thus been an enormous increase in the number of families depending on the sale of firewood for a living. For example, in our study in Orissa, in a sample of 272 families, the number depending on the sale of firewood had gone up from 18 in the early 1960s to 77 in 1983. Similar were our findings in Chattisgarh in Eastern Madhya Pradesh.<sup>11</sup> According to estimates, there are over five million headloaders in the country.<sup>12</sup> To the tribals who had developed a tradition of sustainable development, such a destructive measure is the last survival option in the absence of any other.

## **2. Tribals and Development-Induced Displacement**

Displacement for development projects like dams, mines, industries and wild-life sanctuaries is the second major source of ongoing tribal impoverishment and marginalisation. They live in resource rich regions. Around 90% of minerals like coal, bauxite and uranium, and around 40% of iron and copper ore are in the areas they inhabit.<sup>13</sup> India's industrialisation drive depends on the exploitation of these resources. In other cases, they live in the catchment or submergence areas of major and medium dams.

Its consequence is displacement for development projects. No official information exists on the numbers displaced (DPs) or those deprived of their livelihood without being physically displaced (PAPs). According to research estimates their number exceeds 300 lakhs,<sup>14</sup> at least 40% of them tribals.<sup>15</sup> In other words, around 20% of all Indian tribals have been

displaced at least once, fewer than a quarter of them resettled partially. The rest have been impoverished and have often become bonded labourers. Besides, a much bigger number of PAPs is deprived of their livelihood through the acquisition of the CPRs that are considered State Property. As such, the tribals get no benefit from the project that deprives them of their livelihood, not even compensation.<sup>16</sup>

According to our study in Orissa about 15 lakh persons have thus been displaced or otherwise deprived of their livelihood between 1951 and 1995, in that State alone. Of them, 42% are tribals. Only around 32% of all the DPs and fewer than 25% of tribal DPs have been resettled partially.<sup>17</sup> Besides, forest and other land taken over for development projects runs into hundreds of thousands of hectares. For example, over 23.62 lakh acres have been taken over for all the projects in Orissa, 1951-1995. Around 30% of it, or 7.13 lakh acres are forests and about 20% or 6.61 lakhs revenue land. Much of it is tribal livelihood.<sup>18</sup> According to one estimate,<sup>19</sup> around 4.5 million hectares of forest land have been acquired for development projects since 1951. Since the colonial law, that is still in vogue, denies CPR dependants all legal rights over their livelihood, they are deprived of them for an as yet undefined public purpose, without any compensation.<sup>20</sup>

The two units of the National Aluminium Corporation in Orissa are examples of the immensity of this injustice. In the first, situated in upper caste dominated Angul, only 18% of the land acquired was common, mostly roads,

schools and tanks. In the second unit at Damanjodi in the tribal majority Koraput district, about 60 per cent of land acquired was CPRs. Besides, being administratively neglected, the tribal areas are considered backward. As a result, they get a very low compensation for the little *patta* land they own. For example, in Angul the land owners received an average compensation of Rs. 25,000 per acre while at Damanjodi it was Rs. 2,700.<sup>21</sup> Similar examples can be given from other tribal areas too.

Equally important is the fact that often their habitat is chosen in preference to upper caste dominated regions, apparently on the assumption that being powerless, tribals are unable to resist their displacement. That, for example, is the case of the proposed Military Test Firing Range at Netarhat. It was to be located in Gaya where an already existing smaller base was to be expanded. But the big farmers of the region, some of whose land would have been taken over for it, resisted it. The Range was, therefore, shifted to Netarhat in tribal Jharkhand. The official reason given was that Gaya has many places of religious and historical importance and that it would displace many people. The assumption seems to be that the tribal places of worship are not of much significance and their history does not matter. Besides, Netarhat has a population of 238,000 of which 80% of them tribals. Their powerlessness seems to be the main reason for this decision.

Apart from the injustice of being displaced without their consent, a result of low compensation or lack of it, and

the failure to resettle them is that the tribals are unable to begin a new life after being thus dispossessed. As a result of the impoverishment and bondage that ensue, they resort to destructive practices like cutting trees for sale as firewood or migrate to the urban slums. These are the only survival options they are left with.<sup>22</sup> But to the middle class that gets the benefits of their impoverishment, they are a problem. The tribals who are resorting to these survival options, come to be considered destroyers of the environment, by the class that is at the root of their alienation.

### 3. Alienation and Dispossession

Impoverishment by deforestation and displacement is an integral part of their dispossession. Land alienation is a logical consequence. India has two types of citizens. Those in occupation of revenue land may claim ownership over it after twelve years. But those living on forest land can never get its ownership even though their ancestors might have been in its possession for centuries before the colonial forest and land laws came into force.<sup>23</sup> A large number of tribals belong to the latter category. Forests account for more than 50% of their food and most other requirements of many of their communities. But the colonial law that is in vogue even today continues to treat them as encroachers and denies them the very possibility of their ever owning their habitat.

Even when they own *patta* land, the process of impoverishment mentioned above forces them to sell or mortgage much of it. In other instances the

land they have cultivated for generations is encroached upon, at times with the encouragement of the Government. For example, in the tribal areas of Gudalur in Tamil Nadu, through an agreement, the Nilambur Maharaja handed over to the tribal community, for cultivation in perpetuity, what is known as *poromboke* land belonging to him. In the 1950s the Tamil Nadu Government abrogated this agreement unilaterally. So the land they were cultivating came to be considered Government property, with the tribals losing all legal rights over it. Anyone considered capable of growing more food was encouraged to occupy it. As a result, this land has since been taken over by non-tribal settlers from Kerala, who were encouraged by the Government during the "Grow More Food" campaign of the 1960s. Almost all the tribals have thus lost their land to the settlers and have become bonded labourers.<sup>24</sup>

At times dispossession takes place through connivance between the officials and locally powerful persons. For example, the Land Acquisition Act, 1894, enacted for a colonial objective, empowers the Government to acquire private land for a public purpose. But the "public purpose" is yet to be defined even a century later.<sup>25</sup> So, often the project authorities take over much more land than is required and later sell it for a profit or use it for purposes other than the project, often to the benefit of their relatives.<sup>26</sup>

In many instances, the encroachers belonging to powerful communities, do not allow land laws to be implemented. For example, in the tribal re-

gions of Wynad in Kerala, several hundreds of acres of tribal land was taken over by the Government in 1956, with a promise that it would be developed into a plantation and returned to them after five years. It is yet to be returned to them. A part of it has been given to non-tribals. Besides, a large number of settlers have occupied thousands of acres of tribal land in the Wynad and Idukki districts of Kerala. In many cases the original owners have become bonded labourers. In 1975 the Kerala Legislature passed a law stipulating that the land thus encroached upon be returned to the tribals. It is yet to be implemented because the settlers are a powerful vote bank and the tribals are powerless. In 1996 the Kerala High Court ruled that the law be implemented without delay. Instead of going by this ruling, the Legislature amended the law, making it applicable to land occupied after 1986 instead of 1970 as it was earlier. Most land was occupied in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>27</sup> Because of pressure from the tribals, the President of India refused his signature to the amended bill. But there is no sign that the law will be implemented.

Such powerlessness can be noticed also in other States. In Orissa, more than a third of the tribals have lost their land to non-tribals, through a similar process. When impoverishment forces the man to migrate out of the area in search of jobs, the locally powerful persons exploit the woman's powerlessness, to encroach on her land. In other cases, because of impoverishment, the officials act in connivance with the locally powerful persons and change the records in their favour.<sup>28</sup> Maharashtra

has a "land for land" scheme for irrigation project DPs. In reality, only 30% of those entitled to it have been given land. They include more than 40% of the non-tribals and fewer than 15% of the tribals.<sup>29</sup>

There is little that the tribals can do since they do not have access to the official machinery which, more often than not, goes against them. For example, even according to official estimates 180,000 acres of tribal land in the scheduled areas of Andhra Pradesh has been encroached upon by non-tribals. According to researchers the area thus alienated was more than 600,000 acres in 1988. But instead of enforcing the law that disallows sale of land in the scheduled areas to non-tribals, in 1988 the State Government tried to regularise this encroachment. The Tribal Advisory Council comprising of all the tribal legislators, whose consent is required for this change, was pressurised into accepting it.<sup>30</sup> This measure was abandoned only because of resistance from the tribals.

#### **4. Challenge to Theologians**

We have given above a few instances of the process of tribal dispossession. We have also seen that what is called national development has in reality become a mode of transferring the resources of the poor to the rich. In that sense economic colonialism that is the norm at the international level, continues in another form also within the country. Internationally, the resources of the poor countries are transferred to the rich countries in order to keep up their life-style based on overconsumption. The middle and upper classes

within our country continue the same process. Using the access they have to all the services, these classes appropriate the resources for themselves, and further impoverish the already poor, particularly the tribals and the Dalits.

This situation is a challenge to theologians to join all persons of good will in finding a response to the degradation of the already powerless. Basic to this process is the powerlessness of the tribals and the pattern of development that is geared to building a physical or industrial infrastructure but not to the good of all. A major issue in this debate is environmental degradation. However, not all perceive it in the same manner. There are at least two distinct trends around the environment.

The first is the predominantly Euro-American view accepted by a large number of Indian middle class environmentalists. They perceive ecological imbalance as water and air pollution and destruction of plants and trees. Their task, then, is to save the natural world<sup>31</sup> which is presented by some theologians as restoring the creation of God. These environmentalists do not question the unjust economy and the consumerist society that are basic to environmental degradation and the impoverishment of the eco-system dependants. So often they try to restore nature at the cost of the people, as one can see in many recent Supreme Court judgements on the environment.

The second is the view of those who regard the environment as people who depend on it for a livelihood. For centuries these communities have kept a balance between human and

ecological needs, through a culture that ensures inter- and intra- generational equity and assigns a more important place to women than the “mainstream” societies do, without their being equal to men. This school of thought views the present environmental imbalance as the result of over-exploitation of the resources to meet the needs of a small minority.<sup>32</sup> In this perspective, restoration of the environment is linked to a change in life-styles and to justice to the communities that are being marginalised by the unjust economy.<sup>33</sup>

A theologian can make a choice depending on his/her view of creation and nature. Those who view the natural world predominantly as something to be conquered and dominated present their thinking as the interpretation of Gen 1, 28 “be masters of the earth and conquer it”. In this perspective, the world was the wilderness of little value, waiting to be controlled by human beings. This ideology became the basis not merely of the conquest of nature but also of peoples. Colonialism and the conquest of peoples were often legitimised by pointing to the conquest of their habitat that was presented as being ready to be tamed by human beings: as an integral part of the colonial “civilising education,” not as economic exploitation of the people who depended on it.<sup>34</sup> It was essentially an ethno-centric view of the world. The “civilised” western human being was its centre and the rest of the world belonged to its periphery.

It is Western Christianity that has taught us to see ourselves as the centre of things with the right, even the duty, to conquer, subdue and have dominion

over nature. Early scientific thought reinforced this view of ourselves, by seeing the earth as the centre of the universe, with the planets, the stars and the sun all circling round it.<sup>35</sup>

This view has been basic to the exploitation of the tribals in India. They are commonly presented as people who love dance and music and inhabit the wilderness. An implication of this stereotype is that they are easy going, not hard working and as such not capable of conquering the earth. Those who claim to work hard and can conquer the world according to the Genesis mandate, would then have a right to acquire their resources and develop them. Their habitat can be claimed by the “civilising elements” who are ready to “develop” and maximise its potential. What Sachs states about the international economy is equally true in what concerns the tribal:<sup>36</sup>

Up until recently, the burden of the unification of the world had nearly exclusively to be carried by the people of the Southern hemisphere. Starting with the plague killing millions of Aztecs and Mayas, right after the white person's arrival ... whichever achievements have been brought to the last corner of the globe by the gradual integration of the world, they shrink into insignificance in the face of the bitter consequences which come along with it. By comparison, the countries of the North were able to corner the gains of the unification of the world on their side ... the rise of the West has in part been fuelled by the riches drained from the South through the network of global interconnections.<sup>37</sup>



#### 4.1. Environment as People

While this view dominated the world, there was an equally important, though marginal, view of the role of nature. It found its base in the prophetic trend of the Bible, as given in Ps 8,3-4:

I look up at your heavens, made  
by your fingers,  
At the moon and stars you set in  
place,  
Ah, what is man that you should  
spare a thought for him,  
The son of man that you should  
care for him.

In contrast to the trend to conquer nature, this school tried to “save the earth”. But there are two distinct views even in this. Some look at the earth as the natural world. Many of them give to the earth created by God precedence over human beings, without looking at the political and economic aspect of the use of the natural resources. They rarely question the unjust economic order.

Another school has realised that the causes of injustice have to be remedied. They view the environment as the creation of God with the human being at its centre. The God they believe in is the One who came to make all things new (Rev 1, 5). This renewal makes no sense to them unless the sinful social system is healed. If this perspective is forgotten, there is every danger of further destroying the environment in the name of protecting the natural heritage understood as the creation of God. For example, most European and other OECD countries keep a third of their territory under forests, proclaimed as the creation of God. But they do not reduce their use of timber products. In-

stead, they destroy forests in Africa, Asia and Latin America, in order to save their woods. Indian nature-oriented environmentalists, taking a cue from the West, attempt to do the same. They want nature to be protected and not the people who have ensured its renewability for centuries. The eco-system dependent communities, predominantly tribals in India, are the main victims of this approach. They are often deprived of their livelihood in order to protect the natural heritage.

#### 4.2. The Theologian's Response

Theology has to respond to this process of destruction of nature and marginalisation of the tribals and other eco-system dependent people. In doing so, the first task of the theologian is to acknowledge the role that Christendom has played in the past, and reflect on our role today from the point of view of the victims of development, more specifically the tribals who are paying the price of national development. The theologian needs to reflect also on the environment from the perspective of those depending on nature directly.

As a step towards it, the theologian has to rethink the meaning of the creation of God and situate the tribals within the context of those who have lived the concept of sustainable and just management of what God has put at the disposal of His people. Their communities, women in particular, are now being turned into victims of the development of the powerful. When they resort to the destructive option, that being the only one available to them, they are termed enemies of the creation of God.

So the second task is to play the prophetic role of acknowledging the sinfulness of this pattern of development that denies to the tribals and other poor, the fundamental right to life with dignity which is enshrined in the Indian Constitution under Article 21. The theologian has to join those who are searching for a pattern of development that accords primacy to the people to whom the world belongs and views GNP growth as subordinate to it.

Within this perspective, a theology has to be developed, based on a community ethos and on nature as the creation of God that is meant to be shared by all. Creation is meant for the need of everyone and not greed that is destroying the world and impoverishing communities that depend on it. In this search, the theologian has to get away from the temptation to romanticise the tribals as communities having answers to all the problems of the world. Their culture developed within a certain socio-economic context and may not be able to respond to all the problems we are facing today. They too have a right to change. In the name of the creation of God they cannot be kept as museum pieces. But in theologising, it is important to understand the value system on which their culture was based. These values of equity and renewability are basic, not the practices that can change.<sup>38</sup>

The search for alternatives will depend on these values that are also the

perspective of the biblical jubilee. The management of the creation of God can then be understood according to this value system. For example, forests and other CPRs are today managed on the basis of the right of the powerful. The existing law is supportive of this trend. The management of human resources has to change from the perspective of human development and the concept of a partnership of equals. A genuine community forestry and other natural resource management systems have to be introduced, to keep a balance between the livelihood of the local communities, national development and ecological imperatives. The theologian will have to search for a religious basis within the value system of the tribal management system.

## 5. Conclusion

The theologian will then be a partner with the tribals and other marginalised communities in the search for a pattern of development that combines industrial development with a social infrastructure. The categories which have till now been excluded from the benefits of development have to be given priority in the form of education, health, nutrition and other inputs that can help them to encounter other groups as equals and not as suppliers of cheap raw material and labour as they are today. The livelihood of the tribals and their value system can be the starting point in this common search.

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