Chapter
9

Tribal Culture and Ecology: The Changing Dimensions

Ecology is a study of the relationship between organisms and their environment. The concern in sociology with ecology has to do with the relationship between human beings and their environment. Human beings live in groups distinct from one another in respect of their social structure and culture. Hence, the focus in sociology is invariably on the relationship between groups or communities and their natural environments. This relationship is twofold. The culture of a group or community is shaped by the environment. At the same time, human beings too have an impact on the environment. The relationship between the two is far from uniform. There are countries where the relationship is balanced and others where it is exploitative. The same is the case in respect of regions and groups or communities within a given country. India is no exception to this.

Rapid advances have been made at the cost of natural resources. The greater the development, the greater the destruction of natural resources. Increasing realization of the danger of unchecked ecological and environmental damage has prompted a renewed interest in the conservation of the environment, and even its regeneration. The development of environment-friendly technology requires enormous resources, which only the rich and industrialized nations possess. Further, such technology is still in the nascent stage of development. At the present stage, the major thrust of the development agenda is the preservation of the natural environment. Hence, techniques based on traditional knowledge systems are being sought. That partly explains the renewed interest in the study of tribal people. After all, tribal people are seen as living in relative harmony with the natural environment. The interest in tribal people is thus not so much as people but insofar as they contribute to the maintenance of the natural order. The social and cultural practices by which they relate to the environment and preserve natural resources have come to be one of the major interests in environmental and ecological study (Hebbar 1995).This is abetted by the fact that social and cultural practices and values associated with developed societies have come to be linked with comfort and luxury, which people in these societies are not ready to sacrifice even though they recognize the importance of maintaining the natural environment. Rather, more often than not, they tend to pursue an agenda of exploiting the natural environment, the cost of which they are not interested in bearing but which they want other people, namely the tribals, to bear. This is the case in India, as the discussion below will show.

The way in which tribes have been conceptualized has a great deal to do a with their physical, social, and cultural proximity with nature. Tribes have thus been defined as those who live in simple or primitive conditions, primarily dependent on nature for their survival and livelihood. They have been seen as having a symbiotic relationship with nature. Even deserts, where pastoral tribes lived, were seen as having formed cul-de-sacs, ensuring thereby the physical and cultural survival of the communities (Roy Burman 1993: 180). Tribals are seen to have traditionally balanced their needs with ecological imperatives. They preserved forests as a resource for posterity, it has been argued. They had what Fernandes calls a constructive dependence on forests and other natural resources. However, as a result of the vicious cycle initiated by industrial clear felling and displacement for development projects, there has been a transition to destructive dependence on natural resources (Fernandes 1993: 48).

The relationship of tribes with nature can be explored in two ways. The first is the way in which nature and the environment are articulated and represented in riddles, stories, myths, legends, feasts, and festivals. The focus here is on the way in which the environment is articulated and represented in the cultural domain. The second is examining the ways in which the tribes relate with nature and the environment in their day-to-day existence, that is, the existential conditions of their living. These dimensions are explored in the following discussion.

Tribes in India, though at different stages of development, still live primarily off the land and forests. Some tribes are still practice food-gathering and hunting, and depend exclusively on the forest for their survival. In administrative parlance and practice, they are defined as 'primitive' tribes. Since the Fifth Five Year Plan period, the government has identified 75 such tribal groups in India. The number continues to be the same even after more than three decades of special development projects meant for them. The majority of tribal groups are agriculturists. They practice two kinds of agriculture, settled agriculture and shifting cultivation. Shifting cultivation is most widespread in north-eastern India. In other parts of the country, some tribes inhabiting the areas adjoining the states of Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh practice shifting cultivation. Needless to say, shifting cultivation is linked with forest clearance. The more prevalent form of agriculture among tribes is the same one practiced by non-tribal populations, namely settled agriculture. The only difference is that tribals even then depend on forests for a large part of their needs. Hence, despite being settled agriculturists, their dependence on forests is considerable, which is not the case with non-tribal agriculturists.

Existential Dependence

The tribals' dependence on nature is evident from their daily livelihood needs, beginning with food. Their food habits are intimately linked with their relationship to nature. The staple diet of settled agriculturist tribes consists of rice, dal, and vegetables. Yet what is striking is that leaves, flowers, seeds, roots, and fruit form an integral part of their daily diet. These are procured from the forest. Only a few are cultivated by the tribes themselves. A study has shown that the Oraon tribes eat the leaves of about 21 common native plants. The number of common native plants consumed by the Oraons either whole or in part (flowers, roots, seeds, and fruit) is considerable. In all, 87 common native plants feature in the diet of the Oraon tribes (Kujur 1989). Hoffman (1950) enumerates 71 different wild plants used by the Mundas as pot-herbs, 26 of whose tubers, fruit, and roots are used as vegetables, 15 trees and shrubs whose young leaves are used as pot-herbs, 10 others whose leaves are eaten raw, and 25 wild

trees and plants whose flowers are used as vegetables. He also lists 17 cultivated tubers and roots that are used as food, 28 plants cultivated for other purposes and used also as pot-herbs, and 14 plants cultivated as pot-herbs (Fernandes 1993: 49). In regions where shifting cultivation is practiced, food-value trees and plants along with shifting cultivation constitute more than 50 per cent of the food. It is estimated that at least 50 per cent of the food requirements of tribes are satisfied by produce from forests; some scholars place the figure as high as 80 per cent (Fernandes 1993: 48).

Besides food, tribals are also dependent on forests for construction material for their huts or houses and for raw material for tools and implements required for daily economic and household activities. In the case of tribes dependent on hunting, fishing, and food gathering, shelters are generally of a very elementary nature; poles, frames, and roofing materials are all obtained from the forest. The houses of agriculturist tribes generally have mud walls and tiled or thatched roofs, but even among them there is considerable use of bamboo and timber as poles and frames. They are also dependent on the forest for their daily tools and implements. Agricultural implements like ploughs and yokes, devices used for lifting water for irrigation, and threshing and winnowing tools are all made from materials obtained from the forest. That is also the case with tools and weapons required for hunting, fishing, and food gathering. Hunting implements such as bows and arrows, slings, and spears are made from forest produce. Similarly, fishing tools such as baskets and traps of various kinds are made of bamboo. Fishing nets are made of twines. Umbrellas are made with the handles and ribs of bamboo covered with leaves. Hooded waterproof coats are made of leaves (*gungu*). Most tribal households have items such as paddy-husking contraptions, mats, cots, wooden stools, baskets, cups, plates, cushions, ropes, mortar and pestles, and oil presses, all of which are made from forest produce. Even art objects, artifacts, musical instruments, and ornaments are made from forest produce. In fact, the whole material culture of tribes is rooted in the tribal people's dependence on forests and forest produce. Their ties with forests cannot be severed without destroying their entire way of life.

Knowledge of the treatment of diseases is another sphere where we find a close relation between the tribal communities and their environment. Treatment of diseases is invariably based on the use of medicinal herbs found in forests and adjoining areas. The Oraons use such medicines to treat about 34 diseases, including remedies for pain (headache, toothache, stomachache, eye pain, ear pain, and migraine), fever (high, ordinary, malaria), wounds, constipation, diarrhoea, dysentery, epilepsy, rheumatism, insomnia, tetanus, and eczema. These are treated with medicines derived from the leaves, roots, and barks of plants and trees that grow wild in the jungle. Some of these are cultivated in fields by tribal people (Kujur 1989: 138–44). In a study on Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, Fernandes and his colleagues identified 40 trees and more than 50 herbs used for medicinal purposes in these areas. A study of tribal medicine in Kerala identified at least 39 species of roots, 15 of fruit, 30 of leaves, 12 of bark, and many kinds of latex, flowers, and other plants and herbs in common use (Fernandes 1993: 51).

In addition to being the very source of their identity and way of life, tribals and other forest dwellers derive a large portion of their monetary income and livelihood from forests. One of these sources of income is firewood. It is no wonder that state and forest department officials have accused tribes of destroying forests. However, this is a recent development. The main source of income for the large majority of tribals is not firewood but what is described in administrative records as minor forest produce (MFP). Scholars and activists, however, criticize the use of such a description, arguing that for tribals this is not a minor but

a major source of income. Hence, they prefer the term non-wood forest produce (NWFP). Some of the major NWFP includes lac, kath, bamboo, and leaves such as tendu, keond, sal, and gungu. The mahua flower and fruit are also important sources of income for tribals. Needless to say, non-timber produce has different values in different places and regions. The collection, processing, and sale of NWFP and firewood provide several days of employment for tribals (Fernandes 1993).

Another mode of dependence on forests is slash and burn or shifting cultivation, which is widely practiced in the hill regions of north-eastern India. The practice is more popularly known as jhoom. This agricultural or livelihood practice is also followed by some tribes in certain pockets of eastern and central India. Jhoom has come under sharp criticism from development planners and environmentalists, who argue that the practice of shifting cultivation destroys forest wealth by causing deforestation. They suggest that tribes should be advised to switch over to either terraced cultivation or horticulture. The arguments and suggestions are made, however, without giving adequate and careful attention to the problem. As Misra says, if deforestation is the argument, it has to be shown that more forests are needed, that forest-growing is more profitable than crop-growing, that growing forests is cheaper, and that a market for forests exists. Alternatively, it has to be shown that cultivable land either exists or is available elsewhere or that gainful employment for forest dwellers in other occupations is feasible.

Another related criticism is that shifting cultivation leads to soil erosion. However, even this argument, as Misra puts it, is made without examining whether the rate of soil formation is less than that of soil erosion, or if soil erosion stops without jhooming, or, alternatively, if horticulture and terrace agriculture prevent erosion, land is fit for terraced cultivation and jhooming, however long the jhoom cycle may be, (Misra 1976: 80–84). Those who subscribe to the view that shifting cultivation results in soil erosion will find it disquieting to learn that shifting cultivation is, in fact, a response of the tribal people of the hill areas to the problem of erosion of fertile soil located on steep slopes. In this regard, M.S. Sivaraman, Adviser to the Programme Administration of the Planning Commission, made a perceptive observation as early as 1957. He wrote:

> It is a mistake to assume that shifting cultivation in itself is unscientific land use. Actually, it is a practical approach to certain inherent difficulties in preparing a proper seedbed on steep slopes where any disturbance of the surface by hoeing or ploughing will result in the washing away of the fertile topsoil. The tribal people therefore take care not to plough or disturb the soil before sowing. The destruction of weeds and improvement of tilth necessary for a proper seedbed are achieved with the help of fire (quoted in Bhowmik 1976: 8).

Chaturvedi and Uppal (1953) argue that the widely held notion that shifting cultivation is mainly responsible for large-scale soil erosion needs to be dispelled. Rather, it is to be seen as an agricultural practice that evolved in response to the physiographical character of the land (Bhowmik 1976: 7–8). They further state that a fairly well-distributed annual rainfall of more than 100 inches, high levels of humidity, and the peninsular character of rock formation provide the climatic and soil conditions conducive to the growth of vegetation that no sooner is a patch of ground left to itself than it is rapidly covered with a thick blanket of vegetation. The only time when the soil does get washed away is when it is under agricultural crops (Misra 1976: 82). What this indicates is that shifting cultivation, rather than being destructive, had a symbiotic relationship with the natural environment.

Cultural Dependence

The relationship between the natural environment and the tribes is not only woven around their physical existentce. It is evident in the cultural domain as well. Their myths and stories, riddles and puzzles, songs and dances, feasts and festivals, customs and life-cycle rituals all express, to a greater or lesser degree, various aspects of their relationship with the natural environment.

The natural environment assumes a very significant place in the creation stories of almost all tribes. The subject and the significance of these stories differ from tribe to tribe. This is seen most clearly in the Munda story of creation. The story runs as follows. At the beginning of creation, there was water everywhere. The Singbonga plied around aimlessly on a boat made of leaves. One day, he told his wife that he was fed up; there was no recreation. Therefore, he decided to create the earth and men. He commandeered the services of the fish, the tortoise, and the crab to bring up soil from the bottom of the waters, but they did not succeed. Ultimately, it was the leech that extended itself in such a way that its tail rose above the waters and its mouth sank into the soil underneath, its body serving as the channel for transporting the soil above the waters. So the earth was created, followed by the creation of plants, trees, animals, and birds. Among the birds was one called Hur, which produced a giant egg from which emerged the first two human beings, the ancestors of the Mundas.

The importance of the natural environment is also evident in the day-to-day religious beliefs and practices of tribal people. Spirits are believed to dwell in specific parts of the land, such as hills and hillocks, dense trees and vegetation, and water bodies such as rivers, tanks, and wells. The tribes hold or observe their feasts, customs, and dances to coincide with, and respond to, nature's shifting signals, such as the blossoming of plants and trees, the position of the moon, and on the changing seasons. For example, Sarhul, one of the most important festivals among the Oraons, the Mundas, and the Santhals, is celebrated when the sal trees are in full bloom, with branches of white flowers dominating the landscape. Nature and natural phenomena occupy a central place in rituals associated with this festival. Here a symbolic marriage between the supreme god (symbolized by the sun) and the mother goddess (the earth) is enacted. The ritual is performed with a view to ensuring the fertility of mother earth. A cluster of sal trees, which is considered a sacred grove, acts as a place of worship. The place and even the trees standing there assume importance.

The same is true of Karam, another important festival among these tribes. The tribes consider the karam tree to be sacred to the Karam deity, who has power to determine whether the autumn harvest will be good or bad. The festival is celebrated in September after paddy has been transplanted and has turned green. Boys and girls go to the forest to collect branches of the karam tree. They dance around the karam tree three or five times. Then a boy cuts young branches from a non-flowering karam tree. These are not allowed to fall to the ground while being cut and are handled with great care. Karam branches are then planted in the village courtyard. People sit around the karam branches and hear the story of the Karam rajas. After the storytelling session is over, the girls place flowers at the foot of the karam branches and dance around it the whole night. The next day, these branches are immersed in a pond or stream close by. The stories connected with the Karam festival indicate the tribal people's close bond with nature. These stories speak of punishment being meted out to those who treat the karam branches with disrespect. The punishment continues until the offender asks for pardon and the respect and honour due to the branches has been restored.

The major customs among tribes, as among other communities, are concerned with birth, marriage, and death. The link between customs and the natural environment is best reflected

in customs connected with marriage and death. Among the Oraons, for example, as among other tribes, various pre-wedding customs are closely connected with the environment. Men go to the forest to fetch firewood and women go to fetch sal leaves for making cups and plates. The making of marriage mats and baskets of various sizes is another custom. The setting up of marwa is the most significant custom. Nine sal saplings with leaves on tops are planted in the courtyard in three rows. The middle of the second row differs in height. Branches of bamboo, sidha, bhelwa, mango, and mahua are also planted. The mango suggests perpetuity of descendants, the bamboo symbolizes progeny, the sidha stands for marital fidelity, the bhelwa offers protection from the evil eye, and the mahua symbolizes love between husband and wife. The marriage ritual would be incomplete without this invocation of trees and plants. Even the customs of disposing the dead vary depending on nature's signal. If a person dies after the new paddy seedlings have sprouted, which basically means the arrival of the wet or rainy season, then the Oraons follow the practice of burial. If a death takes place after the harvest and before the sprouting of the paddy, namely the dry season, then the body is cremated (Xaxa 1992: 105).

Customs Related to the Conservation of the Natural Environment

Since the dependence of the tribals on the natural environment is both subsistence-based and cultural, conservation practices among them indicate an obligation towards the environment, which is carried out in many ways. One of the important ways in which this obligation is enacted is through the system of totemism, a practice popular among many tribes in India, especially in eastern and central India. Totemism refers to the relationship between groups such as clans and various species of plants and animals. For example, among the Oraons, the Toppo clan takes its name from a bird, the Minj clan from a particular species of fish, and the Lakra from the tiger. Such is the case also among the Mundas, the Kharias, and the Hos. Although the principal use of totems lies in regulating marriage, it also serves other functions in that it orients people towards the environment in a particular way. Tribes observe certain taboos with respect to the objects of their totems. They do not eat, harm, kill, destroy, or even domesticate them. They do not use anything made or obtained from their totems. At times, such interdictions even extend to animals, birds, and plants that resemble either in shape or colour their particular totems. Thus, those who have the tiger as their clan totem may extend the attitude of reverence that they have towards the tiger to the squirrel as well, as the animals resemble each other with respect to colour and stripes. They do not believe that they have descended from their totems, but they do believe that these totems have helped, protected, or been of service to their ancestors in the past. Hence, they continue to maintain an attitude of reverence towards them. Totemism has resulted in many natural species becoming objects of respect for the tribes. The species that are taken as totems are not from any one single family of animals, birds, reptiles, or plants. Rather, where totemic practice exists, natural objects from all of these families partake in the construction of the social structure. The whole natural order thus becomes an integral part of the social order. Totemism not only expresses but also maintains the relationship of dependency between the social order and the natural order.

For tribals, the natural environment is also a dwelling place for many of their deities and spirits. These are believed to dwell in specific parts of the physical space, such as hills and hillocks, dense trees and vegetation, and water bodies such as rivers, tanks, and springs. Tribals in general respect and maintain these places. Of all the sacred places, the most respected and conserved is what is known as the sacred grove. A sacred grove is often a dense cluster of sal

trees that is considered to be the abode of the guardian spirit of the village. Such attitudes and world views of tribes help to maintain and conserve the natural environment.

In addition, there are other taboos that regulate the relationship of tribes with their natural environment. Among the Oraons, for example, no man in the village is permitted to gather the new fruit, flowers, and edible roots of the season or to plough the fields before the feast of Sarhul, which, as mentioned earlier, marks the symbolic marriage of god with mother earth. Again, hunting expeditions follow certain taboos. Hunters do not kill or hunt any wild animals or birds during the months of June and July. They believe that the breaking of taboos can be harmful to the growing paddy crop.

The bonds between the earth and the tribes are not only material but also moral and ritualistic. Land is valuable to the tribes not only because it provides them the means of survival and livelihood but also because it was bequeathed to them by their ancestors. Hence, it is morally binding on the tribes to preserve the land and hand it over to their descendants. Through sacrifices and prayers, they seek to maintain a good relationship with their ancestors and the earth, on which their survival and livelihood depends.

Even subsistence-wise, their relationship with the natural environment is such that it helps to conserve nature. The community's dependence on nature, as noted earlier, is far from being passive. The community acts on nature and transforms it into forms that are of use to it. However, what is important is that this use of environmental resources is limited only to the extent that it is necessary for the community's survival. It is this attitude that leads to harmony between the community and the environment. Such harmony is possible because of the overriding social values that guide tribal societies. These are the values of balance between nature and culture, egalitarianism in social structure, collectivism in economic structure, accommodation in social relations, consensus in decision making, ethical living in philosophy, and group participation in music, dance, and art (Munda 1992). On these counts, the attitudes of tribes towards the world, including nature, is, to borrow the Weberian notion of rationality, one of rational adaptation and not one of rational domination, namely mastery over the world (Bendix 1960). The latter has invariably led to the exploitation of the natural world with a view to providing greater and greater comfort to humanity. However, provision of comfort at the expense of the natural world has posed immense danger to the very survival of the planet.

Political Economy of the Forest

The harmony between the natural and the social worlds that the tribes had maintained for centuries was ruptured during the colonial period. This had much to do with the forest policy of the colonial state. The policy had its genesis in a memorandum that outlined the rules for the conservation of forests in 1855. In a way, it was a blueprint for the forest policy of the colonial state that was adopted later in 1894. Prior to the introduction of the policy, tribals were virtually the lords of the forest, enjoying unrestrained access to forest and forest produce. The colonial policy, however, turned the situation upside down. It vested unlimited power in the state and paved the way for state control and management of forests. This led to a drastic curtailment of the rights and privileges that the tribals had hitherto enjoyed over the forest. In keeping with the newly conceived policy, the Indian Forest Act was drafted in 1865. It was revised in 1878 and made operational in most of the provinces. Laws relating to forests and forest produce were later consolidated in the Indian Forest Act, 1927 (Kulkarni 1983). The colonial forest policy was oriented more towards revenue and profit making than towards conservation. Hence, the reclamation of forests for land cultivation, expansion of roads and railways, exploitation of mineral resources, and industrial growth assumed the form of a key

economic activity during the colonial period. Needless to say, these policies led to the large-scale destruction of natural resources. And yet the problems and hardships suffered by the tribals were not felt acutely until the post-independence period. Either the exact impact of the policy was not realized or the policy, despite expropriating the rights of tribal people, gave some leeway to them. That the latter was indeed the case is evident from the restrictions added to the New Forest Policy of 1952. The new policy, for example, introduced measures pertaining to the withdrawal of concessions on the release of forests for cultivation, withdrawal of the facility of free grazing, and weaning away tribals from the practice of shifting cultivation. Thus, under the new policy, certain concessions that the tribals had enjoyed during the colonial period were withdrawn. Further, there was now emphasis on increasing the area under forests as well as on measures aimed at stringent regulation, policing, and revenue earning. The policy also aimed to maintain one-third of the country's land area under forest. The drive to achieve this objective led to the claiming of even treeless land as forest land to be brought under the control of the forest department. Through processes such as this thousands of square kilometres of tribal land were brought under the forest department.

Interestingly, the new policy emphasized two goals—the need to increase land under forests, on the one hand, and the need to utilize forests for national needs and maximization of revenue, on the other. National needs entailed the development of infrastructure, acceleration of industrial and agricultural growth, and increased exploitation of minerals. The private accumulation of profit by the Forest Department in collusion with contractors has been the other important factor. This is not to say that tribals have had no hand in it. The loss of livelihood, either because of displacement or for other reasons, has forced many of them to cut trees and sell them in the market as a part of their survival strategy. All these practices have depleted existing forest resources. Paradoxically, most development projects in post-independence India have taken place in tribal-inhabited areas, which comprised large tracts of forest land. In short, it hardly needs any reiteration that the destruction of forest resources has been caused more by development projects and state revenue demands than by tribal needs. Not only that, even the benefits of such development projects have not accrued to the tribals. On the contrary, they have been thrown off the land and forests that had been their life-support system for centuries. There has not even been adequate compensation, let alone rehabilitation, for the land that they were forced to part with for the sake of national development. That tribals have paid a heavy price on account of this development is evident from the fact that while they comprised only 7.5 per cent of the total population of the country, they constituted 40 per cent of the displaced population by 1991 (Planning Commission 2001). Yet a section of the cosmopolitan environmentalists and conservationists tend to accuse tribals of putting the country's forest wealth at stake.

What is even more intriguing is that forest resources, despite being under state control and management, have undergone serious depletion throughout the decades. In the thirty years since the declaration of the policy, in 1952, 4.3 million hectares of forest land were diverted to non-forest purposes (Kashyap 1990). Thus, state control and management of forest resources has not improved forest conservation in any way. Rather, the policy has had the reverse effect. Hence, in order to provide impetus to the protection and conservation of forests, the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 was adopted. The Act forbids measures such as de-reservation of forest lands, use of forest lands for non-forest purposes, clearing of forest trees, etc. by state governments or other authorities without the prior approval of the Union Government. The Act has proved to be instrumental in controlling the indiscriminate diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes. Since the adoption of the Act, the rate of such diversion has fallen to a modest 16,500 hectares per year from the earlier figure of about 1.5 lakh hectares per

year (Kashyap 1990: 316). The Act has had far-reaching implications for tribals. In freezing legal land use of lands officially recorded as forest through the process referred to above, the Act declared millions of tribal forest dwellers illegal occupants on their own lands. Not surprisingly, it has led to a great deal of disquiet and unrest among tribal people. In response, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) issued several circulars aimed either at the regularization of encroachers or at the resolution of disputed claims, but the progress made on this front was insignificant. Meanwhile, India adopted a New Forest Policy in 1988, which for the first time acknowledges the symbiotic relationship of the tribals with forests and the rights and privileges that they have traditionally enjoyed over forests. The policy hence envisages protecting the interest of tribals (Verma 1990: 191). The national policy of 1988 even makes provision for regularizing what it calls tribal encroachments, and it takes 1980 as the cut-off year for this purpose. Despite such well-meaning provisions, the policy has failed to extend any tangible benefits to tribal and forest people. Much of this problem is the result of the judicial pronouncements on the Godavarman PIL before the Supreme Court.

The judicial pronouncements on the case have extended the ambit of the 1980 Act even to lands that have yet to be finally notified under the Indian Forest Act and to all lands conforming to the dictionary definition of forests, irrespective of ownership. The pronouncements had even stayed the regularization of eligible pre-1980 so-called encroachers (Sarin 2005). As part of efforts to enforce the court order, the MOEF has embarked on a drive of mass eviction of tribal and other forest dwellers from lands they have been occupying but that have been declared as forests by the forest department. This is the context in which the scheduled tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, 2005 should be seen. It incorporates the provisions made in the National Forest Policy. It recognizes the right of forest-dwelling scheduled tribes to forest land under their occupation for habitation or self-cultivation for livelihood needs. The right to forest land is in no case to exceed 2.5 hectares and is subject to the condition that such forest-dwelling scheduled tribes have occupied the land or have acquired forest rights before 25 October 1980.

The scheduled tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, 2005 seeks to correct the 'historic wrong' whereby the traditional forest rights of the tribals had been denied under British rule. The draft bill notes that even after independence, India continued to follow the colonial forest policy, dispossessing the tribals even further. These errors were now sought to be rectified by giving a permanent stake in forests to the scheduled tribes living in forests and by associating them with forest protection and conservation. To Guha (2005), this philosophy of conservation represents a significant shift from the policy followed in India for more than a century, which held that forests could be protected only by designating local communities as interlopers and enemies. The Bill, however raised a storm of protest from a section of powerful cosmopolitan environmentalists and the wildlife conservation lobby, whose members believe that giving tribals their long overdue rights will deliver a body blow to attempts aimed at environmental conservation and wildlife protection. There is no denying the truth that there has been widespread destruction of wildlife in India. However, this is not the result of the activities of tribals but the outcome of indiscriminate hunting by rajas and zamindars, ruthless destruction of the forest habitat by the state to meet its revenue demand, and commercial and industrial exploitation. Environmentalists and conservationists, however, see the danger to environmental conservation and wildlife protection emanating primarily from the tribes without even being able to substantiate the extent of wildlife destruction caused by tribal people. Anyone who is familiar with tribal life and culture knows that this is not the tribal ethos.

Forests have been mercilessly and thoughtlessly denuded during the last fifty years. Between 1951 and 1972, 3.4 million hectares of forested area were cut off for use in agriculture, industry, dams, roads, and so on (Shiva et al. 1983). The present rate of deforestation in India is still an incredible one million hectares every year. These statistics do not include the areas near dams and industries where tree cover has been completely destroyed. They also do not include illegal felling and contract felling by the Forest Department. However, interestingly, for the environment and wildlife lobby, the damage caused to forests by these projects has gone unnoticed. These lobbyists did not raise a hue and cry over the loss of forest wealth. Hence, one could hardly have expected them to notice the fact of mass displacement of tribal people resulting from these projects. Yet the loss of forest cover (even when it has no forest vegetation) resulting from the extension of rights to tribals for their livelihood security is immediately noticeable, and a hue and cry is raised accompanied by a distortion of facts and figures. It is worth noting that the rights extended to tribals are not something new. The rights are only being restored. These rights, which they had traditionally enjoyed for centuries, were unjustly taken away from them during the period of colonial rule. Post-independence India continues to perpetuate this injustice, and even expand this process.

Forest Department statistics show that 23 per cent of India's total area is forest land. But this is not forested area. It simply means that this area is under the control of the Forest Department. The National Forest Policy of 1952 recommended that 33 per cent of the country's area should be brought under forest cover. Between 1951 and 1988, under the provisions of the colonial periods Indian Forest Act, 1927, the national forest area was increased by another 26 million hectares, that is, from 41 to 67 million hectares (Sarin 2005). In an attempt to achieve this target, the Forest Department, as was done in the case of the family planning project, went on a spree to bring non-private lands under its control through blanket notification, without even surveying the vegetation or ecological status of these lands and without recognizing the rights of pre-existing occupants and users as required by law. Tribal areas bore the brunt of this drive to achieve statistical success because of poor record-keeping and documentation of the adivasis' customary rights.

Does the onus of maintaining 33 per cent of India's land under forests lie only with the tribals? As it is, 60 per cent of state forests today are concentrated in 187 tribal districts confined to only one-third of the country. In the process, many of the most vulnerable tribes have been stripped of their customary resource rights without even their knowledge and have been labelled encroachers on their ancestral lands (Sarin 2005). The tribals thus have contributed much more than their fair share to the conservation of forest wealth in India. If tribals have been made to sacrifice their rights over land, forests, and other resources for the sake of maintaining the ecological balance of the country for the last hundred years, the onus now lies on the rest of India to step forward, because the contribution of non-tribals to maintaining the ecological balance of the country has been negligible. The non-tribals have been the beneficiaries of this system over the decades. Even in the tribal-inhabited hill regions of the north-east, where shifting cultivation is an age-old practice, and whose inhabitants are seen as threatening forest wealth, forest wealth is far more extensive than in the rest of India. Of course, the land available for shifting cultivation has now shrunk because of various kinds of state- and non-state-sponsored development activities. This factor has affected shifting cultivation insofar as the duration of the cultivation cycle has now been shortened, which in turn has affected soil fertility and productivity. Nevertheless, the tribals' contribution to sustaining forest wealth far exceeds that of the inhabitants of the rest of India. In fact, where state control and management of forests has been historically absent, there has been less destruction of forest wealth. The hill

regions of the north-east, where state management of forests was introduced under the forest policy of 1952, bear testimony to this. The total forested area in the region in the 1980s, including the plains, constituted about 53 per cent of the total reported area. Of this, 36 per cent was reserved and 64 per cent was unclassified and thus open for use by local people. If one were to exclude the plains (the forests in the plains had been under state control and management since the colonial period, yet there has been greater damage of forest wealth there), the area under forest cover in the region would increase further (Xaxa 1998; Patnaik 1987). Thus, the contribution of the north-eastern hill regions, popularly known as the tribal states, to India's forest wealth far exceeds the contributions of the other states.

Since everyone gains from the maintenance of the ecological balance, all citizens—not tribals alone—should be responsible for achieving this goal. Equitable distribution of responsibility demands that non-tribal states and districts should find out how much of their land is under forest cover and how much they have to contribute to maintain national standards. If tribals could be dispossessed and displaced, and even suffer livelihood problems, to maintain the ecological balance of the country, there is no reason why non-tribals and non-tribal states should be spared from going through a similar process.

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