

Tribal Politics

(A brief summary)

Anuradha Jaiswal

- The 1971 census recorded over 400 tribal communities numbering nearly 38 million people and constituting nearly 6.9 percent of the Indian population. Spread all over India there greatest concentration is in Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, north eastern India, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Gujrat and Rajasthan. Except in the North-east, they constitute minorities in their home stare. Colonialism transformed the tribal relationship with the forest. Loss of land, indebtedness, exploitation by middleman, denial of access to forests and forest products, and oppression and extortion by policeman, forest officials, and others was to lead to a series of tribal uprisings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, like the Santhal uprising and the Munda rebellion led by Birsa Munda- and to the participation of the tribal people in the national and peasant movement in Orissa, Bihar, West Bengal, Andhra, Maharashtra and Gujrat.
- The Constitution under Article 46 says that the state should promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the tribal people and should protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation, through special legislation. The Constitution also provided for the setting up of Tribal Advisory Councils in all states containing tribal areas to advise on matters concerning the welfare of tribals. Legislative as well as executive action was taken by the state governments to prevent loss of tribal lands to non-tribal people and to prevent exploitation of the tribals by money lenders. However growing

tribal antagonism towards the non-tribal people or outsiders living in tribal areas has been unfortunate development.

- Tribals in the North east-

a) Nagaland- The Nagas were congeries of tribes living in the eastern Himalayas, along the Burma border, At the time, the Naga hills formed part of Assam, a province very diverse even by Indian standards, sharing borders with China, Burma and East Pakistan, divided into upland and lowland regions and inhabited by hundreds of different communities. Among the tribes of north east India, the Nagas were perhaps the most autonomous, Their territory lay on the Indo-Burmese border-indeed, there were almost as many Nagas in Burma as in India. The Naga question really dates to 1946, the year the fate of British India was being decided. Their ideas were promoted in a journal of their own, called the Naga Nation. The Naga National Council stood for the unity of all Nagas, and their self determination. The moderate wing among them had begun negotiations with the Congress, the radicals however, still stood out for independence. Immediately after independence, the Government of India followed a policy of integrating the Naga areas with the State of Assam and India as a whole. A section of the Naga leadership however opposed such integration and rose in rebellion under the leadership of A.Z.Phizo, demanding separation from India and complete independence. They were encouraged by British officials and missionaries. In 1955, these separatist Nagas declared the formation of an independent government and the launching of a violent insurrection. The Government of India made it clear that it would firmly oppose the secessionist movement it would not tolerate recourse or violence. Consequently when one section of the Nagas

organized an armed struggle for independence, the Government of India replied by sending its army to Nagaland in early 1956 to restore peace and order. Even while encouraging the Nagas to integrate with the rest of the country 'in mind and spirit' Nehru favoured their right to maintain their autonomy in cultural and other matters. Refusing to negotiate with Phizo or his supporters as long as they did not give up their demand for independence or the armed rebellion, he carried on prolonged negotiations with the more moderate, non-violent and non-secessionist Naga leaders, who realised that they could not hope to get a larger degree of autonomy or a more sympathetic leader to settle with Nehru. The Naga leaders headed by Dr Imkongliba Ao came to the fore. They negotiated for the creation of the State of Nagaland within the Indian Union. The Nagas, numbered nearly 500,000 in 1961, constituted less than 0.1 percent of India's population and consisted of many separate tribes speaking different languages. The Government of India accepted their demand through a series of intermediate steps, and the State of Nagaland came into existence in 1963. With the formation of Nagaland as a state the back of rebellion was broken as the rebels lost much of their popular support.

- b) Mizoram- Secessionist demands backed by some British officials had grown there in 1947 but had failed to get much support from the youthful Mizo leadership, which concentrated instead on the issues of democratization of Mizo society, economic development and adequate representation of Mizos in the Assam legislature. However, unhappiness with the Assam government's relief measures during the famine of 1959 and the passage of the Act in 1961, making Assamese the official language of the state, led to the formation of the Mizo National Front (MNF), with Laldenga as President. MNF created a

military wing which received arms and ammunition and military training from East Pakistan and China. On March 1966, the MNF declared independence from India, proclaimed a military uprising and attacked military and civilian targets, The Government of India responded with immediate massive counter-insurgency measures by the army. In 1973 , when the less extremist Mizo leaders had scaled down their demand to that of a separate state of Mizoram within the Indian union, the Mizo district of Assam was separated from Assam and as Mizoram given the status of a Union Territory. A settlement was finally arrived in 1986. Laldenga and the MNF agreed to abandon underground violent activities, surrender before the Indian authorities along with their arms, and recater to the constitutional political stream. The Government of India agreed to grant full statehood to Mizoram, and as part of the accord, a government with Laldenga as Chief minister was formed in the new state of Mizoram in February 1987.

- c) Jharkhand- In this area are concentrated several tribes of India, namely Santhal, Ho, Oraon and Munda. The Jharkhand tribes, however share some features with other Indian tribes. They have lost most of their land, generally to outsiders, and suffer from indebtedness, loss of employment and low agricultural productivity. With the spread of education and modern activity in the tribal areas a movement for the formation of a separate tribal state of Jharkhand, incorporating tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal started during the thirties and forties. The Jharkhand party was founded under the leadership of Jaipal Singh. It did very well in 1952 elections. But the party faced a major dilemma. While it demanded a state where the tribal people would predominate, the

population composition of Jharkhand was such that they would still constitute a minority in it. Several tribal parties and movement developed in Jharkhand, later the most prominent being Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) which was formed in 1972. The JMM turned to a radical programme and ideology. Shibu Soren emerged as their strong leader in the early seventies. After years of struggle Jharkhand state came into being on 15 November 2000, There are nearly eighty - five lakhs adivasis in Jharkhand, comprising around 26.2 percent of the population(2011 census) At present the JMM in coalition with Congress is at the helm of the power.

- d) In Manipur too, there were struggles. It was a home to many Naga, Kuki, Meitei and Pangal communities. In 1947, the Maharaja Buddhachandra of Manipur, signed document, called the instrument of accession joining India. Two years later the maharaja signed the merger agreement in India. It became an independent state in 1972.
- The constitution of India has granted special rights to the tribals of the country. Their rights on land and forest need to be respected. Unfortunately many a times they are used as political tools, especially during the elections. The main concern of the tribals is not of integration into the mainstream society, rather it is their recognition as peoples in their own right, control over their lands and livelihood.

References

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