

Geographical Background to Tribal Situation in the North-East

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Geography, wrote Panikker (1955) forty-two years ago, has been at times one of the great and regrettable gaps in Indian knowledge. Worse than even our lack of interest in things historical, he continued, has been our utter neglect of geography. Panikker, of course, was interested in identifying the importance of geographical factors which have significantly moulded the course of Indian history. But the same can be said about almost all branches of social science which continue to be guided by a peculiar neglect of geographical dimension. This is particularly disturbing when one addresses oneself to questions concerning tribes and problems confronting the tribal segment of India's population. Regrettably, while the anthropologists and the sociologists have made notable contributions to the tribal studies, the regional dimension of this problem has not been given adequate attention so far¹ (Raza et al. 1977). The present study attempts to understand the tribal situation in the north-eastern part of India and is exclusively tied to the regional dimension of the problem which is expected to be complementary and supportive to studies undertaken by other social science disciplines dealing with the tribal situation in this part of the country. A regional perspective to the problem is

absolutely essential in the context of our understanding that the tribal problem, as much as the problems of other socially and economically lagging groups is region specific. They need to be viewed in their respective milieux—social and eco-regions of the country—in which their cultural roots lie. Studies which ignore this vital regional dimension, are less likely to produce desired results. That the regional studies are much important, is evident from the fact that all-India generalisations of the systematic disciplines are inadequate tool for resolutions of the problem which are regional in character.

Generalities

While dealing with as complex a problem as that of the tribal situation in the North-East India, a brief statement on the process of tribal formation and their present-day distribution at the sub-continental scale seems inescapable.

The tribal segment of India's population presents an interesting profile of the country's ethnic diversity. A very significant proportion of India's population consists of tribes. The Census of India, 1991: enumerated a little over 8 per cent of the population belonging to that segment of the population 'Scheduled' as tribes. They belong to a variety of ethno-lingual groups, profess diverse faiths and are at disparate levels of socio-economic development. "Spread along the entire spectrum—ranging from the stone-age hunters and gatherers of forest produce to the urbanized, industrial wage earners—the tribal communities constitute an important segment of the Indian population" (Raza et al. 1977). The spatial distribution of the tribal population, however, is characterized by a striking tendency to cluster and concentrate in a few pockets of diverse degrees of isolation within an environmental setting which is by and large averse to intensive, settled agriculture. For ages, these communities—their size varying enormously from under hundred to as large as a few millions—have lived in relatively isolated pockets or *culs-de-sac*. away from the fertile river valleys and outside the framework of peasant formations. Their tendency to cluster and concentrate in a few enclaves characterised by low agricultural potential, has contributed significantly to the lack of adequate interaction between

the tribal and non-tribal components of population. The process of change within the tribal societies have consequently operated sluggishly permitting the older modes to continue very long with marginal modifications only, leading to socio-economic stagnation of a high order.

The geographical patterning of the distribution of tribal population in India provides valuable clues to the diffusion of social categories within the sub-continent. The tribal population today is concentrated only in a few pockets. The main clusters lie on the north-eastern periphery of the Himalayas, on the Meghalayan plateau, in Chotanagpur, on the eastern flanks of the Aravallis and the Vindyan Uplands in East Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and on Sahyadri as well as in Gujarat and Himachal valleys (Raza and Ahmad 1990). These clusters together account for nearly 55 per cent of the total tribal population of the country while another 40 per cent live in the periphery of these clusters. Significantly, these tribal groups differ from each other in terms of their racial and ethnic characteristics and economic pursuits, but ecologically these tribal habitats are characterized by hilly, forested or semi-arid environment—all largely negative from the point of view of supporting settlements of agricultural communities on a large scale.

The specificities of the present day spatial distribution of tribal population in India today needs to be viewed and explained in terms of the historical process of peopling of the subcontinent. The process of trans-continental migration pattern (Richards 1932) brought people from different ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds into India and have generated forces of cultural assimilation and diffusion (Raza and Ahmad 1990). The geographical factors evidently exercised far-reaching controls over the manner in which these migration waves came into India as well as over their later dispersal into the vastness of the sub-continent. Their entry into India was not easy due to the presence of the great mountain chain in the north represented by the mighty Himalayas which cuts the Indian subcontinent off from the rest of Eurasia while offering only a few gates mostly on the western and the eastern extremes. The nature of incursions into India has thus been very aptly described as a 'backwash' (Panikker 1955).

Every new wave of people who entered the subcontinent found its riverine alluvial plains most attractive and inviting site for settlement. This factor itself became the cause of every fresh wave of immigrants to displace the earlier settlers from the river valleys into the more rugged, hilly, forested, arid and semi-arid tracts adjoining the plains which provided these earlier settlers a fair degree of protection from the successive waves of migration that took place into the river valleys. These are the refuge zones supporting most of the India's tribal population (Raza and Ahmad 1990). "The conclusion is (thus) inescapable that the temporal sequence of cultural changes in India has been greatly influenced by the factors of geography" (Raza and Ahmad 1990). The river basins with their vast agricultural potential have been the perennial nuclear regions supporting large agricultural communities, while the bordering hilly and the forested belts, less suited to settled agriculture have sheltered the tribal segment of population along with their 'primitive' economies.

The geographic patterning of tribal communities of India thus fits admirably into the regional scheme of Subba Rao (1958) based on the principle of attraction or repulsion of the manifestation of certain vital geographical factors. According to Ahmad (1983), "The locational constraints have exercised far-reaching impact on their (tribal) world view, social responses to the agrarian formations and the pattern of interaction with the neighbouring communities. While not subscribing to the theory of the Indian anthropologist of the forties who perceived the tribe as an archetype and a social isolate, there is no gainsaying the fact that the problems of the Indian tribes in contemporary India cannot be understood if they are delinked from the geographical and social isolation. The anthropological theory of interaction, glorified recently, hardly explains the empirical reality".

Constrained by a difficult and rigorous environment—the blind alleys of civilization in India (Subba Rao 1958)—fostering physical and/or social isolation for ages, the tribal communities have been exposed to exogenetic forces fairly recently. Historically

the tribal communities have developed a mode of living "generically linked to the ecological conditions in the enclaves which have provided them with a resource base and have favoured the survival of their way of life with marginal modifications" (Raza et al 1977). Unlike the so-called attractive areas located in the river valleys which experienced faster socio-economic transformation, the ecological base of the tribal habitats blunted the cutting edge of socio-economic change, and the tribal areas have by and large remained under the impact of more or less perpetual stagnation. "The transition from primitiveness to modernity in India is often abrupt and generally ungraded" (Raza et al 1977). Ecologically, however, the tribal homelands are far from homogeneous and as such display a diversity of a high order both in modes of living and in cultural traits of people.

The physical environment of the tribal habitats, at the time of their early settling process, appears to have forced them to make adjustment to it. Depending upon the diversity in the physical environment, the tribes, over time, have developed different types of economies congruent with the ecological potential of these habitats. Initially, the modes of their habitation and economic life were entirely governed by the ecological control of their food supply.

"It was the adequacy and stability of food supply in relation to population which determined whether a primitive tribe should live closer together in contiguous occupancy units or roam about in small bands. Tribes inhabiting in dense rain forest still perform economic functions of food gathering and hunting. In intermontane valleys, enjoying relative isolation, settled agriculture is the normal mode of economy. Tribes living in hills with manageable slopes derive their sustenance from shifting cultivation. On these local variations of topography, soil and the vegetal cover which differentiate tribal habitats, are based the regions of tribal ecology" (Raza and Ahmad, 1990).

The North-East Scene

Having reviewed the geographical patterning of the tribal population in the country as a whole, we may now turn our

attention more specifically to the north-eastern region which constitutes one of the most important regions of tribal concentration in India providing an exceedingly interesting profile of tribal situation in its regional specificity of ecology, habitat and culture.

The second² major concentration of the tribes is seen in the north-eastern periphery of India.

"Nestled within the complex of the sub-Himalayan ranges, the Indo-Burmese hills of Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram and the erosion surfaces of the Meghalayan plateau, the tribes of the north-east India have a world of their own. Having lived in the marchland between India and China and in the triangle where the Indian and the Chinese worlds meet, they have picked up the impression that they belong to none" (Ahmad 1983).

The partially enclosed character of this region has allowed it to develop a personality of its own adding its own indistinguishable individuality to the corpus of Indian culture on the one hand and more significantly to the tribal culture on the other. The peculiarity of the geographical and historical conditions of this region has offered relative isolation to the culture groups who found their way into the region through the passes from the north and the east, and this feature alone is responsible for some kind of a stability in the man-nature interactions in the little habitats of the tribal groups for much longer period than elsewhere. This is why the region continues to be an anthropologist's wonder.

The region presents the complexities of the sub-Himalayan ranges, the Indo-Burmese hills of Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram and the eroded surfaces of the Meghalayan plateau—all encircling the Brahmaputra valley. The hills are sharply marked from the plains physically as well as culturally though so linked that to some extent they must be treated together (Spate and Learmonth 1972).

The region presents itself as a replica of the subcontinent both physically as well as culturally, only on a smaller scale. Often described as a microcosm of the Indian Subcontinent, the north-east is represented by all the three physiographic divisions of the

country only on a much smaller scale—the northern mountains, the central plain and the southern plateau.

The northern mountains are in fact an extension of the Himalayas with modifications introduced in the erosional features by much heavier rainfall. The Indo-Burmese hills in the east are much less imposing as a relief feature. The hills in this region are aligned in intervening parallel valleys. The altitude of Manipur and Naga hills varies between 900 and 2100 metres. Mizo hills are of much lower altitude, rarely rising above 900 metres. Parts of Tripura and Imphal valley in Manipur represent areas of low relief. The geographical layout of Manipur with its central lowland is indeed akin to that of the Brahmaputra valley.

The Assam valley is an alluvial expanse laid down by the mighty Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries extending for nearly 640 kilometres between Dhubri and Sadiya. The average width of the valley ranges between 90 and 100 kilometres.

The Meghalaya and Karbi plateau a fragment of the peninsular block, is a highly dissected tract. The only prominent relief features are found in the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills. The summit levels in these hills rise upto 1300-1800 metres. The southern face of the plateau descends precipitously to the Surma valley. On the contrary, the northern face rises far more gently from the Brahmaputra valley.

The region has the lofty mountains in the north, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, but loses height towards the south and ends in the low hills of Mizoram in the extreme south. The presence of Brahmaputra valley in the middle divides the entire region into two parts, *viz.*, the northern and the southern.

Geologically, the mountains are of young age and break down into soil easily (Bose 1980). The erosion is heavy due to high rainfall received from south-east monsoons. In fact, the entire north-eastern region enjoys a typical monsoon type of climate. Because of the peculiar sickle shape of these hill ranges and the vast open plain towards the south-west followed by the Bay of Bengal, monsoon clouds come directly in contact with the hills and distribute high rainfall towards the southern or windward side of the hills (Bose 1989: 55-65). Conversely the northern mountains receive much less rainfall. Local variations in altitude

and topography cause much variations in temperature and rainfall. Nonetheless, the rainy weather continues here much longer than in other parts, though there are noted variations in rainfall. In general, the amount of rainfall is well over 1500 mm. in the region as a whole, but at places it may be as high as 5000 mm. or more. The rainfall is particularly heavy on the southern face of Meghalayan plateau. Over most of Tripura and Manipur the annual amount vary between 1000 and 2000 mm. The rainfall decreases to less than 400 mm. over southern Mizoram. The natural vegetation consequently comprises of tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen forest types. However, the natural vegetation has suffered from indiscriminate felling for timber and for *jhum* or other forms of agriculture (Raza and Ahmad 1990).

The physical environment as well as the partially enclosed character of the region from the Gangetic plains has provided an ideal habitat for the tribal culture and economy to continue relatively undisturbed till the modern times. It is no wonder, therefore, that the north-eastern region supports one of the largest concentration of tribal population in the country.

Tribal Habitats

Baffling environmental diversity of the region provides sufficient clues to the variety of habitats to which the tribal communities have adapted. Consequently, the tribal population of the north-east displays far greater diversity in their totality of responses "more than any comparable area in the world" (Hutton 1946).

The northern and eastern mountain ranges and the southern plateau understandably provide more suitable tribal habitats compared to the Brahmaputra valley which is almost a flat plain with very little variation in relief. Built by alluvium laid down by this mighty river and its innumerable tributaries, the valley offers suitable environment for the settlement of agricultural communities. However, the valley has not been totally averse to tribal people in providing them a habitat. They have found suitable sites for settlement in the isolated hill features, forested portions of the valley and in the marshy tracts. The northern bank of the river as well as the river islands still retain their predominantly

tribal character. The area of the transition between the hills and the plains of Brahmaputra is also largely tribal in its ethnic composition. The plain tribals

“generally represent the spill over communities from the hilly regions except for the Boros who are a big tribal group largely confined to the plains” (Sharma 1984)

These habitats of the tribes in the valley are in close spatial proximity to areas of peasant cultivation which has profound implication for their society and economy.

“Recent contacts with the non-tribal societies and tea plantations on the hill slopes of Assam have provided new incentives under which the tribals have migrated out of their traditional homelands and have been absorbed as labourers in tea plantations” (Raza and Ahmad 1990).

In sharp contrast to the Brahmaputra valley, the southern plateau designated as Meghalaya—the abode of clouds is studded with several hill features. With its accentuated relief features, ‘V’ shaped valleys, rugged terrain and steep slopes, the plateau locally resembles somewhat of a mountainous terrain. In a climate characterised by congenial temperature, high humidity and excessive rainfall, forest growth is ample. Pines predominate the higher ridges while a mixture of woods and bushes characterise the natural vegetation in the low lands. “These are the tribal habitats par excellence” (Raza and Ahmad 1990). They have been traditionally inhabited by tribal communities—the numerically most predominant being the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos—whose chief mode of economy is *jhum* or shifting cultivation.

Hill ranges of the Indo-Burmese Border are an extension of the Himalayas which take a sharp turn towards the south and the south-west in this sector. The rainfall is heavy—varying between 200 to 250 mm—and the hills are covered with dense forest ranging from tropical evergreen in the wetter south to rough grass on the highest ridges. The eastern segment of the mountain rim—the Naga, Manipur and Mizo hills—comprise of the narrow ranges

and valleys. Though the general altitude is much less imposing compared to the northern segment lying in Arunachal Pradesh, the gorges are so steep and the ridges are so sharp-crested that the region has acquired a very rugged appearance. The central valley of Manipur is a big exposed lake bottom—the most important alluvial expanse traditionally suitable for the settlement of agricultural communities. The behaviour of Manipur valley is akin to that of the Brahmaputra valley. Differential nature of relief features has resulted in different forms of isolation in this part of the eastern Himalayas.

The tribal habitats in the entire region thus display a remarkable diversity in their physical setting and ecological parameters forcing them to make adjustments to make the most effective use of the varying natural resources in accordance with their technological equipment and social resources. The economic and social as well as cultural responses of the tribes thus confirm to the varying qualities of their respective habitats. In the Naga, Khasi, Garo and Jaintia hills, the Manipur plateau and the Himalayan belt in Arunachal Pradesh, the main tribal responses to the physical environment are manifest in shifting or settled agriculture. The Boro-Kacharis, Miris, Khasi and the Jaintias—inhabitants of the foothills, valley and the plateau—are by and large sedentary agriculturists, while the Garos in the Meghalaya Plateau; Dimasas, Lalung and the Mikirs in the northern mountainous area practise shifting cultivation. The Gallongs and the Miniyongs of Arunachal Pradesh are still in hunting and food gathering stage. The Daflas, Abors and the Mishmis—all inhabit inaccessible forest clad mountains subject to an extremely high rainfall. "Accustomed for centuries to descending on the plains for loot and blackmail, it is only in comparatively recent years that they have been reduced to behaviour which is more or less peaceable..." (Hutton 1946). The Apa Tani tribe in this area has an elaborate system of terraced irrigation, but the agriculture of other tribes is much more primitive (Hutton 1946).

Processes of Peopling

The present distribution of tribal population in their respective habitats is a result of a long process of peopling of the region which

brought in its wake a great diversity of ethnic and cultural groups. The favourable environmental conditions with fertile river valleys, high humidity, abundant rainfall, luxuriant vegetation and rich fauna have been fairly attractive to primitive man ever since Palaeolithic Age. Much like the north-western boundary, the north-eastern boundary too is not inaccessible. Passes like Bum La, Tse La and Tunga across eastern Himalayas connecting Tibet with India; Diphu, Kumjawang, Hpungan, Chaukan, Pangsau and more—Tamu across the Patkoi range and An and Taungup across the Arakan Yoma connecting Upper Burma (Myanmar) with India have greatly facilitated incursions of culture groups into this region. As a result, the north-east has received since prehistoric times, diverse culture groups having their origin in Tibet, South-Eastern China and Myanmar. The region is also open to immigrants coming from further west and south through openings offered by Brahmaputra valley and the Barak valley. In a process similar to the subcontinent as a whole, nearly each group which came into the region found the Brahmaputra valley far more attractive before being driven into the adjoining hills and plateau by its successor.

According to anthropologists, the peopling of the region started with the coming in of the Australoids or Astro-Asiatic speaking people from the south-east Asia quite a few millennia before Christ (Taher 1993). After settling for a while in the foothills bordering Brahmaputra valley, they were probably driven by later migrants of the Tibeto-Burman stock to their present habitat in Khasi hills, Karbi Anglong and Cachar hills.

The second major incursion into the region was that of the groups speaking Tibeto-Burman languages. Racially, they belonged to the Mongoloid stock but spoke a variety of languages belonging to eastern Himalayan, North Assam, Bodo and Naga branches. These groups are represented now by the Monpas, Shedukpens living in Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh border of Assam, Mishing and the Deuris of Upper Assam, the great Bodo group of people scattered all over Assam and the Nagas and the Mizos. The Manipuris too belong to this category. Geographical proximity to Myanmar and the contacts with the tribes of Myanmar appear to be the main factors influencing the racial and linguistic structure of the north-eastern tribes.

Another important stream of tribal people entered the Brahmaputra valley during the colonial period itself when the colonial rulers recruited indentured labourers from among the tribes from their mid-Indian location. Mainly Australoid in their racial origin and speaking Mundari languages, these tribes belong to the large tribal groups like the Munda, Ho, Santal, Savara, Oraon and the Gonds.

Apart from these major streams found among the tribes there are many others who have come into the region during prehistoric and historic times and the process continues unabated even to-day. The complex process of peopling has produced a very intricate ethnic mosaic in the region having a few parallels elsewhere in the world.

Spatial Distribution

As a direct outcome of the geographical and historical exigencies, the distribution of the tribal population in the region displays wide variation at all levels of spatial aggregation. Although the absolute population of the Scheduled Tribes is low in this region, their proportion in the total population is exceedingly high, often above 80 per cent. At the state level, however, the distribution is quite uneven. The proportion of tribal population in Manipur and Tripura is substantially low as compared to Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. This indicates the generally open character of the former which has permitted a higher degree of infiltration of non-tribal groups. The tribal population is low in Assam valley due to a more favoured habitat for peasant agriculture.

At the district level, the pattern of clustering and concentration of tribes gets further accentuated. The tribes constitute over 90 per cent of the total population in as many as 15 districts mostly located in the mountainous region and in the Meghalaya Plateau. Their share ranges between 70 to 90 per cent in a set of 11 more districts mostly adjoining the districts in which their share is above 90 per cent.

The tribal population constitutes a majority (50-70 per cent) in four more districts, distributed in the foothill zone and the hilly districts of Assam. In half of the districts, the tribal proportion falls

below that of the non-tribal segment. However, their share is significant (20-25 per cent) in a few districts of Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The tribal population is vastly outnumbered by the non-tribal segments in as many as 21 districts where their share falls below 20 per cent. Most of these districts are confined to the Brahmaputra valley as well as Imphal valley.

The pattern of spatial distribution of the Scheduled Tribes too reveals the tendency of the tribal population to cluster and concentrate in areas which are characterised by an environmental framework by and large negative from the point of view of settled agriculture. There is a striking correspondence and a positive association between attitude and extent of the tribal concentration. A significant feature of the distribution of tribal population in the north-east is their high concentration but low level of agglomeration. This is in sharp contrast to the tribal situation in the mid-Indian belt where the tribes display much higher level of agglomeration associated with low level of concentration. Low resource base of the north-eastern region has not permitted higher agglomeration of tribal population.

Another noteworthy feature of the spatial distribution of the tribal population in the north-east is that the tribal groups, barring a few notable exception are numerically very small. More than three-fourths of all tribal groups have a population below 20,000 each and over 60 per cent of them have a population below 10,000 each. It is interesting to note that as many as 38 tribal groups recorded a population of less than 1000 persons each in 1981. Only a few groups are numerically very large. Notable among them are the Khasi, Jaintias in the plateau, the Mizos and the Nagas in the eastern Himalayas and the Boro Kacharis in the plains. The other numerically larger groups are the Garos in the plateau, the Mikirs, Miris, Rabhas and the Tripuris who are by and large plain tribes. Generally speaking, most of the plain tribes are much larger in their population size than the hilly tribes. An extraordinarily large number of tribal groups occupying the hilly terrain, particularly in Arunachal Himalayas, are numerically insignificant. This fact reveals the importance of the resource base of influencing the population size of individual tribal groups.

Lastly, the tribal groups in the hills, unlike their counterparts

in the valleys or in the mid-Indian tribal belt, are distributed with knife-edged boundaries between them and without a periphery of their distribution. Their cores are highly compact displaying much higher degree of concentration. "This may be largely due to the topography and partly to the relative isolated location of their territory" (Raza and Ahmad 1990).

Concluding Remarks

The foregoing discussion of the tribal situation in the north-east is by no means exhaustive nor complete or adequate. However, the description provides an initial frame to understand many important issues concerning tribal habitat, economy, society and culture. The study only makes the complexities of the tribal situation clear and expects the social scientists to take due note of the geographical perspective while addressing more important issues confronting the tribal population in the north-east.

Notes:

- (1). While dealing with the tribal population with a regional perspective, even the geographers who are traditionally concerned with this dimension have been less enthusiastic. Raza and Ahmad in a survey of researches in geography dealing with tribal situation (Raza and Ahmad 1984) lament this unique inability of the geographer to recognise the tribal phenomena as belonging to the very core of the problem of India's social development. According to them, even in cases where the tribal segment has attracted the scholarly attention, the tribes have often been studied as a mere numerical entity with choropleth design on a map marking the highest level of this cognitive upsurge.

Raza and Ahmad have been extremely candid in their criticism of the geographers and consider this neglect originating from the overall tradition in social anthropology. They observe that :

"All essentially social questions (*concerning tribes*) have been so callously evaded. However, seen in the context of the prevailing climate in Indian social sciences, there was seemingly nothing unique in the geographer's evasion of the socio-economic dimension of the tribal reality

in India, since he was closely following the foot-steps of the social anthropologists of the colonial vintage—one of the rare species which has managed to outlive the colonial era. The geographic cognition of the tribal reality in India has, therefore, been as anaemic as the colonial tradition of scholarship in anthropology. The case is discomfoting in either situation" (1984: 70-71).

- (2) The first major concentration of tribes is found in a mid-Indian tribal belt which girdles the entire expanse of the country from west coast in Gujarat and Maharashtra to the east coast in Orissa and the Rajmahal hills on the southern bank of Ganga in Bihar-West Bengal.

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