

UNDERSTANDING TRIBAL NOTION OF EXPLOITATION

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Tribal areas of North-East India are surcharged with the apprehension of exploitation from industrialization, a mode of development which necessarily introduces outside forces—technology as well as manpower into the society, more specially in a tradition bound one lacking the requisite know-how and entrepreneurial skill. Indeed, such a notion is playing a political role and the destabilising effect of industrialization on population structure and cultural identity in particular is projected by the political parties and pressure groups alike. No wonder, the resultant response is channelised in such a way as to claim an aura of legitimacy. Consequently, *socio-cultural identity has acquired primacy*, ascendancy over economic development and in the prevailing situation *primitive* economic methods continue in vast areas with unremunerative prospects. This resistance to change and development is evident in their opposition to layout of infrastructural facilities, extraction of soils and minerals, generation of electricity and setting up of medium and large scale industries.

This notion has seized the tribal mind in such a way that today, no political party, national or regional, does openly advocate industrialisation for economic development. The State Governments' industrial policy discourages the flow of enterprise from outside on the one hand, and the restrictive nature of employment policy acts as a scare-crow to potential investors on the other. In fact, there has hardly been any worthwhile interest by private industrialists in the development of North-East India, let alone the NRIS.

Against this background, it is necessary to examine the extent to which such a notion is analytically defensible. Apparently, a number of objections features tend to favour the apprehension of exploitation in the tribal areas. The insular nature of the society, the hangover of the colonial past, continuance of traditional economy, interaction of traditional and modern elements in polity; have all combined to provide sustenance to this apprehension. In fact, the very outlook of the people was inhibited by the Inner Line in certain places. Again historically, the tribal areas of the North-East fell into three categories—excluded, partially excluded and unadministered. In the post-Independent period, political extremism has come to stay as a method of inviting centre's resources to 'internal colonial' situation. These apart, geo-political factors have contributed to a feeling of alienation. The small size of the population also added considerably to their apprehension.

Numerous theories of exploitation have been advocated in social theory from time to time. In contemporary analysis, the notion of exploitation has been inseparably linked up with the existence of commercial or industrial society, or for that matter, with modern economic organisation. In a capitalist society, the charge of exploitation has been raised with respect to both the labour market and to exchanges of other goods. Exploitation is looked upon by Marx as a defining feature of a capitalist economic system. Although for Marx, exploitation was an inherent part of capitalism, he used the concept of exploitation with reference to labour market.¹ The nub of Marx's theory of exploitation is the view that exploiters are owners of the means of production who by definition take advantage of the exploited. "It is a necessary consequence of ownership of the means of production by a part of society and is necessarily eliminated when these resources are controlled by society as a whole."² It is clear that such a view does not explain tribal apprehension which is basically a question of 'we' vs 'they'. However to the extent Marx's theory of exploitation can be said to be normative and political,³ the tribal notion bears some superficial affinity, just as the tribal perception generates opposition and hostility to outsiders, 'the insight provided by Marx might be employed in developing hostility to capitalism'. Again, if Marx's theory does play a political role in restructuring society, the tribal perception can be said to be politically directed towards maintaining the supposed cultural identity.

Another theory that exploitation constitutes taking unfair advantage of someone in free-market transactions⁴ may be generally true but it falls

short of explaining tribal apprehension in the absence of free-market transactions in a tribal economy. It has been observed that exploitation is characterised by unequal possession of capital goods and private property.⁵ David Miller however argues that although unequal access to natural resources, may be an important source of exploitation, exploitation can also arise in the course of market transactions between persons who were originally given equal endowments.⁶ The idea of exploitation occurring through market transaction does not obviously explain the issue in question. Steiner centres his theory of exploitation on the violation of rights but Miller denies that exploitation is best conceived as a matter of rights violations. In the North-Eastern scenario, the issue of violation of human rights does figure in the discourse on exploitation, although in the context of industrialization the argument is not offered.

Goodin provides a more general theory of exploitation which distinguishes between exploiting a person and exploiting a situation.⁸ The focus of his approach is that a theory of exploitation should not be parasitic upon a theory about the creation and distribution of valued commodities. Fundamentally, exploitation involves violation of our duty to protect the vulnerable and that vulnerability could be, but is not necessarily economic. Such protection could be afforded by constitution and legal guarantees and more appropriately by democratic institutions and values. Even the liberal theory of exploitation allows identification of some transactions between persons as exploitative. However, tribal fear of exploitation is directed towards excluding others from economy and polity. It does not seek to ensure fairness or avoid wrongfulness.

As the prevailing theories of exploitation cannot explain the apprehension of the tribal people, the answer has to be sought outside the bounds of economic transactions. A meaningful approach would be to link such apprehension with ethnicity, an all-embracing phenomenon energising the perception of the tribal people and influencing political decision-making. From another angle, ethnicity is indeed an important resource, the mobilisation of which is noticeable in endless autonomy movements in the North-East various organisations which emerge in tribal societies become faced with the enduring base of ethnic ties and sentiments and use cultural symbols and emphasise the action on perceived threat from others to mobilise people, although various tribal groups are at 'different stages of ethnic formation'.⁹

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