Socio-cultural Changes in Rural and Tribal India

by

L. K. MAHAPATRA

Karnatak University, India

It is the aim of this exploratory paper to characterize broadly the processes of socio-cultural changes in rural India as also among her tribal peoples. Two motives have actuated this attempt. Firstly, to show how the villagers and the tribal communities, traditionally dubbed as conservative, have been changing. Secondly, it is sought to correct the picture of changing India by reference only to the rate of its urbanization and industrialization. For, India is still overwhelmingly a land of villages and peasants. Among other rural countries of the world it strikes one with its 380,109 villages or 68.1% having less than 500 persons out of a total of 558,088 villages. However, a steady drift to the big cities and towns has been evident since the first detailed Census of 1881. The urban population has grown from 9.3% of the total population in 1881 to 12.8% in 1941 and to 17.3% in 1951. The “pull”, and more especially, the “push” factors are still operating towards greater urbanization. It may be mentioned that India had a large number of cities, towns and ports in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, and that colonial trade policy had resulted in greater ruralization thereafter till new industrial towns grew up, mostly since the middle of the 19th century. For the purpose of this paper, I may concentrate on about 150 years of consolidated British rule, influences of which affected the remotest villages and the most marginal tribes. India had never been so intensively governed in her history, and the tribal communities never so extensively stirred. Therefore, it may be inferred, the changes or the inducements to change have never been so universal and rapid. Since Independence in 1947 this process has been even more intensified and extended under the aegis of a national Welfare State. India has not only undergone a political revolution, but also has entered into what is in reality a social revolution.

The British occupation gradually built up an alternative economy in place of the traditional handicraft-and-caste economy of the past. This new capitalistic money economy brought in large-scale tea, coffee, rubber and

indigo plantations, introduced commercial cash-crops, extended an efficient world trade, and not the least, ushered in industrialization and exploitation of natural resources on a vast scale. Means of rapid communication were extended to all parts of the country. India was de-militarized, and thus internal fighting stopped. It also created absolute landlords in the Permanent Settlement areas, deliberately multiplied a bureaucratic, and built up a professional, intelligentsia via western education in schools and Universities. It secured legal equality for all Indians, but hesitated to interfere in social practices beyond curbing Suttee, infanticide, human sacrifice and slavery. However, it also tacitly encouraged Christianization of tribal groups and lower castes. Printing of books and newspapers took root in India during the regime, offering opportunities to vernacular and tradition-reinforcing literature as well as to liberal western ideas and conflicting values for wide dissemination.

The results of such development were quite impressive: a phenomenal rise of population, accompanied with extension of agriculture to an unprecedented scale, migration - both seasonal and permanent - to cities and towns, mines and plantations, pauperization of handworkers and swelling of the ranks of landless labourers. Western education in schools led to the gradual rise of a rural intelligentsia, and in industrialized plantations and mines in rural areas grew up what is called by Mintz a “rural proletariat”\(^1\). As a reaction to the socio-cultural and political subjugation of the country there developed some synthesizing-reformative and revivalistic socio-religious movements and also nationalistic mass organizations like the political parties. Under the British rule the socio-cultural hiatus, communicational distance, and psychological estrangement as also technological divergence increased between urban centres and villages, as the former attracted the rural elite, industries and a larger share of governmental resources. On the other hand, the traditional isolation and self-sufficiency of villages and tribal communities decreased, as well as interdependence between them and urban centres was intensified. Under Mahatma Gandhi the Congress Party sought to rectify the neglect of villagers, who make up about five-sixths of the total population of India, and to ensure social justice and civic equality to the depressed sections like the low castes and the tribal peoples, thus ultimately to strive towards a welfare state of socialistic pattern.

We may also note that new types of community grew up: “fringe” villages of commuters around cities and towns, and plantation villages, showing many urban influences. Mintz calls these plantation communities of Latin America as “rural proletarian communities”, being “neither folk nor urban, nor syntheses of these classifications. They are, rather, radically new reorganizations of culture and society, forming a distinctive type”. Seasonally and periodically migrant labour, who may be described as peasant-workers, tended to spread many modernistic values and ideas in villages. Moreover, a new type of

---