Development Programs and The Koya of Orissa, India: 
*A Test of Nehru’s Philosophy*

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Introduction

SPREADING CIVILIZATIONS of the past and developing nations today share several problems. One of these is how to deal with tribal populations that come into their sphere of influence. Rome had to deal with the Germanic tribes and the Emperor Ashoka (ca. 273-232 B.C.) declared his compassion for the tribal groups in India. The Aborigines Protective Society was organized in England in 1837 and expressed a major concern over the treatment of the Hottentots and Bantu in the Cape Colony at the hands of the British and the Boers (Stocking 1971: 369). Nearly 150 years later this situation is still a problem attracting world attention. There have been numerous organizations of this type. Two very active ones today are the Cultural Survivals, Inc. (Cambridge, Mass.) and International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (Copenhagen, Denmark).

Policies adopted fall into a continuum from complete loss of identity as a tribe to total isolation from the mainstream. The former may occur through complete assimilation and it may be difficult to establish the fact that they were tribes. For example some of the untouchable or harijan castes of southern India such as the Cherumans and the Panyers of Kerala are thought to have been independent tribes at one time (von Furrer-Haimendorf 1967). It is possible to document cases where tribes were completely destroyed. On the other extreme, there are cases where there were attempts to isolate tribes in much the same manner as preserves are established to keep natural areas untouched. Verrier Elwin advocated some sort of a National Park for the Baiga in India (1939) but later pointed out that this did not mean doing nothing. It was an expediency needed to protect the tribe at that time (1964). At the present time there is an effort to create a park for the Yanomamo of Brazil. In between there are cases of tribal groups such as the Kurds of southwest Asia who have such a strong identity that they are striving for independent national status.
Various countries have had to map out national strategies for dealing with tribal societies. Some have been signatory to an International Labor Organization Convention on Indigenous Populations. Many Latin American countries have been affiliated with the Inter-American Indian Institute established in 1940 as an agency of the Organization of American States. Many have constitutional provisions and may have agencies roughly similar to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the United States.

India provides an interesting example of a long history of dealing with tribal populations. In the colonial period the British tended to leave them alone, partly because of their location in rather isolated areas and partly because of a belief in the "noble savage" that best be left alone (Thundy 1981:22). The isolation was reinforced by designation of "Wholly Excluded Areas" and "Areas of Modified Exclusion." The non-interference policy actually permitted almost unrestricted exploitation by Indian tax collectors, money lenders, contractors, and traders (Das 1964).

In contrast many Indian leaders stressed cultural pluralism. Although the contacts between cultural groups have been and still are often violent there is a strong philosophical current attempting to pull the nation together but, at the same time, assure the equality and dignity of the various cultures. This can be illustrated by the often used quote from Mahatma Gandhi (Mathur 1977:485).

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.

India became independent in 1947 and quickly began to approach the problem of poverty and depressed groups. The basis for this thrust was established in the national constitution. Article 46 states:

The State shall promote with special care educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and in particular of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.

Other articles of the Constitution make special provisions for carrying out this mandate. Indian political leaders frequently express their respect and affection for tribal peoples. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister, compassionately wished to bring modern life to the tribes in a manner that would enhance rather than destroy their traditional way of life. His philosophy was clearly laid down and five principles to guide action were given in the following statement (1964:xiii).

We cannot allow matters to drift in the tribal areas or just not take interest in them. In the world of today that is not possible or desirable. At the same time we should avoid over-administering these areas and, in particular, sending too many outsiders into tribal territory.

It is between these two extreme positions that we have to function. Development in various ways there has to be, such as communications, medical facilities, education and better agriculture. These avenues of development should, however, be pursued within the broad framework of the following five fundamental principles: