

Notes on the Tribal Question in India¹

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The house was empty. The rain, coming down in torrents, poured through the thatch and there was nowhere he could keep himself dry...it occurred to Sukra Jani that he ought to go and bring his daughters home. But what could he feed them on? How would they live? Ought he to bring them home to share his hunger and pain?...Everything he had tried to build had crumbled to dust – why?...He had prayed regularly to the tribal gods, sacrificed pigeons and fowls and goats and fallen full length on the grounds before their altars... But, they had deserted him now, became deaf to all his cries...He beat his forehead on the wet mud, and in a hoarse voice broken by his sobs he cried out to his gods: ‘how cruel you are!’ But, the wind only howled the louder.

Gopinath Mohanty, *Paraja* (translated by Vikram K. Das)
Oxford University Press, Delhi, Sixth impression 1997, pp. 234-5

Gopinath Mohanty’s Sukra Jani, who lost all his lands to the moneylender and whose daughters were forced to go out elsewhere to survive, was created in 1945. Yet, Sukra remains entirely contemporary and has perhaps become more representative of the Adivasi heartland of India than what he was 65 years ago. Recently, I have had an opportunity to see the settings of Mohanty’s novel – Koraput-Kalahandi area of Orissa. The condition of Sukras has indeed changed, but perhaps for the worse. Lands have gone. Forests that gave them livelihood support had been deserted. Sukras were plundered by the moneylender, but now it’s the corporate capital backed by the state that threatens the very existence of the Adivasis.

India is home to 84 million Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes – ST) divided into 416 groups. The STs form 8.2 percent of the country’s total population. And nearly three fourth (74 percent) of them are the inhabitants of nine of the Indian states – Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Bihar. However, unlike the north-eastern states in many of which Scheduled Tribes form more than 50 percent of total population (Mizoram 94 %, Nagaland 89%, Meghalaya 86 %, Arunachal 64 %) the Adivasis are minorities in all the Adivasi heartland states of India. This has given a special dimension to the Adivasi question and our focus here is mainly on the Adivasi problem related to these heartland states. Nevertheless, we will make some reference to the Adivasi problems in Assam and Tripura where the nature of

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the problem has much similarity with that of the heartland states. Similar trend is seen in the southern states.

General deprivation

That the Adivasis in most of the Indian states are deprived of the social opportunities and are vulnerable to economic exploitation is clear enough. Even the state like Kerala, which has created development history, has not been able to narrow, let alone abolish, the literacy gap between the general population (average 91%) and the Adivasis (64%). Coming down to the heartland states, only Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh have Adivasi literacy rates above 50 percent. Indeed, excepting these two and Gujarat (48%) all the 6 other states have Adivasi literacy rates below the national rate of Adivasi literacy (47%).

There are many other indicators, such as nutrition, health status, etc. which bring out clearly the appallingly poor condition of the Adivasis – worse not only than the advanced groups but also other backward communities, namely, the Dalits and Muslims. There is plethora of data from NFHS, NSSO, and so on.

On the economic front the Adivasis form the poorest of the poor – majority of them being agricultural labourer or small farmers. In the heartland states 42 percent of the Adivasi main workers are Agricultural labourers and 41 percent are cultivators. The corresponding average figures are 35 percent and 29 percent. Similar pattern is seen in the southern states and Assam and Tripura.

Deprivation and class connection

Why is it so? Why the age old history of deprivation of the Adivasis – often attributed to the colonial history and rightly so - has not been changed in independent India? There are many different connections, like ethnicity, culture, geography and so on, but the main reason behind the deprivation is class, which plays a central role in intertwining the other aspects.

Land alienation

The deprivation of the Adivasis perhaps begins with land alienation, which started in the early years of colonial rule, precisely with the permanent settlement of 1793. It is a recorded fact that millions of Adivasis had lost their lands to the native allies of the colonial rulers. While the British found among the Adivasis an immense reserve of cheap labour their *desi* partners robbed the Adivasis of their lands.

I was born and brought up in an Adivasi village of West Medinipur of West Bengal. The village was settled by the Mundas and Santhals. As the old land records and the oral history reveal that the original settlers of the village have lost more than 75% of their lands to the *dikus* – people of my origin – who immigrated to the village much later and form not more than 10 percent of the total population.. I lived in a village of Santhal Pargana for one year. It is the same story: the lands were reclaimed by the Santhals but later, more than 60 percent of that land was transferred to a Brahmin immigrated from Birbhum. I had recently visited Rayagada and Kalahandi of Orissa. In Kashipur of Rayagada one Mahapatra – a Brahmin has acquired 1000 acre of land majority of which belonged to the Paraja and Khond tribes who are now work for him as agricultural labourers. One need not depend upon personal experiences. We have mounds of records on the subject.

Demographic change

Now, one direct bearing of land alienation is the weakening of numerical strength: on one hand the Adivasi had to leave their home to settle elsewhere. Millions of Adivasis of present Jharkhand and western part of West Bengal were taken to Assam and North Bengal as tea plantation or agricultural workers. On the other hand, the process of land alienation and other factors led to the increase in non-Adivasi population in the Adivasi areas. In 1856 tribals formed nearly 63 percent of the total population of Kalahandi, which has now reduced to 33 percent. Similar is the case of Chhotanagpur or Santhal Pargana. Now, non-advasis have far out numbered the Adivasis. In Tripura tribals formed two third of the total population which has now become one third.

Displacement

Then came displacement - mainly through development. Studies by Walter Fernandes and many others show how the Adivasis have forcibly been displaced from their homes. Out of the millions uprooted from their habitats, often forcibly, of their livelihood due to development initiatives in post-Independent India, the worst affected have been the Scheduled Tribes (STs) or *adivasis*. According to an estimate they form about 40 per cent of the displaced even though they account for only 8 per cent of India's total population (Fernandes, W. and E.G. Thukral (eds) *Development, Displacement and Rehabilitation*. Indian Social Institute, 1989, New Delhi)

I briefly mention here two of my direct experiences. In 1956, the Government of West Bengal built up a dam on Mayurakshi river at Massanjore of Dumka district of the then Bihar. The objective was two fold: irrigation and generation of hydroelectricity. The West Bengal government made an agreement with the Bihar government. The construction of the dam required 144 villages inhabited mainly by the Adivasis who were uprooted from their homes, in many cases forcibly. Even today, many of them had not even received the declared compensation. I visited about a dozen re-settled villages – on the barren uplands of Raniswar. Their only connection with the past is the retention of their original village name. The cultivator past of the displaced is now lost in the agricultural labourer present. In Massanjore 25 % of the submerged land was Baihar – low and fertile land. In the case of Indravati dam of Orissa – many times bigger than Massanjore – the proportion of low land was much higher. As Shyam Jhodia of Padepadar told me, “we did not need to buy anything but salt. The lands yielded thrice in a year. Even the agricultural labourers were better off. Now we have become beggars.”

Development has not only displaced the Adivasis from their own lands but also robbed them off one of their major source of livelihood – the hills and forests. Large areas of hills are now leased out to the corporate sector – even in Chhattisgarh, the rivers have been leased out! There are many different consequences of the so called industrialisation in the mineral rich central India, but the major one is the complete destabilisation of the Adivasis who have earlier lost their lands and now to lose their last resort – the natural resources.

Coming to Tripura we find that the STs of the state have not only been outnumbered by the immigrant Bangalis, but have also been displaced from 3 lakh hectares of hills awarded to them in 1945 by the Raja. According to a royal order the Adivasis were to enjoy the rights of the hills for ever, but in 1966 the government turned this area to a reserve forest and the Adivasis lost all their rights over the lands. This made them completely dependent on wage earning.

The sense of otherness among the Adivasis is infuriated through the state's aggressiveness: the Dukpas of Buxa Hill of North Bengal have been growing oranges which provided them substantially security of income. In 1992, all of a sudden the forest department cut all the orange trees, It was told that the growing orange was harmful for environment. In 1993, a devastating flood washed away the whole region. Whether there was any causal relation between the felling of trees and the flood was not known, but both, particularly the former, had converted the whole economy: the self-sufficient Dukpa became a labourer. In Bankura of West Bengal the Adivasis used to harvest from the forest the Sabei grass to make ropes.

This used to be a substantial source of income. Suddenly the forest department burnt the *sabei* grass: the reason given was that the Adivasis entered into the forest in name of harvesting *sabei* but actually stole the trees. Indeed, for the Adivasi the most feared and hated creatures on earth are the police, the forest guard and the *mahajan* (moneylender).

Continued Migration

Land alienation and displacement have given rise to the extent of migration among the Adivasis: I have been seeing from my childhood the Adivasis migrating seasonally to the rice bowls of West Bengal as agricultural labourers. There was a brief stop in this course after 1977. Political movements of land reform and enhancement in agricultural wages combined with government programmes like food for work had had a positive impact on the Adivasi households. However, these movements and programmes were not substantially backed by social interventions, particularly education, that led to reverse empowering trend in favour of the old ruling classes.

With changes in land systems and agrarian relations, *adivasis* have historically been the losers and have had to migrate to other locations. The alienation of *adivasi* land to non-*adivasi* traders and moneylenders has been an ongoing process.

The history of the tribal belt of Jharkhand and West Bengal has been the history of continuous migration. Immediately after the legendary Santal unrest of 1855 and its defeat large number of Santals were taken to the tea gardens and other areas as workers. The same time started the process of unending seasonal migration to the ricefields of Barddhaman. My own estimate, based on head count of migrant workers on a particular day, suggest that 100000 workers from Dumka migrate to Barddhaman each of the four cultivation seasons. Similar is the story of Bankura and Puruliya of West Bengal. According to an estimate 5-10 million workers visit Bardhaman every cultivation season. For thousand of Tribals of Kalahandi, Bolangir, Koraput, Rayagada of Orissa migration has become the only source of livelihood.

Deprivation of basic rights

The class linkages of Adivasi deprivation can be seen more clearly from the case of Assam. First, the Santhals, who are treated as ST in all other states are not given the ST status in Assam. So, we actually do not have the exact Santhal population of the country – as the Santhals of Assam are not enumerated in the Census operation under the ST category. . According to some estimates about a million Samthals live in Assam, mainly

in Kokrajhar district, where they were taken by the British to settle and reclaim lands. This exclusion deprived the Santhals of Assam from the opportunities of reservation. The Assamese upper caste rulers have deliberately kept them from the ST list so that the community remain the reserve of cheap labour. For any rational mind it may appear wired, but the Assamese upper caste rulers have designed such a module where the Bodos living on the hills are not treated as ST, though they are given this status in the plain. It is the opposite in case of the Korbis: those living in plain are not treated as ST, though the residents of the hills are treated as ST.. This way the Adivasis are denied of the privilege of reservation. Apart from such extreme cases, there are many other subtle ways, followed by almost the states, to exclude the Adivasis of the purview of reservation.

Wage, again, is a big issue for a major section of the Adivasis of Assam and North Bengal working in the tea gardens. They get Rs 64 a day (52+12) and even the permanent workers do not get any paid holiday. The wage paid is less than declared minimum wage.

So, how do we go? Should we wait for a classless society and put the Adivasis question aside and react only when they become a major source of support of some armed groups considered by the government as the “biggest threat to the country’s internal security?” The government’s approach towards the Adivasi question has not been much different from what it was during the Santal revolt of 1857: crush the agitations with state power and give out some dole. There have been committees, recommendations and plans, but the three freedoms – freedom from fear, freedom from want and freedom from interference – that Verrier Elwin dreamt for the tribals have not been realised at all. In the academic discourse the tribals are generally considered as the anthropologists’ domain. The emphasis is more on culture, ethnicity, language, social structure etc. The approach is rather curatorial - protecting the tribal sanctity. And when economics appear it come in the form of aggression – plundering the land and labour, natural resources and so on.

There are three main lines of thinking: the first take the tribals to be a completely segregated group and want them to continue so, keeping their cultural purity. Second groups, while sympathetic to the tribals think that different models of development should be built up for the tribals as they are incapable of receiving modern education and health, etc. The third, think in generally racial line, again continuing from the colonial time. One example, while updating the Santhal Pargana district gazetteer in 1964, P.C. Roychoudhury wrote that the Adivasis were averse to modern education and health

facilities. But, in the same book he wrote that the immunisation programme launched in 1940s in the district was a huge success. We have seen in the Pratichi Trust's empirical studies that the Adivasis are as eager to access the modern facilities as the others were. But, alas, the supply side has always been shorter than the demand.

In short, while uprooting the tribals from their own setting our modernity did not offer them any choice. Elwin wrote, "I felt that if the tribals were to make any progress, it was essential that the rest of the country should treat them properly and regard them with affection and respect." Indeed, the Adivasis possesses many higher human qualities. The democratic practices among the Adivasi societies are perhaps the best form of democracy human societies have ever seen. The Adivasis are among the major producers and builders of the nation. Many of the Adivasi groups have rich languages and culture. I speak Santali, which has a dictionary of 5 volumes – compiled by P.O. Boddington. The Mundari language has a 14 volume encyclopaedia – prepared by John Hoffman. Yet, why the attitude of Elwin's "rest of India" towards the Adivasis has not changed much is due mainly to the class relation, which Elwin missed. It may sound simplistic: but what other explanation can one give behind the neglect and deprivation of the Adivasis – across the countries and through the regimes?

Nevertheless, respecting the Adivasis is not for the benefit of the Adivasis but for the other India. It is high time that the other India sees the Adivasis not as a threat and make the Adivasi dominated areas police state but see them as a huge opportunity - a contributing community. Elwin remarked, "when you reach the point that people want to do things for you and are proud to do so rather than always being on the receiving end, you have made a big step forward." The democratic India has to address the Adivasi issues with the paradigm of reciprocity.

Appendices

Figure 1. Distribution of ST population of India

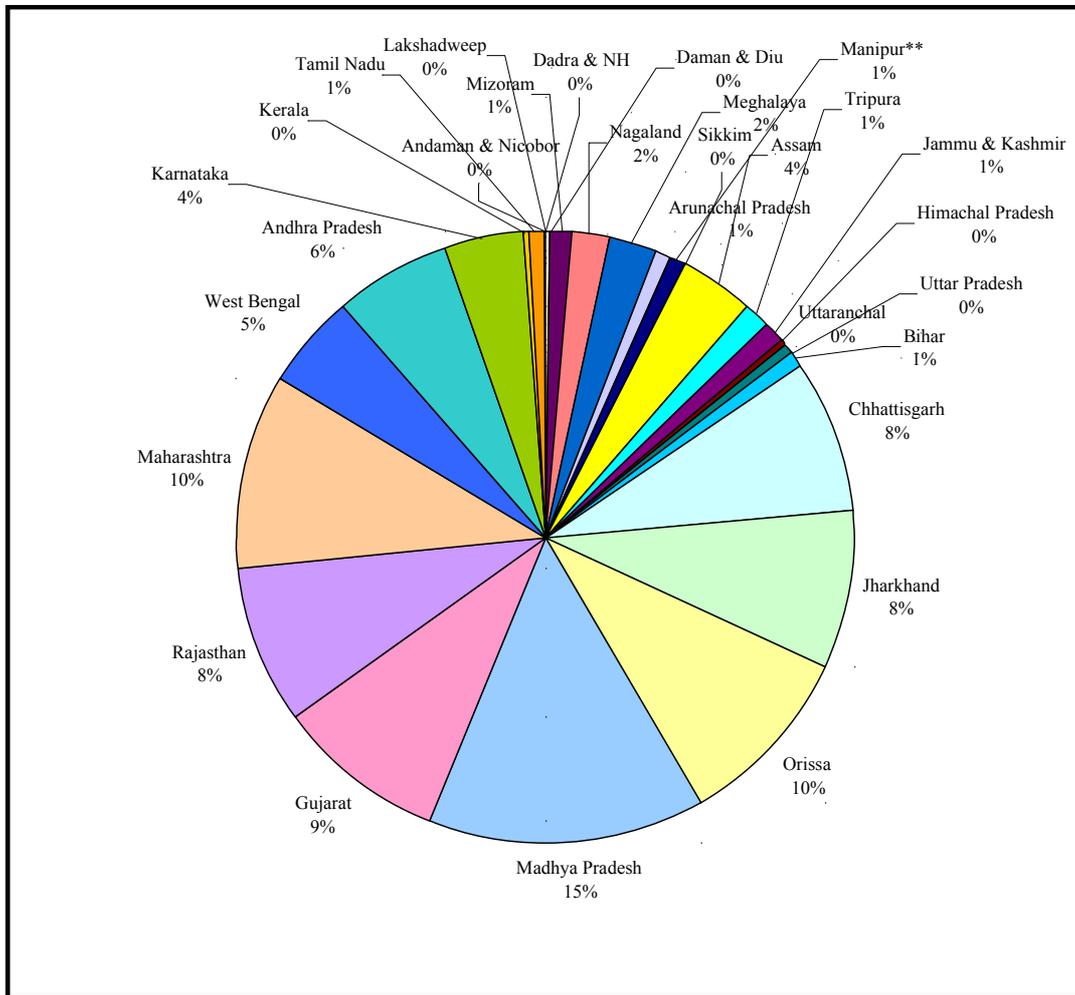
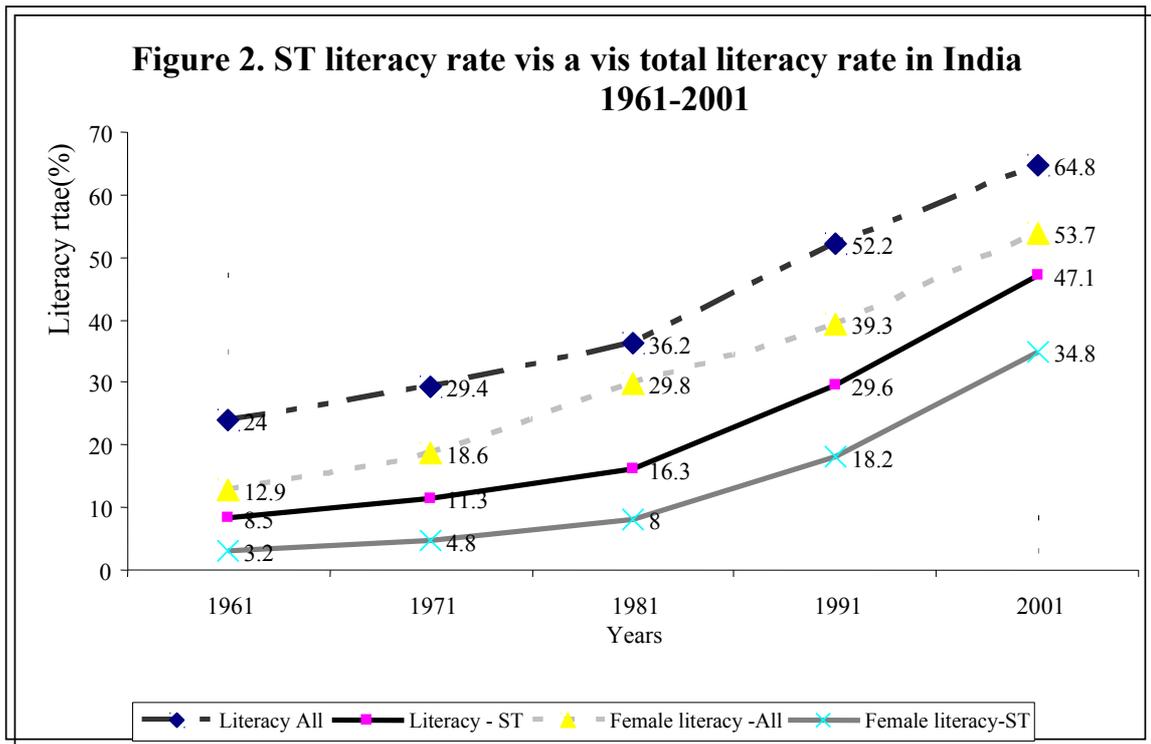


Table 1. The Scheduled Tribes of India: Select Indicators 2001

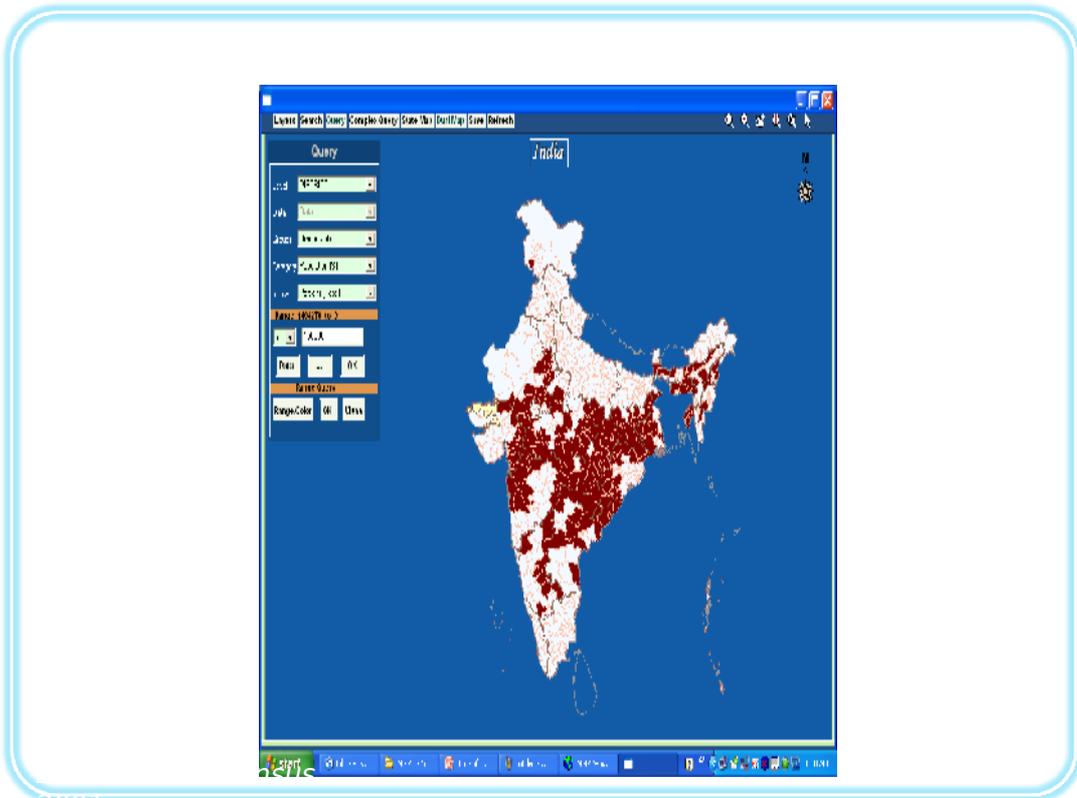
States	ST Population	% to Tot	Literacy rate – ST	Literacy Rate - All	% cultivators - ST	% cultivators - ALL	Agricultural labourers - ST	Agricultural labourers - All
A& N island	29469	8.27	66.8	81.3	0.4	15.8	0.1	3.8
Lakshadweep	57321	94.51	86.1	86.7	0	0	0	0
Dadra & NH	137225	62.24	41.2	57.6	54.3	34.6	19.8	12.9
Daman & Diu	13997	8.85	63.4	78.2	3.8	5.5	9.2	1.8
Mizoram	839310	94.46	89.30	88.8	58.10	54.9	5.90	5.7
Nagaland	1774026	89.15	65.90	66.6	71.40	64.7	3.50	3.6
Meghalaya	1992862	85.94	61.30	62.6	52.90	48.1	18.60	17.7
Arunachal P	705158	64.22	49.60	54.3	75.00	57.8	2.30	3.9
Manipur	741141	34.20	65.90	70.5	64.90	40.2	7.40	12
Sikkim	111405	20.60	67.10	68.8	56.10	49.9	5.40	6.5
Assam	3308570	12.41	62.5	63.3	67.7	39.1	11.6	13.2
Tripura	993426	31.05	56.5	73.2	41.6	27	36.2	23.8
J & K	1105979	10.90	37.5	55.5	58.5	42.4	6.4	6.6
Himachal P	244587	4.02	65.5	76.5	76.1	65.3	1	3.1
Uttaranchal	256129	3.02	63.2	56.3	63	41.1	13.2	24.8
Uttar Pradesh	107963	0.06	35.1	71.6	44.6	50.1	31.4	8.3
Bihar	758351	0.91	28.2	47	21.3	29.3	62.5	48
Chhattisgarh	6616596	31.76	52.1	64.7	56.6	44.5	32.7	31.9
Jharkhand	7087068	26.30	40.7	53.6	52.6	38.5	31	28.2
Orissa	8145081	22.13	37.4	63.1	33.3	29.8	46.9	35
Madhya P	12233474	20.27	41.2	63.7	46.8	42.8	42.1	28.7
Gujarat	7481160	14.76	47.7	69.1	37.6	27.3	43.6	24.3
Rajasthan	7097706	12.56	44.7	60.4	69	55.3	14.1	10.6
Maharashtra	8577276	8.85	55.2	76.9	30.6	28.7	50.7	26.3
West Bengal	4406794	5.50	43.4	68.6	19.5	19.2	53.2	25
Andhra P	5024104	6.59	37	60.5	34.3	22.5	49.3	39.6
Karnataka	3463986	6.55	48.3	66.6	30.8	29.2	43.2	26.5
Kerala	364189	1.14	64.4	90.9	11.2	7	47.1	15.8
Tamil Nadu	651321	1.04	41.5	73.5	36.3	18.4	37.8	31
India	84326240	8.20	47.1	64.8	44.7	31.7	36.9	26.5

**Table 2. 10 Major Tribes of India
(Total number 400+)**

	Total population (Figures in parentheses are percentage to total tribal population in India)	Distribution
Bhil	12689952 (14.74)	Madhya Pradesh - 36.39, Gujarat - 27.12, Rajasthan - 22.11, Maharashtra - 14.33
Gond Rajgond etc.	10859422 (12.62)	Madhya Pradesh - 40.13, Chattisgarh - 33.70, Maharashtra - 14.32, Orissa - 7.20, Andhra Pradesh - 2.32, Karnataka - 1.26, Jharkhand - 0.48, Bihar - 0.48
Santhal	5838016 (6.78)	Jharkhand - 41.29, West Bengal - 39.06, Orissa - 13.31, Bihar - 6.30, Tripura - 0.04
Mina	3800002 (4.42)	Rajasthan 99.99
Naikda etc.	3344954 (3.89)	Karnataka - 87.255, Gujarat - 11.75, Maharashtra - 0.83, Rajasthan - 0.12
Oraon etc.	3142145(3.65)	Jharkhand - 44.25, Chattisgarh - 20.56, West Bengal - 19.64, Orissa - 9.83, Bihar - 3.83, Madhya Pradesh - 0.97, Maharashtra - 0.92
Sugalis etc.	2077947(2.41)	Andhra Pradesh 100.00
Munda etc.	1918218 (2.23)	Jharkhand- 54.73, Orissa - 25.04, West Bengal - 17.81, Bihar - 0.93, Tripura - 0.65, Chattisgarh - 0.65, Madhya Pradesh - 0.21
Naga etc.	1820965 (2.12)	Nagaland - 100.00
Khond etc.	1397384 (1.62)	Orissa - 99.88



Map 1. ST Population > 0.15 Million



Map 2. ST population > 20 %

