GOKHALE INSTITUTE OF POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

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The Aborigines—"So-called"—And Their Future

By

G. S. Ghurye, Ph.D. (Cantab.)
Professor and Head of the Department of Sociology,
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Foreword

This publication of the Institute stands on a somewhat different footing from its predecessors. All the publications issued by the Institute so far, have been written by workers or students connected with the Institute and have embodied results of investigation or research carried out under the guidance of its Director. Dr. Ghurye's work does not fall within this category. It is an independent piece of work which he was kind enough to offer for inclusion in the series of publications of the Institute. The Institute readily agreed to his suggestion because of the importance of what Dr. Ghurye had to say on this vexed question, and also because it raised issues and dealt with problems which, in other contexts, were being studied at the Institute.

Dr. Ghurye writes essentially as a sociologist. The problem he tackles has, however, very important politico-economic aspects. This is hardly surprising as it is fundamentally the result of contact between peoples with widely different economic techniques. The particular problem of the aborigines in India lies at one extreme of the body of problems created by the British occupation and exploitation of India. The history of the occupation by the British of region after region of India runs to a somewhat monotonous pattern. In this history, alliance, protectorate, pacificatory expeditions and occupation follow each other in due course. The initial contact was usually established at the political end, whether for economic or for political aims; the later economic penetration was universal whatever the nature of the political authority obtained over the particular region. The immediate and palpable results of economic exploitation, however, differed from tract to tract and from one economic activity to another according to the worth of exploitable resources contained within the region, or the directness of the impact on the activity. Thus in the history of indigo cultivation in Bengal in the first half of the 19th century or that of tea plantations later, or in the collapse of certain handicrafts, the relation between the economic results and the seizure of political power by the British was obvious to all. In other instances where

the developments were not equally arresting, the connection between the two was not as apparent. This was particularly so in the case of what might be called the "central aboriginal belt." The geographical limits of this belt have been largely determined by the desirability and possibility of exploitation and settlement. The extent of the area in which aboriginal tribes are found comparatively unaffected by outside contact has depended not only on the comparative inaccessibility of the regions inhabited by them, but also on the comparative valuelessness from the point of view of exploitation by the British, of the resources contained within those regions. The opening up of Assam might, in this connection, be contrasted with that of Chota Nagpur. The fact that economic pressure was neither considerable nor direct in some regions, however, makes little difference to the nature of the primary phenomenon. Even in these regions, outside contacts were brought about as a result mainly of the attempts at the establishment of the police and the judiciary, the guaranteeing of the excise revenue, the guarding of forests, the settlement of land, the opening of the country to trade, etc. And all these were parts of the process of the occupation and exploitation of the country by the British. It is necessary in this manner to insist on political contact and economic exploitation not only because they were chronologically prior, but also because they led to a very general modification of social life and social outlook.[1] It is not necessary to labour the point that a change in economic habits and way of life necessarily leads to a general change in all other directions. The intimate connection of social practices and religious rituals with economic life is well known, and if the balance of the one is disturbed the other cannot remain unimpaired.[2]

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1 Cf. the following:

"The first lease of the Cheyla Poonjee orange groves was granted, on the 15th of February 1830, to Mr. Inglis for fifteen years, by the Wahadadars, who, no doubt, at that time were specially empowered by the people to grant that lease in return for a loan of 3,000 Rupees, which had been advanced by Mr. Inglis to the whole Cheyla community to enable them to pay a fine of 4,000 Rupees, which had been imposed upon their district by the Governor General's Agent."—W. J. Allen: "Report on the Administration of the Cossyah and Jyntiah Hill Territory," Para 333 (1853).

The whole course of events had also, it should be noticed, the result of substantially increasing the power of the Wahadadars and undermining an originally democratic tribal organization.

2 Dr. Hutton has pointed out that the introduction of child marriage in certain tribes might itself be due to the ease with which bridal money can be got together in a money economy as compared with a barter economy. Cf. Dr. J. H. Hutton, "Primitive Tribes," in "Modern India and the West." Ed. L. S. S. O'Malley (1941).

In the writings of many Englishmen the problems of contact of the aborigines with the outside world are treated as if they were essentially the result of the impinging of Hindu society on the preserves of the aborigines. This is an entirely wrong view of the problem. The establishment of British rule has brought about a revolution in the nature and extent of the contact of the Hindu with the aborigine. The primary phenomenon in recent history is the extension of British dominion. The Indian features are mere corollaries thereof serving, at a secondary level, the main purpose of the primary phenomenon. This will be the clearer if one studies developments in areas outside India opened up and primarily exploited by Europeans as, for example, in East Africa or in South-East Asia. The Indian trader or money-lender in these tracts appears as a secondary growth in the same manner as in the Indian aboriginal areas. Whether in the one case or the other, it is the exploitation of the country by the new methods that gives the peculiar turn to the results of the contact between the inhabitants of the region and the outside world; and the problem of the Indian aborigines is thus seen to be only one of many such, created by the expansion of the white races and the spread of the Industrial Revolution all over the world.

This will be further emphasized by observing that the new type of money-lender, for example, is, as Dr. Ghurye points out, not the peculiar product of conditions in the aboriginal tract. The spread of the non-indigenous money-lender is, indeed, a peculiar feature of Indian economic history in the 19th century, whose connection with British occupation and the British judicial system cannot be disputed. For example, in the Maratha country, which flanks the central aboriginal belt, the exploitation of different strata of the population by Marwari and Pathan money-lenders has been notorious. With the transition to money economy and the establishment of novel concepts regarding land rights and judicial procedure, the more enterprising money-lenders, who did not belong to the same society as the debtors and whose operations were, therefore, not restrained by pressure of social opinion, had peculiar opportunities. And, within the country, there were naturally found migrating classes who were keen to sense these opportunities, and sedulous in exploiting them. Whether

in the aboriginal or non-aboriginal tracts the resulting phenomenon was in origin and in results of the same type, and had little to do with identity or difference in religion and culture.

It is interesting to observe how the ideas of Europeans on the subject of contacts between peoples have gradually undergone a change in recent times. The two extremes are represented by the idea of a complete "open door" i. e. no restriction or regulation of contact, on the one hand, to the idea of the "National Park" i.e., complete isolation, on the other. The National Park idea is by no means a new one. The Japanese, for example, after some experience of contact with the Whites decided to convert their islands into an isolated National preserve and they persisted in their resolve over a long period until the Americans, by force of superior arms, compelled them to change it. Accepting an open door and freedom of intercourse, the Japanese went on faithfully to copy the objectives and methods of their teachers with the result that they find themselves in disgrace with them today for following exactly the opposite line of conduct. These changes of views and of emphasis in the political sphere can be matched by development of thought in other spheres also. In the economic sphere, for example, there had always been sharp differences of opinion as between the English and the Americans regarding the type of open door or the extent of isolation, and developments in recent decades have brought about a further measure of change in both of them. It is necessary to point to the obvious in this manner, in order to emphasize the environmental factors which are prone to give bias to all thought on matters of social policy. The peculiar recent concern of English writers with the problem of the Indian aborigines is the result of what was feared to be the impending transfer of political control from British to Indian hands. The English members of Parliament who spoke in the Parliamentary debates on the India Bill on this question and Mr. Elwin both belong, it is necessary to remember, to the same phase of English opinion on the subject. It is likely, on the other hand, that Dr. Ghurye is also partly actuated to write because of his concern at the possibility of the creation, in our midst, of regions of unabsorbable men and resources who

might even be given a hostile bias. The only way, therefore, in which matters could be judged somewhat apart from particular bias, is to consider them as parts of a possible universal policy.

In this connection one often hears of a facile talk regarding science and the scientific method. However, this is one of the instances, where such talk is most obviously misplaced. There are at least two major objections against the use of the term "scientific" in this context. The first relates to the objectivity of the data. As Dr. Ghurye shows, this is specially to be doubted. The impressions of different sets of observers, equally competent, may differ as to the phenomenon observed in a striking manner, depending possibly on personal opinion. To one, a people may appear depressed and without zest of life, to another merely sober and more regular in habits. It seems that even in matters such as the quality of the products of crafts, observers might sharply disagree. It thus becomes difficult to dogmatize, especially about the total effect of a many-sided event like the contact of two peoples. But an even more fundamental objection to talking of a policy based on science is that, while the scientific method may enable you to define the causal relation between events, and perhaps even to predict, though the latter very rarely with any certitude in the social sphere, yet the scientific method by itself yields no social values. That a sexual life like that of the Baigas, as Mr. Elwin describes it, is to be preferred to the state in Hindu society where child marriage is common, is an opinion that might be termed highly just, highly sophisticated or highly perverse, according to the peculiar predilections and prejudices of persons, but neither of these judgments could be called more scientific than the others. Among the social sciences, economics is supposed to have advanced more in scientific rigour than the others. But even economists are today insistent on saying that, say, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, as an end of economic activity, must be taken as externally given, and is not yielded by economic analysis by itself. The anthropologist or the sociologist may argue out of the richness of his experience why certain ends are to be preferred to others. He has no authority, however, to clothe

the results of his personal judgment under the commanding garb of the term "scientific."

Dr. Ghurye has shown that English policy has neither been consistent nor successful in its treatment of the problem during the last century and a half. Whatever the variations in this policy, it did not base itself at any time on complete isolationism. An imperial power could not obviously adopt an isolationist position; for, if the aborigine was to be placed in a "reserve," there was no reason why the Hindu also should not be left alone. English non-official thought also did not advocate a policy of complete isolation. Isolationism, where noticed in this period, was of a modified sort, that which stressed the avoidance of contact with the Indian or the Hindu but not with the European or Christian. The extreme position in this regard is, as pointed out above, a definitely recent development.

It is worth while investigating the implications of this isolationism. It seems opposed to all flux or change in respect, at least, of certain communities. It obviously lays special store by the qualities engendered in them by all freedom from contact. It values these above all possible gains of contact, and in doing this it would prevent any further economic and political development of these communities. The large majority of the peoples it would so isolate are living at standards distinctly lower than those of the surrounding population, and in some cases make an extremely precarious living. Politically the idea of the "park," in itself, involves a permanent state of tutelage and guardianship, exercised by whatever paramount political power that happens to hold sway over the area. It definitely denies the right to the protected people themselves to choose, because it questions their ability to make the choice. It gives no heed to the claims of the larger region or society and would make for fossilization instead of for mutual adjustment through time. It seems to originate in a notion similar to that of White trusteeship; for, it would impose a set of values and a course of behaviour entirely independent of the choice of either one or of both of the two parties to the contact, and would substitute for it the judgment of a third which is not even representative of any larger social order embracing the two

parties. It is a much more extreme policy than that adopted on certain reserves, as that of the Maories or of American Indians. For, in the latter, economic and educational progress is not only not hindered but is welcomed, and only such parts of the older cultural pattern preserved as are consistent with such progress. The isolationist in India realizes that he must take an extreme stand because if contact in any one direction is allowed the resulting effects will be such that the process of assimilation in the not very divergent neighbouring strata will easily be set in motion.

As against the isolationist position, Dr. Ghurye would evidently urge that the antagonism between the aborigines and Hindu society, which the isolationist emphasizes, does not in reality exist. The Hindu society immediately surrounding the aborigines is indeed, he would point out, very akin to it in racial composition and spiritual faith. It is made up very largely of the erstwhile aborigines themselves, now incorporated in the Hindu fold and the process of incorporation is far from being an unmixed evil. Such a process, especially with proper regulation and safeguards, is the only one which holds out any promise for the improvement of the political, economic and social conditions of these backward peoples. The Hindu society is itself in a considerable state of flux and its internal stresses are such as to lead to an improvement generally of the strata now reckoned as the lower among it.

Dr. Ghurye rightly points out that the problem of the "so-c lled" aborigines is not essentially different from that of other classes in Hindu society who are socially and economically depressed. Governments in India have already accepted, in principle, the responsibility of specially protecting the interests of the backward and the depressed, as is clear from the prevalence of Money-lenders' Acts and legislation restricting alienation of land. Indian public opinion is in this regard much in advance of the pace of governmental action. This fact, taken together with the internal reforming movements, should prove a sufficient guarantee that the interests of the tribal peoples will not be injured by reason of unregulated and indiscriminate contact. There is, however, one lesson which the emergence of the isolationist position should serve to impress upon leaders of Hindu society. It is that it is both

inexpedient and unjust to attempt to impose their own scheme of concepts and values on all classes. In this regard, the reformers are notoriously the worst sinners. Already their activities in putting their own ideas regarding the drink habit or the marriage tie into legislation seem to be causing unnecessary hardship. The traditional Hindu way, which has ever been tolerant of the settled way of life of those newly entering society, should serve as an object lesson. Provided this lesson is properly learnt no apprehensions need arise on the score of the future of the "so-called" aborigines.

Such are some of the reflections evoked by a perusal of Dr. Ghurye's study in a student of a kindred social science. The reader should be warned, however, that they do not pretend to give a necessarily accurate interpretation of what Dr. Ghurye has to say on the subject; for that, he must go on to the characteristically careful, cautious, and thorough account presented in the pages that follow.

D. R. Gadgil.

Preface

Most of the contemporary nations are composite wholes formed of many ethnic stocks which had their own separate cultures before the nation-making epoch. The differences between the various cultures were in many cases rather small. Today most of them appear homogeneous, at least as regards their major cultural traits. India too has been the home of many ethnic stocks and cultures from prehistoric times. At the dawn of her history the cultural differences in her population appear rather great. Nevertheless, the process of assimilation of smaller groups of different cultures into larger ones of more or less homogeneous culture has been steadily going on. Considering the original differences, the results achieved up to the middle or the third quarter of the 18th century were very hopeful. Owing to a variety of reasons, not the least among them being the nature of the method employed, there were still large sections of the Hindu populace which, in comparison with the uppermost sections, appeared to belong to a different culture altogether, when the British appeared on the scene as the rulers of the land. The old process of assimilation was upset. New problems arose. The sections, till then not properly assimilated, appeared as if they were different from the rest. It is the problem of these peoples which is set forth in this essay.

Being linked up with the political future of the nation, the problem has assumed a very controversial aspect. As a result I have had to load the essay with a far larger number of quotations than I should have liked. Their justification lies in their utility.

I am thankful to Prof. D. R. Gadgil, Director of the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Poona, for the readiness with which he undertook the publication of this brochure.

G. S. Ghurye.

19th August 1943.
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