

Can ‘Beautiful’ Be ‘Backward’? India’s Tribes in a Long-Term Demographic Perspective*

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Not surprisingly, there is no single definition of tribes. They are ordinarily (or rather simplistically) viewed as those fairly homogenous (and primitive) groups of peoples who are *somewhat* outside the mainstream human civilization.¹ While defining ‘tribe’ in academic anthropology is an important and complex issue itself,² the job is particularly difficult in the Indian subcontinent where, unlike most other parts of the world, the rising civilisation neither eliminated, nor quite absorbed, these primitive inhabitants. Indeed, this protracted coexistence of numerous distinctive tribal communities side by side the ‘mainstream’ makes for a good ground in which Indian anthropologists grow rich harvest of ethnography. Although tribes seem to have been almost ‘birthright’ as a subject of inquiry in academic anthropology, substantial possibilities and necessities exist for inter-disciplinary perspectives and approaches based on mutual openness and cross-breeding.³

In fact, dilemmas abound in the Indian tribal discourse developed by contributions chiefly from historians, anthropologists, and sociologists. First, although tribes have been studied both intensively and extensively for many decades both before and after the Independence, they still appear hardly less obscure than before. They have often been glorified by older-generation anthropologists, but the dominant image of them is still rather vague, indifferent, and indeed full of misconceptions. They are often portrayed as ‘original’ inhabitants and practitioners of early civilisation and culture, but they currently appear extremely marginalised and, to some, even alien. Documents and narratives – official and non-official – pile up, describing vividly and eloquently their relative plight; but their acute vulnerability seems to remain chronically.

These persisting dilemmas do reflect a resolute ambivalence on the part of the state towards tribes, who can fetch only very insignificant stake in a democratic polity that rests on electoral support of vast majority of mainstream population. This said, the academic discourse grown so far on tribes has its own deficiencies and delusions. For example, anthropologists’ influential perception, namely, that an *aggregate* notion of tribal people as a whole is untenable, has fed into their methodological biases/angularities, which have largely precluded cohesive, effective, and consistent statements on tribal predicaments and practical remedies. While not questioning the usefulness of anthropological focus into individual tribes at micro-level, it is worth stressing that diversities – socio-cultural, environmental, and geophysical - are relevant not only to the tribal population; India’s non-tribal population are no less varied and diverse. Indeed, it is not always obvious as to why *diversity*, rather than commonality, should deserve particular priority and focus in the analyses of tribal population *vis-à-vis* non-tribal population groups, say lower caste groups.

In fact, our proposed construction of a long-term demographic perspective on India’s tribal population rests on the premise that *aggregation* over diverse tribal groups is

valid not only in statistical and quantitative terms, but it is useful both conceptually and operationally. The intuitive justification for this is rather simple: if aggregate (or average) tribal patterns – say, demographic, socio-cultural - are distinctly different from those of their non-tribal counterparts, the former could well be treated together as one entity *vis-à-vis* the latter. In contrast to anthropological focus on individual tribes, it can be potentially useful to analyse and evaluate demographic features and their socio-cultural underpinnings in tribal population as a whole in a comparative light, particularly in relation to those of their closest non-tribal counterparts, namely lower caste (officially known as Scheduled Caste, SC) people. For this purpose, one can reasonably rely on census-based definitions of tribal and non-tribal people. There can be no denying that census information has inaccuracies; but equally indisputably it is the single best source of information for systematic generalisations necessary towards scientific understanding of the population. In fact the use of official (or 'operational') definition and information on tribes can help us bring out important revelations about their common demographic features, which can throw useful light on the notion of 'tribe' itself.⁴

The demography of tribal peoples of India cannot ever loom large merely from the standpoint of their *relative* size in the country's total population, the former currently being little more than eight per cent of the latter. Still, there are several sound reasons why India's tribal demography is important and deserves serious attention and research. First, there are two distinct facets of tribal identity: one relates to their origin; and the other, perhaps even more important, pertains to its evolution as shaped by long-standing processes of tribal transformation and assimilation within the mainstream Hindu caste society and culture – an issue which is often labelled as 'tribe-caste continuum'. Second, tribes of India have always been distinctive in terms of the features of their demographic behaviour and processes. For example, India's tribes on the whole have traditionally evinced comparatively 'superior' demographic outcomes such as relatively lower levels of fertility and infant/child mortality, and more balanced gender relations *vis-à-vis* those of the non-tribal counterparts (we would return to this issue later). Third, the availability of large mass of information from the Indian censuses beginning as back as the 1870s makes systematic studies of tribal demography feasible and possible. In fact, the present paper attempts at identifying major contours and trends of broad demography as well as demographic outcomes and behaviour of India's tribes at an aggregate level, together with their socio-economic and socio-cultural underpinnings, in a comparative perspective. Let us begin by examining the nature, reliability, and quality of census information on which the present study would depend heavily.

Tribes in the Indian Censuses

There can hardly be any dispute that India is one of very few non-Western countries for which detailed and fairly rich decennial census information is available since as back as the early 1870s, with no break so far. And the census reports and statistical tables have since been presenting demographic information separately for tribal population - and often for many individual tribes. This, of course, provides for scope for research on India's tribal demography – both historical and contemporary. However, the census data, like most other large-scale data sets, are not accurate. A considerable caution is warranted towards drawing conclusions based on the census data on many aspects including those relating to tribal population, as there are difficulties of various kinds,

depending, of course, on the nature/purpose of analysis undertaken. For example, for examining long-term trends, the question of comparability of data from one census to other could be of importance. In a *comparative* demographic analysis of two sub-populations for a single census year, the question of their *relative* accuracy and coverage would be of key significance.

In Indian censuses during the British period (except in the 1941 census) the religion has been one prominent criterion for classification of country's population, with tribals being categorised as those practising hundreds of different 'primitive' religions (i.e., those other than better-known religious categories like Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jew, Buddhist, Jain, Christian). In fact, they used to be classified as 'animists' until the 1931 census when they were enumerated under the heading 'tribal religion'. Thus, up to the 1941 census, the practice of enumerating tribes on the criterion of religious affiliation amounted to bypassing many complex issues - anthropological, sociological, and historical - involved in the notion and/or identity of diverse tribes across the country.

However, the British approach to the enumeration of tribes, as it were, on religious divisions had not been free of difficulties. One major trouble relates to the distinction between Tribal religion and Hindu religion. More specifically, there was considerable confusion over 'a line between advanced primitive religion and backward Hinduism' (Davis 1951:188) because of the syncretistic character of Hinduism, which is so pervasive that it infiltrates nearly every group. Traces of Hindu influence on most of the tribal religions make for some basis for labelling a 'primitive' tribesman as a Hindu unless he is capable of asserting himself in this matter. Another source of error was deliberate misinterpretation, especially in the wake of separate religious electorates since 1909. There was a growing tendency among Hindu organisations to return everyone of doubtful status as a Hindu, which did materialise to a considerable extent in 1931 census. The net effect obviously was under-enumeration of tribal population to an estimated extent of nearly 90 per cent in Bombay and 50 per cent in Madras in 1931 (*see* Davis 1951:189).

It was only in 1941 that the tribals were defined, for the first time in census, not in terms of their religion or faith, but in terms of their 'origin'. The 1941 census enumerated tribals as those who have had a 'tribal origin'. In fact this major shift in the criterion by which tribals were counted and classified, brought in a serious difficulty of comparability of tribal population between 1941 and the preceding census figures based on religious lines (Davis 1951, Appendix J). At around India's independence in 1947, a serious rethinking on the notion of tribe was initiated by political leaders concerned with the secular deterioration of the deal for tribal and other backward sections, whom they wanted to bring up gradually - through 'affection', 'friendliness' and some special protections and provisions - to the mainstream levels. The Committee, appointed for drafting the Constitution of Republic of India, made adequate provisions in the constitution for safeguards and benefits of the tribal peoples. The Constitution empowered the President to declare any tribal community or part thereof as 'scheduled tribe' to be eligible for those special provisions and benefits. With the adoption of the Constitution in 1950 the President promulgated in the same year a list of Scheduled Tribes (ST thereafter) and Scheduled Areas, which was based, in a large measure, on the list of Backward Tribes promulgated in 1936 by the British colonial administration. At the time of the first census of independent India in 1951, the number of scheduled tribal communities or part thereof was 212, with specific areas being earmarked for

each. The Constitution provisions thus 'sealed the boundaries between tribe and non-tribe' and gave to the tribal identity 'a kind of definiteness it lacked in the past' (Béteille 1986:318). While a tribe had hitherto been a part of a regional system, and tribes of different regions had little to do with each other, there emerged since the 1950s not only definite tribal identity with legal sanction, but a distinct political interest forging that identity. The release of such political forces not only disrupted the longstanding historical process of tribal absorption, but they probably, to some extent, even reversed it (*see e. g.* Kulkarni 1991).

Although Indian Constitution did not lay down criteria for scheduling a tribe, it empowered the President of the country to appoint a Commission, which was dubbed as Backward Classes Commission, with three major tasks: evaluating conditions of socially backward classes; recommending policy for amelioration of their hardships and deprivations; and re-examining existing list of Scheduled Tribes for suggesting its revision, if necessary. The first such Backward Classes Commission was appointed in 1953,⁵ which came up with a recommendation for declaring a number of communities across India - in addition to those already declared - as scheduled. Accordingly, a modified (and enlarged) list of scheduled tribes was notified by the President in 1956, and the list was published under Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Modification) Order, 1956. Consequently, at the time of 1961 census the number of scheduled tribe rose to 427 (which was an increase by more than twice the number at the 1951 census), and to 432 by the census of 1971.

In the face of various problems and complaints,⁶ the Removal of Area Restrictions (Amendment) Act of 1976 was passed to remove the area restriction on tribal identity, and henceforth the list of Scheduled Tribes was made applicable to all areas in a state. Consequently, Scheduled Tribes (STs) population since then began to mean officially tribal population of the country.⁷ Difficulties are, of course, produced by 'the varying definition of a tribe, by changes to the list of officially recognised tribes, by qualitative deficiencies in demographic data, administrative changes to India's regions and by the reclassification of tribes as castes' (Wiercinski 1996), but they cannot make census information on definitions of tribes, other lower castes, and related characteristics 'untouchable' for scientific inquiry. Indeed relevant census data are not beyond corrections and adjustments. More importantly, these possible defects of census data have not usually been so serious as to obliterate distinct differences in demographic features and facts between tribal and non-tribal groups.

The scheduling of tribes had occurred simultaneously with the preparation of lists of Scheduled Castes (SC), which include communities of low social status in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy.⁸ Although two *separate* schedules for tribes and low caste peoples are prepared, these two groups are somewhat close to each other in some (but certainly not all) respects. For example, the tribe-caste continuum and consequent proliferation of 'borderline cases' of tribes implies some degree of overlap between lower caste groups and some tribes. In fact, some early attempts at preparing scheduled caste lists in several provinces of British India (e.g. Assam and Bengal) did propose to include some of the most primitive tribes, especially the 'Primitive Hinduised' ones (*see* Gupta 1985:23). Yet, at an aggregate level, they are two distinct groups. Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Ray, popularly known as the 'Father of Indian Ethnology', regarded low caste (i.e. mostly SC) peoples as 'scattered and disorganised offshoots of the Aborigines..' and as the 'descendants of the scattered remnants of the

Aborigines who were left behind on the plains and who succumbed to Aryan domination, lost their native speech and distinctive "aboriginal" culture, and found themselves gradually degraded into landless serfs and the dregs of "Hindu" or "Hinduized" society' (quoted in Gupta 1985:22). While tribal peoples have often been regarded as morally and socio-culturally 'superior' to lower caste (SC) people,⁹ these two groups have been *economically* on rather similar footing in terms of such material indicators as levels of poverty, landlessness, average income, and consumption (we would return to this later).¹⁰ Therefore, it would be *more* illuminating if tribal demographic patterns and trends are examined in comparison with those of the SC population, who are much similar in terms of economic footing to, but are pretty distinct socio-culturally from, the former.¹¹ This comparative approach should enable clearer understanding of socio-cultural influences on demographic behaviour/outcomes, independent of possible mediation of economic factors. Besides, an understanding of tribes in the light of their demographic trends, patterns, and outcomes could bring out useful insights into the evolution of the notion of tribes and their relative social position.

Broad Demographic Patterns and Trends of Indian Tribes: An Aggregative Analysis

As has been clear from the foregoing, India's census information on tribes, though imperfect on several counts, can still be profitably utilised for systematic investigations into aspects of tribal demography. No less importantly, one can even bypass - by relying on the census approaches and definitions - many intricate/subtle issues surrounding the notion and classification of tribes.¹² We now examine - chiefly on the basis of census data - broad features of long-term growth of tribal population since the late nineteenth century, especially in comparison with total population (*see* Table 1). It is useful to examine population trends *separately* for pre-independence and post-independence periods. As can be seen from Table 1, except for three decades, namely 1891-1901, 1911-1921, and 1921-1931, the aggregate tribal population have registered an increase in other periods, although growth rate has varied considerably. For example, during 1881-1891 decade the enumerated *total* population increased by about 12 per cent, while the increase recorded for tribal population during the period was three and half times larger. This could be due to likely improvements in subsequent census taking (at least) to the extent of bringing within enumeration coverage more tribal peoples of remote and isolated terrains. However, over the following decade of 1891-1901, tribal population had experienced a substantial *decline* in their *absolute number vis-à-vis* some meagre increase of total population. This could be because of greater mortality tolls among the tribals in two consecutive large-scale famines of 1896-1897 and 1899-1900.¹³ But in the following decade of 1901-1911 the enumerated tribal population had increased much faster than the general population. This could be related to lessened severity of famines during this decade in terms of frequency, scale and coverage,¹⁴ and also to (presumably) quicker recovery of tribal population who had suffered a greater (in proportionate terms) population loss in the major famines of the preceding decade.¹⁵

Table 1: Long-Term Trends in Population and its Growth, and Sex-Ratio, Total and Tribal Populations, India, 1881-2001

Year	Total Population	Tribal Population		Decadal Growth Rate (per cent)		Sex-Ratio (female per 1,000 males)	
				Total	Tribal	Total	Tribal
British India							
1881	250,155,050	6,426,511	(2.57)	-	-	954	-
1891	279,575,324	9,112,018	(3.26)	11.76	41.79	958	992
1901	283,867,584	8,184,758	(2.88)	1.54	-10.18	972	1021
1911	303,004,354	9,593,695	(3.17)	6.74	17.21	964	1016
1921	305,726,528	9,072,024	(3.00)	0.89	-7.2	955	996
1931	337,675,361	7,629,959	(2.45)	10.45	-15.9	950	1009
1941	388,997,955(a)	8,791,354(b)	(2.26)	15.20	6.17	945	985
Independent India							
1951*	361,088,090	19,111,498	(5.29)			946	1021 ⁺
1961	439,234,771	30,130,184		23.10	33.84 [*]	941	987
1971	548,159,652	38,015,162	(6.93)	24.80	26.17	930	982
1981 ^(c)	665,287,849	51,628,638	(7.76)	24.69	30.6 [@]	934	983
1991 ^(d)	838,583,988	67,758,380	(8.08)	23.79	25.68	927	972
2001	1,028,610,328	84,326,240	(8.20)	22.7	24.50	933	977

(a) Includes 2,331,332 Persons in North-West Frontier Province not enumerated by religion but believed to be Muslim. (b) In view of a change in classification in the 1941 census, this is an estimate - made for the purpose of achieving comparability with the figures of tribal population identified as Animists till 1931 or as people practising tribal religion in 1931 census - of tribal population in 1941, derived after adjustments to the enumerated population of 'tribal origin'. See Davis (1951), Appendix J for adjustments and assumptions involved in obtaining this estimate. (c) Excludes Assam. The decadal growth rate during 1971-1981 has been calculated by excluding the population of Assam.

(d) Excludes Jammu and Kashmir. The decadal growth rate during 1981-1991 has been calculated excluding population of both Assam and Jammu and Kashmir. * See note 1 below; + for India and Pakistan together (Visaria 1969, Table 2.9); @ This has been calculated on the basis of revised estimate of tribal population for 1971 (which is 39,489,232 excluding Assam) after taking account of the abolition of hitherto imposed area restriction for most tribes by an Act of parliament in 1976, which resulted in larger population of several tribes in many states according to 1971 census than were actually enumerated (see Sinha 1986, Tables 4.1, 4.2, and Appendix). In fact the office of the Registrar General worked the revised population of tribals for states where the revision was necessary (see commissioner for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes 1977; and also Sinha 1993)

Note: 1) In 1951 census the tribal population was for the first time enumerated according to a statutory list of scheduled tribes notified by the president under Article 342 of the constitution, which was enlarged through Modification as per order in 1956. According to the 1956 Modification order the tribal population for the 1951 census was revised upward as being 22, 511, 584, with the revised percentage rising to 6.23.. Since tribal population in 1961 was enumerated according to the 1956 Modification list of scheduled tribes, the decadal growth rate of tribal population during 1951-1961 has been calculated on the basis of this revised tribal population for 1951, 2) Figures in parentheses are respective percentage shares of tribal population to the total population.

Source: For British India figures, Davis (1951), Table 77, p. 179; and Mamoria (1958), p. 26; Natarajan (1971), p. 9. For post-Independence period, Census Report, Nag (1984), 15-16; Bose (1996), Government of India (2004).

The growth of total population was negligible during the 1911-1921 decade within which occurred the great influenza pandemic of 1918 with a heavy toll of human lives. However, the record of a negative growth rate for tribals in this period could be indicative of their *relative mortality disadvantage* in the pandemic. Again, during 1921-1931 Indian tribes appear to have experienced a decline in their aggregate enumerated size, while the general population had recorded an increase. This differential seems to have been related to a heightened politics involving religious groups at the time of 1931 census, and especially due to, as noted earlier, an active propaganda that 'practically everyone but Muslims, Christians, and Jews ... should be counted as Hindu' (Davis 1951:188). There was indeed an active pressure on the 1931 census authorities to return 'everyone of doubtful status as Hindu', with a consequent under-enumeration of tribals (Davis 1951:188). Furthermore the substitution of religious criteria by the one of 'tribal origin' for counting tribals in the census 1941 was (at least partly) responsible for a record of slower growth of tribal population during 1931-1941 (see Table 1). Except for dramatic effects of famines and epidemics, the census enumerated tribal population up to 1921 was growing at rates no less (or may indeed be quite higher) than those for total population. However, somewhat sluggish recorded increases of tribal population over

three decades preceding Independence could partly be an artefact of social and political turmoils on religious lines.

Another pre-Independence feature of population increases relates to relative constancy of the proportion of tribal population to the total since the late nineteenth century, along with secular declines in the proportion of the Hindus; while the former ranges between 2.26 per cent to 3.26 during 1881-1941, the latter dropped from 75.1 per cent to 69.5 (see Davis 1951:178). This differential, according to Kingsley Davis, was due to higher fertility of tribal population than that of the Hindus. But there could be other possibilities as well. For example, as we would argue later in this paper, this rising tribal proportion seems to have resulted from their *relatively* lower mortality levels, as their fertility levels (not CWR) could have been lower than those of the mainstream Hindu population.

In the first census of independent India in 1951, the enumerated size of tribal peoples turned much larger (more than twice) than that in the preceding census. This sounds somewhat striking, especially because the partition of India in 1947 had truncated geographical size itself. In fact, the proportion of tribal population had jumped from around 3.0 per cent in the pre-Independence period to more than 5 per cent in 1951. This might have been partly because the regions (e.g. north-western parts and eastern Bengal) that were carved out from erstwhile India were historically of low tribal concentration. However, this can hardly be a full explanation for the recorded increase of tribals by more than ten per cent per annum during 1941-1951, when total population of the country declined by about 7 per cent. In fact, this bursting increase of tribals in 1951 had much to do with their enumeration for the first time on the basis of detailed list of 'scheduled' tribes prepared by the Government, not according to their religious category or their 'origin' as was done previously.¹⁶ Many tribes, who had not been enumerated under tribal category in the earlier censuses on account of their religious affiliation or otherwise, got identified as 'tribal' in the 1951 census. Interestingly, there has been a steady rising trend of tribal *proportion* to the total in the entire post-independence period - from around 5 per cent in 1951 to more than eight per cent in 2001. The enumerated size of tribal population, nearly 84 million according to the latest census, exceeds the population size of many western countries. Furthermore, decadal rate of growth of tribal population has always been higher than of the general population in the post-Independence period (see Table 1). Note, however, that the gap in growth rates between tribal and general population has been highest during the 1951-1961 decade, and it narrowed down over the following decades (perhaps with the exception for 1971-1981 decade).

There could be several plausible explanations, of which some are more readily obvious than others, for higher growth of tribal population and concomitant rises in its share in the post-Independence period. First, a rapid enlargement of the list of Scheduled Tribes, especially up to the late 1970s, as well as removal of area restriction in 1976, certainly contributed to a surge of enumerated tribal population.¹⁷ This tendency got somewhat fuelled by mounting demand for recognition of tribal identity among several hitherto unidentified tribal communities, especially in those regions where local level activism and state support was relatively pronounced toward assuring tribal rights and privileges. However,¹⁸ this cannot account *fully* for almost galloping tribal shares in total population.

For example, there is fairly strong evidence suggesting higher *real* natural growth of tribal than that of total population. While estimated growth rate of ‘matched populations of scheduled tribes’ between 1961 and 1971 turned to be only about one per cent point lower (25.3 per cent) than that (26.2 per cent) based on unadjusted tribal populations, even the former happened to be one per cent point higher than that for total population (Sinha 1979). Moreover, the estimated growth rate of even *matched* tribal population turned to be higher by about one per cent point than that for total population (24.8 per cent), suggesting a higher natural rate of growth among tribes *vis-à-vis* general population.¹⁹ Thus, apart from newer entries to the schedule of tribes, a genuinely *larger* natural increase of tribal population must have contributed to its rising share in the total population in the post-independence period.

Relatively high growth of tribal population in the newly independent country could be related to development and modernisation initiatives and associated changes, albeit limited, in lifestyles, customs, values, and some material improvements. Such changes - especially at the early stage of development/modernisation with little prevalence of modern contraception (as was certainly the case with many tribal communities during first several decades after independence) – could even raise fertility for a while (so-called ‘pre-transition rise of fertility’ i.e., rises of fertility just prior to the beginning of its secular decline).²⁰ In fact such pre-transition fertility rise could be relatively delayed, prolonged, and perhaps pronounced among the ST population *vis-à-vis* SCs. First, many ST communities typically lag behind the SC people in the modernisation process. Second, the Sanskritization process, under which tribals could emulate higher caste Hindu practice of early marriage (e.g. ‘child marriage’), could lower tribal females’ average age at marriage (more on this later), which in turn could have helped increase tribal fertility.²¹ Furthermore, since the ‘pre-transition fertility rise’ is contingent upon relative absence of modern contraceptives, its occurrence could likely be protracted among tribes because of their relative isolation and insulation from family planning programmes/campaigns until much late.²²

A remarkably higher growth rate of tribal population during 1971-1981 was (at least partly) fuelled both by inclusion of new communities into the ST category and by removal of ‘area restriction’ following the 1976 Act, while ‘pre-transition’ rises of fertility in more lately modernised tribal groups might have played a part too. What emerges, on the whole, (ignoring periods of dramatic losses of population due to famines, epidemics and the like) is a picture of tribal population growing - much like general population - at very moderate rates during pre-independence decades, but at much higher rates (with concomitant rises in its population share) thereafter. A relative inflation in the tribal population growth in the post-independence period has been contributed both by newer recognitions of tribal identities as well as late occurrence of their ‘pre-transition rise’ of fertility. However, like total population, the indication of the onset of a declining trend in the growth of tribal population in recent decades - albeit with a lag – seems well discernible.

What is probably most glaring is the difference in the sex-ratio (female-male) between tribal and general populations (Table 1). In distinct contrast to India’s overall sex-ratio having been historically unfavourable to females, the tribal ratio has been always relatively balanced. In fact, females outnumber males in the entire western world and in many other developing countries outside Asia and North Africa. Such excess female scenario derives both from their *biological* edge over males in natural survival as well

as from females' lesser relative vulnerability to deaths due to wars, accidents and unhealthy lifestyles. A relative female deficiency as reflected in very low female-male ratios in general population thus indicates an outweighing of adverse social influences against females' survivability over their intrinsically (biological) advantageous effects.²³ There have been several attempts at estimating what Amartya Sen in the early 1990s famously coined 'missing women' in the countries with lower than a 'benchmark' female-male ratio (i.e., the ratio obtaining in the absence of anti-female social environment). The figure of missing women of about 37 million in India with the sub-Saharan female-male ratio of 1.022 being used as a benchmark gives us a broad sense of how many more females could remain alive if anti-female social environment were absent.²⁴

Perhaps more importantly, a long term *deteriorating* trend in female-male ratio among India's general population since the early twentieth century (as seen in Table 1) has been a source of concern in academic and official circles alike. After several decades of discussions and research, a few stark facts have emerged almost indisputably in the Indian context: a) that low overall female-male ratio in total general population is largely related to a female mortality disadvantage (*vis-à-vis* males), especially in infancy and young childhood ages; b) that this relative female disadvantage, in turn, is a manifestation of familial discrimination and neglect mostly against girls in respect of distribution of resources, especially medical attention and health care; c) that a secular decline in female-male ratio - especially in the post-independence period - implies not only worsening *relative* share of females in the distribution of secular improvements in health and medical facilities, but, even more importantly, there are strong indications of *intensification* - along with overall development and a pervasive transition to smaller family norm - of these gender biases, often more *selectively* against higher parity daughters born already or abortion of high parity female foetus.²⁵ All this is seen as being essentially linked with a pervasive culture of 'son preference' (i.e., preference for sons over daughters).²⁶ It should be stressed that such strong son preference is generally known and shown to be one prominent expression of fundamental Asian cultural framework of patriarchy in which female status and autonomy is relatively low.²⁷

Against these disquieting (and even perhaps growing) imbalances in the sex ratio of India, the tribal record of a far *more* balanced sex ratio than those of general population as well as SC peoples is of considerable interest (*see* Table 1). Indeed, following the foregoing discussion on gender questions, a higher female-male ratio in ST population could well be taken as a clear reflection of much lesser, or relatively negligible, anti-female discrimination and biases amongst tribal societies. That tribal female children and infants, unlike their non-tribal counterparts, suffer less familial neglect and discrimination, is corroborated by the fact of much higher juvenile female-male ratios in tribal population *vis-à-vis* that in the mainstream (e.g. Agnihotri 2000:153). Besides, there is substantial anthropological evidence elucidating relatively little (or perhaps almost total absence of) gender biases in typical and traditional tribal society and culture.²⁸ In this context, a ten-point drop of tribal female-male ratio from 983 to 972 during 1981-1991 decade is particularly noteworthy, pointing to a tribal trend in the direction of the mainstream pattern of growing deficit of females (we would return to this issue later again).

Regional Distribution of Tribal Population and its Trends

Having analysed the broad patterns of growth of tribal population and a few related features at the all-India level, we now turn to regional dimensions and diversities of tribal population. Table 2 provides census-based information on the state-wise shares of ST population for 1961, 1991 and 2001.²⁹ Since physical size of state varies quite widely, the state level shares of tribal population should be analysed both in relation to total state population as well as to total tribal population of the country. Notwithstanding possible regional biases and defects in the enumeration of tribes, the census data are fairly reliable (at least) for the purpose of gleaning major patterns of spatial distribution of Indian tribes. As is seen from Table 2, tribal people, though they are dispersed across almost entire country, are mostly found in the eastern, western and central regions, which altogether (including north-eastern states) is home for nearly ninety per cent of India's tribal population. In contrast, respective shares of northern and southern states in total *tribal* population are quite small. The largest number of ST population enumerated in the 1991 census was in Madhya Pradesh (15.1 million), followed by Maharashtra (7.3 million), Orissa (7.0 million), Bihar (6.6 million), Gujarat (6.2 million) in that order. Indeed the recent regional pattern of distribution of tribal population does not appear substantially different from the pattern recorded three/four decades earlier (*see* Table 2). For example, there is hardly any correspondence between state's share to the country's total tribal population and the proportion of tribal population in the state. While this is not particularly surprising in view of the wide variation in the size of state, the specific regional patterns in terms of these state-level tribal shares have continued largely unaltered.

There are several small states in the far-eastern region, where tribals are the overwhelming majority, but they constitute relatively meagre proportion of total tribal population of the country. On the other hand, the share of Madhya Pradesh alone in total tribal population is nearly 23 per cent, although the tribal proportion to the total state population is far smaller than that for most of the far eastern states (*see* Table 2). Indeed, total tribal population of Madhya Pradesh is about three times as large as that of all eastern states clubbed together. The three western states, namely Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Rajasthan constitute more than one fourth of total tribal population of the country.

However, there have been some notable changes in the regional distribution of census enumerated ST population, especially in terms of states' relative shares to aggregate tribal population. First, except for the eastern region, the rest of the country has had a record of enhanced tribal proportion. In some regions the magnitude of *increase* of tribal proportion has been enormous, say in southern region where the proportionate share in aggregate tribal population of the county has nearly doubled over the period 1961-2001. However, the increase in tribal share has not been uniform across individual states within the region. For instance, within the southern region, the increase has been negligible in Tamil Nadu and even negative in Kerala, while Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have experienced fairly large increases in their tribal shares both within state populations as well as within the country's total tribal population. The tribal share of western region as a whole has got larger within the country as well as region - although quantum of increase is somewhat greater in terms of country level share. Among the three major states of western India (e.g. Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra), which all have gained in terms of tribal share especially within the state population, Maharashtra

seems to have gained the largest tribal share in terms of percent-point increase within state as well as the country. At least a part of this has been contributed by what is often described as 'infiltration' of people into the ST-fold especially before 1971. For example, Maharashtra, a region of relatively strong tribal movements for land distribution, has witnessed comparatively effective implementation of legislative measures of distributing ownership of communal and common property resources to tribals (Guha 1999; Mohanty 2001).

Table 2: Regional Patterns of Growth and Distribution of India's Tribal Population, 1961-2001

State / UT	ST Population (%)					
	To Total Population			To Total Tribal Population		
	1961	1991	2001	1961	1991	2001
India	6.90	8.08	8.2	100	100	100
<i>States</i>						
North Eastern	22.9	25.8	27	11.0	12.0	12.3
Assam	10.74	12.82	12.4	3.86	4.24	3.9
Manipur	31.92	34.41	34.2	0.82	0.93	0.9
Meghalaya	83.07	85.53	85.9	2.11	2.24	2.4
Nagaland	93.92	87.7	89.1	1.13	1.57	2.1
Tripura	31.52	30.95	31.1	1.19	1.26	1.2
Arunachal Pradesh	88.59	63.61	64.2	0.98	0.81	0.8
Mizoram	98.1	94.75	94.5	0.86	0.96	1.0
Eastern	10.6	9.4	6.7	34.7	25.9	15.9
Bihar	9.05	7.66	0.9	13.93	9.76	0.9
Orissa	24.06	22.21	22.1	13.99	10.38	9.7
West Bengal	5.88	5.6	5.5	6.8	5.62	5.2
Sikkim	-	22.36	20.6	-	0.13	0.1
Central	20.6	23.3	20.3	-	-	14.5
Madhya Pradesh	20.62	23.37	20.3	22.13	22.73	14.5
Western	9.4	11.6	11.4	25.0	28.2	27.7
Gujarat	13.34	14.92	14.8	9.12	9.09	8.9
Maharashtra	6.06	9.27	8.9	7.94	10.8	10.2
Rajasthan	11.66	12.44	12.6	7.79	8.08	8.4
D. & N. Haveli	88.43	78.99	62.2	0.16	0.16	0.2
Goa Daman & Diu	-	11.54	0.04	-	0.02	0.0
Northern	0.16	0.35	0.2	-	0.74	0.3
Uttar Pradesh	-	0.21	0.1	-	0.42	0.1
Himachal Pradesh	4.34	4.22	4.0	0.4	0.32	0.3
Southern	1.8	3.6	4.8	6.5	10.3	11.3
Andhra Pradesh	3.68	6.31	6.6	4.38	6.2	6.0
Karnataka	0.81	4.26	6.6	0.63	2.83	4.1
Kerala	1.25	1.1	1.1	0.7	0.47	0.4
Tamil Nadu	0.74	1.03	1.0	0.83	0.85	0.8
Islands	5.3	-	20.6	5.4	0.10	0.1
A. & N. Islands	22.22	9.54	8.3	0.04	0.04	0.0
Lakshadweep	97.02	93.15	94.5	0.07	0.07	0.1

Contd...

Table 2: Regional Patterns of Growth and Distribution of India's Tribal Population, 1961-2001

State / UT	Average Annual Growth Rates							
	1961-1971		1971-1981		1981-1991		1991-2001	
	Total	Tribal	Total	Tribal	Total	Tribal	Total	Tribal
India	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.7	2.1	2.3	2.1	2.4
<i>States</i>								
<i>North Eastern</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.2	2.7
Assam	3	3.2	-	-	-	-	1.9	1.5
Manipur	3.2	2.9	2.8	1.5	2.6	4.9	2.5	0.9
Meghalaya	2.7	2.1	2.8	2.8	2.8	3.4	3.1	3.1
Nagaland	3.4	2.8	4.1	3.5	4.5	4.7	6.5	6.7
Tripura	3.1	2.2	2.8	2.6	2.9	3.8	1.6	1.6
Arunachal Pradesh	3.3	2.1	3	1.8	3.1	2.2	2.7	2.8
Mizoram	2.2	1.8	4	4	3.3	3.3	2.9	2.8
<i>Eastern</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.2	2.3
Bihar	1.9	1.6	2.2	1.7	2.1	1.3	2.9	3.2
Orissa	2.2	1.8	1.8	1.5	1.8	1.7	1.6	1.6
West Bengal	2.4	2.1	2.1	1.7	2.2	2.2	1.8	1.6
Sikkim	-	-	-	-	2.5	2.1	3.3	2.2
<i>Central</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.4	2.6
Madhya Pradesh	2.5	2.3	2.3	2	2.4	2.5	2.4	2.6
<i>Western</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.4	2.2
Gujarat	2.6	3	2.4	2.6	1.9	2.4	2.3	2.1
Maharashtra	2.4	2.1	2.2	4.1	2.3	2.4	2.3	1.7
Rajasthan	2.4	2.8	2.8	2.9	2.5	2.7	2.8	3.0
D. & N. Haveli	2.5	2.3	3.3	2.2	2.9	2.9	5.9	2.6
Goa Daman & Diu	-	-	2.4	3.4	1.6	1.2	1.5	5.1
<i>Northern</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.3	2.0
Uttar Pradesh	-	-	2.3	1.6	2.3	2.1	2.6	4.2
Himachal Pradesh	2.1	1.5	2.1	3.3	1.9	1	1.8	1.2
<i>Southern</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.8	3.6
Andhra Pradesh	1.9	2.2	2.1	3.6	2.2	2.8	1.5	2.0
Karnataka	2.2	1.8	2.4	19.4	1.9	0.5	1.8	8.1
Kerala	2.3	2.3	1.8	3.1	1.3	2.1	0.9	1.3
Tamil Nadu	2	2.1	1.6	1.5	1.4	1	1.2	1.3
<i>Islands</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.5	1.5
A. & N. Islands	5.9	2.5	4.9	2.1	4	1.8	2.7	0.7
Lakshadweep	2.8	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.4	1.7	1.9

Source: Sinha (1994), Table 5.1, 5.12, Census of India 2001, *Primary Census Abstract*, Total Population, Table 5.

In contrast, Madhya Pradesh - the region with highest tribal concentration (both absolutely and relatively) - has witnessed nearly three per cent point increase in the share of ST to the state total population, but without amounting to an increase in its share to the county's total tribal population. Similar is the pattern recorded for north-eastern region on the whole. This seems to be a reflection of relatively high tribal population growth. Note also that Rajasthan and Maharashtra of western region, majority of the smaller north-eastern states, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka of the south

all have experienced somewhat higher population growth rates than the national average both for tribal and general population in most of the period between 1961 and 2001. Putting aside enumeration biases relating to tribals, which is perhaps relevant to a few states (e.g. Karnataka and Maharashtra), the inter-state differential in the growth of tribal population should be shaped by regional variation in death and birth rates (i.e., in natural rate of growth), and migration flows and patterns. For example, a higher growth rate of tribes in a state tends to increase tribal share in total state population, but whether the state's share in the country's tribal population would be higher or not depends on their respective relative rates of growth. Apart from differential natural rates of growth depending on differentials in birth and death rates), the nature and direction of inter-state tribal mobility and movement can also contribute to the outcome of regional patterns of tribal population. For example, tribal migration from Bihar to neighbouring or even to distant states is fairly well-known.

However, the changes in inter-state tribal composition of population can get even more complicated if perceptible differentials in enumeration biases exist across states. Such biases in tribal enumeration in a state could occur not just randomly, but they presumably depend on the character and intensity of politics centring tribes and ethnic minorities in the state. Indeed, there are indications of over-enumeration of tribals in some states. For example, the record of abnormally high growth of ST population in Karnataka during 1971-1981 (namely 19.4 per cent per annum as against 2.4 per cent for general population of the state, and also against 2.7 per cent for country's ST population) is a clear pointer to an upward bias in tribal growth rate (Sinha 1994:300).³⁰ In fact, a similar surge in the growth rate of enumerated ST population during 1971-1981 decade - albeit to a lesser extent than in Karnataka - was also recorded for Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Kerala. At least in case of a few tribal groups the socio-political factors (e.g. movement for inclusion of new tribal groups in the schedule; for example Lambada in Andhra Pradesh before the elections of 1977) must have been important in accounting for a recorded inflation of tribal population growth in these regions (e.g. Golbery, L. de, and A. Chappuis 2000).³¹ However, one should not ignore the influence of possible changes in demographic behaviour, namely a pre-transition rise of tribal fertility along with mortality improvements.

In contrast to the above scenario in many southern and western states in the 1971-1981 period, there had been a distinct drop in the growth rate of tribal population in West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh. Enumeration biases (e.g. conversion of tribes into non-tribal categories), though plausible to some extent, can hardly be a full explanation.³² The clue could partly lie in relatively high or even enhanced mortality levels (related to accentuated mass material deprivation during 1970s when these states were passing through a phase of economic stagnation), and/or in tribal out-migration to relatively fast advancing states of western and southern regions since the mid-1970s. In fact these factors were to a large extent true for general population too, as is reflected in its slow-down of growth rates - albeit by a smaller magnitude.

It is noteworthy that Bihar and Orissa - which are historically the regions of tribal concentration - have experienced between 1961 and 1991 a perceptible decline in their shares not only within state population, but more prominently within country's total tribal population. The rates of growth of tribal population in these two eastern states have been remarkably low, especially in comparison with the rates growth in many

other regions such as central and western India. This differential in tribal population growth between eastern/central and western states particularly during 1971-1981 decade has sometimes been attributed to weaker execution of 'removal of area restrictions' during the 1970s in the latter (Roy Burman 1993:200). It is worth noting, however, that the growth rates of general population have been comparatively low too in these states - in Bihar particularly during 1961-1971 and in Orissa during entire period since 1971. Putting aside the possibility of worsening quality and coverage of census enumeration or other biases,³³ the reasons for this record of relative sluggishness of population increases possibly include relatively high mortality levels, low birth rates, and large exodus. As for Orissa's lower than average growth of tribal and general population, high mortality and low fertility rates have often been held (at least partly) responsible (e.g. Padhi and Mishra 2000: Table 3.1, 3.2).³⁴

While low population growth in Orissa (particularly of tribals) has often been viewed as a 'puzzle' by scholars, this has remained largely unexplored, except for sporadic and inadequately substantiated remarks regarding fertility, mortality and migration. In fact, comparatively higher mortality level in Orissa (or in the eastern region for that matter) should hardly produce surprises, but explanation for Orissa's (comparatively) low fertility level in the 1960s and 1970s is far less obvious and has often been a subject of speculation. For example, one received hypothesis attributes Orissa's comparatively low birth rates to a relatively large proportion of tribals, who, because of their greater vulnerability and lesser political clout, could more easily be targeted by mass sterilisation zeal of family planning programme, particularly during latter's coercive phases (Bose 1983).³⁵ Noting considerable fertility declines in Orissa, particularly in face of sluggish decline of mortality, some scholars have described it as a 'premature fertility transition' (Padhi and Mishra 2000:25-26).

Indeed, there are reasons why relatively large tribal concentration such as in Orissa could help make for a comparatively low overall population growth. First, tribal fertility is historically – and partly due to their distinctive socio-cultural features - lower than non-tribal counterparts (we would return to this question later again). More specifically, the tribes of Orissa and eastern region at large have been suffering for long fairly acute food deprivation and under-nutrition, which could not only contribute to a high mortality, but this could inhibit their natural fecundity too. Anyway, this question deserves painstaking research and serious attention on its own right. This said, the longstanding phenomenon of tribal out-migration is likely to have been particularly important as a contributor to slow population increase in the eastern states of Bihar and Orissa, and particularly in Bihar during first several decades after independence³⁶ (Our own analysis on the demographic trends in Bihar and Jharkhand is available in Maharatna and Chikte 2004).

In Bihar relatively high mortality seems be one major contributory factor for its slower growth of population during 1961-1971. Increases in the birth rate in subsequent decades presumably helped the population growth rate catch up with the level of national average. The information on demographic rates for Bihar is notoriously lacking for the period before 1981. During the subsequent periods both birth and death rates have been clearly higher than the all-India figures. Indeed, Bihar has witnessed almost dramatic rise in the growth rate of tribal population in 1991-2001 decade, reflecting presumably a late onset of modernisation and improvements in health facilities

consistent with a pre-transition fertility and population increases. Indeed, it was only in the 1991-2001 decade, the population growth rates of both general and tribal populations in Bihar have exceeded respective all-India figures. Estimated demographic rates of Bihar for 1997 show that gap in the birth rate of about 4 per thousand between Bihar and India is much larger than only one per cent gap in the death rate, leaving the state with much larger natural rate of population increases in the recent past.

To summarise thus far: a broad regional pattern of India's tribal population – namely, tribes being concentrated (in descending order) in central, eastern (including north-eastern) and western regions (these together constituting about 90 per cent of total tribal population) - has remained largely unshaken since the early 1950s or indeed much earlier. However, there have been some recent changes in the tribal share of a few states. A distinct decline of tribal share of eastern states (particularly Bihar and Orissa) over the post-independence period is notable. The issue of enumeration biases, particularly over-enumeration of tribals, has, of course, been of some significance in southern and western regions – especially up to 1981. But the explanation for the changes in regional composition of tribal population seems to lie *in large part* in inter-state differences in demographic rates (e.g. birth, death) and their trends and in the pattern of spatial mobility and movements of tribal people.

Finally, it is important to note that despite the number of scheduled tribes having already exceeded 500, it is only a few *major* tribal groups that constitute a large bulk of the aggregate of tribal population of the country. For example, as Table 3 shows, about nine major tribal groups constitute nearly half of country's total tribal population, and they are concentrated mostly in the central, western and eastern parts. They are: 1) Bhil, concentrated mostly in central and western regions (e.g. Gujarat, MP, Rajasthan); 2) Gond, mostly concentrated in the central and its western and eastern neighbourhood regions (e.g. MP, Orissa, AP, Maharashtra); 3) Santal, concentrated in eastern states (Bihar, Orissa, Tripura, West Bengal); 4) Oraon, concentrated in eastern and central parts (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and West Bengal); 5) Mina, concentrated mostly in Rajasthan; 6) Munda, mostly in eastern parts (e.g. Bihar, Orissa, WB, MP); Khond, concentrated mostly in central and south-eastern regions (e.g. AP, Orissa). It is of interest that tribe-composition has remained broadly unaltered over post-independence period - despite a process of proliferation and formal recognition of many new tribal sub-groups. For example the shares of Bhil and Gond populations have risen - admittedly marginally, with similarly meagre reduction in the share of Munda population.

There are quite a few tribal groups - each constituting slightly more than one per cent of total tribal population, namely Ho (1.42) in eastern India, Naga (1.23) in north-eastern states.³⁷ Apart from them, there are numerous smaller tribal groups dispersed across the country. In fact there are some 'small' and so-called primitive tribes of which enumerated populations range from as low as 20. Table 4 presents a list of such small tribal communities for 1961, 1971, and 1981. Ignoring possible biases both in enumeration and compilation of enumerated data from three censuses, it is clear that many of such small tribes are indeed on their way toward extinction. This often leads to an alarmist voice of so-called 'vanishing' tribes, as articulated mostly by anthropologists, who professionally often deal particularly with very small tribal communities/clans. Thus, such phenomenon of shrinking population, if at all, is very often extremely localised and indeed specific to a very *small* group situated in very

special circumstances. These most vulnerable tribal groups, who are often branded as 'primitive tribes' - currently number around 75, and who constitute nearly 2 per cent of total tribal population, include Onges, Shompens, the Greater Andamanese, Rajjis Didayis, Hill Korwas, Bondas (Seminar Report 2001). To arrest the depopulation among these small tribal groups and to rehabilitate them is a challenging task; but relatively little more than its mere recognition/admission has so far been forthcoming. For example, the shrinking tribes (especially Onge and Jarawa) of Andaman and Nicobar Islands have often been attributed to specific genetic factors possibly linked with a complex longstanding interplay between geophysical features, tribal seclusion, and forces of modernisation.³⁸ An acute food deprivation and extreme vulnerability to death and disease have sometimes been held responsible for diminution of size of some small tribal groups in some specific locations (e.g. Bhagwan 1997).

Table 3: Growth of Population and Growth of Numerically Large Tribes, 1941-1991, India

Tribe	Regions of Habitation	Population				Average Annual Growth Rate (%)		
		1941#	1961	1971	1981**	1941-1961	1961-1971	1971-1981
Bhil	Gujarat, MP, and Rajasthan	23,30,270 (9.2)	38,36,308 (12.8)	51,82,625 (13.6)	73,92,983 (14.3)	3.23	3.51	4.26
Gond	MP, Orissa, AP, and Maharashtra	32,01,004 (12.6)	39,91,767 (13.4)	48,09,165 (12.7)	73,87,376 (14.3)	1.24	2.05	5.36
Santal	Bihar, Orissa, WB, and Tripura	27,32,266 (10.7)	31,54,107 (10.5)	36,33,459 (9.6)	42,60,842 (8.3)	0.77	1.52	1.73
Oraon	Bihar, MP, Orissa, and WB	11,22,926 (4.4)	14,47,429 (4.8)	17,06,091 (4.5)	18,65,779 (3.6)	1.44	1.80	0.94
Mina	Rajasthan	-	11,55,916 (3.9)	15,33,513 (4.0)	20,86,692 (4.0)	-	3.27	3.61
Munda	Bihar, Orissa, WB, MP	7,06,869 (2.8)	10,19,098 (3.4)	11,63,338 (4.0)	14,22,830 (2.8)	2.21	1.42	2.23
Khond	AP, Orissa	7,44,904 (2.9)	8,45,981 (2.8)	9,11,835 (2.4)		0.68	0.78	
Boro [®]	Assam, WB, Tripura	5,94,979 (2.3)	3,51,583			-2.05		
Varli			3,74,184					

** (Roy Burman 1993:199); the percentage shares have been calculated by the present author on the total tribal population of India (exclusive of Assam).

AP - Andhra Pradesh; MP - Madhya Pradesh; WB - West Bengal. Figures in parentheses are respective percent shares to total tribal population

[®] Borokacharis; # These are 1941 census enumerations of specific tribes on the criterion of 'tribal origin'(rather than tribal religion used in 1931 & before). Therefore the respective shares of tribal groups have been calculated on total enumerated tribal population of 25, 441,548, which is much larger than adjusted figure of 8,791,354 as presented in Table 1.

Source: Roy Burman 1993:199; Government of India (1961), Report of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission Vol.1 1960-1961, p. 7; Sinha (1986), Table 4.3, p. 47.

Table 4 b: Population of Numerically Small Tribes

Community	1961	1971	1981
Arandan	44	5	95
Kochu-velans	47	8	-
Rona/shova	23	12	-
Andamanesae	19	24	42
Sentinese	50	82	-
Shompen	71	92	223
Onge	129	112	97
Makkurun	248	275	-
Jarawa	500	275	31
Toda	716	945	-

Source: Roy Burman (1993), p. 199.

While this 'vanishing tribes' phenomenon, of course, deserves attention and effective public action in its own right, it is important not to vitiate the *aggregate* scenario of India's tribal demography with alarmism.³⁹ In fact the major tribal groups (other than those small so-called 'vanishing' ones) are not experiencing a uniform positive rate of population growth. Table 3 presents information on the differential pattern of population growth between major Indian tribes. While Bhil and Gond - dominant central and western tribes - have had accelerating population growth since the early 1960s, Santals, Mina and Munda - mostly eastern tribes - have fared far less in terms of population increase. The differential growth rates between major tribes broadly correspond to the regional differentials in tribal growth as presented in Table 2. This reaffirms that the patterns of growth of *major* Indian tribes shape not only the pattern of growth of aggregate tribal population, but its regional dimensions too. However, there are instances of a few tribes, which have experienced a vastly different pattern of population change *vis-à-vis* general population of the same region or state. For example, the population of Katkari, an originally nomadic tribe of Konkon region of Maharashtra, has, as per census counts, been almost stationary during 1961-1971 as compared to nearly 2.3 per cent average annual growth rate of aggregate tribal population in the state (Kulkarni 2002). While this could well be related to a relatively acute (absolute) material deprivation, other possibilities (e.g. effect of removal of area restriction) cannot be ruled out. Notably, in the following decade of 1971-1981 the rate of growth of Katkari population went up to about two per cent per annum, but it remained far less than that of many other tribal communities and total ST population of Maharashtra (about 10 per cent).

For example, among the major tribes of central and western states (e.g. Bhil, Gond, Mina) the growth rates of population have been above the national average for total population; and perhaps more importantly they even accelerated in the post-independence period, at least up to the 1980s. As noted before, this rapid growth of tribal population, especially over several decades since independence, seems to have been contributed *inter alia* by a relatively late occurrence of mortality improvement in tribal population, and (somewhat relatedly) by 'pre-transition fertility rises' following a late beginning of modernisation in several tribal communities.⁴⁰ In contrast, the major tribes of eastern India (e.g. Santal, Orao, Munda, Khond) have experienced much lower rates of population increase in comparison with both general population in this region and the tribes of western and central India. As noted already, *relatively* large degree of under-enumeration of tribal people in this region, especially in the late 1970s, could be a factor, since official recognition of tribal identity on the basis of 'area restrictions' continued here for some time even after latter's formal repeal in 1976 (*see* Roy Burman 1993:200). But this cannot perhaps be a full explanation for comparatively slow population growth of eastern Indian major tribes. A relative mortality disadvantage among these tribes (*vis-à-vis* those of central and western India) is a likely contributor – especially over recent past, although the empirical base of this hypothesis is often not very strong.⁴¹ A comparatively low tribal fertility might also have been a contributory factor. Furthermore, the migration propensity and flow of eastern tribes (both short and long term) can hardly be ignored, as there are some broad historical and socio-cultural factors which have made the major east Indian tribes relatively more prone to long distance migration and movement (e.g. Roy Burman 1993:201-202).

In sum: three major tribal groups, namely Bhil, Santal, Gond constitute nearly 40 per cent of the country's total tribal population, and this *numeric* dominance of just a few

major tribes amidst hundreds of tiny groups and sub-groups across India has been continuing for a very long time past. This certainly adds to the credibility and meaningfulness of *aggregative* analysis of India's tribal population, despite a distinct disfavour often voiced by anthropologists and others. We now turn to examining the evolution of India's aggregate tribes in comparison with non-tribal groups, particularly in terms of some broad socio-economic-cultural indicators as well as important demographic outcomes and behaviour over a long time span.

Socio-Economic-Cultural Characteristics and Demographic Outcomes/Behaviour among India's Tribes: A Long-Term Comparative Analysis

Despite substantial pile-up of scattered empirical literature, ethnographical information, and other narratives on the socio-cultural features of India's diverse tribal peoples, the task of collating and stylizing them to delineate its distinctive influences on the demographic outcomes and behaviour (as can be gleaned from large-scale surveys, civil registration and census information) has rather rarely been taken up so far. In this context Table 5 presents summary information for ST, SC and others on socio-economic, cultural, demographic aspects for four points of time spanning over a century beginning from early 1900s is presented [Information on socio-economic parameters separately for social groups is unavailable for the early 1900s]. It would be particularly illuminating to begin by looking back at the past (historic) patterns of differential between India's tribal and non-tribal populations. Although India's historical demographic data are not unquestionably accurate, they can still be used to glean a fairly reliable comparative picture.⁴² First, what appears fairly striking is comparatively *lower* mortality levels among the tribes *vis-à-vis* non-tribal mainstream in the early twentieth century (*see* Table 5). To dismiss these figures of past tribal mortality advantage – especially from the standpoint of contemporary realities - might appear tempting on some readily appealing grounds such as data biases and incompleteness. But there are several important considerations and related historical evidence that lend strong support to its plausibility.

For example, relatively prolonged breast feeding and early start of food supplement for infants - both of which are now widely known to be favourable to infant and early childhood survival – have been prominent traditional practices in tribal communities.⁴³ A few other comparatively good features of infant and childcare practice in tribal cultures include their habit of holding infants and children vertically during most of the waking time and closer physical contact with mothers (*see* e.g. Konner 1976.). On the contrary, many mainstream (non-tribal) customs and practices during childbirth and afterwards are often observed to be somewhat inimical to survival chances of infants and children.

Furthermore, as can be seen from Table 5, tribal females used to marry, on average, about four years later than their non-tribal Hindu counterparts who had historically been subjected to the child marriage practice. In fact, a relative absence of child marriage custom in tribal communities could well have been instrumental to a comparative mortality advantage of tribal infants in the historical past, as the infants of very young mothers run generally higher risk of death, apart from added chances of maternal mortality. Relatedly, comparatively greater autonomy and command of tribal females over intra-household resources might have contributed to a relatively better nutritional levels of tribal children *vis-à-vis* non-tribal counterparts historically.⁴⁴

Table 5: Long-term trends in Some Socio-economic, Demographic, and Socio-cultural indicators, Tribal and Non-Tribal Population, India, from early 1900s to early 1990s.

	Scheduled Tribes				Scheduled Castes			
	1901-21	Early 1970s	Early 1990s	Early 2000s	1901-21	Early 1970s	Early 1990s	Early 2000s
Socio-economic Indicators								
% share in population (NSS)	--	9.2 ^a	10.0	10.6	--	16.8 ^a	17.9	21.6
% share in land (NSS) (rural)	--	10.1 ^a	11.7	11.15	--	7.9 ^a	10.3	9.04
Area owned per household (ha) (rural)	--	--	1.06	0.767	--	--	0.50	0.304
% of farm labourers to total main workers	--	33.0	32.7	28.5	--	51.8	49.1	39.2
% of landless households	--	17.1 ^a	11.5	86.54	--	12.6 ^a	13.3	63.38
Per-capita consumption expenditure (rural)(Rs.)	--	87.2 ^a	123.0 ^β	857.5	--	94.3 ^a	133.1 ^β	758.4
% below poverty line (rural)	--	67.2 ^a	62.7 ^β	48.0	--	61.6 ^a	56.1 ^β	38.4
% literate (5+ years)	--	11.4	23.6	24.35	--	14.7	30.1	45.19
Demographic Indicators								
Fertility (TFR) [average no. of children born to women aged 40-49 years]	--	(4.1) ^ψ	(3.6)	(3.1)	--	(4.8) ^ψ	(3.9)	(2.9)
Mortality (CDR)	(38.6) [@]	(14.7) ^a	(9.0)	--	--	(16.2) ^a	(13.0)	--
IMR	790 ^{8*}	101.1 ^a	88	43.8	--	126.5 ^a	84	50.7
Gender-relations/Female Autonomy								
Sex ratio (f/m)	1010	987	972	979	--	935	922	936
Female Age at marriage (years)	17	16.4	17.1	18.4	--	14.9	16.1	17.6
Number unmarried per 1000 women aged 40-45	23.1 [*]	--	--	1.4	--	--	--	1.3
Other								
	1901-21	Early 1970s	Early 1990s	Early 2000s				
Socio-economic Indicators								
% share in population (NSS)	--	74.8 ^a	72.1	67.9				
% share in land (NSS) (rural)	--	82.0 ^a	78.0	79.8				
Area owned per household (ha) (rural)	--	--	1.01	1.76				
% of farm labourers to total main workers	--	20.2	20.0	31.3				
% of landless households	--	10.2 ^a	10.5	50.1				
Per-capita consumption expenditure (rural)(Rs.)	--	129.0 ^a	169.2 ^β	2177.0				
% below poverty line (rural)	--	43.1 ^a	39.4 ^β	23.2				
% literate (5+ years)	--	33.8	47.7	64.8 [€]				
Demographic Indicators								
Fertility (TFR) [average no. of children born to women aged 40-49 years]	--	(4.5) ^ψ	(3.3)	[4.8]	(2.5)	[3.8]		
Mortality (CDR)	(44.5) ^{@#}	(11.7) ^a	(11.0)	6.4 ^{€a}				
IMR	612 ^{8*#}	99.2 ^a	74	39.2				
Gender-relations/Female Autonomy								
Sex ratio (f/m)	960 [#]	930 [€]	927 [€]	933 [€]				
Female Age at marriage (years)	13.4 [#]	15.4 [€]	17.4 [€]	18.3 [€]				
Number unmarried per 1000 women aged 40-45	11.0 ^{*#}	--	--	1.6 [€]				

@ estimated by indirect methods (see Maharatna 2005: p. 108-109); # Hindu; \$ number of children surviving per 1000 born to families with completed fertility in 1921; ^ Central Provinces/Berar; * 1911-1921; € 1982; a early 1980s; β 1987-88; ψ 1978; £ all; a 2008.

Notes for Early 2000s: Literacy rate relates to age 7+; Unmarried women relates to age 50+; Sources for 2008 data – Estimated by CIA of US. World Facts Book Census of India 2001, *Marital Status and Age at Marriage*; Census of India 2001, *Social & Cultural Tables: C-8 Sc & ST*, Govt. of India, India, *India 2008*. New Delhi NSS 55th Round July - June 2004-2005; NSS 59th Round January-December 2003; www.indiastat.com/data/; GOI, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, India 2008; CSO, Statistical Abstract of India 2005-2006; CSO 2006, *Selected Socio-economic Statistics of India*, 2006, Govt. of India, New Delhi; Census of India 2001, *Marital Status and Age at Marriage, An Analysis of 2001 Census Data*; Census of India 2001, *Social and Cultural Tables, C-8, SC & ST*; Sundaram, K. and S.D. Tendulkar, 'Poverty among Social and Economic Groups in India in the 1990s', Working Paper 118, Centre for Development Economics, Delhi School of Economics; International Institute for Population Sciences, *National Family Health Survey, 1992-1993, 1998-1999*.

Moreover, global evidence (especially prior to the age of large-scale use of antibodies and vaccinations) shows that communities, which used to live in less crowded

settlements and in great intimacy with natural environments (e.g. forests and hills), fared relatively *better* in mortality terms (*see* e.g. Wirsing 1985). And this might well have been true of India's tribal people in the past - when their main settlements were not only in mountainous, hilly, and forested tracts, but their secluded circumstances left them with lesser chances of exposure to contamination and disease transmission. Also highly plausible is their relative efficiency and advantage in using effective indigenous methods and medicines for illness treatment (*vis-à-vis* non-tribal mainstream) in the pre-modern period of epidemiology and medical science. Due to relative closeness to nature and forests, tribals could have generally been more efficient in using herbs and leaves for many purposes including health care. Besides, tribal people - partly because of these healthy aspects of their habitation, and partly due to their isolation from mainstream population - were perhaps relatively less inflicted by epidemics. Although direct relevant evidence in support of this hypothesis seems hard to obtain for India's past, it could be noted in this context that the mortality effect of the great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 was found relatively *less* pronounced among pygmies and bushmen, as compared to other populations of the Kalahari desert (*see* Dornan 1975:141). The elevation of tribal mortality through contamination and disease transmission from the mainstream has often been seen as one negative outcome of former's increasing contact, assimilation, and integration with the latter (*see* e.g. Mamoria 1958:48).

In fact a few other reasons can be adduced for explaining relative mortality advantage of India's tribal population in the past. For example, the malaria, which had remained almost the largest killer particularly prior to the Second World War, might have been somewhat less in tribal habitations in high altitude and relative dryness. Somewhat relatedly, the incidence of diarrhoeal and respiratory diseases might have been relatively less among tribal population, presumably because of their greater dependence on spring waters, lesser density and crowding. Indeed this historical evidence of relative mortality advantage of India's tribal infants and children tallies with what is often observed for foraging/tribal communities globally: 'foraging societies experience relatively low levels of infant and child mortality due to synergistic effects of nutritional patterns yielding adequate growing and maintenance requirements and a relatively low incidence of infectious disease' (Handwerker 1983:15). In any case, it is of interest as to whether historical superiority of some aspects of the tribal demographic regime in the past waned over time along with India's modernisation, development, integration, and cultural assimilation.

Putting aside regional and local-level diversities for the moment, the ST and SC groups at aggregate (all-India) level do not appear to have been vastly differently stationed in the 1970s and 1980s, with a pretty similar socio-economic footing in terms of such hardcore indicators as income, consumption, asset possessions, poverty, occupation (*see* Table 5). Indeed, the aggregate tribal population appear to own larger land per household than the SC counterparts do on the whole; or the former are, according to large-scale sample survey results (at least) till recent past, not found considerably more inflicted by income-poverty. However, on the matter of two key human needs, namely health and education, tribals appear most deprived, and distinctly worse than the aggregate SC population (*see* Table 5 and, also Maharatna 2005, especially chapter 2).

However, as was already discussed above, tribes as a whole evince vastly more balanced female-male ratio in comparison with that of the general population. As can be seen from Table 5, the high female-male ratio in tribal population in the past appears to have been broadly consistent with their demographic and socio-cultural features akin to relatively balanced gender relations and/or high female status and autonomy. For instance, tribal females' nuptial features in the past – namely, marrying (relatively) late and only after ‘maturity’ and mostly on self-chosen (consent) basis, freedom to divorce and remarry, comparatively large proportion of celibates – are a reasonably reliable pointer to a *relatively* high status and autonomy that tribal women had historically. This (with its implication for lower or negligible degree of ‘son preference’) should have had its reflection in comparatively lower tribal fertility in the historical past. Indeed, the latter could derive, more directly, from some such fertility-inhibiting socio-cultural practices and taboos as relatively long durations of breastfeeding and child-spacing, postpartum sexual abstinence, indigenous methods of abortion and contraception. While, as shown by recent research, a large chunk of historical/aboriginal populations across the globe evolved various institutional and cultural mechanisms towards ensuring long-term counterbalancing (or so-called homeostatic) effects on ‘unlimited’ childbearing and population size (*see e.g.* Cleland 2001; Wilson and Airey 1999; Davis 1986), their efficacy often called for comparatively high levels of female autonomy and gender equity.

There are several standard mechanisms - not necessarily mutually exclusive – by which a more patriarchal society is conducive to higher fertility.⁴⁵ For example, patriarchy and adult male domination often places control of fertility decisions in the hands of older male and female members, who in turn are interested in reaping a disproportionately large share of net material benefits from high fertility. Second, women generally are not only with very limited control over familial resources and wealth, but they usually face strong restrictions on freedom of movements and wage earning activities. Therefore, woman's feeling of insecurity associated with her economic and social dependence upon men breeds a desire in her 'to produce sons, as many and as soon as possible' as an insurance against the risk of events which threaten her wellbeing (such as loss of husband's support). Furthermore, a typical lack of female autonomy and decision making power is often thought to suppress the possibility of women's innovative behaviour and decisions favourable to fertility limitation. Since a large part of the cost of childbearing/rearing is disproportionately borne by women (e.g. captivity during pregnancy, risk of maternal complications and death), the major disincentives against frequent childbirth arise from women's side, which remains suppressed under stark patriarchy. Indeed a number of empirical studies over recent past on this hypothesised inverse relationship between female autonomy and fertility have generally confirmed this – albeit mostly with reference to mainstream population of South Asia (*see, for example, Dharmalingam and Morgan 1996; Morgan and Niraula, 1995; Malhotra et al. 1995; and Basu 1992 among others*). Although comparative studies of tribes from this perspective are remarkably rare,⁴⁶ there is some distinct contemporary evidence that suggests fertility having been relatively lower in tribal population than that of non-tribal counterparts, particularly SC people (*see Table 5*).

Thus, although traditional features of tribal demographic regime have continued to be manifest as an aggregate baseline in contemporary period, the present picture appears more complicated and varied owing to mounting complexities of tribal existence as

well as substantial accumulation of evidence with the passage of time. For example, availability of modern medicines/treatment for secondary sterility and sexually transmitted diseases, together with negative effects on some traditional practices (e.g. reduction of breastfeeding duration, indigenous contraceptive methods, sexual abstinence) might have often led to (pre-transition) rises in tribal fertility. Moreover, what were of tribal societies akin, in some key respects, to the European marriage patterns, have been replaced – in varying pace across tribes and regions – by the mainstream Hindu practices, namely, early female (or child) marriage, parental negotiations and transactions/payments (rather than through consensual choice/love between the partners). Such lowering of female marriage age has, in many cases (especially when family planning programme is not widespread and effective), pushed up tribal fertility or has impeded its transition. On the other hand, as was noted already, in some locations or time periods tribal people might have experienced *larger* fertility declines than their counterparts, as a greater proportion of the former could be made to undergo sterilization (through e.g. cash incentives, informal coercion, or even due to greater affinity/acceptability of ideas of fertility control).

Apropos mortality, the past (relative) superiority of aggregate tribal population (particularly in infancy and childhood years), though it has continued to be manifest at an aggregate level till recently, has been subsequently eroded and indeed reversed in the recent past.⁴⁷ And this reflects, chiefly, a growing relative deprivation and vulnerability in livelihood and wellbeing including modern health care facilities. In fact, in some such regions as Bihar, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh, the tribal population seem to have experienced even some (occasional) increases in mortality levels in the recent past. Although overall trend of contemporary mortality level (e.g. infant and child mortality, maternal and adult male death rates) for aggregate tribal population, like those of non-tribal groups, is of course one of decline (except for a few tribal pockets afflicted by extreme hunger, starvation, and disease), the pace is clearly lower for tribals. This is indeed ironic if tribes had used to experience, as India's overall tribal population arguably did, a *relative* superiority in mortality (*vis-à-vis non-tribal* groups) in historical past, when modern medical science was rudimentary, and adaptability with natural environment and lifestyle and other related practices were comparatively important in shaping mortality. And the gradual erosion and even reversal, in more recent periods, of tribal mortality advantage clearly mean that they have been lagging behind non-tribal populations in experiencing contemporary mortality improvements along with expansion and advancement of health and medical infrastructure. This, in fact, reaffirms the recent accentuation of their relative deprivation in nutrition and health care facilities (*vis-à-vis* SC and other non-tribal groups), which is very possibly linked to their growing relative disadvantage in the security of livelihood caused by encroachment, and exploitation and displacement.

This said, tribal people historically have shown remarkable resilience in withstanding formidable adversities occasionally meted out to them by the dominant mainstream. For example, tribals in the face of distress, calamities, and disruptions used to historically, and even today, resort to migration relatively more readily than their non-tribals counterparts. Notwithstanding the fact that movements and migrations have throughout human history been a sheer survival response to distress, it is hard to deny the relative (and some innate) flexibility and liberalism of overall tribal socio-cultural moorings, mores, and organisation that facilitate this process. For instance, our case study of Santhals in parts of West Bengal illustrates a great potential that tribal people

have – via various dynamic and diffusion effects of seasonal migration and mobility of families - in improving their material and social standing and thereby achieving substantial advancement in demographic transition (Maharatna 2005, Chapter 5). As a corollary, balanced gender relations and greater female autonomy, as is generally observed among tribal communities, would not *automatically* turn conducive to fertility *transition* unless newer ideas, attitudes, and information regarding fertility control and methods are percolated among them.

In this context, no less worrying than the growing relative deprivation and vulnerability among aggregate tribal population is the contemporary reversal of traditional gender equities among them. As noted already earlier, a declining tribal female-male ratio, especially over several preceding decades, could well be a broad indication of growing anti-female gender biases amongst tribal societies. There is a mounting evidence of disadvantages that tribal females have been facing in course of contemporary processes of expansion and integration (via e.g. breakdown of traditional forest-based tribal economy, environment, and shifting cultivation as well as via continuing or growing displacement and forced migration). Apart from anti-female biases of changing production organisation affecting tribal economy and its resource base, direct evidence of female discrimination at household level (e.g. sex-differential in mortality, nutritional status, medical attention) seems to be already surfacing in tribal communities – of course in varying pace across locations. This seems broadly to be a manifestation of the tribal trends of taking increasingly to mainstream (Hindu) socio-cultural fold. A recent study, noting this 'sharp' drop in tribal female-male ratio, remarks, '[t]he patriarchal norms of the higher castes, and sanskritization and detribalization are similarly assimilating tribal peoples into a national culture of discrimination against girls and women' (Atkins *et al.* 2000:199). Similarly, Berreman has described the effects of Sanskritisation being 'especially damaging to females because it encourages and enforces patriliney (in both descent and inheritance), patrilocality, early marriage and widow celibacy, limitation of divorce to male initiative, dowry marriage, preference for and favouring of male children, male ownership of virtually all property (especially productive property), low priority to female education, literacy and even health, earning power restricted to males, isolation of social and physical mobility largely to males, and total economic, political and social dependence of females on males' (Berreman 1993:388).⁴⁸ Thus, it is not that the acculturation processes and its anti-female ramifications for tribal societies escaped the attention of previous researchers. But our present demographic study has exposed and established these trends on a firmer footing by undertaking more systematic evaluation of available statistical evidence (some of which has hitherto been relatively neglected) at general/aggregate level.

Concluding Remarks

In the studies of Indian tribes, there has been for long a remarkable lack of interdisciplinary exercises.⁴⁹ Indeed, potentially useful influences on understanding of tribes from such other disciplines as economics and demography have been minimal, with methodological predilections of the Indian anthropology being dominant. With micro-level participatory field work, a meticulous classification of individual tribes has been a major chunk of the output from the Indian anthropology (e.g. Fuchs 1973 and the references cited).

Indeed, the protracted debates and discussions on the notion/definition of tribe is widely agreed to have been, on balance, 'unproductive' and 'sterile' (Agrawal 1977; Misra 1977). The census (operational) approach to the definition and enumeration of Indian tribes – though it has, of course, drawn greatly on anthropological discourse – has been pretty handy for undertaking tribal research. Despite such issues as tribe-caste continuum and/or nature of their interaction and co-existence and related debates, there are indeed distinct overall tribal features that differentiate them from aggregate caste population.⁵⁰ It is important to recognise (perhaps more explicitly than it has been so far) that it is not only valid, but useful and often necessary to identify the core common features (e.g. geophysical, socio-cultural, demographic) of India's aggregate tribal people.⁵¹ For example, despite numerous named tribes classified meticulously, there have been just a handful of major tribes that constitute the bulk of total tribal population of the country, with a similarly limited geographical concentration of their habitation. Indeed analyses of tribal characteristics at an aggregate level should be no less viable, acceptable, and useful than those for aggregate SC population, who have arguably as much diversities across regions as the former.

In fact, the long-term trend of population growth has not been remarkably different between tribal and general population since the 1880s, except for periods of historically contingent events (e.g. famines and epidemics) and for the effects of lag with which 'modernisation' percolated among tribes in contemporary times. This, of course, does not negate the phenomenon of shrinking population (and of some facing impending extinction) which one often comes across in the ethnographic-anthropological literature. But such evidence on highly select and small groups should hardly be construed as an alarm for the aggregate tribal population. Indeed there has been a clear rising share of tribal population over several decades since the independence at all-India level and in many states except few in the eastern region, namely Orissa and Bihar. The rising share of tribal population in the first few decades was partly due to expansion of ST list, and hence was a result of redistribution of enumerated people. But subsequently there emerged some real demographic reasons, namely, pre-transition fertility rise, for this trend of rising tribal share to have continued for some time and even to continue a little longer in some late-developing states like Bihar and Orissa. Although at an aggregate level delayed mortality and fertility declines among tribes have slowed down their demographic transition, a slowing down of population growth of tribal population, like general population, has evidently been underway in the recent past.

What, however, has distinguished aggregate tribal population historically from their mainstream counterparts is a more balanced sex composition and, by implications, much lesser extent of gender discrimination and/or a higher degree of female status and autonomy in overall tribal population. The more balanced gender relations in tribal communities have historically been consistent with, and complemented by, their traditional socio-cultural features including females' marriages after the age of maturity, toleration of widow remarriage, consensual marriage without dowry – the features which are otherwise epitomized as 'advanced' or 'ideal' or more rhetorically speaking, 'beautiful' to be emulated almost universally. These traditional socio-cultural features in tribal population seem to have had commensurately admirable reflections in some of their demographic behaviours and outcomes. From this standpoint, it appears ironic that tribal peoples are typically branded as if they are not civilized or are outside the civilisation, while they have had many so-called 'advanced' socio-cultural features. No

less bizarre in this sense is the fact that tribals are for long in the process of absorbing stark gender inequities and related socio-cultural features of the mainstream, with its clear reflections in growing anti-female imbalances in their sex ratios over last several decades. Such tribal trends, their underlying forces and implications should indeed be among the major concerns that call for further meticulous research. Indeed, it is the continuity of ingrained gender equity in India's tribal culture that perhaps could come to soothe the country's lasting unease and enduring stigma over its mainstream socio-cultural moorings marked infamously by stark gender biases, intense 'son preference', and even their growing pervasiveness with rising levels of education and income.⁵²

Endnote

- * This paper has drawn on the first two chapters in Maharatna (2005).
1. Oxford Dictionary defines a tribe thus: 'a race of people; now applied especially to a primitive or barbarous condition, under a headman or chief; quoted in Ray, N., 'Introductory Address' in Singh 1972:8.
 2. For a succinct discussion on various approaches to a general definition of tribe, *see* Bêteille 1987: 297-318.
 3. For some illustrations, *see* for example, Rao 1997.
 4. For example, in consonance with large-scale initiatives and projects in development and modernization in India, there has been a discernible shift in the orientation of tribal studies, namely from a focus on tribes as communities to a view of them as subjects of modernization and development or as their victims. In contemporary discussion on so-called 'alternative development', a prominent place is often accorded to the plight and predicaments of tribal peoples, who are frequently seen as principal victims of ecological degradations; *see* for example, Xaxa, 2003.
 5. Under the Chairmanship of Kaka Kalelkar.
 6. For example, when a particular tribe, the Warli, was notified as a Scheduled Tribe in Thane district of Maharashtra, many persons belonging to this tribe, who were living in adjacent districts, were not enumerated as members of a Scheduled Tribe. But ironically non-tribal people of Thane district could enjoy benefits and privileges meant basically for the tribals.
 7. Not surprisingly, there have been some anomalies in the official recording of tribal identity. For example, 'all the native inhabitants of the Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh (who constitute an agglomeration of several Hindu castes that have been lumped together as the Kinnaura) are now classified as scheduled tribes' (Dube 1977b:4). However, this does not preclude the usability of census information on ST and SC peoples for at least some limited purposes, say, for comparison of demographic rates and trends. The census data, indeed, often bear out distinct contrasting patterns between them.
 8. These communities include what were formerly labelled as 'untouchable' and 'depressed' castes, many of whom suffered a low social position, and were debarred from entering temples, schools or using even wells. The Scheduled Castes term was first used as back as 1930s - partly to replace the terms 'untouchable' and 'depressed', which used to entail much controversy, confusions and political overtones. The Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1936 came up with a concrete list of 'Scheduled Castes' of which touchstone was 'untouchability' both in literal and notional senses. In this list, Christians, Muslims and the hill and forest tribes, with tribal religion were categorically excluded. Indeed some other conflicting claims of the aborigines were settled by Government of India (Provincial Legislative Assembly) Order 1936, which provided a separate list of backward tribes. However, the identification of lower caste (i.e., SC) groups, which had began as early as 1911 at all-India level, was beset with no less insuperable difficulties than those of identifying tribal groups. For a helpful discussion on the origin and evolution of scheduled castes people, *see* Gupta 1985, especially Chapters 1 and 2.
 9. For example, as Sarat Chandra Ray, while opposing the idea of bracketing aboriginal and low caste people for protection, wrote in 1933 about aboriginals of Bihar and Orissa thus: 'mostly Santals, Mundas, Hos and Oraons have their own racial pride, and in spite of attempts often made to Hinduize them, have kept themselves a distinct community' (quoted in Gupta 1985:23).
 10. Note that the Backward Classes Commission Report in the early 1950's distinguishes tribes (ST) from lower caste (SC) people, not on the criterion of economic conditions and related variables, but on account of their lifestyle and other socio-cultural characteristics and practices. The Report

writes: 'The Scheduled Tribes can also be generally ascertained by the fact that they live apart in hills, and even where they live on the plains they lead a separate, excluded existence and are not fully assimilated in the main body of the people. Scheduled Tribes may belong to any religion. They are listed as Scheduled Tribes because of kind of life led by them (quoted in Singh 1997; italics added).

11. Several socio-cultural practices of SC communities conform to the Hindu patterns and traditions. SC communities, unlike tribals, are not, in Surajit Sinha's words, 'completely free from the influence of the ethically loaded, partly puritanical theology and world-view of literate upper caste Hindus, whose messages they receive through verbal communication, and through cultural performances, such as dance, drama etc' (Sinha 1957:116).
12. For an overview of these issues and complexities, *see* Maharatna (2005), relevant parts of Chapter 1.
13. Famines might have killed tribal peoples *more* severely, as their mortality is likely to have been affected 'more quickly and completely' by changes in external environment such as those in famines (Davis 1951:191). *See* also Merewether (1898:156-160) for a brief narrative of the Gonds of central India being hardest hit by the major large-scale famine of 1896-97. Moreover, as Wood (1998:131) points out, '[g]eneral lack of food storage facilities' among hunter-gatherer communities could make them more vulnerable to famines.
14. *See* Maharatna (1996):11-18. In this decade there had occurred what may be called major famine, in 1907-1908. But its severity and effects were restricted mostly to the United Provinces – a region with very limited concentration of tribes. Also, a more liberal relief policy adopted during this decade - especially for vulnerable sections – might have contributed to the mitigation (at least partly) of the severity of the famines (e.g. Maharatna 1996; McAlpin 1983).
15. There are some standard demographic reasons why a population, which has experienced *larger* proportionate excess mortality (*vis-à-vis* other population) in a famine, could be expected to witness a *quicker* recovery of the pre-famine population size. First, since a famine generally kills more of those who are in most vulnerable age groups, namely infants, children, and elderly, the share of adults, who are generally in their reproductive span, would be proportionately large in the surviving population just after the famine. Second, since an infant death shortens the mother's postpartum amenorrhoea, the more severe the famine is in terms of excess infant deaths, the number of fecund women in the immediate post-famine period is likely to be (proportionately) greater, contributing to a quicker population recovery via (relatively) larger *excess fertility* (*see* Maharatna 1996: 1-11).
16. Just after declaration of Independence and partition in August of 1947, the newly formed Government of India published in September of that year a handbook on population by communities and states, basing itself on the 1941 census. Notably, this official publication reported the total tribal population of independent (i.e. divided) India as being twice as large as the size of enumerated tribal population for undivided India (Government of India 1947). This was largely a result of the use of much expanded list of scheduled tribes that was prepared by Indian government immediately after Independence.
17. As Béteille (1986) observes, '[p]aradoxically, the number of communities deemed to be tribes has increased with the modernisation of the India between 1950 and 1976'. Note that according to 1991 census there are now as many as 573 tribes and 1,091 caste groups that have been scheduled (Unnithan-Kumar 1997:17).
18. For example Vidarbha and Marathawada regions of Maharashtra witnessed abnormally high growth of newly enumerated tribes (*see* e.g. Gaikwad 1986; Guha 1999). Note that this trend can hardly be taken as a reflection of so-called 'retribalisation', since the categories involved are often very different (in form and orientation) from those of the past.
19. A higher growth rate found for the matched populations of scheduled tribes in two censuses could conceivably be consistent with a hypothesis of over-enumerations of those specific tribes; but this is rather unlikely.
20. There are four plausible changes in the early phase of modernisation process, which could contribute to a pre-transition fertility increase: a reduction in breastfeeding intensity and duration, a reduction in postpartum abstinence, a reduction in widowhood, and reduction in sterility due to improvement of public health services (*see* Nag 1980; and Dyson and Murphy 1985 for details). In the early phase of modernisation and integration, the erosion of traditional and indigenous methods of fertility control among tribal communities is sometimes reported to be a contributory factor to a temporary 'fertility rise', especially prior to the introduction of modern contraceptives on a large scale (e.g. Ssenyonga 1993).

21. Although there is hardly any quantitative study of the impact on tribal fertility of declines in their female age at marriage, there is considerable evidence on the negative impact on fertility of rises in female age at marriage in the context of India's mainstream population. To illustrate, an estimated reduction in birth rate (ranging from 16 to 50 per cent) could occur if average marriage age of females rises from 15 to 19-20 years, other things (e.g. contraceptive use, age-pattern of fertility) remaining the same (*see* Goyal 1964; Agarwala 1966; Mandelbaum 1974:35-41 among others). Thus, a *fertility-raising* impact could well be expected among tribes due to declines of their female age at marriage, (at least) in the early phase of their emulation of the Hindu child marriage practices.
22. This assumption however is not true for all tribal groups all over India. Indeed there is evidence of a rapid fertility transition and high degree of contraceptive prevalence among certain tribal people in specific locations.
23. The imbalance of sex ratio in India's total population (which seems bizarre in the light of expected patterns) used to draw attention of Census Commissioners since quite early days of census operations. In fact fairly lengthy and thoughtful analyses of this female deficiency abound in the pages of census reports since quite early. Indeed after several decades of systematic analyses by several scholars it is clear that a relative deficiency of females in India's total population is indeed real, not any artefact of data biases or sex-selective migration.
24. *See* Sen 1999:105-106. There has been, over the recent past, a considerable discussion relating to various issues (including methods of estimation) and implications surrounding the notion of missing women in the wider Asian context (e.g. Klasen 1994, 2009; Coale and Banister 1994; Griffiths et al. 2000).
25. *See* Kynch and Sen 1983; Sen 1989, 1999:104-107; Drèze and Sen 1989, 1995, 2002; Croll 2002; Agnihotri 2000; Klasen and Wink 2002; Oster 2005; Klasen 2009, Das Gupta 2005; Das Gupta and Bhat 1995; among others.
26. With a view to drawing more focused attention to familial neglect and discrimination particularly against female infants and young girls (including conscious abortions of female foetus) in much of Asia, some scholars have suggested for replacement of such terms as 'missing women' and 'son preference' by 'missing girls' and 'daughter discrimination' (Croll 2002: 7-12).
27. A low female-male ratio in India's aggregate population hides a 'north-south divide' within the country (e.g. Miller 1982; Dyson and Moore 1983; Sopher 1980). More specifically, states in the north and north-western regions with low female-male ratios are generally marked for pronounced patriarchal structure, with concomitantly low female status, autonomy and other anti-female biases. In contrast, the 'south' encompassing states lying south of Satpura hills historically evince relatively more balanced sex ratio, with much lesser patriarchal domination and more balanced gender relations. It is worth wondering whether more balanced gender relations in south India are related to specific history of the region, where the Dravidian civilisation and culture seems to have been more directly akin to tribal origins, influences and social features. [It is somewhat striking that most south Indian tribes speak ancient Dravidian languages and dialects. Perhaps more interestingly, the south Indian mainstream people historically (and even now) evince several socio-cultural features (e.g. marriage patterns including cross-cousin marriage and bride-price) that have traditionally characterised most tribal societies of India too]. In any case, this 'north-south' socio-cultural divide (in terms of such indicators as female status/autonomy, marriage patterns /payments) appears to be a key to a corresponding demographic divide between these two broad regions (e.g. Dyson and Moore 1983; Das Gupta 1987; Basu 1992; Kishor 1993 among others). While relatively lower fertility, infant and child mortality levels, lesser gender biases and discrimination are broadly the characteristics of the less patriarchal south, a somewhat opposite demographic regime holds in strong patriarchal 'north'.
28. It is important to stress that overall female-male ratio is far more balanced (indeed generally showing excess females over males) in sub-Saharan Africa's population, who have somewhat similar socio-cultural and lifestyle features as those of Indian tribes. Indeed a relatively balanced sex ratio in sub-Saharan Africa has also been found consistent with the findings showing a relative advantage of females (girls in particular) over male counterparts in terms of nutritional and mortality indicators (e.g. Svedberg 1990), which clearly points to relatively little or perhaps indeed total absence of anti-female gender biases.
29. Taking into account historical, ethnic, and socio-cultural differences, the anthropologists have sometimes constructed a somewhat different geographical classification of India's tribes. For example, one such regional classification is as follows (Roy Burman 1972:39-50; *see also* Vidyarthi 1972): a) Northeast India comprising Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, and Meghalaya; b) the sub-Himalayan region of north and northwest comprising north

- and northwest Uttar Pradesh, Bengal, and Bihar; c) Western India comprising Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra; d) Central and east India covering West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh; e) South India comprising Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, and the different Union Territories including all the island of the region. This regional classification is often used as a proxy for a broad classification of major Indian tribes (Agarwal 1977).
30. This apparently anomalous situation has largely been created by the removal in 1976 of 'area restriction' in identifying scheduled tribe populations, as was discussed earlier.
 31. It may be noted here that official infiltration into tribal fold is relatively easy in southern and western regions of India where names of tribes and castes are often similar and are indeed in many cases almost indistinguishable, unlike in much of eastern and central India.
 32. The criteria for tribal enumeration generally take account of their conversions and make sure that they are enumerated as ST.
 33. For example, the record of slower growth of tribal population in these states could be partly contributed by weaker (even absence of) tendency toward infiltration into ST category, as compared to the scale in which it had happened in some western and southern states, this can hardly be the full explanation.
 34. For example, the estimated crude birth rate for Orissa in 1971 (34.6 per thousand population) was lower than the national average of 36.9, and the estimated Crude Death Rate (CDR) of 15.4 per 1000 was higher than the all-India figure by about one person.
 35. That India's family planning programme has till recently been characterised by an overwhelming predilection towards mass sterilisation is well-known. *See* Maharatna (2002) for a critique.
 36. *See e.g.* Sharma 1994.
 37. These figures are for 1971, and they are taken from Sinha (1986), Table 3.4, p.35.
 38. *See also* Naidu 1998.
 39. It should be noted that some specific *non-tribal* groups too (e.g. informal sector workers living in city slums or workers in mining and/or hazardous industries), because of extreme poverty and health vulnerability, could have an extraordinarily high mortality level and hence low or even negative population growth. For example, survival chances among black men in Harlem district of New York city – of course vastly inferior to those of other districts of the city or of US as a whole – are even worse than in some of the poorest countries (e.g. Sen 1999:23 and references cited therein). But the alarmist attention that this fact invokes about excessive death rate of black men of Harlem is not equally relevant to entire black male population of America. Likewise, the 'vanishing tribes' phenomenon, being restricted to some specific subgroups under particular circumstances, should not necessarily make us equally alarmist about India's overall tribal population.
 40. Note that the scope for additional improvement of mortality should be larger, higher is the initial level of mortality. On this reasoning a relatively late occurrence of mortality decline (as has happened among India's tribal population) should be associated with a (proportionately) larger pace of decline *vis-à-vis* non-tribal groups, thus contributing to a higher tribal population growth.
 41. Much of the literature portraying a picture of excessive mortality in many tribal areas is based on anecdotal/journalistic evidence or is often deduced indirectly from information on such indicators such as starvation, undernutrition, distress migration. However, mortality data even for general population in eastern India often appear inferior, thereby contributing to the haziness of this entire issue of relative tribal mortality. Tribal migration can complicate any explanation for slow population growth too.
 42. For somewhat detailed discussion on the quality and the reliability of historical demographic data particularly on India's tribal and other populations, *see* Maharatna 2005, Chapter 1, *ibid*.
 43. A study of Santal and (non-tribal) SC women in one particular location of West Bengal in a more recent period has brought out the fact of a remarkably prolonged breast feeding and concomitantly lower risk of conception for tribal women (*vis-à-vis* their non-tribal counterparts); *see* Pakrasi and Manna 1989. As the authors note: '[t]he tribal mothers give solid food to their infants after 6 months post-partum and most of them continue with breast feeding' (*ibid*: 46). *See also* Chandrasekhar 1972:228-238 for a useful discussion of the role of supplementary food in lowering the risk of infant/childhood mortality and also for evidence to testify that the Hindus (*vis-à-vis* tribes) are generally late in giving solid food to older infants. It is also noteworthy in this context that a recent finding of (relatively) low levels of infant and childhood mortality (and even of overall mortality to a smaller extent) among one tribal group in Kenya has been largely attributed to a milk-based diet and long periods of breastfeeding; *see* Ssenyonga 1993.
 44. On the autonomy of the tribal females, *see e.g.* Agarwal (1994).

45. For a review of the major perspectives on relationships between patriarchy and other gender inequalities on the one hand and fertility on the other, *see* Koenig and Foo 1992; also Desai 1994.
46. Perhaps only one such study is Harbison *et al.* 1989.
47. Maharatna, (2000).
48. *See also* Maharatna 2000a and literature cited therein; Roy Burman 1987; Thakur and Thakur 1994, especially Chapters 1 and 2.
49. By the time of India's Independence there emerged, to use T.N. Madan's words, 'a tripartite division in the study of culture in India. While Indology was regarded as the study of Pali and Sanskrit texts, sociology was seen as the study of Hindu society and anthropology as the study of Indian tribes' (Madan 1982:12).
50. These, according to one author, include for example 'cohesiveness, habitat, stress on clan structures, ethnicity bonds, higher position of women, strong sense of identity' (*see* Nathan 1997:23). However, there are of course other distinguishing features of tribal people, especially demographic and socio-cultural (which will be illustrated throughout this book).
51. This is not to question the usefulness or validity of anthropological methodology of micro-level intensive and participatory studies on individual tribal communities. This approach has, of course, its own value and usefulness.
52. There is indeed extensive literature on this Indian blemish pertaining to gender inequities; *see* e.g. Sen 1999.

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