

NMML OCCASIONAL PAPER

HISTORY AND SOCIETY

New Series

86

**Debating Tribe and Nation:
Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin
(1920s-1940s)**

Saagar Tewari

Assistant Professor, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities,
O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana



Nehru Memorial Museum and Library 2017

© Saagar Tewari, 2017

All rights reserved. No portion of the contents may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the author. This Occasional Paper should not be reported as representing the views of the NMML. The views expressed in this Occasional Paper are those of the author(s) and speakers and do not represent those of the NMML or NMML policy, or NMML staff, fellows, trustees, advisory groups, or any individuals or organizations that provide support to the NMML Society nor are they endorsed by NMML. Occasional Papers describe research by the author(s) and are published to elicit comments and to further debate. Questions regarding the content of individual Occasional Papers should be directed to the authors. NMML will not be liable for any civil or criminal liability arising out of the statements made herein.

Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library

Teen Murti House

New Delhi-110011

e-mail: director.nmml@gov.in

ISBN: 978-93-84793-012

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar and Elwin (1920s-1940s)*¹

During the period 1920-1950, an intense debate surrounded the 'Tribal Question', the issue of the future of tribal communities in the emergent Indian nation. This paper seeks to situate the debate historically, analysing in particular the arguments made by certain key figures involved in this discourse especially J.H. Hutton, A.V. Thakkar, B.R. Ambedkar and Verrier Elwin. In order to map the ideological landscape of this late colonial discourse, the work and opinions of this set of ideologues and protagonists must be engaged with, based as they are on different vantage points.

For too long now, the intellectual history of the discourse on the tribal populations and their future in independent India has been trapped within the binary limits of the Isolation/Protection versus Intervention/Assimilation debate.² In attempting to move away from this divide, this paper seeks to trace an earlier history through which I hope to show that the tone and tenor of the discourse on tribal populations was not set by Verrier Elwin and G.S. Ghurye, as has often been claimed,³ but found its first articulations in the works of frontier administrators such as J.H. Hutton. These administrators, in turn, were influenced by the prevailing trends in British

* Revised version of the Seminar Paper presented at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 9 June 2015.

¹ This paper has been assembled out of my doctoral thesis titled 'Tribe and Development: Nation-Making in Bastar, Central India (1930s-1980s)' submitted in 2014 at the Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

² The debate arose over the question of whether (and how) the Nation-State should include the tribal people in its path towards 'progress' and 'development'? By the 1940s, most leading anthropologists, administrators, and activists working amongst tribal communities had come to be divided into two camps: the Isolationists/Protectionists on the one hand, and the Assimilationists/Interventionists on the other. Both groups shared an evolutionary understanding with regard to tribes and held that these communities were different from the 'mainstream'. The differences between them lay in their respective views about whether the tribal people should remain isolated or should instead be assimilated.

³ There is a long series of publications which assumes the centrality of the so-called 'Ghurye-Elwin Debate'. A few key ones are Ghosh, Anjan. 1989. 'Whither Indian Sociology?', *Other Sociology* 1; Nongbri, Tiplut. 2006. 'Tribe, Caste and the Indigenous Challenge in India', in Bengt G. Karlsson and Tanka B. Subba (eds), *Indigeneity in India*, pp. 75-95. London: Kegan Paul; Singh, K.S.. 2006. 'G.S. Ghurye, Verrier Elwin and Indian Tribes', in A.R. Momin (ed.), *The Legacy of G.S. Ghurye: A Centennial Festschrift*, pp.39-45. Bombay: Popular Prakashan; Sinha, A.C.. 2005. 'Colonial Anthropology vs Indological Sociology: Elwin and Ghurye on Tribal Policy in India', in Tanka B. Subba and Sujit Som (eds), *Between Ethnography and Fiction: Verrier Elwin and the Tribal Question in India*, pp. 71-85. New Delhi: Orient Longman; Xaxa, Virginius. 18th December 1999. 'Tribes as Indigenous People of India', *EPW*; Xaxa, Virginius. 2003. 'Tribes in India', in Veena Das (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology in India*. Oxford: OUP.

Anthropology which had begun to emerge around the time of the First World War. Therefore, by the 1940s, the discourse on the tribal question was almost two decades old and this pre-history to the debates needs to be charted. Before we begin to do this, however, a few preliminaries are in order.

The Background to the Debates

Central to the late colonial debates on the tribal population was the issue of ‘scheduling’⁴ of predominantly tribal areas in the British Indian Provinces. Scheduling was the act of committing certain areas to a written list or inventory of ‘special administrative regimes’; here, normal laws and regulations prevalent in the rest of British India would not be applicable. Practically, it meant territorial segregation of predominantly tribal areas as far as judicial and legal administration was concerned. The colonial administrators vouchsafed it as a viable method for ensuring ‘protection’ to ‘primitive’ tribal communities from the degenerating effects of ‘culture-contact’ with ‘civilized’ areas. These special administrative regimes were divided into two categories viz. ‘excluded’ and ‘partially excluded’ areas.⁵ As the nomenclature suggests, notifying tribal areas under these categories meant that they were excluded, either totally or partially, from the legislative powers of the elected Provincial and Central Legislative Assemblies and Councils. The underlying belief behind this categorization was that modern representative democracy with electoral politics and law courts was highly unsuited to tribal communities. This belief also presumed that owing to their peculiar socio-economic and cultural institutions and practices, the tribes were unfit to responsibly exercise the power of the vote. Instead, they could manage their life well with the help of tribal ‘customary laws’.

Many of these assumptions had their roots in the nascent discipline of anthropology which vitally shaped this discourse in the run-up to Indian independence. In this period, anthropology was a subject whose contours and methodologies were still in the process of being worked out. While it is true that a number of ‘field-work’ based ethnographic studies by figures like J.H. Hutton, J.P.

⁴ The root of this key word lies in 14th century Latin term *schedula* which again is derived from *scheda* meaning ‘a strip of papyrus’ which was a surface used since ancient times by Egyptians, Greeks and Romans for recording of writing, *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*, Allied Chambers (India) Limited, New Delhi, 2001 (2005 reprint), p. 1255.

⁵ This denotes a semantic shift from the administrative category of ‘Backward Tracts’ as used in the framing of the Government of India Act 1919 to a new reformed Constitution provided to British India under the Government of India Act 1935.

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

Mills, Verrier Elwin, William Archer, Christopher von Furer-Haimendorf and W.V. Grigson etc. were published at regular intervals from the 1920s onwards, only a select few of these individuals (Hutton and Haimendorf) had received rigorous formal training in the discipline.⁶ But despite the self-trained character of these protagonists, their published works rapidly established their stature as anthropologists. Since many of them came from the ranks of the Indian Civil Service (ICS), the visibility that their works received, was vitally dependent upon their perception as power-elite close to the higher echelons of the British Indian ruling establishment. Even non-official figures in this group like Elwin and Haimendorf gained prominence as ‘experts’ on the Indian tribal communities thanks to the patronage they received from their anthropologically minded ICS brethren. They were not, however, the founding fathers of this tradition and many of their arguments drew from a much earlier lineage of similar anthropologically-minded administrators.⁷ Given this background, the characterization of their published works merely as scholarly ethnographies misses out on the significant role that these texts played during the twilight of British rule in India.

Taken together, there is a remarkable unity in the ideas of this ‘knot of men’⁸ whose writings played a crucial role in the articulation of ideas and strategies designed for the protection of tribal communities in future India. Without analysing this body of work, it is almost impossible to theorize the bridge which connects the late colonial to the post-colonial period in relation to the discourse on the Indian tribal population.

At the time when these protagonists were propagating their ideas, the issue of the future of tribal communities was literally at the margins of the constitutional deliberations then taking place. The twin aspects of the ‘Communal’ question i.e. Hindu-Muslim relations and the Depressed Classes issue received the lion’s share of attention.⁹ Additionally, in the virtual absence of an

⁶ Hutton was awarded a Masters degree in Anthropology from the University of Oxford in 1919. Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf received his formal training at the University of Vienna in 1930s.

⁷ A few key figures in such a list are Augustus Cleveland (late 18th century), Captain Thomas Wilkinson (first half of the 19th Century), E.T. Dalton (latter half of the 19th Century) and H.H. Risley (late nineteenth and early twentieth century). All of them belonged to the administrative cadre of the Bengal Presidency.

⁸ I have borrowed this term from Stokes, Eric. 1982 (1959). *The English Utilitarians and India*. New Delhi: OUP, p.9.

⁹ Most of these discussions took place in the process of drafting a workable constitutional arrangement which sought to create India as a ‘Federation’ of British Indian Provinces as well as the Princely States. Following a lot of paper-work and the three Round Table Conferences, the federation ideal remained unfulfilled as the Indian Princes chose to remain out of the fold. However, for the British Indian Provinces, the Government of India Act 1935 was successfully created, whereby, the contentious ‘Communal Award’ provided representation for Muslims, Anglo-

Saagar Tewari

articulate and English-educated middle class amongst the tribals themselves, this handful of European men sought to position themselves as the only real representatives of the interests of tribal communities.

Finally, the discourse on tribal futures was not a standard political one. Rather, it had long-term constitutional implications.¹⁰ Most of the debates took place in connection with the provisions for excluded and partially excluded areas under the Government of India Act, 1935. In many ways, these debates fed into the larger constitutional discourse on the protection of minorities. The framework of excluded and partially excluded areas, in fact, went on to provide the basis and rationale for what we know as the Fifth and Sixth Schedule areas under the Indian Constitution.¹¹ It is noteworthy that the bulk of administrative and legal protection accorded to tribal communities in the Indian Constitution owes its origin to this debate. Although there are vital differences of detail between colonial and post-colonial regimes, the fact remains that the ideological underpinnings of tribal development in independent India owe their origins to this late-colonial discourse. In studying the work and opinions of several of the participants in this

Indians and, Sikhs etc. based upon separate electorates. The stand-off between M K Gandhi and B R Ambedkar over the inclusion of Depressed Classes in this framework, the former's epic fast and the resultant Poona Pact are too well-known to recall. My interest in this set of discussions centre around the categories of excluded and partially excluded areas provided by Sections 91 and 92 of the said Act which territorially segregated several large predominantly tribal areas of the empire and put them outside the purview of the legislative powers of the elected councils and assemblies. A lot of exciting new research has started happening on this transformative phase of constitutional statehood in India.

¹⁰ Here, I am differentiating between 'political' and 'constitutional' purely in terms of the effects that this discourse generated over a length of time. I think that politics, fundamentally, is the process of garnering vocal allies for the fulfillment of an agenda, while a Constitution is a consensual framework which defines legitimate limits to the conduct of all politics. The resolution of political questions is usually somewhat more matter-of-fact, conjectural, and recurrent than constitutional ones which often involve debates and deliberations over a set of procedures which may be amended, albeit, far less periodically. Also, barring a few notable exceptions such as the Constitution of the Weimar Republic, constitutional resolutions often have a much longer life-span than political ones.

¹¹ In November 1949, the Constitution Assembly of India adopted two terms to denote predominantly tribal areas in the emergent nation-state. The first was 'Scheduled Areas' and the other was 'Tribal Areas'. The areas thus categorized under both these heads formed the Fifth and the Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution. In case of the former, a Tribes Advisory Council (TAC) was formed in the states where these areas administratively fell under. The TAC was to have a maximum of 20 members, at least three-fourth were to be tribal MLA's of the state legislature. It was a purely advisory body which provided its recommendations on various kinds of laws to the Governor of the State. The Governor, if he chose to pay heed to the recommendations, was vested with the power of debarring or modifying any central or state law found unsuitable for implementation in the Scheduled Areas. The Fifth Schedule areas are now constitutive of the states of Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh etc.

On the other hand, the tribal areas under the Sixth Schedule lists those found in the north-eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. The Sixth Schedule differs significantly from the Fifth on several counts. It offers far more decentralization of executive powers which operate under the autonomous district/regional councils.

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

debate, it needs to be emphasised that they were consciously crafting their ideas, often in response to each other as well as to the overall contours of the debate.

The first section is concerned with the ideas and policy interventions of John Henry Hutton. He was a staunch supporter of complete territorial segregation of predominantly tribal areas from the emergent constitutional scheme. By forcefully arguing for total exclusion, Hutton worked with enthusiasm to ensure protection to tribal communities inhabiting British India. His role in delineating ‘Tribal Religion’ as distinct from Hinduism through the Census Report of 1931 has been analysed. Significantly, Hutton used this argumentative strategy to demand separate electorates for the tribal communities in the emerging constitutional set-up.

The second section deals with the debate which A.V. Thakkar, a Gandhian nationalist and social worker initiated with J.H. Hutton over the issue of providing guaranteed representation to the tribal people. Thakkar pointed out fundamental flaws in the manner Hutton handled the sensitive data of the 1931 census. In Thakkar’s articulations, we also find a distinct nationalist policy with regard to the place granted to the tribes in the emergent body-politic of India.

The third section outlines the correspondence between A.V. Thakkar and Verrier Elwin. It is here that terms like Protectionists and Interventionists first made an appearance. This marks the mature stage of the discourse on tribal populations in India.

The fourth and final section captures a very interesting public debate between A.V. Thakkar and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on the issue of representation to the tribes in the elected bodies at the central and provincial levels. This debate led to the framing of education as a major marker of backwardness among tribal communities.

Section I

John Henry Hutton: Territorial Segregation, the 1931 Census and Separate Electorates for Tribal Communities

In order to critically locate the late colonial debates on the future of the tribal population, it is necessary to first situate the ideas and career of John Henry Hutton. A scholar-administrator who was appointed as the All India Census Commissioner of the 1931 Census operations, Hutton came to play a pivotal role in the formation of this discourse.

Saagar Tewari

Hutton's ideological paradigm on the tribal question bore the imprint of the Diffusionist school of thought, dominant in the British anthropological circles since the turn of the nineteenth century.¹² Diffusion referred to 'the spread of cultural attributes from one culture to another through contact between different cultural groups'.¹³ The Diffusionist views on culture-contact, as seen in the work of its chief proponents W.H.R. Rivers and Henry Balfour, were developed with regard to the study of the Melanesian islands in the Southern Pacific Ocean. The native communities in these island societies were geographically tucked away from the possibility of any massive intervention from mainland 'civilized' societies. However, with the onset of European colonialism, their 'isolation' was broken which, it was argued, resulted initially in 'loss of interest in life' and ultimately led to the depopulation and virtual extinction of the native societies.¹⁴

Hutton served as Assistant Commissioner of Mokochoing sub-division and Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills from 1913 to 1929. This long administrative experience in a tribal landscape instilled a conviction that although culture-contact between higher and lower cultures was inevitable, its effects were largely detrimental to the primitive communities. Drawing upon Balfour's application of the Diffusionist framework to the Naga Hills, Hutton extended it further and became a champion of this point of view in Indian anthropological circles.¹⁵ In 1929, he was made the All-India Census Commissioner for the soon to be conducted 1931 census operations.

The 1931 census report is, in the words of K.S. Singh, 'easily the most comprehensive of all such reports complete with maps, statistics, ethnographic accounts, and the provinces reports together with a three volume all-India report'. Its extensive format owed a lot to Hutton who, unlike previous heads of the census operations, was formally trained as an anthropologist.¹⁶

¹² For details see, Kuklick, Henrika. 1991. *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

¹³ Marshall, Gordon (ed.). 2004. *A Dictionary of Sociology*. New Delhi: OUP, p. 160.

¹⁴ Rivers, W. H. R. (ed.). 1922. *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

¹⁵ There is evidence to suggest that Henry Balfour and J.H. Hutton shared a good friendship. For instance, Balfour visited the Naga Hills when Hutton was in-charge of it and consistently patronized his academic endeavours. In return, Hutton donated several cultural artefacts for the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford which was headed by his benefactor.

¹⁶ Singh K.S., 1989 (reprint). 'Foreword' in J.H. Hutton, *Census of India 1931: With Complete Survey of Tribal Life and System*. Delhi: Gian Publishing House, p. i.

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

Although the study of the British Indian Census has attracted considerable scholarly attention,¹⁷ most of the existing studies have focused on the issues of religion, caste and labour migration. There is an absence of critical studies on the notion of 'tribe' in various census reports.¹⁸ Scarcer still, are studies on the use of census data in the constitutional discourse during the last phase of British rule in India. In what follows, I shall attempt a limited analysis of the 1931 Census and the work of J.H. Hutton in this regard.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the 1931 census report is that it was the last colonial census which tried to define the concept of 'tribe' through the category of religion. In previous decennial censuses, attempts had been made to encompass tribal communities within categories like 'Animism'. Hutton attempted to set up 'Tribal Religion' as a belief system distinct from Hinduism.¹⁹ In the census report and in his subsequent debates with nationalist politicians, Hutton used several tropes simultaneously to argue that the tribal religions 'represent, as it were, surplus material not yet built into the temple of Hinduism'.²⁰ In Hutton's framework, primitive cultural practices such as fertility cults, cults of the dead, headhunting, erection of monoliths, foundation sacrifices, ideas of reincarnation, totemism and witchcraft, etc. all coalesced into a definite religious philosophy of hagiolatory. Fundamentally, Hutton argued that this was the intrinsic glue which bound together all the disparate set of beliefs found among various primitive tribes in India. In a separate appendix on the 'Primitive Tribes' which was attached to the main report, he delved into this theme at length.

Another novel aspect of the 1931 census was that it enumerated primitive tribes on a very wide basis. The results were significant: as compared to the previous 1921 census, the population figures of primitive tribes rose steeply by 8 million. According to the official figures, including Burma and Ceylon, there were 24.6 million inhabitants belonging to the 'primitive tribes' which made for 6.9 per cent out of a total of 352 million for the entire British Indian Empire. If the figures for princely territories were included, then their numbers swelled to 27.50 million.

¹⁷ The essay by Bernard Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia' has attained mythical status. A useful collection of articles on the census is Barrier, N. Gerarld (ed.). 1981. *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*. New Delhi: Manohar.

¹⁸ Possibly the only exception is the one by Sangeeta Dasgupta, in the second chapter of 'Reordering of Tribal Worlds: Tana Bhagats, Missionaries and the Raj' 1998. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

¹⁹ Hutton, J.H. 1989 (reprint). *Census of India 1931: With Complete Survey of Tribal Life and System*. Delhi: Gian Publishing House, p. 397.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 399.

Saagar Tewari

As K.S. Singh argues, Hutton undertook such enumerations and ‘adjustments’²¹ because of his conviction as an anthropologically trained administrator that the tribals ‘formed a distinct element in the Indian population which was not amenable to normal constitutional processes but which required a strategy of intervention by the government to protect their rights and promote their welfare’. For Hutton, the best government for tribal areas was one that governed the least. This view led him to emphasise the need for introducing gradual changes in the social fabric of primitive tribal communities, for which the key was limiting contact with civilization.

Hutton argued that the effects of ‘opening-up’ tribal areas were often disastrous and contact usually translated into conflict especially in cultural terms. To support this contention he drew upon a series of colonial traditions and stereotypes to outline the negative impacts which the imposition of systematic administration had on tribal communities. Thus, different laws placed them in a debt-trap which frequently led to land-alienation. The criminal laws imposed were also often ‘entirely at variance with what is felt to be just and proper by tribal custom’. The colonial state banned shifting cultivation and though Hutton agreed that this method of cultivation was ‘frequently extremely wasteful of forest land’, he also highlighted that it was ‘very often the only known means of subsistence’. Likewise, the exploitation of minerals deprived the tribals of their land and introduced an alien population in their midst which impinged upon their lives in many ways. Missionaries had also created havoc by breaking the unity of the tribal communitarian spirit.

Hutton noted that declaring predominantly tribal areas as ‘non-regulation districts’, provided the colonial state with a mechanism through which the adverse impacts of contacts with civilization could be, economically and effectively, managed in the relatively inaccessible tracts of British India. By this administrative instrument of territorial segregation, the administration was ‘in a position to tamper the conflict of interest’ such as the struggle for land ownership between tribals and non-tribals. However, Hutton admitted that there were loopholes in the functioning of such exceptional mechanisms for they had not worked very well.

At the time of the 1931 census operations, an unprecedented nationalist surge had accompanied the Civil Disobedience Movement. Though, the British Government managed to control the mass

²¹ Ibid., p. i.

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

movement, it did so with difficulty and was now forced to engage with Indian opinion on the future constitutional model for India. The result was the series of three Round Table Conferences where the Imperial Government engaged and had deliberations with Indians on a variety of issues. As a top bureaucrat of the British Indian Empire, Hutton was aware that the impending constitutional changes in India could sound the death-knell for the system of tribal protection through special administrative regimes. Consequently, he set out to oppose, tooth and nail, the extension of legislative powers of the Provincial and Federal Assemblies over areas primarily inhabited by tribal communities.

In this context, an unknown aspect of Hutton's views is that he recommended a system of separate electorates for the aboriginal tribes. This is significant because in doing so he was apparently following the lead provided by the most vocal segments of minorities recognized by the colonial state that is, Muslims and Depressed Classes. Though, he was of the belief that it was best to exclude the predominantly tribal areas from the purview of representative institutions and the medium of elections, Hutton's position had acquired nuances since the days of the Simon Commission. Back then, he had argued for a clear distinction between hills and plains administration and the need for keeping the former totally separate from the latter.²²

The Indian Franchise Committee headed by Marquis Lothian was given the task of recommending the parameters of the elective system to be put in place in British India on the inauguration of the new Federal Constitution. In March 1932, when the Committee organized its first public meeting in New Delhi, Hutton deposed before it in his capacity as the Census Commissioner of the 1931 census. As mentioned earlier, there was a reported swell in numbers of aboriginal tribes; the figure was a colossal 24.6 million for the whole of British India, including Burma and Ceylon. However, Hutton provided the Committee a figure of only 5 million aboriginals for the whole of British India. This anomalous number led to an interesting correspondence and debate between Hutton and Thakkar which, as we will shortly see, raised a number of crucial issues. For now, it is significant to note that Hutton's evidence was the only one which the Committee had heard on the issue of representation for the aboriginal tribes.

²² Indian Statutory Commission- Memoranda Assam-57-1033, E-Assam-126-Note by Mr. J.H. Hutton, C.I.E., D.Sc., Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills dated 17th March 1928 (Part of Memoranda of the Government of Assam on the working of the reformed government prepared for the Indian Statutory Commission), Appendix B to Chapter II, Assam Government Press, 1928, IOR/13/1/1, British Library, London.

Saagar Tewari

In arguing for separate electorates, Hutton told the Lothian Committee that owing to the general conditions prevalent in tribal tracts, any lowering of voting qualifications, whether financial (such as land revenue/chowkidari tax/house tax) or educational, would not bring substantial numbers of aboriginal tribes into electoral roles. Accordingly, the only way out was to grant the tribals separate representation. He argued that the clan system of the tribes was the ‘natural stock on which enfranchisement might be grafted, and made to bear fruit’.²³ However, Hutton conceded that any utilisation of the clan system to elect tribal representatives had to be carefully worked out with different details for different areas.

Hutton nearly succeeded in achieving some of his key demands. The Lothian Committee Report put its weight behind the idea that at least in the provincial councils, aboriginal interests should be protected by providing them with ‘effective representation’ which was the prevalent term for separate electorates. However, the three Indian members of the Committee vociferously opposed any move of providing separate electorates to the aboriginals.²⁴ Most of the Lothian Committee members were unconvinced that the system of joint electorate system could be given a free hand in predominantly tribal areas. Consequently, the Committee deferred any definite final recommendation on the question and remarked that the issue should be re-examined by local governments at a later date when the delimitation of elective constituencies was to be finalised. The Committee did not recommend any seats for the aboriginal tribes in the Federal Assembly, but for the provinces it suggested that certain seats should be reserved in the districts ‘when their numbers justified it’.²⁵

Section II

The Thakkar-Hutton Debate:

A ‘Nationalist Line’ on Representation to Tribals through Elections?

While these debates on representative institutions and constitutional deliberations were underway, a nationalist social worker who not only kept a watchful eye on the issues concerning aboriginal tribes, but also intervened in this regard was Amritlal Vithaldas [A.V.] Thakkar. Thakkar Bapa, as he was affectionately called, was initially trained as a civil engineer; his career

²³ *The Times of India*, 24th March 1932, p.5.

²⁴ Thakkar, A.V. 23 June 1932. ‘Representation of the Aborigines’, *The Servants of India Society*, XV (23): 192.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

took him to Africa and many Indian Princely States.²⁶ In his mid-forties, Thakkar took a pledge of life-long service to the weakest sections of the Indian population and joined the Servants of India Society with the consent of its founder Gopal Krishna Gokhale.

In 1919, Indulal Yagnik and A.V. Thakkar undertook to raise funds from a few Bombay-based capitalists to distribute food among the hunger-stricken *Bhils* of the Panchmahals, reeling from the effects of a failed monsoon and forceful land-tax exactions.²⁷ Their joint work with this community culminated in the establishment of the Bhil Seva Mandal (1922), which became the pivot for Thakkar's work among the tribal people.

Thakkar had for long advocated the provision of representation for the aboriginal tribes. As early as 1924, he had written:

These tribes do deserve to have a representative either from among themselves if one can be found or one best fitted by sympathy and knowledge of the tribes to speak for them. Nothing is heard in the Councils about the special grievances and disabilities, they are suffering under, and they are so appallingly ignorant and silent.²⁸

Consequently, he viewed the recommendations of the Lothian Committee as a definite advance over the Southborough Committee which was its earlier avatar.²⁹ He expressed happiness that the Lothian Committee had recognized 'the necessity of special representation by some method of election (and not nomination) at least in the provinces of Bihar and Orissa, Assam, the C.P., and possibly Madras'.³⁰ In this context, Thakkar questioned Hutton's role in the then ongoing process of constitutional deliberations. In particular, he took issue with Hutton's flawed enumeration of the aboriginal tribes.

In an article published in the Society newsletter, Thakkar stated that it was 'almost an enigma' to him how the Lothian Committee had been given a figure of 5 million aboriginals in British India. In the 1921 census, their numbers were said to be 16 million and by 1931, it ought to have increased to 18 million owing to the 'greater fecundity' of these tribes. Even if a liberal

²⁶ For biographical details and a selection of writings by Thakkar Bapa see, Jagadisan, T.N. and Shyamlal (eds). 1949. *Thakkar Bapa: Eightieth Birthday Commemoration Volume*. Madras: Diocesan Press.

²⁷ Hardiman, David. 2003. *Gandhi: In His Time and Ours*. Delhi: Permanent Black, p.138. For details of this story, see the first volume of *The Autobiography of Indulal Yagnik*. 2011. Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors.

²⁸ Letter to the Editor, *The Times of India*, 27th May 1924, p. 11.

²⁹ Formed in 1919, to recommend steps to be taken on the issue of providing franchise to the Indian population, the Southborough Franchise Committee had, for the first time ever, recommended representation to the aboriginal tribes. However, this was to be done only in the provinces of Bihar and Assam through a system of nomination.

³⁰ Thakkar, A.V., 23rd June 1932. 'Representation of the Aborigines', *The Servants of India Society*, XV (23): 192.

Saagar Tewari

allowance of fifty percent was made for those residing in the Princely States, their population figures for British India could not be less than nine million, which was 'by itself an underestimated figure'. Thakkar called this abrupt drop in the total aboriginal population 'unintelligible' and demanded an explanation from Hutton who apart from being the Census Commissioner also had a reputation as 'a great well-wisher and lover of the aborigines'.³¹

Indeed, this was a contradiction that required explanation. As K.S. Singh has pointed out, by making 'all kinds of adjustments' in the 1931 census, Hutton had arrived at a figure of 24.6 million aboriginals for the whole of British India. This was much higher than the figure of 18 million anticipated by a figure as astute as A.V. Thakkar. Then how did Hutton, the Census Commissioner, subsequently provide the figure of only 5 million aboriginals to the Lothian Committee while giving his evidence on the issue of aboriginal representation?

Thakkar undertook to write to Hutton and sought an explanation to this riddle.³² Hutton replied in a 'purely private capacity' and wrote,

The actual number of aboriginal tribes who returned their tribal names for their religion in 1931 was 8,280,347 and the number in British India was 5,779,709. This of course does not represent the population of the tribes themselves, as owing in part to the natural process of the substitution of Hinduism for their tribal religion, and the idea of social superiority attaching to a return of Hinduism in addition to a very vigorous propaganda by the Hindu Mahasabha at census time, directed presumably to obtaining (sic) as large as possible a return of Hindus as might be, there has been a very considerable transfer at this census from 'Tribal Religions' to 'Hinduism'.³³

Hutton said that this religious 'transfer' was very considerable in the Central Provinces (C.P.) and Assam which explained why the 1931 census reported a figure of 8 million tribal religionists as opposed to 9 million a decade earlier. Raising doubts about Thakkar's own estimates of enumeration, he wrote, 'I am not quite sure what your 16 millions refers. It cannot be to "Tribal Religions" and must be to primitive tribes including those who returned themselves as Hindu and as Christian'.³⁴

³¹ Ibid.

³² Letter No. 1 dated 8 September 1932, from A.V. Thakkar to J.H. Hutton, IOR/Q/IDC/45, British Library, London.

³³ D.O. No. 18 dated 10 September, Office of the Census Commissioner, from J.H. Hutton to A.V. Thakkar, IOR/Q/IDC/45, British Library, London.

³⁴ Ibid.

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

Hutton's reply is significant because firstly, it points to a debate on numbers and statistics. Secondly, both Hutton's and Thakkar's responses add further complications to much earlier and unresolved debates on the very definition of what constitutes a tribe. In a sense, their correspondence rejuvenated old colonial debates which now acquired considerable political importance as the British were in the process of conferring 'responsible' representative democracy upon the Indian people. A case in point were the developments in the Central Provinces & Berar.

In March 1932, the Central Provinces Franchise Committee had recommended that two seats in the provincial Legislative Council should be filled by nominated representatives of aboriginal tribes.³⁵ The population of aboriginal tribes in C.P. & Berar was proportionately higher than in most of the other areas of British India, as out of 18 million inhabitants, the aboriginal tribes constituted nearly 3 million, making it a sixth of the total population. In this respect, the C.P. Franchise Committee award was actually quite minimal. Moreover, in the August 1932 declaration of the Communal Award, this low figure was further reduced to just one seat. Interestingly, the term used for representation of aboriginal tribes was 'Representative from Backward Areas'. Predictably, Assam was accorded the highest number (9) which was closely followed by Bihar (8). The provinces of C.P., Madras and Bombay received one representative each. No provision was made for any aboriginal representative in the Federal Assembly.

Thakkar was quite upset by these arrangements and their ramifications for tribal communities. He wrote to Hutton that the allocation of the Communal Award was unreasonable. Reiterating his critique of Hutton's provision to the Lothian Committee of only the number of tribal religionists and not the total number of aboriginals, he argued that as a result, the Committee made 'no distinction between the two, though the former figure is only half, or less than one-half of the latter'. Emphasising his definition of tribal 'backwardness', Thakkar argued that 'A Gond or a Santhal remains a backward or a primitive type of man, all the same, whether he professes tribal, Hindu, Christian or even Muslim religion'.³⁶

³⁵ *The Times of India*, 3 March 1932, p. 10.

³⁶ Letter No. 3, from A.V. Thakkar to J.H. Hutton, dated Bhil Seva Mandal, Dohad, 12 September 1932, IOR/Q/IDC/45, British Library, London.

Saagar Tewari

Hutton wrote back to Thakkar agreeing that the case of C.P. aboriginals ‘will be more prejudiced...than anywhere else’. He also informed Thakkar that during his evidence to the Lothian Committee, he ‘inferred from the questions asked that there was a distinct feeling against giving aboriginal separate representation on the central body’.³⁷

Replying to Hutton’s letter, Thakkar agreed that the C.P. aboriginal situation was ‘already prejudiced and that too very badly’. He further wrote,

They are not vocal. Though a separation, I mean a separate electoral roll, may not be liked by the C.P. representatives on the Lothian Committee, they cannot surely object to a large number of seats being reserved for them in general (or Hindu) electorate. They should be given the same number of seats as in Bihar and Assam i.e. 8 or 9 if not more.

I would add that the same seats should be reserved for them at least for the first 5 or 10 years in the Central Legislature, the composition of which is not yet settled. It is in this connection that I want to make a representation, more so as the Lothian Report is silent over this point.

Yes, the word ‘animist’ as applied to tribal religion is no doubt misleading, but the word has been used for long time past and it would be a pity to change it in favour of any other term. No doubt the phrase ‘tribal religion wala’, may be used and ‘animist’ dropped.³⁸

This quotation is important because it demonstrates firstly, the widely prevalent perception that the tribes themselves were not ‘vocal’ and had to be spoken for in order to make their interests visible in the constitutional deliberations. Indeed, there was a veritable absence of a distinct English educated³⁹ middle class amongst the tribal people. It was in this vacuum that key anthropologically minded administrators⁴⁰ like Hutton became their chief representatives in the late-colonial discourse on the tribal question. Secondly, it is interesting to note that at this stage of constitutional deliberations, the resolution to the ‘tribal question’ was being sought on the

³⁷ Letter No. 5, D.O. No. 18 dated 19 October 1932; from J.H. Hutton, Office of the Census Commissioner for India, Simla to A.V. Thakkar, IOR/Q/IDC/45, British Library, London.

³⁸ Letter No. 6 from A.V. Thakkar to J.H. Hutton, dated Delhi 26 October 1932, IOR/Q/IDC/45, British Library, London.

³⁹ English was the language of these constitutional deliberations. The few exceptions to this rule in Central India were Jaipal Singh, Rai Bahadur Dulu Manki and Jawahar Singh. This is potentially a major research area where critical scholarship is urgently required.

⁴⁰ The phrase ‘anthropologically minded administrators’ has been taken from chapter six of Nandini Sundar. 1997. *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854-1996*. Delhi: OUP. These administrators have been categorized differently in works of scholars such as Felix Padel and Susan Bayly. Bayly has used the phrase ‘scholar-administrator’ for this set of people. See, Bayly, Susan. 1997. ‘Caste and ‘race’ in the colonial ethnography of India’, in Peter Robb (ed.), *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, pp. 165-218. Delhi: OUP.

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

lines of the recently concluded Poona Pact between Gandhi and Ambedkar.⁴¹ Thirdly, by doing so, Thakkar displays the nationalist claim of locating tribes within the Hindu fold. This is amply demonstrated from the phrase ‘tribal religion wala’ which features in the last line. Here, Thakkar was clearly being sarcastic about the Hutton’s laboriously constructed notion of ‘tribal religion’.

This complex situation raises an important question for scholars i.e. why is Hutton making an argument for representation of aboriginals based on the category of tribal religion? Possibly, this question is bound by the term ‘Communal Award’ whereby the colonial state recognized and earmarked a minority group for representation based on separate electorates only, and that too only if they could be clearly delineated as a ‘religious’ one. In this light, Hutton’s argumentative strategy falls in line with the circumstances he was working in. Since a Communal Award was conferred upon communities as defined on religious basis, Hutton used the 1931 census to define aboriginals on the basis of tribal religion and subsequently advocated separate electorates for them. This argument is conjectural, however, and as yet we do not possess irrefutable evidence in support of it. On the other hand, it is difficult to understand Hutton’s motives. It is also tempting to pose a related question: what would have happened if Hutton had provided the all-India figures of ‘Aboriginal and Hill Tribes’ to the Lothian Committee, rather than those relating to the followers of ‘Tribal Religion’. Perhaps to deny 24.6 million inhabitants any voice in the Federal Assembly would have been difficult and they would have received greater representation even in the provincial assemblies. Also perhaps, if the larger figure had been mooted, the notion of the territorial segregation of predominantly tribal areas through the mechanism of exclusion and partial exclusion would have gained much less traction than it did in the years leading to the Cadogan Amendment debate in the House of Commons.⁴² It is however, safe to conclude that the census figures played a key role in the period before and during the events leading up to the passage of the Government of India Act, 1935.

To raise the issue of tribal representation at the third session of the Round Table Conference, Thakkar subsequently, roped in N.M. Joshi, a veteran trade union leader from Bombay Presidency and a fellow member of the Servants of India Society. Critiquing Hutton’s evidence

⁴¹ The epic fast by M. K. Gandhi was broken after an agreement called the Poona Pact was signed by Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya and Dr. Ambedkar at Yeravada Central Jail, Pune on 24 September 1932. This is exactly a month before Thakkar drafted the above cited letter to Hutton.

⁴² Cadogan Amendment proposed to include several new predominantly tribal landscapes in the list of excluded and partially excluded areas. See House of Commons Debate of 10 and 13 May 1935, Volume 301.

Saagar Tewari

to the Lothian Committee, Thakkar wrote to Joshi that he must take up the matter with Lord Lothian himself who was a 'fair minded man' so that the error may be rectified. Thakkar further stated that the tribals ought to have 7 per cent per cent of general seats in the Central Legislature. In particular, he desired that the aboriginals be given 10 reserved seats in the Centre (Assam, Bihar, and Orissa and C.P. and Berar 2 seats each; Bombay and Madras 1 seat each). Additionally, 2 aboriginal members were to be co-opted by all the members of the Assembly.⁴³ He urged N.M. Joshi to raise the issue at:

The proper time in the Round Table Conference and not let the case of my and your Aboriginal Tribes go by default. I did not go before the Lothian Committee as a witness and I then failed in my duty to those friends. I do not wish to repeat that error, especially as they are far from vocal like our Depressed Classes.⁴⁴

From a perusal of such scattered evidence in the official archives, Thakkar emerges as a linking figure in the debate on the future of tribal communities in India. In retrospect, by foregrounding and critiquing empirical inconsistencies about tribes in the significant official evidence provided by colonial bureaucrats like Hutton, Thakkar was helping to bring in far greater nationalist attention to the emerging Tribal Question. However, it also leads to multiple questions to which there are no easy answers. Is Thakkar a lone voice, an eccentric, a Hindu nationalist, an odd-ball character? Or is he a figure of importance whose opinions carried substantial weight? Is there such a thing as a 'nationalist line' on the tribal question in this period? Does Thakkar represent it? Only further critical enquiries can unearth plausible interpretations.

Section III

Protection Versus Intervention: The Thakkar-Elwin Debate of 1940

In September 1940, Thakkar wrote a letter to some leading personalities involved in the study of and service to Indian aboriginal communities. In it he outlined a plan for an organization which would bring together 'all the workers working in all parts of the country on non-political lines for the improvement of the lot of aborigines and for their all-round uplift'. He proposed the bringing together of anthropologists and social workers to form an association tentatively called the

⁴³ Letter from A.V. Thakkar to N.M. Joshi dated New Delhi 24 November 1932, IOR/Q/IDC/45, British Library, London.

⁴⁴Ibid.

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

‘Indian Aborigines Friends Society’ which would ‘meet once a year, exchange experience and ideas, discuss all the subjects connected with the various groups of Aboriginal people and evolve, as far as possible, a co-ordinated policy and programme’.⁴⁵ To initiate the process, he suggested the following three-point agenda for the proposed association and asked the addressees for their responses:

- (1) To study the living conditions of the members of the Hill and Forest Tribes who live an isolated life, to bring them nearer to their own tribals living in the plains and to be familiar with their customs and manners.
- (2) To organize, coordinate and assist welfare work conducted for their benefit, such as schools, dispensaries, sanitation and hygiene, which it is always understood, is conducted on humanitarian lines only.
- (3) To represent to the Provincial Governments concerned their disabilities and to suggest schemes for their moral, cultural, economic and political uplift with a view to bring them on a par with the advanced classes in the community.⁴⁶

Thakkar’s letter evinced a detailed response from none other than Verrier Elwin, an Oxford educated Englishman, whose remarkable life has been captured in an outstanding biography by Ramachandra Guha.⁴⁷ Elwin who first came to India as a Christian missionary in 1927, subsequently came under the influence of M. K. Gandhi and actively joined the nationalist ranks. But his work among the tribals of CP. & Berar led him to a profound philosophical metamorphosis as a result of which he shunned the Congress nationalist position and consciously started positioning himself with the anthropologically minded scholar-administrators such as J.H. Hutton.

Verrier Elwin called the proposal for the Aborigines Association ‘attractive’;⁴⁸ however, he thought that it was ‘essential’ that such a venture not be ‘confined to Congress minded Hindus’ alone. Instead, Elwin espoused for a ‘broad-based’ model which would include ‘some weight of scholarship’ and thereby earn ‘the widest respect’. In that vein, he proposed that scholars such as Sarat Chandra Roy⁴⁹, W.V. Grigson,⁵⁰ and J.P. Mills⁵¹ should be included in the association.

⁴⁵ Letter from A.V. Thakkar to W.G. Archer dated Bombay 12th September 1940, Correspondence with A.V. Thakkar, W.G. Archer Papers. Mss Eur F236/11, British Library, London.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Guha, Ramachandra. 2009. *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India*. New Delhi: OUP.

⁴⁸ Copy of letter from Verrier Elwin to A.V. Thakkar, n.d., Correspondence with A.V. Thakkar, W.G. Archer Papers, Mss. Eur. F236/11, British Library.

⁴⁹ Roy was the doyen of Indian Anthropology. Trained as a lawyer, he became interested in issues concerning the Indian aboriginals in general and those of the Chota Nagpur region in particular. He published several ethnographic works and went on to establish the iconic journal *Man in India*. For details of his life and work, please see,

Saagar Tewari

In the same letter, Elwin referred to a ‘divergence of opinion’ between what he termed as the ‘Protectionist’ and ‘Interventionist’ lines of thought. Detailing his view about the Protectionists, Elwin wrote,

The Protectionist is mainly occupied with the problem of social and cultural change. He has examined the fate of the aboriginals in Africa, Australia and North America. He has watched the decay of tribal religion, the collapse of ancient forms of village organization, the extinction of village industries, the weakening of moral fibre which follows the contact of simple and primitive people with civilisation...The Protectionists long to see the Indian aboriginal saved from the fate that has befallen his brethren elsewhere.

Moreover, the Protectionist regards the aboriginals with love and reverence. He does not regard him as a being on a lower level. He recognizes that his honesty, his courage, his simplicity, his truthfulness are far superior to the normal level of honesty and truth in ‘civilised’ society. He regards as intolerable the suggestion that he should ‘uplift’ him. He admires his culture and religion and would like to preserve all of it that has survival value. He recognizes, of course, that tribal society has great evils, but he knows that even these must be so cured that they do not leave a torn and jagged rent in the fabric of the society of which they have been a part...

In contrast,

The Interventionist, on the other hand, is all for uplift. He would not say so, but in his heart he looks down on the aboriginal-otherwise why should we use the word ‘uplift’?-and regards him as being on a lower social and cultural level than himself. He has cut-and-dried ideas about what is good for people and he applies these indiscriminately.

The Interventionist has very rarely lived among the aboriginals so as to understand what they really think, though he has often visited them in order to do them good. He regards their customs as trivial, he ignores their tribal organization, and he wants to bring them into line with the rest of the population as soon as possible. He would forbid their ancient methods of cultivation, bring them down from the hills which have been their immemorial home, and attach them (though hotly denying that he is a proselytiser) to whatever religions or social sect he may happen to belong.⁵²

After this theoretical elaboration, Elwin declared that he considered himself as an ‘out-and-out Protectionist’ who believed in gradual change. Suitable men had to be picked, methods had to be

Dasgupta, Sangeeta. 2007. ‘Recasting the Oraons and the ‘Tribe’: Sarat Chandra Roy’s Anthropology’, in Patricia Uberoi, Nandini Sundar and Satish Deshpande (eds) *Anthropology in the East: Founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology*, pp. 132-171. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

⁵⁰ Wilfrid Vernon Grigson was an anthropologically minded member of the Indian Civil Service who served as the Administrator of the Bastar State between 1927- 31. It is here that he developed a life-long passion for tribals, in particular the Gonds. He went on to write an authoritative monograph titled *The Maria Gonds of Bastar* (1938). Grigson was known for his tremendous acumen in administering predominantly aboriginal areas through a deft handling of popular demands and simultaneous introduction of reforms.

⁵¹ An anthropologically minded administrator of the ICS Assam cadre, James Philip Mills was a close associate and the chief ideological successor of J.H. Hutton.

⁵² Ibid.

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

carefully worked out and most importantly, 'economic advance' had to be put before education and social change.⁵³ From these paragraphs, two facts are worthy of emphasis: firstly, that Elwin is rephrasing in a new time, the kind of arguments made by Hutton and predecessors about the dangers of culture-contact. Secondly, that such articulation represented a mature stage of the debate whereby well-argued positions such as Protection/Isolation versus Intervention/Assimilation could be counterposed.

The chief concern for Elwin was the side on which the proposed organization would stand. He expressed grave reservations on Thakkar's motive of bringing the aboriginals 'nearer to their tribals living in the plains', calling it a 'disastrous' policy which would compel the Protectionists to 'stand aside from the organization'. Elwin also cautioned Thakkar that if his organization would follow a whole-hearted Interventionist policy, his name 'would go down as one of those who contributed to the destruction of the people you love'. In order to avoid such a calamitous course, it was desirable that the two sides should evolve a combined programme,⁵⁴ which Elwin suggested could be on the following lines:

- (1) To study the traditional organization, social customs and economic condition of the aboriginals in order that everything proposed for their advantage may be based on knowledge and not on sentiment or preconceived ideas.
- (2) To study above all the conditions of social and cultural change and to devise means to ensure that the progress of the aboriginals in India may be achieved with the minimum of distress and disaster to themselves.
- (3) During this interim period to afford special protection for the aboriginals against oppressive landlords, grasping money-lenders, corrupt officials, ignorant politicians, proselytising missionaries of any religion, and to free them from any legal or administrative measures that tend to their psychological or economic depression.
- (4) To organize, co-ordinate and assist welfare work for their benefit.
- (5) To represent to Governments the disabilities and needs of the aboriginals and to suggest schemes for their advantage.
- (6) To do everything possible to revive and encourage all that is good and that has survival value in the traditional tribal culture. This will include the revival of aboriginal village industries, restoration of hunting rights, stimulation of dancing and singing and worship of the ancient gods.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Saagar Tewari

Elwin's views received support from W.G. Archer, himself a scholar-administrator of repute. He wrote to Thakkar stating not only that Elwin had discussed the position admirably, but that Thakkar should regard Elwin's letter as an expression of 'our joint views'.⁵⁶

Archer also opposed Thakkar's intent of undertaking a 'moral and cultural uplift' of the tribals. He wrote that this phrase implied inferiority of tribal culture as well as a 'wish to tamper with it'. On the contrary, he argued, the tribal culture was replete with poetry, riddles, music and dance, which were 'beautifully adapted to tribal needs'. Archer wrote,

I do not think that there is any chance of ever bringing the tribes on a par with other classes—in a sense of making them as clever and as self-resourceful. Their whole psychological make-up is against it. No Uraon can ever be a Kayastha. But what does seem important is to obtain from other classes the recognition that the tribes have an equal right to live in their own way. It is not the tribes that should be modified as much as the attitude of other classes to them. Unless this is done, the tribes have no future and are doomed.⁵⁷

Thakkar's reply to Archer was irritable. This was understandable as both Elwin and Archer had effectively punctured his proposal. Simultaneously, his reply provides evidence of his tenacity and unwillingness to entirely concede his ground. He positioned himself as a 'social worker' and not an anthropologist 'like you and Mr Elwin'. Thakkar wrote that he was not in favour of revolutionizing the tribal life of the aboriginals, but believed 'that by slow degrees it is bound to change and that cannot be resisted too strongly'. On the question of culture-contact, Thakkar did not think that it was possible any longer 'to confine the hill people to their hills and make them live their isolated life which they have done upto some time ago'. He defended his position and wrote 'I do not think any tribal culture is inferior because it is tribal' and also agreed that the poetry, dance and riddles of tribal communities were worthy of preservation. Thakkar replied to Archer's jibe ('No Uraon can ever be a Kayastha') by nodding in agreement, however, at the same time adding, 'but is it not desirable to make a Uraon, a more clever man, more intellectual, more resourceful than he at present is? If the tribes continue to live in their own way without any change whatsoever, they are sure to go still lower down in the society'.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ D.O. No. 215-C dated 31 October, 1940, from W.G. Archer to A.V. Thakkar, Correspondence with A.V. Thakkar, W.G. Archer Papers, Mss Eur F236/11, British Library, London.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

This exchange is extremely interesting because it provides evidence that the nationalist articulation vis-à-vis the tribes was neither unquerried, nor did it remain uncriticized. Thakkar's articulation shows up the flaws and problems in the nationalist/Gandhian position on tribes. For instance, Thakkar being a staunch Gandhian was quite puritanical on matters such as sex and consumption of alcohol which were hardly taboos in most tribal societies. There is also a desperate attempt in the emergent nationalist line to co-opt the tribal people in the grand narrative of the nation. However, this was not to be done on terms amicable to the tribes, but rather on a set of moral and cultural norms intrinsic to the nationalism of the late-colonial period.

Section IV

Ambedkar-Thakkar Controversy

The second quarter of 1945 witnessed an eruption of a fresh public controversy on the pages of the prominent Bombay based English daily *The Times of India*. The protagonists of this episode were B.R. Ambedkar and A.V. Thakkar.

On 6 May 1945, Ambedkar made an elaborate speech before the Third Conference of the All India Scheduled Castes Federation in Bombay. The title of his talk was 'Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve It'.⁵⁹ His scheme dealt with the Central Legislative Assembly and all the eleven provincial assemblies. In a situation where Pakistan seemed imminent, Ambedkar hoped to avert the possibility and remarked that his proposals 'do not ask Hindus to abandon the principle of majority rule' but that they must be 'satisfied with relative majority'.⁶⁰

The hallmark of Ambedkar's scheme was the argument that guaranteed representation should be given to several communities both in the Central and Provincial legislatures. The formula that Ambedkar suggested was a proportionate one: [The percentage figures in parenthesis denote the population percentage] Out of the 100 seats in the Central Legislative Assembly, Hindus (54.68per cent) would get 40 seats; Muslims (28.5per cent) 32 seats; Scheduled Castes (14.3per cent) 20 seats; Indian Christians (1.16per cent) 3 seats; Sikhs (1.49per cent) 4 seats and the Anglo-Indians (0.05per cent) 1 seat. Likewise, he gave a similar break-up of seats based on

⁵⁹ The speech in English has been published in Jadhav, Narendra (ed.). 2013. *Ambedkar Speaks Volume III (Political Speeches)*, New Delhi: Konark Publishers, pp. 295-318. A Marathi translation has been published in BAWS Vol. 18(2), pp. 499-534.

⁶⁰ *The Times of India*, 7 May 1945, p. 1.

Saagar Tewari

population for all the major provinces. In arriving at these numbers, Ambedkar deducted the population of the Aboriginal Tribes from the available 1941 census data and made no provision for any seats for them at all.⁶¹ In fact, Ambedkar referred to this anomaly in his speech, but the major press reports omitted the following part of his address in which he said,

It will be obvious that my proposals do not cover the Aboriginal Tribes, although they are larger in numbers than the Sikhs, Anglo Indians, Indian Christians and Parsees. I may state the reasons why I have omitted them from my scheme. *The Aboriginal Tribes have not as yet developed any political sense to make the best use of their political opportunities and they may easily become mere instruments in the hands of either a majority or a minority, and thereby disturb the balance without doing any good to themselves.* In the present state of their development it seems to me that the proper thing to do for these backward communities is to establish a Statutory Commission to administer what are now called the 'Excluded Areas' on the same basis as was done in the case of South African Constitution. Every province in which these 'Excluded Areas' are situated should be compelled to make an annual contribution of a prescribed amount for the administration of these areas.⁶²

This extract remarkably captures the Protectionist logic at work in the thinking of as astutely constitutionalist a figure as Ambedkar. The reference to the South African Constitution is also noteworthy. However, it must be emphasised that the official archive does display instances which suggest that there was a discursive exchange of ideas and experiences of administering the 'tribal' areas in Africa while formulating a suitable legal and judicial regime for similar predominantly tribal territories extant in British India. In an India on the cusp of political independence after nearly two centuries of colonial rule, Ambedkar's omission of representation for tribals from his suggested constitutional scheme was astonishing to the nationalists.

Thakkar picked on this major loop-hole in Ambedkar's scheme. On 12 May 1945, Thakkar wrote a letter to the Editor of *The Times of India* which was published by the newspaper in its issue of 17 May 1945. He pointed out that despite the fact that even the British Government had recognized the aborigines as eligible for some representation under the Government of India Act, 1935:

⁶¹Ibid., p. 5.

⁶² Ambedkar cited in A.V. Thakkar, 'Education among Tribal People very backward: State's responsibility for their Advancement' published in *Leader* dated 11-7-1945, reproduced in *Aboriginals' Cry in the Wilderness: Controversy between Dr. Ambedkar and A.V. Thakkar with facts and Figures regarding Aborigines and Hill Tribes, Their Education and Representation in Legislature*, Published by A.V. Thakkar, Servants of India Society, Bombay, n.d., p. 11, emphasis mine.

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

It is somewhat surprising that this doughty champion of the oppressed and depressed and exploited should have so completely ignored the Aboriginal tribes who are worse off than the Harijans. He would even take away what was given them already! Some Champion indeed of the lowly!⁶³

Thakkar argued that Ambedkar seemed to favour the principle of providing weightage to all communities 'in inverse ratio to social standing, economic position and educational conditions of the community'. Perhaps that was the reason why Ambedkar had suggested that the Harijans were to have a larger weightage than Muslims. However, Thakkar pointed out that since there were about one crore and sixty-seven lakhs aborigines in the British Indian Provinces alone, '(If his principle be applied to Aborigines the weightage for them would be very much larger than for the Harijans; in fact, it may justify an absolute majority!'. Thakkar remarked that the only principle of Dr Ambedkar which stood out in his scheme was his 'excessive favouritism for the Harijans and contemptuous denial of justice to the Aborigines'.⁶⁴

It is crucial to give a brief background of the relations between the two public figures. When the above controversy erupted, Ambedkar was the serving Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council while Thakkar Bapa (as he was affectionately called), was the head of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. The uneasy relationship between the two went a long way back. They had served together as members of the Starte Committee formed by the Bombay Government in 1928 which enquired into the social and educational conditions of the Aborigines and Depressed Classes of the province. Subsequently in 1932, when the Communal Award controversy erupted on the issue of granting of separate electorates to the Depressed Classes (as demanded by Ambedkar for the community) Mahatma Gandhi went on a fast unto death. The epic confrontation which ended in the famous Poona Pact saw Ambedkar retreating from his position and agreeing to a system of joint electorates with reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes. Much work has been done on this historic event, but few people know of the key role played by Thakkar. Ghanshyamdas Birla, a trusted lieutenant of Gandhi recounted the same in the following words:

I entered into a deep bond with Thakkar Bapa in 1932. When Bapu had taken a vow of fast-unto-death and was lying on his death-bed, then a few of us were talking with Mr. Ambedkar, deeply thinking to figure out a way to solve the Harijan question. As time

⁶³ Letter to the Editor, *The Times of India* dated Poona 12 May 1945; from A.V. Thakkar, *The Times of India*, 17 May 1945, p. 6.

⁶⁴Ibid.

Saagar Tewari

went by, Bapu's body was slowly and gradually drowning towards an inert state. A few people were engaged in a tug-of-war over the seats which greatly irked us. At that time, the responsibility of calculating the justifiable number of seats for the Harijans was given to Thakkar Bapa which he fulfilled without any prejudice whatsoever. The life of the 'Poona Pact' is the right to vote provided to the Harijans and this is the creation of Thakkar Bapa. We signed on this document with our eyes closed.⁶⁵

After the Poona Pact, Gandhi formed the Harijan Sevak Sangh and gave over its charge to Thakkar Bapa who hesitantly took over its reign as he considered aboriginal welfare to be his 'old love'. Thus, both Thakkar and Ambedkar spent the subsequent decade working on the Depressed Classes issue, albeit, on the opposite sides of the fence. Work remains to be done on the political animosity between the two, but we know that it did indeed exist.

Ambedkar was evidently stung by Thakkar's attack published in the *The Times of India* on 17 May 1945 for he drafted a response the same day. His reprisal was sharply formulated and in response to Thakkar's characterization of Ambedkar as a 'doughty champion of the oppressed and the depressed', he wrote,

I have never claimed to be a universal leader of suffering humanity. The problem of the Untouchables is quite enough for my slender strength, and I should be very happy if I could successfully rescue the Untouchables from his clutches and those of Mr. Gandhi.⁶⁶

Ambedkar pointed out that Thakkar had criticised him on the 'basis of such extracts as have appeared in the papers'. Had Thakkar read the full text of his speech, it would have been clear that 'far from excluding the cause of Aboriginal Tribes, I had made what, according to my belief, I thought was a far better and a far effective proposal for their protection'.⁶⁷ Rejecting Thakkar's charge of 'partiality and small mindednesses on himself, Ambedkar explained his position thus,

The reason why I did not include the Aboriginal Tribes in the scheme of distribution of seats in the Legislature is not the result of my antipathy to them, but is entirely due to my belief that these Aboriginal Tribes do not as yet possess the political capacity which is necessary to exercise political power for one's own good.⁶⁸

Ambedkar asked Thakkar what he had done to raise the educational standard of the tribals 'so that they may know their own aspirations to rise to the level of the highest Hindu and be in a

⁶⁵ Birla, Ghanshyamdas. 1949. 'Thakkar Bapa'(in Hindi), in T.N. Jagadisan and Shyamlal (eds) *Thakkar Bapa: Eightieth Birthday Commemoration Volume*, Madras: Diocesan Press, (translation mine).

⁶⁶ Letter to the Editor, *The Times of India*, Bombay, dated 17 May 1945 from B.R. Ambedkar, *The Times of India*, Bombay, 18 May 1945, p. 6.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

position to use political power as a means to that end'. He went on to state that the inability to produce a single graduate from the Aboriginal Tribes was a sorry commentary on Thakkar's two decade old career as a professional social servant. Last but not the least, Ambedkar argued that though Thakkar desired to provide representation to the Aboriginal Tribes in proportion to their population, he would know that even to give them some sort of weightage it was imperative to scale down the representation of the Muslims. In a final salvo, Ambedkar posed the following challenge:

Is Mr. Thakkar prepared to fight with the Muslims his battle for the Aborigines? Mr. Thakkar does not prove his love for the Untouchables by cutting into their representation. Mr. Thakkar is not proving a hero by raising his sword against a weak community like the Untouchables which has not received in the past even its fair share of representation. He would prove himself a lover of the aborigines and their hero if he fought to get something out of the weightage enjoyed by the Muslims.⁶⁹

In less than a week, Thakkar was back with a rejoinder on the editorial page of *The Times of India*. He denied the charge of malice towards Ambedkar and pointed out that in his speech in question, Ambedkar had not confined himself to the status of the Scheduled Caste alone. Instead, what was propounded was a 'constitution for India based on principles of general application'. Thus, Thakkar was rather amused that Ambedkar had concerned himself only with the Scheduled Castes and sarcastically commented that 'I had credited him with a wider and juster out-look'.⁷⁰

Thakkar pointed out that Ambedkar himself admitted 'the fact of denial of representation'.⁷¹ He denied Ambedkar's allegation that there was not a single graduate amongst the aboriginals. Indeed, there were several educated Rajas and landlords. In Assam, a tribal was a qualified lawyer who also served as a Minister in the Provincial Cabinet. In Panchmahals which were Thakkar's own field of activity, he knew three graduates, including a girl. He came down heavily on Ambedkar for denying 'not only weightage, but any representation' to the aboriginals, calling it the 'unkindest cut of all'.⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Letter to the Editor, *The Times of India*, from A.V. Thakkar dated 23 May 1945, *The Times of India*, 26 May, 1945.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

Saagar Tewari

In a further attack on Ambedkar published in the newspaper *Leader*⁷³, Thakkar attacked the proposals of Ambedkar as ‘very unjust and reactionary’. In this particular piece, he also made a strong pitch for massive state intervention in the task of educating the tribal people. He wrote that the educational backwardness of the tribal people vis-à-vis Hindus, Muslims and Christians was an incontrovertible fact. The colonial state had neglected them in the field of education for the last one and a half centuries. They lagged far behind even the Depressed Classes who were subject to social disabilities. Thakkar opined that the geographical isolation of such tribal communities in ‘remote hilly and jungle parts of the country, as well as in their own colonies in the plains’ was a major factor in creating this deficit. They were ‘backward to begin with’ and owing to this isolation ‘remained so despite the general advancement’. Only in some areas like the Ranchi district and the Chota Nagpur plateau, the work of Christian missionaries had resulted in educational advancement of the tribal people. Most of the predominantly tribal areas were ‘backward’ in this respect. Thakkar warned that this deplorable situation would continue indefinitely ‘unless the State takes special measures for their advancement. The task is too big for private agencies, which can only pioneer’.⁷⁴

In response to Ambedkar’s jibe that the aboriginals do not have a single graduate amongst them, Thakkar wrote that he had been able to collect a list of 112 graduates. Of these 72 were from the Mundas, Oraons and Santals of Bihar, albeit most of them were Christians. A number of these were professors in colleges and also employed in the judicial and educational services of the province. Next came Madras which accounted for 21 graduates mainly from the Badaga tribe of the Nilgiris but also from Yerukulas and Enadis of the East Coast. Most of these were Hindus who had ‘advanced considerably through their own efforts’. Assam came third with 11 graduates who were mostly Hindus and practising lawyers. Miss Mavis Dun, a khasi law graduate had been a Minister in the provincial government. Another law graduate Sri Rupanath Brahma had been a minister for the previous six years. Among other provinces, C.P. accounted for 5 and Bombay for 4 graduates respectively. These numbers led Thakkar to argue that ‘even now there is an

⁷³ A.V. Thakkar, ‘Education among Tribal People very backward: State’s responsibility for their Advancement’ in *Leader* dated 11 July 1945, reproduced in *Aboriginals’ Cry in the Wilderness: Controversy between Dr. Ambedkar and A.V. Thakkar with facts and Figures regarding Aborigines and Hill Tribes, Their Education and Representation in Legislature*, Published by A.V. Thakkar, Servants of India Society, Bombay, n.d. [], pp. 9-13.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

appreciable intelligentsia from these tribes, who may be drawn upon to represent them in the Legislature, the Executive, as well as the Services.’⁷⁵

Thakkar expressed the hope that a ‘very large number’ of the tribals undergoing college education would soon ‘come out and rub shoulders, not only with Harijan graduates, but also with advanced communities in the country’. However, he reiterated that the State must come forward with ‘schemes of special measures of advancing their education and social betterment’ as the private agencies could not be expected to provide the tribals ‘the needed fillip’. Such a course would require ‘an immediate constructive programme to better the lot of a backward section of the people’ which constituted about 6.5 per cent of India’s total population.⁷⁶

Right at the end of the booklet, Thakkar provided figures (Table 1) and invited readers to compare the figures in the fourth column to that of the last. To make his argument easier, he also broke down the numbers proportionately. Hence, in Bihar, Assam and Orissa, the representation of tribes was one-third to one-half of what should be due on the basis of population. In Orissa, four out of five seats were nominated ones and out of these four, only one member was actually a tribal. Also, he pointed out that in the provinces of Bombay, Bengal, and C.P. & Berar, their representation was negligible, the ‘injustice’ being the greatest in C.P. & Berar. The following table was presented by Thakkar to highlight the mismatch between the population proportion and the representation guaranteed to them under the British constitutional scheme.

Table 1: Percentages of Aboriginal Population and their Representation to Total Population and Total Representation⁷⁷

Province	Total Population in Lakhs(1941)	Aboriginal Population in lakhs (1941)	Percentage of aboriginal to total population	Total No. of seats in the Provincial Assembly	No. of seats reserved for Aborigines	Percentage of Aboriginal seats to total seats
Madras	493.4	5.62	1.13 %	215	1	0.45 %
Bombay	208.4	16.14	7.74 %	175	1	0.57 %
Bengal	603.0	18.89	3.11 %	250	Nil	Nil
Bihar	363.4	50.56	13.91 %	152	7	4.60 %
U.P.	550.2	2.89	0.05 %	228	Nil	Nil
C.P. & Berar	168.1	29.37	17.47 %	112	1	0.89 %
Assam	102.0	24.85	24.36 %	108	9	8.33 %
Orissa	87.2	17.21	19.73 %	60	5	8.33 %

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

Saagar Tewari

A few points about this public debate between Ambedkar and Thakkar deserve to be highlighted. Firstly, that the issue of providing representation to the aboriginal tribes was central to this debate. It was clear to Thakkar that such a representation had to be proportionate to the total population both in the central and the provincial legislative assemblies. He was also not in favour of nominations of any kind and the elective principle was sacrosanct in his scheme of things. When Ambedkar put forward his scheme, Thakkar came down heavily on him for completely leaving out the aboriginals from any sort of representation. In his reply, Ambedkar, linked the issue of representation to that of education which alone enabled proper and true representation possible in a modern democratic set-up. So for Ambedkar, the absence of educated graduates among the aboriginal tribes was an impediment which disqualified them from participating in the modern representative democratic institutions such as the legislative assemblies of future India. A virtual 'absence' of education constituted the chief handicap of the aboriginal populations and the prime reason for their backwardness.

It was significant that Thakkar accepted this line of argument though only partially. While agreeing that the tribal communities indeed were educationally backward, he agreed that there was a massive deficit, but not a total lack of education. Thakkar countered the argumentative line of Ambedkar by marshalling evidence of a little over a hundred graduates existing among the tribal communities of nearly all the British Indian provinces. This existing pool of educated tribal individuals, he argued, when combined with many more tribals undergoing formal education would form the nucleus from which their 'true representatives' would emerge.

As shown above, Thakkar made a strong argument for massive state intervention as piecemeal philanthropic work by private agencies was logistically incapable of removing the educational impediment in a relatively small period of time. Only when such a policy was doggedly followed, could it be ensured that the tribal people become essential parts of the formal state apparatus which included not only the legislatures but also the executive and the services.

Conclusion

In the first half of the twentieth century, as the anti-imperialist struggle gathered momentum, political independence of British India seemed imminent. The nationalist leadership which was to replace the British as new rulers had long-cultivated a vision of a democratic state structure for

Debating Tribe and Nation: Hutton, Thakkar, Ambedkar, and Elwin (1920s-1940s)

the Indian nation. The cornerstone of this proposed framework was the conduct of elections to send representatives to the legislative assemblies and councils. This created a new political contingency whereby all Indians, including the tribal subjects were to have the franchise. The attempt to bring the predominantly tribal tracts under the ambit of elected legislative bodies was bitterly opposed by the ‘official block’ sympathetic to the aboriginal communities. This set of anthropologically minded administrators lobbied heavily for retention of the ‘man on the spot’ administrative model which the Indian nationalists resisted, tooth and nail. In a nutshell, the scholar-administrator viewed the tribal problem as an administrative one while the nationalists saw it as a legislative problem. The dialectical clash of these two camps generated an intense discourse which had far-reaching ramifications for the future of tribal communities inhabiting the Indian subcontinent.

Among the chief protagonists discussed here, A.V. Thakkar emerges as the linking figure of this discourse. He reached out to disparate figures to engage with their ideas and to critique them. In turn, he receives the same treatment and gets heavily critiqued. The fact that many of these debates were happening on the pages of reputed dailies like *The Times of India* speaks volumes about the vibrant public sphere in which these figures were key actors. In the process, not only the category of the tribe itself was being defined, but so was the idea of the nation.

It seems clear that the key figures interested in the Indian tribal communities were in correspondence with each other. By outlining the ideas of and differences between some of these protagonists, this essay is an attempt at writing an intellectual history of the tribal question in India. However, it must be highlighted that despite the marginalization of the tribal question in the overall rubric of the nationalist discourse, this debate conducted on the fringe was remarkably dynamic. The emergent picture is that of a parallel debate involving many parties where the deliberations had a real impact on the framing of official policy. Perhaps, the post-independence situation reflected an accommodation of the different positions outlined in this paper viz. Hutton, Thakkar, Elwin and Ambedkar. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done before the bridge between the colonial and post-colonial state-policy vis-à-vis the tribal people may be theorized.

Acknowledgement

Saagar Tewari

I would like to thank Dr. Sangeeta Dasgupta, Associate Professor, CHS, JNU, and Dr. Rohan D'Souza, Associate Professor, Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University, Japan who jointly supervised this work. The present draft was prepared and fine-tuned while I was a Visiting Associate Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi after the award of my Ph.D. degree. I acknowledge the vital support and encouragement received at both JNU and CSDS which was crucial for this work.