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**Rupert R. Moser: The Situation of the Adivasis
of Chotanagpur and Santal
Parganas, Bihar, India**

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I. Introduction

Although Bihar has one of the largest industrial complexes of India and is rich in mineral resources, one of the poorest and most backward populations of India reside there. The total population of Bihar is 46 455 600. The "Tribal Belt" of Bihar, Chotanagpur Division and Santal Parganas District, is inhabited by more than 11 million. The Tribals there number about 3 million. The most predominant tribes are the Santals (1 255 000), Mundas (614 000), Oraons (554 000) and Hos (434 000) (1). They are characterized as "Scheduled Tribes" by the government.

In Indian newspapers one often can read about encroachments upon the tribals of the Tribal Belt. We will give an example from the Times of India, which one can consider a reliable source of information:

"... The chairman of the Socialist Party, Mr. Karpoori Thakur, alleged here today that 14 Santal sharecroppers, including two women, were killed in firing and arson by the men of big agriculturists in Pupaspur village, Purnea District, on Monday.

He told newsmen that the incident occurred over disputed land. He said when the landlord's 'musclemen' came, the Santals hid inside their houses. The doors were bolted from outside and the houses were set on fire. When the Santals tried to flee, they were shot.

He said six people, including two children, were roasted alive, eight were shot and 61 others were injured, and later taken to hospital.

Mr. Thakur said that a man was killed and some others were injured when the 'henchmen' of landlords and big cultivators opened fire in Suhanshi village, in Purnea district, on the same day

He said similar incidents had occurred in 12 other places in the State and 'in every case the police and the executive remained silent spectators'."(2)

Such encroachments are symptomatic for the whole situation of the tribals, and it seems easy to ascertain the reasons for this situation in the following manner:

"A closer look reveals, that exploitation of indigenous folk by the well-to-do Hindu caste people, the feudal institutions, the massive proselytization and the resultant political awakening and active participation of the people in the political processes - all these partly explain the problem in Chota Nagpur."(3)

But this sort of analysis is too general and can be applied to the situation of many minority groups all over the world. Therefore, we will have to deal with some of the concrete details in order to obtain a specific picture of the problems of the above-mentioned tribes.

II. Historical background

The Dewani of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa passed into British hands on 12th August 1765. Military collectorship was formed in 1780. The revenue was fixed in the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. The traditional tribal tenancy system was ignored and the tribals were left to the mercy of the Zamindars (Landlords), who - by this act - were regarded as landowners. Moslems and Sikhs from the North were introduced as police officers, and police power was granted to the landlords in 1806. The reaction of the tribals to the Zamindari system and the suppressions connected with it were the so-called "insurrec-

tions" and "rebellions" of the Mundas in 1811, 1820, 1831 and from 1895 to 1900; of the Hos in 1831; of the Oraons from 1895 to 1900; and of the Santals in 1855 and 1880. The most important ones were the Sidho-Kanhu movement of the Santals in 1855 and the Birsa movement of the Mundas from 1895 to 1900.(4) The "insurrections" were put down in a bloody fashion; but on the other hand, the tribals enjoyed a temporarily improved situation, as the British learned, at least, to respect some of the rights of the tribals (cf. Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act VI of 1908).

After India gained independence, the confrontation of the tribals with Zamindars (Landlords), Mahajans (Big Men = Moneylenders) and Dikus (Foreigners, mainly Hindu shopkeepers) increased again; the Bihar Land Reforms Act, 1950, and the Bihar Abolition of Zamindaris Act were scarcely able to alter their socio-economic situation.

During my stay in Ranchi, Bihar, in the summer of 1970, Rev. Dr. N. Minz, a tribal priest and a Ph.D. in Anthropology, presented me with A Memorandum on the Adivasi Problems in Central Tribal Belt of India and Their Permanent Solutions, which he had sent to the Prime Minister, the Home Minister, the Rastrapati and the Rajyapal Bihar, and from which the following quotations will be taken.

III. Alienation of Tribal land

After the abolition of the Zamindaris one would have expected that the economic situation of the Tribals would have become better, but ...

"The Tribals, instead of being relieved of their miseries by these policies, again found themselves neglected, discriminated, suppressed and ruthlessly exploited. The aliens to the land of the Tribals became much more active in grabbing the land belonging to the Adivasis with the connivance and subtle support of the Department officials. Instances are plentiful at every corner of the Tribal's belt of lands which they had converted by their sweat and blood into first class paddy (rice)^x) land passing on speedily into the hands of Mahajans and other outsiders by various dubious methods practised freely with the support of many 'Men at Power'. Thus we can find many paddy lands which were Parti or Waste lands before, go in favour of the outsiders. By obtaining fraudulent reports these outsiders get the rent fixed on lands in their favour. The actual tiller of the soil, thus, finds his life's labour snatched away by a simple stroke of the pen against the provisions of the law.

The Tribals file numerous petitions before the proper authorities for assessment of fair rent on their own lands. But the misfortune is that soon the non-tribal claimants, more powerful and deft than them, come forward to challenge their claims and ultimately get in their favour.

Besides this the method of exploitation and objection of Tribal Royots from their land in the name of abandonment of holdings and their surrender have gained momentum after the Independence of our Motherland. There has since been a great influx of outsiders who have made the Tribal Belt a paradise for themselves by acquiring lands through unscrupulous methods, not unknown to all concerned, against the Adivasis. It is one thing to get land belonging to the Government but it is another thing to manage to get first class lands belonging to the Adivasis with the help of departmental agencies amounting to a total

x) my explanation. R.R.M.

exploitation and Suppression of the Tribals. Thus it can hardly been denied that the authorities in power have certainly been instrument of a serious discrimination made against the Tribals. They have encouraged their 'own men' and the outsiders to exploit and grab the Lands of the Adivasis.

To be sure there are Government Policies and directives to settle all Waste and Parti lands belonging now to the Government in favour of the Tribals. But it can safely be said that no satisfactory progress in this direction has been made as the officials concerned did not deem it proper to give the policy its required effect. So far they have remained on paper only. This fact can be justified by a review of the total lands settled in favour of the Adivasis by the Bihar Government on the basis of figures of the last ten years. On the other hand this Parti and Waste lands, even after abolition of Jamindari, have been settled with Ex-landlords and their relatives or their henchmen, by fraudulently creating back dated settlements and their documents which are conveniently and for some other known reasons easily recognised by the officers concerned. Thus in this field also we find that even in Free India today the tribal people gained nothing but disillusionment, distrust and a sense of willful oppression from their non-tribal fellow country-men." (Memorandum pp. 17-19).

One can say that the tribals are becoming landless at a more progressively rapid pace now than during the time of the end of the British period of occupation. This land alienation is supported by the rapid growth of huge industrial plants such as Bokaro, Rourkela, Jamshedpur and Bhilai.

I was told that sometimes when an ex-landlord's grounds were distributed, they were transferred to straw men like the landlord's relatives, his pets or temples. The fact that the practices used to get the tribals' lands are mainly illegal does not alter the situation.

IV. The role of money lenders

Money lenders (Mahajans) are non-tribals, who came to the tribal areas during the British period. Nowadays we can find at least one of them in nearly every village, even the remotest. We can find a description of their practices in the "Memorandum":

"Although the Sahukars and Mahajans lend money at very high rates of interest, they are not primarily interested in receiving their money back with interest from the Adivasis. By their sugar coated words and crocodile's tears they allow the capital and interest to remain with the simple Adivasis to accumulate. Even within a period of two or three years the amount in their book becomes huge, which they manage to manipulate by false accounting. Thereafter they bring pressure on the Adivasis to mortgage their best land in their favour. The irony of fate, thus leads the Adivasis owner and tiller of the land, to become the 'Dhangar' of the Mahajans and Sahukars in the same land which they legally own. These simple Adivasis are thereafter made slaves of these unscrupulous Mahajans and Sahukars by cultivating their own land on 'Adhbatai' (Distribution of the produce between the cultivator and the Sahus). The proportion of distribution between the Tribal cultivator and the Mahajans varies in the ratio 20/80 or 30/70 respectively at different places according to the convenience of the Mahajans. Examples of this fact can be cited in most tribal area.

Thus for years these Mahajans have manipulated to occupy and cultivate the lands by refusing to accept the credit money back on some pretext or other. Such occupations of land by Mahajans at some places measures about 20 to 30 acres which have continued for even 50 to 60 years, for a credit of a petty sum varying from Rs. 50/- to 300/- only. Instances are also not lacking when these Mahajans have completely grabbed the entire holding of the Adivasis by appeasing the Department officials and getting their names entered as owner of land on the lame claim of their occupation of land for so long a period. Thus this method makes the Adivasis landless and they are exploited and suppressed completely.

Another dubious method by the Mahajans for suppressing and exploiting the simple Adivasis prevailing in all areas is very damaging and it is like an octopus. Once a Tribal is ensnared into it he is unable to get himself out of it and at last succumbs to it by losing his land, property and even the entire family. The Sahukars and Mahajans advance credit not on interest but only on a precondition that when the crop is ready the Adivasi debtors are compelled to sell their produce to the creditor Mahajan from whom they received credit for cultivation during the months April/May. The price of each kind of produce of food is fixed at the time of advance usually much below the market rate. At the same time the option to purchase the quantity of the produce from the debtor is solely dependent upon the whims of the Mahajans. This creates a very anomalous situation for the Tribal cultivator and it is perpetuated year after year or in some cases even for Generations." (Memorandum pp. 40-41).

Government schemes introducing co-operatives, land mortgage banks, tribal welfare institutes and other institutions do not yet work to alleviate the situation, because the officials are quite often - as I was told - corrupt and characterized by anti-tribal prejudices. The problem is complicated by two other points, with which we will deal in the next two chapters: the problems of alcoholism and illiteracy among the tribals.

Since the tribals are not able to read, various sheets of printed paper are shown to them as promissory notes which they will accept. They are supplied alcoholic beverages and led to sign these documents, of whose contents they remain ignorant. The next day the Mahajan will tell them that they have surrendered their land for credit to him, and not knowing the laws they will usually believe him. They are so naive that for instance, a tribal whose father has died will believe the Mahajan who tells him that his father has transferred his land to him, or that he will have to work for the Mahajan because of his father's debts, which never existed.

V. Drinking

Rice beer was known among the tribals in pre-British times. It was used at marriage parties and other festivals, but did not lead to alcoholism. After liquor had become so common during the British period that it had led the tribals to Alcoholism, prohibition was introduced by the British. After Independence, prohibition was withdrawn again. In other states of India prohibition is still enforced; and one wonders whether the people who abolished prohibition in Bihar realized what this would mean to the Adivasis. The "Memorandum" tells what it means:

"Since Independence the number of legally permitted distilleries and spirit shops has grown so much that at present the Chota Nagpur Division has become the highest excise revenue paying Division in the whole of Bihar State ... The excise revenue in Ranchi district during the financial year 1967-68 registered an increase of over 28 percent as compared to the figures during the previous year, it is officially stated."

"The excise revenue collected during 1967-68 totalled over Rs. 1.22 crores against over Rs. 95.46 lakhs during the previous year - PTI."(5)

"Some of the specially favoured traders in liquor of Bihar State have been patronised and helped by the influential politicians to obtain licences in Madhya Pradesh & Orissa also, in the very central Tribal belt, where they practise all the legal and illegal methods of their trade, as detailed below. But we must not forget and it has to be borne in mind, that no increase in revenue can justify the destruction by drink of the finest traits in the Aborigines 'mental and physical character'. The commercialisation of the drinking habits among the Adivasis has to be immediately stopped, as it is leading them towards total extinction through exploitation in the economic and social fields. The mushroom growth of distilleries and liquor shops at every major bus stop along the long routes and in every corner of the Adivasi area, naturally leads one to think that the Government is purposely, deliberately and in a planned way carrying on the attack on Adivasi life, culture and economy, in the name of state revenue and thus indirectly helping the non-tribals and outsiders in exploiting and looting the simple Adivasis.

Besides this there are many unauthorised liquor shops locally called 'Parchunia' in most villages in the Adivasi belt run and patronised by Sahus and Mahajans. Thus they have ready liquor to oblige the simple Tribals and create in them a habit of drinking for generations. Paradoxically, these small shops although unauthorised, the liquor tins are kept in the houses of Adivasis themselves although the same are owned by Sahus. But the saddest part of the story is that these unlicensed shops are run freely with the knowledge and connivance of excise officials as well as officials of general administration, but no action is taken against them as all the bureaucracy is obliged by them in many of the prevailing ways. Social workers have tried now and again to check this illicit sale of liquor, but they are either gained over or silenced by threats from the bureaucracy.

On the other hand, the officials of the Excise department harass the innocent Adivasis by incriminating them into false cases of making illicit liquor and even by planting false evidence. These officials are meant to check the illicit sale of liquor mentioned in the above paragraph, but in order to justify their work, poor and innocent Adivasis are made a prey by the confiscation of some 'mahua' which they keep as a stand by for food, or by planting a bottle with just a touch of liquor smell in it and then again recovering it to start prosecution cases." (Memorandum pp. 34-36).

As the government has failed in checking the growth of the sale of liquor - it is called wine but actually it is a sort of spirits - the vicious circle continues. I was told by an informant that there even

exists an interest group holding meetings among the tribals, telling them: "Drinking was always part of the tribal way of life. If missionaries and some of your tribal leaders tell you to stop drinking, they are wrong; continue drinking to save your own way of life."

VI. Lack of education

Malpractices of this sort can only be foisted upon uneducated people. In the field of education (except the education at missions which is decreasing now) the discrimination of tribals becomes most obvious:

"There exists at present an anomalous situation of reserving seats for Adivasi students in colleges and technical and non-technical institutions, which were opened and established to cater primarily to their educational needs. These institutions at present are devoted primarily to serve the needs of outsiders and then a mere paltry seats are left to the local population. This in spite of the fact that countless institutions have already been in every part of the State to cater for the zonal needs. Our students are made to feel as beggars knocking at the doors of these institutions for admission. And receiving continual refuses and rebuffs, they feel quite frustrated and neglected and led to resort to effective measures to right their wrongs. It is evident, then, that the admission of Adivasis to these institutions should be given first preference and if reservations are to be continued at all, they should be for the non-Chotanagpuris

It is an open secret that the Ranchi University is being run at present on a caste basis, as it is prevalent in North Bihar among the upper caste groups. Favouritism and nepotism is rife. The glaring exclusion of Adivasis from the rank of lecturers is a mystery known only to the powers that be. Suitable candidates are very deceitfully ignored

There is no dearth of talented, intelligent and able Adivasi students. But the caste-ridden hierarchy makes sure of disqualifying them" (Memorandum pp. 45-46).

The disadvantage of the tribals in the area of education is not limited to discriminatory practices regarding college admission and selection of faculty, but reaches to the roots of elementary education. For one thing, there exists the linguistic handicap of not having Hindu as a mother tongue. Even if this cultural disadvantage is overcome, a further problem presents itself in the socio-economic situation of the Adivasis: The children must help work on the land, look after their younger siblings, and then in some areas even work in the coal mines when old enough to do so. School attendance is consequently irregular and entails sacrifice of economic imperatives.

VII. Relative decrease in tribal population

Although one can note a rapid population increase among the Hindu population, the tribal population is experiencing a lower and very moderate rate of population growth, and in certain areas even a stagnation and a numerical decline. The following statistics (6) of percentages of population by groups of Hindu, Muslim, Tribal and Christian in Santal Parganas District and - as a part of Chotanagpur - in Ranchi and Singhbhum District indicate this clearly.

District		1901	1911	1921	1931	1951	1961
Santal Parganas:	Hindus	56.12	51.22	45.78	46.27	90.0	81.4
	Muslims	10.90	10.03	9.78	8.40	9.4	13.8
	Tribals	34.93	38.84	43.57	42.14	0.3	3.7
	Christ. ^{x)}	0.55	0.56	0.62	0.66	0.2	1.1
Ranchi:	Hindus	39.95	39.69	41.88	55.48	54.40	63.7
	Muslims	3.53	3.69	3.92	4.21	5.20	5.8
	Tribals	46.00	43.81	39.40	23.50	22.13	12.6
	Christ. ^{x)}	10.52	12.81	14.80	16.80	18.05	17.7
Singhbhum:	Hindus	43.21	41.97	52.67	49.48	62.77	74.5
	Muslims	0.88	1.11	2.06	2.88	3.77	3.7
	Tribals	54.77	55.73	43.73	45.10	30.4	18.7
	Christ. ^{x)}	1.19	1.19	1.54	2.54	2.02	2.1

^{x)} Baptised tribals and those connected with missions are registered in the category "Christian" rather than "Tribal", which indicates the aim of certain political policy to divide the tribals into factions and undermine the unity of a potential political force.

APPENDIX

Heinous Mass Murder in Bihar (7)

As the day broke on November 22, the people of the twin village of Chandwa-Rupaspur saw some unusual movement in the compounds of the landlords. The Santhals living in Rupaspur became panicky because the police force posted in the village had been withdrawn two days earlier. They rushed a man to the Dhamdaha police station, but he was turned out by the thana Munshi. He then went to the BDO who heard him with indifference. By the time the man returned to his village, Rupaspur was under siege. Armed men in jeeps, station wagons, tractors and on foot were surrounding it. They had locked the Adivasis in their houses and set fire on them while the men, women and children cried for help. Some of them did try to escape, but only to be mowed down by bullets or hacked to pieces.

GRUESOME: The fire subsided only after reducing the entire village of 45 houses to ashes. By that time four, including two women, had been roasted alive, 10 had been killed by bullets or hacked to pieces, while 33, including a three-year-old child, were severely injured. Most of the injured had received gun shot injuries on the back hip or thigh. The body of a three-year-old child was riddled with pellets. A woman, after being gored by a spear, was thrown into the fire while the gangsters clapped their hands in glee over their success.

After "operation kill" was over, the jeeps were pressed into service. The bodies were loaded on them, driven 20 miles away, and put under mud and hay on the bank of the Kosi near Kursela. They were later recovered by the police.

In the operation, the private armies of landlords of three different places had taken part - the landlords of Chandwa who are relations of Bihar Assembly's former speaker and the Chief Minister's friend Lakshmi Narayan Singh Sundhanshu; the Sahus of Parbatta and Moul Babu, father-in-law of T. P. Singh ICS. All of them are big landlords. Class interest had brought them together.

THE POLICE: The operation started at about 3 p.m. and lasted till about 6 p.m. But did the police party, stationed only about a mile away get no information? The BDO and the DSP reached the spot two hours after the mass slaughter was over. One of the sons of former Speaker Sundhanshu was arrested under Section 302 of the IPC, but he was bailed out by the police on the basis of an evidence given by an Anand Marg avadhoot who is reported to have claimed that the accused was present at an Anand Marg meeting at the time of the killing. Generally even the magistrates do not allow bail to those accused under Section 302 of the IPC.

The BDO and the DSP have now been suspended for dereliction of duty. But was it just a dereliction of duty? DSP Shiva Balak Singh, who is locally known as Lathi Singh, has always been a pet of the landlords of Chandwa. He was transferred to Gaya during the last days of the SVD Ministry, but soon as the present government took over, the landlords saw to it that their pet DSP was returned. Within 10 days of his joining at Gaya, Singh had returned to Purnea.

OLD DISPUTE: The dispute of the Santhals of Rupaspur and the landlords of Chandwa is quite old. The Santhals had been cultivating the land as sharecroppers for quite a long time. They have also been entered in government registers as sharecroppers. But the landlords were not prepared to accept their rights. Under Section 71 of Bihar Tenancy Act, it is the sharecropper's right to harvest and thresh the crop. Thereafter the landlord gets 10 seers and the sharecropper 30 seers in a maund.

Trouble in the village was apprehended and the government had posted a police party on the spot on November 10. But on November 19, the BDO and the DSP came to the village and the landlords readily agreed to let the sharecroppers harvest the crop. Later developments have shown that this was only a ruse to get the police party withdrawn and to lull the Santhals. For the Santhals, though a simple and poor people, can become ferocious enemies when with their bows and arrows. A little after noon, armed men started arriving in the village and they went to harvest the standing paddy crop. The Santhal sharecroppers went to protest, but they were outnumbered and chased into their huts. The huts were bolted from outside and set ablaze.

A SILENT GOVT: The incident occurred on November 22 but till the 25th, the State Government had no information of it. The first information to the people of Bihar was given by Karpoori Thakur at a press conference. But till the time of writing this report (Tuesday) the Government has not come out with any statement. The Chief Minister opened his mouth only on November 28 - six days after the incident and only after the CPI had given a call for the reconstitution of the Government. Ministers and other Congress leaders who raise great "hulla" when the sharecroppers assert their rights, are all silent now.

Daroga Rai casually referred to the incident eight days after the carnage and that too when his attention was drawn to it by a correspondent. Harinath Mishra who considers Communists of all hues and colours equally dangerous is still mum, while Deputy Chief Minister Ramjipal Singh Yadav took eight days to decide whether to condemn it or not.

All other Congress leaders have preferred to maintain a discreet silence. It is not only their class interest that has put them in such a position. It is also because the family of Lakshmi Narayan Sundhanshu is involved in it.

Quotation taken from the Indian paper "The Illustrated Weekly of India" October 4, 1970, p. 16:

That the progress of land reforms has been half-hearted and halting has been admitted by no less a person than the Union Minister for Food and Agriculture, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed. Other official agencies such as the Planning Commission, the Chief Ministers' Conference in November last, have also acknowledged that the reforms have become perforated with evasions, trickery, fraud and dishonesty. A report in The Statesman, July 18, mentioned of a landlord registering 75 acres of land in the name of his dog: a shameless act of mockery of the government limitation of ceiling on rural land, which was compounded, to be charitable, by the naivety of the State government official registering it. This by no means is a solitary example of this kind.

The green revolution, while it has tackled the question of food production, has, at the same time, added to the pressures for solution of the agrarian problem on a priority basis. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and many other leaders are fully conscious of the explosive situation, especially with regard to land hunger. That is why she struck a strong note of warning at the recent Chief Ministers' Conference, when she said: "The cracks which have appeared in the agrarian structure cannot be papered over. We must act now, when there is still time and hope." She added: We dare not fail because the consequences of failure will be beyond our control." Other participants in the conference could not disagree with the Prime Minister. A significant decision was taken to put a time limit for the abolition of "all remaining intermediaries (Zamindaris, Jagirdaris and Inams, etc.)" to be achieved by the end of this year.

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