

# Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru<sup>1</sup>

*Series II, Volume 27*

## IV. TRIBAL AFFAIRS

### 1. A Balanced Approach to Tribal Welfare<sup>2</sup>

Chairman,<sup>3</sup> comrades and friends,

I heard of this Conference only three days ago when Mrs Khongmen<sup>4</sup> told me about it. It struck me immediately that it would be a happy idea to have such a conference and was surprised that it had been delayed so long although I confess I do not particularly like to give trouble to various state ministers rush backward and forward between Delhi and their states. We, here in Delhi have quite a number of ministries, and if I may say so, at the least, provocation conferences are arranged. I think some check is necessary to this kind of thing.

Nevertheless, so far as this .Conference is concerned, I think it is good idea; but when we talk about tribal people, I wonder how many people have the same idea in mind. Vaguely of course, we have some idea. It is not vaguely; it is a little more precisely-so far as I am concerned, we are all tribals, whether we live in Delhi city or Madras or Bombay or Calcutta or in the hills in in the plains. This business of thinking of qualitative difference,

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<sup>2</sup> Speech while inaugurating the third All India Tribal Affairs Conference. New Delhi, 4 December 1954. JN Papers, NMML

<sup>3</sup> B.N. Datar, Union Deputy Home Minister, presided over the Conference.

<sup>4</sup> Bonily Khongmen (b. 1912); Member and Deputy Speaker, Assam Legislative Assembly, 1946-52; Member, Lok Sabha, 1952-1957; Vice President, Khasi Jaintia National Conference; Member, Advisory Councils of Khasi and Jaintia hills and Mikir hills till 1952; founder of several schools in Assam hills

some calling them primitive and all that, calling ourselves more highly civilized, is basically a wrong approach. There are differences, of course. There are differences of all kinds, for example, between the people of the Punjab and the people of Madras-very marked differences. But there is an essential unity. There are differences always between people living in the hills and the people living in the plains. In hills conditions are different. Ultimately, it is geography and climate that provide different kinds of things in hills and plains, agricultural differences, differences of food and clothing and living conditions. This is inevitable. And other things also make us different from others. We are different, very different, let us say from the Chinese or the Japanese, because in India our conditions and factors are quite different. And yet perhaps there are something more in common between us and the Chinese and the Japanese than there might be between us and some people in Europe. On the other hand there is something more in common between us and Europe in language. So these restrictive factors come. This is a different matter, but it matters that the tribals and the non-tribals are something qualitatively different. I think it is wrong. Take the case of this description in our Constitution or elsewhere of the Scheduled Castes. As you know, it is rather arbitrary. Government after consideration decide whether this is a Scheduled Caste or not. As a matter of fact, you cannot draw a line-a hard and fast line. Of course, ultimately what we should aim at is removal of all these appellations, descriptions, names, etc. which separate ideologically and physically, Depressed Classes, Harijans, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and all that. The differences due geography and climate remain and should remain-the differences in their living, customs and things like that. But this barrier of so and so is a Scheduled Caste should go.

There is at present under Kaka Kalelkar a Backward Classes Commission sitting for a year or two.<sup>5</sup> Many of the Backward Classes are as any Scheduled Castes. In fact, they are more backward. The ultimate problem therefore becomes one of helping all those who are backward. Let us recognize one fact that in India, a handful belong to the so-called superior class, and by a 'handful', I mean not very few, but a considerable population of India. Not that they are necessarily different, but because through generations and centuries they have had greater opportunities of growth, education and living conditions. Therefore, they assumed a relatively more important position in India. Inevitably, of course, some individuals go ahead of others. But I assume that is not a good thing, for castes and such like things to be permanently installed in superior positions. Every individual should have such openings. Now, having said that, the ultimate problem is of raising the level of all depressed humanity in India, not this group or that group. We can never succeed by taking up one group. If a group deserves encouragement or special help, we should give, of course. That really brings us to the much wider problem of education and employment for everybody. I am not in favour of a large improvement in literary education in India today. We talk of basic education. We generally adopt them in resolutions. The fact of the matter is that we have done very little about real basic education in the country. Now education obviously is necessary for everyone. When I say education, I do not mean literacy. If we have to progress economically as a country, we must have much wider education.

All these are general observations which apply to tribals as well as to any other people. All that I would like to stress is that we must cease to think of

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<sup>5</sup> Backward Classes Commission was appointed on 29 January 1953 and was formally inaugurated on 18 March 1953. Kaka Kalelkar, its Chairman submitted the Commission's report on 30 March 1955.

our being different from the so-called tribal people. It is a vicious idea in our mind. It is a superiority complex which is not there. I can say with complete honesty that so far as the tribal people are concerned, some of them have reached a high degree of development. In fact I found that in some places the tribal people are highly educated and more disciplined than in any other part of India, and lead a corporate communal life which, I think, is far better than the caste-ridden society that we suffer from. There are people among tribals who are very primitive; there are others who are very well advanced, though in a somewhat different way.

Then again, we in India are being powerfully affected by all kinds of economic problems in the world-what may be called 'market economy'. The person who can succeed in that economy has certain qualities. Normally speaking, these tribal areas have not come within the scope of that market economy at all. I am not prepared to accept this high type of civilization survival of the fittest. Therefore, it has become necessary, as our Constitution has laid down, that we should prevent this type of incursion, whether it is from the point of view of acquiring land or from the point of view of other economic operations. Rich people require land and they dispossess us. In these particular areas, which have so far not been affected by the market economy, it is particularly necessary that such things do not happen upsetting the economy of the tribal areas. We want the tribal areas to advance in peace in everything.

Looking at other areas outside India, where what are called primitive people live, there are two things affecting them very injuriously. One was the introduction of market economy in the last century or so. The other was gin or some such alcoholic drink which came from Europe. They got accustomed to it. As a result, there was another dangerous thing. They lost their customs. They used to make some kind of handicrafts, etc. You get the most horrid importation from Europe-I am talking about the nineteenth

century early twentieth century, which put an end to the arts and craft and their simple ways of living. They adopted the so-called European civilization, which was most disastrous. Not to some extent, there is the danger of the so-called Indian civilization having this disastrous effect, if we do not check and apply in the proper way.

It is obvious that these areas have to progress. Nobody wants to keep them as museum specimens. But it is equally obvious that they have to progress in their own way. They have their own likes. They do not like something alien to be imposed upon them. No individual can grow in an alien surrounding, habit, or custom. How are we going to keep these two things together? It is not an easy problem. There are two extreme approaches.. One is the museum approach, keeping them as interesting specimens for anthropologists to discuss. The museum approach is of course bad. The other which may be called the open door approach is equally bad. Normally, that approach attracts all the undesirables from outside who exploit these people economically and otherwise, and just take them out of their moorings without any equilibrium. We have to find a middle course. And that can only succeed if the people are in harmony with it and cooperate with it and there is no element of compulsion about it. That approach also has ultimately to be applied through their own people. The first thing, therefore, is to train their own people who can work among them and that would be far more effective than for outsiders to try. Broadly speaking one must raise them up through their own team. There are general approaches which I am venturing to put before you. We have to make them progress, but progress does not mean just an attempt to duplicate what we have got in any part of India. It may not be suitable to them. It may not be suitable even to India. But there are many things in India which are suitable to them. They will adopt them gradually. Any element of imposition has to be absent as far as possible and so people have to be trained to train others. It

may not be a very rapid progress. Every kind of training takes time. Whatever profession you may adopt, it takes years to train people, engineers, doctors and so on. It is better to go ahead on a firm basis than merely to knock about with odd jobs here and there. There is a tendency to do odd jobs in improving them without any firm outlook.

I, therefore, venture to place before you these general considerations. I have not gone into the particular things which you will no doubt discuss.

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## **2. To Jairamdas Doulatram<sup>6</sup>**

New Delhi 20 December 1954

My dear Jairamdas,<sup>7</sup>

Your letter of December 14 with your note about a special cadre for the NEFA. We shall certainly look into this matter further and consider the comments you have made. While there is some force in these comments, I think that you have taken a view which is not wholly correct. Certainly we want people with a certain missionary ardour and special interest in the tribal areas. Such persons may be found' occasionally. There are many others who are interested in tribal affairs and who are trained for the purpose. But to expect any average person to remain there continuously for too long does not appear to me to be reasonable. Occasionally this may happen but the person living in a confined area and specializing on that gets rather narrow in outlook and forgets the larger world. Even from the point of view of his competence, it is desirable for him to have some other experience. Otherwise we create a small sect with both the advantages and the disadvantages of a sect. We have to balance the two. On the one hand

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<sup>6</sup> JN Collection

<sup>7</sup> He was the Governor of Assam

we want to specialize in special interest. On the other hand we want wider experience and knowledge. I do not see why any harm should come if people from the NEFA cadre are used elsewhere occasionally. They may have to work in our Ministry here.

What is referred to in Kaul's<sup>8</sup> note was the inclusion of Lhasa, Sikkim or Bhutan. While it is true that these places are different from the tribal areas, they are not so wholly far removed from them and the experience in one helps in the other. Political or diplomatic experience may well improve the person concerned.

You suggest that these officers should remain there at least for ten years. What do they do after the ten years?

I am just jotting down some of my immediate reactions but we shall consider this matter further.

Yours sincerely,  
Jawaharlal Nehru

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### **3. Toda Tribe<sup>9</sup>.**

This evening I met a deputation of Todas from Nilgiri Hills,<sup>10</sup> who gave me a memorial which I enclose. The Governor<sup>11</sup> was present at the interview. He

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<sup>8</sup> T.N. Kaul, Joint Secretary and Controller General of Emigration, MEA

<sup>9</sup> Note to the Chief Minister of Madras, 20 January 1954. JN Collection. Copies of this note were sent to the Ministers of Home, Education and Health.

<sup>10</sup> The Toda tribe has a small population (879-according to the 1951 census) in Nilgiri hills. They have pastoral economy and a symbiotic relationship with their neighbouring Kota tribe. Different views prevail about their origin and racial affinities. Polyandry, endogamy, poverty, malnutrition and insanitary conditions caused reduction in their numbers.

<sup>11</sup> Sri Prakasa was the Governor of Madras.

has been good enough to take a great deal of interest in the Todas during the last few years.

I think that both the Central Government and the Madras Government should take particular interest in this very old tribe and help it in every way possible. There are also the Kotas in the Nilgiri Hills who' deserve attention and help.

The Todas have written to me about the land problems. I understand that they have been nomadic pastoral people and not accustomed to agriculture. In fact, the land they had, they used to give to someone else to cultivate for them. A change is apparently coming over them and they wish to become agriculturists. I think we should encourage this and provide some land, on the express condition that they engage themselves in agricultural work and must not pass on the land to someone else. To begin with, a hundred acres or even fifty acres might be given to them for this purpose. Apart from this, they deserve help in education. A school has recently been established there. Some assistance might be given to the school. Also some scholarships for higher studies.

I was told that a Toda girl had qualified for nursing by training in England, but is doing nothing now. We should try to find suitable work for her.

An attempt might also be made to encourage these Todas to develop some simple cottage industries.

All this will not cost much and I am sure that Central Government would be glad to help out of the special funds at their disposal for tribal folks etc.

I am sending this note through the Governor, who has been so much interested in the Todas in the past.