Economy of a Tribal Village

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In the traditional Adivasi economic system studied here there is little likelihood of endogenous change. In this system the 'outsider' commercial element and the indigenous social institutions support each other to maintain the stagnant equilibrium of the economy.

Any force which could disturb this equilibrium, therefore, has to come from outside.

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The tribal village of Bamanta is situated nearly nine miles from Alirajpur, an erstwhile Rajput 'native' state in the extreme northwestern corner of Madhya Pradesh. The village is located in a sub-mountainous country. The cultivated land varies from gravelly to sandy loam. Except in some lower valleys, the land is generally shallow and full of rocks. Most of the land is sub-marginal and good for only the crudest cereal and pulse crops such as minor millets (sanwali, bhadhi) and kulthia. The most valuable piece of land is located around a farmer's house. This is where he grows maize. The Adivasi pours most of his compost and fertilisers into this plot of land. Usually the houses are built on higher ground so that the maize field surrounding it can be watched from the house itself when the crop is standing. The uneven nature of the topography and the danger of casual thefts discourages clustered residential localities.

Self-Sufficient Economy

The overwhelming majority of the people in Alirajpur are Adivasis, consisting by and large of Bhil, Bhilala, Kotwal and Patlia tribes. Bamanta is a Bhilala village but of its fifty families three are Kotwals (or Balais). Rest of the families are, of course, Bhilalas. These tribes in the region are often referred to as jatis or castes but they are in fact largely autonomous tribal communities even though they are ranked in a hierarchy of status with Bhilalas and Patlias being considered higher than Bhils and Balais (Kotwals), in that order.

Whereas the economy of the villages of the plains are generally geared to the production of one or more major commercial crops, the economy of Bamanta is primarily oriented towards a high degree of self-sufficiency of the village community.

The basic unit of Bamanta's economy is the family farm. The farm is run under the direction of the head of the household with all the capable members of the family working on it. On the farm are produced various crops and other things needed by the family, the farm and for sale and exchange. Farms vary between six and sixty acres and the family house also includes a cattle shed and storage space. Some of the farms (20 to be precise) also have irrigation wells. Farms, other than those that have wells, have singularly similar economics despite variations in their size. Although there is a certain amount of economic interdependence between farmers, especially during the 'peak seasons' yet, each farm is a fairly self-sufficient unit for most of the year. In the main the exchange transactions of the villagers take place with the shopkeepers of Alirajpur, nine miles away. The total amounts involved in these exchanges are, however, relatively small. One of the important characteristics of the exchange transactions is that the Adivasi often sells agricultural commodities which could supply his important nutritional needs. For example he sells poultry, goats, eggs, vegetables, and even pulses and cereals after harvest, to receive in return commodities such as clothes and kerosene oil.

Subsistence Farming

Closely connected with the high degree of self-sufficiency of the family and the village is the largely subsistence economy. Throughout the seasons, the people work to make just enough for their physical existence. There is neither much saving nor investments to produce very large surpluses. This, of course, does not mean that the Adivasi does not save or invest at all. In fact seeds for cereals and pulses are closed in the bins after threshing, not to be opened till the next sowing season. Again, ornaments purchased are also a kind of saving. When the Adivasi urgently needs some money some of these find their way back to the shops of the goldsmiths. Some of the farmers also purchase bullocks, chicken, goats, etc. Under the influence of the block development agents a certain amount of fertiliser is purchased and some fruit trees planted. The principal items of investment were wells and houses—both of which were heavily subsidised by the block authorities. If we ignore, for the time being, income from the investments made at the initiative and prodding of the block development authorities then we see that the farmers produce just sufficient for their own consumption. For their requirements of cash, however, they grow groundnuts and chillies in small quantities. This crop is not used for consumption but is almost entirely for sale. With the cash obtained from it the land revenue is paid and some other marketing done.

Hand to Mouth Existence

A corollary to the "subsistence economy" is the close dependence of the levels of income and consumption on the vagaries of nature. Unlike the people in the plains the Adivasi farmer and his family do not have a steady level of living. Some seasons are seasons of plenty and the others of abject hunger and poverty. The period beginning with the kharif harvest in September to nearly a month after the Rabi harvest (April) is one of relative prosperity. But after the "Bhagoria" (March) and the "holi" festivals (April) the period of scarcity sets in. Even all the months between September to April are not equally prosperous. As each of the various kharif crops is harvested, the bulk of it is consumed. First to ripen, by the end of September, is maize. This is the happiest time for the Bhilalas, for the elegant cob means food after comparatively food-less days. Rabdi a cooked paste made with its flour is a great delicacy, and for days together they are able to eat it twice daily. Some maize is stored not only for seed but also for guests and special occasions. By the beginning of November other minor millets begin to be harvested. Sinai juice is also extracted from date palms about the same time.

As each crop comes up, bulk of it is gradually consumed; the level of
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living therefore varies with the quality and variety of crops being bar vested as also the products of the various fruit, palm and mahua trees.

Use of Money
Like most of the Adivasi societies Bhillas too are less money conscious than the village communities in the plains. But it would be a great mistake to think that the Adivasis are totally ignorant of the workings of the money economy. On the "hat-day" one finds most Adivasis carrying bundles of things ranging from dried mahua flowers to chicken. These are sold to Banias some of whom may be seen with their way-side shops miles outside the city to buy up the Adivasis goods. The Adivasi sells for money and with the money he purchases small items of food and other use, such as condiments, kerosene oil (gkas tei) and Khara (fried pakodas) made from gram-flour and vegetables. All kinds of grains are sold by volume. Open-mouthed cylindrical vessels (made of wood or brass) are the traditional measures. They are of various sizes. The largest being the Choki. It can hold nearly four seers of dried maize seed. Other current measures are kangan, tuli, ticha and mulia, each ¼th, ½th, 1/16th and 1/24th of tin Choki respectively. Information was sought to be gathered from informants regarding knowledge about prevalent old and new weights and measures and coinage systems. It is interesting to note that whereas nearly 80 per cent of the persons above ten years knew the local measures (choki, etc.), only 33 per cent could be accurate regarding national measuring weights (seers and maunds, etc.), while those who knew something about the metric coinage system were a mere 16 per cent. Metric weights and volume measures (kilograms and litres) were, of course, too much for all of them (See Table). Women throughout show lesser degree of acquaintance with the all-India measures and coinage.

Spreading of the cultivation of ground-nuts is intimately connected with increasing monetization of the Adivasi economy. Groundnuts are grown exclusively for sale to the market. They are ultimately used to extract groundnut oil. It is interesting to note—as it not only symbolises the backwardness of the Adivasi economy, but also emphasises its status of an exploited community—that the Adivasis nowhere process this commercial crop of theirs in their own villages. Their needs of ground-nut cooking oil are entirely met from purchase from the same market that absorbs their groundnut crops. So intimately is the cultivation of groundnuts connected with the market that the Adivasis do not store ground-nut seeds for the next sowing although in the case of all the cereal and pulse crops this frugal practice is widely current. The Adivasi would rather purchase seeds on credit and after the harvest return double the quantity to the bania.

Perpetual Indebtedness
In the not too distant past the Adivasi had extremely modest needs. He still lives close to the earth. He wears very little, or did so at least till very recently, and can manage to survive on whatever little the nature offers. However, increasing contact with the town is beginning to change his needs. Much of the surplus beyond his bare needs for nutrition goes to the town so that he can 'keep up with the Joneses' of his society. Clothing, ornaments, social ceremonies and payments of his debts eat up a great deal of the money he earns.

Indebtedness is the greatest scourge of the Adivasi economy. Borrowing is resorted to for various purposes. Heaviest borrowing is for seed, consumption comes a close second and ceremonies a significant third. Usually the rates of interest paid are exorbitantly high, anywhere between 25 to 50 per cent of the loan per year. The data collected by us on indebtedness are not too reliable. I suspect that the respondents have generally tried to understate their debt burden due probably to the desire not to appear too down and out. Considering their low levels of living Adivasis are still able to produce some surplus from the sale of groundnuts and occasionally sales of rice and wheat. This surplus, through the mechanism of the credit system, finds its way into the pockets of the banias. Even the poorest of the tribals pays a share of his staple produce to the bania by selling during the harvest seasons maize, dried mahua flowers and even some of the millets in order to pay his debts and meet monetary obligations.

Indebtedness is closely connected with the social attitudes and customs of the indigenes, and is a potent factor responsible for their generally stagnant economy. What the Adivasis borrow for seeds is generally repaid after harvesting the crop. At the same time the earlier borrowings for consumption are also repaid, but whatever is borrowed for marriage, very often, remains a permanent loan which they keep repaying through part of their working lives. Payment of "bride-price" and a "lavish" feast on the marriage are a must and no amount of "economic talk" convinces the Adivasis that these are pernicious in their effects.

The words of an informant in this respect are significant. "But if no money is paid why will the bride's father give his daughter?" The Adivasi's logic implies a static view of his world. Things are as they are and have been the same for ages; why will they change now? Simply because for some persons it may be convenient otherwise? Moreover, the ceremonies have social purposes, the most important of which is the periodical rejuvenation of community feeling. For example, marriage ceremonies are occasions when not only does the whole village get together but also kinship and neighbourhood ties are activated. Singing, dancing and community rituals make the ceremonies the occasions for collective enjoyment and collective reaffirmation of ties. They are, therefore, essential for the maintenance of communal unity. Sacrifices made by individual farmers at these times are necessitated by the social need they satisfy.

No Investment
Let us come back now to the second part of the hypothesis that indebtedness is a potent factor in the stagnant economy of the tribes. That investment is a factor of prime importance for economic expansion is a very widely accepted tenet of economic theory. Investment depends on savings. However, interest on loans is very nearly so high that the Adivasi's surplus which, had it been at hand, could have been used for investments in agriculture.

So we find that as far as the traditional economic system of the Adivasi is concerned there is little likelihood of endogenous change in it. In this tradi-
tional economic system the outsider commercial element and the indigenous social institutions support each other to maintain the stagnant economy. There is, however, one exogenous factor for social change whose role we must consider in the ensuing paragraphs.

Block development is the only effective force for social change. Whatever heightening of the tempo of economic change one finds, is almost exclusively due to the activities of the development block. The most effective of the Block activities in the village is construction of huts and wells. During the reference year itself four brick-work wells (pucca) and one unreinforced (kuchha) well were dug. There are altogether 20 wells in the village of which the 13 pucca wells have been constructed with subsidy received from the Block. All the eleven model brick huts are made with the help of the Block authorities. Subsidized construction of irrigation wells is the most important single contribution of the Block to the increase in the production potential of the Adivasis. Previous to the construction of the irrigation wells none of the Bamanta farmers were able to get rabi or zaid crops but now a sizeable proportion of the farmers (13 out of 50) have been able to considerably augment their incomes from the irrigated fields.

I do not wish here to overstress the achievements of the Block workers; they are considerable, but at a great cost. Nevertheless, I would like to point out that the existing country-town complex of the economy of the tribals tends, essentially, to strengthen the stagnant equilibrium of their traditional economy. The only positive force that could break it up must come from 'outside' elements and the Development Block happens to be the only such force

India and U A R for Jointly establishing industrial projects in other developing countries and for extending joint co-operation in the industrial and developmental projects and in the construction of highways, bridges and transport and communication systems in developing countries which would like to have such co-operation. Separate delegations from U A R and India are expected to examine these proposals shortly.

The letters exchanged by the two Ministers contain agreed trade proposals envisaging a total turnover of about Rs 450 million between the two countries in the current year, i.e., Rs 225 million each way. Besides tea and jute goods, numerous engineering, and chemical products and new items like cotton yarn, coco-cola concentrates, tissue paper and re-inforced steel bars are included in the list of goods to be exported by India to U A R. Like, wise, besides Egyptian cotton, rice and rock-phosphate, new products like fertilizers, mazout, flax and printing paper will be exported by U A R to India. The volume of trade between India and U A R was of the value of Rs 250 million in 1963-64, i.e., Rs 125 million each way.