Tribes in India

In general, the problems of the Indian tribes can be discussed under the following heads:

1. Loss of Control over Natural Resources:
Before the coming of the British, the tribals enjoyed unhindered rights of ownership and management over natural resources like land, forests, wildlife, water, soil, fish, etc. With the advent of industrialisation in India and the discovery of mineral and other resources in tribal inhabited areas, these pockets were thrown open to outsiders and state control replaced tribal control.

Thus began the story of unending miseries for the tribals. With the impetus to the development process after independence, pressure on land and forests increased.

This resulted in loss of ownership rights over land, owing to chronic indebtedness, unscrupulous landlords, moneylenders, contractors and officials. With the concepts of protected forests and national forests gaining currency, the tribals felt themselves uprooted from their cultural moorings and with no secure means of livelihood.

2. Lack of Education:
According to the 1991 Census, nearly 70 per cent of the tribals are illiterates. Although it cannot be denied that education can act as the instrument for betterment of the tribals ensuring greater participation for them in the development process, still there are certain factors which inhibit the tribals from taking to education.

These factors include tribal superstitions and prejudices, extreme poverty, nomadic lifestyle of certain tribes, lack of interest in alien subjects taught through an alien language and a lack of suitable teachers and other facilities in the tribal areas.

3. Displacement and Rehabilitation:
After independence, the focus of the development process was on heavy industries and the core sector. As a result huge steel plants, power projects and large dams came up—most of them in the tribal inhabited areas. The mining activities were also accelerated in these areas. Acquisition of tribal land by the government for these projects led to large scale displacement of the tribal population. The tribal pockets of Chhotanagpur region, Orissa, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh suffered the most.

The cash compensation provided by the government was frittered away on wasteful expenditure. No settlements were provided for the displaced tribals within the industrial areas, who were forced to live in peripheries in slums or to migrate to adjoining states to work as unskilled workers in conditions of poverty. The migration of these tribals to the urban areas causes psychological problems for them as they are not able to adjust well to the urban lifestyle and values.

4. Problems of Health and Nutrition:
Because of economic backwardness and insecure livelihood, the tribals face health problems, such as prevalence of disease, like malaria, cholera, tuberculosis, diarrhoea and jaundice, problems associated with malnutrition like iron deficiency and anaemia, high infant mortality rates, low levels of life expectancy, etc.

5. Gender Issues:
The degradation of the natural environment, particularly through the destruction of forests and a rapidly shrinking resource base, has had its impact on the status of women. The opening of the tribal belts to mining, industries and commercialisation has exposed tribal men and women to the ruthless operations of the market economy, giving rise to consumerism and to commoditisation of women.

6. Erosion of Identity:
Increasingly, the traditional institutions and laws of tribals are coming into conflict with modern institutions which create apprehensions among the tribals about preserving their identity. Extinction of tribal dialects and languages is another cause of concern as it indicates an erosion of tribal identity in certain areas.

The factors behind the assertion of tribal identities today?

- Forced incorporation or tribal communities has had a negative impact on tribal cultures and, sodety as much as its economy.
- Tribal identities are today formed by interactional process.
- Because this interactional process has not been in favor of the tribes, many tribal identities are based on ideas of resistance and opposition to the overwhelming force of the non-tribal world.
- The positive impact of success such as the achievement of statehood for Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh is marred by continuous problems. Many citizens of the north-eastern states have been living under special laws that limit their civil liberties. The vicious circle of armed rebellions provoking state repression which in turn fuels further rebellions has taken a heavy toll on the culture, economy, and society of these north-eastern states.
- Gradual emergence of an educated middle class in conjunction with the policy of reservation is creating an urbanized professional dass. As tribal societies get more and more differentiated i.e. developed dass and other division within themselves, current bases grow for the assertion of tribal identity.