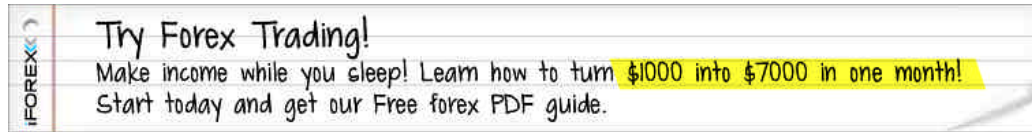


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SWAMINOMICS

# Hills show way forward for tribals

S A Aiyar, 27 June 2010, 12:30 AM IST

So you think that Indian tribals are utterly downtrodden, oppressed and bypassed by national economic development? You think activists are right to view Maoist insurgency as a tribal blessing and the only way forward for such an oppressed group?

Think again. No less than 17.1% of tribals own colour TVs, 46.6% have bicycles, 20% have two-wheelers, 12.5% have life insurance and 8.5% have refrigerators. That is below the national average of course, but nothing like the stark deprivation painted by activists.

These startling figures come from Caste in a Different Mould by Rajesh Shukla, Sunil Jain and Preeti Kakkar. The book draws on major household surveys by the National Council on Applied Economic Research, especially one in 2004-05. Its main finding is that caste matters much less than people think, while education and location matter much more.

That is good news. The OBCs (other backward castes) show no sign of suffering from discrimination — their income and durables ownership shares are roughly in line with population share. The share of dalits and tribals is below the national average, but not nearly as far below as activists and Maoists would have you believe.

India's average annual household income in 2004-05 was Rs 65,041. Upper caste households averaged Rs 86,690, higher than the national average but not dramatically so. Tribals averaged Rs 40,753, lower than the national average but not dramatically so.

Cynics will say this is too good to be true. Academic Pratap Bhanu Mehta expresses surprise in an introductory chapter that inequality seems so low. Tribals account for 8% of the population and 5.2% of national income. This inequality is strikingly modest.

In the US, the bottom quintile (bottom 20%) of the population gets only 3% of the national income. In India, the bottom quintile gets twice as much. Tribals and dalits account for 24.8% of the population and as much as 17% of national income, clear evidence that some are well off.

One-third of tribals are in the lowest quintile, but as many as 4% of them are well off and in the top quintile. Differences between tribals are as great as all-India differences. Hence block benefits for all tribals (such as job reservation) are not warranted.

Tribal households in hill states average an annual income of Rs 72,052, well above the national average. In other states, tribal income rises in line with

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Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar is consulting editor of The Economic Times. He has frequently been a consultant to the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. A popular columnist and TV commentator, Swami has been called "India's leading economic journalist" by Stephen Cohen of the Brookings Institution. "Swaminomics" has been appearing as a weekly column in The Times of India since 1990. In 2008, The Times of India brought out the book "The Benevolent Zookeepers - The Best Of Swaminomics".

*The views expressed in Swaminomics are the author's own.*

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state incomes. Tribals average Rs 30,939 per year in low-income states, Rs 44,533 in middle-income states, and Rs 53,176 in high-income states.

Laws on reservation (and most analyses) make no distinction between tribals in different areas. That is a terrible mistake. Tribals in hill states are privileged, not deprived. The tribal north-eastern states have the benefit of low population, high literacy (boosted initially by Christian missionary schools), and extensive road networks built for defence purposes in these border areas. The north-east also benefits from huge infusions of Central money and substantial income from smuggling. Violent clashes are common in the north-east too, but these are not Maoist: they relate to secession (Nagaland) or inter-tribal tensions (Manipur and the Bodo territories).

Hill tribals constitute a creamy layer, absolutely non-comparable with illiterate tribals in the central Indian jungles. Missionaries worked in the central jungles too, but the number of tribals there was infinitely larger, so the impact on literacy was correspondingly small.

Tribals in low-income states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh earn slightly less than half the national average. This is a pity, but hardly represents a hopeless state of deprivation justifying violent insurrection. Like me, most readers will be astonished that tribals are not worse off in even the most inhospitable locations. Tribals in these locations can double their incomes by migrating to higher income states, and even more (to Rs 85,023 per year) by migrating to big cities.

Illiterate upper castes earn 1.4 times as much as illiterate tribals. This suggests a modest degree of discrimination. But a graduate tribal earns 3.7 times as much as an illiterate one. Among upper castes, graduates earn 4.2 times as much as illiterates. Clearly education provides a way forward for everybody.

This suggests the foundation of a proactive strategy to combat the socio-economic appeal of Maoism in tribal areas. First, roads and other infrastructure are needed to improve economic possibilities and migration opportunities. Second, education is needed to create skills and lift potential incomes.

The combined effect of infrastructure and education can lift tribals above the national average, as has been achieved in the hill states. The task will be much harder in the central Indian jungles. But it can be done. And it will benefit tribals far more than the supposed blessings of Maoist rule.

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 Anirudh says:  
June 27, 2010 at 04:14 AM IST [Agree \(0\)](#)

5. [Mumbai's rail toll tops Bhopal](#)  
4.6/5 

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Showing the tribals as backward and downtrodden is good business for many of these so-called 'activists'

Disagree (0)  
 Recommend (0)  
 Offensive

 **Jitendra Desai** says:  
 June 27,2010 at 07:21 AM IST

This is quite a revelation!Task appears easier than envisaged.Building roads and creating infrastructure for education is no rocket science.

Agree (0)  
 Disagree (0)  
 Recommend (0)  
 Offensive

 **Vijay Thadani** says:  
 June 27,2010 at 12:20 PM IST


Why should the unit of measure of the tribals be measured by money. The wealth of the tribals lies in the jungle. The jungle feeds them. They are healthy and happy(no stress). They are richer than a lot of rich people. Please talk about ensuring the health of the jungle. They lose the jungle. They lose their livelihood. And their health.

Agree (0)  
 Disagree (0)  
 Recommend (0)  
 Offensive

 **Amal** says:  
 June 27,2010 at 12:31 PM IST


Amezing facts!! The tribal poverty is then the handicraft of some leftist intellectuals and journalists??

Agree (0)  
 Disagree (0)  
 Recommend (0)  
 Offensive

 **nirmalya choudhury** says:  
 June 27,2010 at 02:11 PM IST

There are two critical observations. Tribe and caste should not be added when statistical figures are quoted. Both have completely different socio economic context. One example is ownership of land..completely different between caste and class. Second, the tribals are not omogenous category and so adding up tribals on the north, north east and central india will not portray the true situation of the large section of the tribals in central india. There are parts of orrisa where the development indicators are worse than sub saharan africa, and that still exist now. Areas in Rayagada for example. The road and eductaional development houever are beyond any criticism.Road development in states like jharkhand and education in orisaa and jharkhand can definitely bring quantum changes. But it is easier said than done. IN last 3-4 years one can come across numerous studies with similar recommendation of good governance in extremist affected areas..but how? Suggestions are always welcome, but designing means of implementation and to implement them at pilot scale is much more important. Here perhaps the role of NGOs become important. There are lots of NGOs who are working in these areas on field rleated to education, natural resource management, livelihood strengthening etc. Is the government willing to seat with this groups to undertake a different kind of public private partnership (private necessarily dont mean corporate entity)on improved governance. On the contrary there are instances where NGOs are seen with contempt by the government if they are too successful in otherwise extremist affected areas where the otherwise government presence is very low. For example the excellent hospital of Ram Krishna Mission in Bastar which was coerced out of the state on account of suspected links with the extremists. So the government and academics need to go beyond giving broad development suggestions which anyway is nothing knew, rather what is required is strong implementation plan.

Agree (0)  
 Disagree (0)  
 Recommend (0)  
 Offensive

 **ash** says:  
 June 27,2010 at 02:31 PM IST

All of it makes sense apart from this sentence:  
 "Tribals in these locations can double their incomes by migrating to higher income states, and even more (to Rs 85,023 per year) by migrating to big cities."

Agree (0)  
 Disagree (0)  
 Recommend (0)  
 Offensive

Mr Aiyar has clearly not counted few other factors here:  
 1. Cost of living in big cities. Cost of living in a big city is much much more than a hilly area.  
 2. What will they do in the big city? I agree there are more opportunities there but, for most people, unless one has the education, clear goal its not a cake walk.

They will join the every growing slums of big cities and most people will just ignore.

I am fully with the writer that education is a major tool but until that is established suggesting people to move to other area is a bit far fetched and not completely thought of. Overall, comparison with the north east states with central India was interesting and something the policy makers might look at.

 **Moiz Saigara** says:  
June 27,2010 at 03:06 PM IST

Mr Aiyar... I beg you to go and live in a tribal area. Armchair analysis can be very misleading

[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)  
[Offensive](#)

 **M Biswanath Sinha** says:  
June 27,2010 at 03:34 PM IST

This article makes the wrong assumption that tribal is anyway meant to be poorer, which is absurd. I have visited all the hilly tribal states and I am really perplexed to read that road connectivity there is good. In fact, most of these states are connected to mainland only by one road! Finally, I think nobody makes this argument that the Maoist problem in central tribal heartland is only for economic reasons. Years of deprivation of basic rights and dignity also is an important reason for the state of affairs there. Overall, the article reads more like also-run stereotyped reporting written about tribal plight in India.

Thank you.  
M Biswanath Sinha,  
Mumbai.

[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)  
[Offensive](#)

 **Somu** says:  
June 27,2010 at 04:00 PM IST

Well said Mr Ayyar. The last para sums up everything. There is nothing impossible. Will the UPA Govt. tread the correct path?

[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)  
[Offensive](#)

 **turbulence** says:  
June 27,2010 at 05:42 PM IST


Mathematics and statistics has given economics rigor, but alas, also mortis said Robert Heilbroner

[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)  
[Offensive](#)

 **Vishwanath Palagummi** says:  
June 27,2010 at 06:29 PM IST

Your analyses seems to be a bit flawed. When you want to correlate Maoist insurgencies with poor tribals, you tend to summarize the financial status of tribals across all regions in the country, instead of only considering the tribals who live in that Maoism inflicted areas. You suggest that tribals should move out to larger cities to make a living, but maybe this is what they are fighting against. Even, when you make arguments like graduate tribals earn more than illiterate ones, you fail to mention how much percentage of the tribals in Central India (assuming that this is the region with Maoist presence) are graduates and does the average income only include the tribals of central India or tribals all across India.

[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)  
[Offensive](#)

 **Sudeep Singh** says:  
June 27,2010 at 07:11 PM IST

So, Picture is so bright, conclusions are so positive and all hype is creation of activists. Once again proved in a National Daily. So, what is required is to tell tribals these facts provided by some Shukla, Jain and Kakkar, so that they can realize their bright economic position.

[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
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 **shaikhzan** says:  
June 27,2010 at 08:03 PM IST

Mr aiyar, dont just sit in your cosy home and preach. go and take a walk at ground zero and then make your comments. as a state with all kinds of natural resources we are a utter failure and you try to justify our meager progress when in actual we should have been a developed country in more than sixty years of independence. your big chunk of population is still leaving like cave man, even bigger portion does not have basic amenities of any kind of facility which a state should offer and we talk of development. this is pathetic to the core. my suggestion to all you esteemed columnist is, leave everything else and start talking about ACCOUNTABILITY. again, till you start making this the most important word for our RULERS (this includes our politician, bureaucracy and judiciary) we will always be underdeveloped and looted by our own peoples.

[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)  
[Offensive](#)

 **vishnukhadatare** says:  
June 27,2010 at 08:39 PM IST

Sir,  
I respected your economic opinions so far. You do have common sense.  
But this article of yours seems to be written with malice with intention of doing somebody's or some lobby's bidding. Because an economist you know better than that.  
Taking the lowest common denominator of what the tribals have as per your first paragraph you tell us 8.5 percent have refrigerators which according to you is not bad.  
Dont you know that means 91.5 percent tribals are yet to know what a refrigerator is, which is no more luxury cause even in slums like Dharavi every household seems to have one? Knowing fairly well about averages [an economist once entered a river believing crocodiles in the river average only 1.5 foot was eaten by a 15 foot crocodile instead]. Take away Mukesh Ambani with his 40 billion wealth and the equation of our per capita income will get down by 2000 per head.  
Similarly take away the 8.5 percent freeze holding tribals [who still are poor ] probably they are the class four employees who luckily got educated upto 4th to get benefit of reservation to become a peon or something, 91.5 percent remaining tribals will go down to horrific levels of per capita income.  
Another tool you have used in the article to misguide your argument is of comparing one poor with the other poor. Why compare a tribal poor with an upper caste poor when there are too many phenomena working in tandem here i.e. the growing difference between Bharat and India i.e. class struggle and the caste discrimination .  
You assume Maoists are for lower castes only while the oldest fact is that they are for proletariat i.e. economical backwardness which is result of oppression by the rich an ancient battle.  
So, you advise migration. Meaning tribals should migrate to get themselves on higher average and governments should provide roads so that they can go to the city slums and steriles can bring their heavy equipment to mine the bauxite underground the area so encroached upon? SHAME ON U

[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)  
[Offensive](#)

 **Prof. Ravindran** says:  
June 27,2010 at 10:15 PM IST

Swami's statistics is a startling revelation, I regularly read his columns, but what I can understand from this report is that the national average itself is so low therefore the comparison looks irrelevant here. Average people can understand it only if there is comparison between tribal, national average and rich. This will give an idea about who stands where. Mere comparison between tribal and national average will not convince the purpose for which it is written, it will only amount to a political statement.

[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)  
[Offensive](#)

 **Munna** says:  
June 27,2010 at 11:17 PM IST

One sentence reveals it all: Migrate to city and leave the area for mines. Rest is all noise. Bauxite ke liye kuchh bhi karega. Have a nice day.

[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)  
[Offensive](#)

 **Bhagwad Jal Park** says:  
June 27,2010 at 11:51 PM IST

[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)

India and China have lifted 125 million people out of poverty in the last 10 years. We don't need to overthrow the government - we need to join it and help it do even better.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that the Naxals are nothing but terrorists (<http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/indiachina-lift-millions-outslums-un/88943/on>).

If they're so poor, where did they get the money to buy guns and fight a costly war? It's about time activists realize that there are much better ways to protest rather than killing innocent people...

Offensive

 **Ashok Gupta** says:  
June 28,2010 at 02:15 AM IST

Good Analysis?  
BUT AVERAGED NEVER SPELL OUT THE REAL PICTURES.

In such cases where the reach by the analysts is not easier, it is still more difficult to know the actual picture.

Exploitation by the Maoists in tribal areas is not just because of poverty, but there are various other factors like approachability by the state authorities/ fear of loosing their land because of increased mining activities/ lack of education/ lack of infrastructure etc etc etc.

And the situation is getting worse with the passage of time, when these Adivasis are nourished with a dream , 'they can become rulers or masters of the area under them with the power of barrel/ gun' and instead of paying the taxes or Lagan etc, they will charge the taxes from the vehicles passing through their area or miners doing mining in these areas.

DREAM OF BEING A RULER INSTEAD OF GETTING RULED, IS A BIG EXPOSITION.

Agree (0)  
Disagree (0)  
Recommend (0)  
Offensive

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