The tribal population in India is generally regarded as the oldest population of the land. Their numbers are estimated at varying figures; and they are defined and classified in varying ways. In the following article, Dr. Mehta deals with the historical background of India's tribal peoples and throws interesting light on their social and economic life, religious customs and artistic and cultural achievements. The author also makes some practical suggestions for tackling the problem of the tribes in India today.

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The tribal population in India is accepted to be the oldest population of the land. These communities have lived for centuries in the forest and hilly regions, and at present they are found in a wide central belt beginning with the Aravalli Hills in the West and extending through the Dangs, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and Bengal to Assam. There are tribes in the North in the lower ranges of the Himalayas, and also in the South in the Western and Eastern Ghats, and in the Vindhya and Satpura mountains. There is a small, but very important tribal population in the Andaman, Nicobar, Maldives and other islands off the mainland.

Since the first census in India it has been found difficult to reach a correct estimate of their population, and equally difficult has been the problem of their definition and classification. In the various Census Reports and studies of the Castes and Tribes, they have been called by various names, like 'aboriginal tribes', 'primitive tribes', 'tribal populations', 'animists', 'Hindu tribals', etc.

In the Indian Constitution this population is termed as the Scheduled Tribes. The Schedule of Tribes was issued by the President of the Republic in March, 1950, in order to determine the tribal groups who were privileged to enjoy the special rights and benefits conferred by the Constitution on the Scheduled Tribes.

Population.—According to this Schedule, the tribal population in 1950 was 178.75 lakhs, *consisting of 245 tribes. Before Partition, the estimated tribal population in India was about 26 millions. A very small section of the tribal population might have been transferred to areas now belonging to Pakistan. The reduced estimate of the population of Scheduled Tribes in 1950 is, therefore, due to the fact that a section of the tribal population which was entirely acculturated with the non-tribal population is not classified as tribal.

Definition and Classification.—In order to determine the correct population of Scheduled Tribes, it is necessary to define a scheduled tribe. A tribe consists of a group of families who are bound together by kinship, usually descending from a common mythical or legendary ancestor and who live in a common region, speak a common dialect and have a common history. A tribe is invariably endogamous. All tribal groups which can be covered by this general definition of a tribe are not necessarily Scheduled Tribes.

*Note: The tribal population in the States was as follows: (population in lakhs): Assam 17.15; Bihar 42.10; Bombay 30.37; Hyderabad 2.37; Madhya Bharat 9.49; Madras 5.96; Madhya Pradesh 24.59; Mysore .10; Orissa 29.25; Punjab .15; Rajasthan 4.47; Saurashtra .73; Travancore and Cochin .23.

No. of Scheduled Tribes by States: Assam—13; Bihar—28; Bombay—24; Hyderabad—9; Madhya Bharat—3; Madras—40; Madhya Pradesh—31; Mysore—6; Orissa—42; Punjab—1; Rajasthan—1; Saurashtra—6; Travancore-Cochin—16; Vindhya Pradesh—10.
For many centuries, the tribal population has come into contact with other different human groups and cultures. This contact has necessarily led to different types of inter-actions, co-operation and conflict, leading to a high degree of acculturisation, and sometimes even to total assimilation with groups possessing more dominant cultures.

It has been suggested, therefore, that the tribal population should be classified into the following groups: (1) Forest dwellers; (2) Ruralised tribals; (3) Acculturised tribals and (4) Assimilated tribals. The Scheduled Tribals will be only those who have not yet been acculturised to any great degree with non-tribal communities. There are six distinct features which could be taken into consideration to determine whether a particular tribe should be put on the Schedule. These factors are:

1. The nature of the physical region, and communications in that region;
2. Language;
3. Economic life;
4. Religion;
5. Social organisation and type of marriage and family life; and
6. The cultural pattern of the group, its traditions and modes of living.

Though the tribal population has lived in India from the earliest times, there is no historical evidence to show that they are the first inhabitants of the land. Likewise there is no evidence about the lands which were originally occupied by the tribes found in India at the present day. In the absence of any definite information regarding their early history or subsequent migrations, it is to be assumed that, whilst certain tribes in India could have been the original dwellers, other tribes might have migrated into India from outside the country, especially from Burma, Tibet and China. Some tribes must have migrated from one part of the country to another during the last many centuries.

The late Mr. Sarat Chandra Roy, in his study of the Munda tribe, has given an interesting glimpse of the early history of a typical Indian tribe. The tribal population came into contact with the early Aryans. The Aryans, with their superior religious beliefs, philosophies and forms of worship, naturally could not have comprehended primitive animism with its belief in spiritual beings, possession, magical rites and the worship of Nature. They came into conflict with many tribes like the Chandals, Mahars, Nishadas, etc., and held them in great contempt. They even waged a war for their extermination.

The period of conflict between the tribals and the Aryans was, however, brief and with the acceptance of the Atharva Veda as one of the Vedas and holy scriptures, there was an assimilation of the beliefs and forms of worship of the tribals into the larger contents of Hinduism.

There are no historical records of the internal conflicts which must have taken place between various tribes, especially for the occupation of well stocked hunting grounds and for other reasons. However, the history of the major tribes like the Bhils, Gonds, Santals, etc., shows that the large number of tribes with different names and independent habitats that now exist in the tribal areas must have been off-shoots from large concentrations of a smaller number of tribes.

A new page in history begins with the establishment of the supremacy of certain tribal kingdoms, and there is historical evidence of the wisdom, wars, conquests and achievements of tribal kings. There are many historical conflicts between the Rajput rulers and the tribal rulers, and this led to the eventual recognition of Rajput suzerainty over tribal kingdoms of the Bhils, Gonds and others. The kingdom of Ashavel, now known as
Ahmedabad, was ruled by a tribal king. Rajput rulers married tribal women. Goho, King of Bhils, was of Rajput descent. The conflict between the Rajput soldiers and the tribal warriors was of a very short duration, and in almost all cases, the tribals accepted the formal sovereignty of the Rajput king who left the tribe free to continue its isolated existence on the hill-sides. The historical ceremony of crowning a Rajput king with a 'Tikka' on his forehead made with the blood of a tribal chief is significant of the relationship that came to exist between them.

The Muslim conquerors, who followed the Rajputs, brought the Rajputs and the tribals together as fighters against themselves, a common foe. The Muslim rulers also invariably left the tribes alone in the hilly areas, and they continued their independence during the days of the East India Company also. The British followed the same policy of leaving the tribals alone and created a skeleton administration to look after the tribal and forest areas. Their later desire for commercial exploitation of the forests, their efforts to control the distribution of liquor and compel the permanent settlement of tribes in well defined areas as well as the work of the Christian missionaries brought them into conflict with the tribals. It is well-known that the tribals played a very important role during the Indian Mutiny against British soldiers; and this eventually led to the creation of the famous Bhil Corps. The Naga Kingdom in Assam was another prominent independent tribal area which the British could not easily subdue or penetrate; and it continued its almost independent existence in the isolated and highly forestsed areas of Assam.

The construction of railways and the gradual opening up of the country side by highways broke down the barriers between the forest dwellers in the tribal areas, and the agricultural communities in the plains. This resulted in different types of relationships, regular contacts for the exchange of commodities, and the intensification of the process of acculturisation which is continuing up to the present day.

The constant growth of population, its pressure on the soil, the desire for acquisition of land allied to the land policy of the British Government, and the greater use of money as a medium of exchange reduced the possibilities of hunting as well as hunting areas in the tribal territory. The introduction of an element of absentee landlords in tribal areas turned a large section of tribals into agricultural labourers, or drove a part of the tribal population to cities like Jamshedpur and Ahmedabad to become industrial workers. During the transition period from hunting to agricultural economy, the tribals commenced, what is now known as "shifting Cultivation", whereby each year they occupied a particular area, set fire to it, broadcast seeds, and harvested a scanty crop of coarse cereals every year. This kind of cultivation is continued by some tribes even at the present day, though organised efforts are being made by the Government to settle this type of primitive agriculturists to a more permanent form of improved cultivation. Pastoral tribes, especially where there were suitable pasture-lands, were not uncommon in India; and the Todas of the Nilgiri hills, and some tribes in Southern India are important examples of a grassland economy. The tribals were quite successful in breeding cattle, and a majority of them kept herds of goats and developed poultry farming. Elements of hunting, fishing animal husbandry and agriculture are thus found amongst the tribes of India, whilst the section of industrial workers is also sufficiently large.

The gradual death of hunting economy has to be examined in the light of the food pro-
blem of the country, as well as the importance of adjusting the economic activities of human groups to the physical environments in which they live. The competition between hunting animal life for food supply and the economic development of a forest for the purpose of timber and other commercial products has ended the possibilities of hunting in many areas; and once the trees are destroyed, there is the possibility of acquiring land for the purpose of agriculture. As the importance of a forest is now realised, the policy of afforestation could be linked with the restoration of hunting grounds; and there is the possibility of developing a hunting economy, supplemented by a scientific exploitation of the forest for timber and a large number of other forest products through co-operatives organised amongst tribal communities. Where the tribals have taken to agriculture, and where irrigation facilities are available, they will be naturally acculturised to the rest of the rural population of the country. By now it has been proved that the tribals can work efficiently in well developed industrial areas; and therefore, it should be possible to develop mining and other industries based on local raw materials within the areas in which the tribes live.

Tribal Culture and Language.—Surveys of tribal communities which were carried out extensively by early anthropologists revealed that economic activities were not the primary occupation of the tribal people because their needs were limited, and they were able to satisfy them without much difficulty or effort. Their life was, therefore, occupied by religious and cultural activities which included elaborate worship, song, music and dance. The practice of magic and witchcraft, the belief in spirits and demoniac possession, the worship of bull gods, mares, and other contents of their extensive religious life filled the days of their active and interesting life. This early religious life was gradually influenced by the wandering Brahmans and Sadhus and by their own witch-doctors, so that a number of religious sects grew up amongst them. Improved communications and contact with caste Hindus added new beliefs and forms of worship, and Shaivite and Vaishnavite philosophies and ideas accompanied by performance of an increasing number of samskaras led to the classification of certain whole tribes as Hindu tribes in the Census Reports. Christian missionaries also approached the tribal population in different areas with varied success. For example, there was serious trouble amongst the Mundas. In certain areas, churches were even burnt down and bitter conflict developed between the tribal population and the Christian missionaries. In other areas, where the missionaries deserted their activities to the service of the community and the promotion of health and education programmes, they were more successful, and such missionary work in the tribal areas continues up to the present day.

The tribes in India speak thousands of different dialects. Some of them like Bhilori, Gondi, Santali, etc. are important because they are spoken by thousands of people. These dialects did not have any written script and therefore they developed a rich vocabulary as spoken dialects. Apart from the spoken dialects, the witch-doctors used a sound language in the performance of their magical rites. The tribal dialects have contributed many and important words to the provincial languages. After the advent of communications and the development of education by the State, the tribes gradually assimilated the provincial mother tongues of their respective areas. However, even now the language problem is one of the most difficult and vital problems left to be solved by free India, and tentative decisions have been made to give early education in the mother tongue of the
child, adopting the Devanagari script for the dialects. The mother tongue of each provincial area will also play a vital role in the multilingualistic evolution of the tribal people. The tribal dialects are simple and rich in vocabulary and folklore. It is essential to preserve the songs, stories and legends of tribal life, some of which can make a valuable contribution to national culture.

Social Organization.—The tribe is one of the oldest types of social organisation known to the country. The affairs of the tribe are generally managed by a tribal assembly consisting of male adults, and it functions over the entire tribal territory which is invariably homogeneous. If the tribe lived in different and separated areas, very often there is more than one tribal assembly. Gradually the influence of caste penetrated into the tribal areas, and many of the functions of the caste were taken over by the tribal assembly. The original functions of the tribal assembly were to enforce the established customs, especially regarding the observance of endogamy, granting divorce and punishing persons guilty of conduct against the welfare of the community. The exact nature of religious, economic and political functions of a tribal assembly differed from tribe to tribe; and these functions were gradually reduced as the tribes came under the greater influence of more dominant social groups and organised forms of government.

Marriage amongst the tribals has often been described as "a free and transient union", and the customs governing marriage, including courtship, marriage age, and dowry, ceremonials, and regulations of post marital relations like adultery, divorce, and desertion varied from tribe to tribe. It has been generally accepted that the sex life of a tribal was healthy and governed by rigid customs. Interesting types of courtship, like the separate hall system, prevailed in some of the tribes; whilst in almost all tribes the sexes enjoyed a certain amount of freedom, dignity and aesthetics were not unknown among them.

The tribals invariably married late, and it is only due to the unhealthy influence of the Hindu castes, that early marriages and customs of bride price entered tribal life. The reasons for the greater frequency of divorces in tribal communities have been many; but chiefly, the tribes did not practice severe and rigid control over human relationships, and religion was not a controlling factor in married life. The tribals were invariably monogamous, but changed their mates frequently as a result of divorce granted easily by the tribal assembly after the payment of a nominal fine, and the return of half the amount of bride price. Divorces could be obtained freely by both the sexes. The marriage ceremony was invariably a magical rite; but the ceremonials were gradually influenced by an element of vedic rituals.

The pattern of social organisation and customs vary so much in all parts of the country that there is little room for comparison, comment or condemnation. Rigid standards of morality, similarity of outlook on human problems, and observance of uniform philosophies or acceptance of common religious beliefs and dogmas are not known to the tribal world; and therefore the individuality of tribal life and their peculiar standards of morality need to be understood in terms of historical life and experience of each tribe. Even organised efforts to assimilate them into the larger national life need not unduly interfere with their social life and organisation, because improvement of economic life and adaptation to new patterns of economic activity, accompanied by education will lead to a healthy social change
where the initiative and leadership of the tribe itself will lead to improved and suitable patterns of social organisation and development.

**Standard of Life.**—The tribes at the present day have a very low standard of life. Their poverty is due to their inability to take the fullest advantage of their physical environment to develop profitable economic activities whilst they have to live in a social environment which stimulates artificial desires which cannot be easily satisfied. The tribes themselves remarked that within the same environment they were once able to live a comparatively easy existence where there was food and they were able to weave their colourful clothing and wear attractive ornaments; and live in well-constructed and artistic houses. There was work, leisure and cultural recreation full of song, music and dance. Development of communications, extensive use of money economy, and greater contact with new tribal population deprived them of opportunities for their normal economic activity. They lost their lands to money lenders, and the gradual destitution of their forests for commercial purposes led them into a life of inadequately paid wage earners where there was no hunting to supplement their food, and where they had to buy grains for which they had little cash. Thus began an existence of chronic malnutrition facing the entire tribal population. The degeneration of clothing habits, and the gradual disappearance of well-built houses is a story of hardly one hundred years. The absence of freedom in their own environment, lack of money, and worries and anxieties or a life of want and suffering have told on their happy ways of living, and the decadence of tribal arts and culture are today very much in evidence.

No historical data are available about the health and physical fitness of the tribal population. It is generally assumed that where small concentrations of people live a natural life, they maintain a high standard of health and fitness. Highly developed senses and virile physique possessing agility, stamina and high powers of endurance were common to tribal population till malnutrition and poverty entered their lives to be followed by diseases which took a high toll of human life. Throughout the tribal area, the belief in the doctrine of 'possession' and of supernatural causation of disease yet prevails. The traditional medicine-man with his potions and magic rituals yet exists. The deficiency of health services in rural areas is well-known, and the tribal areas which are extensive and lacking in communications, with the population scattered over vast distances, have been hardly provided with any medical assistance up to now. Some of the diseases commonly prevailing in tribal areas are malaria, scabies and other skin diseases, venereal diseases, small-pox, leprosy, tuberculosis, trachoma, glaucoma and elephantiasis. Unhygienic environmental conditions, malnutrition, insanitary water supply, lack of protection against climate, and some harmful social customs and practices are some of the known causes for the extensive prevalence of diseases among the tribal population.

**Tribal Education.**—Intensive studies of education amongst the tribes have not been carried out. Hambly's "Origin of Education amongst Primitive Peoples" revealed that, whilst formal education may be unknown to the tribes, their children learnt the lessons of work and living by observation and direct participation in all aspects of community life. With their keen observation, developed powers of initiative and intensively active nature, they not only became good hunters and herdersmen, but they even became creative artists contributing to the rich culture of the tribes. Formal education was introduced
in tribal territories, and after independence, the process has been accelerated.

Article 46 of the Constitution requires that special attention should be given to the education of children of the Scheduled Tribes. The problem of education is likely to prove the most difficult so far as the tribal areas are concerned. When dealing with their educational problems, the principle will have to be conceded that the usual formal system of education is not likely to prove suitable to tribal communities. Students in tribal areas are to receive a primary-cum-basic education for eight years. Basic education receives the primary attention of the Department of Scheduled Castes and Tribes; and the programme of basic schools is being adjusted to the needs of forest, pastoral and agricultural communities of a very simple type.

Most of the Part A and B States have already commenced implementing the directive principles of the Constitution. Some schools have been started and tuition is free in all institutions. Other types of aids are given to children for the purchase of books, stationery, clothing, etc. State programmes of tribal education include the creation of residential education ashrams, vocational and technical training schools, and hostels for tribal students. The expenditure for the education of tribal students by the States forms part of the total expenditure of Rs. 8,21,00,000 set apart for the education of the backward classes.

*Art and Culture.*—The history of the art and culture of the tribes is shrouded in the unknown past. Animism and the worship of Nature appear to have been the chief motivation of art amongst tribal people. Tribal worship included ritualistic dances accompanied by the beating of metal drums and sticks loaded with metal rings. Wind instruments, made of dried gourds and bamboo, and string instruments were invented by romantic tribesmen. Cloth weaving and the making of ornaments of wood, stone, shells, beads, etc. displayed the craftsmanship and skill as well as the aesthetics and sense of colours of the tribal folk. Pottery has existed from unknown times, and clay pots were made for domestic use; the art of the potter was best displayed in the large clay urns and clay offerings made to the spirits, which are found in large numbers near cremation and burial grounds of the communities. Painting, drawing, and sketching with the use of various types of colours are found on the murals and decorations of tribal homes, which, in many cases, are also examples of their high architectural and artistic skills. A large number of crafts followed the use of local raw materials by the skills of men and women of the tribe for making articles of use for their economic and domestic life. Bows and arrows, fishing nets, animal and bird traps, primitive tools, basket work, etc. displayed their skill and craftsmanship as they involved caning, etching, embroidery and ornamentation of all kinds. The tribal bards and romantic youth developed the songs, stories and legends of ancient heroes and heroines, gods, spirits and warriors. Thus art spread from religious to economic and domestic life, and the culture of the tribe was expressed in the magical rituals, festivals and feasts like the *Holi* which was observed for several days.

*Criminal Tribes.*—In this brief historical background of the tribal people, reference needs to be made to the section of the Indians who were called "criminal tribes." The problem of the so-called criminal tribes has puzzled the administrator for the last two centuries. These tribes seem to consist of a few pastoral communities who could not adjust themselves to the economy of settled life; small sections of forest tribes who broke
away from their larger tribes because they could not adjust themselves to economies which were the result of forest and land policies of successive governments; and certain groups which were temperamentally and psychologically unable to adjust themselves to a law-and-order society, and who found it more profitable to take advantage of concentrated properties in settled economies than to earn their livelihood by productive labour.

The administrative approach to this problem began with Regulation XII of 1793, and successive decades created the need to deal with dacoits, pirates and communities like Pindaris, Thugs, and others, all of whom were not tribal populations. The first Criminal Tribes Act was passed in 1871, and successive legislative enactments of 1897, 1911, and 1924 attempted to deal with the problem.

In the past, the major problem appeared to be the lack of desire or ability on the part of certain communities to live a settled life; and to adjust themselves to the Laws of the land. These nomadic communities preferred to continue their nomadic habits in urban areas where they would not be bound by the need of working on land or by the laws governing land possession. Many of these communities had developed peculiar concepts of property, and possessing certain traits of character, agility of mind and suppleness of skill, they became professional thieves and pick-pockets, or found ways to form themselves into gangs and practised anti-social activities like the sale of stolen property, prostitution, the procurement of narcotics and drugs, and facilitating traffic in women and children in general. It should, however, be taken for granted that all the persons in the community were not criminal, and were willing to find normal vocations and occupations to lead a normal economic life. These communities were especially inclined to become small traders and shop-keepers, and they do possess skills which could be used to develop various crafts. With some persuasion, and given land, they may become agriculturists.

The situation now has changed, and on the whole most of the communities are settled down, and only small sections amongst them follow their old predatory habits. There may be some groups who sometimes take to anti-social acts due to economic conditions, or opportunities offered by the environment. Certain groups still prefer to move from place to place, improvising shelters and finding ways of living to avoid settling down in any particular area.

The last estimated population of criminal tribes was 2,268,348; but this entire population cannot be said to be criminally inclined. There were 198 tribes enumerated as 'criminal', the largest number 48 being in Madras State. The number of registered criminals was 77,159.

There were four chief aspects involved in the treatment of criminal tribes. The enactments provided for the notification of individuals or entire groups as criminal. They further provided for the registration of urban communities to be declared criminal when they were practising anti-social activities in well defined areas. There was a provision for the restriction of movement of these groups so that they had to carry on their life activities within the permitted area. And finally Criminal Tribes Settlements were created all over the country to keep the groups confined within a controlled environment.

The Indian Constitution has accepted that no man could be considered guilty unless he is proved to be so in a court of law.
Accordingly, the Criminal Tribes Act has been repealed and is not in force with effect from 30th August, 1952, in any of the States.

This is the brief historical background of the Indian tribal population. A good deal of material regarding the tribes of India is contained in the gazetteers. A scheme for a systematic and detailed ethnographic survey of the whole of India received the sanction of the Government of India in 1901. A general and un-co-ordinated survey of the tribes and castes in India was carried out by Enthoner in Bombay, Thurston in Madras, Crook in the North West Frontier Provinces and Oudh, Russell in Madhya Pradesh, and Bidulph in the Hindu Kush. Since then, Indian anthropologists carried out a number of studies in Southern India. Detailed studies of the tribes in India are few, and chief amongst these are Roy's Mundas, and Orasons, Dr. River's Todas, Seligan's Veddas, Hodson's and Mills' tours among the Nagas, Gudon's Khasis, and Dalton's Ethnology of Bengal. A new and co-ordinated approach to the study of tribal history, legends, art and culture is needed to reveal to the Indian population the history and culture of the tribal peoples.