

This is the International Year for the World's Indigenous People. The Cabinet approved National Committee, which I chair, has, in collaboration with concerned state agencies, Cultural Survival and several other non-governmental organisations worked out a national programme of activities. We have an ambitious agenda including programmes in the field of education, awareness promotion, research, publications and institution building. The programme is designed to make a permanent impact on and a significant advance in our understanding and appreciation of indigenous people, their culture and their contribution to our civilisation. This programme may help them to strengthen or re-establish their rights, cultural values, institutions and ethnic identity.

There is widespread knowledge of the recommendations of the UN Conference on the Environment and Development on this subject and of the United Nations General Assembly recommendations and resolution designating 1993

as the International Year for the World's Indigenous People. But, there is less awareness of an ILO Convention of 36 years standing, viz: the Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention and Recommendations of 1957, revised and up-dated in 1989 under the title "Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989". The 1957 Convention was an important supplement to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and various international instruments on human rights and the prevention of discrimination adopted prior to 1957.

In many parts of the world, there are indigenous people, often referred to as tribals, who have been marginalised, whose rights have been violated and who continue to be discriminated against even now. Dhebar (1961) describes and analyses how this came about in India. Weiner (1978) notes that the stories of how Indian tribal were tricked into losing their lands

## **SOME THOUGHTS ON THE NATIONAL PROGRAMME TO CELEBRATE THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR FOR THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE**

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are very similar to those heard in native American reservations. The histories of the decline of tribal communities in many countries and the kinds of exploitation and oppression they have been subjected to have many parallels.

In many countries indigenous people are not seen as a class specifically entitled to benefits under the earlier international instruments referred to above. It is in this context that the 1957 Convention was a watershed in the emancipation of indigenous people. Since then many developments have taken place rights to own, occupy and enjoy the produce of their lands. In respect of education, the prescription goes beyond equal opportunity to the requirement that their children should be taught, where practicable, to read and write in their own indigenous language which should be preserved and developed. Moreover, indigenous people should be made aware of their rights and duties; in turn other sections of the people should be educated with a view to creating better understanding of indigenous people and eliminating prejudices against them.

It is on the lines of these and other provisions spelt out in the convention that we have formulated our national agenda. The Sri Lanka based Bellamy television series 'Routes of Wisdom' has already being launched. The second National Environmental Exhibition titled 'Adivasi Lanka' is scheduled to be held in late March 1994. Two special stamps will be issued and there will be an extended programme of broadcasts, telecasts, films, public lectures and seminars on this theme. A section of the Colombo Museum will feature the culture and life-style of the Veddas and a section of the National Archives will store documents relating to them. It is proposed that supplementary readers will be prepared in Sinhala, Tamil and English and Vedda dialects for use by school children. Research activity has begun and we hope to have several publications, cassettes, films and videos which will record for the benefit of present and future generations in Sri Lanka and overseas and, above all, that of the international law and in the situation of indigenous people. These have led to growing awareness and acknowledgement of the ill-effects of discrimination against and persistent neglect of the rights of indigenous people, and of the validity of their aspirations. Their quest for socio-economic advancement while retaining valuable aspects of their culture now receives more attention. There is increasing, though yet inadequate, acceptance of the rights of indigenous people to greater autonomy and to the preservation of their identity, language and religion. There is also a deeper appreciation of the



value of their distinctive contribution to cultural diversity and to social and ecological harmony. That they live closer to nature and have much to teach us about harmonious co-existence with flora and fauna in their natural habitats is now widely recognised.

It is in these circumstances that the ILO had taken the initiative to revise and update the Convention now referred to as the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989. This Convention prescribed that indigenous people should be consulted and freely participate in making decisions on legislative and administrative measures concerning them, that they have the right to decide their own priorities and that it should be ensured that their socio-economic development is compatible with their customs, customary rights and laws: it also casts an obligation on the state to protect indigenous people from violation of their individual and collective rights. The convention affirms their Vedda population, an account of their distinctive culture, life-style and environment-friendly interaction with nature. Some scholarly literature on the subject will also be published. A research centre will be established at Kataragama.

The Veddas claim to be the original inhabitants of Sri Lanka; but we know very little of them. What are the origins of the Veddas? Hutton (1941), Ghurye (1980) and others have attempted to link the origins of the tribes of India to successive waves of invasion over several millennia. The defeated populations may





be completely absorbed by the victors or partly assimilated into a subordinate caste or may escape (or be banished) into a remote region. Populations which occupy inhospitable country may altogether escape subjugation. Some of these populations have subsequently succumbed to physical or cultural conquest. Those who are termed tribals are the descendants of those who escaped or resisted such incorporation. It is likely that much of the history of the Veddas, who are reputed to have been banished into the forests many centuries ago, falls within this pattern; but of their origins there is little knowledge and little agreement among scholars. In other countries too the processes by which tribals emerged appear to have been similar but, again, their origins are often lost in pre-history.

We have no precise definition of either 'Indigenous People' or 'Vedda'. Even in the Sri Lankan context, these terms may not be synonymous nor the categories co-terminus. A further complication is that there are several communities referred to as Veddas living in different localities, speaking distinct dialects and with significant variation in life styles and cultural features. That they are branches of a common ethnic group has not been established. Nor it is clear that all communities descended from pre-historic settlements in Sri Lanka are covered by the term 'Vedda'; some of the communities could possibly be of different origin. Much research needs to be done to throw some light on these issues.

In almost every country there is the inevitable dilemma regarding the country's indigenous/tribal population: to assimilate or to insulate? The former alternative might facilitate rapid economic and educational development but could lead to the disintegration of ethnic identity. The latter alternative might help to preserve the ethnic identity but, in the process, hinder economic and educational

advancement. Within indigenous communities as well as among scholars opinion is divided. Ghurye (1980) lists three options, viz:

- (i) **Revivalism**, in which only such changes are promoted as are designed to capture a past idyllic state;
- (ii) **Isolation and Preservation**, i.e., virtually "hands off"; and
- (iii) **Assimilation**.

These may appear to be contradictory or even mutually exclusive options but we may need to have elements of each of these in any meaningful policy package we adopt in respect of indigenous people. In fact, to the extent that any policy is identifiable, this seems to be the case.

In Sri Lanka, as in many other parts of the world, the institutions representative of indigenous people have been destroyed or have withered away under adverse conditions. Over the centuries their culture has lost its vitality and the indigenous communities have become fragmented, displaced from some of their traditional homelands and geographically scattered. There is no effective institutional mechanism through which they can be consulted. Despite gaps in policy and some weaknesses in implementation, many countries have clearly defined programmes relating to the traditional homelands of indigenous people, to the sustenance of their arts and crafts and to the allocation of resources for their socio-economic advancement. Some countries also have a network of quotas and preferences in recruitment to jobs and admissions to institutions of tertiary education and skill training. In Sri Lanka we have never had a clearly formulated, comprehensive and consistent policy in respect of indigenous people.

We need to jointly search for the re-discovery of the lost heritage of indigenous people and the identification of their contribution to our national culture. We need to create conditions for the re-emergence of institutions to voice their hopes and aspirations and to forge and communicate their collective will. Their songs and dances need to be recorded and their arts and crafts require support. We need, in consultation with them, to formulate policy on matters concerning their national identity and socio-economic development and all other aspects of their welfare. Let us make use of the interest created and the access to global information and resources brought about by the celebration of the International Year for the World's Indigenous People to move towards the restoration of their rights, the re-establishment of their institutions, the re-discovery of their heritage and the recognition of their contribution to our civilisation.