

Celebrated anthropologist Verrier Elwin has been quoted to justify the enactment of a

law granting the right to forest lands to the tribals. Elwin had opposed the reservation of such lands by the government for the sake of ecology and wild life conservation on the grounds that it excluded the tribals from them, although they had lived there for centuries.

The exclusion meant that the tribals were told to remain in their own villages "and not to wander from place to place," Elwin said, adding that in 1933-1934, "there were 27,000 forest offences registered in the Central Provinces... It is obvious that so great a number of offences would not occur unless the forest regulations ran counter to the fundamental needs and sentiment of the tribesmen."

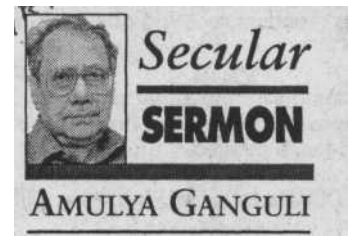
This view regards the tribals as the natural denizens of the forests, who have been cruelly evicted from their habitat to which they had been used for countless years by an insensitive government, which obviously regarded them as groups who did not need special protection. The fact was in Elwin's time, it was also a

Towards tribal appeasement

colonial government that made matters worse, for the alien officials couldn't have had much idea about these people and nor did they care. Subsequently, it has been suggested that the transfer of power to Indian hands did not make any difference since the new government inherited the city-based mindset of the colonial rulers and carried on with the same policies based on the belief that the administration knew best.

It is open to question, however, whether such complaints are valid. Jawaharlal Nehru, who agreed with much of what Elwin said, was of the opinion that while the distinctive lifestyle of the tribals, whether in central India or in the Northeast, should be protected, they should not be treated as museum pieces. As the rest of the country progressed, they should be encouraged to join the mainstream without losing their specific ethnic identities and cultural

heritage. To a considerable extent, this is what has happened if only because as India became urbanised, it was inevitable that the tribals would also be influenced and their ways of living would change. In any event, it would have been naive to regard them as innocent children of nature who would continue to live in their customary ways, immune to the transformation taking place around them, including the unsavoury aspects of modern life. It would also be naive to expect them to continue to behave like innocent children — if they were ever that — in today's world and continue to take care of the forests as they may have done in the misty past. It has to be remembered that the country's forest cover was once much larger than it is today and that if the tribals did indulge in acts of despoliation, it wouldn't have mattered as much as it will now. Any move, therefore,



under the new Scheduled Tribes and Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill to allow incursions into the protected forests is fraught with danger because the tribals are no longer what they were and the forest cover has dwindled from 65 per cent in the mid-Twenties to 19 per cent today.

Instead of a dewy-eyed approach, it is necessary to take a hard-headed look at what is sought to be done. What is disturbing is that there may be a political purpose behind the proposed legislation, which is lost amidst the clamour of the tribal lobby. It has been suspected that the fieldwork undertaken by the saffron

camp to spread its communal message among the *vanavasis*, as the Hindutva brotherhood calls the *adivasis*, has unnerved the Congress, which now wants to regain the lost ground among the forest dwellers through this legislative bonanza. If so, it will only confirm the suspicion that there is a hidden agenda behind almost everything ruling party does. The *hiti* may also believe that the granting of the land rights will help to check the influence of the Naxalites who have been exploiting the disaffection of the tribals to extend their influence. However, even if this isn't true; what is undeniable is that the move intends to legit-

imise the encroachments into protected forests that have taken place. As anyone conversant with such palliatives knows, steps of this nature are an invitation to disaster. Once the encroachments are condoned, more will take place — and this time, the *adivasis* will be able to claim that they are only recovering the forest land from which they had been unfairly ousted. Already, suggestions have been made to bring forward the cut-off date for the conferment of the land rights from 1980 to 1993. It is a fair guess that the demand will not stop at 1993.

Although certain duties have been specified for the land owners, including the need to protect wildlife and biodiversity and assist in the forest's regeneration, the responsibility for ensuring these will be with the local *gram sabhas*. Although, *prima facie*, this is an admirable extension of democracy to the grassroots

level, the record of such local bodies hasn't always been satisfactory. Several of them have been found to have acted on the basis of traditionally regressive norms — in the case of marriages across caste barriers, for instance — which have not met the ends of justice or of individual rights. To expect the *gram sabhas*, therefore, to ensure a strict compliance with the needs of conservation when the tigers are vanishing, may be somewhat optimistic. It is known that the local bodies are the stepping stones of politics. The tribals today are as much involved in the Indian political system as anyone else — and not in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh alone. And there is little to indicate that they are any different from their political colleagues in other parties. The sameness of human nature ensures that they are as good — or as bad — as the rest of them. At a time of intense pressure on the reserved forests as a result of

expanding human settlements and the lure of commercial exploitation, it will take people of exceptional commitment to the preservation of the country's fauna and flora to act as the saviours of the green belt. There may well be many such committed individuals among the tribals, including those familiar with their long-standing cultural traditions of conservation, but it will take a concerted effort by them along with the ecologists and the wildlife conservationists to ensure that no harm is done to India's rapidly shrinking forest cover. It is unfortunate, however, that there is a tendency to trash the conservationists as elitist opponents of the move to eradicate the "historical injustice" that has been done to the *adivasis*. Snide comments that the descendants of feudal lords who recklessly killed tigers are today posing as the champions of the great cats have been made to criticise the opponents of the proposed law. The observation itself has a political ring. Unless politics is replaced by an undiluted emphasis on conservation, India's wildlife and green cover will not survive.