

DO WE REALLY WANT TO KEEP THEM IN A ZOO ?

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In this article the author, who has been accused of advocating a policy of segregation with regard to the aboriginals, explains why such a policy is necessary at present to protect them from being exploited by callous, subordinate forest officials, police and excise officers, and others, and to enable them to become gradually adapted to the life of the outside world.

Mr. Elwin has for many years been working for the betterment of the Baiga and the Gond, living as one of them. His book, *The Baiga*, which is the outcome of his intimate experience and painstaking study, is a notable contribution to Anthropology.

ONE of the more puerile charges that is made against anthropologists in India is that they desire to keep the aboriginals in a sort of a Zoo in order to preserve them as specimens and material for the exercise of their science. Since this accusation has been made not only by reformers and politicians, but also by people of some intellectual standing, it is necessary to examine it.

By a curious coincidence, I have just opened a copy of a widely-read English periodical, *Picture Post*, in which precisely the same charge is levelled against Mahatma Gandhi who wishes, of course, to keep the whole of India as a laboratory in which to conduct his experiments in satyagraha. A series of pictures are published which illustrate the life, not of aboriginal India, but of ordinary Hindu villages and the letter-press describes how backward these are and how sunk in poverty and superstition. At the same time, it is explained that Mahatma Gandhi would keep these unhappy Indian villagers permanently in their backward condition through his dislike of modern medicine, modern industrialism and the ordinary fruits of civilisation. We see a telegraph wire running across a landscape and we are told that this symbol of civilisation strikes a jarring note in the Mahatma's mind. The anthropologist may congratulate himself on being found in such good company as the Mahatma, but actually neither can be called guilty.

For what does it mean to put an animal in a Zoo ? It means that you take it away from its traditional surroundings, you deprive it of its accustomed diet, you alter all its habits and you rob it of its freedom. But what is it that Mahatma Gandhi is fighting for ? It is to restore to the people of India their own home and enable them to live in it as their own, to preserve their own customs untainted by Western influence, and to win for them their liberty. The attitude of the anthropologist is the same. We would give our lives for the freedom of the aboriginals; we would fight to the last to

restore to them their ancestral hills and jungles. We desire nothing better than to see them living their own lives, following their own customs, preserving their own rules of food and drink, delighted with their own simple pleasures in the glorious freedom of their hills. No one believes more passionately in human liberty than the anthropologist, for he is the true student and lover of mankind.

But further it may be said that actually, even from the technically anthropological standpoint, there would be little scientific value in studying people who were artificially isolated in a sort of Zoo. The anthropologist—it cannot be said too often—is concerned with human life as a whole. He is not a specialist in primitive culture and the investigators of the last decade have tended to spend more and more time in the study of more advanced peoples. I need only mention the work of Mass Observation in England. To the anthropologist, indeed, the travail of peoples passing through a period of cultural change and the far greater complexity and interest of more advanced communities often seems of greater significance than the comparatively static life of aborigines, most of whom have now been fully studied and who generally present a considerable degree of sameness and monotony. If I wanted to have an Anthropological Zoo, I would not fill it with Marias and Baigas; I would have a very different company. I would put in one enclosure the whole of the Sevagram Ashram; in a pleasantly-furnished cage within speaking distance of the Mahatma I would confine the President of the Muslim League. Some way off the Office-bearers of the Bombay Purity League would draw crowds of sight-seers eager to watch them sip their lemonade. Elsewhere, carefully segregated, I would include a selection of Hindu Sanatanists as well as a sprinkling of the more diehard officials of the Indian Civil Service. Such types, which will soon be as extinct as the dodo, are of the highest sociological interest and certainly ought to be preserved. The mentality of Lord Linlithgow will surely be a matter of far greater interest and astonishment to the scientists of another age than that of some poor Santal. I would like to put Mr. Amery too in my collection, but such specimens are expensive and the cost of transporting him from England in wartime would be too great.

The position of the anthropologist in this matter is very widely misunderstood, and he has come to be regarded by many thoughtless minds as a sinister person who desires to deprive the aborigines of the blessings of civilisation and is primarily interested in sex. But the anthropologist is simply someone who observes more carefully, takes better photographs, travels more widely and works harder than other travellers and observers who have not had his technical training. Owing to the length of time he spends among his people and the intensive character of his observation, he

generally becomes devoted to them and desires to see their highest interests preserved. It is a significant fact that all over the world these people, who presumably must know what they are talking about, are unanimous in declaring that unregulated and hasty acculturation has a degrading and ruinous effect upon primitive people. The spread of English Missions, English business, English imperialism and English drink in Africa and Australia has had the most devastating results on the primitive inhabitants of those countries. In India, where the less-educated Hindu or Mohammedan villager is only very slightly advanced beyond his aboriginal brother, the process has been slower and is less obvious, but it is no less certain. When the anthropologist, therefore, wants to protect the aboriginal, he has a very good reason for doing so. Contact with the people of the plains in India invariably has the worst possible effect upon them. I will summarise briefly what I have written at length in my *Loss of Nerve* on the result of these contacts : —

1. The people of the plains invariably trick and deceive the simple honest aboriginals out of their land.

2. The people of the plains lend the aboriginals money or goods and thus get them completely into economic servitude.

3. When aboriginals from the hills come in contact with the people of the plains, they get venereal disease. In Bastar State it is a most striking fact, as the Chief Medical Officer has told me, that after 30 years' experience among the aboriginals he has not known a single case of venereal disease among real hillmen. The only aboriginals known to have suffered from it are a certain number of boys who have been educated and by going to school have been thrown into contact with the outside world. Yet, while in Bastar we have a great hill area completely free from these horrible diseases, you have only to go down a little into the plains to find as much as 80% of the population infected.

4. Contact with the plains people results in the hillmen losing their great qualities of honesty and simplicity. Ask any lawyer who has practised in Courts on the boundaries of aboriginal country and he will tell you how honourable a real hillman is and how utterly untruthful and deceitful he becomes after he has been to school or after he has had much contact with the outside world.

5. Aboriginal culture is quickly destroyed when it comes in touch with external influences. The aboriginal loses his religion, his morals, his artistic sense, his poetry, and sinks down into a sort of untouchable without life, without colour and without beauty.

6. Perhaps one of the worst results of mixing up hillmen with the plains people is that the hillmen learn to believe in untouchability, to practise

child marriage, and to put their women in purdah, things of which they are mostly innocent in their wild state.

Now among those who think that this is all nonsense is Mr. A. V. Thakkar. Mr. Thakkar is one of the heroes of humanity. He has devoted the greater part of a long life to the service of the poorest in the land. The Bhil Seva Mandal that he founded in Gujarat is a monument to his genius for taking pains. The work of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, which has been largely inspired and almost wholly controlled by him, is one of the noblest enterprises now being conducted on this planet. His goodness and great-heartedness are known to all. It is, therefore, doubly unfortunate that in regard to the aboriginals he should have taken up an anti-intellectualist policy which cannot fail to lead to the unhappiest results. Mr. Thakkar has recently expressed his views on this subject in a Lecture before the Gokhale Institute and in a communication to *The Times of India*, while the fact that he was Chairman of the Committee appointed by the Orissa Government to enquire into the affairs of the partially Excluded Areas of that Province suggests that we may find a key to his attitude in that Committee's Report. Mr. Thakkar's Gokhale Lecture is full of that love for the people and desire for their welfare that is characteristic of him, but it is based on a few fundamentally wrong assumptions which cannot fail to detract from the value of his conclusions. He regards as frivolous and imaginary any suggestion that there is danger in the unregulated contact of the aboriginals with the people of the plains : " It is difficult for me to understand why people fear the contact with the Hindu and Muslim of the plains. It may be that in a few cases some social evils of the people of the plains are likely to be copied by the unsophisticated aboriginals." Is Mr. Thakkar so ignorant of the state of affairs in aboriginal villages as not to know that it is not in a few cases but everywhere and always that these evils are imitated % Again Mr. Thakkar suggests that " a healthy comradeship should develop between the aborigines and each should profit culturally from the other and in course of time work hand in hand for the welfare of India as a whole." Here again, surely, Mr. Thakkar forgets his own bitter experience in running the Harijan Sevak Sangh. Does he really think that the more advanced sections of Indian society will treat the aboriginals any better than they are still treating the untouchables ? *Whenever the aboriginal and the non-aboriginal come in contact, it is the aboriginal who goes to the wall.* He is economically exploited, his religion, his character, his morals are ruined, and his land and property pass into the hands of the non-aboriginal.

Mr. Thakkar fears that to separate and isolate the aboriginals will strike at the root of national solidarity. I do not think this is a very serious danger,

For no one suggests that the tribesmen should be permanently isolated. AU that the anthropologist suggests is that for the time being, until we have a sufficient staff of workers like Mr. Thakkar himself to deal with the problem, we should go very slowly in promoting among them the process of cultural change and their contacts with civilisation. There is no possible idea of setting up a new minority, though the educated Gonds and Uraons, who are generally hostile to the Congress, are anxious to do this. My own view is that the aboriginals should be classed at the Census as Hindus by religion, because their religion (though in many ways distinctive) undoubtedly belongs to the Hindu family. Indeed, the character of the great majority of them has already become more or less diluted by their contact with the outer world ; they have lost everything that is distinctive of their life and culture, and I agree with Mr. Thakkar that they should be assimilated into the larger community without delay.

The tribesmen who present a really serious problem—a problem which I think Mr. Thakkar and his friends have not sufficiently appreciated—are the five million or so really wild aboriginals who still inhabit the utmost recesses of the hills, live by shifting cultivation, hunting and root-gathering and have preserved much of their old culture, religion and organisation. Unhappily, Mr. Thakkar desires to stop these people practising their traditional method of cultivation, a policy which will bring them to psychological despair and economic ruin. I have discussed this at length in my book *The Baiga* and I need not repeat here what I have said there. I know of Baigas who have taken to a life of crime because they have been prohibited from practising their shifting cultivation. Mr. Thakkar considers this method of cultivation a lazy one, but if he will read Mr. Grigson's book on the Marias, or my own on the Baigas, he will see this charge fully refuted.

To call the poor lazy is, of course, a common habit of upper-class English society. Mr. Thakkar considers that *bewar* or *podu* is an evil practice, a harmful habit and does not give good results, but the aboriginals themselves believe that it gives better crops than any other form of cultivation, and often on the wild steep hillsides where they live, no other form of cultivating the soil is possible. It does a certain amount of harm to the forests (which, of course, ought to be preserved for the profit of the capitalists), but is Mr. Thakkar ignorant of the devastation of the forests to provide timber for the war ? Are not the great saw-mills of industrialism a greater danger to the forests than the few axes of the tribesmen ? I agree that the terraced cultivation of the Savaras and Nagas is excellent, but it is quite impossible to introduce this throughout the rest of aboriginal India.

Mr. Thakkar says, "I cannot agree with the opinion that *bewar* or *podu* is almost a religious necessity to some of the tribes," This is not the way

in which scientific work should be written. What it means is that since Mr. Thakkar (for whom, as a Hindu, the plough and the cow are almost fetishes) does not like shifting cultivation, since it outrages him that some people should believe it to be a religious necessity, therefore it cannot be a religious necessity. He might as well say "I cannot agree with the opinion that the Mass is a religious necessity to a Catholic or that the feast of Bakri Id is a religious necessity to the Mohammedan." I can assure Mr. Thakkar that this form of cultivation *is* a religious necessity to some of these tribes; that when they are prevented from practising it, they feel that they are living in a state of sin and have incurred the displeasure of the gods. Surely religious tolerance demands that we should respect the hopes and fears of simple people. It is a tragic thing to find the largely Congress Thakkar Committee in Orissa recommending a curtailment of the human rights of the tribesmen such as the "oppressive" Imperialist official has never advocated.

Mr. Thakkar regards the aboriginals as living in "a slough of despond and ignorance." It must be several years, I think, since Mr. Thakkar spent any length of time in an aboriginal village. I am writing this article in the wilds of Bastar ; I have never been among happier people. I have rarely seen people who, though ignorant of the violence and corruptions of modern civilised life, are more full of knowledge of trees and birds and animals, of the hills and of the sky, of all natural, good and simple things. I would not myself be so presumptuous as to suggest that I could lift up these people. It is from them that I have learnt many precious lessons for my own life.

One of the reasons why the idea has risen that administrators and anthropologists (though these two classes of people are not usually put together) desire to keep the aboriginals in a Zoo has been the policy of Government to prohibit national workers and Congressmen from entering tribal areas. Mr. Thakkar himself has suffered badly as a result of this type of isolationism. So have I. When I first went to settle in Mandla District, I was ordered out of it by the Deputy Commissioner. My mud-hut was raided by the police several times. An application was made for my" deportation from British India. The India Office cancelled my passport to try to prevent me being in India at all. For years I and my workers were persecuted by the police and forest officials and our work suffered greatly, and even my own health was damaged as a result of the annoyance and worry thus caused. I have every sympathy therefore with Mr. Thakkar's feelings. I agree also with him that it is monstrous that the very Governments which forbid national workers to work among the aboriginals should freely allow Christian Missionaries to spread their propaganda among them. But Mr. Thakkar ought not to blame the anthropologist for this. No class of people have been more

severe in their criticism of the missionaries. Mr. J. P. Mills has said the most stringent things about the Baptist Mission in Assam. Dr. Hutton has long been of the same opinion. I myself have consistently urged that no missionaries should be admitted into tribal areas. Mr. Thakkar must know that and I do not think it is quite fair of him to suggest that the anthropologists are responsible for keeping the national workers out and getting the foreign missionaries in.

Mr. Thakkar adds a select bibliography to his Lecture which has been prepared (not very accurately) by Dr. Karve. Generally, when a writer places a bibliography at the end of his work it is assumed that the books contained in it give some support to his main thesis. In this case, however, the bibliography furnishes the most complete refutation of Mr. Thakkar's positions. There is indeed a very strong body of opinion, both Indian and European, which believes in the danger of allowing the wildest tribes of India to come too rapidly into contact with civilisation. This is very far from wishing to keep the people in the Zoo. It is very far from desiring to deprive them of the blessings of civilisation. It is simply a desire to save them from the psychic and moral decay that follows contact with the degraded adventurers, the sneaking lawyers' touts, the dishonest money-lenders, the grasping landlords, the exploiting merchants and the corrupt subordinate officials who are practically the only representatives of civilisation that they ever meet.

In a letter to *The Times of India*, Mr. Thakkar suggests that anthropologists are ashamed of their civilisation ; otherwise why should they not wish to impart it to the aboriginals ? I imagine that Mr. Thakkar must be one of the very few living people who is proud of our modern civilisation. But let us examine this civilisation to which Mr. Thakkar and his friends are so eager to introduce the aboriginal. Mr. Thakkar is Vice-President of the Servants of India Society, which is more or less responsible for a very good newspaper published from Nagpur, *The Hitawada*. Let us, therefore, turn to this journal, for surely it is here that we will discover what it is that Mr. Thakkar means by civilisation. Open its pages and see first and foremost vivid accounts of the divisions of mankind and their slaughter of one another. Study the prostitution of science in the interests of death ; watch the triumph of the aeroplane, tank and gun. To kill your enemy is the highest achievement of human life, to drown him in hundreds a noble act meriting reward. Then in column after column read of the chicanery of Municipalities, the corruption of District Councils, the hatred of the great communities for one another, the riot and looting in the towns ; watch the reports of cases in the Court, adultery, rape, theft and murder. Study again the almost incredi-

ble futilities of the politicians, the unimaginativeness and short-sightedness of great Governments, the wranglings and meanness of little men. Then turn to the advertisements, for here surely is civilisation at its highest !

One is headed,

**MEN ENJOY LIFE MORE
SEXUAL NOVELTIES**

and here is another,

**BREASTEE REGD.
BEAUTY DEMANDS A CLASSIC BUST
ACHIEVE IT THROUGH BREASTEE**

It develops saggy breasts to original and firm condition giving them good formation, alluring fullness and firmness of youth.

Then again we get:

**I.C.S. APPRECIATES NERVINUS
ELIXIR OF LIFE**

Simply an aphrodisiac !

Then there is the Hermit's message:

The unparalleled secret and select prescription given by a famous Mahatma. Its very first dose produces fresh, rich racing blood ; in 21 days eyes will sparkle and cheeks become like rosy apples. In 40 days it will secure complete victory over the loss of manhood.

So effective is this aphrodisiac that when a certain Swami of the Himalayas gave five or six doses of it to an old man who ignorantly took the whole lot at a time, the poor fellow had to marry three wives at once.

And so on and so on.

I have known unfortunate aboriginals who have learnt to read and write, and having seen similar advertisements in the Hindi press, have written in reply and been grievously cheated of their money.

But this is civilisation—not the whole of civilisation, but that part of it we usually see. For remember, *The Hitawada* is not a bad paper: it is one of the best papers. It gives a true picture. Our civilisation, both European and Indian, for all its many noble qualities, is deeply scarred by a belief in violence, complete indifference to truth, prostitution and other forms of sexual vice, a lack of direction and leadership, inequality in the distribution of property, and oppression and exploitation of the worker and the poor. The best aboriginal society is based on communal living, perfect truthfulness and honesty, ignorance of any form of sexual perversion or prostitution, and fair dealing between man and man. It has its evils, cruelties and superstitions, but those who would dare to try to improve it should look with many a backward glance at the way of life of which they are representatives.

Let me now summarise the position of the anthropologist. He does not want to keep the people in a Zoo. It would be no use to him if he did. He is concerned with truth, and human beings are not like guinea-pigs that can be isolated in a laboratory. What he desires is the freedom and happiness of the people he has come to love. He recognises two types of aboriginal in India: one has already come too much in contact with the outside world that the only thing to do is to educate and develop him as rapidly as possible so that he will be able to fight the battle of life and win it. It is this which our institution in Mandla, the Bhumijan Seva Mandal, is trying to do. The other type of aboriginal, perhaps five million of them, who are scattered in the remotest hills and jungles and who still preserve much of their traditional religion, tribal organisation and recreations, present a far more difficult problem. It is no use saying that they should be given the blessings of civilisation while the rest of India lacks them. Mr. Thakkar has said he wishes to see the aboriginals educated up to the standard of the rest of India. At present over vast areas of our country the villagers are living drab lives of dirt, disease and ignorance and these are villagers who belong to what are known as advanced communities. Surely it is more intelligent to give these people, on whom it can have no possible bad effect, the blessings of civilisation first and then, when the standard all round has risen and there are plenty of devoted workers ready to go among the aboriginals their problem can be tackled. It is worse than useless to send out decadent, degraded, ignorant school-masters into tribal areas. A school may be a centre of darkness rather than light, Long ago I challenged Mr. Thakkar to say that he would refuse to send into the aboriginal areas any schoolmaster who believed and practised untouchability. I repeat that challenge now. If the Congress Leaders are sincere in their desire to abolish untouchability, then when they come back to power, one of the tests for appointing any man to teach in a school, and still more of appointing any man to act as Inspector of Schools, should be that he has abolished untouchability from his own house and his own belief. Otherwise we will conclude that it is the reformer rather than the anthropologist who desires to see bad customs perpetuated. The anthropologist desires to save the aboriginals from such abominations as child-marriage, the isolation and degradation of women, illtreatment of widows and, above all, the belief in untouchability.

But his attitude is not only protective. There is a great deal actually to be done. There is, of course, no such thing really as an anthropological attitude to politics or to social change and development. The anthropologist is concerned with facts and it is his business to produce a complete and accurate picture of the situation for other people to use if they so desire. But

still it is possible to speak, not technically but in a general way, of what the anthropologists want provided it is clearly understood that by this we mean what the majority of the people who happen to be anthropologists and have had that particular kind of experience do actually want. In this sense I think it is true to say that the majority of anthropologists today desire to see the economic position of the tribesmen improved before any attempt is made either to educate them or to alter their customs. I think that is undoubtedly the position, for example, of the London School of Economics, and Mr. Tarak Chandra Das has recently given weighty expression to a similar outlook in fully documented papers before the Indian Science Congress. This is, of course, the old Marxian attitude. First of all improve the prosperity, the health and material condition of your people and then you can proceed to the far more tricky business of cultural change and reform without doing them harm. But if you reverse that process you may cause nothing but disaster.

Aboriginal boys in India who go to school all too often lose the use of their hands. They become too proud of themselves to turn to the simple toil of the fields and live miserable and frustrated lives seeking for employment in Government service. Reformers who try to alter the diet of the tribesmen may simply succeed in depriving them of essential items of nutrition without giving them anything in their place. They forbid them to eat chicken, eggs and pork but they give them no vegetables, no curds, no ghee in substitute. Attempts to interfere with tribal religion may result simply in destroying any kind of religion whatever unless the change that is proposed comes after and not before economic improvement. None of the dangers to which I have just referred arise in communities *where material progress has preceded and not followed cultural change*.

It is obviously useless to expect a high standard of spiritual idealism from people suffering from diseases that torment their spirit and lower their vitality. In Bastar State there is an admirable example of how Government can help the people without in any way harming them. There the terrible disease of yaws has been almost banished from among the aboriginals, where formerly it was rampant, by the devoted service of the State Medical Department. This is the sort of thing that is well worth doing for aboriginals and about which there can be no possible controversy.

Mahatma Gandhi once said to a group of Christian missionaries that it was useless to offer their would-be converts the bread of the gospel until they had provided them first with their daily bread to eat. I would say exactly the same thing to the politicians and reformers who are interested in the Indian aboriginals. It is a mockery to offer them the bread of religious and moral uplift until you have first provided them with enough bread to eat. Here

again the policy of the anthropologist coincides with that of Mahatma Gandhi. That is what we would expect. A Grigson and a Gandhi are alike realist in their approach: they each know the actualities and facts of village life.

There is, therefore, plenty to do. There are the fifteen millions or so semi-civilised aboriginals to educate, to develop, to help. There are five million or so wilder aboriginals to be provided with medical assistance and to be protected from their foes. My readers will, therefore, see that the anthropologists' policy is actually the very reverse of trying to keep the aboriginals in a Zoo. Rather they would set the aboriginals free, restore to them the liberties of their hills and forests, save them from economic exploitation and moral degradation, and thus enable them to play their proper part in the India of the future.

Zoos are very interesting, but I'm not sure if I agree with them. I like looking at the animals, but I always feel sorry for them. They usually look sad. Most of the time they are in tiny cages. They must miss the wild. I think animals need freedom as much as we do. Zoo bosses argue zoos are an important way of educating children. Of course, that's true. However, with the Internet and television documentaries, there are many other ways children can learn about animals. Zoos also argue they are necessary to save endangered species. That may be true too, but most of the animals in zoos are not in danger of extinction. I suppose ...