

EDITORIAL

Tribes in India: Concept, Interpretation, and Contextual Relevance

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INTRODUCTION

Numerous indigenous or tribal communities are found all over the world and they are the real custodians of the cultural heritage of a particular area. They are comparatively earliest settlers of a land or particular region. "There are over 476 million indigenous people living in 90 countries across the world, accounting for 6.2 percent of the global population. Of those, there are more than 5,000 distinct groups"¹. Around 705 tribal groups and sub-groups are found in India².

Tribal groups are popularly known as Indigenous, First Nation, Aborigines, *Qabili* (members of a *Qabila*, *Kabila* or Band), *Adivasi* (ancient residents), *Vanyajati* (forest people), *Vanvasi* (forest dwellers), *Girijan* (hill people), *Janjati* (folk people), *Adimjati* (primitive caste), *Anusuchit Janjati* (scheduled tribe), and so on. The 'tribe' is a collective term initially used to designate the native communities of a particular geographical region. It was popularly used during the colonial period by the colonizing countries to designate such native groups living in their colonial states. The initial meaning of the term tribe is now not much relevant. Gradually, the native communities are becoming culturally aware, politically sound and developing the term tribe in a new form with vitality.

Terminology of Tribe

Online Etymology Dictionary describes the origin and history of the word tribe (noun) as "in the middle of the 13th C. 'one of the twelve divisions of the ancient Hebrews' from Old French *tribu*, from Latin *tribus* one of the three political/ethnic divisions of the original Roman state (Tites, *Ramnes*, and *Luceres*, corresponding, perhaps, to the Latins, Sabines and Etruscans), later, one of the 30 political divisions instituted by Servius Tullius (increased to 35 in 241 B.C.E.), perhaps from *tri* - 'three' + *bhu* - 'root'

of the verb be. Others connect the word with the root of Welsh *tref* 'town, inhabited place'. In the Biblical sense, which was the original one in English, the Latin word translates Greek *phyle* 'race or tribe of men, body of men united by ties of blood and descent, a clan'. Extension to any ethnic group of race of people is first recorded 1590s"³.

According to the Oxford Dictionary the word tribe is defined as "A social division in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader"⁴.

In its simplest form, "A tribe is a group of bands occupying a contiguous territory or territories and having a feeling of unity deriving from numerous similarities in a culture, frequent contacts and a certain community of interests"⁵. Elman Service, a cultural anthropologist, describes a theory on stages of evolution of human communities based on socio-political organization into four successive categories band, tribe, chiefdom and state⁶. He considered the tribe a simple society and developed stage of band or union of many homogenous bands with non-centralized power and a human group without much power hunger. According to Marshall D. Shalin⁷, "a tribe is a segmental organisation which is composed of equivalent and unspecialized multi-family group, clan or band. A collection of bands has a chiefdom to coordinate its economic, social and religious activities. He makes distinction between state and non-state society. Non-state societies are divided into band, tribe and chiefdom".

Concept of Tribe in India

The identification, classification, definition, and description of tribes in India have remained controversial among scholars,



reformers, and administrators. "Risely, Lancey, Elwin and Grigson describe tribes as aborigines or aboriginals, Hutton calls them primitive tribes, G.S. Ghurye describes them as backward Hindus, S.T. Das designates them as 'submerged humanity. Some scholars and reformers describe them as *adivasis*. After 1947, the Government of India assigned them to the Scheduled Tribes category." (8, p. 223)

According to Mehta⁹, tribes in India constitute a significant proportion of country's population. Ancient Indian literature like Veda, Purana, Ramayana and Mahabharata highlight nature and features of tribal social formation in India. According to such mythological texts, in ancient India tribes were given names such as Nishada, Kirata, Dasyu and Dasa. Ramayan mentions that non-Aryans or aboriginal tribes were mainly inhabitants of Deccan region of India. They were called Rakshasa, Yaksha, Vanara, Nishada and Grdhraj.

During the British period, Indian tribes became an object of study of the colonial administrator, missionary and anthropologist. Hutton, Risley, Elwin, and others studied tribes to understand social structure and culture of Indian society in general and of tribes in particular. F.G Bailey and W.H.R. Rivers too became interested to study tribes in India.^{10,11}

"A tribe is a collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous, though originally it might have been so" (12, p. 308).

Majumdar D.N.¹³ define tribe from anthropological perspective as "a social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous, with no specialization of functions, ruled by tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognizing social distance with other tribes or castes, without any social obloquy attaching to them, as it does in the caste structure, followed tribal traditions, beliefs and customs, illiberal of naturalization of ideas from alien sources, above all conscious of homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration."¹⁴

Bardhan A.B.¹⁵ defines the tribe as "course of socio-cultural entity at a definite historical stage of development. It is a single, endogamous community with a cultural and psychological makeup."

Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay¹⁶ defines "a tribe ordinarily has an ancestor or a patron deity. The families or groups composing the larger units are linked through religions and socio-economic functions."

"The tribe is a social group with definite territory, common name, common dialect, common culture, behavior of an endogamous group, common taboos, existence of distinctive social and political system, full faith in leaders and self-sufficiency in their distinct economy" (17, pp. 12-14).

According to Krishnan P.G.¹⁸ tribe is "a social group of simple and kind, the members of which speak a common dialect, have a single government act together for common purposes and have a common name, a contiguous territory, a relatively uniform culture or way of life and traditions of common descent."

T. B. Naik¹⁹ describes various features for the identification of tribes in the Indian context:

1. A tribe should have least functional interdependence within the community.
2. It should be economically backward (i.e. primitive means of exploiting natural resources, tribal economy should be at an underdeveloped stage and it should have multifarious economic pursuits).
3. There should be a comparative geographical isolation of its people.
4. They should have a common dialect, which may be subject to regional influence and differences.
5. Psychological conservatism regarding old traditions and customs should be found more among the tribals with less desire to change.
6. Tribes should be politically organized and community panchayat should be influential.
7. A tribe should have customary laws.

"Naik argues that for a community to be a tribe it should possess all the above mentioned characteristics and a very high level of acculturation with outside society debars it from being a tribe. Thus term usually denotes a social group bound together by kin and duty and associated with a particular territory"²⁰.

Though, scholars specially Anthropologists and Sociologists have tried to provide a common definition of the term tribe, but they

could only provide various features. Different regional situations, such as, distinctive socio-cultural, historical, geographical, ecological, political and economic background of such native communities was a complicated issue in shaping a universally accepted definition for tribes.

Overall, it can be stated that the tribal or indigenous communities are the earliest settlers of a particular geographical territory with their cultural heritage, distinctive language, and lifestyle. They practice peculiar socially sectioned behavior patterns, belief systems, taboos, rites, and rituals. They are comparatively isolated and endogamous in nature, though they may be divided into several sub-groups, exogamous clans, and lineages. They have a strong sense of community feeling and bonding among the members. Multifarious occupation with self-sufficiency, independence, and sometimes joint property ownership are common features of their traditional economic system. Livelihood practices and art forms makes distinctive identity of such groups. They have their own traditional political system with well-established customary laws and practices. Tribal chiefs, headmen, and village elders are acclaimed among the community members and regarded as the most respectful members of society. Indian tribes have various levels of traditional panchayats to maintain customary laws and order in society.

Many scholars consider tribes technically, economically, and socially backward groups. Even the constitution of India (article 342 and other clauses) considers them deprived and provides security and reservation in jobs and constitutional bodies. Article 342 of Indian Constitution describes the procedure of inclusion of a community or part of a group or sub-group in the list of scheduled tribe. Tribal communities are assumed to constitute the earliest ethnological segment of indigenous people in Indian sub-continent.

"The criterion followed for specification of a community, as scheduled tribes are indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness. This criterion is not spelt out in the Constitution but has become well established. It subsumes the definitions contained in 1931 Census, the reports of first Backward Classes Commission

1955, the Advisory Committee (Kalelkar), on Revision of SC/ST lists (Lokur Committee), 1965 and the Joint Committee of Parliament on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes orders (Amendment) Bill 1967 (Chanda Committee), 1969"²¹.

"The inclusion of a community as a Scheduled Tribe is an ongoing process. The essential characteristics, first laid down by the Lokur Committee, for a community to be identified as Scheduled Tribes are:

- a. Indications of primitive traits;
- b. Distinctive culture;
- c. Shyness of contact with the community at large;
- d. Geographical isolation; and
- e. Backwardness."²²

According to G.S. Ghurye²³ "The Scheduled Tribes are neither called the 'Aborigines', nor the 'Adivasis', nor are they treated as a category by themselves. By and large, they are treated together with the Scheduled Castes and further envisaged as one group of the Backward Classes."

According to scholars like Majumdar and Madan¹³ and U.R. Ehrenfels²⁴, many tribes in India do not fall into the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy and are even differentiated from the low-caste Hindus. But in opposition to this, many dominant tribal dynasties also existed in India, such as Gond, Bhil, Ahom, etc. Many such small or big dominant indigenous groups exist all over the world.

Singh²⁵, perceives in his book 'Tribal Society in India: An Anthro-Historical Perspective' that the very rise of the concept of tribe' might be attributed to the confrontation of the West with the rest of the world. The Imperial Rulers tried to define the latter as the 'uncivilized other' 'primitive', 'savages', 'barbarians', 'aborigines', 'uncultured' etc. This also reflects their notion of white man's supremacy.

The term tribe was coined by the colonizing countries to designate such groups living in their colonial states. Now, the word 'tribe' is much criticized due to its sense of racist nature, being considered uncivilized, being differentiated as undeveloped or underdeveloped, and colonial supremacy. However, now, in many countries, this word is still used symbolically for such communities living in a particular geographical area since

the ancient period or a very long time and traditionally professing a distinct culture and language and are comparatively endogamous in nature.²⁶

Geographical Affinity of Tribals and Their Territory in India

The Anthropological Survey of India under the 'People of India Project' identified 4,635 communities in India, of which 461 communities were of the scheduled tribes. The Government of India, in its Draft of the National Tribal Policy for Scheduled Tribes, which came for the first time in February 2004, identified 698 tribal communities in India. The second version of the Draft was circulated in July 2006 which noted that there were more than 700 tribes in India. The Census of India held in 2011 counted the number of scheduled tribes (both 'major tribes' and their 'sub-tribes') to be 705. As can be noted from the increasing number of tribal communities, with the passage of time more and more communities are being added to the list of the scheduled tribes. According to the Census of 2011, the population of scheduled tribes in India was 10,42,81,034 persons (around 104.30 million approx.), constituting 8.6 percent of the country's population². Out of the total Schedule Tribe population of India, 52.4 million are males and 51.9 million females, constitution the sex ratio of 990 females per 1000 males².

Tribes are found in all parts of India, except the states of Punjab and Haryana and the Union Territory of Chandigarh, Delhi and Puducherry. Mizoram and Lakshadweep ranks top with the highest proportion of Scheduled Tribe population of around 95 per cent. Uttar Pradesh stands last with the lowest proportion of Scheduled Tribe population of 0.56 percent (Census of India 2011). The distribution of tribes in India can be classified as:

- North and Central Himalayan belt: Jammu-Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.
- North-Eastern Himalayan belt: Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and northern West Bengal.
- Central and Eastern India: Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh. 55% of the total tribal population of India lives in this belt.
- Western India: Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Goa, Dadra and Nagar Haveli.
- Dravidian Southern India: Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.
- Indian Islands: Lakshadweep, Andaman and Nicobar.

Tribal or indigenous groups are found all over the world in every continent. They are popularly known by different terminologies, in Canada they are called 'First Nation', 'Indigenous people' in Latin America, 'Tribes' in Africa, 'Qabili' (Qabila members) in Middle East Asia and Gulf region, 'Tribe' in Asia, Tribe/ Adivasi in India, 'Aboriginals' in Australia, and so on²⁶. Many big and small museums in various countries have ethnographic collections of these indigenous or tribal communities. All tribal or ethnographic museums have one essential motto to safeguard indigenous culture and propagation of cultural awareness, sustainability and harmony.

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