

Conceptualizing Tribe in the Indian Context

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In the Indian context, the term 'tribe' has been used and is being used somewhat indiscriminately. Several groups of the inhabitants of India before the advent of the Aryans were referred to as tribes. The Aryan invaders themselves were described as tribes by some. In later historical writings the extant small republics were referred to as belonging to particular tribes. Some writers have called even the Rajputs and the Jats as tribes. Still later the term was restricted to the autochthonous, the aboriginal, and the primitive groups.¹

Since the origin of the tribal people can be traced back to the earliest stages of human evolution, some scholars refer to them by the term *adivasis* which means the original inhabitants on the land. Oxford Dictionary of Sociology defines the term tribe usually denotes a social group bound together by kin and duty and associated with a particular territory, members of the tribe share the social cohesion associated with the family, together with the sense of political autonomy of the nation.² According to Risley, the tribe represents a collection or group of families, bearing a common name, which as a rule does not denote any specific occupation, generally claiming common descent from a mythical or historical ancestor and occasionally from an animal, but in some parts of the country, they are held together rather by the obligation of blood bond than by the tradition of kinship, usually speaking the same language and occupying or chaining to occupy a definite tract of country.³

An of D.N. Majumdar argues 'A tribe is a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name, members of which occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos regarding marriage, profession or occupation and have developed a well assessed system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligations. A tribe is

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ordinarily an endogamous unit, is a political unit in the sense that the tribal society owns a political organization'.⁴ According to Dubey, the tribe generally refers to territorial communities living in the relative isolation of hills and forests.⁵

Due to differences in their cultural, economic, political and structural dimensions, the tribes could not be brought under a single definition. The tribal groups are, at places, isolated and away from the civilization centres, but at some places, they are trying to be assimilated in the wider Hindu society. Some groups are more advanced than others, while some are still hesitating to mix with the main stream of the national life.⁶ The word tribe would seem to be one of the most glaring anachronisms of our time. In a world which is so often described as a global village, applying the term tribe and adjective tribal to be particular kind of ethnic and social groups of people who are distinguished by their way of life and existence, remote from the beaten paths of civilization, seems an error of visual acuity.⁷

It is obvious from the above definitions, that the term tribe has many connotations. A single definition which contains all aspects of tribe is impossible to a great extent, because each tribe is different from others. The tribes in the North-Eastern part of India are entirely different from the central and Southern parts of India.

From a discussion of the above definitions the following inferences could be drawn. First, the tribals are the earliest inhabitants on the land and live in a contiguous territory mostly in forests and hill-tracts. Secondly, they speak a common dialect, though every community has not been able to develop its own language. Thirdly, they possess a social system and a culture common to them, though it varies in different regions and localities. Fourthly, they practice endogamy and strictly follow their social and political customs, and owe their loyalty to an elder member of the tribal community, called the tribal chieftain. The last but most important feature, however, is that members of a tribe feel that they have more in common with each other than with neighbouring groups. This sense of commonality brings them together and makes distances between their own members from the non-members.

The tribal communities' consultation held at Shillong in 1962 declared, "A tribe is an indigenous unit speaking a common language, claiming a common descent living in a particular geographical area,

backward technology, and loyalty observing social and political customs based on kinship”.⁸

Here it needs to be noted that the Indian writers had given some common features about the tribes which are as follows. ‘A definite territory or who claim to occupy a common territory; a common name; a common dialect; a common culture; behaviour of an endogamous group; common taboos; existence of distinctive social and political systems; full faith in their leaders; and self-sufficient in their distinct economy’.⁹ The term tribe since the 16th century has referred to groups or communities, which lived in primitive and barbarous conditions of living. To the colonial administrators cum ethnographers, tribes came to be constituted as people who practiced animism or tribal religion. Tribes are addressed by their tribe names, which generally correspond with their distinct language or dialect. But, this aspect of the labeling of tribes has been overlooked in sociological discourse on tribes.¹⁰ It would be very difficult to find many tribal groups in India who possess all these characteristics. Because of the cultural contacts with the non-tribal dominant castes, changes have taken place in the social and economic life of many of the tribal communities.

According to Majumdar, “Today most of these tribes have come in contact with advanced communities, have learnt the traits of their neighbours, have borrowed patterns of their dress and developed an intricate material economy. Some of these tribes have progressed at a tremendous pace effecting in a few years changes which have taken centuries to achieve in other areas”.¹¹ These changes have been brought about as a result of the migration of the tribals from the forest land and their contact with the non-tribal community due to a number of factors.

Actually, wide socio-economic differences have come to be observed among the tribal population of India consequent upon their contact with non-tribal world. While tribal groups around industrial and urban complexes have different problems from their brethren who live in comparative isolation, religious conversion has added another factor of differentiation into the tribal way of life. Considering these factors of differentiation in their eco-systems, traditional economic pursuits, beliefs and practices, and recent industrial and urban impacts, Vidyarthi has classified the tribal population of India into six occupational types. These

are hunters and food gatherers, hill cultivators, plain farmers, simple artisans, cattle keepers, and industrial urban workers.¹²

Article 366 (25) of the Indian Constitution defines the term scheduled tribes as, ‘such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this constitution’.¹³ Then, Article 342 also prescribes procedure to be followed in the matter of specification of scheduled tribes’.¹⁴ ‘The President may with respect to any State or Union territory, and where it is a state, after consultation with the Governor thereof by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall, for the purposes of this constitution, be deemed to be scheduled tribes in relation to that state or Union Territory, as the case may be’.¹⁵

As per Article 366 (25) of the Constitution, ‘the scheduled tribes means such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 (i) to be the scheduled tribes for the purposes of this Constitution.’ Article 342 (i) of the Constitution lays down that ‘The President may, after consultation with the governor of a state or that of a union territory, by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or part of or groups within the tribes or tribal communities or parts which shall, for the purposes of this Constitution, be deemed as scheduled tribes in relation to that state or union territory, as the case may be’.¹⁶ While the scheduled tribes are specified by the President under Article 342 (i) of the Constitution by a public notification, the Parliament may, by law, include or exclude from the list of scheduled tribes any tribal community or part thereof in any state or union territory.

Notwithstanding the confusion pertaining to the definition of tribe and their estimation and inclusion in the list of scheduled tribes, for all practical and theoretical purposes, be that legislation, social or political intervention or collection of data for social science research, the schedule of tribes notified by the government remains the crucial referent. The problems of tribals in India vary from tribe to tribe and from region to region. The strong conviction that economic development of the entire population, will by itself leads to development of tribals, has not proved

to be an illusion. Hence, whenever tribal development as a concept is talked about, it reminds that various types of strategy are essential for the development of tribal communities in India. One may asked or raise pertinent question concerning the incompatibility of development strategies of general people, for the development of tribals, and the inevitability of separate strategies for tribals. The fact is that, tribal communities in India are the weakest section of the society which itself can be divided into many layers.

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