

Tribals and their Aboriginality: A Dimension of Indian Society

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ABSTRACT

India is the hub of tribal population in the world. The tribal world in India remained comparatively placid till the advent of the British. The world knows the Tribals in India form a large part of Indian population. They have their own tradition, culture, customs, costumes and religions. They are not migrants and have not come from any foreign lands. It is a common knowledge and unfortunate that they have not yet joined the mainstream of our society. The colonial system bore harshly on the tribal communities who were formed out of isolation and relatively intact social mechanism of control; they revolted more often than not and much more brutally than to the rest of the community counting Indian peasants. About the aboriginality of the Indian tribes, different view has been expressed by different authorities. Actually the tribals to be the pre-Aryan inhabitants of India and 'the remnants of primitive communities which have, so far, escaped absorption and have preserved in a modified but still distinguishable shape, their independent tribal existence.

1. Introduction

India is the hub of tribal population in the world. The tribal world in India remained comparatively placid till the advent of the British. The colonial system bore harshly on the tribal communities who were formed out of isolation and relatively intact social mechanism of control; they revolted more often than not and much more brutally than to the rest of the community counting Indian peasants. India being a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious country, it should not surprise us with the fact that Indian society is not homogenous. The tribal groups, who live in big or small concentrations in the midst of forests or in areas which were largely inaccessible till recent times, occupy a prominent place among such groups. They are proud of their cultural heritage and lead a distinctive way of life.

The Tribals of India lives in the forest hills and naturally isolated known as a rule by different norms meaning either the people of forest and hill or the original inhabitants and so on. The popular names are *Vanyajati* (Caste of forest), *Vanavasi* (inhabitants of forest), *Pahari* (hill dwellers), *Adimjati* (Original communities), *Adivasi* (first settlers), *Janajati* (Folk people), *Adimjati* (Primitive people), *AnusuchitJanajati* (Schedule tribe) and soon. Among these terms *Adivasi* is known most extensively and *AnusuchitJanajati*, Schedule Tribe is the constitutional name covering all of them.

The world knows the Tribals in India form a large part of Indian population. They have their own tradition, culture, customs, costumes and religions. They are not migrants and have not come from any foreign lands. It is a common knowledge and unfortunate that they have not yet joined the mainstream of our society. Moreover, it is on irony that they have been victims of almost all sorts of inhuman treatments and injustices at the hands of our society. They have suffered abject poverty, pitiable malnutrition, dismal living conditions, and poor health services, lack of proper education, political

negligence, enormous economic exploitations, religious prejudices, legal biases, superstitions, taboos, displacement and discrimination.¹

Naturally all the tribal people of India have been in almost continuous contact with their neighbours, who live by forming and large number of specialized manual industries.ⁱⁱ This contact goes back, at least, to the days of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* for in them if there are reference to tribal communities who are referred to as *Jana*. When, in his exile, Rama reached the borders of the forest of central India, the land was introduced to him as the abode of tribal people, *Jana-sthana*. Even in the Vedic literature, there are reference to the people who were different in physical appearance, and who worshipped strange gods, in other words, the contact between the tribes and the farming and cattle rearing people crowded in the more open plains has been a continuous are over the centuries. This must have led to the love-hate situation which eventually brought about great changes.

Till today they have retained their customs and regulations; nearly all marry within their restricted local groups, and are sometimes guided by their own elders on political chiefs in their internal and external affairs. In other words, they form socially distinct communities in contrast to their neighbours. These communities which have been designated for special treatment.

Barring a very small fraction, there is little difference between their economic life and that of their neighbouring rural folk. Yet, as the tribes have, more or less, retained their separate social identity and on the whole, can be regarded as comparatively isolated and economically backward, they have been placed under the category of Schedule Tribes.

Actually we find that the Tribals are an integral part of the Indian civilization as well as Indian society. Various elements in the ancient civilization of India were contributed by the tribals. It is believed that they were the earliest among the present

inhabitants of the country. As we know that four main races and cultures welded together into one people, the Hindu peopleⁱⁱⁱ.

These are : (i) The Austro-Asiatics, in their primitive form are represented by the Kols or the Mundas, the Khasis and the Nicobarese; (ii) the Mongoloid people speaking dialects of the Sino-Tibetan family who are found largely among the Sub-Himalayan regions and who are represented by the Nagas, the Bodos, the Kuki-Chins etc.; (iii) the Dravidians- the Malers, the Oraons, the Gonds and the Khonds – who speak tongue of the Dravidian family and (iv) the Aryans – who were supposed to be the last to come to India. Thus we see that the first three racial and cultural elements made a great contribution to the formation of the Indian people.

In the ancient literature of India their names in the ancient language, the Sanskrit, would appear to have been respectively (i) Nishadas, Sabaras, Bhils and Kollas. (ii) Kiratas and (iii) Dasas, Dasyus, Sudras, Dramidas and Dravidas. The ancient and epic literature, the Vedas, the Puranas, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* presents good account about the people of India. All these emphasize that India is inhabited by several types of tribes or people.^{iv}

When the Aryan immigrants entered the country they found in the land non-Aryan people and called them Dasyus. The Dasyus of Vedic antiquity, the non-Aryans are mainly of two stock, viz. the Kolarians and the Dravidians. The Mundas, the Santals etc. of today are considered to be the descendants of the non- Aryan Kolarian stock. They can easily be distinguished by their traits of character. Of the Dravidian tribes, they are scattered through the central Vindhya region and have covered the table land of Deccan. The major representative Dravidian tribes are the Gonds, the Kondhs etc. Both Kolarian and the Dravidian came into the land at a pre-historic period for anterior of the Aryan from two opposite directions, the Kolarians from the east or northeast, the Dravidian from the northwest.

It is thought that the Kolarian came first and often spreading over the present north eastern Himalayan region and Bengal encountered the Dravidian current somewhere in the Vindhya region. The Dravidian marched ahead and inhabited the south.^v *Manu Samhita*, suggest that the tribes which by loss of sacred rites became outcasts from the pole of the recognized caste and sub-caste are the Dasyus. The *Ramayana* also tells about some tribes people. It endorses that there were only two groups of people the Aryans and the non Aryans. Among the non Aryans the important tribes were the Rakshasas and the Vanaras, both being the aboriginal tribes of the Deccan. The other tribes were the Nishas, the Girdhajs, the Sabaras, the Yaksas and the Nagas.^{vi} The *Mahabharata* also mentions a few tribes. It is believed that Siva Mahadeva took the form of a 'Kirata' and went to meet Arjun. From the Vedic period the word 'Kirata' had been used for the non-Aryan tribes^{vii} living in the mountains, particularly in the Himalayan region.

About the aboriginality of the Indian tribes, different view has been expressed by different authorities. Baine consider the tribals to be the pre-Aryan inhabitants of India and 'the remnants of primitive communities which have, so far, escaped absorption and have preserved in a modified but still distinguishable shape, their independent tribal existence.'^{viii} H.H. Risley called them aboriginals but found it insolvable questions.

He^{ix} considers the Dravidians to be the original inhabitants of India. Lacey^x and Shoober^{xi} call them 'the purest aboriginal community' and 'the true autochthonous stock and the original inhabitants of the province' respectively. Grigson^{xii} also regarded them as aboriginals. Guha further believes that all the tribes of India are covered under the three types, viz. the Negritos, the Proto-Australoids and the Mongoloids. Dube^{xiii} opines that the Nishadas who are described in the Sanskrit literature seem to be of this type.

2. Tribes in Medieval Period

In the beginning of the medieval period the tribals enjoyed autonomy. But by the end of the 16th century they were harassed by the Mohammedan rules and gradually lost their status. The Bhils of western India felt disturbed due to the Mohammedan and Maratha invaders. There was a large scale conversion of the Bhils to Islam. In the beginning of the seventh century the Bhils seem to have been restless under the oppressive rule of numerous chiefs and many petty rebellions involving looting and arson occurred all over the Bhils region. Armed groups of the Bhils were busy in looting. They came into direct conflict with the local rulers and Maratha invaders.

The Gonds of middle India also met with the same fate in the medieval period. In the beginning of the fifteenth century they had their Gonds dynasty firmly established in Garha (near Jabbalpur). In 1564 the Mughal army conquered Garha and the Gonds had to recognize the sovereignty of the Mughal emperors. By 1780 the remaining Gond dynasty came to end when the Marathas captured the last ruler. The other Gond dynasty of Chanda was also taken by the Marathas.

Thus it is clear that during the medieval period the tribal people inhabiting different parts of India were either disturbed by the Mohammedan rulers or the regional rulers.

3. Tribes in Modern Period:

When the Britishers first entered Chotonagpur (then known as Jangal Mahal) they had to face fierce opposition from the tribals. Subsequently the tribals exposed to atmosphere had to face many conflict situations of a tensional nature, as a good many neo-settlers like money lenders, usurers, etc. gradually came in and tried to exploit them various ways. Encroachment on forest by alien groups and the Government led to the cessation of the right of sole occupation. The forest contractors began to carry away a part of the forest produce. The land settlement policy of Britishers also affected the system of tribal ownership. Oppression of the usurers and Mahajans, grasping enhancement of the rent by land lords, etc. ultimately led to a number of disturbances and uprising. These were started in 1772 by the Mal Paharias and there followed a series of disturbances in 1795, 1800, 1801, 1807, 1808, 1816, 1821 and Chaur or Paik rebellion in Bengal between 1787 and 1830. In 1831-32 followed the great Kol uprising. The rising was suppressed. Regulation XIII of 1833 was passed and Chotonagpur was declared a non-regulating area. This was the beginning of the isolation policy of the Britishers. The Khond rising in 1846, the Santal rebellion in 1855, the unrest in Dhanbad in 1869-70 etc. extended the non-regulation system.

In due course, idea of a distinct and special arrangement for isolated areas got acceptance. In 1874 the Schedule District Act was passed under which the executive was given wide powers. Still a few rising like Sardari agitation in 1887, Birs

movement in 1895, TanaBhagat movement in 1914, etc., came up and were quelled. By then the tribals started taking part in the National freedom movement launched by Gandhiji. It may be said that the tribals in different regions and pockets of the country were not satisfied with the rulers who wanted to protect them as well as themselves.

In British period the tribals faced another encroachment in the form of conversion to Christianity by the missionaries who accompanied the rulers, in the name of the serving the tribals. This helped the tribals in their education and health but created factions who were now divided into two sections, i.e, tribals and Christian tribals. In the north eastern Himalayan region the major tribal population was converted. The conversion as well as the excluded area policy gave rise to a somewhat separate identity in the minds of the tribals of the region.

In the Pre-Independence period of the National movement social workers penetrated deep into the tribal areas and got an encouraging response. Among them the Bhil Seva Mandal of Thakkar Bapa is a pioneer. The tribals reposed confidence in Mahatma Gandhi and other national leaders. They also took part in the national freedom movement. The tribals did not escape the attention a few ethnographers, historians and anthropologist among the learned British administrators who were the first to study these people. These studies were primarily aimed at helping the colonial rule. When we got independence in 1947, our national leaders were very eager to help and uplift the tribals. Many all India organizations of the tribals were formed. The BharatiyaAdimjatiSevak Sangha was also established to help the tribals. In the Constitution of India the tribals were given all special care (Article 46). The isolation policy was rejected outright and instead a policy of integration of the tribals with rest of the people was adopted. Huge amounts were earmarked in different Five year and yearly plans for the welfare of the tribals. As a result the tribals are

now passing through a phase of development with the rest of the country.^{xiv}

In the Post-Independence period the tribals attracted more and more scholars to study them. In the Pre-Independence period, as mentioned earlier, these people were studied with a view to be governed. This view shifted in the Republic India. It was felt that their study, specially analytical and problem oriented in nature, is important for their speedy development and for their orientation of becoming a component of the Indian civilization.

4. Demographic aspect of the Tribals:

There are altogether 427 tribal communities^{xv} all over India. The Anthropological survey (1967) has estimated the number of tribes to be the constituents of a group of tribes designated by a common name such as the Gonds, the Bhils etc. In 1950 the number of scheduled tribes was 212. This number increased in 1956 with the revised list of 1956. All this gave rise to fluctuating figure of tribal communities and the tribals population. Thus it is important to consider the growth of tribal population. Looking at the various census reports since 1891 we find that the tribal population varies from census to census. These tribals were enumerated under different censuses such as people having a tribal form of religion (1891), animist (1901), tribal animist or tribal religion (1911), hill and forest tribe (1921), primitive tribe(1931), tribe (1941) and scheduled tribe (1951, 1961, 1971). In 1891 the number of these tribals was estimated by Baine in the then India to be nearly 1.6 crores of whom nearly 93 lakhs were returned under their tribal form of religion. Sir Marten in his Census Reports of 1921 estimated the total number of those tribals who had been considered inhabitants of the hills and jungle including such tribes as the Gond, the Santal and the Oraon to be roughly over 1.6 crores. Of these 97.5 lakh were listed as followers of tribal religion.

Table-I
Population growth in Post-Independence Period

Census Years	1951	1961		1971	
Category	Considering the modified in 1956	Population	Increase %	Population	Increase %
1. General	36,11,51,669	43,90,72,582	21.58	54,79,47,829	24.66
2. Schedule Tribes	2,25,11,854	2,48,79,249	32.73	3,80,15,162	27.00

Among the Schedule Tribes numerically the most important are the Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, the Bhils of Rajasthan, Gujrat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh and the Santals of Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal. The first two of these communities have the numerical strength of about 40 lakhs each, the third also has a numerical strength of more than 30 lakhs. The smallest tribal communities is the Andamanese, with numerical strength of only 18 (1971 census). Major tribes with the strength of more than 10 lakhs each are six, viz. the Bhils, the Gonds (both are groups of tribes designated with generic names), the Santals, the Minas, the Mundas and Oraons. The Hos, the Khonds and the Kols follow them with a population of more than 5 lakhs. Again there are another 42 tribes, i.e. about 10 percent of the total, which have a population of between 1 and 5 lakhs. These are the Adis, the Baigas, the Buthudis, the Bhottadas, the Bhumijis, the Bhumias, the Chandhris, the Dhankas, the Dhodias, the Dublas, the Gamits, the Garos, the Halbas, the Kacharis, the Kathodis, the Kawars, the Kharias, the Kharwars,

the Khasis, the Kisans, the Coknas, the Kolhas, the KoliMahadeos, the Konda Dhoras, the Korkus, the Koyas, the Lodhas, the Malayalis, the Mikis, the Mizos, the Naikdas, the Porjas, the Rabhas, the Rathawas, the Saoras, the Thakurs, the Tripuris, the Warlis, the Yenadis and the Yerukulas.

There were many ways in which the tribals can be described, such as (I) by region (II) by language (III) by race (IV) by their level of integration with rural folk to which they are connected (v) by their economy (VI) by their cultural pattern as a whole and (VII) by their level of education.

The book *The Aborigines* (1943) Elwin made a four-fold classification of Indian tribes, on their cultural development.^{xvi} To Class I belonged the purest of pure tribal groups, numbering about two to three million persons. Elwin and a large section of missionary reformers and anthropologists grew lyrical over the robust, vibrant and healthy life of this tribal group. Elwin said that these highlanders do not merely exist like so many other people, they really live. Their religion was of a unique nature, their social organisation was unalloyed, and their artistic and

choreographic tradition rooted in the past. Their mythology sustained them in every walk of life. Geographical conditions had largely protected them from coming into contact with outsiders. As Elwin remarked, the hoot of the motor-horn would sound the knell of the aboriginal tribes. Class II of Elwin's this category of tribes of India contaminated by coming in contact with the people of the neighbouring plains. Instead of includes those who have been living in a community, a group of this type tends to settle in a village and became individualistic. The communal life and traditions among them are preserved only in village dormitories. Tribes of this category are less simple and less honest than those belonging to class I. About four-fifths of the tribal population in India, numbering nearly twenty million to what Elwin categorises as belong to class III. They are in a peculiar state of transition. Tribes of this group have been appreciably affected by both the economic and socio cultural forces of Hindu society and resemble lower caste Hindus in their way of living. They have also been subjected to missionary influence. Some among them have adopted Christianity. But, above all, they have been most adversely affected by the economic and political policies of the British, which resulted in their being uprooted from the traditional modes of production. They were dragged into the orbit of the capitalist system of colonial India in much the same way as millions of cultivators and artisans living in the villages were torn from their traditional self-sufficient way of livelihood. Many of them were reduced to the status of bonded slaves of the money-lenders, zamindars and contractors who prospered under the British. Another section was reduced almost to the category of slave labourers working on plantations, mines, railways or road construction or in other enterprise. Finding no other means of subsistence, many of these tribes took to illegal means of livelihood and earned the disrepute of being 'criminal tribes'. By tribes of the Class IV category Verrier means those were included in the old aristocracy, represented today by the great Bhil and Naga Chieftains, Gond Rajas, a few Binshevar and Bhuyia landlords, Korku noblemen, wealthy Santal and Uraon leaders and some highly cultured Mundas. They retain their own tribal names and clan and totem rules along with elements of tribal religion despite adopting in full the Hindu faith. They live in modern or even European style. In Elwin's opinion they adopted to modern condition without losing their tribal identity. They attained economic stability and reveal, a certain arrogance and self-confidence, characteristic of both their traditional lineage and modern enterprise. To Elwin the aim is to lead the tribesmen of the first and second classes into the fourth category, without having to suffer the despair and degradation of the third. For this, he thinks it is necessary to adopt a policy of isolation to grant such protection to the tribal during the transitional stage that they learn to stand on their own and become strong enough to resist those who exploit them.^{xvii} At the same time Elwin cautioned that 'it would be deplorable if yet another minority community which would claim special representation, weightage and a percentage of Government posts were to be created'.^{xviii}

Region:

Tribals communities living in different regions have been divided by Roy Burman^{xix} into the following five territorial groups taking into consideration their historical, ethnic and socio-cultural relations.

- (a) North-East India comprising Assam, Meghalay, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Tripura.
- (b) Sub-Himalayan region of North and North-West India comprising the Northern sub-mountain districts of Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh.
- (c) Central and East India comprising West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh.
- (d) South India comprising Tamil Nadu, Kerela, Karnataka.
- (e) Western India comprising Rajasthan, Gujrat and Maharastra.

Linguistic:

The tribals speak different language in different regions and groups and broadly classified into four main linguistic families. These are

1. Austro-Asiatic family:

- a. Mon-khmer branch : Khasi and Nicobari.
- b. Munda Branch : Santali, Kharwari, Ho, Mundari, Gonds, Kharia, Savara, Khond, Gadaba etc.

2. Tibeto-Chinese family:

- a. Siamese-Chinese sub-family: Tai group – Khampti, Phakial etc.
- b. Tibeto-Burman sub-family:
 - (i) Tebeto-Himalayan branch– Bhotia of Darjeeling.
 - (ii) Western sub group of Pronominalized Himalayan group – Chamba, Lahauli, Kanauri etc.
 - (iii) Non-Pronominalized Himalayan group – Rong or Lepcha, Toto etc.
 - (iv) Arunachal branch – AkaorHrusso, Abot, Miri, Dafla, Mishmi etc.
 - (v) Assam – Bunmese branch:
 - * Bara or Bodo group – Plains Kachari, Dimasa, Garo, Tripuri.
 - * Naga group – Angami, Ao, Sema, Rensma, Kabui Naga, Kachcha Naga etc.
 - * Kachin group – Singpho.
 - * Kuki – Chin group – Manipuri, Thado, Sokte, Ralte, Lushai etc.

3. Dravidian Family:

Dravidian group – Korawa, Yerukah, KurukhororOraon, Malto or Maler, KuiKandhi or Khond Gondi etc.

4. Indo-European Family:

Hajong, Bhil etc.

Racial

The latest racial classification of the Indian people is those attempted by Hutton, Guha andMajumder. By the races there are nine sub types of Indian population.

1. Negrita
2. The Proto-Australoid
3. The Mongoloid
4. The Mediterranean
5. The Western Brachycephals
6. The Nordic

According to Guha, tribal people of India can be grouped into three moajorcategories:

- a. The Proto-Australoid
- b. The Mongoloid
- c. The Negrito

5. Levels of Integration

The tribals and their isolated ecology, economy, society, religious beliefs and centuries long-association with the Hindu neighbours etc. have all given them a characteristic life and they have adjusted to the situation according to their own genius. D.N. Majumder gives a three fold classification, viz.

- a. Primitive tribes outside the pale of Hindu influence, the so called real-primitives.
- b. Primitive tribes which have adopted Hindu customs, beliefs and practices have show a degree of association with the Hindu caste and have attained some cultural progress, though they are not recognize as forming prominent castes.
- c. Primitive tribes who are Hinduized but maintain social distance from their inferior ranks of the caste order, inferior or clean.

Economy:

The economic life of the tribals is specific in nature. The broad economic classifications based on the manner in which the primarily and distinctively make their living are eight.

- a. Forest-Hunting type
- b. Hill cultivation type
- c. Settled agriculture type
- d. Simple artisan type
- e. Cattle herder type
- f. Labour, Agriculture and Industrial type
- g. Folk-Artist type and
- h. White-Collar jobs and Trader type.

Culture:

Very close to the type of economy of the cultural type of tribals. Vidyarthi (1966) has attempted to classify the Bihar tribe

into four cultural types. In evolving the cultural type, the significant factors are

- a. Their economy, which has become a part and parcel of their life because of the centuries-long association resulting in specialization,
- b. Their ecology including human environment, viz. man to man relationship etc.
- c. Socio-cultural adoption of the tribes to ecology and economy.
- d. Their religious beliefs and emerging contemporary situation, influx of other groups of people etc.

Education:

The most recent factor for knowing a community is its educational level. In general the tribal educational level is quite poor. The percentage of literacy among the scheduled tribes of India is 8.5 percent against the 24 among the total population (1961). And among the tribal communities there is wide range of variation in the level of literacy.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion it is important to note the social characteristic as well. Firstly as is evident from their history and different typologies, the tribals acquire a regional culture and their world views go together with their tradition. Secondly, they are proud of their legends and myths about their origin and existence which tell their history. Thirdly, they enjoy equal status in the community and have no social ladder. Lastly, they maintain contact with other section of the people and also run their business in their own style. In other words, they have blended their culture with that of the neighbouring in an orderly manner.

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