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Tribes and Tribal Movements in India

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Abstract

The present essay, with its inter disciplinary approach, anthropologically explores and maps the definition of tribes in the context of India and locates its historical construction and analyses the tribal movements through political lens. The scholarly works of Andre Beteille, K.S. Singh, Dube, etc are explored to build an essay that is divided in to two sections. Section I dwell upon the definition of the tribe in anthropological literature and trace the historical development of the concept of tribe in India. The Section II revolves around the works of various scholars that have analyzed tribal movements in India.

Keywords: Tribes and Tribal Movements ,civilization.

TRIBES IN INDIA: WHO ARE THEY?

Tribes are viewed as those distinctively homogeneous groups (and primitive) of people who are somewhat outside the mainstream (and modern) civilization (Ray 1972). Ray, in his discussion on Tribes notes that there is no single (globally accepted) definition of Tribes and points that Oxford Dictionary defines Tribe as "a race of people; now applied especially to a primitive or barbarous condition, under a headman or chief". How far this is applicable to Tribes in India is a contentious question. Beteille (1986), however, notes that defining a tribe typically constitute, especially in the academic anthropological literature, an important, albeit complex, issue itself. Beteille goes on to say that, defining tribes in India is even more complex, partly because, unlike in most other parts of the world, the rising civilization in the Indian subcontinent neither eliminated nor quite absorbed these primitive inhabitants of the land, there by leaving room for their continuity side by side wt the main stream. In this essay an attempt is made to explore the definition of Tribe in Indian discourse and search for their identity from multiplicity of perspectives, say, historical, anthropological and sociological.

Dube (1977) views that the problem of defining a tribe has become more urgent in the wider national context because solution of vital questions concerning 'isolation or assimilation' or 'integration or homogenization' are affected by it. Dube in his book Tribal Heritage of India, Vol. 1 (1977) lists the following broad characteristics of tribal life as tribals:

• roots in the soil that date back to a very early period;
• live in relative isolation;
• sense of history is very shallow;
• have a low level of techno-economic development
• in terms of their cultural ethos- language,

institutions, beliefs, customs- they maintain separate identity; and
• their social organization is largely non-hierarchic and undifferentiated.

However, Dube clarifies that the above characteristics are rough indicators And very few of them can with stand a critical scrutiny. Sinha (1965) in his article Tribe Caste and Tribe-peasant Continua in Central India makes an argument for distinguishing tribes and castes. For Sinha, in case of tribes the ideal typical formulations are: isolation from the rest of the community in terms of ecology, demography, economy, politics and social relations, lack of stratification and role specialization and existence of strong in group sentiments.

The 'tribals' of India are widely known as indigenous and autonomous people of the land (Beteille 1986). Ray (1972) champions the mainstream tribal story that the tribals had long been settled down in the Indus valley and over large parts of the country. He interprets that compared to the newly invading Aryans, these indigenous people were in a lower stage of development where: many tribal communities were in hunting-gathering, not knowing the use of the metal; they seem to have lived in isolated settlements, spoke a variety of languages and belonged ethnically to a variety of physical types. Ray goes on to say that tribals seem to have practiced what anthropologists call 'primitive religion', and lived in a closed and well-knit, undifferentiated, and homogenous social unit, generally presided over by a headman or a chief. Through much of the anthropological debate took place over the concept of tribe in India, the term has never been defined with any scientific precision (Pathy 2005). Pathy attributes some empirical characteristics to the term tribe, namely (a) homogeneity; (b) isolation and non-assimilation; (c) territorial integrity; (d) consciousness of unique identity; (e) animism; (f) absence of exploiting classes and organized state structure; (g) multi-functionality of kinship relations; (h) segmentary nature of the socio-economic unit; and (i) frequent cooperation for common goals (p.36).

Beteille (1986) identifies that the process of designating or 'scheduling' tribes in India began during British rule and acquired a systematic character from the time of the 1931 census. Davis (1951) observes that religion has been a prominent criterion for classification of population, and

during the entire British period (except in the 1941 census) the tribal population had been presented under religious division, in the belief that tribes practiced hundreds of different religions, all 'primitive' in one way or other. He notes that, it was only in 1941 that the tribes were defined for the first time (by the census) not in terms of their religion but in terms of their origin' and the 1941 census enumerated tribals as those who had a 'tribal origin'. It was only after independence of India in 1947, a substantial rethinking about tribal population has taken place. However, it became involved in political controversy from almost the very beginning. Singh (1985), the official anthropologists who were mostly British members of Indian Civil Services argued that the aboriginal tribes had a distinct identity and marked them out from the rest of the society. Ghurye (1959), on the other hand articulates the nationalist point of view where the nationalist anthropologists argued that tribals were part and parcel of Indian society. These points of view, though apparently contradictory, have both been accommodated in the present constitution which recognizes that tribes are different from castes, but treats tribals, with individual exceptions, as Hindus all the same (Beteille 1986).

It is a well known fact that the Committee appointed for drafting the Constitution of the Republic of India, made adequate provisions in the Constitution for the safeguards and benefits of the tribals taking into account their social, cultural, political and economic characteristics. Galenter (1984) traces that the Government of India act of 1935 had introduced special provisions for the tribal people and a list of Backward Tribes was promulgated in that connexion in 1936. Furthermore, after the new Constitution was adopted in 1950, the president promulgated in the same year a list of Scheduled Tribes that was based substantially on the list of Backward Tribes promulgated in 1936 by the then colonial government (Beteille 1986). At the first census of Independent India, Pathy (2005) notes that number of scheduled tribal communities or part thereof was 212. Moreover, as Pathy narrates, specific areas were earmarked against individual scheduled tribes thus making the members of any scheduled tribe entitled to specific concession and facility only if they were living in the area specified for that tribe. Thus the constitutional provisions 'sealed the boundaries between tribes and non-tribe' and gave to the tribal identity' a kind of definiteness it lacked in the past' (Beteille

1986).

According to Xaxa (2003), the social workers, missionaries and political activists have been using the term 'adivasi', the Indian term for the indigenous people, freely to refer to the tribal people since the turn of the present century. He observes that the term 'adivasi' in conjunction with other related terms such as aborigines, autochthonous, etc, has also been extensively used by scholars and administrators in their writings and reports. For Xaxa, the term 'adivasi' was used mainly as a mark of identification and differentiation, that is, to mark out a group of people different in physical features, language, religion, custom, social organization, etc. Even Ghurye (1959) who otherwise talks of tribes as backward Hindus and has reservation about the use of the term 'adivasi', refers to them as the aborigines. He writes, "When the history of internal movements of peoples is not known, it is utterly unscientific to regard some tribe or the other as the original owner of the soil. It is possible to contend that even if the tribes are not aborigines of the exact area they now occupy, they are the autochthonous of India and to that extent they may be called the aborigines." The term however did not remain confined to only the scholars, administrators, politicians and social workers; it percolated down also to the people. Indeed, it is social workers, political activists, administrators who took the term and along with it all the prejudices and conjectures to the masses (Sengupta 1988). However, tribals claim themselves as the indigenous population and led tribal movements to reclaim their dignity and space in the political arena of India.

TRIBAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

The category of 'tribe' as well 'adivasis' have strong evolutionary as well as racial connotations that can lead to misconception. The discussion in section one about the search for a definition of tribes such as there 'isolation and geographical location in mountains and forest areas often encourages certain stereotypes: tribes are characterized as autochthonous, isolated, without history, economically and culturally primitive, etc (Hardiman 1987; Corbridge 1988).

Dube (1977) tried to present tribal problems in substantive way. He argues that free India has offered a measure of special protection to tribes, but in the rapidly changing context of national life they have been catapulted from relative isolation into the vortex of competitive politics. Dub goes on to say that tribals have several problems and seek the roots of these problems in politics. He writes:

Today, the entire gamut of tribal problems has to be seen in the political perspective. Politics have emerged as the principal avenue through which they look forward to finding solutions to their many problems that have persisted in one form or the other through centuries. In the last two decades some of these problems have acquired a sharp edge. There have been many new editions to the long inventory of tribal needs, for the tribals have also undergone a limited revolution of rising aspirations.

In fact, there are various dimensions of tribal movements. Tribal communities often look back on a history of migration and interaction with other (political) communities and the large majority have been settled agriculturists for centuries, with complex social order and a rich cultural life. The first accounts on tribal movements in India were parts of more general studies on culture and religion of East Indian Tribes (Roy 1928). Datta (1940) traces systematic research on tribal movements to the decade of 1940s. However, the most academic work on the issue of tribal movement came in 1960s and later (Singh 1983). In his two volumes on Tribal Movements in India, Singh (1983) divides social movements into three phases. The first phase was between 1795 and 1860, and coincides with the rise, expansion and establishment of the British Empire. The second phase (1860-1920) covers the period of colonialism in India, "during which merchant capital penetrated in to tribal economy affecting their relationship with he land and forest". The third phase deals with the period from 1920 till the achievement of independence in 1947. During this phase, as argued by Singh, the tribals not only began to launch the so-called separatist movement, but at the same time, participated in nationalist and agrarian movements. Further more, Singh classified the tribal movements into: (1) movements for political autonomy; (2) agrarian and forest-based movements; (3) sanskritization movements; and (4) cultural movements based on script and language. A brief description of these phases and various movements the two volumes of Singh on Tribal Movements in India throws light on the nature of struggles tribals have undergone in various domains of Indian society.

Movements for Political Autonomy:

Singh (1983) examines the movements committed for political autonomy in a historical

perspective. He argues that at the beginning of the Second World War, the Gonds and Bhils demanded the formation of a separate state. He opines that the movement lost in oblivion for the tribals neither specified nor sustained it by any organization. He observes that in a memorandum submitted before the State Reorganization Commission in 1950s, the Gond leaders demanded the formation of a separate state for the tribals to be carved out of the tribal areas of Chattisgarh and the contiguous districts of Rewa region and Vidharbh. A movement consisting of the Gonds of the lower strata led by Hira Singh developed in the late 1950s and reached its peak in 1962-63 before dying down.

Another such example of such movement for political autonomy in recent times is Jharkand movement in Bihar with a demand for political autonomy. Doshi and Jain (2001) are of view that Jharkand movement was a result of the interplay between historical, cultural, economic and political forces which culminated in the emergence of Jarkand Party in the Chotanagpur division of Bihar in the late 1940s. They analyze that the three factors crucial in the Jharkand movement are:

(1) The administrative unity of the region
(2) Exploitation of the people and material resources of the region by outsiders
(3) The ethnic diffrence between the people of Chotanagpur and the people of North Bihar.

The authors view that before 1940s the tribal people of this region had no political consciousness. It is only when the tribals realized that they were being exploited by the outsiders led to the formation of Jharkand party in 1950s that gave a new direction to political and other welfare activities in the Jharkand region of Bihar. After various ups and downs, eventually, Jharkand as a state formed in late 1990s.

AGRARIAN AND FOREST-BASED MOVEMENTS:

Singh (1983) views that as tribals have become an agrarian society and some of them are still dependents on forests, quite a few of their movements are also included in this category. He traces that since 1940s in Madhya Pradesh there are instances such as Gond's resistence to encroachment on their rights in the forest have come to light. Since independence, Gonds territorial and political systems have broken down

and their rights over forests and land have been eroded which made Gonds take a forest movement in Madhya Pradesh to assert their rights on the forests.

There are also instances of agrarian struggles among the tribals of Dhulia of Maharashtra. Singh points out that there has been large-scale transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals who include moneylenders, rich landlords ad traders. As landlessness and poverty grew, the tribals sought employment on low wages. A sarvodaya worker, Amber Singh Suratwanti, a Bhil himself, started to organize the adivasis in 1967. The government of Maharashtra issued an ordinance in July 1975 to prohibit alienation of tribal lands and to provide the restoration of lands alienated in the contravention of the law. Yet another example of agrarian movement is from the tribals of Chotanagpur. In this case, the non-tribals took away the land of the tribals and the tribals organized themselves and got their land vacated from the latter. Singh views that, however, it is not just the land but also the forest itself, which has become the focal point of this movement at Chotanagpur. Also, a new mass movement named as Chipko movement has emerged in late 1980s and still continues its momentum to save the forest. On the other hand, modern forms of tribal resistance, often mediated by political and/or non-governmental organizations, are particularly directed against attacks on the economic and cultural base of tribal existence. These attacks predominantly occur in the form of ecologically destructive, often large scale projects, which go along with the appropriation of tribal territories an the eviction of the tribal people from their land-the internationally most-debated and best documented example being the Narmada (Sardar Sarovar dam) case (Bhaviskar 1995)

SANSKRITIZATION MOVEMENTS

The term 'sanskritization', popularized by M.N. Srinivas, refers to 'the process by which a "low" Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, "twice-born" caste (Srinivas 1966). Sanskritization basically means a gradual process of emulation of higher caste life styles and scriptural norms by lower rung groups. Singh (1983) observes that sanskritization has become s significant movement among the tribals, particularly of central India. The sanskritization movement, which is otherwise called a Bhagat

movement, has been reported in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan. It is argued that, in this process tribals find solutions to their problems in the acceptance of the life style, ideas, values and beliefs of the higher castes. Thos who convert to the new life are called as Bhagats. Hardiman (1987) argues that religiosity had a profound bearing on the state of consciousness of the adivasis. He goes on to say that, religiosity provides tribals with a practical code of ethics to resist and struggle against their exploitation. Hardiman maintains that religiosity provides tribals with a practical code of political ethics to resist and struggle against their exploitation.

CULTURAL MOVEMENTS BASED ON SCRIPT AND LANGUAGE:

Singh reported revival of tribal script and language movement in Chotanagpur area, where the tribals are demanding for the revival of their tribal culture. He goes on to say that the efforts to evolve a script and build up an indigenous literature in tribal language may be seen as part of an overall movement to define and assert tribal identity. Tribals in these movements went to create many of the cultural symbols of the past.

CONCLUSION:

Tribes in India are highly marginalized and are prone to various hazards like illiteracy, disease, displacement, atrocities on tribal women, poverty, etc. In such a context, articulating the their resistance and organizing a movements is essential to make their voice heard and identity visible. This essay is an attempt to highlight the concept of tribe traced in various scholarly works and the movements' tribals have organized in various dimensions ranging from political autonomy to cultural reform.

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