



CONCEPT OF INDIAN TRIBES: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract: *Conceptualizing tribe is very difficult task. Scholars from sociology and social anthropology face tremendous hurdle to conceptualise and provide a universal definition of tribe. Distinctive ecological, geographical, socio-historical and cultural features give a unique identity to each and every tribe. Therefore, definition as well as conceptualisation demands contextualisation. Still scholars agree on some common features of tribes on the basis of which they are defined and conceptualized.*

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INTRODUCTION

Concept vis-à-vis conceptualisation of tribe is a heuristic exercise. More and more study or investigation creates more and more problem on and about concept of tribe. From origin of the concept, regardless of societies, study of tribe probably accumulated enough space and resource and accentuated large scale debate among scholars.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF TRIBE

Tribes in Africa, Australia and Indian, though look alike, each of them has its own distinctive feature and socio-cultural life. Due to this probably concept and conceptualisation of tribe always becomes difficult for scholars. Study of Bronislaw Malinowski of Trobriand Island, A.R.Radcliffe-Brown of Anadaman Island and E. E. Evans-Pritchard on Nuer and Dinka of Southern Sudan along with other classical social anthropologists provides stimulating insight as well as experience to scholars of tribal study.

Ethnography of primitive tribe became major part of investigation of scholars during early period. Religion and magic, family and kinship, economy, political institution, law and other institutions were also base of their study to strengthen concept, theory and method of anthropo-sociological enquiry.

Paradoxically Indian tribes are always centre of hot discussion especially in social anthropology and sociology. Colonial anthropologists initially defined concept of tribe adopting certain parameter and academic convenience. Later scholars from allied or divergent disciplines work on cross-cultural or transnational perspective of tribe exemplify heterogeneity among Indian tribes. Hence any attempt to define tribe in Indian context carries multiplicity of problems vis-à-vis great methodological significance.

TRIBE IN INDIA

Tribes of and in India may not be always compared with native tribe of Africa or aborigine of Australia. Though a great degree of commonality exists in term of their socio-economic condition, qualitative or major difference lies in term of their relationship with outside world. Discussion on Indian tribes needs to take into account wider socio-cultural space in which they are contextualised and contrasted with caste or non-tribes.

A tribe or generally tribes in India believe in blood relation between its members and other factors. They believe to descend from a common, real or mythical ancestor. They have their socio-cultural institution. Belief in supernatural power, magic, sorcery and witchcraft are



integral aspect of tribal mechanical life. Tribal economy is mainly hunting, collecting and fishing or a combination of hunting, collecting with shifting cultivation. 400 tribes live in India with glaring contradiction-most vary at every level. Some of them still uphold and remain unknown, isolated and alienated, while other is different-undergone change.

Tribal study in India or study relating to multi-dimension of tribes in India started during late British period, particularly after 1930's. From 1930 to 1950 British scholars only undertook such studies. Areas they studied are macro covering socio-cultural and political and economic life of tribe. Studies are intensive, formal, holistic and substantivist

From 1950 to early 1970 Indian anthropology and sociology got influenced by British. Their concept, method and approach were followed by most Indian scholars. Subsequently American anthropologists, scholars from Africa and other regions also influenced/motivated Indian scholars. However till early 1970 Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown's method became most popular method for Indian scholars. Accordingly G.S. Ghurye, D.N. Majumdar, Nirmal Kumar Bose, Surajit Singha, S.C. Dube, A.R. Desai B.K. Roy Barman, L.P Vidyarthi, Andre Beteille and other scholars' contribution are noteworthy in field of tribal study in India.

Further controversy arose among scholar, reformer and administrator to describe tribe in India. Risely, Lacey, Elwin, Grigson and others describe tribe as aborigine or aboriginal. Hutton calls them primitive tribe. G.S.Ghurye describes them so-called aborigine or backward Hindu. Some scholars describe them *Adivasi* and scholar like S.T Das designates them 'submerged humanity'.

G.S.Ghurye in his *The Scheduled Tribes*, discusses religion or occupation or racial feature prove inadequate when one attempts to distinguish tribe from non-tribe in India. According to him purest of tribal groups resisting accumulation or absorption, possess certain features which can be considered as common features if possessed by all tribal groups. They are as follows.

1. They live away from civilised world in most inaccessible part of both forest and hill
2. They belong either to one of three stocks-Negrito, Austroloid or Mongoloid
3. They speak same tribal dialect
4. They possess a primitive religion known as Animism in which worship of ghosts or spirit is the most important element
5. They follow primitive occupation such as gleaning, hunting and gathering of forest



produce

6. They are largely carnivorous or flesh or meat eaters.
7. They live either naked or semi-naked, using tree bark and leave for clothing
8. They have nomadic habit and love for drink and dance.

F.G Bailey views tribe and caste as continuum. He seeks to make distinction not in terms of totality of behaviour but in more limited way in relation to political economic system. Briefly Bailey's argument is that a caste society is hierarchical while a tribal society is segmentary and egalitarian. But in contemporary India both caste and tribe are being merged into a different system which is neither one nor other. Tribes in India are influenced by community around them. Major neighbouring community is Hindus. As a result from very early period there have been several points of contact between Hindus and tribal communities living within it. Nature and extent of contact of mutual participation and characteristics of revitalisation movement vary in different parts of India.

According to Andre Beteille defining tribe is difficult and definition should be based on empirical characteristic of a particular mode of human grouping found in different parts of world irrespective of condition of time and place. Conceptually a tribe can be defined as an ideal state, a self-contained unit which constitutes a society in itself. A tribe is a society has a common government and shares a common territory. This definition becomes incomplete if one considers empirical evidence of tribes having segmental political organisations among Nuer and Dinka. Therefore, ecological and political criteria are not sufficient to define tribe as a society.

Again he says for a textual definition of tribe anthropologists include linguistic, cultural, economic and kinship characteristics. Religious practice such as animism, totemism, and nature worship are criteria of defining tribes. Anthropologists try to segregate tribe from non-tribe on basis of their mode of production. Mode of production of tribe is hunting, gathering or primitive agriculture. Tribal economy is underdeveloped for lack of specialisation. Tribal economy is a non-monetised. Above criteria are not sufficient to define Indian tribe. Case of India is more complicated. Hardly any tribes exist as a separate society. They have all been absorbed, in varying degrees, into wider society in India. Moreover, no tribe in India has a complete separate political boundary. Only in NEFA, a certain amount of political separateness is found. Large tribe of Chhoto-Nagpur, Oraon and



Santal are territorially dispersed. Linguistic boundary of tribe is also not clear in India. Bhils who constitute as one of the largest tribes have been using a dialect of Hindi for many years. Languages spoken by tribes of middle and south India have a close proximity with language of some communities there. Therefore, in India, ideal type of tribe in conception of anthropologists is rare. Hence in his views Indian tribes are in transition and one can't have a readymade definition to use in empirical research.

Tribes of India live in forests, hills and isolated regions. L.P.Vidarthi and Binay Kumar Rai views that tribes have been in continuous contact with their neighbours and live by farming and working in industries. Till today they retain their tradition and custom. They form socially distinct communities in contrast to their neighbours. It is these communities which have been designated tribes, and listed them in a schedule for special treatment.

K.S Singh views that tribals outside North-East are closely integrated with prevailing colonial system of economy and administration. Interaction of peasants and tribes led to the development of settled agriculture as primary mode of subsistence in pre-colonial period. This process accentuated in the colonial period and help tribal peasants.

Nirmal Kumar Bose talks about different aspects of tribal life in India. He analyses society, economy and culture of tribes in different parts of India including tribes of North East, Andaman and Nicobar Islands. He also enlightens different means of livelihood of tribes in India including their social organization, religion, art, music and dance. According to him, there are following thirteen tribal languages or dialects each of which is spoken by more than half a million Indian tribal persons such as Bhili, Santali, Gondi, Kuruk or Oraon, Mundari, Bodo, Ho, Khasi, Tripuri, Garo, Kui, Lusai or Mizo and Halvi. Moreover, there are primitive tribes like the tribes of Andaman and Nicobar Islands such as Andamanese, Jarawa, Onge, Sentenelese, Shompen and those on the main land, e.g., Agariya of Madhya Pradesh and Birhor of Bihar and Orissa, who have a very small population and their distinct dialect. Many tribes in India are bilingual but in home or within their social circle they speak their own language. Tribes retain their own marriage regulations and they marry within their restricted local groups. Tribes are guided by their own elders or political chiefs in their internal and external affairs. Tribes in India form socially distinct communities in contrast to their neighbours. He also points out that this distinction is very difficult to find out as economic life between them and their neighbouring peasants are almost similar. The



difference which clearly emerges is only their isolation and economic backwardness due to which they have been placed under category of Schedule Tribes and their number is 300 in all over India. Many tribes on main land of India live on hunting, fishing or gathering but they are not exclusively depended upon these. Aboriginal inhabitants of Andaman Islands entirely depend upon hunting, fishing or gathering for their livelihood. They are isolated from even their neighbouring tribes because of language and they do not have trade relations with others. Tribes of North East India and some tribes in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh principally depend upon a simple form of cultivation known as shifting cultivation which needs different conditions of rainfall. Bose also mentions that tribal communities who practice a simple form of production have been coming in continuous contact with peasants and artisans having greater specialisation. Juang of Orissa, Gond of Madhya Pradesh, Santal of Bihar and Bengal have largely given up their attachment to more primitive form of production and they come within the orbit of peasant civilization of Hindus and are now cultivators, agricultural labourers and workers in some primary type of occupation. Due to their social contact with non-tribes though tribes could change their occupation but in subsequent time particularly during British period tribes become victim of exploitation of money landers and traders of main land. Nirmal Kumar Bose also describes evolution of tribal life under specific historical conditions. Regarding social organisation of tribes he is of view that as a rule, most tribal families consist of husband, wife and children But amongst some tribes in Himalayas, one wife may have several husbands and same is the case of Todas of Nilgiri Hills. Among several tribes youth dormitory serves several purposes. Next to family comes clan in tribal society. Marriage is usually forbidden within a clan. Bose points out that tribal religion or animistic belief is characterised by presence of spirit or supernatural power. As a result of spread of Christianity and Buddhism Indian tribes started to convert into these religions. Some tribes have adopted Hinduism.

D.N Majumdar presents a comprehensive study of polyandrous Khasa and brought out characteristics of tribal-Hindu continuum. He says tribe looks upon Hindu ritual as foreign and extra-religious even though indulging in it and in worship of God and Goddess where as in caste these are necessary part of religion. In caste individuals generally pursue their own definite occupation because functions are divided under caste system. In tribe individuals



can indulge in different profession they prefer as there is no fixed relation between them and occupation.

The fundamental conceptual problem raised by sociologist and anthropologist in defining and conceptualising Indian tribes. A.R. Desai views that tribal problem essentially as an economic-political one. Tribal problem should be approached keeping in view fundamental issue of establishment of a social order found on equality of opportunity and elimination of exploitation. To him, solution of tribal problems demands reconstruction of a new social order. New social order will protect both tribal and non-tribal population from exploitation and will also abolish exploitation. Desai questions nature of assimilation of tribals with non-tribals. Referring work of Haimendorf and Bose he points out aggressive absorption of tribe by Hindu society. Tribal assimilation or acculturation is based on colonial and capitalist matrix. He criticises superficial and uncoordinated nature of aids granted by successive governments in every plan period. Exploitative, competitive, profit-oriented forces of society make tribes object of capitalist exploitation. To him, desperate, violent and militant struggles are being launched by tribal population in various areas. These revolts are directed against inhuman conditions to which they have been subjected even after independence.

Virginius Xaxa defines tribes as indigenous people. Tribes are primary seen as a stage and type of society. They represent a society that lacks positive traits of modern society and thus constitute a simple, illiterate and backward society. With change in these features on account of education, modern occupation, new technology, etc. tribe is no longer considered to be tribal. If transformation is in direction of caste society then it is described as having become a caste society. If reference is present then it is posited as present society if general direction of transformation is social differentiation, then it is described as differentiated or stratified, and thus ceases to be tribal society. In progress it is forgotten that tribe besides being a stage and type of society is also a society alike and similar to any other kind of society. But it is precisely this that comes to be denied on account of changed situation. Tribes are not of same stage and type of societies. There is then something clumsy about use of term tribe in describing Indian social reality.

Further ethnographic data establish that contact varied from semi-isolation to complete assimilation as well as numerous castes among Hindus emerged out of tribal stratum. Recent study of tribe of Himalayan western and middle India reveal some tribes are



Hinduised as they are assimilated with different castes at different levels.

CONCLUSION

Concept of tribe is very complex. Concepts used by early scholars denote simple aspect of tribe. Later other kinds of work on tribes signify divergent aspects. Irony is from anthropologist to sociologist and to scholars of other disciplines, concept of tribe is a perennial problem. Hence though social anthropologists and other scholars generated much interest to conceptualise and define tribe and their socio-cultural aspects, concept of tribe till date remained most problematic and controversial.

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