

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

Lecture10

Lecture 10: Tribe-Caste Continuum

Good morning everyone. I welcome you again to the NPTEL online course on Tribal Studies in India, Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. We have already completed quite a significant lecture or topics on several aspects of tribal studies in India, and today we are going to continue to engage with an attempt to have a better understanding of tribal communities, particularly in the context of the socio-economic transformation of tribes, or what sociologists or anthropologists refer to as the transformation of tribes. From the time we started with this lecture series, one of the things that we tried to really do was to have a very in-depth, perceptive understanding of tribal societies, and by now we understand that the category 'tribe' or 'scheduled tribe' in India, or even other categories like 'denotified tribes' or 'particularly vulnerable tribal groups,' are very helpful to classify and categorize populations. But then we also know that these categories can be very homogeneous in the sense that the communities who are classified as such are quite diverse.

They are very, very heterogeneous. Now, having said that, when we try to talk about the transformation of tribes, it is important to bear in mind that we are talking about a transformation of a community who belongs to different regions, who have different socio-cultural backgrounds, who have a different religious orientation. And the nature of the transformation is also not as simple as it looks. Now, many sociologists and anthropologists particularly have tried to understand how this transformation is happening in the context of tribal society. Now, this question of transformation of society or any society for that matter has been an important part of any sociological or any anthropological work.

Now, if you look at key sociological work, maybe by Karl Marx or Durkheim or Max Weber, you will see that one of the things they tried to do was to explain the transformation of society from a more traditional society to a very modern

industrial society. And from the 19th century and the 20th century onwards, the transformation of society was not something that was regional or nation-specific. Transformation of society was something which was very very global in nature. So every community is affected by transformation. Now in that context sociologists and anthropologists have also really tried to unpack the nature of transformation in society.

And today, we will try to understand this from two broad perspectives. One is the transformation of tribes in relation to what sociologists and anthropologists refer to as the tribe-caste continuum, as you can see, which is also the title of our lecture today. And the other is the transformation of tribes as peasants. Now, the understanding of tribal society, as you have seen in the past lectures, you will see that the understanding of tribal society is deeply influenced by the broader context in which anthropologists and sociologists are understanding. Now, in India, we know that caste is something which is a very important sociological reality.

Therefore, many anthropologists have tried to look at what exactly is the difference between tribe and caste. Are these two different categories? Or if we are saying that one is a caste and one is a tribal community, then in what ways are they different? Or is it that tribes in India are gradually transforming themselves into castes? Now, these are some of the questions that sociologists and anthropologists were trying to understand.

And there are arguments and counterarguments. And many sociologists and anthropologists argue that the transformation definitely is happening. And tribes as a community are not always distinct in the way we thought about the communities. So, today through this lecture, we will try to understand the different kinds of positions, or the different ways in which we can actually understand the tribe caste continuum in the context of India. Now, to start with, the category of ideal tribe and ideal caste may be defined as both a social structure and a cultural pattern.

Introduction

- The category of ideal tribe and ideal caste may be defined as both—a social structure and a cultural pattern (Sinha, 1965).
- The British labelled certain ethnic groups as 'tribes' based on physical and socio-cultural isolation from the caste-based Indian society.
- However, they found it difficult to decide where tribe ended, and caste began (Ghurye, 1943).
- When early anthropologists examined the position of 'tribes' in India, they found a similar image of a gradual merger with the larger caste system.



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Now, again the coming of the British was very important where certain communities in India were classified as tribes on the basis of their physical and socio-cultural isolation from caste-based Indian society. Now, the predominant social structure in India is definitely caste. But then the Britishers encountered these communities in different parts of India who were necessarily outside the influence of the caste system. Now, predominantly, these communities, what they have understood is that they are quite distinct socially, culturally, and economically. Now, most of them came to be defined as tribes.

Now, even till today, the colonial understanding of tribe or the notion of tribe as a distinct community, tribe as primitive or tribe as a community who are distinct from the broader Indian society is something which is very, very prevalent. Now, but what is more difficult? It is easy to categorize that they are tribes, they are caste, they are not caste and they are therefore tribe. But then what is more difficult, what is more puzzling or intriguing is many social scientists, particularly anthropologists, find it very difficult to decide where tribe ended and where caste began. Now this resulted in a kind of debate within social sciences.

Where there are civil anthropologists or sociologists like G.S. Ghurye, who says that there is no real difference between a tribal community and a caste. It is just that tribes are already castes, but then it is just that, you know, they are not fully integrated into the larger Indian society. Now, there are other anthropologists who have taken different positions, and we will look at them over the course of our lecture. So, when early anthropologists examined the position of tribes in India, they found a similar image of a gradual merger with a larger caste system.

So, therefore, as I said, G.S. Ghurye, one of the pioneers of Indian sociology, was of the contention that tribes are not necessarily distinct as we thought.

In fact, they are yet to be fully integrated into the larger mainstream society. They are already castes. So, this is the position that G.S. Ghurye has taken. Now, two influential scholars whom we cannot omit in the discussion of tribes are G.S. Ghurye and Verrier Elwin. Now, Ghurye has devoted his life to the study of Indian communities and was very instrumental in shaping sociology and anthropology in India.

On the other hand, Verrier Elwin is also a very, very known name whose work and influence continue to be seen in terms of his scholarships on tribes in particular. Now, Elwin came to India as a missionary, and later he trained himself and wrote extensively about tribal communities, not only in Central India, but also in Northeast India. He has traveled extensively. He lived with the communities. And he was also a strong advocate for the cause of tribal communities.

Now, the position of Ghurye and Elwin was not only an academic position. This position also influenced the government policies about tribes. Therefore, it is these two scholars who are a very important starting point when we try to understand the issue of tribes in the past as well as the present. Now, G.S. Ghurye argued that tribes are not isolated from the Hindu caste in terms of distribution, language, economy, and religious tradition, nor are they necessarily the indigenous population of where they reside. So, he labelled tribal groups as backward Hindus, i.e., groups that are imperfectly integrated with the caste system.

So, Ghurye ruled out the existence of isolated tribes in India. Now, much of Ghurye's work has to do with the tribal communities in central India, and many of the things that he has written about are also mostly in the context of mainland India. Now, one of the main argument that Ghurye has made is that many times we see tribal communities as living in geographically isolated remote places. Now, Ghurye contends that the idea of geographical isolation of tribal communities is not entirely true or entirely real. Tribal communities have been always in close interaction with the larger Indian society.

And today, we have this distinct sense of understanding about tribal communities as different or distinct from the larger Indian societies, primarily because they are

imperfectly integrated with the caste system. So, therefore, over a period of time, Ghurye assumed that tribal communities will transform or integrate themselves fully into the mainstream Indian society. Now, on the other hand, there is Verrier Elwin, who viewed tribes as belonging to four stages of acculturation. Now, Verrier Elwin's position is in total contrast with Gurye. Now, Verrier Elwin looked at tribal communities as communities in themselves.

- Verrier Elwin (1943) viewed tribes as belonging to four stages of acculturation— 1)most primitive dependent on axe cultivation, 2)less wild aboriginals, 3)the accultured tribes of the open lowlands, and 4)the acculturated tribal aristocrats.
- While moving from the first category to the third, socio-economic life becomes individualistic, and communal art and traditions degenerate.
- In the fourth category, there is a recovery of order and sophistication among a few landed aristocrat tribals.



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Now in his work, he has written extensively about the specific way in which tribal communities have a unique culture when one compares or contrasts it with the larger Indian society, particularly societies which are organized around caste. Now, Elwin viewed tribes as belonging to four stages of acculturation. One is the most primitive, who are dependent on axe cultivation. Second is the less wild aboriginals. The third is the accultured tribes of the open lowlands, and the fourth is the acculturated tribal aristocrats.

Now, when moving from the first category to the third category, the socio-economic life of tribal communities becomes more individualistic, and communal art and traditions degenerate. Now, most of the time when we talk about a tribal society, some of the common assumptions that we have are that the society is more communitarian. The society is organized around kinship. The society is more about communal forms of organizing in the sense of, for example, collective labor or collective land ownership. Many aspects of social life, you know, that we attributed to tribal society are largely in the form of communitarian.

Now, Elwin notes that when tribal communities transform from the first stage to the second stage to the third stage, now, over a period of time, these communitarian values within tribal society also begin to wane away. And then

more and more individualism or ideas of individualism seep into tribal societies. Now, in the fourth category, however, he says that there is a recovery of order and sophistication among a few landed aristocratic tribals. Now, Elwin classified tribals as uncultured, primitive, and marked by ecological isolation, backward food production, technology, communal solidarity, traditional social relations, aesthetics, and religion. Much of these markers of tribal communities, according to Elwin, continue to be very much prevalent even in our understanding of tribal society or tribal communities in contemporary India.

Now, for instance, many times when I raise this question to students in different settings or in different forums, I ask what is the first thing that comes to your mind when you see or hear the term tribe, then students will say that tribal communities are primitive, backward all these things. They may not have read about tribal communities extensively, but then the first impression that comes to mind when one sees or hears the term tribe is some kind of primitive, some kind of backwardness. So, there is a strong negative connotation also which is associated with the term tribe. Now, these features continue to shape our understanding of tribal communities. And many of the things that Elwin has said, for example, isolation, backward food production technology, in the sense that many tribal communities continue to heavily rely on non-mechanised forms of economy, in the sense that many of them continue to practice, for instance, jhum cultivation or shifting cultivation, and these are primarily more towards subsistence economy, not always for profit.

And tribal communities are defined by ecological isolation or geographical isolation, which continues to be, you know, something which is very, very predominant when one talks about tribes. Now, communal solidarity. So, in the last slide, I have explained the kind of communitarian ethos that most tribal communities practice in terms of their customs and traditions. Now, even till today, the idea of tribal society is closely associated with the idea that they are communities which are deeply communitarian. And this communitarian ethos is something which is intrinsic to tribal society.

Now, both Ghurye and Elwin approach the subject in terms of an arbitrary cluster of traits without trying to define tribe and caste as two ideal sociocultural systems. Now, there are many other anthropologists who also try to give their own interpretation of the way in which tribal societies are getting transformed.

Now, for Ghurye, the transformation of tribe is essentially towards a caste society, in a sense that the more and more tribal societies come out of their geographical isolation, and get into closer contact with the mainstream society, then obviously over a period of time, tribes will merge into a caste society, the larger Indian society. That is the position of G.S. Ghurye. Now, on the other hand, Elwin believes that when tribes transform themselves, the kind of values, the kind of ethos that the communities have begin to go away, and they begin to adopt new cultural values, new ideas, such as individualism.

Now, another way in which we can look at this transformation is by trying to understand the distinction between tribe and jati. Now, in Indian society, we are all aware that it is largely categorised into the four varna system, which consists of brahmins, kshatriyas, vaisyas, and sudras. Now, many anthropologists such as B.K. Roy Burman, a very noted anthropologist, argue that the varna system is no longer sufficient to describe all the ethnic classifications and groups. And therefore, anthropologists like Roy Burman specifically tried to advocate the category Jati as something which is more appropriate and something which is more encompassing than Varna. So, Jati did not replace Varna, but it underwent a change where Jati was more frequently used to fit practical purposes and this helped in understanding the Indian situation better.

So, this is the position taken by the anthropologist B.K. Roy Burman. The Jati or the caste system has never been well defined. In many cases, during the 18th century, caste has been synonymously used with tribes. Now, many times, despite the fact that these categories are used in some way as if they are distinct. But at other times, you will see that they are used synonymously, as if tribe and caste are two not entirely distinct but similar categories.

So, sometimes they are being casually used as if they are synonymous with one another. However, with the rise and growth of nationalism in Europe, tribe came to be denoted as a particular stage of the socio-political evolution of a community of people within a definite territory, language, and area. In that light, clan, tribe, nation thus came to denote various progressive stages of such socio-political evolution. In the Indian context, caste was a rather intermediate state that was found in the story of such progression. Under these circumstances, the development of Indian sociology and anthropology occurred to understand these categories and their differences.

But over a period of time, what happened is that; this is also something which we have briefly talked about in our previous lectures, that tribe came to be associated with a particular stage of society in a sense that was deeply influenced by evolutionary thinking that came from the advancement in science. For example, from the work of Darwin who looks at the origins of species in a very evolutionary manner. Now, this evolutionary thinking was also something that deeply influenced anthropology. And when anthropology as a discipline was taking shape, this idea that there are certain communities that are still living in the primitive past, and the belief was that over a period of time, they'd also transform, gradually transform themselves into a modern society. Now, among the communities who are considered to be still living in the primitive past were essentially referred to as tribe.

Now, in the case of India also, when we are using the term tribe, we also have this strong sense of evolutionary notion, particularly in terms of the way in which we view and understand tribes as a society that is still primitive and that is still backward. Now, what is the difference between tribal and jati society? A very important work is by Mendelbaum, who has extensively studied those who have tried to make this distinction between tribal and jati society. According to him, the fundamental difference between tribes and caste can be defined in terms of their impersonal relationship. Now, one, tribal life is tribal communities.

They are defined in terms of kinship. People belonging to tribal groups were less dependent on each other and subordination was also minimal. Now, you know that most tribal societies are organized around kinship. And tribal society represents a segmentary form of society where the community is divided into smaller units or segments. And they are characterized by features like decentralization of power.

And there is no centralized power. And the society tends to be more communitarian. The society tends to be more egalitarian because it is not so much organized vertically, in a sense that the society is organized in a more horizontal manner. Agnatic bonds form the key web of relationships, and affinal ties are less significant. In tribal society, lineage or clans tends to be the chief units.

Now, even till today, even in 2025, if you look at many tribal societies, particularly if you go to the northeast, you will see that tribal societies, whether they are Khasi, whether they are Naga, whether they are Jaintia, whether they are Mizos, are largely organized around clans. You belong to the clan, you belong to the larger lineage, which is very important, and it continues to be organized around clans. Now, what about jati or caste? Caste members are organized hierarchically in society, that is, in contrast to the tribal society, which is more organized in a horizontal manner. But in the case of caste society, they are more organized in a vertical manner.

Kinship cannot be the only unit for social relationship in this system. This system is more unequal when one compares it with the tribal society. And instead of minimizing dependency, they emphasize and try to prolong the dependency on other families. In terms of religious structures, tribal focus on both short-term pragmatic functions of religion as well as the long-term transcendental functions as they do not differentiate between two aspects. But in the case of caste society, people focus more on transcendental functions.

Now, beyond that, one of the simple ways in which we can make a distinction between religion in tribal society and religion in caste society is that most of the nature of beliefs in tribal society doesn't necessarily rely on scriptures; they are more into myths. Their belief revolves around narrating stories of migration, for instance. So it is mostly rooted in the oral culture, or the oral culture is part of the larger belief system in tribal societies as well. But if you look at most communities that are under the caste system, then you will see that they rely more on scriptures. So, these kinds of differences exist between tribal society and caste society.

Now, Mendelbaum argues that tribals take direct and unfiltered satisfaction in the pleasure of senses. There is food culture, but jatis are inclined to form the concept of purity and pollution around such activities. Now, so this is also one important distinction. In the context of caste, the idea of purity and pollution is still something which is very strong, whereas in the context of tribe, that is not so much the case in terms of sharing food, sharing public space, sharing private space, and so on. Despite such differences, there are certain similar features of Jati and tribe.

In both the social categories, the members consider their groups to be endogamous entities and are ritual equal to each other. Now, in the context of tribal society, you will see that the horizontal notion in terms of each member of the community being equal or more or less equal is very strong. Now, in the case of the caste society, it is very clear because it is ordered hierarchically, and there is a strong sense of hierarchy in the sense that you already noted who is higher and who is lower and who is at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Now, another important scholar that I wanted to quickly talk about is F.G. Bailey, who has made a significant contribution in terms of trying to understand the difference between tribe and caste. Now, Bailey makes a systematic analysis and argues that caste societies are organic where various tribal societies are segmentary.

Now, in this case, organic refers to a highly interdependent structure where different groups perform specific roles. On the contrary, segmentary refers to self-sufficient groupings. Now, in the case of caste, like I said, many of caste groups are also linked to occupation. Now, specific caste groups perform different kinds of occupation. Now, in this case, different caste groups, in the order hierarchy, are quite interlinked in the sense that, you know, all of them have to perform different sets of roles and different sets of responsibilities within the caste hierarchy.

Now, in the context of tribes, you will see that the society is more segmentary in the sense that it is more, it is divided into different segments, but then all these segments are also interlinked, but not necessarily in a hierarchical manner. Caste and tribe are opposite ends of a single line. Societies are located at different points along this line. So, that is a different kind of continuum that Bailey is talking about, not necessarily as entirely different, but they are opposite ends of a single line. Societies with greater access to land are closer to tribal end of the continuum, where societies with land rights dependent on relationships are nearer to the caste.

A tribe is a system of social relations as well as a state of mind and cultural tradition characterized by isolation and lack of stratification, and this is also something that characterizes tribal society; for instance, most tribal societies prefer or continue to live in isolation, probably out of their own choice, and there is less stratification as compared to caste society. Now, Surajit Sinha expanded this continuum by providing a new characterization of tribe-caste and tribe-

peasant. This polarity of the continuum was based on Redfield's concept of the folk-urban continuum and peasant society and culture. So, basically Surajit Sinha draws this idea of tribe-caste and tribe-peasant continuum from the work of Redfield, folk-urban continuum and peasant society and culture. Now, according to Sinha, the tribals are marked by demographic, social structures and in-group sentiment, with tribes remaining isolated in various aspects, including ecology, economy, politics and social relations.

Such homogeneity manifests in cultural traits autonomous from others and disconnected from the great traditions of Indian civilization in terms of equality, closeness to natural and supernatural, ethical religion, and puritanical asceticism. So, an important characteristic that we have talked about constantly is the idea of communitarian values in tribal society. So, therefore, Surajit Sinha also notes that one important feature of tribal societies is a very strong in-group sentiment, in the sense that because the communities are so interdependent, there is more of a privilege of communitarian ideas within the community. Therefore, there is some sense of insularity that, you know, Sinha observed in the case of tribal society. And most of the time, tribal societies or tribal communities tend to be very homogeneous in the sense that there will be only one clan or a few clans inhabiting a particular geography or a particular village.

So, unlike many other villages or regional settings in India, you will see that most tribal habitats tend to be quite homogeneous in terms of their composition. Now, on the other hand, caste end is typically connected, heterogeneous, and stratified with occupational specialization, multi-ethnic residence, stratified land tenure, and interdependent out-group interactions. Now, like I said, caste is definitely an identity, but then there is a strong link between caste and occupation as well. So, therefore, as you know, Sinha pointed out that one marker of caste is the occupational specialization within the hierarchy and multi-ethnic residents in the sense that there are different caste groups who live maybe in a single village or within a larger regional setting. Now, land ownership is quite stratified or it can be very, very skewed.

But if you look at most tribal societies, you will see that even land ownership is quite communitarian in the sense that—this is not to say that there is no private land ownership—but most of the time, the land ownership system in tribal communities tends to follow what we sometimes call the communal land holding

system. So, lands, particularly fields, mountains, and hills, which are used for cultivation, are not necessarily owned by any single individual. So, there is this sense of, you know, communal landholding systems in most tribal societies even till today, which is quite distinct when one looks at, you know, caste society. The cultural features of the caste pole involve interaction with the great tradition, polarization of common and elite cultures, hierarchical social relations, the concept of ritual pollution, and a puritanical view of life. Therefore, it is the opposite end of tribal society in the sense that there is far more interaction with the great traditions.

And there is a clear hierarchy, clear distinctions between the caste groups within the caste society. So, these features, you know, according to F.G. Bailey, mark some kind of distinction, the way in which we can distinguish tribe and society, the various markers that distinguish between these two societies. Now, for a multi-caste peasant role, all the features of caste society are applicable. In addition to that, it is marked by territorial affiliations to a diverse network of relationships, heterogeneous internal division into caste class groups, and specialized centers of cultural nucleation. Thus, a movement from isolated tribal pole to caste and peasant involves a progression towards ethnic and cultural heterogeneity, role specialization, social stratification, diversification of territorial network, and further systematization of cultural ideals along the great traditions.

Now, for instance, if a tribal community transform themselves or integrate themselves into the larger caste society, it means that the society also is moving towards a more heterogeneous kind of society. There is far more complex division of labor in terms of role specialization. Social stratification is becoming more evident in a sense that maybe the social stratification in terms of income, in terms of occupations, diversification of territorial network, and further systematization of cultural ideals along with the great traditions. So, this is the argument of F.G. Bailey. Now, through this presentation, what we have tried to do is we try to really understand the difference, the nature of transformation and the kind of debates that took place, you know, particularly from the 60s, the 70s and the 80s onwards.

Now, the idea essentially is that in India, we have used and applied different categories. And one of the most prominent categories that definitely sociologists and anthropologists have to contend with and, you know, still trying to

understand is, for instance, the issue of caste. Now, definitely caste provides an important lens to understand Indian society. And, however, there are many other communities in India who are outside of the caste system. And this is far more prominent in regions like Northeast India.

Where many tribal communities have their own distinct culture, their own distinct sense of identity, language, belief systems, you know, histories, so on and so forth. Now, one of the issues that anthropologists and sociologists have tried to really understand is, you know, where is it that, you know, tribes are gradually transforming themselves into caste? Or if not what are the ways in which you can clearly identify or distinguish between these two categories, tribe and caste. Is there a difference? And if there is a difference, and what is the difference?

But many sociologists and anthropologists, for a long time, you know, maintain a position over a period of time, that tribes are gradually integrating themselves into caste society. Now, this may be true in many parts of India today in a sense that there is no community who are entirely isolated. All communities are getting exposed. There is far more intermixing of populations with urbanization, industrialization, so on and so forth. Many tribal communities have migrated out of their homelands as well.

They have migrated out of their villages, getting exposed to different cultures. Now, in that kind of context, whether the transformation is necessarily moving towards a caste society is still something that needs to be closely studied. But then some of the questions that the anthropologists and sociologists are asking themselves, what is the nature of this transformation that is taking in tribal society? Is it that when tribals are being exposed to different kind of cultural setting, different kind of economic setting, is it that they are adapting or adjusting or absorbed into the larger Indian society? Or is it that they are capable of maintaining their own distinct society?

These are some of the things that continue to be debated, particularly in disciplines like sociology and anthropology. And in the next lecture, we will continue with trying to understand the nature of transformation in tribal society, particularly the transformation of tribe as present. Thank you so much.