

# **TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES**

## **Lecture11**

### **Lecture 11: Tribe as Peasant**

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Thank you. Good afternoon everyone. I welcome you to the NPTEL online course Tribal Studies in India Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. This is the lecture 11 for the course. We have come a long way and I think all of us

Have a very, very good and fair idea about tribal communities in India and also have understood the complexities surrounding tribal communities and some of the issues, specific issues, some of the questions the communities are facing in India today. so, in the last class, we started with the idea of trying to understand the issue of the transformation of tribes. Now, this transformation of tribes is not only something which is specific to the Indian case. And social scientists, particularly those of us who are in sociology and anthropology, or even political scientists or historians, there is always this attempt to understand and explain the transformation of society. And this transformation also is an attempt to understand how modernity came about, or the impact of modernization, the impact of industrial revolution.

The kind of impacts that different changes or different kinds of external or internal changes have taken in the past. So, no communities today are free from any kind of transformation. And particularly in the context of tribes, it is also important to understand that the transformation of tribes has also been part of the larger story

of the transformation of the world. Now, in India also, if you look back at the last 70 to 75 years of India as a country, we have seen transformation at different levels, at society level, at economic levels, at political levels. And this transformation has brought about a lot of change, right?

This transformation is not only affecting, you know, some specific community, some specific regions. This transformation is also something that is very, very national. Now, in that kind of context, it is important to go back to how this transformation is experienced by tribal societies and how sociologists and anthropologists try to explain this transformation. And most of the time, you know, I will constantly refer to sociologists and anthropologists because I don't necessarily make a distinction between these two disciplines. And these two disciplines are also the disciplines that have contributed significantly to the study of tribes.

And much of the literature that I have used for this course is also drawn from sociologists and anthropologists. So therefore, I will keep on mentioning these two disciplines. I don't necessarily make a differentiation in my mind when I'm using sociologists and anthropologists. Now, today for this lecture 11, we will try to really understand one aspect of the transformation of tribe, that is tribe as peasant. Now, all of us know that India is still very, very agrarian, or India is an agrarian society.

And many parts of the world also. If you look at today, one of the most advanced and developed or industrializing nations today, particularly if you look at Europe or if you look at the United States, you will see that in the past, these were also societies that were very, very agrarian. And they have experienced significant transformation primarily because of the different kinds of changes, because of different historical events such as the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and so on and so forth. So in that kind of context, the transformation is very, very clear in a sense that, for example, in western Europe, the transformation was happening at a very massive scale where people were migrating out from rural areas to urban areas. And people were leaving the land and absorbed into factories; from farmers, from peasants they were transformed into workers or the working class.

Now, new identities, new categories emerge in the context of that kind of transformation. But if you look at Indian society, the transmission is very, very complex in the sense that we also experience a lot of industrialization, particularly in the post-independence period, but Indian society continues to be still very, very agrarian. Many, many communities in India continue to live in rural areas. Close to 60 to 70 percent of our Indian population continues to rely on agricultural and allied activities. Now, in that kind of context, the dependence on land is something that is very, very crucial when it comes to Indian society.

So, therefore, in that kind of context, sociologists and anthropologists are really trying to understand: is it that we are seeing a transformation of agriculture? Tribal communities as peasants? Is this taking place? Or if not, what is the nature of the transformation that is taking place among tribal communities? Now, like I said, a very interesting argument has been developed.

And in the previous, like, in the previous class also, we talked about, you know, the transformation of tribe. How much, you know, tribes are, is it the tribes are transforming themselves into caste society? Or is it that they are continuing, you know, they are maintaining their distinct identity? Now, in the context of tribe is present also, socialists and anthropologists have taken different positions. There are certain scholars, anthropologists who argue that tribes are gradually transforming themselves into peasants or that there is a peasantization of tribes.

Now, on the other hand, there are several anthropologists who say that tribes will pursue different occupations. Tribes will take up different kinds of occupations. They will take up new occupations. But that does not necessarily mean that, you know, they are transforming themselves into a different kind of society. They continue to be a tribe.

Now, through this lecture, we will try to understand these different positions. And then we will try to also look at the complexity surrounding the transformation of tribe. So, to start with, anthropologists describe peasant society as a part of the larger society rather than a separate independent one. Two key anthropologists by the name Redfield and Sanin, Redfield, for instance, defined peasants as small farmers who mainly grow food for themselves but are also linked to a town-based economy. So, definitely, there is a close relationship between peasants.

You know, between, you know, farmers or between the peasant and the land. Second, Shanin defined or understood peasants as small-scale farmers using simple tools, mostly producing food for their own needs while being influenced by the wider political and economic system. Now, definitely, you know. In the two definitions that we just read out, it is clear that peasants are primarily small farmers and they are more oriented toward maintaining a subsistence living through farming. However, they are not entirely dissociated from the larger socio-political economic structures.

They have definitely integrated into the larger or wider political and economic system. Foster called peasant society a half society, meaning it is partially integrated into a larger cultural and economic system, maintaining a mutual relationship with it over time. Now, Foster's idea of half society is quite interesting because peasants are not entirely or completely rural, isolated; no, they're entirely urban or, you know, urbanized. So, in a sense, they are somewhere in between. So, they are either not entirely there, or they're either not entirely here.

So therefore, Foster, you know, referred to peasant society as a half society. But then again, you know, like Redfield and Shannon, he also adopted this idea that, you know, they are definitely part of the larger cultural and economic system. Now, like I said, you know, in my preliminary remark, there has been a lot of inquiry, you know, in anthropology with regard to the extent to which tribal communities can be regarded as peasants. Now, if you start visualizing some of the tribal communities in India, whether they are Mundas or Rawans or Santals or even the Gons or the Bills or even Nagas, several Naga tribes, the Mizos or the Khasis in India. Now, if you look at it, if you just imagine these tribal communities, is it that these tribal communities are also peasants?

Can we refer to them as peasants? Now, this is the question. Or is it that they are transforming themselves into a peasant society? Now, in India, like I said, the transformation of tribes into peasants is a contested one, where one set of scholars argues that tribes are continuously transforming into peasant society, while the other set of scholars contests this transformation. So, there is a division within, you know, social scientists that one section, one group, one opinion is that tribes are transforming themselves into peasants.

In a sense, you know, there is presentization of tribal society. On the other hand, there are scholars who counter that kind of understanding. And we will look at these two positions. So, again, you know, there is a long tradition within sociology and anthropology to study tribal society in relation to present society. Now, this understanding is important because many times, really, we try to study tribal society as a society in itself.

We always try to understand tribal society in comparison to other societies, maybe in comparison to caste society. So, likewise, in this context also, why is it that scholars are having this question in their mind about whether tribes are peasants? It is essentially because we study tribal society in relation to other societies. In this case, it is a peasant society. Now, it is argued that tribes engage in a certain mode of livelihood and transform into peasants, like I said, the peasantization of tribal society.

This argument is made on the basis that tribes are gradually in cultural contact with the non-tribal world. In the process, tribal societies cease to be self-contained units. Now, one of the things about tribal societies that we keep on hearing again and again, and which I have been coming back to again and again, is the issue of isolation, geographical isolation. Now geographical isolation is not only about tribals living in some remote peripheral areas. Geographical isolation is also about projecting this idea that tribes are self-sufficient, tribes are living alone, and tribes are not being influenced by any outside world.

So, therefore, In the case of scholars who argue that there is peasantization of tribal society, one of the claims, the basis, one of the important bases of this claim is that tribes are transforming themselves into peasants because they are coming into closer contact with the non-tribal world, which also means that the geographical isolation of tribal societies is gradually coming to an end. They are no longer living in isolation. So, therefore, So, it means that tribes are being influenced by the non-tribal population or non-tribal cultures.

Now, when this kind of influence started happening, tribes no longer ceased to be self-contained units. They also join the larger, and they are integrating themselves into the larger socio-cultural political system. Again, on the evolutionary scale, tribes are often argued to be transforming into peasants. Bose, for example, divided the tribal people into hunters, fishers, and gatherers;

shifting cultivations; settled agriculturists; agriculturalists; nomadic cattle keepers; artisans and laborers; and plantation and industrial workers. Several scholars argue that these are no different from the non-tribal tribes.

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- Bose for example divided the tribal people into (1) hunters, fishers and gatherers; (2) shifting cultivators (3) settled agriculturists; (4) nomadic cattle-keepers, artisans, and labourers; (5) plantation and industrial workers.
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Tribal societies are seen as changing and dynamic rather than static. Now, this transformation of society of tribes as present is also essentially about how tribes are modernizing themselves in the sense that if you look at some description or most of the description of tribal societies, You will always be reminded that, you know, they rely on very, very primitive, you know, backward methods of cultivation, right? And their economy is entirely subsistence. There is no profit motive in tribal society.

There is no idea of saving. Now, because they do like hunters, you know, fishing, you know, shifting cultivation, you cannot produce a lot, right? You cannot produce a lot of surplus if you practice shifting cultivation, right? So, therefore, what happened is that, out of this, when tribal move away from this kind of occupation, then it shows that there is no longer any such distinction that marked the tribal population as unique and different from the larger society. So, therefore, scholars argue that these communities are no longer different from the non-tribal population.

Interaction with the non-tribal communities and government development programs after independence has brought many changes to the tribal life. The role of the state in terms of weeding away the tribes from their habitats and introducing new modes of livelihood. It is argued that tribes are engaged in a certain mode of livelihood and are transformed into peasants. Now, over a period of time, it is not that you know the change that tribal communities are

experiencing is always coming from within. The change is also led by external agents.

Now, one of the important keys or powerful agents is the state. Now, we know that in the post-independence period. Several policies and programs are specifically designed for tribal communities to uplift them socially, economically, and politically. We have quite extensively talked about the different kinds of autonomy provisions as well, for instance, those that try to protect the tribal way of life in terms of their traditions and their culture. Now, economically also, we know that since many tribal communities are struggling or constitute one of the highest numbers of poor, disadvantaged sections of the population, there has been a persistent effort to change their socioeconomic conditions.

Now, in that kind of intervention, the state also plays a very important role in terms of introducing new livelihood, new occupations into the tribal wall. In that kind of context, what we witness is that tribes are gradually moving away from the traditional occupation that they were practicing. So, over a period of time, what we see is that this resulted in the community transforming themselves into peasants. Now, several anthropologists like Surajit Sinha and many others have done an extensive study, and one of the important works of Surajit Sinha is on the Bhumij of Barabhum. He has written quite extensively on the tribe caste and the tribe peasant continuum.

So, he observed that the tribals of Barabhum have Change their way of life and become peasants based on their work. So basically, the idea is that this transformation of peasants is largely linked to the change in occupation or the change in economy that tribes are adapting or adopting new livelihood practices. Many tribes have shifted from hunting and gathering to subsistence farming. For example, the Oraons and the Mundas.

Like I said, many tribal communities in India today, whether they are from central India or northeast India, predominantly practice shifting cultivation. But over a period of time, tribes are gradually moving away from that and practicing subtle cultivation. Today, tribal and non-tribal communities are very similar in terms of how they earn their livelihood. So there is not much of a difference between an Oraon and a Munda or any other non-tribal communities today. Similarly, Shah

and Pathy saw that most of the tribal communities have become very, very differentiated based on land ownership.

There are a lot of landless people. There are a lot of agricultural laborers. There are marginal farmers. There are small farmers. There are middle farmers and rich farmers.

Now, when we talk about tribes, the idea is that tribes are far more egalitarian. there is a communal form of land ownership. So in many states in India, where tribal communities are predominantly the majority community, you will find that there is still a strong sense of communitarian values in the community. And this also comes from the idea of communal land ownership, that you have a stake in the land. You have a stake, you know, in the resources around you.

Now, however, there are several anthropologists who observe that they are no longer living in that kind of situation. Not every tribe, you know, is living in that kind of situation. They are also becoming very, very differentiated. They are becoming very internally differentiated. And this internal differentiation, one of the ways in which this internal differentiation has taken place is in terms of land ownership.

Now, there are many tribal communities who are landless. There are many tribal communities who have, you know, who own the vast majority of land, right? There are, at the same time, small and marginal farmers as well. The community is no longer, you know, very, very homogenous where everyone, you know, is more or less doing the same thing, performing the same kind of occupations. Or, you know, being part of the larger society and, you know, where the communal land ownership system, you know, prevails.

But today what we see is that there is this breakdown of that kind of communitarian or communal values even in tribal society. So, Sinha introduced the idea of tribe-peasant continuum similar to Redfield's folk urban continuum. This concept tries to explain how tribal societies are gradually integrating into peasant societies over a period of time. On the one hand, tribal societies are small, isolated, and simple with little social division. There is less hierarchy in tribal society.

And the tribal end is characterized by demographic and social structural features in ecology, demography, politics, and other social relations from other ethnic groups. Now, if you look at the tribal societies, they are small, they are isolated, they are simple, with very, very little hierarchy in terms of except for age and sex. If you look in terms of social hierarchy around clans or the way in which the society is organized, you will see that the society tends to be more egalitarian. Now, the isolation of tribes generates strong in-group sentiment, and therefore the group is characterized by internal homogeneity on account of lack of social stratification and role specialization. On the other hand, peasant societies are diverse.

It is far more heterogeneous compared to tribal society. It is multi-ethnic and they are connected through larger networks. Now, by virtue of the fact that tribal societies are smaller, they are more isolated, so they are less integrated into larger socioeconomic networks. But when you talk about peasant society, they are far more integrated into the larger network. The position of the tribe on this continuum depends on how much it has merged with the peasant life or mainstream civilization.

You know, how far the question of tribe is peasant. It depends on how far the community has transformed itself, right? How far it has integrated itself, you know, into the larger society. Now, according to Oommen, when tribes adopt settle cultivation, they start becoming more like peasants. Now, if you look at most tribal societies, particularly in the context where they continue to practice shifting cultivation, most of the time, if a community is practicing shifting cultivation, it is also very likely that the land ownership is still very much communal in nature.

So, there is no strong sense of private ownership. One way to define whether tribes are getting transformed into a peasant society or not, according to Oommen, is whether they have moved away from jhum cultivation or shifting cultivation and adopted settled cultivation. Now, what characterizes settled cultivation? Basically, you need your own land, right? there is a strong sense of private ownership associated with settled agriculture.

Now, sometimes, most of the time, you may not necessarily be the one tilling the land. But if you are practicing jhum cultivation, you also end up the one who is

actually tilling the land, who actually takes care of everything and anything associated with the farming. But in the context of settled agriculture, that may not necessarily be the case. So, according to Oommen, one way in which we can understand whether tribal communities are transforming themselves into peasants or not is whether or not they adopt settled cultivation. Now, the anthropologists...

BK Roy Burman has a different thing to say about this. He argues that tribes could opt for different occupations, such as wage earners or traders, while preserving their identity, which Miranda has termed as post-primitive tribes. So it is not necessarily that tribes will only stick to one occupation. They also can take up different kinds of occupations given the opportunities. But that does not necessarily mean that they are transforming themselves into something else.

So, therefore, even those tribes who practice settled farming are not fully peasants in many ways. So, this is exactly countering the argument of, you know, Oommen. Now, Burman says that tribes retain distinct cultural and social practices that differ from traditional peasant communities. They continue to retain their distinctiveness. That distinctiveness can be in terms of social or cultural identity.

Second, tribal settled agriculturalists do not completely adopt the elite culture or the mainstream rural lifestyle. Now, this is an important point. It is not necessary that a tribe, just because it has adopted or taken up new systems of farming or new systems of agricultural practices, necessarily adopts everything entirely, such as the elite culture. For instance, just because tribes are gradually integrating themselves into the larger economic networks, it does not mean that they discard everything, their entire identity, their traditions, or their cultures.

So, even if they become a settled agriculturalist, They may continue to profess their own sense of identity, their own culture, their own social life world associated with their beliefs so on and so forth. So, for instance, Bhumij tribes, although internally stratified and ranked as caste or peasant society, continue worshipping traditional gods and goddesses. Now, this is an example that, you know, Burman has given in the context of Bhumij tribes; yes, the community has undergone significant transformation. The communities have become, you know,

more internally stratified in terms of class, for instance, right, because of the variations in terms of income.

Or it can be internally stratified because of the different land ownership, right, that some families or some individuals own more land whereas others are landless. So, there can be different kinds of internal stratification. But then it does not mean that, you know, the communities have given up everything, right. They might have retained, you know, their own traditions. They might have retained their own values, customs, beliefs, you know, and other things.

So, therefore, the counter argument by scholars like B.K. Roy Burman is that just because tribals have taken up new occupations or have moved into different kinds of occupations, it does not necessarily mean that they are becoming something else. Now, an important contribution towards this is made by the sociologist Virginius Xaxa, who argues that tribes have become peasants and socially differentiated entities, but without any loss of their distinctive identities. So, according to him, like any other communities, tribal communities in India underwent transformation, but this does not mean that they are losing their identity. A good example is that when we are looking at the transformation of tribal society, what we are thinking is that this transformation is resulting in a total change, where tribes are adopting new identities, a new sense of belonging. Just because the society has become internally differentiated, maybe around class.

In the sense that, you know, there are different income groups, right? There are some, you know, who have become a businessman. There are some who have, you know, taken up new occupations. So, according to Xaxa, it does not mean that, you know, they are becoming something else. Just because, you know, an Oraon or a Munda or a Khasi, you know, have taken up new occupations, has become a bureaucrat, he or she does not cease to be a tribe or a Khasi tribe or an Oraon or a Munda.

He or she is still a Munda as much as, you know, any other one. So, according to Virginius Xaxa, his argument is that we should look at tribal society as a society in itself. So, lastly, he contends that it will be productive to view tribes and study them in their own terms. The term of reference for the study of tribes in India is the terms that tribal people themselves use to identify themselves and as they are identified by the people in adjacent habitations. Now, according to Xaxa,

when we try to understand the transformation of tribal society, why is it that, you know, we are always trying to view them as becoming something else?

Can we understand the transformation of tribe in their own terms? That, you know, how they want to be referred, how they are referring to themselves, and how the people who are living, you know, with them. or in close geographical proximity, how they identify themselves. So, why is it that we are trying to constantly say that, you know, they are trying to become themselves, become something in the process of, you know, adopting or adapting to new things? So, Xaxa argument is also, you know, quite instructive in a sense that, you know, to

Really look at the transformation of tribe and understand the kind of social change happening within tribal societies, not always to think of it as if they are becoming something else, but why not treat this as a kind of transformation that every other community, any other community is experiencing in India. So, this is the end of my lecture. Now, Through this, what we really try to look at is that we have taken forward from what we have discussed in the last lecture, that is the transformation of tribes, where in the previous lecture, we talked about the transformation of tribes in the context of the tribe caste continuum. And the second is that we are looking at the transformation of tribes in the context of tribes as peasants, whether tribes are becoming peasants, right, with the kind of changes that we are seeing.

Particularly in the post-independence period, when new forms of occupations are being made available. When government interventions, you know, become very, very important and very, very central to the tribal way of life, is it that over a period of time, tribes are becoming something else, right? Now, this idea of transformation is something that has developed. You know, that has been explored quite extensively by anthropologists and sociologists. And there are different positions, like I said.

One group, whether the tribe caste continuum or the tribe has presence, looks at the argument that over a period of time, the more and more tribal communities are getting integrated into the larger socioeconomic networks. Then they are becoming, you know, moving towards a caste society or they are becoming peasants or the peasantization of tribal society. But there are others like Burman and, you know, Xaxa and many others who claim that, you know, look, yes, the

society is undergoing change. It is becoming more internally differentiated. Different people, different communities are taking up new occupations.

They are exposed, they are migrating to urban areas. They may no longer be connected, you know, to their original habitats. But it does not mean that, you know, they cease to be a tribe? They are still a tribe, irrespective of what they do, because the sense of, you know, having a distinct identity and distinct culture continues to be very, very strong in the context of tribal communities. So with this, I end my lecture for Tribe as peasant.

And these are some of the references that I have used for the purpose of this lecture. Thank you so much.