

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

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Lecture13

Lecture 13: Problems of Categories and Classifications: Part-I

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on tribal studies in India, interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches. So today we are going to discuss the problems of categories and classifications. What are the problems associated with this whole categorization of a people residing in India as tribe? What makes up or what comprises tribes?





Are we defining the tribes In terms of their characteristics or do we have a broader overarching definition that can encompass all the tribes or are these definitions all delimited in their own ways? And how are we classifying the tribes? Are we classifying the tribes in terms of their own traits and characteristics, their own ethnic values and features? Or does this classification lead to further distinctions and stereotypes being reinforced that separate the so-called tribes from the so-called non-tribals?



So today we are going to look at the polemics, the contentions associated with the question of categories and classifications. Now, the use of categories such as caste has not been confined just to the intelligentsia, but we see that the usage or the deployment of this category of caste has also been a part of the thinking of the common people, the practice of the common people much before the advent of the British. So, caste as a as a category has always been existent or it has been existent even before the advent of the British. However, it is not the same situation with the tribes.

In the case of the tribes, we see that a separate category, a specific category called the tribe. So we see that the category of tribe, however, has been largely talked about as a colonial construction. So tribe as a category, as opposed to the non-tribals, has been a part of scholarship and common discourse only since the colonial times. This, however, does not necessarily mean that tribal groups did not have a distinct identity of their own. They not only did have their own identity in separation from or in isolation from or in independence from the non-tribals, not only did they see themselves and identify themselves as being different,

They were also seen as different by the ones that were ethnically not tribals. So this kind of a difference with respect to habits and habitat, with respect to, you know, living in one's own ecosystem, in one's own cosmos had always been there even before the advent of the British. However, the general category of tribe as a formal term, as a classification and, you know, creating certain specific and very curiously, very negative markers that are associated with this category had never been previously present, had never been available in the Indian society in that way. Although the tribals and the non-tribals understood that they were ethnically, you know, culturally and, you know, in terms of social practices, in terms of language, very different from one another. This question of hierarchy, of one being, you know, better than the other or one being better.

more backward or one being savage or one being not educated in terms of modern values had never been there. So this lens actually, this lens is being introduced by the colonizers for the first time. The general category of tribe and the associated stereotypical markers were not there, were not available in the Indian society in that way, in a prominent manner. The distinct identity of all the tribes in India as a part of modern consciousness was brought into being, was brought into existence by the colonial state and was confirmed further by the post-colonial state after India attained its independence.

Introduction

- The use of categories such as 'caste' has not been confined just to the intelligentsia, but is also a part of the thinking of the common people much before the advent of the British. However, this was not the situation in the case of tribes. The category of 'tribe' has been largely talked about as a colonial construction (Singh 1993; Beteille; 1993 as cited in Xaxa, 2008).
- This does not necessarily mean that tribal groups did not have a distinct identity of their own. Not only did these groups see and identify themselves as being different, they were also seen as different by others. However, the general category of tribe was absent. The distinct identity of all the tribes in India, as a part of modern consciousness, was brought into being by the colonial state and was confirmed by the post-colonial state after independence.



So the values associated with the tribes And peculiarly, each of these values, each of these markers being understood as very negative, had started to be, were started to be associated only since the colonial time, since the anthropological exploits that we see being conducted by different Western scholars among the Indian tribal groups. Colonial administrators used this term tribe, this coinage tribe as a way of describing people who were heterogeneous in terms of physical and linguistic traits, demographic size, ecological conditions of living, the regions that they inhabited, the stages of social formation and the levels of acculturation and development. The need for this kind of a category arose from the need to organize vast diversity into clear and meaningful groups, both for classification as well as for administrative ease. So, the study of the tribal groups, which subsequently came to be described as tribal studies.

had begun with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Since the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, scholars and administrators have been writing their works on the people of different regions who are identified as tribals. So while writing about India, the British did not distinguish between the tribe and the caste. So this has also remained a kind of an ambiguity, a kind of a blur. that exists till the current time where in the general perception, in common parlance, we tend to conflate these two categories of the tribes and the castes.

Categorisation of Tribes

- Colonial administrators used the term 'tribe' to describe people who were heterogeneous in physical and linguistic traits, demographic size, ecological conditions of living, regions inhabited, stages of social formation, and levels of acculturation and development.
- The need for such category arose from the need to organise vast diversity into clear and meaningful groups, both for classification and administrative ease.
- The study of groups, which subsequently came to be described as tribal studies, began with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784). Since then, scholars and administrators have been writing their works on the people of different regions.



So, the tribal people themselves have very strongly disagreed to be considered as a part of the caste system, which is primarily a practice identified with the Hindus in India. with the Muslims and Christians in the South Asian region. So, caste practice has been associated majorly with the Hindus as well as with the other communities to some extent in the different nations in South Asia. However, the tribes contend and they argue that they are outside of this caste grid and they are definitely not a part of the lowest rung of the They do not comprise the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder that defines the caste system in the Hindu society.

They are not the same as the so-called low caste or Dalit people in the Hindu society. They are outside of that caste grid. They are ethnically different. In fact, the two terms caste and tribe were rather used synonymously and to an extent they are still used as interchangeable terms. However, at a later period, we see that the British treated the segment of the population who were later known as tribes differently from the rest of the Indian population.

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- While writing about India, the British made no distinction between tribe and caste. In fact, the two terms were rather used synonymously. However, at a later period, the British treated the segment of the population, who were later known as tribes, differently from the rest of the Indian population.
- The difference between the two was conceived more in terms of ethnicity. The two sets of populations had different administrative setups. Laws meant for the general population were not usually applicable in the case of tribes.
- Accordingly, a certain group of people were categorised as tribes when the census began to take place in the late 19th century, although the criteria used for such classification were ambiguous.



They also realize that the tribal people have a different history. They have a different, you know, culture, ecosystem, a different worldview. They are coming from a different lineage altogether, a different background altogether. They are not the same as Hindu community or the way the Hindu community operates or its administration, its cultural bodies actually operate or function. They are very different from

the Hindus. The difference between caste and tribe was conceived more prominently in terms of ethnicity. The two sets of populations had very different administrative setups. Like I was saying, the laws meant for the general population were not usually applicable in the case of the tribes.

So, we see that since the colonial times and even after the colonizers go in the post-colonial scenario also. So, in the post-colonial scenario, we see that the tribal groups have only in some at some selective levels of agreed to merge with the juridical system, the larger, you know, laws and legalities of the Indian nation state. They have their own autonomous bodies which operate as self-sufficient systems. They have their own microcosms vis-a-vis, you know, cultural practices and

administrative bodies and they have their own sets of rules, they have own rituals. So there are certain points of contact as well as certain points of departure between The way the nation state operates, the way the non-tribal society, the larger non-tribal society operates and the way these tribal groups choose to lead their life, their way of life, you know, merges as well as kind of segregates from the mainstream Indian social life. So, because the general laws have not always been applicable or it has not been possible to apply the general laws and legalities on the tribal groups at all times, we see that a certain group of people have therefore been categorized specifically as tribes when the census began to take place in the late 19th century. We see that as the census takes place in the late 19th century and certain people are categorized and identified as tribes separately, the criteria

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- The difference between the two was conceived more in terms of ethnicity. The two sets of populations had different administrative setups. Laws meant for the general population were not usually applicable in the case of tribes.
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used for such classification has always remained ambiguous. There is no clear-cut definition or demarcation or an all-encompassing finalized definitive, you know, definition or labeling that very satisfactorily, you know, tells us who a tribal person is. So, the colonial classifications such as made by a very prominent scholar, Herbert Hope Risley, found that India's caste system provided an ideal setting for such classifications of groups based on physical measurements. And such classifications posed a number of restrictions in terms of marriage or in terms of other social contacts and activities together because we see that larger Indian social system works in a certain way which is not always in agreement with the way the tribal life operates and functions. So intermarriage

Classification, Administration and Politicisation

Colonial period

- The colonial classifications, such as that by Herbert Hope Risley, found that India's caste system provided an ideal setting for such classifications of groups based on physical measurements and they posed several restrictions, such as intermarriage, which were peculiar to the Indian social system. He opined that caste-based classification would favour these observations and would yield particularly clear and instructive results.
- The search for such classification and order that dominated science served as justification for imperial rule. Studying racial classifications and phenomena, such as India's caste system, further enabled the colonizers to make a distinction of the colonies from the West and justify the arguments for foreign rule.



is not very common between a tribal and a non-tribal person. Right. And so these categorizations would involve the way Risley was conducting his research. Categorizations of the tribals would involve physical measurements. And Risley opined

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The search for such classification and order which dominated science served as a justification for imperial rule. So this is where my, you know, whole argument or my whole explanation today is coming from. What is the end result of such classification? which are themselves ambiguous in nature. They lead to further value judgment.

They lead to further reinforcement of stereotypes, creating a further juxtaposition and hierarchies among different groups, among the tribals and the non-tribals. And it further enables and empowers the colonial apparatus to make a distinction of the colonies or the non-West from the West and thereby justify it. Their own argument for foreign rule. So because a person looks a certain way, because a person has a certain physiognomic feature or a certain, you know, physic or body color becomes a marker of such a person's inferiority, backwardness. or some such negative traits and it enables and empowers the western white man to say that these people ought to be controlled and dominated because they are savages, they are not civilized enough.

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So, such categorizations actually very smoothly transition to stereotyping and value judgment. in negative fashion. The colonial obsession with classification was not only for the sake of academic interests and colonial justification, but also for the more practical goal of administration as well. So, too many things are happening at the same time. We see this kind of classification also facilitates their administration.

It facilitates, you know, controlling the different territories, but also facilitates dominating the people that are very different culturally and ethnically, very different from the whites. This classification for administrative purposes even led to the labeling and registering of certain groups of tribal people as criminal tribes in colonial India. The British in India developed criminal ethnography archives and aspired to have systematic anthropometric methods for identifying these so-called criminals. In fact, the criminal categories were not the only ones, you know, that were formed out of administrative interest. Other categories of caste and tribes included the moneylenders, the agricultural groups, the martial groups and so on and they were all important for easy identification which

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- The colonial obsession with classification was not only for the sake of academic interest and colonial justification, but also for the more practical goal of administration.
- This classification for administrative purposes even led to the labelling and registering of certain tribal groups as so-called criminal tribes in colonial India. The British in India developed criminal ethnography archives and aspired to have systematic anthropometric methods to identify criminals.
- In fact, criminal categories were not the only ones of administrative interest; other categories of caste and tribes, such as money-lending, agricultural, martial and so on, were also important for easy identification in the process of their administration.



enabled which further facilitated and enhanced their process of administration. So, administration becomes easier at the expense of labeling people with very questionable terms such as criminal tribes or martial tribes. And what happens as a result is that the other dimensions of that group are thereby ignored. The group becomes criminal forever, right? The group is permanently marked as criminal.

The complexities, the layers, the need to know them further is thereby kind of obliterated, that is ignored. So, through such value judgment, it's also a way of studying a certain group very superficially, very superficially on the surface. There is no need to go deeper into their culture, invest oneself as a researcher to know the other dimensions of their culture, the other possibilities existent in their very many practices. So colonial administrators such as Risley were confident that if the principles on which such classifications were based did not have an appeal to the usages and traditions of the larger population of the country, then it would not have been possible that they would have taken so much trouble and expenditure to secure its application in a certain way, right.

In other words, they justified such classifications saying that this kind of a study, this kind of categorization would be beneficial to the larger Indian population. In other words, what happens is that the dominant groups are being favored by the colonial apparatus in terms of lands, resources, access to different opportunities as well as recognition as a more forward civilization, a more advanced civilization. So, I mean, he argues that this kind of classification is agreeable to the larger Indian population and that is why it has been possible to conduct such a research. which sitting today we find to be questionable and problematic.

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- Colonial attempts to arrange castes and tribes in hierarchy provided an opportunity for the people of the dominant social groups to interact and influence the colonial government in their favour.
- Such categorisation for anthropological and administrative purposes led to caste associations and caste-based organising to develop official caste standing in Indian society.



So colonial attempts to arrange castes and tribes in hierarchy provided an opportunity for the people of the dominant social groups to interact and influence the colonial government in their favor, right? We see that there is some kind of a symbiotic relationship between the dominant social groups who are natives, who are Indians and then the whites. And this kind of symbiosis is greatly disadvantaging the colonial government. Such categorization for anthropological and administrative purposes has led to caste associations and caste based organizing in order to develop official caste standing in Indian society.

So I just explain this. So, such categorization for anthropological and administrative purposes has led to caste association and caste based organizing in order to develop official caste standing in Indian society and it has actually amplified and legitimized a very problematic practice. It has perpetuated the caste practice. In Indian society, right? It begins with the question of anthropological exploits and administrative ease, but it goes on to become a social evil, actually, where in an unthinking manner also.

An individual in an Indian society is prone to, is liable to practice caste distinction, caste hierarchy and treat another person as inferior to him or her in caste terms. So, the social repercussions of such a practice is never good. In the post-colonial period, such classifications of communities continued. 600 investigators participated in the study of more than 4,500 communities across all the states and union territories. Here we see that administrator and anthropologists such as K. Singh continued the process of classification as the Director General of Anthropological Survey of India.

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Post-colonial Period

- In the post-colonial period, such classifications of communities continued. Six hundred investigators participated in the study of 4693 communities across all the states and union territories.
- Administrator-Anthropologist such as K.S. Singh, continued the process of classification as the director general of Anthropological Survey of India. Although inspired by his own administrative and scholarly work and genuine concern for the plight of disadvantaged communities such as Scheduled Tribes, Singh's project of further classifications was haunted by the legacies of colonial anthropology.



Although he was inspired by his own administrative and scholarly work and he had genuine concern for the plight of the disadvantaged communities such as the Scheduled Tribes, K. Singh's project would further these classifications because his project, his research was largely haunted by, it was carrying the hangover of the legalities of colonial anthropologies. Singh's classification bears a strong resemblance to Risley's classification which makes use of biological data including the cephalic or head measurement as well as the nasal indexes and the dermatoglyphics or skin markings or patterns. Such a classification is vital for three different reasons. What are the outcomes or consequences of such classifications?

Firstly, through such classifications, we see that there is a desire to conduct anthropometric measurements on these different groups, which resonates with Risley's enthusiasm for India as an ideal laboratory for conducting these methods. So, treating India as a laboratory where he is comparing and contrasting different groups in terms of their head and nasal measurements or their skin color. Secondly, we see that the labeling of these categories is noteworthy which reinforce hierarchy among the different groups. For example, the upper caste Hindu others are also known as the general population and that has been A part of the colonial legacy till the current time is a reality in present Indian society as well.

The upper caste Hindus who do not use any kind of category or quota are known as the general population and they are opposed to the others and all these others are understood as the minority communities. So, in the labeling, in the appellation itself, we understand who is mainstream and who is the other to this mainstream or in fact, they are seen as anomalous to the mainstream with respect to the mainstream. Thirdly, such categorizations adopt the mainstream. same categories of scheduled caste, scheduled

tribes, as well as religious minorities, which were previously created by the colonial administrators. So, we see that it is coming straight top down from the colonial period and not much has changed in terms of classifications and labeling from the time of the Britishers.

During the post-colonial period, however, due to the use of official categories and the benefits that were at stake, we see that Risley's anthropological project's initial commitment to honor the self-identification of these tribal groups have been largely jeopardized and compromised. In 1990, while Risley's classification and identification project was in full swing, Prime Minister V.P. Singh announced his intention to expand the reservations program for central government jobs in order to benefit not just the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes, but also the other backward classes, in short known as OBCs, which is a category created by the Mandal Commission in the year 1991. However, the polemics lay in the fact that the OBC or other backward classes category would never be very well defined. It was criticized for being ambiguous by several other sections of the Indian society.

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- In 1990, while Risley's classification and identification project was in full swing, Prime Minister V. P. Singh announced his intention to expand the reservations program for central government jobs to benefit not just the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes but also the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), a category created by the Mandal Commission (1991).
- However, the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category was criticised for being ambiguous by several sections of society.



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K. Singh's classification has by and large failed to problematize several elements of the colonial ethnographic tradition, especially the tradition of classifying the peoples, classifying the different tribal groups on grounds that are not very universal, that are not even scientifically proven to some extent. And the use of these classifications for administrative purposes, further for making stereotypes and value judgments about a certain group's culture or an entire people that are homogeneously known as the tribals, as well as the subsequent politicization of anthropology and these categories themselves. What happens is that the classification begins with an academic or scholarly purpose in

mind with an anthropological goal, but it goes on to become something political, something that divides up a society and

Right. And that actually taboos, ultimately taboos a certain people, a certain group of people or groups of people. Despite dramatically changing the interpretations of the Indian nation, the Indian state's colonial and contemporary impulses to categorize and record the people of India have remained very significantly consistent. In post-colonial India, as a list of tribes began to be drawn up by the various administrative projects, the need to provide them with certain political and administrative concessions was felt by the governments at different periods. Greater attention was paid to the criteria for determining the tribes.

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- K.S Singh's classification failed to problematise several elements of the colonial ethnographic tradition, especially the classification of peoples, the use of these classifications for administrative purposes, and the subsequent politicisation of anthropology and the categories themselves.
- Despite dramatically changing interpretations of the Indian nation, the Indian state's colonial and contemporary impulses to categorise and record the people of India have remained remarkably consistent.



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However, today Till today, we see, as Khakha says, there is no agreement or universal understanding on this subject, on who a tribe is. There is no agreement among scholars on this particular subject. Tribes in India are thus defined not so much in terms of a coherent and well-defined criteria, but rather in terms of the administrative classification which divides the population into tribal and non-tribal. To make a long thing short, the tribals have till now not been able to achieve a definition in their own right, which stands in isolation from the non-tribal.

The tribal is thus defined in juxtaposition with the non-tribal much too often. the former's disadvantage because the moment this definition is shaped through a comparison and not as a definition in itself, the definition encompasses certain qualities that are perceived as inferior and which further defines the tribal person as someone imbued with negative values or negative qualities. that need to be improved under the tutelage of the government, under the tutelage of the non-tribals. So, the constitution defines a scheduled tribe as such tribe or tribal community or part of groups within such tribes or tribal

communities as deemed under Article 342. And since the list is associated with the extension of administrative and political concessions and benefits to the groups,

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- In post-colonial India, as the list of tribes began to be drawn up by various administrative projects, the need to provide them with certain political and administrative concessions was felt.
- Greater attention was paid to the criteria for determining tribes. However, today, there is no agreement among scholars on this subject (Xaxa, 2008).
- Tribes in India are thus defined not so much in terms of coherent and well-defined criteria but in terms of the administrative classification that divides the population into tribal and non-tribal.



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mentioned therein, there has been very little attempt, in fact, to relate it to the definition of the tribe. So, a tribe does not attain its own definition from within, but from without only through comparison with someone who is not a tribe. Khaka notes that there is a discrepancy between the concept and its application to different groups and communities listed as tribes. Given that the question of tribes in India is closely linked with administrative and political considerations, there has always been more concern with the identification of the tribes than with defining them.

So, when we identify them, we identify them in terms of some stereotypical traits. which in a way does not show them in a very good light or show them in a very positive light. It becomes a mode of comparing them with the non-tribals. So, the focus has been on identification, on stereotyping rather than on trying to zero down on a definition. The criteria for the definition of the tribals have never been uniform.

They were neither clearly formulated nor systematically applied. One set of criteria was used in one context and quite different set of criteria would be employed in another. So, the result is that the list includes groups and communities that are strikingly different from each other with respect to not only the size of the population, but also the history of development or even their lineage, their practices, their worldview, which are vastly different from one group to another. That needs to be taken into consideration. That needs to be, you know, that needs to be acknowledged.

So another significant issue was that the tribes in India have been seen as the natural equivalent of caste, like we were discussing in the earlier part of our lecture today. And further change among tribes has been studied in terms of their transformation into castes. The irony in this whole situation is that the tribes have been seen primarily not only as a society, but also as a particular type of society with its own peculiar traits. So, conflating the category of caste and tribes, after a point, it does not hold. They have their own trajectories of development.

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- The criteria for the identification of tribals were not uniform. They were neither clearly formulated nor systematically applied. One set of criteria was used in one context, and quite another was employed in another. The result is that the list includes groups and communities strikingly different from each other with respect to not only the size of the population, but also the level of development.
- Another significant issue was that tribes in India have been seen as the natural equivalent of caste and even change among tribes has primarily been studied in terms of their transformation into castes. Paradoxically, this has been the case despite the fact that tribes have been seen primarily not only as a society but also as a particular type of society.



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They have their own worldviews. They have their own metamorphosis and development. So this needs to be taken into consideration that the history or the reality or the experiences or the ethos and consciousness of the tribals cannot be associated with or mixed up with those of the people from different caste groups. Especially there is a tendency to confuse the tribes with the Dalit people who belong to the lowest rung of the Hindu ladder, Hindu caste system ladder.

So they have their very different trajectories, very different histories of development and very different consciousnesses, demands, realities and world views. So with this, I'm going to stop my lecture here today. Let's meet with another round of discussion with another topic in our next lecture. Thank you.

