

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

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**Lecture8**

**Lecture 8: Problems of Categories and Classifications: Part-II**

Thank you. Good morning, and welcome back to the lecture series on tribal studies in India: interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches. So, in continuation from my previous lecture, today I will discuss the problems of categories, categorizations, and classifications associated with tribes. So, we were talking about tribes being an identification as opposed to devising their own definition—their own all-encompassing definition as a category.



### Tribes—Definition or Identification?

- Colonial anthropology and anthropological and sociological literature from the 1920s and 1930s tried to freeze the notion of tribes in time and space on account of certain features. They were also seen as a static, homogeneous and undifferentiated social category.
- We have also discussed how, even in the post-colonial period, such has been continued by scholars and administrators and, most importantly, the state.
- However, in contemporary times, scholars have questioned the notion of tribe as a homogeneous and undifferentiated category, and even pointed out significant differentiation within tribal groups.



Tribal studies as a scholarship and discourse still have to achieve this kind of definition. It falls short in terms of providing a closure or a finalized definition of who a tribal person is. Colonial anthropology and anthropological and sociological literature from the 1920s and 1930s—basically from the early part of the 20th century—

show that these anthropological and sociological exploits have consistently tried to freeze the notion of tribes in time and space based on certain features. They have been consistently—and very problematically—seen as a static, homogeneous, and undifferentiated social category. So, when we talk about tribal persons, certain stereotypes immediately come to mind, which defy variations, metamorphosis, or mutations across time and space. That, in a way, ossifies the meaning of tribes or tribals.

We have also discussed how, even in the post-colonial period, such practices, perspectives, and ways of thinking have remained dominant and have been continued by scholars and administrators alike. And in fact, such perspectives, such ways of understanding the tribes as frozen in time and space have been the common lens or the chief lens adopted by the state as well. However, in contemporary times, scholars have questioned the notion of tribes as a homogeneous and undifferentiated category,

and they have even pointed out the significant differentiation within tribal groups. So, when we say that tribals are homogeneous people, it is tantamount to bulldozing, it is tantamount to flattening the specific distinct histories, lineages, and accounts of struggles and developments that each group has had. In post-colonial India, tribes have been officially defined since at least the 1960s, and there have been certain major features associated with the category of tribes, one being primitive traits. Then their distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with outsiders, and their backwardness.

So, as I have been iterating in my previous lecture also, tribes have been associated with certain features, these features being a specific culture that the larger Indian society

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2

sometimes, many times, cannot associate with or identify with—their geographical isolation, their lack of readiness to contact with non-tribals or outsiders, and then their backwardness. They have been largely perceived as backward people. Scholars argue that tribes in India have always been a political-administrative category and had hardly any socio-cultural or economic dimension of their own. Tribes have been largely conceptualized based on detailed ethnographic accounts, where major emphasis was laid on factors such as kinship, social organization, and their religious practices or spiritual values. The most important feature of such understandings of tribes was that these studies, these scholarly interventions, perceived the tribes as a distinct social category compared to other social groups in the country, right?

**Tribes—A Homogeneous Category**

- Tribes have been largely conceptualised based on detailed ethnographic accounts, where major emphasis was laid on factors like kinship, social organisation and religion. The most important feature of such understandings of tribes was that they perceived tribes as a distinct social category as compared to other social groups in the country.
- The category of tribes in the post-colonial period was considered to have fixed and permanent traits such as 'aboriginal', 'primitive', displaying other features like isolation, backwardness, etc, as decided by the state. Such definition tends to dehumanize rather than trying to understand the tribes. The comparison is in terms of certain standard features possessed by non-tribals.



4

So, rather than a purely academic interest, it involved a certain politicized mindset wherein, in the long run, such interventions—such scholarly interventions, such studies—

would not benefit the subjects of these studies, the tribals themselves. They would disadvantage the subjects, the tribals. The category of tribes in the post-colonial period was considered to have fixed and permanent traits. And what were these traits? None of them were very good.

The key traits associated with the tribals would be aboriginal, primitive, displaying features of isolation, backwardness, etc., as decided by the state. Such definitions would tend to dehumanize rather than attempt to understand the tribes. The comparison would be in terms of certain standard features, certain parameters, that were possessed by the non-tribals.

So the tribals would be largely compared and judged in terms of the features and characteristics possessed by the non-tribals. So these studies would define the tribes as historically and culturally unchanging categories, and the question of exploitation and social conflict would not be discussed much. So, Indian anthropologists depicted the tribes as small, self-contained, self-sufficient, and autonomous communities that practiced subsistence economies within their limited trade, within their limited scope, and geographical space.

**Contd...**

- Tribes were considered to be unique and unchanging historical and cultural categories where exploitation and social conflict had no place. Indian anthropologists depicted tribes as small, self-contained, self-sufficient and autonomous communities practicing subsistence economy with limited trade.
- The Indian Constitution ignored the differentiation among tribes. The economic and political exploitation of tribals also remained understated till a very recent time.



5

The Indian constitution ignored the differentiation among tribes, the heterogeneity, the vast variety of groups, the hundreds of languages, practices, and spiritual beliefs. And lineages, right? All their peculiarities, all their specificities would be flattened when there would be just one sweeping term, 'tribe,' encompassing them all in a very ambiguous fashion. The economic and political exploitation of the tribals also remained understated, under-researched, and under-discussed until very recently. Over the years, we see that there has been a gradual emergence of differentiation within tribal society and also the

growth of class relations within tribes. In fact, within the apparently homogeneous society of tribes.

They are largely perceived as, and seen as, a homogeneous group. But in reality, if we study them in depth, we would know that not all members have equal access to state resources and. Benefits. The new policies that tend to extend certain benefits or advantages to tribal groups are not accessed or enjoyed by all tribals, all members of a given tribe, equally. Some have greater access to these resources, such as employment, education,. Small startups, and so forth, whereas others do not.

So within this category called 'tribe,' we certainly see new gradations emerging in terms of class formation. Here, critic Jagannath Pathy argues that a large number of Indian anthropologists tried to portray the non-existence of differentiation among tribals. This is a very romanticized understanding that tribals are an egalitarian society to begin with. Of course, yes, that's what tribal values teach—egalitarianism. And because there is no caste practice, equality to begin with.

**Tribe—A Differentiated Category**

- Over the years, there has been a gradual emergence of differentiation within tribal society and also the growth of class relations within tribes. In fact, within the apparent homogeneous society of tribes, not all members have equal access to state benefits.
- Jagannath Pathy (as cited in Saqib Khan, 2016) argued that a large number of Indian anthropologists tried to portray the non-existence of differentiation among tribals, which has further generated the myth of homogeneity. Thus, it became the reason for their reluctance to see the development of class relation in the tribal societies.



6

But then that equality does not remain the same across time and space. With travel in time, we see that with the progress of time, new policies benefiting these groups are enjoyed only by a select few and not by everyone. So such myths of homogeneity that have been generated by early Indian anthropologists can be questioned. So when we have such scholarship that talks about this myth of homogeneity, it becomes the reason for scholars to not see the development of class relations among the tribals, within the tribal societies.

So, tribal communities have developed class forces within themselves, and this has become a more pronounced reality with the progress of time, depending primarily on the

nature of growing private landholding, and to a certain extent through the sanction of their traditions and special privileges granted by the state. So, we see that when external factors come and affect a self-sufficient cosmos or ecosystem, there are certain factors such as private landholding and the benefits of education and employment. All these special privileges that are external to their intrinsic social values, when introduced,

are not accessed equally and symmetrically by all members of the community. Scholars have argued that tribals have been internally differentiated with respect to land, the rate of labor exploitation, as well as in terms of income, which structures them in terms of class gradation. Tribes were actually as class-ridden as the rest of Indian society. So this myth of homogeneity is slowly fading away.

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- Scholars have argued that tribes have been internally differentiated with respect to land, the rate of exploitation of labour, and income, which structures them in terms of class gradation. Tribes were actually as class-ridden as the rest of the Indian society (Pathy, as cited in Khan 2016).



7

However, this gradation becomes more amplified as there are newer and newer policies and there is no way of ensuring that these policies, these welfarist policies penetrate the tribal regions in a more effective fashion. As long as they reach only the influential sections of the tribal communities, they remain arrested or limited to select hands, to select few privileged tribal sections. In certain cases of investigation of the actual beneficiaries of tribal welfare programs, it has been found, like I was saying just now, it has been found that approximately a very tiny population, a very thin population among the tribals have benefited within the group. And even within that, it was usually the landlords and the rich peasants who benefited more than those for whom those policies were meant.

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- In certain cases of investigation of the actual beneficiaries of tribal welfare programmes, it was found that approximately a very tiny population of the tribals had benefited within the group, and even in that, it was usually the landlords and rich peasants who benefited more than those for whom those policies were meant.
- Tribes have become differentiated into categories such as rich, middle, poor and landless, which further contributes to the emergence of class relations in tribal societies.



So here I would like to say that the situation is very much comparable with that of the upper class Dalit sections. who have historically played as a liaison between the so-called mainstream or upper caste or socially dominant groups and their own Britain, their own tribal people who belong to the more disadvantaged sections of the society who are socioeconomically not so exposed. So we see that the upper class from the tribal or the Dalit groups play as a liaison, as a bridge between the socially prominent groups and their poorer counterparts, their socio-economically poorer counterparts. And there has been a marked tendency to espouse the values of the mainstream.

So there has been rampant Christianization and Hinduization among the tribes and also among the Dalits. So, they look down upon their own poorer counterparts and they do not work so much as they should have to bring up this section of the society. Their perspectives, their self-perception is now developed in terms of the mainstream values. So, they are mainstreamed. This is a term that is used.

Right. Sometimes in the case of the Dalits, it is said that they have adopted, they have been Brahminized. They have been mainstreamed, and they, in turn, are exploiting or looking down upon their own poorer counterparts. They do not ensure that the same benefits reach the bottom-most rung of the ladder.

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- In certain cases of investigation of the actual beneficiaries of tribal welfare programmes, it was found that approximately a very tiny population of the tribals had benefited within the group, and even in that, it was usually the landlords and rich peasants who benefited more than those for whom those policies were meant.
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Tribes have become differentiated into categories such as the rich, the middle class, the poor, and further, the landless, which further contributes to the emergence of strong class gradation or class relations in these tribal societies. In this respect, we see that the notion of tribal identity has also never remained something closed and finalized. It was also open to question. What is tribal identity? A homogeneous tribal identity has been promoted by the upper-class tribals only to the extent of making broad and generic demands,

such as tribal development, protective legislation, white-collar jobs, higher education, and so forth. At the same time, we see the class differences showing in terms of the wages that the tribals earn. I mean, there can be a huge discrepancy, a huge gap between what the richest of the tribals are earning as opposed to the landless, you know, ryot or tenant who is just staying back in the village and, you know, staying on... who just lives on mere subsistence and very meager wages. In this regard, the upper echelons of the tribal society have largely made use of similar rhetoric—this rhetoric of development, protective legislation, higher education—all these rhetorics have been used by the upper echelons of the tribal society as are applied by the nation-state and official bodies while navigating the policies for the betterment of the tribal communities.

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- The notion of 'tribal identity' was also open to question. A homogeneous tribal identity was promoted by upper-class tribals only to the extent of making broad and generic demands, such as tribal development, protective legislation, white-collar jobs, higher education, etc. At the same time, class differences could be seen in terms of wages.
- In this regard, the upper echelons of the tribal society have largely made use of similar rhetoric as applied by the nation-state and official bodies while navigating policies for the betterment of the tribal communities.



So we see that the upper echelons are instrumental in pushing these policies, in materializing these policies, but they are also the main or the primary beneficiaries of these policies. These policies, the fruits of these policies, or these policies. And these new yojanas do not trickle down to the bottommost rung of the ladder where the help or the aid is most needed. So, as a way of concluding, the process of classification and categorization of tribal communities continues to be a contentious and contested issue that is deeply fraught. With colonial legacies, administrative policies, and sundry academic debates, while at different points in time tribes were seen as static, homogeneous, or fixed categories, contemporary evidence and realities show otherwise.

### Conclusion

- The process of classification and categorisation of tribal communities continues to be a contested issue that is deeply fraught with colonial legacies, administrative policies, and academic debates.
- While at different points in time, tribes were seen as static, homogenous or fixed categories, contemporary evidence and realities show significant internal diversity, economic stratification, and even political mobilisation within such units.
- In fact, future frameworks for tribal identities should move beyond rigid definitions and recognize the evolving nature of tribal identities in order to provide inclusive policies for Scheduled Tribe groups.



They show that there have been significant internal diversities and complexities, economic stratifications, and even very asymmetrical political ambitions and mobilizations within such units. So, these units can hardly be treated as a. Peaceful closure or a static category or a homogeneous whole in itself. In fact, we understand that

the future frameworks for tribal identities should move beyond rigid definitions and recognize the evolving. Nature of tribal identities, the mutating, metamorphosing nature of tribal identities as a way of ensuring inclusive policies for scheduled tribe groups, policies that do not only.

Benefit and develop the upper echelons of the tribal society who have already been so-called mainstreamed and who have already been a part of the national debates vis-à-vis tribal policies and betterments. You know, these growths or these betterments or benefits. Or welfare in the fields of education and employment should touch the grassroots level. They should reach the grassroots level, and that is how the policies will be, you know, successful and they will be deemed as fruitful in the true sense of the term. So, with this, I will stop my lecture here today.

Let us meet for another discussion in our next lecture. Thank you.

