

# TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

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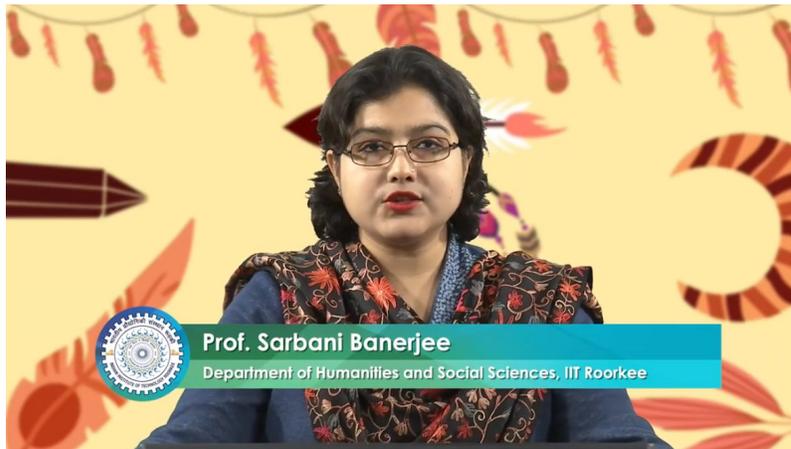
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**Lecture15**

## **Lecture 15: Methods and Approaches to the Study of Tribes**

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 methods and approaches to the study of tribes. The study of tribes has evolved from colonial, anthropological, and cultural frameworks, reflecting the shift in power dynamics. So, early studies on the tribals—about the tribals—were largely influenced by colonial ethnographic practices that aimed at broadly classifying and controlling the tribal populations without necessarily attempting to understand the tribal ethos, thereby often neglecting indigenous voices and agency.



So, colonial ethnographic exploits and studies on tribes primarily emphasized racial classification and categorization of tribes as primitive, backward, or savage—all of which are very negative and offensive terms to describe a people—and these were based primarily on physical anthropometry—the way the tribals appeared or the appearance of the tribes—including measurements of physical attributes to determine their racial

origins. So, their height, skin color, features, and topography—all these things, you know, comprise anthropometry, and that would shape ideas about them—the scales of their primitivity, their primitiveness, their backwardness, and so forth. That was a very



skewed, you know, way of understanding the tribes—a very skewed, lopsided, and many times very offensive and limited set of parameters for describing and understanding the tribal population. Tribes were presented as backward people to justify administrative control over them and reinforce stereotypes about them for easier governance. So, the classification was part of ethnographic and anthropological exploits and interventions that actually served administrative aims. Pseudoscientific methods were used in colonial times to legitimize colonial authority, which were riddled with biases that persist even in contemporary academic discourses based on the study of tribes or tribals. So, the colonial authority

Style of intervention, the colonial scholarship becomes the starting point for understanding the tribes, and those skewed parameters still inform scholars while trying to understand the tribals even in contemporary times. So, it is necessary to move beyond these fixed understandings, these stereotypes and framings, to highlight the socio-political and cultural identities of tribes as active agents in the course of history. In the post-independence period, nationalist narratives replaced colonial accounts, but they often followed some hierarchical research and methodological perspectives. Although Indian anthropologists integrated contemporary socio-political contexts into their research, one sees that indigenous knowledge systems continue to be marginalized. Most of these studies often lack critical reflexivity concerning the researcher's positionality.

To put it plainly, whenever there is a study being conducted on the tribes or the tribals, it is necessary to have critical reflexivity regarding the researcher's own position—whether the person is an outsider vis-à-vis the tribe, someone from outside, you know, who has come to India to study the tribes. So, every researcher carries his or her own cultural baggage, which shapes their perceptions. So, that really cannot be ignored because that actually lends a biased lens, a kind of tilted lens to this whole knowledge system that is being produced.

The growing influence of subaltern studies challenges predominant narratives, emphasizing the voices of marginalized groups, including the tribes. This shift encourages more participatory and inclusive research practices. So, of late, we have been trying to shift predominant narratives as a way of reading and understanding these tribals afresh through certain inclusive research practices. Despite progress in the larger academic and research space, we see that mainstream academia continues to struggle to incorporate indigenous epistemologies in the study of tribes and tribal communities. A critical assessment of post-colonial methodologies reveals the fact

### Post-Colonial Methodological Shifts

- In the post-independence period, nationalist narratives replaced colonial accounts but often followed hierarchical research (methodological) perspectives
- Although Indian anthropologists integrated the contemporary socio-political contexts into their research, the Indigenous knowledge systems continued to be marginalised. Most of these studies often lacked critical reflexivity concerning the researcher's positionality
- The growing influence of subaltern studies challenges the predominant narratives, emphasising the voices of marginalised groups, including the tribes. This shift encourages more participatory and inclusive research practices



that, you know, there is a great need for decolonizing research practices. So our research practices till recently are seen as a hangover from the colonial period and the same biases have been passed on, have been kind of bequeathed to the researchers in the next generations. So those baggages, the colonial baggages need to be kind of disposed of. And new practices should be embraced, which ensure that the tribal studies bring out the lived and live experiences and perspectives of the tribal communities themselves.

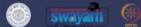
So the voice of the tribals should be heard within the research space concerning them. So, anthropology has a colonial history and was an important tool for studying the tribals as well as the castes and other social categories. In the post-colonial period, anthropology

evolved as a way of critiquing its colonial legacies and it focused on cultural relativism and ethnographic immersion. So that ethnographic I, which becomes predominant and which objectifies the tribal people, treating them just like objects and data, needs to be immersed, needs to be muffled down and toned down. What we need is, you know, to focus on cultural relativity.

**Post-Colonial Methodological Shifts**

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- A critical assessment of post-colonial methodologies reveals the need for decolonising research practices that ensure that tribal studies bring out the lived experiences and perspectives of tribal communities themselves



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It's not a study in terms of hierarchy of cultures where a non-tribal's culture is higher or better than the culture of the tribals. That cannot be a pre-given. That cannot be an a priori. Someone cannot have that in the mind while studying the tribals. There has to be cultural relativism.

So the difference, the different worldview needs to be espoused and accommodated. There has to be an attempt to understand the alternative worldview or the alternative ecosystem within which tribal life operates. So, this shift to cultural relativism aims at understanding the tribes within their own cultural contexts without comparing them to non-tribals or to any other groups. However, early anthropological studies continue to reflect non-tribal biases; the researcher brings with him or her the biases from their own culture, right? So the question of superior, inferior, good, bad—all these dichotomous or binary understandings take place, which is not very healthy and does not facilitate good research, right?



So, they often fail to engage and represent indigenous voices themselves. Such biases actually muffle indigenous voices, and this often leads to misrepresentations and oversimplifications of tribes, tribal groups, and tribal life. Next, we see that archaeology provides insights into the material culture of tribal communities. It helps in reconstructing historical lifeways through artifacts, settlement patterns, and environmental adaptations. Archaeology as a discipline helps in conceptualizing artifacts vis-à-vis broader socio-political and environmental frameworks.

Thereby, it reveals how tribes interact with their surroundings as well as with neighboring non-tribal communities. Archaeological methods include excavation, survey, and analysis, focusing on tools, pottery, and other architectural remains or remnants to shed light on the evolution of tribal societies. So, archaeology as a discipline enables bridging historical gaps, creating a historical trajectory for tribal evolution and development, linking ancient practices with contemporary tribal life, and highlighting the continuity of cultural traditions. Through the integration of indigenous knowledge with archaeological findings, researchers are able to develop comprehensive and culturally sensitive interpretations of tribal histories. Next, we have the historical lens—history as a discipline.

History as a discipline explores the evolution of tribal societies through written records, oral traditions, as well as archival materials, thereby offering a multifaceted or multidimensional perspective on their past. This challenges the colonial narratives by incorporating indigenous perspectives and experiences. So we have other voices also coming in when we incorporate the oral traditions, the oral folklorist tradition. And we see that for a long time, the mainstream historical accounts, written primarily by the

colonizers, the white man, have often excluded the agency and the voice, the agency position of the tribal herself or himself.

So this challenge is, kind of being met, this challenge is kind of being balanced through the historical approach. The difficulty that we have out of reading only the mainstream historical accounts where the oral traditions are not adequately present. So when we bring the other voices, in fact the voices from within, the straightjacketed understandings, the simplified, oversimplified, simplistic understandings are problematized and further complicated.



And that becomes, that renders a more well-rounded perspective to the study of tribes. So historical methodologies analyze events, power dynamics, and socioeconomic changes which affect the tribal communities, providing insights into their resilience and adaptability. Further, historical studies also emphasize the active role of tribes in shaping regional and national histories, countering the stereotype of tribes as passive recipients of historical changes. So in the formal historiography created by the colonizers, the tribal people have been seen as passive recipients of the external changes, the external larger factors that change them, that are imposed on them.

### Historical Approaches in the study of tribes

- Historical methodologies analyse events, power dynamics, and socio-economic changes that affect tribal communities, providing insights into their resilience and adaptability.
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- Integrating oral histories with archival research allows for a more inclusive and accurate representation of tribal experiences across diverse historical periods



This is not true. This is not an adequate picture. The tribals themselves can be instrumental in these changes, in bringing about these changes. They are not merely passive recipients of historical changes, nor are they passive, you know, just pawns in the larger scheme. They are not just pawns and puppets in the larger scheme.

They also are, they also play a role. They are also kind of stakeholders in history. That's what we are discovering. We are arguing through alternative accounts that come from within.

So, these are also many histories that the historical approaches in the study of tribes offer. So, integrating oral histories with archival research enables and facilitates a more inclusive, well-rounded, and accurate representation of tribal experiences across diverse historical periods. So we see that interdisciplinary approaches, interdisciplinary research, where archaeology and social sciences or sociology and history, all of these disciplines have something or the other to offer, to meaningfully engage, you know, in terms of understanding the tribals better. And this crossroads called interdisciplinary studies, promotes methodological flexibility, allowing the researcher to adapt their approaches to the specific contexts and needs of tribal communities.

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When we combine, for example, disciplines such as history, archaeology, and anthropology, what we get is a comprehensive understanding of tribal life beyond disciplinary boundaries. This approach enables a more holistic analysis of tribal societies. Ethnohistory integrates oral traditions with archival research, providing a more accurate and nuanced reconstruction of tribal histories or the tribal past. So, ethnohistory recognizes the value of indigenous narratives in the understanding of historical events. So, history is not something just imposed and heaped on the tribes.

### Interdisciplinary Approaches

- Interdisciplinary research promotes methodological flexibility, allowing researchers to adapt their approaches to the specific contexts and needs of tribal communities (Behera, 2020)
- Combining history, archaeology, and anthropology provides a comprehensive understanding of tribal life beyond disciplinary boundaries. This approach enables a more holistic analysis of tribal societies
- Ethnohistory integrates oral traditions with archival research by providing a more accurate and nuanced reconstruction of tribal histories. It also recognises the value of Indigenous narratives in the understanding of historical events



The tribals also shape history. They are partakers. They are stakeholders within the process of history formation. So, talking about interdisciplinary approaches, archaeology contributes by uncovering material culture, offering insights into the daily lives of the tribals, as well as their social structures and environmental adaptations. Cross-disciplinary insights bridge the knowledge gap between documented history and the lived experiences of tribal communities,

thereby enhancing the authenticity as well as the depth of tribal studies. So, ethnographic research methods rely heavily on participant observation, where the researcher immerses themselves—or, in other words, So, ethnographic research methods rely heavily on participant observation, where the researcher immerses themselves—or, in other words, sets aside their own biases and non-tribal cultural training when visiting the field or tribal communities. They don't let their own cultural training inform their understanding of tribal communities, when they are documenting the daily lives of the tribals.

So early ethnographers, influenced by figures like Bronislaw Malinowski—that's one major name among the tribal ethnographers that we have. So figures like Malinowski prioritized descriptive accounts without considering the power dynamics at play between the observer and the observed. Maybe we are documenting a lot of things about the tribes based on the way we have been trained and the way our perception has been shaped through our own training, which comes from outside the tribal cosmos. Right. So, that is something very much observable in the case of studies made by figures like Bronislaw Malinowski.

So, ethnographic methods often impose external frameworks on tribal societies. That is, they involve the tendency to interpret tribal practices through the prism offered by Western knowledge or through the lens offered by Western society and Western knowledge, which often resulted in distorted, vulgarized, and very exoticized representations of tribal groups. So, traditional ethnography is often criticized due to its extractive nature, where data collection prioritizes academic gain over the general welfare of indigenous communities. Contemporary critics have pushed for ethical reflexivity within this process of data collection and enhancing or facilitating academic gain, which is a way of ensuring that research practices respect the autonomy and knowledge systems of tribal communities. So, decolonizing methodologies challenge traditional research paradigms by prioritizing indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems, largely shifting the focus from research-centric to community-led research.

So, such an approach would focus on collaborative research where tribals are not merely subjects or objects but rather active participants contributing to both the process and the outcomes of research. Decolonizing methodologies advocate for the dismantling of colonial power structures in academia, thereby ensuring that research practices are equitable, fair, and inclusive in nature. By doing so, reflexivity is the key factor because researchers must critically examine their own biases, positions, and the impacts they leave on the tribal communities they study. Ultimately, decolonizing methodologies seek

to restore the agency of indigenous communities, validating their knowledge as legitimate. and valuable in the larger academic discourse.



So, indigenous research methods prioritize community involvement. and recognition of traditional knowledge systems, which is a way of shifting from extractive models toward a participatory approach. So, methods such as oral histories, storytelling, and participatory mapping provide authentic insights into tribal worldviews, reflecting cultural contexts. In these methods, relational accountability is prioritized, where researchers build long-term, trust-based relationships with the tribal communities they study.

So here, it becomes very important to spend a good amount of time, and it is advisable to live with these communities for a longer period, staying among them in their natural habitat as a way of building trust, which doesn't happen overnight. It has to happen over a certain period of time, while spending time together, listening to their versions, listening to their stories, and basically building a relationship or bond with them. So, knowledge co-production becomes central, ensuring research outcomes benefit the communities, while respecting their cultural protocols as well as intellectual sovereignty.

So, research should be such that the subjects of the research, or even the persons whose community we are researching, are also benefited, and their cultural protocols are not violated, nor their intellectual sovereignty outraged or breached. So, ethical considerations in tribal research begin with obtaining informed consent, ensuring that participants are fully aware of a study's purpose, methods, and potential impacts on the communities. So, it is essential for researchers to practice reflexivity, continuously evaluating their own positionality, biases, and the ethical implications of their work within the tribal context. Researchers must respect cultural protocols, which require

engaging with tribal leaders and adhering to traditional norms that govern the process of knowledge sharing and participation. So, data ownership and intellectual property rights are key ethical concerns.

Tribes should retain control over their knowledge with agreements specifying how data will be used and shared. Ethical research fosters reciprocal relationships where benefits flow back to the community through knowledge sharing, capacity building, and policies that support tribal autonomy. So, talking about contemporary trends and methodological innovations within tribal research, we see that indigenous-led research is on the rise, where tribal scholars design and lead studies, shifting control over knowledge production to the communities themselves, thereby challenging traditional academic hierarchies where tribes did not have a significant claim or share. From there on, we see that tribes become visible within the research that concerns them. Advocacy-based research focuses on influencing policy and promoting social justice, thereby integrating academic work with activism as a way of supporting tribal rights and community development initiatives.

**Ethical Considerations in Tribal Research**

- Data ownership and intellectual property rights are key ethical concerns; tribes should retain control over their knowledge, with agreements specifying how data will be used and shared
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Collaborative networks between academic institutions and tribal organizations foster knowledge exchange, supporting interdisciplinary approaches and ethical research practices. Innovative and modern methods, such as visual ethnography, incorporate photography and film to capture the dynamic aspects of tribal life, thereby offering new ways of representing indigenous cultures. Narrative inquiry emphasizes personal stories and lived experiences, providing rich qualitative insights into tribal worldviews. Methods such as collaborative ethnography involve co-authoring research with tribal members, ensuring accuracy and ethical representation. Further, we see that mobile and digital technologies facilitate real-time data collection, enhancing the efficiency and inclusivity of fieldwork.

As a way of concluding our discussion today, the study of tribes and tribal communities has evolved from colonial frameworks to include interdisciplinary, decolonized, and indigenous methodologies. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and community engagement, are central to studying tribal communities using any methodology or approach. Decolonizing methodologies challenge traditional academic paradigms and practices, thereby promoting equity and inclusivity of tribes themselves in the process of knowledge production. Contemporary trends emphasize participatory, reflexive, ethically accountable, indigenous-led, and policy-oriented research, reflecting the dynamic nature of tribal studies as a field. So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture here today.

Let us meet for a new topic and another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.

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