

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

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Lecture16

Lecture 16: Tribes During Colonial Rule

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 conditions of the tribes during colonial rule. I would like to begin our lecture today with a quotation by Bhangya Bhukhya. So in his work entitled *The Roots of Periphery*, which came out in 2017, Bhangya Bhukhya informs, I would quote Bhukia here: 'The British colonial Indian state, in collaboration with anthropologists,'

INTRODUCTION

- Bhangya Bhukya, in his work, *The Roots of Periphery* (2017), informs that "... the British colonial Indian state, in collaboration with anthropologists, missionaries, and influential native informers, produced a large body of knowledge concerning various aspects of the lives of its subject peoples" (11).
- In order to create this knowledge, the **British were compelled to classify, categorise, name, and arrange the diverse groups** they found to be exceedingly numerous and varied.
- Communities characterized by their habitation in inaccessible terrains and their reliance on subsistence practices like hunting-gathering or swidden agriculture were, in this intricate process, classified as 'aboriginals' or 'early tribes' (Bhukya, 2017).



'missionaries, and influential native informers, produced a large body of knowledge concerning various aspects of the lives of its subject peoples,' unquote. So, talking about such knowledge, we have to understand how the knowledge about the tribals was compiled, came together, and was pieced together during colonial times. So, in order to create this knowledge, the British were classifying, categorizing, and organizing these diverse tribal groups in ways that were later found to be questionable and somewhat problematic. So, because they were exceedingly numerous and varied in nature and

number, the British were compelled to categorize and classify the tribals, and thereby the discursive knowledge or existence

of and about the tribals would be catalogued and categorized in a structured and thereby reductive fashion—in a way which could later, in retrospect, be questioned. Such knowledge seems, in retrospect, to be something manufactured and synthetic rather than something organic and authentic to the tribal existence. So, such classifications were introduced to facilitate the colonizers' process of researching and studying these varied groups. Now, communities characterized by their habitation in inaccessible terrains such as dense forests and their reliance on subsistence practices such as hunting, gathering, or even swidden agriculture—all these practices, all these habits—would be classified or would lead to this category called the aboriginals.

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- Communities characterized by their habitation in inaccessible terrains and their reliance on subsistence practices like hunting-gathering or swidden agriculture were, in this intricate process, classified as ‘**aboriginals**’ or ‘**early tribes**’ (Bhukya, 2017).



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So, who would be these aboriginals or early tribes in the eyes of the colonizers? The ones that would primarily practice hunting and gathering. Swidden agriculture, and you know, they would mainly live in the dense parts of the forests. So, these aboriginals or tribes were identified by their clan-based kinship structures and their animistic religious beliefs. They were sometimes categorized by their habitat and would frequently be called jungle tribes or forest tribes, and those resorting to further raids.

So, there were some of the tribes, select tribes, who resorted to raiding the non-tribals. Such tribes, such groups, would be labeled as criminal tribes. Through these various criteria, the category of tribe was therefore established, and a corresponding body of knowledge was formed. So, anthropological and ethnological notes, gazetteers, and census reports served as a way of preserving and propagating this knowledge, this corpus of knowledge that the British colonizers built, they constructed about the tribals.

Categorisation of Tribe

- These groups were **identified by their clan-based kinship structures and animistic religious beliefs**. They were sometimes categorized by their habitat as 'jungle tribes,' and those resorting to raiding were labelled as 'criminal tribes.' Through these various criteria, **the category of 'tribe' was established**, and a corresponding body of knowledge was formed.
- **Anthropological and ethnological notes, gazetteers, and census reports** served to preserve and propagate this knowledge, which then **became the basis for administrative guidelines**.
- This documentation also inadvertently **contributed to the formation of a unified and stereotypical identity** about these geographically scattered communities.



And this knowledge then became the basis for administrative guidelines. So, the tribals were a priori. They always existed much, much before the British came to this land. But the colonizer's eye, the colonizer's gaze, was responsible for making the tribal you know, endowed with the essential qualities that they are associated with, or they are ascribed to, right, or related with in modern times as well.

So it is almost a colonial legacy, the colonial hangover that we have until today when we look at tribal people, a tribal group. So, and this colonial gaze actually went on to shape the yardsticks for treating the tribals as well as the basis for formulating the administrative guidelines. This documentation also inadvertently contributed to the formation of a unified and stereotypical identity. about these geographically scattered communities. So their discursive existence, their discursive identity was being streamlined, and even certain value judgments were being added

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to their identity as per the convenience or as per the cultural perception that the British themselves had. They were looking at the tribals with respect to their own culture, and so

terms like backward, savage, you know, and jungle people—all these terms which are, you know, value-loaded, definitely they are value-loaded, they are stereotypical—all these things arose. And similarly, the administrative, you know, laws would follow. Through exaggerating the historical distinctions between the plains and tribal areas, the colonial rule manufactured certain negative stereotypes

mostly in order to rationalize the suppression and the domination of Adivasi autonomy, Adivasi groups' autonomy. So, scholar Bhukia here argues that the divide between created by colonial rule was dubious in nature and it was majorly driven by administrative concerns, right? So, because they might have thought—the colonizers might have thought—that the groups were one too many, the practices, the habits, the languages, and the cultures were one too many, and they needed to be streamlined, reduced, right? and turned, manufactured, and packaged into a kind of knowledge that is easily understandable, easily deciphered by the colonizers.

And hence, this kind of administrative concern as a way of easing administration, the tribals would be kind of homogenized in a way; their diversity would be bulldozed into some sort of homogeneity, into some sort of ghettoed or ghettoized stereotypes, right, which can be questioned, which can always be questioned. So beyond the colonial separation, the deeply rooted historical differences have gone on to play a significant role in the formation of modern Adivasi identity. And these identities are now, till today, central to their negotiations with the post-colonial state.

Postcolonial Identity

- By exaggerating historical distinctions between the plains and tribal areas, colonial rule manufactured stereotypes to rationalise the suppression of Adivasi autonomy. Bhukya (2017) argues that **“the divide created by colonial rule was dubious and driven by purely administrative concerns”** (12).
- Beyond the colonial separation, deeply rooted historical differences have played a significant role in the formation of modern Adivasi identity, and these identities are now central to their negotiations with the postcolonial state.



Representational image of different tribes.
source: economicstudiesindia.com



Swagati

So the identity that has been ascribed to the Adivasis is not very old. It goes back to colonial times, and however it shapes the post-colonial political discourse, socio-political discourse between the tribals and the non-tribals, the negotiations that keep going on between tribal autonomy and the nation-state, the way the nation-state operates. And we

see that these stereotypes, mostly against the tribals, have actually played against their advantage. They have for a long time disadvantaged the tribals, and the tribals constantly have to justify their practices, mostly understood as malpractices.

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source: economictribes.in/dalites.com



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The way they look, the way they are, the way they have been for generations, they constantly have to be in a position of explaining themselves to the larger nation-state. And this has actually come right from the colonial times. However, Virginius Xaxa notes that tribal communities, largely self-sufficient, would remain separate from Indian society until the British era. So things would be a little different from how they became.

during the period of colonization. Pre-colonization era, we see that the tribals would mostly remain separate from the larger Indian society. While interaction was there, the British had majorly imposed a unified political and administrative structure on these groups and thereby incorporating the tribes into the larger Indian population. Furthermore, Khakha also explains, I quote Khakha here, they were subjected to the same laws, rules and regulations through land, labor, credit and commodity markets.

Unified System

- However, Virginius Xaxa (2016) notes that tribal communities, largely self-sufficient, remained separate from Indian society until the British era. While interaction was present, the **British imposed a unified political and administrative structure**, incorporating tribes into the larger Indian population.
- Furthermore, Xaxa also states that “They were **subjected to the same laws, rules, and regulations**. Through land, labor, credit, and commodity markets, tribes were also brought under a single economic order” (227), effectively ending their prior self-contained existence.



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Tribes were also brought under a single economic order, unquote. And this effectively had jeopardized their prior self-contained self-sufficient existence. Under the new political and administrative system, the tribal communities experienced a continual and consistent decline in their control and access to vital natural resources such as land, forests and water. Erosion, such large scale erosion in terms of natural resources was driven by both the colonial

Double Oppression

- Under the new political and administrative system, **tribal communities experienced a consistent decline in their control and access to vital natural resources** like land, forests, and water.
- This erosion was driven by both the colonial government and non-tribal Indian actors, notably traders, merchants, and moneylenders.
- Tribal communities experienced **two distinct forms of colonial oppression: one from the British, and another from non-tribal Indian populations.**



Republic Day tableau depicts British massacre of tribals.
(Photo: ANI)



government and the non-tribal Indian actors, especially the figures of traders, merchants and money lenders. So here it is very interesting to understand the word Diku. Diku is a word that the tribal people used in their, it's a colloquial term that the tribal people used among themselves to refer to the non-tribals. So as the situation has worsened with progressing decades and years, Dikku has gone on to connote or signify everyone that is non-tribal. And that's a kind of suspicion or that's a kind of doubt that the tribal person who has been historically exploited has in her mind. However, initially, Deku would not be any and every non-tribal.

Deku would mainly be the traders, merchants and moneylenders. These, you know, particular professions among the non-tribals who have continually exploited trade. the tribal people. So, the tribal communities experienced two distinct forms of colonial oppression. One would be from the British and another from the non-tribal Indian populations.

And having said that, I already clarified that non-tribal Indian population Not any and every. DICU is now being generalized to refer to all non-tribals. But it had initially begun to refer to the traders, merchants and moneylenders. So, it was initially coined to refer to professions of traders, merchants and money lenders who were known for cheating and exploiting the tribals.

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So, we see that during the colonial rule, the tribal's prior autonomy and resource control were systematically taken away from them, systematically dismantled through deceptive practices such as fraudulence, putting them into insistent and permanent condition of debt, usury or money lending, all of which effectively marginalize them within the new political and economic framework. So the colonial state implemented policies promoting land ownership and a market-driven agricultural economy in the hills, which marked the last significant land enclosure in India. This agenda

Triggered a wave of migration of the non-tribals from the plains to forest tracts, and it ultimately displaced and marginalized the local hill populations—that is, the tribal populations. They would be engulfed and appropriated; their agro-based economy and their natural habitat would be engulfed and appropriated by the non-tribals. who had newly moved, newly migrated to their lands. Tribal integration led to marginalization—further marginalization of the tribals within the larger scheme of the nation-state—and it caused widespread discontent among the tribals. Such discontent resulted in numerous revolts against both the British and non-tribal Indians in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The British at that time suppressed these revolts and subsequently modified the administrative structure of tribal areas. So, in this regard, Bhangya Bhukya also points out that British colonial revenue and agricultural policies placed immense pressure on the land and this ultimately led to Adivasi land loss, primarily through forced surrender as well as through the intervention of the moneylenders. The colonial administration favored the dominant caste peasants, believing that they would maximize

Land Acquisition

- Tribal **integration led to marginalisation**, which **caused widespread discontent**. This discontent **resulted in numerous revolts** against both the British and non-tribal Indians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The British then suppressed these revolts and subsequently modified the administrative structure of tribal areas.
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the yields and ensure timely rent payments, which was relatively more difficult in the case of the tribals. And thus, the colonizers sought to transfer the originally Adivasi lands to the non-tribals because... That would make their administrative operations simpler and easier. The rents would be paid sooner and more regularly. The yields would be supposedly maximized, according to them.

So in response to such policies, the Adivasi communities often relinquished their lands in protest. Virginius Khakha elucidates that, I quote Khakha here, far before the concerted Indian struggle for freedom from colonial rule emerged, tribes had demonstrated resistance to colonial power and administration as a way of safeguarding tribal autonomy and self-governance, unquote. So in the same vein, we see that Crispin Bates also asserts that land as a fundamental element of social and economic life was the core issue in most tribal uprisings, as seen in the case of the Mundas, Hos, Santals, Bhils, Gonds, and Nagas.

Resistance to Colonial Power

- Xaxa (2016) elucidates that “Far **before the concerted Indian struggle for freedom** from colonial rule emerged, **tribes had demonstrated resistance to colonial power** and administration in order to **safeguard tribal autonomy and self-governance**” (228).
- In the same vein, Crispin Bates (1992) also asserts that **land, as a fundamental element of social and economic life, was the core issue in most tribal uprisings**, as seen among the Mundas, Hos, Santhals, Bhils, Gonds, and Nagas.
- While both tribal and peasant communities faced British exploitation, the **tribals’ primary threat was the loss of their land** itself, their means of production, rather than simply increased demands on their agricultural surplus.



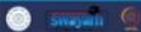
While both tribals and peasant communities faced British exploitation, the tribals' primary threat was the loss of their land itself, their means of production being the land. And they were not so much concerned about the increased demands on their agricultural surplus. Their main sense of loss, sense of unbelonging, was pertaining to poverty. Their land being taken away from them. So according to Bates, the colonial government's economic interest in tribal regions was limited to their interest in acquiring timber, land sales, as well as mining.

So colonial interest or relation with land was very extractive in nature, very exploitative in nature. They were only interested in extracting the natural resources for commercial purposes. So timber, land sales, and mining were some of the things that interested the colonial government. The tribal populations in such a regime would deliberately be marginalized and used as a source of cheap labor in lands that, paradoxically and ironically, belonged to their own ancestors.

Resistance to Colonial Power

- According to Bates (1985), the colonial government's economic interest in tribal regions was limited to timber, land sales, and mining.
- Tribal populations were deliberately marginalised, used as a source of cheap labour, and confined to inaccessible and infertile lands, compelling them to undertake periodic migrations to secure their livelihoods.
- For tribal communities, the British Forest Acts, which reserved large forest areas exclusively for government use, effectively cutting them off from their traditional food supply, were also a major source of conflict.



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And they would be confined to inaccessible and infertile lands, compelling them to undertake periodic migrations in order to secure their livelihoods. So all the good pieces of land were now under the government's administration—under the government's control. They were... Tilling the inaccessible and infertile lands, they were actually laborers in their own lands. Many times, these people would migrate to other places as a way of securing alternate livelihoods.

For tribal communities, the British Forest Act which reserved large forest areas exclusively for government use, effectively cut them off from their traditional food supply, was also a major source of conflict. The forest use would similarly be restricted. Previously, the tribes had a major source of their food as well as economy coming from the forest, but that was cut down—that would be curbed. And this

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- For tribal communities, the British Forest Acts, which reserved large forest areas exclusively for government use, effectively cutting them off from their traditional food supply, were also a major source of conflict.



It itself became a major source of conflict. As a way of maintaining control, the colonial state created an artificial administrative divide between the plains and the hills through a policy of protectionism. Such division was used to exoticize and further stigmatize certain Adivasi groups, thereby justifying their exclusion from self-rule by labeling them as primitive. So when we call someone primitive, backward, or savage, we justify dominance over them—domination over them.

And it is a way of showing that they are not capable of self-rule. They are not capable of or not qualified to earn their own autonomy or be in an agential position. So, they need to be dictated, they need to be dominated and taught. So, India's tribal uprisings, marked by frequent and large-scale clashes with the British, spanned a long historical period.

Notable examples of such conflicts and rebellions include the Malpahariya revolt in 1772, the Gond uprising led by Appasaheb in 1818, the Ho rebellion in 1831, the Lushai and Dhafla raids as well as the Khamti revolt in the 1830s, the Bhela uprising under Khur Jive Basavu in 1846, and the devastating Santal rebellion of 1855, which claimed the lives of almost 10,000 tribals. It was a huge massacre, resulting in the death of almost 10,000 tribals or more. These cycles of uprisings and brutal British reprisals continued until tribal resistance had ultimately collapsed and been crushed.

Tribal Uprisings

- These cycles of uprisings and brutal British reprisals continued until tribal resistance was ultimately crushed.
- These tribal revolts were essentially wars of resistance against colonial conquest, lasting longer than the more conventional battles fought against established powers like the Marathas and Tipu Sultan.
- The lack of an advanced and centralized administrative structure within tribal societies made it significantly harder for the British to enforce their rule.



These tribal revolts were essentially wars of resistance against colonial conquest of their lands and forest resources. And they usually lasted longer than the more conventional battles fought against established powers such as the Marathas and leaders like Tipu Sultan. The lack of an advanced and centralized administrative structure within tribal societies made it significantly harder for the British to enforce their rule. So, as a way of concluding, we see that British colonial rule dramatically reshaped tribal life in India. Prior to colonization, the tribals enjoyed some degree of autonomy.

They lived in their own ecosystem and selectively interacted with the non-tribals. But now, under colonization and colonial administration, they were forcefully integrated into a unified political and economic system, which caused them to lose control over their land and resources. Colonial policies designed for resource extraction and revenue mainly led to land alienation, exploitation, and the imposition of a hierarchical and draconian social order on the tribal people. Tribal resistance was frequent and fierce.

It was sporadic and marked by numerous uprisings against both the British and non-tribal encroachment on their lands. However, because the tribals lacked more sophisticated weapons and mechanisms of war, they were ultimately suppressed and occupied. The colonial administration, through anthropological classifications and administrative policies, solidified a system of total control, often portraying the tribes as primitive and thereby justifying their marginalization and perpetual subjugation. So, the colonial era, one can conclude, was marked by a profound disruption of tribal autonomy.

Conclusion

- The colonial administration, through anthropological classifications and administrative policies, solidified a system of control, often portraying tribes as 'primitive' and justifying their marginalisation.
- This era marked a profound disruption of tribal autonomy and traditional ways of life, leaving a legacy of land loss, cultural change, and persistent social challenges.



It entirely disrupted tribal autonomy and traditional ways of life, leaving a legacy of land loss, cultural change, and persistent social challenges among these tribal groups. With this, I would like to end my lecture today. Let's begin with a new topic and another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.