

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

## **Lecture22**

### **Lecture 22: Tribes and the Indian National Movement**

Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone. Today, we will continue with our NPTEL MOOC course titled Tribal Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. We have come quite far in this course, and I think we have studied quite extensively about tribal communities in India. In the last 20 lectures, you have seen and understood the different ways in which tribal communities have been studied, the different approaches that one can utilize when trying to study tribal communities.

We have also done extensive engagement with the issues of colonialism, the issues related to the categories, the different categories in which communities are understood, particularly tribal communities, such as the significance of Scheduled Tribes (ST), and also other categories like PVTGs, criminal tribes, and so on. We have also looked at the experience of colonialism, the encounter between the colonial state and tribal communities, and the way in which colonial rule impacted tribal societies. Today, we will move ahead of the topics that we have already studied. This lecture will specifically focus on tribes and the Indian national movement. Many times, the assumption is that tribal communities, given that they are already living in geographically isolated places, the British have further reinforced that geographical isolation by implementing laws and regulations that administratively place tribal communities as isolated communities.

Or in short, we can call it administrative isolation, which prevents tribal communities to participate or actively contribute to the wider political processes that were happening during colonial rule, particularly the anti-colonial movements or the Indian national movement. Many times, we are accustomed to thinking that tribal communities had no role or even a minimal role when it comes to the Indian national movement. But through these lectures and through some case studies,

we will, in some sense, debunk this myth by showing that tribal communities were, in fact, very active when it comes to the Indian national movement. And at the same time, this is not to say that all tribal communities in India, the 705 tribal communities were recognized as little tribes in India equally participated. The contribution of all these communities varies from one community to the other community.

The contribution and participation, the role of these communities, the way in which they contributed, the way in which they participated also significantly varies from region to region. But at the same time, the point is that it is wrong to say that tribal communities had no role in the Indian National Movement. And if several communities were unable to actively participate in it, then there must be a reason why they were unable to do so. So, through this lecture, we will try to really look at these issues and bring out the way in which tribal communities contributed or participated in the Indian National Movement. Now, before going to the Indian National Movement, we will try to have a very basic conceptual understanding of what is a national identity.

Now, national identity, in simple words, can be defined as a feeling of consciousness and loyalty towards one community's ethnos. Now, in some of the few lectures, we have already talked about the significance of categories like ethnicity. When one talks about ethnicity, what are we essentially talking about? We are talking about a shared idea of belonging. Now, in the case of national identity also, we are talking about a shared feeling of consciousness in a sense that all of us have this conscious notion and idea that we belong to one singular national community.

**Introduction**

- National identity can be defined as a feeling of consciousness and loyalty towards one's community as ethnos (Xaxa, 2016).
- Given India's enormous diversity, the conception of national identity poses a serious challenge to the idea of a coherent Indian national identity.
- The country is divided into various regions and sub-regions, and the people in such regions are further divided into hundreds of castes and sub-castes. The people who fall outside such linguistic-cum-regional societies and are also excluded from the caste system are described as tribes.



 Swagati 

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That is, in the case of us, we are all Indians, right? Now, likewise, you know, in India particularly, this is very significant because if you look at all the states in India, we come from different regions. We have different identities, languages, cultures, religions, and so on. But then all of us embrace this singular feeling of consciousness that all of us belong to one single national community—that is, we all identify as Indians. Now, given India's enormous diversity, the conception of national identity also poses a serious challenge to the idea of a coherent Indian national identity.

Now, this is not to say that there is no challenge to the idea of a national identity. Everywhere in the world, if you look at it, there are always contestations related to identity. Likewise, in India also, there are several contestations. Sometimes, there are several tensions as well when it comes to conceptualizing a very coherent Indian national identity. Now, like I said, India is a very diverse country divided into various regions and sub-regions, and the people in these sub-regions are further divided into hundreds or thousands of castes and sub-castes.

And most of the time, the people who fall outside these dominant linguistic regional societies—and probably who are mostly non-caste societies—are the ones described or referred to as tribes. Now, this understanding is very important, and very dominant when it comes to tribes, that they are outside the mainstream society. But then, in the last few lectures, we have already talked about how many tribal communities have not integrated themselves into the mainstream society. But then at the same time, in some cases, you know, like in Madhya Pradesh or Jharkhand or many other states, we also see that, you know, many tribal communities are also gradually, you know, undergoing some kind of transformation. Whereas some communities may move towards a more mainstream society, like adopting or moving towards a caste-like society.

Or in some cases, it will be like that they are coming back, you know, to their roots in a sense that there is a kind of ethnic revivalism that is happening, right? So there is a continual interplay of tribal communities moving towards different directions. Now, in India, when we talk about the Indian national movement, it originated out of India's struggle for freedom from British rule. In the course of this struggle, nationalism in India developed two states. One entailed the assertion and articulation of nationalism against the British and the other was India's own linguistic and cultural identity.

Now, at the dawn of India's independence, integrating this entity into a single geographical unit was very challenging. For instance, we have, you know, 562 princely states, right? And beyond the princely states also are this, you know, several tribal regions which were put under partially excluded and excluded areas. So, the question, the task before the Indian nationalist leadership was how to bring all these regions, how to bring all these people together. Now, among these 562 princely states, there are several tribal princely states.

For example, Tripura, Bastar, Chotanapur. So, you will see that in these places, there are also communities belonging to the tribes that actually were having their own princely states. In the North East, Tripura is a very, very classic example. The role, contribution, and participation of tribal communities in India have significantly contributed to the making of Indian national identity and Indian nationalism. Now, in the succeeding slides, we will try to understand how tribals have communicated, how tribals have participated, or contributed.

Now, there is no doubt that colonialism brought about a significant change in Indian society, and the change was not in a very particular domain. It affected or had a significant impact on the economic, political, social, and cultural spheres. The way in which communities have experienced and responded to that kind of change was also not entirely the same, in the sense that not every community experienced a similar kind of impact. Now, before British rule, tribes lived autonomously, separate from the larger Indian society, in a sense that they lived in geographical isolation from the mainstream Indian society. This is not to say that every tribal community refused to be in touch with the larger Indian society or did not want to be in touch with any non-tribal population.

The point being that many tribal communities have lived in areas that are sometimes geographically quite isolated, with rough terrains and difficult access. But at the same time, you will also see that there are many tribal communities who live in close proximity to any other society or community. Now, the colonial administrators integrated them into a unified political and economic system, subjecting them to common laws. This led to the erosion of their control over land, forests, and water, driven by both the British and non-tribal elites. Now, an important part of colonial rule was that it created this unified political and economic system.

And over a period of time, for the tribes, British rule was not only a political subjugation of Indians. British rule was also an economic subjugation. And this one part of the economic subjugation was that definitely there was a lot of deindustrialization. Indian farmers were compelled to cultivate crops which supplied the raw materials such as cotton in the UK. But when it comes to the tribes, the economic subjugation was primarily most intensely felt in terms of loss of access to resources, whether it is forest resources, land resources and water resources.

Now, many tribal communities, if you look at the regions inhabited by tribal communities, you will see that these are also very resource-rich regions, very forested, or where tribal communities have vast amounts of land. Now, with the coming of the British, what happened is that there was commodification of these resources. And in the process, tribal communities were being dispossessed of their lands and prevented from accessing forest resources. So, one of the significant impacts, particularly economic, when one talks about colonialism for the tribes, is the economic subjugation of tribal communities. Now, many times, since the British were also ruling and governing India through Indians themselves.

What we see is that tribes face two kinds of colonialism. One was colonialism by the British and many times tribes also face, you know, a colonial-like situation from the non-tribal population. Prior to India's freedom struggle, tribes fought colonial rule to defend their autonomy, yet they remained largely absent from official histories and their role in the national movement was minimal. Tribal isolation limited national outreach, while exploitation by non-tribals further hindered their participation. Participation of tribal communities was limited to certain pockets.

Some of these were the case in 1772 when the Malpaharias of Bihar revolted. In 1888, the Gonds of the Satpuras took arms under the leadership of Appa Sahib in 1813 and so on. Now, the British rule in India did not happen at one go, right? So, first they occupied certain regions, and gradually expanded to different territories and regions, subjugating the different princely states in India. That is one example.

Now, when it comes to the tribes also, the story was the same, in the sense that all the tribes were made part of their territories and regions which they inhabited, and these were annexed gradually, which took probably more than 100 to 150 years for the British to entirely subjugate all the tribal communities in India. Now, what we see is that during this period, there were a lot of resistance movements against the incursion of the colonial state into tribal territories. Now, many times today, there are attempts to revive these personalities, particularly those coming from the tribal communities, who resisted the expansion of the colonial state. Now, very renowned names like Birsa Munda are being widely circulated today. People have really started knowing that tribal communities have a long history of resisting colonial rule.

And today, Birsa Munda is a very good example of how, in terms of reviving or educating people about the contribution of tribal communities toward resisting the expansion of the colonial state. But the tragedy has been that many of these heroes or icons and personalities were not mentioned when one looks at the official histories, right? So, there was the anti-colonial movement or nationalist leadership as well, but very little effort to really enable the participation of tribal communities. One was because of the administrative isolation imposed by the colonial state, and in a sense, through partially excluded and excluded areas, it did prevent the entry of non-tribal populations into tribal areas in many parts of India. So, for the nationalist leaders it was not always very easy to get into tribal areas and ensure that they were part of the larger Indian national movement.

That also hindered, in a big way, the tribal communities from actively participating in the national movement. Now, even when tribes joined anti-colonial struggles, they remained excluded from leadership and decision-making. Now, another part of this is that, if you look at the nationalist leadership, you will see that very rarely were tribal communities given leadership positions. Therefore, many times, tribal leaders, even if you talk about Birsa Munda, he was a very regional or local leader. So, he did not represent the entire nation as a whole.

So, he was more about representing his own community. It is not it. Therefore, many tribal communities participated actively in the Indian national movement, but not as leaders, nor were they necessarily part of the important decision-makers. Now, there was also another issue that, in some way, hindered the participation of tribal communities: the clash of interests between the Congress

leaders and the tribals, which became very evident from the 1930s onward. For instance, in 1930, about 170,000 villagers, many of whom were Adivasis, were involved in a forest satyagraha, in Ahmednagar and Nasik, independent of the Congress party initiative.

Now, many times, tribals also mobilized themselves outside of the Indian National Congress leadership. So, an example here is that Ahmednagar and Nasik. But if you look at the larger Indian society, say Birsa Munda or less known figures today, you will see that they have resisted the entry or they have resisted colonial rule, in their own territories, in their own homelands by mobilizing themselves. So, many times, you will see that there are hundreds and hundreds of stories of resistance against the expansion of the colonial state. Now, among the Santals, most of the political movements in the early 20s were largely autonomous of the Congress leadership.

The Tebaga movement in Bengal, the provincial Kisan Saba movement in South, all of this took place without the Congress support. In fact, tribals shunned all their relationship with the landlord-dominated Congress. Now, many of the Congress leadership also were contributing towards the exploitation of tribal communities. Therefore, there was some sense of skepticism, you know, about the leadership, on the part of the leadership of the INC. But at the same time, this is not to say that they refused to actively support the movement.

So in their own ways, like I said, across India, they have undertaken movements. They have mobilized the people who were actively fighting or who were actively leading movements to oust the colonial state. Now, by and large, throughout the colonial rule, the British neglected the tribal welfare. However, some development occurred, such as a tribal leadership; a section of tribal communities has taken the position of being a leader within the community, resisting outsider exploitation and clashing with non-tribal society, which also clashes with leadership that overlooks tribal concerns. So many times, tribals have very specific issues.

And many times, there was this strong feeling that their issues were not being taken seriously. So in that kind of situation, it produced tensions and contestations within the larger Indian national movement or anti-colonial movement. Now, there were many important leaders among the community. So, I

will just mention two important leaders. One is Jaipal Singh Munda, and definitely, you know, he is a widely known tribal leader, and the other is J.J. Nichols Roy from Meghalaya.

So, both were also key members of the Constituent Assembly in 1946. Now, to quickly look at Jaipal Singh Munda. He was a very strong advocate for tribal rights and representation in the assembly debates. He also founded the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1930, which played a very important role in popularizing the term Adivasi as an identity to challenge the prejudice against forest communities. Now, Jaipal Singh Munda in the Constituent Assembly had no hesitancy to say that he belongs to a tribe, he is an Adivasi.

And he was very instrumental in popularizing the term Adivasi. Now, if you come to the notice, a very important name, you know, is J.J. Nichols Roy. He was a prominent tribal leader from Assam. Now, if you look here, I'm saying that he is from Assam, simply because in the 1950s, all these states that we have today, like Meghalaya and Mizoram, were all part of Assam. And there were only two princely states, you know, Tripura and Manipur.

So, Meghalaya obtained statehood in 1972, and Mizoram obtained statehood in 1986; it was inaugurated in 1987 along with Arunachal Pradesh. Now, until then, all of these states were part of the greater Assam. He was also a member of the Constituent Assembly. They were made part of the Constituent Assembly to specifically speak for interest of tribal communities. Now, his contribution was significant in advocating for the rights of tribal communities, especially in the northeastern region of India.

Nichols Roy also founded the Assam Tribal League, which worked for the political rights and welfare of the tribal population in Assam. His leadership helped in the organization, bringing attention to the issues of tribal communities in the state. Now, these two leaders I specifically brought here to acknowledge their contributions in the drafting of the Indian constitution, which incorporated a very important element, particularly when one talks about tribes, which is the Fifth Schedule and the Sixth Schedules. Now, the fifth schedule and the sixth schedule, in particular, many political leaders and scholars and activists who are from the Northeast actually call J.J. Nichols Roy as the architect of the Sixth Schedule. Now, likewise, a name that we cannot ignore when we talk about tribal

leadership and its relationship to the larger Indian national movement is Jaipal Singh Munda.

So, now, what happened in post-independent India in relation to national integration or national inclusion in relation to tribes? So, national integration in India is always a priority. However, similar attention is lacking in addressing issues of socioeconomic development and inclusive state policies that show respect for tribal communities. However, in the post-independence period, many communities gained significant attention and underwent significant change, particularly positive change when it comes to socioeconomic development. But when it comes to tribal communities, they continue to suffer extensively from different kinds of marginalization, discrimination.

And like I said, if you look at the national statistics, you will see that tribal communities continue to be at the bottom of the pyramid. Now, in that kind of situation, it becomes very difficult for tribal communities to really be at par with other communities when one looks at various indicators of development. This is not to say that affirmative action policies in the form of reservations are not useful, but in terms of their share and quota, the position of tribals is far from adequate, where dominant regional groups at times also continually oppose reservation policy. And despite the presence of laws restricting the exploitation or expropriation of resources belonging to the tribal communities, what we also see is that there is a lot of dispossession happening. Particularly, one of the most significant dispossessions that has happened among tribal communities is land alienation or more broadly, alienation from their resources.

And this has happened with the coming of the colonial state. But in post-independent India, if you look at the amount of alienation that has happened, you will see that tribes have been continually deprived and dispossessed from different kind of resources. So, just statistically, tribal communities constitute about 40% of the displaced population, although they comprise only about 8% of the total population of India. So the benefits of development presented as modern India's pillar did not, many times, benefit everyone equally. And out of those tribal communities are yet to really benefit from the development.

Particularly in the post-independence period. So, tribes contributed to the making of the nation, but their sacrifice in many cases goes unacknowledged. So, to

conclude, tribal autonomy over land, forest, and water was curbed under colonial rule, adding a new dimension to their marginality. Like I said, the intrusion of the colonial state in tribal territories follows a long history, followed by the dispossession of tribal communities from land, forest, and water resources. Even in the post-independence period, tribes have been consistently treated poorly.

Not only are their interests inadequately addressed, but they also suffer exploitation, oppression, and discrimination. This acts as a hindrance to creating a national identity and further alienates tribes from it. Tribes are not just at the margins, but they are considered even outside the margins of Indian national identity. Therefore, this impoverishment and this dispossession of tribes from the resources, and the kind of exploitation that they continue to face even in the post-independence period, have posed a lot of challenges for the communities in terms of positively contributing to the integration to development at large. Therefore, through this presentation, what we have understood is that it is not that the isolation of tribes has prevented them from participating in the national movement, but there were several factors at some level.

Tribes definitely contributed significantly, perhaps in Central India, but at other places, they may not have made a significant contribution. So, one, it is wrong to say that tribals did not make any significant contribution to the Indian national movement. Secondly, when it comes to the constitution drafting and all, you will see that tribal leaders like Jaipal Singh Munda and Nichols Roy participated and actively contributed, although their contribution was mostly in relation to tribes, but in terms of the overall drafting of the Indian constitution, their contributions and their role cannot be negated. So in this way, the contribution of tribals was not only limited to their community but also resonates widely in terms of building a strong, inclusive Indian national identity. So I'm going to stop here.

Thank you so much.