

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

## **Lecture38**

### **Lecture 38: Tribes in Post-Colonial India II: Tribal Politics and Political Parties I**

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Good evening and welcome back to the NPTEL online certification course, Tribal Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. Today, we are going to look at tribes in post-colonial India, tribal politics, and political parties. I think this is a very important and interesting topic for us to study. And particularly, as you know, India is one of the largest democratic countries in the world, it is more important to really look at and understand the issue of tribal politics and how tribal communities have engaged with democracy in the last 70 to 75 years. Now, needless to say, the issue of politics has always attracted attention from political scientists, sociologists, or the larger social science fraternity.

and particularly, the experience of India is very important because India is a very diverse country in terms of religion, language, caste, and region. So it was not very easy, particularly at the dawn of India's independence. Many observers, particularly from outside India, were also very skeptical about whether India's democracy would survive. But, you know, it survived. And there are a lot of explanations, ideas, and perspectives.

And many times, you know, India's democracy, or democracy in itself, is not understood only as a form of governance. The issue of democracy has been explored from different vantage points in terms of region, in terms of its interface between caste and democracy, or in terms of gender or women and democracy.

In this period, we will try, based on this lecture, to look at how tribal communities have interacted with democracy, the kind of political participation or the kind of contributions that tribal communities have made to India's larger democracy. At the same time, we will also try to look at the political trajectory or the political aspirations of tribal communities through this lecture. Now, to begin with, some of the conceptual foundations pertaining to modern politics.

Since we are talking about a democratic country like India. One cannot but start with the question of representation, as democracy is essentially a system of governance where we elect representatives, and we are talking about representation particularly in terms of elections or the electoral system. A very important fundamental explanation was given by Grazia in 1968, which explained representation as constitutive of the representative and the represented. So, there are two parts of representation in democracy. One is the representative, and one is the represented.

Now, the representative holds the authority in the sense that they are the ones who are elected. On behalf of the represented, the people are the ones who bestow or endow power or authority to the representative. Therefore, democracy, as you know, is essentially about people—whether they are literate or illiterate, young or old. For instance, in the case of India, if they attain the age of 18 years, they have the right to cast their vote and elect their representative. So, in that sense, the represented bestows authority over the former, that is, the representative.

Now, before I proceed, this question of representation is very important, particularly in the context of India, because when India attained independence... It directly or automatically made universal adult suffrage, in the sense that anyone and everyone, irrespective of their belonging, irrespective of their identity, irrespective of the kind of social backgrounds they have, irrespective of whether they are rich or poor, everyone has the right to vote. So, if you look at countries in many parts of the world, even western countries, which have been championing democracy all over the world, you will see that for a long period of time, even in the United States, women were not allowed to vote and blacks were not allowed to vote. It was only very recent that women were allowed to vote, blacks were allowed to vote. But in the context of India, starting from

independence, every adult who has, you know, attained the age of 18 years has the right to vote.

so therefore, the question of representation in the context of india is also very, very important when one talks about, you know, trying to understand questions or issues pertaining to democracy. Further, representation has two strands. One is the substantive part and the other is the descriptive part. Now, in the case of substantive representation, most of the time we are talking about issues and ideas concerning the represented, not only the representative part. Which means that the representation of the represented is paramount, thus minimizing the significance of the representative.

So, basically, in terms of substantive representation, we are mostly talking about the representative representing who they are actually supposed to represent. So, it is more about the represented; it is more about the people rather than the elected representative that is the substantive part. On a broader level, party ideologies along with mechanisms of accountability are what take precedence over the individual characteristics of the elected representative, which has made substantive representation highly valued in the liberal democracy. Now, what about the descriptive representation? The descriptive representation values the representatives.

Now, in the case of substantive representation, we are more focused on the people who are being represented. Now, in the case of descriptive representation, the focus, the issue, or the attention is shifted toward the representative, that is, the person who is representing the people. So, therefore, in that sense, the individual characteristics such as race, gender, ethnicity, become a very very important and very very fundamental part of the representation. That is to say, the representative represents the identity of the represented. Now, in the context of substantive representation, you are not very bothered about the individual characteristics, the individual, the markers of the representative.

Now, in the descriptive representative, you are concerned with the individual characteristics, such as race, what race he or she belongs to, what is the ethnicity, what is the religion, and what is the language. All these things become an important part of the representation. So the representative represents the

identity of the representative. So that is what essentially descriptive representation is. So, the emphasis on the representative is what makes descriptive representation a means of empowerment for the downtrodden, disadvantaged, and marginalized groups for whom visibility to one of their own is fundamental.

Now, in the case of descriptive representation, this becomes more pertinent, particularly for underrepresented groups, marginalized sections, the downtrodden, and disadvantaged groups, essentially because many times you see that there are certain groups who are not being represented enough. So, in that kind of context, descriptive representation becomes very, very important. That is to say, I am reading the quote here, in the context of group mistrust and uncrystallized interests. A history suggesting inability to rule and low de facto legitimacy, descriptive representation enhances substantive representation by ensuring inclusion of disadvantaged and powerless groups, improving the quality of deliberation, and would, in turn, ensure the empowerment of these groups. Now, this is a very important quote that I just read out: why is descriptive representation important in democracy?

Why is descriptive representation important for a country like India also? Essentially, it provides a possible pathway for underrepresented groups to be represented in the larger democratic framework. And which further actually improves the quality of democracy in terms of the kind of issues that are being deliberated, and which further not only enhances the two representations but also results in the empowerment of the groups that are being represented. So that is why descriptive representation is also widely practiced in many democratic countries. so the political theorist Anne Phillips introduced the idea of the politics of presence, which is based on three key beliefs.

First, it argues that communities who have been historically marginalized or excluded have their own unique interests, needs, and concerns that are different from those of the dominant groups in society. Second, it claims that these interests cannot be fully or fairly represented by people who do not belong to these groups. In other words, someone from outside the community may not truly understand or prioritize their issues. Third, the concept emphasizes that having people from these disadvantaged groups elected to political positions ensures

that their voices are genuinely heard. Now, we are still trying to understand the logic of descriptive representation.

Now, the political theorist Anne Phillips, you know, may have come up with this idea, coining the term 'the politics of presence,' by which Phillips talks about three fundamental aspects of the idea. One is that communities who have been historically marginalized or excluded have their own unique interests. In a sense, you know, there are many marginalized communities. There are many, you know, communities—for example, even in India—not everyone has similar interests. Not everyone's problems are the same.

Even within a single region, even within a single state, one can find these communities that are actually marginalized, underrepresented, and have their own unique problems. They will have their own distinct issues, which may be very different even within the marginalized sections. Now, therefore, many times, what can happen is that a person from outside the community may not be in a position to fully understand things from their perspective. Even if representation is there, even if the community has representation in different ways, or if the community is being represented by someone else, what can potentially happen is that the representative may not truly understand the real issues of the people. That is the kind of limitation that Anne Phillips talks about.

Now, therefore, through the politics of presence, Phillips also emphasizes that people from these disadvantaged groups, once elected to political positions, ensure that the issues the communities strongly feel are genuinely heard and properly addressed. Now, this is one of the reasons why many communities in India are also demanding several kinds of provisions that will allow them to represent themselves, not only to be represented. As such, Phillips argued that simply changing the makeup of elected bodies by ensuring that marginalized groups are actively represented is an essential step in deepening democracy. For her, this was not just about numbers or representation, but about making democracy more inclusive, equal, and responsive to all citizens. Now, not only in India, but in many democratic countries, one can say that everyone has the chance to be elected, and everyone is represented equally.

But many times, societies and communities are very complex. So, internal differentiation can happen at various levels—in terms of caste, religion, region,

class, wealth, and so on. In that kind of context, there are always certain groups that are underprivileged. There are groups that are marginalized. At the same time, there are groups that are dominant.

There can also be groups that are quite overrepresented. Now, in that kind of context, what Phillips essentially argues is that by ensuring marginalized groups participate in the larger democratic form of governance, what we're essentially doing is making democracy stronger. Democratic institutions are becoming more durable. They are becoming more efficient. Therefore, she calls this the deepening of democracy.

So, now let us come to the context of tribes. Now, you will see that the tribal population in India is about 8.6 percent of India's total population, which could be around 30 to 35 crores, probably. So, if you look at it, the communities are also very scattered. Except in the northeastern part of India, in the mainland, you will see that the tribal population is very scattered. In terms of demography, in some states, they are very small and negligible.

In certain states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, you will see some form of visibility. But by and large, when it comes to political representation at the state or national level, the representation is still very low. Even in tribal-dominated states like the northeastern part of India, you will see that at the state level, the representation is fairly good because in many states like Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Mizoram, tribes are demographically the dominant communities. But when it comes to national representation, the kind of representation at the national level is not comparable to that of many other communities or regions. Now, we will try to specifically focus on the question of representation in the context of tribal communities.

Now, when one talks about representation in tribal communities, group representation is one of the most essential features of tribal politics in India. And this idea of group representation is guided by the belief that people sharing similar backgrounds and undergoing similar experiences are in a better position to represent the community. So basically, the idea is what we have already elaborated in the case of descriptive representation—that representation from within the community is better than representation by someone else. This is not

to say that only tribes should represent tribes. This is not to say that only that region, that language speaker, that community should represent them.

The point being that at the larger level, many a times, it is better that the communities themselves find representation or the community themselves find a representative that will represent them. Making an argument in favor of group representation, the political theorist Kymlicka, for instance, says that this idea of group representation is imperative against further exclusion and marginalization from the political processes. Now, over the last 50 to 75 years of India's independence, tribal communities, the kind of political engagement that they have with the larger mainstream politics has undergone significant transformation, starting from the pre-colonial period, the colonial period, and the post-colonial period. Now, in the pre-colonial period, more or less, they had their own autonomous set of political institutions, and there was more or less a kind of self-rule that these communities enjoyed. Now, in the colonial period, you will see that although tribal communities in many parts of India were put under indirect rule, they were already integrated into the colonial state system.

In the post-colonial period, these existing institutions, these existing structures of governance were being inherited by the post-colonial Indian state, and more or less it works towards the integration of tribal communities in the larger polity in India. So the British, the colonial period becomes very, very important, and it was the British who introduced tribal communities to electoral politics for the first time through the Government of India Act 1935. Because this act gives provinces more power to govern themselves and also makes special arrangements to protect the interests of certain disadvantaged communities by reserving seats in the legislative bodies. Now, the question of reservation of seats for tribal communities or for certain underprivileged or disadvantaged groups was addressed in the Government of India Act of 1935, which makes it very possible for us to start our narrative of understanding tribal representations from the colonial period. As a part of this, reserved seats were given to Muslims, Christians, and Europeans in the provincial legislative councils under the fifth schedule of the Act.

However, scheduled caste and backward tribes were not given representation or reservation in these councils, and these communities, however, received more reserved seats in the provincial legislative assemblies. Now, in the post-

independent India, it becomes very, very challenging, at least for the Constituent Assembly, to come up with a kind of framework or a solution for the tribes, essentially because many tribal communities in India were demanding autonomous governance. Also, this demand was a kind of precondition that was given by the tribal communities that they would integrate with India only if they were granted some form of or promised some form of autonomy. So this was the kind of challenge that was there at the dawn of India's independence. Political reservation, so in response to the kind of demands and aspirations which were made by the tribal communities, political reservation was adopted for ensuring that tribal representation at the highest level of political institutions is ensured.

For instance, Article 330 and 332 of the Indian Constitution provide reservation of seats in Parliament and state legislative assemblies to the scheduled tribes respectively. So, the insertion of Articles 330 and 332 was essentially to ensure that some seats in the parliament and some seats in the legislative assemblies are reserved for the Scheduled Tribes. So, two very important scholars, Ambagudia and Professor Xaxa, note that this reservation of seats is based on the proportion of tribal population in the constituencies. This proportion is again based on the guiding principle that any successful electoral system cannot offer to ignore the under-representation or lack of representation of ethnically minority communities. So, therefore, again, it is always about ensuring that tribal communities are also given some form of pathway so that they are capable of participating in the larger democratic process of the country.

These reservations in the electoral systems that were introduced, but then the idea was that this was supposed to be something temporary. The main agenda was that all communities in India, including tribal communities, should have fair representation in political bodies. Now, we know that during the entire colonial period, tribal communities were kept away as if they were not interested in politics, as if they had no political consciousness, or as if modern politics were unsuitable for them. But on the contrary, from the 1930s onwards, we see different kinds of political mobilizations that challenged the political systems instituted by the colonial state. By the post-independence period, tribal communities began to demand political representation.

This demand resulted in the culmination of the Sixth Schedule and the Fifth Schedule, which we discussed in the last few classes. Electoral reservations

were part of the extension of the demands and aspirations of tribal communities. These electoral reservations were supposed to be temporary in nature. Initially, this system was supposed to last for only 10 years, based on the belief that this period would allow enough time to address the needs of these communities and measure the outcomes. However, the political reservation for scheduled tribes has been repeatedly extended over the years.

Even today in India, some constituencies are exclusively reserved for tribal communities. As Ambagudia and Xaxa note, this reservation is based on the proportion of the tribal population in the constituencies. This does not mean that reservations for tribal communities need to be made everywhere. But that cannot happen. It can only happen when there is a significant proportion of the tribal population in the constituencies.

Now, in the northern part of India, it has been successfully implemented where many constituencies, such as in Meghalaya, Mizoram, some parts of Manipur, and Nagaland, are exclusively reserved for tribes. And non-tribals cannot contest in those kinds of reserved constituencies. But in these states, again, the population is predominantly tribal communities. Now, let us try to quickly run through the electoral system in India. I am sure that all of us know the kind of electoral systems we follow in our country.

So, the electoral system in India, in a very broad sense, is divided into three phases. One is the one-party dominance, that is, from 1952 to 1967. Basically, we are talking about the dominance of the Congress. And the decline in one-party dominance and the successive rise of opposition parties between 1967 and 1989. And third is the multi-party cooperation, as no single party was able to secure a majority in the national elections.

Now, for almost 15 years, we have had one-party dominance. That is, Congress was a dominant political force, and there was more or less no opposition. But from 1968 onwards, what we essentially see is that this one-party dominance begins to decline. From the 1990s onwards, we began to see that a lot of regional parties sprouted up in different parts of the country. And this resulted in multi-partisan cooperation because there was no single party that was able to secure a majority in the national elections.

So during the dominance of the Congress Party, that is essentially between 1952 and 1967, this period was marked by a low level of electoral participation as Congress was the single largest party and there was no opposition at all. So, moreover, the social identities, particularly the caste of candidates, played a very important role in shaping the voter sentiments. And as such, the political scientist Yogendra Yadav argued that the trend of upper castes occupying the educational and occupational positions continued in the electoral system as well. So, by and large, what we see is that there were certain caste groups who dominated the political scene. In the first phase, that is during the 1952 to 1967 period.

In the second phase of the electoral system, that is, from 1967 to 1989, you will see the entry of the middle or the other backward classes into electoral politics. And it was during this time that we began to see the rise of regional parties or the rise of caste-based political parties such as the Samajwadi Party, the Janata Dal United, the RJD, and so on in many parts of India. Even in the southern states as well. So, the political mobilization of backward castes with statewide caste alliances challenged the otherwise dominance of Congress in national and state elections. Now, the mushrooming of these different political parties from the 1970s onwards also means that the one-party dominance or the dominance of Congress was getting challenged.

And these new political formations actually began to rule successfully, snatching power from Congress in many parts of India. This period was also marked by the articulation of state-wise demands and grievances, which also bolstered the opposition parties to put up a united front against Congress. The most prominent among them was the Janata Dal under the leadership of V. P. Singh. So, further, the disintegration of Janata Dal gave rise to regional political parties such as Biju Janata Dal and Rashtriya Janata Dal. Post-1989, the post-1990s period saw structural reforms in the economy and a simultaneous rise of coalition governments, arguably expanding electoral choices for the voters.

Now, till 1967, there was only one choice, basically the Congress. From 1967 to the 90s onwards, you see, you know, the mustering of different political parties all across the country. In the south, you have, you know, AIADMK. In the northern part of India, you have SP. J.D.U., and these political parties also suffer from fragmentation and splits because of different reasons. But the point is that the

electorals, the representatives that actually begin to have more choices in terms of who to vote.

So, therefore, you see the kind of political fragmentation that is happening, which resulted into a sea of change in India's politics. Now, in terms of political representation, mostly tribal representation in the parliament and state assemblies happens mostly through the route of the mainstream political parties. While tribal members have been elected from different areas, they have often formed a strong support base for specific parties. For a long time, the community supported the mainstream political parties such as the Indian National Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party, and some were also aligned with leftist parties. Tribal voices are also increasingly heard through regional political parties, including those formed by tribal communities themselves.

For instance, the Jharkhand Party is also one of the parties that actually emerged from within the community themselves. In the first general elections after independence, they won 25 out of 35 tribal-reserved seats in the Bihar Assembly. It also won five general seats and two reserved seats for the Scheduled Castes, becoming the main opposition party with 32 seats. Since the disintegration of the Jharkhand Party, tribal-led political parties have weakened, though in recent years there have been signs of revival, like the emergence of the Gondwana Prajatantrik Party. So, you see that, along with the sea of change in terms of the changing face of India's democracy in the last 70 years, the kind of political representation that tribes are getting has also changed in response to what is happening at the larger level.

So, initially, tribal communities mostly aligned themselves with national parties like Congress, the BJP, and also some left parties. But over a period of time, because of the kind of fragmentation we see in larger Indian politics, there also began to be a split within the communities in terms of their political loyalties and political allegiance. But at the same time, it is not that all the communities always supported national parties. Within certain states, in certain parts of India, there were already political formations with the establishment of political parties. Definitely, they are not national in nature, but they are quite influential in states where they are established.

So, an example of this is the Jharkhand Party, which successfully won 25 out of 35 tribal-reserved seats in the first general elections held after independence. Now, today also, there are a lot of new political parties that are formed by tribal communities not only in Jharkhand or in the northeastern part of India but also in states like Gujarat, in states like Rajasthan, or also in several states in different parts of India. However, in many parts of India, these political parties, which are formed essentially to cater to the interests of the communities, many times struggle to survive. But in the case of northeastern India, in some sense, it is quite different because of the demographic advantage that tribal communities have, probably for which regional political parties or tribal-based political parties remain a very predominant force in many states in the region. So, this is happening despite the fact that many of these parties have also split or changed politically.

However, even till today, if you look at the political landscape of northeastern India, you can see that many states in India are actually ruled by regional political parties. So, today in Meghalaya, we have a regional political party led by the Chief Minister Conrad Sangma. In Mizoram also, we have a regional party, which is the Zoram People's Movement, led by the CM Lalduhoma. In Nagaland also, we have always seen that, definitely, Congress and many other national political parties are very important. But you see that it is mostly ruled by regional political players, who are very important when it comes to the northeastern part of India.

So, before I conclude, what I wanted to do through this lecture is essentially to show that there are efforts not only to integrate tribal communities within the larger nation but also to integrate them within the larger political processes. And for this, in the constitution, we have specific provisions that grant reservations for tribal communities, where only people with certain tribal backgrounds can contest elections in certain reserved constituencies. Now, this is done to ensure that tribal communities are not fully marginalized in the democratic processes—marginalized in the sense that they have no representation. It is more or less trying to ensure that the groups also have representation at the national level and at the state level. Now, the kind of representation that tribal communities have is also not the same.

Essentially, because many tribal communities in India are very few in number, whether they are in the southern part, the northern part, or even the northeastern

part of India. Even if I say that tribal communities are dominant in many states in the northeastern part of India, if you look inside these states, you will see that they are very heterogeneous, with many tribal communities. Now, there are some communities whose populations are quite strong. By virtue of this, they are also politically very dominant. But there are some communities which are very small in terms of their demography, and thus, they have no political representation.

So, it is a very complex terrain, which one has to carefully analyze. But at the same time, at the broader level, what we see is that efforts have been made to ensure the political participation of these communities. And they also contribute significantly to the democratic process. So, I am going to stop here. In the next class, we will continue this lecture by trying to understand tribal communities and tribal politics. we will also do a case study to gain a more in-depth understanding of how tribes have engaged with India's democracy in the last 70 to 75 years.

Thank you so much.