

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

Lecture39

Lecture 39: Tribes in Post-Colonial India II : Tribal Politics and Political Parties V

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Good evening, everyone. Welcome back to the NPTEL online certification course, Tribal Studies in India, Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. Today, we will continue with where we left off in the last class, that is tribes in post-colonial India. And specifically, we are interested to understand the way in which tribal communities have engaged with democracy or participated in the formal political process. Now, in the last class, when we talked about the larger idea of democracy, all of us know that the very important element or essence of democracy is that it is a system of government where people elect their representatives.

Now, in India also, we have a very, very vibrant democracy, and social scientists in particular have approached and tried to understand India's democratic processes, its experience, the political trajectories, particularly in the post-independence period, and how India's democracy has brought about significant changes in the lives of its citizens. Now, it's not only Indian social scientists or social scientists in India who are interested in the study of democracy in India. Many, many political theorists, political scientists, sociologists, or social scientists at large are quite interested in understanding the nature, the working, and the kind of experiences... when it comes to democracy, particularly for a country like India, which is very, very diverse in terms of culture, in terms of language, region,

religion, so on and so forth. So in that spirit, it's not that, you know, everyone will equally experience democracy in the same way or everyone will have their own.

It's not that, you know, everyone will experience democracy in the same way, or it is not that the perspectives will be the same for everyone. Now, that is why it is important for us to understand how communities like tribes have specifically engaged with democratic processes in India. So, in the last class, we also looked at some conceptual foundations, some of the key conceptual issues pertaining to representation in India or representation in democracy. We have talked about two forms of representation, that is, substantive representation and descriptive representation. Now, in the case of India, all of us know that being a very diverse country with a lot of social hierarchies and stratifications, it becomes important to ensure that every citizen in India feels able to take part in the larger democratic processes.

One of the ways in which the Indian state has tried to achieve this is by granting every adult in India the right to vote. Another way in which it tries to ensure that every group and community feels a part of the same is by granting some kind of descriptive representation. Now, in the context of tribes, it is very important to understand how this process has unfolded in the last 50 to 60 years. So, in continuation of what we have studied in the last lecture, today we will try to explore more in-depth how tribal communities have engaged with democracy, the way in which they have tried to participate in the formal democratic processes by coming up with their own political parties. So, we will try to have a very broad overview of how different tribal communities in India have engaged with democracy.

And in the next lecture, we will be specifically looking at case studies. And I will be looking at the case of the Mizo Union in Mizoram. So, to understand tribal politics, I have been saying this quite a few times already in my lectures that it is really important to understand that tribal politics is integrally linked to the struggle for autonomy. And when I say struggle for autonomy, it can mostly be related to socio-political movements. And in the 19th century, or except those in the 19th century, most tribal struggles have focused on very specific issues.

And this has been especially true for movements led by national leaders, political parties, or interest groups. but on the other hand, when one looks at specific

tribal movements, then these movements try to address the broader concerns affecting the entire community and their way of life. Some of the most important movements that one cannot miss talking about when looking at the movements that happened in the past are the Kol Rebellion, the Santhal Revolt, and the Birsa Munda's movement. So, these are examples that actually highlight or that are evidence of how tribal communities have been engaged with different kinds of socio-political movements. But, however, broadly, much of these movements that we just talked about, like the Kol Rebellion, the Santhal Revolt, or the movement led by the very famous Birsa Munda, who has been significantly very popular even till today, his name continues to inspire many tribal communities in India.

So, primarily, the movements were mostly reactions to change, and they aimed to bring back the old tribal social order. So, movements like the Birsa Munda movement, for instance, you know, they have a very, very strong millenarian character, that is, they hope to restore a lost golden age. So, basically, this idea of going back to the old tribal social order essentially emanates out of the experience of alienation, emanates out of the exploitative relationships, you know, that came along with colonialism. So, the inspiration behind these different kinds of movements essentially was that they wanted to restore, you know, the lost golden age, essentially when the communities had autonomy over not only their resources, but also autonomy over their lives. Now, from the 1930s onwards, there began to, you know, some kind of change emerge in the nature of tribal movements, particularly from the late 1930s onwards.

And these movements are, you know, very, very specific in the sense that, you know, in terms of their objectives, they started demanding autonomy. And these were therefore not just about, you know, talking about the past, but they also, you know, were very futuristic in terms of the kind of visions that they had. So autonomy in a sense that in the post-colonial period, once the British leave India and India attains independence, what kind of political situation, what kind of political rights will the communities have in the post colonial kind of setup once the British left. Therefore, there is this very forward-looking vision that these movements evoke. Now, by and large, what these movements try to achieve is to reshape tribal society in a new way, and this was expressed through the demand for a separate state for tribal communities.

Now, more broadly, if one goes back to history, then we can say that the idea of tribal autonomy can be traced back to the 1930s and the 1910s onwards. And you will see that in places like Nagaland, there was the formation of the Naga Club. And in the Chottanagpur region, we have the Chottanagpur Unnati Samaj in Jharkhand. So, essentially, it was formed or established to safeguard tribal interests. So, for anyone who studied India's independence movement, the coming of the Simon Commission was a very important chapter in India's nationalist history or anti-colonial movements.

Now, when the Simon Commission visited India in the 1930s, tribal leaders from both Jharkhand and Nagaland raised the idea of separate states. However, there was a difference in their goals: whereas leaders from Jharkhand demanded a separate state within India, the Nagas, mostly in the northeastern part of India, wanted to be left alone. So after independence, these movements did not die down. They continued to gain strength and support from large sections of the tribal population. So in the case of the Nagas, the movement became violent.

- The idea of tribal autonomy can be traced back to the 1910s. During this time, the Naga Club in Nagaland and the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj in Jharkhand were formed to safeguard tribal interests.
- When the Simon Commission visited India, tribal leaders from both Jharkhand and Nagaland raised the idea of separate states. However, there was a difference in their goals—Jharkhand's leaders wanted a separate state within India, while the Nagas wanted to be left alone.
- After India became independent, these movements gained strength and support from large sections of the tribal population.



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And as a way to curb, you know, the movement or pacify the Nagas, in 1963, the first tribal state in India was formed in the form of the state of Nagaland. And whereas in the context of Jharkhand, the journey was almost like it was just about to begin. The Jharkhand movement saw very strong public support. In the first election held after independence, the Jharkhand Party won a significant number of seats in the Bihar Assembly and emerged as the main opposition party, which is quite a significant achievement for the party. So, this success can be attributed to the clear demand for a separate tribal state.

So, many times we think that tribal communities are apolitical. Tribal communities do not care much about politics or, by virtue of their geographical location, live in isolated areas, regions, or hilly areas. You know, it is difficult to reach for any outsiders. But on the contrary, what we see in the case of the Nagas and in the case of tribal communities in today's Jharkhand is that there was a strong political consciousness, and this political consciousness was articulated in the form of demanding autonomy. Now, in the post-independence period, when the State Reorganization Committee rejected the demand for a separate tribal state, the Jharkhand Party eventually broke into smaller groups, and the movement lost momentum for a while.

Now, what I wanted to also talk about a little bit—what I wanted to add here—is that in 1956, the State Reorganization Committee recommended that states in India be reorganized along linguistic lines. Andhra Pradesh was the first state to be formed along linguistic lines. But if you look at the case of Nagaland, the linguistic principle was never applied. It was more the principle of ethnicity that was being applied in the case of Nagaland. Now, whereas, in mainland parts of India, particularly with the demand for reorganization of states, which eventually resulted in the formation of new states, the first one being Andhra, followed by Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

So you will see that the tribal experience, even, is quite different. And the case of Nagaland is evident, an evidence to that. So despite the fact that the Jharkhand party did not really succeed in terms of the demand, there was a simmering tension or desire for a separate state, which continued to stay alive. And new organizations sprang up, such as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and the All Jharkhand Students Union. From the 1970s onwards, the movement became less focused on tribal identity and started to include the interests of other communities living in the region, particularly the non-tribals.

And this resulted in a significant momentum and impetus to the Jharkhand state movement. And eventually, as the movement grew, Jharkhand was given an autonomous regional council with some lawmaking and administrative powers. so, in the context of central india, the demand for a separate jharkhand state became a very important or significant political issue. And it was no longer possible for any national parties to ignore it. The pressure from elections and public opinion eventually led to the formation of the state of Jharkhand.

Compared to other reasons, the demand for autonomy by the tribal communities is very strong in the northeastern part of India. And in most cases, these movements are strongly supported by the vast majority of people. And many times, unlike popular belief, not every movement in the North East is violent. But there are a lot of non-violent movements. And most of these movements were also very, very peaceful.

Consequently, over a period of time, several new states, often called tribal states, were created in the northeast with autonomy provisions in the Sixth Schedule. Now, the reorganization of Northeastern states. On independence, there was only one state in the Northeast. That was Assam. And two princely states, mainly Manipur and Tripura.

By the early 1960s itself, Nagaland was carved out of Assam, so the formation of a tribal state occurred in 1963. And in 1972, Meghalaya was granted statehood, a separate state. And in 1987, Mizoram and Arunachal were granted separate statehood. So, you will see that the reorganization of the northeastern region, today we call it the Seven Sisters, essentially happened because of the demands for autonomy by tribal communities in the region. So, this is what I was narrating, that several states were formed, Meghalaya in 1972.

The hill state movement in Meghalaya began very strongly from the 1960s onwards, and it finally resulted in the formation of a separate state of Meghalaya in 1972. The states of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh were also formed in 1987, which was predominantly the outcome of large or long-running political struggles. Likewise, in many parts of India, there are a lot of movements, and not all the time do these movements succeed in terms of achieving their objectives. And this is quite evident in the case of some tribal communities such as the Gonds in Madhya Pradesh. Now, autonomy movements have also occurred in parts of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.

In southern Gujarat, some tribal communities call for more self-rule, essentially demanding more autonomy. Similarly, in the 1950s, there was also a demand for a separate Gondwana state for the Gonds in Madhya Pradesh. However, these movements did not become large or well-organized. So the issue here is that, you know, tribes were not silent political observers. They also had a strong

political consciousness of being a distinct community with a distinct identity, culture, and language.

And it's a different story that, you know, many times the kind of political aspirations articulated by the tribes were neglected. But it was something, you know, that was very much alive and present. And as you can see, demands like the separate Gondwana state for the Gond tribal communities, who are also one of the largest tribal communities in India. It's a different story that, you know, the movement did not materialize or achieve its objectives. But the point is that, you know, there were these kinds of political aspirations already articulated in the early 1950s.

So, who were the political actors in terms of articulating these political interests specifically coming from the tribal communities? So, therefore, there were a lot of political parties, you know, that were formed all over India. And like I said in my next lecture, we will be specifically looking at the case of the Mizo Union. And so over a period of time, India being a democratic country, the formation of political parties is a very important part or a very important chapter in the sense that, in that way, the communities feel that they are being represented. At the same time, they also feel that they have a stake and voice in the larger democratic processes.

so, movements demanding separate states for tribal communities have been mostly led by regional political groups that represented the hopes and needs of the people. These movements often started with the creation of organizations that later became political parties. Now, these political aspirations definitely emerged first as a kind of idea or aspiration. To translate them into reality, it becomes important that these communities establish their own political platforms. By which, the formation of political parties at times becomes inevitable.

So, therefore, the movement for statehood often or mostly starts with the creation of organizations which later on transform themselves into full-fledged political parties. Now, one of the efforts, one of the earlier such efforts, and we cannot miss or ignore talking about it, is the formation of Adivasi Mahasabha in 1938. Which brought together different tribal organizations, particularly in central India. In 1949, it was renamed as the Jharkhand Party, which demanded a separate state for the tribal population. Likewise, we have the Gondwana Adivasi Seva

Mandal, which began as a movement in the 1940s for a separate Gondwana state, but the State Reorganization Commission rejected both demands, which was a major setback for the communities.

Tribal Political Parties

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- One of the earliest such efforts was the formation of the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1938, which brought together different tribal organizations.
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However, in 1991, the movement gained new strength with the formation of the Gondwana Ganatantra Party. So, therefore, you will see that any movement, any social movement, any socio-political movement, has its ups and downs, right? And many times, you will see that not every movement realizes its objectives. Now, in the case of the tribal communities' aspirations for statehood, some communities are successful. For example, the Nagas.

To an extent, the Mizos, the Khasi, the Jaintia, and the Garos also. Today, you know, they have their own separate states. But there are also many other communities, tribal communities, even non-tribal communities, who are still fighting or claiming, who are still demanding the formation of separate states. In the region that is now Jharkhand, the Jharkhand Party and later the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha were the most influential tribal political groups. Based on different tribal identities, the Jharkhand Party, you know, got fragmented into smaller groups, and the JMM, founded in the 1970s, took its place and is active in regional politics even till today.

So, the Gondwana Prajatantrik Party also pushed for a separate Gondwana state and has shown signs of revival previously. Through participation in elections in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, its impact is still negligible. So, Gonds are also one of the, like I said, one of the largest tribal communities in India, but at the same time, they are also quite scattered geographically. But, so, therefore, one can understand why these communities also aspire to have their own state.

A more recent tribal party is the Bharatiya Tribal Party, which started in Gujarat in 2007 and has gained traction in parts of Rajasthan and Maharashtra.

Now, the BTP has managed to win a few seats in state elections but has not yet succeeded in national parliamentary elections. In Northeast India, when it comes to the northeastern part of India, we see that the formation of political parties picked up particularly after the independence period. Prior to this, there were organizations like the Naga Club, which was founded in 1918, and the Mizo Union—we will be talking about this in my later class—which voiced tribal concerns. And after independence, they converted themselves into stronger political movements. and elsewhere in the northeast, tribal political parties developed following autonomous movements in the hills during the late 1960s.

Now, the 1960s period is a very important period when it comes to the history of the northeastern region, essentially because it was during this time that so many things were happening in the northeast at once. One was that there was an attempt to impose Assamese as the official language in the entire region. And secondly, in states like today's Mizoram, there was a famine, and it resulted in the death of hundreds and hundreds of Mizos. Now, what it did was alienate so many people, and there was already anger and resentment against the attempt to impose Assamese as an official language. The other was that several other issues also happened, such as the one that I mentioned.

The famine in 1959 in Mizo hills in today's Mizoram alienated the vast majority of the Mizo population, and by which they began to demand a separate state for themselves. So, different political formations or different political organizations were established, and one of them was the All People's Hill Leaders Conference. It laid the foundation for today's states, such as Mizoram and Meghalaya, or other political formations like the Hill State People's Democratic Party. Now, the 1960s were a very important period in the northeastern part of India. Like I said, it was during this period that we saw tribal political parties from different parts of the region coming together and trying to raise their voice on a single political platform by demanding the formation of hill states.

So, at the same time, we continue to see the formation of different political parties in the region, such as the United Tribal Nationalist Front, Assam Tribal League, Tripura Upasati Juba Samiti, Tripura National Volunteers, and Naga

National Democratic Party, Nagaland People's Council, and Arunachal Pradesh People's Party. Now, in the northeast, you know, definitely national parties like Congress, the BJP, you know, and other political parties have a very, very strong presence. But then, at the same time, we always see that there is always the presence of strong regional political parties. Even till today, like in the last class also, I have said this, that many of the states in the region are being governed by regional political parties. so, therefore, when one talks about tribal politics, it is very important, you know, to really talk about or engage with different political parties, particularly those which were established to advance the cause of tribal communities in India.

- For example, the All People's Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) laid the foundation for parties in Mizoram and Meghalaya, such as the Hill State People's Democratic Party.
- Other parties followed in different northeastern states, like the United Tribal Nationalist Front, Assam Tribal Leagues, Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti, Tripura National Volunteers, Naga National Democratic Party, Nagaland People's Council, and Arunachal Pradesh People's Party.



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However, contrary to the expectations, the tribal communities in India lack adequate representation in political institutions as well as in the national political parties. Many a time, one can find it quite intriguing that communities which are not very strong in number or communities which do not have a lot of social capital or political capital, decide to form their own political parties. Now, one of the reasons why communities in the region, for example, in the northeast, decide to form their own political parties is that they did not find enough representation in the national platforms or national political parties, by which, you know, communities decide, you know, it is better to have their own political parties and raise their own issues and concerns. So, towards this, an argument is given by Ambagudia and Xaxa that the internal structure of political parties in India is largely guided by winning seats in the elections, and as such, the system is structured or designed in such a way that tribals find it extremely difficult to rise to positions of power and prominence. Now, if you look at the kind of leaders that

we have, you will see that it is very rare that we have someone from tribal backgrounds sitting at the top post.

There can be exceptions. I am not saying that, you know, we never had. But the point is that, by and large, the representation of tribal communities at the top posts in most political parties is something which is negligible. Further, based on the existing data, scholars have also put forth the argument that tribals have never been given proportionate representation in various ministries at the national level. One is that there is underrepresentation of tribes in terms of holding key positions in political parties.

Second is that there is also another side, which is underrepresentation in various ministries at the central level. In the contemporary period, one can also say that tribal political parties continue to emerge essentially because of dissatisfaction with how state and national political parties sideline or fail to address issues concerning tribes. For instance, in Kerala, we have the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS), which was formed to articulate tribal demands. Similarly, in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, the Bharat Jan Andolan or the Indian People's Movement was formed under the leadership of Dr. B.D. Sharma, which contributed to selecting ideal candidates for elections. Now, in states like Kerala, you see that it is many times a tussle between the Communist Party and the Congress Party.

and in between today, we see a new form of political mobilization happening where adivasis are gradually moving away from these two dominant political forces of the state by establishing their own political parties. So, like I said, these political parties are considered to be a way to assert themselves but also to claim political space. Another important issue raised by Ambagudia and Xaxa is how party affiliation is central to parliamentary democracy, which sometimes disadvantages ethnic-based tribal political parties while raising individual voices due to limited time allocation in parliamentary debates and also due to the lesser number of tribal parliamentarians. Now, in many states in the northeast, one may say that tribal communities are dominant there. But then, if you look at the number of representatives in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, for example, states like Mizoram have only one representative in the Lok Sabha and one in the Rajya Sabha.

By which, their voice becomes negligible, and they are also not given much time to speak out on issues concerning the state or the larger tribal communities. so therefore, in some sense, while they may be majority or dominant in their state, but when it comes to the national politics, then still, you know, tribal parliamentarians are still very much invisible. So, as such, due to the limited success of ethnic political parties, it appears that the future of tribal political parties lies not in the formation of various or different political parties, but in how effectively they place their issues and concerns in the larger discourse of democratic parties. Having said that, the core issues such as land, extraction of resources, marginalization, and human rights violations, among others, continue to govern contemporary tribal politics in India. So, through this lecture, what I wanted to essentially convey is how tribes have engaged with the larger democratic processes, and to understand that, it is important to talk about the different kinds of political formations that happened in the last 60 to 75 years.

And many a time we have this impression that by tribal communities living in isolation from the larger Indian society, many times they seem to be invisible in the mainstream democratic, mainstream politics. But from this lecture, what we essentially see is that the communities have actively participated in the democratic processes. And this participation is not only about casting votes, it is also about contributing by establishing their own political parties and articulating their political aspirations. and in many ways, it is not that all political articulations or aspirations are realized and met, but what we see is that many of these political movements by different political parties have been quite successful in terms of securing certain kinds of recognition and rights or in terms of advancing the cause of the tribal communities. Now, on the main, so today we see that one cannot but give credit to the different political mobilizations that happened in the past, which resulted in the formation of states like Meghalaya, Mizoram, and many other states like Jharkhand and all.

So, but we also see that this trend is still continuing, in the sense that we continue to see different forms of political mobilizations, not only in these states, but also in states like Kerala, Gujarat, Maharashtra, where you gradually see that tribes are also trying to claim the political space and articulate their political aspirations. So, with this, I am going to stop here. In the next class, we are going

to specifically look at the case of the Mizo Union, which is the first political party established in the state of Mizoram. Thank you so much.