TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

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Lecture44

Lecture 44: Social and Cultural Changes in Tribes

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies in India, Interdisciplinary Approaches and Perspectives. So today we are going to discuss the social and cultural changes in the tribes. The tribal populations that are inherently dynamic and mobile in their cultural, religious, regional, social, economic, as well as political expressions during the transitional periods have faced the imposition of fixed categories by the non-tribals who have tried to study them. And this process has been going on since the colonial and British administrative times, since the British, you know, formulated the different frameworks, administrative frameworks and also the pedagogy.
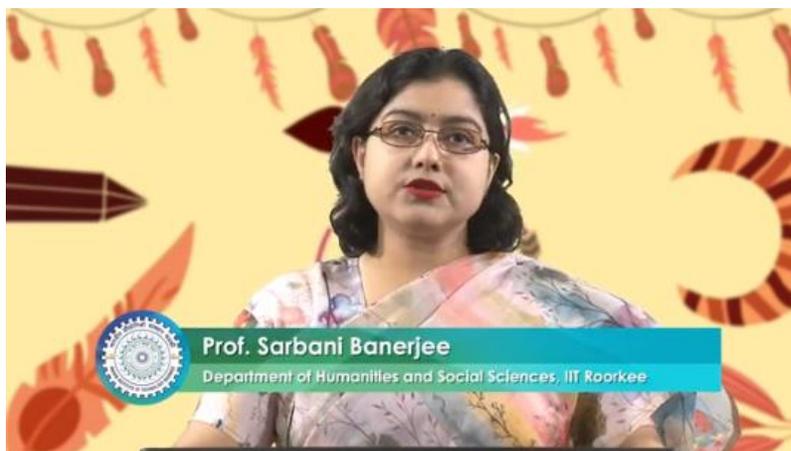
The epistemic violence through the Western viewpoint or the Western standpoint that the tribals have endured is something that we need to look at. So, since the colonial and British administrative frameworks were formulated, they were created the colonizers, the tribal populations have been suffering, you know, certain stereotypes that were imposed

on them. And they kind of stifled or They kind of put into pigeonhole their very many, their variegated cultural, religious, regional, social and political expressions.

So we were made to look at the tribes in a certain way thanks to these British administrative frameworks. So, according to scholar and critic Amrit Barla, the tribal people's historical reliance on hunting and gathering for sustenance, a practice that is dependent on environment variability and which embodies a survival of the fittest dynamic, but also an essentially shared community culture stands very much in contrast with the pervasive influence of globalization. So globalization is a trend. It's a wave that is, you know, originated from the West.

Its point of origin or its hub is the Western culture. On the other hand, we have these different indigenous groups. And here we are talking about the different tribal communities in India who are originally hunter-gatherers, They are deeply reliant on environmental variability. And they are a community-centric people, so they believe in an essentially shared community culture.

Introduction

- Tribal populations, inherently dynamic and mobile in their cultural, religious, regional, social, economic, and political expressions during transitional periods, faced the imposition of fixed categories under colonial and British administrative frameworks.

- According to Amrit Barla (2017), their historical reliance on hunting and gathering for sustenance, a practice dependent environmental variability and embodying a survival-of-the-fittest dynamic, but also an essentially shared community culture, stands in contrast to the pervasive influence of globalisation.

And these two ecosystems, these two worldviews are vastly different from one another. The tribal people's traditional modes of subsistence are intrinsically linked to the natural resources. So they consider the water, forests and land as the sustainer or the sources, the resources that, you know, uphold their life and lifestyle. So they are deeply dependent on the natural resources, the different aspects of nature to the extent that they worship these different aspects of nature as demigods or smaller deities. The tribes are characterized by animistic religious beliefs and a strong internal cohesion that is evidenced in communal living and shared customary practices.

Introduction

- Their traditional modes of subsistence are intrinsically linked to natural resources (water, forests, and land).

- Characterised by animistic religious beliefs and a strong internal cohesion evidenced in communal living and shared customary practices, these groups have historically displayed a limited emphasis on individual competition for social, economic, political, cultural, or occupational advancement.

- Furthermore, they have often experienced systemic disadvantages in access to education, health, sanitation, and awareness of capital, mainstream social relations, and government initiatives.

And so these groups have historically displayed a very limited emphasis on individual competition for social, economic, political, cultural or occupational advancement. So here at this point I would like to talk a little about the tribal village system. My own study is focused on the Santhali people from the eastern states of India. chiefly from Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal. And here I have seen, I have been told when I interviewed the Santhali people, the Santhals, that their marriages, their birth ceremonies or any such special occasions would entail

you know, inviting the entire village. So the entire village as a unit, as a family. So they have this hunting festival that is held on the full moon day in the month of spring, where Santhans from different regions gather in the Ayodhya mountain And they have a number of rituals associated with the hunting practice. And they have a number of rituals associated with the hunting practice.

And if anyone is able to catch a game, to hunt a game, it is not taken back to his own family. It is shared with the other members of the village. Right. The first share goes to

the priest or the Nike and the remaining is shared in a fair manner among the rest of the villages. So there is no concept of selfishness or self-centered attitude.

towards life. Festivals are meant for everyone. It is customary to invite the entire village. And there are festivals that are carried out where, you know, rice and other provisions, other grains are collected from each and every household in a village. It is gathered and food is cooked for everyone together.

So all I'm trying to say is the concept of individual competition. competition at the social or economic level does not arise. It's not existent. It's not inherent to the socio-political system that constitutes a tribal village. And this is a concept that is coming directly from the West.

For one's own advancement, for one's own development, one ought to, you know, suppress or disadvantage the other. This concept is very much Western. It has never been a part of the indigenous system. Furthermore, the tribals have often experienced, you know, systematic disadvantages while getting access to education, health. sanitation and their awareness of capital, you know, how capital market works, how capital flows, as well as the mainstream social relations and the government initiatives remain vastly limited.

So, they have still remained at the fringes of a society where the benefits of mainstream education, health or even understanding of capital flow of government policies have just trickled to some areas, some of the tribal areas, whereas the larger population remain ignorant vis-a-vis these issues. So globalization as a contemporary phenomenon acts as a significant catalyst for social as well as cultural changes that are brought about within tribal societies. And this phenomenon is informed by the legacies of colonial

categorization. and reshaping of the traditional modes of life and identity in complex and multifaceted ways. So globalization has impacted the tribal communities, the different tribal communities existent in Indian society in very different ways.

Barla would further observe that, situated as a social category distinct from the non-tribals or the mainstream communities. And also very different from the Hindu Varna model, the Hindu caste system model, the tribal populations are frequently marked or identified by their geographical isolation and social exclusion. With the concentration of this population living mainly in the hilly and mountainous terrains. So what we understand is that their geographical distance from the mainstream Indian society, the mainland Indian culture, is symbolic of their cultural distance and the kind of knowledge gap with respect to the different institutions, with respect to the different social practices that exist in tribal and non-tribal societies, making these people markedly different.

You know, their everyday experiences, their day-to-day lifestyles are very different from the mainland Indian culture. Right. So all we are trying to understand here is that the model that British anthropological, you know, epistemic framework has offered us, may not always be adequate for understanding the tribal population. They could be something more complex, more nuanced than what these anthropological approaches have to say about them.

Because, like I said, they're geographically distanced, and their cultures are very different. Their rituals are very different. Their world system is vastly different from the non-tribals, from the mainland society. So there ought to be a fresh approach, a fresh outlook toward understanding the tribes. Nonetheless, we see that the tribal societies in themselves have never been static, and significant transformations are evident in their cultural, customary, traditional, religious, economic, as well as political spheres.

These societies, unlike what we commonly believe, have also evolved in dialogue with the larger happenings in the nation. Tribal societies are not insulated ecosystems. They do engage in dialogue with the larger schemes, with the larger happenings taking place in the nation. Since British times, we see a number of anti-colonial struggles that have been initiated from among these societies.

in resistance to the different British moves, the different British policies. Even in post-colonial times, the tribal communities in contact with non-tribal societies have changed. They have influenced their adjacent cultures as well as been influenced by these cultures. They are certainly not a static people. They are also evolving, growing, and metamorphosing, mutating over time.

So the very conceptualization of this term 'tribe' we need to understand. Tribe as a concept is subject to significant semantic as well as political shifts. Evident in this dynamism or this complexity is its manifestation as a colonial category, a globally recognized identity of indigenous peoples, as well as a self-asserted form of representation in India as Adivasi, although we need to understand And take note that the tribal communities in the northeastern region do not call themselves Adivasi. So there is this problem of nomenclature, we may call it.

Tribe, when we say tribe as a concept or as a coinage, it happened mainly during British times. It is a political category. When we call a people a tribe, We are referring mainly to their political representation, their political rights as legitimate members of the Indian nation-state. So here we are talking about their political entity.

Indigenous people—that talks about their provenance, their origin in India, their roots, and their history. And indigenous is a more generic term that is used across the globe for

all tribal populations or all people who are part of different tribal communities. They call themselves indigenous. And the term Adivasi is a self-asserted form of representation. Tribal people from different regions actually tend to call themselves Adivasi.

Adivasi, once again, when translated to English, would be something proximate to indigenous, right? There is another term yet that is in vogue these days, a term called Janjati. But a lot of tribal groups that I have spoken to are not very happy about this term because, according to them, it represents them differently. as forest dwellers. So Janjati directly describes them as forest dwellers, and it may not be correct in all cases, especially for the urban population, for people who have taken up

Different kinds of jobs, they have a different kind of life, which does not adhere exactly to the traditional ways of, you know, traditional tribal modes of existence. So Janjati, once again, according to the tribal populations, is a contested term. So we have all these different terms and terminologies to describe, to refer to these tribal groups. But they have their own baggage, they have their own significations and their own suggestions. Further, we see that the Indian Constitution formally designates the social category as scheduled tribes or scheduled tribes, thereby highlighting the multifaceted and historically contingent nature of this nomenclature.

So, like I was saying, this coinage 'tribe' happened historically. During the time of British colonization in India. And it refers to the tribal people as claimants of certain rights, as legitimate citizens, as a part of the Indian nation-state as legitimate members of the Indian nation-state and claimants of certain rights, claimants of certain benefits and welfarist schemes. So here by tribe, by scheduled tribe, what we understand the signification is in terms of a people's, a community's rights.

As well as their visibility, their claims, their political membership, and their need for political representation in government systems to articulate their demands. So the question of rights and demands is intrinsic to the category termed as scheduled tribes. Barla also highlights the different phases that the tribal communities in India have gone through. This analysis posits three phases of tribal transition in India. So first is the formative pre-independence phase that lasted between 1784 to 1990, which characterized the tribes as geographically isolated,

Subsistence-based societies are often perceived by outsiders as barbarous or barbaric due to their collective ownership and practices of Jhum cultivation, where they basically burn the crops. And next. We have the constructive period. The second phase comprises the

constructive period, lasting between 1920 and 1940, which witnessed academic as well as institutional efforts to define the tribe as a distinct social and colonial category, coinciding with a shift towards more settled rural life and initial contact with mainstream Hindu society. which leads once again to certain stereotypes, such as a prominent scholar like G.S.

Phases of Social Changes

- The constructive period (1920-1940) witnessed academic and institutional efforts to define "tribe" as a distinct social and colonial category, coinciding with a shift towards more settled rural life and initial contact with mainstream Hindu society, leading to G. S. Ghurye's conceptualisation of tribes as "backward Hindus."

- The analytical phase (post-1950) involves government and agency-led action-oriented approaches, marked by the contrasting policies of isolation and assimilation, alongside protective, mobilizational, and developmental measures, resulting in increased tribal mobility, education, individualism, and integration into mainstream society.

Ghurye conceptualizing the tribes as backward Hindus. So the tribes are being defined through the parameters of the Hindu social system. They are seen as Very erroneously, they have often been seen as the lowest rung of the Hindu social order, the backward Hindus, as G.S. Ghurye defines them.

Subsequently, post-1950, we have the analytical phase, which involves government and agency-led action-oriented approaches towards these tribes. marked by the contrasting policies of isolation as well as assimilation alongside protective, mobilizational, and developmental measures, which result in increased tribal mobility, education, individualism, and integration into mainstream society. If we talk in very plain words about these three phases, in the first phase, when they were hunter-gatherers, they were seen as barbaric people who lived their own isolated, you know, world system, which is a very remote and insulated order apart from the mainland culture of India. The next phase, where they are becoming a settler culture, they are often, you know, engulfed or absorbed within the Hindu social order and mistakenly, fallaciously seen as backward Hindus.

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And then the real essence of the term 'tribe' emerges only post-1950s through the analytical phase where they are claimants of, you know, their different rights. The mobilization is happening in a more significant manner; there are developmental measures reaching out to at least some sections of these populations, and there are protective measures which lead to a rise in education, a rise in development, and integration of the tribal people into mainstream society. So, social mobility—when we talk of social mobility—it refers to the transformations within an existing social structure that are aimed at attaining improved circumstances encompassing the sociocultural, occupational, and other dimensions. In the Indian context, the hierarchical caste system facilitates the upward mobility of the lower strata through the adoption of various culturally specific mechanisms. This mobility is often characterized as ritualistic rather than driven by factors such as industrialization and westernization.

So, in other words, in India, there are so many different scholarly works that subscribe to this idea, which have observed that when a Dalit—when anyone from the lowest rung of the Hindu order— or maybe even the Muslim or Christian orders— within the South Asian context, we would say that the caste system as a prevalent practice exists not only among Hindus but also among Muslims and, to some extent, among Christians. And the process of social mobility—upward mobility from the lowest rung—happens through the adoption of upper-caste behavior. So, the Brahminization of the people who have traditionally belonged to the lowest rank occurs when they start adopting the cultural codes of behavior; they actually internalize the more conservative practices and rituals observed among the Brahmins, the upper castes.

They become socially mobilized. They escalate the ladder of caste, right? And so, it is this social mobilization—this social escalation—that happens through an evaluation and a

change perceived in a very traditional sense, in a more... you know, through more traditional parameters rather than through factors, you know, such as industrialization and westernization that have been borrowed from the West. This social mobility that we are talking about here happens through following the traditional benchmarks, the traditional parameters, rather than the Western parameters.

Ultimately, the fundamental impetus behind social mobility is the pursuit of enhanced opportunities for social elevation and the attainment of corresponding status positions. So, behaving like an upper caste enables one to gain similar prestige in society as an upper caste—as simple as that. And a lot of people from the lower rung of Hindu society have tried, you know, adopting such means toward attaining social mobility. So, while often perceived as less susceptible to change and historically isolated, we see that the tribal communities in India face significant limitations and constraints in terms of social mobility, and they experience differential rates of social transformation when compared to non-tribal populations.

In other words, the reason, the process, as well as the consequence of social transformation in any given tribal community may be very different from the others, right? The way one tribal society or community evolves is very different from another. This is also owing to the mainland political climate. The, you know, the linguistic dynamics, the cultural dynamics, the way social institutions work in a certain region—all these factors, all these determinants, you know, shape a tribal community's evolution, its changes, and transformations.

So, I'll give an example. The Santal community—once again, the community that I have studied through my field visits— shows a very different trajectory of transformation or evolution in the three states of Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. Because the political climate, the regional dynamics, the social institutions, and the role of mainstream or institutionalized religions in these three states are very different.

So the local political climate, the local factors become very important. The regional factors become very important towards, you know, determining how a tribal community works. will transform or how it will metamorphose to embrace the larger happenings. So the tribal people's positioning within lower social strata in certain regions often prompts the members of tribal communities to engage in cultural imitation of upper caste groups as an adaptive mechanism. as a mechanism, as a defense mechanism almost to navigate the social hierarchy and seek upward mobility.

And this would in turn influence their initial sociocultural standing. Like I have already explained, the tribes have time and again been seen as the lowest caste in the Hindu

order, very wrongly so. And as a way of defending that, as a way of evading that, some members from the tribal communities seek to emulate the upper caste manners and mannerisms and their rituals and their practices and habits. in order to navigate the social hierarchy and seek upward mobility.

So, migrant members of the Santal community exhibit a significant degree of cultural assimilation as has been evidenced by practices such as the worship of the Tulsi plant, and adherence with the Hindu ritual calendar. So, once again, an anecdote from my own field visit. I have been to different villages in the Jharkhand state, the Jharkhand state in India, and the villages whose households, you know, beard the cross, you know, symbolizing Christianity. They would tell me in interview, very interestingly, that our religion is Christianity.

Or sometimes they would say in other parts of Jharkhand, they would say that our religion is Hindu. So we are not different from the Hindus, but our jati is Santal. So the way these people have been shaped is very intriguing—in fact, very complex, very

intriguing—and it's very important to study further what has gone into shaping them thus, into saying that their religion is Hinduism or Christianity. But their jati is, you know, Santal, or they are Santali people in terms of jati. Right.

Social Mobility
- Migrant members of the Santhal community exhibit a significant degree of cultural assimilation, evidenced by practices such as the worship of the *Tulsi* herb and adherence with the Hindu ritual calendar.
- Similarly, the pastoral Toda community demonstrates functional integration within the Hindu religious sphere through their provision of milk products for temple services.
- This integration is accompanied by the adoption of purity observances related to their traditional pastoral practices, such as the exclusion of menstruating women from buffalo sheds and the preparation of milk products intended for temple use.

Similarly, we see the pastoral Toda community demonstrates functional integration within the Hindu religious sphere through their provision of milk products for temple services. So just like the Hindus have a common practice of using milk as a very pure, you know, substance to be offered to God. The Toda community has also started demonstrating similar rituals because they have stayed in contact with the Hindus for a long time. Such integration is accompanied by the adoption of purity observances related to their traditional pastoral practices. Such as the exclusion of menstruating women from buffalo sheds and the preparation of milk products that are intended for temple use.

So these, you know, tribal communities—originally tribal communities—have been Hinduized, adopting the lens of purity and impurity. Right. The fact that products to be used in the temple are, you know, to be the purest products or substances, and menstruating women should abstain from touching these pure places or pure products. This is a lens that has been essentially borrowed from, you know, the Hindu religious practices. So the interaction between Hindu and tribal communities has therefore resulted in instances of reciprocal cultural influence.

For example, the Khasas from Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh and the non-tribal communities in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh have adopted tribal cultural norms and morals. So here we see the converse. The non-tribal people who are living close to the tribal societies such as the Khasas from Uttar UP and MP, as well as the non-tribal communities in the Basta region of Chhattisgarh, all these regions being predominantly

tribal, the non-tribals adopt the tribal cultural norms and morals. Even their way of speaking, even their languages are deeply influenced by the tribal tongue.

So, D. N. Majumdar's study of the gops from Singhbhum incorporating the whole culture is presented as a case of transculturation which underscores the mutual exchange and integration of cultural elements between the tribal and the non-tribal groups. So, Majumder looks at how the gops from Singhbhumi have incorporated the tribal culture and he calls it as a transcultural phenomenon, transculturation. Critics such as Vinita Damodaran have visited or rather revisited the myth that the negative aspects of the Santali society are completely because of the missionizing and the colonial influence. So colonial influence did not only leave, you know, negative impact on the tribes in their trail. Whereas some of the British writings have indeed drawn rigid boundaries while defining the discourse on tribes, not all works written by

The British anthropologists or ethnographers are homogeneously imperialistic and some of these works, in fact, argue against Europe's arrogant ethnocentrism. For example, the tribal has been perceived as as a cultural being also and British writings look at them as active agent of his own future. So, the tribal man as the active agent of his own future is also a depiction that we find in the colonial writings. In the aftermath of the Santal rebellion, British administrators, missionaries and ethnologists

have expressed humanitarian sentiments and mentioned the moneylenders and the landlords living in the abetting regions, living close to the tribes as the actual exploiters of the Santali people. And this we can see in the Hazaribagh district collectorate records. So J. Troasi's study argues that in some regions, the Adivasis have started worshipping Hindu deities and their own festivals such as the Chhata, Pata, and Jatra. All these festivals are, you know, believed to have Hindu roots. They originally have Hindu roots.

Social Mobility

- J. Troisi's study argues that in some regions the adivasis worship Hindu deities, and their festivals such as Chata, Pata and Jatra are also believed to have Hindu roots.

- In this regard, Shashank Sinha observes that although some tribes continue to practice their specific rituals, traditions, religion and taboos, most of them have become sufficiently Hinduised or Christianised over a period of time (Sinha, "Adivasis" 112).

In this regard, Shashank Sinha observes that although some tribes continue to practice their specific rituals, traditions, religions, and taboos, most of them have sufficiently become Hinduized or Christianized over a period of time. So to conclude, the discussion highlights the complex and dynamic interplay of social and cultural changes within and between the tribal and non-tribal communities in India. Initially characterized by relative isolation, distinct traditions, and often conflated with a lower social status, the tribal societies have undergone significant transformations due to factors such as globalization, development-induced displacement, migration, and contact with the mainstream society, mainstream non-tribal society. All these factors have led to instances of both cultural assimilation, for example, the Santhals adopting Hindu practices, as well as the adoption of tribal cultural elements by the Hindu communities, as in the case of the Khasas and the Gopas.

Conclusion

- The discussion highlights the complex and dynamic interplay of social and cultural changes within and between tribal and non-tribal communities in India. Initially characterized by relative isolation, distinct traditions, and often lower social status, tribal societies have undergone significant transformations due to factors like globalization, development-induced displacement, migration, and contact with mainstream society.

- This has led to instances of both cultural assimilation (e.g., Santhals adopting Hindu practices) and the adoption of tribal cultural elements by Hindu communities (e.g., Khasas, Gops).

So social mobility among the tribes remains a challenge, often lagging behind non-tribal groups and prompting some of the tribal communities to start imitating or emulating the upper-caste cultures as a means of social movement. However, the very definition and categorization of tribe itself is fluid and contested, ranging from colonial classifications to self-proclaimed identities such as Adivasi, as well as a constitutional term emerging from it, such as scheduled tribe, which has the suggestions of rights, claims, and need for protection intrinsically associated with it. So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let us meet with a new topic and another round of discussion in our next lecture.

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Thank you.