

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

Lecture45

Lecture 45: Tribal Middle Class

Thank you. Good evening, everyone. Welcome back to the NPTEL online certification course, Tribal Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. Today, we are going to do our lecture number 45 on Tribal Middle Class. Now, this is a very important topic, particularly for those of us who are in the discipline of social science.

As we know, the question of tribal studies has always been understood largely in the context of tribes as an isolated, backward community. But then, over the last 60 to 75 years, we have seen that tribal communities have undergone significant socioeconomic transformation. And this transformation was enabled by the formation of a new kind of social group within the communities. And that is essentially the emergence and the formation of the middle class within tribal communities. Now, the study of tribal communities or the study of Indian society or the study of communities as such, particularly when one looks at disciplines like sociology, you will see that the question of class is very important.

If one goes back to the pioneers of sociology like Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, you will see that they have engaged with the question of class. And that engagement with the question of class primarily comes from the kind of socioeconomic transformation that human societies have witnessed in the last 200 to 300 years, particularly with the onset of the Industrial Revolution and then subsequently the emergence of capitalism, and so on. In the context of India also, the study of the middle class—who are the middle class, what kind of aspirations do they have, and what kind of social backgrounds do they belong to—continues to occupy a very important field within the discipline of sociology, anthropology, and political science. And the middle class plays a very, very pivotal role in terms of nation-building and in terms of economic growth, urbanisation, infrastructural development, and occupational social mobility. So

understanding the middle class opens up a lot of things for us to understand how community experiences change, but also in terms of trying to understand the kind of change, or who are the actors who actually led the kind of change that we see in society.

Now, unfortunately, when one talks about the middle class or the study of the middle class, it has rarely been studied in the context of tribal society. But through this lecture, what we will try to do is see how the formation of the tribal middle class has been very important, not only in terms of the middle class as a new economic category within the communities, but also in terms of how the middle class within tribal communities has played a very important role in terms of asserting their identities, in terms of pushing some socio-economic interests or political interests pertaining to the communities. Now, before I go into the details of my lecture, I would also like to give some very preliminary remarks in terms of the middle class in India. Now, in India, we know that when we use the term 'class,' the first thing that comes to mind is that we are using 'class' more in the context of an economic category. Now, in that sense, a very simplistic but useful way of categorization that one can do, particularly in the context of India, is class.

Understanding the middle class in the pre-reform period—that is, the economic reforms—and understanding the middle class in the post-economic reforms period. Now, if one goes back to the pre-economic reforms period, that is, before the 1990s, you will see that the middle class primarily comes from those working in public sector undertakings, basically government employees. And also some affluent communities in terms of the landowning class, the landowning caste, or even successful businessmen. So in that sense, the middle class in the pre-reform period was very narrow. But in the context of the post-reform period, we began to see that the middle class widened its social base.

Now, essentially because of the kind of socio-economic transformation that India has witnessed in the post-reform period. Now, in the context of tribes, it is also important to understand that the middle class as a category within tribal society is not a static category. Who are the middle class? What are the kinds of aspirations that they have? What are the kinds of political assertions that they make?

It varies, you know, from region to region, from community to community. So economically, if one looks at, who are the middle class, it's very difficult to actually define who the middle class are. But in India, we use this very broad definition of defining the middle class as people who earn an income of rupees 5 to rupees 30 lakhs. Today in India, about 25% to 30% of India's population constitutes the middle class. The middle class is a very important class when one talks about any society or any country like India.

So, to come to our lecture, the terms 'class' and 'tribe' are contradictory, and it is important to spell out why these two terms are contradictory. So tribes are mostly perceived to have a homogeneous social and economic life, which is based on kinship, clans, or they lack any kind of social differentiation in hierarchy. Now, if you look at the social organization of tribal society, it is largely organized very horizontally, in a sense that tribal communities do not always organize themselves in a very hierarchical manner, and their social and economic diversification has undergone significant transformation, which raises questions about their categorization as tribes. Now, like I said, the idea of tribal communities has also undergone significant transformation. In the past, the communities were pretty much very homogeneous, and there was a lack of social differentiation.

But over a period of time, with the kind of socio-economic transformation the country as a whole is witnessing, even tribal communities are not excluded from that kind of transformation. In that kind of context, what happened is that, you know, it necessitates studying the question of class formation in tribal society. Now, by and large, like I said, when one talks about the question of class, one has to go back to the development of capitalism, the coming of the Industrial Revolution, and so on and so forth. And it was the emergence of a capitalistic economy or the establishment of a capitalistic economy that began to divide society on the basis of the means of production—basically, those who own the means of production and those who do not. And this very capitalist system created a distinction between producers who generated surplus value and those who did not.

Now, many social scientists make categorizations on the basis of who owns the means of production. For example, Marx categorized them as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. And likewise, Weber also made such distinctions in terms of

the status or the rank of a community. However, the middle class as a category has been defined based on two key factors. One is the ownership of the means of production—whether they own land, factories, or industries.

And the production of surplus value. So, based on this very broad understanding, there can probably be four distinct categories in which one can segregate who constitutes the middle class. The first is those who own the means of production and produce surplus value—that is, the petty bourgeoisie. The second is those who own but do not produce surplus value—that is the bourgeois. The third is those who do not own but produce surplus value—the proletariat.

The fourth is those who neither own nor produce surplus value. The middle class most of the time is placed in the first and the fourth categories—basically, those who own the means of production, maybe in terms of land or factories, and those who neither own nor produce surplus value. So, like I said, the middle class is a very fuzzy category. Some of them can be employed in the corporate sector. Some of them can be employed in the government sector.

Some of them can be self-employed. A very successful businessman. Some of them can engage in different kinds of economic ventures. So, it is a class category. It is an occupational category.

It is an economic category. But then it is also very loose in terms of its definitions. Now, in terms of self-employment, the middle class is associated with social differentiation within society. At the top are those who own the means of production and earn income in the form of profit from the sale of the product. At the bottom are those who earn their wages by selling their labor.

And those who fall in between these two are identified as the middle class. Now, this is another way of identifying or categorizing who constitutes the middle class. And most of the time, when we talk about class as an economic category, Most of the time we fall back to the kind of distinction that Marx has made in terms of people who own the means of production and people who sell their labor to survive, basically the working class. Now, a very broad distinction in terms of the old middle class and the new middle class, in the old middle class, we have manufacturers, shopkeepers, artisans, independent farmers, peasants, managers, technocrats, and professionals.

In the context of the new middle class, you will see intellectuals, that is, the non-manual laborers, rather than manual labor, reflected in work, pay, and working conditions. The middle class shares features of land and capital on the one hand and labor on the other, but does not possess land and capital nor perform manual labor. Now, at the start of my lecture, when I was narrating the idea of class or the idea of the middle class, particularly in the context of India, I made this distinction between the pre-reform period and the post-reform period. Now, that kind of distinction becomes helpful when we look at this categorization of the old middle class and the new middle class. Now, in the context of the old middle class, if you look back at what India was like in the pre-1990s period, you will see that the middle class primarily comes from people who own land.

Old Middle Class	New Middle Class
Consists of manufacturers, shopkeepers, artisans, independent farmers/peasants, managers, technocrats, professionals, engineers, educators and white-collar office workers.	Consists of intellectual (non-manual) rather than manual labour, reflected in work, pay and working conditions.
Shares features of land and capital, on the one hand and labour, on the other.	Does not possess land and capital nor performs manual labour.



Or people who come from those engaged in manufacturing, who are shopkeepers, basically, businessmen. But at the same time, there are also successful professionals, technocrats, engineers, teachers, professors, and so on. But in the case of the post-reform period, we began to see a different kind of middle class, one that is far more aspirational and ambitious. And many times, they are no longer interested in owning vast amounts of agricultural land. They are mostly surviving, living off their wages.

The kind of new middle class that we see with the information technology boom is a very good example of how the changing character of the middle class in India is also reflected by the kind of distinctions that we have here. So, in the context of the tribal middle class, now, at the broader level, we can see that there is a clear trajectory in terms of how one can define the middle class at the national level. But in the context of tribal communities, how does this happen?

Who are the middle class? And what is the process of the emergence of the middle class in tribal society?

Now, as I said, most tribal societies in the pre-colonial period, in particular, definitely had social differentiations. But these social differentiations are not always very rigid. These social differentiations are not always very hierarchical. But over time, with the arrival of the British, the introduction of modern education, and the various new systems of governance introduced by the colonial state resulted in the formation of a new class within tribal society, which also means that social differentiation began to seep into tribal communities. Now, we will try to examine how this process of middle-class formation has taken place, particularly in the context of tribal communities.

A very important starting point is colonial rule. So, with the advancement of British rule in India, the system of private property and landlordism was introduced in tribal areas, granting ownership rights over land and other resources to former kings, chiefs, and revenue collectors. As a result, the original landowners became tenants, forced to pay high rents as landlords passed on heavy revenue demands to them. Unable to pay rent, tribals were often evicted from their land. Now, the outcome of this was the marginalization of tribal communities and the emergence of landlessness, or what we can call the proletarianization within tribal society.

Colonial rule in India affected all aspects of life, whether social, cultural, economic, or political. But if you look at the impact, its effects continue to be felt and seen in every society and community. Now, in the context of tribal society, the impact was very profound, evident in the way the British altered property relations and economic structures in tribal society. Now, in many parts of India, while there are many social differences in terms of identity, belonging, religion, and culture within and across tribes, most tribal communities often share a similar pattern or form of economic organization, primarily following a communal system of land ownership. Now, with the arrival of British rule, the British imposed a new system of economic relations through changes in land ownership.

Private property and landlordism. And in the process, what happened is that the actual landowners became tenants or the actual landowners were displaced. And this resulted in the dispossession of tribal communities, by which they became

landless or, as today, most often we call it, the proletarianization of tribes. This proletarianization of tribal communities was mainly caused by outsiders such as traders, moneylenders, and colonial officials taking over tribal lands rather than by internal class divisions within them. So, in the last lectures, we have always talked about one issue which is very pertinent when we study tribal communities: the question of land.

Land is very central to their identity, to their belief system, to their culture. Now, the colonial system disrupted the kind of socio-cultural relations that tribes had with land. This disruption has created far-reaching implications in tribal societies. So they were torn from their land, displaced and uprooted, and were either employed as wage earners by landlords or in establishments run by traders and moneylenders. With this, the demand for labour also increased, which was not only filled by the proletarianized labour alone but also by workers who self-employed themselves on their farms.

Now, you can see that a good example of this process of uprooting and displacing tribal communities is the tea tribes in today's Assam. These tea tribes were uprooted from their lands and involuntarily taken to Assam to work in tea plantations. And they belong to Santhal, Oraon, and many other tribal communities who live in Jharkhand, Bengal, and Chhattisgarh region. So, basically, the demand for labour in tea plantations resulted in not only the dispossession but also the involuntary displacement of tribal communities to different parts of the country. Now, the first tribal middle class was composed of these self-employed labourers, and this class emerged in contrast to the process of proletarianization.

The new administrative legal system and new economic enterprises led to the proletarianization but also paved the way for the emergence of the middle class in tribal society. Basically, this juncture that the new economic relations created by the colonial state unintentionally resulted in the formation of a new class in tribal society in the form of the communities taking up new economic ventures. Proletarianization process was restricted to mainland India and was absent in the tribal societies of northeast India. Over there, the process of social differentiation and equality among tribals was based on religion and modern education. Now, by and large, the kind of disposition, the kind of uprooted, the kind of dislocation that I narrated was mostly confined to mainland India.

Whereas in the northeast India, which has a very strong tribal population, this process of disposition, this process of proletarianization was minimal essentially because the tribal communities in the northeastern part of India were not denied of their rights over their resources. So their rights over their land, their forest, their water remains with them even during the colonial period. The coming of the Christian missionaries in the region, particularly in the northeast, the subsequent proselytization, and access to modern education opened up new employment avenues in the form of religious workers and instructors and later as school teachers and office assistants in institutions. This new employment was not only a source of income but also a new basis of social status in society. Now, the colonial state, like I said, introduced many things.

They cannot just govern, colonize a colony by themselves. So, they need to create a new set of administrations. They need to create a new set of educated classes who will help in the everyday affairs of the colonial state now, so they need basically skilled, educated workers, which in turn opens up new avenues of employment for the colonized now; in the case of tribal society, this is exactly what happened. In the sense that the colonial state instituted different administrative systems of governance, which in turn opened up different avenues for employment. And they were not only a new source of income.

There was not only economic diversification, but also these people began to be seen or occupy a higher social status within the society. So the older tribal middle class emerged by default as a phenomenon of self-employment along with the process of tribal colonization. However, the older middle class which involved the self-employed and land-owning category as well as marginal farmers started to erode in post-independence era as they started supplementing their income to labor and ancillary activities. A more important point is that the new middle class in tribal society. So, in tribal society also, like any other society, there was this diversification of the social base of the middle class.

Now, a very important aspect or a very important class within the tribal society today is the educated class. And this educated class resulted into a new kind of social differentiation in tribal society, which the communities have not witnessed for a long time. So, the new middle class was different and associated with modern education. Tribal society did not have a tradition of reading and writing. But modern education among tribal communities initiated by missionaries in

different parts paved the way for the emergence of new occupations which were absent before in tribal society.

So if you look at this, it is very, very evident in the northeastern part of India or in many parts of India where the colonial state opened new schools and new health centres. And by virtue of which, there are sections of the population who began to be educated, who began to access the kind of new services that were made available by the colonial state. What resulted was that many people no longer live off the land. They began to move away from agriculture, take up new occupations, and engage in different kinds of economic activities. This particular group, although they were very small and very tiny during the colonial period, emerged as a very, very strong force, particularly from the 1940s onwards.

And their role cannot be undermined in terms of their articulation, in terms of the kind of issues that they have raised, particularly when one looks at the socio-political history of tribal communities all over India. So, the growth of the tribal middle class has much to do with the policies and programs of the Indian state as well. So, we are coming to the post-independent period now. Now, in the colonial period, it was essentially the introduction of modern education that enabled the rise of or the formation of middle class. Now, in the post-independence period, what we essentially see is that the policies and programs initiated by the government of India has also opened up new opportunities, new avenues for emergence of middle class.

This is particularly evident in the reservation policy for schedule tribes which have been very very fundamental in shaping the nature and type of middle class in tribal society. The provision of reservations in institutions of higher learning and state employment also complemented each other in this context. However, despite different kind of constitutional provisions for tribal communities, the middle class growth in tribal societies have been significantly very, very slow. This is primarily evident because the quota reserved for tribes in educational institutions, especially government employment, could not be filled. Now, in the post-independence period, with the kind of affirmative action policies that were being followed under the Constitution of India, there was a possibility that some tribal communities, some tribal individuals, were capable of acquiring the benefits or the provisions.

And they constitute the new kind of middle class in the post-independence period. But the growth, the expansion of this particular category within tribal society, was essentially slow because there were very few takers or very few people who could actually even enjoy the benefits of the reservations provided under the Constitution of India. Within tribal society, the growth of the middle class, especially the new middle class, has been far from even. The middle class is the most visible in Northeast India, followed by eastern India. Elsewhere in India, it has remained dormant.

Now, in the northeastern part of India, the middle class becomes a very, very strong force, and they become very, very evident. And this middle class primarily comes from the educated section. Therefore, in all tribal societies in Northeastern India, whether it is in Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, or Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, you will see that this middle class was no longer the same; they were very, very different in terms of their outlook. They were very, very different in terms of their aspirations. And unlike many other parts of India, particularly in the context of tribal communities, the growth of this new middle class is very important, very fundamental, particularly in the context of Northeast India.

So the middle class in Northeast India is very pronounced compared to the rest of the country and much more diverse than in mainland India. In mainland India, it is very rare to find tribes engaging in trade, commerce, business, and shopkeeping. This constitutes an important segment of the middle-class population in Northeast India. Now, if you go to states like Nagaland or Mizoram, you will see that the economy, particularly in Mizoram, is more or less controlled by the Mizoram tribal communities themselves. There is also a section of people who are in government services or who are educated.

Now, in that context, you will see that the social base of the middle class in Mizoram, for instance, is very vast and diverse. But if you look at many states in mainland India, you will see that the social base of the middle class is quite narrow, and they tend to come from a specific section. But in Northeast India, the trend is very different in the sense that the middle class can come from a business background, an entrepreneurial background, or an educated background. Or even from those working in high positions within the government sector. So, they constitute a very diverse and fluid category.

Now, as I said, a very important part—essential in understanding the middle class, their role, and their importance—is particularly evident in terms of the social movements that the communities have witnessed. In my last few lectures, I have already discussed the question of constitutional provisions pertaining to tribes, and one of the questions we constantly engaged with is the question of autonomy movements. These autonomy movements also largely fall within the broader social movements. Today, we will look at how the tribal middle class has played a very important role in articulating the political and socio-cultural aspirations of the communities. So, the tribal middle class, in the form of land-owning cultivators, played a very important role in several tribal revolts or struggles against the changes introduced by the colonial state during the colonial period.

And during the freedom struggle, tribal cultivators aligned or joined forces with other exploited classes of the agrarian society and fought against the landlords for the security of tenure, reduction of rent, or a larger share of produce under a sharecropping arrangement by participating in peasant movements launched by communist and socialist parties. While the old middle class played a very decisive role in these kinds of movements, which were largely pertaining to agrarian issues because they had to do with agriculture, land, and the economic systems they were engaged with. The new middle class, particularly those from educated backgrounds and different occupations, took a very important role in articulating and asserting or directing new movements, specifically those demanding political autonomy, including control over land, forests, and resources. Now, when I say political autonomy, I'm not only talking about governance or administration. Autonomy in the context of tribes is integrally linked with the question of social, economic, and political autonomy.

Thus, one cannot discuss autonomy in the context of tribes without addressing the question of land, forests, and resources. These new movements began to surface in the 1930s and 1940s and continued in the post-independence period, reorienting society into a new mode where this new tribal middle class articulated political demands. So, if not for the tribal middle class, many states in the Northeast or parts of India with dominant tribal populations might not have the provisions they do today. Essentially, because this new middle class was the first

to articulate strong political positions pertaining to their communities. Now, the middle class played a very active role in social movements.

They have also been instrumental in peace negotiations and accords, thereby integrating people in regions within India. At the dawn of India's independence, since the colonial state administratively placed tribal communities outside the larger national framework, in a sense, they were administratively excluded by the Government of India Act, and there was minimal interaction between tribal and non-tribal communities, particularly in areas defined as excluded. So, it was the middle class that played a crucial role in setting the terms and conditions for the nature of integration that was to happen in the post-independence period. So, the constitutional provisions for tribals push towards direction of tribal integration within the larger Indian society. Along with these provisions, there have also been provisions and policies regarding their representation in political institutions, state employment and higher educational institutions.

Now, we have talked about the Fifth Schedule and the Sixth Schedule. Now, the formation of the Fifth and the Sixth Schedules was essentially an outcome of the political mobilizations that tribal communities began to initiate from the 1930s and 1940s, which later on culminated in the inclusion of these constitutional provisions that give some semblance of autonomy to the communities. And it was essentially the tribal middle class, the educated tribal middle class who articulated, who made these kinds of demands that enabled the constitution drafting committee, members of the drafting committee, to listen to the kinds of positions that these tribal leaders, you know, were making. So therefore, It is not to say that the people has no role. It is not to say that the illiterate class, ordinary tribal communities have no role to play in the kind of rights or in the kind of provisions that are being granted to them.

But what I mean to say here essentially is that it was the middle class who were at the forefront of these struggles, and they play a very important role in terms of voicing the concerns and aspirations of the communities. And tribals who have been able to enter these institutions form and represent the new middle class among the tribal population. Their representation in such institutions have been axis of tribal integration within larger Indian society. And now you will see that today in different institutions you will see that tribal communities are getting representation whether it is in terms of employment, whether it is in terms of

political institutions, whether it is in terms of higher educational institutions. All of this plays a very important role in terms of integrating the communities within the larger national, within the larger national culture.

However, in contrast to the state-led integration of the middle class, the market also have been a very, very important player in integrating the tribal middle class, including the landowners, the traders and the shopkeepers. Now, I have been reiterating this point again and again that the idea of the middle class is a very, very diverse, very loose concept. As such, when we talk about the middle class, we cannot only talk about the educated class. Another very important component of this new middle class, the tribal new middle class, is those who are engaged in self-employment or those engaged in economic activities, which include landowners, traders, and shopkeepers. And by which the market also plays a very, very important role in terms of integrating this section of the population.

So tribes today are intricately integrated with the rest of Indian society through participation in state and market institutions. In this context, the role of the middle class has been pivotal. So through this lecture, what we are seeing is that the integration of tribal communities within the larger Indian society cannot be discussed without talking about the role and contribution of the tribal middle class. And a very important starting point to really understand the process of the formation or the emergence of the middle class in tribal societies is the colonial period. During the colonial period, it was the introduction of modern education that provided a catalyst for the emergence of a new middle class.

And even today, if you look at many states in the Northeast in particular, like Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Manipur, you will see that these are communities, these are states which have a very high literacy rate and are quite educated. Essentially, the history of this goes back to the colonial period. And today, the middle class in these states also constitutes the educated class, people who are educated. The educated class constitutes a very important section within the tribal middle class. At the same time, as I said, the category of middle class is a very fluid category.

It's a very, very diverse category, and there are different categories, different people with different occupations who are part of this larger middle class. So, on the one hand, we have the impact of the colonial state. On the other hand, the

post-colonial state, the government of India, also played a very important role in terms of providing provisions that would enable the community to economically improve their condition. And this is evident in terms of the constitutional provisions of political autonomy or the constitutional provisions in terms of reservation. Now, all of this works in favour of the tribes in terms of bringing them closer to the larger Indian society, but at the same time, also in terms of creating a new section within the society, which many times played a very important role in terms of articulating the interests and voicing the concerns of the communities.

So, understanding the tribal middle class today, even within the tribal communities, is very complex, and definitely, there can be regional variations in terms of the nature of the middle class, but the broader context that we have talked about today is very important for us to understand the kind of changes that tribal communities are witnessing, and these changes have come about with the emergence of the tribal middle class. Today's lecture is primarily based on the publication of Professor Virginius Xaxa's, 'Tribal Middle Class in India,' in Sociological Bulletin. So, we will be sharing these readings. And in the next lecture, we will continue to talk about, you know, the kind of socioeconomic changes tribal communities have witnessed, particularly in the post-reform period. Thank you so much.