

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

## **Lecture46**

### **Lecture 46: Social Exclusion & Socio-Economic Status of the Tribes in Post-reform Era**

Thank you. Good evening, everyone, and welcome back to the NPTEL online certification course, Tribal Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. Today, we will be doing our lecture number 46, titled 'Social Exclusion and Socioeconomic Status of Tribes in the Post-Reform Era.' In this lecture, there is a lot to say about the question of exclusion, both conceptually and empirically. In this lecture, we will primarily focus on the question of exclusion and how it happens due to the kind of development interventions in India, particularly in the post-independence period.

Now, the concept of social exclusion has been in circulation for some time. The term 'exclusion' has been used differently, but 'social exclusion' as a concept is more recent. It became popularized when it was used in the European context, particularly in France. When it was used in the European context, it mostly referred to communities living at the margins of society. The term 'social exclusion' is very broad and loose, in the sense that many times there is no clear definition or understanding of what it means.

Exclusion can also happen at the level of an individual, a group, or a community. But today, for this lecture, despite the conceptual difficulties in defining what constitutes social exclusion or exclusion, we are mostly concerned with exclusion as experienced at the community level. So, we are basically talking about social exclusion in relation to tribal communities. Now, let us quickly run through a very basic understanding of tribes and tribal communities, and then we will move on because this is important again, as it helps us to situate the process of exclusion that happens and foreground the issues that tribal communities are facing. So, a very simplistic definition or understanding of tribes is that they are mostly

understood as communities who live in geographical and social isolation from the larger Indian society.

Even if you look at the criteria for defining tribes officially or administratively, one of the most important criteria is that the communities are living in geographical isolation. So, geographical isolation—or the perception of tribal communities as living in remote, inaccessible terrain—is something that is very strong even in the consciousness of many non-tribal communities. So, the moment the term 'tribe' is used, the first thing that comes to mind is that they are living in geographically isolated spaces or regions. They mostly enjoy autonomy of governance over the territory they occupy. They held control over the land, the forests, and other resources and governed themselves in terms of their own laws, traditions, and customs—or, in short, what we call customary laws.

Now, with the coming of British rule, things changed for these communities, and this had deep socio-economic implications in their lives. It did not stop with the end of British rule. It continues even in the post-colonial period. With the coming of British rule, many tribal communities were forced by the colonial state and integrated—often by force—through war, conquest, and annexation. This was followed by the introduction of new and uniform civil and criminal laws, as well as the setting up of administrative structures that were totally different or alien to traditional tribal practices.

So, the encounter between the colonial state and the tribes was defined by violence. It was a very violent encounter where, on one hand, tribal communities fiercely opposed and resisted the expansion of the colonial state into their territories. This was also very evident in the context of the North-Eastern part of India. This was very evident in every part of India where tribal communities live. Therefore, the encounter between tribes and the colonial state was something that was very violent.

With the coming of the colonial state, they began to introduce new laws and new systems of administration. One of them was the introduction of the idea of private property and landlordism. This means that the colonial state introduced new revenue collectors and administrative officials who were converted into owners and landlords. The forest impact is evident here, where the communities who were the owners of their land and forests became tenants to the collectors or

administrative officials designated by the colonial state. Now, what is the impact of this process?

It resulted in large-scale dispossession or eviction of tribes from their land and the installation of non-tribal communities in their place. In regions where the communities still had control over their land, massive transfers of land took place from tribes to non-tribes through measures such as fraud, deceit, mortgage, etc. One of the most important questions when discussing tribal communities is the question of land and the nation. This process of land and the nation was initiated by the colonial state. The position that tribes began to occupy in the new political-administrative system under the colonial state was defined by a steady erosion of their control and access to land, forests, and other resources.

So basically, what we are seeing is that the expansion of the colonial state into the tribal regions resulted in a kind of exclusion that was defined by dispossession, an exclusion defined by deprivation, which further, or which in turn, resulted in poverty, pauperization, and marginalization in the tribal communities. And when one talks about exclusion, economic exclusion is a very important part. There are social exclusions, economic exclusions, and political exclusions. And these three exclusions cannot be understood in isolation from one another. Now, what the colonial state essentially did to the tribal communities was dispossess them of their resources.

And this resulted in tribes being excluded from the process of development. In turn, resulting in or creating exclusion. Tribes who used to have control over their land, their forests, and other resources, and who enjoyed autonomy of governance, were pushed to the margins of the new political and economic systems. Now, in the wider, larger socio-economic and political systems, over a period of time under the colonial state, what we see is that it resulted in massive dispossession, relocation, by which the communities were pushed to the margins of society. So, the process of integrating tribal communities into the larger colonial state was defined by exclusion.

So, there was, on the one hand, inclusion of the communities into the larger colonial state, and this process of inclusion was ironically intertwined with the process of exclusion in the form of loss of access and control over livelihood, that is, basically economic rights, as well as control over the decision-making process

in the determination of their own lives. Now, the loss of autonomy in terms of their resources and political institutions has deep implications in terms of the kind of life that the communities wanted to live and the communities wanted to enjoy. So, in that sense, the inclusion of tribal communities into the larger colonial state resulted in them being excluded, by virtue of which they were dispossessed of their resources, lost control over access to their resources and their livelihood, and finally also lost their autonomy or decision-making power in determining their future. So what about in the context of the post-colonial state? So despite the communities being included in the larger political and economic system, integration or inclusion was far from complete.

So definitely, there is no question about the communities being integrated politically or administratively. But this process of integration also resulted in a lot of exclusion as well. So to ensure integration and thus build an inclusive society, tribals were given the same rights and status as those accorded to members of the larger Indian society. So everyone in India, by virtue of being born in this country, all of us have citizenship rights. And when we have citizenship rights, we have fundamental rights.

Certain fundamental rights are going to be taken away from us. We also have citizenship rights that include civil, political, and social rights. Everyone, irrespective of our background—whether our culture, language, religion, region, or whether we come from different parts of the country—it doesn't matter. By virtue of being Indian, all of us have equal rights. Now, out of all these rights, the most vulnerable as far as tribes are concerned are property and justice under the civil rights category.

Now, why is this so? The right to property of one, mostly non-tribals, has been the right to dispossession of property by another, mostly tribals. Now, in the case of one important right that we have as a human, as a citizen of this country, is the right to property in the sense that we have the right to own a property. But then this right to property has, in some sense, resulted in or granted the right to dispossess tribal communities from the kind of resources or property that they have. So tribes along with Dalits were given certain special rights which the other citizens were not entitled to.

All of us know that if you look at the constitution, there are a lot of special provisions, and there are a lot of special concessions that were granted to the communities belonging to the Scheduled Tribes and the Scheduled Caste. And these special rights granted to them were meant to compensate for the kind of historical injustice that they suffered for centuries, either due to systemic discrimination or historical injustice in the case of tribes and ensure that all of these communities also get equal chances and opportunities and also enjoy the citizenship rights which are enshrined in the constitutions. Now, these laws are meant to protect. Therefore, they are protective in the sense that they are aimed at safeguarding the interests of the tribal people. These rights were aimed at providing them a certain share of participation in state institutions for which there are reservations or quotas which are being designated for these communities in state institutions such as at the level of parliament, at the level of state legislature, governments and institutions of higher learning.

For example, we have 7.5% reservation for tribal communities when it comes to employment. And there are also specific seats which are reserved at the parliamentary level, at the state level as well, to ensure that they get fair chances, they get opportunities, and they don't feel excluded from the larger national processes of development. So, the special treatment, most of the time we call it affirmative action programs, and these affirmative action programs come in various forms and various designs. There can be affirmative action programs in terms of quotas, there can be affirmative action policies in terms of providing special economic benefits or special or different economic support. There can also be affirmative action programs in terms of designing specific policies to economically uplift the communities.

So, the kind of special treatment that is granted to certain categories of people, such as tribes in this context, is to also protect their welfare and interests and promote their development. And affirmative action programs, particularly in the context of India, primarily aim to address the issues that disadvantaged groups face, especially tribal communities. Definitely, they are quite disadvantaged in terms of socioeconomic conditions even today. And, as I said, one very important intervention made by the Government of India is providing reservation quotas for disadvantaged groups in different sectors, particularly in the government sector.

So, various interventions have been in effect, but the reservation policy has drawn the most attention and debate.

It is something very debatable, and it has been debated. And when the idea of having reservations was conceived, the plan was that it should be withdrawn after 10 years. But even today, after 70 years of India's independence, we continue to have this system. And this is something that is very, very debatable. But as of now, the intention was to give opportunities and a fair chance to the communities.

So tribes have definitely benefited from these provisions, but they have certainly taken advantage of these positions. And today you will see that the communities are getting represented at various levels of government services in different categories across the country. However, the other side of this is also that there are a lot of backlogs, and they are still very much underrepresented in different sectors. This is not to say that the policies are not working, but it is not always the case that the provisions laid out for the communities are being implemented. It must be ensured that the communities get the benefit of this.

There are also schemes like post-matric scholarship, book bank, and merit upgradation which have been introduced. In addition to this, there are also development initiatives and special multi-purpose development projects as supplements to the community development projects introduced in tribal areas. Accordingly, the Community Development Programme approach was reoriented, keeping in mind the special problems of the tribal people. Since the previous approach failed to serve the community's interests, a new approach in the form of the Tribal Sub-Plan was adopted in the Fifth Five-Year Plan, which continues to this day. Now, as I said, affirmative action policies do not come as one basket or one approach.

We have, for example, constitutional provisions in terms of reservations. We also have constitutional provisions in terms of political autonomy, which we have already discussed in our previous lectures. Such as primarily by looking at the Fifth Schedule and the Sixth Schedule. And today, we are discussing the constitutional provisions in terms of development. A very important initiative by the Government of India has been the introduction of the Tribal Sub-Plan within the Five-Year Plans.

The tribal sub-plan essentially means that a specific amount of money, a specific budget allocation, is made specifically for the tribal communities in India. This is known as the tribal sub-plan. Now, this Tribal Sub Plan focuses on area development by aiming to improve the quality of life, and its main components are the Integrated Tribal Development Project, the Modified Area Development Approach, and the Primitive Tribal Group Projects. By now, we already know that tribes are not a single category, or Scheduled Tribes is a very heterogeneous category. And many times, it is also difficult because today, if you look at the condition of tribal communities, they are at different levels of development.

Some tribal communities are still in a very difficult situation, whereas some tribal communities have come up very well and do very well in terms of the socio-cultural and economic condition. Therefore, we cannot have a single approach when we deal with tribal communities. So, within the kind of programs and policies that are being constituted for the communities, you will see that there is again a breakdown of this according to the needs, according to the target groups, or according to the intended beneficiaries. So, under the TSP, that is the Tribal Sub Plan, several schemes have been introduced. And this includes schemes like residential schools, vocational education, scholarships, book grants, free uniforms, mid-day meals, etc.

And apart from this, there is also a strong emphasis on extending and improving health infrastructure such as PHCs, CHCs, etc., as well as prevention and control of communicable and non-communicable diseases. Now, many of these schemes under health and education also primarily give a lot of importance to women and children. Now, in the case of economic development, there are important schemes that include the Integrated Tribal Development Projects, Employment Guarantee Scheme, Food for Work Program, Employment Accident Scheme, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, Sampurna Grameen Rozgar Yojana, and Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana. So, all these policies have significantly contributed to the tribal population. The tragedy remains that the level of poverty among tribal communities is still very high.

And today, this is one of the most serious issues or concerns when it comes to poverty discourse in India. So, this is where I wanted to come in. Essentially, when we talk about the exclusion of tribal communities, it is despite the fact that tribes constitute only 8.5 percent of India's population. Their contributions in

terms of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, and so on are very high. So, the government of India also realized that special policies and programs need to be designed specifically for these communities because their needs and challenges are different.

They have different challenges as well. And today, if you look at the statistics, you will see that many communities, particularly tribal communities in states like Odisha and MP, are still living in very difficult conditions. One of the primary reasons for this is the prevalence of extreme poverty. Now, several factors are responsible for this. First, the resources earmarked for tribal development, though increased, have been far from adequate.

So, basically, the budgetary allocation remains low or inadequate. Second, there is ineffective implementation of programs. Now, we just talked about the different kinds of programs and policies that exist, as well as the constitutional provisions. But the challenge remains that there are still many gaps. There are many gaps and loopholes when it comes to the implementation of such programs.

The third factor is that the traditional socio-cultural aspects of tribal life—that is, tribal communities suffer from low income, poor education, and poor health status, as well as various kinds of diseases—are often attributed to their traditions and lifestyle. So, certain aspects of their own traditional culture or traditional structure may also contribute to their developmental exclusion. But by and large, the issue is that in the larger society, there is a tendency even today to view tribes as alien to their society, and then we see that there is overall indifference toward their cause and development. Basically, the kind of political commitment, the kind of seriousness or commitment that is needed to economically uplift these communities has not been there. So, this resulted in a vicious cycle of poverty among large sections of tribal communities.

So, the problem, therefore, is not so much about the failure to push development programs in tribal areas due to inadequate resources or ineffective implementation or even tribal traditions and social structure, but the larger question of development in the form of large-scale development projects such as dams, irrigation, power plants, roads, railways, industry, and mineral exploitation. So the problem is not necessarily that there is no development happening. The problem is not necessarily that there is very little money dedicated to these

communities. The problem is not always that tribal communities or their culture are blocking or acting as a hindrance to development. The larger issue is also that many of the development interventions that have been undertaken in the post-colonial period essentially have actually resulted in the deprivation and dispossession of these communities from their natural resources.

And this has been one of the major factors or the major challenges when one talks about development and exclusion in the context of tribes. Now, these projects that we just talked about resulted in the appropriation of tribal lands, forests, and other resources that began under colonial rule and continued into the post-independence period. Except in the post-independence period, these are justified as development for national and regional purposes. These development interventions prove to be detrimental to the interests of the tribal communities, and in the process, they affect their access to affirmative action programs as well. So, on one hand, we are creating policies which essentially deprive them of their natural resources and habitats, leaving them unable to even enjoy the kind of provisions and special treatments that are being granted or enshrined in the Constitution of India.

So, without any fault of their own, they are steadily pushed away from their land, forests, and other resources due to state-sponsored projects of national development on one side and the transfer of land from tribal to non-tribal communities on the other. So, over the last 60 to 70 years, tribal communities have undergone change, not only in their relationship with land but also in their relationship with forests. As long as tribes had control of the forests, in the sense of unrestricted use of forest resources, they had little difficulty meeting their needs. Most of the time, if you look at tribal society—not to romanticize them—you will see that they continue to practice a very subsistence-based way of life. And there are many communities in India that are still very much dependent on forest resources.

In my previous lectures, I have mentioned that at least 70 to 75 percent of India's tribal population depends directly or indirectly on forest resources. Now, the moment they are deprived of access to forest resources, it results in economic immiseration and pauperization. This deprivation actually excludes them from the larger development processes taking place. One factor is the entry of the colonial state, which drastically altered the relationship between communities and the

forests. The policies pursued by the colonial state were unfortunately continued in the post-independence period, where economic development, even with stricter rules and regulations, was prioritized.

As a result, we continue to see tribal communities being dispossessed of their land and forest resources. And these have had very serious implications in terms of their access to basic necessities of life, such as food and shelter, for the communities. Now, we have talked enough about dispossession, enough about deprivation, and enough about uprootedness. Now, when a community is uprooted—particularly for tribes where social organization is largely around kinship and clans—being uprooted and dispossessed also means the disintegration of community social bonding. Now, for many tribal communities, community bonding is very important.

It is a form of social security because everyone lives together and knows each other. So, most of the time, they also support each other in times of need and trouble. Now, when a community is dispossessed and uprooted, it also means they are deprived of the social community capital they once had. So, the breakdown results in the disintegration of the community, making it very difficult for them to readjust or adapt to a new way of life. So, large-scale development projects and policies deny them access to forest resources, while affirmative action programs designed for tribal welfare often fail to reach these communities.

Now, there are also arguments that affirmative action for tribes no longer serves its purpose, as it fails to uplift them from their traditional social base. Rather, they are pushed alongside processes that further deteriorate their existing social base and expose their vulnerabilities. Now, in many cases, tribal communities have yet to fully benefit from the constitutional provisions enshrined in the Constitution of India. Now, many scholars have observed that these provisions not only fail to work but often push them further toward the margins of society. Unless this is corrected, development will continue to perpetuate social exclusion among tribals.

So by and large, through this lecture, what I essentially wanted to talk about is only one specific dimension of exclusion that has taken place among tribal communities. It is important because if you trace back the history of dispossession, the history of development in post-independent India, you will see

that there has been a lot of displacement. And one of the communities that have faced this on a very enormous scale is the tribal communities. Now, this also means that over the last 50 to 60 years, you will see that these communities have been continually displaced and dispossessed. And over a period of time, they have been gradually pushed to the margins of society.

So, the marginalization or the marginal condition of tribal communities is not of their own creation, but it has happened since the colonial period when the colonial state began to introduce new regimes of property. New regimes of rule pertaining to the governance of forests, the governance of water, and new regimes of property in terms of land ownership, in terms of the way economic relations are organized. So, by and large, over a period of time in the post-colonial period, the process of dispossessing tribals continued in many ways. While there are several constitutional provisions specifically designed for tribal communities, we still have a long way to go in terms of truly integrating them because they continue to face a lot of difficulties, particularly in terms of socio-economic development. And today's lecture is primarily drawn again from the work of Professor Virginius Xaxa, 'Tribes and Social Exclusion.'

And by and large, I think it is a very important question when it comes to the issue of exclusion, particularly in the context of tribes. And even in contemporary India, it continues to resonate deeply in a context where we continue to see that these communities live at the margins of Indian society. With this, I conclude my lecture. Thank you so much.