

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

Lecture53

Lecture 53: Social Movements: Tribal Activism and Tribal Rights: Part II

Thank you. Good morning, everyone. Welcome back to the NPTEL online certification course, Tribal Studies in India, Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. Today, we will be doing our lecture number 53, which is a continuation of what we have studied in the lecture number 52, that is social movements, tribal activism and tribal rights. Now, in the last lecture, we tried to understand the social movements, particularly in the context of the colonial period.

And we also learned that it's very difficult to categorize the different kinds of movements that happened during the colonial period. And there can be a lot of overlapping in the way in which we categorize and classify movements. In the sense that, you know, sometimes scholars classify movements as agrarian movements, ethnic movements, political movements, religious movements, cultural movements, so on and so forth. So, while the broader category, such as ethnic, autonomic movements, agrarian movements, can have different connotations, if you look at the kind of demands that all these movements have, in some sense, there seems to be some kind of convergence. In the sense that these movements may all essentially demand some kind of rights and recognition or these movements can be against different kinds of marginalization that the communities experience.

But at the same time, in the context of social movements during the colonial period, what we have essentially seen is that these movements, which were led by many tribal communities in India, were largely in response to the kind of exploitative conditions during the colonial period. This means that the entry of the colonial state and the annexation of tribal areas within the colonial state systems

have resulted in the massive exploitation of the tribal communities. And this exploitation resulted into dispossession. This exploitation resulted into deprivation. And it also caused enormous hardships to the communities, which resulted into strong resentments that grew among the many tribal communities.

And this experience of exploitation came quite early on, particularly in the context of tribal communities in central India because of their geographical location, also because they were exposed to the colonial state from the 17th century onwards itself. Now, you will see that much of the movements, whether they are agrarian movements, whether they are religious movements or social cultural movements, happen mostly in the central Indian states. And in the context of the northeastern part of India also, you will see that, you know, there were a lot of movements that were against the colonial state. And likewise, you know, it has a very strong resonance with what happened in the central Indian state. In the sense that there was resentment or resistance against the expansion of the colonial state into their areas and into their regions.

However, the colonial state, you know, being more superior in terms of their military might, in terms of, you know, their armed forces, they were able to annex the tribal areas. However, there was a lot of resistance and it was this resistance that resulted into the laying down of different kind of provisions for the tribal communities during the colonial period itself. Now, in the post-independence period also, tribal communities continue to lead different kinds of movements. And these movements again come in different forms. Some movements are very much socio-cultural oriented, some movements are very much economic oriented, some are very political oriented, some are very religion oriented.

So, in that sense, it becomes very difficult to make a very neat classification of all these movements. However, broadly, we will try to understand with examples some of the prominent movements that happened in a post-independent India, taking examples from the northeastern part of India and taking examples from the mainland part of India. So, to start with, after the departure of the British, or that is after the attainment of independence, national leaders in India faced this very, very huge challenge of trying to unite a country, which is very diverse in terms of communities, in terms of regions, and also because of the kind of governance structures that were already in place. For instance, we have 562 princely states, you know, at the time of independence. So the challenge for the

Indian nationalist leaders was how to bring all these communities, all these people, you know, together under one nation state.

So the Constitution of India was, you know, carefully drafted. And it was drafted in such a manner that it promoted equality and justice for everyone, including tribal and marginalized groups. And specifically for communities like the tribals, the constitution has incorporated affirmative action for reservation in politics, education, and government jobs so that, you know, the communities also come at par, you know, with the larger communities or with the larger society. There were also special protections or provisions for tribal communities, particularly with the inclusion of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. Now, in our previous lectures, we have discussed extensively what these two schedules are.

To just, you know, quickly give a recap of this, the fifth schedule is essentially, you know, for the mainland parts of India, and I think it is implemented in 13 states today, and the sixth schedule essentially was designed and crafted for the tribal communities in the northeastern part of India. This does not mean that, you know, all tribal communities in the north-east are under sixth schedule. It does not mean that all tribal communities in the mainland part of India are under the Fifth Schedule. But the Fifth Schedule and the Sixth Schedule provide the political architecture of autonomy for tribal communities even till today. So therefore, these are very, very significant schedules which are introduced or included in the Constitution of India.

Despite the enormous provisions, enormous rights, special constitutional rights, and special constitutional provisions which are included in the Constitution of India, tribal communities continue to face widespread displacement and widespread deprivation due to loss of access to their traditional lands and livelihoods. So the kind of land alienation that took place during the period of colonialism continued in the post-independent period as well. For example, in states like Assam and Tripura, the tribal population lost significant amounts of land due to the large influx of people from Bengal, first encouraged by the British and later increased during and after the partition of India. Now, during the partition of India, you see that many of the refugees from Bangladesh, which was East Pakistan, have come to India. Now, in Tripura, it resulted into a demographic change where, you know, the tribal communities became the minority.

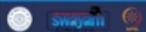
Now, in Assam also, there was this incentivization of migration by the colonial state for which many peasants, many communities, from East Pakistan settled in present-day Assam. And this resulted into a lot of resentments by the local indigenous communities. So, in response, you know, groups like the Bodos in Assam, who are one of the largest tribal communities in Assam and the tribals of Tripura, launched armed movements during the 1980s and 1990s, primarily expressing their anger over the sudden demographic change and political marginalization. So, a good example to understand, you know, the post-colonial, the social movements in the post-colonial period is the Bodo movement. Now, like I said, you know, I'm taking the example of the Bodos essentially because today they are one of the largest, you know, tribal community in Assam.

And the impact of the Bodo movement is very, very strong, is very, very far and wide. Therefore, you know, it's a very good starting point, you know, for us to understand the movement, the Bodo movement, to really unpack the kind of movements that, you know, tribal communities launched in post-independence India, particularly in the north-eastern part of India. In 1967, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam demanded a separate union territory called Udayachal for the tribal groups of Assam. So, the Bodo movement started much before this, but then a very organized, you know, collective organized form of movement began with the formation of the PTCA, which demanded, you know, a separate union territory in the form of Udayachal which will encompass all the tribal groups of Assam. However, due to the lack of support from the non-Bodo plain tribes and internal divisions, the movement did not achieve any kind of political success.

BODO MOVEMENT

- In 1967, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) demanded a separate union territory called Udayachal for the tribal groups of Assam.
- However, lack of support from non-Bodo plains tribes and internal divisions led to the failure of this movement.
- In the early 1980s, Bodo leaders began to demand a separate state for Bodos within the Indian Union— this marked a shift from a pan-tribal to a Bodo-specific movement.



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But then, from the 1980s onwards, there was a remobilization among the Bodo leaders, by which they began to demand a separation for the Bodos within the Indian Union, which, mark you, marked a fundamental shift from a very pan-tribal movement which encompassed different tribal communities to a Bodo-specific movement. An important actor of the Bodo movement was the All Bodo Students Union, which was led by Upendranath Brahma, who became the most important leader advocating for Bodo rights. Now recently in recognition of the contribution of Upendranath Brahma the government of India have renamed a road in Delhi, in recognition of his contribution. Therefore, Upendranath Brahma is a very, very important figure when one talks about, you know, the Bodo movement. So, it is important to understand that, during this period, in the 80s Assam was already reorganized significantly.

- The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) under the leadership of Upendranath Brahma became the most important organization advocating for Bodo rights.
- In 1987, ABSU launched a mass agitation demanding a separate state of Bodoland.
- As talks with the government failed and frustration grew, several militant outfits emerged, including Bodo Security Force (BdSF) later renamed as National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT).



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In 1963, the state of Nagaland was carved out. In 1972, Meghalaya was granted a separate statehood. And today, Mizoram was granted a separate union territory. By 1986, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram also became a separate states. So, Bodos as a tribal community feel marginalized in the hands of the dominant Assamese community and by which they also began to claim for a separate statehood.

And this demand for a separate statehood came strongly which was led by the All Bodo Students Union under the leadership of Upendranath Brahma. So from 1987 onwards, ABSU led a very strong mass agitation demanding a separate state of Bodoland. And some of the known slogans of ABSU was divide Assam 50-50. In a sense that they were demanding that Assam be divided 50-50 in a separate state, specifically for the Bodos to be carved out of Assam. So the

movement, which began in a non-violent manner for a long period of time, soon became very, very violent.

There was a lot of, you know, clashes, there was a lot of tensions, there was a lot of violence and bloodshed. And for a long period of time, any kind of proper arrangement, proper political dialogue with the government of India, also failed. Several militant outfits emerged within the Bodo society, such as Bodo Security Force, which was later renamed as National Democratic Front of Bodo Land, and Bodo Liberation Tigers. Now, these groups engaged in armed insurgency, including attacks on state institutions and any violence to press for the Bodo Land demand. And the movement was very, very violent, but on the other hand, it resulted in some kind of visibility of tribal rights in the context of Assam and also in the larger context of the northeastern part.

So, finally, the movement ended with a constitutional recognition and autonomy was granted through the Sixth Schedule provisions. The Bodo community has its own autonomous council, and this autonomous council is very powerful in the sense that it is far more powerful in terms of the rights, responsibilities, and provisions that the Bodos have is far more you know powerful than the existing autonomous councils, such as in the state of Meghalaya or in the state of Mizoram. is far more you know powerful than the existing autonomous councils such as in the state of Meghalaya or in the state of Mizoram. So, that is an example of the Bodo movement, how it started—a very brief overview of the movement in terms of how it started, the political mobilization of the Bodo's, and then, you know, the current status. So, it is a long history in a sense that from 1987 onwards and from the 1990s onwards it began to be very very violent.

1992-1993 there was a dialogue, there was an attempt to bring an end to the violence and 2000-2000 onwards also there continued to be dialogue. And Bodos were also very persistent with their demands. But today they have settled with the Bodo Territorial Council. And the Bodo Territorial Council is put under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. And they have enormous power, they have enormous rights and responsibilities which are far more powerful than existing autonomous structures in states like I said, Meghalaya and Mizoram.

A very important, you know, when one talks about the social movements in the context of tribal communities, a very important element or a very important part

which one cannot ignore is the environmental movements. Now, in contemporary discourse, many a times, you know, we get also this very romanticized notion of tribal communities as guardians of nature in a sense that, you know, when because today everyone is talking about sustainable development, everyone is talking about, you know, the future of the art in the context of sustainable development. Now, many see tribals as the guardians of nature, whose life or way of life is sustainable, whose way of life respects nature because they essentially worship nature, but at the same time, if you look at many of the movements led by tribal communities, you will see that there is a very strong environmental consciousness embedded in the movements. So it is important, and many of the environmental movements, movements that are primarily concerned about nature, primarily concerned about the larger ecology or environment, are led by tribal communities. So in that context, one cannot but talk about or emphasize the importance of environmental movements when we are talking about the broader social movements in the context of tribal communities.

Now, environmental and ecological movements are also a very, very broad category in itself because it can encompass so many things. It can encompass movements for land rights, it can encompass movement related to water, related to pollution, related to forest rights, so on and so forth. And the nature of the movements are also very, very different. The ideology of the movements are also very, very different. The agenda that they try to achieve can also be very, very different.

So environmental and ecological movements, like any movements, represent collective action by different social groups advocating for fundamental rights and sustainable living. And most of these environmental movements emphasize the importance of rights that may not be explicitly codified in law, but are vital to the everyday life of marginalized communities, such as control over natural resources, cultural preservation for indigenous population, environmental protection, and ecological sustainability. So, like I said, you know the term is very, very broad and it comprises a wide range of local-level struggles centred on securing livelihood and ecological stability. Now, one of the most pressing concerns of today's world is, you know, the environment, right? Because

everywhere you will see that, you know, there is climate change that is happening.

So, environmental movements, you know, is not always, you know, community specific. Environmental movements are not, you know, nation specific. It concerns, you know, global leaders. It concerns global policy makers, global academicians, how to mitigate this. So, therefore, you will see that, you know, environmental movements has become one of the most prominent movements of our times.

And so these movements, you know, date back to the colonial period in the context of, you know, tribal communities. And there has always been, you know, this attempt or there has always been this challenge of this mainstream idea of development that emphasizes, you know, economic growth, that emphasizes or equates progress with economic growth. Now, environmental activism in India, therefore, has consistently critiqued both colonial and post-colonial models of development in the sense that they have put too much emphasis on achieving higher economic growth, which at times resulted in the compromising of the environment. Post-independent India, the Indian state, largely continued or followed a capitalist development model disregarding local or environmental needs. This developmental approach that we follow in India contributed to environmental degradation, deepening poverty, and increased marginalization of rural and tribal communities.

One of the most pressing issues that one cannot help but talk about is the issue of development-induced displacement. And from the 1950s onwards, tribal communities have been incessantly displaced because of different kind of infrastructural projects. These infrastructural projects can be in terms of setting up of refinery plants, setting up of steel plants, construction of hydropower plants, construction of roads, declaration of reserve forests, or, you know, wildlife sanctuary, so on and so forth. So whenever the State undertakes large-scale development initiatives, most of the time, you know, these lands are owned by the tribal communities. Even till today, if you look at it, the most resource-rich regions of the country are areas, you know, which are inhabited by tribes.

Now, any kind of development intervention continue to have adverse consequence on the communities. So, for which you know, tribal communities in

India face large-scale displacement, and this resulted in the emergence of movements that are closely entangled with environmental movements. So, you will see that you know many of the many of the you know infrastructural projects in India are located in areas which are inhabited by tribes because these areas are also primarily resource-rich regions. However, over a period of time, we see that movements emerging that protest against displacement, against dispositions that are happening, and also movements that begin to question the environmental sustainability of such projects, by which these tribal movements began to be closely associated with environmental concerns. Major industrial projects, mining and the construction of dams in tribal regions have led to massive evictions.

And despite, you know, the kind of sacrifice that the communities have made, they are hardly, you know, compensated. They are hardly given any fair compensation. They are hardly given any fair rehabilitation as well. And most of the time, the communities are left jobless and they are forced to migrate to cities. So, like I said, you know, these development projects, the resentments against, you know, development projects, the resentments against, you know, the kind of infrastructure projects that are taking place also have largely emanated out of the experience of being treated poorly.

And many a times, you know, the benefits of these projects did not go back to the communities for which, you know, there is a strong resistance or movements that are emerging. For example, in Bastar in Chhattisgarh, we have famous movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan in the Narmada Valley and the Niyamgiri Hills in Odisha. So the Narmada Bachao Andolan is a very, very well-known movement that happened, you know, in Gujarat primarily. One of the primary communities that have resisted this construction of the dam is the tribal communities. And primarily because many of them will be displaced, will face displacement, and this displacement will result in, you know, massive dispossession and deprivation of their rights.

So, another important example of the recent past is the movements in the Niyamgiri Hills in Orissa, where the Kondh tribes fought against the attempt for bauxite mining. Now, a scholar, you know, Annapurna Pandey argues that this is an example of internal colonialism, where the state is acting more like a partner to big corporations than a protector of its people. Now, why did this community,

why did this community protest? You know, these kinds of interventions would essentially benefit the larger nation. So, for them, this bauxite mining, you know, took place, and it will destroy the social fabric of the corn communities, displace many families, and force them into urban slums like Saila Sahi in Bhubaneswar.

And to this, you know, Pandey argues that this created what she calls involuntary nomads. So, basically, people who are being forcefully displaced from their homes, people who are being forcefully displaced from their homelands and are forced to move and migrate to urban places like in Bhubaneswar. Now, we are discussing the Niyamgiri hills because it received a lot of spotlight and attention when the movement started. And the Kutia, the con communities in Orissa, you know, are, you know, one of the most marginalized communities. And because of this, it also received a lot of attention about what was happening in Niyamgiri Hills.

So the Kutia Kondh and Dongriya Kondh tribes in Orissa have been at the centre of a powerful and inspiring environmental and tribal rights movement. These indigenous communities strongly opposed the bauxite mining project in the Niyamgiri Hills, which was proposed by Vedanta Resources, a multinational company. Now, why were the, you know, Kondh tribal communities so persistent in resisting the bauxite mining in Niyamgiri Hills? This was essentially because the Niyamgiri Hills for the Dongriya Cone are sacred communities. In a sense that, you know, the hills are the home of the deity, that is the Niyam Raja, and they depend on the forest and mountain ecosystem for their livelihood, culture and spiritual practices.

Now, basically, for the Dongria Kondh communities, the Niyamgiri hills are not just another hills. It is, you know, where their life, their belief systems, their livelihood, their entire, you know, socio-cultural well-being, the well-being of the community, the future of the community, the past and the present of the community lie in the hills. And any kind of disruption that is taking place in the hills will result into the destruction of the community in itself. Therefore, you know, because of this, you know, sacred, the hills, you know, for them is, you know, a sacred place. And the destruction and the destroying of this sacred place is tantamount to the destruction and destroying of the way of life of the community itself.

So, for which, you know, they have resisted against the mining. Therefore, the mining would not only have caused severe environmental destruction, including deforestation and loss of biodiversity, but also, most importantly, it would result in the displacement of tribal communities who have lived there for generations. Now, the movement brought together local tribal people, environmental activists, and human rights groups, both from within India and abroad. In 2013, the Supreme Court of India ruled that the Gram Sabha, that is the village council of the affected villages, should have in the final say whether or not the mining should take place. And all the Gram Sabhas unanimously rejected the proposal, effectively stopping the project.

So, like I said, while the movements in Niyamgiri Hills do have a very, very strong environmental component, at the same time, you will also see that, you know, it has a very, very strong cultural component. In a sense, there was this integration of both, you know, ecological concerns and, you know, socio-cultural concerns, where the two are coming together in a way that, you know, one is that it will result in massive displacement of the communities, which will have, you know, severe economic consequences. It will also result in the destruction of the hills, which also means that the hills, which are considered to be sacred by the communities, will be destroyed, and that will essentially, you know, have a direct impact on the socio-cultural life of the people. But at the same time, ecologically also, it will result in massive destruction, massive deforestation and loss of biodiversity in the Niyamgiri Hills. So, as such, in one study, the N.C. Saxena founded over 85 lakhs, that is 8.5 million tribal people were displaced in rural India after 1990 due to big corporate projects.

So, the larger picture is that, you know, tribal communities, despite the fact that they are only 8.5 percent of India's population, when it comes to the communities or people who are being displaced by different projects, you will see that tribal communities constitute, you know, a very, very high number of people who are being displaced. According to sociologist Virginius Xaxa, a major reason for the failure of tribal development is how tribals are treated by the rest of society. While many other communities, dominant communities, enjoy full property rights, tribals often don't. Many cannot even access court to fight for their land. They are seen as outsiders and their problems are largely ignored in national planning.

So, like I said, this is a point which is raised by sociologist Professor Virginius Xaxa, who notes that although tribal communities make up only 8% of the population, they account for 40% of all people displaced by development projects, yet only about 25% of them ever get proper rehabilitation. Now in the last 70 to 75 years of independence, we have seen that there are many communities who have faced severe displacement due to different kind of projects. And you will see that it is the tribal communities who have been disproportionately displaced by these different infrastructural projects. And only 25% of those displaced have faced or received proper rehabilitation. Now, coming to the northeastern part of India today.

For a long period of time, the northeastern part of India, particularly states like Nagaland, Mizoram, or even Arunachal Pradesh, did not receive much attention in the sense that there were no massive infrastructural projects being undertaken. But today, things have changed in the sense that we started seeing a lot of private companies coming in, a lot of construction activities that are happening in terms of road construction, in terms of highways, in terms of hydropower projects. And this has resulted in a new kind of movements that are emerging in the region, primarily because many of these forests and rivers are not only the livelihoods of the people but are also rooted in the belief systems of the communities. Now, if you look at the larger northeastern states today, you will see that, you know, environmental movements are strongly emerging as one of the most prominent movements in the region today. And this is essentially because most of there is, you know, a greater push for infrastructure projects in the region.

At the same time, we have seen a lot of, you know, the construction of hydropower projects. A very good example which has taken place in the last few years is the movements in Sikkim, particularly against the construction of dams in the River Teesta. Now, the River Teesta is not only a mere river which flows. For the Sikkim communities, particularly for the Lepchas and the Bhutias, it is a sacred river where their Gods reside. Now, any kind of disruption in the river will not only be ecologically harmful and destructive, but it will also be, you know, spiritually destructive because their entire belief system will be disrupted.

Likewise, many river systems in the northeast are an integral part of the life of the communities, their oral histories, their myths, their histories are rooted in the

resources that surround them, whether it is water, whether it is forest or whether it is land. So in that kind of context, environmental movements also have a very, very strong cultural element to it. At the same time, environmental movements also have a very strong concern about the question of the future of the people and the community themselves. So in that context, any discussion on tribal communities, particularly in social movements, have to address the question of environmental movements. And these have, you know, the mainland part of India have seen a lot of movements, particularly that put a lot of emphasis on the concern of environment.

And today in the northeastern part of India, we have seen this coming in a very, very, you know, great force today, essentially because of the kind of, you know, new infrastructural projects that are coming up in the region. So with this, I end this lecture. Now, in this lecture, we have tried to understand some of the movements that happened in the post-colonial period. And we have taken two examples. One example is the Bodo example.

The other is the Dongria Kondh communities in Odisha. Now, these two movements are qualitatively different in terms of the nature of the movement, why it emerged, how it emerged. But then, at the end of the day, what they essentially try to achieve is to, you know, get recognition, to get, you know, their rights respected, in a sense that, you know, because of the kind of marginalized conditions that the communities face, particularly in the context of the Bodo communities. Now, when it comes to the Dongria Kondh communities, the question, the movement essentially questions the kind of development model that is being followed, in a sense that it is not only ecologically destructive but also socially, culturally, and economically destructive for the communities. So, you can take, there are a lot of examples, you know, one can take, one can talk about, you know, when we look at, you know, environmental movements, particularly in the context of tribal communities.

But this movement by the Dongria Kondh communities is very, very important in the sense that it came at a time, you know, when India was, you know, pushing, you know, very strongly, you know, to achieve higher economic growth. And there are communities whose lives, you know, will be entirely shattered by this. In that kind of context, the question of environment always comes up. At what cost

do we want development? At what cost do we want economic growth and progress?

No one is against development per se, but then there are certain other questions that one has to address. And social movements in the form of environmental movements have always reminded us that one has to also try to maintain a balance between the desire for growth and development and also the need to be quite conscious about the impact of our actions on the environment. So I'm going to stop here. Thank you so much.