

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

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**Lecture59**

**Lecture 59: Tribal Studies and Humanities and Social Sciences**

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies, Interdisciplinary Approaches and Perspectives. Today, we are going to talk about the future scope of tribal studies within humanities and social sciences. We will explore how tribal studies as a field has been emerging, evolving, and expanding within the field of humanities and social sciences. Approaching the study of tribes through the perspectives of history, archaeology, or culture alone naturally restricts the investigation to the parameters of each of these disciplines.



It is a well-established fact in academia by now that disciplinary approaches, which form the core of inquiry in individual fields such as history, political science, economics, and

archaeology, are characteristically specialized and therefore limited in their own terms. Drawing on the question of disciplinary limitations, Scholar and critic M.C. Behera observes, I quote, 'The inadequacy of a discipline but creates interest in complementing the role of disciplines for a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon over time and space,' unquote. The increasing significance of interdisciplinary approaches is widely recognized in modern academia, which leads to a rise in interdisciplinary fields.

**Interdisciplinary Approaches**

- The increasing significance of interdisciplinary approaches is widely recognized in modern academia, leading to a rise in interdisciplinary fields. Even within disciplines, the more current topics are often explored using interdisciplinary methods, which provide better understanding.
- Behra (2020) asserts that the tribal communities have deep roots that entail extensive study. Colonial powers, upon their initial encounter, struggled to understand these people due to their own ignorance about the tribal way of life and Western-oriented historical perspectives.
- Consequently, they failed to properly investigate the history of these groups, instead imposing labels, such as 'tribes' and 'aborigines'.



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Even within disciplines, the more current topics are often explored using interdisciplinary methods, which provide a better view and understanding of the subject. Behera also asserts that tribal communities have deep roots, which entail, involve, and expect extensive study. Colonial powers, upon their initial encounter with tribal communities, struggled to understand these people due to their own ignorance about the tribal way of life, as well as the fact that they were imposing their Western-oriented historical perspectives to inform their study and investigation of the tribes. Consequently, the colonists, including British anthropologists, mostly failed to properly understand and investigate the history of these groups.

### Interdisciplinary Approaches

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- Behra (2020) asserts that the tribal communities have deep roots that entail extensive study. Colonial powers, upon their initial encounter, struggled to understand these people due to their own ignorance about the tribal way of life and Western-oriented historical perspectives.
- Consequently, they failed to properly investigate the history of these groups, instead imposing labels, such as 'tribes' and 'aborigines'.



And instead, they would impose labels such as tribes, aborigines, and not only that, they would judge these communities themselves. by calling them savages, by calling them backward, and so forth. None of these adjectives are positive. They are loaded with negative meanings. So the colonists and by and large the non-tribals' lack of understanding of tribal history suggests

till a long time led them to limit the scope of human history, thereby confining it within a narrow, supposedly scientific framework, a framework that they asserted to be scientific, but which would be rendered as inadequate when trying to, you know, study the tribal people in terms of those specific Western parameters and standards. Furthermore, we see that the colonists, but also subsequent non-tribal scholars in the post-colonial period dismissed the oral traditions of the tribals and called these traditions as unscientific and unscientific. therefore refused to consider the alternative approaches that used the oral sources in order to reconstruct the history of these preliterate societies in doing so such early scholars have overlooked The significant role of tribal history in shaping the larger human history.

### Interdisciplinary Approaches

- Their lack of understanding of tribal history led them to limit the scope of human history, confining it within a narrow, supposedly scientific framework.
- Furthermore, they **dismissed oral traditions as unscientific and refused to consider alternative approaches that used oral sources to reconstruct the history of these pre-literate societies.** In doing so, they overlooked the significant role of tribal history in shaping the larger human history.
- **History was largely overlooked in anthropology, and for a considerable time, oral tradition was neglected as a legitimate source of information that may add to historical data.**



So they were mostly driven by a very Western centric understanding of knowledge, knowledge that is scripted, that is documented, that has a singular meaning. a final pointed meaning as opposed to such history with a capital H. In tribal societies, we have ramifications. The question of any folklore or any parable or any poem not having any fixity to it, any conclusive, definitive structure to it is something that might have confused the white researchers or the white anthropologists. They would be listened, remembered and retold to the next generations usually.

**Interdisciplinary Approaches**

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- Furthermore, they **dismissed oral traditions as unscientific and refused to consider alternative approaches that used oral sources to reconstruct the history of these pre-literate societies.** In doing so, they overlooked the significant role of tribal history in shaping the larger human history.
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And there would be certain additions and modifications while they were being passed down from one generation to another. Because there is a process of memorization, retelling, hearing, and thereby the knowledge becomes more fluid. Each generation's own consciousness, own sensitivity, and own experiences add to these stories. The folklores change from the folktales; the myths surrounding each deity change from village to village. These ramifications, these kinds of interesting fluidities within knowledge, are something that the white people

were not akin to; they were not familiar with knowledge also changing or traveling through time and space. So they would not so much consider such a ramified, discursive knowledge system or tradition as worthy of being included as any form of historical data. So in doing so, the early anthropologists and ethnographers overlooked the significant role of tribal history in shaping the larger human history. So, we see that history was largely overlooked in anthropology until recently, and for a considerable period of time, oral tradition has been neglected and has not been treated as a legitimate source of information that may add to historical data. So, this entire attitude or approach only began to change with the development of newer fields,

### Interdisciplinary Approaches

- This only began to change with the development of fields like **anthropological history** and **ethnohistory** within anthropology and ethnography – a shift made possible by new ways of understanding knowledge, spurred by methodological innovations, such as **oral history traditions** and **memory studies**.
- The essential point emerging from this is that a single disciplinary approach is inadequate for comprehensively explaining the various aspects of a people's life, both as a unified group and in comparison to other groups, across time and space.



Source: science.org



such as anthropological history and ethno-history within the traditional fields of anthropology and ethnography—a shift that was made possible through new ways of understanding what comprises knowledge. What is knowledge? Is only documented knowledge or a book a strict source of knowledge? Can only a book be considered as text? that emanates understanding, that enables understanding about a people.

So formation of anthropological history, ethno-history, all these newer disciplines actually were spurred by methodological innovations such as oral history traditions as well as the emergent field of memory studies where apart from History and historiography, the memoirs, the autobiographies, the, you know, writings that are a result of interview process or a person's, you know, or testimonial literature, all these things were being given validity. And they were treated as legitimate knowledge. So the essential point emerging from such, you know, evolution or such development in knowledge system in scholarship. is that a single disciplinary approach now becomes inadequate for comprehensively explaining the various aspects of any people's life or lifestyle, both as a unified group and when compared to other groups across time and space.

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Source: science.org






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So studying one group or attempting a comparative study between two groups cannot be done successfully unless there is an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary approach. Only history, only social science, only anthropology cannot do a well-rounded justice. There has to be intersection or crossroads of different disciplines. The whole study should be lying somewhere at the crossroads of, let's say, history, cultural studies, gender studies, ethnography, archaeology, anthropology, and so forth. Vinita Damodaran and Sangeeta Dasgupta note that despite the term Adivasi being a later development, a substantial amount of writing concerning the tribal communities and their issues can be found from the late 18th and 19th centuries, the period of the East India Company and the British Raj.

### Tribal Studies and Interdisciplinary Approaches

- Vinita Damodaran and Sangeeta Dasgupta (2022) note that despite the term 'Adivasi' being a later development, a substantial amount of writing concerning tribal communities and their issues can be found from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the period of the East India Company and the British Raj.
- The many and varied voices of Adivasis are now being heard as they affirm their identity, articulate their politics, and creatively engage with the state and its institutions.
- Living in geographically diverse parts of India, pursuing different livelihoods, and speaking numerous languages, tribal experiences are wide-ranging, encompassing a multitude of realities.






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Many and varied voices of the Adivasis are now being heard even as they affirm their identity, they start to articulate their politics and creatively engage with the state and its institutions. So the voices coming from different directions become very important and

interdisciplinary approaches think it is imperative to include these voices. to take into consideration the complexity, the layeredness, the nuances that these voices render to the study of the tribes. So it cannot remain a very simplified, simplistic, unilinear, homogeneous way of understanding the tribes anymore. The voices from within the communities challenge such simplistic perspectives.

Living in geographically diverse parts of India, pursuing different livelihoods and speaking numerous languages, the tribal experiences are now wide-ranging and encompass a multitude of realities. As stories of tribal marginalization, resilience, and assertion bring them into sharper focus, the academic discipline of Adivasi studies, centered on the Adivasi experience, gains increasing relevance. So, the tribal people's stories and experiences point to the rich diversity of cultures and ways of thinking that must be included within the nation's understanding, and they also offer potential for different ways of living and existing on this planet. Seema, in her book chapter titled 'Ethnography and Emerging Trends in Rock Art Research,' published in 2020, highlights that recent academic approaches to rock art involve a methodological shift that seeks to understand the past of the people linked to the art or to similar traditions.

**Tribal Studies and Interdisciplinary Approaches**

- Seema M. Minz, in her book chapter "Ethnography: An Emerging Trend in Rock Art Research" (2020) highlights that the recent academic approaches to rock art involve a methodological shift that seeks to understand the past of the people linked to the art or to similar traditions.
- This reconstruction often benefits from integrating archaeological techniques with ethnographic research on these communities.
- Despite the impact of modernity and globalization on their original way of life, tribal communities across India still strongly adhere to their traditions, particularly in their belief systems, rituals, ceremonies, and art forms.



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Such reconstruction often benefits from integrating archaeological techniques with ethnographic research on these tribal communities. Despite the impact of modernity and globalization on the tribal way of life, these communities across India still strongly adhere to their original traditions. They still practice their belief systems, rituals, ceremonies, and art forms. So, talking about indigenous traditions, we see that painting, an ancient tribal art, continues to be practiced. It thrives among tribal communities, with several tribes renowned for their distinct painting styles.

### Indigenous Traditions

- Painting, an ancient tribal art, continues to be practiced, with several tribes renowned for their distinct painting styles. These include the Santhal, Gond, Baiga, Kanwar, Bhil, Bhilala, Saora, Warli, Rathwa and Naik.
- Some of these tribal paintings, like Saora, Warli, Gond, Rathwa, Bhil, and Muria art, have become so well-known that they are identified by the tribe's name.



Parwati Paraste, a Gond tribal artist, creating painting on canvas.

Photo: Sagar Ramya




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These include the Santhal, Gond, Baiga, Kamar, Bhil, Bhilala, Saura, Warli, Rathwa, as well as the Naik. Some of these tribal paintings, like Saura, Warli, Gond, Rathwa, Bhil, and Muriya art, have become so well known that they are identified by the tribe's name. Similar to other indigenous and rock art traditions, Indian tribes also decorate their house walls or floors, which they call the Bheeth, with paintings for a variety of specific reasons, including magical practices, expressions of their belief systems, celebrations, rituals, ceremonies, auspicious events, cultural festivals, secular themes, expressions of their myths, and a collective belief system, expressions of gratitude, as well as to appease malevolent deities.

So, here it means that some historians suggest that the early painting tradition from Maharashtra has its roots stretching back to the Neolithic period, specifically between 2500 to 3000 BC. Located at the foot of Bhimbetka mountain, which is renowned for its world heritage rock art, this tiny Gond village of Bhinyapur—it's a tiny village called Bhinyapur, it's a Gond village—exhibits a way of life that has not changed much since the Neolithic times. That's how, you know, invaluable and precious tribal art can be for its timelessness, for its beauty, as well as because it depicts and carries in its history of human civilization as old as the Neolithic period. So, further means are used that the indigenous painting traditions are significant for in-depth rock art research to reconstruct the past cultures which other disciplines miss due to their present focus. So, history as a discipline alone cannot study prehistoric life, but combining ethnography

### Tribal Studies and Interdisciplinary Approaches

- Similar to other indigenous and rock art traditions, Indian tribes decorate their house walls or floors with paintings for a variety of specific reasons, including magical practices, expressions of their belief systems, celebrations, rituals, ceremonies, auspicious events, cultural festivals, secular themes, expressions of gratitude, and appeasement of malevolent deities.
- Minz (2020) elucidates that some historians suggest that the **Warli painting tradition of Maharashtra has roots stretching back to the Neolithic period**, specifically between 2500 and 3000 BC.
- Located at the foot of Bhimbetka Mountain, renowned for its World Heritage rock art, the tiny Gond village of Bhiniyapur exhibits a way of life that hasn't changed much since Neolithic times.



with rock art research can improve our interpretations and our endeavors to reconstruct the tribal past. Once again, the cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary approaches become imperative, become urgent, and are seen as a timely intervention in the field of tribal studies. So, as a way of concluding, we see that understanding tribal communities requires moving beyond any single disciplinary lens. We should rather have multiple disciplinary lenses involved in these studies. Interdisciplinary approaches drawing on history, archaeology, anthropology, art studies, as well as others, are crucial for overcoming the limitations of individual fields.

### Conclusion

- Understanding tribal communities requires moving beyond single disciplinary lenses. Interdisciplinary approaches, drawing on history, archaeology, anthropology, art studies, and others, are crucial for overcoming the limitations of individual fields.
- By incorporating indigenous knowledge, including art forms like painting, alongside archaeological and ethnographic methods, we can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of tribal pasts and presents.
- This interdisciplinary perspective is increasingly crucial in tribal studies, as tribal communities navigate modernity while maintaining connections to their rich cultural heritage.



Each field with its own parameters is delimited and in a way handicapped. So, such handicaps, such limitations, can be overcome when there is a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach. By incorporating indigenous knowledge such as art forms like painting alongside archaeological and ethnographic methods, we can achieve a more comprehensive, a more well-rounded understanding of the tribal past as well as the tribal present. So, this interdisciplinary perspective is increasingly crucial in tribal studies as

tribal communities navigate modernity while maintaining connections to their rich cultural heritage. With this, we come to the end of our lecture today.

**Conclusion**

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Let us meet for another topic and another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.



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