

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, English

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture06

Lecture 06: Understanding Tribes in India: Political Institutions in Tribal Societies

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies in India. So today we are going to discuss the political institutions that are present in tribal societies, the political institutions that run a tribal society. So political institutions exist as a way of performing public decision-making, nominating its own leadership, maintaining social cohesion and order, protecting group rights, and providing safety from external attacks and threats.



So these are some of the basic functions or basic reasons or rationale for having political institutions. Decision-making, nominating leadership, maintaining social cohesion, and protection of a group and its basic rights from external attacks and threats. Tribes have a wide range of political institutions, where highly decentralized political organizations exist along with centralized political organizations. So some aspects of decision-making, some aspects of leadership are decentralized.

Let's say each leader or each head figure is responsible for managing one aspect of the society. Right. I'll give an example. What happens in the Santal society, in the Santal village system, is that there is a Naeke and then there is a Majhi. So the Naeke or the Naeke Baba is responsible for the priestly rights or the priestly duties, everything pertaining to religion and religious observances, whereas the



Majhi is responsible for overseeing the political and administrative aspects of the village system. So, colonial rule was responsible for dismantling some of the inherent tribal political institutions. They were responsible for disrupting tribal solidarity during the colonial period. And caused significant changes to the tribal political structures. Scholars have often argued that the pre-colonial tribal political structure was largely static.

However, historical evidence suggests there were three major trends. First, there was colonization and the establishment of settlements by peasant communities, who were encouraged by Mughal rulers and landlords or zamindars to reclaim land in exchange for substantial incentives. For land reclamation, they were offered incentives. Secondly, several tribes, such as the Bhils, Minas, Kolis, and Gonds, were considered dominant communities by Mughal rule. Lastly, there was the rise of the state, either from the tribal matrix or due to the imposition of authority by Rajputs and other caste groups on the tribal system.

The imposition of a feudal superstructure on tribal society often led to the breakdown of traditional tribal political organizations and their reformation into distinct social strata based on power distribution and economic interests. The rudimentary political institutions of the tribes included the council of village elders, headmen, tribal chiefs, and so on. These institutions mostly consisted of a single person or a group of people. So, let us take them up one by one. When we talk about the council of elders,

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- The rudimentary political institutions of the tribals include—the council of village elders, headman, tribal chief, and so on. These institutions mostly consist of a single person or a group of people.
- **The Council of Elders:** A council of elders is a temporary body of selected villagers, that generally coincides with the elders of the clan to look into the cases brought before them. They are responsible for taking care of disputes and quarrels, tackling sexual offences, intrusions by outsiders and so on. They also deal with deciding agricultural schedules, ceremonies and other occasions.



We refer to a temporary body of selected villagers that generally coincides with the elders of the clan to look into the cases brought before them. This council is generally responsible for handling disputes and quarrels, tackling sexual offenses, intrusions by outsiders, and so on. The council is also responsible for deciding agricultural schedules, ceremonies throughout the year, as well as other occasions. Next, we have the concept of the village headman. The village headman is a hereditary position, subject to the villagers' opinions when required.

Almost every tribe has a headman who acts as a spokesman for the tribe, dealing with various issues inside the village as well as connecting with outside authorities. So, the headman, the village headman, essentially acts as a liaison or mediator between village affairs and external administration. He commands the majority of the village and is considered the guide and keeper of traditional values. Next, we have the figure of the tribal chief, or rather, the position of the tribal chief. The tribal chief is a hereditary post of supreme judicial authority at the tribal level.

The chief of a tribe has the responsibility of not only taking care of the region, his particular region or tribe. But this chief is also the supreme judicial authority at the tribal level. Next, talking about uncentralized political systems, we have the kinship-oriented political systems. A kinship-oriented political system is a political system where a kinship group functions as a political body.

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- **The Village Headman:** This is a hereditary position subject to villagers' opinions when required. Almost every tribe has a headman who acts as the spokesman for the tribe in dealing with various issues inside the village as well as connecting with outside authorities. He acts as a mediator between the village and the external administration. He commands the majority of the village and is considered to be the guide and keeper of traditional values.
- **The Tribal Chief:** The tribal chief is a hereditary post of supreme judicial authority at the tribal level. The chief of a tribe has the responsibility of not only looking after the region or tribe, but is also the supreme judicial authority at the tribe level (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1985).



They are, you know, part of a kinship, part of a familial system almost. So, this primarily includes a lineage-based political system or a clan-based political system. There is a blood relation among the members who are part of this political system. Talking about lineage-based political systems, a lineage is controlled by the eldest existing male who represents it in both ritual and political contexts. The constituents of the family and its relation with the descent group are based on marriage alliances, and it involves both the circulation of women and the exchange of wealth associated with it.

Uncentralised Political Systems

- **Kinship-Oriented Political Systems:** It is a political system where a kinship group works as a political body. This primarily includes— a) lineage-based political systems, and b) clan-based political systems
- **Lineage-based political system:** Lineage is controlled by the eldest male, who represents it in both ritual and political occasions. The constituents of the family and its relation with the descent group are based on marriage alliances, involving both the circulation of women and the exchange of wealth associated with it.



So, lineage-based political systems start with maximal lineages, then major and minor lineages, and it goes on to minimal lineages. The whole group comes together during a conflict between minimal segments or when attacking or being attacked by outsiders. Now, let me try to define each of these lineages. What is a maximal lineage? A maximal lineage is the broadest or most inclusive kinship group, encompassing many smaller sub-lineages.

Major and minor lineages refer to intermediate levels of kinship, meaning that the group is gradually broken down into smaller segments. Finally, the minimal lineage refers to the smallest and often the most immediate kin-based units, usually consisting of close relatives. Normally, members operate within their smaller or minimal lineage groups on a day-to-day basis. However, when larger conflicts arise between these small groups, they may have to seek support and advice from their larger kin groups, which refers to the major and maximal lineages. In the same way, when facing an external threat or an attack, or the need to launch an attack as a defense mechanism, the broader kin group unites for mutual defense or to enable a kind of concerted aggression.

- Normally, members operate within their smaller (minimal) lineage groups. However, when conflicts arise between these small groups, they may seek support from their larger kin groups (major and maximal lineages). Similarly, when facing an external threat (an attack or the need to launch an attack), the broader kin group unites for mutual defence or aggression.
- **Clan-based political system:** Clan is an organising unit. The clan elders form a council to settle disputes. Each clan has its customary law, and the clan council firmly deals with any member who violates the customary law.
- **Non-Kinship-Oriented Political Systems:** These involve political systems that are not necessarily determined by kinships. Such kind of political position involves headman, chiefdom and so on.



The image is a slide from a presentation. It features a blue header and footer. The main content area is white with a blue border. It contains three bullet points. The first bullet point discusses lineage groups and their role in conflict resolution. The second bullet point defines a clan-based political system, mentioning clan elders and customary law. The third bullet point discusses non-kinship-oriented political systems, mentioning headman and chiefdom. To the right of the third bullet point is a small inset image of a woman with dark hair, wearing a red and white patterned top, speaking. The background of the inset image is yellow with red circular patterns. At the bottom left of the slide, there are logos for 'www.jalil' and a small circular logo. At the bottom right, there is a small number '9'.

Next, we are going to talk about clan-based political system; clan is an organizing unit. The clan elders form a council in order to settle disputes. Each clan has its customary law and the clan council firmly deals with any member who violates the customary law. So such a violator is actually dealt with, you know, in terms of very stringent, hard and fast rules that the clan political system has charted out.

Now, non-kinship oriented political systems involve political systems that are not necessarily determined by kinships. Such kind of political position involves the headman, the chiefdom and so on and so forth. So, now talking about the headmanship, the headman is one of the most vital political units in any given tribe. This position is one of the most vital political units in any tribe. The headman is an official position in a tribal group and is governed by some rules of succession.

Even though these rules may be very minimal or vague. The headman is determined less by descent or ancestry and more by an individual's personal characteristics. So, even if a man is a legitimate successor of a previous headman or a successor to headmanship, such a person from the headman's lineage must validate or meet certain criteria.

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- **Headmanship:** He is one of the most vital political units of any tribe. Headman is an official position in a tribal group and is governed by some rules of succession, even though these rules may be minimal or vague. headman is determined less by descent and more by an individual's personal characteristics. Even if a man is a legitimate successor to headmanship, they must validate his occupying position by displaying admirable personal qualities.



He must meet his occupying position by displaying certain admirable personal qualities. Qualities of a leader, qualities of a headman, should be present in an individual. Otherwise, even if he belongs to the lineage of a previous headman, he may not be nominated. Talking about chiefdom, it is a particular form of tribal political organization. In chiefdom, the focus of authority moves higher in the tribal structure beyond the small communities that have lost their autonomy and are reduced to interdependent political subdivisions.

The tribe is composed of various chiefdoms that are politically independent of each other. So, in chiefdoms, descent groups such as clans are ranked in hierarchical order, with one group being chiefly or noble. So, in a chiefdom, what happens is that the different clans are ranked according to a certain hierarchical order, and one such clan would be treated as chiefly or noble. It is from this group or clan that the chief, the concept of chief, comes, and this chief from that particular clan holds authority over all groups in a particular area.

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- **Chiefdom:** It is a particular form of tribal political organisation. In chiefdom, the focus of authority moves up higher in the tribal structure, beyond the small communities that have lost their autonomy and are reduced to interdependent political subdivisions. The tribe is composed of various chiefdoms that are politically independent of each other.
- In chiefdoms, descent groups (such as clans) are ranked in hierarchical order, with one group chiefly or noble. It is from this group that the chief comes, who holds authority over all groups in a particular area.
- Chiefdom, although not directly determined by descent, is composed of several descent groups occupying a defined territory and under the leadership of a chief.



So, chiefdom, although not directly determined by descent, is composed of several descent groups occupying a defined territory, and this territory remains under the leadership of the nominated chief. So, next slide. We are going to look at the centralized political systems. Till now, we were talking about decentralized political systems, and when we refer to centralized political systems, we talk about the intervention of the state.

The state comes into the picture. The state is the ultimate form of a centralized political system, even in the domain of tribal societies. What is a state? A state is a political institution with bureaucracy and diversified governmental institutions, which has varying degrees of centralized control over its subjects. In contemporary times, the state is the political organization in which all people live.

Centralised Political Systems

- The state is the ultimate form of centralised political system, even in the domain of tribal societies.
- **State:** It is a political institution with bureaucracy and diversified governmental institutions with varied degrees of centralised control over its subjects. In contemporary times, the state is the political organisation where all people live. Nevertheless, headmen, clan-based political systems and other such units exist in tribal societies, and all of them are incorporated within the structures of the state.



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Nevertheless, headmen, clan-based political systems, as well as other such tribal units, do exist within tribal societies, and all of them are incorporated within the structures of the state. In contemporary times, both tribal communities and their local leaders have come forward. They have taken the initiative to lead their villagers in the changed democratic setup of the country. In the post-independence period, the advent of the modern state introduced the ideas of general elections, panchayat elections, as well as community development programs to the tribals. So, with the emergence of such new institutions that have traditionally not been part of the tribal cosmos and their leaders, what happens is that traditional leaders of tribes have also tried to participate in national as well as regional tribal politics.

Contemporary Tribal Political Institutions

- In contemporary times, both tribal communities and their local leaders have come forward to lead their villagers in the changed democratic setup of the country.
- In the post-independence period, the advent of the modern state introduced the ideas of general elections, Panchayat elections, and community development programs to the tribals.
- With the emergence of such new institutions and their leaders, traditional leaders of tribes have also tried to participate in national and regional tribal politics.



They become part of the centralized political system too. Now, the panchayat elections have seeped into the national and regional political parties of tribal areas in India. The panchayat and its members handle various activities such as village disputes, village development work, and law-and-order-related issues, which are ongoing, which were, you know, previously often handled by the clan leaders or headmen. We see that the introduction of the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas, in short called PESA (P-E-S-A), was introduced in 1996.

PESA has given birth to the idea of local governance in the tribal regions of India. A three-tier structure of local self-government was initiated in tribal areas under the PESA Act. Next, we look at the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution, which established the Panchayati Raj institutions in India. What is the 73rd Amendment, and what are its highlights? What are the main, you know,

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- Panchayat elections have seeped into the national and regional political parties of tribal areas in India. Panchayat and its members handle various activities such as village disputes, village development work, law and order-related issues, which were often handled by clan leaders or headman.
- The introduction of the **Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Area (or PESA 1996)** has given birth to the idea of local governance in the tribal regions of India. A three-tier structure of local self-government was initiated in tribal areas under this act.

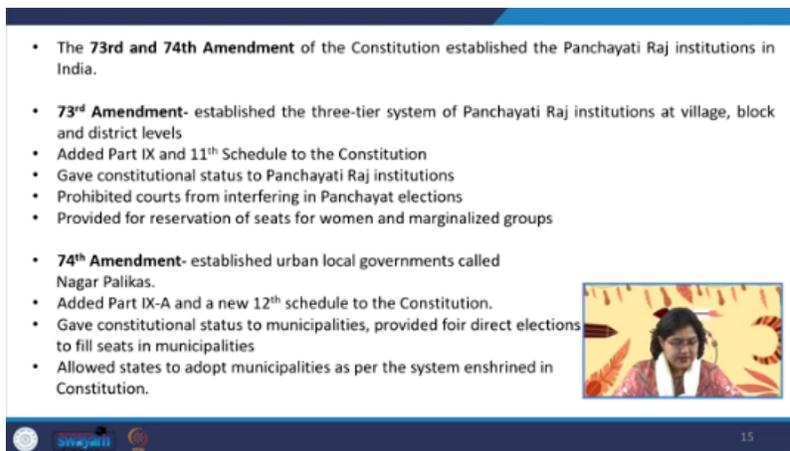


arguments or the main focus of the 73rd Amendment? It established a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj institutions at the village, block, and district levels. It added Part 9 and the

11th Schedule to the Constitution. It gave constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institutions. It prohibited the courts' interference in Panchayat elections.

That is one very important point. The courts cannot interfere in Panchayat elections. Finally, the 73rd Amendment also provided for the reservation of seats for women and marginalized groups. I'll say this again. Finally, the 73rd Amendment provided for the reservation of seats for women and marginalized groups.

Moving on to the 74th Amendment. The 74th Amendment established urban local governments, which are known as Nagarpalikas. It added Part 9A and a new 12th Schedule to the Constitution. The 74th Amendment gave constitutional status to municipalities and provided for direct elections to fill seats in municipalities.



- The **73rd and 74th Amendment** of the Constitution established the Panchayati Raj institutions in India.
- **73rd Amendment**- established the three-tier system of Panchayati Raj institutions at village, block and district levels
- Added Part IX and 11th Schedule to the Constitution
- Gave constitutional status to Panchayati Raj institutions
- Prohibited courts from interfering in Panchayat elections
- Provided for reservation of seats for women and marginalized groups
- **74th Amendment**- established urban local governments called Nagar Palikas.
- Added Part IX-A and a new 12th schedule to the Constitution.
- Gave constitutional status to municipalities, provided for direct elections to fill seats in municipalities
- Allowed states to adopt municipalities as per the system enshrined in Constitution.



Further, we see that it allowed the state to adopt municipalities as per the system enshrined in the Constitution. So, the PESA Act was vital because the 73rd and 74th Amendments did not apply to the regions of the 5th and 6th Schedules of the Indian Constitution. So, the regions falling within the 5th and 6th Schedules of the Indian Constitution were not covered by the 73rd and 74th Amendments, and that's where the PESA Act comes in because these regions, under the 5th and 6th Schedules, had a separate jurisdiction which applied to these scheduled areas. So, PESA, in other words, provided for village-level democracy concerning resources, responsibility, and decision-making to be passed on from the central government

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to the lowest governance unit, right. This Act extended the provisions of panchayats to the tribal areas of the nine states under the Fifth Schedule and most of the northeastern states under the Sixth Schedule. This, in turn, gave the tribal political institutions a democratic political turn in India. So, they gained some kind of economy and some kind of autonomous status as a result of the PESA Act.



With this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let us discuss another topic in our next lecture. Thank you.



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