

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

Lecture60

Lecture 60: The Future of Tribal Studies in India: Current Trends and Scopes

Thank you. Welcome back to the NPTEL online certification course, Tribal Studies in India, Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. We have come far in this course and this is going to be my last lecture, that is the lecture number 60, titled The Future of Tribal Studies in India, Current Trends and Scopes. Now, in many parts of universities and institutions, the study of tribes has remained integral, particularly when it comes to social sciences. And for a long period of time, scholars have studied the communities.

But it is only in recent times that we have begun to ask or question whether or not there is something specifically known as tribal studies. And this has really come from the issues concerning the emergence of gender studies, the emergence of Dalit studies, and the emergence of queer studies, for instance. So in that kind of context, is it possible to think about the possibility of tribal studies? Is it that there is a way to carve out a distinct kind of space that will be known as tribal studies? So, this is an open-ended question and probably in the next few slides we will also try to see how scholars have studied the communities and in the end we will reflect on why this is important or can we have something distinct like tribal studies like this.

Where we have, for example, gender studies, Dalit studies, or when we have disability studies, can we have that kind of separate, distinct tribal studies, a dedicated tribal studies which has its own theoretical, methodological, or epistemological foundations? Now that is the question. So to begin with, one has to go back to the colonial period to talk about tribal studies. And the idea of tribal studies began during the colonial period in a sense that the study of tribes in terms of seeing them or considering them as an object of study has begun during

the colonial period. And this particularly came with the emergence and development of anthropology as a discipline.

And you know that anthropology as a discipline emerged hand in hand with colonialism. Now anthropology in particular emerged as a discipline to study the other, where people from the West in particular came to the non-Western countries like Latin America, Africa, Asia to study the other. Anthropology as a discipline was specifically dedicated to studying communities like tribes who are small, whom they think are primitive, whom they think are backward, whom they think are practicing their own religion, which we sometimes call animism. So the discipline of Anthropology emerged as a study of the other. And in the context of India, many a time, the other is the tribal communities.

But over time, the study of tribes has expanded significantly. And disciplines like political science, sociology, history have also begun to specifically study the tribes. So, there can be no proper or singular definition of what constitutes tribal studies, but it can involve the study of the kinds of research, surveys, or economic work. Whether they are based on field data, whether they are entirely purely theoretical that focus on tribal communities or the settled tribes in India. So, the interesting thing about having this conversation about tribal studies is that it is really important to understand the issue of tribes from multiple perspectives.

And it is for this reason that this very course is structured and designed in a way that we borrow from different disciplines and we also have course instructors who are from different disciplinary backgrounds. Because when we are talking about tribal studies, we cannot only talk tribal studies from a sociological point of view. We cannot only talk tribal studies, at least today, from an anthropological point of view. To really capture the kind of changes the communities have experienced in the last 60 to 70 years or even more, you really need to widen your horizons, you really need to bring in different disciplinary orientations, frameworks and concepts to really unpack the complexities when it comes to the study of tribes. So tribal studies in short, is about bringing together knowledge from the discipline of history, political science, economics, social work, law, sociology and anthropology, so as to have a better understanding of the lives and the challenges of the communities in the contemporary period.

Now, we are going to discuss extensively how Vidyut Joshi, the scholar, has divided how tribes as a community have studied into four phases. The first is the ethnographic phase, the second is the constructive phase, the third is the development phase, and the fourth is the identity phase. Now, when it comes to the first phase, that is the ethnographic phase, it covers the period between 1774 to 1920. And this period was during the colonial period. So, like I said, it was colonialism that that enabled or that provided the ground for the emergence of the disciplines of Anthropology.

And it was during this period that tribal communities began to be studied and their life and their culture began to be documented. So during this period most of the studies focus on describing tribal life, their culture and their traditions in detail. The second phase is the constructive phase that is research during this period aimed at was drifted towards having a holistic understanding of tribal communities and they were primarily aimed towards supporting the communities. The third is the development phase. Now, we are coming to the post-colonial period, the post-independent period that is the 1950s to the 1990s.

Now, this period focus more on how development policies and programs affected the tribes. The last phase is the identity phase which is more recent phase. Until today we are in this phase and in this period most of the studies are concerned about identity issues pertaining to rights and the demand for self-representation and cultural preservation. Now we will look at these phases one by one in greater detail. Now the first is the ethnographic phase.

Now, like I said, it was the colonial state, it was the Britishers who were the first ones to extensively document the life of the tribal communities all over India. And even if you come to regions like northeast India, you will see that they were the first ones to study the Nagas, many of the tribal communities, the tribes within the Nagas, even the Mizos, the Khasis, the Lepchas, the Garos and all. Most of the societies were oral societies and they don't have written records. Now it was the intervention of the colonial state which was very, very important because they have reduced their culture, they have reduced their language, they have reduced their belief system into writing. So for that, they have created institutions that will actually dedicate themselves to documenting the life of the communities.

So, during the British rule, many early studies on tribal communities were carried out by the British scholars. They can be missionaries, they can be administrators, they can be anyone who is associated with the colonial state in different capacities. And like I said, they also created the institutions that will actually facilitate these kind of studies. So, the Asiatic Society of Bengal was established in 1774 and it continues even till today, a very, very important repository when it comes to the study of communities in India. Now, British administrators, missionaries, travelers, all of them were very interested and they began to learn the techniques of writing or studying the communities.

And it was during this period that anthropology as a discipline began to take root. So, many times it is very difficult to really distinguish whether the British administrators were also anthropologists. Sometimes we loosely call them anthropologists. Sometimes, of course, we acknowledge that they are first administrators, but then, given the kind of intellectual orientation or intellectual perspective that they adopt, they begin to follow the method of anthropology that was prevalent during the time. So, in most of these works, they dedicate themselves to writing about the communities by collecting information about their lives, their culture, their belief systems, and so on and so forth.

So most of these writings about the communities came up in journals like the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal that was started in 1784, the Indian Antiquary that was started in 1872, the Journal of Bihar and Odisha Research Society, and Man in India, 1921. And at the same time, there are also scholars who prepared handbooks on Indian tribes and castes. And during major census surveys, especially in 1931 and 1941, both British and Indian anthropologists helped collect data on tribal and caste communities, Now if you go back to any communities, whether one likes it or not, one has to start from the colonial monographs. And the colonial monographs, till today, act as a starting point.

- British administrators, missionaries, travelers, were interested in anthropology, and collected information about the lives and cultures of tribal and rural people.
- The findings were published in journals like the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (started in 1784), *Indian Antiquary* (1872), *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society* (1915), and *Man in India* (1921).
- Some scholars also prepared detailed handbooks on Indian tribes and castes. During major Census surveys—especially in 1931 and 1941—both British and Indian anthropologists helped collect data on tribal and caste communities across India.



The way in which they write about the communities, one can disagree with it because sometimes they use a lot of terrifying stereotypes like tribal communities are wild, savage, barbarian, and they actually use a lot of demeaning language to represent the communities. When it comes to doing research or trying to understand the history of the community, many times we are forced to go back to the colonial monographs because they have actually captured and written about many of the tribal communities in India today, as they were among the first to do so. So, for instance, Campbell, Latham, and Risley wrote books which were meant to help government officials and others understand the cultural diversity of India. And over time, we have detailed studies which were focused extensively on individual tribes or specific tribal communities and castes, such as the work of Shakespeare (1912), who has written about the Lushai Kukis, Gordon (1914), Mills (1922; 1937), and others. The scholars created encyclopedic records on tribes and castes which still serve as valuable sources of basic information about different communities.

Now, this knowledge that the different agents of the colonial state produced was not only because of their enthusiasm for knowledge. It also actually helped the colonial state in terms of governing the populations. So, therefore, there was this dual agenda. One is about the communities. Second is that the information is being utilized by the colonial state to serve its own interests.

So, therefore, you will see that they have written extensively about almost all the communities that they have come into close contact with, or they have almost written about all the communities where they served as an administrator. So, they are actually utilizing their position, liberating the positions that they have to

document the lives of the people that they are governing. So, in that context, the British ethnographic studies are very, very informative, are very, very pivotal, and they serve two main purposes. One is that they portray British society as advanced, that is the modern society, and tribal communities as primitive, based on the idea of social evolutionary scale. Now, evolutionary idea of thinking is something which is very prominent.

Say, for example, it was Charles Darwin, you know, who began this idea of evolution of man where man over a period of time evolved into a full human being. Likewise, the belief even in disciplines like anthropology and sociology is that humans have to pass through different stages of evolution, so the condition of tribal societies according to the Britishers represents the lowest mode of civilization because they are backward, they are primitive, they utilize, you know, at the most primitive methods for making their living, that is shifting cultivation. They are also hardly safe, they are also hardly educated, for which they think that tribal communities are at the lowest rank of human civilization, whereas they see themselves as the most advanced representative of the idea of the modern. Secondly, they were conducted to serve the administrative needs of the British colonial government, which I have already explained. They were not only collecting information and documenting it, but it was also serving the colonial interest by actually amassing information about the communities that they were governing.

The second period or the second phase is the constructive phase. This phase mostly reigns between 1920 to 1950. And this was also the time when the Indian national movement was gaining momentum and gaining a lot of strength. And with the rise of the nationalist movement, the tribal studies, the contour or the trajectory of tribal studies began to witness some kind of shift. And during this period, sociology and anthropology in particular became a part of university education.

Sociology was introduced at Bombay University in 1919, and anthropology at Calcutta University in 1921. Now, what does this mean for the study of tribes? It means that we have Indian anthropologists, Indian sociologists who began to study different Indian communities. So, this period was very important because it marked a maturing phase of Indian anthropology which had originally developed

under strong British influence. So, from being studied by the British, we are gradually moving to studying our own self.

And this began to happen from the 1920s onwards. Now, when it comes to the discipline of anthropology, the focus remains on tribal communities. Like I said, anthropology was dedicated to the study of small-knit communities who are mostly tribal communities, who are mostly backward, who are considered to be primitive. So, therefore, anthropology is a discipline, you know, which continues to hinge on the idea that they are to study other communities. So, therefore, tribal communities become the most important subject of study for anthropologists.

Indian anthropological work during this time followed the tradition of British universities like Cambridge and Oxford, emphasizing ethnographic and monographic studies that looked closely at tribal culture, kinship structures, and social systems. And this trend continued to influence till the 1940s. Some of the important works include Briggs who wrote about the Chamar community. Some Christian missionaries such as P.O. Boddington also became involved in ethnographic and linguistic research on tribal communities. So when any anthropological work looks at the tribal culture, it will be interested in documenting the kinship and the social systems.

The tendency was also that the remote the communities are, the better it is because they tend to be the first ones to document the communities. So the more primitive, the better it is for the anthropologists. So there was a kind of attitude that was prevailing during this period. During this period, a major influence was W.H.R. Rivers, who was a British anthropologist, along with Seligman, Radcliffe-Brown, and Hutton, who were laying the foundation for the discipline of anthropology as pioneers in the field, and these scholars carried out detailed studies on various tribes and published monographs documenting their findings. Among Indian scholars, we have anthropologists, such as S.C. Roy, who worked on tribal groups and gained recognition even from the British anthropologists.

N.K. Bose's book, which continues to be very very important, was Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption. Therefore, from the 1920s onwards we begin to see Indian anthropologists emerging who begin to write about Indian society, who began to write about the communities, and it was no longer only the colonial state who

were writing about tribes, but even anthropologists who were trained in India, who studied in India, who were Indians themselves, began to study tribal communities. A very important figure of this time was Verrier Elwin, and I think most of us have heard about him already, and we have also talked about his contribution to tribal communities in India in our previous lectures in the initial part. He was a British-born scholar who made a very, very important impact on Indian anthropology through his studies on tribes in Madhya Pradesh and Odisha. His writings, particularly on the Baigas, are very, very important and continue to be read widely even till today.

And he has also written on the Agaria and the Maria, which brought more attention to tribal issues. Now, Verrier Elwin was a very, very strong sympathizer of tribal communities. And for a long period of time, his thought and ideas were followed as a national policy by the government of India because he was an advisor to Nehru when it comes to tribal communities. Therefore, his ideas, his views were taken very seriously. And even though there were a lot of disagreements toward the position that he took on the question of tribal issues, but no one can deny the contribution of Verrier Elwin in terms of writing about the communities, understanding the communities, and also advocating their interests.

Then coming to the development study phase, during this period, it is the post-colonial period, and anthropology also began to take a firm foothold in universities, in government institutions, and in that context, a very important institution that was established in the post-colonial period is the Tribal Research and Training Institute. This funded many studies and publications to providing grants to organizations which focus on topics like education, health, development and migration. For instance, in Gujarat, TRTI supported 15 studies on education and 78 on development-related issues. Similar trends were observed in the context of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh with books published on tribal education and migration. Tribal education also gained a very important place.

For example, the Indian Council of Social Science Research even created a special cell under J.P. Nayak, where scholars like Gore, Desai, and Chitnis edited three volumes on the education of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Now, in the post-independent period, what we see is that institutional mechanisms were created to facilitate the process of education, to facilitate more

and more anthropologists, more and more social scientists continue to study and pay attention to the study of tribes. And in India, we have almost all states, you know, major states in India have tribal studies, tribal research institutes, and these research institutes are dedicated towards the study of tribes. So, even in northeast India, TRIs play a very, very important role in terms of documenting and propagating tribal studies. Mazumdar, in 1993, explored the Tribe-Hindu continuum.

Berreman, 1963-1964, supported the idea that tribal people were clearly part of Hindu society. Sinha's research on the Bhumij of Manbhum also reflected the Bhumij-Rajput continuum. Vidyarthi's work in Chhatanagpur showed how the Manjhi tribe gradually gained the status of a caste. So all of this work came out during this period because of the kind of environment that was being created that allowed scholars to pay close attention to the study of tribes. So the 1950s and the 1990s was a very, very important period where it really consolidated the study of tribes.

From the 1990s onwards, the discourse of tribal studies began to take some kind of shift. And this shift essentially was centred around the question of identity. So, during this period, the coverage or the research interest when it comes to tribal studies has expanded significantly, and the kind of issues that scholars began to tackle were also important. You know, we are also becoming very, very broad. Now, there is a study by a scholar named Hugh Brody, a Canadian anthropologist, who criticized large projects like the Sardar Sarovar Dam, which we have talked about.

So, he argued that government ignores the tribal way of life while taking over the land. So, in the post-1990s onwards, scholars began to expand the domain of tribal studies, where they began to look at the interaction between state, development, and tribes. So, according to Brody, tribals see land in three layers, that is, homeland, farmland, and grazing land, but only homeland and farmlands are being compensated during land acquisition, not grazing land, which are vital for livestock. Therefore, Brody stressed that tribals have their own system of governance and should be allowed to manage their own affairs. So basically what is important is that the concern is no longer about on the question of culture.

The concern is no longer on the question of the issue of tribal kinship. The concern has expanded to the question of the way in which tribes engage with the state or the state engage with the tribe. So it has expanded the conversations around tribal studies in India. So there are other scholars, numerous anthropologists, sociologists, you know, have also begun to pay close attention to the study of tribes. And a very important figure is Felix Padel, who has highlighted how development projects such as Vedanta's, mining in Odisha, harm the tribal beliefs.

Padel argues that the hills are sacred to the tribals and removing them is like taking away their gods. Scholars like Amita Baviskar who have studied extensively the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and she came out with a very important book titled *In the Belly of the River*, where she looks at the question of tribal activism, tribal rights, and the larger question of development. So she argues that tribes should be allowed to govern themselves because they already have institutions, they already have their customs. And much of the development experience or the development encounters have told us this story that there is always this deprivation that is going on when it comes to development. So these developments are testament to the fact that tribal studies have grown and changed with the social change.

It has also the potential of developing and encompassing newer approaches to tribal studies. Now overall, what we see is that these four phases capture a very, very broad spectrum of how tribal studies have evolved over the time. Starting from the colonial period, now talking about a contemporary context, we don't have a dedicated conversation about the possibility of tribal studies yet. So there were a few attempts in the past few years. We have seen scholars begin to think along the line of the possibility of tribal studies.

But what I wanted to highlight here is that more so in terms of the scholarships, how different anthropologies or how the colonial state and the post-colonial state and scholars within these two periods have engaged with the study of the tribes. And we see that over a period of time, the nature of studies concerning tribal communities has changed extensively from merely documenting their culture, their customs, and their belief systems towards trying to understand the state, how they interact with the state, how they interact with development, how tribes respond to different kind of developmental initiatives that are being undertaken in

the areas or regions that they inhabit. So overall what one can say essentially is that tribal studies as a field is a growing field and it is an exciting field in terms of really engaging with the questions of identity, with the question of rights, with the question of development, with the question of state. So all of this makes the study of tribes interesting, and being a community that has been marginalized in many forms and in many ways, it is also pertinent that we have a better grasp of the kind of issues that the communities are confronting today. And definitely, there is this strong possibility of the emergence of tribal studies as a specific domain of study within different disciplines, particularly in disciplines like sociology and anthropology.

With this, I end my lecture and thank you so much.