TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND

APPROACHES

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Lecture8

Lecture 08: Assimilation and Integration of Indian Tribes

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies in India, Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. So today we are going to discuss the tribal society's process of assimilation and integration. What are these two concepts, assimilation and integration? According to Ganesh Devy, I quote, "One of the most significant features of Indian civilisation is its immense linguistic variety…. But not all large countries have such a variety as India has. This is so mainly because of India's peculiar history of assimilation of different cultures during the course of the last three millennia." unquote.
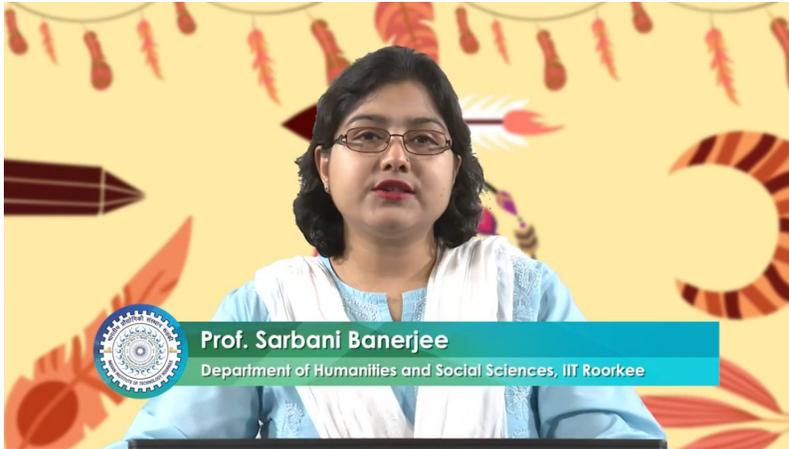
So, here we are opening up our discussion today, looking at the panoramic, you know, picture of Indian civilization. It is the panorama that we have in terms of a hybrid culture with multiple languages, multiple cultures, multiple civilizations at play. for so many decades and centuries together. And we also see how these different cultures, how these different languages and habits actually influence one another. While discussing about the tribals of India, Devy adds that the Adivasi communities possess a remarkable quality of integrating external influences

They are demonstrating very sophisticated mechanisms for interacting with, interfacing with the non-Adivasi world. It is often overlooked that the Adivasi communities are virtually bilingual in India. And this is a characteristic shared by the bilingual populations globally. So, at this stage, we need to understand how assimilation is different from integration. They are often used interchangeably as two terms.

However, they have their different meanings. So, assimilation refers to adjustment of the minority group to conform to the majority group, right? Whereas integration is a mutual

process of adjustment, a more positive connotation is therefore attached with integration. And so there is this mutual process of adjustment entailed by integration, right?

where all the groups are adjusting with one another with no pre-given direction, whereas assimilation is about almost, you know, engulfing of the minority group by the majority group. The minority group is expected to altogether conform with the majority group. So, let us take a look at this small box on our right, various acculturation typology, right? We have all these terms assimilation, integration, segregation and marginalization. So, when we talk about assimilation, it is not a very positive term.

It means accepting of a new culture, mainly the majority groups culture, right? At the expense of rejecting one's own old traditions and values. So, this is pretty negative in nature. Then we have integration, which is a two-way process. It accepts the new culture, some aspects of the new culture, while also maintaining the old culture.
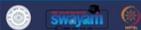
Now, segregation once again is not a very positive term. It rejects anything new. So, it makes a group into a ghetto. It is constantly maintaining its old culture without any updation or any desire to learn or expose itself to any new culture. So, that is also in a way quite negative.

We have marginalization, which is the most negative of all four, which happens at the cost of rejecting both the new as well as the old culture. So colonial administrators, while distinguishing between tribes and civilization, often portrayed the tribal societies as isolated and unchanging, which adhered solely to animistic beliefs. However, this view, this colonial, you know, anthropological perspective has been challenged by scholars such as Surajit Sinha who say that, you know, such a dichotomous view is perhaps problematic. And he argues for a more dynamic understanding, a more layered, you know, understanding of the tribal societies who are constantly interacting with the broader social and cultural landscape. So, while acknowledging change, much of the existing anthropological discourse has focused on a somewhat linear trajectory of tribal to caste.

thereby implying a unidirectional process of assimilation. Right. But this is definitely a flawed way of understanding such a perspective where, you know, tribal, the concept of tribal is equated with the concept of caste, which mainly arises or which mainly springs from the Hindu community. They are not one and the same. Trying to, you know, equalize them or conflate them is a way of oversimplifying the complex realities of tribal societies and their diverse trajectories of changes.

INTRODUCTION

- **Colonial administrators**, while distinguishing between 'tribes' and 'civilization,' often **portrayed tribal societies as isolated and unchanging**, adhering solely to animistic beliefs. However, scholars like Surajit Sinha (1958) challenge this dichotomous view, arguing for a more dynamic understanding of tribal societies as **constantly interacting with the broader social and cultural landscape**.

- While acknowledging change, much of the existing anthropological discourse has **focused on a linear trajectory of 'tribal' to 'caste,'** implying a unidirectional process of assimilation. This perspective, however, may **oversimplify the complex realities** of tribal societies and their diverse trajectories of change.

Source: indiafacts.org.in

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The longstanding issues of integration of India's tribal populations originated with the influx of foreign invaders who displaced the indigenous tribes. While tribes initially retreated to unoccupied areas, the British occupation intensified these problems further. The British government's land policies were unjust in the first place and they granted the non-tribals control over vast tribal territories, which resulted in merciless exploitation of the tribals. When tribal communities revolted against such oppression, the British government brutally suppressed them further as a way of, you know, supposedly maintaining peace and order, citing the need for peace and order. They silenced and they muffled the voices of the tribals.

Colonial Administration

- The long-standing issue of integration of India's tribal populations originated with the **influx of foreign invaders** who **displaced indigenous tribes**. While tribes initially retreated to unoccupied areas, the British occupation intensified these problems.

- The British government's unjust land policies **granted non-tribals control over vast tribal territories**, resulting in merciless exploitation. When tribal communities revolted against this oppression, the British government brutally suppressed them, citing the need for peace and order.

- Stephen Fuchs (1973) elucidates that the consistent root cause of tribal unrest stemmed from profound discontent, fueled by **exploitation at the hands of their culturally more advanced neighbors**.

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Stephen Fuchs said, explains that the consistent root cause of tribal unrest stemmed from profound discontent, a kind of anger and rage kind of seething among the tribal populace. which was fueled by exploitation at the hands of their supposedly culturally more advanced neighbors. So this age-long, this time-worn process of exploitation at the hands

of the non-tribals who posited themselves as culturally superior had caused a lot of deep-rooted unrest and discontent among the tribals. So, recognizing this kind of rage and discontent seething among the tribals, the British government implemented a policy of segregation designating the scheduled districts through an 1874 Act as a way of protecting, as a way of supposedly or apparently protecting the tribal lives and the interests of the tribes.
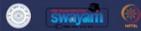
So, in this regard, G.S. Khurye highlights that following the initial establishment, these designated tribal areas were redefined under Section 52A of the 1919 Government of India Act. By 1935, the government further strengthened. the protections of the tribal people by classifying them as totally and partially excluded areas, thereby implementing more rigorous measures of preserving the tribal lands. Numerous acts and regulations subsequently continued to introduce reforms up to the year of independence, 1947.

Meenakshi Natarajan notes that Jaipal Singh Munda, a member of the Constituent Assembly, said the following. So Jaipal Singh Munda said, I quote, You can't teach democracy to tribals. You need to learn democratic values from them. They are the most democratic community on earth. Unquote.

When Jawaharlal Nehru was asked what the stance towards tribal groups should be, he said humility. True national integration therefore necessitates granting the tribal communities significant cultural and even political autonomy rather than just demanding complete assimilation into the majority values and majority practices. There are things more than one or two that the tribal groups can actually teach the non-tribals, that the tribal groups can contribute towards making the larger country, the larger nation state more democratic, more egalitarian. So these values can actually flow directly from their traditional ecosystem.

And that would be lost, that would be a major loss if the tribals are forced to assimilate and kind of muffle their values within the larger scheme of, you know, nation building in terms of non-tribal visions and non-tribal values. So we see that the process of national integration happens In the true sense, if it happens where the tribal's values are also protected, the tribal's values are also celebrated and, you know, in a way emulated. This approach, this two-way approach would foster peaceful coexistence and also strengthen the tribal's connection to the Indian state. We see that in contrast to other parts of India, the tribal communities in Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh who are empowered by education and a strong sense of self have, you know, have been able to.
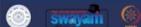
carve out their own identity. They have become more effective advocates for the preservation of their tradition and culture and their tribal identity. According to Fuchs, the political record of the past decades has made it evident that large tribal concentration in the Indian subcontinent, especially in states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh are susceptible to exploitation by the political parties as well as the different communal groups, the different religious groups which can readily provoke these tribals to acts of violence. So, according to Nabarun Purukastha, Dr. Purukastha explains that three Indian tribal development approaches or models have been proposed by the three pioneer tribal scholars in India.

One is the isolationist approach proposed by Verrier-Elwin, assimilationist approach by G.S. Gourier and finally the integrationist approach proposed by Jawaharlal Nehru. titled The Baiga. Verrier-Elwin proposed a national park which would be controlled by a tribal commissioner, allowing them to live freely with restored tribal authority and minimal outside contact. Economic development and need-based education were prioritized,

whereas preserving of tribal culture and banning of outside influence was advocated according to the isolationist approach.

Next, we see that G.S. Gurrier talks about the Indian tribal populations to be essentially backward Hindus. Now, this is also something very contentious. This can be challenged because they are not they don't consider themselves and they are not ethnically speaking or culturally, racially speaking Hindus at all. Whereas G.S.

Guria has has posited, has argued that the Indian tribal populations are essentially backward Hindus. whose primary distinction from other Hindu groups lies in their incomplete integration into Hindu society. He posited that through prolonged contact, tribals have gradually adopted Hindu values and practices, which have been evidenced by changes such as abstaining from alcohol, pursuing education and converting ultimately to Hinduism. There is this brand of scholarship which also asserts and argues that there are Mitakshara schools, for example, the Mitakshara schools that have supposedly civilized and mainstreamed the tribals, made them more like the Hindus through education, abstaining from alcohol and so forth. Right.

Development Approaches

- G.S. Ghurye (1959) argued that Indian tribal populations are essentially "backward Hindus," whose **primary distinction from other Hindu groups lies in their incomplete integration into Hindu society**.

- He posited that through prolonged contact, tribes have gradually adopted Hindu values and practices, evidenced by changes such as abstaining from alcohol, pursuing education, and converting to Hinduism.

- Jawaharlal Nehru's policies, emphasising **special attention to the Northeast**, are reflected in the Sixth Schedule, **granting legislative and judicial powers** to autonomous districts in Assam , and allowing the tribals to maintain their cultural practices.

Basically neutralizing their own values and ethos. Lastly, we have the model proposed by Jawaharlal Nehru. So Jawaharlal Nehru's policies emphasized, you know, they emphasized special attention to the northeastern states of India. And they are reflected in the sixth schedule, which granted legislative and judicial powers to autonomous districts in in Assam, thereby allowing the tribals to maintain their cultural practices.

So there is some form of of decentralized autonomy given to them, to the tribal communities. And at the same time, they also become a part of the central state apparatus or the way the nation state functions. They are part of the nation state and yet some degree of autonomy, some decentralized powers are also attributed to them. So, the government expressed readiness to amend constitutional provisions for greater tribal economy under Nehru's model.

So, Nehru and Elwin's policies were most effectively implemented in the Northeastern Frontier Agency, in short known as NEFA, which was established in 1948 as a union territory outside Assam's jurisdiction under special administration. So, regarding assimilation, scholar and critic case Singh accounts that in the pre-colonial era, the exchange between peasant and tribal communities contributed significantly to the establishment of settled agriculture as the dominant means of survival. Singh adds, I quote Singh, together with the agrarian struggle, Sanskritization processes were also at work, unquote. So, we see that the shifting cultivation is something integral to the tribal culture and it shaped their habitat, their lifestyle, their spiritual outlook and this was very different from the plough agriculture. It was sharply contradictory or contrasting with the plough agriculture.

Assimilation

- K. S. Singh (1982) accounts that in the pre-colonial era, the **exchange between peasant and tribal communities contributed significantly to the establishment of settled agriculture** as the dominant means of survival.

- He also adds that "together with the agrarian struggle sanskritisation processes were also at work." (1982)

- Integral to tribal culture, **shifting cultivation shaped their habitat choice**, lifestyle, and spiritual outlook, **contrasting sharply with plough agriculture**.

They were more familiar with the shifting cultivation. Historically, many Indian tribes relied, depended on the shifting cultivation, a slash and burn method where they planted seeds in the ash enriched soil. This practice requiring only axes and digging sticks. was a common practice across regions like the southern and central India, Chhotanagpur, Bengal, the Himalayas and Assam till the recent time. So when these groups, these communities are shifted from their age-old tradition of shifting cultivation to plough cultivation, which is imposed by the government,

It as a result, it disrupts their entire cultural foundation, making them insecure and disoriented. Basically, it adds to their insecurity and disorientation. This is not due to tribal, you know, inefficiency or ineptitude. but owing to the fact that they are forcefully dismantled from their holistic or their organic way of life. And this, you know, this disruption of the tribal's organic or holistic way of life is a crucial factor that has been often overlooked in tribal development policies.

Assimilation

- Historically, many Indian tribes relied on **shifting cultivation**, a slash-and-burn method where they planted seeds in the ash-enriched soil. This practice, requiring only axes and digging sticks, was common across regions like South and Central India, Chota Nagpur, Bengal, the Himalayas, and Assam until recently.

- The abrupt **shift to plough cultivation**, imposed by government, **disrupted their entire cultural foundation**, causing **insecurity and disorientation**. This is not due to tribal ineptitude but stems from the **forced dismantling** of their holistic way of life, a crucial factor overlooked in tribal development policies.

- For instance, **Bewar is an indigenous farming system practised by the Baigas** in hilly terrains. For generations, the Baiga people have cultivated small hillside plots using the traditional bewar method.

So the development, once again, the whole concept of development comes from outside and is kind of imposed, made to sit on the tribal communities coercively. And it does not try to kind of understand the life that they have been leading previously. So it changes, it drastically transforms the lives of the tribals in the name of development. For instance, beware is an indigenous farming system practiced by the Baigas in hilly terrains.

For generations, the Baiga people have cultivated small hillside plots using the traditional beware method. Each summer, the vigors clear undergrowth and perform controlled burns in order to prepare for the monsoon planting. Similar to the Jhum cultivation in Northeast India, Bewar, which is practiced in MP and Chhattisgarh, supports the diverse crops within a self-contained miniature ecosystem. So, Bewar actually enables different crops to be grown within a smaller, you know, miniature ecosystem.

Assimilation

- Each summer, they **clear undergrowth and perform controlled burns to prepare for monsoon planting**.

- Similar to jhum in Northeast India, bewar, practiced in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, supports diverse crops within a self-contained, miniature ecosystem.

- Bewar **involves growing multiple crops simultaneously**, which also helped streamline land rights claims under the **Forest Rights Act (FRA)**. Passed in 2006, the **FRA grants tribal communities and forest dwellers rights over forest resources**.

Baiga tribals of Dindori, Madhya Pradesh.
Photo credits: Naresh Biswas

Bewar involves growing multiple crops simultaneously which also helps streamline the land rights claims under the Forest Rights Act or FRA. So, a Forest Rights Act which was passed in 2006 grants the tribal communities and forest dwellers the rights over forest resources. So, similar to the Baigas of the Central India who practice Bewar, the cones of Orisha farm in upland areas which are known as the Dongar plots and these plots enable growing of multiple crops. In their report, Deepanwaita Niyogi and Ebin Gheevarghese have highlighted that that the FRA recognizes traditional farming like Bewar and Odisha's Dongar plots.

However, the officials often misunderstand and hinder these traditional tribal practices of crop growing and crop harvesting. Researchers emphasize the need for officials to recognize and respect these longstanding agroecological practices. Driven by their need, the tribals have often sought employment in urban areas, leading to increased interaction

with non-tribal populations. This contact has significantly altered, in fact, disrupted tribal life. And in many cases, we see both positive as well as negative cultural assimilation.

Traditional social structures like moieties and clans have been weakened as a result of urban migration, whereas families adapt to changing circumstances. The extended family born from agricultural adoption now faces further adjustments. So the post-colonial India saw continued tribal movements. But Sanskritization slowed or reversed, you know, particularly in the northeast due to increased welfare demands following the tribal recognition as a privileged category. G. N. Devy writes that Indian Adivasi communities demonstrate a remarkable ability to adapt to external influences.

Assimilation

- Devy (2006) writes that Indian Adivasi communities demonstrate a **remarkable ability to adapt** to external influences. Their sophisticated mechanisms for interacting with the non-Adivasi world are often overlooked. A key factor in this adaptability is their **widespread bilingualism**, a characteristic **known to facilitate assimilation** in communities worldwide.

- He (2006) further adds that there is a sense that the **nation anticipates the forced assimilation** of ninety million Adivasis, "expecting them to lose their identity and 'assimilate' in the great Indian melting pot" and become the new lowest rung of the caste system.

Their sophisticated mechanisms for interacting with the non-Adivasi world has often been overlooked. He further adds, Devy further adds that there is a sense that the nation expects forced assimilation of the 90 million Adivasis, expecting them to lose their identity and assimilate in the great Indian melting pot and become the new lowest rung in the caste system. So, as a way of concluding, the Indian tribal communities face a crisis demanding immediate attention. Encroachment and hindered implementation of the Forest Rights Act threaten their very existence. Effective implementation of welfare measures coupled with sustainable development initiatives is therefore very important to ensure and protect the overall well-being of the tribals.

Assimilation

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forced assimilation and a lack of respect for their unique age-old traditions jeopardize their distinct cultural heritage. So, granting significant cultural and political autonomy is very important towards protecting the tribal languages, customs, habits and knowledge systems. Furthermore, political representation and participation become crucial for their voices to be heard. Meaningful representation in decision-making processes, empowerment of self-governance institutions and protection of their political rights are very necessary in order to ensure their inclusion in the larger scheme of national life. Culturally sensitive education empowers tribal communities while raising awareness among the general public, among the non-tribal population as well as the officials and government authorities and enable them to promote their rights and address their key concerns.

In this regard, interdisciplinary research and documentation of tribal cultures become a very important way And they pave the path for informed policymaking as well as cultural preservation for the years to come. With this, I would stop my lecture here today. Let us

continue with another topic and another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.