

Tribes as Indigenous People of India

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Defining 'tribe' has conceptual as well as empirical problems for the academicians. But this term of administrative convenience has now been adopted by the tribals themselves to mean the dispossessed, deprived people of a region. There is no claim to being the original inhabitants of that region, but a prior claim to the natural resources is asserted vis-a-vis the outsiders and the dominant caste. The tribal identity now gives the marginalised peoples self-esteem and pride.

THE idea of 'indigenous people' is an issue of considerable contention in India today. This was hardly so till a few years ago. In fact, social workers, administrators, politicians and even scholars widely used the term to refer to a certain category of people. They hardly felt any unease in the use of native equivalent of this term, viz. 'adivasi'. Ghurye had of course some reservation to the use of such terms; the expression he used was 'so-called aborigines'. Again it is they who took the term along with all the prejudices and conjectures to the masses. That is how the identity of adivasis has entered into the consciousness of the tribal people. The identity that was forced upon them from outside precisely to mark out differences from the dominant community has now been internalised by the people themselves. Not only has it become an important mark of social differentiation and identity assertion but also an important tool of articulation for empowerment.

The term tribe

The Anthropological Survey of India under the 'People of India Project' identifies 461 tribal communities in India. They are enumerated at 67,583,800 persons constituting 8.08 per cent of the total population as per the 1991 census. The share of the scheduled tribe population to the total population in 1971 and 1981 was 6.94 and 7.85 per cent respectively. The question of tribes in India is closely linked with administrative and political considerations. Hence there has been increasing demand by groups and communities for their inclusion in the list of scheduled tribes of the Indian Constitution. That partly explains the steady increase in the proportion of the scheduled tribe population in India especially in the period between 1971 and 1981.

There has been more concern with the identification of tribes than with their definition. This does not mean that lists have been drawn without any conception of tribe whatsoever. There did exist some conception. This was obvious from the

use of criteria that were adopted. These ranged from such features as geographical isolation, simple technology and condition of living, general backwardness to the practice of animism, tribal language, physical features, etc. The problem however lay in the fact that they were neither clearly formulated nor systematically applied. One set of criteria was used in one context and quite another in another context. The result is that the list includes groups and communities strikingly different from each other in respect of not only size of the population but also the level of technology and other characteristics. Indian anthropologists have been acutely aware of a certain lack of fit between what their discipline defines as tribe and what they are obliged to describe as tribes. Yet they have continued with the existing labels.

The early ethnographers were not very clear about the distinction between caste and tribe in India. The 18th century writings, for example, showed synonymous use of the term tribe with caste. Later it was even used in a cognate manner as one could see in the use of phrase 'caste and tribes of India' by Risley and many others in their writings. Efforts to make a distinction between the two began to be made after initiative was taken to collect detailed information about the people for the census. The census officials were however far from clear with regard to the criterion of distinction. It is with the 1901 census that one finds a mention of criteria howsoever inadequate that may be. It defined tribes as those who practised animism. In the subsequent censuses animism was replaced by the tribal religion. Although the criterion so introduced was highly unsatisfactory, it continued to be used widely and extensively.

It is only in the post-independence period that more systematic effort was made towards distinguishing tribe from caste. Though the distinction between the two was made in both colonial and post-colonial ethnography, the relation between

the two was differently conceived in the two ethnographies. In the colonial ethnography, the concern shown by the British administrators-scholars was to mark off tribe from caste. Hence tribes were shown to be living in complete isolation from the rest of the population and therefore without any interaction or interrelation with them. In contrast the main concern in the native ethnography has been to show close interaction of the tribes with the larger society or the civilisation. Both Ghurye (1963) and Bose (1975), for example, stressed the nature of interaction between tribes and the larger Hindu society and the ways in which tribes have been drawn into the Hindu society. They stressed similarities between the two societies. Sinha (1958) even goes to the extent of viewing tribes as a dimension of little tradition that cannot be adequately understood unless it is seen in relation to the great tradition.

In view of such conception, tribes have come to be primarily studied in relation to features and characteristics of the larger society. The focus is on how tribes are getting absorbed into the larger society, the so-called mainstream, by becoming caste, peasant, class and so on. With such conceptualisation, the identity of the tribal group or community is indeed put at risk. This is because of the way tribes have been conceptualised in anthropological literature and the reference with which tribal society in India is studied.

Tribes are primarily seen as a stage and type of society. They represent a society that lacks positive traits of the modern society and thus constitutes a simple, illiterate and backward society. With change in these features on account of education, modern occupation, new technology, etc, tribal society is no longer considered to be tribal. If transformation is in the direction of caste society then it is described as having become caste society. If the reference is peasant then it is posited as the peasant society and if the general direction of transformation is social differentiation, then it is described as differentiated or