

processes at work in those societies. They are not studied against the end point represented by the communities that are part of civilization, as has been the case with tribes in India. Hence, whereas elsewhere the focus has been on how tribes are changing and how they are becoming nationalities or nations, the focus in India has been on how tribes are becoming castes, peasants, and socially stratified groups. It is a corollary, then, that tribes cease to be tribes or tribal societies. And since these are the features that supposedly characterize general Indian society, tribes are viewed as having been absorbed into general Indian society. What follows is that tribes, through these processes, cease to be tribes, and thereby cease to constitute and maintain a separate society and identity. Tribes are being studied primarily from the perspective of how they are being drawn into the mainstream of civilization. The end result is that the reality of caste remains intact but that of tribe disappears, and this process will increasingly spread as tribal societies come into intensive contact with the outside world. Such an empirical and conceptual scenario in the study of tribes exists in India precisely because of the way in which (1) tribes have been conceptualized in anthropological literature; and (2) the frame of reference in terms of which they have been investigated. In a nutshell, tribes have not been studied in their own right but only in relation to general Indian society, which was marked by the features of caste, peasant, and social differentiation.

Now in the conceptualization of tribes in anthropology, three distinct but interrelated elements are seen. First, tribes in anthropology are invariably seen as societies. They are societies like all other societies. That is, a tribe is made up of people; it has boundaries (people either belonging or not belonging to it); people belong to society by virtue of certain rules, which they accept and which impose on them regular and determinate ways of acting towards one another. A tribe as a society is defined on the basis of its boundaries, which set certain limits on the legal, political, economic, and social relations of its members. These boundaries have been defined linguistically, culturally, and politically by anthropologists.

Second, tribes are also seen as a type of distinct society. Godelier (1977: 30), for example, sees tribal societies as being characterized by certain positive and negative features. The negative features are marked by the absence of the positive traits of modern society, namely non-literate, uncivilized, non-industrialized, non-specialized, etc. The positive features are those that are absent from modern society, namely social relations based on kinship bonds, all-pervasive religion, frequency of cooperation for the achievement of common goals, etc.

Third, tribes are also seen as representing a particular stage in socio-political evolution. It is assumed that with the passage of time they will move to a new stage, such as nationhood or nationality.

While these three distinct aspects have gone into the making of the concept, the last two have overshadowed the first to which tribes owe their separate and independent existence. In the process, tribes have been seen primarily as a stage and a type of society. They are seen as representing a society that lacks the positive traits of modern society. To put it differently, they are seen as constituting primitive, simple, illiterate, and backward societies. As the specific features that distinguish tribes change under the influence of education, specialization, modern occupations, new technologies, etc., tribal society is no longer considered tribal society. If the transformation is in the direction of caste, then it is described as having become a caste society. If the transformation is in the direction of peasantization, then it is posited as a peasant society. If the general direction of transformation is towards social differentiation, then it is described as a socially differentiated society. The end result is that tribal society is no longer considered a tribal society, and rightly so, if it is thought of in terms of stages and specific features. But if a tribe is also a society, it is similar to any other kind of society. However, even this reality comes to be denied with the denial of tribal society as such on account of the changed situation.

With this denial, the very existence of tribe as an independent and separate living entity is jeopardized. In the process, anthropologists and other social scientists have overlooked the context in which the term tribe came to be used in Indian society. In the Indian context, tribes were identified and described primarily in terms of being outside civilization. There is, then, something clumsy about the use of the concept of 'tribe' to describe Indian social reality. Such problems may not arise when tribes do not coexist with non-tribal societies. Indeed, problems of the type referred to above could be overcome by the use of the term 'indigenous' people, but not without giving rise to problems of a different kind. Such problems are rooted in the conceptual framework used for understanding the process of transformation in tribal society in India. There is, then, something clumsy and basically wrong about the use of the term tribe in the Indian context.

Tribe as Community

In view of this, it is suggested that the terms of reference for the study of tribes in India should be the same terms used by the tribal people to identify themselves and by which they are known and addressed by other people. It is well known that groups and communities classified as tribes do not identify themselves in these terms (except by the educated), but call themselves by the names of their own tribes, such as the Santhals, the Oraons, the Khasis, and the Garos. This was how the groups now identified as tribes were identified and addressed throughout history. Ray (1972: 8–10) points to this in his introductory essay in *Tribal Situation in India*. He writes that we know that there were janas or communities of people like the Savaras, the Kullutas, the Kollas, the Bhillas, the Khasas, the Kinnaras, and many others whom today we know as 'tribes', bearing names that are recognizable as almost the same even today. Yet the term by which they were known to others was not tribe but jana, meaning 'community of people'. Hence the plea being made here is to study tribes in India in reference to the actual communities to which they belong and which they represent, that is, as Santhals, Khasis, Gonds, etc. If tribes are studied as such, we can overcome the kinds of problems with which we are confronted when we use the term tribe. The transformation occurring in tribal society, whether in the direction of caste, peasant, social differentiation, or religion, becomes meaningful without in any way affecting the identity of the group concerned. The transformation becomes meaningful precisely because tribes, besides being a type of society also constitute a society as such. This means that the terms of reference or description in tribal studies should not be caste, peasant, or social heterogeneity, but rather groups or communities, such as regional communities, for example, Bengalis, Assamese, and Gujaratis. The counterparts of tribes are not castes or peasants, as has been the case so far in tribal studies, but communities or societies incorporating castes and peasants, for the latter are not the whole society but only an element of the whole. A tribe, on the other hand, is a whole society like any other society, with their own language, territory, culture, customs, and so on. Hence, as societies, tribes must be compared with other societies and not with castes, as has been the case in sociological and anthropological writings.

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