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# **The Challenge of Peace from Tribal Perspectives**

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**Abstract:** There are two major contrasting opinions with regard to the social, cultural and political identity of tribes in India. There is one school of thought who believes that there is no difference between caste and tribe in India. Equally strong opinions are expressed that in India tribals have distinctive culture and they do not belong to caste. This politics of identity itself brings conflict between communities and gives rise to many tribal movements. If we take into consideration all the tribal movements, it could be said that the tribal unrest and the resultant movements were mainly movements launched for liberation from (i) oppression, exploitation and discrimination, (ii) neglect and backwardness, and (iii) a government which was callous to the tribals' plight of poverty, hunger, unemployment and exploitation leading to movements due to separatist tendencies. Unless they are brought to the full development in par with others, conflict is bound to show its ugly head. Hence, in order to build peace and harmony within India from a tribal perspective, we need an inclusive development of tribals. This is a priority.

**Keywords:** Tribal, Tribal Identity, Exploitation, Tribal Conflict, Tribal Rights, Tribal Movements, Inclusive development of tribals

## **1. Who are Tribals?**

The definition of the term "tribe" has long been a subject for discussion among anthropologists, but so far, there

is no generally accepted definition (Naik, 1968: 85-86). Etymologically the word 'tribe' derives its origin from the word 'tribuz' meaning three administrative divisions of ancient Rome. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines a tribe as a "group of people of the same race, with the same custom, language and religion who live in a particular area and are often led by a chief" (Wehmeier, 2000:1387). The British applied it to "a population that lived on the periphery of political and administrative life and called them 'Scheduled Tribes' and guaranteed special rights and protection (Pereira, 2004)

But, the study of tribes in India and the perceptions of their identity begin by locating them not just in the social context, but also in their cultural, political and religious context of their living. Tribal India lives in the forests, hills and naturally isolated regions; it is known by different names, meaning either the people of the forest in the hills or the original inhabitants. It is believed that they were the earliest among the present inhabitants of the country (Vidyarthi, 1976:25-26).

The popular names given for them are: Vanyajati (castes of forest), Vanvasi (inhabitants of forest), Pahari (hill-dwellers), Adimjati (original communities, primitive people), 'Adivasi' (original first settlers), Janjati (folk People), Anusuchitjanjati (scheduled tribes), and so on. Among these terms 'Adivasi' is known most extensively and Anusuchitjanjati (schedule tribes) is the constitutional name covering all of them.

Yet, there is a vague idea on the term tribe. Its evolution is very complex. Sociologists and Anthropologist have not arrived at a unanimous definition of the term. But the most attempted definition took an evolutionary perspective, depicting tribes as backward and primitive. The McMillian Dictionary of Anthropology starts by acknowledging that, "this term has been widely used in anthropology, but there is no general consensus as to its precise definition or appropriate

application” (Symour-Smith, 1986:281). Others like Vidyarthi, (1968:87), “give a host of characteristics, mostly derogative ones denoting primitiveness” that must be fulfilled for a group to qualify as a tribe.

Guha (2015:50-57) describes that the term ‘tribe’ is used in Indian Sociology and Political discourse and does not fit the observed characteristics of the people labelled above in any part of the world. He says so because “all over the world tribes have been generally referred to a strong organisation, often possessing much latent military power” (ibid., 50) but in India we hardly find the tribes with latent military power (leaving out few retaliation in the name of tribal movements).

But for Xaxa (1999:1523), “Tribe is a society, like all other societies, made up of people with its own boundaries. It is a group of people who belong to a society by virtues, rules and which they obey. They have their boundaries which is linguistically, cultural and politically different.” Therefore, “they are a distinct group of people, who have a geographical isolation, physical features, simple condition of living, general backwardness to the practise of animism, special language etc” (Xaxa, 1999: 3589). With this he means to say that tribals are culturally different from the mainstream population of India.

## **2. Politics of Tribal Identity**

There are two major contrasting opinions with regard to the social, cultural and political identity of tribes in India. There is one school of thought who believes that there is no difference between caste and tribe in India (Ghurye: 1943, 1959; Beteille: 1974; Bailey: 1960). Equally strong opinions are expressed that in India tribals have distinctive culture and they do not belong to caste.

Many scholars have presented evidences from the classical, medieval and contemporary sources to demonstrate the tribes of India to be distinctive category from caste (Bose, 1941;

Mandelbaum, 1956; Baily, 1961; Beteille, 1981 and 2008; Singh, 1994; Burman, 1994; Fuchs, 1973; Fuerer-Hemindorf, 1982). From an insider point of view several tribal groups identify themselves as “*adivasis*” or indigenous or most ancient inhabitants of India.

In all the above characteristics tribes are distinguished from the castes with regard to their cultural practices and social organizations (Misra, 2008:433). Tribes are an autonomous group who are having their own distinctive culture and who are not belonging to Sanskritic culture and not members of the Hindu caste system, though a lot of attempts are being made to sanskritize them through the course of Indian history. Their religious world view is not governed by the Hindu philosophical ideas of *karma*, *dharma*, *punergenma* and *moksha* principles. The tribals do not have the Hindu Sanskritic gods in their pantheon. They do not have temples or statues at their original sacred grooves. Thus, conceptually the following criteria were adopted to characterize a tribal community such features as geographical isolation, simple technology and condition of living, general backwardness to the practice of animism, tribal language, physical features, etc.

Xaxa puts it very clearly that the two division within the society was seen because of the social organisation. He says, “Caste was treated as a society regulated by the hereditary division of labour, hierarchy, principle of purity and pollution, civic and religious disabilities, etc. whereas, Tribes on the other hand were characterized by the absence of features attributed to caste” (Xaxa, 2003:384)

In spite of the distinctive characteristics of the tribes, there is a vigorous attempt to absorb tribals to Hindu caste social structure.

### 3. Constitutional Understanding of Tribes

From the above discussion it is clear that it is very difficult to offer a precise and clear-cut definition of the concept of tribe because the nomenclature is overshadowed by political, religious and economic implications.

According to the Article 342 of the Indian Constitution the President of India using his/her discretion schedules certain communities as Tribes eligible for certain governmental benefits. They are called ***Scheduled Tribes (ST)***. Thus, the term 'tribe' has a lot of political connotation. About 8.2% of the Indian populations are officially listed as Scheduled Tribes for the purpose of special benefits of political, economic and educational achievements. However, there are several ethnic groups in India who, by and large, retain cultural background 'analogous' to the officially listed tribes. Ethnicity and cultural identity have emerged as significant social issues for these groups in contemporary India.

### 4. The Rights of the Tribals: Three Major Policies

During the course of the development of Indian Nationalism, the question of tribal identity sprang up very strongly. . Elwin Verrier, though born a British, worked very closely with Gandhi and Nehru and adopted Indian way of living and thinking. He studied and lived with several of the country's little- known tribes. He married a Gond girl and made Mandala as his centre for social work. He is considered to be an authority on tribal culture. He argued that the tribals are the original settlers to this land. They lived with nature and their habits and way of life are conditioned by nature, and they have their unique cultural characteristics and identity. They have all the excellent characters of human beings. He argued that when these tribals come in contact with the non-tribals, they are likely to shed their qualities of life which may lead to their loss of nerve. So, he pleaded that they should be kept

isolated from the mainline of civilization. The proposition made by Elwin created a debate in India. The Gandhian workers argued that the tribals cannot be kept deprived of the benefits of civilization. Isolation in this case would keep them backward, ignorant, poor and illiterate.

The Hindu nationalists, on the other hand, had a completely opposite view of tribal identity. They denied a separate cultural identity for tribals. They are of the opinion that there is no cultural and religious difference between tribals and Hindu castes. So much so, G.S. Ghurye, the well known sociologists from Bombay University began to call them as “Backward Hindus” (1963:19). The Hindu nationalist wanted to absorb the tribals to Hinduism through an assimilation policy. Actually, he devoted two long chapters on tribal assimilation in his book “The Aborigines, So-Called and their Future”

Nevertheless, the liberal nationalist leaders who were not very much satisfied with the Elwins’ isolation theory and the Ghuryes’ assimilation theory, added number of provisions in the constitution so to benefit the welfare of tribal people. They gave the status of scheduled to this group of people so that they can have reservations in jobs and appointments. The constitution also brought in inhabited areas of tribals for the purpose of special treatment in respect of the administration. By doing so the Indian constitution had tried to ‘integrate’ the tribal communities into the trust of one nation (Xaxa, 2003:386). Thus the theory of integration was taken over by the constitution to define the tribes as scheduled group.

Article 342 of the Indian Constitution declares that, “the President may specify by public notification tribes or the tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purpose of this constitution be deemed to be scheduled tribe in relation to that state.” Thus, they were duly specified. However, it does not contain the criterion for the specification of any community as scheduled

tribe. Xaxa observes, “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 in India especially in the period between 1971 and 1981” (1999:3589).

Therefore, in the post-independent India, successive governments have continued with the policy of “scheduling” areas, tribes, castes, and other backward classes despite the weaknesses and difficulties embedded in the process. This is primarily because political parties have found that it is easier to win the voters of “Scheduled India” than the voters of mainstreamed India. The scheduled tribes and castes usually have specific demands, and each political party presents solutions to their demands in its campaign in every general election. Thus the meaning of scheduled became very much misused and manipulated for political gains. This also affects and blurs the identity and their economic future of tribals in India

## **5. Hindutva Politics and Tribal Identity**

India is a pluralistic country comprising multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-cultural characteristics. But today this notion of Indian reality is under great threat. The Hindutva forces who are in almost all mainline political parties and in the government administrations are increasingly seeking to homogenize the culture of India towards an upper caste, Sanskritic, Brahmanic Hinduism. Anything outside this cultural orbit is denied legitimate existence in Indian society. For example, from ancient times, the tribals have been eating cow meeting. But today, the Hindutva forces deny this cultural practice of tribals by enacting laws against their culture.

Immediately after the Independence of India in 1947 and the promulgation of Indian Constitution in 1950, committees were set up for the reorganization of States in the Indian Union. The pleas of several tribals were rejected for their tribal states. The tribal population has been forcefully divided into several states. For example, the Bhil tribes had their own big kingdom in Pre-British India. They are denied for a state of their own. They are split in several states where Hindu caste people are the dominant population. Thus, Bhils are found in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Culturally, linguistically and politically, the Bhils are divided. How could they think of one cultural community in this condition? Similarly, the Adivasis of Chota Nagpur have been also divided in different states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal. This is an injustice done the tribals of India by caste Hindus for their own economic and political advantage which plays out in the exploitation of tribals today in all aspects.

## **6. Tribals Are the Worst Victims of Development Activities**

It is a strange paradox that although the tribes inhabit the most resource-rich regions of India, development benefits hardly reach them. They are the worst victims of 'development' activities, urbanization and industrialization, and eco-tourism projects. These activities cause involuntary displacement, alienation from the natural resources, cultural disorganization, disengagement with the intense community life, eventually pushing them into object poverty and squalor (Bodley, 1988). Many tribes in recent times symbolize the most victimized segments of our society caused by land alienation, poverty, indebtedness, industrialization and urbanization. The tribes of India are dejected people who are facing a loss of cultural identity as well as individual identity because of the interest of 'the other'.



## 7. Tribal Movements

This exploitation of tribals from all aspects of their life has given rise to many big and small, sometimes even violent ,tribal movements. These movements are primarily aimed at protecting themselves from the dominant caste communities

Tribal movements were not only agrarian but also forest-based. Some revolts were ethnic in nature as these were directed against zamindars, moneylenders and petty government officials who were not only their exploiters but aliens too. When tribals were unable to pay their loan or the interest thereon, money-lenders and landlords usurped their lands. The tribals thus became tenants on their own land and sometimes even bonded labourers. The police and the revenue officers hardly understand them and help them. On the contrary, they also used the tribals for personal and government work without any payment. All these factors of land alienation, usurpation, forced labour, minimum wages, and land grabbing compelled many tribes like Munda, Santhals, Kol, Bhils, Warli, etc., in many regions like Assam, Orissa, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and Maharashtra to revolt.

The management of forests also led some tribes to revolt, as forests in some regions are the main sources of their livelihood. The government policies not only deprived the tribals of several forest products but also made them victims of harassment by the forest officials. This led tribes in several regions to launch movements.

The establishment of heavy industries, construction of dams and launching of development plans in tribal zones has necessitated displacement of local population. Thousands of tribal families were displaced from their traditional habitats Contact situations with outsiders have been equally detrimental. Destruction of forests as a consequence of felling of trees for industrial purposes has threatened the small communities of hunters and food-gathers.

Those who could take advantage of new economic and educational frontiers were able to better their lot, while a large sections of the tribals, not adequately prepared to deal with new challenges, gradually depressed into poorer sections of the society. Against economic and social disparities, they have raised a collective voice.

The Naxalite movement of the tribals in Bihar, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh; the agrarian movements of the Gonds and Bhils in Madhya Pradesh and the forest- based movements of Gonds were mainly launched for liberation from oppression and discrimination.

Conflict over the mining of bauxite in Chota Nagpur region has taken a violent turn with killing of three innocent tribal people. Since 1993, the police have registered 80 criminal cases against the tribal people and activists. On several occasions, the police resorted to lathi charge. Activists were attacked and offices of the resistance movement were destroyed.

Another movement has been started in Keonjhar district of Orissa against mining in the 1990s for the displaced people, particularly tribals. In Keonjhar, the mining activities have led to heavy influx of workers from many parts of the country. The 1990s decade saw an increase in migration due to geographical and socio-economic reasons, leading to a threat of cultural invasion. Violence of all type increased. Mining has led to indiscriminate deforestation and displacement of inhabitants. The chief slogan of the movement against mining has been “Our lands, our minerals and our rights.” The villagers have been harassed by police and implicated in false cases for organising meetings, public rallies and hunger strikes. A number of villagers had been sent to jail in false cases between 1994 to 1999.

There are several other tribal movements related to the problem of their identity. For example, in the North-East, the

Bodo and Naga movement are related to this. Ethnic identity takes up political route for raising their interests. In all these separatist movement, uneven development and modernisation, concentration of gains in some area and their non-dispersal to other, and urban- oriented models of growth are the chief causes.

If we take into consideration all the tribal movements, it could be said that the tribal unrest and the resultant movements were mainly movements launched for liberation from (i) oppression, exploitation and discrimination, (ii) neglect and backwardness, and (iii) a government which was callous to the tribals' plight of poverty, hunger, unemployment and exploitation leading to movements due to separatist tendencies.

## **8. Inclusive Development as Means to build Peace in the tribal world in India**

According to 2011 Census, the total population of Scheduled Tribes/Adivasis is 10,42,81,034 persons. It constitutes 8.6 % of Indian population. They are spread over the entire country but are most heavily concentrated in central, eastern and north-eastern India. The Government of India in its Draft National Tribal Policy of 2006 records 698 Scheduled Tribal communities. But as for the 2011 Census of India, the number of individual groups are 705.

Such a huge population of India is deprived of its cultural, economic and political identity. They are the marginalized communities of India. If we want to integrate them with other communities, then, the only way is that the State and Central governments must prioritize social, economic and political inclusion for rebuilding trust between tribal and other communities. The tribal culture should be respected; their land and forest rights should be restored. When big industrial companies enter the tribal areas, most of the non-technical jobs should be given to them.

A number of commissions and committees were appointed in the recent past to look in to the problems of developments in the tribal areas in the country and they have recommended a number of measures to remove the socio-economic disparity. While these policies are in themselves good, but the implementation is the problem. The caste bureaucrats who are coming from caste background do not feel the pain of the tribals. Hence they do not give the importance, these policies deserve for the tribal development. For example, as per the Census of 2011, the literary rate of tribal population is 59 %, which is far lower than the rate of all India which is 73 %. Similarly, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for tribals is only 11% as compared to the overall GER ratio of 21% for the country. This is only just one indicator in the disparity of tribals compared to others. Unless they are brought to the full development in par with others, conflict is bound to show its ugly head. Hence, in order to build peace and harmony within India from a tribal perspective, we need an inclusive development of tribals. This is a priority.

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