
UNIT 1 HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE TRIBALS

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

- To study the origin and rootedness of the tribals;
- To appreciate the claim that the tribals are the original inhabitants of India; and
- To study briefly the diversity and development of tribal cultures.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Adivasi is an umbrella term for a heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups claimed to be the aboriginal population of India. They comprise a substantial indigenous minority of the population of India. Officially recognized by the Indian government as “Scheduled Tribes” in the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India, they are often grouped together with scheduled castes in the category “Scheduled Castes and Tribes”, which is eligible for certain affirmative action measures in India. In this unit we want to familiarise ourselves with the origin, meaning and significance of Tribals in India.

1.2 ADIVASIS: MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE

In this section we deal with the meaning and significance of the word “*Adivasis*,” with view to appreciating their culture and life on the whole. Connotations of the word ‘*Adivasi*’: Although terms such as *atavika* (Sanskrit for forest dwellers), *vanvasi* or *girijan* (hill people) were used for the tribes of India, *adivasi* carries the specific meaning of being the original and autochthonous inhabitants of a given region, and was specifically coined for

that purpose in the 1930s. Over a period of time, unlike the terms “aborigines” or “tribes”, the word “*adivasi*” has also developed a connotation of past autonomy which was disrupted during the British colonial period in India and has not been restored. Today tribals or adivasis have succeeded partially to claim their original rights are dignity and the primordial inhabitants of the land (Adivasi 2011).

Scheduled tribes: The Constitution of India, Article 366 (25) defines Scheduled Tribes as “such tribes or tribal communities or part of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to the Scheduled Tribes (STs) for the purposes of this Constitution”. In Article 342, the procedure to be followed for specification of a scheduled tribe is prescribed. However, it does not contain the criterion for the specification of any community as scheduled tribe. An often used criterion to define adivasi is based on attributes such as:

- Geographical isolation - they live in cloistered, exclusive, remote and inhospitable areas such as hills and forests.
- Backwardness - their livelihood is based on primitive agriculture, a low-value closed economy with a low level of technology that leads to their poverty. They have low levels of literacy and health.
- Distinctive culture, language and religion - communities have developed their own distinctive culture, language and religion.
- Shyness of contact – they have a marginal degree of contact with other cultures and people, though the situation is changing fast today (Johar 2010).

Primitive tribes: The Scheduled Tribe groups who were identified as more backward communities among the tribal population groups have been categorised as ‘Primitive Tribal Groups’ by the Government at the Centre in 1975. So far seventy-five tribal communities have been identified as ‘primitive tribal groups’ in different States of India. These hunting, food-gathering, and some agricultural communities, who have been identified as more backward communities among the tribal population groups need special programmes for their sustainable development. Today the primitive tribes are awakening and demanding their rights for special reservation quota (Adivasi 2011)

1.3 GEOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

There is a substantial list of Scheduled Tribes in India recognised as tribal under the Constitution of India. Tribal peoples constitute 8.2% of the nation’s total population, over 84 million people according to the 2001 census. One concentration lives in a belt along the Himalayas stretching through Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand in the west, to Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland in the northeast. In the northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland, more than 90% of the population is tribal. However, in the remaining northeast states of Assam, Manipur, Sikkim, and Tripura, tribal peoples form between 20 and 30% of the population.

Another concentration lives in the hilly areas of central India (Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and, to a lesser extent, Andhra Pradesh); in this belt,

which is bounded by the Narmada River to the north and the Godavari River to the southeast, tribal peoples occupy the slopes of the region's mountains. Other tribals, including the Santals, live in Jharkhand and West Bengal. Central Indian states have the country's largest tribes, and, taken as a whole, roughly 75% of the total tribal population live there, although the tribal population there accounts for only around 10% of the region's total population.

There are smaller numbers of tribal people in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala in south India; in western India in Gujarat and Rajasthan, and in the union territories of Lakshadweep and the Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands. About one percentage of the populations of Kerala and Tamil Nadu are tribal, whereas about six percentage in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are members of tribes (Adivasi 2011).

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) What are some of the criteria used to define an adivasi?

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- 2) Give an approximate estimate of tribals in South India?

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1.4 THE ORIGIN OF RACES IN INDIA

To trace the origin of tribals, it will be helpful to find out the races in India. According to reliable evidence, the species known as Ramapithecus, one of our pre-human ancestors 12-14 million years ago, was found in the Siwalik foothills of the Northwestern Himalayas (ORI 2011). Further Researches have found that a species resembling the Australopithecus (who are very close to present human beings) lived in India some 2 million years ago. Scientists have so far not been able to account for an evolutionary gap of as much as 12 million years since the appearance of Ramapithecus.

The people of India belong to different anthropological stocks and main ethnic group which define Adivasis especially Santhals, Munda, Kol and Ho are as follows. According to noted anthropologist and the first Director of the Anthropological Survey of India, B. S. Guha, the population of India is derived from six main ethnic groups:

- 1) **Negritos:** The Negritos or the brachycephalic (broad headed) from Africa were the earliest people to inhabit India. They are survived in their original

habitat in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Jarewas, Onges, Sentelenese and Great Andamanis tribes are the examples. Studies have indicated that the Onges tribes have been living in the Andamans for the last 60,000 years. Some hill tribes like Irulas, Kodars, Paniyans and Kurumbas are found only in patches among the hills of south India on the mainland.

- 2) **Pro-Australoids or Austriacs:** This group was the next to come to India after the Negritos. They represent a race of people, with wavy hair plentifully distributed over their brown bodies, long heads with low foreheads and prominent eye ridges, noses with low and broad roots, thick jaws, large palates and teeth and small chins. Austriacs tribes, which are spread over the whole of India, Myanmar and the islands of South East Asia, are said to “form the bedrock of the people”. The Austriacs were the main builders of the Indus Valley Civilisation. They cultivated rice and vegetables and made sugar from sugarcane. Their language has survived in the Kol or Munda (Mundari) in Eastern and Central India.
- 3) **Mongoloids:** These people have features that are common to those of the people of Mongolia, China and Tibet. These tribal groups are located in the Northeastern part of India in states like Assam, Nagaland and Meghalaya and also in Ladakh and Sikkim. Generally, they are people of yellow complexion, oblique eyes, high cheekbones, sparse hair and medium height.
- 4) **Mediterranean or Dravidian:** This group came to India from the Southwest Asia and appear to be people of the same stock as the peoples of Asia Minor and Crete and the pre-Hellenic Aegeans of Greece. They are reputed to have built up the city civilization of the Indus Valley, whose remains have been found at Mohenjodaro and Harappa and other Indus cities. The Dravidians must have spread to the whole of India, supplanting Austriacs and Negritos alike. Dravidians comprise all the three sub-types, Paleo-Mediterranean, the true Mediterranean and Oriental Mediterranean. This group constitutes the bulk of the scheduled castes in the North India. This group has a sub-type called Oriental group (ORI 2011).
- 5) **Western Brachycephals:** These include the Alpinoids, Dinaries and Armenois. The Coorgis and Parsis fall into this category.
- 6) **Nordics:** Nordics or Indo-Aryans are the last immigrants into India. Nordic Aryans were a branch of Indo-Iranians, who had originally left their homes in Central Asia, some 5000 years ago, and had settled in Mesopotamia for some centuries. The Aryans must have come into India between 2000 and 1500 B.C. Their first home in India was western and northern Punjab, from where they spread to the Valley of the Ganga and beyond. These tribes are now mainly found in the Northwest and the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). Many of these tribes belong to the “upper castes” (ORI 2011).

1.5 INDIAN TRIBES: HISTORICAL ROOTS

Indian tribes with their characteristic lifestyle and unblemished tradition, take us earlier to the history of India. In fact the term “Indian tribes” which hold

in an astounding number of tribal populations in the country, meticulously assimilating each characteristic specialty. As noted in the previous section, the first traces of tribes in India can be traced to the species known as 'Ramapithecus', discovered in the Siwalik foothills of the north-western Himalayas. This species, held to be the first in line of hominids, lived approximately 14 million years ago. Researches have established that a species corresponding to the Australopithecus romped about in India roughly 2 million years ago. The people of India belong to different anthropological bloodlines (Indianet 2009).

Indian tribal people amount to an 8.14 percent of the total population of the country, numbering 84.51 million, according to the 2001 census. These tribal people reside in approximately 15 percent of the country's area. Indian tribals primarily reside in various ecological and geo-climatical conditions ranging from plains, forests, hills and inaccessible areas, that perhaps lies dotted in the panoramic Indian terrain. According to Article 342 of the Indian Constitution, at present, there exist 697 tribes notified by the Central Government. These Indian tribal groups of people have been notified to reside in more than one State. More than half of the Indian tribal population is concentrated in the States of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Jharkhand and Gujarat. On the other hand, in other states of India like in Chandigarh, Delhi, Puducherry, Punjab and Haryana there is no particular tribal group that is reckoned as a specific tribal group.

As already shown above, research scientists opine that the population of India, including Indian tribes, is derived from six primary ethnic groups namely Negritos, Pro-Australoids or Austrics, Mongoloids, Mediterranean or Dravidian, Western Brachycephals and Nordics. The Negritos or the brachycephalic (broad-headed) men from Africa were the earliest tribesmen to populate India. They presently survive in their original home-ground in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Jarewas, Onges, Sentinelese tribes and Great Andamani tribes are good examples. Studies have indicated that the Onges tribes have been living in the Andamans for the last 60,000 years. Some hill tribes like Irulas, Kodars, Paniyans and Kurumbas are found only in patches among the hills of south India on the mainland.

This group of Pro-Australoids or Austrics was the subsequent bunch to arrive in India after the Negritos. They symbolise a race of people, with wavy hair. The people of his community were distinguished for their prominent eye ridges, low foreheads and long heads. The other physical features of the people of this tribal community include thick jaws, low and broad based nose, small chins and large teeth. Austrics tribe, dispersed over the whole of India, Myanmar and the islands of South East Asia, are believed to 'form the bedrock of the people'. The Austrics are proudly known to be the main founders of the Indus Valley Civilisation. These people were of agrarian culture and they lived on cultivating vegetables and rice. Some of them were also engaged in making sugar from sugarcane. In Eastern and Central India, the language of this tribal community existed among the Munda or Kol tribes (Indianet 2009).

Mongoloids bear features that are common to people of Mongolia, China and Tibet. These tribal groups are located in the North-eastern portion of India in states like Assam, Nagaland and Meghalaya and also in Ladakh and Sikkim. Generally, these people are of yellow complexion, oblique eyes, high cheekbones, thinning hairline and medium height.

Mediterranean or Dravidian group of tribesmen arrived in India from South-west Asia and appears to be people of the same bloodline as the people of Asia Minor and Crete and the pre-Hellenic Aegeans of Greece. They are presumed to have constructed up the city civilisation of the Indus Valley, whose remains have been discovered at Mohenjodaro and Harappa and other Indus cities. The Dravidians are believed to have circled in the entire part of India, replacing Negritos and Austriacs equally. Dravidians incorporate the three sub-types namely the alio-Mediterranean, the true Mediterranean and Oriental Mediterranean. This group makes up the bulk of the scheduled castes in North India. This group also has a sub-type called Oriental group (Indianet 2009).

The bunch of Western Brachycephals includes the Alpinoids, Dinarics and Armenoids. The Coorgis and Parsis of Indian tribal origin fall into this category. Nordics or Indo-Aryans are the last immigrants into India. Nordic Aryans were a division of Indo-Iranians, who had originally left their homes in Central Asia, approximately 5000 years ago and had settled in Mesopotamia for some centuries. The Aryans must have arrived into India within 2000 and 1500 B.C. Their first home in India was western and northern Punjab, from where they scattered to the Valley of the Ganges and beyond. These tribes are now mainly witnessed in the Northwest and the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). Many of these Indian tribes however belong to the 'upper castes'.

One has to comprehend the inimitability of tribal culture, in order to admire them, to experience their warm hospitality and simple ways of living. Such can be described as the subtle and innocent qualities of Indian tribal people, who at times take recourse to perceptive and sincere judgment of opinions to determine their birth-right and destiny (Indianet 2009).

A positive and blissful note on Indian tribal people is that such endangered men folk are at various stages of social, economical and educational development. Access to sophisticated communication and modern-day transport is yet one of the umpteen domains in which Indian tribal people needs to look towards the future. Yet, the fact that underlines Indian history is not rather surprising, because Indian tribal groups of people perhaps have existed since the birth of history of ancient India. The interesting and novel mode of lifestyle that such Indian tribal people lead, accounts for a vast section of Indian travelogue. Be it in the sphere of much-retold Indian tribes or yet-to-be-known tribes, various styles of eating, drinking, working, singing, dancing, clothing, accessorising, or religious customs, Indian tribal people lead a life of their own. This distinctness is as if encased and enveloped within a protective covering, that at times receives massive public coverage. The distinction in the variety of the tribal people in India enriches the Indian culture and art.

With such bulky and hefty Indian tribal classification, the present Indian tribal scenario has somewhat transformed into an indigenous class, divided into the basic directions of east, west, north and south Indian tribal society and culture. This four cardinal tribal faction in India is then sub-divided into North-East Indian tribes, North Indian tribes, East Indian tribes, South Indian tribes and West Indian tribes and Central tribes. Leaving these spectacular bunches of Indian tribes; the tribes divided into the sections of Union Territories are listed under ethnicity and administrative marvel (Indianet 2009).

[Please note that the student is not expected the names of the different tribes by heart. A general acquaintance only is presupposed.]

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How are the Negritos connected to India?

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2) Give a brief demographic distribution of tribals in India according to 2001 census?

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1.6 THE PEOPLING OF INDIA

The concept of ‘original inhabitant’ is directly related to the initial peopling of India, which, due to the debate on topics such as the Indo-Aryan migration hypothesis, has been a contentious area of research and discourse. Some anthropologists hypothesize that the region was settled by multiple human migrations over tens of millennia, which makes it even harder to select certain groups as being truly aboriginal. One narrative, largely based on genetic research, describes Negritos, similar to the Andamanese adivasis of today, as the first humans to colonize India, likely 30-65 thousand years before present (kybp). 60% of all Indians share the mtDNA haplogroup M, which is universal among Andamanese islander adivasis and might be a genetic legacy of the postulated first Indians.

Some anthropologists theorize that these settlers were displaced by invading Austro-Asiatic-speaking Australoid people (who largely shared skin pigmentation and physiognomy with the Negritos, but had straight rather than kinky hair), and adivasi tribes such as the Irulas trace their origins to that displacement. The Oraon adivasi tribe of eastern India and the Korku tribe of western India are considered to be examples of groups of Australoid origin. Subsequent to the Australoids, some anthropologists and geneticists theorize that Caucasoids (including both Dravidians and Indo-Aryans) and Mongoloids (Sino-Tibetans) immigrated into India: the Dravidians possibly from Iran, the Indo-Aryans possibly from the Central Asian steppes and the Tibeto-Burmans possibly from the Himalayan and north-eastern borders of the subcontinent. None of these hypotheses is free from debate and disagreement (Adivasi 2011).

Ethnic origins and linguistic affiliations in India match only inexactly, however: while the Oraon adivasis are classified as an Australoid group, their language,

called Kurukh, is Dravidian. Khasis and Nicobarese are considered to be Mongoloid groups and the Munda and Santals are Australoid groups, but all four speak Austro-Asiatic languages. The Bhils and Gonds are frequently classified as Australoid groups, yet Bhil languages are Indo-European and the Gondi language is Dravidian. Also, in post-colonial India, tribal languages suffered huge setbacks with the formation of linguistic states after 1956 under the States Reorganisation Act. For example the Santals are “gradually adopting languages of the areas inhabited, like Oriya in Orissa, Hindi in Bihar and Bengali in West Bengal” (Adivasi 2011).

Disruptions during Mughal and Colonial Periods

Although considered uncivilized and primitive, adivasis were usually not held to be intrinsically impure by surrounding (usually, caucasoid - Dravidian or Aryan) caste Hindu populations, unlike Dalits, who were. Thus, the adivasi origins of Maharishi Valmiki, who composed the Ramayana Hindu religious epic, were acknowledged, as were the origins of adivasi tribes such as the Grasia and Bhilala, which descended from mixed Rajput and Bhil marriages. Unlike the subjugation of the dalits, the adivasis often enjoyed autonomy and, depending on region, evolved mixed hunter-gatherer and farming economies, controlling their lands as a joint patrimony of the tribe. In some areas, securing adivasi approval and support was considered crucial by local rulers, and larger adivasi groups were able to sustain their own kingdoms in central India. The Gond Rajas of Garha-Mandla and Chanda are examples of an adivasi aristocracy that ruled in this region, and were “not only the hereditary leaders of their Gond subjects, but also held sway over substantial communities of non-tribals who recognized them as their feudal lords.”

The British Period

This relative autonomy and collective ownership of adivasi land by adivasis was severely disrupted by the advent of the Mughals in the early 16th century. Similarly, the British, beginning in the 18th century added to the consolidation of feudalism in India, first under the jagirdari system and then under the zamindari system. Beginning with the Permanent Settlement imposed by the British in Bengal and Bihar, which later became the template for a deepening of feudalism throughout India, the older social and economic system in the country began to alter radically. Land, both forest areas belonging to adivasis and settled farmland belonging to non-adivasi peasants, was rapidly made the legal property of British-designated zamindars (landlords), who in turn moved to extract the maximum economic benefit possible from their newfound property and subjects without regard to historical tenure or ownership. Adivasi lands sometimes experienced an influx of non-local settlers, often brought from far away (as in the case of Muslims and Sikhs brought to Kol territory) by the zamindars to better exploit local land, forest and labor. Deprived of the forests and resources they traditionally depended on and sometimes coerced to pay taxes, many adivasis were forced to borrow at usurious rates from moneylenders, often the zamindars themselves. When they were unable to pay, that forced them to become bonded laborers for the zamindars. Often, far from paying off the principal of their debt, they were unable even to offset the compounding interest, and this was made the justification for their children working for the zamindar after the death of the initial borrower. In the case of the Andamanese adivasis, long isolated from the outside world in autonomous

societies, mere contact with outsiders was often sufficient to set off deadly epidemics in tribal populations, and it is alleged that some sections of the British government directly attempted to destroy some tribes (Adivasi 2011).

Land dispossession and subjugation by British and zamindar interests resulted in a number of adivasi revolts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as the Santal hul (or Santal revolt) of 1855-56. Although these were suppressed ruthlessly by the governing British authority (the East India Company prior to 1858, and the British government after 1858), partial restoration of privileges to adivasi elites (e.g. to Mankis, the leaders of Munda tribes) and some leniency in tax burdens resulted in relative calm, despite continuing and widespread dispossession, from the late nineteenth century onwards. The economic deprivation, in some cases, triggered internal adivasi migrations within India that would continue for another century, including as labor for the emerging tea plantations in Assam. (Adivasi 2011).

1.7 TRIBAL SITUATION TODAY

The Indian aboriginal tribes constitute roughly 8 percent of the nation's total population, according to the 1991 census. The native tribes were much less in number during the primitive times, however, with the passing decades, the Indian aboriginal tribes considerably grew in number. Some of the native tribes found concentrated in the belt along the Himalayas stretching through Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh in the west, to Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland in the northeast (Indianet 2009).

Another aboriginal tribal group lives in the hilly areas of central India and in this belt, which is surrounded by the Narmada River to the north and the Godavari River to the southeast, tribal people live along the slopes of this region. Other Indian aboriginal tribes are the Santhals, live in Bihar and West Bengal. There are some native tribes in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, in western India in Gujarat and Rajasthan, and in the union territories of Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The extent of the tribal population varies considerably from state to state. In the Northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland, almost 90 percent of the population is tribal. The Gondi tribe is one of the aboriginal tribes of the central India. The Gondi, or Gond people live across the states of Madhya Pradesh, eastern Maharashtra (Vidarbha), Chhattisgarh, northern Andhra Pradesh, and western Orissa. More than four million people, they make up the largest tribe in Central India.

The Kol is a generic name for the Munda, Ho, and Oraon tribes who are the aboriginal groups of India. These tribes live in the states of Jharkhand, Orissa, and West Bengal, and spread over into parts of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Tripura, Bangladesh, and Nepal. The Munda tribe is an aboriginal tribe of Austro-Asiatic physical type and in 1901 they inhabited the Chota Nagpur Division, numbering to almost 438,000. The majority of the Kol people thought themselves to be Hindus with a syncretic admixture of innovative animistic beliefs; some of them also practice Christianity. The village community in its ancient structure still exists among the Mundas (Indianet 2009).

Bhils are the native tribes of Central India who speak Bhil languages, a group of Indic languages. Bhils are scheduled tribes and are found in the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan in western and central India, as well as in Tripura in far-eastern India, on the border with Bangladesh. Bhils also dwell in Tharparkar district of Sindh in Pakistan. The Ghoomar dance is one of the oldest and most popular aspects of Bhil culture. In feudal and colonial times, the ruling Rajputs in various areas of work employed many Bhil tribal groups. Most of times, the Bhils worked as the hunters because of their knowledge of the topography and some had even become warriors in armies.

The Kota tribe, also called Kotas is a community of indigenous peoples who inhabit areas on the slopes of the Nilgiri hills in Tamil Nadu in South India. The Kotas are the experts at the occupation of traditional artisans and arts of pottery and terracotta baking in the Nilgiris and their associated community, the Todas, are the agriculturists of the Nilgiris.

The Santal Tribes are the largest tribal community in India, found mainly in the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam, and Orissa. There is also a significant Santal minority in neighboring Bangladesh.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) How did some of the tribals become bonded labourers?

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- 2) Briefly describe the Kols.

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1.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have introduced ourselves to the general notion of tribal, their meaning, significance and geographical location. We also saw the origin of races in India, the peopling of India and the historical roots of tribals. In general, it is no exaggeration to say that the aboriginal tribes of India are the oldest groups (Indianetzone) and the first population of the country.

1.9 KEY WORDS

- Australopithecus** : A genus of near-men in the subfamily *Australopithecinae* representing a side branch of human.
- Autochthonous** : aboriginal; indigenous (opposed to *heterochthonous*)
- Jagirdar system** : Form of land tenancy introduced in India by the early sultans of Delhi in the early 13th century. Under the system, land, its revenues, and the power to govern it was assigned to an official of the state. The land reverted to the government on the official's death, but heirs could renew the land assignment by paying a fee. Feudalistic in character, the *jagirdar* system tended to enfeeble the central government by setting up quasi-independent baronies. Periodically abolished, it was always renewed. After Indian independence, measures were taken to abolish absentee landownership.
- Negritos** : A member of a black people of short stature native to the Austronesian region.
- Ramapithecus** : *Ramapithecus* (meaning "Rama's apes") an extinct group of arboreal (tree-living) primates that lived from about 12 to 14 million years ago, for a time regarded as a possible ancestor of *Australopithecus*.
- Zamindar** : A landholder in British colonial India responsible for collecting and paying to the government the taxes on the land under his jurisdiction.

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