
UNIT 1 TRIBAL WORLD-VIEW AND PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

- To learn the general aspects of the tribal world-view;
- To focus on the interconnectedness of tribal philosophy; and
- To call to attention the need to undo the “historical injustice” done to adivasis.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The tribal population in India forms a huge chunk of the population. A part of the tribal population has joined the mainstream life and they cannot be considered to be tribals in the about 27% of India's population which includes 8% tribals and the rest as other castes. The tribal population in India is second only to Africa in the World. The actual number of tribals in India is 77 million (8% of India's population). Most of these people are from the North East - 12%; Southern states - 7%, Central zone - 81%. In this unit, we first deal with the characteristic of Indian tribes and then go on to see some aspects of their world view. Then we shall see interconnectedness as their basic philosophy. Finally we talk of the need to undo the injustice meted out to them.

1.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIAN TRIBES

The tribe inhabits and remains within definite and common topography. The members of a tribe possess a consciousness of mutual unity. The members of a tribe speak a common language. The members generally marry into their own

group but now due to increased contact with outsiders there are instances of tribal marring outside as well. The tribes believe in ties of blood relationship between its members. They have faith in their having descended from a common, real or mythical, ancestor and hence believe in blood relationships with other members.

Tribes follow their own political organization which maintains harmony. Religion is of great importance in the tribe. The tribal political and social organization is based on religion because they are granted religious sanctity and recognition (SG 2011).

D.N Majumdar defines tribe as a social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous with no specialization of functions ruled by tribal officers hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect recognizing social distance with other tribes or castes. According to Ralph Linton tribe is a group of bands occupying a contiguous territory or territories and having a feeling of unity deriving from numerous similarities in a culture, frequent contacts and a certain community of interests.

L.M Lewis believes that tribal societies are small in scale are restricted in the spatial and temporal range of their social, legal and political relations and possess a morality, a religion and world view of corresponding dimensions. Characteristically too tribal languages are unwritten and hence the extent of communication both in time and space is inevitably narrow. At the same time tribal societies exhibit a remarkable economy of design and have a compactness and self-sufficiency lacking in modern society (SG 2011).

T.B Naik has given the following features of tribes in Indian context:-

- A tribe should have least functional interdependence within the community.
- It should be economically backward (i.e. primitive means of exploiting natural resources, tribal economy should be at an underdeveloped stage and it should have multifarious economic pursuits).
- There should be a comparative geographical isolation of its people.
- They should have a common dialect.
- Tribes should be politically organized and community panchayat should be influential.
- A tribe should have customary laws.

Another sociologist, David G Mandelbaum mentions the following characteristics of Indian tribes (SG 2011):

- Kinship as an instrument of social bonds.
- A lack of hierarchy among men and groups.
- Absence of strong, complex, formal organization.
- Communitarian basis of land holding.
- Segmentary character.
- Little value on surplus accumulation on the use of capital and on market trading

- Lack of distinction between form and substance of religion
- A distinct psychological bent for enjoying life.

1.3 WORLD-VIEW OF THE TRIBAL POPULATION IN INDIA

After seeing the general characteristics of tribal life, we are in a position to understand their world-view. Some salient features of the world-view of Tribals could be given as follows:

- 1) Close attachment to ancestral territory: All the tribal people have a very close attachment to the territory that they have been living in. In fact there are some tribes that have not been civilized yet and they are fierce and may even kill at times when they are disturbed and are made to go away from their ancestral land (Kumar 2010).
- 2) Close to natural resources: Most of the tribal population in the forests of India lives in areas that are rich in natural resources. These resources include those like iron ore, manganese and even precious and semi precious stones. These make it a hot spot for all the mining companies who try to make many mines in these areas, but the tribals and their support groups are against this.
- 3) Self-identification and identification by others as member of distinct cultural group: This is true because many of the tribals have their own language and they have their own culture that is very different and unique from that of the other groups of the population.
- 4) Indigenous language: Another unique characteristic of the tribals is that they have their own language. Each of the tribal groups has its own language and this also makes them to be very unique when compared to other large groups of populations. In fact there are some tribal groups where there may be only a few hundred people, but they have their own language.
- 5) Presence of customary, social and political institutions: In spite of the various problems, they do have their own social and political institutions and live a life that is full of rituals and other traditions.
- 6) Vulnerability to severe dislocation, disruption and exploitation: The tribal population is very vulnerable to all the problems mentioned above because of the caste system in India and also because of the isolation they face so that they will give up their land to the mining companies (Kumar 2010).

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) What are some of features of tribal life?

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- 2) How “closeness to natural resources” affect tribal life today?

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1.4 INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND TRIBAL PHILOSOPHY

Chief Seattle (1786-1866) of the Duwamish tribe, also known as Chief Seattle was a prominent figure among the American Indian people. The city of Seattle, Washington had been named in memory of him. Chief Seattle is remembered for the famous speech he gave at a large outdoor gathering in Seattle on March 11th, 1854 concerning the concession of native lands to the settlers. He is an apt representative of tribal world-view. We just want to focus on three aspects of connectedness that is intrinsic to the tribal way of life, i.e., connectedness to nature, to one another and to the common destiny (God). Below are given extracts from the talk of the chief of Seattle that highlights this tribal connectedness to nature, to fellow human beings – including animals - and to the Divine – or our common Destiny (SCS 2009).

1.5 CONNECTED TO NATURE

“If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water how can you buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect – all are holy in the memory and experience of my people.” “We know the sap that courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We’re part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers.” “The rocky crests, the juices and the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and men all belong to the same family. The shiny water that moves through the streams and rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you our land you must remember that it is sacred. Each ghostly reflection in the clear water of the lakes tells of events and memories in the life of my people. The water’s murmur is the voice of my father’s father.” “The rivers are our brothers. They quench our thirst. They carry our canoes and feed our children. So you must give to the rivers the kindness you would give any brother.”

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Who is chief Seattle and how is he connected to tribals?

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2) How do the adivasis view the rivers?

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1.6 CONNECTED TO ONE ANOTHER

“Our ways are different than your ways. The sight of your cities pains the eyes of the red man. There is no quiet place in the white man’s cities. No place to hear the unfurling of leaves in spring or the rustle of the insect’s wings. The clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lonely cry of the whippoorwill or the arguments of the frogs around the pond at night? I am a red man and do not understand. The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of a pond and the smell of the wind itself, cleaned by a midday rain.

“The air is precious to the red man for all things share the same breath, the beast, the tree, the man, they all share the same breath. The white man does not seem to notice the air he breathes. Like a man dying for many days he is numb to the stench. But if we sell you our land, you must remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports.”

“The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also receives his last sigh. And if we sell you our land, you must keep it apart and sacred as a place where even the white man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow’s flowers.”

“What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, man would die from a great loneliness of the spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to man. All things are connected.”

“You must teach your children that the ground beneath their feet is the ashes of our grandfathers. So that they will respect the land, tell your children that the earth is rich with the lives of our kin. Teach your children that we have taught our children that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves.”

“This we know; the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected.”

1.7 CONNECTED TO THE COMMON DESTINY (GOD)

“Even the white man, whose God walks and talks with him as friend to friend, cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see. One thing we know which the white man may one day discover; our God is the same God.”

“You may think now that you own Him as you wish to own our land; but you cannot. He is the God of man, and His compassion is equal for the red man and the white. The earth is precious to Him, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator. The whites too shall pass; perhaps sooner than all other tribes. Contaminate your bed and you will one night suffocate in your own waste.”

“But in your perishing you will shine brightly fired by the strength of the God who brought you to this land and for some special purpose gave you dominion over this land and over the red man.”

1.8 TIME TO UNDO ‘HISTORICAL INJUSTICE’ TO TRIBALS IN INDIA: SUPREME COURT

In general the virtues of tribal world-view and life-style could be summed up as: Simplicity, Sincerity and Spontaneity. Precisely because of these, the tribals have been physically and emotionally exploited, robbed of their land and looted of their possession. A recent Supreme Court Judgement noted that “Despite this horrible oppression on them, the tribals of India have generally (though not invariably) retained a higher level of ethics than the non-tribals in our country. They normally do not cheat, tell lies, and do other misdeeds which many non-tribals do. They are generally superior in character to the non-tribals.” Unfortunately great harm has been done to them. So the Supreme Court notes that it is time now to undo the historical injustice to them (Supreme Court 2011).

Woefully noting the sad state of adivasis, whom the Court described as “original inhabitants of India”, the Supreme Court in its decision pronounced in January 2011 (Kailas & Others v. State of Maharashtra) declared that it is “time now to undo the historical injustice to them”. The Court cited the example of Dronacharya and his disciple Eklavya (from Mahabharata) to hold that the tribals have been victims in India for long. The Court noted the ancient history of India to hold that the historical theory that the Dravidians were the original inhabitants of India was also not correct and actually the pre-Dravidian tribals were the original inhabitants of this country.

The Supreme Court held that 92% people living in India today are descendants of immigrants and that it “it is absolutely essential if we wish to keep our country united to have tolerance and equal respect for all communities and sects. It was due to the wisdom of our founding fathers that we have a Constitution which is secular in character, and which caters to the tremendous diversity in our country.”

Below are given extracts from the judgement (Supreme Court 2011):

The Bench *inter alia* observed as under;

4. This appeal furnishes a typical instance of how many of our people in India have been treating the tribal people (Scheduled Tribes or Adivasis), who are probably the descendants of the original inhabitants of India, but now constitute only about 8% of our total population, and as a group are one of the most marginalized and vulnerable communities in India characterized by high level of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, disease, and landlessness.

17. The Bhils are probably the descendants of some of the original inhabitants of India living in various parts of the country particularly southern Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh etc. They are mostly tribal people and have managed to preserve many of their tribal customs despite of many oppressions and atrocities from other communities.
18. It is stated in the Article 'World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – India: Advasis', that in Maharashtra Bhils were mercilessly persecuted in the 17th century. If a criminal was caught and found to be a Bhil, he or she was often killed on the spot. Historical accounts tell us of entire Bhil communities being killed and wiped out. Hence, Bhils retreated to the strongholds of the hills and forests.
19. Thus Bhils are probably the descendants of some of the original inhabitants of India known as the 'aborigines' or Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis), who presently comprise of only about 8% of the population of India. The rest 92 % of the population of India consists of descendants of immigrants. Thus India is broadly a country of immigrants like North America. We may consider this in some detail. India is broadly a country of immigrants
20. While North America (USA and Canada) is a country of new immigrants, who came mainly from Europe over the last four or five centuries, India is a country of old immigrants in which people have been coming in over the last ten thousand years or so. Probably about 92% people living in India today are descendants of immigrants, who came mainly from the North-West, and to a lesser extent from the North-East. Since this is a point of great importance for the understanding of our country, it is necessary to go into it in some detail.
21. People migrate from uncomfortable areas to comfortable areas. This is natural because everyone wants to live in comfort. Before the coming of modern industry there were agricultural societies everywhere, and India was a paradise for these because agriculture requires level land, fertile soil, plenty of water for irrigation etc. which was in abundance in India. Why should anybody living in India migrate to, say, Afghanistan which has a harsh terrain, rocky and mountainous and covered with snow for several months in a year when one cannot grow any crop? Hence, almost all immigrations and invasions came from outside into India (except those Indians who were sent out during British rule as indentured labour, and the recent migration of a few million Indians to the developed countries for job opportunities). There is perhaps not a single instance of an invasion from India to outside India.
22. India was a veritable paradise for pastoral and agricultural societies because it has level and fertile land, hundreds of rivers, forests etc. and is rich in natural resources. Hence for thousands of years people kept pouring into India because they found a comfortable life here in a country which was gifted by nature.
23. As the great Urdu poet Firaq Gorakhpuri wrote: "*Sar Zamin-e—hind par aqwaam-e-alam ke firaq Kafil-e guzarte gae Hindustan banta gaya*" Which means – "In the land of Hind, the Caravans of the peoples of The world kept coming in and India kept getting formed".

24. Who were the original inhabitants of India? At one time it was believed that the Dravidians were the original inhabitants. However, this view has been considerably modified subsequently, and now the generally accepted belief is that the original inhabitants of India were the pre-Dravidian aborigines i.e. the ancestors of the present tribals or advasis (Scheduled Tribes). In this connection it is stated in *The Cambridge History of India (Vol-I)*, *Ancient India* as follows:

“It must be remembered, however, that, when the term ‘Dravidian’ is thus used ethnographically, it is nothing more than a convenient label. It must not be assumed that the speakers of the Dravidian languages are aborigines. In Southern India, as in the North, the same general distinction exists between the more primitive tribes of the hills and jungles and the civilized inhabitants of the fertile tracts; and some ethnologists hold that the difference is racial and not merely the result of culture. Mr. Thurston, for instance, says:

“It is the Pre-Dravidian aborigines, and not the later and more cultured Dravidians, who must be regarded as the primitive existing race..... These Pre-Dravidians are differentiated from the Dravidian classes by their short stature and broad (platyrrhine) noses. There is strong ground for the belief that the Pre-Dravidians are ethnically related to the Vedas of Ceylon, the Talas of the Celebes, the Batin of Sumatra, and possibly the Australians. (*The Madras Presidency*, pp. 124-5.)”

It would seem probable, then, that the original speakers of the Dravidian languages were outsiders, and that the ethnographical Dravidians are a mixed race. In the more habitable regions the two elements have fused, while representatives of the aborigines are still in the fastnesses (in hills and forests) to which they retired before the encroachments of the newcomers. If this view be correct, we must suppose that these aborigines have, in the course of long ages, lost their ancient languages and adopted those of their conquerors. The process of linguistic transformation, which may still be observed in other parts of India, would seem to have been carried out more completely in the South than elsewhere.

The theory that the Dravidian element is the most ancient which we can discover in the population of Northern India, must also be modified by what we now know of the Munda languages, the Indian representatives of the Austric family of speech, and the mixed languages in which their influence has been traced (p.43). Here, according to the evidence now available, it would seem that the Austric element is the oldest, and that it has been overlaid in different regions by successive waves of Dravidian and Indo-European on the one hand, and by Tibeto-Chinese on the other. Most ethnologists hold that there is no difference in physical type between the present speakers of Munda and Dravidian languages. This statement has been called in question; but, if it is true, it shows that racial conditions have become so complicated that it is no longer possible to analyse their constituents. Language alone has preserved a record which would otherwise have been lost.

At the same time, there can be little doubt that Dravidian languages were actually flourishing in the western regions of Northern India at the period when languages of the Indo-European type were introduced by the Aryan invasions from the north-west. Dravidian characteristics have been traced alike in Vedic and Classical Sanskrit, in the Prakrits, or early popular dialects, and in the modern vernaculars derived from them. The linguistic strata would thus appear to be arranged in the order- Austric, Dravidian, Indo-European.

There is good ground, then, for supposing that, before the coming of the Indo-Aryans speakers the Dravidian languages predominated both in Northern and in Southern India; but, as we have seen, older elements are discoverable in the populations of both regions, and therefore the assumption that the Dravidians are aboriginal is no longer tenable. Is there any evidence to show whence they came into India?

No theory of their origin can be maintained which does not account for the existence of Brahui, the large island of Dravidian speech in the mountainous regions of distant Baluchistan which lie near the western routes into India. Is Brahui a surviving trace of the immigration of Dravidian-speaking peoples into India from the west? Or does it mark the limits of an overflow from India into Baluchistan? Both theories have been held; but as all the great movements of peoples have been into India and not out of India, and as a remote mountainous district may be expected to retain the survivals of ancient races while it is not likely to have been colonized, the former view would a priori seem to be by far the more probable.” (See ‘Brahui’ on Google).

25. In Google ‘The original inhabitants of India’, it is mentioned : “A number of earlier anthropologists held the view that the Dravidian peoples together were a distinct race. However, comprehensive genetic studies have proven that this is not the case. The original inhabitants of India may be identified with the speakers of the Munda languages, which are unrelated to either Indo-Aryan or Dravidian languages”
26. Thus the generally accepted view now is that the original inhabitants of India were not the Dravidians but the pre-Dravidians Munda aborigines whose descendants presently live in parts of Chotanagpur (Jharkhand), Chattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal, etc., the Todas of the Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu, the tribals in the Andaman Islands, the Adivasis in various parts of India (especially in the forests and hills) e.g. Gonds, Santhals, Bhils, etc.
27. It is not necessary for us to go into further details into this issue, but the facts mentioned above certainly lends support to the view that about 92% people living in India are descendants of immigrants (though more research is required).
28. It is for this reason that there is such tremendous diversity in India. This diversity is a significant feature of our country, and the only way to explain it is to accept that India is largely a country of immigrants.
29. There are a large number of religions, castes, languages, ethnic groups, cultures etc. in our country, which is due to the fact that India is a country of immigrants. Somebody is tall, somebody is short, some are dark, some are fair complexioned, with all kinds of shades in between, someone has Caucasian features, someone has Mongoloid features, someone has Negroid features, etc. There are differences in dress, food habits and various other matters.
30. We may compare India with China which is larger both in population and in land area than India. China has a population of about 1.3 billion whereas our population is roughly 1.1 billion. Also, China has more than twice our land area. However, all Chinese have Mongoloid features; they have a common written script (Mandarin Chinese) and 95% of them belong to one ethnic group, called the Han Chinese. Hence there is a broad (though not absolute) homogeneity in China.

31. On the other hand, as stated above, India has tremendous diversity and this is due to the large scale migrations and invasions into India over thousands of years. The various immigrants/invaders who came into India brought with them their different cultures, languages, religions, etc. which accounts for the tremendous diversity in India.
32. Since India is a country of great diversity, it is absolutely essential if we wish to keep our country united to have tolerance and equal respect for all communities and sects. It was due to the wisdom of our founding fathers that we have a Constitution which is secular in character, and which caters to the tremendous diversity in our country.
33. Thus it is the Constitution of India which is keeping us together despite all our tremendous diversity, because the Constitution gives equal respect to all communities, sects, lingual and ethnic groups, etc. in the country. The Constitution guarantees to all citizens freedom of speech (Article 19), freedom of religion (Article 25), equality (Articles 14 to 17), liberty (Article 21), etc.
34. However, giving formal equality to all groups or communities in India would not result in genuine equality. The historically disadvantaged groups must be given special protection and help so that they can be uplifted from their poverty and low social status. It is for this reason that special provisions have been made in our Constitution in Articles 15(4), 15(5), 16(4), 16(4A), 46, etc. for the upliftment of these groups. Among these disadvantaged groups, the most disadvantaged and marginalized in India are the Adivasis (STs), who, as already mentioned, are the descendants of the original inhabitants of India, and are the most marginalized and living in terrible poverty with high rates of illiteracy, disease, early mortality etc. Their plight has been described by this Court in *Samatha vs. State of Andhra Pradesh and Ors.* AIR 1997 SC 3297 (vide paragraphs 12 to 15). Hence, it is the duty of all people who love our country to see that no harm is done to the Scheduled Tribes and that they are given all help to bring them up in their economic and social status, since they have been victimized for thousands of years by terrible oppression and atrocities. The mentality of our countrymen towards these tribals must change, and they must be given the respect they deserve as the original inhabitants of India.
35. The bravery of the Bhils was accepted by that great Indian warrior Rana Pratap, who held a high opinion of Bhils as part of his army.
36. The injustice done to the tribal people of India is a shameful chapter in our country's history. The tribals were called '*rakshas*' (demons), '*asuras*', and what not. They were slaughtered in large numbers, and the survivors and their descendants were degraded, humiliated, and all kinds of atrocities inflicted on them for centuries. They were deprived of their lands, and pushed into forests and hills where they eke out a miserable existence of poverty, illiteracy, disease, etc. And now efforts are being made by some people to deprive them even of their forest and hill land where they are living, and the forest produce on which they survive.
37. The well-known example of the injustice to the tribals is the story of Eklavya in the *Adiparva* of the *Mahabharat*. Eklavya wanted to learn archery, but Dronacharya refused to teach him, regarding him as low born. Eklavya then built a statue of Dronacharya and practiced archery before the statue.

He would have perhaps become a better archer than Arjun, but since Arjun was Dronacharya's favourite pupil Dronacharya told Eklavya to cut off his right thumb and give it to him as '*guru dakshina*' (gift to the teacher given traditionally by the student after his study is complete). In his simplicity Eklavya did what he was told.

38. This was a shameful act on the part of Dronacharya. He had not even taught Eklavya, so what right had he to demand '*guru dakshina*', and that too of the right thumb of Eklavya so that the latter may not become a better archer than his favourite pupil Arjun?

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) According to the Supreme Court how many percentage of Indians are descendants of immigrants?

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- 2) How were the tribals persecuted, according to the Supreme Court?

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1.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have briefly dealt with the characteristics and world-view of the tribals. Then we focussed on the need to undo the injustice to them, as noted by the Supreme Court of India.

1.10 KEY WORDS

Chief Seattle's Speech : Chief Seattle's Speech of 1854 is a powerful statement on the environment, culture, and the future of humanity. There is a great deal of controversy surrounding Chief Seattle's speech of 1854. Chief Seattle is remembered for the famous speech he gave at a large outdoor gathering in Seattle on March 11th, 1854 concerning the concession of native lands to the settlers. There are many sources of information, various versions of the speech, and debates over its very existence.

Supreme Court : The Supreme Court of India is the highest court of the land as established by Chapter IV of the Constitution of India. Articles 124 to 147 of the

constitution of India lay down the constitution and jurisdiction of the Supreme Court of India. Primarily, it is an appellate court which takes up appeals against judgments of the provincial High Courts. But, it takes writ petitions in cases of serious human rights violations or if it involves any serious issue that needs immediate resolution. Supreme Court of India had its inaugural sitting on January 28, 1950 and since then has delivered more than 24,000 reported judgments

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