



Chair for Tribal Studies Central University of Himachal Pradesh

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Introductory Paper:

Concept of Tribal and Tribalism in India

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The word “tribe” is derived from the Latin term – tribus, which was applied to the three divisions of the early people of Rome – Titius, Ramnes and Luceres. It also occurs in 12th century English literature as referring to one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Gregory Nagy, citing the linguist Emile Benveniste in his Origines de la formation des noms en indo-europeen noted that the Umbrian trifu (tribus) is apparently derived from a combination of *tri- and *bhu-, where the second element is cognate with the phu- of Greek phule, and that this was subdividing the Greek polis into three phulai. In 242-240 BC, the Tribal Assembly (comitia tribute) in the Roman Republic included 35 tribes – four urban and thirty one rural. The Latin word as used in the Bible translates as Greek phule : race, clan, tribe. Western scholars believe that a tribe was a ‘human social system’ existing before the emergence of nation-states; and, in some cases, continuing to exist independent of the state structure. Historically, tribal societies consisted only of a relatively small local population of a particular region. The internal social structure of a tribe can vary greatly from case to case, but is often a relatively simple structure, with few (if any) significant social distinctions between individuals. While anthropologists previously argued for unilateral cultural evolution, with tribes as ‘stepping stones’ to more advanced civilization; Franz Boas and others argued for cultural relativism with the tribes as objects of study in their own right. Later theorists advocated for tribal culture as the natural state of humankind; and, that the simpler, classless community offered greater leisure and less poverty than modern materialistic advanced societies. Due to the problems in agreeing on the characteristics of tribal society as opposed to structures termed band, clan or chiefdom; many anthropologists decided to abandon the term as theoretical, describing only a hypothetical and illusory society. The alternative term, ethnic group, substituted in many cases. Still, the notion of an ideal society, with many of the characteristics often attributed to tribal societies, remains an intriguing and attractive possibility.

The term is often loosely used to refer to any non-western or indigenous society of Africa, Asia or Australia. Many anthropologists use the term to refer the societies organized largely on the basis of kinship, especially corporate descent groups. In common understanding, the word “tribe” is a social division of interlinked families or communities sharing a common culture and dialect. In the contemporary western mind the modern tribe is typically associated with a seat of traditional authority (tribal leader) with whom the national government legislate. Considerable debate has taken place in the West over how best to characterize tribes. In the popular imagination, tribes reflect a way of life that predates, and is more “natural”, than that in modern states. Tribes also privilege primordial social ties, are clearly bounded, homogeneous and parochial. Thus, many believe that tribes organise links between families (including clans and lineages), and provide them with a social and ideological basis for solidarity that is in some way more limited than that of an ethnic group or of a nation. Tribalism may refer in popular cultural terms to a way of thinking or behaving in which people are loyal to their own social group. It implies the tenure of a strong cultural or ethnic identity based on strong relations of propinquity and kingship. The extreme feeling of common identity and cause can lead people feel tribally allied.

However, anthropological and ethno-historical study has challenged this view. Morton Fried in his book, The Notion of the Tribe (1972), has provided various examples of tribes the members of which spoke different languages and practiced different rituals, or that shared languages and rituals with members of other tribes. Similarly, he provided examples of tribes where people followed different political views. He concluded that tribes in general are characterised by fluid boundaries and heterogeneity, are dynamic and not parochial. It is used for a group of people consisting of a number of clans. With the growth of nationalism in Europe, the term 'tribe' came to denote a race of people living with a given territory.

In Europe, the word 'tribe' literally fell into disfavour in the later part of the 20th century for various reasons. For some anthropologists when the term was clearly defined it became an ideal concept, with no basis in reality. So it was replaced with the designation "ethnic group", which defines a group of people of common ancestry and language, shared cultural history and identifiable territory. This term is also preferred as it overcomes the negative connotations that the term "tribe" had acquired under colonialism. Now literally Europe has no "tribe", but infinite small population of circumpolar communities. However the term "tribe" is still used for documented Native American governments in the United States. The word is also used for Africa, Australia and Asia, but with a different nuance. African nations are called "tribal countries", even when they are following monotheism in majority. In India, it is a colonial legacy to divide the people on the basis of race, ethnicity and religion.

How does the term "tribe", as described, distorted and denounced by the western scholars and anthropologists, apply to India ? No, absolutely not ! In the Sanskrit literature, Epics and Puranas there is a mention of ethnic groups like Vanaras, Rikshas, Suparnas and Nagas who claim their alliance with nature and animals. But such ethnic groups were found throughout the world --- America, Australia, Africa, Asia and Europe. One cannot ignore European ethnic groups -- Eskimos (translating roughly as "eaters of raw meat") and Barbarians, who worshiped Norse mythology. In fact, European knew little about Asia upto 12th Century AD. When they were talking about the beast-headed man of India, the great Indian culture had reached and flourished in South-East Asia. When the world societies were passing through the various stage of development from primitive to progressive one, while the European societies were passing through fetishism, polytheism and monotheism; Indian religions had already given new spiritual and cultural heights to the crude optimistic beliefs and rituals. Modern Hinduism is largely the product of ethnic faiths, worship of nature, traditions, customs, ethics, morals and cultures. Fetishism or animism was the theological stage of thinking. At this stage, people believe that inanimate objects have living spirit in them and worshiped the trees, stones, volcanic eruptions, etc. These traditional beliefs were retained and modified by the Indian sages in a period of more than three millenniums. When Indian society and culture was moving on from one progressive stage to another, West was still conceiving the idea of animism, fetishism, polytheism and monotheism. European intellectuals, while making deprecating annotations about Indian people and its culture, ignore the historical facts that the great Indus Valley Civilization; compilation of sacred Epics, Vedas and Puranas; Great religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism; languages and literature; composite culture and society; splendid art and architecture are the massive Indian legacies to the world.

Hinduism was not created in one day or by one person. It involved the incessant evolution, microscopic observations, constant interpretations and great reform movements of thousands of years; and, passed from one stage or 'yugas' to other. Unfortunately in 19th and 20th centuries maximum works either on Hindu culture or ethnic groups were written by the Church people or the British administrators. They have set a non-Hindu perspective, which continues even today. British authorities saw their own future in ethnic groups or tribals in India. They made every effort, logical or illogical, to recognise them socially and culturally as a separate community than Hindus. When the tribes were provided the status of distinct cultural group, it was easy to convert them into Christianity and rule India for centuries.

India has been a vibrant and viable blend of languages, religions and cultures since prehistoric times. A large number of tribal people, as per the Colonial British terminology, also inhabited here. According to Census of 2011 – which continued the British legacy of dividing people on one excuse or other, they are 8.6% (104 million) of total population. These ethnic groups or tribes live in different regions of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, North-Eastern states, Andaman and Nicobar. The term 'Adivasi', meaning the original or first inhabitants, is used for tribes in India. The term was specifically coined for that purpose in 1930s with a deliberate attempt to divide society in ethnic groups or tribes and castes by the British. Again, the European perception of 'tribe' does not apply in India because it is now established that various ethnic groups appeared at different historical periods. It is also believed that prior to the caste system, people were divided into different tribes or ethnic groups. Atavika, Vanavasi (forest dwellers) and Girijan (hill people) are also used for ethnic groups or tribes in India. These people were never treated as untouchables at any stage of history, but part and parcel of main-stream Hindu society and composite Indian culture. The origin of some ethnic groups or tribes, like Garasia and Bhilala, was the result of intermarriages between the Rajputs and Bhils. They enjoyed autonomy and sustained their own kingdoms in Central India and other regions.

Western school of thought in India, known as orientalist, followed by a few anthropologists and sociologists, argued that ethnic groups or tribes in India belong to three races --- the Negritos, the Mongoloids and the Mediterranean. They advocated that Negritos were the earliest inhabitants of the Indian Peninsula. The Mongoloid race is represented by the tribal people in the sub-Himalayan region. Even they were divided into two categories --- the Palaco Mongoloids, living in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur; and, Tibeto Mongoloids in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. The Mediterranean people are represented by the Dravidians. These Western scholars also coined the theory that after so-called Aryan invasion, there was a protracted struggle between the Aryans and the Dravidians. The conquered Dravidians were reduced to low status and called "Sudras". Those Dravidians who escaped defeat maintained their independent status and are believed to be the forerunners of the various tribes in India. It is also believed that the builders of Indus Valley Civilization might have been the aboriginal people of India and their extinction is attributed to the disastrous alteration of the course of the Indus river. Another vague explanation put forward by some scholars like Stephen Fuchs is that so-called Aryan invaders might have destroyed the centres of Harappan Civilization. No doubt, this conclusion is drawn on the discovery of unburied skeletons on the steps of a building in Mohenjodaro; but, there is also no clear evidence from the archaeological excavations whether they spoke Dravidian or any other language. A thorough study of historical sources reveal that the sub-continent of India has been the cradle of different indigenous cultures and civilizations since ancient times, which developed into mainstream society. Every ethnic group or tribe, caste and clan contributed its share and were incorporated into this society of composite culture and heritage.

The ancient scriptures of the Vedic period contain some references of differences between the Aryans from the north-western region of India and non-Aryans. This conflict between the two continued in the later Vedic period (1000-600 BC) also. But this never proves that Aryans migrated from other countries or regions. It could have been a power or class struggle between the two indigenous groups or regions. According to Kosambi, aryanisation of the Tribals and tribalization of the Aryans was on as a two-way process. During the early phase of historical period, some ethnic pockets were subjugated by invaders, not Aryans. Ajatasatru destroyed the tribal republic of Vaisali and Alexander wiped out tribal settlements on the north-western borders of India. But then invaders are invaders and they never make a difference on the basis of caste, race or religion.

It is literally difficult for a given social grouping to decide whether it is a caste or a tribe. Historians and anthropologists believe that caste endogamy reflect the once-tribal origins of various groups who now constituted the settled-Hindu caste. This fact strongly supports the theory that all people have their origin

from tribes or ethnic groups. It is very important and require a thorough study. Another feature of caste-Hindu society, which is used to distinguish them with Muslims and other social groups, is lineage (clan or 'gotra') and village exogamy. Indian tribes, including the Muslim Gujjars of Kashmir and the Kalas of Pakistan, observe these exogamous traditions in common with caste-Hindus. This proves that the Aryans, the Dravadians, the Ethnic groups ore Tribals, the caste-Hindus --- were all the part and parcel of mainstream society, incorporated together by the close bonds of composite culture and heritage.

The participation of tribals in sub-Puranic and epic traditions also prove that they were always part and parcel of mainstream Indian society. Western or European parameters to distinguish between ethnic groups or tribals and mainstream society was simply a satanic endeavour to divide, convert and rule. Ancient literary works --- Ramayana, Mahabharata, Dharma Sutra (600-300 BC), Manusmriti (200 BC – 200 AD), Panchatantra, Kathasarita Sagara, Vishnu Purana, Kadambari and Harsha-Charita give hundreds of descriptions revealing the close interaction between the tribals and non-tribals. No doubt, during 400-1000 AD, the process of sanskritisation by Brahmin priests and preparing of suitable genealogies for themselves affected the society as a whole and not tribals only. Society was divided into castes and sub-castes. But the mechanism of Brahmins was simply a process of improving their position in local caste hierarchy and it had nothing to do with different ethnic groups.

With the advent of Muslim invaders in the 11th and 12th centuries, some Rajputs --- who did not submit to invaders, took refuge in tribal areas. It was during the Moghul rule (12th – 18th century AD) that the ethnic or tribal and non-tribal rulers in Central India and Bihar were forced to show their allegiance to the Turko-Afghan and Mughal rulers. Persian, Greek and other hordes of nomadic invaders also disturbed the ethnic or tribal and non-tribal regions alike. People were forced to convert to Islam. However, even after conversion to Islam, they retained their identity and remained connected to their roots. Muslim saints, missionaries and refugees also played a major role in the conversion of people to Islam both tribals and caste-Hindus. Kashmiri Pandits --- who were given three choices of conversion, exile or death; and, have suffered the pain and agony of seven migrations, are the best example of brutal tyranny in caste-Hindus.

The British authorities and missionaries tried to change the whole political, social, cultural and economic scenario of India for their own interests. The British rule in India can be divided into three stages:

1. 1756-1858: Period of British conquests, annexations and consolidation,
2. 1858-1905: Period of apparent association,
3. 1905-1947: Period of divide, conversion and rule.

Every effort was made to convert the ethnic groups or tribals and other economically poor people into Christianity. This process of conversion is still on in the remote and far flung areas. During the last few decades ethnic groups or tribes from Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand have been converted to Protestant groups.

The majority of ethnic groups or tribes in India practice Hinduism. There was absolutely no difference between them or caste-Hindus at any phase of history. It is asserted by anthropologists that much of what constitutes folk Hinduism today is actually descended from as amalgamation of ethnic traditions, customs, idol worship practices and deities. At the Lingaraj Temple in Bhubaneshewar, there are Brahmin and Badu (tribal) priests. Some scholars believe that Indian tribals are close to the romantic ideal of the ancient Silvan culture of the Vedic people. Madav Sadashiv Golwalkar said: " The tribals can be given yajnopavita They should be given equal rights and footings in the matter of religious rights, in temple worship, in the study of Vedas and, in general, in all our social and religious affairs"

In the 18th century, the British consolidated the feudalism in India under the Jagirdari and Zamindari systems. Permanent Settlement was imposed in Bengal and Bihar. Land, both forest areas belonging to

tribals and agriculture land of non-tribals, was made the legal property of British–designated landlords (Zamindars). People resented the British exploitation and encroachment in the forests and over agriculture land. There were a number of revolts and uprisings against the imperialist approach of the British:

1. Great Kuki Moment (1860)
2. Halba Revolt (1774-79)
3. Chakma Uprising (1776-87)
4. Chuar Uprising in Bengal (1795-1800)
5. Bhopal-patnam Struggle (1795)
6. Khurda Uprising in Orissa (1817)
7. Bhil Uprising (1822-57)
8. Paralkot Uprising (1825)
9. Tarapur Uprising (1842-54)
10. Maria Uprising (1842-54)
11. First Freedom Struggle by Sidu Murmu and Kanu Murmu (1856-57)
12. Bhil Uprising started by Tanya Tope in Banswara (1858)
13. Koi Uprising (1859)
14. Gond Uprising started by Ramji Gond in Adilabad (1860)
15. Muria Revolt (1876)
16. Rani Uprising (1878-82)
17. Ist Rampa Uprising in Vizagapatnam (now Visakhapatnam District, 1879)
18. Santhal Uprising (1885-86)
19. Bhumkal Uprising (1910)
20. The Kuki Uprising in Manipur (1917-19)
21. IInd Rampa Uprising (1921-23)
22. Munda Revolt
23. Yadav Uprising

In United Kingdom, the census was largely a secular institution for collection and presentation of data. But in colonial India, it was started with different purpose in 1872. It not only aimed at understanding the socio-cultural life of its people to strengthen the subjugation, but also streamline the process of conversion by Christian missionaries. Conscious attempts were made to introduce the elements of religion, caste and race to divide the people on one pretext or other. The process continued throughout the colonial era giving rise to new discourses. Earlier the work on gazetteers was begun by W. W. Hunter under the orders of Lord Mayo. Several volumes of Imperial Gazetteer of India and Census Reports covered large subjects dealing with land and people of India. When the British had every detail, the first thing which struck them was the strong bonding in the Indian society, especially among the Hindus, despite the unimaginable diversities and prevalence of social ills. The Madras Census Report of 1881 quotes the opinion of McIver, " A good deal might be said as to the propriety of the use of the word 'Hindu' as a religious classification when applied to the bulk of the Southern Indian population. Regarded as a definition of religion, or even of race, it is more liberal than accurate. From the point of view of race, it groups together such widely distinct people as the Aryan Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vellalas and Kallars of the South, the Nairs of the West, and the aboriginal tribes of the Southern hill sides. As a religious classification, it groups together the purest surviving forms of Vedic belief with the demon worshippers of Tinnevely and South Canara"

For the first time in the Colonial Census Report of 1901, the name 'TRIBAL' was written in religion column to divide the Hindu society and culture. The purpose was to decrease the political significance of the Hindus and help the Christian missionaries to use social vulnerability for conversion. Every effort was made to 'dehinduise' the socially marginalized castes. But the British were nervous by social structure and composite

culture of Hindu civilization. The Colonial Census Report of 1911 elaborated the same in the following words:

“ In this country no one has any objection to stating his religion, and if all the creeds were clear, definite and mutually exclusive, there would have been no difficulty whatsoever in the way of obtaining an accurate return. With the exception of exotic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, there is no such thing as a definite creed..... The Hindu word ‘DHARMA’, which corresponds most closely to our word ‘religion.’, connotes conduct more than creed.”

The colonial powers made a strategy to divide the people of India on the basis of race, religion and caste to rule over and exploit them. They attempted to change the Hindu demography by redefining Hinduism and unscrambling social realities. Since racism dominated the minds of colonialists, it was used as first order classification of Indian population followed by religion, caste and sects. Following is the scheme of British classification adopted in Indian censuses during the colonial rule:

I: Indo-Aryans

A: Hindus –

Hindu Brahmanic, (b) Hindu (Aryan-Vedic Theists), (c) Hindu (Brahmo-Eclectic Theists).

B: Sikh

C: Jain

D: Buddhist

II: Iranian -

A: Zoroastrian (Parsi)

III: Semitic -

A: Muslims

B: Christians

C: Jews

IV: Primitive –

A: Animistic (Satanic endeavour by the British colonialism to divide, convert and rule the composite Hindu society and culture. Hinduism is the culmination of different ethnic beliefs, traditions and customs. Modern Hinduism passed through different stages and reformations from nature worship to polytheism and monotheism).

V: Miscellaneous – (Can any religion, society or culture be put into miscellaneous category).

In the census of colonial era, every effort was made to extract the ethnic groups or tribal population from Hinduism. The British build categories designed according to the motion of race, caste and religion. It was a master stroke of British diplomacy in India. The reconstruction of heterogeneous and rival communities was the launching-pad through which divide, conversion and rule was possible. This was important for the existence of colonialism in India. British introduced the concepts and categories of race, religion and caste in India according to colonial perception of Indian society as primordial pre-capitalist entities. However, this task was not easy for them as the Census Report of 1901 says:

“The difficulty in obtaining a correct return of the number of Animists is two-fold: In the first place they themselves have no name for their religion. This difficulty was overcome by directing that the name of the

tribe should be repeated in the column of the schedule in which religion was recorded. The second difficulty was more grave – the dividing line between Hinduism and Animism is uncertain

There was absolutely no communal perception or boundary line between the ethnic groups and mainstream society in India. It was also a grave sinister design on the part of the British to write down the word 'tribe' in the religious-columns of census records even when they very well knew that these ethnic groups are an essential part of composite Hinduism. This was a clear formula of divide, convert and rule. In fact, the Christian elites were themselves surprised by the vastness of Hinduism and its inbuilt wide diversity. This led them to realize that the philosophical impact of Hinduism was not confined to religion but also had strong and stubborn geo-cultural characteristics. In the 1911 Census Report, the Census Commissioner said:

"A complex category of creeds and doctrines, it shelters within its portals monotheists, polytheists and pantheists, worshippers of great gods Shiva and Vishnu or their female counterparts, as well as worshippers of the divine mothers, of the spirits of trees, rocks and streams and of the tutelary of village deities; persons who propitiate their deity by all manner of bloody sacrifices and persons who will not only kill no living creature but who must not even use the word 'cut'; those whose rituals consist mainly of prayers and hymns, and those who indulge in unspeakable orgies in the name of religion and many heterodox sectaries, who deny the supremacy of the Brahmins or have non-Brahmin religious leaders".

Prior to the Census of 1911, the Census Superintendent E. A. Gait laid down a set of nefarious parameters to discriminate between the Hindus and other sects. This advisory mitigated to the people were:

1. Deny the supremacy to the Brahmins
2. Do not receive mantras from Brahmins or other recognised Hindu gurus
3. Deny the authority of the Vedas
4. Do not worship the great Hindu gods
5. Are not served by good Brahmins as family priests
6. Have no Brahmin priests at all
7. Are denied access to the interior of ordinary Hindu temples
8. Cause pollution (a) by touch (b) within a certain distance
9. Bury their dead
10. Eat beef and do not revere the cow

This was the ominous design of the British to divide and convert the Hindu society. The Tribune (Lahore) published the satanic circular on November 19, 1910, which perturbed the native intellectuals. Colonel U.N. Mukerji wrote in his book, Hinduism and the Coming Census (Calcutta, 1911):

"The Circular in question affects, according to its own words, millions of people, every one of whom had hitherto been regarded as a Hindu. Probably no document has been issued which involved such gigantic issues; no writing with which we are familiar had for its object the decision of the faith of millions of people. In the history of the Hindus, nobody can recall a similar attempt.... The formation of a society or church is fairly common among the Protestants, but those who secede do not dissociate themselves from Christianity but form new sects. Using the word Religion as understood by Europeans and taking it to be the basis of the intended cleavage, what is this talk about Hindus and non-Hindus".

Colonel Mukerji was absolutely right. There are hundreds of groups and sects in Christianity, but all are Christians. But Hindus in India were divided on the basis of creed, caste and race. This was the height of British colonial hypocrisy. The purpose was to provide a strong support to the Christian missionaries aimed at converting marginalized and suppressed Hindus.

The people in India were turned into enumerated communities through census and later into political communities by the instruments and mechanism of colonial policy of divide, convert and rule. As such the

demographic divide was brought to the centre stage of communal politics. British were aware that to consolidate their position in India, they have to exploit the diversities of Indian people. With this purpose they coined the vague theories of Aryan invasion; tribals and non-tribals; caste-Hindus and stream-lined society; primitive and semitic ; and, all that.

Independent India has inherited this colonial legacy from the British; and, continued the agenda of the construction of communities on the basis of race, religion, caste and region in the census reports. This has terrifically shattered our ancient society and culture. Today no one is Indian --- but tribal, non-tribal, caste-Hindu, sudra, brahmin, kshetriya, rajput and all that. It is most unfortunate that people are not known by the name of nation, but by their respective states like Assam, Punjab, Gujarat, Nagaland, Manipur and so on. This is injurious for the nation and its integration. This is the tremendous damage which British colonialism and imperialism inflicted on India and we continued with it even after the partition and independence of the country. This aberrant dissection on the basis of race, caste and religion has given birth to separatism, militancy and terrorism in the different regions of India. It is strange why we followed the British colonial approach, policies and procedures without knowing their adverse implications. These gigantic blunders need immediate attention and correction. The impact of colonial approach, policies, procedures and census reports on communal relations and communal politics in India have been little explored by researchers. There is an instantaneous need for new vision and thought on the basis of scientific study and research with this dimension to bring out the facts and correct the manipulated perceptions of history.

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जनजातीय अध्यन पीठ

Chair for Tribal Studies

हिमाचल प्रदेश केन्द्रीय विश्विदालय

Central University of Himachal Pradesh

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Dr Satish Kr. Ganjoo
Chair Professor

Dear Sir

India is a land of various ethnic groups. But the people here were turned into enumerated communities through census and later into political communities by the instruments and mechanism of colonial policy of divide, convert and rule. As such the demographic divide was brought to the centre stage of communal politics. British were aware that to consolidate their position in India, they have to exploit the diversities of Indian people. With this purpose they coined the vague theories of Aryan invasion; tribals and non-tribals; caste-Hindus and stream-lined society; primitive and semitic ; and, all that.

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Chair for Tribal Studies, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, is organising a one-day National Workshop on the theme: CONCEPT OF TRIBALS AND TRIBALISM IN INDIA, on 1st September, 2017. You have already established your work with several years of research experience. Your guidance and approach shall be enlightening to the participants. We would appreciate it very much if you would accept our invitation to deliver a lecture on the theme and interact with the participants. Your cooperation in this direction will highly encourage us and make the workshop a grand success.

Kindly communicate your acceptance as soon as possible.

Looking forward for your cooperation

Regards

Dr Satish Kr Ganjoo