
UNIT 1 CONCEPT OF TRIBE: EVOLUTION AND DEBATES

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Learning Objectives

This unit will help you to understand the:

- conceptualisation of tribes;
- tribulations in defining a tribe; and
- concerns of tribe-caste continuum.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The term ‘Tribe’ in common parlance means ‘likeness’ or people related by kin and blood ties. Mention of the ‘lost tribes of Jerusalem’ finds a place in the Biblical text; the term is also used to talk about brotherhood or community belonging. In this unit, however, the focus would be on the anthropological understanding of the concept of tribe. In the first section, the meanings and definitions of ‘tribe’ that have been provided by anthropologists will be taken into account. It would dwell on the problems in the conceptualisation of a tribe and why till date there has been no consensus among anthropologists in defining a tribe. This section would also highlight the use of the term ‘tribe’ and when it came to be used in the Indian context. The unit would also discuss how the Indian Constitution has defined a tribe. The issue of the Tribe-Caste continuum in the Indian scenario is also taken up in this unit. This aspect is important to understand the changing dynamics of the tribal population in India. The last section will be a discussion on the context and relevance of tribe in a post-modern world, followed by a summarisation of the entire discussion.

1.2 MEANINGS AND DEFINITIONS

Anthropology for long has been associated with the study of “simple”, “pre-literate”, “small scale”, “secluded” societies popularly termed as tribes. The works of the early armchair anthropologists had focused on the exotic lands and their “tribes” based on

accounts collected from travelers, traders, and missionaries. This period is accredited with the romanticisation of the tribes, looking at the ‘other’ as an exotic aspect, a view that in itself was ethnocentric in nature. The colonial-era encouraged the anthropologists to study tribes and their behaviour for administrative purposes thus, legitimising the study of tribes in anthropology. However, in the twentieth-century anthropologists started looking at tribes as real entities and not as the ‘exotic other’. The study of tribes was taken up to understand the way of life of the tribal population and the changes that have come up owing to colonisation, modernisation, and globalisation. In this section, we would deliberate on some of the definitions of a tribe based on the theoretical aspects that the anthropologists have tried to describe a tribe. The other aspect that we would deal with in this section is how the nomenclature of ‘tribe’ has come into use for the Indian population and also how the Indian Constitution has defined tribes.

Ethnocentrism: Evaluating a culture by judging it based on preconceived ideas and notions is known as ethnocentrism. Sumner defined ethnocentrism as, ‘... views of things in which one’s own group is the centre of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.... each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, if it observes that other groups have other folkways, they excite its scorn’ (Tylor, Dictionary of Anthropology, 1991, pp 191) This ethnocentric view in studying ‘other culture’ is seen in the works of the early British anthropologists, who during the colonial period, looked at these other societies from their superiority point of view.

1.2.1 Anthropological Definitions of Tribes

In the twentieth century, the definition of tribe emphasised the geographical location and a common language to define a tribe. In one of the early definitions, W.H.R. Rivers (1914:50) had defined a tribe as “a group of a simple kind, always in Melanesia settled in a definite locality which speaks a common language and is capable of uniting for common action as in warfare”. As with River’s definition, the Eurocentric notion of the unilinear or classical hypothesisation of tribe is also seen in Morgan’s definition when he states a tribe to be in “a transient stage in the process of cultural evolution from early hunters and foragers to agrarian societies” (Misra 2013). The above definitions fall in line with the classical evolutionary approach, postulated by early anthropologists which emphasised the theory of evolution from simple to complex. These definitions also emphasised the aspects of common territory, kinship, blood relations, and political autonomy.

The evolutionary approach gave way to the structural approach in defining a tribe where the focus was on understanding the functions and the structure of the tribes without taking into account the evolution of the tribes. Evans- Pritchard in particular used the structural approach in the context of understanding the segmentary societies like the Nuer of Sudan. In later years, Sahlins (1968) characterised tribes with segmentary lineages that were different from centralised chiefdoms. A working definition of a tribe with almost the same criteria of locality and language was given by G.A. Richards (1938: 413-414) describing a tribe as “an economically independent group of people speaking the same language and uniting to defend themselves against outsiders”. Likewise, Hoebel defines a tribe as ‘a social group speaking a distinctive language or dialect and possessing a distinctive culture that marks it off from the other tribes. It is not necessarily organised politically’. Herein, the descriptions were based on the functional aspects; how a tribe cut off from the world survived on its own. The question of how a tribe evolved, the evolutionary aspect took a back seat in the functional approach, more interested in finding out how a tribe sustained itself in isolation.

While speaking about anthropological definitions of a tribe, we also need to take into account, the definition of a tribe as stated in *Notes and Queries in Anthropology*. Herein, a tribe has been defined as, “a politically or socially coherent and autonomous group occupying or claiming a particular territory” (1951:66). For some time the endogamous nature of a tribe also featured in the criteria’s to define a tribe. However, this aspect is not seen among many tribes and there are ethnographic accounts by anthropologists based on fieldwork which has negated the fact that tribes are endogamous entities.

In the Indian context, the Imperial Gazetteer of India has reflected that “A tribe, as we find in India, is a collection of families, groups of families, bearing a common name which, as a rule, does not denote any specific occupation; generally claiming common descent from a mystical or historical ancestor and occasionally from an animal, but in some parts of the country held together rather by the obligation of blood-feud than by the tradition of Kinship; usually speaking the same language and occupying, or claiming to occupy, a definite tract of country. A tribe is not necessarily endogamous, i.e. it is not an invariable rule that a man of a particular tribe must marry a woman of that tribe” (cited in Prasad 2013: 54). However, D. N. Majumdar has defined tribe as a “social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous, with no specialisation of functions, ruled by tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognising social distance with other tribes or castes, without any social obloquy attaching to them, as it does in the caste structure, following tribal traditions, beliefs, and customs, illiberal of naturalisation of ideas from the alien sources, above all conscious of homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration” (Hasnain 1991: 32). Andre Béteille, (1977: 7) has stated that the term ‘tribe’ has been used to describe people who are regarded as ‘primitive’, with animistic religion, and living in hilly terrains or backward areas.

Thus, here we see that the criteria’s for defining a tribe ranged from a common territory to speaking a common language, to being a politically autonomous group, living in isolation and away from other tribes and communities. Yet the definition of a tribe has been one of the most complex aspects among anthropologists. The complexities arise as tribes in different regions, cultural zones and historical connotations though mean ‘people’ yet there are variations and limitations. The criteria for describing a tribe may not always fit one or the other group when we look at the definitions of tribes. In the light of the above, rethinking the definition of a tribe is the need of the hour; as the classical anthropological definitions fail to take into account the changes that have come up owing to modernisation, industrialisation and globalisation. In the next section, we would reflect on how the Tribes have been looked upon in the Indian context.

1.2.2 Tribes in Indian Context

In the Indian context, it is worthy to note that there is no indigenous term equivalent to the word ‘tribe’ which comes from the Roman word *tribus*. From time immemorial the people living in the forests, hills, and remote plain areas within India have been known by such names as *vanavasi* (forest dwellers), *adivasis* (first settlers), *anusuchit janjati* (scheduled tribes), and so on. It has been stated that in Sanskrit, there is a term *atavikajana*, which was used to denote agglomeration of individuals with specific territorial, kinship, and cultural patterns (Atal 2013:41). In most of the anthropological writings, the literal translation of the name of a Tribe means ‘Humans’ or ‘original inhabitants’. For example, in the Karbi village of Soheng Dhenta in the Nagaon district

of Assam, it was revealed that the village name 'Socheng Dhenta' was associated with the early migration of the Karbis from their original abode i.e., from the Karbi Anglong district to the Rongkhong Ranges and finally to the plains near Nagaon. The village name 'Socheng Dhenta' in the Karbi dialect means 'beginning of mankind' as this village is the base of Karbi culture under whose jurisdiction there are 128 other Karbi villages (cited from the author's fieldwork experience). Another example of the Ho's has been cited by Misra (2013:3) where he states that for a Ho tribal living in Chotanagpur region or in adjoining Orissa the literal meaning of Ho in the native language means 'human beings'.

From the examples of empirical works, it is clear that the term 'tribe' is not of Indian origin; let us now understand how the term came to be used in the Indian context. Indian anthropologists have stated time and again that the use of the term 'tribe' in the Indian context dates back to the colonial period. It was during the British rule in India, for better administration purposes, administrators and anthropologists were encouraged and engaged in the study of the Indian population. Let us now understand when the word 'Tribe' was officially recorded and used by the British in the Indian context. The categorisation of the Indian population into two distinct groups- Tribes and Caste came up in the first Census of India 1891, a report prepared by Baine wherein, the tribal groups were clubbed under the category of "Forest Tribes", which constituted a part of the "Agricultural and Pastoral Castes". This population was estimated at 16 million at that time. In the 1901 Census report by Riskey, they were renamed as "Animists", based on religious practices, while in the 1911 Census report by Gait, they were termed as "Tribal Animists" or the people following "Tribal Religion". Hutton in the Census report of 1921 classified tribes under "Hill and Forest tribes" with a population of 22 million. In the 1931 Census, they were named "Primitive Tribes". In the Government of India Act of 1935, they were termed as "Backward Tribes" and the 1941 Census report used the term "Tribes" (cited from Misra 2013:9; Atal 2013: 41).

Thus, from the above citations from the Census of India since 1891 we see that the tribal populations were distinguished from the caste communities on the basis of cultural practices, religion basically termed as 'animism', social organisations, and occupation. Many scholars pointed out that castes have been part of a hierarchical system, whereas tribes have not been part of such a system. The demarcation becomes problematic in the wake of concepts like the tribe-caste continuum and tribe-caste mobility. In the subsequent segment, we would dwell upon how the Indian Constitution after Independence defined tribes.

1.2.3 Tribes as per Indian Constitution

Let us begin this section with the definition of tribes that have been provided in the Indian Constitution under Article 366 (25).

"Scheduled Tribes" means such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this constitution" (The Constitution of India 2014, seventh edition, pp: 378).

The term 'Scheduled Tribes' first appeared in the Constitution of India. Article 342, which is reproduced below, prescribes a procedure to be followed in the matter of specification of scheduled tribes.

Article 342

The President may, with respect to any State or Union territory, and where it is a state, after consultation with the Governor thereof by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall, for the purposes of this constitution, be deemed to be scheduled tribes in relation to that State or Union Territory, as the case may be.

Parliament may by law include in or exclude from the list of Scheduled tribes specified in a notification issued under clause (1) any tribe or tribal community or part of or group within any tribe or tribal community, but save as aforesaid, a notification issued under the said clause shall not be varied by any subsequent notification.

Thus, the first specification of article 342 on Scheduled Tribes states that the President in consultation with the Governor of a particular state/ Union Territory can notify a particular community or part of it as a tribe in that specific state. The notification specified by the President can be modified subsequently only through an Act of Parliament. The important point to note in this constitutional provision is that the listing of scheduled tribes is State/Union Territory-wise and not on an all India basis. For instance, the Rabari are a Scheduled Tribe in Gujarat, but in Rajasthan, they are included in the category of the Other Backward Classes. Similarly, the Gaddis are considered as a Scheduled Tribe in Himachal Pradesh, whereas not in Punjab. The Khasas of Jaunsar-Bawar were not considered as a tribe in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Likewise, in the 1951 list of Scheduled Tribes, in the case of Rajasthan, only one category of Minas, namely the Chowkidar Minas, was included. Later on, due to the protest of the Meenas, all other categories of Meenas were included (Atal 2013:44). Besides the Scheduled Tribes, there are two more classifications of the tribes in India vis-à-vis denotified tribes and criminal tribes that would be dealt with in detail in unit-3 and unit-4 of this block.

Article 342 is linked to special sanctions or benefits under the Constitutional provisions for the upliftment and bringing these Scheduled Tribes at par with the other communities in the country. Moreover, the Constitution does not define a tribe (Dhebar Commission) but implies categories by which a tribe can be identified. This has created issues in the identification of Scheduled Tribes in India as a result of which some of the communities which were earlier listed as tribes were dropped from the list of Scheduled Tribes. Owing to this, we see that the list of Scheduled Tribes in India is ever increasing, it was 500 in the 1951 Census which today stands at around 700 in number. To date, claims of the various communities in India, to be included in the list of Scheduled Tribes continue. To look into such claims, the Joint Parliamentary Committee, 1967 had listed five criteria for judging the eligibility of any group as a tribe (Atal 2013: 44-45)

- a. Indication of primitive traits
- b. Distinctive culture
- c. Geographical isolation
- d. Shyness of contact with the larger community
- e. Backwardness

The above criteria's make it relevant here to reflect on Xaxa's (1999) interpretation of a tribe when he states that in the Indian context the question of tribes is closely linked

with administrative and political considerations. It is essential to note that the term scheduled tribe is only a politico-administrative category. It may not imply any specific cultural or religious traits. In the next section we would understand how the special benefits have resulted in the debate of the tribe-caste continuum.

1.3 TRIBE- CASTE DEBATE IN INDIAN CONTEXT

In this section, we would try to understand some of the key concepts like Sanskritisation, de-tribalisation, and re-tribalisation that have implications when we speak about the tribes in the Indian context. This section would also reflect on how the definition of tribes as per the Indian Constitution has had its repercussion on the processes of Sanskritisation and de-tribalisation that has been an integral part of tribal life in India. M.N. Srinivas had coined the term Sanskritisation to describe the process of how a tribe adopts cultural and social aspects of a caste group to rise in the social ladder and designate itself as a Hindu. It implies that in the Indian context, tribes are not always isolated communities. Srivastava, (2013: xi) had reflected that way back in 1971 during his fieldwork in Ranchi, it had come as a surprise to him that the village Kamre where fieldwork was being conducted was not the abode of the Munda and the Oraon tribes alone but there were non-tribal populations living in the village and in the neighbouring areas. In this village the Sanskritic values were also fast spreading among the tribal population as a temple had been built by a Hindu renouncer, wherein devotional songs were sung by the villagers both tribal and non-tribals. Likewise, today if we take stock of the tribes in North-East India like the Naga tribes of Nagaland most of them have denounced animism, and Christianity as a religion is fast spreading among them. This is basically a process of acculturation assimilation wherein, a tribal population adopts the habits and mannerisms of a caste population. This process has also been termed as de-tribalisation, wherein, the tribal populations have given up on their traditional, way of life like customs, occupation; leaving their traditional abode and shifting to urban areas.

In recent years, however, the process of re-tribalisation has come into play. This aspect has also been termed as 'reverse tribalisation' wherein tribal populations which had been Sanskritised earlier are now going back to their roots, like taking up aspects of their traditional religion like animism. In sociological terms, the process has been observed as 'downward mobility'. The Gujars of Rajasthan were a classic example of Sanskritisation; they had been strongly rising in the caste hierarchy and had been recognised as a caste group in the census of India. However, in the recent past around 2007, they have been fighting for their recognition as a scheduled tribe. In their petition they have been postulating that they have missed out on opportunities as they were recognised as a caste group, though traditionally they are of tribal origin (Srivastava 2013:xiv-xv; Atal 2013:39-43). This has brought to the fore that owing to the provisions that have been provided by the Constitution of India to the Scheduled Tribes, many of the groups are now realising that they are missing out on these opportunities owing to the process of Sanskritisation, which had been an integral part of the Indian tribal population. However, re-tribalisation is the new trend wherein, tribal populations are trying to imbibe some of their lost customs and traditions into their lives, to retain their tribal status. This does not however mean that they are going back to the time of the yore, but are choosing aspects that can fit into their present lives and yet be able to maintain their tribal identity. Many scholars have reflected on this reverse tribalisation as an outcome of the Constitutional provisions which provide special assistance in terms of social and economic facilities to the Scheduled Tribes.

1.4 CONCEPT AND RELEVANCE OF TRIBE IN POST-MODERN WORLD

Anthropologists had concerned themselves with the study and definition of tribes from two perspectives- evolutionary and functional. The study of tribes for early anthropologists was to understand the evolutionary stages of coming of age from horde to nation. The functional perspective of anthropologists was based on the study of synchronic reality “here and now” without giving emphasis to evolution and the history of a tribe. The functionalist approach had viewed Tribe as static entities without emphasising on their history and culture. In the present day most of the features that were accorded to the identity or identifying Tribes are practically impossible to define a tribe, as the ethnographies in recent times have suggested that the “tribes” have coexisted with the indigenous populations. The question here is does the definitions that have been provided over the ages accommodates all the tribes? In the present post-modern era do we find all the criteria that have been listed by anthropologists to define a tribe valid? Is tribe a static entity?

In terms of isolation and the static nature of tribes that have been proposed in the past, let’s explore in the Indian context if there has been such isolation among Indian tribes? In the Indian context, the Jad Bhotiyas of Garhwal, Himachal Pradesh live in remote and border villages but have never been isolated as their survival is dependent on cross-border trade (Channa 2013). In Assam, the Bhotiyas from Arunachal Pradesh came to the plains of Assam in North-Eastern part of India to sell their products during winters. Another classic example comes from the Nilgiri hills of southern India where three tribes the Kurumbas, the Todas, and the Badagas reside in close proximity. The Kurumbas are basically forest dwellers engaged in foraging and shifting cultivations that have always had trade relations with the Todas and the Badagas. The Todas a pastoral tribe relies on the Kurumbas for the supply of tall poles used in funeral rites, along with forest produce like honey, etc. The Badagas a settled tribe invite the Kurumbas to play music during rituals and festivals. The status of the Badagas as a tribe is much disputed in the present era as they have not been listed under the Scheduled Tribes as per Constitutional provisions in India. This leads us to the question of how to understand those communities that have not been listed in the Scheduled Tribes categories. Are they tribes or not? These are some of the raging questions that anthropologists need to take into account.

In the present era, the study of tribes becomes relevant to understand the changes that have marked their lives after they have been touched by the waves of industrialisation and globalisation in the context of the post-modern world. Many of the tribal populations were displaced from their original habitats owing to the construction of dams and roads to accommodate the ever-increasing population and to facilitate the lives of the so-called mainstream Indian population. The Jarawas of Andaman and Nicobar Islands had to struggle for survival when a road was being constructed, which went right through their habitat, to facilitate easy entry to the resorts that were being built in the Andaman Islands to facilitate tourism. The Polavaram Multipurpose River valley project started in 2014, in Andhra Pradesh is another example of the displacement of a large number of Tribal populations like the Konda Reddi, Koya, Konda Kamara, etc., mostly forest dwellers engaged in hunting and food gathering. The displacement not only leads to the economic and social upheaval in the lives of the tribes but also leads to the loss of indigenous knowledge. There are instances from many tribal populations that are on

the verge of extinction owing to displacement and the issues related to it. Thus, in the present context, the tribes are to be studied not as static entities but as realities that are very much a part of our social, economic, and political structure, which needs to be documented as they are fast changing.

1.5 SUMMARY

This unit has tried to understand tribes in the context of the classical definitions of 'tribe' and its usage in the Indian context. The evolutionary and the functional approaches that have defined tribes were explored and it brought to the fore that these definitions fail to take into account the changing dimensions in a tribe. The dynamic attribute of a tribe that has come into prominence owing to modernisation and globalisation brings up the question of how long a tribe is a tribe? Does the changing dimension in a tribe make it lose its identity as a tribe? Thus, the debate of how to define and classify a tribe still continues, urging anthropologists to come up with definitions that take these aspects into its fold. While tracing the history of the nomenclature of tribe in the context of Indian populations, the anthropologists stated that the term is not of Indian origin as *vanavasi*, *anusuchit janjati*, *adivasis* were more commonly used to describe populations living in the hills and forests, who engaged in hunting and gathering or horticulture. The unit also emphasised the need to study tribes in the present context. The tribes today need to be studied to document the rich culture of the tribes that is fast-changing and disappearing, which stems out of displacement, owing to developmental projects, a feature of the concrete jungles that are coming up in the name of modernisation and globalisation.

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Sample Questions

1. Write a note on the anthropological understanding of the concept Tribe. How it has been defined and its meaning.
2. Critically examine tribes in Indian context.
3. Discuss Tribes as per Indian Constitution.
4. Critically analyse tribe-caste continuum.



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