

At A Glance on Scheduled Tribes

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Abstract

The concept and identity of Scheduled Tribes (STs), also referred to as Adivasis, in India has evolved over centuries through diverse interpretations by scholars, colonial administrators, and policymakers. Adivasis are regarded as the original inhabitants of India, with unique socio-cultural traditions, geographical affiliations, and economic practices. This paper explores the historical, anthropological, and political dimensions of tribal identity in India, tracing its origins from ancient texts to colonial classifications and post-independence constitutional recognition. It discusses how the term "tribe" has been variously understood in Western and Indian contexts and how Scheduled Tribes were administratively defined through British and post-colonial legal frameworks. The paper also examines the debates on the use of terms such as "Adivasi," "Aboriginals," and "Indigenous Peoples," and the Indian government's position in international forums. Further, it analyzes constitutional provisions and protective measures for STs, highlighting the evolving role of state intervention in safeguarding tribal rights and promoting socio-economic development. Through a historical and legislative lens, the paper underscores the significance of preserving the cultural autonomy of STs while ensuring their integration into the broader socio-political framework of India.

Keywords: Scheduled Tribes (STs), Indigenous Peoples, Tribal Identity, Social Exclusion

INTRODUCTION:

Scheduled Tribes (STs) are also called Adivasis. Adivasis are the original inhabitants of a particular country, region or province before other immigrants came to settle there. Since they are the original inhabitants, they are generally called 'Adivasis'. The population of Adivasis is the largest in India after Africa. Since Adivasis are the original inhabitants of India, they are also called 'Aborigines'. Risley, Lacey, Elvin, Grierson, Schubert, Sedgwick, Martin and A. V. Thakkar called them Aborigines or Aboriginals. J. H. Hutton called them Primitive Tribes. G. S. Ghurye, however, used the term so-called Aborigines or backward Hindus (Desai, 1978: 223).

There are different views on the origin and meaning of the word 'tribe'. For the Romans, tribe meant a political organization. In Western countries like India, the meaning of the word tribe was different from the current meaning. A tribe is a high political entity consisting of some districts. This was actually called a tribe. They had a definite geographical area and had effective control over the people in it. The permanent residence of a particular tribe in a definite area gives them a geographical identity (Verma, 1997: 2). Even today, there are some areas by which that geographical area is known, such as Mizoram, Nagaland, Santhal Parganas and Gondwana etc.

With the development of nationalism in Europe, the term tribe has come to mean a race of people living within a certain boundary. The term 'tribe', as commonly used by Western writers and orientalist about India, and which has been followed by Indian anthropologists and sociologists, refers to three main

groups of tribes in India. These are the Negritos, Mongoloids and Proto-Australoids (Kulkarni, 2002: 30-50). The Negritos are the ancient inhabitants of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Jarawas, Sentinels, Onge) and the Kadars of Kerala. The Mongols include the Paleo Mongols and Tibetan-Mongols of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. This constitutes a large part of the population of the Mediterranean-speaking tribes. This includes the tribes of Chota Nagpur, the Rajmahal Plateau of Assam, the Aravalli Range, the Central Vindhyan, the Southern Plateau region and the Nilgiri Hills. These tribes are Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada speaking. The Gond, Munda, Oran, Khond and Santhal etc. are the major tribes.

In India, tribals are legally and administratively called 'Scheduled Tribes (STs)'. This administrative name, however, has no social or cultural connotations. The constitution of India, which came into force on 26 January 1950, established protective benefits for members of the STs by statute. For centuries, tribals in the country have been referred to as aboriginals, hill tribes, forest tribes, animists, criminal tribes, primitive tribes, backward tribes and Adivasis. They generally speak their own dialects, follow their own political and cultural structures, live in isolated areas in different regions and are therefore considered socially, educationally and economically backward.

Some social anthropologists and social activists used the word Adivasi for the STs. Verrier Elwin published a book called *Aboriginals*. In it, Elwin used the word *Aboriginals* for the tribes. According to him, the tribals in India are actually a product of Swadeshi, their moral rights and claims date back thousands of years. They came first (Elwin, 1934: 32), Verrier Elwin said that we should first think about this. Elwin called the tribes 'Aboriginals' for two main reasons, first, these people came 6000 years ago and are the original inhabitants. Second, there have been many invasions and changes of power on this country for a long time, yet the tribals still survive by living in the forests and jungles. Their culture is the original culture of this country. In fact, before Verrier Elwin, Oppert wrote about the tribes in his book called 'On The original Inhabitants of Bharatvarsh or India' (Oppert, 1894: 6-7). The idea of *Aboriginals* by Elwin and Oppert's was put forward in the constituent assembly of the country. In this debate, members of Parliament Jaipal Munda and Thakkar Bapa supported the word Adivasi. During the discussion in the constituent assembly on the historical background of the term ST, tribal leader Jaipal Munda demanded that the word Adivasi be given statutory status in place of the term ST, but Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Chairman, Constitution Drafting Committee, while explaining his reason, said that the word Adivasi is actually a general word. Which does not have a specific statutory meaning, whereas, the word STs has a definite meaning. It is difficult to give a definite definition of who is an Adivasi to take to the court of law. It was argued that the use of ST would enable the special incentive measures provided for this community to be properly implemented. Finally, the class called STs should be able to be properly counted.

There is some debate about the STs associated with the term indigenous peoples. The Indian government argued before the United Nations (UN) and the World Human Rights Organization on, a working group on the prevention of discrimination against minorities in the world and the protection of indigenous peoples, that if the STs were given the status of indigenous peoples, then there are some groups in the country who would also claim to be indigenous. The Indian government seems to be opposed to considering the STs as indigenous, as the United Nations does not have the words "tribes" and "indigenous" synonymously. According to the government, the status of the STs of India is different from that of the indigenous peoples of the United States and Australia. Since the arrival of different communities in India since the before Christ century, it is difficult to determine who came first and who

came later. Some communities considered as tribes are those that came from outside even after the communities not considered as tribes. Opponents of the government's argument argue that the question of whether to consider or reject the STs as indigenous is not a conceptual one, but a purely political one. The only certainty is that the international community will benefit from classifying the STs as indigenous for the protection of their human rights.

In the early 19th and late 20th centuries, Indian and European reformers urged the British government to do something for the most disadvantaged groups. In 1935, the British Indian government announced that certain degraded groups would have special electoral representation in the upcoming elections. Accordingly, in 1936, the provincial governments of India prepared schedules of local groups that met the criteria for the lowest group. Castes that were considered unfit for religious rites because they were considered inferior (such as being denied entry to Hindu temples) were called SCs. The tribes considered inferior were called Backward Tribes. They were called 'SCs and STs' after the constitution of India came into force.

The International Labour Organization has recommended that tribal be called 'Indigenous' because tribal culture has developed independently without contact with other cultures.

Objective

The primary objective of this research paper is to explore the historical development and socio-cultural identity of Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India. It aims to analyze the various terminologies used to describe these communities-such as 'Adivasi', 'Aboriginals', and 'Indigenous Peoples'-and to understand the implications of these terms in the context of identity politics and social classification. The study seeks to examine the constitutional, legal, and administrative frameworks that govern the recognition, protection, and welfare of tribal communities in India.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a focus on historical, analytical, and documentary methods. The historical method is used to trace the evolution of tribal identity and classification from ancient India to the contemporary period, drawing upon ancient texts, colonial census records, and scholarly interpretations by figures such as Risley, Elwin, and Oppert. The analytical method helps in interpreting the constitutional provisions, government policies, and legal enactments related to Scheduled Tribes, including key documents like the Government of India Act 1935, the Constitution of India, and various commission reports. The research also incorporates documentary analysis of secondary sources such as books, journal articles, government publications, and international declarations like those of the United Nations. A comparative approach is adopted to understand India's tribal policy in relation to global norms concerning indigenous peoples. The study is interpretive in nature and relies entirely on secondary data for its findings and conclusions.

STs in Indian History

Various terms are found in the Vedic and post-Vedic literature for human groups. These include Jana (people), Gana (originally a nomadic group) and Vish (tribal group). Ancient and medieval writings, including the Vedic and epic literature, describe various tribes such as Bhils, Kols, Kirats, Matsyas, Nishads and Vanars, Tribals and wild residencies are described in the Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as in the Puranas and folk tales. Indian scholars have described tribals and wild residencies.

Buddhist and Jain texts refer to tribal groups living in the foothills of the Himalayas, including the

Shakyas tribe. Kautilya (Chanakya) in his Arthashastra describes how wild tribes can hinder the movement of a king and how kings can use wild tribes to attack other armies. The Mauryan emperor Ashoka (3rd century BC) showed compassion for the wild tribes that had invaded his empire, rather than the threats and violence they posed (Wolpert (ed.) 2006: 15).

In 1666, Thevenot, M. a well-educated Frenchman, traveled to Gujarat and described the Koli tribe as having no fixed settlement and constantly migrating from one village to another. In 1676, Jean B. Tavernier, another Frenchman, published an article in a magazine in which he described the nomadic tent life of four tribes of Manali, North India.

Over time, the term tribal has become more cultural than genetic. Once upon a time, there was a clear identity as a separate race, namely Aryan, Dravidian and Adi-Dravid, i.e. tribals, but over time the gap between Aryan and Dravidian life cultures almost disappeared, but the tribals still retain their ethnic and cultural identity and therefore the curiosity to know about tribal culture is still strong among the people. Since the tribal community has lived in close proximity to nature for centuries, they have developed a way of life through cooperation with the available natural resources and various events that occur, which later became established as a culture. **Tribal culture is a primitive culture, just like Hindu culture is Aryan culture.**

STs and the British

The British East India Company developed a policy of dealing with the tribals after taking control of the Rajmahal Hills in Assam. To reduce potential resistance from the tribals, the East India Company decided to pay tribal leaders to provide security to the company's postmen and to inform them of any violent outbreaks in their area. In 1782, the company transferred the administration of justice on the Rajmahal Hills to hereditary tribal leaders and eventually converted the Rajmahal Hills, which were managed by tribal leaders, into a rent government property. After the military incidents of 1871–72 and the transfer of power from the East India Company to the British, the British conducted their first all-India census. They recorded the caste identities or tribal affiliations of the respondents. In 1872, M. A. Sherring published three volumes under the title 'Hindu Tribes and Castes', in which he listed Brahmins and Kshatriyas at the top and recorded the status of castes as lower castes. In 1891, Commissioner J. A. Bains classified castes on the basis of traditional occupation. A separate sub-heading was made under the category of agricultural and pastoral castes called wild tribes. In the first decade of the 20th century, a major publication describing castes and tribes in different parts of India was published. Herbert Risley wrote two volumes 'The Peoples of India' and other authors wrote about castes and tribes in Bombay, Central Provinces, South India, and the Nizam's Province of Hyderabad. In these publications and in the district gazetteers, the distinction between castes and tribes was unclear. The tribals lived in remote areas and were generally considered to be distinct, maintained their own subsistence economy, spoke their own dialect, did not use Brahmin priests, followed their own religious, cultural and political customs, and were distinct from the majority population. Their distinctive physical appearance and dress were a mark of their identity. The British authorities were divided on the policies they implemented, particularly in the territories they occupied from the tribals. They wanted to bring peace to the tribals in these territories, which meant curbing the 'criminal tribes'. The British wanted to protect the tribal groups from outside traders, moneylenders and landlords, but the lack of adequate protection by the British led to rebellions by the Santhals, Orans, Kols, Bhils, Gonds, Mundas and other tribal groups.

In 1874, the Government of India passed the Scheduled Districts Act, shortly after the completion of the first census, excluding parts of the land of Assam, Bengal, the Central Provinces and some other British

provinces. In fact, this act made laws to protect the tribals from invaders. The Government of India Act of 1919 gave the Governor-General the power to declare any area of India as backward. In addition, some backward provinces should have Wholly Excluded Areas, in which no laws of British India would apply. In the census report of 1901, they called them Animists and in 1911, they called them Animists who follow tribal religion. In the census report of 1921, they called them hill and forest tribes. In 1931, they called them tribal religions. Before the 1931 census, the tribals of India were listed as nature animists rather than Hindus. The vague distinction between the two categories made it difficult for the enumerators to make a clear distinction. The 1941 census report referred to them simply as tribes. This census dropped the category of 'animists' and referred to people of tribal origin. The use of tribal origin helped to include Christians and Muslims and increased the census figures, making it difficult to compare the 1931 and 1941 censuses. The Government of India Act of 1935 called for the representation of backward tribes in the provincial assemblies for the first time. Over the next few years, each province of British India prepared a list of backward tribes, including the names of tribes living in excluded and partially excluded areas.

STs in India after Independence

In 1950, the Scheduled Areas and STs List were declared, which was a revision of the Scheduled Areas created by the British. In 1956, the Constitution was amended and a revised list was prepared. In 1976, some new tribal communities were again included in the list. According to the current opinion of Western writers, the word tribe generally means a geographically separate or partially separate ethnic group, those who are identified within a certain boundary area and have different social, economic and cultural traditions. From an Indian perspective, the constitution of India has provided special privileges and facilities to those who are included in the STs lists. There are no specific criteria in the constitution to define STs. According to Article 342 of the constitution, a ST is a tribe that is considered by the President as a STs. The following criteria have been considered to designate any community as a ST. 1. Traditional right to reside in a geographical area 2. Distinctive culture, including language, customs, traditions, religious beliefs, arts and skills, etc., the entire life cycle. 3. Professional structure-economy 4. Educational and technological-low level of economic development etc. the criteria (According to Lokur Committee (1965), the essential characteristics are indication of primitive traits, distinctive culture, shyness of contact with the community at large, geographical isolation, backwardness) are considered as standard.

The Constitution of India calls for equality of status and opportunity for all citizens. In an effort to improve the socio-educational and economic conditions of the SCs and STs, the Government of India has initiated a policy of affirmative action called protective discrimination or compensatory discrimination. Article 15(4) declares that the State shall make 'special provision' for the advancement of the SCs and STs. Articles 330 and 331 provide for reservation of seats in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies for members of the SCs and STs. According to Article 325, not only the SCs and STs but all voters can participate in the selection of candidates for the reserved seats of the SCs and STs. According to Article 335, jobs in the Central and State Governments are reserved for members of the SCs and STs.

Article 16 of the constitution guarantees equal rights to all Indian citizens, stating that there is reservation in statutory posts and jobs for SCs and STs. Parliament has amended the constitution to extend political reservation for a period of ten years. State governments shall implement protective discrimination provisions for scholarships, admission to colleges and professional education, low-

interest loans and other benefits. The beneficiaries of these shall be members of the SCs and STs. In 1960, the Government of India published an All India Schedule of 405 SCs and 225 STs. After the 1976 constitutional amendment, the Government of India published a revised state-wise list of 841 SCs and 510 STs. In which it was seen that some tribes were scheduled in some places rather than in neighboring places and some tribes were called by different names. According to a study by the Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta (1985), there are 461 ST communities in the country (Singh. 2015:2). The constitution of India empowers the Parliament and the President to take the final decision on the Scheduled or Non-Scheduled status of a group when it is unclear.

The 5th and 6th Schedules of the constitution of India have made rules and regulations for the transfer of land and for the control of moneylenders in the Scheduled Areas. The 5th Schedule provides for the administration and control of the Scheduled Areas and some other areas other than Assam in conjunction with Article 244(1). Article 244(2) of the 6th Schedule of the constitution provides for the administration of autonomous tribal areas in Assam. The President has the power to declare a Scheduled Area. The administration of the specified Scheduled Areas is vested in the Governor (with the concurrence of the Advisory Committee) and the Central Government. The local Governor can decide which laws of the Republic of India shall be applicable to the Scheduled Areas under the jurisdiction of the Governor. In most of the Scheduled Areas, the Local Autonomous STs Member Boards are empowered to levy and collect taxes, manage crop rotation in the fields, manage unprotected forests, deal with inheritance, marriage and social customs.

Tribal populations are found in every region except Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Chandigarh and Pondicherry. In the decades after independence, tribal-dominated regions in the north, east and south of Assam were formed into several states under the Republic of India. These include Nagaland (1963), Manipur (1972), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh (1987) and Mizoram (1987). Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, West Bengal and Andaman and Nicobar Islands have significant tribal populations. In 1993, the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments and the Panchayats Extension to the Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) 1996 gave the states the right to participatory development through Panchayats and Gram Sabhas.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the largest STs in India included the Bhils, Gonds, Santhals, Nayakadas, Orans, Sugali, Mundas, Koli Dhors, Nagas, Khonds, Khasis, Boro, Kols, Warli, Koli Mahadevs, Koknas, Garos, Korkus, Kavars, Bhumijis, Mizos, Koyas, Sahariyas, Dhodias, Dubalas, Halba, Baiga, Bhuriyas, Hos and Savras. More than a third of the STs population resides in Scheduled Areas, with the two states of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand coming into existence in 2000 comprising a majority of the STs population.

The SC Policy of India aims to reduce the socio-educational and economic imbalance among the SCs among the rest of the population of India. In addition to the above objectives, it is noteworthy that an attempt has been made to preserve some cultural uniqueness by granting autonomy to the STs.

STs in Maharashtra

The STs constitute the majority of the deprived and neglected section of the population of Maharashtra. They generally live in the three remote, mountainous and forested regions of the state, namely Sahyadri, Satpura and East Gondwan. Their habitats are in the peripheral areas of the state.

Maharashtra has the second largest population of STs in the country. Although there is a total list of 47 STs in Maharashtra, the Chodhara (No. 12) and Thoti (No. 45) tribes are not present in the state, so now there are 45 STs after their eliminate as per Act 10 of 2003. Some tribes are found only in these specific

areas while others are scattered in different geographical areas of the state. According to the 2011 census, the Bhil, Gond, Koli Mahadev, Warli, Kokna, Thakur, Andh, Katkari, Koli Malhar, Korku, Halba, Pardhi, Koli Dhor, Kolam and Pardhans are the tribes with a population of more than one lakh. On the other hand, Khariyas, Kondhs, Rathwas, Vitoliyas, Koyas, Savaras, Bavchas, Baiga, Parjas, Bhainas, Birhors, Nagasiyas, Bhatras and Pomlas have a population of less than a thousand. Out of the 75 tribes in the country, Katkaris, Kolams and Madiya Gonds have been identified by the Central Government as three PVTGs in the state. They are broadly divided into three classes. 1. Scheduled Tribes living in remote, mountainous, forest areas 2. ST families living in plains with non-tribal people 3. Educated and semi-educated STs. Tribes are also differentiated on the basis of whether they live in the Scheduled Areas or outside the areas.

Conclusion

The study of Scheduled Tribes in India reveals a complex interplay of history, identity, policy, and socio-cultural dynamics. The term 'Scheduled Tribe' itself is a constitutional and administrative construct that masks the immense diversity, cultural richness, and historical depth of tribal communities across the country. While terms like 'Adivasi', 'Aboriginal', and 'Indigenous Peoples' have been used in different contexts, each carries its own political and ideological implications. Historically, colonial and post-colonial policies have influenced the categorization and treatment of tribal groups, often marginalizing them in the name of development or assimilation. The Indian Constitution has made significant provisions for the protection and empowerment of these communities, yet the reality remains that many tribal populations continue to face socio-economic deprivation, cultural erosion, and political underrepresentation. This research highlights the need for a more nuanced and inclusive approach that respects tribal identities, preserves their cultural heritage, and ensures their meaningful participation in nation-building. Understanding the historical evolution of tribal identity is essential for framing policies that are just, participatory, and rooted in the lived realities of India's diverse tribal communities.

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