

Evolution of the Concept of Tribe in the Indian Context: Critical Perspectives in Sociology and Social Anthropology

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Abstract

Tribal Studies in India since the beginning has been an inter-disciplinary field of study comprising of scholars and researchers from mainly anthropology, Sociology and other disciplines. Different scholars have from time to time tried to define and conceptualize the concept or idea of tribe in their own ways of understanding and several methodological issues have also emerged during the process. The concept of tribe in the Indian context remains a much debated and contested category, it has evolved over time with contributions from several scholars. The aim of this paper to historically look at the concept of tribe in the Indian context and to critically analyse the theoretical and conceptual viewpoints provided by the scholars. Also, to delineate the Indian concept of tribe as different from other parts of world due to historical and socio-cultural factors remains another important objective of this paper.

Keywords: Tribe, Indian Society, Tribal Studies, Anthropology and Sociology.

Introduction

The concept of 'tribe' has been widely debated in anthropological and sociological discourses, particularly in the Indian context. Various scholars have attempted to define and conceptualize tribes based on their historical, socio-economic, and cultural characteristics. While early colonial definitions viewed tribes as isolated and primitive communities, post-colonial Indian scholars have presented more nuanced understandings. The term 'tribe' itself is often contested, as it carries colonial legacies and Western connotations that do not always align with the indigenous identities and lived realities of these communities

The term 'tribe' has historically been used to refer to groups that are perceived to have distinct cultural, linguistic, and social traits that separate them from the mainstream population. However, defining a 'tribe' in the Indian context is complex due to the immense diversity in language, culture, occupation, and social organization among different tribal communities. Colonial administrators, anthropologists, and Indian scholars have provided varying definitions of the term, often influenced by political and ideological perspectives.

A widely accepted definition of tribe was provided by L.P. Vidyarthi (1981) who defines tribe as "social group with definite territory, common name, common district, common culture, behavior of an endogamous group, common taboos, existence of distinctive social and political system, full faith in leaders and self-sufficiency in their distinct economy."

This literature review traces the evolution of the concept of 'tribe' in Indian academia by engaging with key scholars such as Verrier Elwin, G.S. Ghurye, Virginius Xaxa, K.S. Singh, Surajit Sinha, Andre Beteille, N.K. Bose, and LP Vidyarthi, among others. By synthesizing their contributions chronologically, this review critically evaluates their perspectives and identifies gaps in existing scholarship, ultimately suggesting a direction for future research.

Evolution of the Concept of 'Tribe' in Indian Scholarship: Colonial and Early Post-Colonial Perspectives -

During the colonial period, the term 'tribe' was largely constructed by British administrators and anthropologists who classified Indian societies into distinct categories. H.H. Risley (1891) and Verrier Elwin (1959) were among the earliest scholars to document tribal life in India. **Herbert Hope Risley** was a British colonial administrator and anthropologist who played a significant role in shaping British ethnographic studies in India. He is best known for his racial classification of Indian society, particularly through his work *The People of India* (1908). His approach to studying tribes was influenced by the then-dominant racial and hierarchical theories of social organization. He argued that tribes were racially distinct from caste Hindus, with tribes being more "Dravidian" and primitive (Risley, 1891).

Verrier Elwin (1959), another British colonial anthropologist viewed tribes as distinct, self-sufficient communities with their own rich cultural traditions. Elwin's work focused on tribal welfare, preservation of culture, and autonomy, rather than their assimilation into mainstream Indian society. He opposed forced modernization and argued that tribes should be allowed to develop on their own terms, rather than being absorbed into the dominant Hindu social order.

While Risley (1891) adopted racial classifications based on physical traits, while Elwin (1959) took a more sympathetic approach, advocating for the protection of tribal autonomy. However, both views tended to essentialize tribes as isolated entities.

G.S. Ghurye (1963) was among the first Indian sociologists to challenge the colonial understanding of tribes. He argued that Indian tribes were not fundamentally different from caste groups and had been historically assimilated into Hindu society. His 'Hinduization' thesis suggested that many tribes were gradually integrating into the caste system, a perspective that has been widely debated in later scholarship. Ghurye was of the view that the Indian tribes were like "backward Hindus". Their backwardness was due to their imperfect integration into Hindu society. The Santhals, Bhils, Gonds, etc. who live in South-Central India are examples of it." For Ghurye, the incorporation of Hindu values and norms into tribal life was a positive development. With increasing contact with the Hindu social groups, the tribes had slowly absorbed certain Hindu values and style of life and came to be considered part of the Hindu caste society. The tribes gave up liquor-drinking, received education and improved their agriculture under Hindu influence. In this respect, Hindu voluntary organisations such as Ramakrishna Mission and Arya Samaj played a constructive role. In his later works on northeastern tribes, Ghurye documented secessionist trends. He felt that unless these were held in check, the political unity of the country would be damaged (Ghurye, 1963).

Functionalist and Structuralist Interpretations

DN Majumdar, a pioneering Indian anthropologist, made significant contributions to the study of tribes in India, blending cultural and physical anthropology with a focus on tribal dynamics, acculturation, and integration. His perspectives were shaped by extensive fieldwork and a functionalist approach influenced

by Bronislaw Malinowski.

Majumdar viewed tribes not as static or isolated entities but as societies in transition, influenced by contact with non-tribal cultures. In his seminal work, *A Tribe in Transition: A Study in Tribal Dynamics* (1937), he examined the Ho tribe of Chota Nagpur, highlighting how external pressures led to cultural shifts. He argued that the imposition of an advanced culture on a simpler society often caused a decline in tribal vitality, a process he observed among the Ho due to acculturation. This perspective emphasized the need to study tribes in the context of their interactions with broader Indian society rather than as isolated units. Unlike some contemporaries like Verrier Elwin, who advocated for tribal isolation, Majumdar opposed the idea of "Tribal Reserve Areas." He proposed a model of "creative or generative adaptation," where tribes should be integrated into Indian society while preserving respect for their cultural identity. In *The Fortunes of Primitive Tribes* (1944), he documented the struggles of tribes like the Korwas, noting their decline but arguing that integration, rather than segregation, was a viable solution. He believed dominant groups should respect backward communities to facilitate a harmonious social change that maintained continuity with tribal traditions (Majumdar, 1956).

S.C. Dube was a prominent sociologist and anthropologist whose work focused on the social transformation of tribal communities in India. Unlike early colonial scholars who viewed tribes as isolated and primitive, Dube emphasized their dynamic interaction with the larger society and analysed the impact of modernization, development policies, and social change on tribal life. He studied the Kamar tribe of Madhya Pradesh as a part of this doctoral research work (Dube, 1951).

Dube (1955) challenged the rigid distinction between tribe and caste, arguing that many tribal communities in India were historically integrated with the surrounding society through economic exchange, cultural interactions, and political structures.

In his studies on tribal development, Dube highlighted the disruptive effects of industrialization, land alienation, and state intervention on traditional tribal structures. He argued that modernization had led to economic marginalization, loss of traditional livelihoods, and cultural erosion among many tribal groups. Dube (1977) emphasized that tribal identity is fluid and evolves over time. He observed that while some tribes had integrated into mainstream society through Sanskritization (Srinivas, 1952), others maintained distinct identities due to political mobilization and resistance to state policies.

N.K. Bose (1971) studied the lives of tribals in India and examined the relations between tribal and non-tribal population in a larger social and cultural perspective. Bose perceived clearly that the tribal communities of India are not all of the same kind and do not stand in the same relation to the wider society. Bose uses ethnographic data to show the nature of tribal communities of Orissa and Chota Nagpur and their relations with wider community. For classifying the tribal communities in India, he uses two related criteria - their level of technological development and the degree of their geographical and social isolation. (Bose, 1971).

N.K. Bose played a crucial role in redefining the understanding of tribal societies in India, particularly through his concept of the "Hindu method of tribal absorption." Unlike colonial scholars who viewed tribes as entirely separate from caste-based Hindu society, Bose argued that tribal communities in India were historically engaged in a gradual process of assimilation into the broader Hindu social structure (Bose, 1941).

Bose (1941) proposed that instead of rigid boundaries between tribes and castes, there existed a fluid continuum where many tribal groups were gradually integrated into Hindu society. He observed that this absorption occurred through religious, economic, and social mechanisms, which included adoption of

Hindu deities and rituals, incorporation into the caste, patronage and economic exchange, marriage and social mobility.

Surajit Sinha (1972) further advanced the debate by introducing the concept of 'tribe-caste continuum.' He examined the process of acculturation, wherein tribal groups gradually adopted mainstream social norms while retaining indigenous cultural elements. Sinha highlighted the complex and multi-directional interactions between tribal and non-tribal societies. He argued that rather than being absorbed into the caste system, many tribes selectively adopted cultural practices while maintaining their traditional governance structures, religious beliefs, and economic systems. His work demonstrated that tribal identity was not necessarily eroded by external influences but could be redefined through continuous negotiation and adaptation (Sinha, 1972). This perspective was significant in understanding the dynamic nature of tribal identities in India.

B.K. Roy Burman (1972) made significant contributions to the study of tribes in India, particularly by critiquing static definitions of tribes and emphasizing their dynamic socio-economic interactions with non-tribal communities. He introduced the concept of the buffer zone in the context of tribal and non-tribal interactions. His work focused on understanding the socio-economic and cultural transformations occurring at the interface of tribal communities and mainstream society, particularly in the context of India's diverse and complex social landscape.

The buffer zone concept refers to the geographical and cultural space between tribal and non-tribal populations where interaction, exchange, and sometimes conflict occur. According to Burman, this zone is neither fully integrated into the tribal world nor completely absorbed into mainstream society. It serves as a transitional space where the influence of dominant economic, political, and cultural forces begins to penetrate tribal societies. This zone witnesses economic exchanges, migration, intermarriage, and cultural diffusion, often leading to the transformation of tribal social structures, governance, and economy. However, it can also lead to exploitation, marginalization, and cultural loss among tribal populations (Roy Burman, 1972).

Burman's concept of the buffer zone highlights the importance of understanding the complexities at the interface of tribal and non-tribal societies. It emphasizes the need for sensitive and inclusive policies that recognize the distinctiveness of tribal communities while managing the pressures of modernization and integration (Roy Burman, 1972).

L.P. Vidyarthi was a significant scholar in Indian anthropology, known for his holistic approach to studying tribes. His work combined structural-functionalism, historical perspectives, and cultural ecology, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding tribal societies.

Vidyarthi (1976) proposed the concept of cultural regions to understand tribal diversity in India. He identified major tribal cultural zones based on ecological, economic, and cultural factors, showing that tribes are not homogeneous but vary significantly in their social organization, religion, and economy.

In his study of tribal communities, particularly among the Birhor and Maler of Bihar, Vidyarthi (1961) introduced the "Sacred Complex" concept. He argued that tribal communities interact with Hindu traditions through pilgrimages, rituals, and religious patronage, contributing to gradual Sanskritization.

Unlike early scholars who focused on cultural aspects alone, Vidyarthi emphasized the role of economic policies and governance in shaping tribal life. He advocated for tribal development programs that respected their cultural identity while providing economic upliftment. His work influenced government approaches toward tribal welfare and development planning (Vidyarthi, 1976).

Contemporary Debates on Tribal Identity and Modernity-

André Beteille, a prominent Indian anthropologist, argued that tribes in India, while often positioned as separate from the larger state or civilization, have historically coexisted and interacted with it, rather than being a distinct stage of societal evolution (Beteille, 1986).

Beteille (1986) emphasized that tribes and civilization have coexisted for centuries in many parts of the world, including India, and that the defining characteristic of tribes in India is their position "outside the state or civilization, whether by choice or necessity". He rejected the idea that tribes represent a specific stage in the evolution of society, arguing that they are not simply a primitive form of civilization. He advocated the historical approach in place of the evolutionary approach in studying tribes in India.

Beteille (1986) also noted that the British colonial administration in India, for the first time, separated tribes from the caste system, which had previously been a more integrated system. He also argued that tribes in India, even those who remained outside the precolonial states, were not disconnected from the larger Indian society and had close interactions with it.

Beteille (1986) highlighted that defining "tribe" has been a problematic task for academics, with the focus often shifting from defining tribes to identifying them.

He pointed out that the definition of tribes became closely linked to political and administrative considerations during the colonial period, as the British sought to control and classify tribal populations. He argued that government classifications of Scheduled Tribes (STs) were often politically motivated rather than sociologically accurate (Beteille, 1986).

Virginius Xaxa reframes tribes in India as indigenous peoples, distinct from the colonial and anthropological constructs that dominated earlier scholarship. In his seminal article "Tribes as Indigenous People of India" (1999), he argues that the term "tribe" in India has been shaped by colonial administrative needs rather than reflecting the self-understanding of these communities. He highlights their historical autonomy over land and resources, disrupted by colonial and post-colonial interventions, and aligns their status with global indigenous rights discourses. This perspective emphasizes their right to self-determination rather than assimilation into the dominant Hindu or caste-based society.

Xaxa challenges the traditional anthropological view, notably propagated by scholars like G.S. Ghurye, that tribes are merely backward castes or part of an evolutionary continuum. In *State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India* (2008), he argues that tribes represent non-caste societies with distinct social, economic, and political structures. He critiques the assumption that tribal transformation into caste is inevitable or desirable, positing instead that tribes follow alternative paths to modernity that do not require subsumption into the caste system.

Xaxa's work frequently addresses the adverse impacts of development on tribal communities. In *State, Society and Tribes* (2008) and his leadership of the Xaxa Committee Report (2014), he documents how industrialization and infrastructure projects have led to land alienation, widespread displacement, loss of livelihoods, and environmental degradation in tribal areas. He critiques the state's failure to implement rehabilitation measures effectively, arguing that tribes bear the costs of national progress without reaping its benefits. His analysis was instrumental in shifting the focus from cultural attributes to material conditions affecting tribal lives.

K.S. Singh (1995) contributed extensively to the empirical documentation of Indian tribes through the 'People of India' project. His work underscored the diversity among tribal groups and challenged homogenized representations of tribes in official discourses (Singh, 1995). His research also brought attention to issues of tribal rights, tribal movements, agrarian relations, customary law, and the economy

of tribal communities, political representation, and the impact of development projects on indigenous communities.

Critical Analysis

The evolution of tribal studies in India reflects a transition from static, colonial representations to dynamic and politically engaged analyses. However, several critical issues emerge. There exists a definitional ambiguity with regards to tribes in India. Despite extensive scholarship, there is no universally accepted definition of 'tribe' in India. The distinctions between tribes and castes remain fluid, leading to contestations in policy implementation (Beteille, 1986; Xaxa, 1999).

It can be noted that Government classifications of Scheduled Tribes often ignore intra-group variations. Policies intended for tribal upliftment sometimes reinforce dependency rather than self-determination (Singh, 1995; Xaxa, 1999).

Earlier works on tribes in India focused on cultural assimilation or acculturation with the wider caste society (Ghurye, 1963; Sinha, 1972), whereas recent scholarship emphasizes economic exploitation, tribal rights and resistance (Xaxa, 1999). A comprehensive framework integrating both aspects remains underdeveloped.

Meanwhile, the influence of globalization, migration to urban areas, and digital connectivity on tribal identities has received limited scholarly attention. Most studies focus on traditional structures rather than contemporary transformations. There also exists a dearth of literature on political mobilization of the tribes and the new tribal movements. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of tribal identities in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape.

Conclusion

The concept of 'tribe' in India has evolved through diverse scholarly perspectives, from colonial classifications rooted in racial and cultural essentialism to post-colonial analyses emphasizing social integration, marginalization, and resistance. Scholars like N.K. Bose, B.K. Roy Burman, L.P. Vidyarthi, D.N. Majumdar, and S.C. Dube have significantly contributed to unpacking the fluidity and complexity of tribal identities. Their works collectively challenge static definitions, highlighting the dynamic interactions between tribes and broader socio-political structures. Understanding tribes as historically engaged, adaptable, and politically assertive communities provides a more nuanced framework that is essential for equitable policy-making and inclusive national development.

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