

REVISITING THE CONCEPT OF TRIBE: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF EXISTING DISCOURSES WITH REFERENCE TO KERALA

¹Muhammed Sihas K. M, ²Dr. Lekshmi V. Nair

¹Department of Humanities, Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

²Associate Professor, Department of Humanities, Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical overview of various debates and arguments regarding the identity questions highlighted in existing definitions of tribes. There have been mainly three concepts used in academia, such as, 1) Tribes, 2) Adivasis and 3) Indigenous people. The prime aim of the study is to analyze and understand these conceptual categories particularly in the Kerala context with the support of empirical knowledge. Specifically, the paper is an attempt to critically engage that the existing definitions and concepts on tribes are in many ways outdated and there is a need for redefinition of the same, especially in the context of Kerala. The existing criteria such as, 1) Indication of Primitive traits 2) Distinctive Culture 3) Geographical Isolation 4) Shyness of contact with the larger community and 5) Backwardness, have to be re-examine. The paper also makes suggestions with respect to possibilities to overcome these limitations.

Keywords: Adivasis, Indigenous Peoples, Identity question, Kerala

INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'tribe' has generated much debate in colonial and postcolonial discourses. Yet its contours lack explicit definition, despite its popular use in the discourses of social anthropologists, administrators, lawyers, tribal activists, politicians, and the government and international agencies. There has been more concern with the identification of tribes than with their definition in India. Popular discourse uses terms such as tribes, Scheduled Tribes, indigenous people, *vanjati*, *adivasi* and *jana* interchangeably.

The evolutionary framework traces out the development of the human civilization. They observe tribes as an initial stage of human civilization. They classified initial human being into three categories such as band, tribe and chiefdom. According to Marshall Sahlins (1960), 'A tribe is a

segmental organization. It is composed of a number of equivalent, unspecialized multifamily groups, each the structural duplicate to the other: A tribe is a congeries of equal kin group blocs'. Godlier (1977) has further elaborated this point, asserts that "tribe seen as a type of society and as a stage of evolution, it is very clear since, each stage of evolution is characterized by a specific mode of social organization...the fundamental difference between tribe and chiefdom because inequalities of class which are absent in the former become established in the latter" (1977, 21).

The definition of tribe is limited by its static nature ignoring such factors as population growth, changing social needs, and people perception of their identity over time. It is difficult to re-use the term tribe for a community or its part in the academic sense in the face of possible political interference, existing constitutional status and identity formation, and more difficult to generalize its use as an exclusive category given the wide range of diversities among tribal communities (Xaxa, 2005).

In India, a joint Parliamentary Committee under the Chairmanship of Anil K Chanda was constituted (1967) to consider the claim of various communities for inclusion in the category Scheduled Tribes. This committee adopted the following five criteria for judging the eligibility for any group as a tribe, 1) Indication of primitive traits 2) Distinctive culture 3) Geographical Isolation 4) Shyness of contact with the larger community 5) Backwardness. After 40 years, Government of India issued a new tribal policy document in July 2006, acknowledging the redundancy of these five criteria. It asserts that "all these broad criteria are not applicable to Scheduled Tribes today. Some of the terms used (eg., primitive traits, backwardness etc.) are also, in today's context pejorative and need to be replaced with terms that are not derogatory. It also observes that "Other more accurate criteria need to be fixed" (Yogesh Atal, 2013; 47). It is significant that the tribal policy acknowledged the need for a process of "descheduling" so as to exclude those communities who have by and large caught up with the general population. Exclusion of the creamy layer among the Scheduled Tribes from the benefits of the reservation has never been seriously considered. As we move towards and try to ensure greater social justice, it would be necessary to give this matter more attention and work out an acceptable system (Yogesh Atal, 2013; 47).

But no serious initiative has been taken to overcome this issue. There are certain limitations among policy makers and planners. However academicians can contribute more meaningful analysis on the basis of empirical understanding. The present study critically engages this discourse with a view to arrive at informed perspectives in the context of ongoing sociocultural evolution.

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TRIBES AS A COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION

Social anthropologists argue that the concept of 'tribe' is a colonial construction (Xaxa 1999b, 2005; Karlsson 2000), necessitated by the need to classify people into categories for administrative purposes and influenced by the work of imperial scholar-administrators in India such as Elwin and Risley and by anthropologists' usage (such as that of Ghurye). The East India Company officers initiated social research in India by collecting information on religion, customs, agriculture, trade and population. These practices were later institutionalized in the census, gazetteers and ethnographic surveys (Cohn 1987: 248).

It is important to note that there is no indigenous word for tribe in any of the Indian languages. In Sanskrit, the word '*atavikajana*' was used to denote agglomeration of individuals with specific territorial, kinship and cultural pattern. Prior to the colonial period, they were also commonly referred to as a '*jati*'- caste. However the colonial administration started calling them tribes and differentiated them from the other groups as animists (Yogesh Atal, 2013:42).

Kamal K Misra (2013) traces out the origin and development of the term Tribe to the period of the European colonial expansion. He writes: "During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the missionaries, traders and adventures visiting non-European countries of the South, presented romantic description of its people, whom they referred to as tribes. The tribes were deceptively painted to be in the primal stage of human evolution. The legacy of this Eurocentric notion was inherited by the Anthropologists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the nineteenth century, within the domain of Anthropology, unilinear or classical evolutionists like Morgan hypothesized tribe as a transient stage in the process of cultural evolution from early hunters and foragers to agrarian societies."

In the Indian context, tribes appeared frequently in the writings of the British Scholar administrators in their government-sponsored ethnographies and administrative reports. The tribes were distinguished from the castes with regard to their cultural practices and social organizations. However, widespread confusions prevailed in these writings with respect to the nomenclature, as many different names and categories were attributed to the Indian tribes. For example, in the Census report of 1891, all tribal groups were clubbed under the category of "Forest Tribes"; they were estimated at 16 million at that time. In 1901, they were named as

“Animist” and the following census, 1911 they were renamed as “Tribal Animist”. J. H Hutton classified tribes under “Hill and Forest Tribes” in the census report of 1921, with a population of 22 million. In the Government of India Act of 1935, they were termed as Backward Tribes and the 1941 Census Report used the term Tribe (Behura and Panigrahi 2006).

INDIA’S TAKE ON TRIBAL STATUS

Article 366 (25) of the Indian constitution describes STs as those communities who are scheduled under Article 342, which defines a scheduled tribe as a community which has been notified as such by the President. However, any criteria in this regard have not been specifically spelt out in the Indian constitution. Yogesh Atal (2016) rightly observes in this juncture that “The constitution of India recognizes the existence of tribes and prepared a Scheduled list for Special treatment to facilitate their entry into the mainstream and enjoy the fruits of development. While taking this step, hailed by all as a well-intentioned policy little attention was paid to the definition of the word tribe”.

In India, the constitution makes special provisions for the protection and welfare of ‘Scheduled Tribes’ which are more of legal and administrative classifications within the constitutional framework. During the debate of the constituent assembly, the plea for the use of the word Adivasi for Indian tribes, was rejected by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution, stating that it was a general term, which had no specific legal de jure connotations. Hence, the term Scheduled Tribe was used in the constitution under Article 342 (Misra, 2013, 7).

The constitution is silent about the definition yet it is quite clear on one front, namely the eligibility for entry in the tribal fold. While in case of Scheduled Caste it says that “the caste, races or tribes, or parts of, or groups within castes, races or tribes” could be notified for inclusion in the category of Scheduled Castes, the scope for eligibility in the category of Scheduled Tribes is limited only to the “tribes or tribal communities, or part or groups within tribes or tribal communities”. Implicit in the formulation is the point that only those groups that were included in the category of tribes in the census of 1931, and in the following decennial censuses, qualify for inclusion in the category of Scheduled Tribes; no caste can be reclassified as a tribe. And, yet we find that today the number of Scheduled Tribe in India has crossed the figure of 700 in 2011 from 500 in 1951 Census. But this number has not increased because of conversion of caste into tribes. It has increased because each state in the Union of India has a right to declare particular groups as tribes.

Delegates of Government of India put forward in the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (1993) that the category of Scheduled Tribe, with which the indigenous people are associated, is

a politico-administrative category and not a historical category as the idea of Indigenous people suggests. It is said that the identification of groups as Scheduled Tribes pertains to administration of social welfare measures to ameliorate the condition of the tribal people. The point made is that the terms Tribe/Scheduled Tribe and Indigenous are not synonymous and thus cannot be equated (Xaxa, 2016: 42).

ADIVASIS/INDIGENOUS COUNTER DEBATES

The term adivasi – meaning original inhabitants – was first used in the Chotanagpur region of Bihar in the 1930s. In the historical context, the term denotes communities lying outside the state/society who were eventually colonised by the British Raj and brought under direct or indirect rule (Heredia 2000: 1522). Historians have documented the oppression, subjugation, colonisation of adivasis by moneylenders and the colonial state, and narrated stories of their resistance and rebellion (Hardiman 1987, Sundar1997). Today, adivasi has achieved a saliency in the discourse of tribal leaders and academia such that it connotes the marginality, dispossession and subjugation of tribal people rather than necessarily original inhabitation (Hardiman 1987). However, there are regional exceptions. In West Bengal, the Rabhas prefer being termed tribal, while using adivasis to connote the tribal groups that migrated from central India to work on the tea plantation. Identity of adivasis or indigenous people is crystallising among the tribes of different parts of India. The term that was initiated mainly as a point of reference or description has become an important marker of identity articulation and assertion today. The designation or description of tribes as indigenous people had not emerged from self-identification or description by the tribal people themselves. It was not a part of positive identification and evaluation by the tribes. Rather the outsiders had imposed it on the tribes. Today, it is an important mark of identity and consciousness of the people, as an identity that evokes a sense of self-esteem and pride rather than a sense of lowly and inferior society that often goes with terms like tribe or tribal (Xaxa, 1999: 3565).

The Adivasi consciousness and the articulation of indigenous people's status are not so much about whether they are the original inhabitants of India as about the fact that they have no power whatsoever over anything (land, forest, river, resources) that lies in the territory they inhabit. This is despite being the original inhabitants of India in relation to the others. The consciousness and the articulation are basically an expression of the yearning to have or to establish a special relation with the territory in which they live. It is a fact that the issue of this identity is more strongly articulated in central, western and southern India than in north-east India. This is because the north-east people exercise some power over their territory. The scenario is just opposite in other parts of tribal India. What this indicates is that the assertion of such an identity is stronger where there is greater degree of marginalization and powerlessness.

In the process of tracing the history of the term Indigenous, Xaxa argues that the concept of race and minority has shaped the concept as well as identity of indigenous people (MeenaRadhakrishna, 2016: 12). UN presented the problem of discrimination against the indigenous people and their precarious condition. The UN organizations have been concerned with the right of minorities to participate in the political, cultural, social and economic life of the countries to which they belong. This concern has often been tied to the issue of race and racial discrimination. Tribe/Indigenous people all over the world constitute a distinct minority and hence in the UN's deliberation on the question of minorities, the issue of tribes and indigenous people has come to be strongly figured (Xaxa, 2016:37).

Defining indigenous was problematic not only within academia, but also amongst UN Organisations. In the thirty year history of indigenous issues at the United Nations, and the long history in the ILO on this question, considerable thinking and debate have been devoted to the question of definition of "indigenous peoples", but no such definition has ever been adopted by any UN-system body. One of the most cited descriptions of the concept of the indigenous was given by Jose R. Martinez Cobo, the Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, in his famous Study on the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations. In this study, Cobo states: "Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in these territories, or part of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and determined.

Indigeneity is a term that emerged in the process of constructing the identity of the indigenous peoples in their political struggle in particular historical context. The most fundamental claim of these peoples was that they were the first or original settlers and, hence, the collective owners of the territory they inhabited and governed their institutions and that their lands had been appropriated by colonialists and post-colonial states and corporate interests with far-reaching consequences for their identity, autonomy and way of life (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam,2015:3) The UN Declaration cast the demands of the indigenous peoples in a paradigm of rights, including the highly politically charged collective right to self-identification. UN declares that indigenous peoples themselves define their own identity as indigenous (UN, 2009: 5).

APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPTS OF TRIBES/ADIVASIS/INDIGENOUS IN KERALA CONTEXT

In Kerala, there is no collectively accepted term that denotes Adivasis. Different people are using different terms in their field. The government of Kerala has been using the term Scheduled Tribe

for the official purposes. But academicians prefer adivasis (Ravi Raman, 2004; Bijoy, 2003) or Indigenous people (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam, 2004; Luisa Steur, 2009). Activists and NGO's also choose to call them as adivasis. In Kerala, tribes too prefer the term Adivasis. The names of various tribal organizations go like Adivasi GothraMaha Sabha (AGMS), Adivasi KshemaSamithi (AKS) and so on.

In the case of Kerala, the discourse of tribal as indigenous people only became explicitly politicized in the 1990s, partly under the influence of the international indigenous movement. The term adivasi... enabled activists to connect the global discourse on indigenous right despite the Indian government's insistence that India... has no indigenous people (Steur 2009: 28).

Luisa Steur (2010) argues that the adivasis consciousness has emerged as an alternative to communist ideology. Traditionally, adivasis in Kerala were supporters of the Marxist ideology. But communism could not integrate the adivasis in their so-called class position. 'Marxists' considered adivasis as a frozen working class and it led the adivasis to develop their own identity as Indigenous people. Along with the dissatisfaction with the communist ideology, several international events also accelerated the adivasi mobilization during this period. International Labor Organization's Convention No 169 in 1989 provides for an international legal framework as regards the right of indigenous peoples. The World Bank's Operational Directive and the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (UNWGIP) of the UN Commission on Human Rights, especially the Draft Declaration on the Right of Indigenous people, agreed to by the UNWGIP in 1993 marked another step forward in the struggle for adivasi rights in Kerala. The year 1993 was declared as the International Year of Indigenous People by UN, and the period of 1995-2004 has been declared as the UN decade of Indigenous Peoples. In April 2000, the UN Human Rights Commission decided to set up a permanent forum on Indigenous Issues. These developments have provided international legitimacy to adivasis of Kerala. Networking of Adivasi communities within the state facilitated by the NGOs was a significant development that furthered the mobilization process.

REVISITING THE CONCEPT OF TRIBE: THE CASE OF KERALA

Until the middle of the last century, most of the Adivasi communities in the State have been leading a relatively isolated life, having very minimal contact with the caste society of Kerala. However, in the past few decades, they have undergone remarkable changes owing to the socio-economic transitions that Kerala has experienced since the middle of the last century. Exposures to modern education, political process and media have altered the traditional lifestyle of these communities. These changes are well expressed in their food habits, dress, religious practices, language, worldview, community structure, social interactions etc. Most of the community members are well conversant with Malayalam. Even in the households, Malayalam is

increasingly becoming common language replacing local dialects. Most of the community members follow the 'locally standardized' religious practices. The traditional political structure is no more powerful as it used to be among most of the communities a few decades ago. So, looking into the current scenario, there is no so-called 'primitiveness' in Kerala.

The criterion of Geographical Isolation is also limited to few communities. Most of the adivasi communities have been attached to the mainstream communities. The government has initiated programs to rehabilitate them near to the mainland. Through the tribal sub-plan approach, the government of Kerala provided a fixed amount of land near the mainland and constructed houses for the adivasis. Information communication technology has also deteriorated the barrier of Isolation. In many parts of Kerala, adivasis are using mobile phone and radio. The government has initiated different tourism programs; eco-tourism especially has accelerated changes in every aspect of their lives. Road connectivity to the tribal settlements has also improved significantly.

The literacy rate among the adivasis in Kerala is higher than the literacy rate of India. The overall literacy rate among the Scheduled Tribes has increased from 64.4 percent in the 2001 Census to 75.8 percent in the 2011 Census. This is higher than the national average of 59 percent. Male literacy has increased from 70.8 percent to 80.8 percent, while female literacy has gone up from 58.1 percent to 71.1 percent during 2001-2011, showing significant improvement.

The study of the Center for Economic and Social studies (2012) observes: "In Kerala the status of Scheduled Tribes is slightly better than their counterparts at the national level; this is evident from a number of indicators: at the national level, nearly half the tribal population lives below poverty line whereas in Kerala the corresponding figure is only less than one-fourth. Literacy among the tribal population in Kerala is high both in the case of general (64.35 percent) and female (58.11 percent) population when compared to their counterparts at the national level. The sex ratio of the tribal communities is also favourable for women in Kerala whereas that is not the case at the national level".

What we are trying to argue here is that, the old theories and attendant concepts have lost their utility. It is essential to develop suitable criteria and concepts for present situation. As an impact of the various affirmative actions, the conditions of the tribes in Kerala have undergone changes to the extent that they no longer fit into the conventional definition of a tribe. The inability of the term tribe to accommodate the changes undergone by these indigenous communities calls for an urgent need to update the conventional definitions and to retain its utility both at the academic and policy level.

Presently, the tribes in Kerala are more closer to the definition of the Adivasis or Indigenous rather than 'tribes'. The conventional criteria for identifying 'tribes' are no longer applicable to

the tribes in Kerala. At the same time, the criteria of Indigenous or Adivasis are very much related to them. According to Xaxa, there are three aspects, which are central to the conceptualisation of the indigenous people. First, the indigenous are those people who lived in the country to which they belong before colonisation or conquest by people from outside the country or geographical region. Secondly, they have become marginalised as an aftermath of conquest and colonisation by the people from outside the region. Thirdly, such people govern their life more in terms of their own social, economic and the cultural institution than the laws applicable to the society or the country at large (Xaxa, 1999:3590). All these criteria are much related to adivasis in Kerala because they were the aborigines of a region before the arrival of any settler peasantry in the locality where they inhabit today. At the same time, they are dispossessed from their land, and their conditions have become deteriorated.

WHY DO WE NEED REDEFINED CRITERIA?

Tribes in Kerala are not homogenous communities. There are stratifications within the tribal group in Kerala. Through our key informant interview with the officials of the KIRTADS, we could understand that a larger proportion of the tribal schemes are benefitting only certain groups within the tribal communities. Thus, Malaarayan, Mavilan, Kurumar, Kuruchyar and Kanikkar hold better position in terms of the socio-economic condition of the adivasis in Kerala. At the same time, Adiyar, Paniyan, Muthuvan and Mala vettuvan are backward communities within the tribe. Again five particularly vulnerable tribal groups inhabit in Kerala. So the main proportion of the reservation and other government benefits are concentrated on a particular group of communities and inequalities within the tribal group is widening. Another fact is that there exists a sort of hierarchy amongst tribal communities in certain localities. For instance, in Wayanad, the landed Scheduled Tribes such as Kurichchian and Kuruman claim a higher status over the rest of the Adivasi communities of the district. They even practiced 'untouchability' with other Adivasi communities and also had a patron-client relationship with them.

So the fundamental question here is that is it just an economic-based category or socio-political based category. If we are considering them as an economic-based category, many of the tribal communities in Kerala have entered the next stage of the development. If we are considering them as a socio-cultural category like caste, they will always be known as the tribes. One way to overcome this problem is to further categorize the tribes in a manner that the needy groups would be prioritized in case of all affirmative actions. It is not possible to discard certain communities in the name of development. Along with the backwardness, historical reasons should also be considered when categorizing the communities. Ethnicity and minority statuses are too restricting to de-tribalize the existing communities. So it is not possible to de-tribalize for the reason that they are not meeting the basic characteristics of the tribes. They might hold better

socio-economic status within the tribal communities, but compared to the larger mainstream societies in Kerala, they may still in a backward position.

Thus, formulating a pan Indian criterion is not a feasible solution in today's situation. The socio-economic conditions of the adivasis in different states are at different levels. Therefore, it would be better if states are formulating the criteria based on the consensus of the tribal people in their own state. With the consensus of the tribal communities, the state can also decide whether the former should be addressed as Tribes, Adivasis or Indigenous.

The paper is in agreement with Xaxa's conclusion that there is no one way of defining tribe. If tribes are defined broadly, then peasant communities will also be included in this category, but if they defined in a narrow sense, then many existing tribal groups will be excluded from the category. To overcome these problems, one way is to broaden the criteria to accommodate today's situations. The Indicators like Annual Income, Educational statuses, Infant Mortality, Life Expectancy, Employment status, Land status etc. should be incorporated with the other socio-cultural attributes. We cannot always escape from the question of the criteria to say that 'tribes are in transition'. They have been always in transition, so there is a need to develop the criteria on the basis of different states. That will offer a solution to these problems to a certain extent.

Yogesh Atal suggests that "in this context, it is more relevant to identify the geographical areas that are suffering from development deficit and develop suitable strategies to reach development to all those who inhabit that region rather than be partial to certain groups in such areas". But it will not solve this issue because, in the context of Kerala, different religions, castes and tribal communities are living in same geographical areas. So tribes would be less prioritized groups within these geographical areas. Tribes have the least socio-economic capital and hence they cannot afford to compete with the other mainstream communities.

In the context of Kerala, identity of being adivasis is providing a degree of self-confidence to the communities. Historically also, they have the right to use the term adivasis/Indigenous because they are the first settlers of the region.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, there has been an increasing requirement of a modified definition in the context of the continuing sociocultural evolution. Such an idea of tribe should encompass the various sociopolitical as well as economic dimensions concerning the existence and welfare of the population in its ambit. The modified criteria should not lead to the exclusion of any particular category from its consideration just because they are economically well off. The criteria also should have well defined indicators to assess the relative scenario of various communities

(within the STs) in the process of evolution. It may use the methods and tools of other disciplines such as Political Science, Economics, Law and Sociology to capture the dynamic nature of social progress happening among the tribes.

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