Tribe: Defined Through An Anthropological Lens  
Sampriti Panda, University Of Delhi

Abstract
When we discuss about ‘tribes' in a broader sense we may think of tribes not only confined to India, but in the whole world and also various types and categories of tribes like Scheduled Tribe, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, Ex-criminal tribes, De-notified or Nomadic tribe, Hunters and Gatherers Tribe, Backward Tribes, Forest Tribes, and may be some other existing forms too. The whole concept and notion of tribal is different and various from individual to individual. The definition of the term 'Tribe' will vary from the definition by a layman, to the definition provided by an anthropologist or sociologist compared to the definition provided by an administrator or a social worker or a researcher. Unfortunately or interestingly even people who are involved with the tribes and the tribal issues, they also vary in their opinions (practically or theoretically) on the concept of 'tribe'.

Keywords: Tribe, PVTG, definition, classification, conceptualization, primitive.

Introduction:

When we hear or read the term 'tribe', we assume a picture in our mind from our experiences and knowledge gathered. Some of us may bring out the picture of some tribal communities belonging to central India and Eastern India, some may think of tribes belonging to North and Western India, while some may assume the picture of North-Eastern Tribes, even some may also think about the tribes belonging to Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This is just a small picture of imagination when we take the term 'tribe', while in reality when we talk of 'tribes' in a broader sense we may think of tribes not only confined to India, but in the whole world and also various types and categories of tribes like Scheduled Tribe, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, Ex-criminal tribes, De-notified or Nomadic tribe, Hunters and Gatherers Tribe, Backward Tribes, Forest Tribes, and may be some other existing forms too.

The whole concept and notion of tribal is different and various from individual to individual. The definition of the term 'Tribe' will vary from the definition by a layman, to the definition provided by an anthropologist or sociologist compared to the definition provided by an administrator or a social worker or a researcher. Unfortunately or interestingly even people who are involved with the tribes and the tribal issues, they also vary in their opinions (practically or theoretically) on the concept of 'tribe'.

Definition of Tribe:

These have been various attempts and classifications to define 'tribe' by many scholarly researchers.

"A tribe is a collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous though originally it might have been so." – Imperial Gazetteer of India

"A tribe is a group of people in a primitive or barbarous stage of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding themselves as descendants of a common ancestor." – Oxford Dictionary.

According to G.W.B. Huntingford, "A tribe is a group united by a common name in which the members take a pride by a common language, by a common territory, and by a feeling that all who do not share this name are outsiders, 'enemies' in fact."

"It its simplest form the tribe is a group of bands occupying a contagious territory or territories and having a feeling of unity deriving from numerous similarities in culture, frequent contacts, and a certain community of interest". – Ralph Linton

"A tribe is a social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous, with no specialization of functions, ruled by tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognizing social distance with other tribes or castes, without any social obloquy attaching to them, as it does in the caste structure, followed tribal traditions, beliefs and customs, illiberal of naturalization of ideas..."
from alien sources, above all conscious of homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration." – D.N. Majumdar

According to Morton Fried, "tribe is a breeding population whose boundaries circumscribe the range of sexual relations. Not only unsanctioned sexual unions but also socially approved marriages, that frequently takes place across the boundaries of what are called Tribes.

According to Sahlins – "A tribe is a segmental organization. It is composed of a number of equivalents, unspecialized multi-family groups, each the structural duplicate of the other: a tribe is a congregate of equal kin group blocs."

As defined by An East Asian Consultation, at Sagada (Philippines), a tribal is a "group of people generally constituting a homogenous unit, speaking a common language, claiming a common ancestry, living in a particular geographic area, generally lacking in scientific knowledge and modern technology and having a social structure based on kinship."

Lucy Mair also defines a tribe as "an independent political division of a population with a common culture."

Contextualizing the problems faced by the tribes in India, T.B. Naik (1968) came up with his own criteria to define a tribe which are as follows:

1. A community can be termed as a 'tribe' if it is not highly interdependent within the community unlike Hindu caste system.
2. A community using primitive means to exploit the natural resources; whose economy is backward or under developed with no understanding of monetary economies may be termed as a 'tribe'.
3. A tribal community must be geographically isolated from the mainstream population.
4. Members of a tribe should have their own common dialect which may vary from other tribal communities or regions.
5. A strong and influential political organization or head should be present within a tribe.
6. The members of a tribe should have a sort of psychological conservatism towards change and should follow their age old customs.
7. Customary laws must be an important feature of a tribal community which would maintain the peace and order of the community.

**Classification of Tribes:**

Understanding the term 'tribe' has been very difficult in a universally accepted situation. Thus researchers and scholars have tried to understand the term 'tribe' by classifying them into various categories.

V. Elwin (1944) in his book "The Aboriginals" attempted to categories tribes into four groups. They are as follows:

(a) Purest to pure tribal groups
(b) Tribal groups who are in closeness to people living in plain areas, but still have maint’ained the tribal mode of living.
(c) Tribal groups who are placed in the lower strata of Hindu society
(d) Groups who are fully emerged into the Hindu faith and tradition, thus having a modern way of living.

B. K. Roy Burman (1972) tried to classify tribes into further four categories in order to have a more clear understanding of the community within Hindu society. Thus it categories this tribe as:

(a) Tribes who are already incorporated in Hindu society.
(b) Tribes who are much oriented towards Hindu Society.
(c) Tribes who have a negative or repulsive behavior and orientation towards Hindu society.

(d) Tribes who behave indifferently towards Hindu Society.

Furthermore, Vidyarthi and Rai (1977) also classified tribes into various categories as follows:

(a) Tribes living in forest areas.
(b) Tribes living in rural areas and villages.
(c) Tribes who are semi-cultured.
(d) Tribes who are influenced by Acculturation.
(e) Tribes who are influenced by Assimilation.

Even after various classifications are categorization of the tribal communities, no common and universal understanding of the term has yet been arrived.

**History/Origin of the term 'Tribe':**

The term 'tribe' is basically of colonial origin. The colonial government classified communities in terms of their size of population, distinctive language and cultural traits, isolated ecological condition and their condition of living. Further such groups were characterized as 'primitive', 'uncivilized' and 'backward' and were designated as 'tribes'. According to the British, the term 'tribe' had various connotations or more than one sense in Indian society. Tribes were known to be a group of people who claimed their descent from a common ancestor and their way of living was subsumed to be very primitive or barbaric.

Xaxa writes "In the census reports of 1881, when the first 'proper' all-India census was undertaken, the term used was not 'tribe' but 'forest-tribe' and that too as a sub-heading within the broader category of agricultural and pastoral castes." In the next two censuses of 1901 and 1911, Sir H-erbert Risley and Sir E.A. Gait respectively, added another term so called ‘animist’. Again in 1921 census, Marten altered the tag from 'animism' to 'tribal religion'. Dr. Hutton in 1931 census followed census Report of 1891 headed by Baines but changed the term 'forest tribe' and introduced 'primitive tribe'. Among all the researchers and scholars it was only Ghurye who refused to accept the term 'tribe' as a category propounded by the colonial regime and described these groups as 'backward Hindus'. (Ghurey 1963: 205)

After independence, the term 'Scheduled Tribe' (STs) came into use and the so-called tribal communities were designated as STs by the constitution of India. Srivatava (2003) mentions the criteria evolved by the Lokur committee for declaring a particular group as Scheduled Tribe. The criteria's are mentioned as follows:

(a) A group showing primitive traits.
(b) The group must have a distinctive culture.
(c) It should be geographically isolated.
(d) The group should isolated and away from the outside world and may have reservation to open up.
(e) The community should be a backward group.

These criteria proposed to describe or define a group as a Scheduled Tribe was later criticized and debated for using the terms like 'primitive', 'backward', 'savage' in the report. Along with the term 'Scheduled Tribes' another term also came into existence known as 'Primitive Tribal Groups', which was later known a 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group.' This Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) is supposed to be more backward than the others. To identify such groups, few criteria are used, on the basis of which further the groups are classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups. They are as follows:

(a) The tribal groups which are now in pre-agricultural stage.
(b) Tribal groups who dwell in isolation and have remote habitation.
(c) The tribal groups which are very small in numbers.
(d) The tribal groups whose population is near constant or at a declining stage.
(e) Groups with very low level of literacy; and
(f) The tribal groups which are very much economically and socially backward.

The above criteria are generally followed to classify a ST as a PVTG but it also needs lots of discussion to throw light on the sensitive issues like PVTGs. However the 'colonial term tribe' got replaced by the term 'Scheduled Tribe' and is presently used at common parlance to all the tribal communities by the constitution of India.

Issue related with the Definition of the Term "Tribe": Being 'Primitive':

In various anthropological articles and usages the term 'tribe' is being equated with the term 'primitive'. Roy Burman (1983) referring to a paper published by Maurice Godelier says that there are two set of characteristic features that comes out from the term 'primitive', one is negative and the other one is positive. In Western Societies, we find the positive trait of being primitive, whereas the negative trait of being primitive is found in our societies like less civilized, use of traditional simple tools and small scale in nature.

In any sense, primitive societies are mostly considered to be 'inferior'. While discussing the concept of 'primitive', Kuper (1988) mentions that "the history of the theory of primitive society is the history of an illusion". Kuper also points out that the whole notion of being 'primitive' was brought out by the Europeans especially in 19th Century, so that the Europeans could understand themselves and their own selves in a better way. Moreover the term 'primitive' became primitive or was forcedly made into primitive simply because of various theoretical debates. (S. Channa, 2008). Channa (2008) also writes in her article that it was not tribes who discovered the anthropology rather the anthropologists discovered the 'tribes'. Thus conceptualizing the whole notion of tribe into a negative or positive sense is our responsibility, the tribes are not in any way to be blamed or involved in it. Moreover the concept of 'tribe' emerged from a situation which featured the superiority of white man, colonial dominance and industrialization.

Conceptualization of Tribes in Anthropology:

Various anthropological research and works are being conducted from very beginning of the concept and study of tribes. Especially anthropologists are known to have experts on tribes the anthropologists first tried to understand and differentiate tribes from the civilization. Since hundreds of years tribes and civilization existed together without any distinction, thus the first attempt was to distinguish tribes and civilization. Andre Beteille (2008) notes two types of approaches which would help to understand the relationship between the tribes and civilization in a more clear way. The first type of approach is Evolutionary Approach, which provides a long-range view of the time and also focuses on the steps of social formation. Whereas the second type of approach is Historical Approach, which is almost contrast to the previous one. The Historical Approach limits itself to a particular framework of space and time and points out the co-existence of social formation unlike the Evolutionary approach.

In India the scenario of understanding and defining a tribe is very different. The main issue that arises in a country like India is to identify a tribe than defining it. Although the constitution of India has provided various tribes with the tag of 'Scheduled Tribe' yet there are many communities which are still to be identified and recognized. This act of identifying tribes becomes very difficult in India because mostly tribes are entangled with another category named castes. Thus many times communities which are classified as tribes in one area are also termed as castes in another area. This happens often because many of the tribal communities dwell in nearby areas to caste communities, thus creating problems and confusion in their classifications. Therefore the effort to identify tribes which began in British India led to various misinterpretations and confusions. Even today in various census data records, the census enumerators also get confused with the distinction between tribes and caste. In such a situation, it is only the anthropologist and the researchers who actually work among
the tribes can provide a clear picture of tribal identity. Tribes and caste not only dwell in close proximity but they also get involved in various economic and social activities that further broaden the issue of tribal identity. But the important point is that apart from various similar characteristics between castes and tribes, the tribes have always tried to maintain their own identity in a unique way and the same effort to maintain the caste identity has also been done by the caste communities.

**Tribes in Ancient and Medieval Context:**

The term 'tribe' today we talk about was not distinctively used in ancient and medieval text. Even in rural India the term for tribes and caste was together used as 'Jati'. The terms like 'Jana' which means ethnic group, and the terms like 'Janapada' which means an ethnic territory were used in texts of ancient times. Surjit Sinha (1982) also mentions terms like 'Atabika Rajyas' which means forest kingdoms and 'Pratyanta Deshas' means frontier regions for various 'janas' like Kirata, Savara, Bhila, Nishada, Abhira who resided in such regions. Sinha also points out that many of us today also label the Scheduled Tribes as 'Jatis', even sometimes these jatis are also known as 'Jungly Jati', which means Jatis living in forest. Also many of these tribal communities perceive the individuals from their own community as 'men' and consider individuals from the other community or outside the tribal group as 'non-men' or 'foreigners. Sinha further explains this by citing an example from one of the tribal communities named 'Santhals'. The Santhals call their own people as 'Hor' (man), whereas they call the people outside their group as 'Diku' which means non-men / foreigners. Generally the tribal communities are meant to have a very close and symbiotic relation with the forest. Tribes who are regarded as a very vital part of forest ecosystem have derived various terms in Indian context. Debnath Debasis (1998) writes that the association of forests with the tribal communities throughout the history has made the tribes as 'lord of the forest' and this has resulted in connoting these tribal groups through various names. The term like 'vanyajati' which means forest-dwelling communities, 'vanabasi' meaning inhabitants of forests and 'vanyaputra' meaning forest dwellers were also coined for these tribal communities. Later the words like 'adivasi', 'pahari', 'adimjati', 'janajati', 'anusuchit jati' and such Indian terms came up connoting the tribes generally.

**Transformation and Changes among Tribes:**

In Indian society when we try to identify tribes, we also find two more communities which also live side by side with tribes; these two groups are peasants and caste. Usually it becomes very difficult to classify and distinguish tribes from peasants. According to Wolf (1966), Peasants are those "for whom agriculture is a livelihood and a way of life, not a business for profit." Referring to this definition, we can easily make an understanding that peasants and tribes are almost same in terms of their livelihood, but there is also some distinction between the groups. The peasants are usually part of a wider society and great tradition whereas the tribes are not a part of a wider society. Apart from all these distinctions and classifications we cannot ignore the transformation of the tribes into caste and peasants.

Generally on transformation of tribes, two models of incorporation are discussed. B.K. Roy Burman (1994) talks of two models, one is 'The Hindu Method of Tribal absorption' given by N.K. Bose and the other model is 'Sanskritization' propounded by M.N. Srinivas. The Hindu Method of Tribal absorption by N.K. Bose suggests that many of the interior hill and forest tribal groups who has remained untouched from the influences of other civilization, slowly and gradually got fused into Hindu society and caste system. For example the tribes like Bhil, Munda, Santhal, Juang, Soara are to be named a few who were influenced by the Hindu method of Tribal absorption.

The other model through which the tribal transformation was further aggregated was Sanskritization and Hinduization. These processes had a tendency to attract the lower strata of the society to observe the lifestyle of a dominant caste or dominant strata of the region. In this process they would turn themselves into a higher and dominant community of the region. Thus many tribal groups were influenced by this process of transformation. But it was mainly Hinduization which actually was prevalent among the tribal communities than Sanskritization. Tribes who followed the
process of Hinduization described themselves as 'Bhagats', not as Hindus. Thus this created further more complications in identifying the tribal communities and more opinions aroused on the definition of tribes. But this process of transformation of tribes is a continuous and slow process, which keeps on going even till date.

**Summary:**

'Tribe' as a concept and as a notion has been debatable and challenging to define various definitions have been provided by scholars and researchers. Yet no single universal definition has been yet conceptualized. Tribes have been difficult to be classified into fixed categories as the situation and environment varies from each group to another. Further the history behind the origin of the term ‘tribe’ has been much sensitive and critical. Thus at present defining tribe in a fixed manner has become the most challenging task yet. Although various issues regarding the conceptualization and transformation of tribes is being considered minutely but at present there are many communities who are not yet recognized a tribes. In fact many a times the reservation policy by the government of India has further complicated the issue. Getting the tag of 'ST' is also being politicized to gain personal benefits and community reservations. At this time of crucial situation, it is the anthropologists who should be given a major role to come up with more clear and scrystal categories and characteristics to define the term 'tribe'.

**REFERENCES**


Wolf, E. Peasants. New