

S. N. Ratha

TRIBE: USE AND MISUSE OF THE TERM

Abstract

Eco-diversity and a forest habitat are believed to be the basis of human evolution. For more than two million years, beginning in early Pleistocene, Man lived in the forest. Only about ten thousand years ago, humans began to distance themselves from the forest, when they learnt tending plants (agriculture) and animals (stock-breeding). In certain parts of the world, the transformation of the forest habitat to the non-forest habitat was complete, before its documentation. However, in many other parts of the world, the process still continues. The residual population, clinging to the forest habitats, is called tribe, a term coined by the Europeans for non-European communities.

In Bharat, however, every endogamous social group, including those of the non-Hindu, is called a jati. In no vernacular of our country, there existed a term equivalent to tribe. The terms, now used are supposed to be equivalent to the English word 'tribe'.

I

The Indian society, to begin with was characterized by a four-fold division (Rv. X.90.12), termed as the *varnashrama*. The *varnas* were Bramhana, Ksatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. Initially and ideally, the *varnas* were not based upon birth but upon the quality and calling of the individual (*guna* and *karma*: Bhagavat Geeta IV.12). Down the corridors of time, the *varna* scheme was consolidated into endogamous sections of functionally interdependent groups in the society; and inter-marriage between the different *varnas* lowered the status of the off-springs and led to the formation of new endogamous divisions. The new ones were called *sankaravarna*. Further inter-marriages between *varnas* and the *sankaravarnas* and between the *sankarvarnas* led to the formation of new *sankaravarnas* (Manu X). In Manu's scheme all such social formations, beyond the four *varnas*, include what in contemporary times have come to be known as *jati* or Castes, *Scheduled Castes* and *Scheduled Tribes* in Indian English. By the time the Indian society was exposed to the Europeans, it was constituted of innumerable *jatis*. The Portuguese called them 'casta'.

S. N. RATHA, Former Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Sambalpur University, Burla, Odisha, E-mail: snratha@rediffmail.com

II

In the *Census*, initiated in 1881, the Indian population was divided into two 'social types', tribes and castes, by which time the term 'tribe' was already in vogue in Europe to designate non-European communities of Africa, Asia, Australia and the Americas. The Europeans used the term for all those communities they looked down upon as inferior and less civilized, an attitude recurrent in the 19th century and early 20th century Anthropological literature parading evolutionism. The tribal society is supposed to represent a stage in the evolution of society from primitive bands to nation states (Service 1962: 110-42)). Even Bailey's conceptualization of tribe-caste continuum (1961: 7-19) is an indirect acceptance of the evolutionary dogma in the specific context of the Indian society. However, *if Manu's authority on social formations in India is accepted, the tribes are to be taken as genetic extensions of the varnas. Thus the Indian tribal societies are not the antecedent stages of civilization but its product.*

III

The terms, caste and tribe became handy for the colonial administrators to 'divide and rule' India. Beginning in 1918, nine Orders/Notifications were issued in different times till 1936 listing the 'Hill Tribes' and 'Backward Tribes.' Notwithstanding such categorization, the record of land rights (R.O.R) in India continued to use the term *jati* to indicate all Indian social types. All communities - castes, tribes, even the Muslims and Christians - are recorded as 'jati'. The constitution Pundits of post British India stuck to the use of the term tribe to set aside a section of India's population to be scheduled under Article 342 of the Constitution, by the President. Article 365 (25) described "Scheduled Tribes..." (the compound term first appeared here) as "...such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be scheduled for the purpose of this Constitution". Article 342 prescribes the procedure to be followed in the matter of specification of *Scheduled Tribes*. The indicators used by the Government of India to classify communities under 'Scheduled Tribes' are 'primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical location, shy of external contact and backwardness'. These criteria do not figure in the constitution but have come to be accepted following the definitions coming down from the 1931 *Census* coined by Hutton, a Cambridge trained anthropologist, the report of the first *Backward Classes Commission* 1955 (Chairman Kaka Kalelkar), the *Advisory Committee on Revision of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe List* 1965 (Lokur Committee), and the *Joint Committee of the Parliament on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Bill* 1967 and *Chanda Committee* 1969.

IV

From a run through of some textbook definitions, what emerges as an

ideal tribe or tribal formation is that it is a social group of a simple uncomplicated kind consisting of a collection of families of common origin or derivation or descent and custom, possessing a distinctive language or dialect and culture, a name and a definite territory, engaged in joint activities for some common purpose.

Some have also used negative descriptors, such as, absence of any occupational specialization (Risley 1901: 22), lack of state organization, absence of classes and literacy (Steward 1954:44), non-involvement in cash economy, little supra-village political organization, non-adherence to any great religion (Moerman 1974: 54), limited cultural elaboration and non-existence of central regulative political organization (Sahlins 1968) to identify tribes.

Tribal societies are said to be inadequately organized to bear an elaborate cultural development, where force is held in severalty and people living in a perpetual state of fear from violence (a situation described as ‘Warre’ by Shalins borrowing the term and the concept from Hobbes), where separate institutions do not exist to control economic, social and religious activities, where all institutions revolve around the wisdom of peace making; where all rituals, economic transactions and kinship are expressions of reciprocity, friendliness, avoidance of unfriendly situations, and where ‘gain’ is measured in terms of social advantages rather than material benefits (Sahlins *ibid*).

Based upon these indicators singly, severally, or in some combination, though one can point at some human aggregates as tribes, it does not necessarily lead to assume a ‘tribal stage’ “to appear in the transit from a single settlement with embedded political organization to state structured society” and goes on to add “that most tribes seem to be secondary phenomenon in a very specific sense: they well be the product of processes stimulated by the appearance of relatively highly organized societies amidst other societies which are organized much more simply.” Thus “tribalism can be viewed as a reaction to the formation of a complex political structure rather than a necessary preliminary stage in its evolution” (Fried *ibid*: 170).

There is no theoretical need for a tribal stage in the evolution of political organization. ‘Tribalism’ is an evolutionary *cul-de-sac*, “part of a spasmodic cycle that in and itself lacks the institutional raw material capable of leading to more complex forms of polity” (*ibid*: 173). Tribal groups are not social organizations, Fried asserts, “whose integrity recedes into a remote past”; and “that there are clues indicating that the tribalism displayed, is reaction to more recent events and conditions”; and “that tribalism can be made to play a major political role in a real present, is not a modern discovery. Long before recent European colonialism, not to say neocolonialism, the Chinese, and the expanding state societies had grasped the essentials of divide and rule” (*ibid*: 173).

V

India is exposed to multiple and varied historical forces over several millennia. It is not hard to find social formations conforming to the indicators used in circumscribing tribal societies. But surfacing communities as distinct social types and naming them as tribes in India begins with the European colonialism.

The *Government of India* issued nine orders listing various communities in various states under the specified Schedule since 6.9. 1950. With the introduction of *Tribal Sub-plan (TSP)* strategy for integrated development of the *Scheduled Tribes* in 1975, some tribes or parts thereof have been identified as *Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG)*. Renamed a Vulnerable Tribal Groups. These groups are identified for their pre-agricultural level of technology, low level of literacy, small, stagnant or diminishing population, remote and isolated habitat, distinct cultural and ethnic individuality and specialized avocation, if any. The Government of India fixed these criteria through an administrative order (G.O.I 1990: 146 and 153). Now, such groups number 75, and more are likely to be added.

Thus in India, "... tribe is an administrative and political concept" (Singh 1994). *All* communities, irrespective of their socio-economic status, have been declared as tribes in Kinnaur, Jaunagar- Bawar, Pangwal and Ladakh (except one community). In common parlance, a tribe is one that which is not a caste, i.e., an individual is a member of some society by virtue of not being a member of other specific societies. "In South East Asia..." observes Moerman (1974: 54), "...a society is member of a tribal set by virtue of not being a member of the civilized set."

In a publication brought out by the *Government of India* in 1998 for 'official use only' 608 communities are listed as *Scheduled Tribes* in an alphabetical order (G.O.I 1998:30-45). In the meantime some more communities have found place in the Schedule. It appears to be an ever-growing list, and many more communities are likely to be added. The Constitution (Article 46) imposes the responsibility of improving the quality of life of the *Scheduled Tribes* on the Union and the State Governments. Therefore, identifying communities fit enough to be 'scheduled', has come to become a permanent administrative exercise; and tribal development has become a major, increasingly more important component of the nation's *Five-Year-Plans*

Special privileges are bestowed on the scheduled communities in the form of reservation in educational institutions, state legislatures, and the Union parliament, scholarships, employment and promotions in government and public undertakings. Areas of tribal concentration are set aside (V and VI *Schedule* of the Constitution) as *Scheduled Areas* for special administrative and infrastructure inputs. These advantages motivate more and more communities to claim scheduled status. Thus the constitution initiated a trend

in creating a vested interest in the scheduled status. The reservations, initially supposed to be withdrawn after ten years, continue till today, being extended at the expiry of every ten years. Such extensions through amendments to the constitution have almost become a permanent feature of the constitution in spite of the caution issued by the *Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes* several years back (X Report- 1960-61, Part-1, p. 342). He wrote, "It is high time to ensure that backwardness does not reach a stage of becoming vested interest with some beneficiaries who are enjoying and monopolizing to themselves the special privileges granted to the backward classes under the excuse of safeguards provided for them in the constitution."

No Indian language had a word in its vocabulary synonymous with the English word 'tribe.' Now several terms, often with different meanings, are in use. For example, in Odia, it is 'Adivasi' (early inhabitants); in Assamese it is 'Janajati' (the term defies translation into English); in Telugu it is 'Girijana' (hill people); and in Hindi it is 'Adimjati' (early jati). Of late, another controversial term has surfaced-'the indigenous people.'

VI

Anthropologists in India also do not project a unified view on the concept of the tribal society. While some, like T. B. Naik hold tribal society completely different from caste society, others, like G. S. Ghurye do not find any difference between the two; Bailey takes a stand between these two extremes (ibid: 11). Thus in India, there is a great deal of confusion in conceptualizing tribal society. To add to this confusion some tribal communities claim *varna* status- some as Brahman, some Ksatriya, some Vaisya and some Sudra (Singh ibid: 7); and some castes claim tribal status. In a nation-wide study of the communities undertaken by the *Anthropological Survey*, it is noted that 11.80 per cent among the tribal communities claim *varna* status. 8.30 per cent claim Ksatriya status, 0.90 per cent Brahman status and 7.50 percent Sudra status. For example, the Gaddi and the Pangwala of Himachal Pradesh and the Kagaty of Sikkim and West Bengal claim Brahman status; whereas the Jaunsari tribes claim Vaisya status (Singh ibid: 7). The same study reports that 171 (26.90%) tribal communities perceive their status as 'high', 298(46.90%) as "middle' and 161(25.30%) as 'low'. Among the non-tribal communities, 11.20 per cent perceive the tribal social status as 'high', 39.20 as 'middle' and 49.40 per cent as 'low'.

At the moment, a community named Durua in Koraput, having all the qualities of a *Primitive Tribal Group*, is yet to be scheduled (Rath 2004). Several members of a non-scheduled community named Rona are surreptitiously changing their community nomenclature to Kotia, a scheduled community, and an innovative method of gaining the Scheduled Tribe status.

Those whose tribal identity is already established are innovating methods to establish distinct identities. "In their quest for a distinct identity",

writes Roy Burman, “the tribal peoples created scripts for and literature in their languages. Today there are at least 10,000 publications including textbooks. Intellectuals among them have brought out analytical history of their social processes, languages and literature. They raise their voices against display of their culture objects in museums without relating the same to their social, cultural, economic, historical and ecological contexts. There is a growing tendency to claim their religions as distinct spiritual calls. 5 per cent of the tribal population returned their religion by the name of their respective tribes or by names adopted by their respective tribes in 1981 census. In 1991 the corresponding figure, was about 10 per cent” (Roy Burman 1995: 10).

Some tribal communities are seen to be on war path to safeguard the privacy of their habitats, for exclusive access, control and management of their resources, to maintain the traditional roles and role models in their socio-economic set-up in their interactions with the government and other agencies asserting their power at all levels. The recent governmental step of extending the provisions of the Panchayati Raj to tribal area is looked upon as historic landmark in the fulfilment of tribal aspirations. There are advantages attached to tribal status in India.

VII

It is alleged that the “word tribe lacked sociological vigor from its very inception” and that it is “the single most egregious case of meaninglessness in anthropological vocabulary”, and “figures prominently on the list of putative technical terms ranked in order of degree of ambiguity” as alleged by Fried (1967: 154). The relevance of the concepts of tribe and the tribal society to anthropology and its practitioners is considerably denuded. In India, however, the term *Scheduled Tribe* is unlikely to become obsolete in Indian English vocabulary and administrative jargon, or non-functional in Indian socio-political dynamics in any predictable future.

References

- Bailey, F.G.
 1961 “Tribe’ and ‘Caste’ in India”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* No. V, pp. 9-19.
- Fried, Morton. H
 1967 *The Evolution of Political Society: An Essay in Political Anthropology*. New York, Random House (The Concept of Tribe, pp.154-184).
- Ghurye, G. S.
 1943 *The Aborigines – “so-called”- and their Future*, Poona, Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Publication No. 11
- Government of India. New Delhi:

- 1998 *Scheduled Tribes Scheduled Areas and Tribal Areas in India*, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (Tribal Development Division).
- Manu.
- 1991 *The Laws of Manu with an Introduction and notes*. Translated by Wendy Doniger with Brian K. Smith, Penguin Books.
- Moerman, Michael
- 1974 "Accomplishing Ethnicity", in Roy Turner (ed). *Ethno methodology*. Penguin, 1975 reprint, pp 54-68.
- Naik, T. B
- "Editorial" in the *Bulletin of the Tribal Research Institute*, Chindwara, Madhya Pradesh, Volume 1, No. 3 (Referred to in Bailey 1961:9).
- Naroll, R.
- 1964 "On ethnic unit classification", *Current Anthropology*. Vol. 5, pp. 283-91, 306-12.
- Roy Burman, B. K.
- 1995 "Tribal Situation and Approach to Tribal Problems in India: A Preliminary Appraisal", Discussion Paper, New Delhi: Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Contemporary Studies.
- Sahlins, D. Marshall
- 1968 *Tribesman*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall.
- Service, Elman R.
- 1962 *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective*. New York: Random House.
- Singh, K. S.
- 1994 *The Scheduled Tribes*. People of India, National Series I, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, Anthropological Survey of India.
- Steward, Julian H.
- 1955 *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilineal Evolution*. Urbana: Illinois University Press.
- Ramsukhdas, Swami
- 1994 *Srimad Bhagavadgita* (With Sanskrit text, Transliteration and English Translation), Gorakhpur: Gita Press.
- Risley, H. H.
- 1901 *People of India*. Bombay: Thacker & Co.



This document was created with the Win2PDF "print to PDF" printer available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>

This version of Win2PDF 10 is for evaluation and non-commercial use only.

This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.

<http://www.win2pdf.com/purchase/>