



De-constructing the term “Tribe/Tribal” in India: a post-colonial reading

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Abstract:

The British colonial administrator-ethnographers in India were pioneers who surveyed and carried out expeditions on tribes but often their methods were doubtful. Their survey reports and papers became the source of precious information about such province and at the same time a tool for their continuous development of colonial administration. However by using official machinery and tour for collecting data they bypassed the ethical consideration of research. Their writings in many ways ended up contorting tribes as being synonymous with

being backward, uncivilized and barbarous. This study critically analyzes the notion of tribes in India as perceived and studied by anthropologists. It also interrogates the Ontology and Epistemic premises of their Knowledge Production on tribes in India. The paper concludes by discussing the various issues on tribal discourse in India.

1. Introduction

The word “Tribe/Tribal” brings to one’s mind a general picture of half-naked people, arrows and spears in their hands, feathers in their heads, unintelligible language often combined with myths of savagery and cannibalism. They are projected as savage, animistic, uncivilized or headhunters and their life as nasty, brutish and short. Their art as crude, their religion as a medley of superstitions and they are dirty with dark complexion, hideously wild, diseased and ugly visages (Guha, 2010). All the early explorers and administrators including professionals like anthropologists, historians, academicians as well as different religious leaders and Missionaries in general have piled over one another in their use of uncomplimentary adjectives to describe the “tribals”. Even many of us today adopt either of these views in their entirety in Indian “tribals” while narrating and speaking on them.

Whatever sample history and literature has been produced on them till the date is from outsiders and it makes sometimes confusion and controversy in the matters of so called "tribals" age old oral history, tradition, concepts, interpretation and values. Hardly one can find references on them in most social text books on Indian subjects, especially in earlier publications. In other words those people groups have either appeared just at the fringe of the history subjects or have been completely passed over as a non-entity and only in very recent times they have been treated as somebody (Henry, 1971). Nevertheless, the Government of India Act 1919, the Simon Commission Report of 1928 and the Government of India Act 1935 have reflected this concern of the administration in seeking to treat the so called “tribals” as a separate entity. Thus these Acts were/are landmarks in the history of people groups who are called “tribals” in India.

After the independence of India (from colonial rule) in 1947, the constitution of India guaranteed special care of the tribes. The policy promulgated was integrationist without destroying their identity. The policy of



Panchsheel enunciated by Pundit Nehru on tribal development in consultation with the then noted anthropologist, Verrier Elwin, remains a memorable framework within which various programs supposed to be implemented till the date but same has to be investigated further for its conceptual clarity and authenticity and in fact no government has followed the *Panchsheel* principles as a policy in dealing with the tribal society in India (Kujur, 2007).

India in spite of being the largest democratic country in the world has failed to define the term tribe and just has inherited D. N. Majumdar's definition which has been given in the Imperial Gazetteer i.e. -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 (Majumdar, 1992). And today they are just described as "the tribes or tribal communities" (Sinha, 1994). The Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Division in the year 1953 records 198 nomadic tribes (Scheduled Tribes) spread over almost all states in India. More than 8% of India's populations are tribals and around 95% of them live in hills, forests and Jungles covering up to 15% of the country's total area (India-Tribalbelt-Wikipedia, 2014).

It is interesting to note that the Census reports of India give different names at different periods for the same people group (tribes) forgetting peoples' own name, dignity and designation. For instance, in 1891, J.A. Brains, the Census Commissioner, reported them as "Forest Tribes" according to their traditional occupation in the forest areas. In 1901 Census report it was changed from "Forest Tribes" to "Animists" and then in 1911 more specifically changed to "Tribal Animists". In the consequent reports of 1931 categorically mentioned as "Primitive Tribes" and "Backward Tribe" in 1935 report. But just mention of "Tribes" in 1941 report. It was only in 1948 census report they are called "*Adivasi*". And only in 1950 for the purpose of special treatment in Constitution of India they were categorized as "Scheduled Tribe". There is no uniformity in the characterization of Scheduled Tribes all over the country (Singh, 2011).

The constitution of India enables the President to specify people group in to tribe and it was this administrative expediency and political opportunism in independent India that not only created mess with Tribal definition and their identification but has also dominated the listing and delisting of communities as Scheduled Tribes and Others for the past 60 years (Singh, 2011).

There is no referable precise and satisfactory definition of the term "tribe" or "tribal" in the history of social science, particularly in India. One of the reasons is that in the ancient Indian languages, there was no term equivalent to the term tribe. There is mention of many communities, which are considered as tribes in the ancient literature of India but without a definition (Majumdar, 1992). In the literature of contemporary social sciences too, the term is just used to denoting a certain group of people but without defining them. Some of the definitions mentioned below will help the reader to understand the gravity of its deviation from appropriateness to inappropriateness and attached to certain people groups against their knowledge and concern.

2. Definition of the term "Tribe/Tribal" in India

The commonly used adjectival form "Tribal" is etymologically derived from a Latin word *tribus* (*tri* + *bhu-our* or *bu* = to be) which was basically used to identify or differentiate the three basic divisions of the Roman people, namely: Tintienses, Ramnenses and Luceres (Micropedia, 1979). There was no derogatory connotation as such as it is now. It had a purposeful concept and clear description, basically used for the division of Roman citizens for the purpose of taxation, military conscription and census collection. All Roman citizens were enrolled in one or other of the tribe (Three divisions). Now unfortunately in India the same term is used to identify and categorize certain bulk of people groups with attached derogatory meanings such as backward, uneducated, and uncivilized and so on. Majumdar is right in saying that though it was not originally used to indicate small technologically backward communities, the sense of backwardness has accreted to the term tribe only when it came to be used to denote peoples who are at present time denoted by the same term. As time passed by this term has been used to identify certain people groups with attached derogatory meanings from positive to negative and appropriate to inappropriate and so on (Yimchunger, 2006). Such a great shift from original meaning and description, therefore, is a matter of remorse for the people who are called now by the name "tribal". According to Dube, it was used at one time to denote a bewildering variety of social categories that were neither analogous nor comparable. In later usage it tended to be restricted only to some people



groups who were described as untouchables, the aboriginals and the primitive groups. At no stage however, did we have a clear set of indicators of tribal-ness (Dube, 1977).

It seems people in India do not try to see and exhume intended purpose of its application and its usage mainly in Indian constitution. Thus it is intentionally distorted and that becomes a problem and hindrance which creates barrier between person to person and the ideals enshrined in the preamble of our Indian constitution remains aloof from actualizing. The meaning of the term tribe is derogated which means primitive people living in the hills and forests, the original but not highly developed inhabitants. They were named like: *We-jati* (out caste and others) *Van Vasi* (Forest dwellers), *Pahardi* (hill dwellers), *Janjati* (folk People) and *Adivasi* (First settlers). This is how one can recognize the intensity of deviation of the term tribe from its original intended meaning (Thanzauva, 2000). The Simla Seminar, (1969) hailed as “The Great Congress of Tribal Situation” too, failed to arrive at a concrete definition except analyzing the tribal situation without defining who they are? The “People of India Project” identified and described various communities in the country, but this ambitious project too could not present conceptual clarity. Even K. S. Singh – one of the top authorities of the project on such conceptualization just says that the communities generally identify themselves as such and are identified as such by others in terms of occupation, endogamy, identity, etc (Singh, 1992). Later in his monumental work, he writes saying any discussion of tribes in India has to proceed from the assumption that a tribe is an administrative and political concept in India (Singh, 1994).

The commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India for the year 1952 defined the term “Tribe” and recommended the same to the government of India for the practical articulation as follows: “Tribals are people who live in the forests and jungles away from the civilized world. They belong to Negrito, Austroloid, or Mongoloid stocks. They speak the same Tribal language or dialect and they profess primitive religion known as Animism. They follow primitive occupations like hunting, gathering etc. They are largely carnivorous-flesh and meat eaters. They live either naked or semi-naked using tree barks or leaves. They love for drinks and dance and spend their life with nomadic habits (Singh, 1972).

It makes one to think the definition given by the commissioner which is a typical case of fiction-creation by the government officers. And therefore in Indian System being a tribe means a person remaining outside of state and civilization than attaining a definite stage and co-exists with the state and civilization (Thomas, 2006). In this juncture literature produced on them by the outsiders like Anthropologists, historians and writers using the existing exhaustive reviews, definitions and terms may not be acceptable to the native people. This calls for an urgent rewriting and detribalizing the history of so called “tribals” in India from native perspective and ultimately ends with deconstructing tribe/tribal in India. And this is definitely a post-colonial/oppositional reading of the master narratives.

3. Post-colonial reading of the term “Tribe/Tribal” in India

The Imperial culture was considered superior to that of indigenous cultures especially in Asia and Africa. The colonizers were of the strong belief that they knew others and they defined who the others were. This assumption led them to colonize countries and annex them as their own. This ‘knowing’ of others cemented the Imperial dominance and it became the mode by which ‘colonized’ increasingly persuaded to know themselves as they were subordinate to Europe. But post-colonial reading refers to a period from the very beginning of colonialism. It is a re-reading and oppositional reading that is reading differently what has been written. So one should understand it as a continuing process of deconstruction and reconstruction. It is a radical rethinking and reformulation of forms of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by colonialism and western domination (Prakash, 1992). This can historically analyze the historical events and its interpretations using the methodology of either oppositional reading or re-reading whichever is applicable in a particular text or situation (Louis, 2000).

The contribution of this methodology is the restoration of the subject, status of the people who were either silenced or taken away for granted by elitist discourses. In such a kind of research what happens is deconstruction of colonial historiography and reconstruction of newer history that is peoples’ history. The imbalance is set right by counter-balancing history through re-reading and re-writing history while considering the nature, role and function of the people. It is also to be noted that by its very virtue re-reading of history is liberative. And its objective is to bring to the fore a perspective that has been missing. This is not to dominate others



rather to impart their qualities to others. This struggle will bring real freedom to the people and it will open a new front in their struggle for freedom. This will repeal and rebuild the past for present sustenance which sometimes to reject and disown all master narratives.

In this process of writing so called "tribals" history people become the source, inspiration and subjects of their own history which becomes a need for a better radical reorientation and sociological thinking to arise out of and adapt to the historical, social, economic, cultural and political as well as religious settings in which they live. Here people become the change agents (Tandon, 1983). This takes people along in developing history where people do not simply become objects but also subjects, not acted upon merely but also become actors. This will give rise to a new ideology to the colonized, with the new found independence, based on different values and concepts. This process will ultimately safeguard and strengthen the specificity of Indian secularism, which is an absolutely necessary for the Indian communities to know how to relate themselves with one another and work together for the promotion of social peace and national unity emphasizing individual freedom, human unity and societal renewal.

History however was often tailored to suit the tastes and conveniences of the dominating class. And the role of the common people, the colonized and marginalized is neglected in making the history. Thus a historian's task is to explain how one understands oneself and others in a given context on the basis of what historian discerns to be the historical fact. When a historian considers a text she/he strives not only to investigate the context within which the text has been produced but also recognizes any biased therein. So that s/he can understand it and overcome the same and come out with the positive and liberative narratives which will end up with deconstruction of colonial historiography particularly with tribe/tribal in India.

It is important for one to maintain his or her Identity in the society as a composite whole (Sen, 2006). According to Downs, identity is the category that provides the most helpful integrative principle that strengthens a consciousness of ecumenism in the society (Downs, 1992). In such a context, of course, identity politics is an important means of emancipating the marginalised groups. Therefore, the re-thinking and reconstruction of one's identity requires a self-critical approach that does not debilitate one's capacity to learn (Giri, 2001). Such an approach is necessary to transcend the essentialization of identities and overcome any constriction to freedom and choice. In the tune of Sebastian Karotempel identity is a quest for dignity and identity as human beings created in the image of God. This identity is inevitably a relational reality in the society at large.

Social status of a person or family in a society can be achieved during his or her lifetime as a result of the exercise of knowledge, ability, skill and/or perseverance. And this status refers to social stratification on a vertical scale neither stagnant nor downward. But unfortunately so called tribal in India are not considered accordingly. For Hindus a cow can attain upward status in the society than a person called tribal in spite of his/her great achievements and knowledge and wisdom. In this juncture the sayings of an anthropologist B.S.Cohn comes true that India is a collection of castes and Brahmins are the preserver as well as intellectual superior to all castes and races. They not only decide social status of Hindus but also non-Hindus in Indian Society (Ketkar, 1998).

In this context as long as one maintains his/her status as Tribal, he or she gives life to the caste system. Liberation, identity and dignity become remote reality in Indian Society. Thus one has to strive hard to get rid of it by rejecting the imposed designation and all the benefits attached to it and impound one's own name and fame with new found independence, dignity and identity. This may be implied to the term Dalit and Dalit Theology too.

4. De-constructing the term "Tribe/tribal" in India

The so called tribal population is spread all over India living in the forests, hills and also in plains. They differ considerably from one another in race, language, culture and beliefs and present a spectacle of striking diversity. It is this diversity marked by varied social characteristics and diverse culture, traditions and linguistic traits that lends trustee to the cultural mosaic of India. In their dividend in to the geo-political situation of their isolation in the lofty mountains, roaring rivers, deep valleys and dense forests and some of them in plains and islands have been made prey and exposed to various forms of exploitations, deprivations, suppression, subjugation and human rights violation both at regional and national levels. And thus majority of them remained illiterate, uneducated, unsophisticated, down trodden, marginalized, poor and destitute.



In the midst of that they have developed their own society where they allowed themselves to be governed by their own primordial and customary traditional laws and rituals, caring for each other and for the natural resources and forced to their own fate. They are as better as anybody else and never be the lower grade of human beings. They have the civilization having all sorts of work culture. They have priests, teachers, religious leaders, manual workers and business people within the frame work of their system. They should not be compared with any other civilization and given defilement in to their dignity and identity. In this light of such perception, how can a tribal society be projected in contrast with modern society as pre-industrial, pre-literate, pre-historic, uncivilized and folk society which legitimizes a sort of humiliation and inferiority complex? (Thanzauva, 2000).

According to the International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) so called "tribals" have their own historical self-understanding about themselves over against the derogatory and discriminatory connotation. They are people with distinct historical, political and cultural identities. They are united by their histories as distinct societies, by their languages, laws, traditions and unique spiritual and economic relationships with their lands and territories. It is commonly accepted and understood that the term 'Tribe' has not derived from those who are being called tribal rather imposed on them in against their own name and fame. In fact, along with colonization and spread of Christianity the use of the term Tribal became more popular and later it was imposed by the constitution of India (Yimchunger, 2006).

The Ethnographic study conducted by H.H. Riseley in Bengal served as a basis for the 1901 census in India and in that census many people groups were misplaced and some groups were under placed in the caste-hierarchy. The vague definition of Tribe first appeared in that year of 1901 in India, which says "*The Tribe is a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name which as a rule does not denote any specific occupation and who claim common descent from a mythical or historical ancestor and occasionally from an animal, who usually speak the same language and occupying a definite tract of the country and not necessarily practicing endogamy*" (Risley, 1903). Then it acquired a systematic character after 1931 census. It is to be mentioned that the concern in India was more with the identification rather than the definition of Tribes and scientific considerations were never allowed to displace administrative or political ones. As Beteille says that those who engaged in census or scheduling the Tribes had their own conceptions of tribe which were neither clearly formulated nor systematically applied. Therefore it has no strong grounding and academic input in the definition to exercise and to justify the term tribe. It is also evident that the terms like animists, animism and Tribal religion have been used as classificatory marks in opposition to caste though the terms lacked the conceptual clarity. The International Labor Organization did not find any exclusiveness in the definition and uses of both Tribes and Indigenous people simultaneously (Roy, 1998).

So called "tribals" are highly spiritual and religious people yet their culture and religious tradition is never been accepted by the main line Government in any calendar for the observation as holiday day. Hardly any male or female of so called "tribals" has become the subject of study in the academics rather they are asked to study about alien aspects, alien culture and alien life style which sometimes create confusion to the total life of so called "tribals". Western education system in one way has forced them to forget their past, neglect their language, art and culture. Every history of "tribals" is at stake. This is a known fact to everybody. Since most of them have no written documents and literature, outsiders have made use of that opportunity to produce the literature on them from their own perspective and thus the ground reality of the so called "tribals" is not manifested.

The common assertion, therefore, is that there are no "tribals" in the region as far as the name is concerned; and none of the communities like to be called or identified as "tribals", except in the context of claiming constitutional provisions for privileges. They never consider themselves as "tribal" but identify with their racial names. In fact, the most of the communities officially referred to as ST have long before moved away from the tribal stage of development. There are now hardly isolated primitive communities in the country where definition of "tribal" can fit into. Many of the communities have been exposed to the process of modernization right from the British days even much more so than that of other communities of other Indian States (Nag, 2002). In theological circles too, there are strong reactions to the pejorative use of the term "tribal". The common contention in all the writings is that the appellative "tribal" is an imposition of anthropologists, missionaries and Indian Constitution that carries negative meanings. However, despite of derogatory connotations, some of the proponents of "Tribal Theology" like Longchar and Thanzauva have retained to use the term "tribe" or



"tribal" for time being with certain justifications (Longchar, 2000). According to Syiemlieh, their stance concerning its temporary use poses serious questions. He finds a number of flaws as regards such a continued use of the term tribe.

The term Tribe therefore in India has no proper explanation and thus has limited scope of application to the diverse situations of the population. It suggests the use of Community in place of Tribe to designate a group. There is no disagreement among the scholars of Tribal Studies that the concept of Tribe is a colonial legacy. The consciousness of the Europeans to situate the self against others got favorable wind in a political situation which involved the dominance of the white people of the colonial power. Naturally the conceptual apparatus of categorizing people as "Tribe" lost the generality and specificity of its application to cross-cultural situations across the globe which is in diversities.

5. Concluding remarks

It is clear from above discussion that so called "tribals" are not "tribals" but they are people group like any other people groups or communities. One of the most common arguments is that as far as the racial history is concerned, the so called "tribals" in India cannot be identified with the term tribal any more. Many studies have shown that there is little scientific basis on which the present categorization of "Scheduled Tribe" (constitution of India) may be defended. Because the exclusion or inclusion of a particular group reflects political mobilization rather than a neutral application of the criteria. The problem in India is to identify the people group rather than to define the people group. Thus in India the term "Tribe" is an inadequate explanatory to identify a group as tribe. At the same time the term tribe is a time-neutral and not being elastic enough to accommodate upward movement of the smallest unit of the social organization of the people group over time and again. So it is suggested that the use of the term "community" is an ideal concept instead of tribe.

The term tribal is not the part of culture rather politically motivated administrative word. Thus probably the Tribal theology is not encouraged any more. People should not use the term tribal attached to their name, community or identity instead should use their own traditional name and identity. Rejection of the use of term tribal by the so called "tribals" will give rise the liberation from below perspective which has been a remote reality from above perspective since long.

In theological circles too, there are strong reactions to the pejorative use of the term tribal. The common contention in all the writings is that the appellative tribal is an imposition of outsiders that carries negative meanings. In India, in the eyes of the dominant community it denotes untouchability and the servile class of Hindu society irrespective of a tribal being highly elevated from all realms.

One may react to the definition of tribal as suggested by many saying that "tribals" are living in the hills and forests outside the civilized society. According to M. Banarjee "tribals" are those people who eat food in *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) leaves, drink water in earthen wares and sleep on mats made of date leaves. Then one can question that what is civilization? What determines it? In real sense, civilization does not mean living in beautiful houses, palace, eating scimptions food or wearing better dress and so on. It is one's creativity, thinking and humbleness, love etc. In relation to discovery and inventions, so called "tribals" are also no less good. Since they have local doctors, discover medicines from the nature and they can invent new ideas according to the need. In spite of that invaders derogated some people groups and named them "tribals", if so, what name should the "tribals" give to those invaders and whether invaders and Indian constitution will accept that?

Before the advent of British Rule so called "tribals" were neglected and oppressed to the worst possible ways and degrees by their neighbors. According to Bishop Dr. Nirmal Minz there was never made an attempt to improve the educational, medical and economic conditions of the aboriginals by the caste ridden Hindu society but the first step was taken by the British Government in the 19th century and even the British Government became the instrumental in helping the exploitative pattern of life, granting legal or semi-legal sanctions to all became advantage to the "non-tribals". As a result so called "tribals" remain isolated as "driven ones" from the aggressors till the date. Bishop Nirmal Minz further says that "tribals" are also considered a "burden" to the so called advanced/cultured/civilized society in India. Hatred and bitterness have created a wide socio-cultural gap between so called "tribals" and non-tribals. The loss of confidence has created mistrust so great and deep that most of the so called "tribals" have taken it for granted that no good can be done for them by any non-tribals in India rather exploitation, domination and irreparable human relationship will continue.



In this context a Christian responsibility is mainly to focus on human rights and social justice. Bible is a text of liberation or we can say that liberation is one of the major themes of the Bible. The Exodus from Egyptian bondage was the foundational narrative of the Jewish nation and Jesus inaugurated his ministry by announcing that he had come to release the oppressed and captives as well as recovery of sight to the blind helping them to go free (Luke 4:18). The theologians should rethink the entire theological enterprise, setting out a new way to do theology with proper insertion and exclusion of terms, concepts and ideology to recover an integrated vision of the gospel as a message of liberation from every kind of oppression and ultimately into the glorious freedom of the "children of God" (John 1:12; Romans 8:21).

One should be proud of being a Christian than being a tribe/tribal. Because a Christian is empowered to be the light of the nation but to become a tribal is a burden of the nation and remain "defeated people" in India. As long as caste system prevails in India citizens will never experience freedom and liberation. According to Charles Dias the modern education system is continuation of colonial legacy of terms and concepts with oppressive quality inherent in it. Be it s/he a civil officer or military officer, a doctor or an engineer cannot escape from its derogative meaning of being called tribe or tribal. Therefore it is a failure of an Indian Constitution which was to see to the welfare of the so called "tribals" and suggest ways and means to bring them at par with the other developed Indian Communities remains a myth. Without a creative interaction between caste-ridden Indian society and the casteless and classless society, the development of India as a nation in unity in diversity can become a remote reality.

In this case why can't one think of coming out of it and stick to the identity as Christian or his/her own traditional nomenclature is a big challenge ahead of us. This liberation campaign should start from below since it is not possible from above perspective due to its attachments to befits as well as politicians for the vote banks. Same is true to some theologians who are benefited out of its galvanization.

Thus revitalizing thrust of liberation from all perspective is an urgent call. To do so rewriting peoples' history becomes mandatory. And this education will become a powerful tool in liberating oppressed masses in general and so called "tribals" in particular from their oppression, exploitation and backwardness. For that one has to go back beyond the colonial British history in India and one has even to go back to the pages of prejudiced Indian history to find the human values which existed and were practiced among the so called tribal people of India. This system of de-tribalization of so called "tribals" in India could become powerful instrument for liberation, dignity and identity of people groups and ultimately lead towards assimilation or proper identification in a greater Indian society.

Similarly the recent curriculum revision under the Senate of Serampore College has witnessed the regrouping of many subjects mainly with the History of Christianity in India where so called "tribals" are put in the center which was not the case before. In line with that our Theological education system should fight for liberation of people here in this world. Tribal studies, *Dalit* Studies (subaltern) should not be allowed under same nomenclatures. These studies remain as pretensions for liberation to masses but in reality subjugate people group generation to generation. Those who expertise on these areas may benefit maximum but ground reality remains the same. So what has been achieved after being many years of having Tribal Theology, *Dalit* Theology and so on in our nation? Is there any single person either of *Dalit* or Tribal who has been assimilated in to caste group due to his education or development?

A Christian becomes liberated and becomes light to the world. Jesus has liberated and also given the elements of liberation to be continued. Image of a Christian is never underestimated rather gained as royal priest and royal nation. In this context it is important to note that the world values survey on Indian Human Development reports that though Christians in India are minority but they stand first in overall development in every sphere of life comparing to Hindus and Muslims. If this is the case then one should be proud of being Christian and strive to remain Christian but nothing else. This should be the bold theological vision for Christians in the days ahead.

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