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Dynamic Concept of Tribes in India: A Historical Excursion

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Abstract: *In India, tribals are generally called 'Adivasis' as they are believed to be the original inhabitants of this land who continue maintain their distinct territorial and cultural identity. The history of India has been influenced by its tribal people to a degree far out of proportion to their numbers from the Vedic to the British period. Tribals are notable for their adaptations to their physical environment. They have a symbiotic relation with the natural setting. The present article aimed at highlighting the changing concept of Tribes in India from the Vedic to present period. This article presents an overview of a dynamics of change among the tribes of India, Constitutional provisions, Article 342, criteria for specification as Scheduled Tribe, religion is no bar for specifying a person or tribe or a community as a scheduled tribe, historical background and procedure for inclusion and the article end with conclusive remark that the tribals are integral part of Indian-civilization and possess a very rich cultural heritage. Their cultural heritage reflected in diversities of their languages and physical characteristics is unique. It has survived through the ages.*

Keywords: *Scheduled Tribe, Tribes, Article 342, Aborigines, India.*

Introduction:

Indian tribes are the autochthonous people of the land who are believed to be the earliest settlers in Indian peninsula. In India, tribals are generally called 'Adivasis' as they are believed to be the original inhabitants of this land who continue maintain their distinct territorial and cultural identity. Bulks of the tribals are believed to be the descendants of Dravidians who inhabited the Indian sub- continent before arrival of Nordic people, called Aryans. Tribal populations representing ancient races and civilizations, following different faiths and practising diverse cultures are found in almost all parts of the world. Tribals are called variously in different countries. For instance, in the United States of America, they are known as 'Red Indians', in Australia as 'Aborigines', in the European countries as 'Gypsies', in the African and Asian countries as 'Tribals' (Beteille, 1986; Jaiswal, 2019).

The history of India has been influenced by its tribal people to a degree far out of proportion to their numbers from the Vedic to the British period. Victory of Rama, the King of Ayodhya over Ravana, the King of Lanka, with the help of Banar tribe during Vedic period, effective use of the Bhil tribe by Maharana Pratap of Udaipur in Rajasthan against the Mughal emperor, Akbar during the Mughal period, protracted guerilla warfare for effective resistance

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of entry of the British into tribal areas of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Parganas (now part of Jharkhand state) by the people from Munda, Oraon, Santhal, Ho, etc., tribes and successful struggle of Naga and other tribes in the North-Eastern region against the British to defend their territory can be cited as some of the turning points of history. Despite changed circumstances, some tribes are still known for their bravery and sustain the customs and traditions of organizing exciting contests in martial arts, sports and athletic activities to show their courage and skills (James, 2001).

Tribals are notable for their adaptations to their physical environment. They have a symbiotic relation with the natural setting. They have unique love for their homeland, its forests, hills, rivers, etc; They have integrity of spirit deeper than conscious reasoning. It is very difficult to understand their love for their homeland which amounts to mystical identification with nature. They are peace-loving and their feelings are true. All this, in a way not subject to analysis, is a part of their religion which is known as animism. The natural setting is jointed with their own spirit in mystical communion. Their love for nature and the solidarity of community find expression in various forms of arts, dance and rituals. They have natural gifts of various handicrafts, hunting skills and martial skills (Bhagabati, 2001).

The ancient and medieval sources of information including the Vedic and the Epic literature mention various tribes like the Bharatas, the Bhils, the Kollas, the Kiratas, the Kinnaras, the Kiris, the Matysas, the Nisadas and the Banars. Prior to the introduction of the caste system during Brahminical Age, people were divided into various tribes. A tribe was homogeneous and self-contained unit without any hierarchical discrimination. Each tribe enjoyed equal status. With the growing need of protection and defence, each tribe was organized under a Chief. The most capable person was elected the chief by the members of the tribe. Gradually, the chief started wielding power over his people and assumed certain privileges for himself. He was a duly recognized military leader whose skill in war and defence was considered essential for his continuance as the chief of the tribe. This process heralded the emergence of republics and monarchies. The tribes were associated with large kingdoms, republics and monarchies. Each tribe had its own system of administration. There was decentralization of authority among the tribes. The traditional tribal institutions were vested with legislative, judicial and executive powers. The Maniki and the Munda system in

Singhbhum and the Manjhi and the Parganait systems in Santhal Parganas of Jharkhand are some of the existing instances of the traditional tribal institutions. These are headed by tribal chiefs who still exercise considerable influence over social, economic and religious affairs of their respective tribes (Verma, 2018; Jaiswal, 2019).

Etymologically, the term 'tribe' derives its origin from the Latin word *tribus* meaning three divisions comprising social, political and economic systems. For Romans, the tribe was a political division. In the West, as also in India, the term tribe had totally different connotation than what is prevalent now. The tribe was the highest political unit comprising several districts which in turn were composed of clans. It occupied a definite geographical area and exercised effective control over its people. Permanent settlement in a particular area gave geographical identity to a tribe. The territory under the domain of a particular tribe was generally named after it. It is believed that India derived its name, Bharat from the mighty Bharata tribe. Similarly, the vast Matsya Kingdom, covering eastern part of existing Rajasthan which flourished in the sixth century B.C. was identified with the Matsya tribe. Even today, there are a number of tribes which continue to maintain their territorial and cultural identity. For example, the states of Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura in the North-

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East, are named after the Mizo, Naga and Tripuri tribes respectively. Similarly, Santhal Pargans in Jharkhand, Gondwana covering parts of Chattisgarh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh and Lahaul, Swangla and Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh are named after their tribal inhabitants viz., the Santhals, the Gonds, the Lahaulas and the Kanuaras respectively (Bindu, 2011; Verma, 2018).

With the growth of nationalism in Europe, the term tribe came to denote a race of people within a given territory. Western writers on India, generally called orientalist, followed by some anthropologists and sociologists in India now use the term tribe in that connotation. The tribes in India broadly belong to three stocks namely, the Negritos, the Mongoloids and the Mediterranean. The Negritos are believed to be the earliest inhabitants of the Indian peninsula. They have almost disappeared. However, some traces of Negritos are still found among the tribals of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, known as the Onges, the Great Andamanese, the Sentinelese and the Jarawas and also in Kerala among the Kaders, the Irulars and the Paniyans. Their identifying features are dark skin, curly hair, broad nose and medium height. The Mongolid race is represented by the tribal people of the Sub-Himalayan region. They may be divided into two categories, namely, the Palaeo Mongoloids and the Tibeto Mongoloids. The Palaeo Mongoloids are represented by the tribes in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur. The Tibeto Mongoloids are represented by the tribals living in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. They are believed to have migrated from Tibet. They have typical eyes and facial features. They speak Monkhmer and Tibeto-Burmese dialects (Pathy, 1974; Verma, 2018).

The Mediterranean people form a bulk of the tribal population and are generally known as the Dravidians. Dravidian is, however, the name of the language spoken by these people and has no ethnic significance. The tribes believed to be belonging to the Dravidian race are found in the Chhotanagpur Plateau, the Rajmahal Hills region, the Aravalli ranges, the Central Vindhya, the Deccan Plateau region and Nilgiri Hills. Dravidian language still survives not only in southern India where Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada are its leading representatives, but also in Central India where its traces are found in the dialects spoken by the Oraons, the Gonds, the Mundas, the Khonds and the other tribes. The Dravidians are presumed to be of two stocks, the Kolarians who speak a dialect called Mundari and the Dravidians proper whose languages are represented by Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada. The Mundas, the Santhals, the Oraons and other tribes inhabiting Chhotanagpur Plateau region are considered to be of the Kolarian stock. The Gonds, the Kandhs and other tribes belong to the Dravidian stock and

are found in Central Vindhya and the Deccan Plateau regions (Rath, 2006; Verma, 2018).

The Nordic people speaking Aryan language, generally called the Aryans, on their entry into Indian Peninsula from the North-West came in conflict with the Dravidians and called them the Dasyus. The term Dasyus was generally used for foes. There was a protracted struggle between the people of the two races and civilizations. The conquered Dravidians were reduced to a servile condition of the sudras by their Aryan conquerors. It explains the origin of the sudra varna which finds mention in the later hymns of the Rig Veda. A section of the Dravidians, who escaped defeat and did not surrender to the Aryans, continued to maintain their independent existence in the remote hills and forests. They are believed to be the forerunners of the various tribes in India (Singh, 2004; Rath, 2006; Verma, 2018).

The Aryans were followed by the Persians, the Greeks, the Sakas, the Huns and other hordes

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of nomadic tribes from Central Asia who also entered India from the North-West. In later period, there were periodical influxes in smaller groups of the Arabs, the Iranians, the Abyssinians, from East Africa and of the Tibeto-Burmans from Burma and Arakan regions. They came to plunder wealth and were not interested in settling down in India. They were followed by the Mughal invaders around eighth century who persisted in their inroads till the establishment of the Mughal empire. The tribes in different parts of India had to face the challenge of the Mughal and, in some place, of the local rulers too, which eventually resulted in substantial erosion of their authority. The tribals and their chiefs were harassed by the Mohammedan rulers. They unleashed a reign of terror on the Oraon, Munda and Ho tribes in Chhotanagpur and other areas. The Bhils of Western India too, suffered from Muslim invasions. They were forced to adopt Islam. Those who resisted were tortured and treated like beasts. The Minas in Rajputana fought the Mughals and the Rajputs but eventually lost their Kingdom. They continued guerrilla warfare but could not succeed in regaining their Kingdom. In Central India, the Gond dynasty which was firmly established Garha near Jabalpur had to fight the Mughals. The Gond rulers had ruled the Gondwana region for about two hundred years. Their declining power in Chand and other areas incapacitated them to face the two pronged attacks of the Mughals and the Marathas and by the end of eighteenth century the Gond dynasty had come to an end (Singh, 2004; Verma, 2018).

When the Mughals invaded South India, they forced the Banjaras, an enterprising tribe of North-Western India to employ their cattle for transporting their supplies. That is how the Banjaras migrated to Andhra Pradesh and other adjoining areas in the South. They have eventually settled down in the Deccan Plateau (Verma, 2018).

The declining authority of the tribal chiefs and increasing oppression of the Mughal rulers and their mercantile allies brought about a large scale conversion of the tribes to Islam. Some of the tribes although converted to Islam have continued to retain their tribal characteristics, for example, the Muslims of the Lakshadweep Islands and the Siddi Muslims of Gujarat. The tribal authority was substantially eroded by the Mughals, and its economic base was wrecked by the zamindars, contractors, petty revenue, forest and police officers.

The British, following the policy of mercantile colonialism, made serious efforts to penetrate into the tribal areas with a view to consolidate their position in the country. The tribals resisted any encroachment on their traditional habitats and the British had to use force very frequently to deal with them. But the British realized their folly and made re- conciliatory efforts by declaring the tribal areas as the non-regulatory areas and by according recognition to traditional system of managing their own affairs. However, they encouraged the missionaries who had already entered the tribal areas, apparently with a helping hand and a message of love and humanity. Some of the missionaries did really good work among the tribals in the field of education and health. In this process, a new class of exploiters represented by contractors, middlemen, zamindars, revenue and police officials who accompanied the missionaries ruthlessly exploited the tribals and shattered their traditional social and economic system. Gradually, some of their fertile lands were grabbed by the new immigrants. The tribals who were a happy-go-lucky lot were reduced to a state of virtual destitution due to exploitation by the 'newcomers' to their territories (Thakur, 1994).

For the first time, the British attempted to have classified information about the tribals. Despite difficult and inaccessible terrain, they conducted census operations in the tribal areas

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so as to assess their population and gather other information. In the Census Report of 1891, J.A. Bains, the Commissioner of Census, classified the castes according to their traditional occupation. Under the category of 'Agricultural and Pastoral Castes' he formed a sub-heading called 'Forest Tribes'. The members of 'Forest Tribes' were estimated to be nearly sixteen million. In the Census Report of 1901, they were classified as "Animists" and in 1911 as "tribal animists or people following tribal religion". In the Census Report of 1921, they were specified as "Hill and Forest Tribes" and their number was estimated to be 16 million. The 1931 census described them as "Primitive tribes". Schedule 13 to the Government of India Act, 1935 specified the tribal population as "Backward Tribes". However, in the Census Report of 1941, they were classified as "Tribes" only. Their total population was estimated to be 24.7 million (Census of India, 2011).

The term tribe, according to western writes, generally means an ethnic group, geographically isolated or semi isolated, identified with one particular territory and having distinct social, economic, cultural traditions and practices. In order to preserve their cultural integrity and inner values, tribals have developed some habit of quiet withdrawal. This habit is often misinterpreted for 'isolation' or 'aloofness' which is not correct. Self respect and trust are integral part of their culture. The tribals were not and are not prepared to compromise their values and culture. This was, perhaps, the main reason, a tribal wanted to be with his people, to preserve his inner values and his cultural integrity. To this desire he owes his remarkable record of survival, the preservation of his identity, through centuries of encroachment on his land. Numerous attempts to throw their dominant culture into the melting pot have been thwarted by their active and passive resistance mainly because they are not willing to accept subordination (Beteille, 1986; Jaiswal, 2013).

Constitutional Provisions

The expressions Scheduled Tribes has been assigned definite meaning under the Constitution. Article 366 (25) refers to Scheduled Tribes as those communities who are scheduled in accordance with Article 342 of the Constitution (Census of India, 2011). As per definition provided under Clause 25 of the Article 366 of the Constitution of India, the Scheduled Tribes means as following:

"Scheduled Tribes means such tribes, or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this Constitution." (Ahmad, 2004).

Article 342 of the Constitution reads as following-"Scheduled Tribes:

- (1) The President may with respect to any State or Union Territory, and where it is a State after consultation with the Governor thereof by public notification, specify the tribes, or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purpose of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that State or Union Territory, as the case may be.
- (2) Parliament may by law include in or exclude from the list of Scheduled Tribes specified in a notification issued under clause (1) any tribe or tribal community or part of group within any tribe or tribal community but save as aforesaid a notification issued under the said clause shall not be subsequent notification."

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From this, it may be observed that only those tribes who have been declared as such by the President through a public notification will be considered to be Scheduled Tribes. Accordingly, a person shall be held to be member of a Scheduled Tribe, if he or she belongs to a tribe which has been specified as such under any of the Presidential Orders issued under Article 342 and shall be eligible for the benefits provided under the Constitution. In other words, all Scheduled Tribes are tribes but all tribes are not scheduled tribes. For instances, certain nomadic tribes are not specified as Scheduled Tribes. Courts cannot add or subtract any entry in the Presidential Order (Singh, 1989).

Criteria for Specification as Scheduled Tribe

The Constitution does not spell out any criteria for specification of a person or community as Scheduled Tribe. But on the basis of Census reports since 1931 and reports of Lokur Committee and various other committees of the Parliament, the following main criteria have become well established for specifying a person or a community as Scheduled Tribe (Singh, 1994):

- Traditional occupation of a definite geographical
- area,
- Distinctive culture which includes whole spectrum of tribal way of life, i.e., language, customs, traditions, religious beliefs, arts and crafts, etc.,
- Primitive traits depicting occupational pattern, economy, etc. and
- Lack of educational and techno-economic development.

Religion no Bar

If a person claims to be Scheduled Tribe, he may profess any religion. Religion is no bar for specifying a person or tribe or a community as a scheduled tribe. However, in case of Scheduled Caste, the position is different. No person or caste professing a religion other than Hinduism, Buddhism or Sikhism can be specified as Scheduled Caste. If a person claims to be Scheduled Caste, he should profess either the Hindu, the Sikh or the Buddhist religion (Verma, 2018).

A person who is a member of Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe would continue to be even after his or her marriage with a person who does not belong to Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe. The list of Scheduled Tribes is state/ UT specific and a community declared as a Scheduled Tribe in a state need not be so in another state/ UT.

Historical Background

Tracing the historical background of the term Scheduled Tribe, as used in the Constitution, it may be stated that during the debates in the Constitution Assembly, Jaipal Singh, representing the tribal interest, had favoured the use of the term 'Adivasi' instead of "Scheduled Tribe". It was however, not accepted. The term Scheduled Tribe was unanimously adopted instead of adivasi. The reason, as explained by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Chairman, Drafting Committee of the Constitution, was that "the word Adivasi is really a general term which has no specific legal deure connotation. Whereas, the word scheduled Tribe has a

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fixed meaning, because it enumerates the tribes". In the event of the matter being taken to a court of law, there should be a precise definition as to who these Adivasis are. It was therefore, decided to enumerate the Adivasis under the term to be called "Scheduled Tribe" (Beteille, 1986).

Procedure for Inclusion

In June, 1999, the Government of India had approved guidelines for deciding claims for inclusion in or exclusion from the list of Scheduled Tribes. According to these approved guidelines, only those claims that have been agreed to by the concerned State Government, the Registrar General of India and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes will be taken up for consideration.

Whenever representations are received in the Ministry of Tribal Affairs for inclusion of any community in the list of Scheduled Tribes of a state/union territory (UT), the Ministry

forwards the same to the concerned state government/UT administration for recommendation as required under Article 342 of the Constitution. If the concerned State Government/ UT recommends the proposal, then it is sent to the Registrar General of India (RGI). The RGI, if satisfied with recommendation of the State Government / UT, recommends the proposal to the Central Government. Thereafter, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs refers the proposal to the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes for their recommendation. If the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes also recommends the case, the matter is processed for the decision of the Cabinet. Thereafter, the matter is put up before the Parliament in the form of a Bill to amend the Presidential Order. The Parliament alone is empowered to include or exclude from the list of the Scheduled Tribes. Once the list is approved by the Parliament, the same cannot be changed by any executive order of the Centre or the state. The courts cannot interfere with the list (Verma, 2018).

In case, there is a disagreement between the views of the state government / UT and the RGI, the views of the RGI are sent to the state Government / UT for reviewing or further justifying their recommendation. On receipt of the further justification/ clarification from the state government / UT administration, the proposal is again referred to the RGI for comments. In such cases where the RGI does not agree to the point of view of the state government / UT administration, the Government of India may reject the said proposal. Claims that neither the RGI nor the concerned state government / UT administration have supported are rejected. Similarly, those cases where the State Government and the RGI favour inclusion / exclusion, but not supported by the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes are also rejected.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it may be seen that in post Independence period the concept of a tribe has undergone a change from that of a socio-political unit of olden days to a community now identified with poverty, illiteracy and backwardness specified as scheduled tribe under the Constitution of India. Centuries old exploitation and oppression has attributed to loss of their economy with a perceptible effect on their culture and community life. It is difficult to reconcile their glorious past with the present state of misery. However, grouping together of all the tribal communities as the Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution is a significant

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achievement. The concessions given to them during the transition period as a distinct ethnic, linguistic and cultural entity. The young generation, particularly the educated youth are waking up from centuries old slumber and making sincere efforts to face the new challenges (Verma, 2018; Jaiswal, 2019).

The tribals are integral part of Indian-civilization and possess a very rich cultural heritage. Their cultural heritage reflected in diversities of their languages and physical characteristics is unique. It has survived through the ages. The first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, while addressing a conference in 1952, had said, "I am not at all sure which way of living is better, ours or theirs. But in some ways, I am quite certain, theirs is better. A great deal of things can be learnt from their culture." These words are highly relevant in the present scenario for proper appreciation of the tribal culture and identity.

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