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Component II: Description of the Module

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1.1 Introduction

Indian society is known for its diverse and varied culture. As such, differences have been the hallmark of Indian society. These differences did not appear overnight rather they were the result of various long and historical processes (Xaxa, 2014). The major marks of differentiation are: caste, religion, region and language. Within these categories of disparity, the category of tribe was a later inclusion during the colonial regime.

Though the term tribe usually means a group of people having a common dialect and similar culture usually isolated from the mainstream culture but this definition holds no ground. Because of the changes in human societies, the above stated definition freezes community's association with tribes.

The question that arises here is who actually the tribal population is. What are the criteria to define and identify a tribal group? There are various questions that could be raised on the validation and identification of a tribal group. But in order to substantiate the current article, a few of the definitions of 'tribe' given by different scholars at different times and extracted from other sources are taken into account and some of them are as follows:

Merriam-Webster defines 'tribe' as:

"a social group comprising numerous families, clans, or generations together with slaves, dependents, or adopted strangers" (Merriam Webster).

In the concise dictionary of social and cultural anthropology, a tribe is defined as:

"a social group sharing common descent and a common language, territory, and culture. The term usually designates a historical community, or one in a non-western context, with possibly derogatory overtones. In modern anthropology, it is mostly used to describe political formations rather than ethnic ones" (Morris, 2012).

Ralph Linton (1936 cited in Huizer et al., 1979), an American cultural Anthropologist outlines tribe as:

"In the simplest form the tribe is a group of bands occupying contiguous territories and having a feeling of unity deriving from numerous similarities in culture, frequent friendly contacts, and a certain community of interest. More or less elaborate superstructures of formal tribal organization may be erected upon this basic condition, but the tribal groups can exist and function without them".

D.N Majumdar, an Indian anthropologist defines tribe as:

"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."

While according to Oxford Dictionary the term 'tribe' means

‘A social division in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader’ (Oxford Dictionary).

Xaxa has quoted an Indian Sociologist G.S. Ghurye stating:

“Tribes were backward Hindus as there were cut off from the main stream Indian population and also place them at the lower rung of evolutionary ladder” (Xaxa, 2014).

The main criteria of defining tribe basically involve few parameters namely the geographical isolation and the common dialect. Adding to it, few scholars made no distinction between a caste and a tribe in their definition of tribe. Ghurye called tribes as backward Hindus. A closer observation at the above definitions shows that there is a wide contestation and debate among academicians and scholars over the definition of the term ‘tribe’. So in that case, a concrete definition that places few groups under the umbrella term of tribe becomes a difficult task. But some features that seem to be highlighted in the above stated definitions which could be curtailed as the characteristics of tribe are as follows:

- A tribe is a social group;
- They should have a common dialect and culture; and
- Association of tribal society with customary laws and practices.

The usages of the term ‘tribe’ to designate people who differ from those of the mainstream civilization have been viewed as a colonial construction (Beteille 1995, Singh 1993 cited in Xaxa 2005). Although the category of tribe has been treated as a colonial construction, the underlying meaning and image of it as the category cannot be associated with colonialism. Moreover, in this regard, the discipline of Anthropology from its conception has been engaged in the study of tribal societies. The discipline of Anthropology was the outcome of colonial regime as colonial administrators were entrusted with the task of studying different groups of people who were not Western and they considered such groups as ‘others’. These viewpoints of colonial regime were reflected on the bulk of books that came out in the form of ethnographies and monographs. John Beattie, in his book, *Other Cultures: Aims, Methods and achievements in Social Anthropology*, shows how the engagement of the British with non-western society, which gave rise to the discipline of Anthropology, reflects the notion of tribes among western societies. Though other disciplines apart from anthropology have contributed to tribal study but anthropologists were the ones who ascribed different terms to designate a tribe and they were janajati, adivasi, ethnic group, indigenous group, and so on.

Here, the understanding of ‘tribe’ would be explained in the context of India. Furthermore, to add to it, one has to bring in different aspects of understanding the term ‘tribe’ and some of these aspects such as: the discourse on the usage of the term ‘tribe’, its history, the politics behind its conception, the question of identity and many more would be discussed in the latter sections of this module.

1.2 The discourse of the term 'Tribe'

There is still an ongoing debate on the question: “where the term ‘tribe’ was first conceptualized”. A section of the scholars believe that it was the British Administration who conceptualized the term, however there are other who refuse to accept that the term tribe was conceptualized by British Administration. Instead, they argue that the conceptual meaning of tribe was given in India long before British came to India.

1.3 Census and Religion

To understand the origin of the term ‘tribe’, one has to look at the census which played an important role in identifying as well as classifying people. The first all India census was taken in the year 1881 under British. In this census report, the term ‘forest tribe’ was used not to designate tribal communities rather it was placed under the broader category of agricultural and pastoral castes (Xaxa, 2014). While in the subsequent censuses, a similar trend of ascribing identity markers were seen where clubbing of tribal communities under a broader group was in vogue. The Census report of 1901 described tribes as ‘*groups who practiced animism*’; while the Census 1921 used the category ‘*hill and forest tribes*’ and in Census 1931 the term ‘*primitive tribe*’ was used. Although consecutive census surveys attempted to arrive at a definitive criterion for tribes, they were often either ambiguous or inadequate. In the writings of the British, a ‘tribe’ is referred to as a group, claiming descent from a common ancestor or one which lived in primitive and barbarous conditions (Xaxa, 1999).

T. K. Oommen’s article *Culture Change among the Tribes of Northeast India* states that in British Indian Census, the use of variable categories such as animist, naturist, primitive, etc. were used to indicate tribal religious affiliations. While the first census after India got independence from the clutches of the British regime abolished such categories but it sorted tribal groups in the categories of the major religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, thus nullifying the existentiarity of tribal-religious affiliations. Herein, the clubbing of tribal groups under major religious group denies the rights of the tribes to practice their own religion. The author also states that change in the nomenclature of a religious community does not bring about change in their religious beliefs and rituals. But the undeniable fact is that changes in nomenclature do bring in changes in the attitude of tribal groups towards their own religious affiliation.

1.4 The Administrative term- Scheduled Tribe

After India got independence from the clutches of British regime, the trend to typecast the tribal groups remained unchanged. These tribal groups are now clubbed under the administrative term, the Scheduled Tribe. President of India holds the ultimate authority to include or not any tribal group in the Scheduled tribe category.

There are certain conditions for a community to be included in the scheduled tribe category. Few of such conditions are the indications of primitive traits such as distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness. These conditions were not existent in the pre-independence

period however post-independence, these have become well established. It is also evident that Indian Constitution is following the same strategy as the British to identify tribes (Ministry of Tribal Affairs).

2.1 The question of Identity among the Tribals

According to the Census Report of 2001, tribal population in India was 8.2 percent only. In 2011 Census Report, the percentage share went by a small margin and thus stands at 8.6 percent (Census of India - 2011). These figures indicate that the tribal population of this country is relatively low.

The Anthropological Survey of India undertook a project titled “People of India - Project” which identified 461 tribal communities in India. The actual population of tribals, according to this project, stands at 67,583,800, thus constituting 8.08 per cent of the total population.

V. Xaxa (2005) in his article titled *Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India* states that the initial discourse of the tribal identity can be divided into two categories: in the first category tribal communities were integrated as the citizens of a nation state while in the other category, tribes trying to assimilate into the Hindu fold. Though the terms tribe and tribal identity have been imported from the British, however this identity has been internalized by the tribal communities. The identity of belonging to a tribal group now provides the marginalized people self-esteem and pride (Xaxa, 1999).

2.2 The notion of Identity

In this section, we will learn about identity and the importance of identity formation in the contemporary period. Basically, an identity is established and created through a series of differences that have been recognized socially. These differences become essential to its being. If they do not coexist as differences, one would not exist in its distinctness and solidity (Connolly, 1991 cited in Brown, 1995). While Karlsson (2000) states that we must look at identity that constructs the ‘other’, a splitting ‘between that which one is, and that which is other’. The idea that identities are never fixed within themselves, nor do they emerge from nowhere; they are constructed primarily in and through relations, and are always involved in a process of translating (Karlsson, 2000:19; Hall & Maharaj, 2001: 36 cited in Longkumer, 2010).

The definition of identity, according to the concise dictionary of social and cultural anthropology, is

“the combination of characteristics that collectively demarcate an individual or group, both to themselves and others. Anthropologists are interested not only in the features that people may feel give them a valid identity as individuals but also in the collective identities—of family, ethnicity, and nation—to which they subscribe” (Morris, 2012).

Identities are basically fluid in nature and as they are constructed and created, so in contemporary times various groups are coming up to demand their distinct identity

character. The question of identity has brought in various tribal identity movements. Some of the reasons behind such uprising are:

- The special provisions that are provided to the tribal groups by the state.
- The fear of losing their identity and culture and thereby losing their agency.
- The recognition and equal treatment of the state towards such marginalized groups.
- The fear of being assimilated with other groups.

Khan (2016) quotes Sumit Guha having stated that it were Anthropological and Sociological studies that build up the notion of tribe. Colonial anthropology in the 19th century and early 20th century played an important role in shaping the tribe as a category in India. After the foundation of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, British administrators, missionaries, travelers and anthropologists collected data on tribal and rural groups and wrote about their life and culture (ICSSR 1972 cited in Khan, 2016).

2.3 Identity and Development

For the Socio-economic and overall development of the Tribal people, special provisions and safeguards have been provided in the Constitution of India and some initiative have also been taken by the Government of India, including Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) strategy. The Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) strategy was aimed for the rapid socio-economic development of tribal people. The funds provided under the Tribal Sub Plan of the State have to be at least equal in proportion to the ST population of each State or UTs (NCST).

Although the agenda taken up by the State was to ensure active participation and equal rights to the marginalized people but this in a way created a rift among the tribes and non-tribes and also within the tribal groups.

In the line of nation development, Jawaharlal Nehru [1889–1964, the first Prime Minister of India] formulated the following five principles for the policy to be pursued in order to integrate the tribal population within the nation's '*pan-development dream*'. These five principles articulated by Nehru were:

1. Tribals should be developed along the lines of their own terms, and the imposition of alien values should be avoided and should be encouraged in every way their own traditional arts and culture.
2. The rights of tribals over land and forest should be respected.
3. Tribals should be trained so as to build team of their own people to do the work of administration and development. Introduction of too many outsiders into the tribal territory should be avoided.

4. Tribal areas should not be over administered or overwhelmed with a multiplicity of schemes rather work should be done in accordance to their social and cultural institution.
5. Results should be judged not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but by the human character that is evolved (Xaxa, 2014).

This shows that the Nehru devised to integrate the tribal population in the '*pan-India development project*'. The approach of integration unlike other approaches of isolation and assimilation undertaken by the state provided opportunities for the development of the community.

2.4 Case Study- Dimasas and their Struggle for identity

In order to understand the intricacies of tribal identity, politics, assertion of identity claims leading to intra-tribal and inter-tribal conflicts with present day context, a case study is provided in this section. The tribal group is from North East India where the issues of ethnic identities are on the rise so as to discuss the fallacies of the government and the people.

Dimasas are an ethnic group residing in North Eastern part of the Indian sub-continent. This ethnic group belongs to Tibeto-Burman linguistic and ethnic community. The term 'Dimasa' literally means the children or descendants of a big river meaning, 'the Brahmaputra'. In Dimasa, 'Di' means 'water', 'Ma' means 'big' and 'Sa' means 'children' (Bordoloi, 1984). Dipali Danda (1978) stated the literal meaning of the word Dimasa is river folk. The Dimasas are the most dominant ethnic groups in Dima Hasao (previously known as North Cachar Hills). Apart from Dima Hasao district in Assam, the members of this ethnic group are found in the neighbouring state of Nagaland (only in Dimapur).

Dimasas were not identified as a separate tribal group post-independence rather they were treated as a sub-tribe of the Kachari tribe. It was in the 1961 census where the Dimasas were finally classified as a separate tribe. This recognition did not come overnight instead people from this tribal group had to fight a long way in order to attain recognition. The present Autonomous District Council was inaugurated on 19th April, 1952 which was previously known as North Cachar District Council. The Dimasas have demanded to form a separate state but their plea for a separate state was not fulfilled, however North Cachar Hill was renamed recently as Dima Hasao. The Dima Hasao District Council comes under the provision of the Sixth Schedule of Constitution of India. This recognition of the Dimasas had brought unrest in the district as the minor tribal groups wanted further bifurcation of the district.

Dimasas are classified as Scheduled Tribe Hills (STH). However, the section of the people living in the plains districts of Barak Valley and Nagaon district are designated by the state of Assam as Scheduled Tribes Plains (STP). They are officially known as Barman Kacharis and Hojai Kacharis respectively, rather than Dimasa. Only those living in the hill districts of Dima Hasao (formerly North Cachar Hills) and Karbi Anglong are categorised as Dimasa. On the other hand, the Dimasas living in Nagaland are called Kacharis in official terms (Bathari, 2014).

While Dimasas distinguish themselves into four main groups: Dezuasa of Dimapur District of Nagaland; Dembrasa, living in Karbi Anglong and Nagaon Districts of Assam; Hawarsa of the Cachar District referred to themselves as Barmans or Burmans; and Hasaosa, Dimasa of the Dima Hasao District (Kolb, 2017). This inter-tribe differentiation stresses upon relooking at the connotation of the broader term Dimasas. Beteille (1986) rightly argues that the problem in India was that emphasis was placed on identification of tribes rather than that of defining them through scientific or theoretical considerations. In this regard, colonial anthropology in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century played an important role in shaping the tribe as a category in India (Khan, 2016).

Currently, the district faces numerous strikes called by various underground militant groups as well as other indigenous students group demanding for the bifurcation of the district as many tribal groups residing in the Dima Hasao District were not recognized by the state.

3.1 Conclusion

The issue of tribe and tribal identity can be discussed in length as there are varied viewpoints put forward by various researchers and scholars.

If one re-looks at the history of tribal identity formation and course of recent developments, the government policies for their socio-economic development can be also be taken into account. In this regard, census played a crucial role in stereotyping and localizing the identity of tribal population. Apart from this, there were other policy makers who were not discussed but they formed a fundamental part of current tribal identity formation. Moreover, clubbing one tribal group with another robs agency of any tribal group where one's identity gets sidelined.

Earlier the distinction of caste and tribe were not clear rather these were clubbed as the same. With the passage of time, this discourse of identifying tribe as caste was discarded. Beteille (1998) states that even the best ethnographers confuse tribe with caste. This in a way shows that the approach taken up by various scholars, such as G.S. Ghurye, was not appropriate to understand tribe in general. Thus it can be concluded that it was indeed a tough job for both scholars and researchers to conceptualize a definite definition of tribe.

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