

## 1. Details of Module and its structure

Module Detail	
Subject Name	Sociology
Course Name	Sociology 03 (Class XII, Semester - 1)
Module Name/Title	Tribes in India and tribal culture – Part 2
Module Id	lesy_10302
Pre-requisites	Sociology, concepts, social institutions, social change
Objectives	After going through this lesson, the learners will be able to understand the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Definition, Features &amp; Classifications of Tribe Society</li><li>2. Tribe in past independent Indian</li><li>3. Mainstream attitude towards tribes</li><li>4. National development vs. Tribes development</li><li>5. Tribes Identity</li></ol>
Keywords	Indian society, Social change, Social institutions, Caste, Tribes, Processes of social change

## 2. Development Team

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## Who are Tribes?

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

While caste is predominantly a socio-cultural group, a tribe is more a territorial group. It is a social group comprising numerous families, clans, or generations together, a group of persons having a common character, occupation, or interest. 'Tribe' is a term for communities that are very old, perhaps being among the oldest inhabitants of the sub-continent. According to Ralph Linton tribe is a group of bands occupying a contiguous territory or territories and having a feeling of unity deriving from numerous similarities in a culture, frequent contacts and a certain community of interests.

D.N Majumdar 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. Tribes in India have generally been defined in terms of what they were *not*. Tribes were communities that did not practice a religion with a written text; did not have a state or political form of the normal kind; did not have sharp class divisions; and, most important, they did not have caste and were neither Hindus nor peasants. The term was introduced in the colonial era. The use of a single term for a very disparate set of communities was more a matter of administrative convenience.

The term "**tribal** society" is used to refer to societies organized largely on the basis of social, especially familial, descent groups (such as clan and kinship). A customary tribe in these terms is a face-to-face **community**, relatively bound by kinship relations, reciprocal exchange, and strong ties to place.

But to summarise let us look at the **features of tribes in Indian context** :

- A tribe has least functional interdependence within the community.
- It is economically backward (i.e. primitive means of exploiting natural resources, tribal economy should be at an underdeveloped stage and it should have multifarious economic pursuits).
- There are geographically isolated.
- They have a common dialect.
- Tribes are politically organized and their community panchayat is influential.

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- A tribe has customary laws.

According to **Mandelbaum** the following characteristics of significant among Indian tribes:-

- Kinship as an instrument of social bonds.
- A lack of hierarchy among men and groups.
- Absence of strong, complex, formal organization.
- Communitarian basis of land holding.
- Segmentary character.
- Little value on surplus accumulation on the use of capital and on market trading
- Lack of distinction between form and substance of religion
- A distinct psychological bent for enjoying life.

### **Classifications of Tribal Societies**

In terms of positive characteristics, tribes have been classified according to their 'permanent' and 'acquired' traits. Permanent traits include region, language, physical characteristics and ecological habitat.

#### **Permanent Traits**

The tribal population of India is widely dispersed, but there are also concentrations in certain regions. About 85% of the tribal population lives in 'middle India', a wide band stretching from Gujarat and Rajasthan in the west to West Bengal and Orissa in the east, with Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and parts of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh forming the heart of this region. Of the remaining 15%, over 11% is in the North Eastern states, leaving only a little over 3% living in the rest of India. If we look at the share of tribals in the state population, then the North Eastern states have the highest concentrations, with all states except Assam having concentrations of more than 30%, and some like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland with more than 60% and upto 95% of tribal population. In the rest of the country, however, the tribal population is very small, being less than 12% in all states except Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. The ecological habitats covered includes hills, forests, rural plains and urban industrial areas.

In terms of **language**, tribes are categorised into four categories. Two of them, **Indo-Aryan** and **Dravidian**, are shared by the rest of the Indian population as well, and tribes account

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for only about 1% of the former and about 3% of the latter. The other two language groups, the **Austriac** and **Tibeto-Burman**, are primarily spoken by tribals, who account for all of the first and over 80% of the second group. In **physical-racial terms**, tribes are classified under the **Negrito, Australoid, Mongoloid, Dravidian and Aryan categories**. The last two are again shared with the rest of the population of India.

In terms of size, tribes vary a great deal, ranging from about seven million to some Andamanese islanders who may number less than a hundred persons. The biggest tribes are the Gonds, Bhils, Santhals, Oraons, Minas, Bodos and Mundas, all of whom are at least a million strong. The total population of tribes amounts to about 8.2% of the population of India, or about 84 million persons according to the 2001 Census.

### **Acquired Traits**

Classifications based on acquired traits use two main criteria – mode of livelihood, and extent of incorporation into Hindu society – or a combination of the two.

On the basis of **livelihood**, tribes can be categorised into fishermen, food gatherers and hunters, shifting cultivators, peasants and plantation and industrial workers. However, the dominant classification both in academic sociology as well as in politics and public affairs is the **degree of assimilation into Hindu society**. Assimilation can be seen either from the point of view of the tribes, or (as has been most often the case) from the point of view of the dominant Hindu mainstream. From the tribe's point of view, apart from the extent of assimilation, attitude towards Hindu society is also a major criterion, with differentiation between tribes that are positively inclined towards Hinduism and those who resist or oppose it. From the mainstream point of view, tribes may be viewed in terms of the status accorded to them in Hindu society, ranging from the high status given to some, to the generally low status accorded to most.

### **TRIBE – In post independent India**

The tribes in India have always been influenced by selective customs and traditions of the communities inhabiting the areas around them. One of the major influence from the neighboring community in all the areas has always been coming from Hindus.

During the 1960s scholars debated whether tribes should be seen as one end of a continuum with caste-based (Hindu) peasant society, or whether they were an altogether different kind of community. Those who argued for the continuum saw tribes as not being fundamentally

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different from caste-peasant society, but merely less stratified (fewer levels of hierarchy) and with a more community- based rather than individual notion of resource ownership. However, opponents argued that tribes were wholly different from castes because they had no notion of purity and pollution which is central to the caste system.

### **Caste tribe continuum**

According to Ghurye tribal people are backward Hindus differing only in degrees from the other segments of Hindu society. According to Andre Beteille there are certain commonly observed differences between tribes and castes. The tribes are relatively isolated as compared to the castes. They are world within itself having few external contact or relations. Tribes speak a variety of dialects which separates them from non tribes. They follow their own religion and practices which are not common in Hinduism.

On the other hand according to N.K Bose one can observe many similarities in customs, traditions and practices between tribes and castes and they are interdependent. For instance, marriage within the clan is forbidden both in the tribe as well as in the caste. Both generally don't encourage marriage outside the group.

Elwin argued for the recognition of separate social and cultural identity of tribal people. Government of India gives tacit recognition to this identity of keeping alive under constitution sanction their lists of Scheduled Tribe.



*A tribal village fair*

In short, the argument for a tribe-caste distinction was founded on an assumed cultural difference between Hindu castes, with their beliefs in purity and pollution and hierarchical

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integration, and 'animist' tribals with their more egalitarian and kinship based modes of social organisation.

By the 1970s all the major definitions of tribe were shown to be faulty. It was pointed out that the tribe-peasantry distinction did not hold in terms of any of the commonly advanced criteria: size, isolation, religion, and means of livelihood. Some Indian "tribes" like Santhal, Gonds, and Bhils are very large and spread over extensive territory. Certain tribes like Munda, Hos and others have long since turned to settled agriculture, and even hunting gathering tribes, like the Birhors of Bihar employ specialised households to make baskets, press oil etc. It has also been pointed out in a number of cases, that in the absence of other alternatives, "castes" (or non-tribals) have turned to hunting and gathering.

The discussion on caste-tribe differences was accompanied by a large body of literature on the mechanisms through which tribes were absorbed into Hindu society, throughout the ages – through Sanskritisation, acceptance into the Shudra fold following conquest by caste Hindus, through acculturation and so on. The whole span of Indian history is often seen as an absorption of different tribal groups into caste Hindu society at varying levels of the hierarchy, as their lands were colonised and the forests cut down. This is seen as either natural, parallel to the process by which all groups are assimilated into Hinduism as sects; or it is seen as exploitative. The early school of anthropologists tended to emphasise the cultural aspects of tribal absorption into the mainstream, while the later writers have concentrated on the exploitative and political nature of the incorporation.

Some scholars have also argued that there is no coherent basis for treating tribes as "pristine" – i.e., original or pure – societies uncontaminated by civilisation. They propose instead that tribes should really be seen as "secondary" phenomena arising out of the exploitative and colonialist contact between pre-existing states and non-state groups like the tribals. This contact itself creates an ideology of "tribalism" – the tribal groups begin to define themselves as tribals in order to distinguish themselves from the newly encountered others.

Nevertheless, the idea that tribes are like stone age hunting and gathering societies that have remained untouched by time is still common, even though this has not been true for a long time. To begin with, adivasis were not always the oppressed groups they are now – there were several Gond kingdoms in Central India such as that of Garha Mandla, or Chanda. Many of the so-called Rajput kingdoms of central and western India actually emerged through a process of stratification among adivasi communities themselves. adivasis often

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exercised dominance over the plains people through their capacity to raid them, and through their services as local militias. They also occupied a special trade niche, trading forest produce, salt and elephants. Moreover, the capitalist economy's drive to exploit forest resources and minerals and to recruit cheap labour has brought tribal societies in contact with mainstream society a long time ago.

There is a continuum between caste and tribe. According to Bailey, a caste society is hierarchical while a tribal society is segmentary and egalitarian. But in contemporary India both caste and tribe are being merged into a different system which is neither one nor the other. In caste system individuals generally pursue a definite occupation of their caste community, as caste is an occupational division of labour. In the tribes an individuals can pursue whatever profession they like/prefer as there is no fixed relation between their category and occupation they choose.

### **Mainstream Attitudes Towards Tribes**

Although the early anthropological work of the colonial era had described tribes as isolated cohesive communities, colonialism had already brought irrevocable changes in their world. On the political and economic front, tribal societies were faced with the incursion of money lenders. They were also losing their land to non-tribal immigrant settlers, and their access to forests because of the government policy of reservation of forests and the introduction of mining operations. Unlike other areas, where land rent was the primary source of surplus extraction, in these hilly and forested areas, it was mostly appropriation of natural resources – forests and minerals – which was the main source of income for the colonial government. Following the various rebellions in tribal areas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the colonial government set up 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' areas, where the entry of non-tribals was prohibited or regulated. In these areas, the British favoured indirect rule through local kings or headmen.

The famous isolation versus integration debate of the 1940s built upon this standard picture of tribal societies as isolated wholes. The isolationist side argued that tribals needed protection from traders, moneylenders and Hindu and Christian missionaries, all of whom were intent on reducing tribals to detribalised landless labour. The integrationists, on the other hand, argued that tribals were merely backward Hindus, and their problems had to be addressed within the same framework as that of other backward classes. This opposition dominated the Constituent Assembly debates, which were finally settled along the lines of a

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compromise which advocated welfare schemes that would enable controlled integration. The subsequent schemes for tribal development – five year plans, tribal sub-plans, tribal welfare blocks, special multipurpose area schemes all continue with this mode of thinking. But the basic issue here is that the integration of tribes has neglected their own needs or desires; integration has been on the terms of the mainstream society and for its own benefit. The tribal societies have had their lands, forests taken away and their communities shattered in the name of development.

### **National Development Versus Tribal Development**

The imperatives of ‘development’ have governed attitudes towards tribes and shaped the policies of the state. National development, particularly in the Nehruvian era, involved the building of large dams, factories and mines. Because the tribal areas were located in mineral rich and forest covered parts of the country, tribals have paid a disproportionate price for the development of the rest of Indian society. This kind of development has benefited the mainstream at the expense of the tribes. The process of dispossessing tribals of their land has occurred as a necessary byproduct of the exploitation of minerals and the utilisation of favourable sites for setting up hydroelectric power plants, many of which were in tribal areas.

The loss of the forests on which most tribal communities depended has been a major blow. Forests started to be systematically exploited in British times and the trend continued after Independence. The coming of private property in land has also adversely affected tribals, whose community-based forms of collective ownership were placed at a disadvantage in the new system. The most recent such example is the series of dams being built on the Narmada, where most of the costs and benefits seem to flow disproportionately to different communities and regions.

Many tribal concentration regions and states have also been experiencing the problem of heavy in-migration of non-tribals in response to the pressures of development. This threatens to disrupt and overwhelm tribal communities and cultures, besides accelerating the process of exploitation of tribals. The industrial areas of Jharkhand for example have suffered a dilution of the tribal share of population. But the most dramatic cases are probably in the North-East. A state like Tripura had the tribal share of its population halved within a single decade, reducing them to a minority. Similar pressure is being felt by Arunachal Pradesh.



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## **Tribal Identity Today**

Forced incorporation of tribal communities into mainstream processes has had its impact on tribal culture and society as much as its economy. Tribal identities today are formed by this interactional process rather than any primordial (original, ancient) characteristics peculiar to tribes. Because the interaction with the mainstream has generally been on terms unfavourable to the tribal communities, many tribal identities today are centred on ideas of resistance and opposition to the overwhelming force of the non-tribal world.



The positive impact of successes – such as the achievement of statehood for Jharkhand and Chattisgarh after a long struggle – is moderated by continuing problems. Many of the states of the North-East, for example, have been living for decades under special laws that limit the civil liberties of citizens. Thus, citizens of states like Manipur or Nagaland don't have the same rights as other citizens of India because their states have been declared as 'disturbed areas'. The vicious circle of armed rebellions provoking state repression which in turn fuels further rebellions has taken a heavy toll on the economy, culture and society of the North-eastern states. In another part of the country, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh are yet to make full use of their new-found statehood, and the political system there is still not autonomous of larger structures in which tribals are powerless.

Another significant development is the gradual emergence of an educated middle class among tribal communities. Most visible in the North-eastern states, this is now a segment beginning to be seen in the rest of the country as well, particularly among members of the larger tribal communities. In conjunction with policies of reservation (about which you will learn more in Chapter 5), education is creating an urbanised professional class. As tribal societies get more differentiated – i.e., develop class and other divisions within themselves – different bases are growing for the assertion of tribal identity.

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Two broad sets of issues have been most important in giving rise to tribal movements. These are issues relating to control over vital economic resources like land and specially forests, and issues relating to matters of ethnic-cultural identity. The two can often go together, but with differentiation of tribal society they may also diverge. The reasons why the middle classes within tribal societies may assert their tribal identity may be different from the reasons why poor and uneducated tribals join tribal movements. As with any other community, it is the relationship between these kinds of internal dynamics and external forces that will shape the future.

### **BOX 3.1**

Assertions of tribal identity are on the rise. This can be laid at the door of the emergence of a middle class within the tribal society. With the emergence of this class in particular, issues of culture, tradition, livelihood, even control over land and resources, as well as demands for a share in the benefits of the projects of modernity, have become an integral part of the articulation of identity among the tribes. There is, therefore, a new consciousness among tribes now, coming from its middle classes. The middle classes themselves are a consequence of modern education and modern occupations, aided in turn by the reservation policies...

*(Source: Virginius Xaxa, 'Culture, Politics and Identity: The Case of the Tribes in India', in John et al 2006)*