

"Unravelling Tribe: The Colonial Origins, Usage and Consequences of the Term 'Tribe' in India"

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical construction of the 'tribe' as a category in India, focusing on its colonial origins and subsequent consequences for Adivasi communities. By analysing the role of British ethnographers and colonial policies, the paper argues that the classification of Adivasi groups as 'tribes' was a deliberate strategy to justify colonial domination and control. The study traces the evolution of this category from its roots in Sanskritic texts to its consolidation during British rule. It further explores the impact of colonial representations on post-independence India, highlighting the enduring marginalization of Adivasi communities. By critically examining the historical and political context of the 'tribe' category, this paper seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts to deconstruct colonial legacies and empower Adivasi voices. The paper also traces the post-independence shift from the term "tribe" to "Adivasi," a move toward reclaiming agency and identity. While acknowledging the term's limitations, the paper argues that "Adivasi" has become a crucial tool for political mobilization and cultural preservation.

Keywords: Tribes, Sanskritic Representation, History. Colonial Legacy, Adivasi Identity.

Introduction

The term 'tribe' has long been used to categorize and differentiate certain communities from the mainstream population in India. During the British rule, the term was employed to describe groups that were perceived as fundamentally distinct from the rest of the mainstream Indian societies, based on their customs, traditions, and linguistic traits. However, the usage of 'tribe' in the Indian context is fraught with complexities, stemming from the lack of a concrete definition and the colonial agenda of controlling and marginalising Indigenous communities. The classification of non-caste communities as 'tribes' by British colonial officials and ethnographers is not merely an academic exercise but a deliberate act that served the imperialist agenda. This categorization has had severe

consequences, contributing to the marginalization of Adivasi (indigenous) communities in India. The term itself is loaded with assumptions and generalizations that have shaped both colonial and post-colonial perceptions of these communities. This paper seeks to unravel the origins and usage of the term 'tribe' within the Indian context, tracing its roots to colonial knowledge production and Sanskritic representations. By examining the contributions of British ethnographers and the colonial policies that ensued, this study aims to shed light on how these categorizations have continued into the present, affecting the social and political dynamics surrounding adivasi communities. This paper argues that the British categorization of adivasi communities as 'tribes' was both a product of colonial power dynamics and an extension of pre-existing local representations.

The usage of the term 'tribe' to capture the non-caste communities in India contains complexities at various levels due to the non-availability of concrete definitions (Xaxa 3; Kumari 182). The British officials, ethnographers and anthropologists have employed the term 'tribe' in India, as they did in every other colony to designate societies that feature striking diversity from the rest of the country. These differences exist in terms of customs, traditions and linguistic characteristics. In his introduction to *Being Adivasi*, G.N. Devy notes that the incapacity to load every local community that the British encountered in different continents gave rise to the production of terms such as 'aboriginal', 'Indians', 'indigenous' and 'tribes'. (xv). In the case of India, the term 'tribe' utilized by the British was and remains ambiguous, due to the inherent nature of seclusion as originally conceived in the term. Unlike other continents in India, the adivasis are not completely separated from the mainstream societies. Few of them have connected with mainstream societies through commerce and maintained their livelihood apart. Amita Kumari in her book chapter notes that the "idea of isolated existence in inhabitable regions with no contact with the mainstream society ... is more irrelevant in the context of the Indian situation" (184). In India, there are only tribes in transition to be found throughout the timelines, not fitting into the ideal conception of the term.

Regardless of their connectivity with the mainstream communities and heightened form of living style, the image perceptive of them now is largely undermining. The mainstream societies consider adivasi's "art as crude, their religion as a medley of superstitions and they are dirty with dark complexion, hideously wild, diseased and ugly visages" (Qtd .in Digal 86). Adivasi communities in India are understood as a secluded population distanced from any notion of advancement in lifestyle, culture, and mindset. Instead of their historical thriving parallel to the caste-bound societies, they are now considered the baggage left to be carried into the future by the state.

To attribute the conception of the Adivasi societies, as exists now, totally to the creation of British minds is ahistorical. Indian texts belonging to various timelines of history have recorded the existence of adivasis outside caste-bound societies. British scholars and ethnographers relied on such texts to capture an understanding of the ethnic communities, as it was needed to rule over the adivasis. A study of the adivasi as conceived in those texts is requisite to understand the trajectories that led to the conception of 'tribe' in India.

Categorization of 'Tribe' as a Distinct Social Group: Knowledge Production and Circulation in the Colonial Context

The attribution of knowledge production during the colonial period to the colonizer's advent in "seeking moral justification for the imperialist agenda of the West" (19) as Ashoka Kumar Sen puts it, might serve two purposes. At first, such attempts by scholars working under the colonial government tried to materialize the notion of uncivilized non-Western societies through which the British sought to establish their moral obligation for the process of civilization. Secondly, they aided the colonized territories' material exploitation, which benefitted the colonial government. Unfortunately, their exploitations resulted in detrimental consequences for the adivasis. The British not only wanted the natural wealth of the adivasi communities, but they also wanted to attune them according to the colonial rule. To understand these distinct ethnic communities, they needed to study and understand them. Texts produced with the colonial thirst for power shaped the politico-administrative structure of the period. Understanding the contribution of the Indian texts to this power dynamic is crucial since they, regardless of the negativity of representation, implicitly acknowledge the existence of adivasis.

Devy posits two types of origins of the category called tribe, one is that the British rule designated adivasi "as a distinct ethnic and social group" and the later, is the notion as adivasi as a "social legacy inherited by us from precolonial times" from local sources. While weighing between the two possible contentions for the origin of the category called 'tribe', later becomes sounder in terms of recorded description in texts. He says "There are ample descriptions of forest dwellers in epics, plays myths and folktales, giving evidence of communities distinct from the urban and rural Indian society in existence from prehistorical times. "(xv). Textual evidence such as these strongly acknowledges the initial step towards alienation as these communities "exist outside the pale of the law, social customs, tradition and belief systems." (Ibid), all across the centuries.

Commenting on the contribution of Sanskritic representation of adivasis, Ashoka Kumar Sen hints at the representation given by the texts that helped the colonial ethnographers to the formation of adivasi identity.

"In Sanskrit texts, tribal communities in India were variously designated as das (slave), dasyu (robbers), rakshasa, asura, danava, savara, and Pulinda (demon). They were not only identified as ethnologically different but also culturally inferior and low people....the tribal were considered inferior by Rig Veda because of their black skin twacham Krishnam, fierce eyes ghora chakshas, deformed nose (visipra) or noseless (anasa)." (16)

Such representations in Indian texts were readily available to the colonial ethnographers to mark adivasis as distinct categories, not bounded caste systems prevalent in the mainland. He also comments about the different ways of knowledge production during colonialism emphasising the utility of local zamindars and officials to gather details. Since the Indians were prejudiced against the indigenous communities the stigma once again repeated itself leaving no place for reality. Such acts of gathering details indirectly for governance contributed to the challenges of providing a conclusive definition. In the later stages of British rule, a greater number of texts were produced as the government took a stronghold in the country. Many scholars have visited India to study the land and the communities and to

serve their government. The earlier representations in the local texts have had a significant impact on their studies.

In the next part, the paper details the categorization of tribes as distinct social groups which took shape from the books produced on them and the regulations by the government.

Knowledge and Power: The Shaping of Colonial Governance Structure and Ethnographers

Having been impacted by the Sanskritic representation of ethnic communities, ethnographers like Justice Campbell, Dalton and Hunter (Sen 18), formed the conceptualization of ‘the tribes,’ as uncivilized social groups. British have taken strenuous measures to study the various ethnic communities across the country to absorb them into the colonial rule. In that regard, British ethnographers and scholars have played a crucial role in establishing the term ‘tribe’ as standard usage through their texts. Many works have been produced by ethnographers whose knowledge helped the British classify a division between communities based on certain parameters. Dalton’s *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872), Herbert Hope Risley’s *Tribes and Caste of Bengal* (1892), Edward Thurston’s *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909), Robert Vane Russell and Rai Bahadur Hira Lal’s *The Caste and Tribes of the Central Provinces* (1916) are some notable works in that regard. Fürer-Haimendorf who arrived at a later stage was considered the first ethnographer with the formal training he received in Vienna and London. He has three works to his credit, *The Naked Naga* (1939), *The Chenchus: Jungle Folk of the Deccan* (1943) and *The Raj Gonds of Adilabad: A Peasant Culture of the Deccan* (1948). (Tripura 03).

Among these colonial ethnographers, Haimen Dorf and Verrier Elwin held prominence for their close association with tribal communities. They associated themselves with the environment, customs and traditions of the tribal communities rather than relying on textual information. To this day the name of the Verrier Elwin stands as an important authority in the field of Tribal Studies. Scholars in this field possess a venerable space for him and his studies on tribals which has become indispensable in the field.

It is also not beneficial to negate the ethnographic records of the colonial era for being authored by British scholars. As a field, Adivasi Studies owe a great deal to the colonial records. Nevertheless, the knowledge produced by them served the imperialist motives of the British. Bhukya speculates an alternative view behind their seemingly philanthropic and genuine motives. He cites the positions they secured as a real interest behind their study, not any type of academic motive. Haimen Dorf became a professor of Anthropology at the University of Hyderabad and the legal adviser to Nizam for tribal and backward classes. Elvin was appointed as an adviser on tribal affairs to the Northeast Frontier Agency between 1954 and 1964. (Bhukya 107). However, whether the possession of power or the instinct to please the government made the ethnographers produce their studies, the name ‘tribes’ was moulded as the standard usage.

Another advantage of such studies is the expansion of the British regime to various provinces to plunder the wealth of the land. British regulated laws that would aid them in securing their control over every corner of the nation. To put it in a nutshell, the knowledge was transmitted into power. To quote Edward Said “Knowledge of subject races or Orientals

is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge” (36). As a result of the knowledge gathered from the agents of the colonial government from ethnographers to zamindars aided by the local population, the laws created were deathly and stringent. *The Criminal Tribal Act* of 1871 was a culminating point in the atrocities against the indigenous communities by the British. At the centre of the issue was the act was the notion of a ‘habitual offender’ whose instinct to steal is inbuilt and therefore needs to be controlled. The communities notified under the act are forced into settlements and put to hard labour to rehabilitate. Most of these communities are nomadic in their lifestyles and must be mobile between places for their survival. As a result, the communities lost their traditional way of life and suffered poverty, leading to steady marginalization.

At an outward look, this seems to be another violent act by the British to exercise their dominion over the nook and cranny of the country. But G.N. Devy details the history behind the act, attributing it to the necessity to disarm the soldiers and to safeguard commercial activities without any hindrance.

“After the British had more or less secured authority over all princely states of India, they found it necessary to disarm the disbanded soldiers of the vanquished armies of Indian princess. The British also wanted to ensure safety In Indian states for commercial purposes.” (xx)

Devy here explains the affinity of the Adivasis with ‘Warfare’ showing that they are mighty warriors known for their courage and tactics. However, the image of the adivasi being a warrior tribe is highly overshadowed by their image of criminals even today. Regardless of their de-notification after independence, they are still associated with the stigma resulting in harassment and alienation. It is vital to understand that mistreatments of such types come from the historical alienation of the adivasi communities, from the developments of the country. To remove the notion of coloniality while addressing the Indigenous communities, the term Adivasi came to prominence.

Aftermath of Independence: Replacement of ‘Tribe’ with ‘Adivasi’ and Claiming Agency

After the Independence, the question of integration remained a major aspect of the problems in the lives of adivasis, as a result of their long affinity with autonomy and self-governance. From the time of their origin as a social group, they continued as a self-governing community, until the colonial intervention. The need to possess a sense of agency to claim their deserving place in the country’s arena led to the discussion of many challenges in the public sphere. Such challenges can no longer be addressed due to the inherent lack of merit in the word “tribe”, filled with coloniality. The realization led to the popularization of the term ‘Adivasi’ in the place of ‘Tribe’. Xaxa in his article *Tribes as Indigenous People of India* opines that the usage of the term adivasi is “a mark of identification and differentiation, that is, to mark out a group of people different in physical features, language, religion, custom, social organization,” (3590) has been in existence in India for a longer period. However, the notion of the word “Original Inhibitor” is also contested due to the scientific scholarship on migration. As Kumari puts it in her chapter “keeping in mind the history of migration of the human population, the epithet of Indigenous for a particular community seems untenable”. (187).

Nevertheless, the usage of the term Adivasi is advantageous to the ethnic communities in asserting their claim to the soil and to unite as a single entity before the global arena to push forward their claims. Today, “Adivasi” has become a politically loaded term used by the representatives of the communities to seek solutions to problems adivasi societies encounter. The term Adivasi has become favoured to address the ethnic communities of the nation, replacing the word “tribes”. It was used for the first time by the activist Amritlal Vithaldas Thakkar, widely recognized as Thakkar Bapa and was taken up by the Academics and popularized. One must keep that in mind, the terms Tribes, Tribal and Adivasi are classifications that came into being recently. Communities classified under the term are “diverse and heterogeneous – culturally, socially, economically and politically- and spread over 15 percent of the country’s plains, forests and hills.” (Bhuria and Bhuria 48). As a result of their heterogeneity as a social group, gathering under particular political movements is necessary for the adivasi societies at present. To become a mobile political power to advance their claims and to safeguard their distinctions, it is vital that they unite under a particular banner. Since most ethnic communities are facing a threat to their culture, habitat and languages, it is easy to do so.

Conclusion:

Due to the integration into the administrative structure by the British, the adivasis continued to be a part of the national governance after the independence as well. Despite having privileges allotted to them in the constitution, they still face marginalization due to their identity. Most of the existing problems of adivasis are the result of a lack of knowledge available to mainstream societies and the unwillingness on the part of the individual to make an effort to understand their place in the nation and the sacrifices they have endured for the welfare of the nation. The role played by the adivasis in the freedom struggle movement has not even received a thin acknowledgment compared to other popular leaders. Revolts spearheaded by the adivasi leaders are not acknowledged during celebrations. Movements like The Great Kol Insurrection of (1831–32), Bhumij Revolt (1832–33), Santhal Rebellion (1855–57), the Kherwar/Sardari Movement (1858–95), and the Birsa Munda Movement (1895–1990) have not gotten their due respect. Leaders like Birsa Munda must get nationwide recognition to give the much-needed homage to adivasis which has been in due for a longer period.

To most of the mainstream societies, they are still “tribes”, a category that is the invention of the British era. The term tribe wherever used, is used in the degrading sense to refer to an uncivilized, underdeveloped, marginalized ‘other’, who must be taken care of, through provisions and privileges in the governance. As a society, we must understand that they are ‘Adivasis’, a part and parcel of this country before it was named and became a modern civilization.

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