

INDIGENOUS/TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA

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The concept of “tribe” in India is a very contested one, and shares overlapping definition with a number of nomenclatures – “indigenous people”, “*adivasis*” and even “Scheduled Tribes” (Béteille 1998; Kuper 2003; Radhakrishna 2016). Romila Thapar argues that the image of “tribe” draws its genesis from the curious situation of the arrival of the Indo-Aryan speaking nomadic pastoralists in northern India who came into contact with the indigenous population (possibly the remnants of the urban civilisation of the Indus) and regarded them as *mleccha* (barbarians) as against the Aryans who were distinct because of their linguistic (speaking Sanskrit) and racial supremacy (Thapar 1971). It appears that anyone who did not belong to the Hindu *Varna* or caste system, or did not practice an identifiable mainstream religion, was classified as tribe. These indigenous communities, through the ages, have not only been considered as a problem, but also represented as almost lesser humans. Ancient scriptures like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas*, the *Samhitas* and other so-called “sacred books” refer to indigenous communities as *rakshasa* (demons), *vanara* (monkeys), *jambuvan* (boar men), *naga* (serpents), *bhusundi kaka* (crow) and *garuda* (king of eagles). In medieval India, they were derogatorily called *kirata* (people with lion nature), *nishada* (hunter), *dasa* (slave) and *dasyu* (a hostile robber).

In the late nineteenth century, the British colonial administrators arbitrarily classified and categorised Indian population into “caste” and “tribes” mostly for political/administrative reasons. Particularly the census authorities of colonial India categories the tribal communities in various names, such as tribal communities in different names, such as “Forest Tribes” under “Agricultural and Pastoral Castes”

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(Census Report, 1891), “Animists” (Census Report, 1901), “Tribal Animists” or “People Following Tribal Religion” (Census Report, 1911), “Hill and Forest Tribes” (Census Report 1921), “Primitive Tribes” (Census Report, 1931), “Backward Tribes” (Government of India Act, 1935), and “Tribes” (Census Report, 1941).

Colonial anthropology as well, ignoring the historically built differences between tribal communities, resulted in stigmatizing the tribals of India as aboriginal, primitive, savage, indigenous, uncivilized, illiterate, *banbasi* or *Jangli* (forest dwellers), autochthonous and, certainly, “exotic” (Mahana 2019: 10). Thus, they have very often been represented by others as autochthonous, wild or primitive. In reality, as the first citizens of the country (Radhakrishna, 2016), “they are different, but certainly not primitive” (Evans-Pritchard 1955).

Without understanding this colonial legacy, the Constitution of India “labelled” (imposed) 212 tribal communities as Scheduled Tribes (STs) in 1950 without making any substantial changes to the 1936 list of “tribes” but failed to recognise them as indigenous people for their disputed origin (Shah 2010). Later, the number of ST communities increased manyfold. Consisting of 8.6 percentage of Indian population, today there are 705 ST communities (census 2011) which has increased over years from 212 in 1950, 314 in 1967 and 427 in 1981. It became problematic, since the constitutional category of Scheduled Tribes has now been the staple of anthropological and sociological enquiry all over the country, which implies even the contemporary disciplinary boundaries have been drawn with state given categories. In reality, the social formations of the tribes are dynamic and the criteria for inclusion in this category of persons are contingent, changing, and subject to social and political negotiation (Sylvain 2014: 252).

For all these reasons – to understand the evolutionary prospective of human civilisation, record the distinctive cultural practices of tribals, analyse state-subject making process of the tribes, deconstruct/reconstruct their identities, honour their claims for recognition and to ensure economic equality and social justice, to name a few – there has been a growing impetus for tribal/indigenous studies in India in various academic disciplines starting from anthropology, sociology, history, development studies, rural management to environmental studies.

Against the normative perception that tribals are primitive, we would like to enhance the idea that there was always the concept of citizenship among the tribal communities. When we address this issue, we consider that “the functional prerequisites of citizenship, such as consciousness of the rights of freedom, equality, and respect for pluralism need to be met quintessentially. Nations and the nation states need to inculcate a spirit of proud citizenship in the citizenry clearly delineating their rights and responsibilities” (Nayak 2012: 268–291). Indigenously and ontologically, the major tribes in India enjoyed a variant of citizenship in the past, which they “valued the most being members of distinct ethno-cultural groups, territorially organized groups, and at the same time being rightful, functional citizens having a stake in the politics of the state (*id.*)”.

Tribals in their native territories feel proud that they have inherited royal ancestry and often proclaim, “*ameraja loka*”, “we are born kings and we people are king-like”. In the recent historical past they were governed by feudatory kings, but their relationship with the king was very special: “the king owned them and they owned the king” (Nayak 2007b: 19–69). As citizen subjects they were closely interacting with the king¹ and their citizenship can be labeled “kingly citizenship”² (Nayak 2012, *op. cit.*). During our field research among tribes such as Dongria Kondhs, Bondos, Juangs, Gadabas, Koyas, Bhuiyans and Saoras, we understood that they consider themselves rightful citizens of the jungle kingdoms, saying that “they are *Khunt-Kati* people, early settlers, who own *Dongars*, swiddens and *Padaras*, clan-based villages and territories. In real life, the territorial chiefs, the village headmen and the village priests are their sources of strength and they expect their kings to be powerful and just. They toil hard in the jungle, enjoy the fruits of their own labor and lead a happy life” (*id.*).

We are however critical towards the modern concept of citizenship borrowed from the West and the way it is practiced today in India, as it is rather emphasizing the citizen’s rights, and overlooking the duties and responsibilities towards the state and larger society, which leads to a lack of participatory citizenship³ (*id.*). The economic success of India, in recent years, is undoubtedly a leap forward, however in the context of globalization and liberalization, the manifestations in every social and political sphere needs to be tackled, with a special attention in the case of tribal populations.

In the present system of democratic governance the institutional bases of functional citizenship of tribals “have never been recognized, nor given due regard, rather they have been castigated obsolete. They have been rendered dysfunctional. In consequence, the tribals have been disillusioned, in particular about their citizenship” (*id.*). Furthermore, in recent years, under the PESA (of Panchayats

¹ Professor Nayak worked together with H. Kulke and B. Schnepel in a research project sponsored by German Research Council (DFG) to investigate the interaction of the king of the princely state of Keonjhar and the Bhuiyan tribe from historical and ethno-historical perspectives and came up with the view that the Bhuiyan citizenship is kingly (see Nayak, 2007b). The key ideas and observations in Prof. Nayak’s are based on long years of fieldworks in tribal areas of Odisha and also on his interactions and association with Mitra’s Citizenship project (cf. references, Nayak’s as well as Mitra’s works).

² In the ethnographic accounts of tribes of Odisha and for that matter that of India, the king is almost missing, history is neglected, and ethno-history is given a raw deal (cf. Nayak 2001a). On the basis of working in tribal areas of Odisha since 1972, if we want to understand tribes, their social institutions and cultures in reality, they have to be seen in their interaction with the king out there in the past and their own identity with the state as citizens of the kingly order. The use of the phrase ‘kingly citizenship’ is a pointer towards reconsidering tribes people and their cultures and dispelling some of our misconceptions about them (cf. Nayak 2001b).

³ From his student days Prof. Nayak has keenly observed the functioning of government officials and peoples’ willing support for them in realizing development goals and the mission of nation building. Today in every sphere there is a decline (cf. Nayak, 2000, 2004, 2007a, 2010).

Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, the village level *Parha*, *Palli* or *Gram Sabha*, democratically elected village level councils, which are new modern institutions, “have failed to meet the hopes and aspirations of the people and the citizenry is affected; it is at a loss. Tribes lose their land and forest to either the government, or to multinational companies under mega development projects. People’s voices supported by human rights activists fall to deaf ears. Does it not render the tribals the second-grade citizens?” (*id.*).

The fact remains that these communities, for centuries, have been subjected to the painful predicament of disparate and inimical historical process which have led to their destitution and marginalisation. As a result, waves of “development” interventions have been implemented (both by the state and civil societies) in the name of “progress”, “development” and “civilisation”, which, in turn, have simultaneously dispossessed the tribals of their language, culture, resources and identity (Mahana 2016). There is also a growing consensus to record their claims for recognition as a means to counteract inequality and oppression. However, the politics of recognition potentially “diverts attention from the struggle for economic inequality and social justice”, leaving the prevailing social order intact (Parekh 2004: 202; also Fraser 1997).

The purpose of the present volume is to engage with the historical, social and political process which go into making of Indian tribes and explore various critical issues and challenges confronting the indigenous populations of India today. Therefore, academic research papers were invited on various aspects of tribal/indigenous people of India. What follows is a brief summary of all the papers presented in this volume.

The first article of this issue, authored by Kamal K. Misra, is dedicated to “Tribal Women in India: Popular Rhetoric and Lived Realities”. Gender relations in tribal societies and the status of tribal women are approached from a discursive point of view. As the author suggests, tribal gender relations could not be analysed in a dichotomy perspective, between a “higher” and a “lower” status of a tribal woman, in comparison to the tribal man, but rather with a multi-dimensional approach, taking into consideration the specificity and complexity of these communities. The author brings arguments from his own field research or other researchers’ observations on tribes like the Kutia Kondh in Odisha or the Santal in Odisha and West Bengal, to give light to the heterogeneity in terms of women’s role and status within the tribal community.

The article authored by B.N. Sharma, “Changing notions of Marriage Payments Among the Savara, Andhra Pradesh”, brings new light on a topic extensively treated in the anthropological approaches on tribal customs, namely the marriage payments – bride-price and dowry. The author focuses on the payments made by Savara men if they acquire mates through remarriage of previously married women, as well as frequency of such marriages among the Savara, as well the changing notions surrounding such payments and their impacts on the Savara

social organisation, particularly the position of women in it. The author analyses the literature on the theme and explains the organisation of the Savara tribe, their rules and types of marriage and re-marriage, the rules presiding over the marriage payments, *olipelli* and *moganal* notions and their variations in time.

In her article “Trading across Indo-Tibet Border and its Impact on the Tribes of the Himalayan Borders”, Subhadra Mitra Channa considers first of all the concept of tribe seen as “Other” from the point of view of the mainstream population in India. The paper is based on field work among the border tribes of the upper Himalayas (Nepal Bhutan and Sikkim, India), namely the Bhotiyas of Uttarkashi (Jad Bhotiyas) and Kinnaurians (Himachal Pradesh), pastoral communities engaged in trans-border trade with Tibet (now China). The author historically outlines the political, cultural and religious shifts along the Tibet border, with a focus on the tribal identity.

In the article entitled “Ethnomedical Practices and Indian Scheduled Tribes”, P. C. Joshi approaches the very interesting topic of traditional healing systems as indigenously rooted arrangements of social relationships, cultural patterns and therapeutic activities within the Indian scheduled tribes. The author argues that the knowledge retained by the traditional communities is for the general good of mankind, the economic, as well as the intellectual property right of the tribal communities over their traditional medicines needs to be protected and ensured.

Manas Ranjan Kar analyses the role of NGOs in contributing to communities development through the “Introduction of New Practices for Adoption by Local Communities: Lessons Learnt from Koraput District in Odisha”. As the author points out, the development agents have often been criticised for undermining socio-cultural and economic practices, values, and traditional knowledge of local communities, which has led to poor appreciation and adoption of new practices, particularly with reference to technology and economic opportunities. Based on the observations during the field research conducted in Boipariguda and Kundra block in Koraput district in Odisha, an eastern Indian state, the paper argues that socio-cultural analysis of the communities, and market studies in the locality and nearby areas are necessary preconditions for introduction of new practices, so as to become impactful.

In his article “Socio-cultural impact of non-tribal contact on tribes of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, India”, P. Venkata Rao approaches the interesting topic of contacts between tribal and non-tribal communities. Although anthropologically, tribal people have been studied as different from the rest of the Indian population based on racial, linguistic and cultural traits, the socio-cultural impact of non-tribal contact on tribes of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana is evident in the presence of caste-like hierarchy, linkages with Hindu mythology and association with local rulers. This tendency though, as the author points out, witnessed a decline in the post-independence period, due to awareness of constitutional privileges and developmental benefits available to the scheduled tribes.

Deepak Kumar Ojha approaches the “Problem of Changing Livelihood for a Primitive Tribe: A Case of Kutia Kandha Resettlers in Odisha”. As the author argues, mining-induced displacement and resettlement is a severe problem in case of the primitive tribal groups who largely depend on natural resources for their livelihood and socio-cultural life. Attention should be given to the resulting shifts in traditional occupation, loss of common property resources and decline in income level for the native inhabitants. Based on qualitative ethnographic approach, the paper describes the changes that have taken place within the livelihood of the Kutia Kandha tribe who were displaced due to the Vedanta Aluminum industry in Lanjigarh of Odisha; the research envisaged two villages: Kutia Kandha traditional village, Ambaguda and the newly built resettlement colony, named Vedanta Nagara, in order to comparatively measure the changes in the occupation, income level and access to natural resources.

R. Siva Prasad brings up a challenging issue that concerns not only Indian tribal communities but also to many communities across the globe, namely the effects of globalisation and economic liberalism on the cultural identity of local communities. In his article entitled “The Development Blues: The Tribe is Dead! Long Live the Tribal”, the author discusses the effects of globalisation on the tribal communities in India, after 1990. One observation is that tribal unity, an important feature of tribal communities, is replaced by the individualism trend. As the author warns, these worldwide trends endanger the very existence of tribes as communities, leading to a loss of culture, self-esteem, dignity, and identity.

We hope that the articles of the present volume shed more light on understanding the historical, social and political process in making of Indian tribes and exploring various critical issues and challenges confronting this extremely vulnerable section of Indian society today.

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