

Module-6

TRIBES IN INDIA



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INTRODUCTION

India is known to be a vast country with scanty population in the prehistoric age. During this period there were small groups of people scattered throughout the country in different spots having a characteristic look and life style. A tribe is a group of people, usually staying in jungle areas, in a small locality, absolutely illiterate poor, hardly clad in clothes, usually dark and frail, fully living within their own community whose marriage always takes place among themselves, engaged in hunting and searching for roots, shoots and fruits as their veg food and roasted animals as non-veg food, completely oblivious of the country's political and economic condition, resisting all efforts of development and have a strong dislike for strangers and educated modern community. The number of such tribal community is very large e.g. Santhals, Kora people, Kol, etc. most of whom fall under scheduled caste, scheduled tribe and other backward classes. Most of the projects and efforts for uplifting their health, education and economic condition have failed both for their own unwillingness for change and absolute non cooperation as well as lethargy, dishonesty and corruption of the intermediaries

DEFINITION OF TRIBE

What is a tribe? What exactly are the criteria for considering a human group, a tribe? What are the indices of the tribal life? Interestingly but sadly the anthropologists, sociologists, social workers, administrators and such people who have been involved with the tribes and their problems either on theoretical plane or on practical grounds are still not on the same wave length regarding the concept and the definition of their subject. Arthur Wilke et al. (1979) puts the problem in proper perspective by stating that for years ambiguity has stalked India's official portrait of tribal people. From 1917 through the 1931 census, for instance, the nomenclature referring to tribes underwent successive modifications, involving primarily changes in the descriptive adjectives such as "aboriginal" or "depressed classes". By the 1941 Census, these qualifying adjectives were dropped, a practice continued after independence with the adoption of the notion of scheduled tribes or as they are commonly called, Adivasi. Such standardization did not, however, remove all ambiguity. No doubt with the passage of time, the differences on the concept and definition of 'tribe' have certainly narrowed down to an appreciable extent, but a theoretical discussion seems imperative to understand this problem in its proper perspective.

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.

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. 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.

L.M Lewis believes that tribal societies are small in scale are restricted in the spatial and temporal range of their social, legal and political relations and possess a morality, a religion and world view of corresponding dimensions. Characteristically too tribal languages are unwritten and hence the extent of communication both in time and space is inevitably narrow. At the same time tribal societies exhibit a remarkable economy of design and have a compactness and self-sufficiency lacking in modern society.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TRIBE

1. Definite Common Topography:

Tribal people live within a definite topography and it is a common place for all the members of a particular tribe occupying that region. In the absence of a common but definite living place, the tribals will lose other characteristics of a tribal life, like common language, way of living and community sentiment etc.

2. Sense of Unity:

Unless and until, a group living in a particular area and using that area as a common residence, does not possess the sense of unity, it cannot be called a tribe. Sense of unity is an invariable necessity for a true tribal life. The very existence of a tribe depends upon the tribal's sense of unity during the times of peace and war.

3. Endogamous Group:

Tribal people generally do not marry outside their tribe and marriage within the tribe is highly appreciated and much applauded. But the pressing effects of changes following the forces of mobility have also changed the attitude of tribals and now, inter-tribe marriages are becoming more and more common.

4. Common Dialect:

Members of a tribe exchange their views in a common dialect. This element further strengthens their sense of unity.

5. Ties of Blood-relationship:

Blood-relation is the greatest bond and most powerful force inculcating sense of unity among the tribals.

6. Protection Awareness:

Tribal people always need protection from intrusion and infiltration and for this a single political authority is established and all the powers are vested in this authority. The safety of the tribal is left to the skill and mental power of the person enjoying political authority. The tribal chief is aided by a tribal committee, in the events of contingencies. Tribe is divided into a number of small groups and each group is headed by its own leader. The chief of a group works according to the directives received by him from the tribal chief.

7. Distinct Political Organization:

Every tribe has its own distinct political organisation which looks after the interests of tribal people. The whole political authority lies in the hands of a tribal chief. In some tribes, tribal committees exist to help the tribal chief in discharging his functions in the interests of the tribe.

8. Common Culture:

Common culture of a tribe springs out from the sense of unity, common language, common religion, common political organisation. Common culture produces a life of homogeneity among the tribals.

9. Importance of Kinship:

Kinship forms the basis of tribal social organization. Most tribes are divided into exogamous clans and lineages. The marriage among tribals is based on the rule of tribal endogamy. Marriage is viewed as a contract and there are no prohibition on divorce and remarriage.

10. Egalitarian Values:

The tribal social organization is based on the egalitarian principle. Thus there are no institutionalized inequalities like the caste system or sex based inequalities. Thus men and women enjoyed equal status and freedom. However some degrees of social inequality may be found in case of tribal chiefs or tribal kings who enjoy a higher social status, exercise political power and possess wealth.

ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION OF TRIBE

The sources of subsistence and livelihood are varied so far the Indian tribals are concerned. Starting from the pure and simple parasitic habit of the nomadic hunters and food-gatherers who depend mostly on nature for the sources of subsistence to the settled agriculturists and the group of industrial laborers, we have the views of different economic set-up the Indian tribals. From this view point, we can classify the Indian tribals into six broad economic clusters:

1. **Food-gatherers and hunters:** The nomadic primitive tribes like the Andamanese, Onge, Jarwa, Kadar, Kharia, Lodha, etc. are included in this category so far their subsistence economy is concerned. They usually live far away from rural-urban way of life and possess a simple type of social organization.
2. **Permanent Settled Cultivators:** Like the cultivators of the advanced societies, some of the tribals in India are taking resort to permanent settled agriculture. The Oraon, Munda, Gond, Bhumij, Ho, Santal, are efficient cultivators at present. They practice wet cultivation by transplanting method. Artificial irrigation and application of compost manure are not unknown to them. Rotation of crops is within the knowledge of these cultivators. They work in their owned fields as well as in the fields of others as share-croppers (Bhag-Chasi). The major bulk of the tribal population work as agricultural laborers. In search of jobs, these landless agricultural laborers participate in seasonal migration to the neighboring states. The social and religious organizations of these settled agriculturist tribals are much developed and highly complex. The traditional council of elders (panchayet) has to perform significant role in maintaining societal norms.
3. **Pastoral people:** The Bhotia of Almora and the Toda of the Nilgiri hills of South India live on pastoral economy. They do not practice agriculture, hunting, fishing, etc. They also live far away from the sophisticated modern world and possess a slightly developed but non-complicated social structure. Both of them, practice polyandrous marriage system. They rear buffaloes and cows, the milk-products are being exchanged to procure the commodities of day-to-day use.
4. **Shifting Hill cultivators:** A section of the Gond, Naga, Kharia, Juang, Riang, Khasi, Garo, Savara practice such type of primitive cultivation by “slash and burn” method. It is known by different names in different areas. The Assam tribes call it Jhum, the Gond as Podu, etc. A hilly forested tract is selected for this purpose may have to be abandoned after three successive cultivating seasons as this soil likely to lose fertility. The plants, shrubs, and undergrowth’s are cut down and left for drying for a month or so. Then, they set fire to them. The ashes serve as auto-manure to the soil. On the onset of monsoon, the soil is slightly loosened by a simple digging stick or hoe. Seeds of different Kharif crops, millet’s like Bajra, Jowar, Kurthi, pulses, potato, tobacco, and sugar-cane are grown in this type of cultivation. It could support them partially but not wholly. They have to find out some other vocations as supporting source of subsistence.
5. **Manual laboring group:** A substantial portion of the tribals has become landless laboring class owing to the economic hardship which they are facing at present. They earn their livelihood by selling their manual labor in different vocations.
6. **Craftsmen:** Some of the tribals are still retaining their traditional crafts along with the principle sources of subsistence. The Naga and the Khasi are experts in coloured hand-loom products and the Lohar are traditional black smiths. With the marginal profit in their traditional specialized crafts, these tribals are at present, taking resort to other types of jobs. Their mixed pattern of economy reflects back adversely upon their social system.

TRIBAL RELIGION

Indian tribal religion is the most primitive type of religion found in human society. The important characteristics of an Indian tribal religion are discussed as following.

Mana

Mana is a force different from physical force which acts in all kinds of good and bad and control the disturbance. Mana is a supernatural power which is used to control many natural phenomena in man life. According to Maxmullar, Mana is an attempt to define some natural phenomena in term of some impersonal power. In tribal religion Mana is the force applied to natural and impersonal things like mountains, rivers, thunders etc. According to Majumdar, Mana is a belief on an understandable, impersonal and material thing having some super natural power and to which people bows for control and peace.

Bonga

Bonga is a type of Mana. Ho and Monda tribes use this word and says that it is a mysterious and impersonal power at the back of some natural calamity. These calamities are flood epidemics, heavy rains, storms etc. everyone tries to be safe from these activities and they perform bonga.

Animism

Animism is the belief that material things have life. In Indian tribal religion animism is the important characteristic of people. The tribal people have beliefs in supernatural power at the back of heavy rains, big trees, mountains and other flood and storms. They want to please these power, and they perform different type of worships. The most important type of animism is the ancestral worship which is found in Sanathals and Oraons. These tribes worship various deities specified for different jobs. One God is responsible for crop, other for animals and a deity presiding rain. That is common in Korawa tribe. To please these gods and goddesses they give the sacrifices of various animals. The principles of animism is based on two beliefs.

1. There are some powerful souls besides gods and man is connected to these souls. They feel pleasure and pain through these souls.
2. The soul of a man survives even after the death. The idea of animism was firstly given by Taylor using the term in anthropology. According to Taylor. "Animism is the belief on some natural material objects having souls from very ancient time to that civilized man".

Animatism

Animatism is the most wide spread idea in tribal people as compare to animism. According to animatism there is some impersonal power behind every material thing besides living things. In Indian tribal religion materials like bones, stones and feathers are worshiped to bring peace and prosperity. For example in Bihar tribe stones and feathers are considered to have magical power. The stones are considered as the children of earth mother. So, animatism is the faith in material things have living soul.

Naturalism

Naturalism is the faith on worship of nature. The Gar tribe of Assam worship sun and moon while the Monda people practice worship to sun god. Besides it many other tribes worship rivers, mountains, trees, stars and other natural objects.

Immortality of Soul

Many of the people of India tribal religion believe in the immortality of soul. They have faith that the soul of died person remain in the body and for this purpose there observed the funeral rites twice. The second time rite is considered more important than the first time. The living soul of the dead person requires food etc. for a sufficient period of time. Among Naga and Nikobar islands the skull of a man is placed in wooden statue believing that the soul of the person would pass from the skull to the wooden statue and skull to the wooden statue and make it able for worship and they made every effort to fulfill all its needs. In south India in kerola the statue of a dead body is worshiped only once is a year. In Naga tribe the soul of the ancestors are worshiped at the time of sowing and need of rain.

Faith in Re-Birth

This is another belief present is Indian tribal religion. According to this faith the soul of a man after death remains alive and enters into the body of some animals, birds or any other living thing. This is practiced in Naga, Anir, Kamar, and Gond tribes.

Faith in Magic

Magic is the most important faith is Indian tribal religion. It is the method which is used to twist the nature is a specific way for the need and desire fulfillment of a person. The events are to control automatically through magic. The tribal people believe in magicians as expert for that practice and they are respected. Other various magical rites are found in Indian tribes for the control of diseases and epidemics. It is the change is nature through magic.

Totem and Taboo

Totem is the faith of Indian tribes in a particular kind of animal or object having close relation with that family. The tribe associate with that animal in different ways and the animal is worshiped. They are considered themselves as the descent of that animal. So, Totem is the belief is a specific animal have close connection with a family is India tribes.

Killing and eating of that animal is a taboo for the particular family. The animal is worshiped and respected everywhere. The people of the same Totem do not contract marriages because they think that there exists blood relation among them. Every sacrifice is made for pleasing and worshiping of the animal. It has been concluded from the above discussion that Indian tribal religion is the most primitive type of religion and is passing through different stages and evolution. It has connected with different is practiced is various tribes of India. Those activities and rituals performed by them is to fulfill their needs and desires in their social life.