UNIT 32 STUDYING TRIBES UNDER COLONIALISM

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32.0 INTRODUCTION

This unit shows how the different perceptions of tribes and their problems have influenced the anthropological writings of our times. In the main we identify two tendencies in this unit: one which argued for the isolation of tribes in order that their ancient heritage be preserved and the second one that argued for the assimilation of tribal people into the mainstream of Indian life. Between these two ends of the spectrum there were varying degrees of opinion that reflected the status, political stance and historical conjecture at which particular actors stood. But this was only part of the story as perceptions of tribes were also determined by the exigencies of colonial rule. Thus the competing perceptions of tribes, as we know them today, were a result of the transformations of the polity, society and economy in different points in history. It uses selected primary and secondary materials for this purpose.

32.1 PERCEPTIONS OF TRIBES BEFORE COLONIAL ANNEXATION OF TERRITORIES

The first forays of British colonists into North and Central India in the late 18th century got them in touch with several non-agricultural communities. These communities were dependent on both land and forest resources for their survival and often came into conflict with their rulers in order to meet their needs. In his recent work on Khandesh and Central India Sumit Guha shows that early British accounts in the region suggest that the complex interrelationships between pre-colonial regimes of natural resource management, environmental changes and tribal subsistence in the Maratha period. The resultant identity of people as tribals is then governed by the multiple contexts of survival within which these people used to live. Larger patterns of resource use and the impact of other forces on them also determined the political economy of such identities and survival systems.

In pre-colonial Central and Northern India one of the main factors that had an impact on both identity and subsistence was the military conflict between ruling elite in both the Maratha and Mughal periods. The chieftain societies of different tribes like the Gonds or the Khakkars or Jats also participated in these conflicts. At the same time the tribals who were peasants and or gatherers in the forests were forced to support their own chieftains and therefore formed bands in forests and formed important part of the chieftains mercenary army. In this context it is important to remember that the term “tribes” has been used very loosely for communities which were existed in a “pre-class society”. In keeping with this definition many communities that were later
described as peasants by Britishers were termed tribes by the accounts of the medieval period. Chetan Singh’s early article on the role of tribal chieftains in Mughal administration clearly identified warrior and ruling classes of indigenous kingdoms as superior tribal linkages. Amongst these were the Jats, the Kakkhars, Baluchis and Afghans in this vein, the chief feature of their society not only being their blood and kinship line of descent but also their pastoral and non-sedentary occupational characteristics. In a later article Singh is however more categorical about the mention of hunters and gatherers as primitive people. For example he writes of their references in Akbarnama where tribal people were described as “men who go naked living in the wilds, and subsist by their bows and arrows and the game they kill”. He also argues that the medieval texts show that in case of tribes like the Gonds “that people of India despise them and regard them outside the pale of their realm and religion”. Such an identification of tribes as outside the realm of the sedentary cultivation was contingent upon the development of a system of land administration which was an important characteristic of the Mughal 16th and 17th centuries and British regimes of the 19th century. Before that the British perceptions of tribes were conditioned by their own contingencies. For example the Anglo-Maratha conflicts of the 18th century led to descriptions that described the Gond chieftains as the “lords of the rugged hills” and their subjects as people who were prone to anarchic behaviour and “habitual depredations”. Some of these depredations were described as “ravages of lawless tribes” who assisted the errant and “chaotic rulers. We see similar perceptions of the tribes on the Northeast frontiers of the British Rule. Writing about the Eastern Naga tribes in the early 19th century Captain Michelle said that the Nagas carried on the most profitable trade in slaves and suppressed all ryots in their neighbourhood. The greed of gain caused endless feuds between villages and tribes. There are numerous accounts like this that stress the importance and the situation of the tribes before the annexation of territories and after British domination. In almost all these accounts the tribal problem appears to be one where the British see themselves as people who have a duty towards teaching tribes civilised behaviour and an orderly life. While this expression of the civilising mission did not change after the annexation of territories. Rather it expressed itself in a different form.

32.2 TRIBES AND THEIR COLONIAL RULERS

The advent of colonialism in regions that were earlier under residencies and indigenous chieftancies saw the assertion of British colonial sovereignty in several significant ways some of which have been described by Nandini Sundar in the context of tribal Bastar. However from the point of view of perceptions about tribals themselves perhaps the most important factor that influenced them was the settlement of territories and land rights in the Provinces with significant amount of tribal populations. The permanent settlement in Bengal in the late 18th century and the subsequent ryot settlements in Madras, Central Provinces and United Provinces all betrayed a bias towards a certain notion of the agrarian society which was firmly grounded in the ideas about modernity and progress. Within this perspective an evolutionary way of seeing development also influenced the colonial images of tribal life. For example the Report of the Ethnological Committee of the Races of Central Provinces that described its task in the following manner:

“We have confined our analysis entirely to very curious tribes in this country, which are usually called aborigines, their original seat in reality being unknown and which are supposed to be different in languages, custom and physical formation from the greatness of India”.

The term ‘race’ excluded all races and castes that were considered immigrants, i.e., the Hindu cultivators who settled in the valleys and the plains since the ancient times. It only included the tribes who were considered the original inhabitants of the country.
and carried special reports on areas like Chanda, Bhandara and others that were considered to be strongholds of tribal population. The notion that tribes were the original and isolated inhabitants of the forests was useful to colonial officials in their endeavour to take over the fertile plains and valleys of different parts of the country. In keeping with this image they were also described as rather timid, shy and well behaved. For example Briggs remarked in his *Lecture on the Wild Tribes* that they were the “best behaved wild tribes” even while they lived in seclusion and acted as the “wild beasts around them”.

The second characteristic of the official images in the early and mid 19th centuries was the notion that these “primitive tribes” were essentially animist forest people who hated the intrusion of outsiders into their life. A good example of this was the description of the Baigas and the Gonds of the “remotest hills” in the Central Provinces who were described as living in harmony with nature. Forsyth’s account of the Maikal hills was reflective of this when he wrote that:

“The real Byga of the hill ranges is still almost in the state of nature. They are very black, with an upright slim, though exceedingly wiry frame showing less of the negro type of features than any other of these wild tribes.... Destitute of all clothing but a small strip of cloth.... The Byga is the very model of a hill tribe”.

This introduction to the Byga is accompanied by Forsyth’s detailed account of the forest hunt and the pursuit of game. He considered their cultivation practices and hunting as a sign of their seclusion and primitiveness.

Finally, despite such a classification of the Bygas, Forsyth and his colleagues were not unaware of the differentiation within the tribal economy. Tribals were classified according to their level of development and their amalgamation of the Hindu society. Social customs and conventions was a yardstick to assess the ‘scale of civilisation’. On the economic front the scale of civilisation that the report referred to was measured by the yardstick of progress which was manifested in the idea of a peasant. This meant that the colonial ideals about the improvement of the tribal society was centred around their perception of their own role in teaching tribal people how to live a civilised life. This meant that they were to be taught plough cultivation that was more desirable than shifting cultivation and that all those living in the rural areas had to be taught the value of a sedentary peasant society.

It is in this context that the first impressions of bewar (a term for shifting cultivation in the Central Provinces) justified the British need of intervention for the improvement in Baiga lifestyle in consonance with the above-mentioned idea of progress. In colonial terminology the terms bewar and dhaiya were used for the Baiga cultivation. The term bewar was sometimes also used for the field that the Baigas prepare for cultivation. Despite this confusion, in all cases the term *dhaiya* and bewar were used for survival systems that were classed primitive, isolated and highly destructive to forests. For example, Richard Temple just after the formation of the Central Provinces that:

“One great cause of wastage and destruction of the forest is called Dhya cultivation? This Dhya cultivation is practically a substitute for ploughing and a device for saving trouble of that operation. It is resorted to by hill people who are averse to labour and have virtually no agricultural capital”.

Temple classified the dhaiya economy as “primitive” or “backward”. Its traits were laziness and wastefulness. He implied that the tribals of the Central Provinces preferred to do the minimum amount of labour to eke the minimum that they needed. Above all such images also stressed the fact that bewar cultivation was not eco-friendly and brought about the destruction of the forests. All these arguments were used to justify colonial interventions for controlling land and forests in the 19th century.
32.3 ROMANTICISM AND TRIBAL PROTECTION: COLONIALISM AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN 20TH CENTURY

The late 19th century saw a worsening of living conditions of tribal people in the tribal areas. Most areas like Bihar, Orissa and Central Provinces, land alienation and indebtedness amongst tribal people grew at an alarming rate. At the same time the conditions of tribals in forests also worsened as they were reduced to providing cheap labour to the forest department. All this created conditions of extreme dissatisfaction that also led to much protest by tribal people. Some of the most famous ones were Birsa Munda’s movement in 1875, the Gudem Ramapa Uprising and the Santhal Uprising that forced the colonial policies. In other areas like the Mandla district of the Central Provinces Baiga tribal people fled from the forests and the British were forced to negotiate with them so that they remain in their villages and work for the forest department. They were thus forced to create an area where the otherwise banned practice of shifting cultivation would be allowed in some part of the forests.

All these protests and negotiations not only resulted in some welfare measures being put into place but also resulted in the crystallisation of the tribal cultural identity which was reflected in anthropological and official texts of the time.

One of the most important debates of the time was the debate about the demarcation of tribal areas into protected zones under the Government of India Act of 1935. The enactment of the provisions showed that the tribals had now become completely dependent on the welfare measures of the state to meet their basic needs. The debate on the measures proposed under the Act also revealed the way in which different people viewed tribal people. One of the most important figures in the debate was W.V. Grigson, an official who was commissioned to enquire into conditions of tribals in the Central Provinces viewed them with the lens of benevolent patriarchal authority. In the Maria Gonds of Bastar he wrote that the Marias, a primitive tribe of Bastar, were people who had lived in harmony with forests and thus he said that:

“In most of this area (penda area) the forests have been too remote and inaccessible to be exploited, and that, even though some fine timber has been sacrificed much that has gone is over mature. Vast areas of forest have been reserved by the State, and it is not possible to work half these reserves. The Maria does not rage through the forest clearing patches for cultivation at random; he has more or less definite rotations, and a field of two to three years’ they may have a twelve or fourteen years’ rest, and a dense forest at the end of it. The axe and fire have let the light of civilisation penetrate slowly but surely into the Bison-horn country as nothing would have done for centuries; they alone have prevented the Abujhmarh tract from remaining a trackless wilderness”.

This view marked a significant departure from the views of officials in the 19th century. It also showed that the officials were forced to recognise the rights of tribal people in a manner that they were being articulated at that time. Further people like Grigson also reflected upon the role of the British Empire in tribal development when he wrote that,

“Above all there must be an approach to some elements of ‘economic democracy’ if the aboriginal is to play his due part in the India of the future.... There is no political democracy without economic democracy”.

For Grigson ‘economic democracy’ denoted ownership of land, freedom from indebtedness and from exploitation of labour at unusually low wages. To achieve ‘economic democracy’ outside intervention in tribal areas had to be restricted and
government protection ensured. However what is significant about Grigson’s perception is the fact that he considered the people in Bastar as similar to that of people in Africa when he wrote that:

“The primitives have more in common with African tribes than they have with people in other parts of India such as the plains of Bengal, the Punjab or Maharashtra…. I don’t think that “self governance” outside the village or tribe has ever entered their heads. It is obvious that what is needed is a form of protectorate and this can only be achieved through benevolent autocracy”.

The belief that tribals were not able to look after their own interests was largely based on the assumption that they had always lived in a hostile society that had exploited them. The creation of a protectorate would in fact enable forces that had their benefit at heart to protect their interests and also bring about their economic development. This perception was integral to many official anthropologists of the period whose vision was also informed by the European anthropological writings of their times. The most prominent of these anthropologists was Verrier Elwin who worked first in Central India, then Eastern India and finally the NorthEast. The romanticism and the functionalism of his anthropology have had an important impact on the way in which people have looked at tribal people. In the 1940s Elwin wrote in his famous pamphlet, Aboriginal, that “a tribe that dances does not die”. By making such a statement he exemplified the fact that tribal people were distinguished from others by their distinctive cultural identity. For Elwin the ‘primitive’ was a romantic category which he described in the following way when he wrote that:

“The life of a true aboriginal is simple and happy, enriched by natural pleasures. For all their poverty, their days are spent in the beauty of the hills. A woman carrying a load to the hill-top pauses a moment to see the scene below her. It is the ‘sweet forest’ the ‘forest of joy and sandal’ in which they live”.

The ‘forest of joy’ was Elwin’s dreamland - a place where people tended the dead, were devoted to the soil, staged a magnificent and colourful tribal festivals, and were infused with the spirit of sharing. For Elwin these were ‘things of value in tribal life’. For him the ‘primitive’ constituted a ‘pure’ and a ‘pristine’ state of existence that was morally superior to the civilized world. Elwin’s image of the forest dwellers voiced his despair at the tendency towards the destruction of an idyllic society. However this emotion was not expressed in a vacuum and embedded in it the critique of the modern industrial society. Thus he said that:

“Until modern life is itself reformed, until civilisation is itself civilised, until war is vanished from Europe and untouchability from India, there is no point in trying to change the aboriginals”.

“Far better let them be for the time being – not forever of course; that would be absurd. Perhaps in twenty, fifty or hundred years a race of men may arise who are qualified to assimilate these fine people in their society without doing them harm. Such men do not exist today”.

Elwin assumed that the contact between the tribals and the wider agrarian society would result in the injustice to their cause. In this he also critiqued the British rule for its policies towards the tribals. He opposed the British policy of extending of modern commercial economy into these areas, and wanted a relaxation of forest rules. In this he also received the support of some colonial officials, notable amongst whom was the Governor of Bombay, Mr Wylie who wrote that:

“We are dealing with people whom their admirers describe as the ancient lords of the jungle but whom I personally prefer to consider as forest
labourers isolated from the normal working of the law of demand and supply and as such at the mercy of the Forest Department who are the sole pervayors of the labour from which, if the inhabitants of the forest villages are to stay there at all, they have got to make a livelihood”.

Sharing such a critique with Elwin also ensured that many colonists like Wylie and Grigson also shared with him the solutions to the problem. Ideally Elwin wanted the forest dwellers to acquire the spirit and benefits of civilisation without a painful transition process. Thus he wrote that:

“I advocate, therefore, for the aboriginals a policy of temporary partial protection, and for their civilized neighbours a policy of immediate reform....It is not enough to uplift them into a social and economic sphere in which they cannot adapt themselves, but to restore to them liberties of their own countryside”.

By advocating this position, Elwin showed how systemic change in forested areas, were organically linked to changes in modern society, which he considered decadent. Such a perception of tribes, their problems and he solutions was to influence the thinking of scholars down the ages. The most prominent of these is Ramachandra Guha, who in a recent biography of Verrier Elwin celebrated the cultural primitivism for which Elwin became really well known:

“Most of all Verrier Elwin must be distinguished from other primitivists in that he actually lived with the persons whose culture he so vigorously celebrated. The narrator of primitivist revelries has the choice, which he generally excercises. “to return, at the end his sojourn, to the highly civilized countries he came from”.... Not many who wrote so eloquently of the return to nature,’ he [Elwin] remarked, “were prepared however, to take the journey themselves, at least not without a return ticket”.

Elwin was living with the tribals and his understanding of their problems was therefore based on their experiences and life rather than the participant observation of an academic anthropologist. But even if this distinguished him from others, his long-term ideas and the policies that he recommended succeeded in supporting the benevolent imperialism of people like Grigson. But it is not only Guha who were influenced by colonial anthropology. Several other activists and anthropologists also used the arguments of people like Elwin and Grigson to justify their arguments for the restoration of traditional tribal rights and identities in the current polity.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, tribes were seen as self sufficient and isolated societies that lived in harmony with nature. In the late 1980s and early 1990s a significant body of environmental history concentrates on the history of state forest management and its impact on the rights of local people. In these studies, some historians follow the assumptions of their predecessors by stressing that tribal communities had stable systems of survival. However the notion of stability and harmony is elaborated in terms of the theory of ecological prudence. Authors like Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil argue that pre-colonial societies were well-adjusted caste institutions that regulated resource use where each community occupied a specific ecological niche in society. These ecological niches were closed and self-contained systems of resource use that were regulated by social and cultural codes. And within this system the tribes were given the niche of being either hunter gatherers or shifting cultivators who were well adjusted to their surroundings in all its aspects.

The notion of a community is characterised by the idea of egalitarianism and homogeneity where there is little differentiation in terms of access to resources. It is also marked by the fact that political and ritualistic authorities are the source of resource management as well as the cohesiveness of the community. Kinship is defined as the organising principle of labour and the conceptual and the cultural
aspects of society defined the way in which the community related with other and defined the boundaries of the community. This is reflected in the work of Nandini Sundar and Ajay Skaria who attempt to complicate the picture by hinting at the transformation of community identities in history. While they are right about the transformations in identity, they too refuse to acknowledge the fact that the identities that they themselves were writing about were a result of the underdevelopment of tribal regions. The self-perceptions of tribals people of themselves as the original inhabitants or as shifting cultivators and hunters and gatherers got solidified with the colonial government putting a ban on these practices. Thus the primordial tribal identity was hardly traditional in nature and infact reflected the destruction of the productive forces in tribal societies.

32.4 TRIBALS AND THE NATIONALISTS: ANTHROPOLOGY FOR NATION BUILDING

In the contrast to the views of the anthropologists and the colonists the nationalists of the 1930s and 40s were severely critical of colonial policies and hostile towards anthropological writings that celebrated the cultural primitivism. The supporters of tribal culture values considered the relationship between tribes and peasants to be exploitative in character. They contended that the segregation of these people was the most effective way of modernising them. Nationalist anthropologists and Congressmen contested these assertions, thereby arguing that the basis of exclusion was completely unfounded. The Congress debated the pro-exclusion British officials on two counts. The first argument was political. It concentrated on being anti-imperialist in its stance and laid emphasis on the development of an overwhelming Indian identity that was intended to mobilise people against the colonial rule. The second contention contested the social and anthropological basis of the contentions made by those supporting the government policies of Exclusion and Partial Exclusion.

The Congress thought that the future of tribals was integrally linked with the economic progress of the rest of the Indian population. They did not want to deny these communities an opportunity to associate and learn from other advanced communities. They disagreed with the official view that the tribal people had special needs and rejected anything that celebrated the distinctiveness of cultures. For example in this scheme of thinking anthropology deserved contempt. Two leaders of the Central Provinces, M.S. Aney and N.M. Joshi, charged all anthropologists with desiring to keep all the “primitive races of India uncivilised and in a state of barbarism as raw material for their science in order to add to their blessed stock of scientific knowledge. But the most articulate position in this respect was taken by G.S. Ghurye in his monograph Aborigines – so called and their future in which the crux of his thesis was that ‘aborigines’ were an integral part of the Hindu society since a very long time. Explaining why these communities must be called “so-called aborigines” he said that:

“It is clear from this discussion that the proper description of these peoples must refer itself to their place in it near Hindu society and not to their supposed autochthonism. While sections of these tribes are properly integrated with Hindu society, very large sections, in fact a bulk of them, are rather loosely assimilated. Only very small sections, living in the recesses of the hills and the depths of the forests, have not been more than touched by Hinduism. Under the circumstances the only proper definition of these people is that they are imperfectly integrated classes of Hindu society. Though for the sake of convenience they may he designated the tribal classes of Hindu society, suggesting thereby the social fact that they have retained much more of the tribal creeds and organisation than many of the castes of Hindu society, yet they are in reality Backward Hindus”.

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According to Ghurye, the historical process inevitably led to the Hinduization of the tribals. He argued that they would witness moral and economic betterment if they were ‘properly assimilated’ into such a society. Their dance and music would be allowed in Hindu society; and even if they lost some part of their culture, they would be at an advantageous position in the long-run. Of the preservation of “tribal culture” Ghurye stated that:

 Isoislationism or assimilationism does not therefore appear to owe its inspiration either to a supposedly queer academic interest of the anthropologist or to the possibility of the perverse mentality of British administrators. It is very largely a matter of opinion as to [which is] the best way of preserving the vitality of the tribal people only secondarily complicated by other considerations”.

Ghurye stated that the exclusion of the tribals was a political statement that was to be opposed. According to him its sociological and historical assumptions were inaccurate. He saw the peasant and tribal communities as open and dynamic structures, each influencing the other. But despite this conceptual framework, the merits of the assimilation of the tribes into Hindu society continued to be over emphasised in Ghurye’s work.

Ghurye was not the only nationalist sociologist to criticise the pro-Exclusionist policies. In an essay entitled ‘Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption’ Nirmal Kumar Bose laid down his interpretation of the relationship of the dominant Hindu communities with tribes. He said that,

 From what has been observed among the Juangs and from the reading of law books, it is to be noted that the Hindu society while absorbing a new tribe or while creating a new jati by differentiation of occupation, always guaranteed or tried to guarantee monopoly in a particular occupation to each caste within a given region. The last point is very important; for the same jati may be found practising many different trades if it finds the prescribed hereditary occupations no longer economically satisfactory”.

The stances of both Ghurye and Bose resulted in a defence of Hindu culture and society. They saw the tribal identity as a sub-set of the larger identity of the caste Hindu society and therefore did not consider the assimilation into Hindu society a major problem. But this was not true of all nationalists. Social workers like A.V. Thakkar reflected upon the need to develop a strong nationalist identity. In 1941 Thakkar wrote that,

 These people were the original sons of the soil and were in possession of our country before the Aryans poured in from the North West and North East passes, conquered them with their superior powers and talents and drove them from the plains to the hills and forests. They are older and more ancient children of the soils than the Hindus and more so than the Muslims and Anglo-Indians. But they are steeped in ignorance and poverty and do not know their rights and privileges, much less their collective and national responsibilitie”.

In his interpretation of the tribal past, Thakkar tried reinstate the position of these communities as the ‘original inhabitants of India’. However in doing so he also asserted that the present conditions of poverty and ignorance in which tribal people lived had to be changed. This transformation could not be brought about through a policy of isolationism or Exclusion. Thakkar argued that the spirit of provincial government of national responsibility could only be inculcated into these communities through a policy of “assimilation”. But his path of assimilation was slightly different from that of Ghurye and Bose. He said that:
Thakkar considered the strategy of assimilation was an essential part of their development process. He believed that if these communities learnt some good things from the Hindu society, they would also be exploited by it. Hence he proposed a different type of a policy of protection for these communities. Rather than the confinement of these communities in a segregated space, he proposed protection of the forest communities through the legislation of special laws. In this sense, even if Thakkar was opposed to the Exclusion, he was in favour of some kind of protection for tribals.

The predominant nationalist view that the tribes was not a historically and anthropologically valid category was reflected in the writings of post colonial writers who were inspired by them. Reviewing the literature on tribes and peasantry Andre Beteille wrote in 1987 that there was no satisfactory way of defining the tribal society. Arguing that it was difficult to call any one a tribal in Indian society, rather the agrarian society was comprised of a heterogeneous body of peasants cut up into various ethno-linguistic categories. In a similar vein Guha also argues that historically informed anthropologists like G.S. Ghurye and D.R. Gadgil were justified in repudiating the categories of aboriginals and tribals and that the historical record supported such skepticism. Thus we find that the anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of contemporary tribal India were profoundly influenced by the writings of people who studied tribes in the colonial times.

32.5 SUMMARY

In this unit we introduced you to various strands of writings on tribal studies. We saw how the colonial officials and the nationalists differed in their perceptions of tribes in India. Different shades of opinions amongst both of them have also been spelt out.

32.6 GLOSSARY

Pre Class Society : Historically societies that emerged before the formation of classes occurred. These societies were primarily marked by kin based or lineage based formations.

32.7 EXERCISES

1) What were the different views of British officials about tribes in India?
2) What was the defining principle of the nationalists on tribes in India?
SUGGESTED READINGS


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