
UNIT 2 CONCEPT OF TRIBE IN RELATION TO CONCEPT OF INDIGENOUS

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Learning Objectives

In this unit, you will learn about the:

- nomenclatures and their significance in relation to Tribes and Indigenous;
- political implications that a label may carry;
- difference that it makes to be called as tribe or as indigenous; and
- why Indian tribes are being denied the identity of being Indigenous.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The term tribe faced political rejection in many parts of the world as it was associated with the colonisation project by which people in many parts of the world lost their sovereignty and their dignity as human beings to become classified as tribes. The term tribe came with the connotation of being uncivilised, 'primitive', and less than human (Kuper 1998). In many parts of the world, the local people dislike the discipline of anthropology because it thinks that the discipline justified colonisation by inventing the terms tribe and 'primitive'. While this may have been true during the period when evolutionary theory held sway, contemporary anthropologists have been the greatest allies of the people known variously as indigenous, aborigines or tribes. Anthropologists have been at the forefront of deconstructing these labels and showing them for what they are, namely political and economically informed constructs that at any point of time served to benefit those that had the power to bestow labels and name (Channa 2015).

A very important aspect of naming has been that many communities across the globe have asked for and also at times acquired the right and the power to choose names for themselves. For example, some untouchables in India have found a voice via the name Dalit and some tribal groups in the North-East have empowered themselves by joining hands under the label of Naga. Globally the people who had suffered the loss of land and identity by European colonisers, had opted for the label of indigenous as against tribe, the anthropological terminology in common academic use. The Indian state had opposed the use of this term for Indian tribes. In this unit, we shall get a deeper

understanding of the terms tribe and indigenous and also the political contestation over the use of these terms.

2.2 UNDERSTANDING TRIBES

Unnithan-Kumar (1997:1), in her ethnography of the Girasia of Rajasthan, writes, “Caste and tribe, I believe, are constructed and represent categories which are products of historical and contemporary social, economic and political processes”. The Girasia of Rajasthan has been less in contact with the upper castes, than the Bhils, who played a key role in the feudal system of this region, often acting as allies of the local Rajput chieftains. However, it is the Girasia, who have kept to the more inaccessible areas, who claim an upper-caste Rajput status. They are regarded by the surrounding caste groups as ‘*junglee*’ and uncivilised, with their women being specifically targeted as too independent and of loose sexual morals. The Girasia are not the only tribe who are in their self-construction, upper-caste Hindus.” The Bhotiya and the Kinnaurie studied by Channa (2013) also consider themselves to be upper caste Kshatriyas while being designated as a scheduled tribe in the official records. Thus, being regarded as uncivilised or a tribe (often in popular view regarded as synonymous) is not how specific communities regard themselves. Padel (2011:12) writes how the Konds asked him if there were Konds in his country as well. This simple question indicates as Padel puts it, “how differently Konds see themselves from the way the ethnographic tradition defines them-precisely as it defines other tribes, by locating them in a particular area and giving an exact figure for their population. Konds see themselves, quite simply, as one of the main races or divisions of mankind”. Being set aside as a tribe or *janjati*, is a construct imposed on these people from the outside and is never an aspect of their self-recognition. Thus, if the tribe acquires a sense of hierarchy or inferiority, it is only in relation to others, who imbibe or force these values onto them. It is not simply interaction but the nature of the interaction that determines the self-cognition of a tribe.

Few tribes in India have been isolated. As Padel (2009) has described in his ethnography about the Konds, the Kond deity, and their ritual of sacrifice to the Earth-mother (*Tari-Penu*) were accepted and contributed to by the local Hindu rulers, who also equated their tribal goddess to the Hindu goddess Durga, and the local Hindus, “readily identified *Tari Penu* with the goddess Durga when talking to British officials’ (ibid:129). Thus, the Konds were allies of the local rulers who paid obeisance to their goddess and had no reason to consider themselves as inferior to the Hindus. Similarly, the many communities subsumed under the generic term Bhotiya, engaged in cross-border trade across the Himalayan borders, had high social status in their own region, and were economically better off than their cultivating neighbours, being engaged in lucrative trade relations and having large herds of animals that are a source of wealth. Most tribes, being economically self-sufficient and not having values of hierarchy, as in the caste society, were proud and independent people, to whom the idea of subservience to outside authority was not acceptable. All tribes consider themselves to be important, the center of the universe, and having a prime position in the order of the universe. The label of being marginal, underdeveloped, and backward, is purely an external view that not even the so-called “primitive” tribes had about themselves.

The term tribe is not an indigenous one. The indigenous term *jati*, encompassed both caste and tribe; it did not mention any specific character that set the tribe apart from a caste. The term *janjati* is used for those *jatis* that are located in the forests. Since

there are many tribes in India that claim caste status, terms such as 'sanskritisation' have been used to denote attempts at upward mobility on behalf of the tribe. Some authors are of the opinion that some actual upper castes may have been reduced to so-called, marginal status as they lost their political power and the terms, tribalisation has been used for them. However, Unnithan-Kumar is in disagreement with the concept that tribalisation means a loss of civilised ways and is more supportive of the idea that communities like Girasia have been able to maintain their original lifeways to a greater extent than those like the Bhils, that had more intimate contact with the caste communities. It has been recorded by Brown (1990), that the Bhotiya tribes on the Indo-Tibet border were actually Rajputs who preferred to accept a non-Hindu lifestyle like beef-eating in order to form long term trading relationships with the Tibetans that had involved living in each other's houses for the purpose of long term trade. They had sacrificed their upper-caste status for the sake of economic benefits. Again, as Channa (2013) has revealed in her work, once the trade was discontinued and the communities of Bhotiya find themselves forging greater economic and political relations with the Indian mainland, they are attempting to move towards their original Hindu upper-caste identity. Thus, the identity of being a tribe and the identity of being a caste is, as suggested by Unnithan-Kumar, a matter of historical and political processes and may tend to change over time, depending upon the context.

The term tribe is also viewed by many as introduced by the British colonial official as an administrative strategy, to distinguish between those that were already incorporated within the hierarchical feudal system and those that were situated outside of it. The British viewed the tribes as those characterised by Animistic religion, racially distinct, and not part of the Hindu civilisation. The Aryan myth was a popular construct that also provided an ideological basis for separating what the British and other race theorists believed were the original inhabitants of this continent and the later invaders of the sub-continent, romantically referred to as the Aryans. This myth, imagined a continent of short, dark-skinned people, being invaded by tall fair-skinned people of possible European origin, was something that appealed to both the Indian upper castes and the British (Trautmann 2004). The former was now convinced that the superiority that they had always claimed on the basis of the scriptures was a real one scientifically provable. In the course of time the Aryan myth as well as the racial differences of the Indian population were disproved by scientific analysis but is still a part of the collective imagination of the upper caste Indian.

From a more paternalistic standpoint, the British also realised that the tribes were open to exploitation by the more sophisticated, urban Indians, especially the money-lenders and those who were after the bodies of the tribal women. They thus attempted to keep the tribes away from the mainstream by creating excluded and scheduled areas (Elwin 1959). These attempts to keep the tribes 'safe' from the caste Hindus have not been viewed kindly by many Indian scholars as well as administrators, many of whom thought this created a 'museum effect' and has prevented the tribes from getting absorbed into the mainstream of Indian society. A prominent sociologist of western India, Ghurey for example was against treating tribes as a separate category, preferring to use the term "backward Hindus" (1943:24), a term both derogatory and smacking of ethnocentrism. It is this sentiment that treats tribes as 'uncivilised' and in need of absorption into the Hindu mainstream that still drives much of the political ideology of the Indian state.

From the British times, there has been a dual approach by the state to the tribes. On one hand in its paternalistic role, the state including both the colonial and the post-

colonial one, has shown some degree of positive discrimination towards the tribes, and following Nehru, who acted on the advice of anthropologists such as Verrier Elwin, a policy of relative non-interference has been practiced towards some tribes and tribal areas. But even the British had not been tolerant of the tribes that showed too much political independence and which they perceived as a threat to their sovereignty. Padel (2009) in his detailed account of the British attacks and brutal subjugation of the independent Kondh tribes of Odisha, has clearly shown that extreme brutality and show of power was used by the British to subjugate a relatively unarmed and passive people, whose only fault was that they did not recognise the hierarchy and order that the colonial powers sought to impose on them. Similar heavy-handedness was shown in the British raids on the villages of the tribes of the North-East, where again entire villages were burnt or razed and many persons killed just to make clear the fact of British dominance over this region. The process of “teaching a lesson” to these people and setting “examples” often led to mass executions, torture, and extreme brutality by the colonial troops and their leaders.

Similar attitudes were inherited by the post-colonial government that still maintains a paternalistic attitude of treating the tribes as marginal, under-developed, and in need of civilising. Since the inclusion of a community within the label of the tribe also entitles them to the official policy of positive discrimination, from 1950, onwards, when the Constitution of India, provided these safeguards, the matter of being included or not included in one or other of the categories, namely scheduled tribe, scheduled caste and Other Backward Caste; became more of a political than an academic project. Thus, Béteille (1986) maintains that in this process of ‘identification’ of tribes, the actual process of defining them was thrust aside. The question being posed was, “who?” with little reference to “why?” Thus, the officials were under pressure to recognise certain communities as tribe due to local maneuvering, and not locate them by using any defined characters. Thus, we may find the same community like the Girasia, being identified as scheduled caste in Rajasthan, but not in the neighbouring state of Gujarat. Also many were recognised under names that were imposed on them by outside power holding groups and not as they recognised themselves.

The state also followed the policy of use of force, brutality, and suppression if the tribals showed any form of resistance. The state has refused to treat the tribes as central to the policies of benefit that it extends to those that constitute the so-called ‘mainstream’, populations. Under these circumstances, the resistance of the Indian state to the use of the term indigenous can be understood as an attempt to keep the tribes disempowered and voiceless.

2.3 INDIGENOUS: MEANING AND CONCEPT

The term Indigenous is to be examined more critically when applied to the tribes. Indigenous means the ‘original people’ and is more a representative term than the pejorative term, “native” used for the people occupying the colonies before the Europeans conquered them. The term indigenous was a self-designation that sought to empower these very people, referred to as native, by giving them the status of original occupants, and is associated with the notion of ownership and rights of possession of resources and land. Historically this term is a byproduct of colonisation and was used for the native populations of countries such as the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. It refers largely to the western occupation of these countries and refers to

the original non-white people who lived there, such as the Australian Aborigines, the Native Americans, the New Zealand Maoris and the Cree of Canada. When the Europeans entered these territories they often regarded themselves as the first humans to step into these territories and claimed possession over them by the claim of 'discovery'; a claim that was based on the total disregard of the original and existing populations on these territories as 'non-existent'. The continents of New Zealand and Australia were termed *terra nullis* or unoccupied, in spite of having thriving populations of many communities (Shanklin 1994). These people, the Australian Aborigines, the Maori, etc., were regarded as non-people, non-human, and their presence on these lands did not qualify to regard them as 'occupied'.

To counter these values and ideologies, that had justified colonisation with impunity, driving out living cultures and disregarding human lives as non-human, akin to the wildlife and nature that was equally devastated in the process of colonisation, the term indigenous was coined. This was not an externally imposed term like a native, but one that was self-acquired to assert the fact that when the white men arrived on these continents, these were not empty, they had people, and these were the original inhabitants. This name was a claim to humanity, to original occupancy, and also to sovereignty. However, since powerful nation-states had already been established, the claims of the original inhabitants were limited but still, there was a voice, a label under which rights could be claimed and assertions made. Since the claims to their territories were not given up without a fight, the term indigenous was operative in principle from the time these people encountered the outsiders who sought to exterminate them and take over their lands. The term indigenous also put a question mark on the legitimacy of the rule of the later entrants, namely the European colonisers. In many parts of the world, large tracts have been returned to the original owners. In Canada, there are tracts of un-ceded Algonquin territories and in the USA, Native Americans can lay claim to their original territories, if enough proof can be raised. In Canada the original inhabitants have been given the name of First Nation people, to identify their original claim.

Thus the indigenous people have acted politically for centuries as they fought the invaders into their terrain. But the identity 'indigenous' was given a concrete shape by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in its 1953 report, "Indigenous Peoples: Living and Working Conditions of Aboriginal Populations in Independent Countries"; and later in its 1957 International Labour Organisation Convention (No.107) Concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries. As pointed out by the distinguished Indian scholar B.K. Roy Burman (1998:145), the initial convention, although highlighting the plight of the indigenous people had a certain ethnocentric bias, especially as it considered the indigenous to be less advanced than the other populations. Later there has been an amendment and the ILO drew up a new convention namely Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of Independent Countries (Convention 169 of 1989). In this, the earlier evolutionist bias regarding progress has been removed and the terms tribe and indigenous have been treated as separate but analogous. It would be noteworthy for the learners to point out here that this ILO convention 169 has not been ratified by the Indian Government. Regarding these two conventions Roy Burman (ibid:46) has turned his critical gaze pointing out that while the tribal has been referred to as 'peoples' all through, it is mentioned that the indigenous were populations in the pre-colonial era that became peoples only in the post-colonial phase, which according to Roy Burman has grave legal implications and protects the colonising countries. The distinction between population and people is a critical one, as the former refers only to a species or aggregate

of humans and the latter refers to an organised society and culture with a specific identity. In a broader sense, it makes the crucial distinction between uncivilised non-human and civilised human. As populations the pre-colonised indigenous people had no particular legal rights which they only acquire when they become peoples, and this credit of making them into peoples also goes to the colonisers and the creation of nation-states.

Roy Burman also points to huge discrepancies in the definition of Indigenous by UN sources who largely decline to name the indigenous on their own, leaving it to the people to so categorise themselves. But again, Europe is shown as not having any indigenous populations because it was never colonised but at the same time, China and Thailand, which too were never colonised are shown as having indigenous people by the same sources, again pointing to a Eurocentric bias.

Since the Indian subcontinent and Asia are occupied by mostly all indigenous people, yet not all of whom are tribal. India can be viewed as an indigenously evolved civilisation, where various streams of populations had come from ancient times to create a diverse ethnic and cultural mosaic. The Indian government had rejected the use of the term indigenous on the plea that almost everyone in India is indigenous and India cannot be compared to the colonies like USA, New Zealand and Australia. The distinction made in India between the tribal and the non-tribal is cultural and does not refer to any specific sequence of entering the country. In this context, India's Ram Dayal Munda (a recognised tribal leader) had made an appeal to the UN Working group on Indigenous people to consider tribal and indigenous to be the same for these countries. The category indigenous confers a lot of political mileage and connectivity to a huge global network.

The tribes of India have suffered because they have not been recognised formally as indigenous by the Indian government. However, such an appeal has not been accepted by the UN working committee. A direct effect of the denial of indigenous status to the Indian tribes has been their deprivation of legal rights under this rubric. The use of the term peoples for the indigenous confers considerable rights to them as peoples have a distinct identity as a community, and are recognised as having some kind of a structure. One of the most fundamental rights that a person may have is the right to self-determination. Once designated as indigenous and a people, a group may claim the right to self-determination. But this right comes up as a direct confrontation to the right to sovereignty of the nation-state of which that particular person may be a part. Thus, Hector GrosEspiel (1988), who prepared the report on self-determination for the UN, clearly reserves the right to secession only for those people who are ruled by an external source or for a situation of 'external colonisation'. Here it is pertinent to quote Javaid Rehman (1998:74)

"The inevitable movement towards decolonisation was built around a consensus that the right to self-determination was only permissible if the State and its 'colonial peoples' were geographically distinct. The plea by many indigenous people and minorities that 'colonisation is no less colonisation, if it is made by territorial contiguity than by overseas expansion' was ignored for it provided a threat to the sacrosanct principles of territorial integrity and State sovereignty on which the post-colonial world order was established"

In spite of the complete aversion to any form of threat to the territorial integrity of sovereign countries, United Nations Special Rapporteur, Jose Martinez Cobo (see Rehman 1998:76) laid down some definitions that are widely quoted and put in practice. His definition of indigenous includes the notion of having a distinct identity from the

dominant peoples now ruling over their territories and who have continuity with pre-colonial and pre-invasion communities on the territories they now occupy. These people are self-motivated to carry forward their identities through the preservation and continuity of their lifeways and ancestral territories. The historical continuity mentioned includes territory, common ancestry, language, and residence along with other relevant factors. However, one key factor that is mentioned in Article (1) of the ILO convention of 169 adopted in 1989 mentions

“Self-identification as indigenous or tribal shall be regarded as a fundamental criterion for determining the groups to which the provisions of this convention apply”.

This particular convention moves forward from the earlier ones in addressing many pressing issues. Article 2 of this convention urges the governments to take responsibility for ensuring the participation of these peoples in the process of governance, to protect their rights, and to ensure the protection of their ways of life, customs, and institutions.

Article 3 prohibits discrimination in the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. And the other articles too enjoin the rights of people to live according to their own wishes and to enjoy their territorial and cultural freedoms.

Article 6 and 7 are of special importance as the former requires governments to consult peoples in matters affecting them and Article 7 states that the people concerned shall have their right to decide on their course of development in as much as it affects their lives, beliefs, institutions, and spiritual well-being.

But at the same time, it makes it clear that the term ‘peoples’ as applied to them comes without any bearing on how this term is used in international law. Thus all through we find that there is a tight rope walk between granting people their rights and the threat to the sovereignty of the nations of which they are a part.

The reluctance of the governments of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, etc., to grant the status of Indigenous people to their tribal populations is understandable as all these countries are encroaching on the lands and resources of their tribal populations to a very large extent in their push for so-called development. Conceding the status of indigenous to these people would tie up the hands of the state in making dams, mining, and extracting resources from tribal areas, without paying them or recognising that the resources belong not to the larger nation, but to the people on whose territory they lie.

Although tribal lands are protected from ordinary non-tribals, by the inner line provisions and the customary rights granted to the tribes; they are not exempt from being used for the larger, “national interest”; on the plea of which ‘interest’, there is rampant destruction of tribal environment and societies. Since they are not recognised as indigenous, the Indian tribes do not have the same kind of platform for negotiation as the aboriginal peoples of Canada, Australia, and the USA.

2.4 NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES

In the contemporary world, having a name bestows a status and a status comes often with associated legal and political abilities as well as disabilities. The term tribe is associated with inferiority, marginal position, and cultural and social denigration. Indigenous on the other hand signifies dignity, recognition, and rights. The status of

indigenous was obtained by the aboriginal and native peoples of the colonised nations after long periods of negotiation bloodshed and genocide. The status of South Asian tribal populations remains ambiguous as they too had suffered a lot under European colonisation, some of them becoming almost decimated like the Andaman Islanders and the Chenchus. But in the present times, they are equal citizens of an independent country. They have equal rights and positions as any other Indian citizen and are part of the democratic setup. Under the Indian Constitution, as Scheduled tribes, they have privileges and enjoy many provisions. In reality, the tribal people of India remain marginalised, poor, and neglected. Whenever they have tried to make their voice heard, they have been subjected to brutal oppression, no less in brutality than the outsider colonisers.

The fact of internal colonisation is a harsh reality in many post-colonial nations, where they divide and distance between elite and non-elite are glaring and often involve processes of extraction and exploitation to support what is seen as “development”. The ideology of colonisation that masked exploitation in the garb of “civilising the savage”, is also at work in internal colonisation. Under such conditions, letting people decide for themselves and giving them too much independence and rights, may be seen as politically not feasible. Most policymakers, power holders, and even members of the general public are averse to what they see as fissiparous tendencies on the part of some segments of the nation-state. Ignorance about tribal cultures and the value of their knowledge and cosmology, also informs the hostile attitude that states have for the people on the margins of the state. Empowering labels as indigenous are not easily granted and even if grudgingly accepted are not allowed to be exerted to the full extent of their legal and political implications. It would be a fantasy for us to imagine that aborigines have a much better life under the label of indigenous than they have as tribes. But as indigenous they have a voice, and can also connect to a global network of support. Thus, Indian tribal leaders and also those who advocate for their welfare have tried to assert the right of the South Asian tribes to be recognised as indigenous. They have argued that the term indigenous should include the present conditions of existence of the people and not only refer to their historical past.

2.5 SUMMARY

In this unit, we have learned about the political game of naming and labeling. The terms tribe and indigenous have been critically evaluated and understood. The reasons why the Indian state has declined the use of the term indigenous for Indian tribes has been analysed and understood in the backdrop of internal stratification and colonisation. The overall understanding that we get from this unit is to not take any given nomenclature at face value but to examine them as politically informed constructs that have values attached. The students are encouraged to not take any definition or criteria for naming and labeling as given but to critically examine them in the context in which they arise and the role that they play in the negotiations for resources and power.

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Sample Questions

1. Discuss the role played by colonial administration in constructing the tribe as a category.
2. Were Indian tribes isolated? Critically discuss.
3. Discuss the social and political implications of the term tribe in the Indian context
4. What kind of racial theory was propagated to place the Indian tribes in a historical context?
5. When and how did the term indigenous gain recognition?
6. What were the historical conditions of colonisation and the implications for the original people of the continents such as Australia and Canada?

7. Give some critical appraisal of the term indigenous in the way it was adopted by the ILO?
8. In what way can the Indian tribes be understood as indigenous?
9. What difference is it likely to make if Indian tribes attain indigenous status?
10. What arguments has the Indian state made to deny indigenous status to Indian tribes?

