

The Concept of Tribe in the Indian Context*

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The Shillong Times of October 3, 2007 had a headline titled “Purno opposes ST status to Others”, which carried a statement given by the National Congress Party General Secretary and former Lok Sabha Speaker, Purno A. Sangma, at the Annual Conference of Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad held in Jaipur, Rajasthan. Among other things he reportedly said: (1) “We (tribals) are classless and casteless people and not going to let anyone to dilute our tribal character”, and (2) “A tribal status is given to one who is primitive, has distinct culture, geographical isolation and has shyness of contact”.

The above attempt to define a tribe by a tribal leader assumes a lot of significance not only because of the stature of the person but also because this heralds a new era of self-definition. The innumerable attempts to define a tribe in the early stages of Anthropology have been made almost exclusively

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by anthropologists belonging to Anglo-Saxon origin. They used words like primitive, savage, and barbarous to describe the tribes they came in contact with. Later anthropologists used less pejorative expressions like egalitarian, totemic, kinship-based, culturally homogenous, having a definite territory, geographically isolated or living in forests, hills and distant places, and so on to define the tribes they studied. But every anthropologist was acutely aware of the fact that all the tribes he knew did not fit into any concept of tribe. Hence, most of them chose to propose only a working definition that would be relevant only to the tribes they studied or the ones in question. The problem continues today even if we seek to confine our definition of tribe to a single country like India, which is the focus of the present essay.

Over the years, we have come to such a passe that we have begun to talk about what a tribe is not, rather than what it is. This is understandable in view of the immense variation the tribes in India show in terms of size and distribution of population, level of literacy and technology, linguistic diversity, religious and occupational affiliations, and the degree of their integration with other communities. This diversity owes its origin partly to the diverse, arbitrary and politically expedient ways of scheduling a community as a tribe in the constitution of India for the past five decades or so. This diversity creates a huge challenge for anthropologists to define a tribe in the Indian context. The challenge not only lies in finding universally acceptable criteria but also an acceptable label. The criteria "dispossessed and deprived people" (see Xaxa 1999) might make sense in the plains of India but certainly is not equally relevant in North I East India. Thus, in the context of India as a whole, the label itself is a major problem because the tribes of North II East India do not wish to be labeled "*adivasi*" and do not recognize the *adivasis* in the region as tribes. The English

word "tribe" is well accepted by the former and arguably gives them a sense of "self-esteem and pride" (Xaxa1999: 3589). But, as Beteille has rightly pointed out, finding an acceptable definition of tribe is not only an academic requirement but in many countries like India also a legal and constitutional one (1998: 187). It is certainly not enough to say that tribes in India refer to those communities which are listed in the Constitution. The Constitution simply designates a certain community as a scheduled tribe without defining what a tribe, according to it, is. And if we continue to get daunted by the great diversity among tribes within India (see Sinha 2006 for details) or continue to blame the colonial administration for creating this mess about concepts like caste and tribe it does not speak well of the intellectual ability of the postcolonial Indians, who I suspect have not made any serious effort to define a tribe. While till 1990s there were several efforts to contrast caste with tribe, despite dissenting voices that argued that the distinction between caste and tribe is a non-issue (see Misra 1972, Misra 1977, Subba 2006b), the efforts after 1990s have been more or less limited to showing the conceptual similarities and differences between tribe and indigenous people (Roy Burman 1992, Beteille 1998, Xaxa 1999, Karlsson and Subba 2006).

Politics of Definition

In this section I dwell briefly on the politics of defining a tribe. Definition of a people as a tribe becomes important from administrative point of view so that the state can decide whether or not to extend a certain constitutional privilege to a particular community. National resources being limited in a country like India the state must prioritize the beneficiaries on the basis of certain criteria. But more importantly perhaps defining a tribe means bringing the people being so defined under some kind of conceptual control and bringing certain degree of certainty,

and hence predictability, about their socio-economic and psychological characteristics or behaviour. And once a tribe is so labeled other people even begin to see such people bearing those characteristics that might not have been noticed prior to being so labeled. Labeling generates new characteristics - for those who label as well as those who are so labeled - that in turn tend to identify a community so labeled differently (see Scheff 1966, Rosenhan 1973, Thoits 1985 on labeling and identity).

I further argue that defining a tribe amounts to stereotyping it, highlighting some of its characteristics and ignoring others, thereby fossilizing its personality. That it is a tribe becomes the foremost and often the only identity of the community and rest of its qualities or shortcomings simply fall in place according to the label given to it. Much of the comparisons between caste and tribe that exist in Indian Anthropology and Sociology textbooks are afflicted with this shortcoming. The two concepts are contrasted without pausing for a while to see if they should be contrasted or compared. One can certainly talk about the caste system, but can one talk about a tribal system in organic sense? The study of Rajalakshmi Misra on inter-tribal relations among Chetty, Mullukurumba, Urali Kurumba, Kattu Naicken and Paniyan in Erumad village of the Nilgiri Hills (1972) tends to suggest that it is possible to talk about tribal system as organic system.

Defining a tribe is also an act of homogenizing not only from outside but also from within. The expected gains from a tribal identity gradually mould them to project a homogenous and externally expected image of them and all contradictory features are dismissed as aberrations. It is a process in which the community itself participates actively in the hope of a better future, a more secured landholding, regaining traditional rights over now "reserved forests", priority in employments, promotions, etc. I clearly recall how in 2005 the leaders of

various communities in the process of being labeled as tribes in Sikkim welcomed the members of the group of “experts”, which included me, who visited Sikkim to prepare ethnographic reports on them, which were expected to be completed soon and be the “passports” to the “heavenly” world of tribes where there is only happiness and prosperity. Once they become tribes, they think that that would be end of their suffering, misery, stagnation and poverty. That is why they welcomed us to the capital of Sikkim as though we were celebrities and provided us with every possible information on their culture and language. They also presented to us self-prepared ethnographic reports in hard copy as well as in CDs. Above all their faces showed how keen they were to attain a tribal identity. The success of Limbus and Tamangs, who were in many ways no different from themselves, in being scheduled as tribes in January 2003 had filled them with the necessary hopes and aspirations.

Undoubtedly, defining a tribe is one of the greatest challenges Indian anthropologists face today because it calls upon them to find that common thread that connects the now seven hundred odd tribes spread over the length and breadth of India and belonging to different races, languages, religions, literacy levels, modes of livelihood, and so on. In the remaining part of my essay I have tried to do that exactly, although I had the choice to simply bring out the difficulties of defining a tribe in the Indian context. Doing so would be easy but a bad caricature of what Andre Beteille (1974) has so well done. I decided to go for the more challenging of the two options I had while preparing this essay. The basic premise on which I rest my effort to define a tribe is that it should be based on a common and positive attribute shared by most of the tribes in India. The task is daunting and the acceptability of what I propose is limited, but the effort is worth making. When more such efforts are made by Indian anthropologists I hope a pan-Indian definition of tribe can emerge.

Sangma's Definition of Tribe

Let me begin defining a tribe by referring to what Purno A. Sangma, one of the best known tribal leaders of India, is quoted to have said at Jaipur this year, reference to which is made in the very beginning of this essay. There are three important words he has used in his address, viz., primitive, casteless and classless. I would like to argue that none of these three concepts, individually or together, define a tribe and they all indicate the absence of something – culture, caste and class – respectively. In that sense, the concepts used by Sangma to define a tribe are negative concepts. If I were to choose a negative concept to define a tribe today I would choose “backwardness” not only because tribes are invariably thought to be backward by non-tribal societies but the tribes themselves think that they are backward vis-à-vis the non-tribal people they come in contact with in schools, colleges, offices, markets, and so on. If tribes were not considered “backward” by themselves they would fight for de-reservation and if they were not considered so by non-tribal societies they would not seek withdrawal of such privileges from those who now form the “creamy layer” of tribal societies. But I choose not to define a tribe on the basis of backwardness because this is not only a relative but also a negative concept and I think a community ought not to be defined negatively.

To go back to Sangma's definition it must be remembered that a tribe shares several characteristics with a caste. A tribe is not only localized and endogamous group like a caste, but is often characterized by hierarchical relationship among them. There is also a shared consciousness about membership and a sense of belonging to a tribe, which is also seen in case of a caste. The only difference I can see between the two concepts is not religious, as many would expect in view of the wrong association between Animism and tribe, but linguistic: almost

every tribe has a language of its own, but castes are part of larger, regional, linguistic communities. But, I must hasten to add that even if every tribe has a language of its own most of them have “lost” it and become speakers of regional languages very much like their caste counterparts. About castes being organic and tribes segmentary suffice to say here that there are segmentary castes – especially in the middle rung – as much as there are hierarchical tribes in India where certain clans occupy higher status than other clans. Sangma also claims that tribes have distinct cultures, geographical isolation and shyness. The distinctiveness of culture is a debatable issue. Every tribe has something distinctive about its culture, notably a language, but it also shares very many material and non-material cultural traits with neighbouring communities who may be tribes or castes. Geographical isolation is similarly problematic. The tribes themselves were not geographically isolated from each other; who they were relatively isolated from perhaps were the plains Hindus or Muslims, as the case may be, who were equally isolated (or not) from the hill tribes. So why look at the tribes from the perspective of the plainsmen even if we accept for the moment that there was no interaction between the hill tribes and plains castes. There are enough evidences to show that the hill tribes interacted with the plainsmen through centuries. The most difficult issue to agree on is perhaps the “shyness of culture”. If the hill tribes largely remained in the hills in the past it was more perhaps due to fear of dying of malaria, heat and humidity, lack of linguistic ability to communicate with the plains people, and the fear of being looted or cheated by the plains people. But why are the plains people not considered to have “shyness of culture” if their visit to the hills was equally scarce?

I have consciously dwelt on the definition of tribe given by Sangma in some detail here because in doing so I saw an

excellent opportunity to illustrate how the self-definition of a tribe can in many ways be very similar to the definitions given by non-tribals. While this is nothing new about etic-emic debate in anthropology (Headland, Pike and Harris 1990) adoption of the categories of non-tribals by Sangma may be read as a strategy to gain more economic and political mileage out of the dominant discourse on tribes in India. This is likely because Sangma is aware that there is growing resentment in many parts of India against the rich tribal facilities in almost every tribal community who enjoy all the privileges of being “backward” like not having to pay income tax and reservation in jobs. He is also aware of the frustration among many tribes in India about the fact that the percentage of seats reserved for them remains 7.5 percent whereas every few years several new communities are listed as Scheduled Tribes.

Search for a Definition of Tribe

Coming back to my effort to define a tribe in the Indian context, what is that common thread that passes through all the tribes that are already scheduled or are yet to be scheduled? What is that single most common denominator of all tribes in India? As I was contemplating to prepare this essay I threw this question open to some of my tribal colleagues and students. If I am to summarise their responses in one word it is “backwardness”, which was incidentally a common criterion also mentioned in the reports of all the 14 state governments who were asked to suggest criteria for identification of scheduled tribes in 1950 (Sinha 2006). My students and colleagues replied, “We are backward in comparison to the plains people”, “We are kind of laid back people”, “We are not concerned about our future”, “We do not think of the consequences of our actions”, “We are not clever like the plainsmen”, etc. Something that comes out consistently in all these responses is a sense of something

lacking in them. This is what Verrier Elwin referred to by his famous expression "loss of nerve" (Elwin 1966). Why did they not come up, on their own, with a single statement that indicated something positive? I am perturbed by these responses, albeit I am fully conscious of the fact that they were spontaneous about the same.

The fact that my tribal colleagues and students, who represent several tribes of Northeast India, did not volunteer a single positive attribute of tribe to define it is something I wish to dwell on briefly before moving on further. One should remember that the hill tribes of the region, who represented my universe for eliciting the above responses, do not otherwise always have a positive view of the plains people. The plains people are seen as source of all the vices like theft, cunningness, untrustworthiness, and so on. Even baldness of head and darkness of skin among the hill tribes are considered as characteristics received from the plains people. On the other hand, the plains people rarely have any negative views of the hill people who are religiously believed to be simple and honest. This certainly indicates that there was an age-old interaction between them and the experience of the people living in the hills and plains about each other was different. Such stereotypes still dominate their attitudes towards each other, which is rather unfortunate.

In the course of my conversations with my subjects I prodded further on what they thought were the positive attributes of the tribes. Some of the oft-repeated expressions were as follows: "We are simple", "We are honest", and "We are straightforward". Can these attributes be considered as "positive"? I am not too sure about it even though many non-tribals tend to consider these attributes of tribes to be positive. Even if we accept these attributes to be positive, should our definition of a tribe based on such attributes? Are we not, in

doing so, stereotyping national characters of tribes (Subba 2006a)? Is it not possible that many among the tribes are not simple, not honest, not straightforward, and so on? Even if there are very few such persons among the tribes – say less than 10 percent - a definition based on such attributes will still exclude such people from the category of tribes.

Any act of defining necessarily involves exclusion. Defining a group of people is a positivistic exercise in highlighting the regularities, the patterns, and the commonalities in the group, which would automatically mean exclusion of the attributes that do not fall in the pattern, are atypical, and are aberrant. What is more important to note is the fact the exclusion of certain attributes is not based on any statistical or scientific principle but is politically decided.

Seen from this perspective, any definition of tribe includes something and excludes something else that belongs to the universe of tribes. Unless we accept this premise we cannot make further progress in this regard because an all-inclusive definition of tribe is empirically impossible. While the usage of the word “tribe” is quite universal, our encounters with tribes have resulted in a bewildering variety of experiences that cannot be easily subsumed under any concept. Our concepts and theories must be regularly exposed to various empirical situations, but the latter being what they are will not make sense until they are brought under some kind of conceptual framework knowing full well that such an act will be a violation of many an empirical reality.

Tribes and Evolution

It will not be too gross a statement to say that we do not yet have a definition of a tribe that is inclusive of the diversity in tribal situations in India. Here, I must caution that perception of the tribal situation in India will of course vary depending on

the conceptual framework of the researcher.

Theoretically speaking, perception of tribal situation in India, or elsewhere, has largely been in the evolutionary perspective – as people occupying an earlier stage in the evolution of mankind, as people close to nature, compared to the stage of those who are not considered as tribes. This is the most dominant perception in administrative circles as well as among the lay.

So, how do I define a tribe in the Indian context? Or rather, would I still like to try and define a tribe? I think yes, because it is time now to see whether the word “tribe” has any relevance, or see if it is time to replace it with something more inclusive, less pejorative, and less loaded word. Some effort has already been made towards replacing the word “tribe” with other words like “native”, “indigenous people”, “backward Hindus” (Ghurye 1943), “aboriginals” (Elwin 1943), and the Indic words “*janajati*” and “*adivasi*”. However, the fact remains that no word has been able to replace the word “tribe”, which means, it carries a certain meaning, or set of meanings, that other words have failed to carry. What is it in the word “tribe” carries that other words do not seem to carry? It is certainly the wide currency of the word to refer to a group of people who are, in the eyes of those who are not labeled so, “exotic” or “different” from others in terms of food habits, sexual relations, marriage customs, religious beliefs, and so on. The word is further used to refer to peoples who have been living on the edge of human civilization, eking their livelihood from Mother Nature, and maintaining some kind of symbiosis with nature. Such romanticisation of the tribes unfortunately continues to dominate the horizon of tribal anthropology in India.

If there is no better word than “tribe” to represent the tribal world, it is more reasonable to try and define the word once again rather than try and replace it with a more suitable word. But such a definition must go beyond the existing

definitions in which “homogeneity” is a given – they are seen as people who speak the same language, share the same culture, practise the same religious beliefs and practices, etc. By contrast, those who are not tribes are seen as “heterogeneous” in terms of language, culture, customs, beliefs, practices, and so on. An evolutionary perspective places the two in a continuum because it is based on the principle of organicism. Organisms, as we all know, evolve from simple to complex and homogeneous to heterogeneous structures. The people called tribes are hence naturally seen as occupying an earlier stage in human evolution and hence are treated as homogenous.

Conclusion: Tribe as Reciprocal People

I propose to define tribe here as a “reciprocal people” because the importance tribes generally attach to the norms of reciprocity is evidently a lot more significant than in non-tribal societies. Reciprocal obligation is met at any cost and those who do not honour this obligation are gossiped and jeered at in practically all tribal societies.

An instance of how important this norm can be is seen in the Khasi folktale. In this folktale a poor man and a rich trader are known to be bosom friends. After being much obliged to his rich friend the poor man invites him to his house one evening but realizes that he has nothing to offer his friend in return. Having nothing to cook for the rich friend the wife of the poor man kills herself leaving a kettle boiling in the hearth. When her husband goes in to check out if some food is ready he finds his wife lying dead near the boiling kettle. Realizing the reason for her death he too kills himself with a sword. When the rich trader goes in to find out why his friend did not return for long he finds both his friend and his wife dead by the hearth and the kettle still boiling. Out of remorse for driving his friend and his wife to kill themselves he too kills himself with the

same sword.

This is narrated as the story of the origin of *kwai*, which is a combination of areca nut and betel leaf with a dash of lime. This is offered to visiting guests as a symbol of hospitality in Khasi society. *Kwai* is something even the poorest of the poor can offer to guests.

In brief this story shows how a man and his wife killed themselves for not being able to reciprocate the gesture of the rich friend. There are many such folktales among other tribes as well. But I have been particularly impressed by the high level of participation of community members in all events of crisis in tribal societies, which I presume is driven by the need to oblige in order that the one who is obliged reciprocates in times of need. Such reciprocal obligation is inevitable in case of clan and lineage members but also involves villagers irrespective of their clan or other identities. At times reciprocal obligation is fulfilled even by borrowing or selling household goods or cattle. Agricultural operations, marriage and death rituals, construction and repair of houses, and other such events in tribal societies bring a large number of families together, who pool their meagre resources to accomplish what would otherwise be impossible for a single family. Such a family keeps mental or written record of who had helped and in what form and the same is recalled when it is time for the family to reciprocate. It is also seen that the amount or value given in reciprocation is never less than the amount or value originally received. If this is ignored the defaulter may be gossiped about and even criticized, especially if such a family is rich enough to reciprocate an equal or greater amount. A sense of guilt is inevitable if a family is unable to reciprocate, which is a lot more powerful mechanism for perpetuating reciprocity than a punishment for having failed to do so.

Even the blood-revenges that were so common among many tribal communities until recently could be seen as negative

reciprocities. Although blood-revenges have been virtually non-existent today, the principle of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth still seems to appeal the tribal people. Without strong and democratically constituted traditional polities one would certainly see more of negative reciprocities at play than we tend to see today.

Reciprocity may perhaps be seen as a survival strategy adopted by tribes in the wake of rapid erosion of their resources after coming in contact with non-tribals and the state. They experienced land alienation, forest alienation, displacement, and other forms of exploitation like no other communities did, not even the Scheduled Castes, who suffered from social disabilities but did not have to experience displacement the way tribal people had to. In a situation where they felt threatened of their survival not only in the hands of resource-hungry state but also the ruthless administrators and greedy traders they seem to have used reciprocity as the key to their survival. It, however, not only ensured mutual survival but also the survival of their language, songs, dances, art and rituals to a large extent.

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