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TRIBAL CULTURE, POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Historicising Tribal Struggles for Epistemological Integration in India

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Abstract

Tribes in India have been seeking to negotiate more socio-political space from the State since the 1950s. Beginning in the late 2000s, this struggle between Tribes and the State has shifted fundamentally towards a more subtle domain - epistemology. Tribes have now become more overt about what they perceive as a demeaning of their epistemology by dominant groups and a 'paternalistic' epistemological gaze by the State. This has set the stage for an axiological battle over a demand by Tribes for 'epistemological integration'. Examining these historical struggles, this paper attempts to engage theoretically with these socio-community processes.

Key Words: Policy Practice, Scheduled Tribes, Tribal Struggles, Epistemological Integration

The Context

Like elsewhere, the Tribal peoples in India are diverse communities; heterogeneous socio-cultural entities and historico-political nations. Each with their own language, differing substantively in population size, and spread across varied regions of the country. The Indian state does not officially recognise the Tribal communities in India as 'indigenous peoples'. They are instead officially notified individually by a legal administrative category called 'Scheduled Tribe' (ST), as per Article 342 of the Constitution of India. The Census of India 2011 identifies 10,42,81,034 persons of 705 communities being notified as such.

Tribal Struggle for Epistemological Integration in India: A Policy Perspective

After India attained its independence from British rule, the Indian Constitution came about in 1950. Based on persistent demands by various Tribes in the Constituent Assembly, especially those from North East

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India and Chhotanagpur, the Indian state provided ‘special constitutional measures’ around a concept called “special treatment.” (Lokur Committee, 1965, p.7). This was enshrined in Article 244 of the Constitution that provided a different structure of administration in the form of a Fifth Schedule, to apply for the ‘administration and control of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes in any State, other than Assam’ and the Sixth Schedule, that applies to the ‘administration of the Tribal areas in the State of Assam’.

The concept of a ‘tribal area’ can be traced back to the Scheduled Areas Act, 1874 of British India, wherein certain districts and villages inhabited by Tribes was marked out as ‘Scheduled Districts’ by the said Act. The 1874 Act provided for the extension, by notification to the Scheduled Districts, of laws in force across British India, with such special restrictions and modifications as were deemed necessary by the Governor General in Council. Much later in the Government of India Act, 1919, these Scheduled Districts were removed from the purview of the legislatures, but the limits of exclusion differed in their extent and degree: from which arose two categories of tribal areas - ‘Wholly Excluded Areas’ and ‘Areas of Modified Exclusion’.

In the year 1935, another Act known as the Government of India Act, 1935 was promulgated. Based on the suggestions of the Indian Statutory Commission, the 1935 Act noted in Section 91 and 92 providing the declaration by an Order in Council of two types of tribal areas: the ‘Excluded Areas’ and the ‘Partially Excluded Areas’. It was on this framework that Article 244 of the Constitution of India based its decision to demarcate the tribal areas under the Fifth and Sixth Scheduled Areas.

The criteria suggested initially by the committee to the Constituent Assembly of India to identify and pronounce a territory as Fifth Scheduled area were (i) preponderance of tribal population (ii) stage of development and degree of assimilation (iii) the susceptibility of these areas to special administrative treatment. Later in 1960, a few more criteria were added by a Commission set up by the Government of India under Article 339(I) to study the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes. The criteria added was – the preponderance of tribals in the population (50 percent), compactness and reasonable size, underdeveloped nature of an area and marred disparity in economic standards of the people (Dhebar Commission, 1961).

While the process of demarcating Fifth Scheduled areas is still an ongoing process, the areas under Sixth Schedule were demarcated immediately with

the promulgation of the Indian Constitution in 1950. It is important to note that the Tribal areas under Sixth Schedule are extremely cohesive and far easier to identify. In 1952 the *Khasi- Jaintia, Garo, Lushai, Karbi Anglong* and *Dimasa Hasao* (earlier North Kachar Hills) Autonomous Councils were set up. These were followed by few new 'Autonomous Councils' – Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Councils (ADC) in 1985, three new ADCs carved out of the Union Territory of Mizoram in 1972- Mara ADC (earlier Lakher ADC), Lai ADC (earlier Pawi ADC) and Chakma ADC and the latest being the Bodoland Territorial Council in 2003 within Assam. Most of these ADCs came about after intense struggles by the tribes, especially in Tripura and Bodoland.

During this initial stage of State formation, the *Nehruvian Panchsheel* was asserted as a policy framework. It constituted of elements that are generally understood as the guiding principles of conscious 'integration' of Tribes into the Indian mainstream. Over the years these guiding principles have been reiterated in a number of Government Commissions and Committees set up to study and make recommendations for the STs. The Verrier Elwin Committee (1960), tasked to report on 'Special Multipurpose Tribal Blocks' and to 'advise the Government of India on how to implement the intensive development programme of the Blocks more effectively and give the programme a proper tribal bias', noted and affirmed all of the Nehruvian principles under a sub section titled 'The Fundamentals of an Approach to the Tribes'. Earlier this approach was affirmed by the Renuka Ray Committee (1959), who asserted the stated principles as the perfect policy for the "the eventual 'integration' of these persons and groups (STs) into the normal (non-tribal) community".

When viewed from the Indian State's perspective, it appears that the Fifth and Sixth Schedule, as enshrined in the Constitution, came about as a paternalistic largesse from the State to the Tribal people. The same was supposedly envisioned by the State, or so it was posited, as a mechanism to 'protect' the tribes from non-tribal onslaught. This was to a great extent based on the view that Tribes were 'backward', 'weak' and could easily be manipulated by the more 'civilised other'. Thus it was deemed necessary to provide them with some 'protection' till such time that they were brought to some level of development, were integrated enough into the mainstream of Indian society, and can then manage to engage with the non-tribal mainstream on their own terms. These protective mechanisms were perceived by the State as immediately imperative, but not desirable in the long run.

From a tribal perspective, however, these protective mechanisms were perceived by the Tribal peoples as politically extracted from the Indian State through unrelenting struggle and negotiations. The idea that special protective mechanisms be instituted and incorporated in the Constitution was a key demand of the Tribal communities throughout the State-making process. Thus, when the Indian State did finally relent to Tribal demands for incorporating an asymmetrical federal structure in the Constitution, many Tribes felt that they had won a major historico-political victory in a new, post British set up, dominated by non-tribes.

Notwithstanding these institutionalized asymmetrical structures of state 'protection', with time, reports began trickling in from Tribal peoples inhabiting the Fifth Schedule and the Sixth Schedule areas of multiple violations of their constitutionally enshrined rights. In the erstwhile State of Assam, where the Sixth Schedule was in operation, massive tribal resistance movements began to erupt against a particular language bill of the Government of Assam that tried to bring about a law that would require all citizens of the state to know and use the Assamese language for all official purposes (Lyngdoh, 1996). A number of Tribes under the 'All Parties Hills Leaders Conference' (APHLC) spearheaded a people's movement against this Bill. When this led to a critical situation, the Government of India had to agree to carve a new state from Assam called Meghalaya in which three dominant tribes, the Garos, the Khasis and the Jaintias inhabit. The state currently constitutes 86.1 percent STs (Census, 2011). These changes were noted in Article 244a of the Indian Constitution brought about by the Twenty Second Amendment Act, 1969 later substituted by the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971 w.e.f 21-1-1972. Article 244a concerns the 'Formation of an autonomous State comprising certain tribal areas in Assam and creation of local Legislature or Council of Ministers or both therefore.' It is important to note that even before this, in 1962, the Indian state had to create a new state of Nagaland as a means of pacifying the Naga peoples' attempt to secede from India. The State of Nagaland Act, 1962 was passed by the Indian parliament and the new tribal majority State of Nagaland was inaugurated on December 1, 1963. The STs in Nagaland constitutes 86.5 percent of the total population. Later the Union Territory (UT) of Mizoram and the UT of Arunachal Pradesh, were notified in 1972 as the States of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. The ST population in Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh are 94.4 and 68.8 percent respectively.

In response to upheavals that were also spreading across the central

Indian belt that falls within the Fifth Schedule, the Indian state initiated a different approach envisaged as a 'Holistic Frame and Planning from Below in Schedule Areas' that was “wedded around the ideals of Effective Protection, Peace and Development” in 1972. It embodied 'protection' together with a component of 'development' (Mungekar Committee, 2009) which on ground were a battery of welfare measures aimed as a 'strategy for integrated development' (Bhuria Committee, 2004) of STs.

The development of this new approach was based on the recommendations of the P. Shilu Ao Committee, (1969) appointed by the Planning Commission, to study the existing 'Tribal Development Programmes' in the country. This Committee detailed the main weaknesses in the Tribal Development Programmes in the light of the manifestations of discontent and unrest in tribal areas during this period. It also provided an exhaustive report of each sectoral programme (agriculture and allied sectors, forest, education, medical and public health, etc), that dealt with administration and institutional set-up and the provisions contained in the Constitution for the promotion of educational and economic interests of the STs and other safeguards provided for them.

This new approach embodied an integrated development component called the Tribal Sub Plan (TSP). Its focus was on economic upliftment. 'The policy comprises two coequal pillars, viz., the FS (Fifth Schedule) and the TSP (Tribal Sub Plan)' (Shilu Ao, 1969, pp. 54-55). Posited to be used as a strategy to realise 'peace and good government', it included the elimination of exploitation and the building of the inner strength of the community aimed to achieve the holistic social and economic development of the tribe. It had a communitarian thrust which took precedence over individual needs, and was, at the level of governance, all-inclusive.

The then Prime Minister of India initiated the TSP by creating a financial outlay which was supposed to be non-lapsable and non-divertible for tribal development in the state's plan approach. 'The TSP was introduced in 1974 during the Fifth Five Year Plan to provide for financial allocations in proportion to the population of STs in the annual plans at the Central and State level' (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2006, pp.2-3).

In the formulation of the concept of TSP, three observations were made about the Tribal condition, that (i) there are variations in the socio-economic and cultural milieu among the different scheduled tribe communities in the country, (ii) that their demographic distribution reveals their concentration in parts of some States, dispersal in others and absence in a few, (iii) that

the so called primitive tribal communities live in secluded regions (Bhuria Committee, 2004, p. 78).

The success that was envisaged to be achieved by an integrated development approach under the TSP was far from expected. The government's twin notion of 'protection and development', which on the ground manifested more as welfare measures, did not fare well among the Tribal peoples inhabiting the Fifth Schedule areas (Mungekar, 2009).

Interestingly, the failure of this framework provided a fillip for a rethinking of the state's approach to Tribal realities especially in Fifth Schedule areas. Many within academia and the state administration began discussing ways forward that considered the idea of giving more 'power' to the STs as definitive to the process of tribal development rather than merely resting on the a policy framework defined by 'protection' and 'welfare'. This concrete condition prevailing among the majority of the Tribal communities, of being in a state of 'powerlessness', was also being articulated by Tribes themselves through their social movements that were spreading across the Fifth Schedule areas. These demands were argued in various ways and forms, but what stood out was their demand for political power to be realized through a separate state.

While the state had already given in to the demands of the tribes inhabiting the Sixth Schedule areas in the form of a separate tribal majority state and a tribal majority Union Territory, this realization among Tribes in Fifth Schedule areas came only in the mid 1990s. There are multiple reasons for this, one being that Sixth Scheduled areas were viewed as needing to be 'integrated' into the Indian state, while Fifth Schedule areas and its numerous tribal communities were viewed as needing to be 'assimilated' into the Indian (non-tribal/caste) 'mainstream'.

With Tribes in Fifth Schedule areas arguing and bargaining for more power from the state to define their own destiny, this 'struggle for power' became more fundamental in the State's policy discourse. In this context, the State, realizing the need to negotiate genuinely with Tribal peoples proposed a new law known as the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, 1996 (PESA). This Act was formulated with the goal of protecting Tribal people's interest through a toned down conception of self-rule by empowering local governance systems to take leadership and control of the developmental activities at the village level.

The PESA envisaged a structure that gives Tribal society direct control

over their future. It preserved their traditional rights over natural resources. This was to be achieved by traditional tribal political institutions of self-governance. The PESA did indeed give Tribal society in Fifth Schedule areas some sense of power, but this was mostly on paper. Realising this law was a big challenge, Dungdung (2009) points out that the necessary consultation with the *gram sabhas* as mandated by the PESA Act had not worked as envisaged.

During this period when power was being negotiated by the Tribal peoples, the Indian State transferred the earlier 'tribal division', initially under the Ministry of Home Affairs and later with the Ministry of Social Welfare, to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in 1998. Later in September, 1999, recognising the critical nature of the subject matter, a whole new Ministry of Tribal Affairs was created to look after the affairs of the STs. In the following year, 2000, based on mass movements and persistent demands of the Tribes, the Government of India created two new states – Jharkhand (26.2 percent tribal population) and Chhattisgarh (30.6 percent tribal population), both in Fifth Schedule areas that had a sizable tribal population. The two states are inhabited by 32 and 42 tribal groups respectively.

Notwithstanding these multiple political resolutions that succeeded to some extent in tempering the upheavals in Fifth Schedule areas, the Mungekar Committee (2009), tasked to study 'Inter-Sectoral issues relating to Tribal Development on standards of administration and governance in the (Fifth) Scheduled Areas', asserted that there was still a need to immediately try to regain the confidence of the tribal peoples. It seemed that the tribal people were losing their faith in the Indian State. The Committee made some key suggestions, such as reviving institutions of self-governance, erasing the dissonance of laws, devolution of powers, make *gram sabha* (village level self-governance) fully functional and positing a participatory approach of programme implementation. It further asserted that this can be realised only by effective protection, no displacement and against land alienation and its restoration. Overall what it asserted was that the situation on the ground was still dire and the tribal problem needed immediate attention and a genuine attempt from the state to resolve contentious matters.

These interventions by the State in Fifth Schedule areas were seen as critical because field data emerging from Tribal areas revealed massive land alienation (Xaxa Committee, 2014, pp.251-275) and difficulties in the implementation of PESA (ibid, pp.338-342). Many other issues such

as pauperization of the community, illiteracy, and displacement were also reported. These led to the STs in central India to begin to demand for the replacement of the Fifth Schedule by the Sixth Schedule especially in the state of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. The Fifth Schedule was seen as not having the legal strength and political might that the Sixth Schedule provides, or so it is argued (Bodhi & Ekka, 2016). During this period we observed many movements emerging in Tribal areas, each arising from distinct conditions and each articulating the need for more political power and greater stakes in the development process concerning their lives.

Three Broad Trends in Tribal Movements

Most of these tribal political assertions sought recognition from the state to be treated as equal. However, they were not a homogenous tribal struggle. Each, were fuelled by different visions, mission and contextual needs. While some tribes sought more power from the State to challenge their sense of historical marginalization through separate statehood, others sought more welfare rights and a few more were merely seeking to protect themselves from displacement and from falling into abject poverty.

During this phase, there were three major trends of Tribal struggles. The first constituted of those who fundamentally disagreed with the State and held the view that great injustice and betrayal had been committed on the Tribes, viewing the State as semi-colonial or even colonial. For this grouping the State, in its current form, was fundamentally flawed and needed to be fundamentally restructured. Such a formulation produced a radical discourse and even a violent movement that in many occasions intersected with the ultra left wing ideology, as the Indian Prime Minister noted in 2009¹. For many treading this line of struggle, there is a belief that the Indian State was two faced; saying something overtly in policy while doing exactly the opposite in practice. There seems to be no consonance between overt policy and covert practice. In such a condition, when the State cannot be relied upon, the only language the State seems to truly understand, it was held, was the language of violence and the language of international pressure. These movements were observed being carried forth in the central belt of India, especially the Bastar region of present day Chhattisgarh, part of Odisha, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and erstwhile Andhra Pradesh.

The second trend constituted of Tribal movements who grounded their struggle around keeping their community intact while adapting to the situation and seeking what they felt was a respectful integration into the

Indian State. The notion of ‘to be treated as equal’ in this context was conceived as a search for mutual respect for their ethnic and linguistic community and to be treated not less, but at par with other dominant (caste or tribal) societies. For them the State is a structure in which power can be negotiated and it was possible within the current constitutional framework to correct historical wrongs experienced by Tribes. Interestingly, there were two groupings within this particular path; one seeking power through the economic development route and the other through the social movement route. Those taking the development route sought critical infrastructure, educational rights, employment opportunities and development councils. Those taking the social movement route sought recognition of land and forest rights, rights over their natural resources, recognition of language, more political representation and recognition of their traditional governance systems. These movements were observed in Chhotanagpur and Kolhan region, Santhal Parganas, part of Chhattisgarh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura and in some tribal pockets across the Fifth Schedule areas in mainland India and in the North East region.

Over and above the two trends, there was also a third. This was a movement prevalent among many Tribal groups who believed that while attempting to preserve and protect themselves as a community; it was finally in taking refuge in the Indian State and either merging or oscillating between larger dominant groups; caste or tribe, within a particular geography, that the destiny of their community lay. For these Tribal groups, life and living itself, was conceived as a struggle; a movement in and by itself. Compared to the above two trends, theirs was a minimal struggle that sought to adapt to larger and more dominant polities rather than confront the powers that be on the immediate concrete experience of peripheralisation that they face. What they sought, however, was not equality or power but minimal space to live their culture with dignity and self respect. In this sense, theirs was a survivalist politics; a movement seeking only to be allowed to live their epistemology quietly without being offensive to the sense and sensibilities of dominant cultural groups. Such struggles were observed taking place across the country, both in some Fifth Schedule and Sixth Schedule areas, especially among smaller tribes. This, however, can also be observed in states where the tribal population is minuscule in size compared to caste society.

The Pending Question about Epistemological Integration

The historical struggles of the Tribes starting with a demand for autonomy, leading to the demand for holistic development and then more power to

be treated as equal, is now unravelling a more fundamental outcry - the crisis of epistemology. Not that an epistemicide² has occurred, but that many Tribes currently being subsumed within a State dominated by non-tribes are being subjected to large scale assimilation. The assimilative process is characterised by a loss of power and identity, fragmentation of the community, a blurring of social boundaries, ruination of language and spoliation of history. This has led to 'epistemological disintegration' of the Tribes (Bodhi & Jojo, 2019, p. 46).

Epistemological disintegration, however, is not a concrete condition that can be generalized across Tribal realities. There are many other Tribal communities that are experiencing epistemological stability and many more who are experiencing a less severe process of disintegration of their epistemology, albeit some degree of epistemological distortion. Bodhi & Jojo, (2019) defines epistemological stability as a state in which a community displays characteristics such as stable ontology, history and cultural processes, distinct social/identity boundaries, have firm control over natural resources, experience reality in their own language and on their organic socio-cultural terms, have a strong sense of nationhood and has state power to negotiate their realities with the other. 'Epistemological distortion', however, is defined as a condition in which a community emits features, such as ontological or identity negotiations with self and other, tension between endonym (name given by self) and exonym (name given by others), demand for engagement and dialogue with the dominant forces, numerous protest and resistance movements, overt assertion and display of cultural practices, attempts to protect and seek recognition for language and script, make historical claims over land, water and forest, resist expropriation by outside forces yet have experienced some degree of cultural appropriation (Bodhi & Jojo, 2019, p.46).

It is observed that in both Fifth and Sixth Schedule areas, the struggle of numerous Tribes is centred on their epistemology; either to surrender, alter or to defend it against assimilation. Those experiencing epistemological disintegration are struggling to resurrect their epistemology (Vaditya, 2018), others who are experiencing epistemological distortion are struggling to stabilise their epistemology and those experiencing epistemological stability sometimes engage in open epistemological assertion, having the capacity to resist any act of dominance by any other external force on them.

From a Tribal point of view, this struggle to somewhat hold on to their epistemology is often articulated in the political domain as a demand

seeking respect for their identity within the framework of epistemological justice. But these processes related to a pulsating desire of Tribes for defending their epistemology are somewhat invisible to the dominant group and is rarely noticed by the State.³ The Indian State and the dominant groups (from caste society) seem incapable to comprehend the Tribal demand for epistemological justice. Thus, most State intervention and its approaches to Tribes remains confined to the basics of ‘security and welfare’, and most dominant perspectives about Tribes revolving fundamentally around the theoretically fatuous and epistemologically parochial framework of assimilation, integration and isolation; these stemming from the one-sided commonsensical gaze of the dominant caste-other.

Concluding Remarks

The social and political location of Tribes in the Indian state is anachronistic. Embedded in the very nature of the State is a perspective embodying a ‘civilizing mission’ (Xaxa, 2019, p. 68). This does not allow it to engage with dignity and respect with an epistemological entity it labels as ‘tribes’; especially when its conception of the category insinuates a social reality that is ‘primitive, backward, shy, culturally inferior, geographical isolated.’ (Lokur Committee, 1965).

For Tribes however, epistemology is fundamental to their being. What they seek from the State is ‘not emotional, psychological, political or even historiographical integration, but epistemological integration. (Bodhi & Ziipao, 2019). This epistemological integration is to be understood as a search for recognition and respect for the totality of a community’s being, which includes a theoretical acceptance of its history, a legal recognition of its habitat, a social respect of its culture and a political willingness to see and treat the community as equal and self-determining.

This understanding is however missing from the State’s gaze, both as a sentiment and a perspective. It is unlikely that such an insight will dawn on the powers that be. Notwithstanding this fact, Tribal movements, no matter what is politically articulated in the public domain, will always have as its cornerstone the Tribal thirst to protect, preserve, promote and persist with their epistemology. In this sense, the fundamental Tribal question, we opine, concerns a historically grounded epistemological angst. It is not to be misread or reduced merely to the questions of welfare, security and development. □

End Notes

1. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh noted in 2009 the “systemic failure in giving the tribals a stake in the modern economic processes that inexorably intrude into their living spaces,” that has now led to a “dangerous turn,” pointing to the rising extremist militant movement in the tribal areas led by the Maoist’..... In response to this, an eighteen member National Council for Tribal Welfare (NCTW) was formed on 3 September 2010, headed by the Prime Minister himself. (P.M. to head council on tribal welfare, 2009. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/pm-to-head-council-on-tribal-welfare/> (Accessed on 30 September 2020)
2. Refers to a concrete condition in which severe assimilation has taken place and the community has begun living within the epistemology of the dominant group. Epistemicide refers to the destruction of a community’s history, culture, language and identity by the dominant group through conscious acts of violence and threats.
3. It could be argued that the conflict between one tribe and another, sometimes extremely violent can also be viewed from this epistemological gaze, where one tribe begins to experience the imposition of another tribe’s epistemology on them leading to epistemological resistance.

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