# On the concept of tribe

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The Constitution of India gives recognition to a category of people designated as the Scheduled Tribes, and makes special provisions for their political representation and their economic and social welfare. The Scheduled Tribes and the Scheduled Castes constitute the two principal components of the backward classes towards which the Government of India has adopted a policy of protective discrimination. This policy has various implications, and questions are raised from time to time about the exact basis of the social identity of the communities whose members are its beneficiaries. These matters come up before the courts, and some lawyers at least seem to assume that there must be a clear answer to the question as to what constitutes a tribe within the knowledge of the sociologist or the social anthropologist.

Anthropologists have since the time of Lewis Henry Morgan argued about the definition of tribe, but very little account has been taken of the tribal communities of India in these general debates over definition. This is unfortunate, not only because of the legal and constitutional significance of the problem, but also because of the size and variety of the tribal population of India. This population comprises about 6.5 per cent of the total, and stood at nearly 40 million at the 1971 census. There are said to be over 400 tribes in India, and they cover the widest range of variation in terms of race, religion and language, as well as economic and political organization.

It is sometimes said that in putting the policy of protective discrimination into action officials of the Government of India are interested not in tribes as such but in only those communities that have been identified and listed as the Scheduled Tribes. But this is to evade the issue, for it can hardly be maintained that the list itself is a random collection of communities put together with no regard for any rational criteria of classification. As a matter of fact, the criteria used have been several and varied; they have not always been related to each other; and they have been left implicit more often than made explicit.

The list of Scheduled Tribes now in use has been constructed by the efforts of various people, beginning more than a hundred years ago. The British Indian civil servants of the nineteenth century often combined the duties of administration with the pleasures of ethnography. Their labours produced a large corpus of reports, manuals and gazetteers devoted to the enumeration and description of the peoples of India. The decennial census provided these ethnographer-administrators with opportunities for constructing a kind of ethnographic map of India, which they hoped to use in the administration of the country. They proceeded by trial and error, rather than according to any clearly formulated system of classification.

The earlier accounts of the peoples of India show a preoccupation with the identification and description of the various tribes and castes in the population, without any clear criterion of distinction between the two kinds of units. What are now acknowledged as castes are freely described as tribes, and vice versa. Even today it is not always easy to tell whether a particular group should be described as a caste or a tribe. Yet it might seem that if only we followed the anthropologist's definition of 'tribe' nothing would be easier than to distinguish between the two. In practice the distinction between 'tribe' and 'caste' continues to bedevil the student of Indian society,

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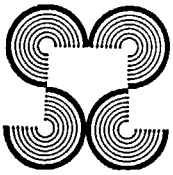


and so we must ask whether this does not reveal a deficiency in the conception itself of tribe.

Anthropological convention has treated the tribe as a 'completely organized society',[1] i.e. a self-perpetuating system having within its boundaries all the resources necessary for the continued maintenance of a particular mode of collective existence. The tribe is in this sense a whole society and a whole culture, unlike the moiety, the phratry, the clan, the lineage or the family. Each tribe has its own territory, which means that it is politically autonomous, whether or not it is politically organized. It also has its own language or dialect which is the mark of its distinctive culture. It has been tacitly assumed that, as in the case of the nation-states of Europe, common territory and common language go hand in hand.

Until recently social anthropologists have been inclined to take the boundaries of the tribe for granted, focusing their attention on its internal structure. It is as if a tribe could be understood on its own terms without taking into account other tribes or other societies of a different kind. The work of Evans-Pritchard among the Nuer showed that a tribe is a tribe only in opposition to other tribes.[2] The experience of India (and other Asian societies) would seem to indicate that a tribe might usefully be viewed as a tribe only in opposition to a social order of another kind.

Nineteenth-century scholars viewed tribal societies in the light of evolutionary theory. This was true not only of anthropologists like Lewis Henry Morgan but also of historians like Fustel de Coulanges. Morgan sought to demonstrate the stages of social evolution by the comparison of contemporary primitive societies. Fustel reconstructed the transformation of Greek and Roman society from a primitive to an advanced type. In all of this the tribe represented a type of social organization as well as a stage in social evolution.

The evolutionary perspective has been revived in the writings of Marshall Sahlins and in Godelier's critique of Sahlins.[3] Godelier goes back to the writings of Morgan to argue that we can understand the tribe as a type of social organization only if we view it as a stage in social evolution. Now, we may follow Morgan and show how savagery is replaced by barbarism which in turn is replaced by civilization; or we may use a more differentiated sequence of stages, identifying the tribal type of organization with a particular stage in the sequence. But the real problem, it seems to me, lies not in identifying the evolutionary stage to which the tribal type of organization corresponds, but in coming to terms with the coexistence of the tribal and other types of organization within the same social and historical context. And it is precisely here that the evolutionists of both the past and the present fail to give satisfaction, in so far as evolutionary theory cannot be a substitute for historical understanding.

The trouble with nineteenth-century evolutionists was that they too readily believed that the development of a more complex or a more advanced type of society led automatically to the effacement of the tribal type. It is a truism that tribe has preceded state and civilization on the broad scale of social evolution. That is not the problem. The problem is that tribes have for centuries and millennia continued to exist on the lap of state and civilization, and to be marked by their impress. The evolutionist is preoccupied with the succession of types; our problem is how to deal with the coexistence of types in the multistructural formations that are a characteristic feature of so many Asian societies.

Godelier has drawn attention to the two schemes of classification presented by Sahlins in his discussion of tribes. In the first scheme, presented in 1961, there are four types of organization corresponding to four stages of evolution: the band, the tribe, the chiefdom and the state. In a longer essay, published seven years later, the scheme is somewhat simplified, and, instead of four, we have three types, namely, the band, the tribe and the state. Godelier finds fault with Sahlins for collapsing the two middle terms of his first scheme (tribe and chiefdom) into one, and so making his later conception of tribe somewhat more elastic than his earlier.

In his first essay Sahlins had considered a segmentary structure to be the defining feature of the tribe as a type of society. The significance of segmentary political systems was brought to light by British social anthropologists who had worked in Africa. The initial effect of the publication o *African Political Systems* was to highlight the differences between centralized and segmentary societies, characterized by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard as societies of Group A and Group B. However it soon became apparent that the distinction between the tribe as segmentary system

and the tribe as chiefdom is relative rather than absolute. In the interval between the first and the second essays by Sahlins, Gluckman had published his authoritative work in which he had argued that 'the difference between tribes organized under chiefs and those which lack chiefs is not as great as it appears to be'.[4] Even such a redoubtable ethnographer as Malinowski had, it would seem, mistaken for a chiefdom a system that was basically segmentary in character.[5]

In the hundred years since Morgan anthropologists have learnt to distinguish analytically between the band, the segmentary system and the chiefdom. But they have continued, by and large, to apply the same term 'tribe' to all the three. It is to some extent a matter of convenience whether we emphasize the continuities between the three modes of tribal organization or their discontinuities. For those who are interested in examining as a historical process the interactions between tribe and state (or between tribe and civilization) there are obvious advantages in starting with the continuities between the various modes of tribal organization.

The several hundred units that comprise the Scheduled Tribes of India cover all the modes of tribal organization from the band to the chiefdom. This was so as far back as the early nineteenth century when the tribal areas began to be systematically opened up by the colonial administration. Indeed, up to that period one might with some justice speak of 'tribal states' in addition to tribal bands, segmentary tribes and tribal chiefdoms. Historically, whether a given tribe was to be reckoned as a tribal chiefdom or qualified as a tribal state depended very much on the fluctuating fortunes of the larger polity of which it was a part or to which it was related, and not simply on its own evolutionary potential.

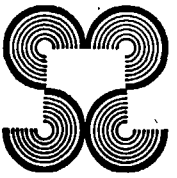
At the beginning of the nineteenth century the mix of the different modes of tribal organization among those who comprise the Scheduled Tribes of today was different from the present mix. Bands of hunters and gatherers such as still exist among the Andaman Islanders, or, on the mainland, among the Birhors, were more common then than now. The segmentary mode of tribal organization was also more common in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and in the frontier areas. But there were chiefdoms as well, in addition to the tribal states referred to above.

The concept of tribe thus faces a double problem in the context of Indian society. There is first of all the problem of discriminating among related and overlapping modes of tribal organization. There is the equally vexatious problem of drawing clear lines of demarcation between tribal and non-tribal society. In a sense the first problem is only an aspect of the second.

In North America, Australia, Melanesia, Polynesia and, to a large extent, even in Africa south of the Sahara, the relationship between tribe and civilization (or between tribe and state) has been of a very different order from this relationship in India and in Asian countries generally. It is for this reason that a concept of tribe based on the experience of Australia or North America—the richest fields of classical anthropology—can do little justice to the realities of the Indian situation. In India evolutionary schemes which outline the succession of different types of social organization must yield to the actual historical analysis of coexisting social formations varying widely in scale and complexity.

In North America, in Melanesia and in Australia the encounter between tribe and civilization was sharp and sudden; and it has a dramatic, not to say traumatic, character. The conditions of the encounter were such as to bring out the contrast and the cleavage between tribe and civilization, rather than the overlap and the continuity between them. Australia provides the best example: here tribe and civilization represented the two extremes on the scales of technology, social organization and ideology. Race, language and culture divided the tribal from the non-tribal population so sharply that there never could be, as in India, any doubt about their respective identities.

In India the encounters between tribe and civilization have taken place under historical conditions of a radically different sort. The coexistence of tribe and civilization, and their mutual interaction go back to the beginnings of recorded history and earlier. Tribes have existed at the margins of Hindu civilization from time immemorial, and these margins have always been vague, uncertain and fluctuating.[6] Hindu civilization acknowledged the distinction between tribe and caste in the distinction between two kinds of communities, *jana* and *jati*, the one confined to the isolation of hills and forests, the other settled in villages and towns with a more elaborate division



of labour. The transformation of tribes into castes has been documented by a large number of anthropologists and historians; undoubtedly, the opposite process also took place, though it cannot be as easily documented.

The tribe as a mode of organization has always differed from the caste-based mode of organization. But considered as individual units, tribes are not always easy to distinguish from castes, particularly at the margins where the two modes of organization meet. The native terminology itself reflects this ambiguity. For instance, in the Bengali language the term for caste is *jati* and the term for tribe is *upajati*; but *upajati* might also denote subcaste.

The distinctive condition of the tribe in India has been its isolation, mainly in the interior hills and forests, but also in the frontier regions. By and large the tribal communities are those which were either left behind in these ecological niches or pushed back into them in course of the expansion of state and civilization. Their material culture and their social organization have largely been related to the ecological niches in which they have lived their isolated lives.

The isolation of the tribal communities is and always has been a matter of degree. Some tribes have been more isolated than others, but at least in the interior areas, where the bulk of the tribal population is to be found, none has been completely free from the impress of the wider civilization. Their isolation, whether self-imposed or imposed by others, blocked the growth of their material culture, but it also enabled them to retain their distinctive modes of speech. Today the most important single indicator of the distinction between tribe and caste is language. The castes speak one or another of the major literary languages; each tribe has its own distinctive dialect which might differ fundamentally from the prevalent regional language. But even this test of identity does not always work. There are many tribes in western India, including the Bhils, one of the most populous in the country, who do not have any language of their own, having at an unknown date adopted the language of the region. It is no accident that from time immemorial the Bhils have also been associated, both materially and symbolically, with some of the most important states in the history of western India.

## Notes

[1] This is Morgan's phrase, repeated in a recent text by Godelier referred in note 3, below.

[2] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, Clarendon Press, 1940; see also M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (eds.), *African Political Systems*, Oxford University Press, 1940.

[3] Marshall D. Sahlins, 'The Segmentary Lineage: an Organization of Predatory Expansion', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 63, 1961, p. 322–45; Marshall D. Sahlins, *Tribesmen*, Prentice Hall, 1968; Maurice Godelier, *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

[4] Max Gluckman, *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*, p. 85, Basil Blackwell, 1965.

[5] J. P. Singh Uberoi, *The Politics of the Kula Ring*, Manchester University Press, 1962.

[6] There is a vast literature on the subject, but the best single account is in N. K. Bose, *The Structure of Hindu Society*, Orient Longman, 1975.