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What makes a tribe? Top anthropologists say the answer lies on a spectrum, not in a binary classification

This is a paradigm shift in approach from the Centre's five-point criteria for inclusion in the ST list; a new tool could assess the "degree of tribalness" using a matrix of up to 150 indicators, anthropologists say

Updated - March 15, 2025 09:37 pm IST - NEW DELHI

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Hundreds of communities across the country are currently demanding inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes, in order to access the benefits of reservations in education and jobs, and other governmental aid. | Photo Credit: Special arrangement

Top anthropologists have called for a paradigm shift in the way India defines a “tribe”, overwhelmingly supporting the idea that a community’s classification should be assessed on a “spectrum of tribalness” rather than the binary question of whether or not it is a tribe.

This was the broad consensus reached at a recent Indian Anthropology Congress, where the leadership of the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI), and senior officials of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) were among the participants of a roundtable discussion on the topic of “Developing a scale to distinguish tribal populations from caste-based and ‘mainstream’ communities”.

These academic discussions feed into policymaking and have real-world impacts. Hundreds of communities across the country are currently demanding inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes, in order to access the benefits of reservations in education and jobs, and other governmental aid. The immediate trigger for the current ethnic conflict in Manipur, for instance, lay in the Meitei community’s demand to be designated a Scheduled Tribe (ST), which is opposed not just by the Kuki-Zo tribes in the State but also the Naga tribes, who are not a part of the conflict.

‘Outdated criteria’

The Union government has maintained that the criteria it uses to classify communities as ST are the ones set by the Lokur Committee 60 years ago in 1965. These check for “primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, backwardness”. Over the past decade, academics and expert panels inside and outside the government have termed these criteria “condescending”, “obsolete”,

“derogatory”, and “meaningless”.

“The existing criteria may have made sense when they were made but they are losing meaning now. And virtually no community meets 100% of these criteria. So, instead of finding criteria that can be met fully, the idea is to see if we can build a tool to assess the ‘tribalness’ of the community,” AnSI director B.V. Sharma told *The Hindu*, adding that it is “definitely not easy and will be challenging given the regional diversity of India.

Noting the “persistent difficulty” in defining tribal populations and “the need for a systematic tool to ensure accurate classification”, the roundtable’s concept note emphasised that “this initiative aligns with constitutional mandates and will assist tribal research institutions (TRIs) in preparing ethnographic reports for policymaking.”

Matrix of indicators

This shift in understanding how to define “tribes” would invariably require extensive deliberations on overhauling the existing criteria for classifying communities as Scheduled Tribe, the anthropologists and officials said, adding that the idea is to build a “matrix or spectrum” of as many detailed characteristics as possible, with a weightage assigned to each, so that a “degree of tribalness” of the community can be determined.

Dr. Sharma explained that any new scale to define tribes in India will have to consider a host of characteristics. “It may not have to be restricted to just five. It could be as many as 150 indicators,” he said, adding that any such tool, provided consensus is reached, “would be a better instrument” to classify communities.

“When an ethnographic report (ER) is prepared to assess claims of inclusion, some guidelines must be there. Then, officials doing the ER can keep in mind

what is required,” he said.

Focus on social institutions

India currently lists more than 756 entries in the list of Scheduled Tribes. Since the last Census was conducted in 2011, at least 27 communities have been added to the ST list – five as main entries and 22 as sub-entries – even as hundreds of other communities seek to be added to the list, these demands leading to inter-community conflicts in some cases.

This move has come even as tribal outfits across the country, including the Sangh Parivar’s Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad, have pressed for stricter application of the Lokur Committee criteria for inclusions on the list.

Now, instead of looking at the traits as set out by the Lokur Committee — derisively described in academic circles as a “committee of bureaucrats” — scholars, experts, and officials are thinking about creating indicators, both tangible and intangible, that can be “instinctively” agreed upon as “tribal”. And this time, the focus is on social institutions like marriage, kinship, classification of relatives, rituals in practice, language, and the “materiality of cultural indicators”, including headgear or weaponry.

Civilisational approach

In building such a tool, Dr. Sharma said that India will be able to also account for how communities like to see themselves as opposed to how they have been studied for long – as the “other”. S.M. Patnaik, who heads Delhi University’s Anthropology Department and also participated in the roundtable, added that there was a need to move from the “evolutionary” approach used in places like Australia and China to a more “historical or civilisational” approach.

“India has a history of forests as a place to go and seek knowledge from. There is evidence of co-existence with such communities without an oppressing or

colonial relationship with the other communities around them,” Professor Patnaik said, adding that the academic community and the policymaking community must “bridge the gap” in their respective understanding of how to define “tribes”.

No change for six decades

While participants at the roundtable discussion told *The Hindu* that this was “just the beginning” of changing how India understands classification of communities as “tribes”, successive national commissions set up by the Union government since Independence have tried and failed to come up with a watertight set of criteria that solves classification problems.

The last time an attempt was made to change the criteria for ST status from within the government was when a task force was formed under the leadership of then-Tribal Affairs Secretary Hrusikesh Panda. This task force recommended changing the criteria set by the Lokur Committee in a 2014 report, just as the first Narendra Modi-led government was taking charge. Eight years after the Panda task force’s report, the government declared that it had decided to continue with the Lokur Committee’s criteria instead.

The three-day Indian Anthropology Congress was organised by the Union Culture Ministry’s AnSI along with the National Confederation and Academy of Anthropologists last month. Chaired by NCST member Nirupam Chakma and convened by the AnSI director, the roundtable brought together top faculty members from the anthropology departments of more than 11 universities and institutes, experts, and senior NCST officials.

Published – March 15, 2025 09:25 pm IST

