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Author(s): Virginius Xaxa

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# Transformation of Tribes in India

## Terms of Discourse

Virginius Xaxa

*Sociologists and anthropologists tend to see as the end result of social change in tribal India the transformation of any given tribe into a caste or just another socially stratified group, or the merger of the tribe in the peasantry. Questioning the assumption of loss of tribal identity, this article attributes it to the study of tribes not as communities in their own right but in terms of affinity or non-affinity with mainstream communities.*

THERE are more than 400 groups in Indian society which are officially designated as scheduled tribes. These groups have all been undergoing changes. These changes have been observed and described by a variety of persons for nearly 100 years, but their consequences and implications have been seriously misconstrued. The conventional wisdom among anthropologists has been that when a tribe undergoes change through a loss of isolation and through close integration with the wider society, sooner or later, and with unflinching regularity, it becomes a caste. While this may have been true to a greater or lesser extent till the forties, the argument is no longer valid. Yet anthropologists have gone on making such generalisation – and despite inadequacy of data, concept and argument to support it.

Now, while tribes continue to undergo changes of many kinds, these no longer transform them into castes. The Oraons today practise various religions and speak more than one language; they earn their livelihood from a variety of occupations, both agricultural and non-agricultural. Yet they remain Oraons in some socially significant sense. They have not become a caste with any definite standing in the caste hierarchy. This argument has implications not only for the understanding of tribes but also for the understanding of Indian society as a whole. The most important implication is that new castes are no longer being formed, whether, by the transformation of tribes into castes or by other means. Tribes have become peasants and socially differentiated entities but, contrary to views held, without any loss of their distinctive identities.

### CASTE AND TRIBE

Diversity or heterogeneity has been termed one of the hallmarks of Indian society. Religion, language, region, caste and tribe have been considered to be the most important distinctions. But not all of them have been conceptually and theoretically as contentious as the category of tribe. It has generally been said that the categories of religion, language, region

and caste have been rooted in the consciousness and the social relations of the people at large. They have also had a long history. Such has not been the case with the category of the tribe: it was added to the list mentioned above by the British in the 19th century. That category is hence seen as a colonial construction [Beteille 1995; Singh 1993]. Even so, it has come to be extensively used in social science literature in general and sociological and anthropological literature in particular as an aid to an understanding of Indian social reality.

When the British began to write on Indian society, the term 'tribe' was used in general parlance in more than one sense: in reference to a group of people claiming descent from a common ancestor, and in reference to a group living in a primitive or barbarous conditions. The former usage has a longer history than the one which became prevalent after the colonial encounter. Yet it is in the sense that developed later (the primitive stage of living) that the term 'tribe' has come to be mainly conceptualised in anthropological writings. The term has thus undergone changes in the concept in the course of history.

The early British writings on India did not study groups or communities from the caste/tribe perspective. The groups were studied in their capacity as human groupings or communities. Their description in caste/tribe terms was a later phenomenon. It is therefore not very clear in which sense the British ethnographers used the term 'tribe' in India, especially in the early phase. The impression one gets is that the usage in the sense of common ancestry may have been more in vogue. References to the rajput, ahir and jat 'tribes' as well as the interchangeable use of the terms 'tribe' and 'caste' in 18th century writings on India tends to support such view. Ethnographers evidently had difficulty differentiating one from the other at least in the initial stage.

In the census reports of 1881, when the first 'proper' all-India census was undertaken, the term used was not 'tribe' but 'forest tribe', and that too as a sub-heading within the broader category of agricultural

and pastoral castes. A somewhat more serious effort towards a distinction is reflected in the later censuses. Risley and Gait, in charge of the 1901 and 1911 censuses respectively, added 'so-called animists' in the table for caste and others. Marten followed the same pattern in the 1921 Census, except that he changed the heading from 'animism' to 'tribal religion'. Hutton continued with the distinction between tribes and others in terms of religion and tribes were distinguished from not in terms of caste or caste-like features. For Hutton the tribe-caste distinction could be maintained only thus.

Tribes were thus defined as those that practised 'animism'. Of course those in charge of the census operations were not satisfied with this basis of demarcation of the tribes. They were of the view that there were difficulties in distinguishing the religion of the tribes from that of the lower strata of Hindu society. Keeping these observations in mind Ghurye [1963:205] went to the extent of observing that so-called aboriginals who form the bulk of the scheduled tribes and who have been designated in the censuses as animists are best described as 'backward Hindus'.

In the post-independence period one finds more systematic efforts to distinguish tribe from caste. And yet, scholars have not arrived at systematically worked-out criteria to this day. It has generally been assumed that tribe and caste represent two different forms of social organisations – castes being regulated by the hereditary division of labour, hierarchy, the principle of purity and pollution, civic and religious disabilities, etc, and tribes being characterised by the absence of the caste attributes.

The two types of social organisations are seen as being governed by different principles. It is said that kinship bonds govern tribal society. Each individual is hence considered equal to the others. The lineage and clan tend to be the chief unit of ownership as well as of production and consumption. In contrast, inequality, dependency and subordination are integral features of caste society. It is also said

that tribes do not differentiate as sharply as caste groups do between the utilitarian and non-utilitarian function of religion. Caste groups tend to maintain different forms, practices and behaviour patterns for each of these two aspects of the religion. Tribes in contrast maintain similar forms, practices and behaviour patterns for both functions.

Tribes and castes are also seen to be different in respect of the psychological disposition of members. Tribes are said to take direct, unalloyed satisfaction in the pleasures of the senses – in such areas as food, drink, sex, dance and song – whereas caste people maintain a certain ambivalence about such pleasures. Further, in the 'jati' society, the village is expected to be culturally heterogeneous, with each jati following a unique combination of customary practices. Tribesmen, on the other hand, expect their society to be homogeneous – or, at least, not necessarily heterogeneous [Mandelbaum 1970:577].

From attempt such as these certain images and perceptions have been developed with respect to the 'tribe' concept in India. These include the absence of exploiting classes and organised state structures; multi-functionality of kinship bonds; all-pervasiveness of religion; segmented character of the socio-economic unit; frequent co-operation for common goals; shallow history; distinct taboos, customs and moral codes; the youth dormitory; a low level of technology; common names, territories, descent, language, culture, etc [Pathy 1992:50].

But these sets of attributes in terms of which tribes are differentiated from castes are not possessed by a large number of groups identified as tribes in India. And even groups that do subscribe these attributes have dissimilarities. At one end there are groups that have all these features and at the other are those that hardly show these attributes. The large majority of the groups, however, fall somewhere in between. The assumptions made about tribes more often than not have, therefore, been misleading and fallacious to a considerable extent.

The only thing the tribes seem to have in common is, as Beteille puts it, that they all stand more or less outside Hindu civilisation. And since the identification of tribes is also linked with political and administrative considerations, little effort has been made to critically examine it. Rather the criteria have been uncritically accepted among social scientists.

#### TRANSFORMATION TO CASTES

The concerns of the British Raj's administrator scholars gave rise to the conception that tribes lived in isolation from

the rest of the population and had no interaction or interconnection with them. In contrast the main concern of post-colonial ethnography has been to show a close interaction between the tribes and the larger society or civilisation. The relationship has, of course, been differently conceptualised. Sinha [1958] views 'tribe' as a dimension of little tradition that cannot be adequately understood unless it is seen in relation to the great tradition. In contrast Beteille [1986:316] views it more in terms of distance from state and civilisation in contexts where tribe and civilisation coexist, as in India and the Islamic world. Though the distinction is maintained, the two are treated not as isolated but in interaction with each other. Even when tribes have been conceived as remaining outside the state, which has most often been the case, they have been viewed as being in constant interaction with civilisation: tribal society has been seen not as static but in process of change.

One of the dominant modes in which the transformation of the tribal society has been conceived is in terms of a tribe getting absorbed into a society that represents civilisation. Both historians and anthropologists have made such observations in the context of the past. Kosambi (1975) has referred to tribal elements being fused into the general society. N K Bose (1941) makes a reference to tribes being absorbed into Hindu society. A large number of anthropological works of the post-independence era still points to phenomenon such as tribes being absorbed or assimilated into Hindu society or tribes becoming castes. Tribes are said to have accepted the ethos of caste structure and to have got absorbed within it. Hence they are treated as hardly differentiable from neighbouring Hindu peasantry. Some of the well known tribes in this category are said to be bhils, bhumijs, majhis, khasas and raj-gonds. In fact, much of the social anthropological discourse on tribes has been primarily couched in terms of tribes being transformed into castes.

Nowhere is this better reflected than in the classifications of tribes provided by eminent anthropologists. Roy-Burman [1972] classified tribes into (1) those incorporated in Hindu society, (2) those positively oriented to Hindu society, (3) those negatively oriented and (4) those indifferent to Hindu society. Vidyarthi [1977] talked of tribes as (1) living in forests, (2) living in rural areas, (3) semi-acculturated, (4) acculturated, or (5) assimilated. Elwin [1944] envisaged four categories of tribes: (1) purest of pure tribal groups, (2) groups in contact with the plains but still retaining the tribal mode of living, (3) groups forming the lower

rungs of Hindu society, and (4) groups fully adapted to the Hindu faith and living in modern style.

The criteria of classification used by Vidyarthi suffer for want of logical consistency. Elwin went to the extent of writing that the whole aboriginal problem was one of how to enable the tribesmen of the first and the second classes to advance direct into the fourth class without their having to suffer the despair and degradation of the third. Dube classifies tribes almost along the lines spelt out by Elwin. Many others, including Bose and Fuchs, have not made specific classifications but do mention tribes occupying either the lower or the higher rungs by getting absorbed into Hindu society.

Some scholars caution against such a conception of transformation of the tribes. Roy-Burman [1983-1994] in his later writings points out that if the transformation of tribe into peasant cannot be taken for granted nor can the transformation of tribe into caste in the Indian context. Pathy [1992:50-51] questions the dominant trend in the interpretation of tribal transformation, citing lack of historical and contextual evidence. Yet he endorses quite approvingly the observation of Kosambi that the entire course of Indian history shows tribal elements being fused into the general society.

The transformation of tribes into castes is conceived to occur through methods which have been diversely conceptualised. Kosambi [1975] considers adoption of the technology of Hindu society by the tribes, the major method of absorption that takes place under the prevalent system for the organisation of production. He says that tribes are drawn into the non-competitive system because they find protection within it. Sanskritisation is seen as another method through which tribes are absorbed into Hindu society. The other significant method of tribal assimilation is what Sinha [1962, 1987] calls the state formation. He states that the process of acculturation, Hinduisation and social stratification within the village could not be properly understood unless the data are examined in the broader context of the formation of the principality. He adds that the formation of the state provided the decisive socio-political framework for the transformation of the tribal system into the regional caste system.

#### SANSKRITISATION

Scholars have conceptualised diversely the processes of social change experienced by tribes in contact with non-tribal societies. This is evident from the range of the terms used for capturing the processes, the most common being 'Sanskritisation'

and 'Hinduisation'. At times anthropologists have also used 'Kshatriyisation' and 'Rajputisation' as substitutes for 'Sanskritisation'. These terms describe different social processes at work, though in actual empirical reality these processes coincide and overlap. There has been a tendency among the social scientists to use them interchangeably. More often than not the difficulties arising from the use of such terms are overcome by use of such generic terms as 'acculturation', 'assimilation' and 'absorption'. However, the main processes in terms of which the transformation of tribe into caste is interpreted are Hinduisation and Sanskritisation.

The question is whether such processes as Hinduisation and Sanskritisation lead to the dislocation of tribal society and pave the way for its absorption into Hindu society. Does a tribe by virtue of acculturation cease to be a tribe and become a caste? Almost all the scholars referred to earlier tend to think so. To these scholars, tribes eventually cease to exist as entities independent of the caste society from which they were earlier differentiated. The fact of the matter is that while this may have been the case in the past, it is not true of India after independence.

Since acculturation or transformation of tribes into castes is attributed to the process of Sanskritisation/Hinduisation, it is imperative at the very outset to examine the appropriateness of these terms and concepts. Sanskritisation is seen as a process whereby communities lower down the social ladder emulate the lifestyle of the dominant caste of a region. By this process of emulation, the lower castes would move up in the caste hierarchy. Sociologists and social anthropologists have broadened the scope of this concept to describe a certain process of change that has been going on in tribal society. Is this extension of scope valid? In the author's view it is far from appropriate. The extension is inappropriate because it assumes that tribes are part of Hindu society and caste society. But tribes have been conceived of as tribes precisely because they are outside Hindu as well as caste society. Sanskritisation demands that tribes must first enter Hindu society.

The question that arises is whether Hinduisation is the same as Sanskritisation. The two are interrelated, but it may be more appropriate to describe the processes involved in the context of tribes as Hinduisation. This is so because climbing up the caste ladder is not the overriding concern among the tribes. Of course it is not possible to conceive of the Hindu faith and practices outside organisation into castes. Hinduisation invariably entails assuming some caste status. But the status

that is accorded to is said to be 'low caste'. If this is the case, where is the process of social mobility for the tribes? What is it that tribes gain through this process? Nor have tribes made claims for higher status [Hardiman 1987:158-59]. Rather it is outsiders who impose such a status on the tribes. In fact, even after Hinduisation tribes remain by and large outside the hierarchical structure of Hindu society. If at all tribes have made claims they have been made only after they have been drawn into the larger social structure of the neighbouring Hindu and linguistic community.

Take the case of the meteis and the koch-rajbongshis, who unlike other tribes have taken to Hinduism as a whole. It is not clear what caste status and caste name they assumed after adopting Hinduism. Their claim of kshatriya status was made much after their adoption of the Hindu way of life. Moreover, it was made for the whole of the community and not for a segment of it. Hardly any elaborate caste differentiation exists within the tribe. If at all there are brahmins, they are immigrants. In Manipur they are not from amongst the meteis but belong to other ethnic communities and are not considered part of metei society. The latter too see themselves as different from the meteis.

Likewise, the integration of the koch-rajbongshis who have embraced Hinduism as well as Bengali/Assamese with the dominant regional community had been far from complete. In fact, they are addressed and identified more by their ethnic names than the caste name. It is not even sure that they have a caste identity. That they have been claiming kshatriya status is an altogether different story.

The problems with the concept of Sanskritisation of tribes do not end there. There is also the problem of the reference group. It is far from clear from the literature as to which of the caste groups the tribes (barring those belonging to royal or chieftainly lineage) emulated in their respective regions. The royal/chieftainly lineage has invariably emulated the rajputs and has entered into matrimonial alliances with them. Thus whereas the upper strata of tribal society got integrated into Hindu caste society, the rank and file continued to live outside Hindu society though there may have been a process of Hinduisation among them. Climbing up the ladder of hierarchy had not been their main concern.

Given all this, it would perhaps be appropriate to speak of Hinduisation rather than of Sanskritisation in the context of tribes in India. If at all tribes consider some castes superior, it is not because of the caste factor per se but because their members happen to be jagirdars, thicadars, lambardars, etc. Why do tribes Hinduise

themselves even though they attain no higher status? Do they want to be absorbed into the larger society? Well, this may have been the case in the past but no longer. Today, acculturation for tribes means adopting the ideas values and practices of the dominant community rather than being part of that society by assuming a caste status.

#### HINDUISATION

Is the process of Hinduisation sufficient ground for designating a group as a caste? Is it not possible for a tribe to be Hinduised and yet to remain outside the caste system, and to be governed by tribal principles of social organisation? Such questions have either not been given sufficient attention or have been overlooked in studies which place tribes in a caste or civilisation framework. If Hindu society cannot be understood otherwise than as a caste society, the transformation of tribe into caste or Hindu society as the scholars have been postulating is problematic. Indeed, the whole argument of the transformation of tribe into caste seems to be misplaced and even erroneous.

Theoretically it is possible to embrace a form of Hindu faith and practices without becoming part of Hindu society in the caste sense. If Hindu society and caste organisation are inseparable, however, Hinduisation alone cannot account for the transformation of tribe into caste. In fact sociologists and social anthropologists need to consider other questions: do tribes actually become part of the structure of caste society after they have taken to Hinduisation/Sanskritisation? What caste identity do they assume and what position do they occupy in the caste hierarchy? Nor is it clear whether all groups involved in the process of Hinduisation occupy the same position or there is hierarchical arrangement among them as in the case of the dalits.

Also what caste roles do such groups assume, say, in villages of Chhotanagpur in which banias, brahmins, rajputs and others live alongside the tribals? In fact, the nature of tribal people's interaction with the caste members of society is governed more by consideration of market and economic interdependence than by purity-pollution ones. Further, their lives continue to be grounded on kinship bonds and the absence of hierarchical ordering. In short, tribes do not have any kind of social, cultural or ritual dependence on caste society even after acculturation into the Hindu belief system and practices. Is it appropriate then, to study people described as tribes from the perspective of the caste structure? The anthropologists have tried to find caste where it does not exist.

It is also to be stated that tribes have not moved into processes like Hinduisation or Sanskritisation as whole groups. The general pattern is that only a section of a tribe moves to a new pattern of life, provided by say Christianity, Hinduism or Islam. If this is the case more often than not, can we describe some members of a group as a caste and others as a tribe? The empirical reality of a village in which tribes form a minority and are absorbed into the Hindu fold is inappropriately extended to villages and regions where they may not be in a minority and where even if Hinduisation operates it may not lead to abandonment of tribal identity. Where, however, tribes have taken to Hinduisation en bloc, they have to a great extent moulded themselves along caste lines. They have even identified themselves in caste terms and others too have addressed them as castes rather than as tribes. The Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam and West Bengal are a case in point. But the phenomenon of the group as a whole moving to a different value system is rather rare. Even where such a thing has happened, it has not given rise to a hierarchical caste structure. The group as a whole tends in general to belong to the same caste stratum. Nor is the group adequately integrated into the caste structure of the neighbouring regional community.

In examining the question of the transformation of tribe into caste, it is not enough to look only at the relationship between tribes and caste society. There is also a need to consider how tribes themselves perceive their equation with caste society. After adopting certain Hindu beliefs and practices, do tribes identify themselves as tribes or as castes? The important route along which tribes underwent Hinduisation or Sanskritisation is what anthropologists have described as the 'religious/cultural movement'. Among the tribes, the movement is better known as the Bhagat movement.

It is interesting to note that tribes even when they have been Hinduised describe themselves not as Hindus but as Bhagats. It is outsiders, census officials and anthropologists, who tend to describe them as 'Hindus'. Anthropologists have even been prone to describe them as castes. Tribes, however, do not identify and designate themselves as belonging to different castes in the sense used and understood by the outsiders and the social scientists. Nowhere is this aspect of distinctive identity more glaring than in the movements launched by the tribes, especially those pertaining to autonomy, land, forests and employment. In these movements the divide between caste and tribe has been relatively sharp. And yet tribes that have

been Hinduised have shown solidarity with groups described as tribes rather than as castes.

In short the process of Hinduisation is necessary but not sufficient for tribes to be integrated into caste society. To be integrated tribes must be drawn into the social organisation of the caste. That by and large, is not an empirical reality.

#### LANGUAGE

The discussion above points to the fact that it is not possible for a tribe to become a caste without being first integrated into the structure of Hindu society. Where such integration has occurred, a very important process has been the adoption by the tribe of the language of the regional community. A caste as a social organisation is operative only within a linguistic community. Hence it is possible for a tribe to become a caste only after it has been assimilated into the regional linguistic community such as the Bengali or the Oriya or the Assamese community. This process which is so central to integration with the regional community and therefore caste society has been glossed over by sociologists and social anthropologists. In fact, it is not possible to get integrated into the caste society without first getting integrated into the linguistic community.

Tribes have been differentiated not only from castes but also from the dominant community of the region. The dominant community is invariably a linguistic community. Besides representing a language it also represents a set of customs, a social organisation and a way of life. This raises an interesting question: should a tribe which has become Hinduised and even 'caste-like' be treated as a caste or as a tribe if it sticks to its language? After all, tribe has also been conceived in opposition to 'linguistic community'. Can a group be both a tribe and a caste at the same time? This seems far from tenable.

Does a Hinduised, Sanskritised tribe become a caste if it retain its language, culture, customs, social practices and so on? While the influence of Hinduism or Hinduism on tribes is important, it does not make them Hindus. To be Hindus they need to be drawn into the structure of Hindu society, which is possible only if they get drawn into the structure of the regional linguistic community.

Tribes were differentiated from non-tribes on the basis of religion alone by the colonial ethnographers. But anthropologists have distinguished tribes from others on several criteria, the most important being language and the social organisation of the caste. Tribes have been treated as tribes precisely because they have been outside the dominant regional community

and thus outside the complex of civilisation. One is not sure whether even after experiencing changes at the level of culture, including religion and language, a tribe can be said to have become a caste. Much depends on the nature of its linkage with the social structure of the regional, linguistic and caste society. Indeed what seems to this author to be the most crucial feature for the integration of a tribe into the structure of the regional community is not only religion and language but also the organisational structure of the regional community.

One could say that linguistic acculturation is more important than religious acculturation. Sociologists and anthropologists have never given language the place it deserves in interpretation of the transformation of tribe into caste. And yet anthropologists have arrived at the conclusion that tribes are becoming castes or getting integrated into Hindu society.

A tribe which is drawn into a larger society does not cease to operate as a society. Does a society cease, by virtue of cultural change, to be a society? Does Bengali society cease to be a society in the wake of westernisation and modernisation within it? Nobody ever denies the existence and identity of Bengali society, but if cultural transformation occurs in a tribal society the general trend is to negate its existence. Anthropologists have been swift to incorporate tribes in the larger society at the slightest sign of change in their life patterns.

What the discussion points to is that conclusions such as the ones reached by sociologists/social anthropologists are based on inadequate ethnography, concept and even logic. There is hardly any inquiry into the ways in which a Hinduised tribe is linked with caste society and with its roots. Also, no effort has been made to ascertain whether an acculturated tribe is regulated by caste or tribal principles of social organisation. Concepts such as Sanskritisation and Hinduisation are inadequate for advancing the argument in support of transformation of tribe into caste.

#### TRIBE AND PEASANT

Tribal society in India has been studied not only in relation to caste but also in relation to peasant society. In social anthropological literature peasant society has invariably been conceptualised and studied in contrast to tribal society. A tribe has generally been defined as a more or less homogeneous community having common government, a common dialect and common culture.

But as Beteille [1960] puts it, it is one thing to show the boundaries between tribes and non-tribes or between different

tribes and quite another to specify the characteristics of tribal societies in general. An attempt has therefore been made to specify these characteristics. Tribes have come to be defined by the features of a segmentary system. This means that tribes are conceived of not only as small in scale but also as representative of a structural type which is quite different from the more complex social system in which the peasantry and gentry coexist. Ideally then, tribal societies are small in scale, restricted in the spatial and temporal range of their social, legal and political relations and in possession of a morality, religion and worldview of a corresponding order. In short, tribal societies are self-contained units.

In contrast, peasant society is seen not as a whole society but as a part society with part culture. Redfield [1956], for example, uses the term peasant for any society of small producers who produce for their own consumption through the cultivation of land and who form a segment of the town-centred economy and society. Similarly, Shanin [1973] defines peasants as small agricultural producers who with the help of simple equipment and family labour produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfilment of their obligation to the holders of political and economic power.

There has been much inquiry in anthropology with regard to the extent to which tribal people in India can be regarded as peasants. The inquiry arises from the fact that not all the communities described as tribes stand at the same level of development. Accordingly, tribes have been classified on the basis of the characteristic mode of livelihood. Bose [1971:4-5], for example, divided the tribal people into: (1) hunters, fishers and gatherers; (2) shifting cultivators; (3) settled agriculturists using plough and plough cattle; (4) nomadic cattle-keepers, artisans, agricultural labourers; and (5) plantation and industrial workers. Some of these are considered no different from the non-tribal peasant population. The process of peasantisation among tribes in Indian history is attributed largely to cultural contact with the non-tribal world. It has also been attributed to the development strategy of Indian state especially after independence.

In support of the theory of the transformation of tribes into peasants some scholars have focused on the fact that tribes have moved away from hunting/fishing or shifting agriculture to terraced or settled agriculture. Others note that tribes have shifted to plough agriculture. In fact, more often than not tribes have been described as peasants without the criteria used for defining peasants being adequately ap-

plied. Some scholars describe them as peasants because they see little difference in the way tribes make their living from the way the larger non-tribal community does.

There are of course scholars who have tried to look at the problem by systematically applying criteria evolved in anthropological writings. Thus, keeping in mind the segmentary system in terms of which tribes have generally been defined, Bailey [1961] differentiates tribes from caste peasants. It is worth noting that Bailey was more interested in differentiating tribe from caste rather than from peasant. He characterises caste society as predominantly hierarchical and organic and tribal society as basically segmental. Sinha [1965] finds such characterisation inadequate. He says there are some parts of India where peasants, especially those belonging to the rajput and jat castes, approximate more or less closely to the characteristics of the tribes. He goes to the extent of viewing tribes as a special case of a little tradition within the civilisation of India. Beteille [1974:61] applies the concept of peasants, as formalised in Shanin's definition, to the empirical realities of the tribes in Chhotanagpur and shows that the realities there approximate to the concept of peasant more than the realities obtaining elsewhere among communities that have generally been described as peasants.

The study of tribes as communities has given way to 'village studies'. Indeed, village studies are seen as different from, or alternative to, tribal studies. There is little doubt that this way of contrasting tribal studies with village studies is a direct consequence of the false opposition between tribe and peasant posed in anthropological writings. The dichotomy posed between caste and tribe in the study of Indian society has also led to a dichotomy between the concepts of tribe and peasant. Indian society has been seen not only as a caste society but also as a peasant society. The two in fact have been seen as co-terminus. Conversely, communities identified as tribes are not treated as peasants and assumed to make a living in ways that are different from those of the larger caste society. Correspondingly, tribes in India are seen apart not only from the caste dimension of Indian society but also from the peasant dimension. Hence any tribal community which has been making a living in the same way as the larger community is said to be either in the process of becoming a peasant society or already one. Either in the process of ceasing to be a tribal society or already a non-tribal society. Does it mean that there is nothing left of the attributes associated with the tribe in the changed situation of the peasantisation process?

One is confronted with such a problem because of the false dichotomy that has been posed between tribe and peasant. Tribes can still move in the direction of the peasantry without losing the social attributes of tribes. Social scientists have therefore not been quite at ease even when they talk of the transformation of tribe to peasant. Oommen [1995:21-37], for example, points out that with the advent of the settled agriculture among the tribes, they are increasingly specialised as peasants but that even the settled agriculturists among them are not yet peasants in several respects, particularly in the area of culture.

#### SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION

There is still a third term of reference in terms of which tribes in India have been studied, and this is social differentiation. Sometimes this has been couched in terms of class or social stratification while tribal society has never been static, change has never been as unprecedented and dramatic as in the last 50 years: Tribal society has moved from homogeneity to a considerable degree of heterogeneity.

To start with, there is occupational differentiation in tribal society. One can find in the same society people who are engaged in agriculture (shifting or settled) or commerce. There are others who work as landless agricultural labourers, quarry/mine workers, stone crushers, plantation workers or industrial workers. And still others are lawyers, doctors, teachers, government servants, politicians, etc. Along with occupational differentiation there have been differences of wealth and income, giving rise to social stratification in the form of class not only in the qualitative as well as the quantitative sense.

There have also been differences of religion, ideology, values, political orientation, way of life, etc., among the members of a tribal community. In view of all this, it is generally held that a given tribal society has become like any other component of Indian society and hence that society is no longer a tribal society.

#### BASIS FOR MISCONSTRUCTION

Elsewhere in the world, tribes are studied in their own right and against the backdrop of the processes at work in those societies. Unlike in India, they are not studied against the end point represented by communities that are seen to be part of civilisation. Whereas elsewhere the focus of study has been on how tribes are changing and becoming nationalities or nations in the process, the focus in India has been on how tribes are becoming castes, peasants and stratified communities. And since these are the features which characterise Indian society in general, tribes

are viewed as being absorbed into the larger society, in the process losing total identity.

Such an empirical and conceptual scenario in the study of tribes exists in India precisely because of (1) the way tribes have been conceptualised in the anthropological literature and (2) the reference in terms of which they have been investigated. In nutshell, tribes have been studied not in their own right but only in relation to the general Indian society, the overriding features of which are caste, peasant status and social differentiation.

In the conceptualisation of tribes in anthropology, three distinct but inter-related strands are intertwined. Tribes are first of all invariably seen as society. It is a society like all other societies. That is, it is made up of people; it has boundaries (people who either belong or do not). People belong to a society by virtue of the rules under which they stand, rules which impose on them regular, determinate ways of acting towards and in regard to one another. The characteristic of a tribe as a society is related through its boundaries. At the same time, boundaries have been defined linguistically, culturally and politically by anthropologists. Boundaries set certain limit of interaction in the legal political, economic and social relations of its members.

Secondly, a tribe is also seen as a distinctive type of society. Godelier (1977:30), for example, sees tribal societies as being characterised by certain positive and negative features, the negatives being the absence of literacy, civilisation, industrialisation, specialisation, etc. The positive features are those absent in modern societies: social relations based on kinship bonds, all-pervasive religion, frequency of co-operation for common goals, etc. Thirdly tribes are seen as representing a socio-political formation which with the passage of time will move on to a new stage such as nation, nationality or nationhood.

While these three approaches have gone into the making of the concept of tribe, the last two have overshadowed the first. What has happened in the process is that tribes have been primarily seen as a stage and type of society. They are seen as primitive, simple, illiterate and backward societies. With the onset of changes in the features that constitute its specific features through education, specialisation, modern occupations, new technology, etc, tribal society is no longer considered tribal society. It is described as having become caste society, peasant society or a socially-differentiated society as the case may be.

What has happened is that anthropologists and other social scientists have

overlooked the context in which the term 'tribe' has come to be used in Indian society: in the Indian context tribes are identified and described primarily in terms of their being outside civilisation. Such problems may not arise when tribes do not coexist with non-tribal societies. Indeed, problems of the type referred to above could be overcome by the use of the term 'indigenous people' – but not without giving rise to problems of a different dimension. There is then something clumsy and basically wrong with the use of the term 'tribe' in the Indian context.

#### TRIBE AS COMMUNITY

In view of all this what is suggested as the term of reference for the study of tribes in India is the terms that tribal people themselves use to identify themselves and as they are identified by the people in adjacent habitations. It is common experience that groups and communities brought under the broad category of tribe generally see say, as santhals, oraons, khasis or garos and not as tribesmen. Even in history this was how groups now identified as tribes were identified and addressed. Ray [1972:8-10] points to this in his introductory essay in the volume 'Tribal Situation in India'. He says, we know that there were 'janas' or communities of people like the savaras, the kullutas, the lollas, the bhillas, the khasas, the kinnaras and countless others whom today we know as 'tribes' and who bear almost the same names. Yet the term by which they were known to the multitudes of people were not 'tribes' but 'janas' meaning 'communities of people'.

If tribes are studied as janas, the problems we are confronted with when we use the term 'tribe' will be overcome. Such an approach will enable us to assess transformations occurring in tribal society in the direction of caste, peasant, social differentiation or religion without questioning distinctive identity of the group concerned. It means that the terms of reference in tribal studies are not to be such categories as caste, peasantry and social heterogeneity but groups or communities such as the Bengalis, the Assamese and the Gujaratis. The counterparts of tribes are not castes or peasants but communities or societies incorporating castes and peasants. The latter are not whole societies but only elements of wholes. Tribes on the other hand are whole societies each with its own language, territory, culture, customs and so on. Generally speaking therefore, they must be compared with other societies and not, with castes, as has been the case in sociological and anthropological writings.

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